



Courage Project Case Study, Strand C Low Commitment Sports, Fitness and Social Activity - Walk and Talk

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Setting the scene

The primary aim of this strand of Courage Project work was to provide opportunities for PGRs to engage in low-commitment physical activity that could be easily integrated into day-to-day activities. This initiative was set up to support PGRs, at any stage and under any circumstances but particularly as a place to discuss challenges around stress, mental health and wellbeing and challenges engaging in physical activity during their studies, social isolation and loneliness. Moreover, the walks became a useful method for reducing stigma around mental health and wellbeing.

Action taken

Walk and Talk group walks were arranged with the PGR Mental Health Coordinator, most often with a theme or topic to discuss on the walk around campus. The theme would be advertised prior to the walk. Walks lasted up to 45 minutes and were at a gentle pace around the UEA campus grounds.

PGR Mental Health Coordinator from UEA Student's Union arranged the walks, university staff (including academics and careers advisers) were invited at times to lead the walk theme if relevant e.g. qualitative research methods, wellbeing in academia.

Regular Walk and Talks took place, a variety of days of the week and times of day were used to attempt to provide a time for as many people as possible to be able to engage. Walks were advertised to last no more than 1 hour but generally took 45 minutes. The group met at a regular place every time.

Over the duration of the Courage Project, 27 Walk and Talks took place. PGRs from across different disciplines attended the walks. Staff were also welcomed to attend. Themes on the walks included

qualitative research methods, mental health, imposter syndrome, Silent Space, What Next After Your PhD, where to start with your PhD, work-life balance, wellbeing in academia. In addition, a number of walks made use of the UEA Sculpture Park and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts for art tours and discussion around art, creativity and mental health.

The ethos of the walk and talk as a way to discuss a range of topics relevant to PGRs was well received and the method worked well to open such discussions. However, challenges were often around participation and finding a suitable time but a group of around 6-8 worked well for the walk and talk regardless.

The walks would use the topic of discussion to create a conversation throughout the walk. One example of this is presented in one of the PGR Lakeside View Blog posts

<https://www.uea.su/blogs/blog/lakesideview/2018/11/29/Walk-and-Talk/> . During this walk, the PGRs used a technique called photo elicitation. They were asked to take one photo during the walk that exemplified how they were feeling about their PhD. These photos were then used to stimulate an open conversation about personal experiences.

"Today's walk was really useful for reflecting on my own research methods and for broadening my awareness of other peoples' projects and methodological concerns. It was such a lovely afternoon, and really helped to blow the cobwebs out! As a first-year PhD student, my picture represents the many layers of information and the various possibilities that I'm attempting to confront concurrently, and my attempt to find clarity amidst the madness."

Key impacts/ outcomes

The key outcomes of this Walk and Talk group were gathered from qualitative feedback from people who had attended the walks. A key outcome of the structure of the walks was that this created a place for open and supportive discussion about mental health, reducing stigma and providing support:

"Discussing my fears and worries in an open area ,non-formal area and with other PhD helps me a lot this year comparing to previous years as I feels much better each time I walk" – 4th year PGR

The group helped to reduce feels of isolation and loneliness and encouraged PGRs to take a break away from their studies and feel part of a community:

“It is easy to get isolated and sedentary when doing a PhD, the walking group gave an incentive to leave the desk, get some fresh air whatever the weather and to meet new people. It helps integrate you into the whole University, not just your area of research.” – 2nd year PGR

“I think it was interesting to talk extensively with some body for the first time. People start deferent conversations with "strangers", and it is very supportive and human to talk about life, project, and even about personal part with somebody who just introduce themselves 10 mins ago! This is very helpful” – 2nd year PGR

To improve the structure of the group, the routes should be identified as accessible to everyone. Moreover, more people from different areas of expertise and interest could be invited as them leaders to lead the discussion of the walk. This will engage different people and develop community across areas.

This was a simple and cheap activity to run, the only cost incurred would be salary cost time of the walk leader (for which this was part of the PGR Mental health Coordinators role). A walk doesn't necessarily need to take place in green spaces but creating time to get away from your desk for a break is useful anywhere and in any environment.

Appendix:

Image 1: Walk and Talk with PGRs



Image 1: Walk and Talk with invited guest lead Dr Sarah Hanson discussing qualitative research methods as the theme



Image 3: Example of advertisement for Courage Project Walk and Talks

