

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 *Quality Higher Ed.* **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.”



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combine them.” Researchers will lose out if they try to move investments, she adds, or if they leave a position before working long enough to qualify for pension rights.

There is a glimmer of good news for researchers in Europe who want a portable pension. For much of the past decade, the EU has been working to create a common market for research, encouraging member states to make it easier for people to take benefits with them across jurisdictions. One such effort, known as RESAVER, is creating a pan-European pension fund specifically aimed at organizations that employ researchers. The scheme will allow employees to work in numerous positions across Europe, but continue paying into a single pension fund. Once a research institution becomes a member of the fund, its scientists and other employees will be able to pay into it with no vesting period, and to carry their pension account with them to any other member institution. They’ll be able to track all their retirement savings in one place, avoiding the hassles — and financial losses — involved in piecing together far-flung investments.

MARKETING DRIVE

RESAVER has 21 founding institutions, but so far only one — Central European University in Budapest — is paying into the fund. Individuals taking part in the scheme should start paying in this month. Thierry Verkest, a partner in the international retirement and investment practice at Aon Hewitt, which advises RESAVER, thinks that Hewitt’s marketing efforts will pay off and that many other institutions will soon join. “We are

reaching out to hundreds of organizations,” he says. “It’s about attracting researchers in Europe, retaining them and getting them a decent pension.”

Some EU states have tried to address issues of pension portability on their own. In Germany, universities have set up offices to advise foreign researchers on visa, social security and retirement issues (such as how to collect retirement funds scattered across a variety of locations.) The country has also relaxed some rules under which tenured professors lost their special state-pension benefits if they left their public-sector professorships. Now, they can keep a larger share of their academic-pension payments if they switch to a position in the private sector. Duda is sceptical about RESAVER’s potential, but notes that the scheme has already had at least one positive outcome. “It put a lot of pressure on the member states to be more flexible,” he says.

Miguel Jorge, a chemical engineer and materials scientist, is hoping that RESAVER works out. He lectures at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK, but has pension savings scattered across the United States, the United Kingdom and his native Portugal. Relocation is part of the life of a researcher, he says, and will nearly always take precedence over retirement-savings goals. “You weigh retirement against career, and career wins out — even if it means losing money,” he says. “Retirement is something you put on the back burner.” ■

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