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# Doctoral Times.

Issue 20 | Summer 2020

Doctoral Student Journey  
**Experiences &  
Challenges**

Part 2

The Newsletter for  
Doctoral Researchers

## **Editorial team**

**Kim Steele & Fozia Yasmin**

**A big THANK YOU to everyone who contributed  
to this edition**

# Welcome

## Welcome to the latest edition of the Doctoral Times

The doctoral experience can differ from student to student and we all face our own personal challenges along the way. This issue continues to look at the doctoral experience, focusing on the challenges doctoral students face and overcome along their PhD journey. Providing you with a range of top tips and advice from current students and support services to help you succeed.

Whether you're studying part time, full time, or juggling family life or work commitments alongside your PhD, we hope this issue will provide some useful information to help make your PhD experience a positive one.

When we originally asked our existing PhD cohort to provide feedback on their own experiences as postgraduate researchers, we knew this would be a popular topic but, we never envisaged how much support would be volunteered. Although, we wouldn't expect anything less from our student community! We cannot say *'thank you'* enough to all of the students who have taken the time to write and contribute to this edition, we couldn't have done this without you. Unfortunately we couldn't include all of the amazing articles here, so we have created this [google folder](#) to showcase and share the valuable experience.

If you are interested in writing an article for the next edition of the Doctoral Times, then we would love to hear from you: [doctoraltimes@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:doctoraltimes@sheffield.ac.uk).

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# The Challenges of Studying a PhD Overseas



*Molly Newcomb, PhD student, Information School, shares her own personal experience as an international student from the USA.*

Moving to a new country was one of the easiest decisions I have ever made. The chance to study for three years at one of the top [information schools](#) in the world was an opportunity I could not pass up! As excited as I was to live and study in another country, I certainly was not prepared for some of the challenges I faced during the first couple of months of living and studying in the UK. Not only were these academic challenges but also social and personal challenges, many of which I continue to struggle with.

One of the biggest challenges I faced at the beginning of my PhD programme was, in fact, the very thing I thought I was most comfortable with: academics. I've always loved being a student, and continuing onto a PhD course was naturally the next step in my education journey, but what I didn't expect was, for the first time in about 20 years, I would be responsible for setting my timetable, my deadlines, my meetings, and my research plan. Let me tell you; it's not easy to break a habit that has been ingrained in you since the age of seven. But that is exactly what I had to do once I arrived in Sheffield.

Here are a couple of things I've discovered since coming to Sheffield:

**1** It's important to spend time in your academic department and get to know the person you sit next to. You may not meet your next best friend but you'll meet other researchers who will be your source of support for the next three years.

**2** [ThinkAhead](#) have a range of great programmes that bring researchers together from many different departments. These events have nothing to do with academic research but have everything to do with maintaining a healthy school-life balance.

**3** Talk to your supervisor or personal tutor if you're struggling with the self-paced nature of your PhD. If you're used to having shorter deadlines, tell them. If you're more comfortable in a class, ask if you can sit in during a taught class. Though it seems like your PhD is solely dependent on you, it is actually a chance for you to explore ways to be the best researcher possible. They want you to succeed!

Another challenge I faced when I made the trip to the UK was managing my mental health. I suffer from several mental health conditions, all of which have taken me years to fully understand. In the USA I had a consistent routine, a consistent job, and a consistent network of family who kept me grounded. Once arriving in Sheffield, I had to restart my mental health journey, but this time adapting to a new set of circumstances. I didn't have a consistent job, I didn't have a consistent routine, and more importantly, I didn't have my family nearby.

**“Once arriving in Sheffield, I had to restart my mental health journey, but this time adapting to a new set of circumstances”**

One of the symptoms of my mental health condition is social anxiety, particularly when I don't know anyone. I'll go through periods where I won't leave my room unless it's to go into school because I don't want to run into someone that I may have to talk to. It seems foolish, I know, but it's a real struggle, and one I often find myself grappling with. I've thankfully found ways to encourage socialisation without causing too much anxiety. Here are some of my top tips:

**Get out of your room** - I used to think that studying in my room was the best way to be productive, but I find that though I'm more comfortable in my own environment, my productivity suffers. Western Bank Library is my favourite place on campus to study! You can be around other people without having the pressure to speak to them.

**Get outside** - Go for a run, go for a walk, go dog watching, anything to get some fresh air. Take some deep breaths and clear your head. I absolutely love running through Endcliffe Park and down to Shepard's Wheel.

**Find a coffee shop and become a regular** - You'll get to know people without the pressure to hold a conversation longer than you feel comfortable with.

Just remember that what you are going through is valid and that there are ways to help overcome, or at least manage, these struggles. One of the most comforting things I've recognised through the time I've been in Sheffield is that although I'm from another country, there are people here who are going through the same struggles as I am. But more importantly, there are people here to support me.



# An International Journey



*Srinivas Mallampalli Satsai, PhD Student,  
Department of Electronic and Electrical  
Engineering*

As we see a rise in international student numbers across Europe and the USA, more students are leaving the familiarity of their home country and moving to foreign places where the sense of being alone becomes amplified. Even with student unions buzzing with activities, most international students initially tend to feel they do not belong. With the demanding nature of the PhD programme, most students start off the programme focusing entirely on work, and in the process sacrificing social life.

Adapting to the local culture of socialising, language barriers, and sometimes even the unfamiliar weather can all feel like insurmountable barriers to a newly arrived international student. At times it feels easier to sink deeper into your work and avoid having to face these challenges. Not only does this quickly become unsustainable but also robs you of the opportunity to experience life in a new country and the social connections that could have been formed in the process. All of these contribute to a feeling of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and a feeling of isolation.

Personally, being from India where mental health is still not spoken about openly as it should be, taking the first step to attend a triage at the [University Counselling Service \(UCS\)](#) was essential. It is always difficult to ask for help especially for something as personal as mental health, however serious or otherwise it may be. Here you are encouraged to openly express your state of mind to get the best help you can get, but it did take me an inordinately long amount of time to go to the UCS for help.

The first and hardest step I have found is to accept that there is an issue to be addressed, (anxiety, feeling low, unable to keep up academically, loneliness, or in extreme cases, suicidal) and the fact that talking to someone might help. Meditation and guided cognitive behavioural therapy are especially helpful as well. The UCS is a wonderful resource offered to all students to tackle some, if not all, of these problems. While you might not always be guaranteed a counsellor to talk to immediately and the waiting might put you off, I cannot emphasize enough the benefit there is to be gained in taking the help of a professional.

Part of the cultural learning process for me has been realising that talking about mental health is actually encouraged here. Letting unhelpful thoughts stew without getting help is not useful and reminding yourself that you will not be judged for it can go miles in making you feel and perform better in daily life. Learning to be kind and compassionate to ourselves and lowering the volume, or at least soothing, the critical tone of that inner voice goes a long way in helping to cope with the stressors we come across. Being aware of whether your response to challenging situations is just a reaction from the fight/flight response part of your brain is helpful in maintaining perspective.

# Student Support

## Finding support

The University takes your health and wellbeing seriously, and there's a wide range of support that you can access to help manage stress and anxiety during challenging times.

Student Support Services offer support through:

- [Counselling services](#)
- [SAMHS](#)
- [Student Wellbeing Service](#)
- [Big White Wall](#)
- [International Student Support](#)
- [SSID](#)

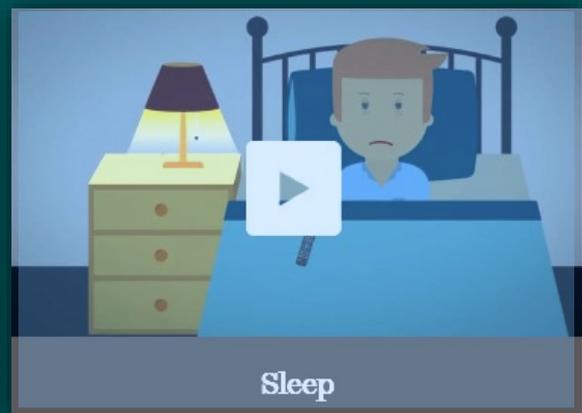


Sheffield IAPT is run by the local NHS and offers help for improving your mental wellbeing. Follow the link below to view their webpage and explore the support on offer <http://iaptsheffield.shsc.nhs.uk/stress-control/>

## Recommended self help resources

The [counselling self help webpage](#) includes valuable pages for [managing anxiety](#) and [relaxation](#) for anyone who is feeling anxious during their PhD.

These self help leaflets are also a valuable resource <https://web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>



# Getting together during lockdown: introducing Global Hangouts

*Dr Tim Cooper, International Student Support Officer and a founding member of the Global Campus team, tells us how Global Hangouts have become a vital source of support for doctoral students.*

In light of the current pandemic my colleagues and I in the International Student Support team had to suspend our usual Global Campus activities at the start of lockdown. These are aimed at both providing support for international students and promoting integration with UK students. In 'normal times' we run activities every day of the week. These are:

- ◆ [Global Conversation](#)
- ◆ [Culture Compass](#)
- ◆ [Local History Walks](#)
- ◆ [Global Café](#)
- ◆ [GC Social](#)

As the pandemic took hold we were very aware that quite a lot of our international students were isolated in their accommodation here in Sheffield and we wanted to find a way of somehow replicating the social element of these activities during lockdown. As I know from personal experience, undertaking a PhD is an isolated enough experience even during 'normal' times. But at a time when labs are closed and students are unable to get together with fellow researchers to exchange ideas or just chat and take time out, things are even more challenging.

So we set up Global Hangouts to provide a virtual space where students from all backgrounds, levels of study, and nationalities can come together and chat, share ideas for coping with lockdown, and ask questions of staff. Sessions are hosted by members of the International Student Support team, so participants have an opportunity to put questions and concerns to staff. These can either be answered directly, an arrangement can be made for a follow-up one-to-one meeting, or the query can be passed on to other staff or management as appropriate.

While the main aim of the Hangouts is to provide a virtual version of Global Café we also hope to incorporate aspects of our other regular Global Campus activities. Some participants have reported a decline in confidence in speaking English during lockdown and that taking part in 'Hangouts' has helped them to get this back. We recently held our first Hangouts Sheffield Quiz, and in part this served as a replacement for our regular local history walks. We are now looking into whether we can present an interactive local history activity online that would replicate some of the main attractions of that popular activity. Finally, in our chats we have often found ourselves coming round to discussions of what people are missing from their own cultures, and cultural differences they have noticed during their time in the UK. Again, in the weeks ahead we hope to build cultural discussion more regularly into the sessions as a way of dealing with some of the issues normally covered by [Culture Compass](#).

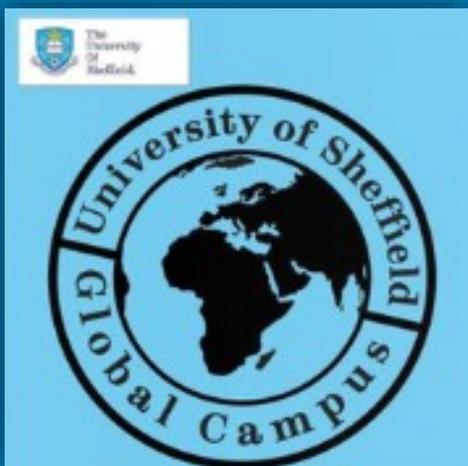


Which brings me to my final point. Those of us who work in International Student Support know that among the challenges faced by students studying in another country, in addition to language and educational differences, is adapting to a different culture. Our own research has shown that cultural difference is at least as big a challenge to international students as keeping up with language ability. So-called 'culture shock' can cause particular difficulties for PhD students due to the fact that you spend so much of your time buried in analysis of data or lab experiments that it can be hard to put aside time to get to know the ways of your new home community. Add to that the recent weeks of enforced social isolation and you have a big challenge indeed!

From my own experience of helping students deal with the effects of culture shock, I think the two main things that help are - 1) knowing that it exists, 2) knowing that you are not alone in experiencing it. To take an example, about three years ago I was walking across campus and I bumped into one of our regular Local History Walk participants, an outgoing, charming research student in Linguistics. On this occasion he just didn't seem his normal self and when I asked him how he was doing he said he'd felt down for the past month or so and was thinking of taking a trip back to his native Poland to see his family.

I said "sure, why not?" but as this was late November - the height of the 'culture shock season' - I asked him to describe how he was feeling. He told me that the joy had gone out of his life and everything that had seemed exciting when he started his PhD earlier in the year now seemed to have gone stale. What I will never forget about this case was when I replied that I thought he was going through culture shock, his mood already started to lift. "Ah, right" he said "Is that a thing? I thought it was just me and there must be something wrong with me!"

He did go back to Poland - for Christmas - but when he came back he was much more his normal self. Though over the coming years I did notice a difference - he wasn't quite the bubbly person he'd been at the start of his research programme. But that's to be expected. It's normal. Getting used to life in a different culture is about gradually realising that you're not going to feel like you're on vacation every day. Those feelings (they're known as the 'honeymoon period') will subside as we get used to living 'normally' in a different culture. It's just that if we're not expecting it, it can come as a crash - a shock to the system.



Helping international students deal with getting used to life in another culture is one of the main reasons we set up Global Café about seven years ago. Over the years, we could see that giving people a place to come together and chat with others - to share experiences - was a very powerful tool in dealing with culture shock. And over those same years we've noticed that a significant proportion of participants, maybe about a quarter, are doing PhD.



So remember, you're not alone, these feelings are normal and you will get through it. But there will be times when you might need some support. During these times of social restrictions there will be occasions when you need help, and until we can get Global Café up and running, why not join the many students from around the world who are meeting up at [Global Hangouts](#)? You might be amazed to find that it's one of the easiest and best things you did for your well-being. So many of the regular participants have said it's just like Global Café - only these days you need to bring along your own drinks!

Global Hangouts are currently taking place **Monday, Wednesday and Friday** at **12.00**. Anyone wishing to join can sign up by following the link below:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScIrrWp15NO-kJ4AALf3DuKdLXdPk710X2A0Zdak5yG1gS1JA/viewform>

Afterwards you will be sent an invitation to the hangout. Alternatively you can email [globalcampus@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:globalcampus@sheffield.ac.uk) who can provide you with the link and any further details you require.

If you have a general query you can contact the International Student Support team at : [international.students@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:international.students@sheffield.ac.uk)

# The Truths about Your Well-being and Your PhD



*Celia Tara-Ann Wallace, PhD student, Department of Economics.*

Before I started my PhD I heard many horror stories about students who didn't know how to cope with the

pressures that arose while doing a PhD, and would have a mental breakdown, or more tragically there would be a risk of suicide. Entering my PhD I never thought there would have been anything during this period that would affect my well-being, but the thing about well-being that we need to understand is that, we won't necessarily only be affected by the research we are conducting but by every stimuli around us.

I was never the type of person to work seven days a week on my research as I believe that there needs to be a day of rest in which the brain can rejuvenate. My rest day is on Saturdays and on a good week I might also take Sunday off.

This was proving quite effective for me for the first year. It wasn't until my second year that I started having migraines on my rest days that could not be treated with medication because they were caused by stress. I decided to take advantage of the university services that are offered to help with coping with stressors while studying at the university. I started having counselling by Student Access to Mental Health Support (SAMHS). I am from a culture in which we try to deal with our problems on our own so I was quite reserved going into the first sessions. But I can tell you that there is no better feeling than sorting through your thoughts in a non-judgmental environment and in the end feeling the progress made throughout the weeks. At the time I was dealing with my mom fighting cancer back in my home country, and struggling with the thought of staying to complete my PhD. While my supervisors were quite understanding, I still had difficulties coping with new challenges.

One other important stressor for me at the time came from my own thoughts and self-judgment. Several times I would set unrealistic deadlines for myself with my research and when I can't meet that deadline it would send me into a spiral as well. The result? A day or two when I can't get out of bed because I feel so far behind that I don't know how to get back into my schedule.

Below are my top tips for coping with the stressors that affect you during your PhD Journey:

**Work and time management** - Set realistic goals for yourself. Don't be too hard on yourself. If making lists work for you, set daily, and realistic, goals. Maintain the relationship with your supervisors as they are there to facilitate the process of your PhD.

**Surround yourself with people you can talk to** - I find that just having people to either talk to about your research, or even personal life, helps with reducing stress levels.

**Take a day off** - I cannot emphasize how important this is. The brain needs to rest in order for us to not go crazy.

**Exercise** - Sitting at a desk for 12 or more hours for seven days a week puts pressure on your physical and mental well-being. It helps to do some form of exercise daily, whether walking, running, or hitting the gym, it all helps.

**Identify your stressors** - Anyone who knows me knows I overthink scenarios and I hate feeling out of control in situations. Having identified this as my biggest source of stress I've come up with ways of compartmentalising my thoughts and starting to tell myself that I won't always be in control.

# An Holistic Approach to Time Management



*Aleksandra Liachenko Monteiro, PhD student, School of Architecture*

Doctoral studies are said to have the capability to crush one's soul. No academic references to cite here, just my one and only *vox pop* interviews around the doctoral community. I understand that this does not sound encouraging at all, but surely it will sound relieving to know that we do not stand alone in the darkest times. Managing and balancing work and personal dimensions of life is essential in having a tranquil and productive doctoral experience. This premise can be extrapolated to life in general.

It took me almost three years to realise how crucial is it to not only manage my schedule, but also include myself in it. I suppose that this is a rookie mistake. There are three major lessons that I would like to share; learn boundary setting, schedule tasks, and that to be highly productive for five hours is better than staring at the screen for eight hours with no results.

Boundary setting is a life lesson. As mentioned above, it took me too long to include myself in my own schedule. I came to acknowledge that one has to set rules on the time, energy, and priority given to interpersonal interactions and tasks. Our life spreadsheet should include the variable 'self'. In fact, that variable should be a priority at all times.

How many of us have spent days or weeks trying to finish a paper, statistical analyses, or any other adventurous academic endeavour for long hours with no success? Our brain needs some chill time to rewire processes in order to approach matters from a new angle and then find a solution. For example, I had all these ideas about what to write for this chronicle and I was not able to put them onto paper in a connected way. I let myself be distracted with different tasks and 320 words later, here we are. So far, I believe, so good.

This leads me to my second point: scheduling tasks increases productivity. At this moment, I am in the thesis writing stage and I call Google Calendar a bestie. I schedule absolutely everything, from work appointments or tasks to personal pleasures. I once heard a colleague say that the PhD feels like we are intellectual athletes. You know what athletes do: they take care of their body, mind, and, most likely, soul. In this perspective, my weekly rituals are cooking healthy meals, attending yoga infallibly, having at least one quality moment with friends or family, and spending at least a few hours sitting with myself. This proved to be my formidable formula for reducing anxiety and stress and increasing my productivity in my work. Give it a try! I mean, considering your own preferences. A few hours to take care of yourself, another few to share with other people and a physical care activity.

Last but not least, my final suggestion is to give yourself a break and accept that you, as intellectually athletic as you may be, are also human and have the right to feel tired. Burning ourselves out will certainly serve no good along our doctorate journey. These doctoral times are no doubt demanding, but can also be times of incredible and enjoyable personal growth, if only we balance the scales of work and personal needs.

# Navigating the Isolating PhD Journey



*Audrey Dugué-Nevers, PhD student,  
Department of Politics and International  
Studies,*

In academia, the consensus is that embarking on a PhD journey feels like an ineluctable isolating experience. The academic environment implies that yielding to pervasive pressures is part of the doctoral research deal, thus suggesting that isolation and loneliness are inexorable. Some supervisors tell their doctoral students that in order to achieve success, the sacrifice is as follows: “no family, no friends, and no relationships”. Unless an individual made personal choices tailored to their specific situation, shall people with childcare feel guilty and out of place? Does fulfilling one’s potential as well as university expectations entail escaping responsibilities and eschewing the people who encourage and support you in your endeavours?

Conversely, “be kind to yourself” is a vital piece of advice friends and professional student services offer, as they argue that looking after one’s well-being and mental health is paramount in the long-term, and that saving space for human interactions matters. Is this sound recommendation incompatible with the challenging task of writing a PhD thesis? Beyond institutional frameworks, funding, and tips, researchers benefit from precious personal support towards achieving their goals. The acknowledgement page of PhD theses illustrates who the main sources of moral support are: parents and other relatives, as well as partners, friends, and colleagues.

Becoming addicted to work during the PhD process is a common pitfall: reading, writing, attending compulsory doctoral training, preparing conferences presentations, networking, and teaching all are activities contributing to the curriculum and which are evidenced in a portfolio. Although it can be tempting to over exert oneself to the point or burning out in the hope of doing more work, sustained stress and an inappropriate work-life balance have adverse effects on productivity.

Maintaining boundaries between work and life is one way of countering the researcher’s initiation ritual, and thus a way of mitigating a naturally isolating process: keeping one’s favourite hobbies allows the mind to relax. As such, the [Students’ Union](#) and the [University Sports centre](#) offer a breadth of cultural and physical activities accommodating all tastes ranging from societies and clubs to individual and social sports. Alternatively, there are opportunities to reflect and unwind through sightseeing, walking in nature, or visiting cinemas and museums.



In addition, peer support equally contributes to helping the researcher navigate the isolating PhD journey successfully. Through enthusiastic board game nights and conversation, it is an invaluable chance to share concerns, discuss how to overcome obstacles, and realise that peers have similar academic adventures. Engaging in sport sessions, Students' Union's days out, or Global Campus activities can provide occasions to meet other students in a relaxed atmosphere.

Stress can be overwhelming when one does not feel in control of life events. However, being lonely and helpless in difficult times is not inescapable. The Student Advice Centre, University Counselling Services (UCS), and Student Access to Mental Health Support (SAMHS) all offer invaluable assistance. For example, pet therapy became a popular stress-relief method on British campuses, especially prior to exams. The UCS team invites volunteers and guide dogs to meet students. The author of this article enjoyed meeting these adorable creatures, who are full of empathy and affection towards humans. Leaving them with a big smile is guaranteed.

Moreover, when struggling with problems, administrative issues, or other ordeals, professional student support services do amazing work to support students and find solutions.

Finally, if you hear that gaining work experience, developing transferable skills, earning money, caring for an ill parent, or grieving are a distraction from a demanding thesis, it is equally worth remembering that each individual will have different experiences: adapting and planning to tailor it to one's unforeseeable setbacks is possible with the support of relevant university services. Everyone should have equal opportunities to perform research to high standards, in spite of obstacles and personal circumstances.

Isolation is not inevitable: there is no need to sacrifice people or physical or mental health on the way. In spite of a thesis being an individual achievement, a behind-the-scenes community of support fosters confidence and nurtures the pathway to success and well-being. Consequently, the PhD journey should be a path enabling the researcher to grow professionally and personally, so as to become a rounded person.

# The University of Sheffield Student Wellbeing Service

*Steve Race, Manager, Student Wellbeing Services, shares essential information about the support available for doctoral students.*

Wellbeing is fundamental to our overall health, enabling us to successfully overcome difficulties and achieve what we want out of life. Taking notice of our wellbeing is an important aspect of safeguarding a balanced and healthy approach to life.

Psychologists use the term wellbeing to describe the type of happiness that is based on meaning, purpose, and fulfilling one's potential. Research consistently shows that those who cultivate meaning and purpose, develop skills and competencies, exercise autonomy, attend to their relationships, and try to contribute to things they care about, even when it is stressful and difficult, are psychologically healthier. They have higher self-esteem, lower risk of depression, and greater satisfaction with their lives.

We understand that the research degree experience is significantly different from that of taught courses and can create specific challenges in looking after your emotional health. PGR students consistently describe the doctoral degree as a stressful experience at some stage. Feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and shame associated with not coping are commonplace and PGR's often report that they find it difficult to talk about their struggles, particularly if they are concerned that it will reflect badly on how their progress is viewed.

Here at The University of Sheffield Student Wellbeing Service we take a holistic approach to wellbeing and emotional health, and we recognise that both psychological understanding and self-care (as illustrated in our service Wellbeing Wheel above) play an important part in helping to improve and maintain wellbeing and ensure the smooth continuation of academic life.



# Six Key Elements of Psychological Wellbeing

## Autonomy

To make your own decisions about how you think and behave and pursue freely chosen goals that have genuine value.

## Self-acceptance

To accept your strengths and weaknesses and to be understanding and nonjudgmental of yourself

## Competence

To have knowledge, skills and the ability to solve problems and accomplish worthwhile tasks

## Personal Growth

To be open to learning and new experiences that broaden your horizons and fulfil your potential

## Healthy Relationships

To develop caring, trusting and supportive connections with others

## Purpose in life

To have a sense of direction and value and find satisfaction in setting and achieving goals



Conceptualised by Steve Race  
(Manager, Student Wellbeing Service, University of Sheffield)  
Designed by Dan Radburn . © Copyright Steve Race & Dan Radburn.



The Student Wellbeing Service provides confidential short-term tailored one-to-one support and could be helpful if you are feeling down, overwhelmed, or struggling to adjust to university life. We offer a holistic assessment of need to help you recognise and understand your difficulties and utilise a range of therapeutic interventions, self-help techniques and practical advice to formulate a plan to get you back on track.

We have 10 Wellbeing Advisors who are qualified and experienced mental health professionals, who are all faculty-based and are currently offering remote support via Google Hangouts, telephone, or Google Chat.

Sessions last for a maximum of 40 minutes and you can access the service as often as you like to ensure that you stay well throughout your engagement with the University.

For more information about our service or to make use of the support that we offer, please visit the Student Wellbeing Service Website <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/wellbeing> where you can directly book an appointment with your faculty Wellbeing Advisor.

As a member of our wellbeing community, you may also find our Student Wellbeing Service Blog a useful resource, you can find a link to the blog on our service website or directly access it by visiting <https://wellbeingservice20.wixsite.com/website> We will regularly update the blog with articles and helpful advice to support you to look after yourself and remain connected throughout this challenging period.

We look forward to supporting you, in the meantime take care and stay safe.



# Supporting you

J

*Sarah Bell, Researcher Development Manager, talks about the support available to all doctoral students at the University of Sheffield*

I work in the University's Researcher Development Team. We work with postgraduate researchers and research staff, supporting them to develop careers inside or outside of academia. We're very privileged to be able to work with researchers as they progress through their PhD, start a new research contract or take the next step in their career. We see their successes and their achievements – and it's brilliant!

Inevitably, though, we also see the other side: researchers who are struggling or stressed-out. Because – spoiler alert – academia is hard! It's enough of a challenge when everything's plain-sailing in the rest of your life, but when a perfect storm of work and other life stresses come at once, it can feel overwhelming.

Back in January, when I was first asked to write a piece for this edition of The Doctoral Times about the support available to doctoral researchers during their PhD, I don't think I'd yet heard the term coronavirus or, if I had, it certainly wasn't something that was affecting my life or the way I thought about my work. What a difference a few weeks makes.

Whilst the way we're providing support has obviously changed, the University's commitment to your well-being has not, and there is a wide range of support that you can access if you're struggling. As well as talking to your supervisor or postgraduate director, you can use the Health and Well-being services (<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/health-wellbeing>) run by Student Support (SSiD), and book one-to-one consultations with the new faculty-based well-being advisors (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/wellbeing/appointments>). At the moment, these appointments are taking place online to support you throughout the pandemic.

Some of the doctoral researchers I talk to are unsure whether or not they're allowed to access Student Support services, so I'd just like to say a big **"YES!"** to any postgraduate researcher wondering whether SSiD is the right place for them to find support.

If you don't need to make use of our dedicated support services, the University provides other services and resources to help you stay well and in control of your PhD. We have a specific Researcher Well-being programme called ResearchWell (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ecr/wellbeing>) (Twitter: @reswellsheff), which offers well-being sessions, online resources, and info throughout the year, as well as the annual Researcher Well-being Month, which runs across June. Like everything else in the university, this year's activity has been impacted by the coronavirus outbreak, but we'll be doing the best we can to help you look after your well-being during this time.

# through your Doctoral Journey

We also have a number of peer-support networks, including for disabled and ill researchers, PGR parents and researchers engaged in emotionally demanding research. If you think one or more of these might be helpful to you, please take a look at the webpage: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ecr/wellbeing/networks>.

You can also access training and professional development activities through the Doctoral Development Programme (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ddportal>) and the Think Ahead programme (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ecr>), run by the Researcher Development Team, to help you manage your stress, project, supervisor(!), and time - as well as helping you develop other key skills such as writing about and presenting your research.

We work closely with our colleagues in the Careers Service who provide specialist guidance for researchers to help them make decisions about their future career and to support them to take the next step. You can book one-to-one careers consultations (again, currently online) to discuss your options, or to get help with an application. Visit <https://careerconnect.sheffield.ac.uk/home.html>.



We also have our themed resources site, Think Further (<https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/thinkahead>), which offers online training and development to researchers, enabling you to learn at a time and place that suits you.

We've all been working hard to take our workshops, meetings, and advice sessions online, so please do keep checking, as we update frequently - you'll also hear about upcoming workshops and other events of interest in our faculty-specific newsletters.

Doctoral research can be fascinating, rewarding, exhilarating, exhausting, and stressful - sometimes all at the same time. The University wants to support you throughout the whole of your PhD, and we work hard to provide the services and resources to do just that. If you need help, please do reach out, if you possibly can.



# Top Tips for Improvi

*Eleni Routoula, PhD student, Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering*

The PhD journey can be tough. There are many external factors that can go wrong (supervisors, funding, science, duration), but also many internal factors that can contribute negatively (physical health, mental health, relationships, dietary habits). Unfortunately, we can only control our reactions and ourselves, so we should focus on “eliminating” the possible internal factors - at least on paper anyway, because it took me two and a half years to realise what was wrong and how to improve my PhD life. I realised I was devoting so much time and effort to my PhD that I forgot to take care of me, the most important person for the success of my project!



Everyone who has been through a PhD journey has some advice to share with PhD candidates, mainly on the research or professional front. But not many people are able to provide advice on how not to allow the PhD experience to “swallow” you. Based on my experience, I will have a go.

## Make time for yourself

In the fast-paced academic environment it is very easy to embrace an over-working culture. It is common for PhD students to work double-digit hours per day, thinking of it as normal. Although there is no rule or contract indicating how many hours researchers need to work, we need to maintain a balance, make time for ourselves to relax, see our friends and family, gain perspective, and treat our human side, not only our scientific side.

## Avoid comparison with other researchers

Although comparison is needed to keep us aware of our performance and our previous “records”, in academia it is very easy to compare ourselves to the achievements of other researchers, ignoring a huge and usually forgotten fact: every researcher is a different person, every project is different and the conditions in each case are different. Unfortunately success in academia is measured by publications and the ability of academics to overpower each other, so a “bad” comparison is almost inevitable.

## Realise your value and hold on it

In my second year I realised that my project would not be an “academically successful” one. This was a major hit to my self-esteem, as I had tied my self-worth to the success of my project. I thought that it was my fault things did not work. Well, science does not always work in our favour. Most of the times, not achieving a positive/expected/successful result has nothing to do with our abilities and everything to do with unmapped scientific details. Nevertheless, during my PhD I developed as a researcher, learnt about my topic, learnt new techniques, developed new skills and broadened my horizons. And no-one can take that away from me.

There are many publications showing that PhD researchers can develop issues related to poor mental health during their studies, indicating that there is definitely a problem. Being aware of it is half the way of solving it. You are not alone, speak up.

## Reflect and talk about feelings

It took me a long time to start discussing how certain behaviours, events, and situations made me feel and it felt so much better after doing it! Especially since many other colleagues were experiencing similar feelings. Not talking about how we feel means that no-one can provide advice because no-one knows what we are going through. This might have an impact on our performance and lead to depression and deprivation of our mental health. Having people around me, able to understand what I was talking about, made me feel “normal”.

# ng your Well-being

*Victoria Johnson, PhD student, Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering*

It's no secret that embarking on a doctoral degree is a challenging but rewarding experience, and performance in academic studies can be linked with well-being. As a person who has repeatedly ignored their own mental needs throughout their academic career, it has become clear that these two cannot be unlinked. However, as the saying goes, every cloud has a silver lining; sometimes that silver lining may simply be the things learnt through challenging experiences to help oneself go on and thrive in another situation. I would like to share some ideas for improving well-being while undertaking your PhD.

## Hobbies outside of work

It's important to maintain a hobby outside of your academic work, ideally one in which you are not under pressure to perform. There can be benefits and drawbacks to different types of hobbies depending on your own experience: returning to a hobby you are already good at, or one you loved doing when you were younger (pencil drawing, in my case), may provide a feeling of pride and accomplishment when you achieve something or finish up a piece. Picking up something entirely new can be refreshing, and if you don't already have standards to live up to, then you can do the hobby for fun, regardless of your own personal standards.

## Physical activity

Everyone hates being told to do exercise but, with a little patience and persistence (doctoral students know more about persistence than most so nobody has an excuse), exercise can be life changing. The best thing about it is that many more activities can count as exercise than the usual swimming, running, and cycling (or the dreaded gym), so there's something for everyone out there. Dancing, gardening, or hiking through the Peak District all count as exercise, and you'll never be more than a Google search from a community that enjoys similar activities to you. Personally, I love running and can recommend Parkrun for encouragement and community, meeting every Saturday morning at six different parks in Sheffield to run 5km. If you manage to get your friends to go to Parkrun with you as well, then all the better.

## Eating well

Sorting out meals can be a pain at the best of times, and if you're already struggling in your head then it can seem nearly impossible to eat well while managing your doctoral studies. However, there are some ways to make it slightly easier to manage in tough times. Replacing high-sugar snacks for fruit is one easy way, and keeping a bowl of fruit on hand and in sight makes the process much easier. Find the fruits you love (for me, this is raisins, oranges, and plums) and make sure you keep them stocked. For meals, adding a portion of frozen veggies to your pasta can make a world of difference, and it's easy to just heat them up and eat them with whatever you happen to be making. Small steps are the key to improved well-being, and they're easier to maintain.

## Professional help

Sometimes things get a bit too much and it gets too difficult to handle by yourself. There is no shame in seeing a doctor if your mental health is becoming difficult to manage, and they, along with the University Counselling Service, can suggest ways to help. It's not embarrassing or shameful to take control of your own mental health by accepting help from another person (especially if people close to you are being affected by your mental state); this is something I learned from my own therapist! Suffering is not objective. It doesn't matter how much or how little you struggle, if you think you would benefit from talking to a counsellor or therapist, then do it. The first step is always the hardest.

# The Highs and Lows of the PhD Journey



*Thomas Butler, PhD student, Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, now working for Synalgae, a microalgal biotechnology start-up in the Netherlands*

A PhD is very much like a rollercoaster, except with more highs and lows. A PhD is not a nine-to-five job where you can switch off at the end of the day, you will end up investing a great deal of time, in some cases greater than 60 hours per week. A PhD becomes an obsession and, like any story, is full of twists and turns. With each experiment there are new avenues to explore, future collaborations to develop, and additional papers to publish. A PhD research question can be broad but also require a significant amount of specialist knowledge. You must be a jack-of-all-trades and a master in several areas. Throughout the PhD journey it is essential to focus on what experiments are critical to answer your research question and obtain your PhD; you are constrained by time and your research budget.

One difficult part of a PhD is that you may be extremely passionate about your research area, but other people might not be. Your family may not fully understand why you are undertaking this journey, your friends who are not in the same position will not sympathise with your choice to embark on the PhD route, and therefore it is hard to find support. Here is often a low point for PhD students. However, one of the most amazing things about a PhD is that you will meet new friends who are going through exactly what you are at different stages! You also have access to a great student support team. They can advise you throughout your PhD, provide information and help about the one-year confirmation review, poster presentations, oral presentations, and preparation for your viva. Any questions you have, I am quite sure they will have come across before, you are not alone! During your PhD you can endure hardships together with friends in the same situation. I found Friday night at the pub was a great way to meet likeminded people and de-stress about the difficulties of the week. I have met several friends and colleagues who I will stay in touch with for life.

It is always essential to think about how your research can affect society and what problem you are trying to address. Discussing with like-minded people can help you in this. Arriving at the final destination of submitting the thesis is difficult, and even though you have three years of funding, I only know of one individual who completed his PhD in that time. I had three years of PhD funding and I am now at three years and three months, I aim to submit in the coming months. I have a nine-to-five job and I am working in the Netherlands, so I have the added issue of only being able to write up in evenings and at weekends, as well as learning Dutch which complicates matters. Ideally have your PhD completed before starting a new job!

A great attribute of a PhD is the extracurricular activities that you can participate in, which can also go towards your Doctoral Development Programme (essential for completing your PhD and equipping yourself with skills for a subsequent job). Attending conferences was certainly a high and it is great to have the opportunity to visit new countries. Attending conferences and learning about other disciplines which are relevant can ensure you think about the bigger picture, enabling a broader overview of how your research can address societal needs. Attending an entrepreneurship competition called 'Biotechnology YES' enabled me to pitch an idea alongside friends; we were looking into biological solar panels, and it was great to compete against other universities to learn more about commercialisation, business, and the importance of intellectual property. I have also enjoyed teaching undergraduates in Biological and Chemical Engineering, helping to develop passion in their subject area, and trying to encourage them to think about undertaking a PhD.

An invaluable experience was mentoring masters students throughout my PhD and designing research questions related to my

project and tailored towards their interest. It was great to see my students develop scientific rigour, a more questioning nature, and soft skills.

My key points and motivational tips would be:

- Stay focussed on your research question.
- Ensure you know the layout of your thesis.
- Work through your PhD thesis chapter by chapter.
- Design your experiments well.
- Learn to politely say no to people (and to your supervisor) to avoid a higher and unrealistic workload.
- Learn to delegate effectively with masters students but ensure you provide them with full support and don't overload them.
- Enjoy each day of your PhD and don't get absorbed by the negativity of people who are not enjoying their PhD.
- Always stay positive and lead a balanced lifestyle to ensure good mental health.

One final point, ensure you pick a research topic you are passionate about, you will be working on it for over three years! The PhD is certainly a challenging journey, but it will really be worth it in the end!



# Women in Academia

*Alex Ricketts, PhD student at the University of Sheffield, and Alice Wilson PhD student at the University of York, share their personal experiences having organised the Women in Academia Conference*

On the 13th of December 2019, our disappointment with the results of the general election was tempered by our excitement at the prospect of what that particular day had in store for us; the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership's first ever Women in Academia conference. The gathering together of an accomplished, animated, and diverse panel of women academics alongside an equally ambitious and dedicated audience of early-career scholars was both a tonic for the disheartening political news and a call to action reminding us all of what we can do to platform one another and pursue rigour and excellence in our work.

The event started as a conversation between five members of the WRDTP's student forum (<https://wrntp.ac.uk/student-forum-new/>), Alex Ricketts, Tamara Satmarean, Sophie Phillips, Alice Wilson, and Danielle Beaton. The student forum is a platform which provides a direct link between students at each of the seven affiliated universities and the WRDTP managerial team. Here, we discuss ideas for training and conferences as well as implementing 'champion' role initiatives. Champions are members of the student forum who take up the mantle for specific student interests; Alex is our Women's Champion, Tamara is our Careers Champion, Sophie is our Disability Champion, and Danielle is our Well-being Champion. The 'leaky pipeline' problem, referring to the drastically diminishing number of women in senior leadership roles is not a problem that is unique to academia, nor is the comparative absence of women of colour, disabled women, and non-binary people.

And so, strategising and planning began for the first event of its kind run with the WRDTP to address these issues and more in an inclusive and energising day of knowledge sharing, best practice discussion, and focused workshops on specific issues facing women in the context of the often harmful or unethical practices of the neo-liberal university.

Whilst organising the event we were all keen to ensure that we kept a healthy work/life balance. Often organising events like this can result in your life being dominated by the event, which, as PhD students, we were really keen for that not to happen! Alex had previously worked as a project manager, so the first thing she did was to implement a scrum system to manage the event (scrum is a type of project management that is often used in the IT sector). This helped to identify all of the tasks which needed to be done, both on the day and the run up to the day.

In order to get all of these tasks done, whilst maintaining a work/life balance we regularly checked in with each other. At every meeting or Whatsapp conversation we discussed the tasks to do and asked each other if the workload was manageable. This created a supportive environment, as we were often better at assessing if each other was taking on too much, than assessing ourselves. This was a crucial part of our organising, as at different points over the organising period each of us needed to take a step back, either relating to personal or work priorities shifting. We strongly believe that it was through this open communication about our schedules and

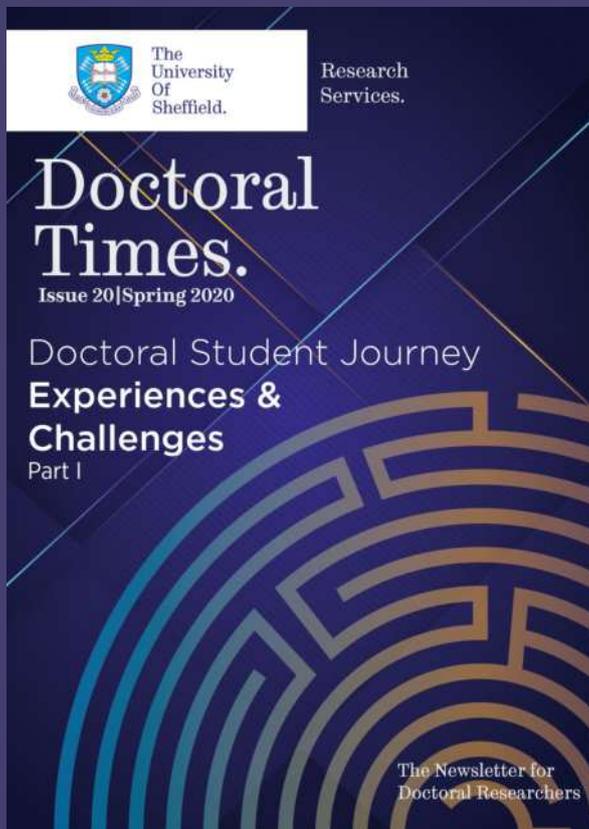


(Left to right: Tamara Satmarean, Alice Wilson, Sophie Phillips, Alex Ricketts)

where everyone was comfortable to say that their workload was getting too much and that they needed to step back.

We were really passionate about making the event as inclusive as possible, not only within the sessions, but throughout the entire day. During the sessions, in order to ensure those living with disabilities and social anxiety felt comfortable attending and engaging, we implemented a red post-it note policy. This was suggested and implemented by Sophie, our Disability Champion. The red post-it note is placed by an individual on the table in front of them, and enables people to signal that they don't feel comfortable talking but that they want to listen to conversations. We also wanted to ensure that every aspect of the event was inclusive, including the toilets. We worked with the Octagon team to ensure that some of the toilets at the venue were gender neutral. This was something that the Octagon team had not been asked to do before, so it just goes to show, *if you don't ask, you don't get!*

Overall we all had a great experience of creating, developing, running, and attending this event. We would recommend any PhD student to get involved in the forum or work with us to develop an event in the future. The PhD journey can be as little or as much as you choose, so go for it!



You can find Part 1 of this issue by following the link below:

<https://www.flipsnack.com/Tuostimes/doctoral-student-journey-part-1-experiences-challenges.html>

We would love to know more about our readers and value your feedback on the Doctoral Times. Please follow the link below to complete a short feedback survey:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxNQ1FliM4-sLqfLt8FofvGcnCW\\_5a4sYOKIQuXfJwE8bw7g/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxNQ1FliM4-sLqfLt8FofvGcnCW_5a4sYOKIQuXfJwE8bw7g/viewform?usp=sf_link)