

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0242

P12 | Raglan

Chaired by Kay Guccione

Thu 12 Dec 2019

16:45 - 17:15

How much do we appreciate international postgraduate researchers' psychological wellbeing?
Perspectives from their first port of call

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Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract: With the increasing recognition of a link between doctoral studies and psychological distress, a greater focus on postgraduate researchers' mental health at the global level and in the UK can be observed. Recently, a key report has highlighted how the circumstances of the international cohort make them the most vulnerable due to the distinct challenges they typically encounter. This paper focuses on the UKCISA-funded research, which investigated doctoral supervisors' understanding and existing support provision available to the international postgraduate researcher cohort. Being their first port of call, this paper argues how crucial this area is, presents the emergent findings and its implications not only for students, but equally, for their supervisors and the institutions. Reflecting on the 'protective factors', 'stress triggers', and other 'distinct' circumstances that supervisors observed from this cohort, a joined-up approach with practical recommendations for students, supervisors, academic developers and HE institutions will be proposed.

References below

Paper: The presence of international postgraduate researchers (PGRs) can be observed in almost every British Higher Education Institution. According to HESA statistics, there were nearly 50,000 PGRs (both full-time and part-time) from outside the UK (EU and non-EU) in 2016-17 (www.hesa.ac.uk). Whereas a doctoral education sojourn is anticipated to bring about educational and career-related opportunities, substantial adjustment to new academic and societal cultures is nevertheless expected as part and parcel of their international experience.

With the heightened focus on doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing (Barry et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017) as well as recognition of the distinct circumstances faced by the international cohort, there is arguably a continuing necessity to gain a deeper appreciation of this intersection. To further such understanding, a key document published by Vitae suggests that international PGRs' circumstances make them the most vulnerable of all doctoral learners:

Among doctoral schools and faculty staff, discussions about which groups of PGRs are most vulnerable to developing poor mental health were often dominated by difficulties experienced by international PGRs. There was recognition among staff that PGRs coming to the UK from countries with very different cultures could struggle and were likely to experience a combination of risk factors. International PGRs newly coming to the UK for their doctoral degree were likely to be vulnerable due to a combination of reasons, including their ability to adjust to a new culture, their existing cultural mores, finance, visas, family circumstances and potentially less access to family and friend support. (Metcalf, Wilson and Levecque, 2018, p. 26)

Despite the potential challenges, previous research in this area also highlights a number of ways in which international PGRs may not only cope but even thrive in their doctoral experiential journeys (see Bengtson, 2016a,b; Elliot et al., 2016a; Wisker et al., 2017). This may require openness to the various opportunities presented to them as a consequence of embarking on an educational sojourn leading to the co-existence of two ecological models. Each ecological model is largely informed by the influences from both their home and host countries. Some of our earlier research in this area offered viable platforms in which the idea of a thriving international PhD experience can materialise. This may involve harnessing the distinct strengths that international PGRs bring with them; actively exploring the benefits offered by the hidden curriculum; and/or proactively seeking to enhance their overall learning experience by pursuing their own 'third space' (Elliot et al, 2016a,b,c). Likewise, enabling and maximising these opportunities can be complemented by the approaches thoughtfully employed by the supervisors when engaging with their international PGRs (e.g. Elliot & Kobayashi, 2018), or more tailored provision created for international PGRs or for staff members who support them (i.e. supervisors, mentors, PGR administrators). Unsurprisingly, the quality of supervision has also been highlighted as being a key influencer of PGR happiness, PGR mental health and how students perceive whether their PhD was 'worth it' or not (Bryan & Guccione, 2018; Cowling, 2017).

Our UKCISA-funded research aims to contribute further to this debate by offering a critical perspective on this important subject. Acknowledging the crucial role played by PGR supervisors on the overall quality of PGR experience, our research focused on the invaluable insights of those who are regarded as the first port of call for the international PGR cohort. In this regard, our research primarily investigated and addressed the following questions:

- What is the level of understanding about mental health and wellbeing issues of international doctoral students amongst UK-based supervisors?
- To what extent are UK-based supervisors equipped to respond appropriately to these mental health and wellbeing needs?

- What additional support or resources would supervisors benefit from to be better able to support international doctoral students' needs?

This research was undertaken by a team of researchers from the Universities of Sheffield, Glasgow and Heriot-Watt. Drawing upon Seligman's (2011) five elements of well-being theory: 'positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment' (p. 16), the research team seek to understand the psychological wellbeing of international doctoral students through the eyes of their supervisors, and explore the support that is currently offered to both the supervisors and their doctoral students. Participant recruitment was principally undertaken via social media networks (e.g. Twitter) with support from key UK organisations (UKCISA, UKCGE) in order to reach the highly experienced doctoral supervisors (n=15). Our in-depth interviews with supervisors from different UK HE institutions were facilitated by a creative research tool that is intended to explore their observations of the most stressful periods during the international PGRs' journey.

Following an inductive NVivo-assisted data analysis, we highlight some significant and intertwined findings.

- Our study suggests that the international PGR cohort is 'more vulnerable to increased stress'. It was also reported that 'disclosure' could be an issue in itself.
- Supervisors highlighted the key stress points in the doctoral journey, e.g. the settling period, fieldwork, and the writing up period leading up to submission and viva.
- On a positive note, many international students have inherent 'protective factors', which help them cope, e.g. strong work ethic, resilience and survival instinct.
- Seemingly, there are 'stress triggers' that are unique to this doctoral cohort – isolation and loss of a strong social network, different academic culture causing confusion over expectations and non-academic external pressure.
- There is lack of training and support provided to supervisors. Currently, most support comes 'informally' from their fellow supervisors.
- Supervising international and/or home students who experience poor mental health and wellbeing has a huge impact on their own psychological health.

Although the focus of the investigation was on understanding issues pertaining to the psychological wellbeing of international PGRs and possibly seeking effective support mechanisms, our findings point to matters that require greater attention in an effort to support not only our students, but the supervisors who are expected to support them. Our study strongly advocates that promoting a healthy mental health and wellbeing necessitates a joined-up and pre-emptive approach from all key stakeholders as we present practical recommendations for students, supervisors, academic developers and HE institutions.

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