

Abstract

Recent research has found that PhD students are suffering from psychological well-being problems at much higher rates than the general population. The alarming extent of these problems lead to much individual suffering and impose hefty economic, social, and intellectual costs. Despite increasing attention on doctoral well-being, there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the factors that underpin it. Most studies have been limited by focusing on one institution or disciplinary area. Moreover, almost all published studies have focused on PhD students in Western societies and there has been no large-scale systematic attempt to map out the psychological well-being of PhD students in Hong Kong, or elsewhere in Asia for that matter. To address these limitations, the proposed study will involve an empirical, mixed methods study of PhD students across all disciplines and across all public universities in Hong Kong. More specifically, this study aims to: (1) document the psychological well-being of PhD students in Hong Kong; (2) examine how the postgraduate research environment predicts PhD student psychological well-being; (3) compare the well-being of PhD students in Hong Kong with international comparison groups; and (4) provide feedback to the University Grants Committee and the Graduate Schools to improve policy and practice. The study has three phases. In Phase 1, a large-scale territory-wide survey will be administered to saturation to the more than 7,000 PhD students in Hong Kong's eight publicly-funded universities. The survey will cover the postgraduate research environment, psychological well-being, and key personal background characteristics. A follow-up qualitative study using focus groups will flesh out the quantitative results. In Phase 2, the well-being data from Phase 1 will be compared with a key international dataset to help put the Hong Kong findings in context. Phase 3 will focus on providing feedback to the government and universities, with the goal of helping them formulate beneficial policies and practices, thereby maximizing impact. The proposed project moves the literature forward by examining the role of the postgraduate research environment in enabling or inhibiting well-being. The focus on environmental factors is theoretically rooted in a solid body of psychological research and is also solution-focused, because they are more malleable and amenable to policy and intervention efforts. By identifying the critical environmental factors most pertinent for well-being, it also yields actionable knowledge that can be used to craft effective policies and practices for optimizing doctoral well-being.