

# The PhD Well-being Assessment

## Information for PhD Students

### Background

In early 2009, an on-line well-being assessment was developed specifically for Imperial's PhD population. The assessment was based on a clinically approved methodology and drew upon consultations with over 60 students and staff. After piloting, students were invited to complete the questionnaire during May 2009.

### Results

1202 students completed the assessment, giving a response rate of over 45%. In addition to quantitative data, 229 free text comments were received.

Statistical 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 students might like to consider.

### The well-being top ten most troublesome items:

1. Feeling frustrated / demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress.
2. Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research.
3. Being unclear about the next stage of your career after your PhD.
4. Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard.
5. Being frustrated with the college's administration systems.
6. Having a high workload that impacts on your private life.
7. Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research.
8. Experiencing a persistent low mood because of your research.
9. Feeling constantly tired and run-down because of your workload.
10. Feeling disappointed in your own abilities as an academic researcher.

### Questions to consider

#### *About doing research*

- Are your expectations for your rate of progress realistic? Are you aware that for most researchers progress is non-linear and there may be periods when you feel like you are getting nowhere?
- Are you receiving sufficient and useful feedback and guidance about your work? If not, let your supervisor(s) know.
- Is/are your relationship(s) with supervisor(s) sufficiently open to allow you to raise difficulties and doubts? It is usually better to address problems quickly, before they grow.

- Do you have sufficiently strong relationships with others in your group / department so that problems may be discussed?
- Are you taking up appropriate opportunities to speak about your work at seminars or conferences?
- Is your workload appropriate? Do you need to discuss it with your supervisor(s)?
- Do your research group activities include a social element? If not, consider starting something up – probably everyone else would appreciate it?

#### *About stress and your health*

- Are you aware of the support available within the department (postgraduate tutors) and beyond (College tutors), the counselling service and stress management workshops run by the graduate schools?
- Are you being proactive to manage your stress levels? Don't ignore the signs of stress or wait for problems to become serious.
- Are you taking suitable breaks, doing any physical exercise, eating well, etc?
- Is your work-life balance acceptable and healthy?
- Are you working late evenings and at weekends too often?
- Do you find some time for recreational activities?
- Are you aware of your holiday entitlements? Are you actually taking any holiday?

#### *About your future plans*

- Are you aware of the career management courses offered by the Graduate Schools and that you may freely consult the Careers Advisory Service (who offer services and events specifically for PhD students)?
- Have you talked to your supervisor and others in your department/division about your career plans?
- Are you starting to think about your next steps early on in your PhD? Career planning takes time, so don't leave it too late!

#### *About other matters*

- Do you regularly get together with other researchers for social as well as research related reasons?
- Is there clear guidance within your department/division about administration processes? If not, ask for it.

### **Guidance for Academic Staff**

There is a companion document to this one written for academic staff. It can be downloaded from the Graduate Schools' web site at <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/graduateschools/events>

### **Further work**

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