

Prioritising Wellbeing for Doctoral and Early Career Researchers



The mental health and wellbeing of doctoral and early career researchers are often overlooked and underrepresented in institutional support systems, says **Dilara Özel**.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1250-599X>

Academic wellbeing is the cornerstone of a productive and thriving research environment. However, the mental health and wellbeing of doctoral and early career researchers are often overlooked and underrepresented in institutional support systems. Addressing this critical issue is essential for creating and sustaining a supportive research environment, which enhances productivity, fosters academic success, and ensures long-term career sustainability.

ENHANCING ACADEMIC WELLBEING

Several institutions have begun to recognise the importance of academic wellbeing and have implemented successful initiatives to support their staff and students. Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, has proposed actions for the wellbeing of doctoral candidates. This includes advocating for better working conditions, mental health support, and work-life balance.

Similarly, Vitae, a worldwide frontrunner in advancing the professional growth of researchers, supports researchers by organising meetings, workshops, conferences, and training sessions aimed at enhancing their professional development and wellbeing. In the UK,

the Association of Mental Health Peer Researchers was launched, and the University of Bristol established a Centre for Academic Mental Health. Furthermore, the University of California, Berkeley, established the Be Well at Work program, which offers resources and workshops on stress management, work-life balance, and mental health. Similarly, the University of Oxford's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy focuses on promoting a supportive and inclusive environment, with initiatives such as mental health first aid training and wellbeing including doctoral students. Despite growing awareness, the efforts to support academic wellbeing remain fragmented and insufficient. There is still a significant need for improving academic wellbeing.

THE SILENT STRUGGLES OF RESEARCHERS

Symptoms of anxiety, depression, imposter syndrome, burnout, and suicidal ideation among doctoral students are on the rise (Satinsky et al., 2021). The intense pressure to publish, secure funding, and achieve academic recognition creates a highly stressful environment. Since 2011, the journal *Nature* has been conducting a survey across seven continents in six different languages on early career researchers, identifying predictors of wellbeing and mental health issues (Woolston, 2017, 2019). The survey highlights key factors such as bullying, sexual

harassment, discrimination, and various forms of microaggression, as well as the quality of supervision, inclusion of diversity, equity, and social support systems, particularly for international researchers. Additionally, the competitive research landscape, characterised by a “publish or perish” culture, precarious contracts that lead to financial instability and uncertainty, and intense competition for subsequent academic jobs, contributes to the mental health challenges faced by researchers (Satinsky et al., 2021).

Research highlights significant mental health challenges faced by academics and researchers across various career stages, shedding light on the silent struggles within academia. For instance, Satinsky et al. (2021) systematically reviewed depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among PhD students, emphasising the alarming prevalence of these issues in this group. Similarly, Krilić et al. (2018) examined work–life balance among early career researchers in six European countries, revealing how precarious contracts and long working hours strain their wellbeing. Kageyama et al. (2001) also identified job stress as a critical factor affecting the mental health of scientific researchers in Japan, highlighting the pressures stemming from high expectations and competitive environments.

Social-science research indicates that social exclusion, anxiety, and stress can drive unethical behaviours, such as falsifying results (Tepper, 2000). This underscores the need to examine the determinants of student abuse and its role in high doctoral attrition rates, where 40–70% of students in the USA leave their programs prematurely, many during their first year (Gardner, 2007; Jones, 2013). A significant factor is the hierarchical relationship in academia, where researchers often view their supervisors as authoritarian bosses rather than mentors, and supervisors regard students as followers rather than learners (Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Vähämäki et al., 2021). Moss, in her 2018 publication titled *Research is Set Up for Bullies to Thrive*, explains that some research environments exhibit higher rates of bullying compared to other workplaces. This culture of abuse and exploitation not only drives capable academics out of the system (Gardner, 2007; Jones, 2013). Cohen and Baruch (2021) revealed through their model that perceptions of power and workplace politics play a key role in

perpetuating these dynamics, highlighting the importance of addressing these challenges to foster ethical, supportive, and inclusive academic environments.

BUILDING RESILIENT AND SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS

Addressing mental health issues like burnout and mobbing is critical not only for academic success but also for ensuring the effective functioning of our institutions, and it's something we must prioritise. Studies show that academic wellbeing is frequently neglected, with a significant number of researchers experiencing burnout and mobbing (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023). There is a need to build resources and support networks for researchers. For instance, the establishment of mental health services and support groups can provide much-needed relief and guidance for those struggling with the demands of academia. Psychological support is also crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of academic pressures.

In their insightful 2019 piece in *The Conversation*, Sibai, Figueiredo, and Ferreira discussed loneliness and its potential to lead to significant emotional distress, highlighting a UK survey that found 46% of researchers feel lonely at work. Social isolation is particularly prevalent among early career academics, with 64% of PhD candidates reporting such feelings. Academia is often described as a lonely place, but it's crucial for the community to provide support to this vulnerable group (Jandric, 2022). We collaborate with national and international scholars on various projects, articles, and research. However, often we only exchange smiles and know little about one another's personal lives. Do we have families? Is a family member ill? Are we facing personal struggles? These factors significantly impact our work, yet we tend to avoid discussing them, inadvertently dehumanising our profession.

Creating a supportive environment where researchers can share their challenges without fear of judgment is essential. By fostering a sense of community and open communication, we can reduce the isolation many researchers feel and promote a more holistic approach to academic success. University administrators and

policymakers must prioritise academic wellbeing in this sense. This includes implementing comprehensive mental health services, fostering supportive academic environments, and encouraging collaboration among researchers. By addressing these issues, we can create a healthier, more inclusive academic community that supports the mental and emotional wellbeing of all its members.

TIME FOR ACTION

Academia can often be a lonely place, with many researchers experiencing social isolation, burnout, and emotional distress. Protecting and addressing the mental health and wellbeing of researchers is both a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity. By providing environments where researchers can share their personal and professional challenges without fear of judgment, we can reduce isolation and promote a more holistic approach to both researchers' wellbeing and their academic success.

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By fostering a supportive and inclusive research environment and academic culture, we can enhance the productivity, creativity, and overall success of our researchers and research communities. The importance of academic wellbeing cannot be overstated. It is the foundation upon which successful research and innovation are built. As Albert Szent-Györgyi stated “*Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.*” This underscores the essence of research, seeing and thinking differently. To continue to innovate and make meaningful discoveries, we must ensure that our researchers receive support that they need at every level, to the fullest extent of our ability.

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Dilara Özel is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow and holds a PhD in Guidance and Counselling from Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara.