Graduate Union

Postgraduate Mental Health Report

Prepared by Sofia Ropek Hewson
GU President, 2018/19

Introduction

Global context:

Times Higher Education recently reported a 'mental health crisis among postgraduates', and referenced a study in which postgraduate students described experiencing psychological distress, felt under constant strain, and had other symptoms including depression, unhappiness and sleeping problems.[1] Other similar surveys across the world make clear that postgraduate populations are very likely to have a high incidence of mental health problems. A study published in *Nature* in March 2018 found that graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience anxiety and depression as the general population.[2] The authors write that these 'strikingly high rates of anxiety and depression support a call to action'.[3] Even accepting that respondents with mental health problems may have been more likely to respond to the survey, our findings similarly support a call to action.

Cambridge context:

At a mental health forum organised by the Graduate Union during the summer of 2018, postgraduates discussed anxiety, depression, isolation, difficult supervisor relationships, and housing problems specific to students with families. They discussed what they described as the 'Cambridge Culture', exemplified by a rigid commitment to excellence which made them feel that they could never fail or be vulnerable. Many felt unable to take holidays, work reasonable hours, report serious problems with their supervisors, or ask for help. This culture, combined with other structural issues and problems inherent to postgraduate programmes, results in postgraduate students relying disproportionately on University provisions such as the Disability Resource Centre, the University Counselling Service and the Students' Unions' Advice Service. In response to our initial findings and national and international research, the Graduate Union ran a survey on postgraduate mental health, organised a series of events, and has worked with the University to develop its Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Survey methodology:

Our survey was circulated among colleges and departments, on our social media pages, and in our Graduate Union Bulletin. The survey was open in Michaelmas Term, from September 7 to December 9, 2018. A pizza party was offered to the MCR with the highest respondent rate - which was St Catharine's College MCR. 1803 students completed our survey in total, and students from every college. We acknowledge the potentially difficult and sensitive nature of the survey, and included links to welfare service providers, in order to signpost students in need of support. We acknowledge obvious biases: students responding to a survey on mental health are disproportionately likely to have mental health problems. Despite this caveat, our data makes visible a range of serious problems which must be urgently addressed. This report was compiled by Graduate Union President, Sofia Ropek Hewson (2018-19). If you would like more information or specific data, please email president@gradunion.cam.ac.uk.

[1] Ellie Bothwell, 'Universities urged to tackle PhD mental health crisis', *Times Higher Education*, 13 April 2017, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-urged-tackle-phd-mental-health-crisis.
[2] Theresa Evans, Lindsay Bira, 'Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education', *Nature*, 6 March 2018, https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.4089.
[3] Ibid.

Key Findings and Priority Areas

Overall, **67%** of respondents reported both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health problems.

Cambridge Culture:

46% of all respondents reported feeling either uncomfortable taking breaks/holidays or not allowed to take them, and a resultant negative impact on their mental health.
61% reported that a competitive and high pressured university environment had affected their mental health.
68% reported imposter syndrome affecting their mental health.
59% reported isolation and loneliness affecting their mental health.

Supervisor Relationships:

93% of students who reported that their supervisor has unreasonable expectations also reported mental health problems.
80% of students reporting that their supervisor does not provide welfare support or signpost to support services also reported mental health problems.
25% of 1803 respondents report that their relationship with their supervisor has negatively affected their mental health.

Inequalities:

14% of all respondents report that classism has affected their mental health.
22% of women reported that sexism has affected their mental health.
27% of BAME respondents note that racism has affected their mental health.
68% of LGB respondents reported that loneliness had affected their mental health.
23% of LGB respondents reported that discrimination had affected their mental health.
74% of women reported imposter syndrome, in comparison with **58%** of men.
Women, bisexual students, queer students, gay/lesbian students, and students in the humanities were more likely to report mental health problems.

Structural Problems:

30% of international students report that immigration and visa problems have affected their mental health.
37% of all respondents report that financial problems have affected their mental health.
28% note that administrative problems have affected their mental health.
31% report that housing problems have affected their mental health.

Support Provisions:

Respondents are most aware of the University Counselling Service (**85%**) and college graduate tutors (**94%**).
Multiple respondents specifically praised the DRC's mentoring scheme and the UCS's Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor, but criticised both general services for long waiting times.
Some criticised University and college provisions for being/the perception that they were less operational outside term-time, despite postgraduate students living in Cambridge year-round.

Career Concerns:

47% of respondents were definitely considering an academic career, and **36%** were unsure. In the comments section, many recorded feeling anxious and ill due to concerns about their career prospects in a casualised and competitive job-market.

Cambridge Culture

- **46%** of our respondents (836 postgraduate students) reported that they felt uncomfortable taking regular breaks and holidays, or are not permitted to take them.
- **51%** of women responding feel uncomfortable taking holidays or breaks, in comparison with **38%** of men. These figures correspond with gendered experiences of imposter syndrome: **74%** of women responding to our survey report imposter syndrome affecting their mental health, in comparison with **58%** of men.
- **61%** of all respondents report that a competitive and high pressured university environment has contributed to mental health problems. **54%** of men and **66%** of women and non-binary people report problems with this competitive environment.
- **59%** of respondents report that loneliness and isolation have affected their mental health.
- Feelings of isolation, loneliness and unhappiness could be produced by a combination of these cultural factors: a high-pressured and competitive environment, imposter syndrome, and feeling unable to take breaks and holidays – among other factors.
- This collection of problems has previously been described by a postgraduate student in a GU mental health workshop as the 'Cambridge Culture': a culture of excellence which makes it extremely difficult to fail or feel vulnerable, a culture which could then be described as being as unforgiving as it is excellent.

Recommendations:

1. Make holiday allowances clear to supervisors and students at point of entry and run a University-wide campaign to remind postgraduate students of the importance of holidays – and their cultural acceptability.
2. Openly acknowledge and discuss our shared vulnerabilities and failures, in order to counter, or soften, the rigid Cambridge 'culture of excellence'.[4]
3. Encourage and financially support departmental student cohorts to allow for mutual support and to reduce isolation and loneliness.

'More persistent sense of imposter syndrome than at undergraduate level. Loneliness. Far more competitive environment between postgraduate students than I have previously experienced. Fear about funding/job opportunities.'

'The ridiculous standards and things you have to have achieved to become even vaguely competitive for a postdoc/JRF (compared to even a few years ago) - seems that the next 3-4 years will be flogging myself to reach this level.'

'Taking breaks feels completely not ok [...] I don't feel I have the right to take holidays when my project isn't working.'

'More clearly defined institutional acknowledgement that PhDs deserve holidays [...] at a departmental level.'

'I think it might be useful for the university/departments/colleges to provide a tracker for time off my PhD students-- I think many of us are not good at taking real holidays completely away from work. It would be good to provide a tool to plan and count days away from work, so when you're on one of those days you don't feel pressure to work.'

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[4] See Smith College's 'Failing Well' project: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/fashion/fear-of-failure.html.

Supervisor Relationships

The student/supervisor relationship is a troublingly dependent one, and, when it goes wrong, it can leave students vulnerable and isolated.

- **25%** of all respondents reported that their supervisor relationship had negatively affected their mental health.
- We found a statistically significant relationship between whether a supervisor provides welfare support or can signpost to welfare support and prevalence of mental health problems. There is also a statistically significant relationship between whether a supervisor is perceived to have reasonable expectations and prevalence of mental health problems.
- Of students who reported that their supervisor provides welfare support or signposts to welfare support, **60%** reported mental health problems; while of students who reported that their supervisor does not provide welfare support or signpost, **80%** reported mental health problems.
- Of students who reported that their supervisor has reasonable expectations, **60%** reported mental health problems; while of students who reported that their supervisors' expectations were unreasonable, **93%** reported mental health problems (this is a small sample, but there is still a statistically significant relationship).

Recommendations:
1. Provide students with clear, consistent ways of reporting problems with supervisors.
2. Strengthen the role of secondary supervisors/advisors to reduce dependence.
3. Provide supervisors with welfare-signposting training, which encompasses training on Breaking the Silence policies and procedures.

'If their supervisors do not pay them any attention, do not provide orientation, or are negligent in their duties towards them, PhD students are left in a very vulnerable position.'

'The power of the direct PhD supervisor is too large and there is little accountability. Because of the one sided power situation, there is little motivation to push back against a supervisor's expectations if they are unreasonable.'

'There aren't a lot of easy avenues to request help that do not cross your supervisor's desk.'

'The postgraduate environment is one of so much uncertainty, and that brings a lot of anxiety. Supervisors (especially in science fields) often use PhD students in exploitative ways, which can exacerbate mental health issues, especially as they do not allow for longer breaks/time off.'

'The relationship with the supervisor is vital to the postgraduate experience, and the amount of power that they have or seem to have over your future career can make it impossible to raise concerns about their attitude or behaviour.'

'I think the biggest challenge the University needs to overcome with postgraduate mental health is addressing supervisor-student relationships. It is in the breakdown of these where most mental health issues arise (in my experience).'

Inequalities

Isolation, loneliness and mental health problems can be produced or reinforced by experiences of inequality, discrimination, harassment and assault.

- **27%** of BME respondents reported that racism had affected their mental health.
- **23%** of gay/lesbian, queer, and bisexual respondents reported that LGBQ discrimination had affected their mental health.
- **22%** of women respondents reported that sexism had affected their mental health.
- All 21 non-binary respondents reported imposter syndrome affecting their mental health, and 17 of 21 reported loneliness and isolation impacting their health (**81%**).
- **68%** of LGBQ respondents felt that loneliness and isolation had affected their mental health, in comparison with **56%** of non-LGBQ respondents.
- **61%** of women responding to the survey felt that loneliness and isolation had affected their mental health, in comparison with **56%** of men.
- **51%** of women responding feel uncomfortable taking holidays or breaks, in comparison with **38%** of men.
- **74%** of women responding to our survey reported imposter syndrome affecting their mental health, in comparison with **58%** of men.
- **14%** of respondents overall report that classism has affected their mental health.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure BME points of contact in colleges.
2. Provide funded master's and doctoral studentships for BME students, following UCL, in order to address under-representation at Cambridge, and, more broadly, in academia.
3. Seriously address the under-representation of women in senior leadership roles across the Collegiate University through progression and hiring initiatives and positive action.
4. More effectively connect postgraduate LGBTQ+ networks, in faculties as well as MCRs, to ensure supportive communities.

'I'm lucky that my supervisor took me seriously when I trusted him with my experiences of racism […], but then he didn't do anything about it, which I guess makes me feel supported and not supported at the same time.'

'There is a culture of sexism, racism, classism, homophobia etc. in college which no one seems to want to deal with because most of the time the perpetrators are only around for a year. The combination of temporary people, cultural differences and insufficient time to know people well enough makes it incredibly hard to call out. There is a sort of passivity about stuff.'

'Sexual harassment and assault are very common problems in Cambridge, and there seems to be a culture for tolerating it. For those who are affected by this, it can be catastrophic to their mental health.'

'Every college needs a BAME officer'.

'Isolation has been my biggest problem. As a disabled student the shared workspaces are fairly inaccessible to me, so I end up working alone in my accommodation. This very negatively impacts my mental health.'

Structural Problems

A significant number of respondents reported structural problems of different kinds. Cambridge is structurally configured to support undergraduate students, with work organised around short terms, and, occasionally, college and University services provided exclusively during term-time. Growth in postgraduate numbers necessitates structural change.

- **37%** of respondents noted that financial problems had affected their mental health.
- **28%** reported that administrative problems had affected their mental health.
- **31%** responded that housing problems had affected their mental health.
- **26%** of respondents felt that the University probably or definitely does not have sufficient provisions for supporting postgraduate students with mental health problems.
- **20%** of respondents felt that their college did not have sufficient provisions.
- Although a large number of postgraduate students are independent researchers, they are also deeply dependent on college and University structures.
- Postgraduate and undergraduate numbers now approach parity, thus a review of how we can provide for all of our students fairly is overdue.

Recommendations
1. Commission a full systematic review of University and college provisions and policies in order to ensure we provide fairly for postgraduate students.
2. Review the funding and structure of the graduate tutorial system, and the funding and structure of departmental welfare provision for graduates across the University.
3. Reduce rents across the Collegiate University, and increase doctoral stipends, or encourage funding bodies to increase doctoral stipends, to acknowledge the cost of living in Cambridge.

'More and cheaper housing. More scholarships and funding. More emphasis on the colleges looking after graduates as well as they do undergraduates.'

'The financial challenge of living in Cambridge on a £14k stipend has a drastic effect on my mental health. Given that London students receive £16.5k and Cambridge is only marginally cheaper, I believe increased funding or significantly cheaper college accommodation would transform my graduate experience.'

'I just have enough money to afford living here.'

'Double beds as standard in all college accommodation. Come on guys.'

'Unreasonable and overpriced college housing'.

'The lifestyle of postgraduates lends itself to loneliness, especially in the single occupancy college accommodation (without living space) so common in the university. Graduate students also typically receive a stipend of around £14000 per year, which is in line with national fees but does not account for the high cost of living in Cambridge -- rent and living costs are closer to London prices than Newcastle. This adds a huge personal strain to study.'

Support Provisions

- Our survey data indicates that most respondents are aware of the University Counselling Service (**85%**), and college graduate tutors (**94%**).
- In comparison, fewer respondents are aware of the Students' Unions' Advice Service (**41%**), Departmental Directors of Graduate Studies (**55%**), and the Disability Resource Centre (**66%**).
- If Cambridge postgraduate students often identify more strongly with their departments than their colleges, these results indicate that students might benefit from more visible Departmental Directors of Graduate Studies who maintain regular communication with their students.
- Increased contact with departmental members of staff responsible for postgraduate welfare may prevent feelings of isolation, loneliness and unhappiness.
- Equally, the Students' Unions' Advice Service must continue to extend its visibility and reach across the University.

Recommendations:

1. Increase the visibility of the Departmental Director of Graduate Studies (or similar) and encourage their regular communication with postgraduate students in their departments.
2. Ensure the consistent provision of departmental welfare support or welfare signposting.
3. Ensure continued funding for the clearly valued Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor.
4. Ensure the continued funding of the clearly valued DRC mentoring programme.
5. Ensure that college and University provisions are available outside term-time, and advertise support provisions outside term-time.

'I used the University Counselling Service during my MPhil last year. It took around eight weeks for me to get an appointment. This aside, the support I had from the service was fantastic'.

'DRC mentoring has been very helpful'; 'DRC brilliantly helpful'.

'That SAHA role at the Counselling Centre is so incredibly important and the current adviser is a credit to the University and humanity. I wish all college counsellors could be trained in professional rape response so no one else ever suffers as I did'; 'The Sexual Assault & Harassment counsellor is wonderful'.

'The DRC and Counselling service staffers are overwhelmed.'

'There is a massive discrepancy in how different colleges support their students […] there is a lack of awareness that graduate students are expected to work year-round […] the same is true with college welfare for the most part, in that positions like the college nurse are only paid for Michaelmas, Lent, and Easter terms, often reducing hours or altogether stopping out of term and over the summer. This leaves graduate students for weeks or even months on end without normal support systems available in term.'

'More LGBT+ counselling resources needed.'

Career Concerns

47% of all respondents are definitely considering pursuing an academic career; **36%** are unsure, and **17%** of respondents are not considering an academic career.

- Qualitative analysis makes visible a number of students who feel deeply concerned about the academic job-market and their future career prospects.
- Increasing postgraduate numbers for the purpose of financial sustainability will have an impact on postgraduate researchers, who then risk embarking on potentially financially unsustainable and precarious careers.
- The high incidence of mental health problems among postgraduate students is presumably caused by a variety of factors, outlined above. But widespread concerns about the numbers of academic jobs in comparison with the numbers of PhD students can also contribute to mental health pressures, outlined in student comments below.
- Vik Loveday, a sociologist at Goldsmiths, has written extensively on anxiety and casualisation among postdoctoral researchers – specifically, anxiety produced by a competitive, casualised work-environment.[5] It seems plausible that postgraduate researchers are similarly anxious about entering this workplace.

Recommendations:
1. As a Collegiate University, we need to be honest about why we need postgraduate students, and we need to provide for them fairly.
2. Any postgraduate numbers increases must be considered in the context of an extremely crowded, casualised and precarious job-market.
3. A variety of non-academic career paths must be increasingly valorised and supported.
4. Any postgraduate numbers increases must be considered in the context of widespread mental health problems among postgraduate populations, and the need for corresponding increases in resourcing.

'The crap job market [...] makes everyone stressed and feel like we're pitted against each other'.

'For almost every postgraduate classmate I've spoken to, including myself, we struggle with thinking about the future [...] and this makes it hard to focus on studies and feel happy and satisfied.'

'I have found worrying about the future to be the major source of stress for me, and this state of mind is not conducive to producing high quality work day to day.'

'I think a major issue which I have not seen addressed is the job market. Prospects are not good. This is a major topic of conversation among PhD students in my department [...] knowing I had a reliable career future that would stem from my work in this PhD program would put my mind much more at ease and alleviate mental health challenges. The anxiety that comes from the realities of this job market, the lack of support (senior academics seem either unaware of what we are going through or feel they are unable to do anything about it), etc. are major problems. The university needs to be part of this change, somehow - it won't come from addressing welfare, but from addressing the structures of employment around getting a PhD. This causes tremendous anxiety.'

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[5] Vik Loveday on anxiety and casualisation: https://doi.org/10.108017530350.2018.1426032.

Summary of Recommendations

Cambridge Culture

1. Make holiday allowances clear to supervisors and students at point of entry, centrally, and run a University-wide campaign to remind postgraduate students of the importance of holidays – and their cultural acceptability.
2. Openly acknowledge and discuss our shared vulnerabilities and permit failure, in order to counter, or soften, the rigid Cambridge 'culture of excellence'.
3. Encourage and financially support departmental student cohorts to allow for mutual support and to reduce isolation and loneliness.

Supervisor Relationships

1. Provide students with clear, consistent ways of reporting problems with supervisors.
2. Strengthen the roles of secondary supervisors/advisors to reduce dependence.
3. Consistently provide supervisors with welfare and welfare-signposting training, which encompasses training on Breaking the Silence policies and procedures.

Inequalities

1. Ensure BME points of contact in colleges.
2. Provide funded master's and doctoral studentships for BME students, following UCL, in order to address under-representation at Cambridge, and, more broadly, in academia.
3. Seriously address the under-representation of women in senior leadership roles across the Collegiate University through progression and hiring initiatives and positive action.
4. More effectively connect postgraduate LGBTQ+ networks, in faculties as well as MCRs, to ensure supportive communities.

Structural Problems

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Support Provisions

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2. Ensure the consistent provision of departmental welfare support or welfare signposting.
3. Ensure continued funding for the clearly valued Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor.
4. Ensure the continued funding of the equally valued DRC mentoring programme.
5. Ensure that college and University provisions support all students as fairly as possible, taking into account that postgraduate students live in Cambridge outside term-time.

Career Concerns

1. We need to be honest about why we need postgraduate students, and provide for them fairly across the Collegiate University.
2. Any postgraduate numbers increases must be considered in the context of an extremely crowded, casualised and precarious job-market.
3. A variety of non-academic career paths must be increasingly valorised and supported.
4. Any postgraduate numbers increases must be considered in the context of widespread mental health problems among postgraduate populations, and the need for corresponding increases in resourcing.