

## **Intentional Re-framing of Self-Care as an Institutional Priority in Postgraduate Teaching**

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## **Abstract**

The prioritization of self-care in postgraduate teaching has emerged as a critical yet often overlooked component of both personal and professional success. As the intensifying demands of the role continue to test the boundaries of mental wellness and professional sustainability, the absence of structured, institutionally supported mechanisms for educator well-being has become increasingly apparent. Rather than being embedded in formal support systems, self-care is often treated as an individual responsibility, managed informally or in isolation, leaving educators vulnerable to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement. This review synthesizes peer-reviewed studies using a critical approach to evaluate institutional practices regarding postgraduate teachers' well-being. It identifies key gaps in support systems, including the lack of integrated mental health frameworks and limited access to preventive wellness resources. In response, the paper proposes deliberate strategies such as the development and implementation of comprehensive institutional mental health policies and the establishment of ongoing preventive wellness programs tailored to academic staff, emphasizing stress management, resilience, and holistic well-being. These measures reconceptualize educators not merely as knowledge transmitters but as whole individuals navigating complex professional and emotional demands. By positioning mental wellness as an institutional responsibility rather than a personal afterthought, this shift redefines self-care from an isolated coping mechanism into a collective, strategic necessity for achieving sustainable excellence in academia.

**Keywords:** Institutional support, Mental wellness, Postgraduate teaching, Professional sustainability, Resilience, Self-care.

## Introduction

Well-being is widely recognized as essential for effective teaching and learning across many education systems, and seen as a core component of teachers' professional competencies. (Campbell, Gray, Dey, Holt, & Mulholland, 2024). Higher education teaching, specifically postgraduate teaching has traditionally been defined by intellectual rigor, research productivity, and pedagogical competence, while the equally important dimension of the educator well-being has remained marginal. Postgraduate teaching is uniquely stressful compared to undergraduate instruction because it involves not only advanced content delivery and supervision of complex research projects but also the demanding scholarly expectations and roles that often blur the line between academic and personal life. The mental and emotional demands placed on postgraduate teachers are treated as personal matters, left to individual coping strategies. This privatization of self-care obscures the fact that sustained excellence in teaching and research is inseparable from the mental health of those responsible for advancing scholarship. As expectations around research output, administrative responsibilities, and student supervision continue to intensify, the absence of structured support systems threatens both individual resilience and institutional effectiveness.

Reducing self-care to an optional or personal undertaking overlooks its broader implications for academic culture. (Turner & Rankine, 2025) When educators contend with lingering stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion in isolation, the impact extends beyond personal well-being to diminished instructional quality, weakened mentorship, and strained collegial relations. (Deep, Ghosh, & Chen, 2025) Higher institutions that fail to integrate wellness into their operational frameworks inadvertently compromise the quality and sustainability of postgraduate education. Addressing this oversight requires a fundamental rethinking of self-care, repositioning it not as an optional and individual coping mechanism but as a strategic institutional priority embedded within the structures of academic life. Reframing self-care in institutional terms necessitates policies and practices that treat the educator well-being as integral to academic success. This involves instituting comprehensive mental health frameworks, establishing preventive wellness initiatives, and creating environments that actively support resilience and psychological balance. Such measures move beyond temporary relief to cultivate enduring capacity for effective teaching and scholarship. This review paper argues that the intentional reframing of self-care as an institutional responsibility constitutes a necessary condition for safeguarding the sustainability of postgraduate education and ensuring its continued relevance in an increasingly demanding academic landscape.

**Institutional Gaps in Supporting Postgraduate Teachers' Well-Being**  
Some higher education institutions, particularly in regions such as the United Kingdom-UK, have established general wellbeing services accessible to GTAs, however, some of these systems fall short of addressing the specific and compounded challenges of postgraduate teaching. Structured provisions for postgraduate teachers' well-being remain underdeveloped or insufficiently targeted, despite the toll that academic pressures exert on educators, (Howard-Hill, 2023) failing to address their unique challenges such as excessive workload, and limited access to tailored mental health support, making it an optional or peripheral program.

The burden of sustaining mental balance therefore falls squarely on the individual, who must manage stress, exhaustion, and competing obligations in isolation, which continue to be a problem among teachers, leading to anxiety and depression. (Agyapong Obuobi-Donkor, Burbach, & Wei, 2022) This neglect of responsibility by institutions reveals a profound gap between commitments to academic excellence and the lived conditions of those who make it possible.

A comprehensive understanding of postgraduate teachers' well-being must also account for the economic and structural conditions that sustain academic burnout. Unsustainable employment conditions, low remuneration, and unstable funding environments intensify psychological strain and reduce access to institutional support. It disproportionately affects minoritized groups, including academics with disabilities and neurodivergent educators, who often encounter systemic barriers to well-being resources. Integrating these economic and equity dimensions is essential for developing inclusive and sustainable institutional strategies that genuinely promote educator resilience and mental health.

The consequences of such neglect are profound and multi-layered. Educators grappling with burnout may experience diminished enthusiasm in the lecture room, strain on personal relationships, decreased leisure time, and neglect of self-care leading to superficial rather than transformative engagement with students. (Oderinde, Akintunde, & Ajala, 2024; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Supervisory relationships, which are central to postgraduate education, may also suffer when postgraduate teachers lack the emotional capacity to guide students through the uncertainties of advanced research. On a broader scale, institutions risk weakening their own intellectual vigor when their teaching staff are drained of energy and purpose, resulting in reduced research productivity and lowered morale.

This institutional silence normalizes stress and exhaustion as the price of academic commitment. Without visible acknowledgment of educators' struggles, those experiencing fatigue or emotional distress may internalize their challenges as personal inadequacies rather than systemic shortcomings. This not only perpetuates cycles of self-blame but also deters educators from seeking help, reinforcing isolation and deepening disengagement. This neglect not only isolates individuals but sustains a system where institutional accountability for well-being is overlooked. The very individuals (postgraduate teachers) whose works develop student engagement and belonging are often those who lack adequate support themselves. Postgraduate teachers cannot be expected to "run on empty." (Hattersley, 2022). If higher institutions are to build compassionate learning environments, they must move beyond offering generic wellbeing services that often fail to meet the specific needs of postgraduate teachers. While such services may exist within student support structures, they are typically not tailored to the dual pressures GTAs face as both learners and educators. Likewise, the burden of care cannot simply be transferred to already overburdened professional staff, who themselves experience similar strains. Institutions must therefore develop targeted structures that address these overlapping vulnerabilities, integrating care as a shared, structural responsibility rather than an individual or informal one. Recognizing these systemic gaps is the first step toward reshaping the ethos of postgraduate education into one that is both sustainable and humane.

Institutional Gap	Description
Insufficient integrated mental health frameworks	Absence or weakness of comprehensive, institution-wide systems that embed mental health support within the everyday structures, policies, and practices of higher education institutions
Non-targeted wellbeing interventions	Such as generic counseling services or campus-wide stress management workshops, that often fail to accommodate the distinct pressures faced by postgraduate GTAs under constrained economic and temporal conditions.
Weak institutional accountability	Limited or inadequate responsibility that higher education institutions assume to systematically assess, monitor, and respond to wellbeing challenges.

**Table 1 Key Institutional Gaps in Supporting Postgraduate Teachers' Well-Being**

### Repositioning the Educator as a Whole Person

Teaching is challenging and yet one of the most rewarding professions. (Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burbach, & Wei, 2022). The role of the teacher in higher education has often been narrowly defined, emphasizing cognitive expertise and the efficient transmission of disciplinary knowledge. This reductionist and mechanistic view strips teaching of its depth, portraying educators as functionaries whose value lies in the delivery of content rather than in the cultivation of intellectual and relational growth. Repositioning the educator as a whole person calls for a deliberate re-examination of this framing, urging a shift from mechanistic model of teaching toward more humane, relational, and transformative understandings of pedagogy. This perspective insists that the educator's intellectual, emotional, and personal dimensions must be recognized as integral to the teaching enterprise if postgraduate education is to remain both rigorous and meaningful. This new way of seeing postgraduate teachers is not only timely but current. (Hattersley, 2022)

Beyond viewing educators solely as transmitters of knowledge Puoti, Latino, and Tafuri (2025) critique traditional conceptions of teaching that construct educators as mere conduits of intellectual content, whose primary responsibility is the precise and authoritative transmission of information to students. This narrow conception reduces teaching to a technical exercise, privileging cognitive output while disregarding the personhood of the educator. To reposition the educator as a whole person is to move beyond this mechanistic view and to acknowledge that teaching is not merely the communication of disciplinary expertise but the enactment of a deeply situated, reflective, and responsive practice. This approach resists the commodification of knowledge and asserts that educators are not interchangeable components of an educational machine but a living, thinking and feeling person in an intellectual and emotional ecosystem.

This expanded view reclaims the teacher's identity as one whose professional, personal, and emotional parts in teaching are intertwined. Every

lecture, seminar, and mentoring session is imbued with the educator's lived experience, value system, and affective investments. The recognition of this interplay invites a paradigm shift where the personal is not viewed as a distraction from academic rigor but as a legitimate and powerful source of pedagogical depth. The fusion of the professional, personal and emotional elements, humanizes and makes teaching a generative act that cultivates human connection rather than merely transmitting information. To humanize postgraduate teaching is to recognize that education is fundamentally a relationship-driven enterprise, where the quality of interaction between educator, colleagues and students profoundly shapes learning outcomes, because teachers' mental health impacts not only their personal well-being but also the overall quality of education and student performance. (Emeljanovas, Sabaliauskas, Meziene, & Istomina, 2023) This holistic approach to teaching acknowledges that educators inhabit an intellectual and emotional ecosystem, where wellness is essential. This reorientation challenges neutral structures in institutions, emphasizing instead the designing of spaces that support the emotional well-being and honour the dignity of postgraduate teachers. In this space, education becomes not just a site of knowledge acquisition but a transformative process that nurtures the mind, strengthens community, and affirms the humanity of teachers involved.

## **Institutional Response to Mental Well-being: A Duty of Care**

### **Mental Health Policies**

Findings reported by Einav, Confino, Geva, and Margalit (2024) indicate that the presence of institutional support is significantly associated with reduced teacher burnout and improved overall well-being. This finding lends support to the argument advanced by Crook et al. (2021), who contend that higher education institutions should play a more active role in creating supportive environments that safeguard staff well-being and mitigate burnout. According to Taja-on and Vergara (2025), a meaningful response to the mental health challenges faced by postgraduate educators begins with embedding mental health policies within the formal structures of academic governance. These policies must transcend their symbolic presence in institutional handbooks to become part of the institution's operational ethos, explicitly framing mental health as central to staff welfare in statutes and quality assurance frameworks. This response to mental health concerns further lays the groundwork for sustainable and inclusive institutional support. Embedding mental well-being into evaluations, workload policies, and promotion criteria reflects a shift from a purely productivity-driven model to one that affirms institutional duty of care. In some parts around the world, GTAs currently lack basic protections such as paid sick leave, access to confidential counseling, or contractual occupational health rights, often bearing the burden of finding cover when unwell. Enforceable measures like mandated breaks, institutional counseling services, and formal mental health leave would therefore reframe wellness as a collective institutional responsibility rather than an individual choice.

Postgraduate teachers face distinctive pressures such as the burden of supervising complex research and the expectation to produce scholarship at a competitive pace, heavy teaching loads, and balancing administrative duties with their own academic growth, just to mention a few. Without designing robust and

responsive mental health frameworks, these pressures can lead to burnout, diminished teaching quality, and a gradual erosion of intellectual creativity that undermines both staff well-being and institutional excellence.

### Preventive Wellness Programs

Ross, Scanes, and Locke (2024) argue that, for academics, particularly postgraduate educators to adapt and recover in the current era of heightened stress, and thereby sustain educational quality and student learning, preventive wellness programs must explicitly target the specific stressors these educators face on a daily basis. Such programs might include stress-management interventions tailored to the cyclical demands of teaching, supervision, and research deadlines. Examples include resilience training delivered through interactive, practice-oriented workshops rather than purely theoretical seminars designed to equip postgraduate educators with strategies for responding constructively to criticism, rejection, setbacks, and the inevitable disruptions inherent in academic life.

Peer support networks also deserve institutional investment. They can provide a confidential space for postgraduate teachers to share coping strategies and affirm the validity of their struggles without fear of professional stigma. (Filippou, Acquah, & Bengs, 2025) These measures are not indulgences but pragmatic tools for sustaining intellectual vigor and pedagogical excellence within the institution. Some examples of effective preventive wellness initiatives can be observed across UK higher education institutions. University of Warwick's Wellbeing Strategy 2020–24 adopts a comprehensive approach that integrates prevention and wellbeing within institutional structures for both students and staff. Similarly, at University College London (UCL), the Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan establishes a whole-university framework aimed at ensuring psychological health among employees. The University of Bath's Work-related Stress and Wellbeing Policy further exemplifies institutional commitment to preventive action, explicitly applying to all university employees and outlining proactive measures to minimize the risk of work-related ill-health and stress.

It should be noted that the success of preventive programs mentioned above lies in their ability to integrate seamlessly into the working lives of teaching staff. If wellness programs demand additional hours from already overburdened teachers, they risk becoming counterproductive. Higher education institutions should therefore seek to integrate well-being programs into existing professional development structures where feasible, ensuring participation remains flexible rather than burdensome. Instead of mandating attendance which could inadvertently contribute to workload stress institutions might embed wellness-focused peer networks and reflective practices within ongoing academic activities. This approach reframes well-being not as an additional obligation but as a supportive, voluntary resource in higher education, reinforcing institutions' commitment to a compassionate and sustainable academic culture.

### Leadership Modeling

Institutional leaders hold the symbolic and practical power to make wellness a normative aspect of academic culture in any higher institution. When deans, heads of department, and senior faculty openly acknowledge their own engagement with



mental health resources or participate in wellness activities, they dismantle the pervasive culture of silence. Leadership that engages openly and authentically with wellness issues demonstrates that self-care is not a marker of weakness but a professional responsibility.

Normalization further necessitates that institutional leadership embed wellness within the broader narrative of organizational success. Instead of framing staff well-being as a solely individual responsibility, it should be positioned as a core driver of research productivity, student learning outcomes, and the institution's reputation. Consistent communication about wellness initiatives and the integration of wellness indicators into annual institutional reports can gradually reshape collective attitudes. Over time, these practices reposition wellness from a discretionary benefit to a core characteristic of the academic environment, signaling a progressive institution that regards its staff not only as intellectual contributors but as whole persons deserving of care and support. (Love et al., 2024)

## **Implications of Institutionalizing Self-Care for Academic Excellence and Institutional Sustainability**

### **Enhanced Teaching Effectiveness and Research Productivity**

As evidenced by initiatives such as University of Warwick's Wellbeing Strategy 2020–24 and UCL's Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan, which integrate wellness into institutional practice. Such examples show that when higher education institutions prioritize holistic support, they guarantee sustainable academic cultures that safeguard both human well-being and long-term excellence. Institutionalized self-care is not an indulgent enterprise but a structural necessity for sustaining academic rigor and productivity. When postgraduate educators are supported through formal mechanisms that prioritize mental health and emotional resilience, their capacity for pedagogical engagement expands. As argued above, that teaching is not a mechanical transfer of knowledge but a process that demands intellectual presence, patience, and empathy. A teacher burdened by unmitigated stress, lingering fatigue, limited resources and time constraints cannot consistently sustain the energy required to animate the classroom, (Einav, Confino, Geva, & Margalit, 2024) and this may lead to reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and poor work performance. (Seo, Wei, Qin, Kim, Yan, & Greengard, 2017) In contrast, higher institutions that integrate self-care within their governance structures encourage a pedagogical space that enables educators to engage with their teaching both effectively and sustainably. Such an environment does more than alleviate immediate stressors, it equips postgraduate teachers with the emotional and cognitive range to plan, deliver, and assess learning with depth and creativity. In this way, teaching becomes not merely a contractual obligation but a deliberate and life-giving intellectual endeavour, reinforcing the institution's reputation as a place where excellence is nurtured rather than extracted at the expense of human well-being.

#### **Long-Term Relevance of Postgraduate Education**

Postgraduate education occupies a unique place in society, serving as the crucible for advanced research, innovation, and thought leadership. Its continued relevance rests upon those who teach and supervise within it. White et al. (2024) suggest that the extent to which higher education institutions assume responsibility

for the well-being of postgraduate educators is a critical determinant of the sustained relevance and effectiveness of postgraduate education. Institutions compete not only for students but also for the brightest educators and researchers. Institutions that fail to create conditions for mental and emotional flourishing risk losing talent to more supportive environments. A culture of stress and neglect undermines institutional continuity and drives talent from academia, with marginalized groups, especially academics with disabilities and neurodivergent educators who are disproportionately affected due to inadequate support and accessibility (Preece & Howley, 2018). Sustained investment in wellness is therefore not only an ethical obligation but a strategic necessity for safeguarding the intellectual capital upon which the institution's competitiveness and continuity depend. In doing so, institutions ensure that postgraduate education remains relevant and serves the broader project of societal advancement.

The academic space has long been characterized by a culture in which exhaustion is valorized, where working to the point of depletion is treated as evidence of commitment and intellectual seriousness. Postgraduate educators are often celebrated for keeping demanding schedules or sacrificing weekends to research and grading, as though such practices were markers of professional excellence rather than symptoms of systemic overreach. This cycle leaves little room for rest or reflection. Perpetuating this cycle of overwork is not only unsustainable but ultimately detrimental to teaching quality, research innovation, and the well-being of the very individuals on whom the academic enterprise depends. (Cadena-Povea, Hernandez-Martinez, Bastidas-Amador, & Torres-Andrade, 2025).

Institutionalizing self-care initiates a cultural shift that challenges the longstanding mythology of academic overwork as a badge of honour. When wellness practices are normalized, the academy evolves from a space where exhaustion is valorized to one where balance is seen as conducive to excellence. This transformation destabilizes the cycle of guilt and self-neglect that often characterizes postgraduate teaching, inviting a new brand of educators to embrace sustainable work habits without fear of being perceived as less committed. By centering self-care within academic culture, universities affirm that no group should have to sacrifice well-being for legitimacy. This not only creates a more compassionate workplace but also one that aligns the academy with the ethical imperatives of justice and equity that underpin its social contract.

Institutionalizing self-care enhances teaching quality, research productivity, and staff retention while promoting equity and sustainability. Embedding wellness in academic culture safeguards intellectual capital and affirms the academy's commitment to both human well-being and long-term academic excellence.

## **Conclusion**

This review underscores that self-care in postgraduate teaching should extend beyond individual efforts, highlighting the need for a systemic, institution-wide approach to staff wellbeing, not limited to GTAs alone. The growing pressures of postgraduate education call for policies that embed psychological health and preventive wellness into academic structures. By addressing gaps such as limited mental health frameworks and inadequate access to support resources, institutions

can ensure resilience, reduce stress, and nurture holistic development. Reimagining educators as whole individuals rather than solely as knowledge transmitters ensures a more humane and sustainable academic environment. Moving forward, higher education institutions must make self-care a strategic priority, positioning well-being as essential to both academic excellence and the enduring progress of education.

### **Ethical Claim**

This review, titled “Intentional Re-framing of Self-Care as an Institutional Priority in Postgraduate Teaching,” did not involve human participants or interventions requiring formal institutional or supervisory approval.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

None.

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