

The PhD Well-being Assessment – Information for Supervisors

Introduction

The graduate schools' objectives include the enhancement of the quality of postgraduate training and education and the dissemination of best practice. Previous surveys such as ROLE(2007) and PRES(2008) have reported high levels of satisfaction overall amongst our PhD population, without necessarily giving clear pointers as to how the quality of the student experience could be further improved. Therefore, to gain a better insight, it was decided to conduct a more in-depth assessment of the Imperial PhD experience.

The assessment

An on-line assessment was developed specifically for Imperial's PhD population. The assessment was based upon a clinically approved methodology and drew upon consultations with over 60 students and staff. After piloting, the students were invited to complete a questionnaire during May 2009. The student union was highly supportive of the project and helped to publicise the exercise.

Results

1202 students completed the assessment, giving a response rate of over 45%. In addition to quantitative data, 229 free text comments were received. Analysis has allowed us to rank the issues that have the greatest negative impact on researchers' well-being. The top ten are reported here, along with some questions that supervisors, directors of postgraduate study, postgraduate tutors and other colleagues might consider. The findings underline the importance of an open relationship between supervisors and students within which appropriate feedback may be given – both to reassure students who are performing well and to point out problems that may need addressing.

The well-being top ten most troublesome items:

1. Feeling frustrated / demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress

Experienced researchers understand that progress is non-linear and difficult to predict. For inexperienced researchers, remaining objective and realistic about an apparent lack of progress can be difficult.

- Do your PhD students have a realistic view of what research is like?
- Are they well prepared for the inevitable difficulties along the way?

2. Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research

The following comment was typical "it's stressful not knowing what you are doing, where you are headed and time running out." Compared to undergraduate life, the PhD experience is much more demanding and some stress may be unavoidable. It can be helpful to encourage a more proactive approach to stress management.

- Are students aware of the support available within the department and beyond, such as the counselling service and stress management workshops run by the graduate schools?

3. Being unclear about the next stage of your career after your PhD?

Uncertainty about one's career is inevitable, especially in times of economic downturn. As time goes by, this item becomes increasingly worrying if not resolved.

- Are PhD students aware of the career management courses offered by the Graduate Schools and that they may freely consult the Careers Advisory Service (who offer services specifically for PhD students)?
- Are they encouraged to think about career options sooner rather than later?

4. Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard.

Students reported not feeling good enough to be doing a PhD and being scared that they would be "found out". Related to this is a certain lack of understanding of what constitutes work of "the necessary standard". Research elsewhere indicates that students are sometimes unwilling to discuss research problems with supervisors for fear of looking unprofessional.

- Is sufficient feedback being offered to help PhD students gain a clear idea of their performance and the level of work expected?

5. Being frustrated with the college's administration systems

Some issues of departmental administration are bothersome to students. For example, students may perceive that progress reports or updates required by departments are not read by anyone and are therefore pointless. Students get frustrated by administration related to registering, ordering supplies, finances, etc., particularly when they seem to be unnecessarily time consuming.

- Is there clear guidance within the department/division about PhD administration procedures and how reports are dealt with?
- Could more be done to raise awareness of how to deal with administration processes?

6. Having a high workload that impacts on your private life

Achieving a reasonable work-life balance can be very difficult. Reported reasons for perhaps trying to do too much included self-imposed pressure and feeling the need to compete with others. However, as one student said, "even PhD students are not brains in jars" and everyone needs some time off. Several students reported not knowing about holiday allowances or feeling unable to take holiday because of their workload.

- Is the student's workload regularly discussed with the supervisor?
- Is the level of late evening and weekend work appropriate?
- Are students aware of their holiday entitlements? How much holiday are they actually taking?

7. Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research

PhD students normally have a track-record of high achievement prior to commencing their degree. When faced with the new challenges of research, it can be difficult to cope – students may feel that failure is a possibility for the first time or may have unrealistic expectations that work must be perfect. Some students reported making unfavourable comparisons with colleagues, often

assuming that others are doing much better, which further added to their anxiety. Again, feedback is crucial to allow researchers to have a realistic view of their performance and progress.

- Does the student have sufficiently strong relationships with other researchers in the group / department within which research problems may be discussed?

8. Experiencing a persistent low mood because of your research

One student summed this up by saying “the transition from ‘top of the class’ to ‘bad researcher’ is pretty tough”.

- Does the research group environment include a social element?

9. Feeling constantly tired and run-down because of your workload

Several students reported problems with sleeping and /or working too many hours to get enough rest.

- Is the work-life balance acceptable?
- If this problem is persistent, is the student made aware of the appropriate support mechanisms?

10. Feeling disappointed in your own abilities as an academic researcher.

In many cases PhD candidates begin with the intention of pursuing a research/academic career afterwards. During the course of the PhD many researchers change their career intentions. Perhaps some potentially successful researchers are deterred because of their own unduly harsh assessments of their abilities. This may also lead to a loss of motivation for the final stages of the PhD.

- Is the PhD student encouraged to take up appropriate opportunities to speak about their work at seminars or conferences?
- Is the student receiving sufficient feedback, both negative and positive, to allow them to achieve their full potential?

Further work

The graduate schools will carry out further analysis of the well-being data and will issue further reports from time to time. If you would like to comment upon this work, please email elaine.walsh@imperial.ac.uk.