Mental Health

Degree and depression

A study of PhD students in Belgium adds to a body of research highlighting a harsh reality: PhD students are more likely to experience mental-health distress than other highly educated individuals, including those in the general population, employees and higher-education students. The study found that more than half of the respondents reported experiencing at least two mental-health problems in recent weeks, and 32% reported four or more symptoms (K. Levecque et al. Res. Policy 46, 868–879; 2017). Common complaints included feelings of constant strain, unhappiness, worry-induced sleeplessness and an inability to enjoy everyday activities. About two-thirds of the respondents were in the hard sciences and one-third in the humanities or social sciences. There was no clear trend between area of study and risk of mental-health issues.

PhD students fared poorly relative to non-students, the study found. They were nearly 2.5 times more likely than highly educated people in the general population to be at risk of depression or another psychiatric disorder. PhD students were also about twice as likely as higher-education students in general to show red flags for such conditions.

Lead author Katia Levecque, who teaches industrial relations at Ghent University in Belgium, says that the results highlight the need for universities to offer counselling services and other resources to PhD students. In many cases, students need to look beyond their own departments for help. “Professors may be willing to support their students, but they don’t have the time or skill,” she says. “They’re also vulnerable to a lot of the same sorts of problems.”

Students who said that they struggled to balance work with their home life were especially likely to report psychiatric symptoms. Other predictors of distress include excessive workloads and a lack of control. Gail Kinman, an occupational-health psychologist at the University of Bedfordshire in Luton, UK, says that the findings complement her work revealing high levels of psychological distress in people working in UK higher education. Her research has found that academics are often more stressed than nurses and social workers and cannot mitigate it (G. Kinman, F. Jones and R. Kinman Qual. Higher Educ. 12, 15–27; 2006).

“Job demands are increasing, control is reducing and support from managers is diminishing,” she says. “Academics in the sciences may have a particularly difficult time.”