

Report to GU Council and Annual General Meeting

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Initiatives and Projects

1. GU Mental Health Report

Full report available here: <https://www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/files/postgraduate-mhreport> (the full report includes analysis, recommendations and student comments).

Background:

Times Higher Education recently reported a 'mental health crisis among postgraduates', and surveys across the world make clear that postgraduate populations are very likely to have a high incidence of mental health problems.^{1 2} In response to national and international research, and local reports of poor mental health following a forum run by the previous GU President, the GU has continued its work in this area. The GU ran two successful mental health events with staff and students, on funding and finances, and supervisor relationships. The GU also ran a survey on postgraduate mental health, and has worked closely with the University to develop its Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. 1803 students responded to the survey, which was open during Michaelmas 2018.

Survey Priority Areas/Key Findings:

- Overall, **67%** of respondents reported diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health problems.

Cambridge Culture

- **46%** of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable taking breaks/holidays.
- **59%** of respondents reported isolation and loneliness affecting their mental health.

Supervisor Relationships

- **93%** of students reporting that their supervisor has unreasonable expectations also reported mental health problems.
- **25%** of all respondents reported that their supervisor relationship has negatively affected their mental health while at Cambridge.

Inequalities

- **27%** of BAME respondents note that racism has affected their mental health.
- **74%** of women reported imposter syndrome, in comparison with **58%** of men.

Structural problems

¹ Ellie Bothwell, 'Universities urged to tackle PhD mental health crisis', *Times Higher Education*, 13 April 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-urged-tackle-phd-mental-health-crisis>.

² Theresa Evans, Lindsay Bira, 'Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education', *Nature*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.4089>.

- **37%** of all respondents report that financial problems have affected their mental health.
- **31%** report that housing problems have affected their mental health.

Support Provisions

- Respondents are most aware of the University Counselling Service (**85%**) and graduate tutors (**94%**).
- Multiple respondents praised the Disability Resource Centre's mentoring scheme and the UCS's Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor.

Career Concerns

- **47%** of respondents were definitely considering an academic career, and **36%** were unsure.
- In the comments section, many recorded feeling anxious and ill due to concerns about their career prospects in a casualised and competitive job-market.

2. Widening Participation

Background:

Widening postgraduate access and participation encompasses: funding, reviewing admission processes and the makeup of your postgraduate population, ensuring that all students feel welcome and participate in University life, and supporting students to access and progress into their chosen fields of work or further study. Widening postgraduate participation is in the Council's Priorities Framework, is an aim of the Student Support Initiative, and was mentioned in the Vice-Chancellor's annual address: 'we will also ensure that our widening participation activities are extended to explicitly encompass postgraduate students.'³

Supporting data:

- According to HESA data, black students form 8% of national PG research students and 10% of PG taught students; in Cambridge, black students are 1.9% of the postgraduate population.
- According to the Graduate Union's Mental Health Survey (2019), 27% of BME postgraduate respondents reported that racism had affected their mental health while at Cambridge; 74% of women reported imposter syndrome affecting their mental health.
- 37% of all postgraduate students responding to the GU's Mental Health Survey reported that financial problems had affected their mental health.
- The OfS' report on the impact of postgraduate loans demonstrates that providing funding widens postgraduate participation: there has been an increase in students from low-participation areas enrolling on postgraduate courses.⁴

GU Postgraduate Widening Participation Work:

- Opposed the proposed 50% increase in the postgraduate application fee at the Board of Graduate Studies, General Board and PAC, among other groups. Successfully reduced the increase, with an increase agreed on the basis that application fee-waivers would be implemented

³ The Vice-Chancellor's address: <https://www.v-c.admin.cam.ac.uk/professor-stephen-j-toope-0/selected-speeches-professor-stephen-j-toope/address-university-1-october>.

⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/the-effect-of-postgraduate-loans/>.

- Successfully proposed the introduction of a postgraduate application fee-waiver for prospective students from low-income backgrounds and refugees, with the Director of Admissions and the Head of Graduate Admissions, which will be implemented in autumn 2019.
- Ensured that the Student Support Initiative vision and mission statements included a commitment to widen postgraduate participation, and smooth funding disparities between colleges.
- Opened the UK Council on Graduate Education's Postgraduate Widening Participation Workshop with Pro-Vice-Chancellor Graham Virgo.
- Wrote an article on postgraduate widening participation for Pembroke College's *The Martlet*.
- Interviewed Graham Virgo on postgraduate widening participation and wrote an article for a Faculty of Arts and Humanities blog.
- Ensured that widening postgraduate participation was actively considered across the Collegiate University in all relevant committees and working groups.
- Applied for funding for a University staff member to work on and co-ordinate postgraduate widening participation work, with a number of different departments.

Potential areas of work for development:

- Assess current, local postgraduate widening participation activity.
- Review DLHE survey data to assess which Cambridge undergraduate students progress into postgraduate study.
- Review the makeup of our postgraduate population to assess which students are underrepresented and how to improve their representation and inclusion.
- Continue to assess whether our admissions criteria are inclusive, in colleges and departments, and ensure that our admissions processes are sufficiently joined-up.
- Assess whether a Cambridge PhD adequately prepares students for a wide range of careers – acknowledging the saturated academic job market, and the wide applicability of a postgraduate degree.
- Co-ordinate work on career option pathways and skills training for postgraduate students with the Careers Service, the Researcher Development Programme and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- Ensure that work on the size of our postgraduate population is connected to work on postgraduate widening participation.
- Develop funding as part of the Student Support Initiative which targets excellent students in need, rather than solely highly-ranked students.
- Develop a pilot programme (perhaps in the model of Oxford's UNIQ+), to directly tackle barriers to broad postgraduate access and participation.