Researcher-Led Mental Health and Wellbeing Initiatives – Guidance for applicants

Applications are invited from doctoral researchers at the University of Sussex for funding to support initiatives and interventions in relation to doctoral researcher mental health and wellbeing. The funding scheme is one of several outcomes relating to Understanding the mental health of doctoral researchers project.

You may seek funding for any activity that promotes awareness of, supports or improves doctoral research mental health and wellbeing, which aligns with one or more of the broad themes detailed below. These themes reflect the suggestions for interventions made by University of Sussex doctoral researchers attending focus groups in May 2018.

Theme 1: Creating and maintaining community belonging

"And then you're not isolated, you know someone who knows what you're going through"

Doctoral researchers emphasised the importance of community in terms of obtaining and providing support and experiencing a sense of belonging and mattering. Community could include immediate (for example lab or School) and broader university-level communities. Doctoral researchers suggested that initiatives to create community can often have mainly temporary effects. Some groups were thought to be potentially more vulnerable to isolation (for example, part-time researchers, researchers with extensive fieldwork or without dedicated offices and working spaces, parents and carers, and international students) but all doctoral researchers identified a risk of feeling isolated and a desire for an increased sense of community belonging.

Theme 2: Cultivating time to breathe

"Actually take a breather and have it as a routine", "having a kind of rhythm to your work day that everybody is participating in"

Doctoral researchers wanted initiatives that would help them cultivate and maintain wellbeing within the working day, emphasising the need to prioritise regularly 'taking a breather' but also the struggle to find the time and motivation to do so. Examples of 'take-a-breather' activities included creative, sport and physical activities, being in nature, walking and running around campus and surrounding parkland, and interacting with others. Doctoral researchers also mentioned the value of perceiving a sense of having a shared rhythm to the work day with other doctoral researchers - something that engaging in collective 'take-a-breather' activities provide.

Theme 3: Celebrating self and successes

"There needs to be a focus on that, enjoying the process", "you can kind of trick yourself into thinking that it was really all down to chance, any person could have done it"

Doctoral researchers talked about finding it challenging to recognise, own and celebrate their own successes - sometimes feeling that researchers have a tendency to undermine, ignore or write-off their successes as chance. There was an interest in developing an increased sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy and helping other doctoral researchers to do the same. Doctoral researchers also spoke of the desire to have increased positive conversations with colleagues more generally; sharing hopefulness, optimism and positive aspects of the doctoral process and academia more broadly.

Theme 4: Constructing "other groups, other routes, other ways to be free"

Doctoral researchers emphasised the power of 'outside' interests to create a feeling of 'headspace', giving a sense of separation from the PhD and of a healthy work-life balance. Researchers also emphasised the potential to feel constrained - mentally and physically- during the PhD process and their interest in finding ways to experience an increased sense of freedom. 'Other groups, other routes, other ways to be free' included, therefore, finding activities and groups which were either actually separate to the university or provided a sense of separation from the doctoral research and process.

Theme 5: Curating experiences of research process - seminars and events *"with more of a focus on the people rather than the publications"* **and that** *"allow people to express how their time is going, structured in a more focused way to build healthy working practices"*

Doctoral researchers emphasised a desire to share their own and learn about others' experiences of the research process - contrasting this to resources and training packages which may focus on more specific research skills, software, or techniques. The desire to share and learn included wanting to engage in discussing shared experiences of the PhD process with other doctoral researchers including sharing experiences around managing the PhD and personal lives. Researchers also emphasised an interest in hearing PhD completers and researchers that are more senior talk about their experiences of the research process - including the journey, struggles, successes, and tips and tricks for managing the experience.

The activity may be designed initially for the departmental or School level, or for a broader range of researchers across Schools. It will be essential for applications for smaller scale (departmental or School level) initiatives to describe how their proposal could potentially be scaled up to benefit larger groups of researchers.

Funding will not be granted retrospectively to cover initiatives occurring before application deadlines. All applications will be reviewed after the closing date unless your proposed initiative must take place before the deadline. If this is the case, please ensure you apply at least four weeks before the date of your initiative.

Applicants are encouraged to consider how they will evaluate their activity.

Budget

The maximum total amount available to any single project is £750.

A clear budget is required in your application and successful applicants are expected to provide a final statement of expenditure after the initiative. The deadline for the final statement of expenditure is 6 weeks after your initiative has taken place. Any unspent funds should be returned to the Doctoral School.

Please note that funds cannot be used to cover the applicant's time or for travel, course or conference attendance, or staffing costs, and research projects are beyond the scope of this funding stream.

Projects are expected to deliver value for money, and funds can only be used for items that are required for the activity.

Award recipients should make themselves familiar with the University's supply agreements. Costs for catering an event should be reasonable, and where an external caterer is used, in line with hospitality provided by Sussex Food.

If your application is successful, you will be required to identify a School/department budget code to which the funds will be transferred.

Selection process

Membership of the selection panel will be drawn from the [Understanding the Mental Health of Doctoral Researchers](#) project team.

In addition to overall quality, the panel will judge applications against the following criteria:

- Alignment of the proposed initiative or intervention with themes proposed by focus group participants
- Potential for the proposed initiative/intervention to promote awareness of, support or improve doctoral researcher mental health
- Detailed and appropriate budget
- Scalability of the proposed initiative/intervention
- Strong evaluation plans to measure the success of the proposed initiative/intervention

The panel reserves the right to offer partial funding for applications and may seek expert advice on any aspect of the application. Applicants may be asked for further information, or to amend their application.

In the event that there are multiple applications proposing very similar initiatives, you may be invited to work with other doctoral researchers to deliver the proposed initiative collaboratively. This will ensure that the funds available are able to support a diverse range of projects.

We aim to inform you of the decision within four weeks of the closing date of the funding round in which your application falls.

The [Understanding the Mental Health of Doctoral Researchers](#) team would be pleased to have informal discussions with researchers in the development of their applications - please contact S.Valeix@sussex.ac.uk.