



UNIVERSITY of
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Supporting Postgraduate Research Student Success through a Peer Connect Initiative

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PGR Connect – The Vision

PGR Connect was developed based on the belief that researchers benefit from strong peer support networks which create a “space” for them to engage with and support each other:

- ✓ Facilitated by the institution
- ✓ PGR-Led
- ✓ Peer to Peer



It was designed on the premise that by developing a sense of belonging, nurturing positive wellbeing through openness and conversation, this would lead to increased PGR student engagement and success.

PGR Connect – Project Overview

- Catalyst funded project (HEFCE, Dec 2017)
- Project launched in June 2018, overseen by a Steering Group.
- Project manager in post July 2018 – end of 2019.
- First cohort of PGRs in October 2018; second intake February 2019.
- In 2019-20 academic year embedded activity in core practice of induction and researcher development training.



What did the project entail?

Model 1:

- 1-day immersive wellbeing event to “launch” the peer network model (delivered just after induction) which included wellbeing workshops and activities (Tai Chi, Creative Writing, Expressive Arts).
- “Connect” groups were launched – facilitators (2nd/3rd year PGRs) had been previously trained to lead these groups and an inaugural meet was held during the one-day event.

Model 2:

- February in-take, wellbeing and peer support workshops were included as part of the general PGR induction programme – boosted engagement but loss of the 1-day event.
- Worked with SU and Faculties to trial additional social networking events for PGRs in these areas instead.

Peer to Peer Support:

- In both models the forming of the ‘Connect’ groups where small groups of students come together, facilitated by 2nd or 3rd year PGRs, was central to the project.
- All Connect facilitators were supported with Mental Health First Aid Training.

What was the impact – Peer to Peer

The peer 'Connect' groups were successful with five groups established during the first 6 months of the project involving around 40 researchers across the Connect network.

“With the group facilitation and coaching skills training I was able to provide a safe and comfortable environment for students to share their experiences” (PGR Connect Facilitator, 2018).



The Connect networks enabled PGRs to forge relationships across the community and provide support to one another.

“realising and recognising the value of sharing experience to help normalise the ups and downs of the research experience” (PGR Connect Participant, 2018).

What was the impact – Wellbeing

By running ‘Wellbeing Workshops’ as part of the induction programme the project attracted newly enrolled researchers who were able to engage with a strong preventative wellness message and access innovative techniques and strategies to support them in nurturing their mental wellbeing right from the beginning of their research journey. The feedback was consistently 100% positive for these interventions, and they generated a strong ethos of open dialogue on mental wellbeing for those who attended.



What was the impact – Data

Source	2016	2019
PRES Research Culture	58%	65%
PRES Professional Networks & Contacts	65%	78%
Withdrawal/ Suspension	128	85

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Survey (WEMWBS) – This was administered to evaluate the impact on overall wellbeing. However, as our overall PGR numbers are small, the data obtained has not been statistically significant. Institutionally, WEMWS is now a part of our enrolment process for all students.

A Sustainable Model

- PGR Connect continues as part of the institution's peer support portfolio
- Wellbeing-focused sessions are embedded in the PGR Development Programmes
- Shaped part of our Access and Participation Plan with a strategic measure focusing on Peer Mentoring for Wellbeing.
- Extending the model to undergraduate taught programmes this year (2020-21) through a pilot.
- Reviewing how we talk about and embed wellbeing as part of all Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader Training.

Reflections & Conclusion

- **Ownership:** Ensuring a balance between the individual student and the institution. Students need to take responsibility for their wellbeing but the institution needs to provide the “space” in which they can do this, culturally, academically and environmentally.
- **Engagement:** “With” the student and not being done “to them”. The currency of wellbeing is crucial and a recognition that everyone’s needs are different is key to engagement and success.
- **Dialogue:** with students and at faculty/school level is essential to promote engagement and involvement in the wellbeing experience for all.
- **Accessible:** The need to provide an accessible range of activities is essential, it is important to take a broad approach, so interventions are meaningful and viewed as such rather than “just another workshop”.
- **Wellness:** Mental wellbeing intervention needs to “start upstream”. Preventative approaches are essential to promote a proactive mental wellness model rather than a reactive model that only works on mental illness. This requires institutional commitment to support students to create a “wellbeing space” in the broadest sense and by prioritising wellness activities.