The importance of mental health and wellbeing to doctoral students on their PhD journey: A Q methodology study

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Increasingly, the mental health and wellbeing of doctoral students is on the agenda for graduate schools in UK universities. Furthermore, with high attrition rates and frequent time delay for doctoral award completion, understanding the doctoral student experience is crucial to enable graduate schools and supervisors to provide effective support.

The current study utilised Q methodology to examine the factors that doctoral students believe to be important as they progress on their PhD journey. Thirty-four statements, developed using an extensive literature review, were ranked by forty-four doctoral students who were at varying stages on their research journey.

The findings indicated that there were four distinct shared perspectives in terms of what had been important to the doctoral students’ PhD journey: resilience and wellbeing, being valued, the supervisor: supervisee relationship and maintaining an identity outside of the PhD. All these aspects can impact on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of doctoral students.

Further, there were individual nuances that existed within each viewpoint, supporting the need for supervisors to take an individualised approach to each student. These findings have implications for those involved in the doctoral students’ journey. Recommendations are made for a frequently completed needs analysis for each doctoral student to enable the most appropriate support to be provided. There is a role for graduate schools to provide individualised, holistic support for students that goes beyond the traditional academic support role.