

Systemic Issues Impacting Academic Mental Health

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Hi! I am ...

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Foto Reyer Boxem

Summer vacation is a luxury for the few in academia

6 SEPTEMBER 2023 COLUMN

I decided to take a – let’s say – long vacation this year. I attempted to stay away from email for four weeks. I planned to spend time on an isolated beach in the Mediterranean snorkeling and swimming with newborn turtles.

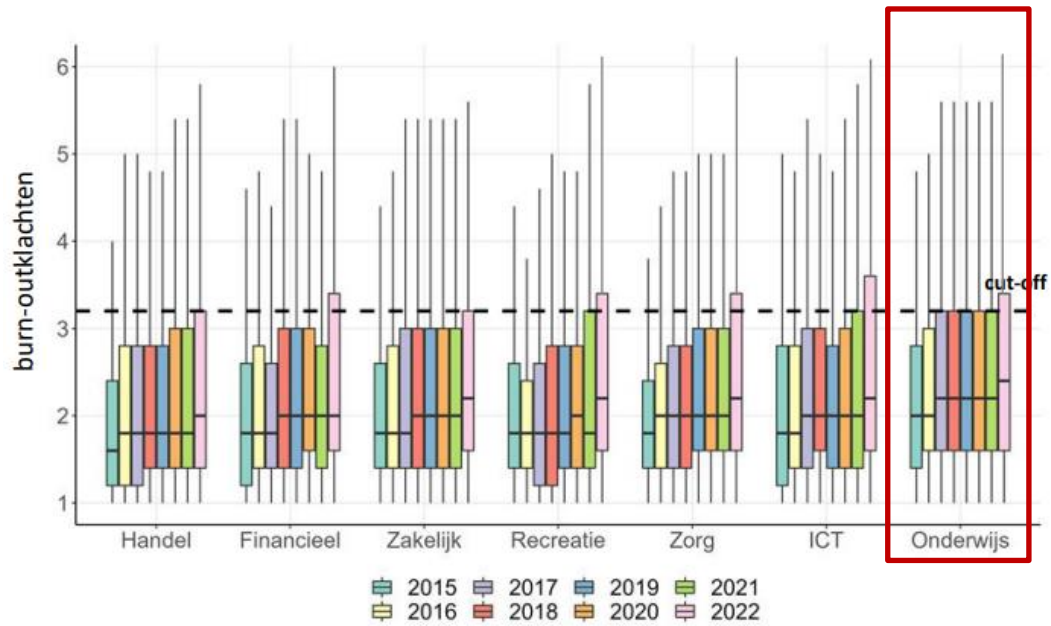
I made it to seven days in a row. The rest of the time I was checking email at least twice a day and spent on average two hours per day on the computer on ‘urgent’ requests and lots of unpaid service work.

Like most small-sized research teams, mine also works as a self-employed business: managers’ tasks are not taken over by others.



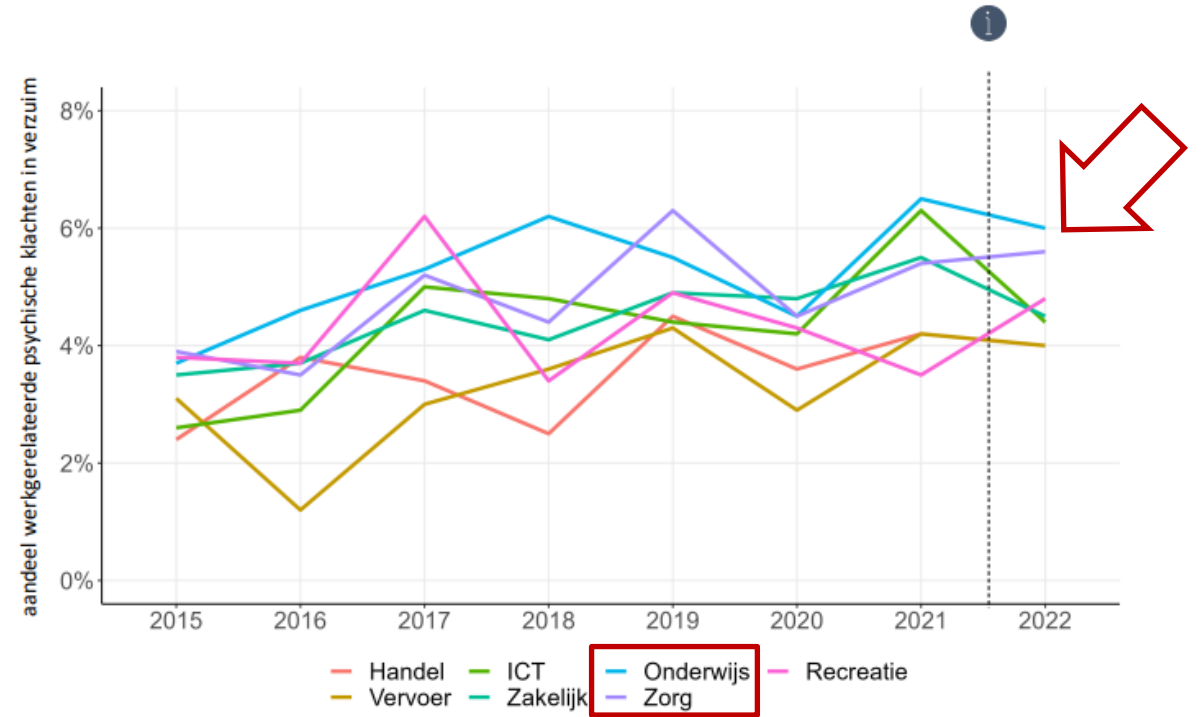
Source: [Ukrant](https://www.ukrant.nl)

BURN-OUTKLACHTEN ONDER JONGEREN, NAAR SECTOR



Bron: NEA – TNO, CBS

AANDEEL WERKGERELATEERDE PSYCHISCHE KLACHTEN IN VERZUIM, NAAR SECTOR










Bron: NEA – TNO, CBS


Source: [TNO](#)



Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>

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Abstract

Research policy observers are increasingly concerned about the potential impact of current academic working conditions on mental health, particularly in PhD students. The aim of the current study is threefold. First, we assess the prevalence of mental health problems in a representative sample of PhD students in Flanders, Belgium ($N=3659$). Second, we compare PhD students to three other samples: (1) highly educated in the general population ($N=769$); (2) highly educated employees ($N=592$); and (3) higher education students ($N=333$). Third, we assess those organizational factors relating to the role of PhD students that predict mental health status. Results based on 12 mental health symptoms (GHQ-12) showed that 32% of PhD students are at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, especially depression. This estimate was significantly

higher than those obtained in the comparison groups. Organizational policies were significantly associated with the prevalence of mental health problems. Especially work-family interface, job demands and job control, the supervisor's leadership style, team decision-making culture, and perception of a career outside academia are linked to mental health problems.

Prevalence of mental disorders

- 19% in the general population
- 32-42% in academics

Institutional policies are related to this.

Source: [Research Policy](#)

Instead of institutional change, often there are many recommendations what YOU can do better

Tips for Emotional Wellness:

1. Gratitude – it is important to be thankful for everything in our lives. From the smallest to the biggest things.
2. Being happy with yourself – it is very important to be proud of yourself and be okay with who you are as a person
3. Reminding yourself of your purpose – It is good to let yourself know why you are here and in the moment of who are. For example, I let myself know the reason I am here today is because my purpose is to change a small part of society to make it better for the future generations. Your purpose can be anything you want it to be, career, hobby, family or community.
4. Learning to manage stress – there are many tips for self-care and managing stress. Some include: exercise, get support with a health professional, meditate, listen to music, distract yourself with a hobby or interest you like, video game or watch a movie.

Tips for Academic Wellness:

1. Getting help – if you are struggling in school you can use help centres such as the math and stats or the You can even get yourself a learning strategist or tutor through Centre for Accessible Learning.
2. Preventing burnout – it can get overwhelming with exams, papers, group projects and deadlines. It is important to take the stress as it comes.
3. Time management and organization – it is important to make sure you give yourself enough time to do your homework. I started to use google calendar to organize my schedule and put my daily activities in it. It has really helped me keep up with schedule and less stressed.
4. Setting goals – it is important to have goals but making sure the goals are realistic is important. I used to have goals that were unattainable for me, and they would upset my emotions and lead to me struggling in school. Now I set goals I know I can achieve and are attainable. I have been able to stick to the goals and achieve them.



@PhD_Balance

IMPOSTER SYNDROME PART OF THE STRONGER TOGETHER SERIES IMPROVING GRAD STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Below are ten tips to help you work towards mastering Imposter Syndrome from our Stronger Together series. Imposter syndrome is a common pattern of behavior where one doubts their own accomplishments, feels they do not deserve to be where they are and has a persistent, often internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud.

- ### 1 REWARD YOURSELF FOR EVERY SUCCESS

Make sure to take a moment to enjoy even the little wins. You worked hard for your achievement, so you deserve to celebrate your win, no matter if it's a small one, or a much bigger one. Schedule time in to celebrate properly before moving on to the next task.
- ### 2 CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Adopt a growth mindset as opposed to a fixed one. Understand you will never stop learning, but this does not mean you don't deserve to be where you are. Know that your abilities can be developed with hard work and persistence.
- ### 3 LET GO OF PERFECTIONISM

By accepting that good is good enough, you can let go of the fear of not achieving perfection and being exposed as a fraud.
- ### 4 FOCUS ON YOUR SUCCESSES

Create a list of your successes. Write down the actions you took to achieve those wins to show yourself you are not an imposter. Save the list, and look back at it when you are struggling to show yourself what you are capable of.
- ### 5 WRITE A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Write yourself a recommendation letter that highlights your expertise and accomplishments. Think about how someone else views you - in a positive light. What are you good at? If you cannot write your own letter, ask someone else to!
- ### 6 SPOT TRIGGERS

Recognize when you feel like an imposter. By knowing your triggers, you can more objectively navigate past them and respond accordingly.
- ### 7 OPEN UP

Talk with friends, colleagues and mentors about how you are feeling. You will soon realize how common Imposter Syndrome is.
- ### 8 SEEK THERAPY

If feeling like a fraud is debilitating, seek out a professional who can help you process your emotions in a safe space.
- ### 9 LIST YOUR EXPERTISE

You don't have to know everything. By recognizing your areas of expertise and accepting your limitations, you can realize your true potential.
- ### 10 ACCEPT RECOGNITION

Stop minimizing compliments and explaining why you shouldn't be receiving the praise. Simply say "thank you." Let the praise sink in. Allow yourself to be proud of what you have achieved.

#PhDstrongertogether Infographic designed by @zjayres, content by @BrittanyUhlorn from @PhD_Balance

1. Set Reasonable Expectations.

Maybe "straight As" are the goal that you set for yourself, but is it realistic? Very few students get a 4.0 GPA every semester. We all have academic strengths and weaknesses that help us in some courses and make others more challenging. When you set reasonable goals and then achieve them, you feel a sense of pride. However, when you set lofty and unattainable goals, you set yourself up for feeling bad about yourself—even if you gave a great effort and worked close to your top ability. The goal is to build self-esteem and confidence by achieving your reasonable goals, not to set yourself up for a letdown.

2. Be Better Organized.

One of the best ways to reduce stress and anxiety is to get more organized. Getting organized can benefit you by ending the stressful, last-minute scrambling in various situations. Getting organized can also feel empowering and exciting, making it more likely that you will stick to your organization strategies in the long run (Glover, 2021). Other strategies include planning ahead and getting things done early. Waiting until the last minute is a recipe for disaster. Look at your schedule and determine how much time assignments or exams in your courses might require for the week. Then, assign times in your schedule when things are less busy to get started early. Don't forget to set some time aside for healthy activities like exercise, socializing, or simply relaxing. Finally, know when to say "I'm done for today."

3. Practice Self-Care.

The following examples of self-care practices are just a few of the many ways to take better care of yourself. Without proper self-care you are likely to be less effective academically, more emotionally unstable, and be at a higher risk of developing mental health issues.

- **Sleep.** Healthy sleep is vital to your overall health. It rejuvenates you and gives you the ability to focus and concentrate on important tasks. Try to avoid eating and consuming caffeine right before going to bed. Avoid experiences that require concentration like video games or being on a phone or tablet as they actually serve to keep us stimulated and awake. High quality sleep helps alleviate anxious and depressive feelings by allowing the brain to recharge. Healthy sleep habits help improve one's mood and energy level. For more information about the benefits of high-quality sleep and to see different strategies to improve sleep quality, visit the Family Institute at Northwestern University (2020): <https://counseling.northwestern.edu/blog/sleep-hygiene-mental-health/>
- **Nutrition.** We all know the stories of people going off to college and eating terribly. Maybe it is too much starch, or not enough vegetables. Maybe you just generally don't eat enough. Either way, a healthy diet is associated with lower stress levels and a decreased risk of depressive symptoms. Eating natural foods, including plants, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and lean proteins can also impact your mental health positively. To learn more about the relationship between diet and mental health, visit The Nutrition Source at T.H. Chan Harvard School of Public Health (n.d.): <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-weight/healthy-dietary-styles>
- **Stay Social.** Yes, at college you are surrounded by people all the time, but do you have strong relationships with people who play a positive role in your life? The American Psychological Association (2019) published a paper outlining the benefits of social support indicating that almost all of us benefit from social and emotional support. And though it may seem

Systemic Issues

Working Conditions

- Lack of permanent contracts
 - > Forced mobility
- Performance pressure: publishing and obtaining grants
- Job demands (aka too high workload)



I am having to constantly choose between options: keep my career, or go home. I may never be able to do both. For now at least, I have chosen my career. But that comes with its own stressors.

...the university might see the stress you are under from constantly moving, and may or may not choose to care. Individual colleagues might be sympathetic, but universities as institutions are as disinterested in the stress and expense of moving as they usually are about faculty wellbeing.

Upcoming blog post:

The Eternal Dislocation of Academic Living

By Clare Griffin

Source: [Voices of Academia Blog](#)

Is the workload in academia too high? [higher than in the past?]

Professor Is At Least 13 Jobs (I Counted)

Professors in clinical psychology are asked to:

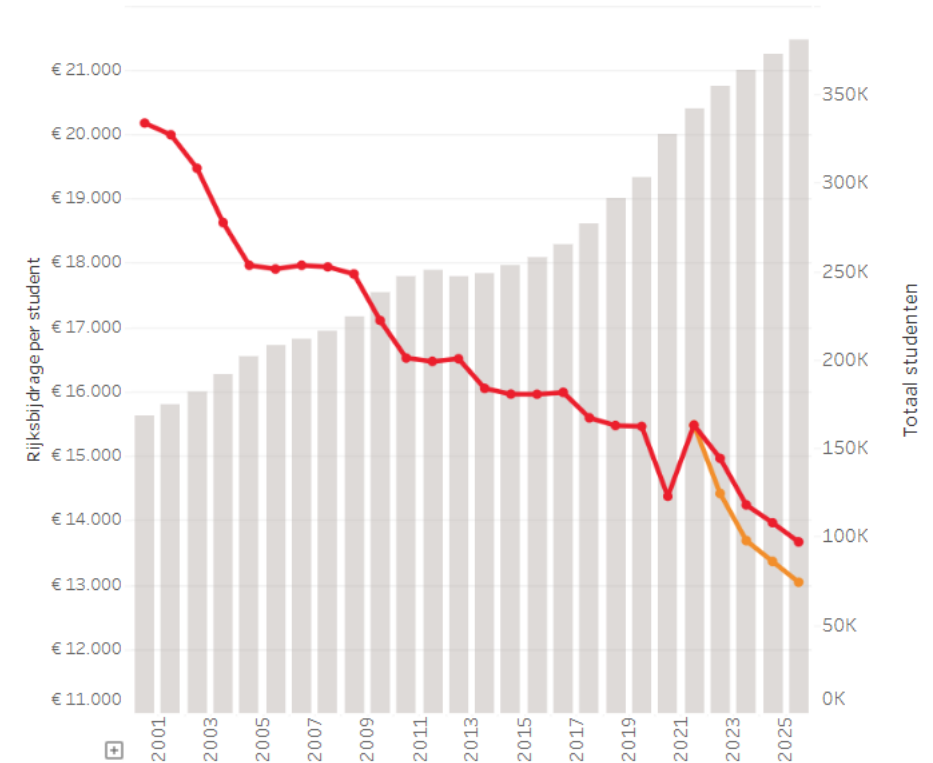
1. Get grants ⁶
2. Oversee/perform data collection ⁷
3. Clean/preprocess data ⁸
4. Store data in a safe, reliable way ⁹
5. Analyze the data ¹⁰
6. Write reports based on the data/publish them ¹¹
7. Publicize research results ¹²
8. Review others' research papers ¹³
9. Review others' grants ¹⁴

That's already so much! But wait, that's only the research part of the process. You also have to:

10. Interview/hire graduate students and staff ¹⁵
11. Mentor students/staff ¹⁶
12. Provide clinical supervision/consultation/see patients ¹⁷
13. Teach classes ¹⁸

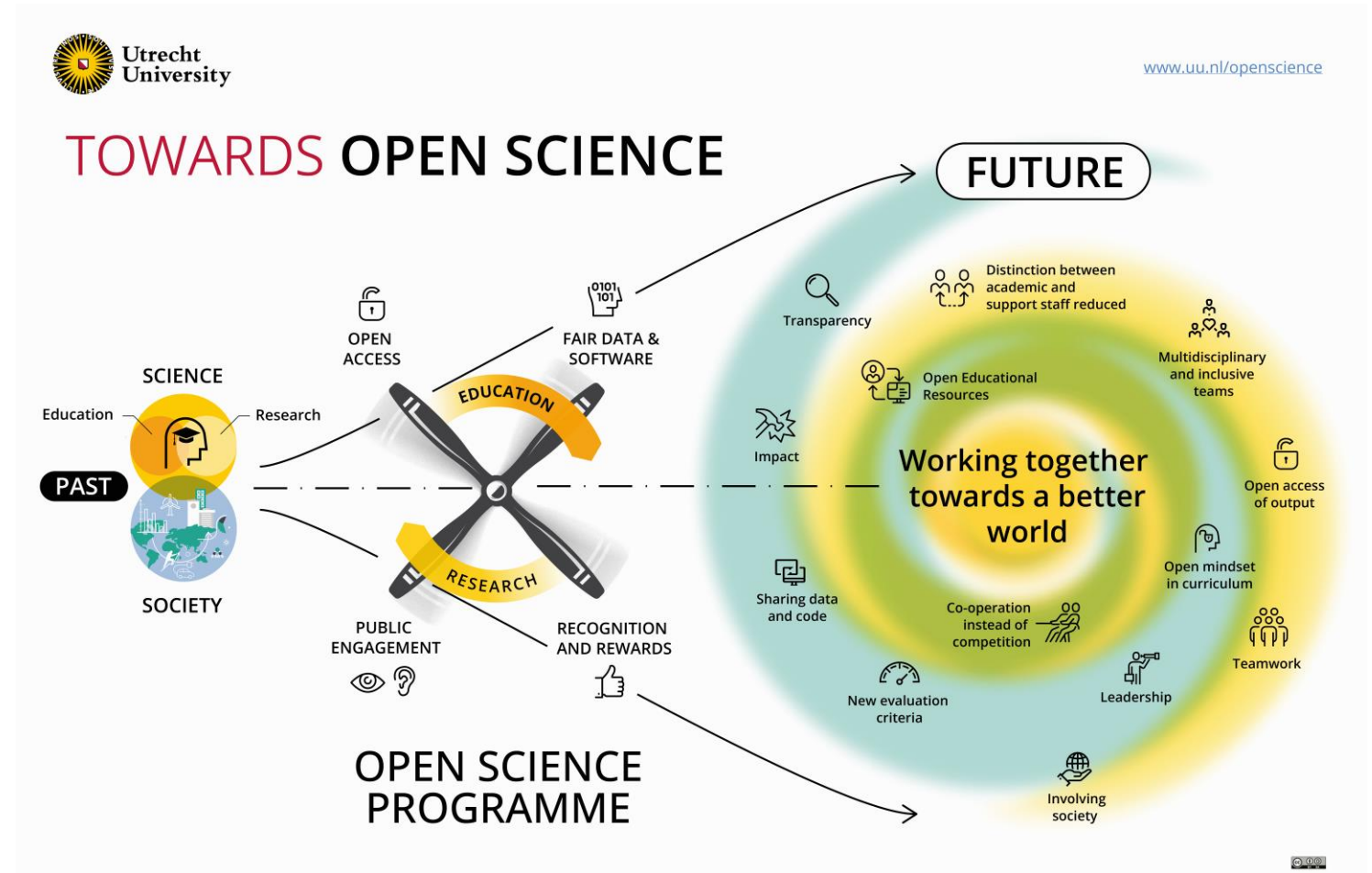
Rijksbijdrage per student

- Rijksbijdrage per student
- Rijksbijdrage per student exclusief studievoorschotmiddelen
- Totaal studenten_AFG



Sources: [Blog by dr. Michael Mullarkey](#)
Figure from UNL

Is the workload in academia too high? [higher than in the past?]



Sources: [GDPR Infographic](#)
[Open Science Infographic UU](#)



Voices of Academia

Improving mental health and wellness in academia by giving you a voice.



#AcademicMentalHealth
@academicvoices



Voices of Academia

Improving mental health and wellness in academia by giving you a voice.

[Overwork] is often demonstrated through humour - the jokes about "it must be nice to take a holiday" or "days off? what are those?". It is present in the offhand quips about PhD researchers sleeping at their desks or not having time to eat.

Academia has a culture that valorizes feeling perpetually overburdened and fatigued. This, of course, manifests in structural ways through precariousness, unmanageable workloads, inequalities, and bullying.

I continued working harder and harder and became a person who was unable to stop working for a long time. I had stopped listening to the concerns of my body and mind and only focused on my productivity level, which made me experience burnout with increasing intensity.

After many attempts, I was finally at a point where I was able to start drawing boundaries by unlearning these habits and started to take care of myself, especially my mind and body. I took time off from all my workspaces and universities.

Upcoming blog post:
The Glorification of Overwork in Academia and its Impact on our Collective Wellbeing
By Jenna Mittelmeier

Upcoming blog post:
The Impact of Hustle Culture in Academia on Disabled Student
By Nikita Ghodke

Sources: [Blog by Jenna Mittelmeier](#)
[Blog by Nikita Ghodke](#)

Research Culture & Norms

Science is like competitive sports

Science is like competitive sports

The summer of 2021 is shaping up to be – *corona volente* – a summer full of exciting sports events, including the European Football Championship, closely followed by the Olympic Games, to name just two. I'm often struck by the parallels between competitive sports and good scientific research. Successful research is the result of hard work by researchers, just as top athletes have to train many hours a week to reach their goals. Research is often just as competitive as the rivalry between athletes. Indeed, researchers also want to be the first to make a discovery or the best in their field, and consequently they too set the bar higher and higher. And like many sports, science is often a team effort, where the score doesn't depend on one person but on the hard work of several researchers, supported by technicians, lab technicians, students, librarians, assistants or scientific instrument makers.

How important is winning to you?

Elite sport is a choice, not an obligation. Therefore, when people ask me why top athletes are prepared to put up with all those hardships, I always answer: it is an individual's free choice. You have a choice, nobody is forcing you.

Of course, we do need to be straightforward and honest in describing to talented young athletes the path that lies ahead of them. And then to prepare them for this as well as possible. The aim is clear: excel on the global stage. Dafne, Epke, Marit and Kiran want to win against China, America and Australia, and not so much against other Dutch athletes. Their benchmark is international, and that determines what they need to do. By definition, that involves pushing back boundaries (performance) without crossing boundaries (transgressive behaviour).



“ Not everyone is good enough or has the right attitude ”
Maurits Hendriks

Sources: [NWO Column by Marcel Levi](#)
[NWO Column by Maurits Hendriks](#)
[Survivorship Bias](#)

Early Career Researchers Face Additional Stressors



PhDs:

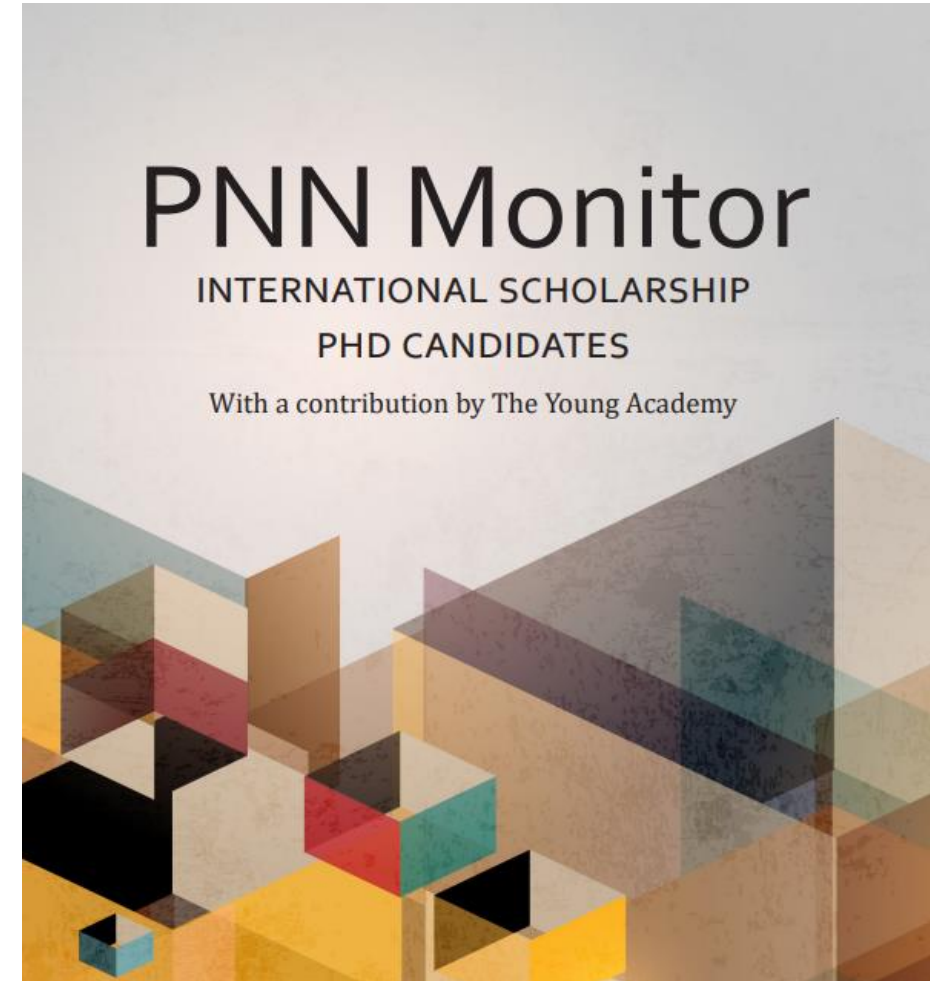
- Dependence on supervisors
- First time 'failing'
- Financial concerns (depending on contract type)
 - In the Netherlands: Issues with finding affordable housing

Postdocs:

- Temporary employment
- Phase of life to start a family
- Opting out of academia?

Internationals Face Additional Stressors

- Language barrier
- Practical issues of immigration
- Being away from family/friends
- Discrimination
- Working is tied to their residence permit



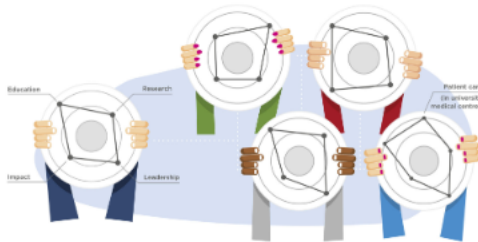
Source: [PNN report on ISPCs](#)

Solutions?

Recognition & Rewards

WHAT WE AIM FOR

Diversifying and vitalising career paths



We enable more diversity in career paths and profiles for academics

Achieving balance between individuals and the collective



We assess academics based on both their individual and their team performance

Stimulating open science



We encourage academics to share their research outcomes with society

National Recommendations by PNN & PostdocNL

Topics warrant institutional action:

- Supervision
- Performance evaluation & job requirements
- Funding & career perspectives
- Prevention & (Access to) help
- Systematic data collection about mental health and workload



Source: [Improving mental health of early-career researchers by PNN & PostdocNL](#)

Action Across Europe

– A Manifesto for Researcher Mental Health

- Need to create environments that foster mental health (decrease stigma, empower researchers regarding wellbeing at work)
- **Macro (system):** systematic data collection, evidence-based policy making, revising academic reward systems
- **Meso (Institutional change):** recognize mental health issues; create climate that fosters mental health; sharing best practices; personalised performance assessments
- **Micro level:** peer to peer support initiatives



Sources: [ReMo Manifesto](#)

Systematic Data Collection: Take Part in the ReMo Survey



September 15th 2023 at 15:00 - 16:30 CET

Launch of the STAIRCASE Survey on Sustainable Working Conditions in Academia



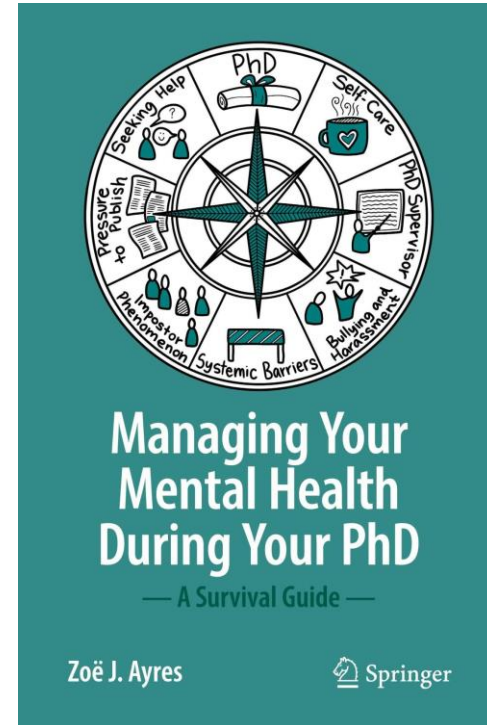
[Participate in the STAIRCASE Survey here](#)



Thanks for your attention!

You can contact me at wellbeing@hetpnn.nl

**Check out
this book!**



Source: [Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD](#)
Institutional Edit by Zoë Ayres