



CAPTURING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY



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01. BACKGROUND

Previous evidence demonstrates that doctoral students are at a significantly higher risk of developing poor mental health, with some students expected to develop a mental health problem, as part of their doctoral journey [1].



Factors that contribute to this heightened risk include [2]:

- Work overload
- Financial worries
- Procrastination
- Fear of failure
- Lack of motivation
- Supervisory relationship
- Stigma and discrimination in self-disclosure.



Despite acknowledgement and support from some Higher Education Institutes evidence continues to indicate there is a mental health crisis in graduate education [3].



02. AIM

To gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and enablers associated with doctoral student mental health and support future doctoral students and supervisors to spot the signs and symptoms of poor mental health.



03. METHODOLOGY

Stage 1:

- Scoping review
- Twitter study
- Reddit study



Stage 2:

Longitudinal focus groups with doctoral students at LJMU over a 12 month period.

Data Analysis:

Scoping review and FGs using reflexive thematic analysis [4].
Online studies using content analysis.

04. RESULTS

'Not just an accessory'

- Power imbalance, unclear supervisory roles, encouraging unhealthy competition, high expectations, bullying, harassment, no accountability.



'Institutional Structure and Role Marginalisation'

- PhD by design encourages loneliness and isolation, and consumption, production and distribution at the heart of the crisis.
- Focus on quantity output not quality.
- Prior academic success- a predictor or precursor.

'Hold Up: Friends!'

- Increase well-being and reduce psychological distress and reduces suicide risk.
- PhDs should come with a warning.
- International students- fragmented social networks.

'Myths, Misunderstandings and Mud'

- Stigmatisation vs negative self-evaluation.
- Workaholism and maladaptive perfectionism increased the likelihood of depression.



'SOGIE'

- Stark differences in males and females.
- Non-binary, bisexual and homosexual orientation, linked to poor sleep, and elevated risk of suicide.



05. REFERENCES

1. Hazell, et al. (2021) Nationwide assessment of the mental health of UK Doctoral Researchers. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications.
2. Mackie, S., and Bates, G.B. (2019) Contribution of the doctoral education environment to PhD candidates' mental health problems: a scoping review, Higher Education Research & Development.
3. Friedrich, J., et al. (2023) "How is your thesis going?" -Ph.D. students' perspectives on mental health and stress in academia. PLoS ONE 18(7): e0288103.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage.