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Enhancing PhD students' wellbeing using creative methods (0300)

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Introduction:

Globalisation, rising social inequality, job insecurity and increased pressures to succeed are leaving Higher Education students more susceptible to mental health issues than ever before. Key stressors on PhD students include financial insecurity, job insecurity in academia and work life balance (Levecque et al., 2017). Equally, societal changes mean that mental health concerns, work-life balance and wellbeing are becoming more openly discussed and students seek more help. Also, universities are becoming more resourced to provide relevant support, for example through HEFCE's 2017 Catalyst fund specifically to focus on wellbeing of researchers. Within that the focus on PhD students is somewhat limited, and yet, nowhere in academia are contradictions and challenges more palpably embodied than for doctoral candidates. Caught in a liminal space between 'undergraduate studies' and 'professional' status, they are both made aware of and invited to overcome the barrier of progressing into academia. Yet, as only around 20% (Vitae, 2009) of doctoral graduates will go on to work in academia, they have to fathom and formulate a future whilst undertaking the PhD.

We argue that within the context of competing ideologies, drivers and experiences, paying attention to, and gathering information about PhD students' wellbeing is key to understanding the impact these conflicts have on those who are at the 'cutting edge of' and furthering knowledge and learning in HE. Some studies have sought to quantify and measure PhD student wellbeing (Levecque et al., 2017; Juniper et al, 2012), yet, our work is centred on a series of workshops to provide students with reflective tools to enhance their wellbeing and resilience. In our paper, we present the context and background as well as the impact and outcomes of the workshops delivered to postgraduate students at the University of Kent's Graduate School.

Context of the workshop at University of Kent

The mission of the Graduate School at the University of Kent is to provide cutting-edge training and education for the wider postgraduate community across all faculties and schools. Within that work over the years, we have realised that we need to consider the PhD

experience on its own terms, as it is indeed very different from undergraduate or Master's level provisions. The experience of isolation is a serious issue for PhD students and building a community is often seen as difficult, near impossible. Also, the PhD involves a move towards professional status but that does ultimately position the student in the status of novice until the PhD is achieved (Beeler, 1991), whilst at the same time a certain level of conceptual sophistication is required, as after all the PhD needs to represent a significant contribution that advances one's discipline (Trafford and Leshem, 2007). For the PhD students, the research project itself might be troubling, as the working process is more unstructured and uncertain: researchers often don't know what they are going to find exactly before they find it. Margaret Kiley (2009) and Gina Wisker et al. (2010) have investigated how PhD students encounter the PhD process describe a process of 'crossing thresholds' and PhD students often described the process of doing a PhD as an emotional rollercoaster. And this is where students' reports of concerns around wellbeing is particularly relevant.

What is wellbeing?

Counter-intuitively, it is easier to start of thinking about wellbeing through negatives and what it is not. Wellbeing cannot be done to people; they choose to pursue it for its own sake (Seligman, p.321). It cannot be reduced to a mental state or to happiness, and indeed it is not the same as happiness. It is a construct, but the reality of wellbeing is that its meaning differs with experience, context and positivity; wellbeing is contingent, and relational, it depends on someone's interactions with other people. The *National Accounts of Wellbeing* (2009) explains that wellbeing is 'a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community' (p. 18). And this is indeed what PhD students often express within the Graduate School.

The workshop using creative methods

In order to respond to the PhD students' needs we have designed a series of workshops, which we offer to all PhD students within the University of Kent. The workshops integrate our complementary approaches, utilising Author1's expertise in creative methods, and Author2's coaching skills. The workshops provide participants with reflective tools, which, if applied consistently, help students understand their innermost emotions, concerns and needs. This recognition of personal experiences and feelings provides the first step towards developing strategies for wellbeing. On the other hand, the workshops also serve as a basis for an action-research to gain better insight into postgraduate students' views, challenges

and understandings, especially in relation to wellbeing. We would like to focus on three student workshop activities: “Who am I?”, “What does your learning journey look like?”, “What is your PhD?”. The activity “Who am I?” draws on the use of objects and metaphors, and through the process of reducing an experience to its essence and subsequently elaborating on that essence, students implicitly learn how to reflect deeply. The following two activities build on this process of reduction and elaboration through the use of a river drawing activity and LEGO bricks. Students work in groups to represent their learning journey as a river and will then build their individual LEGO model of learning.

Concluding thoughts

Through our presentation we would like to demonstrate our work with the doctoral students, but also open up a discussion regarding wider issues around wellbeing. The role of creative methods in relation empowerment is exemplified in existing work (Lyon, 2016; Author1, 2017; Author1, 2018). And indeed, according to students’ feedback it is the experience of empowerment and sense of belonging that helps centre their emotions and therefore appears to have beneficial effects on wellbeing.

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