# Logo - The Open University

# Postgraduate Research Student

# Wellbeing & Mental Health Policy

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## Summary **of policy**

Postgraduate research students may encounter a diverse range of challenges during their student journey. Some of these challenges may be overcome by talking to family, friends, a supervisor, or a third-party monitor. However, the University recognises that some students may experience emotional and/or psychological difficulties which have a significant impact on their ability to engage in their research and progress on the student journey. These may be temporary and/or episodic and may require different levels of supports at different points in a student’s progress.

In order to deliver our mission and vision, the Open University aims to provide a supportive environment in which student wellbeing is paramount. The Open University is committed to taking reasonable steps to ensure the wellbeing, and promote the good mental health, of its postgraduate research students. However, the Open University, as an educational establishment with expertise in the provision of higher education, will not always be able to deliver this, and in some cases should not, provide specialised mental health support and wellbeing services that individual students may need to access as this is the role of professional mental health services, general practitioners or therapists. Where the Open University is unable to provide support, it will aim to provide students with the information and signposts that they need to enable them to gain access to external resources/services and appropriate expertise.

### Summary of significant changes since last version

This is a new policy. It was approved by Research Degrees Committee in January 2020.

**Policies superseded by this document**

This is a new policy.

## Scope

### Who and which circumstances this policy covers

This policy outlines how The Open University supports the postgraduate research student community, working to promote wellbeing and good mental health.

Who and which circumstances this policy does not cover

This policy does not cover students who are not postgraduate research students.

## **Related** Documentation

Refer to the following documentation in conjunction with this document:

Research Degrees Regulations:

<https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/research-degree-regulations>

**The Open University Student Charter Principles**

This policy aligns with the following [Open University Student Charter](http://www.open.ac.uk/students/charter/) Principles:

* Principle 1: We treat each other with dignity and respect
* Principle 2: We aim to inspire and enable learning
* Principle 3: We share the responsibility of learning
* Principle 4: We work together to secure the University’s mission and to promote the University’s values

## Introduction

The Open University’s mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas; to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Our vision is to reach more students with life-changing learning that meets their needs and enriches society.

In order to deliver our mission and vision, The Open University aims to provide a supportive environment in which student wellbeing is paramount. The Open University is committed to taking reasonable steps to ensure the wellbeing, and promote the good mental health, of its postgraduate research students. However, the Open University, as an educational establishment with expertise in the provision of higher education, will not always be able to deliver this, and in some cases should not, provide specialised mental health support and wellbeing services that individual students may need to access as this is the role of professional mental health services, general practitioners or therapists. Where the Open University is unable to provide support, it will aim to provide students with the information and signposts that they need to enable them to gain access to external resources/services and appropriate expertise.

In all cases the specific needs of individual students will be considered within the context of the wider Open University community.

This policy outlines how the Open University supports the postgraduate research student community, working to promote wellbeing and good mental health.

For specific guidance on how this policy may relate to your personal circumstances, please contact your Research Degrees Office via [research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk](mailto:research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk) who are specially trained to advise on the implementation of policy.

## Policy

1. Purpose

This Policy aims to provide PGR students with the information and signposts that they need to enable them to gain access to external resources/services, and appropriate expertise, in relation to their continuing mental health and wellbeing.

* 1. The objectives of this policy are:
     1. Promote an Open-University-wide community that is committed to supporting postgraduate research student wellbeing and positive mental health.
     2. Promote a culture of healthy behaviours that support wellbeing and positive mental health within the postgraduate research student community.
     3. Raise awareness of mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, severe mental illness) and their causes (e.g. stress, workload, loneliness or pre-existing mental health conditions) in order to promote discussion, reducing stigma and encouraging students in difficulty to seek the appropriate health support.
     4. Work collaboratively across Faculties and Units to ensure the early identification of any students at risk and proactively work to provide signposts to the necessary support.
     5. Ensure effective signposting and easy access to resources and services that meet the needs of its diverse postgraduate research students.
     6. Provide training and support for student-facing staff which enables them to help those students in need to access advice and guidance.

2. Policy principles

Roles

Postgraduate research students may encounter a diverse range of challenges during their student journey. Some of these challenges may be overcome by talking to family, friends, a supervisor, or a third-party monitor. However, the Open University recognises that some students may experience emotional and/or psychological difficulties which have a significant impact on their ability to engage in their research and progress on the student journey. These may be temporary and/or episodic and may require different levels of supports at different points in a student’s progress. Support for students with mental health issues can currently be found at the following:

Faculties

Schools/departments within Faculties have primary responsibility for the pastoral care of their postgraduate research students. Upon registration, students are assigned a supervisory team, and within one month of registration they are assigned an independent third-party monitor with whom they can raise issues and seek advice in confidence[[1]](#footnote-2). Alternatively, the student may wish to address concerns to the Postgraduate Research Tutor, Faculty Director of Research Degrees, Deputy Associate Dean (Research) or Associate Dean (Research) depending on the structure of the faculty.

It is expected that the staff in these student-facing roles receive training that provides them with an awareness of the indicators of mental health difficulties. Staff should be in a position to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to a student’s declaration of any mental health concerns and direct them to appropriate support. Where this is not possible, or where a member of staff feels unable to deal with a situation, then they should have the contact details of someone who can provide the student with the necessary support. Where appropriate, students will be encouraged to seek help from outside the University (e.g. the student’s GP).

Graduate School

The Graduate School is the central hub for providing postgraduate research student support. Where a student, for whatever reason, feels unable to raise issues within the Faculty they may contact the Graduate School in confidence directly.

The [Graduate School Network](http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/) provides postgraduate research students with links to internal and external resources on student wellbeing.

Employee Assistance Programme

This service is only available to all directly supported students. It is a free and confidential 24/7 service that offers expert information, advice, counselling and support on a wide range of issues.

**Togetherall**

Registered students can access free mental health and wellbeing support through our partnership with [togetherall](https://www.togetherall.com)[[2]](#footnote-3). The togetherall website provides a safe, totally anonymous online space to air concerns, explore feelings and learn how to self-manage mental health and wellbeing.

Student Support Team

Where a mental health condition has lasted, or is expected to last, 12 months or more, and has a substantial impact in day-to day activities, it meets the Equality Act definition of a [disability](https://www.gov.uk/when-mental-health-condition-becomes-disability)[[3]](#footnote-4) Students who have such a disability or who are experiencing Mental Health difficulties, regardless of duration, can contact the Student Support Team who can provide information on [‘What disability support is available[[4]](#footnote-5)’](https://help.open.ac.uk/topic/disability/category/what-disability-support-is-available) and [‘How to get disability support and funding[[5]](#footnote-6)’](https://help.open.ac.uk/topic/disability/category/disability-support-and-funding).

Provision Beyond the University

Where the Open University is unable to support the needs of an individual student it is essential that they receive appropriate professional support. Students who move to Milton Keynes are encouraged to register with a local NHS general practice who can provide them with referrals to other NHS services as appropriate.

Admissions

The Open University research degrees programme is open to suitably qualified applicants on the proviso that the Open University has the necessary expertise, resources and capacity to support a particular discipline. Decisions regarding admission are based on academic grounds and no student will be discriminated against on the basis of a mental health issue.

The Open University recognises that research degree programmes are challenging and that it is imperative that students maintain a healthy work-life balance. Students are therefore admitted on the expectation that their research project can be completed within the designated time frames.

Disclosure

The Open University recognises that poor mental health conditions have been stigmatised and that although a significant amount of work has been done to raise awareness and promote discussion, it still remains a difficult subject for some people to address. For students from outside the UK, where cultural beliefs and values may differ, this can create additional barriers to an open and frank discussion. Anxiety about the response to a declaration of mental health difficulties, concerns about lack of confidentiality and the potential for impact on their academic standing makes some students reluctant to admit that they have a problem.

The Open University encourages students to declare any difficulties at an early stage in order to provide the necessary help and support in a timely manner and minimize any negative impact on academic progression. Although the student retains the right not to declare a mental health issue this will impact on the Open University’s ability to support the student.

Where a student declares a mental health illness or issue, they should be encouraged to contact the Student Support Team for help and advice regardless of whether or not the issue falls within the definition of a disability under the Equality Act.

Study breaks and phased return to study

When PGR students experience mental ill health, they can seek to take study breaks in periods of one or more months. A full-time student may apply for a study break for up to a maximum of 12 months and a part-time student may apply for a study break for up to a maximum of 24 months. For students who have declared a mental health disability these periods may be extended under the Reasonable Adjustment Regulations.

A PGR student who undertakes a study break will retain access to student services but should not actively engage in the research degree programme.

Where a student has episodic mental health issues that incapacitate them for short periods of time this should be discussed with the supervisors and the Graduate School, and an action plan put in place to mitigate the long-term impact on progress and the ability to meet deadlines. In such cases the University may allow the student/supervisors to record the days on which they were unable to work and adjust the maximum registration date accordingly.

Study breaks do not count towards the maximum period of study.

Where a PGR student has been absent from the University as a consequence of a serious mental health difficulty, they may seek a phased return to study. PGR students who, for example are normally full-time, may for a specified period return to work part-time hours until such a time as they are fit to resume full-time study. Likewise, where a student’s mental health and wellbeing would benefit from a temporary switch to part-time hours, if supported by a medical practitioner, this will also be accommodated. In such cases the maximum period of study will be adjusted to reflect the mode of study.

Studying at a distance

Where a PGR student is studying off-campus for the purposes of fieldwork, placements, research or domestic arrangements it is the responsibility of the Faculties to ensure that the risk to those students with mental health issues are identified and actions are identified and taken to mitigate any effects (e.g. frequency of contact, shared contact details, access to insurance help lines for those travelling on fieldwork).

Support for students in crisis

The Mental Health Capacity Act 2005 is based on principles that include:

a) every adult has the right to make his or her own decisions and must be assumed to have capacity to do so unless it is proved otherwise;

b) every adult should be supported to make their own decisions and be provided by appropriate help before anyone concludes that they cannot make their own decisions;

c) every adult retains the right to make eccentric and unwise decisions.

Adults will only be deemed to lack capacity if:

a) they have an impairment or disturbance (for example, a disability, condition or trauma) that affects the way their mind or brain works, and

b) the impairment or disturbance means that they are unable to make a speciﬁc decision at the time it needs to be made.

Where a member of staff is concerned that a student’s mental health capacity is impaired, they should involve the [safeguarding team](https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-academic-services/Pages/Safeguarding.aspx)[[6]](#footnote-7).

Where a student is at risk of self-harm, staff, who feel able to do so, should follow the [Guidelines for responding to distressed and suicidal students[[7]](#footnote-8).](https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-academic-services/Pages/Guidelines-for-responding-to-distressed-and-suicidal-students.aspx)

Health, Wellbeing and Fitness to Study

Unless the student is incapacitated it is unlikely that they will not be able to make decisions about their study and it is important not to conflate mental illness with fitness to study.

Where a students’ health and wellbeing deteriorates to the point where it becomes impossible for them to be able to continue with their studies the Open University may invoke the [Fitness to Study Policy](https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/fitness-to-study)[[8]](#footnote-9). This should be used where concerns have been expressed over a student’s health or behaviour, which has led to doubts from the faculty over the students’ wellbeing and fitness to study at the Open University and/or disruptions to the progress of others.

The guidelines are intended to provide a framework for the positive management of students. However, where behaviour as a result of ill health or disability poses a risk of harm to either the student themselves or others, or where students do not positively respond to more supportive interventions it may be necessary to invoke Disciplinary Procedures.

Confidentiality

The Open University will respect the confidentiality of a student’s health and welfare.

A student may feel that disclosing personal or “special category”[[9]](#footnote-10) data, such as information about physical or mental health, will help them to access the support that they require. Students can withdraw their consent for the Open University to use this “special category” data at any time and to ask the Open University to remove any data from its systems. However, we would no longer be able to provide the relevant support or adjustments.

Where a student discloses disability information to the Open University, the information will be entered into the student record. Students will be asked if they wish this information to be sent to the support teams who can talk to them about additional support that may be available. This information will only be shared if the student agrees.

More information about how your data is used, stored and shared is given in the [Student Privacy Notice](https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/privacy-notice)[[10]](#footnote-11).

The Open University does not require student consent to store and share information even where includes special category data, if it deems the student or other students or staff to be at risk of harm because of the student’s behaviour ([Data Protection Act 2018](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents/enacted) Schedule 1 paragraphs 1 and 18)[[11]](#footnote-12).

Under normal circumstances, student data will not be shared with third parties outside the Open University. If the data does need to be shared, the Open University will seek the consent of the student. The only circumstances under which the Open University could share the data with other organisations without student consent are in [Data Protection Act 2018](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents/enacted) Schedule 1 paragraphs 1, 10 and 18.

## Further clarification

If you have any queries around the content provided within this document and how to interpret it, please contact the Graduate School via [research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk](mailto:research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk) who are specially trained to advise on the implementation of policy.

If you have any comments about this policy document and how it might be improved, please submit these to the Graduate School via [research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk](mailto:research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk).

1. A third party monitor who has genuine concerns regarding the health and welfare of a student or other parties should raise the issues discussed with appropriate specialists within the University in confidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [https://www.togetherall.com](https://www.togetherall.com/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.gov.uk/when-mental-health-condition-becomes-disability> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://help.open.ac.uk/topic/disability/category/what-disability-support-is-available> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://help.open.ac.uk/topic/disability/category/disability-support-and-funding> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. <https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-academic-services/Pages/Safeguarding.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. <https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-academic-services/Pages/Guidelines-for-responding-to-distressed-and-suicidal-students.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/fitness-to-study>   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The General Data Protection Regulation sets out “special categories” of data which have to be given additional protection. These comprise your racial or ethnic origin, religious beliefs, political opinions, trade union membership, genetics, biometrics (where used for ID purposes) physical or mental health, sex life and sexual orientation. Information about criminal offences or criminal proceedings are treated similarly. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Student Privacy Notice  
     <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/sites/www.open.ac.uk.about.main/files/files/pgr-student-privacy-notice.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Data Protection Act 2018 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents/enacted> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)