

## ESCalate Themed funding: Student Well-being Grant Project Final Report

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**Project Title** Troublesome Encounters: Strategies for managing the wellbeing of Postgraduate Education students during their learning processes

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# **Troublesome Encounters: Strategies for managing the wellbeing of Masters and Doctoral Education students during their learning processes**

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## **Executive Summary**

This research investigated factors in the learning of masters and doctoral students in Education which impact on their wellbeing. It started with the premise that postgraduate learning often involves transformation, yet encounters with new concepts and ways of being can trigger anxiety and uncertainty. Exploring these troublesome encounters, we aimed to identify strategies to enhance wellbeing and therefore success. The project has built on previous research conducted by the investigators, which included an HEA NTFS funded research project 'Doctoral learning journeys' (Wisker, Morris et.al 2010) and an individual NTFS project (2005- 2011) led by Professor Gina Wisker, alongside University of Brighton research and development into student wellbeing led by the researcher Charlotte Morris (Marshall and Morris, 2011; Morris with Wisker et.al, 2011). This ESCalate project brings together the central themes of research student supervision, threshold concepts theory and student wellbeing. It was funded by an ESCalate Themed funding 'Student Well-being' Grant and was run from the Centre for Learning and Teaching in the University of Brighton in collaboration with the University of Strathclyde and the University of Durham.

## **Project Aims**

1. Develop theoretical understanding through capturing troublesome encounters specific to Education research students;

2. Explore how these encounters impact on personal, professional and academic wellbeing and
3. Identify wellbeing enhancement strategies which students, supervisors, programmes and institutions can employ to enable wellbeing, emotional resilience and successful learning experiences.

### Research questions

1. In what ways do encounters with troublesome knowledge impact on the wellbeing of masters' and doctoral students in Education?
2. What strategies can students employ to enhance their wellbeing, develop emotional resilience and enable a successful learning experience and achievement at this level?
3. What strategies can supervisors, programme leaders and others employ to support student wellbeing, develop emotional resilience and enable a successful learning experience and achievement at this level?

### Summary of main research findings

#### Academic wellbeing

Academic wellbeing is conceived, on the basis of this research, to be a combination of the personal and learning oriented qualities and skills students bring to their studies, the opportunity to develop these, the resources available to them and the community and culture to which they belong and which shape the conditions for success. Research students experience wellbeing when they belong and contribute to their academic community, when their basic welfare and health needs are met, they are able to achieve a balance and way of working which enables their best learning to take place and when they are nurtured, challenged and encouraged to achieve their potential.

#### Preparedness

The anxieties participants experienced were often related to how far they felt prepared for the commitment, level and potential intensity of their studies. This suggests a possible need for more pre-entry support, guidance and advice for M- and D-level applicants.

#### Community belonging

A sense of belonging to community of peers, to institution and wider academic community was the main factor identified by research students as contributing to their academic wellbeing. This included a sense of being valued and having a clear status as a research student. Universities have a crucial role to play in nurturing a positive research student and

academic culture. Peer mentoring was identified as being one potential way forward in enhancing community belonging and achievement.

### **Academic Culture and Environment**

Student participants felt that a positive academic culture which nurtured confidence through collegiality and a valuing of research students and research contributed to their sense of belonging and wellbeing. It was also seen as beneficial when wellbeing concerns were made explicit and visible and where resources to nurture wellbeing were made available, seen as part of a framework for success and the development of essential life and professional skills. Research students highlighted the need to feel to feel empowered and for their voices to be heard so they had some control over their environment. The use of physical environments and spaces were essential in facilitating quality learning and in underpinning a positive, non-hierarchical, integrated and fulfilling research culture.

### **Positive supervisory relationship**

Key to the development of successful supervisory relationships, according to participants, is regular supervision and / contact, good availability, positive and constructive feedback, enthusiasm for the students' research and a non-hierarchical or collegiate relationship.

Students valued supervisors being aware of their personal issues and concerns as well as their academic progress, or in other words had a 'whole student' focus. Supervisors play a vital role in facilitating community belonging and in providing crucial support and signposting at times of vulnerability.

### **Equitability**

A concern arose from the study in terms of equitability with some mature, women, disabled students and those with additional work and family responsibilities finding it difficult to access resources and training. The study identified a need for much more focus on the needs of part-time students. The theme of equitability is one which should be investigated further in order to ensure the needs of diverse students are being met and that they are given the best opportunity to achieve academic wellbeing and success.

### **Troublesomeness in Education research student learning**

Troublesomeness can occur for Education research students when they move beyond their comfort zone in learning, getting to grips with new theoretical perspectives, ontology and epistemology, challenging and re-evaluating previously held ideas. This can be exacerbated when students have built up fixed notions of the world and of their discipline through previous experiences and professional practice. Educational theories can therefore seem counter-intuitive and bring practices into question. Troublesomeness can also be heightened where there are additional experiential or cultural barriers to learning experienced by mature

students who have been out of Education for an extended period, those new to Education as a discipline in itself and International students who have come from contrasting Educational cultures and environments to those in which they are studying now at M or D level.

Troublesomeness is, however, a normal and necessary part of a successful learning journey and this should be made explicit for students. At the same time there does need to be a strong safety net of support and community in place to foster resilience when students are experiencing times of vulnerability with additional challenges to their wellbeing.

## Literature

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In postgraduate learning, profound ontological anxieties and uncertainty may accompany encounters with unfamiliar concepts and ways of being, described here as *troublesome knowledge* and *troublesomeness*. Intellectual boundaries, ways of seeing the world and teaching practices are tested and possibly transformed (Barnett, 2007; Meyer and Land, 2003; 2006) and so for Education students, this may impact on personal, academic and professional identities. Theories of threshold concepts, conceptual thresholds, and the accompanying notion of *troublesome knowledge*, provide a framework for approaching these challenges to ways of thinking and being in the world, as learners and educational practitioners.

Threshold concept theory initially explored discipline-specific transformative learning processes for undergraduates (Meyer and Land 2003; Cousin 2003; Meyer and Land 2005; Meyer and Land 2006). More recently, the concept of ‘conceptual threshold crossing’ has referred to postgraduate students’ development in terms of ways in which they understand knowledge and themselves (Kiley and Wisker, 2008; Kiley and Wisker, 2009; Wisker, Morris, Warnes, Cheng, Masika, Robinson, Trafford and Lilly, 2010). This wider body of work begins to explore encounters with troublesome knowledge in terms of conceptual and identity development. Analysis of examiner comments suggests that doctoral students encounter troublesome knowledge in the form of perceptions, understandings and issues which are unfamiliar or problematic (Trafford and Leshem, 2009) while supervisors have observed moments of ‘stuckness’ or developmental blockages which can impact negatively on self-esteem, confidence and lead to attrition (Kiley, 2009). Related factors identified as impacting on postgraduate student wellbeing include academic isolation (Poyatos-Matas, 2009); role confusion in academic identity development (Jazvac-Martek, 2009); complexity of the doctoral experience (Beauchamp, Jazvac-Martek, and McAlpine, 2009) and the need

for emotional support (Shacham, and Od-Cohen, 2009). However, to date, the links between wellbeing and learning have not been fully developed or sufficiently focused on student perspectives.

The project was conducted in the context of growing concern, debates and research around student mental health and wellbeing, which in turn relate to wider debates around equity and sustainability. Developments such as the national Mental Health in Higher Education project, a Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education committee and the Health Promoting University movement (Dooris, 2001) have highlighted these concerns. A recent report on student mental health by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) suggests that these issues are more pressing than ever in the current economic climate. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995), SENDA (2001) and the Disability Equality Duty, which came into force in 2006, along with the Duty of Care legislation require that higher education institutions attend to the wellbeing needs of their students. This project contributes knowledge development relating to the relationship between learning, teaching and wellbeing, enabling HEIs to meet these responsibilities through learning, teaching and supervisory practices which enhance students' wellbeing and empower their learning. Through embedding wellbeing in academic settings and enabling postgraduate students to build emotional resilience, it offers a sustainable approach to the personal and learning development of Education professionals – enabling them to cope and engage with the many intellectual and professional challenges that arise. The continued promotion and development of wellbeing in universities, to which our team are committed (see Marshall and Morris, 2011), has the potential for widespread health, economic and social benefits nationally and internationally.

The World Health Organisation definition of mental health and wellbeing provides a starting point for approaching the concept of 'wellbeing' and the project has discussed ways in which it is relevant in a learning situation, to enhance *academic wellbeing*: '*...a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his /her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.*' For the purposes of this study we are primarily concerned with wellbeing in its 'eudaimonic' sense, or pertaining to human flourishing as opposed to its 'hedonic' use which relates more narrowly to feelings of happiness or the avoidance of pain (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Expanding and developing the concept of wellbeing, the research included the personal, emotional and ontological as well as academic dimensions of postgraduate student learning.



These have tended to be neglected as has the relationship between wellbeing and learning more generally (Poyatos-Matas, 2009). While previous wellbeing developments have tended to focus on the physical dimension of wellbeing, this project explores affective domains of learning and intellectual wellbeing. Wellbeing enhancement strategies have been explored as tools to empower students to cope with risk, uncertainty and insecurity in their learning and to develop emotional resilience.

Wellbeing emerged as an important theme in the HEA NTFS funded 'Doctoral Learning Journeys' project (Wisker, Morris et al, 2010; Morris, Wisker et.al., 2011) which recognized a number of factors which can impact on the wellbeing of doctoral students during the course of their learning journeys. Doctoral study, along with other forms of postgraduate study, can be a major time and financial commitment which requires sustained motivation and momentum. The supervisory relationship has the potential to be problematic and doctoral students often reported feeling personally and academically isolated. The status of the research student can be uncertain as they do not always feel they belong to the student body but are not always seen as equal to academic staff, although they may simultaneously be working in academic roles and contributing to their academic community. Some research students experience issues around identity, uncertain as to how they fit in to academic culture and many also experience academic insecurity, struggling to manage criticism, along with ontological insecurity that can come with exploring new forms of knowledge and different ways of seeing the world. Postgraduate learning can be an intensive experience which contains a significant emotional dimension due to pushing personal and intellectual boundaries as part of their conceptual threshold crossing (Wisker, Morris et.al 2010), ontological and epistemological development and discovering potential as well as limitations. This study highlighted the need for further research to identify ways to safeguard and enhance research student wellbeing, enabling them to build emotional resilience to deal with the personal and academic challenges they may face.

## Research Design

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This research adopted a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques, in order to produce both generalisable research for use in the wider sector and an

in-depth, rich description of learning experiences. Methods included a survey, focus groups and semi-structured interviews (please see Appendix 1, 2 and 3 for schedules). Criteria for inclusion were that the participants are currently studying in Higher education at masters or doctoral level in Education. An online survey, utilising survey monkey, was distributed nationally (through Vitae and a range of 16 individual HEIs) to identify the various ways in which postgraduate Education students encounter troublesome knowledge and the potential impact on wellbeing. Through a series of open and closed questions, the survey explored whether there are particular disciplinary concepts which students find troublesome, it captured moments where they become stuck and drew out challenges faced in terms of ontological and epistemological development. The survey attracted over 300 responses in total although just 209 fully completed which may be due to the length of the survey and also the depth of some of the questions which therefore meant it took more time and thought than shorter questionnaires. It produced quantitative and qualitative data, providing frequencies in terms of what students find challenging, at what stage in their studies; exploring how such experiences impact on their wellbeing, and strategies they and their supervisors can employ to enable them to continue to move forward in terms of their personal and learning development.

Following on from and informed by the survey, focus groups of masters and doctoral students recruited at two institutions explored notions of conceptual threshold crossing and troublesome knowledge in relation to wellbeing. They captured shared understandings from the student perspective and enabled reflection on students' learning experiences. Through purposive sampling we engaged a cross-section of students in the research (masters, doctoral, International / home, part-time and full-time) to allow a variety of perspectives to emerge. Focus groups with supervisors, programme leaders and those involved in research student learning in Education provided staff perspectives on student learning processes, captured further wellbeing enhancement strategies and provided opportunities to consider further developments. Initially we hoped to run focus groups at each of the three participating institutions but they took place at two, due to timing issues and restructuring at one of the institutions.

**Semi-structured interviews** with 20 students recruited from all three institutions, including PhD, EdD and masters students, explored their experiences in more depth, leading to the development of case study resources. Open questions were designed to capture experiences

of troublesome encounters and learning breakthroughs, explore factors relating to these learning processes which impact both negatively and positively on wellbeing and identify positive strategies which they, their supervisors and institutions do or could potentially employ to enhance their wellbeing and learning (see interview schedule in appendix). Participants were recruited through named academic staff in Education at the participating universities. An invitation was forwarded to all masters and doctoral students in Education via the appropriate administrators and the project was publicised by members of academic staff. The total number of participants was twenty and this provided ample data for the purposes of completing the survey and focus group data and providing in-depth insights in order to answer the research questions. Content analysis was undertaken for each qualitative data set, with data coded and organized into themes by the researcher. Findings are triangulated in the conclusions, drawing together the main themes which run consistently throughout the findings.

## Student Survey findings

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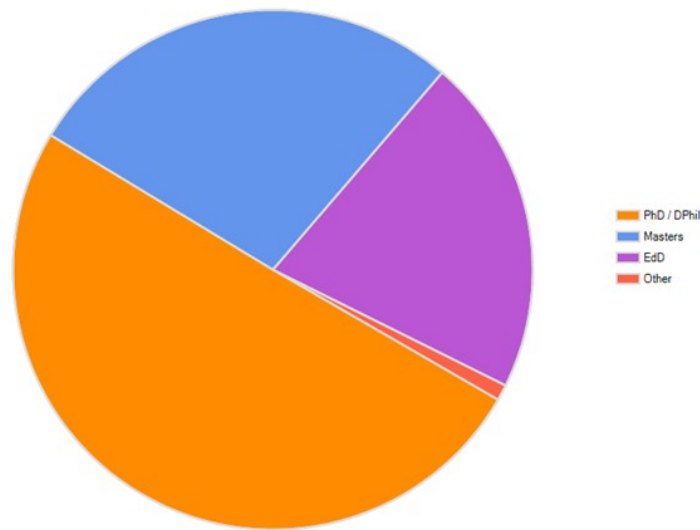
The survey for postgraduate students in Education was designed and piloted with 8 participants from Brighton in May, following ethics approval being granted. The survey was distributed in early June via course administrators in participating institutions and also a further 20 institutions approached by the researcher. The majority of questions are designed to elicit qualitative responses (see survey questions in Appendix 1). In addition, the survey invitation was distributed via the Vitae networks. Promotion of the survey focused on the participating institutions to ensure that students had the opportunity to engage in the project with the potential of participating further, in focus groups and/ or interviews.

The sample is summarised below:

**No. respondents: 309; 209 fully completed**

**Programme of study**

What programme of study are you currently following?



Others (including MPhil, PhD 1 + 3, Prof Doc in education and Child Psychology)

**Part-time** 56.5% ; **Full-time** 43.5%

**Home** 66.1%; **International** 33.9%

### Participating Universities

University of Edinburgh  
University of Manchester  
University of Sussex  
University of Leicester  
Liverpool John Moores University  
University of Birmingham  
Nottingham Trent University  
University of Durham  
University of Oxford  
University of Dundee  
University of Brighton  
University of Lancaster  
University of Strathclyde  
University of Essex  
University of Warwick  
University of Glasgow

## Findings

### 1. Positive aspects of higher level study

Participants were asked ‘*what are the positive aspects of studying at this level?*’ and identified a broad range of personal, professional and academic benefits, summarised below.

Comments indicate ways in which participation in postgraduate learning can benefit overall

wellbeing, enabling research students to make a contribution and achieve their personal and academic potential.

### **Knowledge Development**

- *'Deeper understanding of education research and theories'*
- *'Being able to focus on an area of personal interest in depth'*
- *'Learnt a lot of theories I didn't even think about before'*

### **Thinking Development**

- *'Developing the skills and competencies for critical analysis'*
- *'Deeper level thinking and the ability to express own ideas'*
- *'The intellectual stimulation of thinking about new concepts'*

### **Engaging in Learning**

- *'It has been really interesting to be learning again!'*
- *'Joy of learning.'*
- *'I have been retired from teaching for 8 years. I have enjoyed having my brain stretched again and working with very bright young people.'*

### **Becoming an independent learner**

- *'The fact that you explore different paths of your research field on your own.'*
- *'Independent study – you get to explore issues in depth.'*
- *'freedom to learn independently.'*

### **Becoming reflexive (about self, learning, practice)**

- *'I have become more reflexive in my professional and personal life'*
- *'Reflecting on own learning, views and values.'*
- *'Opportunity to reflect on personal practice.'*

### **Positive impact on practice**

- *'It's challenging my practice as a school leader.'*
- *'It has had a positive impact on my teaching practice.'*
- *'I have developed my understanding of how students learn.'*

### **Academic Freedom**

- *'Freedom, freedom and freedom. It's great working on your own, deciding your own path.'*
- *'Freedom to manage own time and to make own decisions about what to focus on and how to go about the research.'*
- *'It allows for more autonomy and individual expression.'*

### **Specific academic tasks**

- *'The reading I have done and getting articles published.'*
- *'The writing process and the final product.'*
- *'I love writing my thesis – I think of it as my 'book' and I have always wanted to be an author.'*

### **Being part of the academic community**

- *'Meeting a range of people from diverse backgrounds and sharing ideas'*
- *'Going to conferences, meeting like-minded people.'*
- *'The ability to network and gain key International contacts.'*

### **Making a contribution**

- *'I have used my research to give workshops.'*
- *'Finding gaps in research and how my research may help to fill the gaps.'*
- *'Ability to influence things positively.'*

### **Personal achievement**

- *'I have had satisfaction from studying and meeting course deadlines.'*
- *'A personal sense of achievement.'*
- *'Achieving something I thought I never would or could.'*

#### **Improved personal effectiveness**

- *'The need for better time management.'*
- *'Stress reduction.'*
- *'I'm learning to overcome difficult things in an easy way.'*

#### **Skills development**

- *'Raised confidence, presentation skills, networking, writing skills, working autonomously, taking initiatives.'*
- *'Learning to plan and work through a major project.'*
- *'It has forced me to be up-to-date with current literature and it has made me seek out and use analytic tools such as Nvivo and discourse analysis.'*

#### **Improved career prospects**

- *'Gain useful knowledge for future career'*
- *'The potential for better employment.'*
- *'Opens up further job opportunities and potential future avenues to pursue.'*

#### **Enhanced personal / professional status**

- *'Professionally people take more of an interest in you after you start doctoral study and it was essential to get my current job.'*
- *'Respect of other people – both academics and everybody else.'*
- *'The feeling of 'almost' getting to become a doctor and the immense pride I will feel when I reach the end.'*

#### **Improved confidence (personal, academic, professional)**

- *'I like the feeling that I can speak fluently on the topics I have studied.'*
- *'It is helping my self-esteem.'*
- *'Enhanced confidence as an academic.'*

#### **Enhanced understanding of research**

- *'Understand the background philosophy to undertaking research.'*
- *'I'm more aware of the way research is conducted.'*
- *'A deeper understanding of the whole research process.'*

#### **Contrast with / enrichment of day job**

- *'It's a nice break from "working with students" ... now I work with "adults".'*
- *'Taking time out of a job to do further studies.'*
- *'Level of enrichment to daily working life.'*

#### **Interaction with others**

- *'Developing broader social and professional networks.'*
- *'I have loved the 'group' nature of the early stages of the EdD.'*
- *'I enjoy the interactions and shared interests with like-minded professionals.'*

#### **Flexibility**

- *'Flexibility within a pre-defined structure with a reliable degree of autonomy and choice over scheduling workload.'*
- *'Institutional flexibility of being a PhD student here.'*
- *'Varied programme content to choose from, can relate to my practice.'*

#### **Access to resources**

- *'Access to cutting edge resources and thinking in the field.'*
- *'Access to journal articles and people to discuss things with.'*
- *'Access to databases and the cross-fertilisation of ideas when meeting other students.'*

## **Support**

- *'The encouragement given for self-development, guidance for putting your ideas into concrete writing.'*
- *'Support and advice from my leader of study.'*
- *'The support I've had for the project from everybody from the lads in the pub, my supervisors, my other half and my work colleagues.'*

## **2. Development**

Students were asked which the most important aspects of their development were, so far in their studies, and data was categorized as pertaining to academic, personal and professional development or in combination. It demonstrates that while some of the motivations and benefits of research student learning are instrumental, e.g. they lead to a promotion, a lot of personal as well as academic and professional transformation can take place, indicating profound ontological and epistemological shifts which irreversibly change outlooks, perspectives and, in the case of professional learning, practices. These findings are in line with findings from earlier research on conceptual threshold crossings (Wisker, Morris et.al 2010).

### **Academic**

- *'Applying the research and critical thinking at this level.'*
- *'Obtain deeper understanding of the field I'm interested in.'*
- *'The fact that my work has been presented at International conferences and that I have something to add.'*
- *'I have learned to read in detail and with more insight I never had before.'*

### **Personal**

- *'Self-belief'*
- *'Personal development is the main aspect for me.'*
- *'Renewed sense of purpose and direction.'*
- *'Personal development, in terms of changing my world viewpoints.'*

### **Professional**

- *'Professionally more confident in my working knowledge.'*
- *'Learning that teaching / learning / education was a discipline and that I could influence how my students learned by facilitating and nurturing situations.'*
- *'It has influenced my leadership skills a great deal.'*
- *'Academic knowledge to align with increasing professional responsibilities – I'm now head of school.'*

### **Overlap**

- *'Belief in my own ability to study at this level.'*
- *'Both academically and personally I have become a more patient and disciplined person.'*
- *'Gaining more academic depth and a sense of satisfaction / fulfilment about being able to study something in depth.'*

- *'Continuous acquirement of new skills and learning to separate family and work time.'*

### 3. Challenges

The issues below have been identified as the main challenges to students' learning. Time / workload and life / work / study balance issues are currently the most frequently mentioned concerns (24%). These results may reflect the high number of part-time, mature students with work and family commitments and the fact that many of these students are also currently working as Education professionals. Clash with demands of workplace and academic demands of course emerged as a major problem for many students, especially MA and EdD students or those on part-time PhD programmes. While workplaces were aware of their academic commitments, it was not always possible to negotiate time off for studies and often the busiest periods of work clashed with submission dates and also the timings of taught elements of courses often clashed with working hours. For others, especially those with family commitments, writing assignments during holiday times was problematic and led to them feeling exhausted and demotivated. This is partly a generational issue - mature students often have multiple caring responsibilities including children and parents. There is also an issue of gender, with women being disproportionately affected by caring responsibilities. A typical comment is that *'family commitments are increasing and it's becoming more and more difficult to juggle everything'*. The graph below summarises the challenges experienced by research students which have impacted on their wellbeing and further common statements to do with challenges around time commitments follow:

*'Getting time off work to attend some of the lectures that I cannot as the lecture timings clash with work times.'*

*'Lack of interaction so far with other students. Conflict with current practice in work establishment. Time'*

*'Juggling studies, work and family- too little time to do all adequately and I feel that I am not giving 100% to all'*

Underlying many of the comments is a sense of lack of *preparedness* and possibly in some cases unrealistic expectations. The requirements of course in terms of time and energy and impact on emotions and person and professional identity can come as a shock. There can also be culture shock regarding academic culture, at times perceived as highly competitive in contrast to other educational or work settings. Research students often report a sense of a



low status as a student, in comparison with academic colleagues and this can create feelings of isolation and not belonging: *'feelings of initial isolation as I am not part of an academic establishment'*. These factors can affect personal and academic confidence, especially for those who have been used to being perceived positively as high achieving individuals in education and / or employment and for those who find the standard of work required is very high in contrast to previous educational experiences: *'Feeling deskilled 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!'*

Often research students are new to Educational theory, having previously studied in different fields and are unused to different learning processes involved. Many have been in practice for long periods of time and have not studied so reading, writing and new technologies can seem daunting.

Transition to a new level of study and also completion are therefore potentially troublesome but transfer of status seems to be particularly problematic and this area should be investigated further – particularly as there was a sense that formal procedures were at times a barrier to learning. This is a typical statement about the upgrade procedure: *'To up-grade from MPhil to PhD, which I managed to do, but it was difficult because there was a fundamental disagreement between myself and the up-grader as we were using two different research paradigms.'*

The following comment demonstrates the emotional impact that formal review processes can have on research students and suggests the need for students to be prepared to take criticism on board and build resilience. It can be particularly difficult to experience dips in confidence due to failure or negative feedback when students are already vulnerable through heavy workloads, family responsibilities and / or health and personal issues. *'I was very upset about my end of Year One review - I had to give a presentation, and I felt that I didn't do very well. I came home and cried for about two days. Ultimately, I took on board the criticism and used it to improve my thesis, but I found the criticism hard at the time.'*

### **Summary of challenges to studying at Masters / Doctoral level (with illustrative quotes)**

**Time / workload:** *'Finding time to study - I don't get any time from work.'*

**Work / life balancing:** *'Balancing home life, 2 children, child care, and study'*

**Motivation, maintaining momentum:** *'Motivating myself to work to a plan. I find I do my best work when I capitalise on day to day energies rather than plan ahead and 'force' it.'*

**Writing:** *'Writing for an academic audience rather than a professional one.'*

**Language barriers** (International students): *'taking class with all other classmates who are British caused difficulty to caught the detail of idea during class discussion but ok for the gist.'*

**Financial / welfare:** *'I would really like to immerse myself more fully in my academic life and I am unable to do this due to finances'*

**Reading:** *'Getting to grips with the literature, some were very easy to read and understand, others were too theoretical and intensive.'*

**Research design:** *'Finding a focus for main research'*

**Supervision issues:** *'Obtaining timely feedback from supervisors and clear guidance'*

**Isolation:** *'Lack of interaction so far with other students.'*

**Coping with disability / illness:** *'Coping with my disability and access to computers.'*

**Access to resources (computers, library, course materials):** *'Access to research papers / books.'*

**Formal / administrative procedures / processes:** *'Formal procedures which are not developmental but 'gatekeeping''*

**Self-belief / confidence:** *'General lack of confidence/small fish-big pond syndrome'*

**Level of work:** *'The level of EdD is far higher than a Masters'*

**Thinking skills:** *'Critical reading for developmental thinking.'*

**Fieldwork:** *'Negotiating my fieldwork requirements in a field where, after my retirement, I no longer have any power or authority and where my work is not high on anyone's list of priorities.'*

**Academic culture:** *'Academic environment where competition/importance of 'proving' your success is intense at times and can undermine own confidence.'*

**Lack of contact time with staff:** *'Lecturers are sometimes not available to discuss assignments.'*

**Lack of support:** *'There is a serious lack of support from the University and my work place. They appear to have forgotten that people on my course work full as teachers.'*

**IT skills:** *'Probably I.T. stuff...everything is so technological now whereas I never had anything like that when I did my undergrad.'*

**Environment:** *'We, the final year students are in writing up process are the ones who use the research room on regular basis yet, we have to abide by the regulations that limit our stay in research room.'*

**Independent learning**

**Troublesomeness:** *'...seeing things that you never thought they existed before'*

**Identity issues:** *'Reconciling identity as a researcher with that of an employee'*

**Analysis:** *'Finding a way of analysing textual data.'*

**Cultural issues:** *'I grew up (personally as well as academically) in Germany and approaches to research and academic writing are very different'*

**Lack of preparedness:** *'It has required skills and emotional commitment I did not anticipate.'*

**Personal issues, Practical issues, e.g. travel to study**

#### 4. Impacts of challenges on research student wellbeing

While there were examples of some positive impacts of encountering some of the listed challenges in the course of their learning, such as improved organization, skills developments and learning to produce a good quality of work in their studies, many negative impacts were reported which included high stress levels, anxiety, isolation, lack of motivation and fear of failure. Particularly concerning were comments which indicated the student was at risk of developing mental health problems or cases where stress may exacerbate existing problems, especially where students reported a poor personal and academic support networks. Stress was reported as having a detrimental impact on academic work and progress and examples of impacts on studies when wellbeing is negatively affected are given below. At times students reported giving up and several participants stated they were seriously thinking about giving up their course. Others were able to seek support, employ strategies to overcome the challenge with many participants experiencing ongoing problems. Illustrative quotes are given below, including those which indicate positives such as learning to prioritize, strengthening relationships and the stimulation of postgraduate study. This is followed by a graph which indicates the frequencies of response when students were asked about the impact on their studies when wellbeing is negatively affected.

**Examples of negative impacts:**

*'Made the experience of study more stressful which impacts on the quality of the work produced.'*

*'At key 'pressure points' I have experienced high levels of stress '*

*'Yes. It makes worried all the time about my work and that I don't feel I am doing much in terms of production'*

*'Yeah, that sense of isolation, it made me feel a bit down, but I just pushed on through and got help from my friends and family :-)'*

*'I feel totally demotivated and I have three years of work and feel that it is now too late to continue with the research...'*

*'During the most challenging times I was serious about giving up. I felt that the anxiety would affect my well-being if I did not do something about it. Peer support and one constant supervisor kept me going.'*

*'I feel that I am sometimes missing out on some of the best years of my life'*

*'I am very afraid of failing.'*

**Both:**

*'I am much more aware of tasks that needs to be prioritised, although I can become somewhat anxious if submission deadlines are stretched.'*

*'Both positively and negatively, as well as personally and academically. It helps to develop my personality and personal life and relationships, but sometimes it can be quite stressful, especially when I knew I was not focused, but I wasn't sure how to overcome it.'*

*'Would probably be bored otherwise. But I sometimes have the feeling of being blocked and that not having finished my thesis is stopping me from moving on to other interesting things I want to do.'*

Equally, when wellbeing is negatively affected, this can have a detrimental impact on studies and so at times students can experience a vicious cycle where they lose confidence and

motivation, their progress is delayed and they are at risk of withdrawal as illustrated in the quotes below.

*'Time spent on it is less effective.'*

*'Lack of concentration.'*

*'Tiredness, whether it's emotional or physical, affects motivation and productivity. It makes it more difficult to keep focussed and it adversely affects the quality of thinking.'*

*'I find I am not motivated.'*

*'I can't move forward with my studies.'*

*'If I am ill or depressed I study even less than usual.'*

*'Gets me down and increases frustration. You start to wonder is this path the correct one?'*

*'I don't want to continue with the studies...'*

*'Simple - I don't study.'*

*'There have been long periods of time when my well-being has been negatively affected (even whole years) and the only thing I did about study was worry about it.'*

*'Can cause one to question ones capacity to engage in learning at this level.'*

### **Impact on studies when wellbeing is negatively affected**

(N=190)

Concentration / Focus – 35 (18%)

Motivation – 23 (12%)

Withdrawal / Delay in Studies – 21 (11%)

Loss of interest / engagement with studies – 16 (8%)

Less time spent on academic work – 15 (7.5%)

Unsure / N/A – 14 (7%)

Lowering in quality of work – 14 (7%)

Decrease in academic confidence – 11 (5.8%)

Mental / physical health – 10 (5%)

Quality of thinking negatively affected – 8 (4%)

Less energy – 7 (3.5%)

Procrastination – 7 (3.5%)

## **5. Factors which help overcome challenges and support academic wellbeing**

The following themes (with illustrative quotes) emerged in terms of what might help students to overcome the challenges in their learning and therefore support their academic wellbeing.

These include more **support** from the institution, from supervisors, peers and support services - as well as supportive family members, friends and partners external to the university – and in particular through more contact with academic staff; **institutional factors** including more general support from their programme or institution in terms of understanding and meeting their needs through for example provision of adequate supervision, communicating expectations and flexibility; their own **personal qualities and strategies** (both intrinsic and learnt) such as the ability to prioritise and inner strength and motivation; **preparation** for each phase of the course, involving clear guidance and opportunities to discuss what is expected and strategies for dealing with problems which may emerge.

### **Support (individual, supervisory, structural, community)**

*'More support with my learning disability.'*

*'More financial support on the form of scholarships or grants from employers and/or the University.'*

*'A supportive partner has helped! Excellent tutorial and email support from tutors has also been very valuable.'*

*'Supportive supervision at the time I need it.'*

*'Support from colleagues (as they understand the PhD experience). In my field (education and development) students travel a lot, so I don't have a core group of close friends/colleagues in my department who I've known for a long time.'*

### **Contact**

*'Being part time, contact with supervisor, support of the course convener and colleagues on the course.'*

*'Talking to colleagues, supervisor, family and friends. Going on to the online discussion board for PhDs, writing them down and reflecting them.'*

### **Institutional factors**

*'Flexibility on the submission dates. Little and often approach to supervision and to study.'*

*'Realistic expectations from the University.'*

*'Having a supervisor!!!!'*

### **Personal qualities & strategies**

*'Mental strength and self-motivation.'*

*'Re-align my priorities.'*

### **Preparation (e.g. for fieldwork)**

*'Perhaps the only thing that might have helped would have been an opportunity to work through some of what I might experience beforehand through discussion or reading about the possible emotional implications of seeing case study work through.'*

*'A more experienced professional might have developed more techniques to deal with it (commenting on experiencing difficulties in fieldwork).'*

### **Barriers**

*'The child care issue is always a problem. It might be solved momentarily but nothing forever.'*

*'Want to take some unpaid study leave but my work won't let me. I'm using my annual leave (i.e. holidays) instead which is only a few weeks but hope it will help nevertheless.'*

## **6a Strategies to safeguard / enhance Research Student Wellbeing: Students**

Strategies which research students employed themselves to safeguard and enhance their wellbeing included prioritizing **peer support**; developing their **work-life-study balance**; engaging in opportunities for **academic development**; developing their **project management** skills; addressing **structural issues** such as the need for study time and flexibility with employers and / or programme leaders and **support seeking** from sources internal and external to the university such as course convenors, peers, professional counselors and family and friends. Examples of quotations from each category are given below:

### **Peer support**

*'Attend support group meetings that are for the appropriate year group. It is best if the Tutors seek to establish business meetings for the course where students attend to help to give a sense of group purpose.'*

*'Getting to know other students going through a similar process and talking about how things are going.'*

*'Peer support - realising that others are experiencing the same worries, stress etc.'*

#### **Work-life-study balance**

*'Have a well balanced life.'*

*'Regularising the working day so study has its place but it doesn't make socialising etc difficult.'*

#### **Academic development**

*'Thinking skills and problem solving skills.'*

#### **Project management, planning**

*'Be prepared for everything and have a plan and contingency plan in advance.'*

#### **Addressing structural issues with employers**

*'Ensuring that employers provide at least some protected time for reading/research.'*

#### **Support seeking**

*'Talking to other post grads, seeking reassurance from supervisor/course convener and therapy provided through the university counselling service.'*

*'On fieldwork I learnt to ask for support when I needed it (e.g. phone parents or friends), which I never used to do. It was a good lesson to learn.'*

## **6b Strategies to safeguard / enhance Research Student Wellbeing: Supervisors, Departments and Institutions**

Strategies which participants suggested supervisors might employ to safeguard / enhance their wellbeing included regular, structured meetings, a supportive approach, have a 'whole student' approach or showing interest in their lives, a 'student centred' approach where the supervision is tailored to meet the students' needs and regular, positive feedback. Strategies for departments and programmes included facilitating peer support, providing both formal and informal opportunities for discussion and socializing and having an awareness of the diverse needs of students, providing flexibility for those who need it. A wide range of potential institutional strategies were identified, including awareness and prioritizing of wellbeing and issues which may negatively impact on student wellbeing; the promotion of wellbeing and opportunities to develop personal wellbeing strategies; more training and support for supervisors, including ring-fencing time to spend on supervision; recognition of the importance of community belonging and resourcing appropriately, providing suitable environments, both physical and virtual, to engage research students and facilitate community building; more opportunities for interdisciplinary interaction; accessible opening hours for part-time students alongside an enhanced general awareness of their needs and concerns; clear guidance about what to expect and what is expected of research students; high visibility

of support services and pastoral care (research students are not always clear about their entitlements and what is available to them in terms of support) and more opportunities for the research student voice to be heard through consultation.

### **Supervisors**

*'Ensure that meetings are structured, regular, and supportive.'*

*'Show interest in their personal lives and not just focus of their academic outcomes, allow flexibility in methods of supervising in order to meet the specific needs of their students.'*

*'Give positive feedback whenever possible - it does lift you at 3am!!'*

### **Departments**

*'Facilitate communication such as small groups tutorials or buddy systems in a more formal way.'*

*'Arrange opportunities for students to meet each other for social activities as well as for studies.'*

*'Have greater awareness that the start/end of terms are the busiest times for those either in Education or with children and that setting deadlines around those times can make things difficult.'*

### **Institutions**

*'Recognise that the process is tough and can be lonely and emotionally challenging.'*

*'Ensure that supervisors have the knowledge and skills to offer students the support they need through the supervisory process. This is a training issue as much as anything else.'*

*'Ensure students studying at this level have opportunity for supported social networking and discussion of issues which might affect wellbeing.'*

*'Lots of students live / do research abroad and it would help a lot if they were better connected to avoid the feeling of being alone. The uni already tries to do this with online tools but it doesn't quite do the trick yet. I think the key is to have something that combines academic discussion with everyday conversation and is enjoyable to use.'*

*'For on campus students there could also be a lot more interaction with students in other departments, especially since they are often working on similar areas - both for fun and academic exchange.'*

*'Get the 2 uni libraries (& the gym) to complement their hours.'*

*'Get the university to realise we are part-time because we work full-time not because we are lazy! The uni ignores our needs totally.'*

*'Reduce the amount of forms and Bureaucratic procedures.'*

*'Clearer guidelines for expectations.'*

*'Maybe talk more about it - because I know there are pastoral people in departments, but nobody really mentions it.'*

*'Institutions could take the need for supervision time very seriously and allocate appropriate hours. The time must not be eaten into by other duties.'*

*'LISTEN more to students' worries and personal concerns. A doctoral degree takes up a huge chunk of your life and it is bound to affect you and your family in a major way; it takes a lot of sacrifices. So, it's important that educators and institutions understand that your performance is directly and inherently linked to your personal wellbeing!! They have to be supportive and not push you because you will quit when they do that.'*



## 7. Summary of Training and Resources identified by research students as potentially supporting their wellbeing

(What is and is not available is institution specific, with much variation and many research students praised their departments / institutions for their provision.)

- Workshops on stress managements, time management, managing wellbeing, emotional intelligence, assertiveness, study skills, budgeting;
- Workshops on research design, research methodology, methods and analysis;
- More discipline specific (as opposed to generic) training;
- Guidance on academic writing and specific support for thesis writing;
- Reading / writing support groups;
- Discussion groups;
- General training on “being a postgraduate student”;
- I.T. and library support specifically for research students;
- More training available out-of-hours;
- More support for those for whom English is not their first language;
- Supportive, positive environment;
- Opportunities for networking, conferencing;
- Facilitation of postgraduate networks;
- More contact with course leaders;
- Regular contact with staff and peers;
- Peer support;
- Social opportunities;
- Better access to Sport / leisure facilities;
- Online resources;
- Support for off-campus students;
- Literature on achieving balance;



- Resources on stress relief;
- Financial support and advice;
- More publicity around available resources;
- Good availability of well-equipped work spaces;
- Improved supervision process;
- Clear complaints procedure;
- Better preparation on what to expect from the course, what is expected of the student and timelines;
- Health and safety training around computer use (to prevent back problems);
- Availability of CBT;
- Assertiveness training.

## Focus groups

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### 1. Research student focus groups

The findings here reflect discussions from eight students from two focus groups across two institutions. The focus groups, as with the staff focus groups, began with a discussion of the idea of ‘academic wellbeing’, taking as a starting point the World Health Organisation definition - which includes the categories of realizing potential; coping with the normal stresses of life; working productively and fruitfully and making a contribution to her or his community - and its relevance to their experiences of postgraduate study. The discussion then went on to discuss what were the most pertinent issues relating to wellbeing for participants, using the survey findings as prompts.

#### Academic Wellbeing

##### Realising potential

Participants discussed that entering into higher level study itself is an aspect of wellbeing as it is a step towards fulfilling potential: *‘...if you’re thinking there’s still more that I can do, I haven’t finished yet, then part of wellbeing is going on to higher study.’* They valued the sense

of achievement from successful completion of their work. The students' internal motivation and discipline were seen as important, alongside sound academic support and a nurturing environment. Personal wellbeing, including physical wellbeing, was seen as an important basis for achieving optimal academic functioning. However, it was noted that students don't always perceive the value of attending to wellbeing issues and may not always make the most of activities, resources or forms of support which are on offer.

### **Coping with the normal stresses of life and working productively and fruitfully**

These categories were seen as highly important and interlinked as it was perceived that there needed to be a level of being able to cope with everyday life as a basis to coping with higher level studies which could be a source of additional stress. It was highlighted that there was a strong link between learning and emotions so it was difficult to distinguish between personal and academic wellbeing. Academic staff, including lecturers and supervisors were identified as a crucial source of support in helping to cope with stresses encountered while studying and peers were also seen as essential. Maintaining a healthy life-work-study balance, including a social life, organisation and attending to personal health and wellbeing were all factors which facilitated productive working as well as enabling students to cope with stress. However, for certain groups of students there were immediate issues and stressors which needed to take priority before they could focus primarily on academic work. For International students coping with homesickness and cultural shock, alongside learning the language and different academic conventions took precedence while for part-time students, especially mature students and those with caring responsibilities needed to learn to manage their time and find a balance which worked. Transition to higher level study was seen as a time where a higher level of academic support was needed, particularly where the student was vulnerable or had additional challenges in coping. It is also a vital opportunity for student to identify their own needs, develop self-awareness and get coping strategies into place and establish support networks in the early stages of their programme.

*'I think if you want to do research work wellbeing is important because the way we cope with or encounter the stresses of life is important.'*

*'To what extent are the stresses we're going through normal and I think in higher education just getting the support you need from academics if they're education or emotional stresses – they are obviously interlinked.'*

*'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 am here*

*alone, I miss my family members, my daughter, my husband so the first think I needed to cope with is homesick.'*

*'I am a part-time student so stresses or the difficulties I might have are doing it alongside my own job and other commitments and they're the biggest thing that might get in the way. So trying to fit it all into place and make sure I give myself enough time to do justice with it.'*

*'It's important to be able to find a structure, to know you're not just flailing around in the middle of nothingness, especially at the beginning when you haven't really honed in on what you're going to be doing – it's important to have academic support in that time... it's also good to have your friends around who are doing the same kind of thing so you can see how they are dealing with it, what are their strategies.'*

### **Making a contribution to the community**

When students were able to contribute, whether through an assignment, presentation or paper, this produced a huge sense of accomplishment and heightened confidence. However, this was the area which provoked the most concern amongst participants about “fitting in”, concerns about the transience of the research student experience and perceptions that community was not prioritised in their department or institution. Promotion and support for the research student community and integration into the wider academic community were seen as potentially positive developments. There was a particular concern about the need for part-time students to feel more connected with their institutions.

*'To be happy, to have this sense of wellbeing is to be comfortable that you can achieve and feel that you can contribute to the community and you can find that from submitting assignments and what have you and feeling like you've got some tangible reward...it's the perception that you can manage between whatever is set for you and being able to complete it and to complete it well.'*

### **Community Belonging**

Focus group participants concurred with the survey finding that a sense of community belonging was paramount to achieving academic wellbeing. The topic was raised among students without being asked specific questions which demonstrates how important this issue is for research students. The feeling of disconnection and transience resulting from a temporary community which is extremely diverse and permanently in flux was voiced, as was

the importance of institutional support in enabling ongoing research student communities to flourish despite their transience. It confirmed the suggestion from the survey that opportunities for talking through research provides an important platform for progression and to deepen knowledge and understanding of the topic. The importance of facilitating these essential informal academic discussions through providing an appropriate environment and dedicated space was an interesting development here. Research students also suggested a need for enhanced virtual spaces in order to more fully include International, distance and part-time learners and those undertaking fieldwork. The final quotation here links this theme to that of academic culture, stressing the importance of developing collegiality among and between staff and students, contributing to a non-hierarchical environment where knowledge exchange and discussion at all levels is encouraged and supported.

*'The issues I raised were about community within our department... you know, there's a limited number of full-time students, mostly international students. People have gone away for field work and, you know, don't necessarily come back to be based here, people are based where they're from so I feel quite disconnected within my department, and then on a broader scale because we're, because education is separate from for example social science the sort of institutional boundaries, which have prevented me from getting to know PhDs from other disciplines even though, you know, my research is X but because that's, you know, the next building along I kind of haven't been able to build up the relationships that I would have liked to I suppose, so it's been a bit frustrating.'*

*'I think if your knowledge is going to be deep within something, what you're learning, you need to have people around whether they be students or other people who you can discuss ideas that you're reading about with because if you don't then you'll get only so far and you won't have somebody who provides a counter argument because you can try and provide it yourself but, you know, if you're completely persuaded of one side it's really difficult to kind of see how... and that would be really enriching for your own work so I think that is something that is better.'*

*'I do think it's important to have spaces where people, where there is sort of informal mixing. Whether that's, you know, a physical space, you know, within the department or sort of just after a seminar, have a little social for people to keep up on with what you're doing and also in my case I think, coz it's very transient, people coming and going I think if there's a strong... lots of informal discussions, sort of building relationships between staff and students and between staff and staff then if I left... for example when I left for a year, when I returned I could just sort of slot back in to where I was, if there's that community already there.'*

*'I was thinking well maybe if one day I become an academic I'll want to be in an environment where me and my colleagues will discuss what we're doing, with students as well and with researchers so... but I do, I do agree it has to have some sort of leadership involved and also to be institutionalised in some sense. You know I've seen some initiatives based on, you know, particularly active students who are interested in organising events and then, you know, it fizzles out when they stop doing it and then wait for someone else to come along to set it up.'*

## Motivation

Motivation was discussed as a theme arising from the survey and a combination of intrinsic personal qualities such as self-awareness and determination were stressed, at the same time as the recognition that departments can facilitate the development of certain personal qualities such as self-awareness. The importance of signposting and being introduced to new ideas or topics is highlighted, so that students do not feel overwhelmed by the volume of ideas and literature. For Masters students, the benefit of attending a variety of lectures within their field to begin to expose them to new concepts which they may come to use in their research is apparent.

*'Yeah, goal setting and again giving myself self-appraisal and saying well actually well done, you've completed it, or more likely you haven't touched that, you really need to get going on this but it's that self-evaluation part which comes into it where you realise how much you contribute, how much you're doing there, and for me that's the biggest thing with the self-awareness of your own time and how much you want to energise yourself to do it.'*

*'If you've been doing a little bit here and there and you feel like you've satisfied a certain amount, if you've been doing loads, for me I've done this, that, the other, that's great I can probably relax a little bit now or I can maybe take my foot off the pedal and make sure if I've been missing out on anything else, spend time on that, and equally if I, which more often than not you haven't done a great deal for a while, that almost guilt to yourself that you feel that you deserve better, you need to do more towards it, is one of my driving forces that actually keep momentum, keep researching, keep going and remind myself that the outcomes of what I will get from doing it. I have to remember that I have chosen this for myself, for my own reasons, for my own interest. If I'm not doing that then why have I actually chosen it?'*

*'I came to one of the lectures here and I found that really helpful because it was people doing their doctorate and so obviously, you know, I was nothing... sort of academically speaking I was nothing like any of them but I found it really helpful because it was like an introduction to ideas that I had never thought about and it kind of guided me towards just somewhere to start really and things to read and I was chatting to [X] about it, because it was him that did the lecture, and that really helped me even though sort of practically speaking for my research it might have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with it but to give you a starting point I found that really helpful and if they had, you know, it wouldn't necessarily have to be on that person's particular, it could be on anything, you know, and it would get people together and get people talking and it might increase students motivation. It certainly did with me, I'm not just basing that on nothing.'*

## Troublesomeness in learning

A certain amount of troublesomeness in learning was reported as arising from identity and confidence issues. These included mature professionals who were uncertain of their abilities and place in academic culture, or were finding it hard to grasp the discourse within the field. International students often hold different understandings and perspectives as well as language and expression relating to topics of study and this can create an additional layer of troublesomeness. Troublesomeness manifested itself here with students at Masters level staying within their comfort zone and also research students feeling overwhelmed by amount of knowledge available and being unsure “where to start”, especially when developing research questions.

*‘I am 10 years out of a loop as it is and I think that’s really impacted on my wellbeing because I really, I don’t know ... especially compared with the students on the course who have come straight from their undergraduate degrees who wrote their dissertation a few months ago, who still have it all, you know, on their tip of their tongue, well in the seminars they definitely seem to, and I just really think mmm and I, you know, I kind of say what I think because at work I’m used to having meetings with senior managers and having to put my point across and I’m not like... I’m confident, you know, in sort of talking in front of other people but I sometimes I wish I wasn’t because I think oh no.’*

*‘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 something like, yeah, “I think” but in the UK teacher’s told me you don’t say “I think”. Yeah, you are not a doctor’s supervisor, 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.’*

*‘Now to our research question the whole bit was to make sure that we refined it down to the tiniest, most simplest concise sentence and then branch out again. So for me I want to focus on theory and not only that I want to focus on one time part of that theory. There’s nothing there for me to go ahead and do. I only know that theory or part of that theory because of my previous research from my undergrad and I am wondering if I am refining myself too much for that, would I have found that if I had gone off to do a different module or something else. I don’t think I would have had the hours to research all the guidance to go in the right line to do that. I know about this one part of this theory that I’m looking at, you know, the live thing, because I spent thousands of hours or whatever doing it for my dissertation, for my undergrad. If I had not done that I don’t think I would have been... I don’t think I would be confident and the fact that you’re unaware and you’re effectively lost would affect your wellbeing. It would, to me, it would reduce my value of the subject itself, it would reduce my own expectation for success and it would increase the margin of stress between what I can do and what is expected of me.’*

## Emotional Literacy & self-awareness

It was seen as highly important to have opportunities for developing self-awareness, not just so that students can maintain balance and motivation but also for the self-development and professional development. Self-awareness and emotional literacy were seen as qualities and skills which could potentially be useful for a future academic career or current careers in education as well as a tool to strengthen learning. It was seen as an extremely valuable tool for those who may go on to supervise future research students and to create a more emotionally literate educational culture, particularly in higher education. This was seen as linked to, but not the same as, the development of reflection.

*'I think is really important, that sort of level of awareness and self-awareness and the more self-aware you are of your situation then the better informed you're gonna be to make choices, and actually that's a very emotionally literate area to focus on and certainly on my doctorate programme, and I imagine many others there are not many sessions that are focussed on developing your own emotional literacy and self-awareness, and I wonder whether actually that being part of the programme would enhance it.'*

## Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring was raised as a potentially valuable development which could help to facilitate the transition to M- or D- level, foster a sense of community belonging, provide informal support and enable better confidence development through normalizing the issues new research students may face, including troublesomeness. Students drew on experiences of being involved in undergraduate mentoring in their responses.

*'I mean there's a potential there for a mentoring programme because... I'm college tutor for the undergrads and thankfully it's not that many years since I was an undergrad myself so they can turn to me and they feel really comfortable and go like yeah, we did this, we did that, couldn't do this or wanted to do this but didn't feel they did as well in this and oh yeah, I felt terrible that day, this, that and the other and I say oh, I know exactly why... I have an understanding and a bit like the others, absolutely normal, I did this, just a reassurance, a mentoring thing or a peer kind of thing. In college they have mums and dads or whatever, someone that you can turn to that you kind of know... But they don't have that for postgraduate students and I'm ... like I need a mum and dad, not in the same way maybe that an undergraduate would...'*

## 2. Staff focus group findings

These findings reflect the discussions of two focus groups across two institutions which included mainly supervisors and also administrative staff and course convenors. The format followed that of the research student focus groups.

## Academic Wellbeing

Staff identified the following areas as being crucial to research student wellbeing and providing the necessary basis for fulfilling their academic potential:

- Health;
- Sense of security in what they're doing;
- Ability to cope with stress;
- Comfortable in the process of learning.

It was perceived that it was essential to establish a balance between providing support and ensuring the research students develop as independent learners. The role of the supervisor in relation to research student wellbeing was a point of contention in one of the focus groups, with a question relating to how far supervisors should get involved in personal issues. A counter argument suggested that it was helpful to view the student holistically. The role of the supervisor in supporting research student wellbeing is discussed in more detail below. There was further discussion around how far wellbeing should be the student's own responsibility as opposed to supervisors or the institution. In contrast to the student focus group there was more emphasis on wellbeing being negatively affected as opposed to ways of maintaining and enhancing positive wellbeing and this tendency was recognized by one the participants, perhaps due to the additional layer of stress which may accompany academic study:

*'We tend to think about wellbeing in terms of its absence more than its presence. I mean it's, you know, the notion of wellbeing is a kind of a default and we notice when we move away from it rather than... and I think probably there's something about stress. I think where most people feel that they're not in a state of wellbeing it's often to do with pressures and stresses on them, and that's interesting coz if you look at the definition of wellbeing it says it's about realising potential and coping with the normal stresses of life, and I think that's probably the key thing is that we don't have a sense of wellbeing because the level of stress that we experience is more than we can easily cope with.'*

## Role of the Supervisor

It was seen as important that supervisors maintain professional boundaries, partly in order to preserve their own sense of wellbeing and not become over-involved in students' personal lives. There were differences of opinion as to how far supervisors should become involved,



with some emphasizing the importance of being aware of what was going on for the student. It was seen as important to recognize where the supervisor role should stop and students should be referred to those with the professional skills to provide the best support for them, such as counselors or therapists. It was seen therefore as essential that supervisors should be aware of the support infrastructure in their institutions. A distinction was made between external problems – juggling workloads, family problems and bereavement for example and issues, discussed as ‘troublesome knowledge’ which are related to intellectual development. It was highlighted that in terms of intellectual development, students needed to be challenged and experience ‘*troublesomeness*’. There was also an awareness that research students can become ill with stress, especially when dealing with multiple challenges, underlining the importance of maintaining awareness of ‘the whole student’. An aspect of supporting academic wellbeing might be to suggest the student takes a break from their studies and support them through that process. There was also a suggestion that at times boundaries may become blurred as supervisors empathise with what the students are going through, having faced similar difficulties in their own learning journeys and so they can bring their own experience to bear on the situation. At challenging times the supervision may be adapted to the student’s needs so that, for example, tasks are broken down into smaller components and there are more regular supervisions during that period. Supervisors recognized that each research student journey is unique and that they each bring different personal attributes and experiences to their learning. Concerns about the supervision needs of different groups of students, especially International, mature students with family commitments, professional doctorate students and part-time students were raised and will be discussed in the next section on diversity. A lack of preparedness about what to expect was raised as an issue, especially for those students with additional responsibilities or those with extra support needs which may not necessarily be met. Supervisors were seen as having a role in terms of welcoming students into the academic community although there was a differentiation between students who go on to become academics and those who return to their professions. They perceived that they might quickly identify students with the most academic potential but that this might at times block the progress of some students whose potential is not so immediately apparent. Providing developmental opportunities such as writing a paper, ensuring clarity of expectations and balancing the need for structure with the need for independent learning were also identified as part of the supervisory role. Finally, especially with professional doctorates, students may not be used to allowing themselves time to read and think, particularly those who have been away from higher education and engaged in their

professions for a long time and so for these students supervisors almost ‘give permission’ for them to spend time in that way, to enjoy a degree of ‘academic freedom’ which is necessary to help them fulfill their potential and enhance wellbeing. These key findings are summarized here with illustrative quotes:

### **Professional boundaries**

*‘When I think about my PhD students, when I think about looking after their wellbeing, I almost don’t see that coping with their stresses and anxieties is a big part of my role but coping with what they have to do to complete their PhD is my role. And so if they have problems in their flat or if they have...I don’t really see it as my role to be their advisor on that because the way the university is set up here there are people much better able to support those, I wouldn’t say clinical, but those more personal problems that they have. So I mean identifying these things as a supervisor I always see that those other things, people are much better able to solve the personal problems that people have.’*

*‘Because what I’m talking about is to give them the skills that allow them to solve the problems they have to do in their academic lives but the other part of that is the stuff that’s going on in their lives and I don’t think it is part of mine and that might be the thing that’s stopping them realise their potential but what I’m saying is it’s not my business. This bit’s my business so I am going to help them achieve the academic components that allow them to do the task that they have to pass a PhD, pass a MD, pass a MA.’*

*‘I think there was a question of kind of stepping out of the professional role and understanding this person is not a student but a whole human being with lots of other things going on in their lives and being able to say I think you might want to think about suspending for 6 months, get these things sorted out and then come back, you have our absolute support.’*

*‘It’s not our job to completely make our students feel comfortable intellectually. It’s our job to challenge them and give them problems to solve and we all know how that feels but it’s being able to recognise when that becomes too much and then I think that comes back to what you were saying about health really because we do have a lot of students who fall ill but it’s kind of manifest through tonsillitis or something, you know, their stress levels are so high that they are not getting the vitamins they need.’*

*‘[There may be examples from ] your own experience where you’ve panicked when faced with similar problems, academically, professionally, so then you might draw on that experience and pull the students in and have an intensive period where you are setting short term targets and you are keeping them very kind of close and working them through the panic zone until they can get out either side of it and I think that, in a way, I think there are some blurring and boundaries there, for me anyway, maybe it’s just a female thing, you know, where you sort of take them under your wing and you say look, I know exactly how you feel and then you empathise and you say in a similar situation I felt just the way you did, this is the way I coped with it or this is how students in the past have coped with this and it does become quite personal I think... I do think there are those moments when you pull students close to get through a difficult period which is work related.’*

### **Signposting**

*'Okay, the professional aspect is kind of recognising that that's affecting the learning but I think that there is an additional role that we, not that we fix it clearly, but we are aware of the infrastructure, you know, there are times, very recently with an undergraduate student, not a postgrad, where I rang the counselling services and the senior tutor just so they would then get in touch with the student concerned and then that allows me to step back but I'm aware of that infrastructure whereas the student might not be. So that awareness of what's happening I would add to, you know, obviously it's not our role to fix it, we don't know how to fix some of these things, but we are aware of the infrastructure.'*

### **Learning Journeys**

*'I think for me I was always think of it as a journey as well and everyone is different because each student is different although you've got a kind of a varied but relatively stable idea and the structure of that journey and what a thesis might look like structurally. The way to achieve that is different from person to person isn't it, as well, so I think the training is very, very useful but I do think it's down... a lot of it is also personality and instinct and then there's mutual understanding and respect.'*

### **Identifying potential**

*'It depends what the supervisor kind of sees as, you know, what's best for the student, you know, and also in a kind of a different way it's, you know, especially with the EdDs are we, do we see these students as going on to become academics in the future? If that's your picture then you might be looking after their wellbeing, getting them into the academic community, providing them with that experience, but if you are seeing them as, you know, remaining in their professional role, you realise that's what they want to do, you know, you'd behave differently I think in the wider kind of context of trying to realise their potential. So it all depends...it depends who's defining the potential and what that looks like.'*

*'I could get very excited about one or two of our PhD students at the moment and think in terms of writing papers with them and, you know, getting involved on a quite a close colleague kind of level but then there are other people that you think, well, you know, they'll get through but I can't imagine them being part of this academic community. So how much we're projecting, I'm only just thinking of this now, you know, how much we might be projecting our vision of that student's potential on to the student and whether or not that might be another block to their potential because we've drawn a line already in our thinking, which is awful isn't it?'*

### **Developmental opportunities**

*'I've got my PhD students now, they've just started, the first thing they do is start to... I get reviews to do for journals, they do a bit of a review, because in 2 years time they can do the reviews themselves. So get them targeting best journals just so that when it comes to an interview for [X] University they're going to be ready for it. So that's... I always picture my student as a member of staff here at [X] University in 5 years time, what do they need to do?'*

### **Clarity of expectation and structure**

*'In terms of positive wellbeing you want a level of clarity and I like the students to have a level of clarity of exactly what they're supposed to be doing so, you know, there will, you know, in my case there will be negotiation of exactly what we're going to do over the coming year, there will be deadlines, and that might be the first step. You obviously want them to get a sense of, you know, become*

*more independent so you may relax that over time but again it's just being, it's what are the goals that you want for the student at a particular time and you arrange things accordingly, I think.'*

### **Academic freedom**

*I think the PhD students and the Ed.D students that I've come across, you know, they do come from a professional background where they are very busy teaching, planning, marking, being involved and actually being able to say to them it's okay to sit in the library and just read and think, you are now becoming a philosopher and actually giving someone permission to...I wish we could give ourselves permission to do it, but it's that being able to say, you know, this is your time to really read and really think about these issues and then come back with a position, your position, that you've got something to add to the field and I think sometimes that's one of the things you do in the early part sort of almost giving license to not have to do anything much apart from think and so I often say things like, you know, go and have a walk on the beach but think about this.'*

### **Diversity**

Another crucial dimension to the supervisor role is being aware of and sensitive to the often divergent needs of a diverse student body and learning to respond appropriately to these needs as part of their pastoral care responsibilities. Participants discussed the need to ensure equitability of experience and access, alongside a need for more awareness of and sensitivity to personal issues. However there can be challenges in this from supervisors' perspective. One of the main challenges identified is working with International students who can experience profound culture shock on arrival and may have additional support and pastoral care needs. In addition, students from different cultures also have particular expectations of education and / or supervision which contrast with norms in the UK. Participants reported that at times there can be much higher expectations around the level of support and contact than they are able to offer. Students can also have contrasting expectations of the supervisory relationship, tending to see it as hierarchical which possibly inhibits questioning and independent thought. There is a challenge in helping to guide students towards gaining more independence while balancing this with an appropriate level of support. Another issue raised was that it may be more difficult for some International to socially integrate, they may group together with others from the same part of the world and may be more at risk of isolation. There can also be additional pressure to succeed and to complete in a limited amount of time. Another group which were a particular cause for concern were part-time and professional doctoral students who often struggle with balancing work and study demands. Students may need to negotiate with employers and / or course leaders when they need extra study time or extended deadlines and this is not always straightforward. Similarly to International students,

there may be expectations of a level of support which is not always forthcoming and also they may initially underestimate the time and academic demands of their programme. Mature students, especially those with caring responsibilities often have particular challenges in managing the range of demands on their time and energy. It was raised as a gender issue, particularly affecting women and especially those who may be caring for both children and elderly parents, often while maintaining a senior professional role and higher level study. This is an area which requires further research as it is essential to ensure equitability, access and inclusion for diverse groups of students and to take steps to safeguard their wellbeing and foster resilience.

### **International students**

*'We experience student who come to this country and probably are quite overwhelmed with just the cultural differences and expectation, and mainly come, you know, very dependent on administration staff, whoever they think their supervisor may be and then gets into the habit of asking a lot of questions, which aren't always work related and I suppose the job then seems to become more about helping them settle and become confident, so that that balance between asking sensible questions and yet being able to go and find answers for themselves is in harmony, and I think sometimes that can be unbalanced and either the students don't ask questions and you wish they'd had, or they ask so many questions that they're not actually doing anything to progress themselves.'*

### **Professional doctorates, part-time students**

*'And I think, you know, I mean I can talk here both of my experience as a post-graduate research student in [education] and as a supervisor, and I think there is something about... a lot of post-graduate research students in education are working and are doing this part-time, and are in some way, you know, it relates to their work in some way and they will have had to negotiate something, whether it's contribution to fees or maybe a bit of study time or they'll be some kind of, you know, in a lot of cases they'll be some kind of input from the employer. But I'm not sure... and I think, so I think sometimes I wonder whether you embark on something with an expectation of the support that might be available, but then isn't available.'*

### **Mature students / students with caring responsibilities**

[Extract from focus group discussion]

*'We have students who, who have got parents in their nineties, you know, that they have to look after and children that they're bringing up simultaneously and they really are looking at external problems that an under-graduate or a, you know, a younger student just isn't gonna have at all'.*

*'And this is, I think it's part of what [the university] will have to actually take on board. Especially again if you look at the X campus in that there is*

*a high proportion of female students and, you know, they... how many of them are gonna actually have families and old parents, you know, or parents and children as you've said, you know, there's a whole generation of...*

*'I mean if you think about the age profile of Prof Doc particularly but, you know, if you think of the age profile they tend to be probably mid-career, forties, so they're precisely at the point where they've still got children relying on them and they've got elderly parents ...*

*'And then very pressured jobs so, you know, I do think that there's a lot... so that, you know, that takes us back to stress and I think what we need to do, we need to think more about how, how we can best, you know, manage or help people manage that stress and I think often we don't particularly it's just presented and people are left to get on and manage it as best they can.'*

### **Addressing structural / bureaucratic issues**

A further area of concern arising from staff focus group discussions was around structural and bureaucratic procedures. One issue was around deadlines and especially around the timing of assignment hand-ins for taught courses as these can clash with teaching responsibilities: the end of term when first assignment are due in may come at a particularly challenging time for educationalists who may also be exceptionally busy in their work settings. This may be especially challenging for those who are also parents. Another issue was the administrative and academic challenges when students go beyond their time. It was recognized that many students respond well to tight deadlines and finite completion times. However, at the same time, many education students need additional flexibility, especially those with professional / caring responsibilities. It was discussed that it is impossible to homogenise learners as they all have different needs, learn at different rates and respond differently to learning situations. This led to discussion about whether bureaucratic procedures are always conducive to learning and it was reported that some required paperwork, especially around intermission, can impede rather than further learning. It was recognized that administrative and course procedures need to take both learning processes and wellbeing needs into account. Relevant quotes relating to this area are provided below:

*'I did feel that a source of stress is unrealistic deadlines and I do appreciate why deadlines are important, and I do appreciate that you need to generate a momentum and if people are left to drift they'll just drift away and not completely... you know I absolutely understand those kinds of concerns and recognise that they're real issues. But I think the converse of that is... I also have the experience of people who, you know, who feel like they're failing because they're not able to meet what were always going to be unrealistic deadlines for*

*them... and then people, and then people say, 'oh well I can't do this, oh I'll just give up then' and that worries me.'*

*'I know having talked to several of them already that their big issue is that they are semester one heavy in terms of teaching, semester two becomes much, much lighter. So semester one where they've got an assignment as you said earlier on X that they've got a deadline, which comes in x, you know, that's less than six months, four months to write, you know, the first assignment when most of their teaching falls as well. So trying to get that balance is a big, big issue. Again, you know, there are both sides, the university needs to actually make sure that it is producing its doctoral students as it ought to, but also at the same time there's the issue then of well are we then beginning to possibly lose good quality research because we are having to carry on with this.'*

*'I'm coming now from a completely different perspective to you because I see the repercussions of people taking a long time, and that is that it effects the completion rate but also it ties up supervisors for a long time, and I think unless someone actually registers on to an eight year Prof Doc course as opposed to a six year so that we expect our students are going to take much longer and organise things accordingly, and there are lots and lots of issues with students going beyond their time and one of them is that actually you can't take on new students because you haven't got the supervision for them.'*

*'We say to them write your own plan from, right from the point of enrolment, point of submission with times against them and it's remarkable how many of them manage to completely stick to it. You know I can see both sides, I can see that it's a real struggle for some people and that it might lead to them just saying, 'well I give up because I'm obviously...' you know maybe in their head they think I'm just not good enough, I'm just not up to it. But on the other hand I do see students who respond very well to having those deadlines and it gives them something to aim for.'*

*'You know we have a ludicrous situation for example where any student who suspends, before they can resume their studies, registry now insists that they have a progression review. The student has suspended for a year, how much progress do you expect them to have made? Why are we having a progression review? And to try to make that process meaningful for the student, you know, what is it we're asking them to come in and do? Why should they travel from X to do this or, you know, what's the purpose? The purpose seems to be to tick a box in registry whereas I can see that there's value for example if a student's had a year out, to ask them to come in and say, you know, how are you going to pick up your studies, have you thought about this, you know, what are your plans for the next year? But to call it a progression review and, you know, to make them fill in a progress review form, which has no meaning, not to the student, not to their supervisors, not to us, just to tick a box. What a waste of time and the enrolment processes every year it's different.'*

## **Wellbeing enhancement strategies**

Wellbeing enhancement strategies as identified by staff participants included valuing research students' contribution to the life of the institution and the wider academic community and encouragement to fully participate in that community; the potential for peer mentoring

schemes for researchers and research students to facilitate social and academic integration and help build academic confidence and to improve and develop the environment, providing appropriate setting for formal and informal academic exchange and community building.

Examples of supporting data are provided below:

### **Valuing research student contribution**

*'And I do think there's something about that, which is how the institution values the research or support or acknowledges the research that's done in the context of Prof Docs and whatever. I mean I do feel that we don't make as much of the research that people... well a number of things I don't think we do, which I think would be supportive of students and would contribute to their wellbeing, and again going on personal experience, when I did my second assignment as part of the EdD I reworked it and submitted it to a journal and it was accepted for publication, peer reviewed and that, and that was actually incredibly, you know, validating and important and I felt very, I don't know, I am doing the right thing, I can do this. It was... it contributed significantly to my wellbeing.'*

### **Peer mentoring**

*'At the start of the stage one of the EdD, I found I wanted, I was more in need of sort of a friend or a buddy to work alongside to get an idea. Because it is a big step from M to D level, and whether you're writing at D level and all right having a good relationship with my supervisor was fantastic it still didn't stop me from feeling sometimes well actually is this D level? And so somebody who had gone through the system maybe was either, you know, in the second year of stage one or into stage two to begin with, would certainly I think have been a big, big help in alleviating the anxieties that I had. It wouldn't have taken away the stresses and strains of time and everything else as well... it doesn't need to be formalised but just irregular meetings, quick catch up, how things are going and maybe it is sometimes, you know, it can be sometimes how much have you written? Knowing they've got a deadline of such and such coming up.'*

*'I mean the other thing that happened that I found useful was the fact that when we do have the system whereby, you know, once you've actually completed and the assignment's been marked you say whether you're prepared to actually let it be seen by other students, and I found it incredibly useful especially when I found that I was going off at a complete and utter tangent in one case on the second assignment I think it was that I completely, not completely missed the point but I was going off at, you know, 90° to where I in theory ought to have been going. So actually being able to have that and that was a very, very useful strategy and again having read through a couple of them it put my mind at rest.'*

### **Environment**

[extract from focus group discussion]

*'I feel very strongly that it should provide something that doesn't seem to be valued at all in the fabric of the institution anymore is social, you know, appropriate social meeting space not airport lounges. Because that's how, you know, to have a little common room or, you know, something, a little social space where students who are based on this site know they can go to have a drink and meet other students who are also research students and...'*

*I3: 'And let off steam, you know, whatever it is...'*



*I2: 'And make contact, I mean I think the staff need it and don't have it; I think research students need it and don't have it. You know what we have... and I do feel very strong... you can tell... what we have are these horrible anonymous airport lounges that are filthy most of the time and that are just not conducive to the kind of informal conversations and exchanges. You need something on a much smaller scale, much more dedicated and then that's when people wouldn't feel isolated, because they'd have a home.'*

## Research Student Interviews

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### Summary of factors which contribute positively to research student wellbeing:

- Community belonging;
- Academic culture;
- Support for academic and personal balance;
- Development of academic confidence;
- Empowerment and student engagement;
- Positive supervisory relationship;
- Motivation;
- Ownership;
- Learning Environment;
- Welfare needs met;
- Cultural awareness.
- A number of **positives impacts** of doctoral study for personal wellbeing were also noted.

### Community belonging

A sense of belonging to community of peers, to institution and wider academic community was the main factor identified by research students as contributing to their academic wellbeing. This included a sense of being valued and having a clear status as a research student. Collegiality, opportunities to contribute and inter-disciplinary discussion helped to contribute to a sense of belonging. Empowerment of students within their learning communities occurred when students felt their voices were being heard, there was support for student led initiatives such as support and discussion groups and they felt their contribution was valued. Research students valued having a supportive infrastructure and some had benefited directly from services such as counselling and welfare and accommodation support. Good communication was seen as essential in instigating an awareness of what support is available at institutions. Equally important was access to facilities such as libraries and

developmental opportunities although for part-time students, especially those with children, this could be problematic as opening hours and opportunities such as departmental seminars were not always convenient. An awareness of the diverse needs of, for example, part-time, mature, International and student parents by university staff and embedded in the ethos of the university helped to underpin a sense of belonging.

Responses often challenged the “ivory tower” conception of research, academia and the isolated research student. Respondents such, as in the example, below highlighted the shared nature of knowledge creation and exchange and the importance of interaction and dialogue with others in the production of the final thesis. This PhD student suggested that there was a need for culture change to reflect and to support the importance of community in the research student learning experience:

*‘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 and I think that then in turn impacts the way we not only produce knowledge but on a basis of producing knowledge how we organise the research and 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.’*

The benefits of feeling part of an academic community were frequently highlighted and included a sense of recognition and support for shared experiences, the development of an academic identity, the opportunity to be involved and to contribute, intellectual stimulation and motivation, sharing different perspectives and the exchange of information and advice on seeking support and enjoying a successful experience as well as contributing to a sense overall personal wellbeing. Where students did not feel they were part of a community, at times this led to a sense of isolation and demotivation as the discussion below indicates:

*‘I don’t feel like I’m part of any kind of community of... and student community at all not in any, in any way.*

*R: ‘And would it help you if you felt that you were?’*

*I: 'I think that's quite interesting and I have thought about that before because I think it's good to talk to people and I mean, and as you know because we're in similar jobs, you know, when you do get to have a coffee, which is very rare or sit in the same room, you know, you get to have a chat about it and it is nice to know somebody else is kind of having the same kinds of experience as you...'*

*'I think you can be just very sort of isolated and live a very insular sort of existence here. I mean when I've got real sort of writing and stuff to do I just work at home. I've been in my office all day today and I haven't spoken to anybody, you know, and that's fine coz I've got absolutely loads to do and so I've just been getting on with it but it doesn't kind of fire you up.'*

In contrast, the quotes below illustrate the profound benefits of becoming part of an academic community and the potential impact on academic wellbeing, a positive research student experience, retention and success, fostering a sense of belonging, positive identities, informal learning experiences, opportunities to contribute, knowledge sharing and interdisciplinary discussion, academic development and support from those who experience similar issues:

*'Actually [being part of a community] makes a big difference to how you feel about your study, how you feel about your role, the part you play in the sort of, the wider scheme of things.'*

*'I would say that actually informal opportunities for a discussion are probably as important or as influential on not only my wellbeing but on my progress in my doctorate... I don't feel that I get as much out of the discussion as someone who is engaged in the process, sort of working towards their doctorate as I find that a much more sort of, oh how're you getting on, how are you, how's the whole tussling with the issues and things like that so I find that quite an enriching experience regardless of whether it's somebody doing PhD at a different institution on a completely different topic coz I think it's the process that we're both engaged in is the thing that gives us a shared area for discussion.'*

*'We see each other in the corridor and we can have that informal conversation about how you're getting on, how's your writing going, things like that and I think that gives a little bit of feeling whereby you think "oh I'm not on my own, there are other people who are, you know, going through the same thing and are trying to achieve the same goals, that does help definitely.'*

*'It's really important, the support from having contacts or people who become friends who are interested in what you're doing and can engage with it on a similar sort of academic level. Like, you know, I've got lots of support from friends and family who kind of get what I'm doing but we don't necessarily sit around and have methodological debates. Whereas you can do that to some extent or you can ask people their advice for, you know, the small things.'*

*'[an aspect of wellbeing is] contribution to the community... I suppose in some ways I feel that I'm already contributing in to the community in teaching but research has a kind of wider impact maybe, hopefully in that it's not just my school it's a broader kind of thinking on, about education in X.'*

Everyone at the institution can make a positive contribution to instilling a sense of community belonging, as illustrated here. This masters student highlighted the importance of awareness of others and a willingness to engage and to make students feel welcome, including administrative staff and peers:

*'I think wellbeing is something that people should have a greater understanding of, especially for teacher or lecturer kind of relationships with their students and equally peers, to kind of understand where they're coming from and how people's actions affect them. The weekend admin was very polite and was very kind and there was a couple of people that, you know, you wouldn't have necessarily have gone and started a conversation with but everyone had time for everyone, which was fantastic. But for whatever reason if anybody was to be outlandish or brash that may very easily affect that person's wellbeing, whether they feel comfortable in the thing, whether they feel that they feel they're welcome and what have you, and because we're all kind of at a like mind that was useful there. But I think people should be more aware of how little things make a big difference to certain people.'*

### **Student Strategies**

There were a variety of strategies students could employ to feel part of their community.

These included engaging in virtual communities such as online forums, which can helpfully be made available and explicit as part of programmes:

*'Perhaps something that then is less explicit within EdD programme is the support that someone like myself can get from online communities, and that's something I think that actually has helped me a lot... especially where if I have an idea I can very quickly find other people who have had similar thoughts before and see where they've taken them, and there not only can I find out about their ideas but I can also find out the other ideas that they have that are connected to those, and there are often, there are lots of websites where you can get inspired by those ideas.'*

Some students had been involved in initiating peer support groups to mitigate against the potential isolation of doctoral study in particular, although this student found that there was a lack of institutional support for this:

*'Well I think try and get together as much as possible and try and sort of shape that environment as much as possible, which is what we've been trying to do. Now as I say that's not always been encouraged, there have been times when you felt, you know, a [dampener] had been poured on initiatives and stuff that could have been, that should have been I think promoted rather than suffocated or... getting together you've got more strength if things don't come from individuals but come from a group of people there should be more strength there. So yeah, so getting together and talking that also breaks you out of the isolation in which you work most of the time as a PhD student.'*

### **Supervisory strategies**

Alongside the support and stimulation that can be gained from being part of the wider academic community and sharing the journey of postgraduate learning with peers, opportunities for dialogue with supervisors is invaluable in enabling students to develop academic confidence and progress in their learning. This is complemented by dialoguing with other colleagues and peers and supervisors can play a central role in facilitating the development of wider networks. An International student recognised the importance of her

supervisor supporting and enabling her attendance at conferences and helping her to establish internal and external networks, as a major turning point in her doctoral journey, as this enhanced her personal and academic confidence and led to her participating in International academic networks. For another student this facilitative process started while they were still an undergraduate interested in undertaking postgraduate study. They found the consistent “open door” policy of their supervisory invaluable and felt that the early development of academic and support networks, which provided ongoing opportunities for discussion, enabled much a deeper, more enriching learning experience to take place:

*‘...in 5 years every time I’ve had a single question about something that I was interested in and something that, you know, maybe I wasn’t sure about, there was always an open door, every single time, whether it’s been my supervisor who like 3 years ago was like do you want to do a PhD when I was still and undergrad and I was kind of like, you know, a bit scared of the world and all that but then he organised people for me to talk to, to get ideas going... if your knowledge is going to be deep within something, what you’re learning, you need to have people around whether they be students or other people who you can discuss ideas that you’re reading about with because if you don’t then you’ll get only so far and you won’t have somebody who provides a counter argument because you can try and provide it yourself but, you know, if you’re completely persuaded of one side it’s really difficult to kind of see how... and that would be really enriching for your own work so I think that is something that is better.’*

*‘...[what helped me to make the learning leap is] being part of a community of people who are in the same, involved in the same journey as I am. Although it’s important to have role models and to have colleagues who I can discuss some of that journey with, and having a supervisor who clearly understands the process and knows where to push and prod me and what questions to ask I think is invaluable, I think price, absolutely priceless, incredibly skillful I think to be able to do that, worth a lot of money, worth a lot.’*

*‘Another thing, my supervisor helped me to get engage with pupil here. He encourage me to attend research meeting after I arrive, he encourage me to attend a conference in X. I say I don’t want to go coz I feel so lonely, I feel so scary of anything, you know, even I don’t know how to go by train and he say okay, you can go with us. We’ve got a group of student and then he say just wait at the train station, we can go and he introduced me with so many people at conference. So that’s a beginning, a starting, you know, a turning point for me because after that he encourage me to prepare to present at conference, at the world conference. He say you can put my name if you feel so scary about that and then he introduce me to so many people for networking and from there I have worldwide networking.’*

### **Departmental / Programme strategies**

Participants reported contrasting experiences of departmental and institutional support for the development of supportive academic communities. One research students found involvement in a departmental reading group to be a positive, inclusive learning experience while others felt that much more could be done to facilitate research students coming together with other

research students and staff in order to maximise the potential benefits. For EdD students the taught element of their course and structured interaction with peers usually proved very supportive as well as formative and was reported in a factor enabling their continuation of the course of study:

*'I think coz of my doctoral program and the way it's structured, those kind of weekends where you talk to other people on your course going through the same thing, those conversations have been one of the big ways probably that I've learnt I suppose, rather than learning in isolation, which is I think one of the reasons I'm still doing it.'*

*'But actually in our department we have been addressing [social and academic isolation] as a team and we have, we've developed a reading group, but we're not meeting all the time and also a peer review group so everybody can submit, everyone gets a turn to submit a draft paper and everybody feeds back on, you know, where they see the strengths, what they see the problems might be. So we're just sort of in the process I think of really sort of extending our community and I have found that really nice.'*

Participants also indicated some of the environmental factors involved in community building. Shared office space with peers or proximity to peers and staff facilitated informal contact, socialising and ultimately belonging:

*'[what helped me to develop was] the kind of environment I came into was really welcoming. I think that has helped a lot at the beginning, you can feel well and think you want to spend three years here.*

*... there was this sort of group of people who were, at the time, maybe working in one of the projects, that they were kind of all located on one floor and I got an office there with two other PhD students who are both like attached to my supervisor, and it was just a nice atmosphere there of people who were having lunch together and doing social things together, and sometimes after work and it was just great and everyone was just integrated into a group, so that's really yeah very good.'*

### **Institutional strategies**

Institutions play a role in developing an academic community ethos, recognising and valuing its importance, sending out positive messages, stimulating and encouraging informal opportunities and providing appropriate learning and study forums and environments. One key recommendation which arose from the research interviews as well as focus groups was the potential for the establishment of more formal peer mentoring for research students.

### **Valuing and encouraging informal discussion –**

*'I think it's the messages you send out about what you value and if you value discussion and you value critical enquiry then the message you send out about that will be picked up... it's led by people with power in the department as well and that has to be recognized that actually they're the ones who need to role model the values they believe in and if they do believe time should be set aside for academic discourse then that should be visible. So I mean if that was more visible*

*then that would certainly encourage me to do it more and also encourage my students a bit more.'*

#### **Providing (fit-for-purpose) online forums -**

*'One of the, yeah one of the things I mentioned earlier is sort of using online media forums to support people in my position in the development of their ideas, and at the minute the university has a, has a very, very poor and almost prehistoric... I dunno how... it's like a dinosaur you know? It's not, it doesn't support me in any way or shape or form and actually hinders, I'd say that it hinders my progress. The sort of [online facility] we're talking about, it definitely holds me back and... whereas I think there's so much potential for us to have a place online where we can support each other and support the growth of ideas and contribute. I mean that, that would be hugely helpful, hugely helpful I think, and certainly for the coming generation of doctoral students there is a difference in how the younger generation approach things. You know as a teacher I can see that and that's, at the minute it's what we provide, the arena we provide is inadequate, completely inadequate.'*

#### **Support research student-led initiatives -**

*'Maybe, yeah make contacts with other PhD students and try to support each other and maybe do these things, writing together or giving each other feedback. That's something we've kind of tried to get off the ground here as well to kind of have these self organised writing or discussion groups, and yeah it was, it is quite hard if you don't have the sort of institutional structure to do it I think because it's, yeah someone has to organise it and it's just if it's sort of organised by someone by a higher level maybe or, then there's more of this continuity and I think people tend to maybe attend these things more regularly.'*

#### **Peer mentoring -**

*'...one basic thing is just to know that you're not, that you're not on your own and that other people have similar difficulties... that it is not a really, that is not a [strange] thing and everybody feels similarly and then also maybe giving each other advice, maybe also people maybe a bit more advanced in their PhD could give advice too [a little more] at the beginning and just about these practical issues and maybe also, I mean if the topics are really similar also maybe in more substantial terms.'*

### **Academic culture:**

As well as supporting formal and informal development opportunities through the institutional ethos, interventions and resources directed towards research students, it was felt at certain institutions that there could be more support for research generally. A general sense of collegiality and integration with academic colleagues as well as peers contributed to students' sense of balance and wellbeing but when this did not happen, it could lead to isolation, frustration and missed opportunities for development:

*'In terms of academic exchange that maybe it could have happened more. That's something I think I have maybe missed a little bit because there's not so much... I mean especially on this campus there's not so much culture of research I would say. Coz it's very much geared towards training teachers, not so much towards*

*research and I think it can, you can notice that. So there's not so much... I mean I would have maybe expected to have more sort of seminars, you know, where you present and discuss your research or maybe invite guest speakers and these sorts of things, and, but happens very rarely.'*

## **Academic / Personal Balance (Whole student approach)**

Institutions can play a vital role in nurturing a culture in which academic and personal balance is recognised and prioritised, or in other words to foster a 'whole student' focussed approach to learning. Wellbeing and work / life / study balance issues can be made explicit and integrated into course material content. It can also help to be explicit about the emotional dimension of learning. Research students indicated that they value opportunities to develop personally as well as academically and would appreciate continued opportunities to develop self-awareness, self-management and wellbeing strategies as part of their courses. Social opportunities, both formal and informal can contribute to a sense of balance and wellbeing and life balancing and time management skills were seen as essential components of personal and professional development. Participants valued flexibility from supervisors and course leaders in terms of deadlines and comments were a reminder of the importance of an awareness of potential challenges students may face, in particular in terms of family and teaching commitments which at times impacted on their ability to study effectively and achieve deadlines.

*'A friend of mine who's in a similar position, probably puts more hours in terms of [contact] and investment and emotional involvement and what have you, has put so much into it they rattle with it. They get the best out of it but equally are set up to fail and kind of crumble when things don't work out quite so well. Whereas I've again been fortunate that I can kind of just separate work from personal and from additional, like extracurricular things I can kind of deal with that.'*

*'Wellbeing for me really means how effective you are being as a person, okay so personal effectiveness is the word I would use and your professional effectiveness is completely contingent on your personal effectiveness. That's not to say that it'll only happen in a professional context, absolutely not but I think the learning happens better when you are being in your, being effective as a person.'*

*'Well I think [personal wellbeing] is very important and I especially realise that now, like coming towards the end of the second year, start of the third year that you are under a lot of I mean to finish, bring everything together and to write this thesis, and I think you kind of need something else, I mean otherwise I think you I don't know just go crazy. So yeah you need people at work and I think probably also sort in your private life, and people then may get activities that kind of balance the PhD work.'*

*'It's important to have a very good wellbeing to help you, to, I mean to support you for your learning and study because if you don't have a positive wellbeing you will be unable to keep moving in your learning and study. Important I think. I don't*



*know... to make student aware about increasing their wellbeing, finding a way to help them to cope, because nobody will help you if you don't want to help yourself.'*

There were particular challenges around achieving balance for those who work at the institution where they also study (especially when working and studying in the same department). The challenges can be especially acute for professionals who also have caring responsibilities. In this scenario there is a responsibility, as well as an opportunity, to ensure through line managers and programme leaders that work-life balance issues are actively discussed and addressed:

*'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.'*

*'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.'*

### **Student strategies**

Students stressed the importance of caring for their wellbeing through healthy lifestyle choices and good planning and time management strategies. Not only did this help to maintain basic health and wellbeing, with reference to Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow, 1954), but enabled them to perform at their best academically and rise to the many challenges that they were presented with during their learning process. Taking a break from studies was also seen as essential in order to focus better and maintain momentum in the short and long term. Supervisors were seen as having a role to play in facilitating and role modeling effective academic wellbeing strategies and in turn, some research students found that they were becoming better role models for their students and more empathetic to their needs in terms of managing workloads.

### **Maintaining physical and mental health through lifestyle -**

*'So actually to be able to perform well as an academic doctoral student you've gotta be in top personal condition and so basics such as exercise, sleep and nutrition will allow you to have a decent base functionality. I certainly know that if I really want to be performing well as a doctoral student I need to make sure I am socializing a certain amount during the week and making sure that I'm reading other stuff, whether that's fiction or getting creative inspiration from other sources coz I actually think those things make a difference. Now I don't quite understand how and why but I know that keeping my brain in trim as it were through the physical needs and perhaps through psychological needs really puts you in a strong position to be able to study in a doctoral way, that's in terms of thinking and writing.'*

*'It's that kind of Maslow's hierarchy of needs idea that unless everything else is in place you can't do that highest level thinking. So if anything it's probably made me more aware of my, you know, I must, you know, make sure I'm eating healthy, I'm not getting ill, I'm going to the gym, spending time with my husband, you know, that I'm attending to all those needs otherwise it won't happen... suddenly, there's suddenly more value in keeping yourself together and, you know, functioning because otherwise you don't reach the end.'*

#### **Compartmentalising -**

*'I think you have to be kind to yourself, which a lot of people aren't very good at doing unfortunately in my experience, particularly women. That sometimes, and you can just know this from the outset, there are gonna be times when it has to go in its box and have the lid put on, and you're gonna have to acknowledge that actually I'm not gonna think about it for a month because I don't know, whatever it is. Because I mean they're all, most people are part-time in our, you know, so okay so you're a head teacher of a school, you know you've got X coming in, you're not gonna do anything on your X or your PHD, you know, and just be kind to yourself and just know that.'*

#### **Taking a break -**

*'Certainly [wellbeing is] pretty critical really, I mean I know again with my research, my studies whatever, if it's getting too much or whatever I can put it to one side. I obviously want to do as much as I can with it, I obviously wanna do... but I know that I can almost close that door on that and if it's getting too much, okay I can give myself a break, I'll come back and I'll have a fresh face and go at it from another angle. I think obviously wellbeing affects everything that you do. It can be affected by different domains and how much you attribute its importance, the value of it and also like your ability to succeed at it.'*

#### **Planning with supervisors -**

*'One thing is definitely to make a plan with my supervisors and just have very definite deadlines, and try to really finish by the deadline so not extend things too long and that's probably a good idea. It's difficult for me because I tend to want to do everything perfectly and spend, I can spend ages like a few pages or one chapter or whatever, but I know that that way I'm not going to finish.'*

#### **Time management strategies -**

*'I try and keep myself up to date in terms of my diary and calendar and I do the majority of that stuff through my outlook calendar at work. So I schedule in all my meetings up, everything like that and also have it as something in front of me that I can list every task that I need to do I can check it off, and it's something that's right in front of me that every time I open my computer, which is a daily thing or hourly thing, I can say right that's done, needs to be done and I can break it down*

*into time periods as well. I can set dates that things should be due by... Time management is a big thing and also just physical things actually just leaving my reading or whatever next to my computer at home to remind me, coz if I don't, if I put them on my shelf I won't touch it for weeks. So little post-it's sometimes or little reminders on the phone, okay I need to do this by that ... what have you, they're my normal things.'*

### **Role modeling for pupils -**

*'Sometimes my year elevens go, 'I've got something to do I can't get that essay in', and I say, 'oh I know what you mean, you know, I've got a full time job and I've got to give an essay in for the end of the week'. Now I know how hard it is and I think, you know, from their point of view it gives me not more of a right but it's good that they see that learning can be something that happens across your life and that other people... that they're not alone in having these demands on them and... so I think that's quite good.'*

### **Supervisory strategies**

Supervisors play an essential role in making life balancing and academic wellbeing issues explicit. It is also helpful when there is sensitivity to personal circumstances, such as managing a young family, and a non-judgemental, empathetic approach towards the challenges research students may face. Supervisors can offer practical support in terms of time management strategies and emotional support in terms of not placing students under additional pressure at critical points in their journey or when they have additional challenges to cope with in their personal lives.

### **Empathy -**

*'I think that my initial supervisory team was very good in the sense that one of them was very rooted in theory and kind of conceptual knowledge of this subject area, and the other one was much more rooted in the practical application of and time management and had a young family and knew about the kind of, the juggling, you know, whereas the other supervisor would just say oh you should just get up before everyone else in the morning and study for a few hours, and it's just like I get up at six and don't get to bed 'til eleven. If I get up at, you know, by the end of the week I'll be on my knees. I'm always tired as it is... do you know what I mean? Kind of not really getting it?'*

### **Not too much pressure at critical times –**

*'I suppose the most important thing to help is me staying relaxed and positive with the work and motivated and not too stressed, you know, just to keep a steady pace going and not to have massive ups and downs with it. So pressure from around me, you know, I know that the PhD is important, it's my life, it's my livelihood, it's what I hope to base my career on so I don't feel I really need people telling me, now come on dear, this is an important thing you're working towards because I already know that. So I just think a supportive atmosphere.'*

### **Departmental strategies**

#### **Training in self-awareness, emotional literacy & personal /academic effectiveness -**

*'I think that's really important, that sort of level of awareness and self-awareness and the more self-aware of your situation then the better informed you're gonna*

*be to make choices, and actually that's a very emotionally literate area to focus on and certainly on my doctoral programme and I imagine many others there are not many sessions that are focused on developing your own emotional literacy and self-awareness and I wonder whether actually being part of the programme would enhance it.'*

*'I'd appreciate not only, not just a session at the start of the doctorate and that but, you know, a continued revisiting of where we are in our programme and how we're managing and how we can manage it better. Coz at the minutes there's a lot of reflexivity that's happening but it's often about the intellectual process rather than the physical managing, the reading, writing and workload process, which actually I think is something that is a big factor in how effective you are at doing the doctorate.'*

#### **Promotion and availability of training opportunities -**

*[re. voluntary workshops on personal and academic effectiveness] 'I'm full-time so I'm alright and I can take 3 days to do it. I don't know if they've been adapted so they're more open to part-time students for example and, you know, it's also an issue with student priorities, you know, just coz it's something that I see as valuable is it what other students... you know, that maybe needs to be discussed or presented a bit more to highlight to students that these workshops are available and are useful'*

*'Being under pressure like managing yourself, I mean that's probably my biggest problem so I always come back to that, and also having almost the feeling that you kind of, you're behind and then know that many PhD students do, I mean almost all of the ones I spoke to. I mean we have that feeling, you know, them behind, I mean behind with the plan and maybe also that feeling that you've never really finished anything. I think that's quite difficult to endure.'*

#### **Fostering a supportive culture –**

*'In terms of kind of, sort of personal wellbeing in terms of like you said about stress and things like that, that's a careful balancing act and there are risks I think, you know, with that structure of doing both alongside each other. That's, you know, you need some looking after to make sure that that's kept in check. But I mean I think the university do that really, really well both in the group structure of my course that, so... you know it kinda introduces you to other people that are likely to having the same dilemmas at the same time so you get in touch with them, and also, you know, your supervisor and your course leaders tend to go, 'you'll be fine, you can do it just keep going' sort of thing.'*

#### **Structure of programmes –**

*'Last year it was all or nothing, it was a phase that I don't think we did lectures, contact time until November last year, so it was very useful that it started so late on coz it meant that I could get settled in and know [my colleagues], and what have you and get used to the demands of the job and what have you. But then it also kind of felt like I'm waiting around and I haven't really got into it, and then as soon as I got in the first module was evaluating educational research, that needed to be in for just after Christmas or February or something like that. So the period between then became very busy and that kind of coincided with work getting a lot busier as well, so that was interesting'*

#### **Preparation for the course (including wellbeing issues) -**

*'I think [PAUSE] I think as a Masters student, to be quite honest, it's presumed that you can look after yourself. I think there is a lot of looking after yourself that goes on and I think there are some experiences that actually we know that they're*

*gonna come, we know that you're going to have a workload that you didn't expect, you know, we know that you're gonna get stressy. To be more upfront about these things, but also then be more upfront about the cognitive and emotional experiences and things you're gonna go through. So, you've got a picture of [Mazlow] on the wall, you know, explain, you know some sort of introduction that Mazlow's a bit rubbish and we can pull it to bits but it's a good diagram and you are likely, if you are going well, to experience new things within these bounds, you're going to feel on top of the world, you're gonna feel... you're gonna feel dreadful when you don't get it, you're gonna feel like Dahla Lama at points when you're achieve enlightenment, nourish it, go with it, really record those things, we're told to keep a learning diary – er, nobody knows what that is either, it's like this thing where you have fabricate later if somebody if somebody really insists on looking at it. But if, you know, encourages just a bit more in tune with our emotions about what we're gonna experience and how we deal with the things, because we're all going through it, and we know we're gonna... you know, those that have been through it can foresee what others are likely to experience, nobody's going to stop me smoking, nobody is going to stop me feeling sick when I eat too much chocolate because I've been snacking all day whilst trying to work. Something about brain food, eat nuts and raisins not bloody Fruit and Nut bars, you know, you know, some information about, you know, actually these are good study sweets, you know, dried bananas, probably really good, I don't know.'*

## **Academic confidence development**

Participating in the wider academic community was one essential component of the development of academic confidence and this comprised both formal and informal opportunities to discuss work. Engaging in ongoing dialogue helps to foster a sense of ownership over research and aids focus and clarity and research students establish their position within the wider theoretical frameworks and methodologies available to them. Opportunities for discussion within their disciplines may expose them to further ideas which may be of benefit to their work and interdisciplinary discussion enables the development of clarity in explaining and justifying their work to other which are essential skills for viva and for future careers within academia and beyond. Research community participation also enables them to recognize that the difficulties they might encounter in their work, for example with writing, are common to many other research students and academics. Research students highlighted the vital role supervisors can play in facilitating academic confidence development. Positive supervision was described as balancing pastoral care and support with academic challenge and debate. Students enjoyed the sense of their work and ideas being valued by supervisors alongside the intellectual stimulation that could be provided by rigorous questioning, helping them to develop the skills to defend their work in a safe space. This process is supported by wider collegiality and interaction with academic staff, including

informal discussion and sharing of work. Key learning moments often occur during the process of presentation and publication which can lead to a sense of enhanced confidence. Developmental opportunities such as attending courses on networking or turning a conference paper into a publication can complement the support provided by supervisors and enhance the research student experience.

*'If I do get to go to a good seminar or a good conference it does fire you up and kind of get you thinking, and get you thinking about the way other people think, other people are thinking about their work and it is interesting and, you know, I heard a seminar, which ultimately you wouldn't think had anything to do with my work... You know so actually on the face of it which kind of reaffirmed some of the arguments that I was making in my introduction and kind of, you know, and kind of made me think yeah, no this is absolutely important and, you know, so... and I don't think we have enough of that here.'*

As well as enhancing overall confidence, academic engagement enables students to overcome troublesomeness, stuck places and blocks in their learning. For research students in Education this troublesomeness often flowed from wrestling with ontology and epistemology – in terms of trying to understand these concepts and their relation to their work; attempting to establish their own ontological and epistemological frameworks and asking profound questions of themselves such as 'who am I', 'what do I believe in' and 'what is knowledge'?

*'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?'*

This process can be troublesome but it can equally be experienced as stimulating and exhilarating: *'It feels like I'm being made to think a lot deeper about things or being pushed to consider my own position and things a lot more. Which I'm really enjoying, getting, deriving, a lot of benefit from it.'* For some students, faced with intellectual uncertainty and clashing world views which they felt unable to reconcile, the acceptance of this situation as one beyond their control helped. For this student, learning to live with uncertainty and embracing academic difficulty as part of the learning journey was a crucial turning point:

*'I don't really make any significant progress until I find myself in an area of quite significant self-doubt and initially that was a sort of first few times I found myself in that zone. That's quite a discomforting situation because the way I see the world is called into question and I've build up this way of seeing the world for many years and sort of founding a lot of my life decisions on it. But then I think, you know, it's one of the beautiful things about doctoral study is how that pushes you to begin to question how you see the world. I find that emerging from the other side when you sort of realize that I'm still covered in doubt but emerging through the other side means that I'm now in doubt but happy with that position'*

*and that actually I'm happier now being in the zone where everything's a little more uncertain than it was previously.'*

For others, the process of collecting data and writing up the thesis enabled the development of more clarity about their work and enhanced intellectual confidence:

*'...it is a varied, it is a varied experience as it evolves, and even the writing up process like I feel now that I've got things down, it's much easier coz I kind of know what I'm trying to say and I know what literally I need to look at and that kind of thing, I know how I'm gonna use my data. Whereas when I first come back from fieldwork it was just a huge blog of data, and I was like well how am I gonna work that into a text you know' (male ft PhD student)*

The process of coming through the challenges of doctoral study was found to be personally beneficial in enhancing confidence as research students realized their abilities both intellectually and personally to overcome difficulties. This student describes moving from a place where she felt apologetic about her work and ideas to speaking with authority:

*'In some ways it's definitely made me more confident and kind of stronger and more, I have got more faith in my abilities to manage some of these things, you know, so that's all for the good. I think doing a PHD in itself and getting that depth of knowledge kind of increases your confidence, you know, in your field, which is only good thing and sort of helps you to have the confidence to speak out and I think, you know, helps you to give conference presentations and things with much more of a voice of authority and write papers, you know, with much more authority than kind of before - I think I was much more apologetic for my opinion.'*

For one part-time MA student, failing a module early in the course proved to be emotionally devastating, having never previously encountered academic difficulties, but was also a turning point in terms of their learning journey - emotionally as well as intellectually - becoming more emotionally resilient and self-aware as a learner, developing the ability to bounce back emotionally and to engage in learning on a deeper level:

*'...so the dive then was massive, it was really, really massive and took me a while. I was learning I suppose about managing time, but managing emotions, managing reactions to, managing a sense of self that previously I had been very, very happy for that sense, that academic sense just had to be validated by passing things and getting the bits of paper and now I had to find a new way into that and to value the learning process and to value myself as someone who hadn't got the bit of paper and that that wasn't the end of the world.'*

An important step in this journey is recognizing that it is not necessary to know everything or have all the answers but that you do have knowledge of one area within your field. Coming through the journey with all its difficulties and developing more confidence has potential to enhance overall personal wellbeing and resilience:

*'I even think being able to say that is a confidence thing, you know, because before I would have apologised for not knowing enough about x. Whereas now I don't really, you know, I can't know everything about everything and actually for the purposes of this paper you don't need to know everything that's ever been*

*thought of in relation to x, and I've got to be very precise about what it is that I... so I think even though... you know so you kind of go through that but I think when you come out the other side, if you do come out with more confidence and belief in... you're sort of right with that. Okay so I don't know this but I do know about this and actually this is what we need to know about, because what I'm trying to tell you is this.'*

*'Emotionally it's made me more confident because I think if you, if you get the opportunity to engage with how you interpret the world in a profound way then that's only going to lead to a sense of greater confidence and calm in your life. You may trawl through the swamps on the way to get there but I think the outcome, certainly for me, is that perhaps I'm more settled in a world as a result of my intellectual pursuit and so on. You know there definitely has been changes in my, in my personal being or through personal development that's closely linked to this, to the EdD.'*

As well as the personal, emotional and intellectual gains of engaging in the learning process, including encountering periods of troublesomeness, research students reported positive impacts on practice. The following example describes enhanced professional practice as educator in Higher Education, following on from the modeling of positive supervision which involves questioning, encouraging, stimulating engagement in enquiry and ultimately building academic confidence. Subsequent quotes pertain to teachers in secondary education who experienced heightened awareness, reflexivity and creativity around their professional practice, with one expressing the positive identity resulting from study which permeates other areas of life and practice:

*'What I feel I can do is replicate some of the process that my supervisor has engaged with me in. So with my students I think that I am or I hope that I am getting better at prodding and pushing and encouraging them and having confidence in their contributions and things like that, so sort of more of a process thing than a product thing if that makes sense ...So I'd hope that I'm being a better role model for enquiry.'*

*'I think I'm more confident because, coz I'm doing this and I'm surviving and I've passed assignments and things. So you sort of think oh I'm not too bad and I think it tends to make you look at everything that's happening more deeply, whereas when you're just sort of teaching and just working in the classroom you're just getting through the day really. But the more, you know, you read studies of looking at classroom dynamics and things like that you... things happen and you have those moments where you step outside of it and think that's interesting what's going on there? You question things more. I've probably become more awkward at school so like when people are saying, 'why don't we do this?' and I'm saying, 'oh but I think we need to consider the...' so yeah thinking too much.'*

*'Yeah, some people may be very reflective teachers anyway, whether they are studying what's going on in the classroom or not, but I don't think you can fail to be more reflective if you're thinking about things in those ways. Also I suppose the other thing is because doctoral study is so kind of narrowly focussed, maybe it makes you, you know, almost unduly focussed on one area of practise to the [detriment] of others I dunno. But it certainly made me think more about what I do in my job.'*



*'You get a sense of achievement or of a sense of development that really, really is important. I think also you know, being in this middle management post with all of the, the vagaries of that, actually the knowledge that I'm gaining here is upping the confidence levels I have to voice ideas, concepts and suggestions in that role has been, so in a sense that the, the benefits of the learning are spreading out into the wellbeing beyond that persona I have of a student on the MA course and into other identities'.*

*'It's changed my approach to students and the way in which I talk about study and learning and approach to learning and ways of learning, and I'm coming from a starting point which says you can achieve anything you want to achieve and for some of you it might take longer than others and that really doesn't matter and the only way in which you fail is if you stop...*

*...so underlying everything I'm saying or asking them to do is this kind of concept that yes you have to take responsibility and you do need to engage and reflect and do all these other bits and pieces and be a master of your own journey really, but if you do do that, you can be as successful as you want to be, you can achieve almost anything you want, and that's where I'm coming from. So, it's not about learning subject knowledge, subject matter, although of course that's part of it, well it's more about learning how to learn I s'pose that's the easiest way to say it and that's such a catchphrase but it's about learning how to learn and how to deal with the process of learning I think.'*

This last comment reflects the importance of 'learning how to learn' and becoming comfortable with and confident in the learning process with highly positive benefits for educational practice. As part of the learning process, participants recognized the necessity for their learning of taking risks and pushing their own boundaries. The challenge involved in this can be anxiety provoking and therefore is potentially detrimental to wellbeing. The student quoted here described that paradox, the need to care for wellbeing and have a support network in place while at the same time putting themselves in an insecure position. It might be argued that the personal, professional, intellectual and emotional benefits of the intensive learning which can take place outweighs the risks involved. Indeed for academic wellbeing, challenge and risk can be seen as essential components, facilitating students achieving their personal and intellectual potential. It might also be argued that it is beneficial to start from a secure place in terms of having a support network in place and good overall wellbeing to enable resilience.

*'I don't know if I could do all the things I do if I didn't have that kind of family support, belief and husband support and, you know, a school who are behind me. So all those kind of social structures I've got supporting me are vital I think. But then I suppose that's the other thing about the risk level that you're not learning unless you're at the boundary so you kind of need to push your wellbeing to its limits to get anything done. If you're not taking risks emotionally and intellectually that you're probably not learning very much. So it's a bit of a conflicting model.'*

## **Student Strategies**

Strategies participants have employed to develop their academic confidence have included keeping perspective and remembering that their postgraduate study is only the beginning of an academic journey, they will develop confidence and the ability to vocalize ideas as they continue; managing their own expectations and recognizing that their work may have a limited impact at this stage but the most important thing is taking part in a discussion and becoming part of their wider academic community; engaging academically and taking part in conferences which enabled them to speak with other research students going through similar experiences and also to develop confidence through successes such as conference presentations; embracing the difficulty as this means important learning is taking place; noticing increasing familiarity with the language and topic within their discipline and celebrating accomplishments and milestones such as reviews as they go along and finally, buddying up with peers for the writing phase.

#### **Keeping perspective -**

*'The people who I work with I kind of forget that they're all thirty years older but I mean quite a lot of them are the same age as my parents, and I think you end up comparing your experience and your knowledge or your ability to sort of verbalise your kind of theoretical arguments aren't as good as theirs. You know I think oh I couldn't say that that eloquently or I, you know, that's what I meant or... do you know what I mean? And then I have to remind myself actually they've been doing it for twenty-five years longer than you, in twenty-five years you'll be able to do that.'*

#### **Managing expectations –**

*'I mean I think the further you get, the further you go into a doctorate the more modest you become about what impact any findings might have. But I'd like... you know I was saying about those names that come up, particularly looking at an issue that the same names come up? Just to be one of those names would be a starting point I mean, you know, the names that people reference in a body of thinking I think that's... whereas, you know, I think when you start you think I'm gonna have some ground breaking discovery that no one else has thought of, but actually realised that it's much more a community of research than that and it's just I'd be happy just to gain admission into the community.'*

#### **Academic engagement –**

*'Personally the fact that other people go through your same process and I think that should be encouraged. It was also going to conferences and things like that and seeing that, after all what you go through and the insecurities you have other people have and, you know, that makes you feel a bit better about yourself because I think quite a few PHD students, or the ones that I've been able to speak to go through this phase where they think, 'oh I can't do this, I'm not clever enough, I'm not good enough' or whatever; 'I'm not academic enough' or whatever and... but the fact that you can see other people going through it and you can see people who've been through it and got out the other end, and they still have doubts I think that, you know, personally that made me feel a lot better; a lot more secure about what I was doing and I also got quite a lot out of presenting at conferences, which I think the first time must have been a bit drunk because I*

*was so, so worried about it or worried about making a mess of it and so on. But the fact that I was able to do it, the fact that I got good feedback that was, you know, both on a work level but also on a personal level that made me feel yes I could do this, I could pretend to be an academic yes. So that was, personally that gave me a lot of, more to be filling my potential and my abilities.'*

#### **Embracing the difficulty –**

*'I think it's that thing about realising that if you're gonna get somewhere useful it's going to be difficult and if it's not it's probably not worth it, and if, and that that... being... it being difficult might involve things like having criticism or being forced to think about things that are difficult to think about, either coz they're sort of, you know, either kind of an emotional level are difficult or just coz there's lots of long words involved, and so just sort of being, expecting it to be hard and relishing the difficulty rather than feeling, rather than allowing yourself to feel insecure about it, and just sort of seeing it as that's what happens when you're on the boundaries, when you're learning.'*

#### **Developing knowledge of discipline, topic and familiarity with language –**

*'I'm probably sort of more confident, I had my second year review yesterday and I remember like compared to after the first, I mean after the first year was just so nervous and so insecure and yesterday I felt I was more confident about speaking about my research because I had done things, I had read a lot so I felt much better compared to the first year, and probably also regarding in writing and kind of terminology I've probably learned a lot compared to the beginning.'*

The writing phase can be particularly formative but can also be stressful, isolating and a time when academic wellbeing and confidence can be challenged. Buddying up with a peer was one beneficial strategy employed at this time:

*'The other thing that I'm planning to do now with another student is to meet up and just write together ... just to have that, well certain times, which are really dedicated to writing and also that feeling there's someone else there, you know, you're not completely on your own and you maybe also moderate each other or just a feeling of having someone, knowing that there's someone working besides you, I think it can be quite stimulating.'*

#### **Supervisory strategies**

Strategies employed by supervisors to encourage positive academic confidence development included careful questioning, opportunities for discussion, introducing different perspectives, providing reassurance and valuing students' contributions to the discussion.

#### **Questioning and discussion -**

*'I feel [my supervision] has enabled me to make that journey, to make that progress and I think some of the things they've done to do that are to encourage me to question my position, and that in combination with a very supportive approach which says it's Ok to think differently or have different views of the world and I think together that gives you confidence to begin to challenge your own position, identifying different options and then being able to sort of pursue those and say actually no, this is how it might work and for your supervisor to say well that's Ok, you know, that's fine, develop that and run with that, you know, it's quite an empowering process.'*

#### **Valuing student contributions -**

*'I knew that my supervisor was open, not only open but actually valued my ideas and contributions... And I don't think she'd ever... she never said that, you know, it's not something she's said but it something that I came across in our conversations, or continues to come across in conversations and that value on my contribution encourages you to do, to think and produce some things like that. So yes a lot of respect I think.'*

### **Departmental / programme / institutional strategies**

Academic departments, programmes and institutions can support the development of academic confidence by creating safe, managed spaces and opportunities for the explicit exploration of the concepts of epistemology and ontology; normalizing the experiences of troublesomeness students may encounter such as questioning their own position; providing developmental events which include both staff and students and also ensuring that these are accessible as possible. An example is careful timing of events so that parents are more likely to be able to attend. Peer support and mentoring schemes have the potential to enable the development of academic confidence through facilitating understanding and engagement with the setting and providing safe opportunities to discuss any anxieties and insecurities with someone who has recently been through a similar experience and may be able to share strategies and useful information. It may also be helpful to develop an awareness of the importance of sensitive feedback and support at critical moments, an example being the importance of constructive feedback for EdD coursework. Here this is compared to the teaching process in school from a student's professional life and she recognizes that these can be critical moments where there is potential for students' confidence to be irreparably knocked, and risking attrition.

### **Explorations of epistemology and ontology -**

*'Well one of the, one of the most significant moments for me was when we had, during one of the research methodology sessions we explored ontology and epistemology and what it means, and where we lie and for my supervisor we made an extra special effort to encourage me to really, before I did any research as it's [tradition] in a sense to really explore quite deeply where my own ontology lay, and that was a bit of an arduous process. I remember it taking all weekend to write, it come to 250 words something like that but what it produced was sort of perhaps the most meaningful 250 words that I've written in my life probably so far...'*

### **Normalising –**

*'How explicit is it in the doctoral handbook, in the documentation, in the induction? You should expect to find yourself in the murky quagmires and questioning the grounds of your own worldview...'*

### **Developmental events for students and staff –**

*'I do think those reading groups that I said to you about and the peer review groups could be more widely spread out, coz I do think they're really valuable. I think it would get you used to that process of what people say about other people's work and how you challenge it, and to read different styles of writing before the*

*meeting and how people take to those styles of writing and, you know, I take little things from the way that other people write... I think there's all sorts of valuable things to be taken from those sessions on lots of different levels really, so kind of being a part of the process, feeling part of the community, seeing how other people have to take criticism no matter how highbrow in your eyes they may be, yeah so I think there's lots of different things you can take from things like that.'*

**Accessible research events –**

*'Either sort of lunchtime or sort of, I wouldn't even mind late afternoon say three 'til five, or three-thirty 'til five-thirty, it's the bridging over sort of dinner into evening bedtime sort of placement that just makes it... the things you'd have to ask of people to help you would be just too much, people don't mind having your child over for dinner, people don't mind them coming to play after school, people don't mind babysitting in the evening but you can't ask somebody to fill all those roles, you know, I think it's a step too far really and also whether or not you're happy to do that with your child or whether you want them to have a routine where you all eat dinner together and you put them to bed, if that's possible for you, which is something that I like to try and do, you know, and that's me. Yeah so lunchtimes, late afternoons or I really would come back and seven o'clock for a session.'*

**Peer support / mentoring –**

*'When I was in my first year I would have appreciated a lot more contact with people who'd gone through the same process, because I think and I can see it in the new students, you spend a lot of time pretending you know what it's all about but, you know, of course unless it's your second PhD you don't know what it's all about and, you know, as I say you pretend a lot of time that you know what people are talking about and what's what in the university but it's quite baffling, and if you did have this, the possibility of exchanging your ignorance and your insecurities with other people it would be so much more beneficial. People that have been through what you do...'*

**Sensitive feedback and support at critical moments -**

*'I remember having some less than positive feedback, and I think maybe that's... those are the times that you need to think... coz I know with students that's when I can lose them. If they... if I hand them back an essay and it's an E and they wanna get Cs it can almost make it impossible that they'll never get above an E because of what it does to their belief, and I think especially... you know even I have sort of sang the praises of this kind of assignment style structure, for people who fail one, it completely throws their belief that they're able to do it and I think that maybe that's the moment when that sort of high level of intervention is required. I don't know every time I write an assignment I think I'm not gonna be able to complete it, but then I always go and talk to my course leader and say, 'what happens if I don't get this in on time and what happens if...?' and she just always points out to me that I said that last time and I managed to pass. So that, you know, and that's all I need. But actually if it did go wrong maybe I'd need more.'*

**Pre-entry information and support –**

*'I think it would have been good if at interview, a lot of us are coming to this MA from full time jobs and particularly the older ones, the dinosaurs like me who did their degrees over 20 years ago when we didn't have all the rules and regulations or the quality assurance checks or what have you, you know, we could slide through. We never had a single session on this that the other, the nuts and bolts of academic presentation, or doing it this way or that way...'*

*I mean that's fine, you would expect at M level for someone like me to get off their butt and do that research and I don't mind doing that, but it would have been interesting for those questions to have been asked at interview, what can you remember about or what, you know, what was your experience, because even then if you're lying to yourself or the interviewer about how confident you are, its flagging it up in your head, oh yeah I need to, and that probably sounds really obvious, but I think there's a couple of us older ones that have had a curve there that we might have been able to pre-empt a little bit more.'*

#### **Clear expectations -**

*'People that are clear in their expectations of you, so... coz I think one of the things is if you're not clear about what's being asked of you, and I think this goes in any walk of life, it's very easy to be conservative and to retract to a conservative position where actually no point in trying, no point in pushing the boundaries, it doesn't... nothing's inviting exploration here. Exploration is fraught with risk and potential failure. In a more holding environment where risk and potential failure are welcomed and where challenges and danger are acknowledge and mitigated, would be a more interesting place to be.'*

#### **Empowerment and student engagement**

It was important to participants that they felt their voices were heard and that they had some control over their environment. For some the identity shift to becoming a student, having been a professional was particularly challenging, as described here, because of the perception that there is less scope for making an impact or effecting change as a student. As these quotes illustrate, feeling disempowered can be a particularly pertinent problem for education professionals:

*'It's not as structured, you have to find your own self-discipline but it's also a matter of establishing relationships with other people. You don't have the role that you have in a working, in a work situation or you don't feel you have it so it's a bit more trial and error and dead ends, and so some upsettings along the way as well about really how active you are in shaping what your environment, you know? I'm used to being able to make an impact in what I do; it's been a bit more different.'*

*'As a student it's been a bit, been blown with the wind. You don't and I haven't felt personally but also as part of a bigger group that there was so much that we knew about what was going on or any influence about what is going on about, you know... we just had to adapt it whatever is happening, and that is, you know, we're all... often other PHD students are your more mature person. You've got quite lot of work experience and you've got this ambition, like I'm shaping it but you're, that's not always possible [in this environment].'*

*'I think it's also being in a work situation, you are used to shaping what you do. Of course you've got, you know, superiors and other people that you listen to but you are used to working also as a teacher and part of a team you are used to share, and construct things as part of a team. But this doesn't seem to happen, PHD students are all working in isolation and they're not encouraged enough to get together and express their needs and have things tailored to what their needs are, as expressed by them not as assumed by people who might have gone through*

*a PHD a while ago but perhaps in a different situation, perhaps in a different time.'*

Another area for concern arose for research students who were also employed at the institution where they were studying, especially in instances where they were supervised within their working team. This can make it difficult to ask for help and makes it difficult when the relationship with a supervisor breaks down. It can also augment departmental hierarchies and create a sense of role and status confusion.

*'Everybody knew that I was struggling and that they wouldn't talk to each other and I was too frightened to get rid of one of [my supervisors] and not the other, you know, I mean it was just horrible... these people, you know, professor this, they all just seem so kind of high powered and, you know... you don't really have any power at all in that relationship.'*

### **Institutional strategies**

One of the underlying issues creating a sense of disempowerment for many research students, which can be felt more keenly by professional or ex professional learners, is the lack of clarity regarding their status and this may be an area which could usefully be discussed at institutional level:

*'I dunno whether this is a problem it's difficult to say but there seems to be a general problem that the PHD students are really... in X we have this no meat nor fish, neither meat or fish and your caught in... 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.'*

Solutions offered by the research students include providing opportunities for the research student voice to be heard, instilling a sense that student rights will be upheld and making it clear where to go for neutral, non-judgmental support along with enabling, supporting, facilitating and resourcing student led initiatives. Any initiatives to help support and develop research students should take place in consultation with them and students strongly voiced the importance of student led initiatives. Ultimately it is essential that research students feel valued and visible in their institution and the link to wellbeing is made explicit in the final illustrative quote here:

*'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 don't feel that PhD students are, PhD students ideas and needs and... it's all, it's all top, bottom and sort of handed down. But what... it's... you're not asked enough, you know, what do you need and what do you want to do and do you have*

*any ideas and do you want to organise anything, you know, when that happens sometimes you realise you're stood on someone's patch and you've not meant to, and that to me is astonishing coz it should be a lot more student led especially at a PhD level when you're supposed to know what you're doing and what you need and you want. But that doesn't seem to be the case. You know I have not been once asked, 'what do you think?' you know 'what do you need?' in my three years of experience, and I think that all these other students should be heard a lot more.'*

*'We felt the best way for the university to support and develop sort of sense of belonging to communities was to work with students to help be able to identify issues, to do something about it. The problem is that the university keeps on jumping on these ideas, "Here's a wonderful idea, let's set up this course and we will send out the information and they will come". That to me doesn't resolve it, people have ideas, people have experience, people have talent, particularly the PhDs body, I mean, you get a group of them together there's so much talent it's immense but they're not given the opportunity to do something about it because they're stepping on someone else's territory.'*

*'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. I think there's a strength in being a full time PhD student, but there's also a weakness, sometimes you've got too much time on your hands. 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.'*

### **Positive supervisory relationship**

Participants highly valued positive supervisory relationships which were seen as key to success. At times of vulnerability, either in their studies or when students were experienced difficulties in their personal lives, supervisors often made the difference by signposting to appropriate sources of support and staying in contact with students. For International students in particular, supervisors play a crucial role in instigating a sense of belonging to the institution and so support at the beginning of students' journeys is essential while they settle in and begin to develop support networks and become familiar with the institutional culture. Supervisors can help students to begin to create support and academic networks by introducing them to peers and colleagues and suggesting events and other developmental opportunities they might helpfully attend. As one student stated, their supervisor helped them to map out a 'pathway to success'. As well as providing pastoral care and support, students benefitted from their supervisors being ambitious for them and encouraging them to present and publish their work. Students valued a sense that their supervisors were aware of their personal issues and concerns as well as their academic progress, or in other words had a



‘whole student’ focus. Key to the development of successful supervisory relationships, according to participants, is regular supervision and / contact, good availability, positive and constructive feedback, enthusiasm for the students’ research and a non-hierarchical or collegiate relationship. In cases where the relationship breaks down or students find it difficult to access their supervisor or gain the support they need, particularly in moments of crisis, whether personal or academic, this can have a profoundly negative effect on wellbeing and on successful completion of the research.

*‘I think...well my supervisors being there would have been helpful and I am glad that this is sorted out now but I think in that early stages, well really all through the PhD, I still feel like I need a lot of support but especially in the early stages to see supervisors regularly. So in the first...in the months when I was planning my fieldwork and in the months when I was starting my fieldwork I didn’t see my supervisors at all... So I think seeing people quite regularly, I think that would be supportive. I guess as I feel now, it’s not a terrible mistake, I can still write a PhD from it, it’s nothing terrible, but it’s the sort of situation I know in hindsight that I sort of could have done the fieldwork more effectively and more realistically...’*  
*‘...you know, when I did see supervisors, and this would be a general comment as well, that there some, it wasn’t just like a listening space where you could say how you’re finding it because that’s really important but also to have some actual interventions from time to time, you know, somebody saying no actually, I think you really need to take route B rather than route A, this isn’t going to work. I’ve still never had that, I scarcely even get a, you know, a grammatical correction, you know, all my supervisors are very hands off so I think a little bit more hands on intervention would be good.’*

### **Student Strategies**

Students can feel empowered through taking control of their learning journey, developing an assertive approach and asking for what they need, which includes being aware of what their entitlements are. An example here is where one student sets the agenda for meetings. This raises the issue of expectation management for students as some, particularly those from different cultural settings may see the relationship as hierarchical or they may have an expectation of more intensive support than the supervisor may be able to give.

*‘I kind of set him an agenda, during the meeting I kind of guide him through what I’m looking for because I view our relationship as a kind of partnership and we’re friends and it’s nice. Whereas if you go into it and think of it as a hierarchy, you know, especially viewed from a non-British context and it’s your supervisor and you can’t question them then that’s gonna lead to frustrations.’*

### **Supervisory strategies**

#### **Collegiality -**

*‘[One of the things I value most] would be my supervisor, who is technically the academic adviser, because he’s fantastic and everything that you’d want in a supervisor and particularly with an emphasis on things like flexible and making time for you and just putting the kettle on and having a cup of tea and making it feel like its, you know, colleagues as well as it being a hierarchical arrangement*

*which is really nice and I think that's got better as the PhDs gone along really. It's really...it makes the...I have a supervision later and it's something that I am really looking forward to as opposed to something that I'm dreading and feeling bad about so I think that's really valuable and especially as I haven't had that experience with my first set of supervisors who didn't really attend to me very well and so I really value that.'*

### **Departmental Strategies**

Departments are seen as having a role to play in terms of monitoring the supervision process in terms of meeting and contact with students. Several participants had had to change their supervisory team and it was stressed that this process could be better managed to minimize the negative impact on students:

*'I think as well just keeping serious, keeping a very serious eye on supervisions. We fill out supervision logs... in both departments we fill out logs and ultimately our supervisions, the quantity for getting them, this is what our tuition fees go towards, this is part of, you know, a learning contract, and I think that there should be more administrative checks, I think, to say oh look, this student hasn't had a supervision. No, we haven't had any forms for her for 8 months, it seems that she's only had 3 supervisions in 18 months, what's going on here, and I think that should be a standard thing rather than waiting for people to come unstuck. I think that should be chased up by everyone.'*

*'I think that should be across the university and it should just happen, you know, as standard, and then if things are not working out, you know, then that should be a conversation that's happened straight away and it shouldn't end up as...you know the situation with me, it ended up with me actually contacting the [X] to say I'm not getting the support that you're paying my institution to provide which... it's silly, it's embarrassing for everyone to let things get to that stage.'*

*'So just have some checks in place and if there's a particular supervisor who is not pulling their weight or if there's not a bond between people just change it, you know, it doesn't have to be heavy handed. To add to that I actually get on well with the people who were my supervisors and now aren't like we chat over coffee and it's all good natured. I don't think it has to be this big tense, bitter experience. I think it just has to be, you know, oh yeah, you really don't have time to supervise me, we don't share any research interests, and we don't really share enough mutual desire of where the project is going, to work very well together, lets rethink this and I think they've now got supervisees they connect with and I have supervisors who I like. So it doesn't have to be a bad experience but that should happen in the first few months, not in the last year I think.'*

### **Motivation**

Research students reported intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors which included having a sense of purpose, the postgraduate study forming part of their life and/or career plan, the potential value of their research, career progression and time and financial constraints. Those who reported high levels of intrinsic motivation around personal fulfillment tended to feel

more satisfied with their programme, as illustrated in these contrasting quotes. Some participants reported that the challenge involved in their own learning provided a welcome contrast to their everyday, routine activities in their working lives. For others, it is essential to focus on the benefits and remember the reason they started the programme to begin with. Enjoying and celebrating achievements and the completion of goals along the way helps as does planning towards the next goal, for example a PhD, an article or applying for post-doctoral funding. Strategies such as time management and breaking talks into manageable chunks helped with motivation and it was also important to keep studies in perspective, remembering that they are only a small phase of life and there is an end-point.

#### **Intrinsic satisfaction -**

*'For me I'm doing it from, for my own benefits more so from like an intrinsic side for the fact that I can, I should in theory get a sense of enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction from knowing that I'm learning and I'm actually challenging myself, which perhaps has been lacking in my job.'*

*'I think one of the factors that will influence [my wellbeing and workload management] is my motivation because as always if you're interested in something it's a lot less, it's a lot less hard to actually get up in the morning to read and write about it, in fact you want to do it and it becomes part of your leisure time or things like that, something you enjoy doing. So I think one of the main challenges is going to be to continue to allow myself to be, to focus on areas that I'm passionate about.'*

#### **Keeping goals in sight -**

*'I've thought about giving up quite often and it's kind of not, not really an option for me. I did go to an X event last week and they were saying, you know, PhDs don't increase your opportunities for earning or your career prospects but actually in my line of work that's not true. If I don't get my PhD then I will, then this is me, you know, there won't be any further opportunities for me and I won't be able to apply for the funding that I want to apply for, so actually I think that's probably kind of, kind of specific to what it is that you want to do with your life, which field you want to work in. So yeah, so I've thought about it long and hard and it's actually not an option for me not to do it and the stress of it being in the background is too much, so I just think suffer for a year and get it done.'*

#### **Celebrating achievements -**

*'You know it's stressful and it is kind of a big commitment of your life but then I kind of think of how proud I'll be when it's done and how pleased people will be for me, and the opportunities that it will afford me. Because the book that I've been asked to write I don't think I would have been asked to write it if they hadn't have known that I was in writing up phase of my PhD. You know and that is one of the greatest things that's ever happened to me in my sort of career or working life, because I was kind of chosen from a conference presentation that I gave, the person approached me and do you know what I mean? And so it's... that is an amazing thing to be proud of and... do you know? So that makes me kind of happy and makes me feel good, and makes me feel good about myself and opens up other opportunities to me, which hopefully will make my career, you know, path easier to kind of follow and give me a bit more status with... do you know what I mean?'*

*So it's, so that... I guess for me at the moment it seems like the sacrifice is worth the gain.'*

#### **Breaking the task down into smaller deadlines -**

*'Sometimes quite a solitary experience, what else comes in my mind first... that you have to rely a lot on yourself first of all and finding... well a topic was given but I still had to define it further and find a focus, find questions, then you basically have to do all the work, I mean you have to get the data to use or whatever yourself and analyse them. So it's, yeah it's quite a lot and you have to, I mean and also you have to motivate yourself constantly because you also have to... coz you're kind of the only one who has the, really the overview of what you're doing. So you have to manage yourself and set yourself deadlines and meet them and, I mean that's at least my experience.'*

#### **Keeping perspective –**

*'Have courage and keep going and remember it's just a PhD and, you know, it feels like your whole life and remember it's a marathon not a sprint so I think...I increasingly think all PhDs have big ups and downs, some more than others, but I've not really met anybody who hasn't and those people who seem to be very efficient and very calm and like they're just having the most straightforward time I found out, I think without exception, that they are not always feeling the same inside. So I think everybody is, you know, does go through periods of time where they're struggling even if that's, you know, some people more than others. So I'd probably give somebody the advice look, this is a hard thing to do but it's not a horrendous thing to do, it's a lot better than a lot of other work you could be doing but just be patient with yourself and be patient with the project and, you know, just keep going.'*

#### **Supervisory Strategies**

##### **Manage the writing process -**

*'It's about having goals and feeling like you're achieving them. So like, I mean our current strategy is writing up is... I feel very sorry for my supervisor... is just to write as much as I can as quick as I can so I'm thinking about quantity not quality, which means, which isn't great for him coz he's got to read through lots of rubbish to get to what I'm trying to say. But it does mean that it develops quite quickly in terms of content and having things down, which is good for my motivation and is good to stop me feeling worried about it you know? It relieves my anxiety coz I've got stuff written down.'*

##### **Recognise the value and contribution of the research -**

*'My supervisor say you came from Asian country, you did all these thing that people don't do yet, you combine three different approach and claim that for your own and this is something people really fascinate to see because from my experience, when I interview practitioner, the way of responding that I receive they say I feel so fascinate with your research, I want to see the outcome, I want to see how it's help. It's not only help you, but help us too. So, you know, this is something motivate me.'*

##### **Encouragement -**

*'...like my supervisor say, you need to climb again to the mountain. Climb and climb and climb so finding a way to arrive at the summit and then he say to me... this is my second supervisor; I don't know, maybe both my supervisor quite philosophical...and then he say to me when you arrive at summit you can see from a view of helicopter and we will feel proud about yourself, so that something*

*encourage me and, you know, indirectly it enhance my wellbeing. It's enhanced a lot.'*

## **Departmental strategies**

### **Awareness of study needs of employees -**

*'It felt like a bomb and actually the more that time went by I think I became even more nervous about kind of opening it and it just seemed impossible because I only ever had like three hours here of four hours there, and it just wasn't, I just didn't have any grip of it at all it was just this unwieldy thing, and the data that I collected had been very much directed by the project so actually it wasn't even particularly rooted in my sort of theoretical and... do you know what I mean?*

*Like I'm just being brutally honest it was data, you know, and, you know, I had a progression review and said all this and just, you know, I think they knew that I was just thinking this is just a waste of time, and they said to me that I could have a month off to just get my head around it, which I did and actually it was the best thing that ever happened to me and I don't know if anything would have happened without that actually.'*

## **Ownership**

Ownership emerged as a theme which closely related to academic confidence. A sense of ownership of the research tended to develop over time as research students gained confidence and supervisors drew back from a directive approach, which was helpful initially while students were at the beginning of their research journey and grappling with the research questions and design. As research students develop, however, it is important to become independent and make their own decisions about their work. This is described in the first quote here as 'developing a PhD voice' and speaking with authority, able to challenge existing ideas and their supervisor. This is something which supervisors can helpfully recognize, encourage and celebrate. Ownership can be more problematic in cases where the research student joins a pre-existing research team or undertakes a studentship and there were instances where this did not work well, seriously affecting the student's confidence and motivation, as illustrated in the second quote. However, there was also an instance where the research student did go on to develop a sense of ownership as the research progressed, helped by a sensitive and supportive team who gave them the freedom to shape the work.

*'It's actually been really good for me, you know, coz I do admire his work a lot and do sort of, you know, admire the kind of depth of knowledge he's got and the, you know, the way he can just reel off papers that, you know, and you just think oh I'm never gonna be able to do that. But no so it's given me a, given me more confidence definitely. Which I think has helped me to go on and write the next book, and my supervisor said to me, my other supervisor, she said I just read the last bits you sent to me and I thought to myself brilliant she's got it, she's go her*

*PhD voice she's speaking with authority, you know, and I think yeah that's what you need isn't it? There's something that happens, like I say to you from being apologetic... I'm very sorry, I'm very sorry. I think I think this but I won't think that if you tell me not to, to kind of, you know, no I think this because of this and actually I've seen it in action and maybe I'm not sure why it is but this, you know, I'm not willing to discount it.'*

*'The only major difficulty I've had is that I have a departmental studentship, so there was a project brief written up by a person, I was supposed to take ownership of that and that's a challenge in itself because you want to respect the person and their ideas, but you also want to take ownership, because unless you feel that you can intellectually produce in your own head, as opposed to parrot-fashion, what this person might want, I think that the way it should go, then you're never ever going to come out with anything, I think, and I don't like the word "original", but of value to yourself, because it's not yours.'*

## Academic Learning Environment

Access to an appropriate space in which to work was seen as highly important by participants, facilitating concentration and focus and also enabling the development of good relationships between staff and students. Organizing space so that research students were able to sit together means that peer communities can flourish, supporting the invaluable informal academic exchange which is essential for development and providing a site where academic wellbeing strategies can be shared. One student, quoted below, described how this shared space engendered a sense of identity or belonging. The social aspect of space sharing provided some balance, contributing to enjoyment and fulfillment as well as offering a supportive arena in which to work. Additionally, research students feel more valued when they have access to an appropriate and pleasant working environment and conversely may feel undervalued when environments are of poor quality. The use of space can at times reinforce hierarchies and the separation of staff and research students, for example when research students are not allowed access to staffroom facilities and / or do not have their own area which provides basic facilities. Shared spaces can foster an atmosphere of collegiality in academic exchange and break down barriers. Issues of equitability arise as not all students have access to an appropriate space in which to work; this is felt particularly keenly by those students who are unable to or find it difficult to study at home due to lack of space or an environment which is less than ideal, perhaps due to a young family. Another vital issue to address is the health and safety aspects of studying. Not all students will have had any formal training in sitting appropriately at their computers and, especially when caught in in the writing process, may not take appropriate breaks with potential serious consequences of their

posture and eyesight. It is therefore important that advice is available to students about ensuring they have a suitable workspace.

**Impact on physical wellbeing –**

*'The pain of sitting badly is just phenomenal and I don't think with anyone who's ever given any thought to giving guidance on actually setting students' desks up properly and saying this is what a normal... this is a nice working area, of course you're gonna have to accommodate, you've got family, you've got kids, you've got cats, you've got, you know, whatever, but really how big a desk do you need? At least a metre, that you can sit down, yeah and a chair that sits up straight, coz I know some people are sitting there with a granny dinners tray with a laptop on it, on their sofa and I'm surprised they can still walk. But yeah, you know, it's an absolutely pain and then a panic, because if you're in writhing agony, you're not thinking about your work, you're not, sure as hell ain't producing any, and the clock's ticking.'*

**Linked to hierarchies / uncertain status –**

*'There's increasing pressure on the desk space and this is slowly being taken away from the students actually in a very, sort of in a gradual way in that we used to have it all through our PhD and now first years don't get desk space. I think, my sense from people I speak to, is simply that there's no particular culture of people working here day in, day out, and the environments are not very nice for people to be in. I think that needs to be kept a careful eye on because I just find it important and I know that people who work around me feel it's important too.'*

**Equitability -**

*'As it is, not having a good sort of, a physical, a logistic environment to work in that has been a problem as well in the use of the space. I personally cannot work from home, partly because I've got three children and when they come home after school it's not, it's not quiet enough, and partly because once you've done, you've worked for a long time, well at least for me that's the case, my brain does not go into working mode unless I physically leave the house and have a space, which I separate from... I suppose I've been working outside the house for too long to be able to do it in the house, my brain just doesn't switch on in the same way as it does... so I think what I, you know, the need of a space but also the need of a role or... yeah you're in a space and you're in a place at university for three, most likely four years.'*

**Linked to identity and community belonging –**

*'The other thing that I really value [as well as a positive supervisory relationships] is my office, my shared office, and having that structured space that I do feel like I've got a work identity when I go to, you know, I've got a desk and, you know, and I go to work and I do the PhD at work and I'm not sure that my friends who are doing PhDs over here might feel the same way about the space that they have but for me that's really good and to be surrounded by other PhD students who you can talk with, you know, as part of that shared space, so I think those are the two things that sort of really like they support me when things aren't going very well but they also make life enjoyable and fulfilling when they, you know, when things are going well they're probably the things which would, I would say, are, you know, factors in making them go well.'*

*'I do think it's important to have spaces where people, where there is sort of informal mixing. Whether that's, you know, a physical space within a department*



*or sort of just after a seminar, have a little social for people to keep up with what you're doing.'*

## **Welfare & health needs met**

Some participants had experienced struggles with their basic welfare and health, including lack of support for mental health problems, inadequate housing and severe financial constraints and these can seriously impact on their ability to study. Other participants had experienced traumatic life events including marital breakdown, bereavement and domestic violence. They described how important it was to feel supported by their supervisor, department and university and how valuable this contact was. In some instances students agreed with their supervisors to take time out from their studies and it was essential that they had a lot of support when returning. Often being part of a university and having an academic goal to reach were seen as important aspects of recovery and, with support, were confident of a successful outcome. It was seen as highly important that staff were aware of and sensitive to their needs. It was also seen as essential that available resources such as counselling and advice services are made visible to research students, as they can sometimes feel uncertain as to what is available and whether or how they can access it. Encouraging support seeking and signposting to what is available are therefore important strategies for supervisors and other members of staff to apply to research students. As caring for wellbeing and building emotional resilience is so important in enabling students to cope during challenging times, universities, departments and staff have a vital role to play in ensuring they have access to resources which underpin the importance of and support the development wellbeing strategies.

### **Welfare and health issues, impact on personal / academic wellbeing –**

*'...also kind of how you're living circumstances are, I mean I think that's quite important. I mean last year I was just not so... well I wasn't, I didn't really feel well in the sort of area and house where I lived I felt that that caused quite a lot of extra sort of stress, and troubles and I'm really happy that that's sort of settled now and that I feel really kind of comfortable in my home.'*

*'Also the money that's a thing I maybe haven't mentioned to you in the first year, I mean my scholarship was quite low so I was, always had to watch the money and we kind of always had... yeah it was always quite, quite short of money and that also caused quite a bit of stress, and then when there's something extra, something unexpected happened and, you know, you, you can't pay your bills that's yeah not a very nice feeling.'*

*'From my perspective when I'm not well and depression is bad then I just find learning really difficult. I find that I don't want to learn new things...I don't want things or ideas around me and being open to new things, which you have to, to*



*learn, just seems like I've got enough whizzing around my head already and it can feel like an assault sometimes, you know, like on a...because my normal perspective is, you know, if there's a bundle of ideas, a bundle of articles in front of me, which I know are full of ideas, I feel goody, goody, lovely ideas but I think when you are not in a good place personally it's like the ideas are out to get you a little bit and you're like I don't want those in my head and it feels like just your mind closes up, your mind's eye will close...'*

**Awareness of the support available -**

*'...maybe offering some sort of personal counselling or advice as well. I mean I know it's there but maybe it's not as obvious that it's there and maybe you wouldn't know about it or you maybe sometimes think it's more for people who really have problems, you know, and your problems aren't big enough. I mean that's probably what many PhD students think that they have to get through this and that maybe it's, yeah on their own and that maybe the problems aren't sort of pressing enough to seek maybe counselling or something but... so maybe that could be targeted more towards Postgraduate or PhD students.'*

**Access to professional support -**

*'Yes, actually [a marriage breakdown] not easy thing for me to face in a strange country, but then because of the support from my supervisor, from my co-ordinator from the faculty, from the university. I mean I have a counsellor that I can talk through all these thing and then resource support here... decide I need to stay here to finish my study and keep moving and that's something, turning point for me. You imagine, came here with three children and husband, sold my house and car, and now I have nothing, only with my three children. But because of the support that I have here, my doctor, mental health team, that support me, so it's enhanced my well-being.'*

**Support from academic staff / supervisor -**

*'...a few months I was unable to manage thing due to my depression and until, as I mentioned to you, support from child therapies, counsellor woman, social worker, mental health team, after that I am able to work again. When I saw my supervisor effort he try make every effort to make me sit back for my PhD, to make me focus again for my research and I know my research is quite something important for me when I return home and I will bring something quite wonderful to introduce in X.'*

**Personal wellbeing strategies -**

*'How to find a way because those who suffer will say to me you must taking care, have a good taking care of yourself. After that you will, you can, you will be able to take care of other; your children, your study or whatever. Yes, that what I have experience because if I don't have a good care of myself I will be unable to do everything. I have experience three month of severe depression. I couldn't do anything, but after that, you know, time will heal. After that I manage because important for me to look after myself, to be healthy mentally, emotionally, physically. After that I will have a good taking care of my children because when I feel good about myself I can provide a good thing for my children. Yes, that something important for me to find a way... It's a very valuable experience, because [my friend] say to me if you don't have a very healthy, physically, mentally, emotionally, how can you want to keep moving? So that's important. I need to try even it's not easy.'*

## Cultural awareness

International students have additional layers of challenge to cope with, including homesickness, coping without their usual support networks, adjusting to a new culture, different academic norms and language barriers. For this group, it is even more important that they come into a supportive environment, learn coping techniques and access support from their peers, supervisors and student services. Good language support in particular is seen as an essential component of their successful progression. Intensive support from a supervisor at the beginning of the research journey, including providing regular meetings and introducing her to other staff and peers and enabling her to begin building a support as well as an academic network, was seen as invaluable by one student who described her supervisor as carving out a 'pathway to success' for her.

*'...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.'*

*'At first, when I first arrive here I feel quite difficult to adapt, to adjust, with different, you know, different language and English, different English accent and different way of life, different food, everything, but because for me open to new experience will provide you with different thing and I prepare my children too. And it's a big challenge for us, quite stressful, and the thing that help me, because during my journey in term of study I have lots of support service from university. I mean English, we can attend workshop from English learning division and then about study, study [matter], anything about study [matter], we have have lots of workshop and then programme for how to gain professional knowledge, so many thing. And the most important thing for me, I have a very supportive facilitative and understand supervisor, I mean the best supervisor for me.'*

*'My supervisor tried to [host] me, like to help me adjust with the environment. I remember on the first day, the reason I chose to come to X, I mean to come to X, because the correspondence, the previous correspondence I had with my supervisor since I was in X because I planned to go to X and then I realise... supervisor is important to help us during our journey. And then from his way of corresponding he asked me to do a background reading, so I know this is a very good supervisor. And then when arrived here he introduce me to department, to his colleague, to, you know, to make me familiar with everything... and then he meet me on weekly basis to support me, show me about everything, so that's something I feel quite essential and, you know, it motivates me, enhance me to do something good in return because I have a very good supervisor so...he just want to help me so I need to do something good about myself and I work hard about that.'*

## Positives of postgraduate study for personal wellbeing

Undertaking a higher degree can have a profoundly positive impact on lives, not just in terms of career development but in terms of the personal gains – the development of emotional resilience by coming through periods of troublesomeness and surviving and the personal transformations inherent in study at this level. This is manifested in research students thinking in a different way, seeing the world in new ways, feeling like a different person, achieving their personal and academic potential and enjoying enhanced confidence and self-esteem as a result.

*'I like it, it's hard though. I like it but it's hard. I think that's all I can really say but yeah, but it's, it's worth it. I think it's doing me good even though I find it difficult in terms of... like I was saying that whole thing about self-belief, self-esteem, you know, it's got high status hasn't it doctoral level study, and that to do it and survive it feels good.'*

*'Do it, do it, it's, on the whole I believe, really worthwhile, especially do it if someone else is gonna pay for it, really, you're a fool if you don't do it at that point, but my God it's going to take some time, you're gonna make sacrifices, you're gonna not do all the stuff that you thought you were gonna do and you're gonna become someone else and I think even in, you know, past 18 months I've very much become more of someone, more of myself maybe. I can't say I've become someone else but I'm a different person I was 18 months ago, just having thought about that and be prepared for that because it affects the way you think, that way you interact, it affects the way that... I'm more critical.'*

## Staff and Student Workshops

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### Student Workshops

Three hour workshops were offered to research students at each participating institution. These were designed to promote the importance of wellbeing, develop ideas around academic wellbeing, promote self-awareness, foster a sense of community among attendees and provide an opportunity to share practical strategies such as time management, life balancing and communication skills as well as tips for overcoming blocks in writing. These sessions were well attended with between 12 and 20 participants at each institution. Research students were initially encouraged to get to know each other by talking informally in pairs about themselves and their programme and / or research topic. This was followed by a group discussion about wellbeing, what it means and why it is important for studies. The notion of academic wellbeing, previously discussed in the focus groups, was explored.

Participants were then invited to reflect on their individual wellbeing priorities and to share their favourite wellbeing strategies in small groups. These strategies were then collated into a 'wellbeing menu' by the wider group. Work-life balance issues were then discussed with opportunities for individual and group reflection and participants were able to identify which area of their life needed more time. Strategies were then shared to enable successful achievement of work-life-study balance. Participants shared that at times they might be studying hard and neglecting their family life or finding it hard to make time for themselves. Conversely, at other times everyday life might take precedence over study time. Strategies included good diary management, including colour coding, being assertive and saying no, asking family members for support, for example in domestic tasks, negotiating with employers, capturing their best energy by identifying which time of day they studies best at and reviewing their studying pattern. Some participants identified that they could improve their study output and enhance their wellbeing and resilience by working in 'bitesized' chunks every day rather than trying to work intensively for a few weeks before a deadline. Data from the research was discussed as 'mythbusting', helping students to recognize that their experiences and issues were a normal part of the learning process and that academic confidence is something which develops over time and even experienced academics have issues with time management, presenting and writing. Myths included the propositions that:

- Most research students are totally in control of their studies and manage their time perfectly.
- Research students and academics are extremely confident at all times.
- Most research students understand ontology and epistemology and the relationships between them.
- Research students never have existential crises.
- Most research students and academics love writing.
- Research students and academics always meet deadlines.

A number of coping strategies for overcoming writing blocks and working effectively with supervisors were also discussed and data was shared from Professor Wisker's work which focused specifically on these areas as well as insights from this project. Writing strategies discussed included:

- Using the blocking stages to develop :
- Patchwriting;
- Reading to write;
- Writing to write;
- Using critical friends;
- Planning to write;

- Managing the writing energy;
- Multi-tasking to release creativity;
- Looking ahead to the end;
- Persistence.

Strategies for managing supervisors were shared, including the following:

- Agree on learning contract , ground rules, well spaced out supervisions;
- Get clear instructions
- Get hold of rules and regulations yourself – understand them
- Don't take anything for granted – check
- Try & get on with your supervisor – it is a professional relationship.
- Clear communication over time;
- Agree how to send work, questions;
- Respond to suggestions.

At the end of the session participants were encouraged to note three practical, manageable strategies they could employ to enhance their academic wellbeing. These points were written on postcards and sent on to the students 6 – 8 weeks after the workshop to ensure continuity.

Further resources, such as those available from Vitae, as well as local student support were highlighted with distribution of appropriate literature. Finally, the participants were encouraged to stay in touch with each other and offer peer support – this element of the workshop proved successful as research students from the same department were introduced, sometimes for the first time and the workshops provided an opportunity for ongoing friendship and collaboration, enhancing the research student community.

A two hour workshop for staff took place at one of the participating institutions and a presentation of survey findings took place at another. The workshop was cancelled at a third institution due to timing issues, however staff there had had the opportunity to take part in the focus group which generated very rich discussion and the sharing of good practice. The two hour workshop was based on a presentation and discussion of research findings, focusing especially on the survey findings and comments from student interview participants. It provided an opportunity for workshop participants to reflect on their own practice and consider what individual members of staff, departments and institutions can do to enhance the wellbeing of research students in Education. While there were many examples of good practice by individual members of staff, and while wellbeing was recognized as being at least partially the responsibility of students themselves, the discussion reiterated the importance of wellbeing as a crucial aspect of good institutional practice and a positive and successful research culture.

# Dissemination Events

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## **'Pathways to Success' Dissemination event at University of Strathclyde**

This event took place on June 16, 2011 at the University of Strathclyde. It attracted over 20 delegates, including visiting delegates from the University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of Lancaster, University of Edinburgh and University of Bristol. The aim was to provide an opportunity for academics and research students to come together and discuss ways of enhancing research student learning experiences, share research in the area, enable the research student voice to be heard and identify best practices. The event was Chaired and hosted by project partners from the Centre for Academic Practices and Learning Enhancement and the keynote speaker for the event was Professor Glynis Cousin from the University of Wolverhampton who focused on the troublesome nature of learning about ontology and epistemology and this led to very interesting and engaged discussion with some interesting parallels with the work of 'Troublesome Encounters'. The full programme is provided below and powerpoint presentations are available online via the Centre for Learning and Teaching and Escalate websites.

### **Symposium Programme:**

**Welcome and Introduction**

**Jan Smith, Centre for Academic Practices and Learning Enhancement, University of Strathclyde**

**Professor Glynis Cousin, University of Wolverhampton**

**Keynote: '*Getting the ologies through the back door*'**

In my experience of teaching on a professional doctorate in higher education, many students struggle with the methodological debates that they are required to master. Partly this may be due to the fact that a number of such students do not have a disciplinary grounding in the social sciences and are thus unfamiliar with the language and conceptual frameworks deployed but this reason does not apply to all who struggle. For many doctoral students, notions of 'epistemology and ontology' are felt to be hard to grasp, unduly complex and unhelpful to the task of conducting empirical research. They do not move beyond a liminal state. It is also my experience that required assignments on methodology often betray more mimicry than understanding and while some students may

move beyond mimicry as their research matures, many do not. Moreover, these assignments are often at the beginning of the students' doctoral journey and they frequently serve to unnerve more than they do to enlighten them about important debates in the field. Indeed, a number of students become very anxious about their ability to ever master methodological issues and this undermines their confidence to do good research. How, then, do we introduce these issues in ways that grow students' confidence and mastery? In this talk I propose that the best response to this question is to park the ologies and instead focus discussion on researcher reflexivity; this will allow questions of how we come to know and our positionality to emerge from a more grounded point of departure. I will also propose that in offering this focus it is important to go beyond ritual acknowledgements of power (gender, class, etc) or to insider/outsider status that so often characterise reflexive narratives. In attempting to so do, I will propose an expanded way of approaching reflexivity which I think holds promise for grasping those ologies in less troubling or formulaic ways.

### **Biography**

Prof. Glynis Cousin, prior to joining the University of Wolverhampton, was Senior Advisor at the Higher Education Academy. Prof. Cousin has worked in adult, community and higher education. Her recent book *Researching Learning in Higher Education* has just been published by Routledge.

**Charlotte Morris,  
University of Brighton**

**Troublesome Encounters: Wellbeing enhancement strategies for research students in Education** This paper will present findings from the Escalate funded 'Troublesome Encounters' project. Research investigated factors which impact on the wellbeing of master's and doctoral students in Education. Postgraduate learning often involves transformation, yet encounters with new concepts and ways of being can trigger anxiety and uncertainty or *troublesomeness*. The project explored ways to manage wellbeing during these learning processes, identifying strategies for students, supervisors, programmes and institutions.

Mixed methods involved a national survey, focus groups of staff and students and semi-structured interviews. This paper will focus on discussing findings from twenty semi-structured interviews with research students. Factors which contribute to academic wellbeing include community belonging, positive supervisory relationships, an inclusive academic culture and facilitative environment. Students' personal wellbeing strategies, alongside positive supervision, departmental and institutional support, contribute to the development of resilience in their learning. Experiences of *troublesomeness* are a normal aspect of the learning journey which can be effectively managed, enabling research students to achieve their potential.

The research explores personal, emotional and ontological dimensions of learning which are often neglected. It offers a sustainable approach to the development of Education professionals and academics, and those in a variety of disciplines, through its identification of positive wellbeing enhancement strategies.

#### **Biography**

Charlotte Morris is currently a Research Officer in the Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton. Research interests in Higher Education include student wellbeing, inclusive teaching practices and postgraduate learning. She is also completing a DPhil in Sociology at the University of Sussex.

**Elena Golovushkina,  
Colin Milligan, Glasgow  
Caledonian University**

#### **Developing employability skills of doctoral researchers in social sciences: exploring students' perceptions**

Graduate employability has been the focus of much activity at both research and policy levels within Higher Education. Initially focused primarily on undergraduate students, in the past few years the debate has broadened to include the development of employability skills of postgraduates, including doctoral researchers. Despite an increased focus on this aspect of doctoral education, discourse in this area still lacks studies exploring perceptions of doctoral researchers themselves on their employability and the key skills they need to develop.

In an attempt to address this gap, this paper provides an insight into the perceptions of 15 social science doctoral researchers on development of employability skills collected by means of semi-structured interviews. The majority of researchers acknowledged the important role of everyday tasks they are involved in, and stated that they develop various skills by engagement in these tasks. Only few researchers mentioned that they develop these skills by attending the skills workshops provided by the university. These perceptions are closely related to the concept of situated learning where learning is acquired in the context of its application (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, one of the biggest challenges of situated learning is its transferability to other contexts. This poses further questions for development of skills of doctoral researchers that can be transferred to different contexts (Greeno et al, 1996).

The study contributes to the body of knowledge on development of employability skills of doctoral researchers in social sciences. It also provides the ground for further exploration of the perceptions of PhD candidates on the skills development during candidature.

#### **Biography**

Elena Golovushkina is a doctoral candidate at the Caledonian Academy, Glasgow Caledonian university. In her PhD project Elena is looking at the ways of enhancing development of employability skills of doctoral candidates in social sciences. It is a joint project co-



supervised by three centres: Caledonian Academy, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning and Graduate School at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Colin Milligan is currently a Research Fellow in the Caledonian Academy at Glasgow Caledonian University. His research focuses on knowledge worker learning, including the learning experiences of postgraduate research students.

**Robert Bray, CAPLE,  
University of Strathclyde**

### **Developing researcher identities for the 21st century**

Researchers in Higher Education have been relatively neglected in studies of Higher Education. Recently that has begun to change, as HE Institutions have recognised the contribution of research staff to institutional research profiles and subsequently the importance of support for, and professional development of, research staff. The implication is that researchers have a role as learners that has been hitherto overlooked, but is now emerging as a key institutional purpose. However, comparatively little is known about the needs and identities of researchers in this role. This paper explores the nature of the 'Researchers as Learners' identity.

The paper commences with a review of the (rather scanty) research on researchers. Emergent themes include the impact of funding changes on the researcher role and the move towards Mode 2 research. Survey data, from the UK-wide 'Careers in Research Online Survey' (2009), and from a survey of postdoctoral and contract researchers at the University of Strathclyde 2006-07 (Boon and Land, 2007), is discussed. The evidence from these studies has been used to develop a model of the identity of researchers as learners. Such identities are characterised by fragmentation, flux and volatility. The implications of this model for the support and training of researchers, through recognition of heterogeneous needs, are discussed. New career development provision for researchers at the University of Strathclyde is evaluated. Finally, some proposals for new initiatives are outlined.

### **Biography**

Robert Bray is Project Officer on the Roberts funded 'Building a Successful Research Career' programme run by the Centre for Academic Practice & Learning Enhancement (CAPLE) at the University of Strathclyde.

## **'Pathways to Success' Dissemination event at University of Brighton**

This dissemination event attracted 37 delegates from the Universities of Brighton and Sussex, including 16 research students. It was hosted by the Centre for Learning and Teaching and the Escalate project and chaired by the project researcher. The keynote speaker was Professor Gina Wisker, the Principal Investigator for the project, who shared parallel research into 'doctoral orphans', investigating experiences of students who have been neglected or

abandoned by their supervisors. Another visiting speaker was Jill Johnston who runs the Doctoral School at the University of Sussex and discussed the Vitae researcher framework. The day ended with a roundtable discussion about ways to enhance the learning experiences of research students at the University of Brighton. The event evaluated well with the majority of participants finding it well organized, relevant, informative and stimulating and that they took away positive suggestions for future practice. Delegates included International students who expressed a wish to share the findings of the ‘Troublesome Encounters’ project with colleagues and students, and possibly to develop similar projects, at their home universities in Malaysia and Brazil. The full programme is given below and this is followed by a summary of the roundtable discussion which highlighted points for action and further research:

### **Symposium Programme:**

**Introduction: Charlotte Morris, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Escalate project researcher**

**Gina Wisker,  
Centre for  
Learning and  
Teaching**

**Keynote: ‘Doctoral Orphans’**

Much research into doctoral student - supervisor relations focuses on developing positive interactions. For many students however, the research experience can be troubled by breakdowns in communication, and even the loss of the supervisor(s), turning the student into a doctoral ‘orphan’, and impacting on their academic identities and ability and confidence in producing a sound doctoral level contribution to knowledge. Our work with a range of UK and international based doctoral students looks specifically at reasons why they might lose their supervisors, and the students’ experience of being doctoral ‘orphans’ in terms of identity, confidence and success. It discovers and suggests both institutional support, and strategies for emotional resilience.

#### **Biography**

Professor Gina Wisker is professor of contemporary literature and higher education with a longstanding track record and expertise in research student learning and supervision. She is a National Teaching Fellow and author of *The Good Supervisor* and has a particular interest in support for writing development.

**Charlotte  
Morris,  
Centre for  
Learning and  
Teaching**

**‘Troublesome Encounters: Wellbeing enhancement strategies for research students in Education’**

This paper will present findings from the Escalate funded ‘Troublesome Encounters’ project. Research investigated factors which impact on the wellbeing of master’s and doctoral students in Education. Postgraduate learning often involves transformation, yet encounters with new concepts and ways of being can trigger anxiety and uncertainty or *troublesomeness*.

The project explored ways to manage wellbeing during these learning processes, identifying strategies for students, supervisors, programmes and institutions.

Mixed methods involved a national survey, focus groups of staff and students and semi-structured interviews. This paper will focus on discussing findings from twenty semi-structured interviews with research students. Factors which contribute to academic wellbeing include community belonging, positive supervisory relationships, an inclusive academic culture and facilitative environment. Students' personal wellbeing strategies, alongside positive supervision, departmental and institutional support, contribute to the development of resilience in their learning. Experiences of *troublesomeness* are a normal aspect of the learning journey which can be effectively managed, enabling research students to achieve their potential.

The research explores personal, emotional and ontological dimensions of learning which are often neglected. It offers a sustainable approach to the development of Education professionals and academics, and those in a variety of disciplines, through its identification of positive wellbeing enhancement strategies.

#### **Biography**

Charlotte Morris is currently a Research Officer in the Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton. Research interests in Higher Education include student wellbeing, inclusive teaching practices and postgraduate learning. She is also completing a DPhil in Sociology at the University of Sussex.

**Dr Joan Williams,  
School of  
Education**

#### **‘Face to face with my demons: The final hurdle in an ultra-distance PhD journey’**

My story will take an ‘up close and personal’ look at the feelings of relief and ecstasy as a result of a very cogent and successful viva, followed by the shock and deep agony felt only minutes later as a result of the major written alterations required by the external examiners. I will go on to consider the learning that occurred as a result of making the alterations and the tremendous relief and elation felt when the senior examiner reported ‘... she has done a fine job ... and should feel confident publishing’. In particular, I will examine the way in which I experienced the impact; how I responded to the situation in which I found myself; the importance of preparing always for the unexpected; and how I came to adopt an alternative perspective to the process of referral. I will use examples of challenging supervisory situations to support the argument that greater consideration may need to be given to the nature of support provided for supervisors, ‘external’ students and ‘staff as students’ throughout these intense episodes of learning journeys. Additionally, I will make links with my study of the learning relationship between school-based mentors and trainee teachers to support a case for examining further the components of an inter-personal relationship between supervisors and PhD students that facilitates transformation.

#### **Biography**

Joan is a senior lecturer in the school of Education. She is currently working with students from across all of the masters in education programmes and contributing to the teaching of research methods in the BA Education programme. She received her PhD in July 2010. The title of her thesis was 'The nature of the mentor/trainee relationship in Physical Education initial teacher training'. Exploration of the nature of the mentor / trainee learning relationship along with the experience of her personal PhD learning journey provide a foundation for the presentation today entitled 'Face to face with my demons: The final hurdle in an ultra-distance PhD journey'.

**Monica  
Brewis, St  
Peter's  
House  
Library**

### **'The library and research students'**

How can the academic library and its services support today's research student? It is often assumed these students know already how to use libraries and library resources. Yet the modern university library is a very different place compared to that of ten or fifteen years ago. Research students are now a far more diverse group, many have returned to study after a long gap outside Higher Education, others are undertaking research while already enjoying a successful career, and international students may encounter a very different culture to the one they have grown up with at home.

How do we manage student expectations and how do we support students in the research environment? In the age of the Internet do students still use the library, and if they do, do they use it differently?

I would argue that the library has a central role to play in the research student's career. It is a gateway of possibilities. It offers the thrill of the unexpected discovery, and the opportunity to master the tools that will unlock further discoveries. This paper will explore what libraries in the twenty-first century mean to research students and how librarians can assist and enrich the experience of learning to be a researcher.

### **Biography**

I'm an Information Adviser based at St Peter's House Library. Most of my professional career has been spent working as a subject librarian in Higher Education. My academic background is in art and design history, and I was awarded a PhD from the University of Brighton in 2004.

**Gill  
Johnston,  
Vitae &  
University of  
Sussex**

### **'Ins and outs of the Researcher Development Framework'**

Vitae is the UK organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes. Late last year, Vitae launched the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) as 'a comprehensive new approach to enhancing the careers of researchers'. I will provide an introduction to the framework and describe how we are beginning to use it at Sussex to structure and inform professional development opportunities for doctoral researchers, with a view to identifying some of the benefits and challenges this new initiative presents for researchers, supervisors and institutions.

### **Biography**

I am Head of Teaching and Learning Development Unit, University of Sussex, and I have a role co-ordinating the South East regional Hub of Vitae. My academic background is in Philosophy and my professional background is in teaching, teacher training and CPD in further and higher education.

### **Roundtable discussion.**

## **Summary of Roundtable discussion**

*How can we enhance the research student learning experience at the University of Brighton?*

### **Recommendations**

#### **Community building**

- More communication opportunities – online and face-to-face
- Work in progress seminars and student conferences
- Libraries have the potential to contribute to developing online spaces
- “One-stop shop” – online / document (handbook) – all resources available to research student
- The **Induction** process should be reviewed – importance of establishing networks at induction; better integration of learning support

#### **Improved supervision**

- How is time allotted to supervisors – how is this managed? Investigation of time pressures on supervisors required.
- Supervisor / student workshops – make supervisory relationship challenges explicit
- Need to monitor supervision
- Further training provision for supervisors
- Supervisors should be encouraged to value the importance of training

#### **Researcher training**

- Currently research methods training is too generic & one-size fits all for research students – is it possible to also have more discipline specific training?
- Needs to be responsive to feedback
- Currently too limited a conception of research – it may be assumed that research is deductive, with a pre-defined hypothesis
- **Whole Institution approach** - Coherent programme tailored to research students with joined up thinking and working – IT, the Libraries and CLT, for example, have an important role to play
- The **Researcher Development Framework** should be adopted at policy level at the university and inform the development of doctoral training
- Compulsory training in transferable skills to support employability

- Emotional intelligence, wellbeing strategies, listening / interpersonal skills and resilience incorporated into training – research students are future academics and employees / employers
- Library skills seen as central, part of researcher development framework – important role for information services
- Experiences of troublesomeness should be acknowledged and shared
- Case studies of how students came through journeys

### **English language and academic writing support**

– In terms of proofing and guidance, needs to be more nuanced to take into account alternative disciplinary approaches (e.g. assumes that all academic writing in English is impersonal)

### **Academic Culture issues**

- Challenge boundaries between academic / non-academic staff – we're all researchers, multi-skilled and contribute to the student experience
- Review the language which we use to describe research students (doctoral researchers more appropriate?)

### **Further Research Required**

#### **Researcher identity**

- research students may hold multiple identities
- may not recognise themselves in available labels
- May affect access to resources
- In particular the experience of students who are also staff need to be explored

## **Conclusions**

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### **Academic Wellbeing**

#### **Welfare / Economic wellbeing & Health**

Basic economic and physical wellbeing is foundational for overall wellbeing and resilience (Hart et.al. 2007; Maslow, 1954). Where students were adversely affected by lack of finances or decent accommodation or their safety was threatened, this made engagement with their studies extremely challenging. During times of significant adversity, students often needed to delay, postpone or even consider terminating their studies.

Where basic physical or mental health was threatened this also made engaging in higher level study significantly more challenging, although many students with long-term health problems were able to persevere. This sometimes partly depended on the support available to them – where this was not forthcoming, some students considered attrition. Many students also

experienced unexpected life events such as divorce or bereavement which temporarily caused emotional distress and often meant postponing studies while they recovered. Continuing with their studies potentially helped their recovery in some cases but appropriate support from the institution and key members of staff was essential.

### **Personal wellbeing & balance**

A degree of personal wellbeing and balance helped to optimize the learning experience for many participants. Many indicated self-awareness of their personal wellbeing and had positive strategies in place, such as good nutrition, exercise, healthy sleeping and working / resting patterns, to maintain and enhance this. Participants also recognized the importance of socializing and engaging with their peers to get the most out of their learning and to build their emotional resilience and help them cope in times of vulnerability. However, managing personal wellbeing can be particularly challenging for research students as it can be hard to prioritise wellbeing when immersed in studies and particularly for those with multiple responsibilities. Research can easily become all-consuming and some students reported working very long hours, seeing little daylight, having little exercise and becoming isolated from peers. Over time these factors can potentially have serious physical and mental health consequences. Embarking on a higher degree can often mean financial sacrifices and this can present additional challenges in terms of accessing good nutrition and sports / fitness facilities. The stresses and pressures associated with research learning can also mean that students may adopt unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption which exacerbate the problem. Stress can also impact on and exacerbate pre-existing health conditions. It is therefore essential that every opportunity is taken to remind research students about what is available to them as a student and the importance of prioritizing and managing their wellbeing and building their resilience.

### **Academic wellbeing**

The ability to learn effectively, engage, contribute to the learning community and achieve academic potential is dependent on a number of factors. These include personal qualities and experiences the students bring to their learning and their openness to learning and engaging with new ideas. The academic culture and learning environment are also vital contributing factors to academic wellbeing. Access to resources, facilitating preparation for and transition

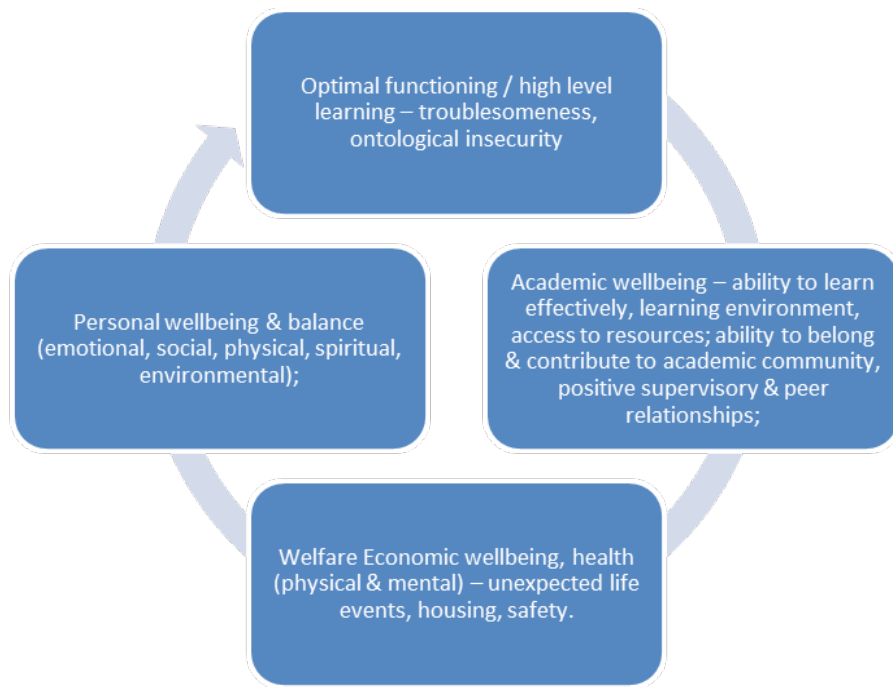
through studies, the promotion and support for wellbeing and fostering good relationships through a strong community provide the foundations for students to be able to develop, overcome challenges and reach their goals. Institutions, departments and academic staff have a key role to play in fostering academic wellbeing with the potential to enhance student retention, progression and achievement as well as providing a rewarding experience.

### **Optimal functioning / high level learning**

Higher level study ideally entails a high level of academic challenge which can potentially test research students' potential and limitations. Research students often experience troublesomeness in their learning but this is often a necessary, if intellectually and at times emotional demanding. The emotional resilience research students develop through community belonging and participation, positive relationships, wellbeing strategies and a strong safety net for when they experience adversity and / or at times of vulnerability, supports their journey and provides the best basis for engaging and coping with academic challenges and troublesomeness.

Dimensions of wellbeing identified as important to support the learning of survey participants - and corroborated by focus group and interview responses - fell into four main categories summarised in the chart below. Rather than a hierarchical chart (Maslow, 1954), these dimensions are portrayed as being in an ongoing relationship with each other. Academic wellbeing is not reliant solely on individual traits but on the academic culture and environment in which learning takes place and this includes access to resources, a community to belong to and opportunities to contribute:





## Summary of main research findings

### Academic wellbeing

Academic wellbeing is conceived, on the basis of this research, to be a combination of the personal qualities and skills students bring to their studies, the opportunity to develop these, the resources available to them and the community and culture to which they belong and which shape the conditions for success. Research students experience wellbeing when they belong and contribute to their academic community, when their basic welfare and health needs are met, they are able to achieve a balance and way of working which enables their best learning to take place and when they are nurtured, challenged and encouraged to achieve their potential.

### Preparedness

The anxieties participants experiences were often related to how far they felt prepared for the commitment, level and potential intensity of their studies. This suggests a possible need for more pre-entry support, guidance and advice for M- and D-level applicants.

### Community belonging

A sense of belonging to community of peers, to institution and wider academic community was the main factor identified by research students as contributing to their academic wellbeing. This included a sense of being valued and having a clear status as a research

student. Universities have a crucial role to play in nurturing a positive research student and academic culture. Peer mentoring was identified as being one potential way forward in enhancing community belonging and achievement.

### **Academic Culture and Environment**

Student participants felt that a positive academic culture which nurtured confidence through collegiality and a valuing of research students and research contributed to their sense of belonging and wellbeing. It was also seen as beneficial when wellbeing concerns were made explicit and visible and where resources to nurture wellbeing were made available, seen as part of a framework for success and the development of essential life and professional skills. Research students highlighted the need to feel to feel empowered and for their voices to be heard so they had some control over their environment. The use of physical environments and spaces were essential in facilitating quality learning and in underpinning a positive, non-hierarchical, integrated and fulfilling research culture.

### **Positive supervisory relationship**

Key to the development of successful supervisory relationships, according to participants, is regular supervision and / contact, good availability, positive and constructive feedback, enthusiasm for the students' research and a non-hierarchical or collegiate relationship. Students valued supervisors being aware of their personal issues and concerns as well as their academic progress, or in other words had a 'whole student' focus. Supervisors play a vital role in facilitating community belonging and in providing crucial support and signposting at times of vulnerability.

### **Equitability**

A concern arose from the study in terms of equitability with some mature, women, disabled students and those with additional work and family responsibilities finding it difficult to access resources and training. The study identified a need for much more focus on the needs of part-time students, women students and carers. This theme is one which should be investigated further to ensure an equitable experience for this group of learners as well as safeguarding their wellbeing.

### **Troublesomeness in Education research student learning**

Troublesomeness can occur for Education research students when they move beyond their comfort zone in learning, getting to grips with new theoretical perspectives, ontology and epistemology, challenging and re-evaluating previously held ideas. This can be exacerbated when students have built up fixed notions of the world and of their discipline through previous experiences and professional practice. Educational theories can therefore seem counter-intuitive and bring practices into question. Troublesomeness can also be heightened

where there are additional experiential or cultural barriers to learning experienced by mature students who have been out of Education for an extended period, those new to Education as a discipline in itself and International students who have come from contrasting Educational cultures and environments. Troublesomeness is, however, a normal and necessary part of a successful learning journey and this should be made explicit. At the same time there does need to be a strong safety net of support and community in place to foster resilience when students are experiencing times of vulnerability with additional challenges to their wellbeing.

## Recommendations

- **Enhanced pre-entry support**, including explicit information about the time and commitment required and highlighting the importance of developing self-management and wellbeing strategies, for research students.
- **Investigation into equitability and access for research students in Education** (and other disciplines), recognizing the diversity of this group of learners and the needs of part-time students and those with caring responsibilities.
- **Ensure student services and facilities are targeted effectively towards postgraduate students** – research students are often unaware of what support is available and how to access it.
- **Target health and safety awareness to research students** – especially in terms of the risks around computer use and the need to manage stress.
- **Community building** – especially initiatives which help to integrate research students more fully into their academic setting and the wider research community.
- **Research and development in the area of peer mentoring for research students**
- **Opportunities for the research student voice to be heard**
- **Institutional support for research student led initiatives**
- **Full consultation with and involvement of research students in decision making processes / developments which are likely to affect them**
- **Attention to improving learning environments** – development of suitable virtual and physical learning spaces which facilitate academic engagement.
- **Heightened monitoring of supervision process**
- **Enhanced training for supervisors** – especially around professional boundaries, signposting, equality, diversity and disability, cultural awareness, communication, feedback, motivating students.

- **Enhanced personal / professional development for research students** – including training around personal effectiveness, management of wellbeing / stress, communication skills.
- **Exploration of how universities and workplaces might better co-ordinate learning activities and support for professional doctorates.**
- **Investigation into best practice for managing the academic wellbeing of those studying and working in the same environment.**
- **Investigate how to manage key transitional stages in the research learning journey** – such as research design, upgrade, commencing fieldwork, writing and submission.
- **Review of bureaucratic procedures** - are they conducive to the learning and wellbeing of students?
- **Normalising ‘troublesome encounters’ as a crucial part of the learning journey.**
- **Further investigation into the (positive) impacts on professional life (in Education and other disciplines) of research student learning journeys, including ‘troublesomeness’.**

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## Appendix 1:

### Wellbeing in Learning Survey text

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#### Section 1. About this survey

This Wellbeing in Learning survey is part of an Escalate (HEA subject centre for Education) funded research project. It aims to investigate factors which impact on the wellbeing of masters and doctoral students in Education. It is run from the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton, in collaboration with the University of Durham and University of Strathclyde. We hope this work will identify positive strategies for research student wellbeing and create resources for research students, their supervisors and institutions.

Wellbeing is defined as '*A state in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community*' (World Health Organisation).

Should taking part in this survey raise any wellbeing concerns, please contact your local student support services or speak to your supervisor / programme leader.

The survey has 4 pages in total and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It is designed to enable you to reflect on your wellbeing as you learn so this may take longer. All data collected in this survey will be treated confidentially and held securely. Your contribution is much appreciated.

If you have any queries about this survey or any other aspect of the research, please contact the researcher, Charlotte Morris, University of Brighton, email: [cm147@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:cm147@brighton.ac.uk), tel: 01273 642686.

#### Section 2. Background information

Providing these details will help give us a sense of the context in which you are studying. You are not obliged to answer these questions.

1. *What programme of study are you currently following?*

PhD / DPhil / Masters / EdD / Other

Other (please specify)

2. *What stage are you at in your studies?* (e.g. year, transfer of status, fieldwork, writing up thesis / dissertation, continuation or viva)

3. *Are you part-time or full-time?*

Part-time / Full-time

4. *International or Home student?*

Home / International

5. Institution (not required):

#### Section 3.

1. *What motivated you to undertake your current course?*

2. *What have you found to be the positive aspects of studying at this level?*

3. *What has been the most important aspect of your development so far? (this may be academic, personal, professional, technical or a combination)*
4. *What have been the main challenges in your learning on your current course?*
5. *How have these challenges impacted on you personally (in terms of your personal wellbeing)?*
6. *What helps you (or might help you) to overcome the challenges you encounter in your studies?*
7. *Are there any further factors which could be detrimental to your wellbeing while studying at this level? (Please state)*
8. *When wellbeing is negatively affected, for whatever reason, how does this impact on your studies?*
9. *What strategies do (or might) postgraduate students employ to safeguard / enhance their wellbeing?*
10. *What strategies could supervisors, Education departments and Institutions employ to safeguard / enhance research student wellbeing?*
11. *Are there any specific resources or types of training which would help you to safeguard / enhance your wellbeing?*
12. *Any further comments in relation to the wellbeing and learning of research students in Education?*

**Section 4. Thank you!**

Thank you for completing this survey.

We are hoping to follow up the survey with a number of in-depth research interviews. If you would be happy to be contacted about the possibility of taking part in further research in this area please provide your name and contact details.

If you have any queries or would like any further information, please contact Charlotte Morris on [cm147@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:cm147@brighton.ac.uk).

1. Contact details:

Name

Location

Phone number

Email

## Appendix 2:

# Focus Group Schedule

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### Focus Groups – staff and students – 90 minutes

1.) Introduce concept of wellbeing & discuss

*What factors impact on research student wellbeing during their studies?*

*When wellbeing is affected, how does this impact on learning?*

*How can this be addressed by (a) the student (b) the department / programme leaders and (c) the institution?*

2.) Introduce findings from survey & elicit responses

*The survey indicates that maintaining a work / life / study balance is the biggest challenge for research students in Education. From your experience, would you agree?*

*What strategies would be helpful in enabling research students to achieve a good balance?*

*In what ways would a good work / life / study balance be beneficial to your studies?*

*Another key factor in research student wellbeing is isolation.*

*What steps if any has your department or the programme you're on addressed this?*

*How important do you feel peer support is in terms of your learning?*

*Is there anything your university could do to help foster a sense of community among students?*

3.) Introduce concept of troublesome knowledge and discuss

Troublesome knowledge refers to concepts or experiences in learning which are difficult, counter-intuitive or alien.

*Have there been aspects of your (your research students) learning that you have struggled with? (e.g. difficult concepts, how to work with more than one concept, developing a conceptual framework)*

*What has been the most difficult, challenging part of your studies to date?*

*How does this make you feel?*

*Does it affect your wellbeing in any way?*

*What strategies can enable research students to overcome these sorts of challenges?*

*What strategies can supervisors, departments and institutions put in place?*



# Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

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## Interview Schedule (1 – 2 hours)

### **Section 1 – background**

*What programme of study are you on?*

*What stage are you at?*

*What made you decide to study at this level?*

*Do you have work / family responsibilities?*

### **Section 2 - learning**

*Tell me about your topic.*

*Tell me about your learning experience so far.*

*What have been the most positive aspects of studying at this level?*

*What have been the main challenges in your learning?*

*Have there been any specific aspects of the research you've struggled with?*

*How has this impacted on you personally?*

*How do you overcome these sorts of challenges?*

*What other factors enable you to move forwards in your learning?*

*What has been the most important thing you have learned so far?*

### **Section 3 – the doctoral experience and wellbeing**

*Has the experience been what you expected?*

*Are there any ways in which you feel you have changed as a person as part of this process?*

*What have been the positive and negative aspects of the research student experience?*

*Are there any other factors which impact on research student wellbeing?*

*What would you say are effective ways for research students to manage their wellbeing?*

*What strategies can supervisors employ to support research student wellbeing?*

*What role do or should departments and institutions have to play in supporting research student wellbeing? Any further comments in relation to research student learning and wellbeing?*