

Researchers' Experience and Wellbeing: The European University Institute 2017

Introduction:

The Researchers' Experience and Wellbeing survey at the EUI was conducted in February 2017. The questionnaire was a slightly revised version of the exercise launched in October 2010. The survey was designed to assess the mental health needs and concerns of doctoral researchers with a view to sustaining a high level of the research-students' support system and developing further the EUI-strategy to improve the wellbeing and mental health facilities at the Institute.

Method of survey:

The survey was conducted on-line and based on a questionnaire developed and administered by a team of researchers at UC Berkeley on behalf of the Graduate Assembly in 2004.¹ The Academic service maintains that conducting parallel surveys at the EUI would produce indicative results that could be analysed from a comparative perspective. Academic Service had obtained the permission of the UC Berkeley research team to use their survey instrument and adapted it to fit the context of the institute.

The questionnaire was sent by email to EUI researchers explaining the objectives of the survey and assuring that results would be anonymous and that data would be collected and analysed on an aggregate basis. Researchers were invited to answer only those questions with which they felt comfortable and were informed that they could refuse to answer any or all of the questions.

The survey addresses the following issues:

- Researchers' self-reported mental health needs and concerns
- Utilization and assessment of the EUI Mental Health Services
- The Climate in the Academic Departments
- Researchers' demographic characteristics

Participants:

The questionnaire was addressed to five-hundred and nineteen EUI researchers (510 doctoral researchers and 9 LLM students) with active student status (first to fifth year) in February 2017. Responses were collected over the month of February 2017.

¹ Hyun, Jenny K, Brian C Quinn, Temina Madon, and Steve Lustig, "Graduate Student Mental Health: needs Assessment and Utilization of Counselling Services;" *Journal of College Student Development*; May/June 2006.

The return rate for the survey, which featured a series of highly personal questions, is 47% (244 out of 519). The response rate of the 2010 EUI wellbeing survey was 52%. In general, response rates of this type of surveys reach a 33% benchmark.

Gender representation:

Whereas the gender variable registered in the EUI database, is the one officially recognized in the official identity documents (Male or Female), the question was formulated to invite respondents to answer according to the gender they identify to which they most identify including other categories than Male Vs. Female (transgender female, transgender male, gender variant-non conforming, not listed).

Female respondents (51%) were slightly over represented compared to recipients of the survey (47%). 43% of respondents were males, and 4% of respondents identified with other gender categories.

Mean age of respondents:

63% are between 26-30 years. 18% are between 31 and 35 years, and 15% are younger than 25.

| <u>Academic department</u> | <u>Actual %</u> | <u>Survey respondents' to this question%</u> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Economics | 18% | 12% |
| History and Civilization | 28% | 29% |
| Law | 26% | 29% |
| Political & Social Sciences | 28% | 29% |

| <u>Academic year:</u> | <u>Actual %</u> | <u>Survey respondents' to this question%</u> |
|-----------------------|-----------------|--|
| First year | 22% | 18% |
| Second year | 19% | 20% |
| Third year | 23% | 20% |
| Fourth year | 20% | 15% |
| Fifth year | 16% | 8% |

Note: 18% of respondents chose not to identify their academic year of registration.

The response population can be considered representative of the total researchers' population in terms of; gender, academic department and citizenship. It can also be considered representative in terms of academic year of registration, even though fifth year researchers are under-represented among respondents. This may be explained by the fact that fifth-year researchers do not have the obligation of residency and therefore project themselves beyond their EUI experience.

Respondents were also representative in terms of nationally groups. 187 respondents chose to identify the nationality group they consider themselves to belong to. 41% of respondents are from Western Europe; 26% from Southern Europe; 16% are from Central and Eastern Europe; and 11% from northern Europe. Only 5% of respondents are from the rest of the world. This is highly representative of the entire researchers' population.

Another aspect of representativeness of respondents, is the percentage of respondents who stated they have children. 4.4% (9/204) of respondents reported to have children, and interestingly 5.4% (28/510) of EUI doctoral researchers have requested leave for maternity/paternity.

Data Analysis:

1. Researchers' self reported mental health needs and concerns:

A considerable majority (65%) of the respondents reported emotional or stress-related problems over the previous year. This is considered an increase compared to the 53% reported by respondents in 2010. Another 74% reported having a colleague with an emotional or stress-related problem over the last 12 months.

59% of respondents (127 EUI researchers) considered using mental health services in the past 12 months.

In a more recent wellbeing survey conducted at UC Berkley in 2014; 47% of PhD "students" and 37% of Master's and Professional students score as depressed.² The same survey showed that graduate students in the Arts & Humanities "fared poorly on several indicators and 64% score as depressed."

Gender Differences (comparison with EUI 2010 survey and UC Berkeley 2004 survey)

| Perceived need | EUI 2017 | EUI 2010 | UC-Berkley survey³ |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Males reporting emotional stress | 59% | 44% | 39% |
| Females reporting emotional stress | 70% | 61% | 52% |
| Other Gender categories reporting emotional stress | 56% | No data | No data |
| Males seeking help from mental health services | 50% | 10% | 39% |
| Females seeking help from mental health services | 68% | 26% | 63% |
| Other Gender categories seeking help from mental health services | 60% | No data | No data |

² "Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report/2014" ga.berkeley.edu/wellbeingreport 2014.

³ "Student Mental Health Committee: Final Report;" Office of the President, University of California, September 2006.

60% of First-year researchers (the **2016 cohort**) stated that they have had emotional or stress related problems that significantly affected their wellbeing and/or academic performance in the past year. We need to bear in mind that first-year researchers were reporting on their experience during the past 12 months, i.e. before joining EUI. We can see that the rate of self-reported emotional stress has increased since 2010, when 34% of the 2010 cohort, reported to have experienced high emotional stress in the previous year.

The highest level of stress among the other cohorts (second to fifth year researchers) was reported by fifth-year researchers (87%); followed by third-year researchers (72%); then second-years (61%) and least by fourth-years (49%).

The level of stress among researchers from the same academic department ranged from 60% in ECO; 61% in SPS; 64% in LAW and 68% in HEC.

The corresponding figures in 2010 were: 45% in ECO, to 47% in LAW, 54% in HEC and 57% in SPS. Researchers who retain they have poor linguistic skills report higher levels of stress (87%) compared to those who believe they have good linguistic skills (61%). Back in 2010, respondents who retained they had poor linguistic skills reported higher levels of stress (60%) as compared to those who believed they had good linguistic skills (52%).

| Perceived state of mind (frequently or all the time) | EUI 2017 | EUI 2010 | UC-Berkeley survey |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| In the past 12 months, have you had an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly affected your well being and/or academic performance? | 65% | 53% | 45% |
| Felt things were <i>hopeless</i> | 21% | 15% | 67% |
| Felt <i>overwhelmed</i> by all you had to do | 49% | 28% | 46% |
| Felt so depressed that it was <i>difficult to function</i> | 12% | 8% | 54% |
| Felt <i>exhausted</i> (not from physical activity) | 43% | 30% | 42% |
| Felt <i>very sad</i> | 27% | 18% | 19% |

59% of respondents among EUI researchers state that they considered using mental health services (counsellors, social services or psychiatrists) in the past year. 29% (62) of respondents report having actually used the EUI counselling services and 14% (30) report having sought off-campus (non-EUI) mental health services in the past year.

75% of respondents who saw an-EUI counsellor (46 out of 61) were either very satisfied or satisfied with the counsellor they saw. The average of satisfaction is in line with the one of the 2010 survey (79%).

19 respondents reported having been assisted by an-EUI sponsored psychiatrist (external medical specialist paid by the EUI) in the past year. 68% of those who were assisted by those external medical specialists were either very satisfied or satisfied.

Personal, emotional and relationship issues are reported to be the major reasons why researchers may seek help (43%), followed by academic (23%), career (14%), transition to Florence and the EUI (10%) financial (7%). 2% of researchers reported seeking help for harassment, bullying or sexual identity issues. These figures are very similar to the ones revealed by the 2010 survey.

| Reasons for seeking help | EUI 2017 | EUI 2010 | UC-Berkley survey |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| Emotional problems | 29% | 28% | 50% |
| Academic problems | 23% | 21% | 33% |
| Career problems | 14% | 12% | 25% |
| Relationship problems | 14% | 17% | 31% |
| Transition problems | 10% | 10% | No data |
| Financial problems | 7% | 9% | 14% |
| Harassment and bullying | 1.7% | No data | No data |
| Sexual identity | 0.4% | 0.8% | 2% |

The percentage of respondents who considered seeking mental health services is more or less consistent across respondents from the four academic departments; ranging between 54% in SPS; 59% in ECO & LAW; and 62% in HEC.

The highest percentage of respondents who report to have thought about using mental health service in the past year is among current third-year (64%), first-year (61%) and fifth-year researchers (60%), followed by second-years (53%) and fourth-years researchers (52%).

The variation among nationality groups in the consideration of respondents to seek help with mental health ranges between 48% of respondents from Western Europe to 72% of respondents from Eastern Europe.

2. Knowledge and utilization of the EUI Counselling and Wellbeing Service

The Counselling Service started its activities in 2006. The composition of the counselling and wellbeing team changed over the 12 months covered by the survey (from January 2016 to February 2017). For the first half of the period, the team was composed of two part-time counsellors and one full-time counsellor who also acted as a coordinator; in addition to an external body worker. From October 2016, the team composed of two full-time counsellors, one part-time counsellor and a body worker.

The survey reconfirms the high awareness of the counselling services at the EUI (97%). 62 respondents (29%) reported that they used the counselling service at the EUI and answered the question about the level of satisfaction with the service. 70% of those respondents stated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied. And 75% were very satisfied or satisfied with the individual EUI counsellor they saw.

30 respondents (14%) said that they saw a non EUI counsellor. (77%) 10 out 19 who answered a question about satisfaction with the non-EUI counsellor, said they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the counsellor they saw.

It is also important to contemplate on the additional comments and suggestions of researchers with regard to general health issues and mental health services at the EUI. Many respondents pointed out the need to improve access and information about medical services in Florence.

| Assessment | EUI 2017 | EUI 2010 | UC-Berkeley survey |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Awareness of the Counselling Service | 97% | 95% | 76% |
| Considered using Counselling | 59% | 40% | 50% |
| Using the on campus counselling service | 29% | 17% | 31% |
| Using off-campus counselling | 14% | 14% | 11% |
| Satisfaction with on-campus counselling service | 75% | 85% | 75% |

46% of respondents state that they learned about the counselling services at the EUI during the September meetings with Academic Service and the Dean of Studies, followed by the EUI web site (23%), and from fellow researchers or friends (10%).

8 respondents reported being aware of the counselling services at the EUI but chose not to use them and gave the following reasons for their decision:

1. Confidentiality concerns (3)
2. Perceived lack of quality (3)
3. Inconvenient location (2)
4. Lack of time (1)
5. Stigma (1)
6. No need (1)

64 % of respondents who reported using the EUI counselling service were females; 31% males and 5% were respondents who identified with other gender categories.

3. Climate in the Academic Departments:

This section of the survey inquired about the level of satisfaction of researchers with their academic supervisors (focusing on the various aspects of supervision), satisfaction with administrative staff in the four academic departments, Academic Service, the overall support received from the department and the rate of competitiveness and /or support among researchers.

The level of satisfaction with supervisors revealed by the wellbeing survey of February 2017 was slightly lower (68% either very satisfied or satisfied) than the figures reported by the supervision assessment survey conducted in May 2016 (75%).

The variation of satisfaction with supervision in the wellbeing survey of February 2017 varies among respondents from the four departments:

- 62% of ECO respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied
- 65% of HEC respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied
- 74% of LAW respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied
- 78% of SPS respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied

In the supervision assessment survey of May 2016 was as follows:

- 71% of ECO researchers were either very satisfied or satisfied
- 75% of HEC researchers were either very satisfied or satisfied
- 82% of LAW researchers were either very satisfied or satisfied
- 75% of SPS researchers were either very satisfied or satisfied

78% of male respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied with their supervisor, compared to 66% of female respondents.

36% of respondents (77 out of 215) said that they met their supervisor once per month or more and 23% of respondents (48 out of 211) said they felt the frequency of the meetings were not enough.

Correlation between satisfaction with supervision and experiencing emotional stress:

| Had an emotional or stress-related problem | YES | | NO | | Total |
|---|------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | |
| How satisfied/dissatisfied are you with your supervisor? | No. | % | No. | % | |
| Very satisfied | 42 | 30% | 29 | 38% | 71 |
| Satisfied | 45 | 33% | 29 | 38% | 74 |
| Somewhat satisfied | 28 | 20% | 12 | 16% | 40 |
| Somewhat dissatisfied | 7 | 5% | 3 | 4% | 10 |
| Dissatisfied | 7 | 5% | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| Very dissatisfied | 4 | 3% | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Not applicable or no answer | 8 | 6% | 2 | 3% | 10 |
| Total | 138 | 53% | 76 | 47% | 214 |

49% of researchers maintained that their supervisors have been considerate of their personal problems; the other 51% either disagreed or felt the issue was not applicable to their case. 73% of researchers reported that supervisors encouraged their intellectual self-confidence and 73% felt that supervisors were satisfied with their performance. These figures are very similar to the responses of the 2010 wellbeing survey.

Many researchers took the opportunity of open-ended questions to express their concerns about the quality of the academic climate in the departments. The general feeling is that there is more need to raise awareness among supervisors about issues of wellbeing, mental health needs and concerns of researchers.

The general level of satisfaction (very satisfied or satisfied) with administrative staff in the academic departments and Academic Service ranges between 92% for ECO; 97% for HEC; 92% for LAW and 89% for SPS. 83% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with administrative staff in Academic Service.

59% of researchers express a high level of satisfaction with the overall support received from academic departments (faculty and administrative staff), 13% stated that the overall environment in the academic departments was 'un-supportive'.

30% of respondents perceived high levels of competitiveness among researchers in the academic departments. The highest level of competitiveness was perceived among ECO respondents (40%). Respondents who perceived high levels of competitiveness from the other departments ranged between 21% HEC to 29% SPS. Female respondents perceived higher levels of competitiveness among researchers in their respective academic departments (37%) compared to males (22%).

On the other hand, 85% of respondents perceived a high rate of peer support in their respective departments. It is reported slightly higher among male respondents (90%) compared to female respondents (84%).

4. Researchers' demographic characteristics

Relationship Status:

The correlation of some demographic characteristics of researchers reporting stress related problems reveals the following:

| Had an emotional or stress-related problem | YES emotional stress | | NO emotional stress | | Total/ relationship status |
|---|----------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | |
| How do you describe your relationship status?(Multiple responses allowed) | | | | | |
| Single | 42 | 30% | 23 | 30% | 65 |
| In an on-off relationship | 13 | 9% | 1 | 1% | 14 |
| In a regular relationship | 38 | 27% | 22 | 29% | 60 |
| Partnered | 23 | 16% | 17 | 22% | 41 |
| Married | 11 | 8% | 8 | 11% | 19 |
| Separated | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 |
| Divorced | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 |
| Other | 3 | % | 1 | % | 4 |
| No answer | 11 | 7% | 4 | 5% | 41 |
| Total | 141 | 65% | 76 | 35% | 244 |

Very few (only 9 out of 204) respondents reported having children. 40 respondents did not answer this question. Therefore, no conclusions are being based on this demographic factor.

Sexual Orientation:

There seems to be no direct correlation between the sexual orientation of researchers and reporting emotional or stress-related problems in the past year. 102 out of 141 of respondents who reported emotional stress were heterosexual.

| In the past 12 months, have you had an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly affected your well being and/or academic performance? By sexual orientation/identity | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|------------|
| Sexual Orientation | Emotional/Stress related problem in the last 12 | | | | Total | % | Total: 202 |
| | Yes | No | Total | % | | | |
| Heterosexual | 102 | 50% | 65 | 32% | 167 | 83% | |
| Gay/Lesbian | 3 | 1% | 1 | 0% | 4 | 2% | |
| Bisexual | 8 | 4% | 2 | 1% | 10 | 5% | |
| Transsexual | 1 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0% | |
| Not listed | 3 | 1% | 1 | 0% | 4 | 2% | |
| Not sure | 3 | 1% | 2 | 1% | 5 | 2% | |
| Prefer not to answer | 9 | 4% | 1 | 0% | 10 | 5% | |
| Other | 1 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0% | |
| No answer | 42 | | 17% | | | | |

In the 2014 wellbeing survey conducted at UC Berkley; “lesbian, gay and bisexual grad students reported lower well-being as do students of “other” race/ethnicity and older students.

Financial Status:

There seems to be no strong correlation between the financial status of researchers and reporting emotional or stress-related problems in the past year. 57% (55 out of 96) of respondents who reported emotional stress said their grant was sufficient to cover their expenses.

| In the past 12 months, have you had an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly affected your well being and/or academic performance? By Financial situation | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|------------|
| Financial Status | Emotional/Stress related problem in the last 12 | | | | Total | % | Total: 209 |
| | Yes | No | Total | % | | | |
| My grant is sufficient to and | 55 | 26% | 41 | 20% | 96 | 46% | |
| My grant just covers my | 58 | 28% | 32 | 15% | 90 | 43% | |
| My grant does not cover my main expenses | 21 | 10% | 2 | 1% | 23 | 11% | |
| No answer | 35 | | 14% | | | | |

Health insurance coverage:

Many respondents took the opportunity of the survey to raise problems of medical services in Florence and at the EUI and requested more information and support for researchers' physical health. 40% of respondents stated they were covered by the EUI-sponsored health insurance coverage (CIGNA), whereas another 36% said they were covered by their own national health insurance schemes and 16% covered by the Italian health insurance scheme (ASL).

| What kind of health insurance do you have (if any)? | | | |
|---|-------|-----|------------|
| What kind of health insurance do you have? | Freq. | % | Total: 200 |
| You are covered by your own | 72 | 36% | |
| You are covered by the Italian | 31 | 16% | |
| Other state insurance | 5 | 3% | |
| You have cigna health | 80 | 40% | |
| Other private health | 11 | 6% | |
| Other | 1 | 1% | |
| No answer | 44 | 18% | |

General Reflections:

Mental health within the university setting has come to the fore over the last few years. Blanco et al. (2008) evidenced that many students begin their university careers with mood, anxiety and eating disorders.⁴ Whereas recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) in the UK highlighted that between 2009 to 2015 there has been a 210% increase in students leaving university early due to mental health difficulties.⁵ Further to this Berkeley's graduate student Happiness and Wellbeing Report (2014) found that 47% of PhD students that responded to their survey scored as depressed.⁶

⁴ Blanco, C., Okuda, M., Wright, C., Hasin, D.S., Grant, B.F., Liu, S.M., Olsson, M., 2008. Mental Health of College Students and their non-college attending peers: results from the national epidemiological study on alcohol and related conditions. Arch. Gen. Psychiatry 65, 1429-1437.

⁵ Higher Education Statistic Agency non continuation data: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation>

⁶ Berkeley happiness and Wellbeing Report (2014) http://ga.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/wellbeingreport_2014.pdf

Whilst 64.98% of EUI researchers had experienced an emotional or stress related problem that significantly effected wellbeing and or academic performance over the past year, a far smaller percentage of respondents reported feeling hopeless, exhausted, very sad, felt so depressed as to have difficulty functioning or to have seriously considered attempting suicide (feelings typically associated depression) frequently or all of the time.

Factors such as sleep, family and peer support networks and socializing with friends are all important from a prognostic perspective as to whether an emotional or stress related problem becomes a diagnosable mental health difficulty.

Berkley's graduate Student Happiness and Wellbeing Report identified inadequate sleep as predictive of depression. Most EUI researchers who participated in the 2017 health and Wellbeing Survey reported sleeping more than 6 hours a day. However 27 respondents were sleeping less than 6 hours a day. Further statistical analysis is required to ascertain whether those sleeping less score more highly on the items associated with depression.

Similarly most researchers reported speaking to family members at least once a week if not more frequently and 83.02% socialized with close friends at least once a week . However 18.8% of respondents reported talking to a family member once a month or less and 16.98% socialized with close friends once a month or less further analysis is needed to understand the impact that these variables have on researcher's mental health.

Nearly half (48.62%) of researchers who responded to the survey felt overwhelmed frequently or all of the time. Levecque et al. (2017) highlight that occupational stress among academics is on the rise and identified that whilst there has been a huge increase in those undertaking and receiving PhD's in Flanders the number of faculty positions has remained relatively unchanged.⁷ Therefore the level of competition between academics is growing fast. Further to this research has consistently evidenced associations between high job demands, low job control, emotional exhaustion and feelings associated with depression. Statistical analysis of the items pertaining to how many hours a week researchers work alone, in groups and on non- academic work will provide further information about the aforementioned work stressors.

We aim to further analyse the data generated from this survey in terms of department and year of study to dovetail intervention and future workshops to the health and wellbeing needs of the EUI researchers.

⁷ Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., Gisle L., 2017. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy* 46, 868-879.