Doctoral Researchers' well-being: integrating support (0117)

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Well-being is a key indicator of social progress, now used by public sector services, industry and governments; socio economic changes since 2008 have had negative effects on life satisfaction and the measurement of well-being and progress is a key priority for the OECD (2016). Following serious incidents, universities are increasing support systems and holding national events to promote well-being (UUK, 2015 and UKCGE, 2015). As key players in the knowledge and innovation led economy (Etzkowitz, 2008; Walsh *et al*., 2015) the well-being of doctoral researchers is worthy of study.

In 2009, this research intensive university carried out the specifically designed wellbeing study; we repeated the study in 2014 to learn more about the doctoral researcher experience. The research defined well-being to be 'that part of a researcher's overall well-being that is primarily influenced by their PhD position and which can be influenced by university-based interventions' (Juniper *et al,* 2012, 565). The earlier work focussed on the design of the study and methods. This paper highlights key findings of the recent research, which compared results with the earlier study, examined how the doctoral experience impacts researchers, and formed recommendations to enhance their well-being. This presentation considers the results in light of the changing environment in HE, uncertainty and gender issues.

Overall well-being scores were satisfactory. However, although 71% of respondents were positive about their overall experience, other changes gave cause for concern. All domains scored lower for well-being than the 2009 study. The impact of all of the top

10 most important and bothersome items has become greater, and a higher percentage of researchers reported being very or extremely bothered by them than in 2009. Of particular concern were the lower reported well-being levels of women and late stage researchers.

Declines in well-being in doctoral researchers may in part be a product of the situation in higher education (HE). The pace of change in HE, and policy change in particular, is described as 'relentless' (Deem, 2016). Universities are subject to increasing performativity (Deem, 1998 and Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007), increasingly accountable, and at the same time expected to generate wealth and maintain freedom for fundamental research and independent thought. Kinman and Wray's 2013 study reported worsened well-being in staff in HE compared to 2008, with 39% experiencing "unacceptable levels" of stress always or often. Altered national funding for HE can make staff more competitive with each other (Leisyte and Dee, 2012) and all staff may perceive less secure futures. Researchers do not generally report *Supervision* as a cause for concern; in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) researchers were most satisfied with *Supervision,* whilst the *Research Culture* domain scored lowest nationally both in 2008 and 2015 (HEA, 2008 and Turner, 2015). Results from this survey add depth of understanding to the larger studies, academic organisations are urged to implement recommended improvements to the research community to improve the researcher experience (UUK, 2009; QAA, 2013a and b; Juniper *et al*., 2012; Walsh, *et al.,* 2013; Hargreaves, 2014).

Doctoral researchers encounter new levels of uncertainty as they begin their research careers, as an understanding of identity and recognising uncertainty are developed in the final stage of the *development of learning* (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 53). Doctoral researchers face uncertainty as inherent to research, and in a changing HE environment, there is added uncertainty about future careers (Pritchard, MacKenzie

and Cusack 2009, 29; The Royal Society, 2010: McAlpine, 2014 and McAlpine et al., 2015). They are also trained to be critical and so tend to underestimate their own abilities, a factor likely to add to their uncertainty and stress (Kearns et al., 2008).

The impact of items within all domains was greater for women than for men and has increased compared to the 2009 study. Women leave science and engineering disciplines more than men at transitions from undergraduate study through postgraduate research (Gibbs, *et al*., 2014; Hancock, 2015). Ülkü-Steiner, KurtzCostes and Kinlaw highlighted that women expressed lower academic 'self-concept' and lower commitment to their careers than men, which decreased over two years (2000, 304). Nationally there are fewer women in senior academic roles to act as role models; in 2014/15 only 23% UK professors were women (HESA, 2015), while national funding for diversity has decreased since 2008 (CaSE, 2014; HESA, 2015).

As the doctorate progresses the impacts of stress and frustration due to research and increased uncertainty regarding careers and persistent low mood become greater. Writing up students, face increased time and/or financial pressures, as funding may cease or perhaps they are forced to take on employment. Researchers' support systems may change as people leave and join their research environment, and they tend to work increasingly in isolation, factors known to increase stress (Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes and Kinlaw 2000; Jairam and Kahl, 2012; Jawitz 2015). During their doctorates researchers may also notice aspects of life in HE, which do not fit with their initial career interests, often believing that academic careers would not support a work life balance (Mason *et al*., 2009). Late stage researchers often lack clarity regarding their professional identity, and have rarely decided on their next role (Mason *et al*., 2009; Hancock and Walsh, 2014).

The above factors contribute to the decline in well-being in general and over time, to improve the well-being of doctoral researchers we propose four main recommendations: enhance integrated support for doctoral students, in particular for female and underrepresented doctoral students; improve support for later stage doctoral researchers; further develop the training and understanding of well-being for all staff who engage with doctoral students; improve signposting of support to all (staff and students). We also recommend that future national studies incorporate additional relevant questions regarding well-being.

As strategic players in the changing economy doctoral researchers deserve better integrated support throughout their doctorates, and underrepresented groups need more focused guidance. Enhanced research and HE communities would result in researchers and staff who are more aware of the support available to them, access development opportunities and contribute to sustaining the relevance of services they access.

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