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**How to enhance PGR research culture**

*Writing with former colleagues from the University of Kent, Dave Thomas, Advance HE Senior Adviser for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, shares their experience in creating a better experience for postgraduate researchers (PGRs).*

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***Introduction – The (Inter)national Problem***

When rating various aspects of their student experience on the national Postgraduate Research Student Survey (PRES), UK PGR students were least satisfied with their research culture, with 40% of students dissatisfied even before the pandemic (Pitkin, 2020). Making up just 4% of the overall HE student population (HESA, 2021), PGR students are in the minority in the UK HE sector. Thus, institutions may be much more focused on undergraduate students’ experience than PGR students’ experiences, contributing to a sense of marginalisation. Many PGR students are learning within small programmes where they may feel excluded from both the wider student culture and disciplinary academic cultures.

A sense of isolation also may be more acute for students in arts, humanities and social sciences and in professional fields than for science students who work in collaborative, lab-based teams. International students, racially minoritized students, and part time students may feel particularly marginalised. To enrich their experience of a research culture, all PGR students need opportunities to cultivate professional, intellectual, social, and emotional collegiality (Brown, 2019).

***A local case***

We faced all these challenges in our local context. In March 2020, the University of Kent’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education had only five doctoral students, four of whom were part-time, living all over Kent, and balancing study, work, and family demands. Students were all at different stages of study and with diverse background. Unsurprisingly, students did not feel they fully belonged to a community; they didn’t even know the other students studying on the programme. Even the full-time student who had an office in our Centre felt like something of an outsider because everyone around them was an academic. The pandemic exacerbated and brought to light problems of isolation and loneliness that had already been there.

***A solution***

With the onset of the first Covid lockdown (March 2020), we introduced a fortnightly one-hour online work-in-progress seminar. At these ’meet-ups’’”, students at all stages take turns presenting on their work, fielding questions, and considering feedback. Supervisors are also invited, but the emphasis is on peer-to-peer interactions. Mindful not to overburden already-busy students, we opted to minimise preparation time by not making it a writing group. Instead, we focus on short presentations of students’ work, building the ability to verbally summarise and defend one’s research.

At the beginning, we had a very small group, so we occasionally interspersed student presentations with inspirational talks from recent graduates. Graduates reflected on their experience of doctoral education, gave advice, and talked about their post-PhD career and research trajectories. Occasionally, we discuss key journal articles on topics of interest to everyone. During the first year, the doctoral programme enrolment doubled, partly because prospective students found the prospect of this research community appealing. After a year, students wrote 250-300 word reflections on their experience of the work-in-progress seminars and the difference it had made to them. We excerpted some highlights, organised according to Brown’s (2019) four forms of collegiality.

***Impact on students***

In terms of the *professional* form of collegiality, the seminars helped one senior student in, “preparing for presenting my research findings at several national and international conferences”. A first-year student emphasised learning about how to approach the PhD itself: “The opportunity of meeting other CSHE colleagues who are in different stages in their PhD journey has given me some invaluable insights into how I should approach my plan and design my research… improved my expectation management, raised my awareness of some potential risks, and prepared me to mitigate them.”

In terms of *intellectual* collegiality, most students commented on how the discussions broadened their knowledge of the field. For example, “before the meet-ups, my interest was very much uniquely focused on [my speciality]. As I started listening to others exploring different areas, theories and topics I realised that there is much more that I could learn about! This really motivated me to read and participate in events that are beyond just [my own research speciality].” Being able to integrate new international students despite travel bans also broadened students’ outlooks: “This innovation has allowed peers to join the provision from across the world… it really gives an international basis for discussing current HE pedagogy and practices.” Intellectually, colleagues have also challenged each other to think differently about their own research: “My doctoral research has been reshaped by contributions and ideas from this community. My peers in this community have offered very valuable insights, experiences and suggestions which is bolstering my work.” The community experience, “hones all the critical research skills of each member for the mutual benefit of all.”

*Socially*, most students emphasised the importance of building supportive and trusting relationships with colleagues saying, “the community was very welcoming and made me feel like one of the team, even from a distance…” and “there is a strong sense of belonging and that you are not alone.”

These social connections also benefitted students *emotionally*. A senior student reflected on life before the seminars: “my PhD journey has been compounded by lack of opportunities to develop meaningful relationships within a research community… the[se] feelings of isolation prompted imposter syndrome and other feelings that have negative implications for my wellbeing.”

Another said, “It has greatly helped in dealing with my problem of loneliness, by providing a….feeling of camaraderie…” A first year student wrote, “the meet-ups has been of great benefit to my confidence, knowledge, enjoyment and inspiration as part of an education research community”.

***Conclusion***

Evidence shows that many PGR students are dissatisfied with their research culture and in establishing a fortnightly, virtual work-in-progress seminar attended by PhD students and, sometimes, supervisors, our students acknowledged experiencing a richer research culture. Our experience highlighted how important a sense of community is to doctoral students’ success and well-being and our “meet-ups” are positively affecting students professionally, intellectually, socially and emotionally and offer a model for other departments with similar challenges.

***References***

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