

Interim Report into a Proposed Student Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy

Executive Summary

This Interim Report details the work to date of the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group, established in February 2023 at the Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London. The motivation for undertaking this initial research was a growing anecdotal awareness amongst personal tutors working with students enrolled on the MSc in Health Policy and the MSc in Patient Safety of increased reported Mental Health issues amongst these cohorts of students. This is coupled with the hypothesis these problems might be generated or exacerbated by the move to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as the primary mode of delivery for the MSc in Health Policy and MSc in Patient Safety.

An initial survey of the existing literature suggested a growing attention and focus on student mental health over the last 10 years but revealed a surprising and problematic paucity of research on specific issues for students undertaking an ODL-based education. A recent report from the Policy Institute at King's College London and the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education indicated the primary reason cited by students leaving university before completion of their studies was their mental health (Sanders, 2023). The report notes, “[t]here is a growing recognition that the psychological, inner lives of students matter as much to their studies as does their intelligence, if they are to succeed in their studies and later into life’, but asserts that “we know too little about the picture of student mental health at a national level, and who is most affected by mental ill-health” (ibid, p.4).

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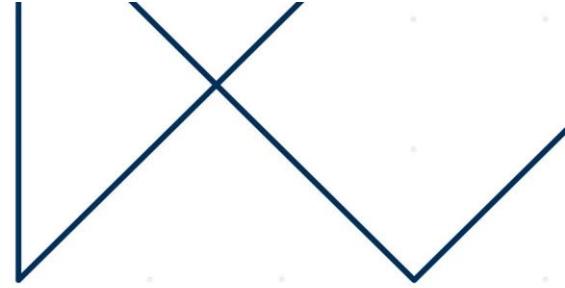
The Working Group proposed two research questions to be explored as a starting point, in order to develop a Mental Health strategy:

- What types of support, if any, do other comparable universities and institutes offer to students enrolled on postgraduate ODL programmes?
- What are the potential mental health impacts on our own students of studying on a part-time postgraduate ODL-based degree course, and what strategies might we implement to mitigate these impacts?

To ascertain preliminary answers to both of those broad research questions the working group developed two different questionnaires. The first was a short 7-question survey sent to individual university teaching staff at other universities identified through online research; the second was a 13-question survey distributed amongst MSc Health Policy and MSc Patient Safety students. In both cases response rates were sufficient for the Working Group to undertake credible data analysis, and to extrapolate results on which to formulate a Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the MSc Health Policy and MSc in Patient Safety. It is the understanding of the Working Group that this constitutes a novel enquiry into the issues facing students undertaking an ODL-based programme.

The results of this initial research which are presented in full in this report, confirm the initial motivation that underpinned the establishment of the Working Group. Namely, there is a substantial and growing challenge to student mental health as a consequence of undertaking ODL-based study. It allowed the working group to identify:

- Firstly, a number of actions that could be implemented quickly and with reasonable ease to address a number of these issues in the short term
- Secondly, a series of recommendations that could be rolled out in the medium and longer term, involving for instance staff development and pedagogical enhancements
- Thirdly, a series of next steps to expand this initial research phase and to develop a fully-fledged Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, that will impact on the experience of current and future students on the MSc Health Policy and MSc in Patient Safety, but also contribute to the growing research and enquiry into these issues across the postgraduate sector



Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased recognition of the need to address issues relating to student mental health and wellbeing within higher education. There is clear evidence that students who experience mental health issues are more likely to fail a module or course, or to drop out from a programme of study (Richardson, 2015), and are less likely to attain higher grades than their peers who are not experiencing mental health issues (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009). Research has also shown that students experience or develop mental health-related issues at a higher rate than non-students (Ribeiro et al, 2018), which suggests that participation in higher education could be a significant contributing factor to this increased burden.

However, the focus of research into student mental wellbeing has been on undergraduate and postgraduate research students, and on campus-based programmes more broadly (Lister, Seale, & Douce, 2021). This highlights a gap in the evidence base, which persists despite evidence showing that ODL students are as likely to experience mental health issues that impact on their learning experience as their on-campus peers (Barr, 2014). Furthermore, evidence from the Open University, the UK's largest provider of ODL university level courses, showed that between 2017-2018, 7.8% of their student body disclosed a mental health condition, compared to an average of 2.0% across the UK higher education (HE) sector (HESA, 2017). While it may be possible that individuals with mental health issues are more likely to opt for an ODL course rather than on-campus learning, the figures suggest that there is a higher burden related to mental ill health in ODL students (HESA, 2017). The increased mental health burden experienced by ODL students has been linked to employment, family, and caregiving responsibilities (Kahu et al, 2014), learning in isolation (Rath et al, 2019), and limited access to student support services (Tait, 2014). Despite this, there is still a paucity of research when it comes to identifying the barriers that stand in the way of supporting and improving mental health and wellbeing among online postgraduate taught students.

The Institute of Global Health Innovation (IGHI) is one of seven global challenge institutes at Imperial College London and is led by Professor the Lord Ara Darzi of Denham and Professor David Nabarro CBE. The IGHl is structured around core centres of excellence, including but not limited to the Centre for Health Policy, the HELIX Centre, and the Climate Cares Centre. The IGHl also offers a range of postgraduate programmes, including an MSc in Health Policy, and MSc in Healthcare and Design, and an MRes in Medical Robotics and Image-Guided Intervention. The IGHl is also responsible for the delivery of the flagship NHS Digital Academy programme, a PG Dip in Digital Health Leadership, as well as a Digital Maternity Leaders programme. Across all of its postgraduate programmes, the IGHl hosts around 400 students, a large number of whom are in full-time employment and undertake their studies on a part-time basis. Anecdotal evidence from teaching and support staff on these programmes suggest the burden of mental health issues is growing amongst IGHl students. A review of the literature highlighted the lack of evidence-based approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing in ODL postgraduate students (McManus, Dryer, & Henning, 2017; Frampton, Thompson, & Positive Digital Practices Student Panel, 2023; Lister, Seale, & Douce, 2023) and the difficulty in finding best practice recommendations on this topic.

In response to this need for evidence, a Working Group was set-up within MSc Health Policy, a programme delivered by the IGHl Education Team. The aim of the Working Group is to gather data on the topic of student mental health and wellbeing, both from internal sources (e.g. current students and alumni) and external sources, e.g. staff involved with the delivery of ODL postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes at other institutions. The research undertaken by the group will feed into a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, as well as forming the basis for the creation of a community of best practice dedicated to supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing amongst ODL PGT students.

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Methods

External Survey

In order to gather data on how other universities deliver support for the mental health and wellbeing of their ODL PGT students, a seven-question survey was developed (see Appendix A). The questions were developed based on themes identified in literature on student mental health and the researcher's professional experiences.

The inclusion criteria for this strand of the research project were:

- Working at a UK University
- Being a member of Teaching Staff responsible for, or closely linked to, the delivery of online postgraduate courses

Potential participants were identified through online searches, individuals whose emails were available online were added to the mailing list for the survey, and they were contacted via email. The email contained information about the research project, a link to the survey, and an invitation to stay in touch with the research team in order to create a community of best practice focused on the mental health and wellbeing of ODL PGT students. Eight responses were received. Whilst these responses are valued, we recognise the limitations of a small sample size.

Internal Survey

A 13-question was developed in order to gather data about student mental health and wellbeing of the current students on two of the IGHI's postgraduate programmes (MSc Health Policy and MSc Patient Safety). The questions were based on topics identified through literature review as well as information gathered as part of the external survey (see Appendix B).

The inclusion criteria were:

- Currently studying on the MSc in Health Policy at the IGHI
- Currently studying on the MSc in Patient Safety at the IGHI

Both the MSc in Health Policy and MSc in Patient Safety are part-time programmes completed over

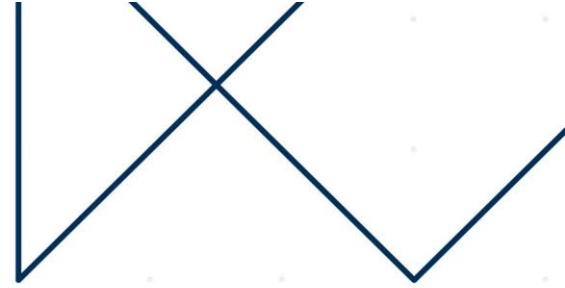
the course of two years. The survey was circulated among students by programme administrators. Potential participants were given a month to complete the survey, and a reminder email was sent two weeks into the four-week period. 36 responses were received. The students who responded were either finishing the 2nd year of their MSc in Health Policy or MSc in Patient Safety, finishing the 1st year of the same programmes.

Results

External Survey Results

Responses to the survey suggested that staff members involved in the delivery of ODL PGT programmes in the UK believed that students on these programmes faced specific challenges when it came to managing their mental health and wellbeing. The challenges highlighted included issues related to isolation and the lack of opportunities for face-to-face contact, during which staff could identify issues and provide support. Isolation was a key theme, as students had fewer opportunities to interact with their peers and create relationships, which could negatively affect both their learning experience and overall wellbeing. The other key set of challenges was related to time management, as ODL PGT students often have to complete their academic workload 'while maintaining a family and work life'.

In terms of whether ODL PGT programmes have a specific focus on mental health and wellbeing, 85% (6/7) of responses stated 'Yes'. Proactiveness and openness in discussing mental health, themed drop-in sessions for dissertation students (who seem particularly susceptible to mental health issues, perhaps due to the higher workload and solitary working?), and both regular and informal catch-ups between students and their personal tutor were all highlighted as initiatives put in place by programmes, with the aim of supporting and improving mental health and wellbeing. The negative answer identified lack of staff resources as a blocker to increasing focus on mental health. Other suggestions of 'best practice' included embedding self-care tips in online learning materials, inviting previous students to talk to current students to share how they managed their mental health, and ensuring the presence of multiple Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA England, 2023) among the IGHI programme team.



All of the respondents stated that the institutions where programmes were offered provided mental health support. Multiple responses offered suggestions as to how to increase awareness of these sources of support among students, including having a dedicated Student Advisor attached to each programme, making sure Personal Tutors are aware of the available services, and are able to signpost them when needed, and ensuring the support resources are collated and accessible to students (e.g. in a Programme Handbook). However, lack of funding for mental health services was highlighted as a barrier to providing effective support to students.

The final questions of the survey were related to the role of Personal Tutors. Seven of the eight responses indicated that there was a personal tutoring system in place within their institution. However, the roles and responsibilities of these Personal Tutors were less clear. Five participants replied to the question 'are personal tutors expected to provide mental health support to their tutees', with four participants responding 'Yes', and one responding 'No'. It was highlighted that Personal Tutors who were expected to provide mental health support were only intended to provide "limited direct support" but should be able to signpost tutees towards appropriate services. The 'direct support' was framed as "providing understanding and a compassionate ear to students" (Participant 6).

Internal Survey Results

The first two questions of the survey aimed to provide information as to how the students' mental health and wellbeing had evolved over the course of the programme. The results shown in Tables 1 and 2 highlight that a student's perception of their mental wellbeing seems to follow a negative course as students progress through the programme. Indeed, 82.4% of students stated that they had a positive feeling about their mental wellbeing before starting the course, but this figure drops to 38.2% for the statement "*I currently feel positive about my mental wellbeing*".

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Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Somewhat Disagree	3	8.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	8.8%
Somewhat Agree	17	50.0%
Strongly Agree	11	32.4%

Table 1: I felt positive about my mental wellbeing before starting my course (34 responses).

Strongly Disagree	4	11.8%
Somewhat Disagree	14	41.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	8.8%
Somewhat Agree	11	32.4%
Strongly Agree	2	5.9%

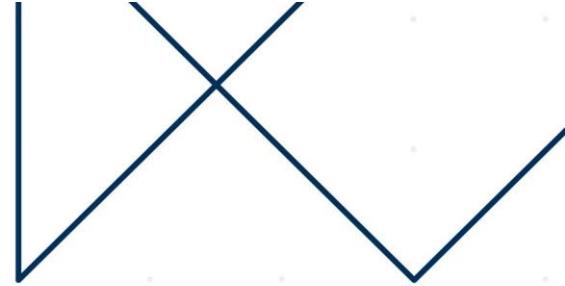
Table 2: I currently feel positive about my mental wellbeing (33 responses).

In order to provide further context to the data gathered in Questions 1 and 2, Question 3 asked participants to provide explanations behind the change in perception of their mental wellbeing. Difficulties in finding a work-life balance and ensuring effective time management were highlighted as key challenges. These difficulties were related to feeling overwhelmed by the demands of completing a PGT course (e.g., assessments and dissertation workload, where applicable) whilst juggling professional commitments and family life. As a result, students stated that they had less free time, which in turn implied that they had less time to rest and engage in leisure activities, resulting in fatigue and stress. Fatigue and stress were also linked to the isolation of studying online and therefore not having the opportunity to interact with their peers (both online and in-person). There was a mixed response in Question 4 about whether students were able to cope with the course-related workload. 41.2% of students stated they were not able to cope, whilst 41.2% of students responded that they could (see Table 3).

Strongly Disagree	1	2.9%
Somewhat Disagree	13	38.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	6	17.6%
Somewhat Agree	12	35.3%
Strongly Agree	2	5.9%

Table 3: Q4 - I am usually able to cope with the course-related workload I am expected to complete (34 responses).

Questions 5 and 6 discussed staff support and approachability. 28 of 33 participants responded either "Somewhat Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" to the statement "Staff on my course check in with me regularly to see how I am doing", with the remaining five participants answering "Neither agree nor disagree" (see Table 4). The results for Question 6, "I would feel comfortable raising any concerns with staff about my mental wellbeing", were more positive, with 16 out of 34 participants (47.1%) replying "Somewhat Agree" (N=14) or "Strongly



Agree” (N=2). 14 out of 34 participants (41.2%) replied either “Somewhat Disagree” (N=12) or “Strongly Disagree” (N=2) (see Table 5).

Strongly Disagree	13	39.4%
Somewhat Disagree	15	45.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	5	15.2%
Somewhat Agree	0	0.0%
Strongly Agree	0	0.0%

Table 4: Q5 - Staff on my course check-in with me regularly to see how I am doing (33 responses).

Strongly Disagree	2	5.9%
Somewhat Disagree	12	35.3%
Neither agree nor disagree	4	11.8%
Somewhat Agree	14	41.2%
Strongly Agree	2	5.9%

Table 5: Q6 - I would feel comfortable raising any concerns with staff about my mental wellbeing (34 responses).

Questions 7 through 9 were focussed on the topic of support services, and responses showed that awareness of tools and support offered by Imperial College was mixed amongst participants (see Table 6). Only three had experience of interacting with Imperial College support services aimed at mental wellbeing. The feedback from these students included the comments that the experience was “very positive”, but also that “[t]he waiting list was so long that it ended up being 3 months before [the student] received support” and “support services are helpful but overwhelmed”.

Strongly Disagree	1	2.9%
Somewhat Disagree	12	35.3%
Neither agree nor disagree	10	29.4%
Somewhat Agree	10	29.4%
Strongly Agree	1	2.9%

Table 6: Q7 - I am aware of the tools and support offered by Imperial College to support my mental wellbeing. (34 responses)

Questions 10 through 12 were on the topic of student mental wellbeing within the IGHI. Responses to Q10, “I believe that student wellbeing is a priority within the Institute of Global Health Innovation”, suggest that students are largely unaware of student wellbeing as a particular focus within the institute, as 20 out of 32 respondents answered “Neither Agree nor Disagree”. Five participants responded either “Somewhat Disagree” or “Strongly

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Disagree”, whilst 7 students responded either “Somewhat Agree” or “Strongly Agree”. In responses to Q11, “Do you have any suggestions as to how the Institute of Global Health Innovation could support student wellbeing?”, the key themes included improved pre-course communication, increase visibility and awareness of support services, increase contact with Personal Tutors (PTs), improve consistency and flexibility across modules, and an increased number of social events and other opportunities for face-to-face contact (see *Panel 1* for more detailed information).

Pre-course Communication:

- Provide detailed information about expected hours, term dates, and assignment deadlines upfront, before students commence the course.
- Highlight groupwork deadlines after holiday breaks to minimise disruptions for those who may have scheduled leave.
- Take into account the challenges faced by students with regard to school holidays and explore alternative scheduling options.

In-person Engagement:

- Increase the number of in-person days throughout the course to foster greater face-to-face interaction and collaboration among students.
- Recognise the difficulties faced by students working full time and living in different time zones, and adapt group projects to accommodate these challenges.

Peer Support and Buddy System:

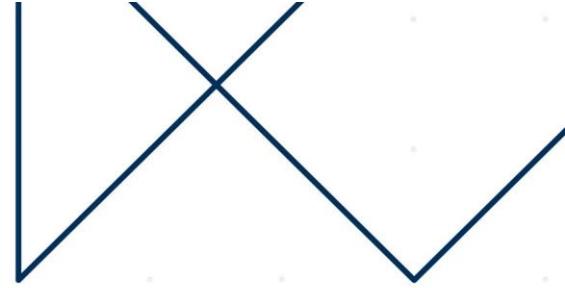
- Establish a ‘buddy’ system that pairs students to provide mutual assistance and encouragement and make better use of existing peer-support provision
- Encourage students to form study groups or support networks to share experiences and help each other cope with the demands of the course.

Support Resources:

- Introduce a confidential support service provided by individuals independent of the course and university to address students' personal and mental health concerns.
- Ensure that students are aware of support services and the resources available to them for seeking assistance.
- Improve the signposting of available resources and support services, emphasising these during on-campus days and residential.
- Provide occasional sessions during residential to address mental health and wellbeing topics, promoting self-care and resilience.
- Explore opportunities for students to build relationships and feel connected to the department, such as arranging optional visits to relevant exhibitions or institutions.

Course Redesign and Understanding Student Situations:

- Enhance understanding among lecturers and course leads regarding the students' situations and constraints to ensure more empathetic and flexible course delivery.

**Personal Tutor and Regular Contact:**

- Encourage regular communication between tutors and students to address concerns, offer guidance, and monitor student wellbeing.

Clear Extension Process:

- Provide guidelines and instructions to students on how to apply for extensions and clarify how these extensions apply to group assessments.

Early Release of Reading Material:

- Release reading materials for upcoming modules well in advance, including during the summer break, to allow students more time to familiarise themselves with the content.

Consistency and Flexibility:

- Strive for greater consistency across modules regarding workload, expectations, and assessment criteria to reduce unnecessary stress and confusion.
- Encourage course leaders to consider external pressures on students' lives and explore flexible approaches to deadlines, sessions, and assessments.

Timely Support and Increased Interaction:

- Ensure timely responses to student queries through email and other communication channels.
- Organise longer online sessions, such as extended office hours, to provide students with additional opportunities for interaction and support.

Group Coaching and Social Events:

- Arrange group coaching sessions with tutors to foster a supportive learning community and address collective concerns.
- Organize social events and activities, both in person and online, to promote student socialization and a sense of belonging within the course.

Panel 1: Suggestions on how the IGHI could improve student wellbeing

Of the initiatives put forward in Q12 of the survey, “Do you think any of the following ideas would be useful in helping you manage your mental wellbeing?”, a mentoring scheme received the most positive response (25 out of 34 participants stated they thought it would be helpful), whilst social events were also highlighted as a potentially useful intervention (16 out of 34 participants stated they thought it would be helpful). Mindfulness lessons and “stress-busting” workshops received some positive feedback (9/34 and 6/34 respectively).

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Mindfulness Lessons, Drop-In Sessions, or Group Workshops	9
Stress-Busting Workshops	6
Mentoring Scheme	25
IGHI-organised social events to meet and interact with other students	16

Table 7: Q12 - Do you think any of the following ideas would be useful in helping you manage your mental wellbeing? Please tick the options you think would be helpful.

Summary of Results & Key Recommendations

Summary of Results

The results of the surveys support the anecdotal experience of staff within the IGHl who reported that they had noticed an increase in mental health issues. The data gathered from IGHl students also supports the view shared by staff members involved in the delivery of ODL PGT programmes that there were particular challenges related to being an ODL PGT student, and that these challenges are likely to play a part in the development of certain mental health and wellbeing issues reported by students.

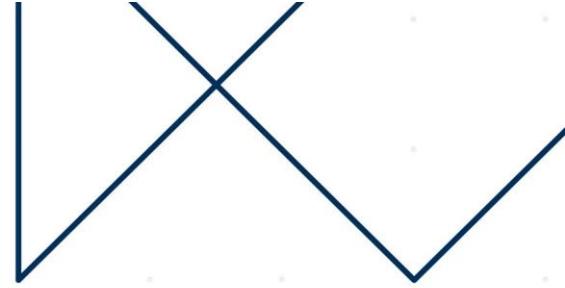
The student-facing survey also highlighted that there is an opportunity for the IGHl to increase its focus on the mental health and wellbeing of students on its academic programmes. A key finding of the survey is that there is considerable improvement to be made when it comes to making students aware of support services available to them, but also to shine a light on student mental wellbeing more broadly. The results of the survey suggest that fostering an environment where mental health is openly discussed and where students are aware that their mental wellbeing is being taken into account is essential to making sure that students feel comfortable discussing their mental wellbeing, and by extension it is an essential step in allowing staff to provide support to students when needed. The findings of this report suggest that adopting a proactive and visible approach to student mental wellbeing is a key step in creating an environment conducive to the effective support and promotion of student mental wellbeing.

The findings of the surveys undertaken within the scope of this project were used as a basis to create an IGHl Student Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy. Another key deliverable of the project was the drafting of a Student Mental Health Support Plan to raise awareness and facilitate mental health-related interactions and discussions among both students and staff members. Recommendations and suggested actions are presented in the following section.

Key Recommendations

Practical Recommendations

- Pre-Course Communication
 - Provide detailed information about expected hours, term dates, and assignment deadlines upfront, before students commence the course.
 - Highlight groupwork deadlines after holiday breaks to minimize disruptions for those who may have scheduled leave.
 - Take into account the challenges faced by students with regard to school holidays and explore alternative scheduling options.
- In-Person Engagement
 - Increase the number of in-person days throughout the course to foster greater face-to-face interaction and collaboration among students.



- Recognise the difficulties faced by students working full time and living in different time zones, and adapt group projects to accommodate these challenges.
- Peer Support & Mentoring
 - Establish a peer support programme or buddy system that pairs students to provide mutual assistance and encouragement.
 - Encourage students to form study groups or support networks to share experiences and help each other cope with the demands of the course.
 - Introduce a mentoring programme.
- Group Coaching and Social Events
 - Arrange group coaching sessions with tutors to foster a supportive learning community and address collective concerns.
 - Organise social events and activities, both in person and online, to promote student socialization and a sense of belonging within the course.
- Add **indication of 'time-to-complete'** for online learning materials.
- **Conduct Student Mental Health & Wellbeing Survey every start & end of year** (to track wellbeing of cohort & impact of actions).
- Rework approach to **building connections between students** – mentoring scheme, peer support groups etc...
- Ensure **Personal Tutors are proactive** in supporting students allocated to them.
- Build on external colleague survey to **create a community of best practice** for supporting online PG students.

Limitations

As this was an exploratory study, there are multiple limitations to the resulting report. Firstly, the number of participants was low across both surveys. Limited additional information was collected about the participants (e.g. age, employment status, location...). The data collected as part of the student-facing survey was self-reported, and as such may be affected by social desirability bias and courtesy bias. Furthermore, the data were not subjected to any rigorous statistical tests. Responses for the student survey were only gathered from students on IGHI ODL PGT programmes, so findings may not be generalisable to other institutions or student cohorts. Finally, the numerical scales used may not capture the entirety of the human experience involved in some of the constructs and domains examined.

Broader Improvements

- **Review workload across modules** to ensure consistency.
- **Review deadlines** and necessity of having >2 assessments.

Conclusion

This report has shown that there are particular challenges linked to the experience of being an ODL PGT student, and that these challenges can lead students to develop issues related to their mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the rapid review of the literature undertaken within the scope of this project has shown that there is a lack of evidence when it comes to developing and implementing interventions and initiatives that support and promote positive mental health and wellbeing among these student cohorts.

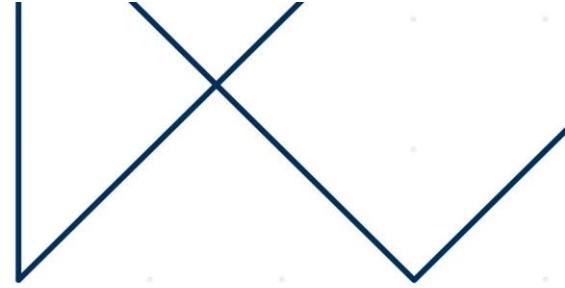
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This report presents a list of key recommendations, both practical and those with a broader scope, which may be helpful in providing the framework for the development of mental health strategies aimed at supporting the mental health and wellbeing of ODL PGT students.

As stated previously, there are limitations to the evidence presented in this report due to the exploratory nature of this research project. However, the results clearly indicate that further research is needed in terms of understanding how ODL PGT students manage their mental health and wellbeing, the challenges they face which may have a negative impact on their mental wellbeing, and how institutions and programme teams can develop and implement initiatives which helps students overcome these barriers but also promotes their wellbeing more broadly.

Another key aim that the authors of this report are very interested in meeting is the creation of a community of best practice which brings together staff members who are involved in the delivery of ODL PG programmes. Setting-up this community will enable relevant staff to meet and discuss issues related to the mental health and wellbeing of ODL PGT students, and to share recommendations and experiences which will improve the sector-wide approach to this issue.

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