

Supporting Doctoral Researchers' social isolation through a student-led community

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Abstract

Doctoral researchers face many challenges during their PhD. Financial constraints, workload and the pressure to complete within the time lead to stress, anxiety, social isolation and other mental health problems. Social isolation has always been an issue amongst PhD students; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many problems due largely to working from home. This case study explores how a student-led group, the PhD Society, supports community-building, fosters (digital) wellbeing and connectivity through collaborative activities, and encourages further professional development beyond the university. Overall, this article shares insights on what can be done to facilitate social connectivity. Ultimately, it argues that doctoral researchers should not be viewed merely as students but as colleagues in Higher Education.

Introduction

Pursuing a doctorate brings multiple unexpected challenges. Some embrace this independence, while others struggle with ad-hoc support and collaborative conversations with peers and colleagues and limited non-academic social activities. For others, the responsibility and challenges faced during the doctorate may be why they do not complete their studies (Golde, 2001; Gardner, 2010; Young *et al.*, 2019). A survey of PhD students (Woolston, 2019) emphasised the uncertainties many faces, such as struggling with depression and anxiety, as well as personal stories of resilience against those challenges. Furthermore, it also emphasised that completing a PhD is not just about the graduation rates but rather the perilous journey along the way. Statistics showed that 40% of respondents studied away from their home country, 76% of respondents worked more than 41 hours per week, nearly 40% of respondents felt unsatisfied with their work-life balance, and 45% of respondents felt their satisfaction levels fell as they progressed through their PhD. Vincent (2015) edified this area and identified how the shift in Higher Education (HE) from a 'social democrat to a more neoliberal' approach has also impacted life in academia. For example, the resulting reduction in public funding coupled with increasing workloads has heightened stress and mental health problems for many doctoral students, particularly given the lack of institutional support for early career professionals and widespread job insecurity (Gill, 2010). Thus, doing a doctorate is far from a linear process, but the challenges that doctoral students need to consider and manage.

Research has indicated that graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Flaherty, 2018). Counteracting the social isolation experienced by PhD students and highlighting the importance of professional development aside from conducting their research is just as important as completing a PhD. Previous literature highlighted the student's responsibility to

be intrinsically motivated and resourceful to manage the PhD process and ensure completion (Gardner, 2010; Young *et al.*, 2019). It has also argued that professional development activities enable students to maintain their ethical standards, becoming more autonomous researchers through deeper engagement with their community (Golde and Walker, 2006; Russell, 2015; Russell *et al.*, 2016). Though ultimately beneficial, the energy required to maintain the momentum of enthusiasm, coping with the vast opportunities available whilst completing a PhD could undoubtedly be detrimental to students' mental health. For example, Sverdlik *et al.* (2018) reviewed the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and wellbeing amongst 163 articles that examined postgraduate experience in doctoral education. Here, external factors (e.g., supervision, financial support, resources) and internal factors such as psychological/ mental processes were equally noted as important facets influencing doctoral students; these discrete contributing factors are largely intertwined. Similarly, Satinsky *et al.* (2021) presented how these internal and external factors may negatively affect students' mental health and subsequently their physical health, work performance and other interpersonal relationships, contributing to a gradual decline in wellbeing during their PhD. Therefore, a clear link has been established between the prevalence of mental health problems and the challenges students face during their doctoral studies.

There is an association between research students and those suffering from depression and social isolation, and this can be due to the fact that students' research areas are often disparate. (Levecque *et al.*, 2017; Gin *et al.*, 2021; Satinsky *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 undoubtedly caused the doctoral community to fragment further. It weakened individuals' connections and identifications on multiple levels, leading to increased isolation and feelings of loneliness, as well as adding further challenges for students to navigate, such as financial issues and delays in completing their work (Johnson *et al.*, 2020). The precarity of doing a doctorate in normal times, let alone during the pandemic, brings much vulnerability. The pandemic brought pressure to many students who were forced to continue their research under even more isolated conditions, and this impacted the way they navigated their work-life balance, often working in a makeshift work-from-home environment. This could suggest a *be waiting to happen*, in terms of psychological and physiological impacts, if PhD students are expected to play a pivotal role in knowledge advancement, innovation, and economic growth.

The PhD Society

This case study explores the PhD Society, a student-led society at the University of Westminster, and how it has so far successfully engaged doctoral researchers to 1) build a community, 2) foster digital wellbeing, and 3) overcome the perceived barriers faced whilst actively maintaining the enthusiasm and motivation they once had when applying to graduate school. This case study highlights the importance of using extracurricular activities within the institution for the social community and how it also facilitates professional development outside the students' research

Created in 2017/2018, the PhD Society addresses the doctoral community's social and wellbeing needs. Since its launch, the Society has organised and hosted various regular activities designed to enhance students' university experiences and enable greater

connection with the wider university community and other like-minded colleagues experiencing similar challenges, such as social isolation. The PhD Society operates under the Student Union's (SU) constitution with its committee members (i.e., President, Vice-President, and Treasurer), all elected annually and with responsibilities set out in the constitution. The Committee consists of fully enrolled doctoral research students at the university. In addition, the Society is also supported by the University's Graduate School. This allows transparent communication between students, the SU, and the Graduate School, enabling better collaborations through PhD activities and a channel to voice the community's concerns.

The PhD Society and tackling social isolation

As noted in the literature, the many challenges and barriers faced by doctoral students could lead to burnout, stress, and anxiety, with consequences for mental health and an increase in social isolation. (Levecque *et al.*, 2017; Gin *et al.*, 2021; Satinsky *et al.*, 2021) To tackle social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the PhD Society supported students' wellbeing through various activities. Acknowledging that the pandemic was a barrier to any in-person social interactions due to restrictions, maintaining connectivity and ensuring that students had the space to share their feelings and challenges became a prominent aim. Regular short online coffee meet-ups were set up by the Society during the first lockdown in the UK in 2020 to ensure the continuity of connectivity and for everyone to have informal conversations replicating informal interactions in the office pre-pandemic. Though interactions may not be as spontaneous as pre-pandemic, these sessions meant that those not necessarily in the same PhD office or school could interact and meant new networks were developed across the institution.

For many, the consequences of COVID-19 impacted the progress of their academic research. The closure of laboratories, the impossibility of conducting fieldwork, the rearrangement of study designs and doctorate priorities, and reduced productivity were all major factors. Moreover, many faced difficulties with prolonged research tasks and were unsure when the restrictions would end. These implications undoubtedly impacted students' morale and motivation, with no sense of seeing the end of their research journey. For example, students often be waited for an extended period before receiving a response to their emails. Thus, seeking advice from peers was quicker and provided a more valuable experience and interaction within the community. Therefore, having a communication channel that everyone could access proved to be a practical step towards inclusivity. All PhD students within the institution were invited to join the WhatsApp group at the start of their first year. The group allows everyone to share their challenges and resources and seek advice from fellow students, regardless of their stage in their work. The advantage of having doctoral students at different stages meant that everyone shared experiences and insights on how best to survive the PhD journey. Furthermore, it allowed students to connect across disciplines and communicate with people they may not have had the chance to meet in-person due to working from home. Without a doubt, this communication channel offers everyone the chance to practice empathy towards one another, reemphasising that the role of being a PhD student is not purely completing research but using the support mechanisms available in the community to progress through the barriers. As a result, the group does its best to celebrate the success of those who completed their PhDs, offer motivation for others, and remind its members that everyone will flourish in the end despite all challenges. Since

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the pandemic had many negative consequences for PhD students, the Whatsapp group highlighted that empathy and compassion could be practised through informal communication channels, supporting social interaction and motivation in challenging times.

Across the world, the pandemic has changed the way we work, shifting from office-based to home-working life. Similarly, all activities were also transferred to online sessions, meaning more time was spent in front of computer screens. Acknowledging that everyone was working in silos on their research from home also indicates the challenge people faced in terms of social interactions outside of their research topics. To help tackle the social isolation and lack of connectivity and acknowledge that colleagues were all spread across the country, and indeed the world, the impacts on mental health and wellbeing for all PhD students during the pandemic were the key drivers for this activity.

In 2020, the PhD Society Committee organised a virtual student collaborative led PhD symposium which aimed to engage all doctoral researchers in building a sense of community. The conference aimed not to focus on the students' research but instead on how to overcome the barriers everyone faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, no matter where they were based geographically. Over the two days, 217 registered delegates from 139 institutions worldwide joined and networked together. The symposium explored soft skills related topics and experts gave talks on how people can develop their professional skills through their doctorate journey. Topics included procrastination, engaging employers, confidence coaching, additional grant funding, media training, entrepreneurship, and a career panel. The symposium was a success not simply because it ran smoothly but because it acted as an instigator for further dialogue and forged connections between doctoral students outside of their disciplines. It offered a space for students to share their experiences and be in the same virtual room to have honest conversations without feeling anxious about being judged.

In addition to students' wellbeing, the PhD Society aims to represent the voice of the doctoral community within the institution. An example of this is the liaison between students, the Graduate School and the wider university. The Society acts as a support mechanism, ensuring institutional activities include doctoral students and undergraduates and postgraduate taught students. Furthermore, the Society gives voice to the concerns raised by the PhD community; for example, it aims to hold the institution accountable, ensuring students are transitioning as smoothly as possible from year to year. A prominent ongoing challenge faced by all research students is their ambiguous status within the institution – e.g., the constant flipping of 'unofficial' status between being a member of staff and a student can be considered a barrier. For example, the first unexpected lockdown in March 2020 meant that many research students suddenly lost access their offices, laboratories, and other onsite resources, being left unable to continue their research project (if relying solely on onsite resources). Moreover, as students, they were ineligible for the furlough payment scheme due to their status of being 'non-staff members'. Though institutions could only provide students with PhD deferrals and extensions due to the pandemic disruption, for some, this meant they could not use the facilities when they had financially contributed to their degree for a set period. Doctoral students can be staff one day, students the next, but this never seems to work in their favour. Considering the challenges doctoral students face, the PhD Society plays a centralised role within the community to support students and voice their concerns through the relevant hierarchies within the institution, ensuring that problems

are heard, and solutions can be found (e.g., supporting students during the pandemic lockdowns). Therefore, the support for postgraduate research students is just as vital as supporting undergraduates and staff members.

The PhD Society and supporting professional development

The PhD Society primarily offers students wellbeing support; however, being in a vibrant community where everyone is doing their research is also an exciting platform to seek professional development opportunities. Previous literature noted that professional development opportunities influence career trajectories (Nerad, 2015; Sharmini and Spronken-Smoth, 2020). However, as the availability of those opportunities is scarce and highly competitive, supporting students to participate in other scholarly activities is an important topic in the PhD community. One of the workstreams within the Society is to facilitate the organisation of scholarly activities on topics not yet available from the Graduate School. An example of this was organising a series of workshops specifically on 'Writing and Publication Strategy'. The workshop was identified as an area where students felt they were not supported. Following informal consultations amongst the community (i.e., via emails and through the WhatsApp group), the opportunity enabled students to develop a strategic publication approach relevant to their discipline. Here, the role of the Society was to facilitate the sessions. This involved consulting with the wider PhD community on their professional development needs, collaborating in writing a funding bid and submitting it to the Graduate School, sourcing a credible expert to deliver and facilitate the series of workshops, and finally writing a report back to the Graduate School. The process emphasised the importance of staying up to date on doctoral students' needs and how the community can support its members to become motivated and competent graduates.

Conclusion

Doctoral researchers face many challenges during their doctorate, leading to increased stress and mental health problems (Gardner, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2018; Flaherty, 2018; Young *et al.*, 2019). Doing a doctorate during normal times is an isolating experience but doing a PhD during the pandemic added other constraints, such as lack of financial support and decreased access to facilities and resources. This article draws on the importance of supporting PhD students and reducing their social isolation, particularly in these unprecedented times. Examples of initiatives such as communication forums and extracurricular activities identified areas where motivation and morale can be increased, and connections could be made with students from other disciplines to share experiences and practice. Here, the PhD Society acted as a facilitator, bringing students who may not have previously connected - together in a shared space and offering wellbeing support through regular virtual activities.

In addition, the PhD Society represents the doctoral community's voice within the institution. From escalating concerns that act as barriers to supporting professional development to organising scholarly activities, the PhD Society aims to facilitate a sense of belonging for everyone to enjoy their doctoral journey and provide the opportunity for individuals to learn new skills. Doctoral researchers are the future of many professions, and fostering a student community is important, not just for undergraduates or taught postgraduate students. This article emphasises the importance of doctoral researchers' university experience and how

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their social interactions within the community and wellbeing are just as important. The PhD journey is not solely getting the doctorate at the end, but rather the experience of connecting with other colleagues, the opportunity for confidence building, improving communication skills, and addressing the wider societal issues around research topics and beyond the university community. As such, doctoral researchers should not merely be viewed as students but as colleagues, working in collaboration with the same goals.

The question here is, are we doing enough to support and listen to our doctoral researchers?

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