

# Understanding the Mental health of Doctoral Researchers

## Researcher-Led Mental Health and Wellbeing Initiatives - Application Form

Thank you for your interest in applying to the Researcher-Led Mental Health and Wellbeing Initiatives funding scheme.

The deadline for applications is Friday 8th November 2019.

Please ensure that you have read the application guidance before completing your application.

### 1. Name

First

Last

### 2. Sussex e-mail address

### 4. School and department of lead applicant

## About the proposed initiative

### Title of initiative

### When is the proposed initiative running?

On a single date  On multiple dates

End date

Start date

### Which theme(s) does your proposed initiative best align with?

- Theme 1: Creating and maintaining community belonging
- Theme 2: Cultivating time to breathe
- Theme 3: Celebrating self and successes
- Theme 4: Constructing "other groups, other routes, other ways to be free"
- Theme 5: Curating experiences of research process

Please describe your proposed initiative (including how it aligns with the theme(s) you have selected above):

“Creating and maintaining community belonging” and tackling isolation has been a particularly prominent concern within the School of Media, Film and Music (MFM). Many have commented that they have found building community very difficult as a result of a variety of factors (outlined later in the “promote awareness” section). This is compounded by the lack of a dedicated work space for doctoral students which can be found in other schools and departments. MFM international students, in particular, have found that the lacking sense of community has been incredibly isolating for them.

Alongside a focus on creating community, we have included the themes “Cultivating time to breathe” and “Celebrating self and successes” in developing our initiative. Our proposed initiative will mainly revolve around fortnightly peer support groups. These will begin by sharing an area of our research that we are finding particularly challenging in small groups to reflect and gain insight from others. To ensure we have “cultivated time to breathe”, the peer support group will either begin or culminate with a social/creative activity. The first session in September, for example, will start with a walk through Stanmer Park and picnic before the peer support groups. Later sessions will include arts, crafts and games, and the final session in December will end with a festive social event. To incorporate “celebrating self and success”, the second part of the peer support group session will include encouraging people to share and celebrate their own, and others, successes. We will redefine “success” as any small moment of achievement over the previous few weeks. This will promote an increased sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, alongside providing a space to share optimism about positive aspects of the doctoral process.

Alternating sessions will include higher education support professionals, who will either share their thoughts in a lecture format or provide hands-on support as a group facilitator. The inclusion of those who have either worked in, or with students from, higher education alongside peer support sessions will strengthen researcher’s understanding of both mental health concerns and coping mechanisms within academia. The alternating nature of this initiative will therefore be open to those who wish to only attend the peer support groups, only attend the professional advice sessions or those who wish to combine the two. All of these elements will build a sense of community and provide mutual peer support around wellbeing and mental health which is currently missing in MFM.

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**Please provide a project timeline, outlining the steps you would take to organise the initiative, including promotion and evaluation of the activity**

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#### June and July: Initial Organisation of Activity

Over the summer, we will source the professional speakers/facilitators for three sessions, book rooms ideally within the Media, Film and Music building, Silverstone, and order coffee, tea and biscuits in advance from University of Sussex catering. We will also start sourcing any equipment we need for our creative sessions and our peer support groups (such as stationery, arts and crafts provision, suitable games).

#### August and September: Promotion of the Initiative

Once all of the main structures are in place we will then start to promote our initiative to the MFM PhD community. The first step will be to create a poster, which will be sent out to all MFM Doctoral students via email and hung in the different MFM PhD offices. We will also post it on our MFM PhD Facebook page and create separate Facebook events for each session. To make sure it reaches as many PhD students as possible within our department, we will get in touch with PhD supervisors to promote this initiative to their students and we will also attend the PhD induction in September to introduce this to newcomers.

#### September – December: Schedule of Mental Health and Wellbeing Activities

First meeting week commencing 16th September – Walk in the Park and Picnic and first Peer Support Group

Second Meeting week commencing 30th September – Talk by Professional Mental Health Speaker

Third Meeting week commencing 14th October – Peer Support Group and Games afternoon

Fourth Meeting week commencing 28th October – Talk by Professional Mental Health Speaker

Fifth Meeting week commencing 11th November – Arts and Crafts Session (Art Therapy) and Peer Support Group

Sixth Meeting week commencing 25th November – Talk by Professional Mental Health Speaker

Seventh Meeting week commencing 9th December – Peer Support Group and Festive get-together

#### December and January: Evaluation of Activity

After our last session in December we will ask participants to give us feedback on the initiative through a short survey to understand if it was beneficial for them, what aspects were especially helpful and how we can improve on the themes and structure of the activities. Alongside the survey, we will ask participants to write one thing that worked well and one thing that did not work on post it notes after each session to constantly review our approach to the peer support groups.

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*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**Please describe the target audience. For example, would your initiative be suitable for all doctoral researchers or only those at a particular stage and/or in a specific discipline?**

Our proposed initiative would be targeted to all the doctoral researchers currently enrolled in MFM, whether they live locally or out of the Brighton area. In total, the school currently has 110 enrolled Doctoral students (including those who are intermitting and those awaiting their Viva), but the number is set to increase in the next term with the influx of new researchers in September.

For some years now, MFM students have been organising the Research in Progress Seminar, an event that happens fortnightly on Wednesdays. Students may find an opportunity to meet fellow students outside their own cohort, present and discuss the progression of researches, as well to deal with the struggles of the research practice in an open forum formula. These meetings, with an average attendance of 15-20 students per week (about 15%), contribute to a growing sense of community amongst MFM students. The general opinion, however, is that having only those two meetings every month is still not enough to support the community, especially because they are mainly focused on the progression of academic work. So the feeling that doctoral research can be isolating is still a strong one amongst us.

Testing out a series of events focused specifically on mental health and wellbeing within the MFM term calendar will be a valuable tool in enhancing our sense of community, especially for those in the most common demographic groups in MFM, such as international students, returning students, part-time students, practice-based researchers and researchers that are parents and carers. As defined by Westheimer and Kahne (1993), the sense of community increases following the interaction and deliberation by individuals with particular interests and shared goals. Thus, an initiative such as this will help MFM students to connect, interact, and share stories of their success and concerns, increasing the likelihood of feelings of belonging in the MFM community.

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "Building School Communities: An Experienced-Based Model," Phi Delta Kappan Vol. 75 (4), 1993.

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**If your target audience is within your department or School, please set out how the initiative could be scaled up (in future projects) to reach a broader range of doctoral researchers across Schools**

For this initial test of our initiative from September until January, we hope to bring a sense of belonging and cohesion that is lacking in our department. However, we believe that this project would work well within most humanities departments. It has been shown that PhD students in the humanities and social sciences are more likely to work in isolation and to experience feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Levecque et al, 2017). This is often due to the independent nature of the projects and a less structured PhD experience. Doctoral students in the sciences often work on a regular basis with their supervisors and other doctoral students together in labs and on collaborative projects, which rarely is the case for doctoral students in the humanities (Percy, 2014). The mixed approach of this initiative - combining social activities with the creation of informal peer support groups - will hopefully lead to feelings of a more supportive community. Therefore, this initiative hopes to relieve the feeling of isolation and not knowing who to talk to. Sharing our similar experiences will also be a useful way to connect researchers across the different humanities, which is already being considered on a larger scale. A meeting is planned for the end of this term involving some of the humanities departments at Sussex (MFM, HAHP, English and SCLS) to discuss the proposal for an expanded School. In this case this initiative could easily be expanded to include a broader range of doctoral researchers in the different humanities subjects. We hope to apply for the next round of funding in October 2019 to continue a modified version (depending on feedback from our trial) of our initiative that we would like to open up to other PhD researchers in the different humanities and include more creative workshops, such as life writing, using the expertise from different Schools.

Leveque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J. and Gisle, L., 2017. Work Organisation and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46, 868-879.

Percy, A., 2014. Studying a PhD: Don't suffer in silence. *The Guardian* [online], 25 March 2014. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/mar/25/studying-phd-dont-suffer-in-silence-see-support> [Accessed 24 March 2018].

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**Please outline how your proposed initiative will promote awareness of, support, or improve doctoral researcher mental health and/or wellbeing at Sussex**

This initiative is responding, in part, to various issues which have recently been discussed within the School of MFM. Following a lacking sense of community within MFM, doctoral researchers and Postgraduate student representatives suggested a feedback forum in which researchers could raise concerns and experiences directly with faculty. An initial meeting was arranged with the Head of School and the Director of Doctoral Studies which took place a few weeks ago. The agenda included concerns such as: unfair allocation of teaching, poor treatment of international students, practice-based researchers struggling with limited guidance, unclear guidance on available funding, poor support from certain supervisors, and the scope of the School with many wide-ranging topics and little cohesion both amongst the doctoral community and in bridging the gap from researchers to faculty.

As a result of these concerns, when we first heard about the proposed initiative, we discussed various different forms of support to enable a better sense of community and wellbeing in the School of Media, Film and Music (MFM). We found that researchers responded positively to the idea of peer support groups. Research into higher education suggests that peer support can be incredibly important for the academic adjustment of college students (Astin, 1993). [REDACTED] from Creative Transformative, who is trained in the Alexander technique, Coaching and Embodied Mindfulness, has worked with doctoral students for many years. She will be facilitating the first peer support coaching session to enable participants to understand the process. [REDACTED] the Student Experience Officer for MFM with expertise in psychoanalysis, clinical psychology and abnormal psychology, has offered to discuss different supportive techniques during a later session (Session 4 or 6). [REDACTED] the lead applicant, has undergone Level 2 Counselling Skills which has provided insight into helping, empathising with and listening to others. She has also undertaken a peer support coaching course which will enable her to help facilitate the peer support groups.

With a range of supportive activities and professional support, both in cultivating time to breathe and in celebrating successes, doctoral researchers in MFM will be able to build a sense of community and establish skills to support their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. We envision this initiative as the first of many, providing continuity in support for those who are at varying stages of their research through to completion.

Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters in college: Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**Describe how the success and impact of the initiative will be evaluated:**

Evaluating the success and the impact of an initiative that proposes to celebrate success in the MFM doctoral community is essential in order to gain an understanding on its mechanisms, to improve similar initiatives, discover the experiences of individuals participating, and contribute to the enhancement of a sense of community. We, however, understand that it would be difficult to measure positive or negative results on mental health and wellness itself with accuracy without conducting further and deeper research.

Thus, we propose two simple but effective methods of evaluating impact: one for the general success of the initiative and the other more focused on individuals. In a broader form of assessment, we will ask participants to voluntarily write one thing that worked well and one thing that did not work on post it notes after each session to constantly review our approach to the peer support groups. On a more personal level, participants will be asked to indicate their mood (anxious, worried, excited, relieved, comforted etc) in a form at the beginning and end of every peer group session. They would then be free to either hand this in or keep it to themselves and any that are handed in could be used to evaluate the feelings of those involved in specific meetings and any shifts in the mood of participants. Obviously, some sessions may be more difficult than others and may result in negative feelings, but this will be a good starting point for people to reflect on their own feelings as the session goes on and gives us an idea of how people may find that the supportive environment has a positive impact on their mood.

In the last session of the initiative, participants will be asked to answer a more elaborate survey in order to give us further feedback on the initiative. This will assess whether it was beneficial, outline the most helpful aspects, and how we can improve on the structure of the activities for further submission. The survey will also assess the impact of the groups on their own wellbeing and on the general sense of community of MFM, in which they will also be given the space to suggest changes to the events, as well as new themes and professional involvement. These different forms of evaluation will help us to shape and plan the following term's activities should we be successful in a further application.

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

## Budget

Please provide a detailed budget indicating what you would spend the funding on if you are successful in your application.

Your budget should include a breakdown of costs and justification for each item (e.g. lunch for 30 people at £6 per head from Sussex Food; accommodation for external speaker at £80 per night at a University approved hotel or guest house). See the guidance notes for further advice on your proposed budget.

## Budget details

Item details	£
Peer coaching facilitator	£300.00
Arts and crafts for the art therapy event	£40.00

Food and drinks for the picnic induction event	£90.00
Stationery, equipment and games for peer support group sessions	£40.00
Printing costs for posters advertising the initiative	£20.00
Drinks and snacks for end of term social event	£60.00
Travel costs to support those who live remotely (up to £40 each person to cover all sessions)	£200.00

**Total: £750.00**

**Total requested**

£750.00

**Do you have additional funding for the proposed initiative (e.g. from your School or Department?)**

Yes  No

**Please describe what additional funding you have for this initiative (how much and from whom), and what the additional funding would be spent on**

The School of Media, Film and Music have agreed to contribute £150 to the initiative to cover the cost of refreshments for the peer support groups and events including professional speakers. This is excluding the costs of the picnic (first event) and snacks and refreshments (end of term social event) which is included above. This means they will be providing refreshments for 5 of the 7 events at £30 each.

*Please limit your response to a maximum of 400 words*

**Please attach any additional documents here relevant to your application (e.g. to assist the panel in understanding the activity) (optional)**