

COURAGE STRAND H: FESTIVAL CASE STUDY

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A) Overview

The Courage Project had a brief to provide a public dissemination activity under its final strand of work. Initially conceived of as a summit similar to an academic conference, this developed under a dedicated sub-committee into a festival of university wellbeing practice, encompassing elements of an academic conference, elements of an expert/public consultation, and a host of practical engagement activities bringing together stakeholders in postgraduate mental health. Engagement throughout the day enabled a public statement to be composed integrating the array of insights captured.

B) Action taken

The initial priority identified for this strand of activity under Courage was the provision of a high quality activity bringing together stakeholders (both key individuals from other Catalyst-funded projects and a broader array of interested parties, particularly current doctoral researchers) in order to share good practice, consolidate recommendations for future work around doctoral researcher wellbeing, and support an emerging network of research and practice in this area.

To ensure a successful event, in early 2019 a planning sub-committee was formed. This was chaired by Dr Bryony Porter from UEA students' union and had strong representation from current postgraduate researchers (in particular Maria Tsimpiri, who paused her PhD work to take up a dedicated placement organising the event). It was noted in the regular meetings held that the University of Sussex were planning a conference of scale as part of their Catalyst-funded activities, and that UEA-based activities should be complementary but reasonably distinct. Courage Project representatives attended this conference in May, in order to ensure that work held at UEA and partners could build effectively on what the Sussex team had established.

Additional objectives for the event were developed by the planning committee. Foremost amongst these were:

- That the event should be an information-gathering activity as well as a dissemination one, and should produce its own output.

- That the event should feature interactive, engaging activities that would make the topic of wellbeing accessible and embody the 'doing with, not to' approach that had developed from other Courage strands, in response to their findings and recent academic literature on the benefits of 'shoulder to shoulder' approaches to mental health.
- That Courageous Conversations should be had throughout the day, and that whilst a positive, progressive focus would be clear, controversial content would have a place.
- That the event would engage with the three focal themes that had emerged from other Courage activities: Prevention; Resilience; Support.
- That, whilst being accessible to all, the event would not oversimplify the issues addressed, and be clear about the causality of wellbeing issues at three particular levels of analysis: Individual; Institutional; Societal.
- That (as per other aspects of Courage) current doctoral students, particularly those who had experienced wellbeing difficulties, would be involved in all aspects of event design, delivery and participation.

In accordance with the above, a festival format was decided upon. This had the following components:

- Introductory briefing and keynotes
- A varied program of practical workshops on aspects of doctoral wellbeing
- Public consultation
- Graphic facilitation and video recording for information capture
- Catered breaks as networking opportunities for attendees

C) Impacts and outcomes

Impact was captured at both the level of individual events within the festival, and the festival as a whole. Regarding the former, individual events included PGR-led workshops on Self-Compassion, Empowerment, Conferences and Publishing and Giving Voice to PGRs through sharing monologues of PGR experiences. Staff-led sessions included, Yoga for the Mind, Careers Walk and Talk, Mindful Walk and Talk, Psychological Responses to Perceived Failure, Bullet Journaling and workshops to explore the Barriers to Universities Supporting PGR Mental Health and Healthier University Policies. Each event was practical, with active engagement from participants.

The final workshop of the day was used to bring all the attendees together to reflect on the festival and steps moving forwards. During this workshop, attendees were invited to reflect on three key areas:

1. Prevention at an individual level
2. Prevention at a systems and institutional level
3. What might help (1) and (2) happen

Key outputs reflecting the festival were the visuals created by the graphic facilitator and the public statement that was generated from the final workshop and collated by the Courage Project team (see Appendix 1 and separate document with the public statement). On the day of the festival all participants were asked to contribute to a consultation, with ideas of what they would like to see change across the themes of systemic/institutional prevention, individual resilience and dedicated support. The project team were then able to integrate this in to a statement of concrete areas of suggested priority for UK universities, accompanied by clear examples.

In turn, this statement helped to form a point of reference for the roundtable event detailed in a separate case, in which policymakers and project staff could discuss implications and implementation resulting from its content in a dedicated workshop.

What worked well / not - overcoming challenges?

There were 75 PGRs, staff and academics who attended the event, many attending from other institutions. The event was well-received. For many attendees, the festival improved awareness of some of the issues and challenges that PGRs from across disciplines and universities are experiencing. For some PGRs attending the event was useful in having an “awareness that other people are experiencing similar issues”.

Many attendees took away practical skills that they described as something they would ‘do-differently’ as a result of attending the festival. This included practising self-compassion, bullet journaling, listening to PGRs, practice active listening, embedding fulfilling activities beyond their research into their lives and considering the use of language in feedback and discussions around wellbeing and mental health.

Overall, the festival was described as motivating an “open minded approach that does not readily accept more of the same.”

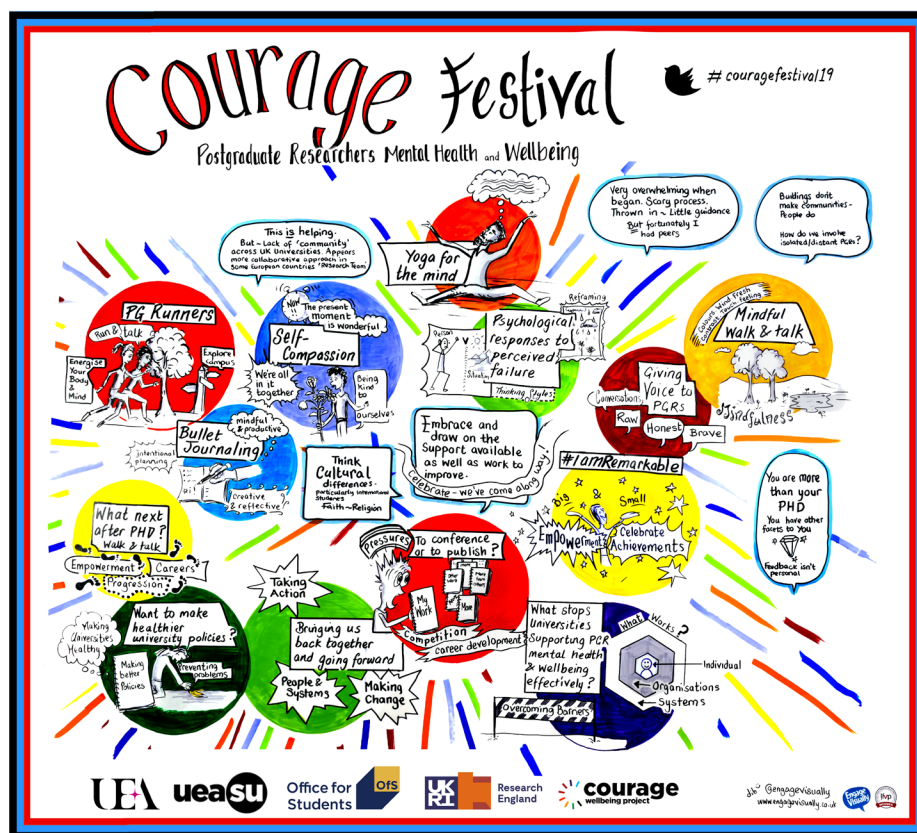
Recommendations for future use, and other unis: What do differently / for next time?

The Courage Festival was a key event in bringing together the multiple strands of the Courage Project work and the multifaceted and whole university approach that has been used. As Courage is part of the wider group of Universities in the Catalyst funding network, this event created an opportunity for shared learning and collaboration. Being part of a sector-wide conversation and action around PGR mental health has been an important part of the Catalyst network and future events

like the Courage Festival could provide a means for this conversation to continue and develop on a national level. Similarly the festival model arrived at as a vehicle for the event is considered a success and potentially transferrable to other institutions looking to implement further dissemination and engagement events.

The practical nature of all the sessions created a space for open, honest and courageous conversations to take place. This was carefully facilitated by individuals with experience in mental health and with the support of Student Support Services and trained Mental Health First Aiders throughout the day.

APPENDIX 1: Summary graphic from facilitator





APPENDIX 2

(Video link) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LBkOg7hfqU>

APPENDIX 3

Maria's festival plan doc – festival program

<https://www.uea.su/pageassets/postgraduate/courage/couragefestival/couragefestprog/Courage-Festival-Program-Update.pdf>