

Walking and Wayfinding Together – Weaving the Tapestry of PGR Community through the Walk'n'Talk Initiative

Carrie-Anne Sturt, Mariia Tishenina, Chiara Colombo, Jessica Eccles-Padwick, Amelia Frances Ernest-Shay, Matthew Greenhalgh, Phuong Tu Nguyen, Keisha-Ann Stewart, Thilini Nilanka Weerasooriya, Delta Wright, Danielle Vipond
Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Embarking on a doctoral journey can be a transformative experience, but it also presents challenges, such as isolation and disconnection, that can impact the well-being of postgraduate researchers (PGRs). Recognising the need for targeted support, a group of PGRs at a post-1992 campus-based university have initiated a grassroots approach to address these challenges and celebrate individual personal victories through the "Walk and Talk" initiative.

This paper will present insights into the power of shared journeys in doctoral education for fostering a supportive research culture that nurtures the well-being and growth of PGRs. The "Walk and Talk" initiative serves as an inspiring example of PGRs taking ownership of their academic experiences, co-creating a transformative environment that facilitates personal and professional development.

Full paper

Following ethical approval, this study employed a collaborative autoethnographic methodology to explore how walking and open dialogue can address the challenges faced by PGRs. The key research questions addressed are: what are the sociological and psychological impacts of the Walk'n'Talk initiative on participants, and how does the initiative contribute to the development of research skills, researcher identities, and a purposeful academic community?

"Belonging" in an academic context is a well-documented issue for many PGR students (Grant et al., 2024; Hattersley, 2022) and is associated with challenges in three main areas: isolation, separation of power, and collaboration (Caligiuri et al., 2022; Cruz et al., 2022). Recognising these challenges, a group of PGRs at a post-1992 UK university initiated the

grassroots Walk'n'Talk initiative. This innovative project leverages the simple yet profound act of walking combined with open dialogue to foster a sense of belonging, promote mental well-being, and enhance research culture among PGRs.

This collaborative autoethnographic study explores the sociological, psychological, and physiological impacts of the Walk'n'Talk initiative. Higher education institutions can promote social integration and community building by providing spaces that encourage “individuals with shared interests or identities to come together” for “face-to-face interaction ... in small group settings” (Laryea & Brandtner, 2024, p.181). Yet, while social rhythms have become normalised, this normality is “driven by the rhythms of capital” (Lefebvre, 2004, p.279) rather than by the unique rhythms of the PGR journey, in which both time and space shape the academic experience (Shaw & Blazek, 2024).

Walking and talking offer PhD students an opportunity to disrupt the conventional rhythm of production and performativity. By stepping out of traditional academic spaces and into the natural surroundings of the campus, participants benefit from environments that stimulate both physical activity and meaningful conversation.

"What stood out most to me after reflecting on all the walks I went on was that we were learning from each other, even though we were not all at the same stage in the PhD process. I learned how to navigate aspects of academia as well as UK culture, how to celebrate my wins while recognising that the best laid plans do go awry, yet I do not need to focus on the failures."

Participant 2 - Reflective Excerpt

These “mini journeys” may not only alleviate feelings of isolation but also facilitate the development of research skills, strengthen researcher identities, and contribute to building a purposeful academic community. The trust fostered through exercising together has been documented as both a physical and social factor that enhances the productive elements of study (Grant et al., 2024). The rhythmic activity of walking in natural surroundings fosters a conducive environment for deep discussions, helping participants align along parallel trajectories in their academic and personal lives.

"I remember feeling tired and drained after teaching a class, hesitant to attend the walk-and-talk appointment since I only had a one-hour break between classes. I decided to go nonetheless and as I walked, I found myself unwinding, decompressing and truly enjoying the experience. By the time I returned to teach my next lesson, I felt refreshed, reenergised, and invigorated. I taught my lesson with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and vitality."

Participant 3 - Reflective Excerpt

Preliminary findings suggest that the Walk'n'Talk initiative offers a transformative approach to addressing the common challenges faced by PGRs. Participants report improved well-being, greater confidence in their academic roles, and enriched perspectives on interdisciplinary collaboration.

"As we walked, we discussed our work with a renewed enthusiasm I noted was lacking from our day-to-day interactions wherein we survived the flux of the academy. I knew about my peers projects and had heard the details recited in numerous meetings and classes, but to hear about their work in detail with a fresh enthusiasm in this new space was inspiring and empowering."

Participant 5 - Reflective Excerpt

The initiative also provides insights into supporting neurodiverse doctoral students by creating an accessible and empathetic space for dialogue.

*"I did my original one walk and talk and absolutely felt an instant kinship with the person I had walked with. For the first time in probably 18 months, I felt that someone was actively experiencing the issues I was going through with my academic studies and could relate in a way that made it really clear to see it wasn't just *me*"*

Participant 4 - Reflective Excerpt

By weaving together diverse experiences and perspectives, the Walk'n'Talk initiative demonstrates how small-scale interventions can create a resilient support network that enriches both individual journeys and the broader academic community.