

On the 25th of January, a symposium on the mental well-being of PhD candidates was held, titled "Keeping sane in your PhD - What can you do? What can UU do?"<sup>1</sup>. The event was organized by the University Council, PhD Network Utrecht (PROUT), the Utrecht PhD Party (UPP) and the Graduate School of Life Sciences (GSLs). The fully booked event was attended by 130 people including PhD candidates, graduate school representatives, policy makers and supervisors. Based on talks, and a panel discussion lead by Prof. dr. Janneke Plantenga during this symposium, the organizers would like to make several recommendations to improve the mental well-being of PhD candidates.

## The problem

More and more evidence shows the prevalence of mental health issues among PhD candidates, e.g. high risks of depression and burnout, unhappiness, anxiety and high levels of stress. Within the UU, surveys showed that 24,8% of PhDs in Life Sciences had a possible burnout, determined using a clinically validated questionnaire<sup>2</sup>. One third of PhDs in Geosciences experienced depressive thoughts during their PhD<sup>3</sup>. When facing such problems, however, many of those PhDs did not know whom to contact for help. In Social and Behavioral Sciences 21.7% of PhDs report that they experience burnout symptoms<sup>4</sup>.

Other research at Dutch and foreign universities shows that PhDs have significantly higher mental health issues than their peers of the same age and education working outside of academia<sup>5</sup>. A study in Berkeley showed that 47% of PhDs scored 'depressed' on a depression scale<sup>6</sup>. This study was also performed at the University of Amsterdam, with similar results: 36,5% of PhD candidates were at risk of mental health problems<sup>7</sup>.

According to the study done at Leiden university, factors associated with mental health issues are workload, unclear requirements, inadequate supervision, and stress regarding future career prospects. Additional factors found in interviews with international PhD candidates are cultural differences, and the absence of a local social network<sup>8</sup>. Mental health issues have consequences: they are a major factor in PhD dropout<sup>9</sup>. The current ~33%<sup>10</sup> dropout rate of PhD candidates represents huge losses in financial and scientific investments.

## The solution

Addressing mental health problems requires addressing its diverse set of causes, focusing on prevention and coping. The answer lies on a system of measures that draws from best practices within and outside UU, to be implemented by the different organizational levels of the university. The following recommendations are all based on the research mentioned above.

## Recommendations to improve PhD mental health and well-being

1. **Appoint a full-time PhD psychologist** - make it easy for PhDs who are struggling to get specialized professional help.
2. **Offer free courses on transferable skills** - these courses can optimize the PhD process, as well as strengthen skills that are valued outside of academia.
3. **Be transparent about requirements for PhDs** - "make the implicit explicit" regarding duties and rights, including (in)formal rules that are UU-wide and specific requirements of departments.
4. **Properly implement a PhD mentoring system** - each PhD should have an appointed mentor. The mentor should be a neutral person, with whom the PhD can talk about the process of the PhD. Mentors should proactively check on PhDs (once/twice a year).
5. **Offer training to PhD supervisors** - encourage supervisors to take courses on PhD supervision.
6. **Monitor the quality, satisfaction and problems of PhD supervision** - at the moment PhD supervision is not adequately assessed. Finding ways to systematically monitor supervision quality would help to develop processes to solve problems.
7. **Instate career coaching for PhDs focusing on academic and non-academic careers** - the availability of career officers, career-minded trainings and events can decrease the anxiety linked to a future career.

8. **Organize introduction sessions for new PhDs, creating Graduate School PhD cohorts** - this can be partly UU-wide, and partly the responsibility of faculties/departments. Having cohorts of PhDs starting at the same time contributes to social cohesion.
9. **Create a welcoming and inclusive environment, explicitly including internationals** - e.g. from UU and faculty communication (in English), to an active culture of inclusion within each department.
10. **The whole UU is co-responsible for ensuring that a proper support system is available to all PhDs** - the above stated measures would constitute such a support system, which can only be built with the engagement of all UU, from the higher to the most local level: UU management, faculties, graduate schools, departments, and research groups.

We hope that the university board will take immediate action to improve the current situation. Doing so would not only improve PhD wellbeing, but also prevent financial losses associated with PhDs quitting or delaying their graduation.

This memorandum is supported by:

Utrecht PhD Party (UPP)  
PhD Network Utrecht (PROUT)  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Life Sciences  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Law, Economics and Governance  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Natural Sciences  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Geosciences  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Humanities  
PhD Council of the graduate school of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
Student fraction of the University Council  
Paul Herfs - confidential adviser  
Federico D'Ambrosio - Faculty Council Natural Sciences  
Andrea van Leerdam – Faculty Council of Humanities

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<sup>1</sup> <http://prout.nl/2018/01/institutional-action-is-needed-a-review-of-the-phd-mental-health-symposium/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://utrechtphdparty.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PhD-survey-results-2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://geophd.sites.uu.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/178/2017/02/Geosciences-PhD-Survey-Nov-2016-Final-Results.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://intranet.uu.nl/actueel/nieuws/phd-council-survey-fsbs-phd-candidates-are-happy-under-stress>

<sup>5</sup> Levecque, Katia, et al. "Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students." *Research Policy* 46.4 (2017): 868-879.

<sup>6</sup> [http://ga.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/wellbeingreport\\_2014.pdf](http://ga.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/wellbeingreport_2014.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.folia.nl/uploads/UvAPro%20Survey%202015%20-%20Depression.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "The mental well-being of Leiden University PhD candidates" by Inge van der Wijden and Ingeborg Meijer

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/05/04/veel-wetenschapsgeld-verspild-aan-wegwerppromovendi-a1556970>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.delta.tudelft.nl/article/promovendi-haken-massaal-af>