

The impact of supervision and working conditions on the mental health of early-stage academics and researchers

Thursday 7 December 2023 15:30 (1h 30m)

The N-squared network (N2) unites the doctoral researchers (DRs) from the three largest non-university institutions in Germany: the Helmholtz and Leibniz Associations and the Max-Planck Society. In total, it represents the interests of around 16,000 DRs. As part of its activities, N2 conducts a bi-annual survey among all research centers and looks into all relevant aspects for the DRs, including mental health.

In 2019, around 5,000 DRs took part in the harmonized survey and the data revealed an underlying mental-health crisis among them: more than 15% of the doctoral researchers suffer from moderate to severe depressive symptoms, and more than 40% from anxiety. Three factors correlate prominently with mental health outcomes: high workload, unsatisfactory supervision, and an unsupportive working environment.

As doctoral researchers are the backbone of generating novel research results, patents, and publications at the Helmholtz Association, it is of paramount importance that we create a supportive and thriving environment for them and set an example that academic excellence and nurtured mental health can go hand-in-hand.

Therefore, this workshop will not only raise awareness by discussing the statistically-relevant findings for mental health in academia, but it will also aim at educating the participants (such as supervisors, group leaders, principal investigators (PIs), and professors) on how to early-on detect mental-health challenges among the doctoral researchers and how to better guide them during these difficult times.

The workshop will not provide medical advice; it will instead present softer techniques that the supervisors can implement so that the DRs can be more satisfied with their supervision, workload, and working environment. Examples of these techniques are: constructive communication and time management, conflict resolution, setting boundaries and expectations, understanding the needs of the doctoral researchers, distinguishing between micro-management and supportive supervision, creating productive research plans, understanding the team dynamics, and creating productive teams.

The workshop will consist of around 30 minutes of presentation/lecture and 60 minutes of active/group work, but this is open for discussion if the organizers expect a different format.

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