



# Strand A: Research Culture and Community PGR Placement Report

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## Introduction

Following the [PGR mental health survey](#) conducted by the UEA students union in 2015, it was found that a sizable proportion of UEA PGRs display symptoms of poor mental-health with 76% of respondents experiencing anxiety, 58% experiencing depression and 45% suffering from loneliness and isolation during their studies. The purpose of this report is describe the work conducted as part of the Strand A of the Courage Project PGR placement to understand research culture and community and to focus on the cross-section of PGRs in the faculty of science (SCI), identifying faculty-specific factors that may impact upon wellbeing and mental health, including the working environment, bullying and harassment and supervisory relationships and to make recommendations for improvements.

UEA has a reputation as an inclusive university and many are attracted to study here precisely because of this. To live up to this reputation we must root out the cause of mental health problems within our own ranks. The purpose of this study is first to understand the nature of these issues within SCI and evaluate how these findings may be applicable at an institutional level. In addition to suggesting faculty-specific measures, this report will suggest fundamental changes to the nature of academia that will affect how institutions are run and grants are awarded.

## Methods

Eleven one-on-one interviews have been conducted with current or recent PGRs across the seven schools in SCI faculty. Interview responses were recorded and transcribed according to GDPR regulations. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, where questions varied depending on the interview responses. These questions were asked around the following themes: research culture and community e.g. 'how is wellbeing promoted in your research environment?' PGR-supervisor relationship e.g. 'how would you describe your relationship with your primary supervisor?', and how their difficulties were handled by the university 'did you seek help?' The questions were designed to understand the following

- Is there a culture of acceptance around mental health problems in SCI?
- Are supervisors following university guidelines on good supervisor practice?
- Are measures in place to adequately support students?
- How can the culture in academia be improved?

The responses from the interviews were then used to construct fictional anonymous monologues. This was done so that anonymity of these PGRs is preserved whilst the impact on their mental health, of their PhD studies, can be fully appreciated and their experiences shared. A selection of the monologues were performed during a workshop at the Courage Festival during the Giving a Voice session and have been published in the Lakeside View PGR Blog. The monologues are fictional but are based on the true experiences of the interviewees. It is hoped that by sharing these monologues and the recommendations that arose through the interview process, that the voice of PGRs experiencing challenging circumstances can be heard and courageous conversations can begin. The monologues are presented in the following section.

## Monologues

### Monologue A

I have always struggled a lot with anxiety but these last three years, things have really gone downhill. I knew that a PhD would be hard work, but I have done hard work before. The stress I have been experiencing through this is something on a whole different plane. It is this environment, it is hostile and uncertain. It is not a supportive or kind place, it multiplies the stress. There are so many competing pressures. Undercutting them is that looming deadline, the one where everything rests on this big book you produce. I find that my supervisors do not seem to care so much about that aspect of it. One time they suggested I could write it in two months. And that is the thing: they have no idea how long something is going to take or how reasonable it is to ask us to do something in a certain time-frame. There is this never-ending list that keeps growing, every week it is another task, another thing to juggle. There is simply too much work to do in too little time. There have been four month stretches where I have worked twelve hours a day. It is not down to poor experimental planning either, it is just the sheer workload. Also there are just two machines for everyone to do this one very common thing in this entire school and we chaotically organise it amongst ourselves, there are no systems in place to efficiently allocate these resources. I do not know about other universities, but it feels like facilities here are not that great or state-of-the-art, which is fine, but I do not think supervisors account for how this will affect progress. They all went to top universities where they had everything and now, because they leave us to do the grunt work, they do not appreciate how difficult it is for us to get this stuff done. It is basic things we do not have, like having proper office space outside of the lab. The university spends so much money on making the university a nice place for the undergrads, what about us, do we not deserve basic facilities? I also find that I am implicitly taking on so many other roles in addition to my immediate PhD work. I am expected to be a technician, a postdoc, a mentor. Every year we get new project students that we are expected to supervise as well. Not just help them, but actually supervise them.

I have this feeling that nothing I do will ever be enough and no one praises you here, no one tells you if you are doing well. Theoretically, research is about experimenting. You do everything you can, but sometimes, most of the time, you fail. You have negative results and that is fine. Or it should be fine. But in practice that attitude is not welcomed here. If something goes wrong or does not work, which will most of the time be the case, you get punished for it.

I think it would be good for me to get an extension, but I get the feeling that I would be judged for it. My friends outside of the university keep telling me to do it, but I just do not feel it would be good for me career-wise. Like I do not think this environment - the pressure, the expectations - gives you permission to take a rest. Because there is this implication that academia is the only thing that is important, research is the only thing that is important. I feel like if people see that it has taken me longer than four years, they will assume I am lazy and will not give me a break. I also get the feeling that if it is seen that PGRs are talking about their mental health problems, it is as if they're weak. I do not say this out of paranoia, I say this because this is my experience. I think the school finds it easy to blame these issues on millennial PGRs being like snowflakes or something, with their mental health problems. So many times I have been told I am being too sensitive. Sometimes they pretend that it is just the students' own problems. Like, I may have had pre-existing anxiety issues but I was not breaking down on my way to the lab on a daily basis before this. I think the school needs to take responsibility for the environment it is creating. Most people I know are working 24/7 always checking their emails, evenings and weekends. Of course there is always that internal pressure that you should be working harder but this environment puts that on you do, like supervisors will suggest that you work on the evenings and weekends. Mine has made it very clear to me on several occasions that they do not like me taking holidays. I really cannot work harder than I am now, I really should not be working as hard as I am now, but there is no room for that here. None.

I think this kind of pressure, this 24/7 work-life has made it difficult for me to make friends outside of my lab. Being friends with the people you work with, and only the people you work with, in this high-pressure environment makes these friendships insular and toxic. You can see that factions form and if you are not considered part of 'the group' then people treat you differently.

I do not know about others, but personally I have issues with nearly everyone in every echelon of the school. My supervisors, my head of school, all of them. I feel as if I am being punished for standing up for myself. I had also explained to them that I had these anxiety issues, but I think they just lack the empathy to behave in the best way to me. Like, if I tell them I am feeling down or stressed, they tread on eggshells around me for a week but then go back to being overly critical and just plain rude. It is almost like they cannot help themselves from making that jabbing comment here and there or to put you down. No wonder so many PGRs have mental health problems, if this is the default behaviour of our superiors. If they just behaved like normal people: with consistency and compassion, my anxiety would be a non-issue.

I find also I get punished for wanting to do other things outside of the lab, or for my own career, like wanting to do an internship. It makes it really difficult to talk to your supervisors when they react unreasonably like this. I feel like they take me for a fool sometimes, disrespecting my ability to understand what is going on. And if you say that some behaviour of theirs is not right or is causing you distress, they instinctively act defensively instead of trying to find a resolution. I also thought that the secondary supervisor's role was to discuss morale issues, say if you have an issue with your primary supervisor, but I feel like they do not want to hear from me, as if I will be putting them into trouble if I try to get them to support me. I feel like the whole school is against me and they treat me as if I am out to cause trouble. But this is my life and all I am trying to do is be happy and enjoy the things I used to passionate about. Why is that too much to ask?

I am not a quitter and I keep telling myself that, but the bigger question I ask myself is how much damage is there going to be when this is all done? I went into this believing in science, that it is this idealistic place where everyone is open-minded and open to talk about ideas and support you. I have found out that it is the opposite and I just want to get out. I know that I am not alone in thinking this and many people leave because of the stress. I wonder about the people that do stay, what sort of sacrifices they have made to stay, what sort of people they have turned into because of this environment. Maybe this is why you find so many difficult PI's, because they have had to become less compassionate in order to survive in academia. Maybe this is why they treat PGRs like robots rather than humans that deserve respect. If anyone asks me if they should do a PhD, I immediately say no. I am traumatised by this, really traumatised. It is not worth the cost. I just want to put my head down, get this PhD done and get out. So many students before me have done the same but no one wonders why they left, the official line is simply that "academia was not for them". If it is not for people like us, the people who found solace in science, the people who believe passionately in the pursuit of knowledge, who strive to do their best work, if it is not for people like us then who is it for?

## Monologue B

I can go days without seeing another person. I sit in this office all by myself, I think it is the nature of my project being quite computer based. People do technically have desks in here, but they are rarely around because they are in the lab. It is not as if I don't try to socialise, I go for tea breaks with people or go for lunch with a group. But that sort of every day working interaction, that's what is really lacking. It might seem like some small thing to anyone else, but you don't know what it is, or how important it is, until you don't have it any more. It's not that I need someone to baby me, I can get my work done with little external motivation because I have always been someone who works independently. But just having someone to talk to about the research, to bounce ideas off or someone to share frustrations with, that would mean everything, I would feel like I am part of something, like my contribution matters to people.

I suppose for other people they can find that sense of comradery in their lab group or their office mates but I have neither. Also, because my supervisor works remotely a lot, I don't see them that much or at all really. It can be months sometimes before I've talked to anyone else properly about my work. But it's not just that interaction, it's something deeper. It just feels like my supervisor doesn't actually *care* about the work I am doing, if I am even on target to complete it, if I even show up at all. That's not to say that they're not a nice person otherwise, but you can tell when someone just does not care. It's almost as if they get frustrated at me asking them for help.

I have tried my best to get on without their help but sometimes you just need it. Even if it's something silly, *especially* when it's something silly. Sometimes I've been running around in circles for weeks on end and I just need them to tell me if what I am doing makes sense. Often I have been alone for days on end and have been in my own head for so long that I can't see the wood from the trees. If they just made the time for me it would be at least a bit better, but I find I am spending half the time, half of my energy just trying to chase them down. Say I have been trying to do this task for weeks on end now, which is often the case. I finally decide that I cannot figure this out myself and so I decide to email my supervisor and ask for some guidance. At first they just don't respond, so I send a second email a few days later, still no response. I finally see them in the corridor and they come up with reasons x,y and z as to why they couldn't get back to me. I get them to agree to see me some point next week. As that's not bad enough, when I finally get to talk about the issue, it's as if they're not really listening. I have to really work hard to get them to pay attention, to get them to at least *pretend* to care. After all of that, after all these unnecessary obstacles, when they have finally allowed me to explain the problem, I find out it was

just some elementary mistake. And that, that just knocks me for six, knowing how much time I have been wasting on these stupid mistakes, knowing that they could have been spotted easily if my supervisor just made that little effort. And I am still learning, I am going to make these mistakes, I just do not have the experience.

It makes me wonder how many other mistakes I have made without realising, without that guidance of some mentor figure. The first year it was okay because everything was new. I mean, it was still hard because I was getting started in this whole new field and could have really used the support, but at least I learned a lot on my own. And people always say that to me, that this experience is making me stronger and more independent. But now I am really starting to worry about my results, about my methods, about everything. I don't feel independent, I feel lost. I have no idea if what I'm doing is PhD-worthy because I have only been relying on my own intuition. I could really just do with some reassurance. A life-line. Real reassurance, where I feel like they are actually listening and considering what I am doing or saying instead of batting me away when I am reaching out for help.

I can feel this isolation growing new limbs and becoming something else. The little things I did have, like tea breaks and going to lunch have kind of just stopped, I think it's a combination of me not making the effort and work picking up for everyone. But it is alright for them, they all get to see each other in the labs or offices but for me? That tea break, that lunch, those small breaks were my only contact with outside world during the day. I think back to how things used to be. I used to be really outgoing, really friendly and chatty, but now I feel like a stranger in my own skin, I feel like I have forgotten how to talk to people. I don't want to speak to people. It's in a feedback loop, the more I spend away from people, the less I try to see people and the more isolated I feel.

I went to support services and receiving some counselling which had tided me through, but it doesn't fix the underlying issue of feeling so isolated by my empty office and my absent and frankly negligent supervisor.

I did try to talk to my supervisor about all this. I told them that small things would help, like answering emails more quickly or just popping their head around the door from time to time, reading my chapter drafts more thoroughly, just to appraise my work a bit more. They seemed to listen and it worked for a short while. But now it has flipped right back as if we never had that conversation and it's honestly devastating. Before I used to wonder if they ever really cared, but now I just have had to accept that they didn't care. They don't care. And that is the hardest thing. I don't know if that realisation is overall

healthy. It's true that I do not have to feel that crushing disappointment anymore when they have let me down when I needed them but with that something else has also gone too: hope. Hope that things will get better, hope that the results I am getting are good or publishable, hope that I will even finish at all. I am just drifting day in and day out, surviving each day, I don't feel much feeling, there is none left in me, it is all just mechanical now.

## Monologue C

My supervisor's behaviour was notorious, that became clear when I started my PhD. Older students warned me about him but I didn't get it. You see, you don't understand it until you experience it. At the time I thought he was a perfectionist or something, someone who just really valued good science. I believed if I worked hard enough, he would appreciate it and things would be fine. But it was never fine, I never did anything that warranted praise, I've been there now for three years and I can only count a few instances where he ever said anything vaguely positive about me or my work.

People have many descriptions of what my supervisor was, they called him "hard to work with" or "scary" or "overly-critical". What they mean to say is that he is emotionally abusive. It started off with little things: the emails I would receive after work hours, the surprise meetings, the pep talks. During my second year it escalated. He would barge into the lab unannounced at six or seven in the evening and demand an immediate progress report. I would be unprepared and caught off guard. I couldn't tell him what he wanted to hear so he'd get angry and frustrated. He would talk about how I was going to fail if I didn't magically produce what he wanted. Every misstep I made, he was there to criticise it, tear it apart and paint a bleak future for me.

After a while I didn't feel like I had any agency. I felt that my mind was not mine. I could almost feel him trying to get into my head and correct me as if I was a faulty machine. He made me feel like I was broken, worthless and small. After a while I became fearful of doing my experiments, I was second guessing everything I was doing. I couldn't sleep through the night because I felt like I didn't deserve to sleep. I would wake up in the morning in tears, sick to my stomach. Sometimes I would be too scared to come to work. It was like my body was rebelling, telling me it had had enough.

If I hadn't come in for a day or two, I would receive emails from my supervisor chiding me, accusing me of slacking. It would take every inch of will power to come in after that. The longer I would leave it, the harder I would be punished. When I would finally summon the courage to come to the lab, after a period of absence, he would be there waiting for me, demanding answers and would micromanage my schedule down to every half hour. No time for lunch, no time to think. I told him when I thought a task would take more time than he'd given it, he'd just say he didn't agree and that was that. Naturally I made errors as it was work I was rushing to complete under the impossible time constraints. I would send it to him, *not good enough*, he'd send it back telling me how useless I was.

One day, and with enormous support from my friends, I decided to talk to him about his behaviour. I told him as clearly and diplomatically as I could that I was having difficulty working under these conditions. But something weird happened in that meeting, it was as if he'd prepared an answer for everything. He'd say that I was falling behind and that this was why he'd been working me so hard. It was to help me, he said. All that criticism, all the anxiety and depression he'd caused me, all the birthdays I'd missed, all the hours I didn't sleep, all the friends I wasn't responding to, all the pressure I put on my partner to support me, that was supposed to help me! He made me question my version of events: telling me I'd misunderstood when he yelled at me, that I'd misinterpreted the tone of his emails, that I'd wronged *him* in some way. Somehow we agreed at the end of the meeting that this was all my fault and I almost believed him. I walked out of that meeting and broke down. I felt hopeless and exhausted. I decided it was easier to carry on under this draconian rule than to fight it.

And people still ask me now: "why you didn't go to the head of school or the PGR office... why did you allow this to happen?" I allowed it to happen because I learned the hard way that no one would help me. I remember trying to discuss the problem with my secondary supervisor, the person who I was supposed to turn to for help in these circumstances. I remember feeling like she was lying to my face, pretending my primary supervisor isn't as bad as he is. She'd say "sorry, that you're having trouble, how do you think you could improve the situation?". She put the responsibility on *me* to change the behaviour of my supervisor. Every single person in that school knew what my supervisor was doing, they would see it happen in front of their very eyes. The amount of times he'd criticise me in front of our lab, the amount of times he'd keep me late after work, the amount of times they'd see my face swollen from the sleeplessness and the exhaustion. No one said anything to him. No one intervened.

I started abusing study drugs. I knew people took them to help revise for exams or complete assignments, I was just taking them to get up in the morning. They didn't necessarily make me feel happy or productive, just allowed me to feel detached. Allowed me to not *feel*. They would put me into a strange sort of dissociative state, in those instances I could handle more of the abuse my supervisor would level at me. But the problem was when the effect wore off I'd feel ten times more depressed, ten times more suicidal.

Over these last years, this PhD had eaten away at every part of my life, at the foundations of my relationships. I split with my partner. 9 years down the drain because I'd become a shadow of myself. What was left was this angry, sad, anxious person. That's who I'd bring home every evening and who would cry into the early hours of the morning, needing constant reassurance. Of course it was too much for them to deal with. To lose someone important in your life like that at such a crucial point your studies was absolutely devastating. But it made me open my eyes and realise how much this PhD had cost me, how much it's taking from me, how much it was consuming me. That was the first time I tried to seek some sort of medical help.

First, I went into the doctors surgery, completely exhausted, practically hallucinating from the stress. I tried to tell him what was happening. He asked me a few token questions about sleep and stress. Then he asked me, in this cold, clinical tone: "have you felt suicidal?". How do I respond when someone is asking about the deepest, darkest parts of my mind with such carelessness? I don't remember how the rest of the conversation went after that, because I felt too invaded. Because when things start to overwhelm me like this, I disassociate. I watch events happening to me as if I'm watching it unfold on TV. It's easier to detach and watch your hopes being snuffed than to experience it. They didn't even refer me for counselling, they just gave me some leaflets on sleep and told me to stop taking the study drugs. Considering this was about the fifth time I'd felt let down by the system, it honestly didn't bother me, I almost expected it. I put those leaflets straight in the bin and popped another pill.

I remember when I finally told my friends about the severity of what happened. I just wish I talked to them sooner about all this, about how bad everything was. They convinced me to seek a therapist independently. It was costly, about £60 per session, but I felt like it was my only option at that point. I'll tell you what though, that was the turning point for me, that's what made the difference between me being here and not. My therapist convinced me to take a break from my studies. I never would have considered that before, I thought taking a break was almost an expression of failure.

Finding the interruption to study form was a minefield in itself, the website was just a mess. When I finally found it, it said I needed to wait up to 3 months for approval. *3 months* to essentially sign a piece of paper. Can you imagine? I'm struggling to keep my head above water, I can't wait another 3 months! I needed medical evidence too so I had to go back to the bloody doctor surgery. I was constantly asking myself if this was really worth it. My stipend was running out soon, was I even sure if I could *afford* to do

this? All the while, I'm getting email after email from my supervisor about how much work I'm not doing. But my therapist and my friends were such an enormous source of strength and with that encouragement I found the will to do it. Really, they helped me through that process so much.

So I pushed ahead with this interruption to study, now I still didn't have a straight answer about the 3 month turn around on this, but I decided that even if they don't approve the form, it doesn't matter. Sure I would suffer a huge set back in my PhD if I took a three or four month break, but you can't get a PhD if you're dead.

Then I had to meet with my supervisory team before submitting the form and crucially I had to downplay my supervisor's role in all this. So I blamed external factors, family issues, my inability to cope, anything to deflect away from what really happened, I felt almost dirty doing that. And I felt like my supervisor was revelling in how I was talking down about myself. He said that I could not handle stress, that I was too sensitive, that I should not have let it get to this point and that I should have talked to him earlier. I just let it slide, there was no point challenging him. The day after that meeting, I began my interruption. And I didn't feel any sense of relief, just nothing at that point because there was so much loss I needed to confront.

Now, I'm coming to the end of my interruption—which they finally approved about two weeks ago. And things are better, I still don't feel entirely right but I have started to feel some relief. Many people judge me for taking that time off, but I know I have done what I have to do to survive, I do not need to answer to them. Instead of study drugs I now take antidepressants. I am sleeping better and I am learning to love myself again and make amends with the people I've hurt. I've also made a big decision to return to study after my interruption. Maybe it's just a case of sunken-cost fallacy, but I feel that I've fought too hard to throw in the towel now and I feel like I'm letting the system win if I disappear. I know that my supervisor will try and sink his claws into me when I return, it's inevitable and I know there is nothing to shield me, to protect me.

So here I am, a lone soldier on this front, waiting for the next battle, knowing that no one is going to come to save me. I'm watching my enemies gather momentum on the horizon. I am raising up arms, wish me luck.

## Monologue D

Doing my PhD is not the experience I was expecting. I was prepared for the hard work, but I wasn't prepared for the feeling of isolation, the belittling from my supervisor, and near – constant feeling that I don't belong here.

I've thought a lot about what went wrong. During the first couple of months of my PhD I had some really difficult things happen in my personal life. I had just arrived in the UK and didn't feel like I had a support network here, so I didn't talk to anyone about it, just kept my head down and tried to carry on. It definitely affected my work; at the time I should have been excited about starting my PhD in a field I thought I was passionate about, I felt completely detached and numb. I couldn't focus on my work, and already felt the pressure of being behind. I was coming in to the lab on weekends just to try and keep my head above water, and soon realised that this was almost expected.

I went home to my family for a short trip and I felt such relief to be out of this environment. Just before I was supposed to come back to Norwich, I experienced my first real panic attack. I've always been quite an anxious person, but this was a completely separate and terrifying experience. I had intense chest pains, couldn't breathe, was shaking and sweating. I genuinely thought I was dying. I couldn't understand how I could feel this all so physically. Looking back, I think it was a reaction to coming back here.

When I did come back, I made an appointment with student support services. I broke down when I was talking to the well-being advisor, and told her everything I had been feeling. I started seeing a counsellor through student support services the very next day. I've heard people have experienced long waits for the counselling service, and I'll always be grateful that this wasn't the case for me, I honestly don't think I could have coped otherwise. The support I got from them has been amazing. I also went to the medical centre and started taking antidepressants.

Student support services said I needed to let my supervisor know I was struggling. That's a conversation I never want to have again. Their response, "Ok, why are you telling me? There's nothing I can do". Just a little acknowledgement that this was really hard for me to open up about, or understanding that I'm going through a tough time, would have gone a long way, and instead I got nothing and felt ashamed.

What makes it tougher is I hear my peers talking about how great their relationship with their supervisors are, while I feel perpetually on edge, waiting for the next bout of criticism. I berate myself for not being the dream PhD student my supervisor wanted.

A few months later, I realised I needed to take time out. This process in itself is stressful and archaic and needs to change. I had to wait 3 months for my request to be approved, by which time I was already getting ready to come back. While I recognise I needed this break, I now worry that I will have even more PhD left at the end of my funding. I don't know how I will support myself financially when my funding ends. The fact that PhD students in my lab group have stipends for either 3, 3.5, or 4 years, and yet we're all expected to produce a thesis of the same quality, is, in my view, offensive, but again this is just how things are.

In my experience, academia is a toxic world. There seems to be an acceptance that doing a PhD will be a drain on your mental health and well-being. I feel it's almost treated as a rite of passage. I constantly question why I am here. I feel I don't belong in this environment, and I blame myself for being too sensitive, not driven enough, and not being able to work the expected impossible hours. I sacrificed a lot to move to the UK and do this PhD, and right now I don't think it has been worth it.

## Recommendations

These recommendations arose from the interviews with PGRs during this project and provide areas for consideration in the development and improvement of PGR supervision.

- Support relationships and reduce isolation and loneliness within labs but ensuring that no student is in a lab by themselves and that those who share labs are introduced.
- Consider the impact of supervisory workload prior to appointing additional PGRs. If the workload is such that it negates the quality and quantity of supervision provided to any PGRs.
- Supervisors should be contractually obliged to stay with a student until they've completed their studies.
- Supervisors should be appraised for their role as a supervisor.
- Financially support improving conditions in labs and allowing departments to share equipment.
- Review the interim and annual meeting processes. Interim and annual meeting forms are not fit for purpose, students are put on the spot about their supervision experience and cannot answer questions honestly, since their supervisory team can see the answers.
- Adequate office space should be ensured before faculties take on additional students.

## Support Systems Recommendations

Of the PGRs interviewed who sought help within the university, their experiences were mixed. Many were initially unaware of what sorts of support they could get, such as talking to those outside of their immediate supervisory team or externally to their school. Some of those who had received CBT or other therapies from student support services (SSS) were positive about their experiences, feeling that overall it had helped them cope, citing the convenience of sessions being held on campus at times that suited them. However they still felt that the ongoing support was lacking, as SSS do not allow re-referrals for 6 months after students have received support. A few had felt the support from SSS was wholly inadequate such as experiencing waiting times for up to three months for their initial appointment. This is still better than those who had gone to the doctor and felt they had not been listened to at all and are still on waiting lists for initial appointments even after eight months.

- We recommend then that PGRs are made well aware of the different forms of support available, within the school, within the university and externally, and crucially what kind of support these services can offer.
- We recommend that Heads of Schools and PGR directors undertake mental health first aid training and seek advice as soon as possible if they do not feel equipped to deal with a situation.
- We recommend that the university provides more support to the SSS teams.
- We recommend that support services work with local mental health services and the NHS so that those who need it have access to longer-term support.
- We encourage RCUK to assess for access to mental health support when awarding grants.

## Appendix

The appendix contains two monologues that were created by Katie Stockton, a student at UEA.

### Dissolution

*By Katie Stockton*

#### Notes for Reader

All dialogue is spoken by a single speaker.

A “-“ indicates a sentence or word that has been interrupted.

A “...” indicates a silence or beat.

Stage directions are *(italicised in brackets.)*

Words that are underlined are emphasized by the speaker.

*(A PhD student sits and scribbles notes.)*

Though some monasteries were, in their lifetimes, belonging to both the Benedictines and Cistercians.

Unnecessary subordinate clause. Some monasteries belonged to both Benedictines and Cistercians.

Historically? No. It's obviously, you know, historic. Jesus.

*(The student stops scribbling and addresses the audience. This section can be more 'read' than 'acted.')*

This isn't my idea of fun, you know. I wouldn't put it on my tinder profile – PhD in Benedictine Monasteries, in the South of France, no less.

I used to have fun, you know. Acres of fun. I used to know fun. I used to hold a Masters in Fun. From a good uni, too...

... What would I put on my tinder profile, now I come to think of it? If I genuinely enjoy long walks on the beach, I am kind of stuck, no? I'll just sound completely unoriginal.

Where I'm from, originally - home - there's beaches. None around here, though.

In fact, someone once told me this was the furthest place anywhere in the UK from the sea. Right splat bang in the middle. Lots of monasteries, though, so, there's that.

A friend told me that during my undergrad. Four years or so ago now. I did my undergrad here, and my masters, and now my doctorate. A real loyal soldier, you see. No defecting for me. I'm not sure what it is, or was, that made me stay. I like to imagine it was something simple. Like the iccream in the SU.

I've become a bit of a man about campus. A well-known face, a stock figure.

Well, that's not quite true.

I was.

But then, everyone just sort of left.

Like, during my undergrad, I barely came out with a top grade because, well, I just had so many friends. I was shoved into halls with a load of arts freaks – though, I am myself an art freak and don't get me wrong, I love them - and then we started dating the rugby and football teams, and before you knew it, I sort of knew everyone?

I remember one great night where I was sat in the middle of a sort of circle bench outside my accommodation, at 6am, with my philosophy and lit friend, and we were explaining, to these big rugby lads who were all sitting around, the utter inability and failure of language to communicate... well... anything, really...

*(Back to writing.)*

You're right, an Oxford comma is for idiots. Who wouldn't know that the last two things in the list are separate? Although, I guess, the Congregation of La Chaise-Dieu, the Congregation of Saint-Victor (Victorines), the Bursflede Congregation and the Alsace Congregation could be construed as two congregations in one?

The Bursflede Congregation... and the Alsace Congregation.

The Bursflede Congregation and the Alsace Congregation.

Jesus.

Surely, I can't email my supervisor about this? A fucking comma?

*(Look up from page. Back to talking.)*

And graduation was amazing, because we were all there together; all my friends I'd made on my course, and my boyfriend – did Physics, earning 70k a year now to tell you if your ball point pen design is original or whether you need to purchase someone's copyright to get onto a production line – I should say, ex-boyfriend, turned up with flowers.

What a day.

And masters was great, too, actually. Less friends around, but that just seemed to mean I got more work done. And the friends who stayed were the hard-working types, you know, the got a First and now doing a master's types, so we just drank coffee in the library and made some lazy carbonara at each other's houses afterwards. And there was my Masters' group, a lovely set of 12, with only one I hated for being obscenely arrogant, and we were all friends too.

Last time I saw them was the second graduation I had. Masters graduation never quite feels as great as your first one.

And now, well, PhD. Just me and my tutor – who is lovely, of course! Don't get me wrong. He's pretty much the reason I did all this. So, so intelligent and on it.

But I just wouldn't say I'm a particularly well-known figure around here, anymore.

This year, I took some Latin classes. Not living Latin, like... Latin, Latin. (*Shudders.*) I thought it would help me with understanding some texts on my literature review, and when I go to read some archives soon, but also, just to... you know... make friends?

*(Reciting Latin as if in a class.)*

*Puella amico velit.*

The girl wants a friend.

*Puella latine loqui possumus.*

The girl can't speak Latin.

*Sola puella est.*

The girl is lonely.\*

*(Back to reading.)*

But I think I just sort of realised that Latin is just as bad as any other language at portraying, well, anything.

Do you know what I mean by that?

I hope you do.

If you don't, I want you all to picture a book. Maybe it's a thick book, around 80k pages, and it took two years to research and write.

It's about Benedictine Monasteries in Southern France and contains no Oxford commas.

I'll even help you a little bit more. There's no cover. It's just black and white.

And you're picturing this, now, yes?

Well, you can guarantee that none of the mental images you have all cast are the same as another, and no matter how much detail you add through language, none the closer do all these images get to being the same. I mean, what gradient of light is there on this book? From what precise angle are you looking at it, what precise size is it? You see – language

Just

Fails.

To connect us on anything.

Now imaging me trying to explain this with the example of a rugby ball.

Anyway, Latin is the same.

It's all the same.

...

My tutor is lovely.

He really is.

I'm so sorry.

That I had to do it.

But I had to.

...

It's like, when all you can think about is work, and loneliness, and work, and that is all going around in your head, reaching out to someone to be friends is a bit... difficult? And then the whole thing about language being useless anyway just makes you want to give up.

It just dissolves away.

...

So I had to email you about this.

I can't stay on.

It's too much.

I want to see my mother. I want to live with her for a bit again.

I don't want to be in this world of online access, emails, notifications and my own desk.

I want to be in her world of wooden spoons, eggs cracking, aprons and watching Pointless.

Maybe there'll be a final round on the monasteries.

I want to go

Where language feels real.

Where words feel like the matter. Commas or not.

I'm sorry.

***End of monologue.***

\*gender can be changed according to speaker.

# PROBATIONARY REVIEW

By Katie Stockton

## Notes for Reader

All dialogue is spoken by a single speaker.

A “-“ indicates a sentence or word that has been interrupted.

A “...” indicates a silence or beat.

Stage directions are (*italicised in brackets.*)

Hi – yes – lovely to meet you all. Sorry for the lateness I just, always underestimate that walk. Big campus. Lovely, lovely campus, though. But big, colossal! There are always some younger people just sort of shuffling around on the pavements and you have to weave your way through – No, I don’t, I live in another city entirely. Not used to what is where, yet. And the, well the elevator is broken.

Shouldn’t you know that? Like, my being a pretty remote Phd? Right, right.

Where should I drop my stuff? Sorry for the suitcase, I’m staying overnight with a friend. Two train journeys in a day is hell – and those bloody stairs just now – yes, of course, trains are a great place to write, I’ve always found that too –

Here, this seat, here? Great. Thanks. Great. Lovely chair. Big.

Oh, yes, I am doing great, thank you! The wife is good, yeah, yeah. Saw some fun graffiti on my journey over, you know. Big letters on a blue bridge saying “Boris is helch!” Ha!

H-e-l-c-h. What does it mean? Well, I googled it and a VICE article said apparently it really doesn’t mean anything. Helch is just the name of the artist! But the tag really is everywhere in London, you know.

...

Yes, I suppose that could have been more interesting. And fun. If there was some sort of story behind it. Yes, I am feeling ready. Yes, ready and good. Great, even. Yes, we can begin. Sorry for the rather useless anecdote – yes, I am calm, sorry.

...

I understand. Yes, I’ve got my own copies of the supporting documents and the substantive. Okay, reports first then presentation? Great. Can do. Noooo problem.

I found it okay! Working from home is something I do best. The chapters for the first half are pretty much all decided on, for now, as in, their titles and the permission for research is coming in in most areas –

Seven schools. Yes, I’ve been to seven schools and talked to about eight to ten students, and two teachers from each school. Arts and Literature teachers. Do I think this is enough? Well, no, if you see, Chapter 5 is all about how getting kids to write poetry about their community can reveal – but you see, not many kids that age from these demographics even know what poetry is, so I need to contact more schools – yes, I’ve asked the department for funding to travel to the schools in the North of the county

but it hasn't come through yet. I cannot fund it myself. Being an associate tutor only allows for 6 hours a week here, which is around 400 pounds max, and I have to get a train here to teach. My funding doesn't cover it.

Have I thought of a different chapter title if the funding doesn't come through? Well, no, I foresee no problems with getting money for something so simple and integral – Have I thoroughly pitched my methodology practises? For when I get there? Well, yes, to the extent my supervisor told me too. I sit down with someone with a DBS check, no, I haven't got one, and I interview with the same questions for all the kids. And a different set for the teachers. And then I am sent some poetry later to my academic email once the permission slips are signed by the parents.

Yes, I think the chapter really adds some belly, some feeling to the overall –

Yes, I teach here, six hours on one day –

No, as I said, I don't know my way around yet, the literature building stands out a bit from all the swanky glass palaces –

Yes, underfunded, I understand –

Ah, you were pleased with my literature review? That is wonderful, great news. Yes, I agree, there is lots of context available for my chosen topic – plenty of people interested in arts in underfunded areas. Yeah, it's a really well researched topic. It's been great fun collating all of the previous literature, actually –

What will my original contribution be? Well, I... I seem to remember my supervisor saying that my proposal was deemed pretty original, because of its geographic element –

Chapter 5? The reports don't favour it. Right, of course. Not enough diversity amongst student bodies. Poor Norfolk.

Cambridge? Oh, I've never really been. Its hard for me to get to.

Well, yes, I suppose a chapter on the disparity between university engagement and school engagement would be... but I haven't read much on further education yet in my literature review - Instead of Chapter 5? Well, I'd need to apply for funding again, for the trip – and that would need to come through quick, because, as you said, I need to collate more data but the funding needs to – yes, I can write another funding application. Yes.

Actually, my supervisor is on maternity leave next month, and I've been given someone from Warwick University – not sure how, but I'll have to email them mostly to sort out a new application – okay, yes, I can do that. It does sound exciting. I've got you. Cambridge, not Norfolk. Got it.

Thanks. Thank you. Thanks.

...

Presentation? Yes. I've brought some slides, haha! Just let me put my stick into your computer here...

Loading.. yep, PowerPoint... yep, aha, here we go, presentation time. My research, my contexts, my work so far, my original contributions – already covered that a little haven't we -, my methodology, and alternate methodologies, and timeline – how do I plan to get this all done and dusted, hey?

...

*(The character talks to the audience now, instead.)*

*(He loosens his tie.)*

I get tired a lot of the time – don't pity me – a lot of people have it worse. Knew someone with chronic fatigue syndrome during my undergrad and woosh that really takes it out on you. No, I just get back pain, especially when travelling.

Anyway so this one time when I was back in London – where I'm from – where I write from, I was taking my kid and wife round the British gallery and

I had to sit on the floor

Like just sit and I couldn't lean my back against any walls because, well, you aren't allowed near the paintings. They have these little red barriers that don't let you.

My kid had previously saw a landscape piece from the renaissance in oils and said "ooo look its still wet", and ran his finger through it. First instinct, its 600 years old, its not still wet, but I guess you are seven, and second instinct, if it were wet, you'd have just run your sticky finger through a priceless painting, but I guess you are only seven. Bless him. A surprisingly quiet alarm went off from behind the painting and a guard very politely told us to not let our kid do that again – sure thing, I said, obviously. Lovely museum, I told him, as if he had built the place himself, big, I said, but lovely.

And I was sat down with my back right up against nothing, and this man doing a tour came round to my room. The wife and kid had ran off to see a video exhibition. The benches were full already so yes, here I was, stuck on the floor, when lots of others who had been following the art tour came and sat around me, listening to this man speak. So, I kind of had no option but to join in – the crowd had kind of made me part of them.

The tour guide has telling us about the artist Stanley Spencer. Stanley spencer, though his name is not the important part, had a tiny art studio that over looked a fairground in London. It was so small that he couldn't really look at his art all at once, you see. If he was painting a big piece, and he needed to take a step back from it to take it all in at once. And he just couldn't. Because he couldn't walk back in that studio space.

So, to assess it, Stanley Spencer would go down to the fairground outside his studio on a weekend, and take a ride on the helter-skelter. Do it too much and he'd get sick. But it was his only way of viewing his own work. No one believed in him enough to get him a bigger space. And now he is hanging in the Tate.

So I'm listening to this story and its getting a good few laughs from the crowd, when I see the young man who has sat next to me is on his phone. Very millennial, backpack and square-rim glasses, twenty something and handsome and bearded, and I'm thinking, you sod, what could be on Facebook that would be better than this little anecdote of lovely knowledge presented to us, when I stretch over a bit and realise he is just taking notes

Taking lovely little, slow notes on the talk, the whole of the talk before this, by the looks of the length of the iNotes.

And you know what the last note said? What he took from the Stanley Spencer anecdote?

"Never accept less than you deserve."

And this pop-philosophy, ten pence Facebook quote you usually find on your aunties wall sort of, hit me in a new way. This self assured kid, half my age, kind of knew something I didn't, or at least, in that moment, could see something I couldn't, from the talk we'd both been listening to... never accept less than you deserve. Never be made to ride the helter skelter, you know?

And that's sort of what I've been doing for the past ten months. Just, not me, not who I was during my undergrad and even my masters when I still had the flare for all this. I've just been asked to do one thing, made to wait in a queue for too long to ride this helter skelter, just too see that my work, well, is rarely, if ever, up to scratch. And then I am dizzy and made to start the process all over again.

All to hang in the Tate.

I grew up in Wales.

Always thought it would be worth it

To hang in the Tate.

We all did, in our small towns.

Lovely, big, colossal venues like the Tate seeming such far away things.

All to hang in the Tate, hey?

Is it worth it?

I ask. The probation board asks.

To hang in the Tate.

*(The character fiddles with all his papers, sighing. He looks at his watch.)*

Well, that is that over, am I right in thinking, gentleman? Great. You'll let me know soon, great. I'll be heading back home, to my wife and kids, tomorrow afternoon. So, if you need me till then –

- I'll be around.

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