Is it just me?
Discussing mental health and the PhD experience

30 January 2019
16:00 – 20:00

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Equity concerns & postgraduate wellbeing

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Introduction

• Institutional responses tend to overlook links between wellbeing & inequalities - wellbeing positioned as individual responsibility.
• Important to open up spaces to talk about mental health, emotional issues and self-care strategies & support needs for those with ongoing mental health conditions / experiencing mental distress;
• Need to consider impacts of experiences of marginalisation and structural inequalities within hierarchical elitist and neoliberalised academic settings;
• Impacts of highly stressful, performative and competitive academic culture, including experiences of exploitation, bullying and precarity;
• Risk is to label and re-stigmatise those who are struggling as ‘individual failures’.
Overview

• Contextual factors;

• Stress factors of the doctoral journey;

• Wellbeing and learning;

• Academic culture & belonging:

• Conclusions.
The studies

• HEA funded. Led by Professor Gina Wisker.
• Following learning journeys of 30 arts, social sciences & humanities doctoral researchers over two year period - interviews and written reflections on learning moments.
• Three institutional case studies including focus groups with students and staff & 20 interviews & survey of over 200 postgraduate researchers.
Postgraduate mental ill-health: A problem with the individual?

- Contextual factors:
  - Universities: high postgraduate competition; performative culture - pressures to publish, win funding; ‘competition / importance of ‘proving’ your success is intense at times and can undermine confidence.’
  - Many postgraduates working in exploitative conditions and facing potential years of precarious employment (if lucky) & expected to be mobile;
  - Academic culture - lack of recognition for emotional / caring domains of life;
  - Hierarchical, lack of diversity, exclusionary - sense of non-belonging among non-traditional learners, including mature women, carers, ethnic minority learners, International students, those with disabilities including mental health challenges (Vitae report: Metcalfe, Wilson and Levecque, 2018)
  - Lack of resource - is enough being invested in university support services / health promotion / mental health awareness?
  - Broader factors - austerity, economic uncertainty, high student fees, declining public services - lack of safety net; broader inequalities, discrimination along lines of gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, language, religion, citizenship status.
Stress factors of the doctoral journey

• Time and financial commitment, including loss of earnings; requires sustained motivation.

• Financial difficulties, poor housing, worries about homelessness;

• Uncertain status; ‘You’re not part of the staff but you’re not like an undergraduate, you know, who goes in and does what they’re told. So you’re in this kind of... this can be quite unsettling and it can influence and disrupt your work as well.’

• ‘Feeling deskill ed having come from a job I knew exceptionally well and was at a high level in my field, to feeling like I know nothing at all!’

• Lack of resource such as space within department / work station;

• Isolation - not feeling part of academic community & distance (social, emotional & geographical) from support network;

• ‘It means putting up with a lot of disrespect from people because of what you do. They just see you as a layabout, still a student, when are you going to get a proper job?’
The doctoral journey ctd.

- Juggling different responsibilities:
  - ‘Juggling studies, work and family... too little time to do all adequately and I feel that I am not giving 100% to all’ (survey respondent)
  - Not always possible to compartmentalise, separate from life -
  - Life experiences, bodies, emotions, responsibilities and relationships do not always fit with rigid bureaucratic requirements and pressures to complete.
  - Problematic supervisory & collegial relationships, including bullying
  - ‘I mean I have, I have been ill as I couldn’t say it’s as a consequence of just being a student, but being a student and working at the same time I’ve definitely been ill just as a consequence of being exhausted from pulling those two things together. So that’s kind of physically, but I... just mentally it’s very draining and like I think it can also be hard when you work here and you’re a student here.’
- Exploitative situations - difficulty saying no due to widespread precarity.
‘I’ve been given sort of increased teaching responsibilities, which is great but I think it’s quite challenging for me because I think that they give you thirty hours to teach something, and I think that’s kind of fine for someone who’s been doing it for five years. I think when you’re starting everything from scratch and you’re re-evaluating everything that you did in a session, and trying to look at what you would do better next time now, actually thirty hours doesn’t seem... you know so I think that’s quite time consuming and I really feel quite responsible for the students. You know it’s not kind of like oh I’ll just do that and it’ll be all right, I sort of take it quite seriously, which I think is a good thing. But it means it’s quite time consuming. I’ve also been asked to write a book, which is just also amazing but it’s like the time commitment is enormous. So I’ve sort of got that going on top of my normal kind of work load and then [I have a child] and I am the main carer in the house, you know, food shopper, dinner cooker, bedding changer, clothes washer, you know.’
Wellbeing & doctoral learning

• Emotional and ontological as well as intellectual journey.

• ‘Troublesome knowledge’ in relation to doctoral journey (Cousin, 2003; Meyer and Land, 2006; Wisker, Morris et al., 2010)

• ‘I mean it was sometimes probably, yeah it was sometimes quite unsettling I would say, also because I encountered ideas that are new and kind of sometimes makes you look at the world differently and it’s sometimes, you have the feeling it’s, everything gets quite relative. I mean especially with that sort of theory everything... yeah is there anything you can really believe in anymore or is there like certain knowledge?’
‘It’s my belief that a PhD involves a collective offering of knowledge but it also does involve that, you know, where you have to bowl on your own at some point. I think the problem is that too much of the PhD experience is weighted towards the latter, bowling alone: going to the library, come back in three years and you have your PhD and not enough of the recognition that through your data, selection, through your conferences you attend, through your correspondence with other people, through your supervision sessions that it is not a solo act, a PhD, it’s a collective [offering] of knowledge but we just don’t have that recognised ... I think that kind of cultural issue is at the heart of why a lot of students do experience social isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging to community.’

‘I would say there’s a correlation between social isolation and your sense of wellbeing. I would say that it does affect your health, I think we are social animals and we’re put in a situation where we’re expected to be very, very individualised people and I think a lot of people struggle with that. I think you need to talk to people about your ideas, you need to hear back from other people what they think about your ideas and if you don’t have that then that can have an impact on your wellbeing, I definitely believe that. I think it can lead to bouts of depression for some people.’
Belonging

• Main factor identified as contributing to sense of wellbeing;
• Exclusions in the academy - uncertain status of doctoral researchers in hierarchical environment;
• Academic culture - To what extent are doctoral researchers valued? To what extent are their voices heard? What role do they play in their departments / institutions?
• ‘...feelings of initial isolation as I am not part of an academic establishment’ (survey respondent)
‘You think okay well have I not got any say in here, my voice is not being heard and I think that can be a bit unsettling when you don’t know really where your place is and you feel like, okay I’ve got space and I’ve got... but it’s, you know, I could be chucked out any day and again, also as your work is concerned you feel is anybody interested in what I’m doing apart from my supervisors, it doesn’t seem to be the case. You know so it’s, you feel it’s the in-between position of a PhD student I think that can be, can be unpleasant.’

‘I think you have to feel supported. I think you have to have a coherence between what you’re thinking and what you actually perceive out there. I think that lack of recognition can lead to many ways to a feeling of isolation, to the detachment of anything broader. The best way to... the best way I feel that you can enhance wellbeing is to have the students involved in self-determining activities. There’s no better way to have a sense of wellbeing than feel that you have some power and some control over what’s happening round about you.’
International students

- Difference educational contexts, approaches to research and writing;
- High expectations of support.
- Academic English language and conventions;
- ‘I think from overseas students, especially Asian students, the struggle is the academic difference between UK or western country and Asian countries. For example when I do my research, masters research, or when I supplied my article to public Chinese journal, I think that in the UK teachers told me you don’t say I think. So I just give an example, the assessment between Asian countries and western countries are so different. We need to cope with this difference. The second thing is the way to write a sentence, it’s totally different. So to Asian students or foreign students, Asian students I think there are, how to say, academic difference is very important as it is one first things they need to cope with, they struggle.’
- Missing family / friends - homesickness, culture shock;
- ‘...when I come here last year I think the first thing I had to cope with is homesick although it is a really nice place and everyone treated me very well and so kind and so helpful but I can hear alone, yeah. I miss my family members, my daughter, my husband so the first thing I needed to cope with is homesick.
- Need to financially support family - Additional pressures to complete - citizenship concerns.
Conclusions

• Range of institutional strategies to respond to postgraduate wellbeing needs;
• Each learning journey is unique so there can never be a ‘one size fits all’ solution;
• Equity issues at the heart of these endeavours;
• Nuanced understandings of the multi-layered factors which can impact on mental wellbeing including contextual and broader structural factors;
• Impact of precarity, exploitative working conditions;
• Understanding interrelation of learning and wellbeing;
• ‘Whole learner’ approach.
References


• Metcalfe, J. et al. (2018)


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BECOMING A RESEARCHER
The most significant events that mark PhD students’ journeys

Isabelle Skakni, PhD
University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland &
Lancaster University

Queen Mary University of London
January 30, 2019
OUTLINE

• RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
• DESIGN & SAMPLE
• PHD STUDENTS’ MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
• FURTHER THOUGHTS
THE PROJECT

Reseaaeh Identity Development
Strengthening Science in Society Strategies

RID·SSISS
Researcher Identity Development: Strengthening Science in Society Strategies
2017-2019

The RID·SSISS project aims at re-conceptualizing the role of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and providing them with innovative and quality educational resources to help them develop as researchers and successfully face current societal challenges and establish satisfactory careers.

The specific objectives are:

To design, implement and assess interactive online research-based resources to help ECRs (PhD students and post-doc) face challenges concerning interactions with supervisors, teams and communities of reference; scientific writing and production; ethics and ethics of research, and strategies for developing resilience and regulating emotions.

To develop, validate and set-up digital tools that contribute to developing ECR identity and career trajectories through effective participation in the professional and scientific communities of reference.

To raise awareness within the European scientific community of the importance of researcher identity and career development through the presence of these digital tools.

www.researcher-identity.com
Cross-Cultural Mixed-Method Study

- Online survey
- Semi-structured interviews
- Open-ended questions
- Network map
- Journey plot

RESEARCH DESIGN

ERASMUS+ RESEARCHER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT (RID-SSISS)
RESEARCH DESIGN

Focus: Most significant events

Cross-Cultural Mixed-Method Study

- Online survey
- Semi-structured interviews
- Open-ended questions
- Network map
- Journey plot

ERASMUS+ RESEARCHER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT (RID-SSISS)
The UK
Online Survey
108 Docs
71 Postdocs
9 Docs
11 Postdocs

Switzerland
Online Survey
124 Docs
45 Postdocs
12 Docs
13 Postdocs
SAMPLE

N = 232
Age = 31.5
154 Female / 78 Male
206 HSS / 26 STEM

The UK
Online Survey
108 Docs
71 Postdocs
9 Docs
11 Postdocs

Switzerland
Online Survey
124 Docs
45 Postdocs
12 Docs
13 Postdocs
**MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS**

The most positive event or experience from the beginning of my doctoral journey until now was when... *(please note when, where and who was involved)*

This event or experience was important to me because...

At that time I felt...

In relation to this, now, I feel...

The most negative event or experience from the beginning of my doctoral journey until now was when... *(please note when, where and who was involved)*

In that moment, what I did was...

This event or experience was important to me because...

At that time I felt...

In relation to this, now, I feel...
SIGNIFICANT EVENTS - Previous year Switzerland

- Spent Christmas at university writing proposal for conference
- Break-up
- Struggling with analysis
- Abstract submitted
- Super positive feedback (poster)
- Working on my thesis (writing & analysis)
SIGNIFICANT EVENTS - Previous year UK
**POSITIVE EVENTS**

- First paper accepted
- Invited to prestigious conference
- Stimulating fieldwork experience
- Getting exciting findings
- Stimulating teamwork experience
- Getting fellowship

**NEGATIVE EVENTS**

- Paper rejection
- Discouraging feedback
- Big set of experiments failed
- Change framework
- Difficult relationships supervisor/colleagues/peers
- Supervisor changed universities

**SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION**

**RESEARCH PROCESS**

**RESEARCH COMMUNITY**

**RESOURCES, AFFORDANCES & LIMITATIONS**
**PERSONAL LIFE**
- Birth of a child
- Illness
- Family responsibilities

**AGENCY & COGNITIVE/AFFECTIVE REGULATION**
- Losing inspiration
- Experiencing high levels of stress

**ACADEMIC CULTURE**
- Becoming aware of the competition culture

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT**
- Research stay abroad
- No job prospects at the end of the PhD
MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Important because…

- Validation by others
- Self-validation
- Motivation
- Sense of accomplishment
- Future career implications
- New understanding of oneself/lesson for the future
MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
Feelings & Emotions

SUCCESSFUL
ENTHUSIASTIC
RECOGNISED
INVIGORATED
ELATED
HAPPY
PROUD
SUPPORTED
SATISFIED
INVINCIBLE
THRILLED
CONFIDENT
INTELLIGENT

FRUSTRATED
ALONE
DOWNCAST
TRAPPED
HELPLESS
NOT UNDERSTOOD
BETRAYED
DEPRESSED
CONFUSED
DISAPPOINTED
DISSPIRITED
TIRED
OVERWHELMED
DOING A PhD IS A UNIQUE AND HIGHLY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS TALK ABOUT

• Quality of relationships with supervisors, colleagues and peers
• Perceived support
• Perceived competencies
• Perceived adequacy with one’s doctoral /academic environment
• Self-confidence, self-esteem and well-being

PhD STUDENTS’ TRAINING & SUPPORT IS A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY
BECOMING A RESEARCHER
The most significant events that mark PhD students’ journeys

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On self, becoming and belonging in the PGR supervisory relationship

Richard Hall | @hallymk1 | rhall1@dmu.ac.uk | richard-hall.org
the commodity form, stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of [humans]; [their] qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of [their] personality, they are things which [they] can “own” or “dispose of” like the various objects of the external world.

And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which [humans] can bring [their] physical and psychic “qualities” into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process.

Re-engineering Higher Education: The Subsumption of Academic Labour and the Exploitation of Anxiety

Richard Hall, Kate Bowles
this makes me feel like just another p-number rather than a human being

a tension in identity: a constant dishonesty

guilt and a dangerous cycle of self-loathing

she has voiced several times that all I care about is work

finding balance is unrealistic

culture, immigration and mental health
Jekyll and Hyde supervisors

clashes in expectations

the drive to both formalise the processes and expectations around progress could lead to amplified anxiety - completing a PhD is not a linear and even process

it often felt like the best and most authentic part of my work as 'an academic'... only achieved by trying not to spend too much time on performance management

[supervisors] put 'me as a person' before 'me as a PhD candidate', so I felt safe to tell [them] when I was struggling
living a feminist life:
• does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct;
• although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world);
• how to create relationships with others that are more equal;
• how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems;
• how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls.

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