

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0319

L10 | Cardiff

Chaired by Owen Gower

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14:15 - 15:30

Postgraduate Researcher Mental Health and Wellbeing

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**Research Domain:** Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

**Abstract:** The purpose of this panel session is to explore national and international perspectives on the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers. There is a growing international research base indicating higher levels of psychological distress and depression, anxiety and stress amongst postgraduate researchers than in the general population (Leveque et al, 2017; Barry et al, 2017; Guthrie et al, 2017). However, in the UK, the Office for Students have invested £1.5 million for in 17 projects through the Catalyst Fund, with the aim of improving support for the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers. As these projects come to an end of the funded period, this panel will consider how the approaches explored by these projects to promote mental health and wellbeing can be embedded in institutional practices and policies, developed into sector-wide good practice and challenge our current conceptions of the doctoral research experience.

**Paper:** The purpose of this panel session is to explore national and international perspectives on the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers. There is a growing international research base indicating higher levels of psychological distress and depression, anxiety and stress amongst postgraduate researchers than in the general population (Leveque et al, 2017; Barry et al, 2017; Guthrie et al, 2017). Although universities are increasingly aware of the mental health and wellbeing requirements of undergraduate students, the specific factors impacting on postgraduate researchers' needs and how these might be addressed have received less attention. However, in the UK, the Office for Students have invested £1.5 million for in 17 projects through the Catalyst Fund, with the aim of improving support for the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers. As these projects come to an end of the funded period, this panel will consider how the approaches explored by these projects to promote mental health and wellbeing can be embedded in institutional practices and policies, developed into sector-wide good practice and challenge our current conceptions of the doctoral research experience.

**Contributors:**

*Dr Owen Gower, Director of UK Graduate Council of Education (Chair)*

*Dr Jane Creaton, University of Portsmouth: Developing and Implementing Sustainable Institutional PGR Wellbeing Strategies.* This presentation discusses the specific challenges in developing institutional strategies for PGR mental health and wellbeing. Changing the institutional culture and commitment to mental health and wellbeing requires senior management buy-in, better data collection and monitoring and increased resources, but how can this be secured, particularly in the context of potential reductions in funding in the sector? Drawing on a policy analysis of UK universities' responses to the StepChange Framework, I consider the extent to which this has been a driver for change for mental health and wellbeing and what lessons can be drawn for the implementation of policies to support PGR students.

*Paul Roberts, University of Sussex.* This presentation will draw on the findings from the University of Sussex Catalyst grant together and papers from the 1st International Conference on the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers to provide recommendations for institutional practices and policies for Higher Education Institutions. The Sussex project aimed to: (1) understand the prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst PhD students; (2) identify risk factors that may make PhD students more vulnerable to mental health difficulties; and (3) identify protective factors that may help PhD students maintain a good mental health. We conducted a mixed methods systematic review, identifying publications focused on PhD student mental health and mental health problems.

*Professor Fiona Denney, Brunel University London and UK Graduate Council of Education.* This presentation explores some of the reasons why postgraduate research students experience mental health problems, illustrated with anonymised case examples from the presenter's own "case book" of dealing with postgraduate research students at a number of institutions. This presentation finishes with a summary of the work done by the UKCGE Working Group on Postgraduate Student Mental Health and Wellbeing under the three workstreams of Individual; Institution and Systems and invites participants to consider how they might be able to contribute positively in their own institution or sphere of practice.

There are a number of key themes running through the three presentations, including the balance between individual and systemic responses to mental health; changing institutional cultures and the relationship between the doctoral study and mental health. Some initial questions to start the discussion include:

**Discussion Questions**

1. How can a community of practice be developed to enable the exchange and dissemination of good practice in this area?
2. How can the evidence generated from existing research and projects be used to inform policy and practice?
3. How can we embed the learning from projects into the day to day practices of institutions?

**References**

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doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(3), 468–483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.142597>

Guthrie, S., Lichten, C., van Belle, J., Ball, J., Knack, A., & Hofman, J. (2017). *Understanding mental health in the research environment: A rapid evidence assessment*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND

Levecque, K., Ansell, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868–879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>