Invited Blog for BERA (British Educational Research Association) – November 2023

**Understanding and Improving the Wellbeing of Postgraduate Taught Students: A Longitudinal Study**

By Paula J. Miles

Previous literature acknowledges that student wellbeing is lower than that of the general adult population (Stallman, 2010). This is especially true for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students who have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group, reporting the lowest levels of wellbeing in any university student cohort and being referred to as the ‘forgotten cohort’ (Coneyworth et al., 2019). With increasing numbers of PGT students across the UK, and accounting for approximately 25% of the student body at UK universities in 2021-2022 (HESA, 2022), it is important that these students are given the attention they deserve.

Researchers have attributed the poor wellbeing of PGT students to their unique university experience – that is, undergoing a great deal of change in a very short time frame. In the UK context this is typically one year of intense study comprising both taught and research components. Changes that PGTs experience over the span of their short degree include: transitioning to a new learning environment; experiencing higher academic expectations; adapting to new living environments; developing new support systems; and, juggling increased academic and personal responsibilities.

If we want to help improve the wellbeing of our PGT students, we must first establish what the wellbeing levels are for our PGT cohort. We can then develop an understanding of the factors that help and hinder our PGTs’ wellbeing. With this knowledge, we will be able to create targeted interventions to strengthen the wellbeing of our PGT students.

Utilising a longitudinal mixed-methods design, over a five-year period, we have asked PGT student groups to complete questionnaires and participate in focus groups that centre around the theme of wellbeing. Our three aims are: 1) to monitor and better understand PGT wellbeing across the academic year, utilising the CORE-GP scale for wellbeing; 2) to compare PGT wellbeing across multiple years - pre, during and post COVID-19; and, 3) to impact university policy and practice by developing the tools necessary to support PGT wellbeing.

Preliminary findings highlight that PGT wellbeing, as measured by the CORE-GP, is consistently poor across the year. Interestingly, this was observed in each year of our study (before, during and after COVID-19). This result supports previous claims that PGT wellbeing is worryingly low and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Due to our mixed-methods approach, we are now in a good place to demonstrate which factors help and hinder wellbeing. Preliminary analyses of qualitative data suggest that social interaction, loneliness, stress, housing and issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion are factors that can negatively affect PGT wellbeing. Positive factors include the kindness and pastoral support of academic staff as well as personal hobbies such as sport and nature activities. This provides us with vital information to aid in the development of interventions, which will be the next phase of our project.

By carrying out this work over a period of 5 years and keeping the student voice at the heart of this work, we are ensuring that future interventions are appropriately tailored to the wellbeing needs of our PGT students. We believe that this work will bring about positive change for a cohort of students who are often overlooked and who we know experience significant challenges when completing their postgraduate studies.

Research Team: Paula Miles, Veronica O’Carroll, Francesca Fotheringham, Francesca Marshall

References:

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). (2022). HESA Report: Who’s studying in HE?. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>

Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, *45*(4), 249–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2010.482109>

Coneyworth, L., Jessop, R., Maden, P., White, G. (2019). The Overlooked Cohort? -- Improving the Taught Postgraduate Student Experience in Higher Education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 57(3): 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1617184>