PGR Wellbeing Project: Enhancing Pastoral Care at Doctoral Level

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Higher Education Network
Academics
Anonymous

There is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia

I've seen PhD students with depression, sleep issues, eating disorders, and thoughts of suicide. Mental health in academia is an issue that needs to be addressed

● Why mental illness is on the rise in academia

Anonymous academic

Saturday 1 March 2014
09.30 GMT

SHARE
WRITTEN BY
Jennifer Walker

November 12, 2015

The days I spent pursuing my PhD in physics were some of my darkest.

One night during the third year of my PhD program, I sat on my bed with a packet of tranquilizers and a bottle of vodka. I popped a few pills in my mouth and swigged out of the bottle, feeling them burn down my throat. Moments later, I realized I was making a terrible mistake. I stopped, trembling as I realized what I'd nearly done.

I called a friend and met her in a bar exactly halfway between my house and hers. That night changed things for both of us. She met the love of her life—the bartender, who she later married. And I decided I wanted to live. The morning after, I found a therapist and considered quitting my PhD.

It's common knowledge that getting a PhD is hard. It's meant to be. Some even say that if you're not up all night working or skipping meals, you're doing it wrong. But while PhD students are not so naive as to enter the program expecting an easy ride, there is a cost to the endeavor that no one talks about: a psychological one.

http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/mar/01/mental-health-issue-phd-research-university

http://qz.com/547641/theres-an-awful-cost-to-getting-a-phd-that-no-one-talks-about/

2

Why is a PhD stressful?

- Workload and deadlines

- Feeling of uncertainty about the future

- Feeling of inadequacy (imposter syndrome)

- Lack of research progress

- Supervisory relationships

- Financial concerns

- Language proficiency for international students

- Lack of research training

- Office environment

- University administration systems

- Struggles with acculturation

- Isolation

- Managing demands of childcare and family life

- Experiences of gender inequality

- Experiences of racial inequality

Institutional context

- Growth in PGR numbers that has not been met with an immediate increase in institutional resources or academic jobs

- An increase in students taking professional doctorates in a bid to make doctoral degrees more accessible to and relevant for those working outside academia

- An increase in overseas students studying in the UK

- A push by institutions and funding bodies to keep average completion times within four years.

Project aim:

To gather evidence (project phase 1) for the Doctoral College, Enabling Services and Faculty Graduate Schools Directorates on PGR experience and pastoral support, reviewing the effectiveness of current non-academic support in order to formulate a set of recommendations for implementation (project phase 2).
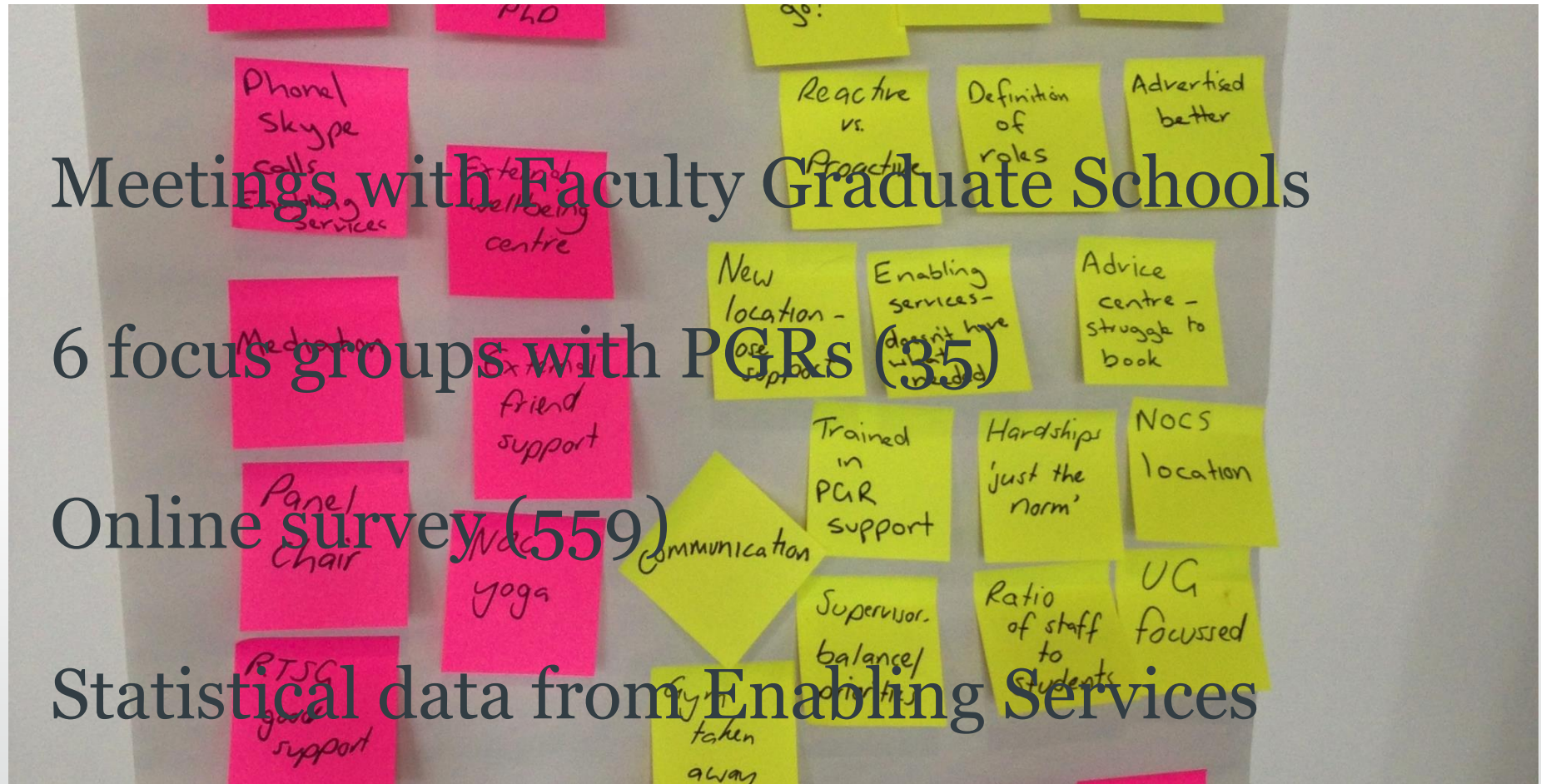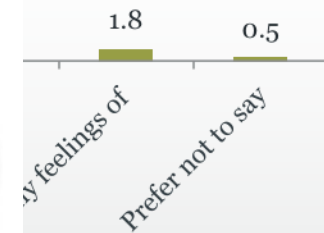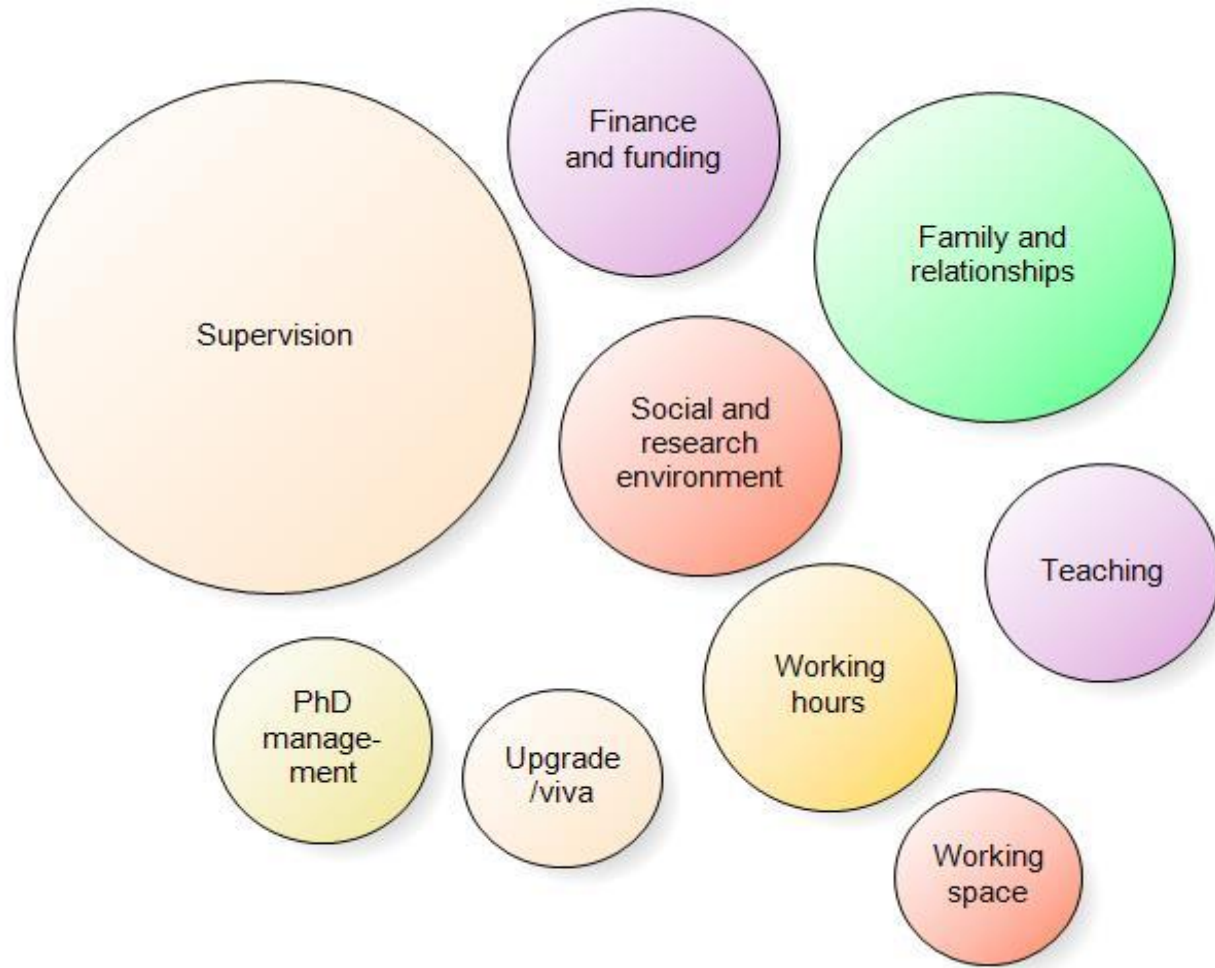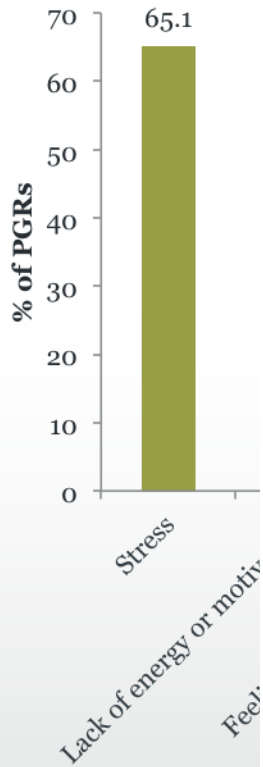
Methods

Meetings with Faculty Graduate Schools

6 focus groups with PGRs (35)

Online survey (559)

Statistical data from Enabling Services

Common feelings of distress

Supervision

"Are they supposed to offer you support? Are they meant to send you to someone else? What is their role in managing your stress?" (Focus group participant)

- Inconsistency between PGRs in experience of supervision

- Anxiety over sharing personal problems with supervisory team for fear of repercussions

- Managing conflicting opinions of supervisory team

- Supervisor endorsed 'rite of passage' (normalising workload & stress)

- Feeling that supervisors are over-stretched – delays in feedback

- Conflicting working styles

Social and research environment

"One thing I find quite strange is that in a very open environment, is actually how isolating it is. People don't go around and talk to each other, it's really weird".


Cycle of isolation

Pastoral support

"I wouldn't really know who to go to. When we first started in our department we were told that we would go to this person but that person happens to be the most awkward person in the world"

- Difficult to find non-academic support info on website
- No 'one person' to go to for support
- Feel uncomfortable discussing with academic supervisor
- Lack of understanding in dept. that mental health conditions are long term
- Cultural stigma of mental illness
- Pastoral support in departments seems reactive rather than proactive
- Where pastoral tutors are in place PGRs are not aware of them
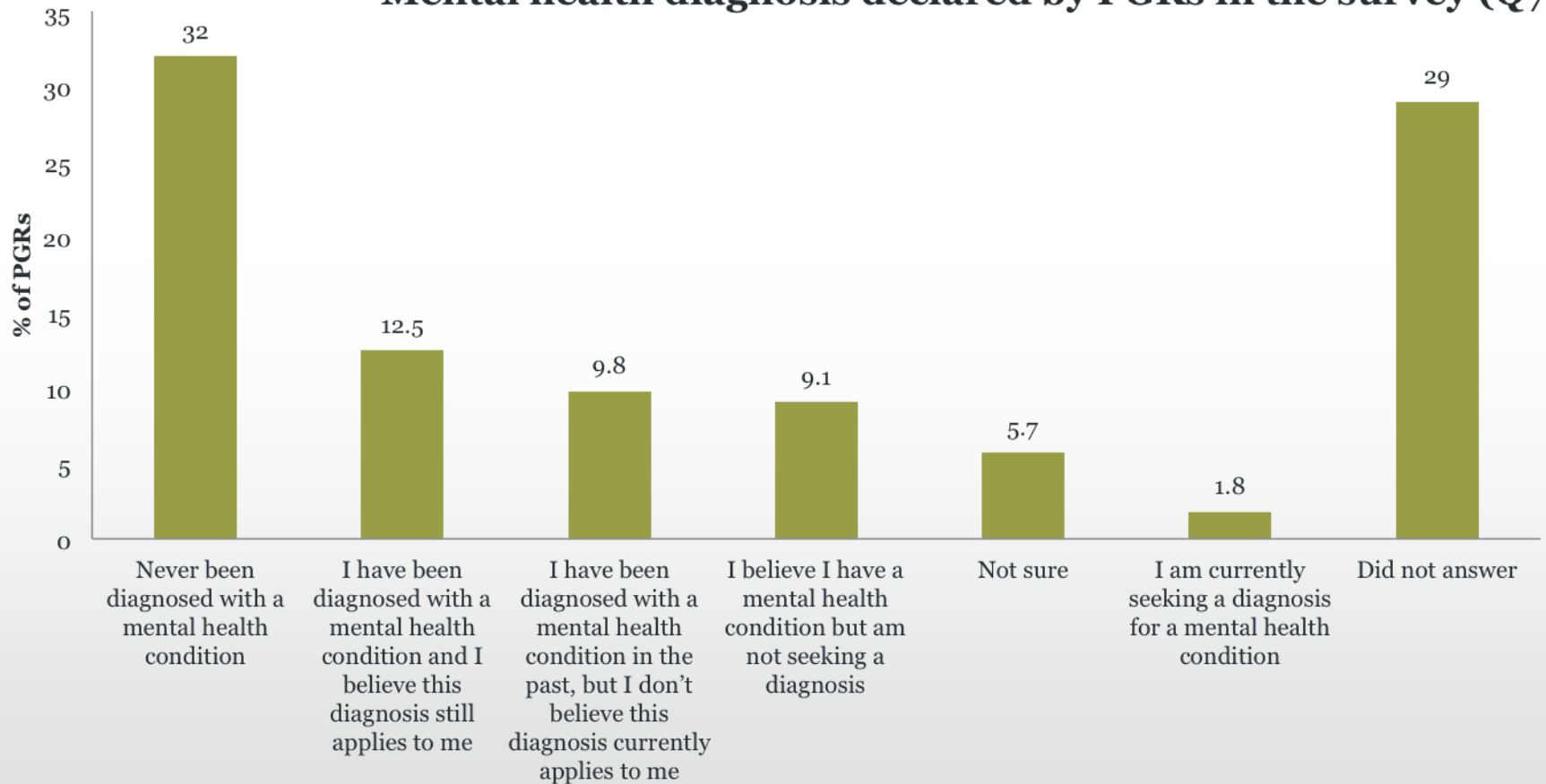- Faculty admin team are not trained to provide pastoral support

Seeking support
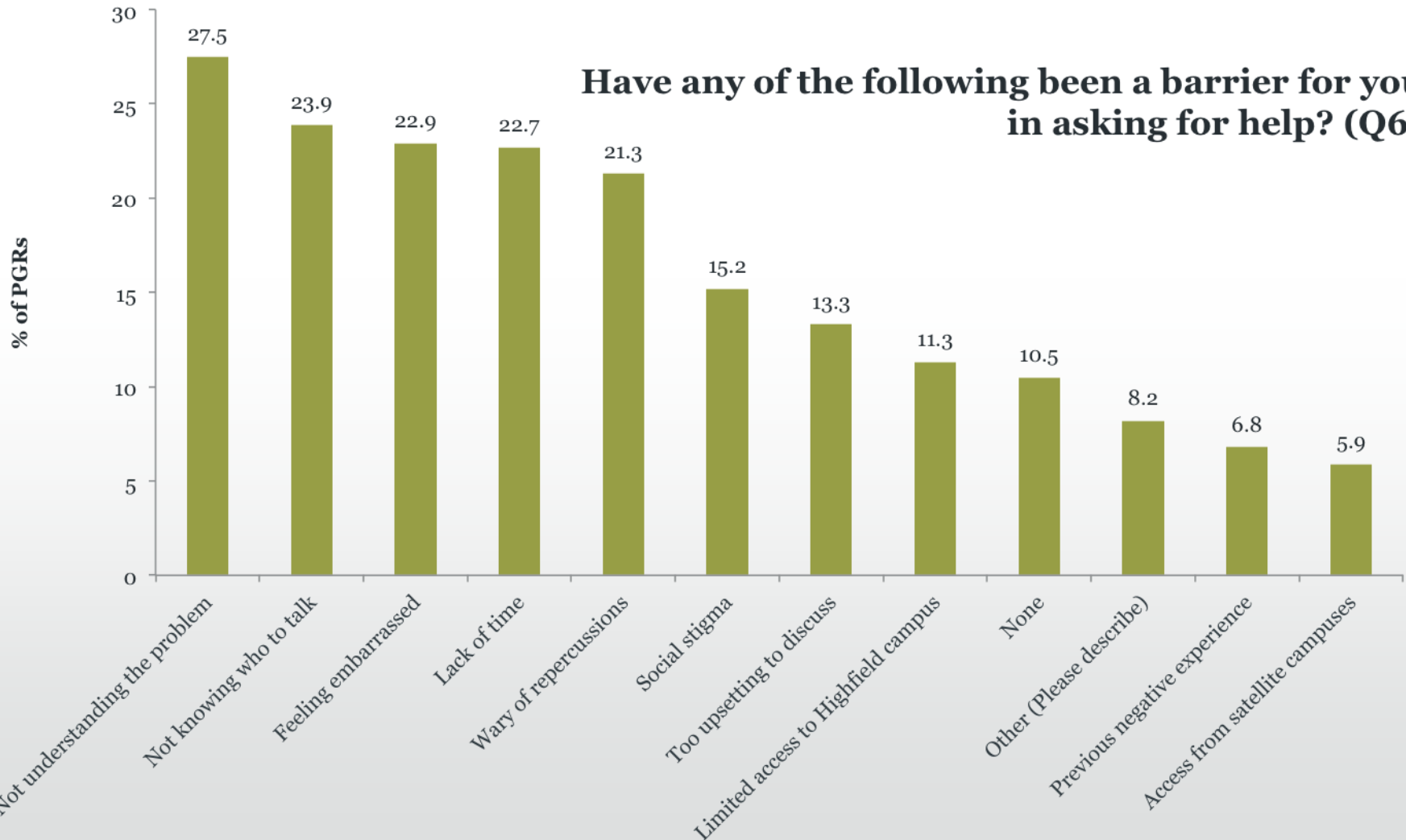
Mental health diagnosis

Mental health diagnosis declared by PGRs in the survey (Q7)

Accessing student services

Experiences with Enabling Services' practitioners are generally reported to be **good** for PGRs with both the focus groups and survey participants saying that seeing a counsellor helped them greatly. The problems occur in accessing this level of support. The main barriers are:

•A feeling that Enabling Services "isn't for postgrads"

•Difficulties finding the time to attend a drop-in session

•Difficulties accessing support services on satellite campuses

•Waiting lists being too long

•Previous negative experiences as an undergraduate

•Feeling put off by triage

Recommendations

There are three main recommendations:

Self-improvement (self-help)

Recommendation 1: To improve awareness of wellbeing among PGRs by improving visibility of resources currently offered and producing new resources designed for and targeted at PGRs.

Peer support (mutual help)

Recommendation 2: To facilitate a supportive peer-to-peer PGR community by offering PGRs opportunities to support each other through the sharing of personal experiences within a programme of formal and informal activities.

Institutional support (supervisors, faculties and professional services)

Recommendation 3: To enhance the institutional environment to proactively manage the quality of the experience of PGRs as well as ensuring parity of experience.

A final note –

it's good to talk!

*"If you can have meetings with other PGR students like this one - I feel really good being here and being able to know that I'm not the only one going through those difficulties"
(Focus group participant)*