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Postgraduate researchers' identities and wellbeing – what is the link and why does it matter?

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Summary

Doctoral students have higher rates of mental ill health than comparable populations. Contributors include institutional stressors such as competitive fields, uncertain futures and liminal professional identity.

This exploratory study drew on social psychology, taking a broad narrative approach, to explore what professional (academic) communities postgraduate researchers (PGRs) identify with, and how these identifications relate to wellbeing. Focus groups were conducted with social science and humanities PGRs in three UK Russell Group universities.

PGRs experiences were diverse, but common themes related to ambiguity about their roles as students and researchers; the precariousness of academic careers; commitments to scholarly research; the importance of validation from supervisors and the wider academic community; and the particular challenges when other social roles (e.g. relating to ethnicity or parenthood) align poorly with academic roles.

Key conclusions are the importance of validating and supportive research communities that did not necessarily map onto departments or disciplines; meaningful and practically empowering supervisory relationships, which can serve as a buffer against stress and uncertainty; and the relative paucity of 'postgraduate/doctoral researcher/student' as a social identity.

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Introduction

The last few years have put in sharp relief the fact that doctoral students appear significantly more susceptible to ill mental health (particularly anxiety and depression, one often comorbid with the other) than general – comparable – populations (Levecque et al., 2017; Mackie and Bates, 2019). Recent UK-based research has confirmed the higher prevalence of mental health disorders among doctoral researchers than in other highly educated working professionals (Hazell et al., 2021) and further highlighted that neither the existing research nor wellbeing services built on the needs of undergraduate and post-graduate taught students are adequate for the doctoral student community (Vitae, 2018; 2020a), prompting an acceleration of efforts to better understand and meet the specific needs and issues faced by this population (Vitae, 2020b).

Research so far conducted in this area, predominantly in the Anglo-Saxon, and select Western European and Nordic contexts, has identified a large number of potential stressors, ranging from individual to institutional and sectorial. Quite a few of them can be grouped around, and linked to, what we are identifying as (lack of) social identification and belonging: isolation, imposter syndrome, self-confidence and self-depreciation, problematic supervisor relationships, or issues around job control and uncertainty (Vitae 2018; 2020; Byrom et al., 2020). While some of factors of well/ill-being are found both in student populations and work organisations, what distinguishes, and possibly exacerbates, the issues faced by doctoral students, is that these issues arise in the context in which the professional identity is not yet formed and the individuals exist in a state of liminality, often at odds with the life stage (43% of the UK PGR population is 30 years-old and over according to HESA data), yet work is performed and identity constructed in an all-consuming, extremely competitive environment in which the life-work imbalance is accepted as the norm – and not seldom celebrated – levels of burnout higher than in general working population and similar types of employment (Guthrie et al., 2018) and rewards are uncertain (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

Complementing the work of colleagues approaching the issue from a psychological and psychiatric perspective with the aim of identifying the types of, and interaction between, different stressors, we attempted in our project on doctoral students' social identities and wellbeing to avoid the pathologisation - and concomitantly, normalisation of pathologisation – of doctoral experience, and take instead a broader, narrative, lifeworld, approach to understanding the experience of wellbeing and prospering (or absence thereof) in the process of building academic/professional identities and communities in the context of changing academia. This working paper looks at the initial findings stemming from the focus

groups interviews conducted with postgraduate researchers (PGRs - we are using the most inclusive category in recognition of models of doctoral study that involve a year of master's research degree before officially transferring to doctoral research) working in humanities and social sciences at three Russell Group universities in the UK, with the view to understanding the content and meaning of the PGRs' developing – or perhaps already established – academic identities, the relationship between these and their other social identities, and the overall sense of belonging and wellbeing in academia stemming from the more or less 'successful' or unproblematic social identification.

We were guided in our query by an interest in the 'social cure' theory (Haslam et al., 2009), or the idea in social psychology that plural, compatible, social identities aid wellbeing, and by the preoccupation in higher education research with the multiplication and dissolution of 'academic identity' as a form of high-status professional identity. While underlining some commonalities with other studies, such as the incompatibilities between academic and some other broader social identities (based on class, gender, family role), these discussions emphasised the diversity of experiences and (problems with) academic and professional identification that do not prescribe simple solutions and interventions either on an individual or institutional level, but which do reveal, and require further investigation into, the problematic value of a 'doctoral student' category as a professional/academic status and role designation. The points raised in these discussions require further investigation into both structural and relational conditions that enable positive social and professional identification, a sense of meaning, belonging, and validation in the context of doctoral study, as factors of wellbeing.

PGR wellbeing in the UK and internationally

The topic of PGR mental health, previously mostly treated in a piecemeal and local manner, exploded onto researchers' and institutional agendas with the findings of a recent large-scale survey in Flemish universities (Levecque et al., 2017) that was among the first to unequivocally demonstrate the prevalence of mental health problems among the doctoral student population, significantly more common than among comparable population of working professionals. Despite their cultural situation, the results resonated among researchers and stakeholders internationally, prompting further large-scale investigation in other countries' higher education systems. In the UK, which is the focus of this paper, several sector-wide studies were conducted in recent years (Vitae 2018; 2020; Hazell et al.,

2021), mirroring overseas findings not only about the presence of the problem, but suggesting a culture in which the onset of some form of mental health issue had come to be taken for granted. In support of this trend, one of the earlier surveys of doctoral wellbeing conducted internally by the Imperial College London (Hargreaves et al., 2017) demonstrated the steady deterioration wellbeing scores over a five-year period.

These reports identified a number of common issues that can negatively affecting students' mental health across cultural and institutional contexts: worry about the future; financial situation; relationship with the supervisor; lack of clear guidance, expectations, and feedback, often married to sizeable workloads and own expectations of high achievement, supported by heavy-workload-high-stress culture in their institutions; isolation, especially for the international students for whom absence of family and friend network and the adaptation to a new culture were other important factors; not being able to talk about one's problems for fear of how it would impact others' confidence in their progress. A scoping review of the influence of doctoral environments on student mental health conducted by Mackie and Bates (2019) similarly found the supervisor relationships, less-than-transparent processes and expectations, combination of intense workloads and low status, poor work-life balance and role conflict, especially for female students (confirming findings by Haynes et al., 2012), and non-traditional and not widely represented young academics (confirming findings by Shavers and Moore, 2014) to have a negative influence on wellbeing.

In 2020, the year of the pandemic which, as in many other sectors, exacerbated ongoing problems, a large funding programme delivered by universities across the country and supported by two major UK higher education funding and regulatory bodies, Research England and Office for Students, further re-emphasised the seriousness of the problem but without being able to establish clear causalities and identify the reasons behind some groups' becoming more prone to mental health issues than others. Programme evaluation (Vitae, 2020b) did point out that issues spread beyond concrete stressors and into the wider systemic problems surrounding funding, duration of study, career opportunities, and research cultures, and concluded with recommendations for tackling the problem at all levels, showcasing examples of successful initiatives at participating institutions, ranging from supervisor training, transition support, wellbeing apps, to various forms of peer support and mentorship. While offering examples of 'what works' is always instructive, however, we felt that an overwhelming focus on localised and other common forms of support – often housed within (overstretched) wellbeing and PGR development and support services – threatens to move the attention away from systemic issues and research ecologies (Mackie

and Bates, 2019) and place the onus of responsibility on individual students, supervisors, and to a smaller degree, administrators.

Highlighting thus the importance of broader cultural and more diffuse factors that cannot easily be addressed with improved communication and training, Hazell et al. (2020), for example, found in their recent systematic review of doctoral researchers' mental health, that one of the common issues with which the latter struggled concerned the mismatch between students' personal values and other identities, and what they felt was the powerlessness of 'being beholden to the prevailing culture in which it was expected to prioritise above all else developing into a competitive, self-promoting researcher in a high-performing research active institution' (p. 21), with supervisors often transmitting this 'ideal' and students feeling 'reticent to act in any way which suggested that they did not personally value the pursuit of a leading research career above all else' (*ibid.*). It is this concern with PGRs' wellbeing not necessarily defined as absence of a mental health problem in the narrow course of pursuing a degree, but as eudemonic in the broader context of their lived social environment, their values and purpose, academic and otherwise, that inspired our project and particularly its focus on social identities.

Social identities and wellbeing

Our interest in the relationship between social identities and wellbeing was prompted by the recent research agenda in the fields of social and applied psychology that demonstrated a positive correlation between the strength of social identification and positive health outcomes, including, but not limited to, mental health (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2012). This work has shown the power of 'social cure' or positive social identification – the more numerous and compatible, the better – to act as a buffer in stressful and challenging situations and directly and indirectly improve wellbeing, including in the (undergraduate) student populations (Iyer et al., 2009; McIntyre et al., 2018).

What is meant by social identities in this context is that which provides one with a sense of self: the attitudes, feelings, norms, and behaviours that contribute to one's development and coherence, derived from various group identities that are almost always accompanied by a perception of group homogeneity and within-group assimilation (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Some of these identities can be more or less central, or at least more long-term (such as gender, ethnicity or nationality, sexuality, religion, class), others have various degrees of

ephemerality and relative salience (occupation/profession, family role, adherence to a political party or a cause, sports team or a hobby), but what matters is that the identification is positive, or validated by the group (Jenkins, 1996), which provides protective function and ensures one's sense of meaningful belonging.

In the context of doctoral study, then, we were particularly interested in the way in which, as mentioned before, doctoral students construct their professional – academic – identities, and the ways in which these interact with their other salient social identities. This preoccupation was framed by the significance accorded in studies of PGRs' mental health to factors of isolation (both from the academic community and other personal relationships), imposter syndrome and otherness, or role conflict, as causes of ill-being (Hazell et al., 2020), and to the protective role of social support and engagement, and the sense of belonging (McAlpine et al., 2020). Our enquiry was guided by the following questions:

- What are the professional (academic) communities that PGRs feel they identify with?
- What are the characteristics of academic communities that PGRs (aspire to) identify with? Are they compatible with other social roles and identities?
- What is the relationship between their wellbeing and academic identification?

Finally, we both anticipated and were curious about the problem of 'academic' identification in the context of the transforming university and the uncertain and changing meaning of 'academic' (identity) in the first place (for theoretical overview, see Djerasimovic, 2021). Briefly, it has been argued that the ongoing, and often externally (by governments and other non-academic actors) imposed changes in research funding and governance (performance-based funding, emphasis on external, competitive forms of funding, concern with socio-economic impact) have, for the past two or three decades, been eroding the somewhat clearly delineated group boundaries and distinct sets of values (key in creation of social identities) – professional autonomy, critique of received wisdom, disciplinary/epistemic norms – that had previously defined the academic community in fairly universal terms, leading to dissolution, fragmentation, or at the very least fluidity of academic identity as a social-professional identity category, not dissimilar to the general late modern (Giddens, 1991) untethering of professional communities from their defining norms and towards individual and smaller-scale social identity projects (see also Jones and Green, 2006 on the comparable changing professionalism in the general medical practitioner community in the UK as example of a wider trend). Given this postulated change, which also often incorporates the dissatisfaction with and outright resistance towards the erstwhile identity-anchoring institution – now that of the neoliberal university – our secondary interest was also

in the form and strength of academic/professional identities that do arise, and to a degree in the reality of the perseverance of some professional idea(l)s despite this change, such as the passionate, all-consuming pursuit of knowledge-as-vocation.

Project description

In 2021, we – a team of higher education, psychology, and humanities (English and Drama) researchers – organised an event on PGR social identities and wellbeing. In this event, that brought together humanities and social sciences PGRs and supervisors from across several research-intensive universities in England's south-west, we aimed to avoid the focus on the common stressors and focus instead on the sense of belonging and community. The event led to a number of discussions, some guided and some unstructured, which were thought-provoking, and for many, cathartic. Following the event, it was felt that a deeper exploration of some of the points raised in these discussions was warranted – particularly the issue of a lack of (clarity around) a strong PGR identity, or the significance of belonging and identity for an 'atypical' (non-White/international/working class/mature/distance) doctoral student. To this end, four focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 12 (self-selected) PGRs from across social science and humanities disciplines and three different institutions in February 2022. Five of our interviewees were funded by Doctoral Training Partnerships, two received a different type of external/institutional funding, and five were self-funded. Nine were international (including EU and overseas) students, and overwhelming majority identified as female. Around half could be categorised as 'mature' students, a category that many of them found problematic, due both to its leaving a possibility of someone 'immature' conducting doctoral research, and to the implication that a standard doctoral student is someone young, without a prior career, professional experience, or caring responsibilities.

Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours, were recorded and professionally transcribed. Discussions were organised around the following topics: the understanding/embodiment of a PGR/PhD identity; relationship between this and other social identities; relationship with the wider institutional and extra-institutional scholarly community; sense of belonging as a PGR/PhD. Our aim was to understand whether there was such a thing as a common PGR identity (and if this matters at all) and how these relationships and points of identification support or obstruct the participants' sense of wellbeing and prospering at university. Below are the results of our preliminary analysis conducted with the above questions in mind, an interpretive, iterative reading of interviewees' contributions around the themes of

professional and academic identification (what is its form, what is its content?) and the relationship between this and other forms of social identification, where it is presented as either a factor of support or challenge to one's wellbeing during their study. At this point, having conducted the interviews as an exploratory pilot, we were interested in identifying commonalities as well as diversity of experiences, that will guide the next steps in our research programme aimed at understanding not only the first-hand experiences of PGRs, but the broader social environment of doctoral study and the available discourses and points of identification created via national and institutional policies and practices, and the work of departments, research groups and centres, and supervisors.

Forms of PGR professional identification, their compatibility with other social identities, and wellbeing

What's in a name?

The first point around professional/academic communities and identifications, a reiteration of what the discussions at our event already highlighted, is that, for the overwhelming majority of our interviewees, the various collective labels used to institutionally designate a PhD candidate status such as 'PGR' or more commonly 'PhD student' do not really provide meaningful lines of identification. One participant commented positively on the inclusive nature of 'postgraduate' or 'early career' researcher category, pointing out the emphasis these place on research and away from formal status, while for majority of others, the choice of a label, insofar that it was a choice, and, it must be stressed, not one that most of them consciously made at most times, depended on the social circumstances, and, as one interviewee put it, the game that needed to be played, whether to be taken more seriously professionally or in countering negative societal stereotypes.

For example, one interviewee noted: "I think maybe in some cases I would prefer to take [the title of] doctoral researcher. Because... they treat you better when you say you're a researcher... you don't want to be a student if you're applying for a flat, you'd prefer to be a researcher." Some of the others, while uneasy about the 'myth of prestigiousness' associated with the status of a PhD student – implications that they would occasionally seek to dispel by invoking the reality of 'struggle', 'emotional challenge' and 'suffering' that doing a PhD entails, particularly exacerbated by the certainty of precarity (or at the very least difficulty of obtaining an academic position) at the end of it, of downplay it in private circles removed from academia to avoid the appearance of complacency and 'changing of the

dynamic' – would still use it as the most socially recognisable label, and particularly in social situations in which their status could be questioned.

Or when you want to raise your status because you're not taken seriously because you're a woman, or whatever. And I think in those moments it becomes like a shortcut to some sort of respect. Because I think when you are, as I am, a working class migrant background, I'm a first generation of my family to go to university at all, let alone do a PhD. So it can be quite difficult to garner respect.

Consequently, such strategic and ambivalent (regarding the implied low/high social status) employment of labels should not be confused with actual embodiment of social categories and identities. While in most cases, interviews admitted defaulting to 'PhD student' as the most commonly used and widely recognised category, it was usually one empty of meaning (unlike that of, for example, an undergraduate student). Occasionally it would signify that one was working towards a qualification, or imply that they saw their supervisors and other senior scholars as someone determining the value of their work, but not as peers or fellow scholars. Otherwise, there was little normative or behavioural content that imbued their use of 'student', apart from one interviewee's insistence on the importance of resisting the "marketing of PhD students as PhD researchers", as the former connoted positively in their academic environment with dynamic, innovative, and fresh ideas and projects that would excite and inspire senior peers, and was thus something to preserve and celebrate. This note on the receptive and appreciative audience is key to understanding this student's positive experience in a social environment in which "being just a student" (as a mark of inferiority) is rare, and contributions at all levels are recognised, where it is the commonalities of doing good, exciting work that matter and serve as points of identification.

But for all those who did use the 'PhD student' category, what really defined their professional role was not learning and gaining skills, but creating – it was work, labour, originality, inspired and passionate effort to contribute to knowledge and scholarship through their project, and thus it was arguably 'researcher' that best matched their desired, if not always fully accepted, identification. Lines of identification could run variously along disciplines, interdisciplinary agendas, research topics, or common epistemologies and shared values about the nature and purpose of academic research. And it is important to note that this was exclusively about research – teaching and wider scholarship, even in the preferred field of scholarly identification, were either not mentioned, or discussed in the context of the necessary CV-building activity, or in one case, as a form of imbuing their own

perceived sense of student identity with authority reserved for more senior staff, a way of approaching the aspired-to identity via validation by audience of undergraduate students.

Within the wider (senior) academic and scholarly setting, however, audience validation of researcher identity often proved more problematic. Similarly to participants in larger surveys, both in the UK (Hazell et al., 2020) and internationally (e.g. in Finland; see Stubb et al., 2011), our interviewees tended to define the PGR/doctoral student 'community' (community in this sense as an externally, institutionally mandated group, rather than a more organically created collective) unfavourably in comparison and contrast to the academic community to which very few of them felt they belonged. As in Hazell and colleagues' study, descriptions such as 'bottom of the pile' (professionally) were used, and similarly to their Finnish peers in the survey conducted by Stubb and colleagues, there was often a sense of 'exclusion and exteriority' and 'unworthiness' (p. 40). The last point is key to understanding the professional communities to which PGRs (sought to) belong. Rather than insisting on rather amorphous 'PGR' or 'doctoral' communities, what worked in social identification terms was meaningful inclusion – in the sense of recognition, opportunities for expert contribution, and collaboration – in one's scholarly community, whether at a departmental or a research group/centre level.

Often, a successful/positive identification with a specific academic community was contingent on the extent to which supervisors were prepared to engage with PGRs as colleagues rather than students, as one interviewee notes, "My supervisors ... approach me more as a team member ... I'm involved in their projects as well ... they ask me about my expertise, and I ask them about their expertise..." Interviewees felt that the supervisory relationship was fundamental to developing a positive academic identity and sense of belonging to a professional/academic community. As one interviewee put it: "She [the supervisor] always has a new, big project going on... she has such an amazing network. And she fits me into that but not as the lowest person in the team, but just as a team member." In the words of another interviewee, regular participation in research centre meetings, "makes you feel like you are a researcher and not a student", echoing findings by Stubb et al. (2011) about the importance of intensification of a researcher and a colleague status for PGRs' thriving.

[What's an academic? Some observations on social category meaning and status](#)

For those for whom such validation – as well as the practical opportunity for networking – was lacking on a regular basis, the experience of doctoral research could become adversely

affected by maladaptive perfectionism, recognised by Berry et al. (2021) as one of the chief contributors to ill mental health among doctoral students. In the words of one of the (externally funded) interviewees: “You start a PhD and it’s like permanent sense of incompetence. Yes I know probably from some kind of perspective somewhere I’m doing okay. I don’t know. I think I feel too uncertain of myself in terms of competence to say that I feel particularly, genuinely proud.” Another interviewee, a first generation scholar, recalls a family member’s expressing a sense of pride over her achievements, which she found difficult to share:

[He was saying] ‘you are the first person in the family who is published, you are published. And this is like amazing.’ So it’s very nice and very touching. But on the other hand I know that for them it means a lot. For the academic side I’m one end of the many.

For her, the stark reality of the academic labour market overshadows the ability to experience scholarly pride:

I’m going to be 28 this year, and at some point I want to have children, I want to have a family. If I stay in academia knowing that [getting an academic post will] probably [take] about 10 years, if I am lucky enough to get contracts even. Constantly moving, considering my partner as well in everything, where we could potentially settle down. So this is very, very anxious times for me.

It is thus not only the difficult-to-attain academic identity that is a cause of stress for some of our doctoral students vis-à-vis the broader community of senior peers, it is also the uncertainty about the value of belonging to this group. Several of them perceived being an academic as a continuous struggle and doubt about one’s work, occasionally gleaned even in senior academics, the excessive workloads, and the reality of being a cog in a neoliberal machine in contrast to the previous expectations of university scholarship as space for critique and social deconstruction. Academic identity for several of our interviewees appeared also in the state of contrast, not compatibility, with their other social identities. As was clear from some of the above examples, it is often seen as standing in contrast with certain gender and class realities, supporting the perseverance of the ‘traditional’ idea of an academic as White, male, middle-class, and completely devoted to work. For some interviewees, the question of its compatibility with being a parent was also raised, invoking the expectation of complete enmeshment in one’s work as a defining characteristic of an academic:

But I think certain identity demands mean- like for example, a parent, we've mentioned networking. We've mentioned conferences and all that. I find it really difficult to take part in those kinds of activities to my full potential. Because my children are still actually more important than the PhD. So it's kind of quite difficult to consolidate those two things with only 24 hours in a day.

For another parent, it was the external perception of the incompatibility of motherhood and serious scholarship that was problematic:

It's tricky because on the other hand I just had my children. So they're very young, they're one and three. So I think a lot of people who know me or don't know me a lot, they have it in their mind that I'm a mother and I'm doing something else on the side. They're not sure about my maternity leave or what I'm doing right now, it's a bit confusing in their minds. Like, 'Are you on maternity leave? What are you doing? Are you in the school? Are you teaching?' And I'm like, 'No, I'm doing my PhD.' 'Oh yeah, okay.'

Invoking the incompatibility of academic and other social identities, another interviewee talked about a rare research event in which they keenly felt a sense of community and belonging in academia, this episode highlighting the majority of occasions in which this was not the case:

The bottom line actually was about identity. It was about the diversity of- so most of us were international students. It was the diversity of race, gender, economic status, all of these things. It was about 15 people total. We were all so different, and we brought our identities, and our politics with us. And we were honest and open about that. And that was fundamental to feeling like I belonged. I could be honest about who I was, and in an academic arena that was openminded. I want that experience across the board. And that's sometimes hard to come by in academia.

Others who did not often find an easy confluence between academic and other social identities, as indicated earlier, preferred to keep them separate, noting, sometimes with humour, sometimes matter-of-factly, that their families and friends outside academia did not really understand their work, and in some cases did not expressly hold it in high esteem. There was a split, overall, among our interviewees, between those for whom their work, while source of passion and satisfaction, was 'just' work, akin to a job from which they felt they could separate their other social identities, and those for whom the personal and

reflective nature of their research, or the complete commitment to their work formed a part of their “holistic identity”, something that they either fully embraced at their present life stage, or something that was simply inevitable:

My identities inform how I am in the world, what I'm writing about, how I write about it. And the clash that I feel, the interference that I feel is the same interference I feel in the broader world of my identities. It's not specific to academia. It's just yet another institution that has these ideas and standards and whatever.

Overall, however, the common expectation that being an academic meant a complete enmeshment in one's work, to the degree where the latter trumps all other social experiences and relationships, whether one submitted to it or felt various degrees of guilt and conflict in not being able to submit to it, while still present, was borne out by only around a half of our interviewees' experiences. The age at which one commenced their doctoral work did not seem to make much difference – the plurality of social identities and commitments that arguably increases with age was for some interviewees more likely to create conflicts of identities, for others more likely to enable productive separation of them.

'Fewer PhD students, less suffering'

In terms of effects on wellbeing in the course of doctoral study, it appeared that the ability to create identity separation was mostly beneficial. While more research, and more experiences are needed to understand individual reasons for this difference in capacity and approach, there were some possible pointers arising from our discussions, concerning primarily the original motivation for engaging in PhD work. For those hoping for an academic career and thus a long-term academic identification, the practical circumstances surrounding its pursuit: extended period of precariousness, uncertain rewards, un-remunerated labour, role confusion and identity incompatibility, all led to decreased wellbeing. For those for whom commencing a PhD was a decision driven by either a specific interest in the field/topic, whether or not pursued within an academic post in the future, or a motivation to bolster one's professional standing and prospects, marrying a prior/existing career with a pursuit of a salient research project, the chances of increased wellbeing resting on the ability to maintain an unproblematic coexistence of established (professional) identities were much stronger.

This observation should not be mistaken for an assertion that it is one's expectations and motivation that bear the sole responsibility for their wellbeing, as it would be erroneous (though not the focus of this paper) to omit the role of structural conditions – availability of permanent and full-time academic posts, adequate remuneration for academic labour (e.g.

teaching, mentoring, editing, academic event organisation and participation) performed in addition to the work done on one's project, labour protection for those engaging in paid work – in producing the problematic dynamic between aspiration and validation. Other, institutional, issues mentioned by some interviewees included institutional role ambiguity (neither a student nor an employee) underscored by the perceived lack of standard safeguards and support mechanisms afforded to teachers and students by the institution. In practical terms, this also meant multiple IT accounts, wasted time in juggling administration, absence of clear and dedicated physical and virtual working spaces where one's professional status as a colleague would be clear and gaps in access to resources and information depending on the 'most active' role/account. Finally, without consistent and reliable feedback, training, and support, many interviewees expressed feeling lost and scared, learning of institutional resources by word of mouth, being asked/expected to do tasks for which they had not been trained, or feeling like there is a right way to progress with their work and potential career-building that they were not privy to.

Where support was forthcoming, however, the impact on wellbeing was profound. As one interviewee noted:

I know I'm doing the right thing with my life ... when my supervisors say to me, yes this is good, or this is the right path ... it's a validation of my existence as a PhD student ... it is a belonging, a 'you do belong here, you're doing the right thing.'

While for some it was a more holistic sense of validation coming from supervisors that mattered, for others, the sense of wellbeing was to be derived from the maintaining a purely transactional relationship, benefitting from professional support, but minimising any chances of conflict and disruption in the relationship by containing "any form of dysfunction or dysregulation" – this being, we would like to emphasise, an example of PGR's agency in managing the supervisor relationship to their benefit, rather than reluctance to reveal struggle. Finally, as pointed out previously, among those of our interviewees who did engage in doctoral study with the perspective of an academic career, supportive and enabling social environment consisting not only of proactive supervisors, especially those with the eye on the post-PhD landscape, but also empowering research groups and centres providing opportunities for focused professional growth, project development, funding, and networking made a huge difference to their future prospects and consequently, their present state of wellbeing.

Career development opportunities notwithstanding, an overwhelming majority of interviewees insisted on the value of inclusive, non-hierarchical research/disciplinary communities, with emphasis on exchange and collaboration. In addition to broader, departmental and institutional research centres, groups, and communities where the professional (both scholarly and career-supporting) and social interaction and support overlapped – where peer friendships (“we all know what we’re going through” ... “you don’t have to present yourself or explain anything”) and mentorships could develop, this for some also included dedicated spaces designed specifically by doctoral training partnerships or collaborative doctoral partnerships for the cohort (“to share our journeys” ... “a good community to reach out to”). Several interviewees, however, appreciated smaller, intimate communities that “evolved in a kind of organic way rather than something that was put in place for you.”

This is perhaps a fitting conclusion to some of the insights developed here: the necessity for institutions and academic communities to avoid assumptions about who PGRs are and instead focus attention and resources on understanding their diverse paths, needs, motivations, and contributions to social and professional environments, creating space for supportive, meaningful identities to be (re)formed on the basis of them.

Discussion and directions for further research

Our findings, based as they are on exploratory research and a small number of individual reports, do not in any way suggest generalisable conclusions about PGRs’ experiences across disciplines, fields of research, types of institution or forms of doctoral training, but they do, we hope, etch out a few aspects of social identity/wellbeing nexus that merit further enquiry.

Firstly, the unsurprising importance of social support in combating distress that can arise either from loneliness and isolation of doctoral work, and from being too enmeshed in it (Berry et al., 2021), was reiterated in our interviewees’ reports, as was the apparently beneficial effect of belonging to multiple social groups (Iyer et al., 2009) that one could switch between, creating a level of distance and separation, even if – or especially if, contrary to Iyer and colleagues’ findings – the multiple identities did not always have to be compatible and mutually reinforcing. The reports in our study also seem to support another of Berry et al.’s (2021) findings about the detrimental effect of too many social roles *within*

the context of academia (researching, teaching, etc.) which could lead to both poor work-life balance, and role conflict and confusion. Their survey also highlighted the benefit of good supervisory relationship, with the emphasis on ‘authentic mentorship, positive collaboration, communication, and flexibility’ (p. 8) and not only on research training, as mentioned, too, by several of our interviewees.

Significance of multiple social memberships was also borne out by Hazell et al.’s (2020) systematic review of the topic of doctoral researchers’ mental health, particularly where there was a threat of diminished personal identity due to enmeshment with their PhD. In their analysis, there were two opposite trends – one which was the accruing of (professional) roles, goals, and activities ‘as an antidote to the loss of personal identity’ (p. 23), and the other that, similarly to above, emphasised the value of maintaining strong relationships and group membership in environments outside of academia, as well as ‘deprogramming’ and divorcing personal values and a sense of self from the PhD and systemic norms (p. 22). The latter was particularly important in those cases, as highlighted by some of our participants, where there was a detachment from or even conflict with contemporary university and its many aspects that one would find problematic, such as the absence of critique, structural inequalities, lack of diversity, or neoliberal exploitation – all this addressing the important question of community formation in the environment characterised by isolation and competition (Wellcome Trust, 2020). In these environments, as vividly highlighted by some of the above quotes, the importance of ‘being seen’ and ‘being visible to personal and professional others’ (whether at the level of peers or senior colleagues), and (re)asserting meaning, purpose, and the potential for ‘collective authenticity’ (Hazell et al., 2020: 22) is absolutely paramount.

What is at stake here is the importance of social spaces and opportunities for identity development for the many PGRs for whom such categorisation (with ‘doctoral student’, ‘doctoral researcher’, ‘PhD student’ similarly vague variants) is ‘unclear and confusing’ (Hazell et al., 2020: 19). While those with an established professional identity and not necessarily seeking an additional/complementary career in academia, or those fortunate enough to have their scholarly (often disciplinary) identities established and reinforced by acknowledgment from the social group, might not necessarily need these additional spaces (real and metaphorical, physical and virtual – it is here that cohorts and infrastructures created by different funding schemes and partnerships often proved useful) of exploration and positive identification, our interviewees’ experiences confirmed the beneficial effect of both regular and ephemeral opportunities for convening, exchange, mutual support, or simply socialisation – especially for those working in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary

fields, international students, second career students, and all those in heightened states of transition and liminality.

Conclusion

This working paper addressed the issue of postgraduate researchers' (PGRs') wellbeing from the perspective of social identities. Departing from the idea that positive social identification has a beneficial effect on wellbeing, our focus group interviews with doctoral students working in research intensive universities in social sciences and humanities in the UK explored what forms of professional or academic identification are available to, and used by, this group, the relationship in which these stand to students' other social identities, and with what consequences for their wellbeing. Their experiences, while diverse, pointed to the distinct benefit, to positive social identification and a sense of wellbeing, of both validating and supportive research communities that did not necessarily map onto departments and disciplinary units, including meaningful and practically empowering supervisory relationships, and strong, pre-existing, social identities that serve as a buffer for the stresses and a sense of uncertainty and lack of strong professional identity in the academic environment.

The majority of reports also revealed the inadequacy of the doctoral student/PhD student/PGR category as a site of meaningful social identification, as it was at best found to be relatively empty of meaning and cohesive strength, and at worst deemed undesirable due to its connoting low or problematic professional status. Additional problem with a positive sense of belonging that would stem from embodying a doctoral student identity in an empowering, or even any meaningful way lies in its association with a professional identity (academic) that, given the reality of PGR career aspirations and post-PhD career realities (Cornell, 2020; Vitae, 2019) will for the overwhelming majority of doctoral students remain unattainable. Such structural issues that can stand in a way of positive social identification and be a cause of the feelings of isolation, imposter-hood, or failure, have to be discussed more vocally lest the attention and onus in efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing is too firmly placed on individual students and often equally distressed and overworked supervisors and under-resourced wellbeing and other institutional services.

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