



**THE POSITIVE START PROJECT: A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO  
PROMOTING WELLBEING IN THE NEWER ENGINEERING  
ACADEMIC COMMUNITY**

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## ABSTRACT

The Positive Start Project is a new initiative that is in the process of providing a series of workshops and events focused on academic wellbeing, career development and positive mental health within a large faculty of engineering and applied science in the UK. Aimed at building a scholarly and sustainable research and teaching community of early career academics (ECAs), the project has arisen out of a need to provide high quality professional development activities and frameworks for the ECA community whilst also combatting social and academic isolation left over from the two-year long period of 'lockdown'.

Adopting an Action Research Approach this paper addresses a little considered topic in academic circles, the need to nurture positive wellbeing amongst the Engineering Education academic community. Describing proposed plans for how the Positive Start Project will be developed, disseminated, and reviewed, attention is paid to how 'wellbeing' will be benchmarked at the beginning of the project. Following this a brief overview of some of the planned support and development activities is given whilst the conclusion reiterates the need for a positive and proactive approach to academic wellbeing whilst also noting why Early Career Academics are an important demographic group within our Engineering Education community.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Set within one of the UK's largest applied Engineering Education Faculties, WMG employs almost 800 academic and professional support staff. In addition to this, it is home to around 350 postgraduate researchers and over 3,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students studying a range of different engineering, applied science and management disciplines. Tasked with rebuilding the academic community after two years of remote and hybrid working, the Positive Start Project aims to develop a unique Community of Practice for our Early Career Academics<sup>2</sup> [ECAs]. Starting with a two-day long professional development workshop in which the focus will be on colleagues' strengths and attributes (using the Clifton Strengths Tool<sup>[1]</sup>) a fully licenced and fully experienced Clifton Strength Coach / Consultant has been employed to work alongside the academic team leading the project. Following this a series of 'live' face-to-face training workshops and upskilling events will be held alongside peer mentoring opportunities and coaching sessions. Underpinned and evidenced by an Action Research approach this short paper provides an insight into how the Positive Start Project will make a significant impact to the academic culture of WMG by targeting our large Early Career Academic (ECA) community.

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<sup>2</sup> Early Career Academics (ECAs): *For the context of this project, the term ECAs refers to the following: PhD students: Colleagues in their first academic post, who have been employed five years or less as an academic, including those on research only, research & teaching or teaching only contracts; Colleagues within 5 years of beginning an academic career (this includes graduates as well as more senior colleagues who have entered academia after a career in industry); Colleagues who have worked in academia for some time but who have changed focus within the last five years (for example, colleagues whose whole career has been research-focused who have within the last five years changed to a teaching contract and colleagues who have previously been employed on a teaching contract who have, within the last five years, changed to a research or research / teaching contract).*



## 2. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

One of WMG's key strengths within the University of Warwick is found in its longstanding links with industry. With a leading international reputation for cross-sectoral collaboration and cooperation, WMG has an established record of driving engineering innovation through cutting-edge research. At the same time, WMG's teaching portfolio is built upon a strong emphasis on scholarship and constructive alignment. Colleagues are supported to adopt an applied pedagogy whereby research, learning and teaching, student employability and the needs and expectations of wider society are contemporaneously considered.

Like the majority of academic institutions worldwide, the Covid19 Pandemic has had a marked impact on how WMG operates. Indeed, the past two years have seen a notable change in how the 'day-to-day' operationalisation of learning and teaching is managed and provided. From a teaching perspective there have been a number of changes in the make-up of the academic faculty, with many people leaving the organisation and newer colleagues joining. Many of the new arrivals are Early Career Academics [ECAs] at various stages of their own learning and teaching journey (from Graduate Teaching Assistants to post-doc academics and people new to teaching who are fresh out of employment). A significant number joined the organisation when the curriculum was only offered online, and no one permitted to visit the campus. Joining a large organisation during a global crisis, and then working in enforced isolation, without having an *a priori* relationship within an academic team, it is perhaps not surprising that some newer colleagues, most notably the ECAs have found themselves feeling somewhat isolated.

Yet, as we move towards what is becoming an 'emerging, reformed normality', so the impact of the Pandemic is becomes more evident. One notable issue that is increasingly being reported in the media, is a general increase in mental health problems across the population<sup>[2]</sup>. Already acknowledged to be a matter of some concern amongst the academic postgraduate research community<sup>[3,4]</sup>, problems with poor mental health are augmented by low levels of individual wellbeing to impair promising academic careers<sup>[4,5]</sup>.

It is in this unique 'reformed normality' that this paper is set. Within WMG itself there is a general recognition across the academic faculty that we need to rebuild and reboot our unique Academic Community of Practice. This is particularly the case for our ECAs, some of whom had limited or no opportunity to get to know their colleagues personally and so are struggling to feel part of an academic community. It is the impact of this 'lockdown gap' that this project will address over the next 12 months.

## 3. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Positive Start Project proactively addresses what is often perceived to be a 'taboo subject' in UK Higher Education, that of *collegial wellbeing*. Starting with a benchmarking survey aimed at gauging wellbeing across the faculty, a series of bespoke workshops and events are being put in place to help rebuild our academic community. To facilitate this the project has a single primary objective:



*To provide the means by which WMG's Early Career Academic (ECA) colleagues can become part of a thriving Academic Community of Practice whilst developing their individual transferable professional competencies.*

To support this, four sub-objectives have been developed:

- Conduct a detailed and critical literature review about collegial wellbeing in academia with a particular focus on Engineering Education.
- Undertake a benchmarking survey looking at academic wellbeing on which to ground ongoing interventions
- Starting with a number of two-day long 'kick-off' workshops, develop a series of developmental activities and events aimed at supporting the ECA community
- Disseminate knowledge across the university and beyond about how to better support ECAs from a professional development and wellbeing perspective

#### **4. THE KICK-OFF WORKSHOPS**

The kick-off workshops will take place over three days, offered in two distinctive themes:

1. **Academic Wellbeing: Balancing Professional 'Health' & Individual 'Wellbeing' (Workshop 1: Days 1 & 2):** *This theme emphasizes the link between academic wellbeing and professional development. Colleagues will be taught how to use tools such as a 'force field' analysis to build up persistence and research stamina*
2. **Academic Apprenticeship: Balancing Research, Teaching and Life (Workshop 2: Day 3):** *This workshop will occur 4 weeks after workshop 1 and will provide ECAs with the tools and strategies needed to move forward as part of a larger academic community of practice.*

In addition to the above, a programme of academic development workshops and events is being put together. This programme will provide colleagues with opportunities to share their experiences of learning and teaching in engineering whilst also providing opportunities for upskilling. Newer Career Academics will be encouraged to present their ideas and also to engage in scholarship; conducting research into their own teaching to identify areas for improvement and development.

#### **5. BUILDING TOMORROW'S ACADEMIC COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN ENGINEERING**

Whilst the generic benefits of developing an Academic Community of Practice are recorded in the literature<sup>[6]</sup>, this project is distinctive in that it is focused very much on a relatively large single community of early career academics working within an



applied Engineering Education setting. In addition to the 'Kick-Off Workshops' discussed above, the following activities and interventions will be rolled out of the next 12 months:

1. Peer Mentoring Network: Using an approach developed by two WMG colleagues<sup>[7]</sup> a Peer Mentoring Programme will be launched through the summer of 2022. It is anticipated that this will provide one-to-one and / or group support for all newer academic colleagues. In addition to the PGR community of 350 individuals, this intervention will be open for newly appointed researchers and teachers to join (those within the first three years of their first academic appointment initially).
2. Professional Development & Teacher Training: The need to train academics to teach has long been acknowledged in the literature<sup>[8,9]</sup>. Facilitated in partnership with WMG'S Education Innovation Group a series of learning and teaching focused workshops will be offered to all ECAs. Topics covered will vary, starting at a basic level for colleagues joining academia from industry or as graduate teaching assistants, with topics such as 'An Introduction to Constructive Alignment'. More advanced workshops will include 'Curriculum Design', 'Developing a Successful MOOC', and 'PhD Supervision'. The professional development and teacher training activities will start in the summer of 2022 and continue.
3. Research Methods: WMG currently offers Research Methods training to all PGRs as part of their compulsory year 1 training. The Positive Start Project will expand on this and offer further specialised RM training workshops and events throughout the year open to all ECAs including colleagues who having moved to teaching directly from industry have little or no experience in conducting research.

### **5.1 Leading by Example: Scholarship in Action**

In addition to the professional development focus described above, the Positive Start Project encapsulates an Action Research<sup>[10]</sup> strand. Adopting a mixed methodological approach, the project will begin with the administration of a survey aimed at gauging general wellbeing amongst the faculty as society begins to move out of the global Pandemic. Adapted from the NHS Staff Survey (2021)<sup>[11]</sup> the survey begins with a series of demographic and background questions. It is important to note that such questions are for analytical purposes only as all data collected in the survey will be anonymous. Ethical approval has been acquired and steps put in place so that should any sub-group be small enough to risk identifying individuals, the data will be aggregated into a larger classification.

The findings from the benchmarking survey will be used to guide and inform both the Positive Start Project whilst also being disseminated amongst the PGR team to enable future activity planning.



## 5.2 The Survey Tool: The main themes to be investigated.

In planning the benchmarking survey, a literature review has been conducted to identify the key factors underpinning wellbeing and mental health at work. Seven different themes are to be addressed by the survey:

- i. **Number of hours per week spent at work / study:** Whilst occupational resilience is acknowledged to be linked to the ability to be flexible with regards to workload and other employment related demands<sup>[12]</sup>, a small but important corpus of literature focuses on occupational burnout and excessive workload for colleagues working in Higher Education<sup>[13,14,15]</sup>. Given the focus on early-career academics, the need to gain an insight into the number of hours colleagues spend at work and / or studying is an important factor which will inform future decisions in respect of workload management and work-life balance.
- ii. **Sleep:** There exists a considerable body of knowledge about sleep deprivation within younger people amongst university / college students and those in the early part of their (i.e., age 16-30 years)<sup>[16,17,18]</sup>. Whilst a different, but equally significant corpus of research has examined the impact of sleep deprivation on work performance of people of various ages<sup>[19]</sup>. In analysing this literature, the link between sleep deprivation, stress, poor work performance and general lower quality of life is evident making this an important variable within the study.
- iii. **Exercise & Physical Activity:** Links between poor mental health, stress and a lack of physical activity are widely acknowledged<sup>[20,21]</sup>. The benchmarking survey will ask colleagues to gauge their level of activity and the nature of their role in terms of physical activity. Given the varied nature of WMG's ECA community this question is particularly relevant. A small handful of colleagues have physically demanding roles conducting primary engineering research, whilst others' time is generally spent conducting desk research. Over the Pandemic teaching has become a somewhat sedentary occupation, mainly taking place online. As we move back towards a more 'usual' pedagogic practice in which students will be taught in classrooms and laboratories the benchmarking survey will look at the physical nature of colleagues roles.
- iv. **Individual Perceptions of Physical & Mental Health:** Connected to wellbeing these questions focus on the participants' perceptions of their own health.
- v. **Social life / Leisure time:** The relationship between the amount of time spent on leisure or social activities and positive wellbeing and mental health on students and young people in particular has been well-researched<sup>[22,23]</sup>. In building an academic community of practice, particular amongst the postgraduate research community, the project team are aware of the need to support social activities. The benchmarking survey will look at what colleagues prefer to do outside of the academy.



- vi. **Professional Development Activities:** The final quantitative question focuses on the proposed activities planned within the Positive Start Project asking participants to gauge the potential value of each activity. The responses to these questions will be used to guide and inform future activities in WMG.
- vii. **Support within the Academy:** Three open questions are asked, one of which focuses on how WMG could better support ECAs professional and academic development. Whilst the second question asks about support for participant's overall wellbeing. The final 'catch all' question is intended to provide participants' with the opportunity to raise any issues pertinent to them.

### 5.3 Benchmarking Survey: Data Analysis

No identifying data will be collected. The data will be analysed using Qualtrics to produce descriptive statistics. A series of cross-tabulations will be undertaken with a view to gaining insight into any demographic differences in participants' perspectives and experiences. The three open questions will be analysed using an approach based on grounded theory methodologies in which the data will be conceptually analysed using simple and axial coding

### 5.4 Action Research Qualitative Research.

Following a typical Action Research methodological approach<sup>[10]</sup>, the results of the wellbeing benchmarking survey will be to inform and underpin subsequent academic activities offered under the auspices of the wider project. Following this, the next stage of the research part of the project will be to critically analyse the impact and longer-term outcomes of the planned interventions. This will be undertaken using in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups which will then be analysed, and the findings used to inform subsequent activities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Purposefully designed as a holistic yet multifaceted approach to early academic career support, the Positive Start Project is still in its very early days. The intention in providing a range of opportunities from two-day-long workshops through to smaller professional development activities and workshops is to help the somewhat 'covid beleaguered academic community' to pick itself up and move forward.

In conclusion, the focus on the ECA community is important as newer academics, long expected to simply 'fit in' to the academy, are integral to the successful future of Engineering Education. Left alone to 'sink or swim' for far too long the Positive Start Project will make a significant difference across the faculty; building a cohesive, academic-focused, and supportive community will undoubtedly improve academic wellbeing amongst colleagues which will in-turn, enhance the student experience.



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