

## **Researchers' Experience and Wellbeing:**

### **Executive Summary:**

#### **I. The Researchers' Experience and Wellbeing survey:**

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 an EUI-strategy to improve the wellbeing and mental health facilities at the Institute. Academic Service and the office of the Dean of Studies conducted the first Researchers' Experience and Wellbeing Survey over the month of October 2010. 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.<sup>1</sup> Academic service and the Dean of Studies retained that conducting a parallel survey at the EUI would produce indicative results that could be analysed in a comparative perspective.

The questionnaire was sent by email to EUI researchers, accompanied by a message from the Dean of Studies explaining the objectives of the survey and assuring that results would be strictly anonymous and 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
- Knowledge and utilization of the EUI Counselling service
- The Climate in the Academic Departments
- Researchers' Personal State

#### **Participants:**

The questionnaire was addressed to six-hundred and five (605) EUI researchers (589 doctoral researchers and 16 LLM students) with active student status (first to fifth year) in October 2010. The response population is representative of the total researchers' population in terms of; gender, academic department and citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **General Conclusions:**

### Researchers' self reported mental health needs and concerns:

- Despite the relatively high rate of perceived emotional and stress-related problems among EUI researchers (53%), compared to (45%) in UC Berkley and (30%) in UC Irvine, the self-reported mind-sets used as indicators of poor mental health are significantly lower.
- The relatively high percentage (46%) of current second-year researchers at the EUI who report high levels of anxiety and need for professional help during the past 12 months, reveals the general difficulties faced by first-year researchers in the process of academic and social transition.
- Researchers with financial problems (18% of respondents) as well as those with inadequate linguistic skills (12% of respondents) report higher levels of anxiety than others.
- Emotional and relationship problems are reported as the main reasons why EUI researchers seek professional help, followed by academic and career problems.
- The general trend indicating females, among graduate students, to reporting more emotional and stress-related problems as opposed to males, is confirmed by the results of the EUI survey.

### Assessment of needs for the EUI counselling services:

- The survey reveals a very high rate of awareness about the service (95%) compared to 76% in UC Berkeley and 68% in UC Irvine.
- EUI researchers stated that the September meetings with Academic Service and the Dean of Studies together with the Web site and flyers available on campus were the main sources of information about counselling and other health services.
- 40% of respondents have considered using counselling services. 31% of respondents actually use counselling services (both off and on campus). In comparison with other surveys, we see that 17% of EUI respondents use on-campus counselling services, whereas; 27% and 25% of respondents seek on-campus counselling in UC Berkeley and UC Irvine respectively.
- Consistently with the findings of the other surveys, concerns about confidentiality, lack of quality and social stigma are reported to be the main reasons for deciding not to use on-campus counselling services at EUI.

- Respondents express a high level of satisfaction with EUI counselling services (85%) as compared to satisfaction with off-campus services (79%) and the satisfaction rate in UC Berkeley (75%).
- Many respondents took the opportunity of the survey to raise problems of medical services at the EUI and requested more information and support for researchers' physical health.

Assessment of academic and administrative support for researchers' wellbeing:

- The survey results are more or less consistent with the supervision assessment survey conducted a few months earlier. The general rate of satisfaction with supervision ranges between 68% and 79%.
- Despite the fact that all respondents (15) who stated to be either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with supervision reported high levels of stress, the survey results do not lead to a direct correlation between the level of satisfaction with supervision and stress-related problems.
- A number of respondents focused on the need to raise more awareness among academic and administrative staff regarding issues of general wellbeing and mental health of researchers.
- The high satisfaction with administrative support reaches 96% for ECO and 90% for HEC.

Researchers' personal status:

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

- Relationship status is confirmed to correlate with the levels of stress among EUI researchers, however, unlike the results of the UC Berkley survey, where married researchers seemed to experience less stress related problems, married/partnered EUI researchers report more difficulties related to distance, transition, financial situation and others.
- There seems to be no direct correlation between the sexual orientation of researchers and reporting emotional or stress-related problems in the past year.

## **II. Mental Health and Well-being Workshop:**

The workshop was organized by Academic Service and the Office of the Dean of Studies in order to establish a knowledge base for the development of an institutional strategy to improve well-being and mental health facilities at the Institute.

On the basis of presentations from Scottish and English experts, Barbara Lawton (University of Leeds), Kathryn Hill (Mental Health Foundation), Sandy MacLean (Scotland's Colleges) and Tom Finnigan (Lancaster University) part of the EUI-community, including researchers, administrators and some professors, met on Friday 18 February to try and find ways towards, as the workshop title announced, 'a healthier institution' and to enhance 'a positive learning environment'. Workshop sessions discussed the following issues:

- Promoting Mental Health among PhD Researchers
- Identifying the characteristics of a healthy institution
- Assessment of the EUI Researchers' experience and wellbeing
- Supporting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Institutional policies and strategies promoting mental health and well-being in higher education
- Implications for the EUI - Session to draw final conclusions and recommendations

### **Principles**

Mental health policy has gone through a major shift over the last years, moving from a 'stop-gap' approach that dealt with problems only when they became acute mainly via psychological and counselling services, to a more comprehensive, 'holistic' approach. As far as academic institutions are concerned three key principles of this new approach stand out.

First, it is vital to integrate mental health, well-being and personnel policies at all levels of the institution --i.e. in our case researchers, supervisors and administrators-- and to involve senior management from the very start in a leading role. Personnel policy, student (academic) services, counselling and psychological services need to be fully integrated, under the responsibility of a team of senior managers.

Second, institutions should move to a policy that actively promotes a healthy life and seeks to prevent mental health problems from arising. A wide range of devices to raise awareness of health issues are available-- from putting up informative websites to offering 'first aid in mental health' training to researchers, administrators and supervisors.

Thirdly, this new approach recognizes the unity of the life of academic research/learning with general well-being, which amongst others means that academics should not only be trained in acquiring academic and research skills but also skills of 'emotional intelligence'-- now seen as being equally important to a successful --and happy-- academic and personal life.

### **Recommendations:**

Recommendations approved by the Doctoral Programme Committee for an action plan to be discussed and eventually implemented in cooperation and coordination the various departments, services and Units at the EUI:

1. Recognize the importance of 'social spaces' and develop sports facilities on campus. Where space is physically scarce, as it is at the EUI, consider turning computer labs into 'common rooms' with just a small number of terminals, wifi and access points for laptops, and comfy furniture offering space for study and conversation.
2. Adding a joyful touch to the physical environment in the EUI campuses and creating a friendlier cosy environment. For instance. establishing seating spaces in the EUI gardens and children playground areas and so on.
3. Do not set counselling and medical services physically apart, but integrate them with all student services, thus lowering a range of access thresholds.
4. Offer courses to PhD-researchers on 'balancing the act' between becoming 'Dr. Who' and the other aspects of life and offer a number of sessions during the first term (but not immediately at the beginning) on the social and cultural opportunities and problems of Florence.

5. Assure the integration of mental health services on campus with those in Florence.
6. Develop an active policy for 'partners' at all levels of the institute, recognising that a major part of researchers, administrators and professors come to Florence living in an enduring personal relationship.
7. Recognize that across Europe academic institutions such as ours are facing growing problems with alcohol and drugs-- as indicated by some of our researchers in the survey. Provide information materials, introduce the self-testing machine in Bar Fiasco and adopt the 'Italian code' of not giving more to persons who are drinking too much.
8. Rethink what to do in cases of anxiety and depression. More specifically, reconsider the policy of granting 'intermission' to one of developing individual pathways for researchers facing anxiety and depression, which means that researchers, supervisors and mental health workers join forces and set out individual study plans, which will not involve intermission, but can adopt alternative time frames.
9. Conduct a 'mental health and well-being survey' for the EUI administrative and professorial staff, in order to be able to develop a more comprehensive health policy at the EUI.

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