'A fascinating time to be involved with research’ Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on postgraduate psycho-oncology researchers

King, Lucy, Matthews, Sara, Foster, Claire, Starkings, Rachel, Holch, Patricia, Absolom, Kate and Archer, Stephanie (2022) 'A fascinating time to be involved with research' Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on postgraduate psycho-oncology researchers. Psycho-Oncology. pp. 1-5. ISSN 1057-9249

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/103917/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
‘A fascinating time to be involved with research’ Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on postgraduate psycho-oncology researchers

Lucy King (BSc), Postgraduate Researcher, School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Sara Matthews (BSc), Postgraduate Researcher, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, UK.

Prof Claire Foster, Professor of Psychosocial Oncology, Director of Macmillan Survivorship Research Group, Health Sciences, University of Southampton, UK.

Rachel Starkings, Research Fellow, Sussex Health Outcomes Research & Education in Cancer (SHORE-C), Brighton and Sussex Medical School, UK.

Dr Patricia Holch, Senior Lecturer, Psychology Department, School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Dr Kate Absolom, University Academic Fellow, Patient Centred Outcome Research, Leeds Institute of Medical Research at St James’s, UK/ Division of Health Services Research, Leeds Institute of Health Sciences, University of Leeds, UK.

Dr Stephanie Archer, Research Associate, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, UK/ Department of Surgery and Cancer, Imperial College London, UK.

On behalf of the British Psychosocial Oncology Society Executive Committee.

Keywords: cancer, COVID-19, PGR, postgraduate researcher, psycho-oncology, qualitative research, survey methodology, United Kingdom

Key points
• To explore UK postgraduate researcher (PGRs) COVID-19 experiences, the British Psychosocial Oncology Society (BPOS) conducted an online survey.
• 23 respondents’ qualitative data were analysed thematically and summarised using the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) framework.
• COVID-19 offered opportunities to develop online skills, resilience, and adaptability, whilst opening wellbeing conversations.
• PGRs reported practical difficulties, social isolation, unhealthy work/life balance and concerns about future careers.
• PGRs have had an unprecedented and continually evolving experience; BPOS and relevant institutions must continue to provide adequate support and development opportunities to safeguard their futures.
Introduction
In its capacity to develop and support future researchers, the Executive Committee of the British Psychosocial Oncology Society (BPOS) was prompted to survey the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon UK post-graduate students undertaking psychological, behavioural, social science or applied research degrees. Such students commonly undertake their studies independently, with supporting institutions organising supervision. The impact of COVID-19 has been explored from the perspective of medical students, but not necessarily allied research roles [1]. This survey complemented our UK professionals’ study [2] and builds upon contemporaneous research such as the National Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (NPRES) 2021 [3], providing context-specific data.

Aims of the study
To explore the views of psycho-oncology post-graduate research students (PGRs) regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and research.

Method
Design
A cross-sectional qualitative survey.

Materials
An online survey of UK psycho-oncology PGRs administered via QUALTRICS from December 2020–February 2021, during the second UK ‘lockdown’. The survey included demographic and open response questions (Figure 1).

Participants
Students of mixed oncology disciplines undertaking psychological, behavioural, social science or applied post-graduate research degrees (e.g., PhD, MRes, DPhil).

Procedure
The survey was advertised through the BPOS membership (students n=19) and wider email/social media networks.

Ethics
Ethical approval was received from Leeds Beckett University (REC reference: 84470).

Data analysis
Data were analysed thematically [4] by four authors (LK, SM, KA & SA). Extracted codes were grouped into over-arching and sub-themes. The SWOT framework [5] was used to organise sub-themes into events that had occurred (strengths and weaknesses) or were anticipated (opportunities and threats).

Results and study sample demographics
23 PGRs provided sufficient data for analysis following 30 responses to the survey (Table 1).

Survey findings
The overarching themes ‘Changes to research context and methods’ and ‘PGR experience and development’ are described below. Appendix A shows the sub-themes.

Theme 1: Changes to research context and methods

Strengths and Opportunities: PGRs recognised the unique opportunity COVID-19 provided for understanding patient experiences and adapting research methods:

‘...it has been a fascinating time to be involved with research, seeing the impact of COVID in the clinical setting and observing the fast pace of research in the midst of so many challenges.’

Students viewed adjusted research methods, principally the adoption of online interviewing positively and accepted its' future continued use to increase recruitment and interventions, with scale and cost benefits. They also recognised that online research could be beneficial for isolated patients to gather regularly, virtually during lockdown. The skills acquired through the rapid adaptations positively encouraged some PGRs’ awareness of their potential:

‘I believe PGRs like myself, while it may have felt overwhelming, should pride themselves in a sense of mastery - we survived the worst of it and continue to prove our resilience and adaptability...’

Weaknesses and Threats: Research settings (e.g., care homes) or methodologies (e.g., ethnography) meant active or planned studies had to be redesigned. Changes to service delivery (clinics/pathways/practice) increased pressures upon potential healthcare collaborators and participants, resulting in slow progress. Timelines were extended to negotiate practical issues causing considerable worry about meeting course deadlines:
'The next phase of my project is delayed due to the site research and development office not accepting new study applications due to capacity issues…'

Although most survey respondents were not self-funded, delays also caused financial uncertainty:

‘I suspect I will have to focus on a new setting and methodology. This essentially means starting my PhD again. I don’t know how this will affect my funding.’

PGRs working clinically, part-time were required to suspend their research studies to dedicate more time to their clinical role. For those continuing with clinically based research, novel emotional challenges were encountered around face-to-face contact with the at-risk cancer population:

‘I was very anxious to be in such close contact with extremely vulnerable patients for fear of passing COVID to them…’

Remote recruitment and data collection, reduced opportunities for PGRs to gain experience of in-person contact with patients and healthcare professionals, creating practical challenges and influencing collaboration possibilities. There was concern about the impact of COVID-19 on data quality due to interviews not being face to face or from reduced recruitment:

‘The research question will only be partially answered by a small cohort of patients, so I feel the project will suffer as a result’

Theme 2: PGR experience and development

Strengths and opportunities: COVID-19 led to changed perspectives and priorities. The circumstances heightened the desire for a research career for some, building resilience, new skills, and adaptability:

‘I think that this whole situation has made me more keen to pursue a career in research as my PhD work has probably saved me over the past year....Although the research is really challenging it has helped me to see that this is what I really love doing.’

COVID-19 emphasised the importance of wellbeing, work/life balance and resources that should be available.
In general, overwhelming praise was expressed for institutions and supervision teams:

‘[Supervisors] have been very encouraging and reassuring when I have felt that I am falling behind. We had a very good training session about online research strategies which helped a lot.’

**Weaknesses and threats**: Concerns around COVID-19 were apparent, as was difficulty negotiating lockdowns, unique challenges including lack of working space or resources (technology/equipment), and the erosion of boundaries for home working/schooling.

Many PGRs had clinical, charity or teaching roles, which increased workload pressure:

‘…Study leave has been cancelled. Annual leave which I had saved for study has had to be used to cover childcare.’

Many felt a sense of isolation, missing both learning experiences and social support; although often available online, face-to-face was preferred:

‘I feel I have missed out on the social support and the ability to ask the smaller, procedural and 'get started' questions that I would have been able to ask in an office setting.’

This was further impacted by reduced conference and general networking opportunities, an important aspect of career development.

For some, the consequence of so many life adjustments reduced productivity, motivation and impacted psychological health:

‘I experienced burnout while attempting to push through the psychological impact of the pandemic and deadlines of the PhD…..it is difficult to return to the pre-pandemic levels of motivation and focus.’

The uncertain landscape posed a threat to future career prospects and ambitions:
‘I feel so unsure of myself and it is really impacting the decisions for what I should do next when I was so sure before. I hope my confidence comes back gradually. I am worried about future jobs…’

Strengths and limitations of study
Motivation to participate may have included polarized experiences which could bias findings. Also, retrospective accounts may not convey the uncertainty surrounding how long COVID-19 and the restrictions would last, which made forecasting and planning at the time very difficult.

Future studies could involve global postgraduates as there are likely to be similarities and differences in the impact of COVID-19.

Extensions of this study could utilise a theory-based analysis, with the ultimate goal of understanding postgraduates' support needs further.

Conclusion
COVID-19 significantly impacted psycho-oncology PGRs during an already demanding programme of study. Nevertheless, there was overwhelming expression of appreciation for the support offered by supervisory teams and institutions and PGRs have shown discipline, adaptability, and resilience. However, threats to future research careers included reduced networking and fears around availability of opportunities for professional development, echoing wider research [3]. In addition, only 63% of respondents to the NPRE survey agreed their well-being support needs (a new criterion for the 2021 survey) were met, whilst the mentality of being depressed, stressed and anxious was considered normal.

Whilst many institutions have general support in place (extension processes and remote support), ongoing development and wellbeing support will be required to safeguard the future for a cohort of PGRs whose introduction to a research career has been a time of unprecedented challenge. Organisations who support PGR communities, such as BPOS, should continue to monitor and respond to the changing COVID-19 landscape. This survey illustrates that further exploration of PGRs' support needs is required to inform the development of theory driven interventions to support postgraduates in a wider context.

Acknowledgements
We thank the survey respondents for participating, and colleagues who assisted in the direction and progress of the study.
Data Availability Statement
The supporting data are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.
### Multiple choice demographic questions
1. In what region of the UK is your academic institution located?
2. What type of research degree are you currently working towards?
3. Are you completing this degree full-time or part-time?
4. Is your research degree self-funded, funded by your institution, externally funded or otherwise? (A free text option given for details of funding arrangements and/or extensions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic)
5. What year of study are you currently in?
6. Are you completing the degree alongside another role?
7. What is your research area/topic? (Free text, with option not to answer)

### Open text questions:
1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your research/student experience? Please describe:
   a. any challenges, changes or issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to your research (e.g., research area, recruitment, methodology, timelines etc)
   b. how these challenges/changes/issues have been addressed
2. Please tell us about any positive changes to your research as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., positive changes to research plans, methodology, use of technology, working with participants and collaborators, personal working arrangements etc).
3. Please tell us about any personal changes you have made to adapt to the research/student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. managing caring responsibilities, work-life balance, finances, remote working)
4. Thinking about the research support, training, or supervision you have received during the COVID-19 pandemic:
   a. what support, advice or training has been provided by your academic institution or supervisory team?
   b. what other types of support/training/supervision would you like to have received?
5. Please tell us about any long-term impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have on your research, student experience or future career plans
6. Please use the box below to share any further information or views about your research or student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic
Table 1: Demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>n. 23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and Humber</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>n. 23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study time</th>
<th>n. 23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional role</th>
<th>n. 14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHP</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching/Academic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity / Finance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>n. 23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>n. 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self (full or part)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External (full or part)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity (part)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University (full)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


