



University of
Sheffield

Pay the piper — working with PGRs to develop a University PGR well-being strategy

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Working with PGRs



Background

- Conversations in UKCGE conference in Brighton (2022)
- University of Sheffield PGR Committee agreed to support a new well-being strategy (2023)
- ‘PGR Wellbeing Strategy Group’ awarded Research Culture Funding to support this work (2024)
- Strategy to be published in 2025
- Financial context (UoS and HE sector)

Lived experience of PGRs

How to ensure that

- Strategy is based on lived experience of current PGRs
- PGRs are properly rewarded / recognised for their work, experience and expertise

Lived experience of PGRs

- Proposal to undertake research based on qualitative focus groups of PGRs
- 3 x current PGRs were recruited to co-design and facilitate the focus groups - they were trained in qual interviewing and analysis
- 46 x PGRs attended FGs to provide lived experience and views on strategy
- 5 x PGRs were recruited as members of the Strategy group to represent views of PGRs in their Faculties/Departments
- Agreement that all PGRs would be paid (time-limited not open-ended)

Payments

- **External trainers** paid £2,500 to train 3 x PGR facilitators to run/analyse FGs
- 3 x **PGR facilitators** (casual worker, grade 7.3) paid to:
 - attend training
 - prepare FGs
 - run FGs
 - analyse data and produce a report
- 60 x **PGRs** paid to attend 90 minute FGs (casual worker, grade 6.1)
- 5 x **PGR strategy group members** paid to attend group meetings and do associated work (casual worker, grade 6.1)
- Total c. £8,000

Methods



Interview Guide

- Informed by literature and PGRs' own experiences

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Focus Groups

- 6 focus groups
- 5 in-person, 1 online
- 90 mins
- Co-facilitated by 2 PGR facilitators

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Participants

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- Recruited via email
- Paid £25
- 46 Attendees

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Analysis

- Thematic analysis
- Findings from 6 focus groups in a [final report](#)

Themes	Codes
Specific challenges for international students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● International students' struggles in settling down ● Feeling isolated as international student ● Distance from support networks
Fears of not being productive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lose work-life balance ● Need to feel productive
Needs to belong, challenges in connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Space to work, space to belong ● Opportunities to connect with others ● Difficulties in peer networking ● PhD as isolating ● Networks outside of academic department ● Peer support networks

Themes	Codes
Power Dynamics in supervisory relationship(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominance of supervisor relationship • Knowing what to accept • Managing supervisor relationships
Identity struggle between student and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity struggle between student and staff • Lack of PGR specific support • Falling between the student/staff gap • Balancing freedom and need for structure
Experience of support from the university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive experiences with university services • Negative experiences with university services • Lack of clear admin guidance • Need for clear and consistent information • Lack of emotional support from supervisors • Support from own department

Developing the PGR Wellbeing Strategy



Our principles - the strategy group

- **Diverse membership:** all faculties; wide staff-group representation.
- **Payment of PGR members:** ensuring diversity of voices; properly valuing PGR time and expertise; encouraging a feeling of parity within the group and ownership of the work.
- **Collaboration and consensus:** no voice more important than another; meetings a time for discussion and deliberation.
- **Trust and transparency:** subgroups led on specific areas; majority of work done between meetings; open about what was and was not likely to be possible.

Our principles - the strategy

- **Data & research-led:** focus groups; Researcher Wellbeing Conference; *PGR Voices* survey; feedback to PGR representatives; existing literature.
- **Action-focused:** determined that it shouldn't collect *digital dust*.
- **Complementary & collaborative:** lots of work in this space; consulting and working with colleagues was crucial.
- **Mindful of financial constraints:** front-loaded much of cost; creativity over cash...but clear that this work isn't "free".
- **Tackle, not just treat:** very clear that the strategy must address root causes/systemic issues *as well as* supporting current PGR wellbeing.

Discussions → development

- **Balance:** needed time/space to discuss and consider, but without becoming a “talking shop” .
- **Between-meetings work crucial:** document-wrangling & online collaboration.
- **Identification & articulation of key themes:**
 1. Community and culture
 2. Policies and processes
 3. Skills and support
 4. Equity of experience

Where we are...

- **Financial & structural changes during strategy development**
- **Approval process:** strategy & action plan presented to University's PGR Committee May 2025
- **Support *and* supportive challenge:** very clear support from senior leadership; useful questions around priorities & resources.

Where next?

- **Summer lull (ha!):** finishing revisions to action plan.
- **Launching formally in the autumn:** to coincide with other wellbeing activity.
- **Template for further strategic wellbeing work:** especially for research staff.
- **More sector-wide work (and solidarity!):** linking up with colleagues from other HEIs.

Successes, lessons and challenges

Successes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Securing agreement and funds to pay for PGR involvement● Genuinely PGR-centred and driven● Co-led by researcher development and academics● Talking to other colleagues early and often
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Reminder of how <i>long</i> things can take in HE● Environment can change rapidly - need to be agile/adaptable● People are great!● Co-production vital, but need behind-the-scenes drivers too
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How to drive and support meaningful change within tight financial constraints● Finding out about & keeping abreast of complementary work● Is it working?? How to measure impact...

We'd love to stay in touch!

Interested in researcher wellbeing?

Want to connect with colleagues with similar interests?

~~Let's take over the HE world!~~

<https://forms.gle/5XU4ywjB7a9wiptA8>





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Questions

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Extra material - if needed

Specific challenges for international students

“I've come to a whole new country where everyone does everything differently. They **speak different language**... I would want to know **how do I open a bank account? How do I rent a house?** ... You know, you just want to know there should be something about that [offered by the university for international student]. And there should be a PhD exclusive induction process ... **I just asked another person**... A lot of people from all different faculties... saying **they learned by asking another person** and **that should never be the case**, you should know the stuff that you need to know. Certainly there should be more attention be put in making a person feel welcome in the university.”

“We had a faculty induction day, which was mainly just **information overload**.”

Specific challenges for international students

“I feel like my **educational background is completely different** to the way things are laid out here in the department or in the university. For me, I've always been used to instruct it in a way that is very much structured. Having a fully structured schedule, you have to wake up at this time, you have to attend classes, you have to pass an exam. Coming to do a PhD here, which is completely independent and very autonomous, **I had to navigate everything on my own.**”

Fears of not being productive

“Sometimes I feel like I have absolutely know that and I have to work the whole day but then there are days where because I'm **waiting** for the supervisors to come back to me... **for days, I have nothing to do...** Sometimes I feel like it's [doing a PhD is] a **marathon**, another day, feels [it's] like a **sprint**.”

Fears of not being productive

“Even if it's just teaching, but let's do some teaching and **take my mind off** my page. Let me go and teach for 3 hours continuously, **even if it burns me out at the end of the day**. I'd rather do that just to be able to **take a break** from that [working on my thesis].”

Needs to belong, challenges in connection

“One reason I think PhD is such an individual that you do not get to meet a lot of people. You do not get to hang out with a lot because **not everybody comes at the same time** or **not everybody comes to the department...** So social life definitely goes out of the picture. So **there's no social life.** ”

Needs to belong, challenges in connection

“...for someone who's got **dietary requirements**, there's hardly one or two [dishes to eat at social events]... And the other thing is whenever there's anything social at the department, there's drinking all the time. For someone who **does not drink**, that becomes a problem... I feel uncomfortable when people say if I you don't drink but at least come... which is why I **end up missing all the so called social interactions**... It's just been so difficult because I think that also becomes a **separating and isolating** factor.... Again, it's even **cultural things** ... The conversations [between home students] are difficult to follow. They can be talking about music, but I don't listen to English music... I've not even heard the songs that they're talking about. So I think that also limits a lot of interaction that you can have. **Even if they are from your cohort from the same group.**”

Power Dynamics in supervisory relationship(s)

“...my relationship with my supervisor has been fantastic. They're always there, always. And not just like professionally and work-related but even emotionally ... Sometimes it's very difficult for me to step up and be like, no, this is what I want to do. So I am also **figuring out how I need to step in and say what I really want to do**. But by and large, if I have to say it's great!”

Power Dynamics in supervisory relationship(s)

“...from my experience, the supervisor is detrimental to the PGR experience and wellbeing, both mental and physical. And they can often **guilt you** into doing more hours, be present in the office when you shouldn't really have to be in the office or keep you from taking time off. It's the **lack of accountability** for the academic supervisors.”

Student/staff identity struggle

“The line between staff and student is very vague”

“cause we're kind of **straddling that in between**, I think sometimes it's quite hard to balance like, as we said, not having structure, but also it is a job and you are expected to have outputs.”

Student/staff identity struggle

“It’s that thing again, **are you employed or are you a student?**

When you're a student, they have a lot more responsibility to you and there's a bigger culture around, you know, students....But when you straddle that thing like, well, you are doing research, you are employed but I feel like they feel like there's a **bit of a dearth of responsibility to what they actually owe you**”

Experience of support from the University

“I've used the wellbeing advice thing a few times... And she's been **really, really helpful**. And she was **with me when I was at the lowest point in my life**, maybe. And, um, She also took great notes and **made me feel very remembered** that she would recall some of the points that I made in our last meeting ... So I would really recommend this”

Experience of support from the University

“...she said, that's totally normal because we're so close to your confirmation review and this feeling is for you, and that's okay probably after your confirmation review, you're feeling relaxed. Yeah, I knew that. But **I wanted to know she empathised with me** and I think she didn't. And she said I don't need any consultation or something and probably after the confirmation I will be okay. But at the time I didn't feel like that so **it was a bad experience for me.**”

Background - previous studies

Particular concern about PhD students (Levecque et al, 2017)

Issues facing PGRs include:

- Understanding the PhD process (Evans, 2007)
- Academic literacy (Odena & Burgess, 2017)
- Managing the supervisory relationship (Evans, 2007)
- Imposter syndrome (Odena & Burgess, 2017)
- Loneliness, isolation and finding a sense of community (Evans, 2017)
- Competing factors, e.g. PhD v family life (Odena & Burgess, 2017)
- Intellectual challenge
- Pressure to succeed / expectations
- Time limits, financial pressures, career prospects