Smart people problems: we need to talk about PhD mental health

timeshighereducation.com/blog/smart-people-problems-we-need-talk-about-phd-mental-health

January 20, 2018

I was once invited to a costume party by graduate students where the theme was “what you would be doing if you hadn’t gone to grad school”. Although I never attended the party, in hindsight I would probably have dressed as a pharmaceutical sales rep for the mood stabiliser medication that I am currently taking. Something akin to the character Jamie Randall in the film *Love & Other Drugs*.

In fact, my medication has had such a positive impact on my emotional health that (so goes my joke) I may very well become a sales rep for it *after* my PhD.

Yet no one likes to talk about mental health in PhD programmes, and much less about how the organisational culture in academic departments might affect it. Some people, however – particularly in northern Europe – have studied this matter in detail. It turns out that “smart people problems”, as I call them, are quite common and perhaps even normal in environments where talented intellectuals congregate.

In fact, some accounts claim that there is a culture of acceptance surrounding mental health issues in academia.

In my area, the humanities, there are steps that we can take to reduce such problems and make our work environments friendlier, more productive, and better suited to student success.

Search our database of more than 3,000 global university jobs

---

Part of the problem is that both professors and PhD candidates are overworked. The rise of metrics-based accountability in the university has a significant impact on the pace and weight of work. With academics increasingly expected to maintain a certain output of articles and publications, less emphasis is placed on the things that drive students' psychosocial well-being, such as the feeling of belonging, support from learning resources, and a clear distinction between work and leisure time.

These are some of the issues highlighted in a Swedish study of 278 PhD candidates at Umeå University. For instance, 60 per cent of the participants believed that conflicts were not handled appropriately in their departments. "The climate here at the department is not exactly such that you can talk about things," says Marianne, one of the students interviewed in the study.

A further 40 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men confessed to having received "insulting special treatment". Sanna, another participant, revealed that she was "in a situation where I have a supervisor who has insulted a lot of people [who] I like". As a result, she says, "I feel very uncertain about where my loyalty should lie."

This is the sort of environment that leads not to solidarity, but rather to the impoverishment of research.

In fact, Jenni Stubb and her team of researchers from the University of Helsinki found that emotional exhaustion was less prevalent among PhD candidates when they were considered colleagues instead of students. In today's alt-ac and post-ac environments, where there are regular discussions of how to talk to your professors about extra-academic employment, this is all the more critical to avoiding ostracism.

The next issue is known as the Janus complex, which is the conundrum of not having clearly defined hours for work and leisure. While this freedom is also considered a benefit of academic life, 90 per cent of the students surveyed at Umeå confessed to "thinking about work" after hours or during weekends. This places considerable stress on interpersonal relationships, especially for cohabiting women, who were more often responsible for domestic chores or keeping in touch with friends or relations.

Monika Appel and Lars Dahlgren put it succinctly in their article: "A number of the doctoral students said that they felt that their research was always hanging over them and giving them a guilty conscience...that 'never being totally free' was difficult."

In response, we might ask: should doctoral programmes become managed environments?

Some researchers suggest that they should. According to Stubb and her team, PhD students working in peer groups or research units experience a stronger sense of belonging that reduces their chances of dropping out. Without this, one student recounts, “there’s not much of a role to take...you just have to do your job alone without anyone to help you”.

Clearly, this is a problem that must be addressed. Stubb observes that students are less prone to burnout in what she calls “well-defined fields”, or areas of study where there is a consensus on the acceptable methods to be used in research.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with ambiguity or purely academic enquiry, there *is* a problem of efficiency in a culture where the “field” is defined by one or two figures in a department, often without regard for professional outcomes or societal demands.

How then, should humanities research units be organised?

They should be functions of what students desire most: jobs. In all three studies considered in this blog, financial insecurity was one of the main causes of stress, loss of motivation and cynicism. PhD students are already twice as likely to develop a psychiatric condition as regular full-time employees; and when they do, 32 per cent of them will experience four or more such symptoms.

A case in point is Kim, from the survey at Umeå University. “There’s no incentive to finish writing my thesis,” she admits, “because I haven’t been guaranteed a post, so I’d rather prolong [the period as a doctoral student]”.

Katia Levecque and her team of researchers from Ghent University agree: “Career prospects (both in and outside of academia) were a determinant of mental health problems” in PhD students.

Imagine if the humanities could produce graduates such as Michael McGrade, (PhD, historical musicology) Craig Kelly, (PhD, Romance languages); or Michael Zimm (PhD, Classics) in a streamlined way towards employment in the alt-ac or post-ac sectors.

Wouldn’t that improve the appeal of our discipline as a whole? Wouldn’t it also free up jobs for those solely interested in the professoriate? Imagine: business and human values flourishing; literature and war; queer theory and medicine.

These are all being done today, and they just might help us feel better about what we do and where we are going.

If there is one thing that I have learned during my own graduate studies at France’s Aix-Marseille University, it’s that working longer hours does not necessarily generate greater productivity. In fact, French workers are practically as productive as their American counterparts, even though they receive twice the amount of vacation time and work, on average, 300 hours less per year.

Alfredo Cumerma is a Gilman research fellow at Johns Hopkins University, where he teaches Spanish language and conducts research on Latin American culture and American foreign policy. Follow him on LinkedIn.