

The State of Mental Health in European Economics Departments

Elisa Macchi*, Clara Sievert†, Paul Barreira‡, Valentin Bolotnyy§

June 14, 2022

Abstract

We study the mental health of graduate students and faculty at 14 Economics PhD programs in Europe. Using clinically validated surveys sent out in the fall of 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find that 34.7% of graduate students experience moderate to severe symptoms of depression or anxiety and 17.3% report suicidal or self-harm ideation in a two-week period. A U.S. study done in 2017 across 8 top-ranked departments found the prevalence rates to be 24.8% and 11.3%, respectively. Only 19.2% of students with significant symptoms are in treatment, compared to 25.2% of students in the U.S. study. Among faculty, 15.8% experience moderate to severe depression or anxiety symptoms (31.4% among untenured, tenure-track faculty).

1 Executive Summary

The objectives of this study were to (1) understand the prevalence and severity of mental health issues in Economics PhD programs in Europe, among students and faculty; (2) understand student and faculty experiences in their departments; (3) compare prevalence rates of student mental health issues and student experiences to those of U.S. students, as addressed in a 2017 U.S. study (Bolotnyy et al., 2021); (4) gain insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected student and faculty mental health; and (5) make data-informed recommendations to departments on ways to improve graduate student and faculty mental health.

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Email: emacchi@mit.edu.

†Harvard University. Email: clarasievert@g.harvard.edu.

‡Harvard University. Email: paul.barreira@harvard.edu.

§Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Email: vbolotnyy@stanford.edu.

The 14 programs participating in the study were: Bocconi University, Bonn Graduate School of Economics, Central European University, European University Institute, London School of Economics, Mannheim Graduate School of Economics, Paris School of Economics, Sciences Po, Stockholm School of Economics, University College London, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, University of Warwick, University of Zurich, and Uppsala Universitet. 1,144 Economics PhD students and approximately 814 faculty members across these programs received a link to our surveys by email. In total, 568 students (49.6%) and 255 faculty members (31.3%) voluntarily participated in our study. Of the participants, 556 students (97.8%) and 165 faculty members (64.7%) completed the clinically validated screening tools for depression or anxiety.

Below, we summarize some of our main findings. A detailed paper covering all of the results of the study is forthcoming.

1.1 Prevalence and Severity of Mental Health Issues

- 34.7% of students are experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression or anxiety. This prevalence rate is likely higher than in the 2017 U.S. study (24.8%) in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Among faculty, 15.8% are experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression or anxiety. There is significant heterogeneity by tenure track status: 31.4% of untenured, tenure-track faculty experience moderate to severe depression or anxiety symptoms, compared to 9.6% of tenured faculty.
- The depression and anxiety prevalence rates we find among untenured, tenure-track faculty and among graduate students are larger than nationally representative equivalents from many European countries at the peak of the first COVID-19 wave (March 2020; [Shevlin et al., 2022](#)) and at subsequent moments of the pandemic (November 2020, January 2021, and April 2021; [Hajek et al., 2022](#)). Depression and anxiety rates among tenured faculty in our sample appear much lower than overall population rates.
- 17.3% of students (96 people) reported frequently thinking of suicide or self harm in the past two weeks. In the U.S. study, among students, the prevalence rate was 11%. Focusing on suicidal thoughts in the one-year period before our survey, 11% of European Economics PhD students thought seriously about suicide and 1.8% of students planned a suicide attempt.

- 24.4% of students have at some point in their lives been diagnosed with a mental health issue by a professional, a number comparable to the one reported in the U.S. study (25%). 14.7% were diagnosed before starting the PhD program, while 9.7% were diagnosed after.
- Only 19.2% of the 34.7% experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression are currently receiving any form of mental health treatment. Only 21.9% of those students who have contemplated suicide or self-harm in the two week period prior to the survey are receiving any form of mental health treatment. A national survey of individuals in the U.S. labor market had previously raised concerns that only half of those who experienced serious symptoms of depression were receiving treatment ([Kessler et al., 2008](#)).
- Loneliness and isolation are also significant issues. 20.6% of students often feel a lack of companionship, 17.5% often feel left out, and 18.9% often feel isolated from others.
- The majority of students, 59%, have frequent or often intense imposter experiences.
- Women, self-identified racial minorities, and non-heterosexual students have a higher prevalence of mental health issues than the study population overall. In particular, rates of depression are significantly higher among non-heterosexual students (56% more likely). Graduate students who were first-generation to college fare slightly better than the study population overall.
- Although most students have a good understanding of whether their own mental health is good or poor, many overestimate how well they are doing relative to other students. Among students who are doing worse than the average student on depression or anxiety symptoms, 30% think they are doing better than the average student. 18.5% of students who experience frequent suicidal or self-harm ideation in a two-week period think their mental health is better than that of the average student.
- Faculty who participated in our study were very aware of the prevalence of mental health issues among graduate students. On average, faculty members guessed that, of the students taking the survey, 31% experienced depression symptoms and 40% experienced anxiety symptoms more than half of the days in the past two weeks.

1.2 Student Experiences in Their Programs

- About 74.4% of students say they would know where to turn for help, if they were experiencing mental health issues (87% in the U.S. study).
- 24% of students report feeling like their work is useful always or most of the time (26% in the U.S. study). For faculty, the percentage is 54% (70% in the U.S. study). 18.7% of students feel that they have opportunities to make a positive impact on their community or society (19% in the U.S. study) compared to 44% of faculty (58% in the U.S. study).
- 77% of students state that making time for their personal life is a source of stress in their daily life. Finding a dissertation topic, finishing the dissertation, and managing one's time are a source of stress for 80% to 90% of the students. About 40% of students worry about financial difficulties.
- About 90% of students say they met with their main adviser at least once in the last 2 months. The number of students who did not meet with their main adviser at all in the U.S. study was 4.4% (compared to 10% in this European study). 56% of students believe, more or less strongly, that the number of meetings was sufficient to meet their needs.
- Similar to the U.S. study, fewer than half of the students (48%) say they would know where to turn for help with advising if an issue arose.
- Few students feel comfortable raising their hand in a seminar setting. 24.4% of women feel comfortable doing so (19% in the U.S. study), compared to 38.6% of men (35% in the U.S. study).
- Overall, 25.9% of students experienced sexual harassment since the start of the graduate program. This number was significantly lower, 16%, in the U.S. study. The numbers are 34.5% for women (21.5% in the U.S.) and 18.7% for men (13% in the U.S.). While already larger than the comparable U.S. statistics, these numbers are likely lowered by the fact that students, because of the pandemic, were largely not physically present in their departments in the 1.5 years prior to them taking our survey.
- 89.3% of students have a friendly relationship with peers in their department and 88.4% have at least one peer they could turn to if they needed help. Viewed

another way, however, this means that 11.6% of students do not feel like they can turn to any of their peers for help. About 50% of students often or very often let others know when they have a problem.

- Older graduate student cohorts are more likely to experience depression symptoms and to have suicidal thoughts. Younger cohorts are more likely to experience anxiety. In older cohorts, a higher percentage of students who experience moderate to severe depression or anxiety symptoms is in treatment.

1.3 Student Experiences and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Most students (81.1%) report that world events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, were a source of stress during the last year.
- 28% of students self-report that the pandemic impacted their mental health. Fewer students report impacts on their physical (14.2%) or financial health (6.1%).
- 34% of students report that the pandemic affected their productivity, although fewer than 10% of student projects saw their viability impacted by the pandemic.
- 16% of students state that the pandemic affected the health and safety of family members or friends.
- For almost half of the students (49.1%) the pandemic affected the possibility of maintaining existing relationships or making new relationships, friendships, and social connections. For 45% of the students, the pandemic impacted their feeling of connection with their Economics department.

2 Background Information

In 2018, a study of mental health issues among graduate students in top U.S. Economics departments provided evidence of high rates of depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as suicidal or self-harm ideation. This first paper raised interest in how well the findings reflected the state of graduate student mental health outside of the top U.S. departments and left the state of faculty mental health unaddressed. As a response, the authors decided to implement a second data-collection effort, to investigate mental health issue prevalence in Economics departments in Europe.

Our study consisted of one student survey, about 25 minutes in length, and one faculty survey, about 15-minute in length, administered in the fall of 2021. A week before the launch of the initial survey, each Department Chair e-mailed his or her students and faculty with an endorsement of the study, making clear that responses would be strictly confidential and promising that the results would be taken seriously. We did not provide financial participation incentives for any of the surveys.

We note that our study comes after (and was significantly delayed by) 1.5 years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have provided evidence that the pandemic has had large negative effects on the mental health of the global population ([Pfefferbaum and North, 2020](#)). Our work sheds some light on how the pandemic has affected graduate students and faculty in particular, but more research is certainly needed in this space.

References

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Appendix Table

Table 1: Prevalence of mental health issues

	European Sample (2021)	U.S. Sample (2017)
	Students	
Depression	27.3%	17.7%
Anxiety	25.9%	17.6%
Depression or Anxiety	34.7%	24.8%
Suicide or Self Harm 2-weeks	17.3%	11.3%
Suicide Thoughts 1 year	11.0%	12.0%
Suicide Plan 1-year	1.8%	-
UCLA Loneliness	5.3 (1.9)	5.2 (1.8)
N	556	513
Female	36.3%	34.7%
Dissertation Phase	57.6%	60.3%
	Faculty	
	Untenured, Tenure-Track	
Depression	25.7%	-
Anxiety	20.6%	-
Depression or Anxiety	31.4%	-
	Tenured	
Depression	6.2%	-
Anxiety	8.0%	-
Depression or Anxiety	9.6%	-
N	165	
Tenured	68.9%	

Note: Percent of students or faculty scoring above thresholds for mental health concern. Depression and Anxiety show those scoring 10 or higher on the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, respectively. Suicide or Self Harm 2-weeks show the percentage of those reporting contemplating suicide or self-harm on at least several days in the last two weeks (Item 9 on the PHQ-9). Suicide Thoughts 1-year refer to those answering yes to the question “In the past year, did you ever seriously think about attempting suicide?” in the European sample; for the U.S. sample it refers to those scoring 7 or higher on the SBQR suicidality screening tool (1-year look-back questions). Suicide Plan 1-year refers to those answering yes to the question “In the past year, did you make a plan for attempting suicide?”. Suicide Attempt 1-year refers to those answering yes to the question “In the past year, did you attempt suicide?”. UCLA Loneliness is the mean score on the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale. Dissertation Phase indicates students enrolled in the G3+ year of their program. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

