

# Researcher Mental Health and Well-being Manifesto



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## Key Points

The [ReMO COST Action](#) is a network of stakeholders from all levels of the research community that is setting out to address mental health and well-being within academia. A high prevalence of mental health issues among researchers is signalled in both the extant research literature, EU policy<sup>1</sup> and beyond<sup>2</sup>. Tackling this state of affairs, requires systemic action at the macro, meso, and micro levels. Specifically the ReMO network aims to create institutional environments that foster mental health and well-being, reduce mental health stigma, and empower researchers when it comes to well-being at work. Key recommendations of this manifesto are summarized below:

1. At the macro level: ongoing dialogue between all relevant stakeholders; systematic and structured data collection for evidence-based policy making; dissemination of state-of-the-art evidence and tools addressing mental health; and revising the academic reward system.
2. At the meso level: Recognizing mental health and well-being issues; sharing best practices across institutions; development of fair and personalized research performance assessment; addressing well-being in doctoral and staff professionalization; supporting change initiatives at the organizational level.
3. At the micro level: Supporting grassroots initiatives; peer-to-peer support actions; a person-centered approach to training and career management; anecdotal evidence collection.

ReMO will realize these ambitions by i) establishing a global discussion forum; ii) the creation of an open evidence hub; and iii) launching the researcher well-being ambassador program.

## Mental Health and Well-being Crisis in Research

In the past decade, institutions such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the European Commission (EC) have increasingly urged governments and organizations to include mental health and well-being among their top priorities<sup>3</sup>. When comparing different occupational groups, academics rank among those with the highest levels of common mental disorders: the prevalence of common psychological disorders estimated to be between 32% and 42% among academic employees and postgraduate students, compared to approximately 19% in the general population<sup>4</sup>.

Attaining academic well-being requires more than simply managing stressful work conditions and coping with the extraordinary competitiveness that researchers face. In particular, manifestations of toxic work climates and specific work conditions negatively impact the mental well-being of individual academics<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Council conclusions on "Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality"

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49980/st09138-en21.pdf>, Last accessed: 29 September 2021,

<sup>2</sup> OECD. (2021). Reducing the precarity of academic research careers. <https://doi.org/10.1787/0f8bd468-en>

<sup>3</sup> WHO Healthy Workplace Framework and Model (2010)

[https://www.who.int/occupational\\_health/healthy\\_workplace\\_framework.pdf](https://www.who.int/occupational_health/healthy_workplace_framework.pdf), Last accessed: 29 September 2021

ILO Mental Health in the workplace (2010)

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---ifp\\_skills/documents/publication/wcms\\_108221.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_108221.pdf), Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>4</sup> Levecque, K., et.al. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868-879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>; Guthrie, S., et.al., Understanding mental health in the research environment: A Rapid Evidence Assessment. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2022.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2022.html), Last accessed: 29 September 2021; Barry, K. M., et.al.

(2018). Psychological health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(3), 468-483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1425979>;

Garcia-Williams, A. G., et.al. (2014). Mental health and suicidal behavior among graduate students. *Academic psychiatry*, 38(5), 554-560. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40596-014-0041-y>

<sup>5</sup> Mattijssen, L. M. S., Bergmans, J. E., van der Weijden, I. C. M., & Teelken, J. C. (2021). In the eye of the storm: The mental health situation of PhD candidates. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 10(2), 71–72.

Moreover, working conditions, forced mobility, and unavailability of permanent contracts have a major impact on researchers' job experience<sup>6</sup>. These challenges can be exacerbated by a lack of both (research) funding, contractual recognition of the work of doctoral candidates and the precarity of research careers<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, there is only sparse and fragmented evidence on what constitutes effective practices, and current capacities to share best practices are limited.

In an effort to respond to this state of affairs, the 234 members (representing 34 European countries) of the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) COST Action<sup>8</sup> are calling for action to address these issues. The ReMO COST Action network is one of the first coordinated and evidence-based European initiatives tackling mental health and well-being issues in academia, focusing on understanding (a) how mental health and well-being in research can be characterised and improved, (b) how to measure the impact of mental health and well-being on the academic workforce, and (c) how to efficiently share evidence-based practices, and construct a coordinated Community of Practice for practitioners serving research communities.

In this public declaration, we specifically plead for explicit actions at the macro (research system), meso (institutional context), and micro (individual and small community) levels. We need to understand how mental health and well-being can best be nourished and sustained, to foster healthy and respectful working environments allowing for the attainment of key objective performance indicators that facilitate both the individual and collective pursuit of well-being and mental health. Recommendations in this manifesto were generated through extensive consultations among the COST Action members who expressed their views in three Working Groups at each of the aforementioned levels.

## Call for Transforming the Research Ecosystem to Benefit Mental Health and Well-being

The research ecosystem is the policy-level context, which sets the external framework for research institutions and researchers. Current practices, such as research funding, employment conditions (incl. pension plans and social security) and immigration law, lay the bed for the institutional exploitation of early-career researchers<sup>9</sup>. Even in well-funded national research systems, the predominance of short-term project-based funding leads to a stark imbalance between fixed-term and permanent positions<sup>10</sup>. As a result, especially at early and postdoctoral stages, researchers often find themselves on a very stressful career track which impacts not only the quality of their scientific work, but also their mental health<sup>11</sup>.

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<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-020-00639-4>; Satinsky, E. N., Kimura, T., Kiang, M. V., Abebe, R., Cunningham, S., Lee, H., Lin, X., Liu, C. H., Rudan, I., Sen, S., Tomlinson, M., Yaver, M., & Tsai, A. C. (2021). Systematic review and meta-analysis of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among Ph.D. students. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1), 14370. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-93687-7>

<sup>6</sup> Olsthoorn, L. H. M., Heckmann, L. A., Filippi, A., Vieira, R. M., Varanasi, R. S., Lasser, J., Bäuerle, F., Zeis, P., & Schulte-Sasse, R. (2020). Max Planck Phdnet Survey 2019 Report. Max Planck PhdNet.

[https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/145345/PhDnet\\_Survey\\_Report\\_2019.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/145345/PhDnet_Survey_Report_2019.pdf), Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services LLP (CSES), Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission), Whittle, M., & Rampton, J. (2020). Towards a 2030 vision on the future of universities in Europe. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/510530>

<sup>8</sup> CA19117 - Researcher Mental Health Action is funded by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) for the period 1 November 2020 - 31 October 2024 <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA19117/>

<sup>9</sup> Cactus Foundation Mental Health Survey. (2020). <https://www.cactusglobal.com/mental-health-survey/> Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>10</sup> Initiative for Science in Europe. (2021). Position on precarity of academic careers.

<https://initiative-se.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Research-Precarity-ISE-position.pdf> Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>11</sup> Woolston, C. (2019). PhDs: The tortuous truth. *Nature*, 575(7782), 403–406.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03459-7>

We call for policies that monitor, improve, and maintain well-being and mental health in the research environment, delineating more encompassing metrics of success and quality, supporting work-life balance, inclusiveness, and family-friendly sustainable research careers. In order to achieve this, we need to encourage and incentivize system level actors<sup>12</sup> to systematically promote and improve the mental health and well-being of researchers, by:

1. Creating an inclusive platform that fosters **ongoing dialogue** between stakeholders, both within and between countries and research environments.
2. Challenging, monitoring, and informing national situations and priorities, through **systematic and structured data collection** on researcher well-being and working conditions.
3. Maintaining an **open-access Evidence Hub** to collect and disseminate state of the art evidence and tools to support decision making at all levels.
4. **Revising** not only **the academic reward system**, but also the criteria by which institutions themselves are accredited and incentivized, to respect researchers' personal need for sustaining their mental health and well-being.
5. Developing strategies for how **EU and national project-based research funding can be spent more sustainably** and hence lead to improved career perspectives in academia and beyond.

## Fostering and Sustaining Mental Health and Well-being by Design: A Call for Institutional Change

It is crucial that institutional actors in research address mental well-being, reduce stigma, and work towards an accepted and recognized framework for the provision of support to staff members<sup>13</sup>. Sharing institutional learnings can assist institutions in recognising and addressing idiosyncratic challenges within their local environments. This call for institutional change may be achieved by:

1. Institutions have to **take ownership for their impact on their employees' wellbeing**. This includes the recognition of mental health issues and symptoms among staff members, and proactive support of change initiatives and interventions<sup>14</sup>.
2. **Creating and sharing a battery of evidence-based institutional practices** that support researcher well-being and address the impact of working conditions on mental health and well-being. Special attention needs to be paid to the encouragement of bottom-up initiatives, and appointing a high level mental well-being officer with adequate resources and a defined mandate.
3. Developing fair and **personalized research performance assessment** protocols, by recognizing that no set of performance assessment standards can do justice to the full set of individual contributions to the organization. This includes that individual researchers receive praise and recognition for their work, even when it is not formally acknowledged in performance appraisal systems<sup>15</sup>.
4. Extending the **professionalisation of doctoral and academic staff training** with well-being related content especially in the areas of supervisor-supervisee relationships and communication.

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<sup>12</sup> e.g., national and European legislators, funding agencies, and accreditation bodies

<sup>13</sup> Kismihók, G., et al.. (2019). Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers. Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3082245>

<sup>14</sup> An example for this approach from Norway: Innstrand, S. T., & Christensen, M. (2020). Healthy Universities. The development and implementation of a holistic health promotion intervention programme especially adapted for staff working in the higher educational sector: The ARK study. *Global Health Promotion*, 27(1), 68–76.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975918786877>

<sup>15</sup> Solloway, A. (2020, September 14). Promoting a culture of wellbeing for researchers and improving the way we evaluate research [Speech]. Vitae Connections Week.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/science-minister-at-vitae-connections-week-2020>, Last accessed: 29 September 2021

Academic support centres must also actively promote and provide psychological support services aimed at both prevention and amelioration<sup>16</sup>.

## Call for Researcher Empowerment

Actors of local research environments and beyond should develop and promote a healthy research climate to sustain employability of researchers and their long-term integration within workplaces<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, specific behaviors that harm mental health (such as exploitation and academic bullying) need to be identified, targeted, and phased out<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, it is crucial to foster multidimensional actions targeted at workplaces to raise awareness about the relevance of mental health and well-being along with an researchers' emotional, and psychological well-being. As a result, a researcher can work productively and fruitfully and be able to make contributions to their own community and to the greater society. To make this happen, the following has to be done:

1. **Raise awareness of well-being at the individual level**, emphasising a democratic and positive approach towards mental well-being. This includes the provision of bottom-up means to speak-up, discuss, and/or report problems by creating trustful local environments for open communication among local stakeholders: principal investigators, researchers, and managers.
2. We need to support individual mental health and wellbeing focussed activities like seeking aid from their coworkers, or safeguarding wellbeing. In this regard, we must **promote bottom-up initiatives such as peer-to-peer mentorship**<sup>19</sup> and support/discussion groups, which can serve as a scalable tool for forming networks while emphasizing inclusivity and ethical behavior.
3. We need a more **person-centred and evidence-based approach to training and career management**, including communication and feedback, academic job organisation, strategies for research team- and self-management.
4. **Professionalisation of supervision** is primarily expected<sup>20</sup>. This includes developing skills and models for supervision<sup>21</sup>, and recognizing 'academic services' such as onboarding, mentoring, or mental well-being awareness as part of academic performance.

## ReMO takes Action

The ReMO community has chosen to go beyond sympathizing and supporting victims of poisonous research environments. We want to influence and win key players of research to create healthier, inclusive and more ethical research environments through a global observatory. Our actions will analyze and promote mental well-being in academic environments, complemented by knowledge sharing and tailored training activities both for individuals and organisations. To be specific, we aim to

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<sup>16</sup> Vitae in the UK developed a mental health lens for researcher development: Wellbeing and mental health lens on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/wellbeing-and-mental-health-lens/view> Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>17</sup> Woolston, C. (2020). Postdocs under pressure: 'Can I even do this any more?' *Nature*, 587(7835), 689–692. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-03235-y>

<sup>18</sup> Moss, S., & Mahmoudi, M. (2021). STEM the Bullying: An Empirical Investigation of Abusive Supervision in Academic Science. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3850784>

<sup>19</sup> Some research communities already started developing mentoring programmes, like Referent at the Marie Curie Alumni Association <https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/referent-mentoring-initiative-msca-early-career-researchers> Last accessed: 29 September 2021

<sup>20</sup> Devine, K., & Hunter, K. H. (2017). PhD student emotional exhaustion: The role of supportive supervision and self-presentation behaviours. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(4), 335–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2016.1174143>

<sup>21</sup> Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. (2020). Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions guidelines on supervision. <https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/node/901> Last accessed: 29 September 2021

1. **Establish a global discussion forum about mental well-being.** With members from 34 countries already, we are creating a bridge between local and global levels of discussions, by organising workshops, conferences, webinars, and networking events involving both local and global research communities, and relevant stakeholders.
2. **Collect evidence pertaining to researcher well-being in an open Evidence Hub** by literature reviews and evaluations of existing resources (tools, training materials, etc). ReMO is also working towards further evidence generation through a systematic multilevel data collection effort on researcher well-being, across countries and institutions represented within and beyond the ReMO Network.
3. **Launch the Researcher Well-being Ambassador Programme** to ensure the transfer of ideas and intervention practices to diverse local research environments. This train-the-trainer programme will be open to current and future ReMO members and will address the importance of mental health and well-being in research, how to discuss well-being related issues in a context-aware manner, how to decrease the stigma attached to mental health, and how research teams and organisations may nourish and sustain well-being.

## How to Support this Manifesto?

ReMO is a global, open community of both individuals and organisations in research. If you are willing to support the activities outlined above please do the following:

- Share the ReMO Manifesto with your colleagues, administrators and policy makers in your country
- Sign the [Petition](#) supporting the Researcher Mental Health Manifesto
- Get in touch with [MC members](#) of ReMO in your country and get involved with activities at the national level
- Get in touch with the [ReMO Grant Manager](#) about joining the [ReMO COST Action](#)
- Apply for the forthcoming Researcher Well-being Ambassador Programme

## Who we are

The ReMO COST Action focuses on well-being and mental health within academia, a theme of strategic importance for the European Research Area. The ReMO network, composed of academics, practitioners, policy makers, and consultants for higher education institutions, is an international mix of scientific knowledge and practice on researcher mental health and well-being. ReMO offers a unique and much needed interdisciplinary, multilevel, and intercultural perspective on the issue. Together, ReMO members strive to develop effective, efficient, and tailored action programs to increase well-being in research environments by building on evidence from their own evidence hub, the extant literature, and empirical data. ReMO members aim at being local ambassadors and address the situation in their countries. More information about our network, including current activities and instructions for joining these initiatives is available here: <http://remo-network.eu/>

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