The Researcher Toolkit

Examples of Practice, The Student Mental Health Evidence Hub

The Student Mental Health Project is an Office for Students (OfS) funded project that aims to help higher education providers develop their student mental health interventions. The project has developed a Student Mental Health Evidence Hub, a free resource consisting of an evidence-based toolkit, evaluation guidance, examples of practice and the results of our sector engagement and student panel work. The project was led by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) as part of a consortium with What Works Wellbeing, SMaRteN, Student Minds and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.

This document contains an example of practice to support student mental health in higher education. This is one of a number of examples which have been collated as a result of calls to the sector issued by TASO. Please note that the information contained in these examples is not endorsed by TASO, and TASO has not been involved at any stage of intervention development, delivery or evaluation. We are grateful to the participating higher education providers for sharing information to facilitate the development of these examples.

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Overview

Higher Education Provider:	University of Plymouth
Intervention Title:	The Researcher Toolkit
Intervention Type:	Peer Support
Target Group:	Postgraduate students
Date:	October 2023

With thanks to Emily Burchell of Manchester Metropolitan University in developing this example of practice.

Brief overview of the intervention

Research has shown that 32% of postgraduate research students (PGRs) have or may develop a mental health problem, and 50% experience significant symptoms (Levecque et al., 2017). In addition there are high attrition rates within PhD programmes, with many citing leaving for the sake of their mental health. There is a need for initiatives to recognise their unique experiences and the stigma surrounding accessing support. PGRs make up a small percentage of UK students and there is a lack of mental health provision designed primarily for their use. Moreover, practitioners designing the Researcher Toolkit identified that there is an additional stigma associated with PGR mental health needs as it is seen to reflect badly on their research ability and careers.

Previous PGR workshops at University of Plymouth (UoP) titled 'Coping with stress' or 'Managing anxiety', delivered by staff, were very poorly attended, likely due to stigma. The Researcher Toolkit is a novel intervention to address a gap in provision. There is some evidence to support peer support models in mental health support (Repper and Carter, 2011) and the Toolkit combines the peer support model with other evidence-based approaches such as CBT techniques, as well as critical pedagogy.

The Researcher Toolkit aims to be a proactive, positive and preventative approach to postgraduate mental health. It prevents the development of mental health difficulties by promoting good working practice and self-care. The Toolkit facilitates early intervention by equipping PGRs to notice early warning signs and act before problems escalate. It aims to avoid and reduce stigma by promoting cultural change towards accepting wellbeing as part of researcher development. It also aims to initiate dialogues and create networks of social support among PGRs.

A previous mixed-methods evaluation showed the Toolkit was rated as enjoyable and helpful by PGRs, and that they valued peer-integration and refreshingly open dialogues about wellbeing and working culture. The Toolkit subsequently won the findaphd.com award for 'Best Postgraduate Wellbeing Intervention' in 2021.

Intervention approach

The intervention began in 2018 and the pilot study ran for one year, 2018/19. It is ongoing with no planned end date. The Researcher Toolkit consists of five researcher development workshops. These include research skills and tips for PGR study, with messages about wellbeing, work-life balance, good working practice and self-care, and incorporates CBT techniques. A peer support model is adopted where PGR Workshop Leaders run the sessions, and a hybrid approach is offered with a classroom and webinar version of each workshop. The workshops last two hours each with a 10 minute break and are spread across the academic year, taking place once every few months. Workshops are designed so that students can participate in any workshops, in any order. For example the first workshop, titled 'What next? Starting a project and maintaining momentum', is more suited to new starters, although more experienced PGRs still attend and benefit.

The workshops are open to all PGR students. Leaders were recruited through online advertising and email. In order to maximise engagement, workshops were advertised as researcher development, without the mention of wellbeing. This approach fits into a growing field of stealth interventions for mental health support, that embed wellbeing discreetly, but avoid stigma by branding as wellbeing workshops. Crucially, this was not misleading as workshops did cover researcher development, but framed within overarching messages about prioritising wellbeing. Workshops are advertised as part of the Researcher Development Programme (within the Researcher Development Programme catalogue and via email communications to PGRs).

Resources required

The workshops were designed by a postdoctoral research fellow (PGR in clinical psychology at the time). Four people from each of the School of Psychology, Student Wellbeing Services, Research Development Manager initially critiqued and developed the workshops which were then delivered to the recruited PGR Leaders, who gave feedback and reflections and helped co-create the sessions.

20 PGR Workshop Leaders were recruited and given 12 hours of induction training (four hours of training per workshop). The Leaders were a diverse and representative group including a mix of genders, ethnicities, ages, home and international students, full-time, part-time, funded and self-funded students, all in at least year two of study.

The costs to produce the workshop materials and run the pilot were covered by grant funding from the Office for Students / Research England (£140,000 in total). The materials are now freely available from the University of Plymouth website. It is recommended that Workshop Leaders are paid for their time at demonstrator rate (approx. £18/h) and paid for preparation time as well as workshop delivery time. Once the first cohort of Workshop Leaders are trained using the Workshop Leader training materials, they can then train the next cohort, and so on. The total budget to maintain the programme at Plymouth is approximately £2,500p/a.

Intervention evaluation

A mixed methods approach was adopted with the aim of assessing the Researcher Toolkit's success in being universally appealing to a diverse range of PGRs.

The outcome measures considered:
- Whether the workshops were enjoyable
- Whether the workshops were helpful
- Whether the workshops were worthwhile
- Whether PGRs recommend workshops to peers
- Whether PGRs would consider attended another session
- Whether Workshops Leaders enjoyed delivering sessions
- Whether Workshops Leaders felt the sessions were well received by attendees
- Whether Workshops Leaders felt adequately prepared

Focus groups were held with Workshop Leaders, Online feedback from PGR leaders and attendees was collected and Likert scales scores presented as percentages. The data collected from focus groups were analysed thematically.

To fit within the timescales of the funding period, we focused on the first two levels of Kirkpatrick's model of training evaluation: initial reactions and the degree to which learning was internalised. Longer-term projects could address the higher levels of the model, including resulting behaviour change and institution-level impacts. Evaluations across institutions would also be beneficial

The evaluation found high satisfaction ratings for the workshops, from both the students and the leaders. Themes identified from thematic analysis included meeting new peers; health and wellbeing; group sizes; engagement during workshops; perceived positive changes; suggestions for improvement; value of peer delivery; workshop leader training. The focus groups with Workshop Leaders found that running the intervention was good for their own mental health. Workshop Leaders found that teaching techniques meant they were embodying them, as well as the social aspect of making connections through the workshops

Attendees found workshops enjoyable, helpful and worthwhile, and Leaders enjoyed delivering workshops and felt prepared to do so. Findings from the qualitative analysis suggest that the project met its wider aims of prioritising well being and self-care, acting on early warning signs and reducing mental health stigma.

Recommendations

Specific to the Researcher Toolkit:
- Adopt the University of Plymouth approach to branding the Toolkit to maximise PGR engagement.
- Aim for groups of 5-10 PGRs, facilitated by two Workshop Leaders.
- Host sessions in rooms large enough to move around comfortably.
- Offer webinars to increase inclusivity.

Recommendations for policy and practice:
- Peer-integration should be explored and tested in a higher education context.
- PGRs feel empowered when reassured that their institution prioritises wellbeing and work-life balance.
- Institutions must balance interventions targeted at individual students with ongoing critical analysis of systemic issues surrounding environment and culture.

Next steps

There are discussions happening on ways to scale up the intervention through various evaluation methods, potentially through collaboration with other universities, such as, for example, by comparing levels of mental ill health within PGR before and after introducing the Toolkit.

Materials are freely available online but there is perhaps a need to better 'advertise' to other institutions.

Links

Researcher Toolkit: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/your-studies/research-degrees/toolkit/resources

Evaluation:
Homer, S.R., Solbrig, L., Djama, D., Bentley, A., Kearns, S. and May, J. (2021). The researcher toolkit: A preventative, peer-support approach to postgraduate research student mental health. Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education, 12(1), pp.7-25.
https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10026.1/16601/The%20Researcher%20Toolkit%20Homer%20et.%20al.pdf?sequence=5

References

Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J. and Gisle, L., 2017. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. Research Policy, 46(4), pp.868-879.
Repper, J. and Carter, T., 2011. A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services. Journal of mental health, 20(4), pp.392-411.