



WELL-BEING RESEARCH NETWORK NEWSLETTER

February 2025

Why has the well-being network been set-up?

In July 2021 WISERD launched a wellbeing Research Network, headed by Professor Steve Smith, at The University of South Wales. The network is focussed on well-being research and has been set-up recognising two main factors which have profoundly affected well-being research in recent years.

- The increasing academic importance of well-being research for understanding civil society and its goals, coupled with the growing political significance, in Wales and elsewhere, of using well-being as a key measure of social and economic progress.
- The increasing range of well-being research undertaken, from a variety of often disparate disciplines and settings, across a wide range of subject areas, and for a number of different purposes.

What are the aims of the well-being network?

Given the above developments in well-being research, WISERD thought it timely to set-up a well-being research network with the following aims in mind:

To champion interdisciplinary well-being research, drawing from a range of disciplines, for example, (but not exclusively and in no particular order): social policy, sociology, economics, social geography, political science, psychology, criminology, health sciences, pedagogy, creative arts and cultural industries, business studies, and applied social and political philosophy.

To facilitate cross-organisational and intra/inter-institutional exchanges and partnerships, concerning well-being research across a wide range of subject areas, within and between the WISERD partners, other relevant research centres, individual researchers, and including those from outside the WISERD partner institutions.

To systematically engage in co-productive research reflecting the agendas, knowledge and experience of key non-academic stakeholders in well-being research, with a view to including these stakeholders in the research process, working alongside academics, and within various professional and policy-based contexts.

To inform and positively impact the development of policy and practice across statutory and non-statutory settings, for example (but not exclusively and in no particular order), in social services, health, education, housing, income maintenance, education, youthwork, workplaces, community groups and activities, businesses and social enterprises, and other public, private, and third sector settings.

The network's register

- We have collated a *register* of those researchers who have become members of the well-being network, with presently 48 members, representing 8 universities in Wales and England, and 6 other organisations which variously engage with well-being research and policy development.
- Members have been sent a copy of the register which shares what kind of well-being research members of the network are presently engaged in, with details about relevant organisation(s) or institution(s) that members are affiliated to and partner with, including contact details, weblinks, and so on.
- The network updates the register periodically, and with a view to using this register as a basis for supporting the above aims.
- Members are encouraged to promote the network and recruit new members, inviting potential new members to contact Steve Smith, the network lead, steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk.
- The network's leadership team has also developed a strategy to provide a framework for implementing the above, and which includes producing this newsletter.

The purpose of this newsletter

The newsletter is intended to advertise the work we have done and will do, including the individual research members are engaged in. So, building on a series of seminar/workshop events we organised during the 2021-2022 academic session (both online and face-to-face), the delivery of an ambitious programme of activities for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 sessions, in the 2024-2025 session we have been engaged in completing and developing the 2023-2024 programme, and devising further online and potentially face-to-face activities as forums to share further our work across the network, and with others. These activities and programmes are discussed and devised at an annual meeting with the leadership team held in November (details about the leadership team can be found in the network's register), alongside suggestions from members about what the network might usefully 'do next'.

Sharing some of our current research and other activities of the network

Enhancing support for doctoral researchers' wellbeing

By Jenny Mercer, Cardiff Metropolitan University, jmercer@cardiffmet.ac.uk

There is robust evidence that doctoral researchers report higher levels of stress and are at an elevated risk of mental ill health compared with undergraduates and the wider population. What is important to note about such findings, however, is that this is not due to pre-existing mental health problems, rather to factors specifically associated with doctoral research programmes. These often include (to list a few examples) isolation, role conflict and supervisory relationships, all of which can exacerbate doctoral researchers' stress levels.

What is so different about PhDs?

Doctoral programmes are less structured than taught programmes; with each doctoral researcher focusing on a tailored research question. Students work exclusively with a small team of supervisors, over several years, and the relationship with this group is core. Their status within the university is unusual – somewhere between student and staff (doctoral researchers might support teaching, others work as research assistants). By the nature of the entry requirements, they are likely to be older than typical undergraduate students, which often means that they have additional financial and caring responsibilities. They are frequently located in doctoral schools, with programmes governed by research rather than learning and teaching regulations. As such they sit outside the usual structures yet are expected to seek support from centralised services that more regularly deal with undergraduates.

It is not surprising that this has the potential to impact the wellbeing of doctoral researchers, a group who, I would argue, require tailored and bespoke support which acknowledges the nature of doctoral study. Keen to do something practical to address this, I secured funding from the HEFCW Strategic Investment Fund to lead a project entitled “Enhancing provision to support doctoral students' wellbeing: developing a platform for Wales.” Working in collaboration with Aberystwyth University and co-constructed with other Welsh Universities, Researcher Wellbeing Cymru evolved.

Introducing Researcher Wellbeing Cymru (RWC)

RWC is an open access online platform to help navigate the doctoral journey. It provides a library of over 130 bespoke resources covering areas such as working with your supervisors, managing your time, keeping motivated, imposter syndrome and studying remotely. Resources are evidence based and include journal articles, podcasts, videos and web resources. The content of the website was also made with doctoral researchers for doctoral researchers. Students from Welsh universities have provided student stories, tips for progression, day in the life videos, and we have a resident blogger who will be sharing his experiences of doctoral life across the academic year. There are also opportunities to connect with peers across Wales by joining specific online community groups and a regular sit down and write session.

RWC provides a toolkit for researchers to dip into at any stage of their studies. It can support them to identify beneficial ways of working and foster a healthier sense of wellbeing. RWC also provides invaluable insights for supervisors, wellbeing services and those involved in doctoral education in H.E.

You can log onto Researcher Wellbeing Cymru at www.rwcymru.ac.uk

The Wales Arts and Humanities Alliance (WAHA), forms an Arts Health and Wellbeing Working Group

By Emily Underwood-Lee, University of South Wales, emily.underwood-lee@southwales.ac.uk

Wales Arts and Humanities Alliance (WAHA), part of the [Wales Innovation Network](#) (WIN), is forming an Arts, Health and Wellbeing working group. WIN is a collaborative initiative set up to strengthen research and innovation in Wales with membership from all nine Welsh Universities. Health and Wellbeing are significant research priorities across the UK and internationally with the arts and humanities key to achieving goals in this area. There is robust and widely accepted evidence of the benefits of the arts and humanities for health and wellbeing (see The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APG) on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017¹; Fancourt and Finn, 2019²). Internationally, health and wellbeing is central to all 17 of the United Nation's sustainable development goals, although most obviously aligned with goal 3 'Good Health and Wellbeing'. At a UK level, all 5 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) strategic priorities are underpinned by wellbeing, with 'secure better health, ageing and wellbeing for everyone' a named priority. Closer to Wales, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act is key to the Welsh policy landscape. Within this fertile research environment, the WAHA Arts Health and Wellbeing group will bring together nominated representatives from each of the Welsh Universities to develop collaborative projects.

To find out more, email the WAHA Arts Health and Wellbeing group, Chair: emily.underwood-lee@southwales.ac.uk

¹ Link to the APG 2017 report, [Creative Health Inquiry Report 2017 - Second Edition.pdf](#)

² Fancourt D, and Finn S. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report 67).

Other network activities

The philosophy of well-being reading group—next steps

Following suggestions made by network members to set-up reading groups, three members of the network have set-up by the above group, Gideon Calder (University of Swansea), Dave Morgans (University of Wales, Trinity St David), and Steve Smith (University of South Wales). The group explores issues concerning the application of theory and wider philosophical reflections to well-being research, and how notions of well-being are variously conceptualised and promoted in policy and practice. The group to date has met for two online sessions. In these sessions two journal articles were discussed, exploring the relationship between 'subjective' and 'objective' conceptions of well-being, and what might be variously understood as a 'meaningful' life over time, and as related to different understandings of well-being and its enhancement.

The group is now putting together a programme of meetings for 2025, where the members will examine Wittgenstein's later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, and how his insights have a bearing, either directly or indirectly, on issues relating to understandings of well-being and its promotion. The group also plans to advertise this programme outside the network, with a view to recruiting new members to the reading group, and to the network. Of course, if any existing members of the network are interested in joining us, please don't hesitate to contact steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk

We would also very much encourage other network members to set-up on-line reading groups, which can then be publicised via the network. Again, contact steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk if you want to discuss

Setting-up conversational interviews between network members

The idea here, again suggested by members, is to more deeply and actively engage in each others' work, but in ways which are accessible to wider audiences (both within and outside the network). To achieve this, an informal interview format has been used to facilitate members reading each others' work, and then having conversations with each other about their research, with a view to this being recorded and disseminated accordingly.

The first of these interviews has now taken place, between Sarah White (Co-Founder of The Relational Wellbeing Collaborative), and Steve Smith (University of South Wales, and author of *The Ontology of Well-Being in Social Policy and Welfare Practice*. Springer Publications, 2022). The pair read each others' work and used this as a basis for discussing how their ideas have developed, and might develop further, their research. They then reflected on the links that might be made between their different subject areas, and where their work 'fits' with other research outside, or on the margins of, each of their disciplinary fields. The interview style was very informal and relaxed, with a view to providing a 'safe place' for sharing their work. The session was recorded and made available to members.

We would also very much encourage other network members to set-up similar informal interviews, which can then be publicised via the network. Please contact steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk , if you want to discuss this possibility further.

Group Concept Mapping Exercise:

Developing Further our Understanding of the Research Network, and to Further Develop Meaningful Collaborations between Members

An online Group Concept Mapping (GCM) exercise has been organised, which is systematically exploring (with the help of GCM software), what research questions are most important to members of the network, as related to their personal interests and motivations. These research questions have been identified and listed by members during the first stage of the GCM and have been 'cleaned' by the data collection team from within the network, Steve Smith (University of South Wales), Carolyn Wallace (University of South Wales). The second and third stages have now been set-up and opened for completion. Members have been asked to group or 'sort' these questions thematically, providing a data platform to explore the relationship between these questions and their groupings; and to rank the relative importance or significance of these questions and groupings, in relation to (a) their perceived impactfulness on policy and practice, and (b) their perceived potential for underpinning successful grant applications, across teams and a range of interdisciplinary settings. Once both these latter stages have been completed we will then produce a report of the findings which we will send to members, with a view to developing our understanding of the research network, and to further facilitate meaningful collaboration between members.

What next for 2025/26?

Developing further our relationships across the network

Building on the activities of the network since its inception in 2021, and following discussion in the leadership team in our annual meeting in November 2024, the overall aim for the 2025/26 session is to consolidate and develop further our relationships across the network. This is based on the assumption that the more communication that happens between members, the more likely fruitful relationships will develop, enhancing both the relevance and vitality of the network. In this vein, we will continue with the GCM exercise above and encourage the setting-up of reading groups and interview pairings, and focus any additional efforts on holding one or two network events in the 2025/26 session. These events will be designed to (a) better share what work individual members are doing across network, and (b) provide forums to discuss how well-being research more generally relates to policy making and practice development.

Last but not least, introducing new members of the leadership team!

We have recruited two new members to the leadership team, both from Cardiff Metropolitan University, Jen Lyttleton-Smith, Jrlyttleton-smith@cardiffmet.ac.uk, and Stuart Scott, sscott@cardiffmet.ac.uk. So, Jen and Stu, many thanks again for volunteering for these roles, and for the contributions you have already made to the network's leadership team, and will no doubt continue to make.

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