

Research Group Discussion Forum – Mental health and wellbeing

Monday 29 November 2021, held online

Representatives from Research Groups and departmental wellbeing leads attended this session focused on mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing is a hugely important issue in society and in higher education, for staff, students and other members of our communities.

Through events at the Annual Conference and with Research Groups, Maddy Thompson, Helen Pallett and Chloe Asker (and others) have been leading recent initiatives to bring the community and conversations together - to highlight issues, challenges, and good practice. This has highlighted issues affecting academia/higher education as a sector, but also geography-specific issues, especially around fieldwork and field-courses.

Recognising the importance of the issue and that much really good work is being done in departments and by Research Groups, RHED is currently dedicating some time and resource to collate resources and share good practice, hosting a series of conversations and events (including at the annual conference and at the postgraduate mid-term conference), and establishing a network across Research Groups and departments. This group will meet bi-monthly through 2022.

You can find some [of these resources on our website](#). If you have other resources you'd like to share, or would like to be part of this work, please get in touch and see our [call for resources](#) (led by Maddy Thompson).

At the event on 29 November, we made use of focused breakout discussion to consider:

- What Research Groups are doing to support their communities
- Initiatives that are planned
- Ideas about specific interventions to be developed or good ideas seen elsewhere

Some of the key points highlighted included:

- The value and importance of Research Groups and the opportunities they provide for colleagues to come together across universities, not solving structural issues but facilitating and communicating support.
- The opportunities for Research Groups to foreground sub-disciplinary root causes (if they exist)
- The distinction between supporting others with wellbeing and addressing mental health problems. Questions were raised about the extent to which Research Groups are equipped to do the latter, or whether they should concentrate resources on the former.
- The value of getting PhD students and ECRs to join RGs early - to ensure joining networks/support happens early.
- Lack of effective training in supporting others – whether fellow colleagues, students, or wider community. Concerns that intervening without appropriate training could exacerbate problems
- The need to explore more fully across the discipline the intersections between mental health and inequalities
- The different but overlapping challenges for ECRs (isolation, loneliness, precarity) and more advanced-career colleagues (workload, inequality, wider structural issues in HE).
- Challenges of online burnout - the 'turn' to the digital - what if we don't enjoy/are tired of this?
- Reflection on the mitigating circumstances/extensions/support process for students at institutions and how these might translate to RGs/academic staff - e.g. mental health at the forefront of all discussions.
- Possibilities of mindfulness education, coaching networks, wellbeing/MH champions.
- The particular challenges of fieldwork - Training and Policies
<https://blog.geolsoc.org.uk/2020/05/19/mental-health-and-fieldwork/>
- In the context of mentoring programmes/work done by Research Groups, supporting colleagues on an individual/one-one basis
 - Support and training needed for mentors

- When someone is struggling, the value of being able to signpost resources
- Getting people to recognise they are struggling before it becomes a serious issue – and applying this to oneself too.

Specific activities Research Groups have underway (we recognise this is a very partial list)

- Online coffee and chat meetings:
 - Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group;
 - Latin America Working Group -a PhD cafe, which includes PGRs, reflecting on experiences of the pandemic and the specific demands of fieldwork in Latin America given Covid – also on practical solutions. (*regular shared discussion space to come together*)
- Regular writing groups:
 - [Get Happy and Write \(Geographies of Health and Wellbeing Research Group\)](#);
 - [Historical Geography Research Group online January writing retreat](#);
 - [Political Geography Research Group writing retreat](#)
 - These often of particular value to PG/ECRs who may be often very isolated; GHWRG example showcased value and popularity of women in academia;
- Online resources:
 - [GHWRG mentoring resource](#)
 - Social and Cultural Geography Research Group resource on [doing a dissertation during the pandemic](#)
 - Development Geographies and Gender & Feminist Geographies Research Groups' joint project on [care and the academy](#) and resulting resources
 - Race working group – [report on supervising Black geography PhD researchers](#)