



Case Study: Strand A: Research Culture and Community – SCIENCE Faculty PGR Placement

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Setting the scene

Strand A of the Courage Project focused on research culture and community across each of the four faculties at UEA, across the Norwich Bioscience Institutes and at the University of Suffolk. A PGR (or multiple PGRs) was employed as paid placement holders through the project to understand and address research culture and community in their respective faculties. The projects were PGR-led and responsive to the specific needs of PGRs within each of the respective general discipline areas.

This was a 3 month full-time paid PGR placement. The placement was PGR-led and the PGR-led proposal for the project was borne out of a desire to understand relevant factors that may impact upon mental health and wellbeing, including working environment, bullying and harassment and supervisory relationships.

Action taken

Eleven one-on-one interviews were conducted by the PGR placement holder with current or recent PGRs across different Science disciplines. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Questions were asked around the following themes: research culture and community e.g. 'how is wellbeing promoted in your research environment?' PGR-supervisor relationship e.g. 'how would you describe your relationship with your primary supervisor?', and how their difficulties were handled by the university 'did you seek help?' The questions were designed to understand the following:

- Is there a culture of acceptance around mental health problems?

- Are supervisors following university guidelines on good supervisor practice?
- Are measures in place to adequately support students?
- How can the culture in academia be improved?

The responses from the interviews were then used to construct fictional anonymous monologues. This was done so that anonymity of these PGRs experiences was preserved whilst the impact on their mental health, of their PhD studies, can be fully appreciated and their experiences shared. A selection of the monologues were performed during a workshop at the Courage Festival during the Giving a Voice session and have been published in the Lakeside View PGR Blog. The monologues are fictional but are based on the true experiences of the interviewees. One monologue is presented in this case study as an exemplar.

Zahara's Monologue

Doing my PhD is not the experience I was expecting. I was prepared for the hard work, but I wasn't prepared for the feeling of isolation, the belittling from my supervisor, and near – constant feeling that I don't belong here.

I've thought a lot about what went wrong. During the first couple of months of my PhD I had some really difficult things happen in my personal life. I had just arrived in the UK and didn't feel like I had a support network here, so I didn't talk to anyone about it, just kept my head down and tried to carry on. It definitely affected my work; at the time I should have been excited about starting my PhD in a field I thought I was passionate about, I felt completely detached and numb. I couldn't focus on my work, and already felt the pressure of being behind. I was coming in to the lab on weekends just to try and keep my head above water, and soon realised that this was almost expected.

I went home to my family for a short trip and I felt such relief to be out of this environment. Just before I was supposed to come back to Norwich, I experienced my first real panic attack. I've always been quite an anxious person, but this was a completely separate and terrifying experience. I had intense chest pains, couldn't breathe, was shaking and sweating. I genuinely thought I was dying. I couldn't understand how I could feel this all so physically. Looking back, I think it was a reaction to coming back here.

When I did come back, I made an appointment with student support services. I broke down when I was talking to the well-being advisor, and told her everything I had been feeling. I started seeing a counsellor through student support services the very next day. I've heard people have experienced long waits for the counselling service, and I'll always be grateful that this wasn't the case for me, I honestly don't think I could have coped otherwise. The support I got from them has been amazing. I also went to the medical centre and started taking antidepressants.

Student support services said I needed to let my supervisor know I was struggling. That's a conversation I never want to have again. Their response, "Ok, why are you telling me? There's nothing I can do". Just a little acknowledgement that this was really hard for me to open up about, or understanding that I'm going through a tough time, would have gone a long way, and instead I got nothing and felt ashamed. What makes it tougher is I hear my peers talking about how great their relationship with their supervisors are, while I feel perpetually on edge, waiting for the next bout of criticism. I berate myself for not being the dream PhD student my supervisor wanted.

A few months later, I realised I needed to take time out. This process in itself is stressful and archaic and needs to change. I had to wait 3 months for my request to be approved, by which time I was already getting ready to come back. While I recognise I needed this break, I now worry that I will have even more PhD left at the end of my funding. I don't know how I will support myself financially when my funding ends. The fact that PhD students in my lab group have stipends for either 3, 3.5, or 4 years, and yet we're all expected to produce a thesis of the same quality, is, in my view, offensive, but again this is just how things are.

In my experience, academia is a toxic world. There seems to be an acceptance that doing a PhD will be a drain on your mental health and well-being. I feel it's almost treated as a rite of passage. I constantly question why I am here. I feel I don't belong in this environment, and I blame myself for being too sensitive, not driven enough, and not being able to work the expected impossible hours. I sacrificed a lot to move to the UK and do this PhD, and right now I don't think it has been worth it.

Key Impacts and Outcomes

Through these interviews, the experiences of PGRs have been shared. . It is hoped that by sharing these monologues and the recommendations that arose through the interview process, that the voice of PGRs experiencing challenging circumstances can be heard and courageous conversations

can begin. Sometimes, these experiences may be difficult to hear or read but it is through open, honest and courageous conversations that systems can be challenged and changed.