



Mental health and work-life balance of PhD candidates: insights from the Netherlands

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Universiteit
Leiden



Topics



Study Leiden University
(2016-17)



Study PhD wellbeing in
the Netherlands
(2020)



National Developments



Study Leiden University - 2016/17

Aims

- Collect systematic empirical data on mental health of PhD candidates in Leiden University
- Better understand how the (perceptions of) academic working conditions may relate to mental health

Study Leiden University - 2016/17

Mixed Design



Online Survey among PhD candidates

N=283



Semi-structured interviews with PhD candidates

N=12



Recommendations



Online Survey

- Multiple topics
- Contract, tasks, autonomy, supervision, career development
- Workload, work-life balance, mental health (GHQ-12)
- In close collaboration with ECOOM-Belgium / Survey of Junior Researchers
- 283 respondents

Mental Health Symptoms



47%

Feel under constant strain



32%

Feel unhappy and depressed



32%

Sleeping Problems



31%

Not able to concentrate on PhD work

Mental health problems: 38%

Risk Factors (1)

✓ Problems dealing with work pressure

Interviews: association with tasks (e.g. teaching duties) that take up time that is not offset in other ways

✓ Negative views on career perspectives in academia

✓ Considering to quit PhD study

Interviews: Lack of transparency about PhD requirements

*“The thing is: you must accept you have no Christmas, you have no Valentine’s Day, you have no birthday... The more work you make, the more work you create and the more... So, you have also your limits, because otherwise you stop eating properly, you stop sleeping enough hours and then it all turns against you. I have this thing on Saturday, clean my house, do my laundry, I go to the market, I cook for the whole week. So, it’s [the PhD journey] a time of sacrifice. And it’s a time of self-discipline”
(respondent 12)*

"...at the end of my second year, when there was no paper... the lab experiments all fail. There was not even a view of something that was publishable or a result. I did not feel really strong or smart enough for that ... Then I really thought of ... where does it go anyway? What else can I do?" (respondent 8)

Risk Factors (2)



Not satisfied with Supervision



Receiving not enough social support from supervisor



Age



International PhD candidates

"..something about the Dutch system...when I came, I didn't know that I should have applied for NWO scholarship instead of the one I applied for. It was my own decision, I didn't know what my decision would imply. I didn't know, because I thought it was the same, being financed by Portugal or by Holland. And apparently there is a big difference. Either you are in NWO, or you cannot teach for instance. [...]. That I didn't know as a guest PhD researcher...I didn't even know my title was guest. No, nothing was clear" (Respondent 12)



No Associations

- ✓ Gender
- ✓ Type of PhD candidate
- ✓ Autonomy in PhD project
- ✓ Leadership Style Supervisor

Recommendations

Multi level Perspective



- Appoint an independent psychologist for PhDs
- Develop career coaching for both non-academic and academic careers, including the development of transferable skills
- Establish a supervision team for international PhD candidates



- Attend supervisor training program
- Be transparent about requirements PhD candidates must meet
- Be aware: after the PhD all knowledge-intensive jobs are open. An academic career is just one of them



- Let's talk...and seek help
- Build independent PhD mentoring / intervention groups
- Decrease career stress: start thinking of life after PhD in early phase

Leiden University Response

Three examples



Training Program

Training program for PhDs
Mindfulness since 2020 / Resilience (pilot 2021)

Training for New Supervisors since 2018
Thematic webinars for Experienced Supervisors
(pilot 2021)

Welcome to the PhD Careerplatform
**The first step to
the next move!**

Know yourself

Whats next

Job orientation skills

Plan your career

Online PhD Career Platform

Online Assessments
Workshops Job Orientation/ Job Search skills
Career Coaching Sessions



Professionalisation Graduate Schools

Career Days
PhD Newsletters
Brochure Mental Fitness with links to PhD support
Appointment of PhD coordinator at department level

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National Developments

Determinants of PhD wellbeing in the Netherlands

- PNN (PhD candidate Network Netherlands) PhD Survey 2020
- Survey aimed at all universities, university medical centers and research institutes in the Netherlands
- Determinants of PhD wellbeing in the Netherlands: Individual, employment contract and trajectory characteristics
- Report Wellbeing: <https://hetpnn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PNN-PhD-Survey-report-Wellbeing.pdf>





Online Survey

- Mental health: GHQ-12
- Burnout scale
- Individual characteristics (*gender, age, nationality*)
- Contract characteristics (*e.g. type, phase, working hours*)
- Trajectory characteristics (*e.g. supervision, harassment, freedom*)
- 2034 respondents ->1437 in analyses

Results

- ✓ Trajectory characteristic matter most in explaining PhD wellbeing
- ✓ Supervision quality and personal support is key (lower risk)
- ✓ Women and PhD with non-Dutch background more at risk
- ✓ Contract has little effect (only phase)

Mental health problems: 47.1%

Burn out risk: 38.8%

Topics



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National Developments

PhD Experience Survey



- Pilot in 2021
(survey open from June-August)
- Common set of questions
 - Education & training
 - Supervision
 - Career development
 - Progress & wellbeing
 - COVID
- Participation of 9 Dutch universities
- *Involvement of Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU)*

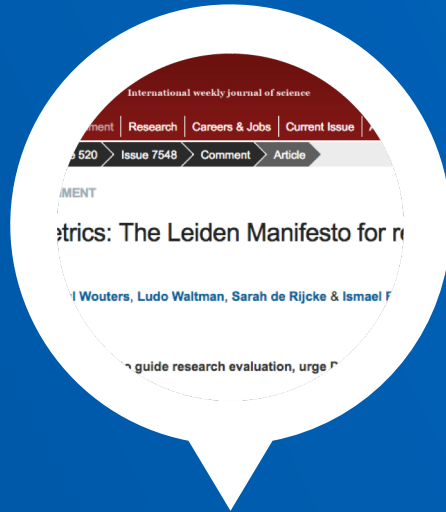
Dutch Developments in Academia



2014

‘Science in transition’

<https://scienceintransition.nl/en>



2015

10 principles in the
Leiden Manifesto

<https://www.nature.com/articles/520429a.pdf>



2019

Room for everyone’s
talent

<https://vsnu.nl/recognitionandrewards/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Position-paper-Room-for-everyone%E2%80%99s-talent.pdf>



2021

From 1 July 2021 an
ombudsman should be
appointed at all Dutch
universities

https://vsnu.nl/en_GB/universitaire-ombudsfunctie.html



Inge van der Weijden

<https://www.cwts.nl/news?article=n-r2r234&title=almost-40-of-leiden-university-phd-candidates-are-at-risk-of-serious-mental-health-problems>

www.hetpnn.nl/en/phdsurvey2020



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