Online PhD Research Support Groups

Background

Undertaking a PhD is exciting and stimulating. However, there are many well-documented challenges facing doctoral students including isolation, the need for connection, lack of clarity and feedback, high workload, stress and maintaining motivation (Hazell et al, 2020; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Vitae, 2018). In addition, through our work with PhD students we hear about their current struggles due to COVID-19 restrictions and uncertainty.

We believe peer support groups provide an opportunity to address these challenges, promote productivity and improve wellbeing. In a systematic review of the research on understanding the mental health of doctoral students, social support was identified as a protective factor to help reduce stress and good mental health (Hazell, et al 2020). Our experience has found that PhD students find it very beneficial to share experiences, talk about their research and get support from each other (O'Connor & Hayes, 2020).

Some universities, such as the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Queen Mary's, recommend PhD Support Groups. The University of Sussex's Doctoral School has gone further and actively promotes the formation of Online PhD peer support groups. One of their PhD students formed a support group at the start of her degree and subsequently researched students' experience of them:

> "Group members describe their experience over the last three years of participating in the video call support group as very positive. They say that it has kept them connected, made them feel supported during the highs and lows of PhD life and, most importantly, has improved their mental wellbeing" (Durrant, 2020, p. 4).

Given the current circumstances, online, video support groups for doctoral researchers makes sense. Therefore, Student Learning Development is offering to facilitate the matching up of interested doctoral students.

Potential Benefits:

- Discuss challenges and issues of doing a PhD with other people experiencing similar. Family and friends are a great support but sometimes it's good to talk with someone who is in the same boat. Plus, not everyone has willing family and friends!
- Space to discuss each other's research. Sometimes it's nice to be to talk about it with someone other than your supervisor. Talking can help clarify your ideas and thinking.
- Someone to talk to about the ups and downs
- Update on research progress, share ideas, discuss research methods, resources, writing strategies, etc.
- Stay connected. Especially for students who are studying part-time, distance, etc.
- Make friends.

Setting up a support group

It is recommended that students in a group share similar circumstances (e.g. full-time/part-time), school or discipline and stage of research.

Students should first see if there are other students in their school. If not, Student Learning Development will try to match up students to a group. Students can complete an online application form here.

Students are asked to read and follow the **Guidelines for an Online Doctorate Research Support Group** (see below).

Evaluation

Group members are advised to monitor and evaluate how the group is working on a regular basis. In addition, SLD will send a short questionnaire after a few months regarding the online support group to see how it is working (or not).

References

Durrant, C. (2020). *Video Call Support Groups for Doctoral Researchers: An Implementation Guide*. University of Sussex. http://www.sussex.ac.uk/internal/doctoralschool/wellbeing/supportgroups.

Hazell, C.M., Chapman, L., Valeix, S.F., Roberts, P., Niven, J.E. & Berry, C. (2020). Understanding the mental health of doctoral researchers: a mixed methods systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. *Systematic Reviews, 9 (197)*, 2-30. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01443-1.

GuildHE. (2018). *Wellbeing in higher education: A GuildHE research report*. https://guildhe.ac.uk/?s=wellbeing+in+higher+education.

Metcalfe, J., Wilson, S. & Levecque, K. (2018). *Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers*. Vitae, The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited. https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health/HEFCE-Report_Exploring-PGR-Mental-health-support/view.

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Schmidt, M. & Hansson, E. (2018). Doctoral students' well-being: a literature review. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 13 (1)*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1508171.

Guidelines for an online Doctorate Research Support Group

Guide to setting up

Participation

Ideally, try to find students in your school or department at a similar stage in the research process as yourself. Groups of 3-4 seem to work best. Try contacting the Director of Teaching & Learning (Postgraduate) for your school to see if he/she knows of other doctoral students who might be interested. Or use the matching service provided by Student Learning Development - application form

Once you are matched with 2-3 others, one person needs to take responsibility to email everyone and arrange a date for the group to meet initially. Use the following suggestions.

Practicalities

You will need an internet connection, speakers/headphone, microphone, webcam.

The group needs to decide which Video Call software to use: Skype, Zoom, MSTeams, WhatApp, Google Hangouts.

For Skype: Each group member should download the Skype app and create an account. Full instructions for getting up and running are available in this online tutorial.

For Zoom: The free version only lasts 40 minutes but you can re-connect. Instructions for getting started are available in this online tutorial.

It is recommended that groups meet a minimum of once a month. Of course, the group can meet more often if all members agree! It's advised to schedule an hour for the meeting; again, members may decide a longer period is needed. Also, the group could have a What's App group for less formal chat between meetings, if all are agreeable and don't feel that it would be too much.

First meeting

Discuss and set boundaries for the group. For example,

- the importance of confidentiality
- agree to listen actively and not interrupt
- the importance of respecting each other's views
- who will moderate or 'chair' each group meeting. This can rotate or be set for a fixed period of time
- How to resolve possible conflicts or problems.

The group will also need to agree a structure which can be flexible. However, here are some examples from the University of Sussex:

● Each member has the opportunity to share with the group what they have been doing on their PhD in the preceding month. This is an interactive process, with other members being able to comment and ask questions. Talking about one's PhD in an informal, trusted environment can be very useful for sorting out issues and increasing confidence.

• There is also an opportunity for members to talk about their supervision, anything that they are finding particularly challenging, and to share their worries and concerns.

• At the end of each meeting a date should be agreed for the following month (Durrant, 2020, p.6).

If more structure is desired, group members can agree at the start of the meeting what they want to cover or even a week before.

Be supportive and not judgemental – there's plenty of that around!

Evaluation

Group members are advised to monitor and evaluate how the group is working on a regular basis. In addition, SLD will send a short questionnaire after a few months regarding the online support group.

Contact

If you have any questions or issues, please contact student.learning@tcd.ie.