Peer Pastoral Support: Working with Doctoral Students to Co-Create a Supportive Postgraduate Researcher Environment

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Abstract

This paper delves into the inception, evolution, and impact of Peer Pastoral Support Groups (PPSGs) at Newcastle University, specifically within the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty. Originating as a response to the challenges imposed by the COVID- 19 pandemic, the PPSGs were initially designed to mitigate potential loneliness and facilitate socialisation among first-year PhD students. However, these groups continued beyond the pandemic, becoming an integral part of the Researcher Education and Development (RED) program. The paper suggests that the co-creation of support networks is vital in establishing a supportive postgraduate researcher environment.

Keywords: peer support; co-creation; student experience; mutual support; higher education; pandemic

1. Introduction

Establishing an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters the 'integration and socialisation' of doctoral students with their peers and the wider academic community has repeatedly arisen in qualitative research as one of the main factors that prevent early dropout during the initial stages of a PhD (Devos & Boudrenghien et al., 2017). Accessing opportunities for socialisation, however, became increasingly difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, where typical induction activities migrated to an online space. At Newcastle University, within the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty (HaSS) Researcher Education and Development (RED) programme, Peer Pastoral Support Groups (PPSGs) were created for new first year PhD students to mitigate the potential loneliness they might feel, not only as a result of the COVID- 19 Pandemic but the general and widely self-reported loneliness that can occur during the period of a doctoral degree (Togetherall, 2022).

These PPSGs, being a popular feature of the doctoral training offered, then continued after the COVID-19 pandemic, providing more students the opportunity to meet researchers outside of their academic school unit and from different stages within the PhD process. The resulting analysis explores the significance of the PPSGs at Newcastle University from 2020 to 2023, summarising not only the benefits a similar system can bring to a higher-education doctoral training course but also how the doctoral students appointed as leaders of these groups adapted the support they offered, collected feedback and how, reciprocally, they grew as more thoughtful and compassionate researchers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Building the PPSG Community

The PPSG case study primarily targets stage 1 PGR students and those enrolled in the Postgraduate Training Certificate within the HaSS faculty. This initiative has been successful in establishing a meaningful peer support network among staff and students. The PPSG operates throughout the academic year, offering a dedicated space for PGRs to openly discuss their first- year doctoral experiences, including key milestones and challenges, while engaging with peers from various disciplines within the faculty. During the first semester, these groups convene six to seven times, and in the second semester, the continuity is maintained with one or two seminar groups meeting an additional four to five times.

In accordance with the findings from the study by Cahill et al. (2014), which indicate that students are inclined to seek academic and pastoral support that resonates with their goals, the PPSG has been designed to fulfil three primary objectives: 1) It provides practical guidance to help students navigate the RED framework effectively; 2) It ensures that first-stage students have consistent access to a supportive peer network, irrespective of external circumstances; 3)

It fosters an environment where colleagues facing similar academic journeys can connect, share insights, and offer mutual support, thereby enhancing their overall program experience.

2.2. Establishment the Function of PPSG

In September 2020, the PPSG was established to support new PhD students during the lockdown. Its primary aim was to keep students on course with their induction process while addressing the isolation felt by many, particularly those studying from abroad or living alone in student halls in Newcastle (Leonardo, 2021). Recognizing a gap that Student Union societies' social activities could not fill, the PPSG offered more curriculum-focused support to foster a sense of community and maintain student engagement.

To facilitate this, students were encouraged to join the PPSG and were strategically placed into diverse groups. This intentional mixing was designed to mirror the program's cross-

disciplinary nature and proved to be effective. Consequently, seven or eight small groups, each comprising ten to twelve students, were successfully established. This structure not only helped in maintaining a close-knit community but also allowed for a more personalised support system, aligning with the program's overarching goals of connection and academic progress.

2.3. Delivery and Structure of PPSG Sessions

During the pandemic, the PPSG sessions were conducted exclusively via Zoom to adhere to safety protocols. However, with the easing of restrictions in the UK, a hybrid model for session delivery was adopted post-pandemic. This new approach includes two groups continuing solely online, two groups meeting exclusively in-person, and three to four groups adopting a flexible format that combines both online and in-person meetings.

Table 1: Schedule of Sessions with Topics and Sub-topics

Schedule of Session	Topics and Sub-topics
Session 1	Welcome and Introductions
Session 2	Inductions; Basic Requirements for First-Year PhDs; Navigation and Utilisation of Essential Websites and Systems at Newcastle University
Session 3	Personal Development and Research Training Planning; Time Management; Selection of Suitable Research Training
Session 4	Learning and Researching Online
Session 5	Reflections – "How is it Going?"
Session 6	Review of the First Few Months and Looking Ahead
Session 7	Content Varies Based on Group Feedback

The PPSG activities were structured into seven distinct sessions, each focusing on a specific aspect of the program. (For a detailed overview, please refer to Table 1 above, which outlines the topics for each session scheduled for Semester One.) Initially, these sessions were held more frequently to aid student induction, gradually reducing in frequency to allow students to focus on their individual projects, while still providing regular check-in points. These sessions addressed common concerns and challenges at different stages of the program. For instance, one session was dedicated to effective time management strategies during research training and project execution.

2.4. Facilitating PPSG Sessions with Flexibility and Collaboration

To ensure a smooth progression of the Pastoral Peer Support Group (PPSG) sessions, Teaching Assistants (TAs) were equipped with PowerPoint presentations for the first six

sessions. This approach significantly reduced the need for extensive preparation, allowing TAs to focus more on facilitation. However, recognizing the dynamic nature of these sessions, TAs were granted the flexibility to modify the provided materials and topics to better align with the specific learning needs of the students in each session. This adaptability ensured that the content remained relevant and responsive to the group's evolving requirements. For the seventh and final session, a more collaborative approach was adopted. TAs were encouraged to actively engage with student feedback to shape the session's content. This process involved working collectively to identify key areas of interest or concern among the students and then developing tailored materials to address these topics. This collaborative effort between TAs and students not only enhanced the relevance of the final session but also fostered a sense of ownership and engagement within the group.

2.5. Roles, Training and Feedback Process for TAs in PPSG Sessions

The PPSG sessions were conducted by later-stage research student TAs, who brought their empathy and firsthand experiences to assist new students. In collaboration with faculty members, TAs co-created the foundational agendas and materials for each session, fostering a co-construction of knowledge that was instrumental in building rapport between staff and students (Van Schaik, et al., 2019). TAs were responsible for fielding queries and providing feedback to faculty members as necessary, creating a responsive and engaging learning environment.

To prepare TAs for their roles, the module leader conducted training and welcome sessions before each semester, as well as mid-term and concluding meetings. These training sessions and meetings aimed to align TAs with the common goals of the peer support groups, offer a platform for feedback and encourage them to share feedback about the sessions, and discuss strategies to tailor the sessions to optimally meet the diverse learning needs of students.

Considering the distinct characteristics and dynamic nature of each group, TAs were required to provide written feedback after every session. This feedback, sent via email to the module leader, includes detailed observations and reflections on how the session unfolded. This practice allowed for effective monitoring of TA engagement and commitments and gauging the overall progress of each session.

As the semester draws to a close, TAs and faculty members come together to assess the semester's outcomes. This collaborative review process also involves making strategic decisions about the number of groups to be continued or adjusted for the following semester, ensuring the program's responsiveness to the evolving educational landscape and student needs.

At the end of each semester, a collaborative review between TAs and faculty members took place to evaluate the semester's outcomes. This collaborative review process also involves

making strategic decisions about the number of groups to be continued or adjusted for the following semester, ensuring the program's responsiveness to the evolving educational landscape and student needs. TAs received both compensation for their time and valuable experience, enhancing the appeal of these roles for students looking to enrich their CVs.

3. Data Analysis

We devised a questionnaire containing 12 questions (excluding identifying data) in order to discover the impact of the PPSGs on stage 1 PhD and PGCert students in the HaSS faculty and improve the experience for subsequent cohorts. Respondents were anonymised, consented to the use of their data in this research paper and had the option to withdraw before publication. The findings from this questionnaire will also be used to improve the PPSGs for future PhD and PGCert students. The questionnaire received 11 responses from PhD and/or PGCert students from a variety of schools within the HaSS faculty. There was a minimum of 1 respondent per academic year (2020-2023), with the highest proportion of respondents attending semester 1 of the current academic year (23/24). Respondents attended either in-person or online, though the latter was more commonly observed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were full- time, with the exception of one part-time respondent.

The respondents understood the aim of the PPSGs to be supportive, sympathetic and non-judgemental, with each session revolving around a predetermined topic. This is an accurate reflection of the main aim of the PPSGs, which indicates that the PPSGs were successful in their approach. The respondents identified that PPSGs focused on topics such as registration, time management, Annual Progress Review regulations and stress reduction techniques. Respondents noted that the PPSG leaders provided an open forum to ask questions and seek guidance on areas they needed support with, which is a particular strength of the PPSGs.

Students were overall quite satisfied with the support offered by the PPSGs, as indicated by responses to question 9 (Table 2). Many students selected 10 for this, which indicates the PPSGs are supportive environments. The responses to question 10 (Table 2) were more varied, concluding in a rounded average of 6.91. This demonstrates that there is potential to improve descriptions and understandings of the essential requirements through PPSGs. However, we have since produced a series of 12 educational resource videos, funded by the Faculty Education Enhancement Fund, as a response to this potentiality in light of previous student feedback, which aims to tackle this issue. As a result, subsequent PPSGs will direct students to these resources and then tackle any further questions within the sessions when the students require them.

Table 2: Responses to the questions assessing the satisfaction of the students, and imparting of knowledge regarding the essential requirements of the PhD or PGCert.

ID	Question 9 : With 10 being the most supportive and 1 being the least, how would you rate the level of support provided by your Peer Pastoral Group Leader?	Question 10: With 10 being the most, and 1 being the least, how would you rate the extent to which the Peer Pastoral Group has helped you understand the essential requirements of your PhD or PGCert?
HCA1	7	6
HCA2	10	10
SELL1	7	4
HCA3	8	4
APL1	7	1
LS1	10	10
HCA4	7	4
ECLS1	10	10
SML1	10	7
ELCS2	10	10
HCA5	10	10
Average	8.727272727	6.909090909

Respondents were asked to provide three words to describe their Peer Pastoral experience, as seen below in Figure 1. With the exception of two students who stated it could be improved through the continuation of PPSG groups throughout the PhD process, respondents typically responded positively.

Figure 1:Word cloud depicting all the responses to question 11. The larger text indicates a higher frequency.

Responses to question 12, an open-ended question requesting any other comments or feedback, featured ideas that are largely recommendations out of the scope of PPSGs. This included requests for groups formulated around students with 'caring responsibilities', for example, mature students or school-specific meetings. These groups are available in the wider University through societies, for example. However, the suggestion of these implies a lack of

awareness regarding community-building initiatives, which the PPSGs could draw more attention towards. Other responses request more opportunities for feedback immediately after the PPSG has lapsed to allow for continuous improvement and growth and provision past first-year PhD. We willreflect on these comments and consider how they can be implemented. Though PPSGs do not currently exist past first year PhD, the wider university hosts accountability groups for PhD students across the university at any stage. Therefore, our primary concern will be increasing awareness of the aims of the PPSG and implementing a more robust feedback protocol.

4. Reflections & Limitations

Reflecting on what made the PPSGs a success from the point of view of the leaders of this group, i.e., the PhD students who facilitated the support, it is the joint opinion of the authors of this paper that co-creation was necessary to adapt the objectives of the groups to the changing needs of the students. What this translates to is working with staff from the RED programme to review and construct sessions that are built on 'live' feedback given by participants during the PPSG sessions. For example, in the first year of the sessions, much of the discussions focused on understanding technical acronyms relating to parts of a PhD. By coming together to meet with other leaders and staff, we could then move to co-create resources that assisted new PhD students in understanding the 'language' of the programme.

While this study offers valuable insights into student expectations and the effectiveness of academic and pastoral support, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in its design. The study utilised a relatively small sample size, which exhibited biases in terms of disciplines (only in HaSS faculty). Additionally, various contextual factors, including the students' place of residence, age, work-based learning experiences, the specific curriculum studied, and their prior educational background, might have influenced the outcomes. These variables warrant further exploration to deepen our understanding of their impact and to enhance the comprehensiveness of future research in this area.

5. Conclusion

The PPSGs were born out of the pandemic crisis but quickly turned into a dynamic and well-received feature of our faculty's offerings for PGRs. Sense of belonging in a scholarly community, social isolation and anticipation of future workload are cited as some of the main stressors for first-stage PhD students (Cornwall et al., 2019), and the data gathered for this study seems to suggest, notwithstanding the limitation of our sample, that the PPSGs have contributed to an easier and more productive transition for new students at Newcastle University.

The fundamental value of peer connections (Jackmant et al., 2023) for new PhD students was at the basis of the creation of the groups, and it was rewarding to see that our participants used words such as supportive, social, reassuring and friendly in their responses. This initial study seems to indicate that aimed peer support in the delicate period of transition into a PhD is a useful and worthwhile endeavour, but that provisions should not stop at stage one and that more could be done to provide new starters with the key information they need on processes and requirements. We have already started to respond to the feedback by creating a package of video resources and are exploring synergies with our University's PGR Community to trace a clear path of peer support across a PhD career.

The next step in our investigation will be reflecting on the intrinsic reward, both in terms of professional development, personal growth and researcher education, that leading these groups brings to our Teaching Assistant. We hope to secure further funding from the University to pursue these pedagogical research avenues and to continue to offer "invaluable" and "supportive" peer exchange spaces for all our PGRs.

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