SUPPORTING

the **mental health** and **wellbeing** of postgraduate researchers

Briefing for supervisors

The Universities UK (UUK) Stepchange framework stresses the importance of taking a whole university approach to creating 'Mentally Healthy Universities' and there is strong evidence that good mental health has a positive impact on a person's learning, creativity, ability to concentrate and overall performance levels. This is equally important in supporting the mental health of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as research shows that they are more at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, such as anxiety, than the general population (Levecque 2017).

Supervisors have the closest relationships with PGRs and are best positioned to encourage them to manage their mental health and wellbeing, and to identify those potentially at risk as early as possible. Poor PGR mental health can have a devastating impact on individuals, families, friends and university communities. It may also lead to increased study suspensions, fewer completions, and disrupted research outputs. Part-time researchers, international researchers, those working remotely, with caring responsibilities or those with existing disabilities can be most at risk (Vitae 2018). This briefing presents ways in which supervisors can contribute to maintaining the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs within their care.

Creating a healthy academic culture

Creating a healthy local academic culture that recognises and actively promotes good mental health, for example through good work life balance and a caring and supportive community, will be beneficial for PGR wellbeing, and others.

The nature of doctoral study is that PGRs can suffer from feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome. Workload expectations, supervisory relationships, lack of a sense of belonging, finances and visa concerns can all cause feelings of anxiety, potentially leading to poor mental health. Part-time researchers, international researchers, those working remotely, with caring responsibilities or those with existing disabilities can be most at risk. Ensuring PGRs are well integrated in the immediate research culture and fostering a sense of community and belonging are essential in tackling isolation and loneliness.

Recognising the link between good mental health and academic success

PGRs can experience anxiety and distress about their doctoral studies, which should not be seen as a reflection on their intellectual abilities to undertake a PhD. However if ignored, poor mental health can impact on their performance and lead to interruption of their studies and their ability to complete their doctorate.

Supervisors should promote the importance of maintaining good mental health and wellbeing for academic success. This can include encouraging good working behaviours; participation in other non-research activities; and knowing and using their entitlements, for example, annual leave.
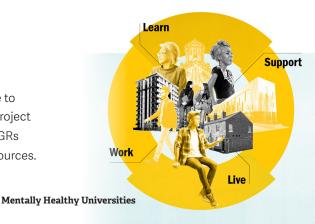
Knowing their boundaries

Supervisors have a pastoral responsibility for their PGRs. As well as ensuring good progress and successful submission, supervisors have a duty of care to consider the wellbeing of their PGRs. However, they should not do this in isolation of other support structures across their institution.

Supervisors need to be clear about the appropriate boundaries in their interactions with PGRs about their wellbeing; knowing how to have effective conversations and when to ask for additional support for PGRs and themselves. Supervisors should not be expected to undertake activities that impact on their own mental health.

Knowing how to signpost PGRs to support

Supervisors need to be aware of the range of support services that are available to PGRs and how PGRs can access them. The University of Manchester Catalyst project developed a helpful 'Decision tree for supervisors', including questions to ask PGRs about their wellbeing and information on institutional support services and resources.

Mentally Healthy Universities

Considering their own mental health

There is increasing evidence of poor mental health amongst academic staff. To effectively support the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs, supervisors also need to look after their own mental health, actively seeking support when needed. Modelling good behaviours will have benefits for PGRs.

Institutions are increasingly incorporating the importance of wellbeing into supervisor training and running specific wellbeing interventions for supervisors.

USEFUL RESOURCES

– **Universities UK Stepchange Mental Health Framework**

– **Student Minds Mental Health Charter**

– **Catalyst Project Resources**

– **Vitae Mental Health and Wellbeing Resources**

– **Five steps to mental wellbeing**

– **Charlie Waller Memorial Trust 'Keeping mental health in mind': free online learning for all university staff**

– **Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for PGRs, Vitae, 2018**

– **The Wellbeing Thesis**

– **Mental Health and Wellbeing – Online Training for Supervisors and PGRs**

– **Supporting PGRs - Decision Trees for Supervisors**

– **Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students, Levecque et al, 2017**

This briefing was developed as part of the evaluation of the Catalyst Fund: Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs.

£1.5M was awarded to seventeen projects by the Office for Students and Research England, UKRI. More information on the individual projects and the full project report can be found here.

Vitae in partnership with Universities UK were commissioned to evaluate and identify the outcomes from the programme and share good practice. The resulting evaluation report and programme resources can be found here.