

Case study - interview with Rosita

Student Happiness Index

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HOWDEN



Interview with Rosita



Background

Rosita is a PhD student in Public Health at City St. George University of London. She's currently in her third year and revising her thesis on migrant worker health ahead of final submission. She's looking forward to returning to her native Taiwan when her PhD is completed and is applying for academic jobs there, having found her time in London to be isolated with an intense focus on her studies.

The student experience

While more isolating than she expected it to be, Rosita says that PhD life is inherently lonely by its nature. Her research is fully funded and independent, and she doesn't attend classes like undergraduates and other postgraduates do, with the majority of her time spent writing on her own.

This isolation does have an impact on Rosita's mental health – sometimes she can find it depressing to be working so intensely every day on her thesis, and it can feel relentless,

especially when receiving rounds of feedback. But her research group is supportive, she can message them at any time, and she always keeps in mind how long she has left to finish and how much funding she has left, which enables her to focus and carry on. In fact, she often feels that she doesn't have time to feel lonely or think about her mental health because her workload is so intense, which comes with its own pros and cons.

The language barrier

Rosita does have friends she can talk to that she's met at academic events or through her research group, but as an international student, she finds the language barrier can be a problem. This is one of the reasons she hasn't taken up any of the university's mental health support services, saying she would find it challenging and uncomfortable to talk to a stranger about something so personal like her mental health in a different language, even though she doesn't have much of a local network of friends to talk to in the UK.

Communication challenges

While she speaks highly of her accommodation – saying it's better than she expected – she does think London itself is part of the problem. The weather aside (which was a shock for her), the sheer size of London makes it hard for her to build any sense of belonging here. This can make the isolation worse, especially for international students. She thinks this, coupled with her own intense focus on finishing her thesis, means it can be all too easy to go for a long time without speaking to people, which could have an impact on mental health.

She thinks this could generally be the case when it comes to international students. In her student accommodation, she says about two thirds are undergraduates and the rest postgraduate and there's a real mix of cultural backgrounds. She believes the university could do more to organise events that encourage people from different nationalities and cultures to get to know, and understand, different cultures better – promoting mutual understanding and easier mixing.

This could be true of any student who is lonely, and she thinks the university could be more proactive in offering quick mental health check-ins, perhaps via email, rather than waiting for students who are struggling to reach out. Rosita believes that often those most in need of help are the ones who are least likely to ask for it, and she points out how easy it is to lose communication skills when you're on your own for long periods of a time, saying it's almost as if you forget how to speak.

AI as a tool to help

Luckily for Rosita, she has found AI like ChatGPT to be a real help when it comes to navigating the language barrier. Three years ago, when she was applying for her PhD, she was worried about how to find a proof reader to help with her English writing, but she says now ChatGPT is the perfect tool to help. She advises caution, "if you put garbage in, you get garbage out", but as a tool she's found it very helpful.

She doesn't use it for mental health support, but she says it can help her understand herself better when it comes to her writing, thought patterns, and the ideas and research she's working on. It has saved her significant time and also helps her meet the rigorous written standards of her supervisor.

Overall, despite some tough times throughout her PhD, Rosita is feeling optimistic about the future – she's looking forward to returning to Taiwan and working there, and she's grateful for the government funding that has enabled her to study without any financial worries.



Get in touch

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