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CREATING AND SUSTAINING HEALTHY, SUPPORTIVE, AND INCLUSIVE CULTURES FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

Drs Faye Didymus FBASES and Patricia Jackman discuss research culture in the context of postgraduate research students and provide recommendations for supervisors; departments, schools, and research groups; Universities; and the field of sport and exercise sciences more broadly.



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Increasing numbers of people are embarking on postgraduate research degrees in sport and exercise sciences. During the last Research Excellence Framework (REF) cycle in the United Kingdom (U.K.; 2013-2019), for example, more than 1800 doctoral degrees were awarded across 62 institutions submitted to the Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism unit of assessment. Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are pivotal to our field, with their research driving innovation and advancements in knowledge. Training for PGRs is intended to develop professional independence and skills that equip them to create solutions to societal challenges. Not only do PGRs conduct a significant amount of research in sport and exercise sciences right now, they are also the research leaders, educators, and practitioners of the future.

In recent years, concerns surrounding mental health and wellbeing among PGRs have become more visible. PGRs report significantly higher stress than the general

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Initiatives designed to support PGRs' mental health and wellbeing often place emphasis on individual-level behaviour change (e.g., mindfulness, time management, self-care), with less attention directed toward the interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal factors that contribute to good mental health and wellbeing.

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population (Hazell *et al.*, 2020) and research from the U.K. has suggested that more than one in four doctoral researchers reported poor mental wellbeing (Byrom *et al.*, 2020). Poor mental health and wellbeing among PGRs is a significant issue because it can have serious health consequences for PGRs themselves and contributes to student attrition. Against this backdrop and owing to the importance of PGRs to the sport and exercise sciences community, the purpose of this article is to offer recommendations that can help to create and sustain healthy, supportive, and inclusive cultures for PGRs in the sport and exercise sciences.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

When studying for a postgraduate research degree, students traverse many complex roles (e.g., student, research group member, staff member), generate new knowledge, develop a professional identity, and acquire new skills and virtues. It is not surprising, therefore, that postgraduate study is often an “intense experience that can trigger anxiety, stress and self-doubt” (Mowbray & Halse, 2010, p. 658). A recent systematic review illuminated mental health and wellbeing concerns among doctoral students, particularly during the early stages of a PhD candidature (Jackman *et al.*, 2021). This early stage of a postgraduate degree is often where students experience changes to their support systems, increased independence, and find that they need to adapt to and facilitate new ways of thinking. Thus, reading for a postgraduate research degree represents a significant period of development and flux that requires students to be supported effectively via healthy and inclusive research cultures.

Whilst much good practice is ongoing in the U.K. to support the creation and sustenance of healthy, supportive, and inclusive research cultures, we have some way to go before we inculcate consistently optimal environments across the sector. Indeed, drop-out rates of postgraduate research students remain noteworthy, and we know that many students experience significant challenges that are, in part, a product of ineffective research cultures (Zile *et al.*, 2023). These challenges are compounded when we consider offshore, part-time, and mature students who may have vastly different experiences to full-time, onshore students.

SUPPORT PROVIDER	RECOMMENDATION	SPECIFIC EXAMPLES
PGR supervisors	Recognise the value of PGR students as the future of our profession.	Encourage students to share their ideas during teaching- and research-focused staff meetings. Inspire curiosity, ambition, and learning.
	Embody the mentor and act as a role model.	Recognise that our conduct moulds research culture. Model healthy, supportive, and inclusive behaviours. Set and uphold healthy work-life boundaries and balance.
	Engage in development as a supervisor	Engage with regular development opportunities (e.g., supervisor network events) to refine supervisory skills and check and challenge current practice.
	Support the needs of supervisees holistically	Support the person, not just a project. Provide support that encourages development of doctoral researchers and their career ambitions. Offer pastoral support and be responsive to mental health needs, signposting as necessary. Be considerate of individual circumstances, how these might impact the PGR experience, and how we can best support each PGR.
Departments/ schools/ research groups	Create welcoming and inclusive research communities.	Offer welcoming and inclusive (e.g., hybrid) induction activities. Host regular PGR networking and development events and invite PGRs to varied CPD opportunities. Include PGRs within department/school/ research group activities (e.g., writing retreats, CPD events). Deliver activities that can help PGRs to learn from more experienced researchers (e.g., sharing of staff research journeys).
	Encourage and allow individuals to take ownership for their own careers.	Encourage and facilitate professional visibility by, for example, supporting PGRs to attend (and, if possible, present at) national and international conferences.
Universities	Recruit and progress diverse PGR and supervisor communities.	Provide transparent and competency-based recruitment and progression opportunities for both supervisors and PGRs.
	Broaden the scope of what is valued as outputs of research activities.	Value and formally recognise setbacks (e.g., unsuccessful grant submissions, journal article rejections) for the learning and development potential that they hold.
	Support supervisory practice	Use the Good Supervisory Practice Framework (UKCGE) to support supervisor development and recognise excellence in supervisory practice. Create mechanisms to facilitate continual development of supervisory practice (e.g., resources, guides, FAQs forums, up-to-date training, supervisor mentoring). Deliver training for supervisors that equips them with the interpersonal, cultural, and pastoral care skills required to support PGRs. Ensure workload allocation for PGR supervision is appropriate and that quality of supervision is not compromised by volume of candidates. Support PGR supervisors to develop professionally through recognition programmes (e.g., UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme)
The sport and exercise sciences sector	Broaden the concept of excellence in research.	Redefine “excellence” as a multidimensional idea that recognises quality as a career-stage relative notion.
	Celebrate the PGR community.	Host regular sector-wide networking and knowledge sharing activities for PGR students and supervisors (e.g., via the BASES Education and Teaching Special Interest Group). Include PGRs during sector wide education initiatives and forums.
	Advocate for policy reform that better values and remunerates PGR students.	Lobby for changes to pension policy to allow students who earn a stipend to be included in NEST (the government-backed workplace pension scheme).

▲ Table 1: Recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences sector, universities, departments, and individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SPORT AND EXERCISE SCIENCES SECTOR, UNIVERSITIES, DEPARTMENTS, AND INDIVIDUALS

Based on existing research, sector-wide guidance, and consultation with current and recently graduated PGRs, we offer a series of recommendations intended to nourish the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs in the sport and exercise sciences. Initiatives designed to support PGRs’ mental health and wellbeing often place emphasis on individual-level behaviour change (e.g., mindfulness, time management, self-care), with less attention directed toward the interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal factors that contribute to good mental health and wellbeing. By focusing on intrapersonal factors, responsibility is placed with PGRs to take care of their own mental health and wellbeing and overlooks social responsibility. To address this, we call for preventative measures that do not perpetuate discourse and norms implying the need to “survive” a postgraduate research degree, but instead adopt a socio-ecological perspective that recognises the collective responsibility of the wider research community to

create and sustain adaptive research cultures. By creating such environments, we enhance the ability of PGRs to reach their potential and thrive as people and researchers.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

Based on our collective experiences, consultation with PGRs to develop this article, and our bodies of relevant published works, we advocate for system-wide enhancements to create and sustain healthy, supportive, and inclusive research cultures. We encourage a move away from downstream approaches and individualised interventions that place onus on PGRs themselves to navigate challenges during their postgraduate journeys. Instead, we call on supervisors, departments/schools, research groups, universities, and the wider sport and exercise sciences sector to work collectively to create and sustain research environments that positively impact the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs and enable them to flourish. We hope that the recommendations advanced in this article can facilitate dialogue and instigate actions that contribute to these outcomes. ■

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