



# postgraduate researcher mental health and wellbeing

recommended priority actions,  
october 2019

# postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are central to teaching, research and community-building in universities.

There are particular pressures and challenges around mental health and wellbeing faced by all in universities, and some of these challenges are acutely heightened for PGRs. But while there is increasing action to support PGR mental health and wellbeing, there is a need for more clarity about what to prioritise.

## **This public statement sets out our proposed priority actions.**

This public statement sets out our proposed priority actions. It was developed through the Courage Project, and inspired by the Courage Festival on 11 September 2019. We thank everyone who has contributed. The statement is aimed at University staff, PGRs, University leaders, higher education policy actors and funders [1]. The following page sets out the headlines which we explain in more detail in subsequent pages.

### **Main headlines:**

- Mental wellbeing is something that affects all of us, while some people are affected by mental ill health. Both are experienced differently by different people.
- To reflect different experiences, a wide range of voices should be involved in developing actions, in partnership between academics and professional services, PGRs and Students' Unions.
- Base actions on evidence and understanding of how previous actions have fared in practice, and create actions that generate further evidence.
- Actions of three different types should be considered :
  - Supporting people living with mental health or wellbeing issues
  - Prevention through helping people develop appropriate skills for stressful circumstances
  - Prevention through removing potential risk factors at institution and system level
- Within each type of action, both individuals and institutions have a responsibility to act.
- Postgraduate research is in some ways a microcosm of university life, covering teaching, research, personal and professional development, regulation and community-building. The actions proposed here could be usefully applied well beyond postgraduate research.

# supporting people: these actions are about supporting people living with mental health or wellbeing issues

## How can you, as an individual, support people living with mental health or wellbeing issues?

- Develop your own skills and experience in effectively supporting others, for example: an understanding of mental ill health, or taking training like Mental Health First Aid, Emotional Intelligence, Action Learning facilitation.
- Be ready to signpost people to appropriate support services.
- If someone talks to you about their mental health, listen attentively and non-judgmentally. People don't always want solutions, rather someone to listen to them.
- There are many wellbeing support initiatives. Look, see if there is something that you are interested in trying, and get involved.
- Practice self-compassion: schedule breaks for exercise, spend time doing activities beyond your work, connect with other people.

## How can institutions support people living with mental health or wellbeing issues?

- Understand the variety of lived experience of mental ill health. People with a range of experiences, backgrounds, ethnicity, genders, and sexualities should always be consulted and listened to in designing interventions.
- Support varied and accessible activities, training and development around mental wellbeing throughout postgraduate research, such as wellbeing drop-in sessions, PGR Walks, assertiveness training, self-compassion, active listening, and Mental Health First Aid training.
- Improve communication between individuals, and between teams, functions and Schools.
- Create clear, systematic, and consistent signposting to key resources and support services.
- Encourage and support staff to be advocates for mental health and wellbeing.
- Embed mental health and wellbeing in organisational culture through language and practical resources, such as targeted funding and through managers, staff/supervisors, and PGRs using wellness action plans (WAPs).
- Recognise and work with wider context (e.g. national policy, learning from other institutions) and organisations such as the NHS.
- Evaluate the impact of wellbeing initiatives. Positive intentions can have mixed impacts in practice.

# prevention (individuals): these actions are about helping people develop appropriate skills for stressful circumstances

Many of the priorities under 'Supporting People' are equally applicable to helping prevent problems. We don't need to wait until we are in a crisis.

## How can you, as an individual, help others develop appropriate skills for stressful circumstances?

- Use your experiences to help others - be willing to share while actively listening.
- Consider using practical strategies such as: bullet journaling, keeping diaries, maintaining social networks, engaging in developing your community within and beyond your own discipline or area, regular exercise (any physical activity is beneficial: walking, gardening, running, climbing...), keeping a balanced diet, and sharing stories of setbacks, struggles and successes.
- Celebrate success, and not just that based on academic achievements; understand more about your colleagues as people.

## How can institutions help people develop appropriate skills for stressful circumstances?

- Support resilience strategies. They need to be well-led, structured and run. Making resources available to small groups to meet/self-organise is important.
- Raise awareness of such activities, embedding them in the cultural landscape. Make them normal rather than niche.
- Recognise differences between people across disciplines, identities and circumstances.
- Discuss with staff / PGRs what could be done to improve work-life balance.
- Clarify PGRs' responsibilities, and also what they can expect from whom.



# **prevention (institutions and systems): these actions are about removing potential risk factors at institutional and system levels**

## **How can you, as an individual, help remove potential risk factors at institution and system level?**

- Be aware of language used around mental health, wellbeing and those affected [3].
- Record issues of bad behaviour, including harassment, bullying, sexual misconduct and discrimination.
- Develop personal openness to supporting others. This can be through Personal and Professional Development training, such as Mental Health First Aid.

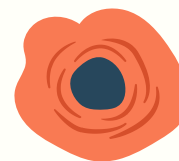
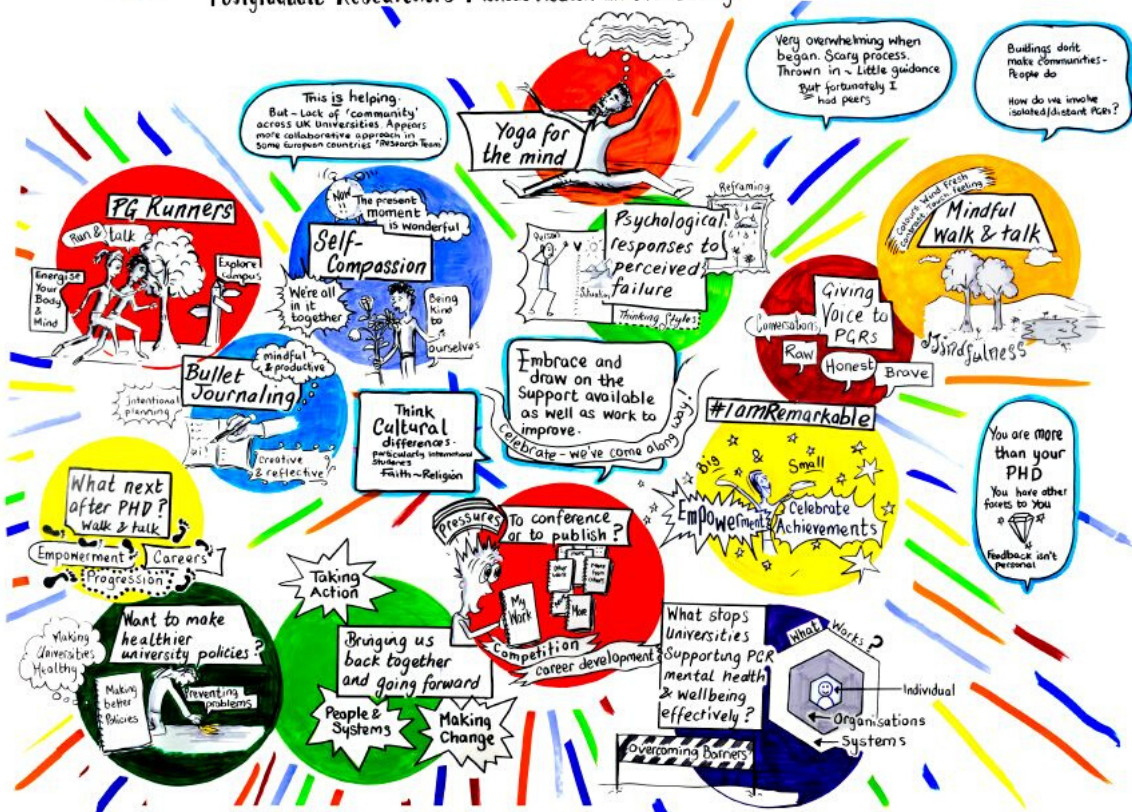
## **How can institutions help remove potential risk factors at institution and system level?**

- Provide clear and confidential avenues for people to report, and raise concerns about, harassment, bullying and sexual misconduct.
- Ensure basic structures are in place. For example, do all PGRs have two supervisors?
- Recognise importance and priority of individual PGR workspaces.
- Embed wellbeing into supervision and supervisor training and consider supervisory skills when hiring staff.
- Engage with sector-wide good practice for supervisor development and support [4].
- Include wellbeing within reviews of staff workload.
- Assess all university policies for potential mental health impact before decisions are made.
- Challenge casualisation of PGRs who teach, for example ensure transparent hiring practices.
- Ensure policy on wellbeing is co-designed, up-to-date and working.
- Build identity within department/group/Faculty, and monitor health of sub-cultures within Schools and professional services.
- Run good appraisal and mentoring systems that notice and address difficulties early.
- Be sensitive to potential effects of competition between PGRs, for example for jobs.
- Develop initiatives for financial support such as PGR hardship funds, and support for visa costs.

# Courage Festival

Postgraduate Researchers Mental Health and Wellbeing

#couragefestival19



1. Funded under the Catalyst network by the Office for Students and Research England. It is piloting new approaches to prevention, intervention and cultural change around mental health and wellbeing among PGRs. It is led by the University of East Anglia, in partnership with UEA Students' Union, the Norwich Bioscience Institutes, and the University of Suffolk. For more details, please see [www.uea.su/courage](http://www.uea.su/courage) and contact [courage.pgroffice@uea.ac.uk](mailto:courage.pgroffice@uea.ac.uk)
2. See Memish, K.; Martin, A.; Bartlett, L.; Dawkins, S.; Sanderson, K. (2017) Workplace mental health: an international review of guidelines. *Preventative Medicine* 101: 213-222
3. See for example guidance at <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/media-centre/responsible-reporting/mind-your-language>
4. See for example the UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme <https://supervision.ukcge.ac.uk>