

Student-Led Strategies for Doctoral Well-Being: A Systematic Review

Overview

This review systematically focuses on research-based, student-led strategies for sustaining doctoral well-being. We conducted a systematic review of empirical studies that offered explicit or implicit student-actionable suggestions to enhance their own well-being, and inductively organised these into four domains: reflect (engaging in self-analysis and understanding psychological dynamics), routinise (establishing sustainable work and self-care patterns), reveal (expressing experiences and challenges to others) and relate (building and maintaining supportive relationships).

Introduction

Previous systematic reviews have examined challenges and resource factors for doctoral well-being (e.g. supervision, workload and personal attributes) and have debated conceptual and measurement issues in the prior studies. However, they have not synthesised what doctoral students themselves can deliberately do in their daily academic lives to protect and enhance their well-being. Addressing this gap, this systematic literature review examines research-based strategies and practices that enable doctoral students to maintain and enhance their well-being.

Methods

This review targets empirical studies that explicitly address doctoral well-being and provide recommendations or implications translatable into actionable student strategies. Specifically, it addresses the following research question: What proactive strategies can doctoral students use to maintain and enhance their well-being? Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, the review identifies and synthesises relevant articles through a transparent, structured process. The study addresses the main research task in four stages. First, we searched EBSCOhost, Scopus, and Web of Science for 2014–2024 using a systematic query, yielding 864 records. Second, we screened titles and abstracts for articles focused on doctoral students and explicit well-being

discussions, reducing the pool to 59 eligible empirical articles. Third, we extracted explicit recommendations and implicit student-actionable suggestions from these articles, collated them into a shared dataset, and ensured coding consistency across authors. Fourth, inductive analysis synthesised these suggestions into four interrelated domains of proactive behaviour—reflect, routinise, reveal, and relate—yielding a theoretically grounded framework that doctoral students can use to understand and foster their well-being.

Results

The study extracted that research-based suggestions for doctoral well-being clustering into four interrelated domains of proactive behaviour: reflect, routinise, reveal and relate (“the four Rs”). ‘Reflect’ encompasses strategies that enhance self-awareness and psychological insight, such as revisiting motivations, monitoring perfectionism, cultivating positive self-narratives and using reflective writing or mindfulness to regulate emotions and reframe progress. ‘Routinise’ involves creating consistent, humane work patterns through daily planning, realistic writing rhythms, intentional workspace design, regular physical activity, restorative leisure and firm boundaries between work and non-work. ‘Reveal’ refers to disclosing challenges, emotions and needs to supervisors, peers, family or counsellors, which both triggers access to support and normalises struggle, especially around imposter feelings, time pressure and sociocultural difficulties. ‘Relate’ highlights actively building and managing relationships, such as joining scholarly communities and writing groups, nurturing friendships and family ties, selecting and, if needed, changing supervisors, and practising empathy and gratitude to foster psychologically safe environments. The review also finds that these four Rs are synergistic rather than discrete, for example, reflection underpins sustainable routines, and both are strengthened or undermined by the quality of revealing and relating practices within students’ social contexts.

Implications

We argue that proactive well-being is best understood as an interconnected web of four practices—reflect, routinise, reveal and relate—rather than a menu of isolated tips. Reflection is positioned as the foundation that helps students understand their emotional dynamics, recalibrate perfectionistic or “persist at all costs” narratives and consciously redefine progress as including both productivity and mental health. Routinising humane work patterns including regular schedules, physical activity, restorative leisure and boundaries is discussed as necessary but fragile unless grounded in reflective awareness and supported by social contexts. On the social side, we emphasise that revealing struggles and needs, and

cultivating relationships across supervisory, peer, family and wider scholarly networks, normalises difficulty, counters isolation and creates access to practical and emotional support. We caution, however, that these strategies can backfire in competitive or unsupportive environments, reinforcing the point that individual agency is always constrained by institutional conditions. Practically, the findings suggest that doctoral students use the four Rs as a flexible, mutually reinforcing repertoire and adjust routines in light of reflection, seeking alternative relational spaces when disclosure with supervisors feels unsafe, and contributing to emotionally safe, grateful and empathetic communities. This study also calls on institutions to design multilevel interventions that complement, rather than offload onto, students' individual efforts.

Key words

Well-being, Student-led strategy, Systematic review, Doctoral student