



Description

A recent [Nature graduate survey](#) of doctoral students observed high level of commitment of students to complete the PhD program against odds. However, these statistics are not surprising given the strong academic nature of the candidates. Undoubtedly, science PhD students are passionate about what they do. However, the top outcomes of [Nature's career week survey](#) warn that most PhD students may also suffer for this same reason.

Cause for Concern

Most of the [doctoral students](#) (>5,700) surveyed globally showed high levels of satisfaction with their present research program. Conversely, they also expressed significant levels of worry and uncertainty.

Mental health was one of the major concerns with 12% of the respondents claiming they sought help for depression and anxiety.

However, this percentage undermines the level of stress experienced by students during their graduate or research programs. Since only 12% resorted to help for their stress, the level of prevalence might still be higher. The concern stemmed from their current workload, future prospects, and uncertainty over long-term career in research.

By its very nature, academic PhD research is intense and requires strict discipline and an unfailing work ethic. Few respondents have highlighted this on the survey, commenting on reserving a 'special room' for recovery from over-work.

Role of Good Mentors

The survey further showed a strong connection between student's achievements and well-matched PhD advisor. While most respondents were satisfied with their present advisor, nearly one-quarter admitted they would switch advisors if possible. PhD students usually work independently but they do require support from advisor to handle difficult situations.

A Widespread Struggle

Results indicated that 52% of the respondents would consider a career in academia as compared to just 22% in the industry. These findings were similar to those of other University surveys, where graduate students expressed satisfaction in their decision to complete a PhD. Approximately 80% of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied. An existing cause for concern among respondents with anxiety is their inability to get adequate assistance. Of those surveyed, 20% respondents lacked support in their own institution, predominantly due to cultural or financial constraints. Interestingly, nearly half of the students who sought help for anxiety or depression were satisfied or very satisfied with their PhD program. The main reason underlying the overall mental health state was the uncertainty over long-term career in research. Similar studies conducted on the [impact of research on mental health](#), earlier this year further support the outcomes of the present survey.

Tackling the Problem

Building resilience is a priority to overcome current issues followed by a [realistic overview](#) of postdoctoral careers in academia. For example, according to the survey, the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, now conducts monthly seminars on 'Research Resilience'. Topics of discussion include mindfulness and the pitfalls of [imposter syndrome](#) that are common among the students. Interestingly, one in four respondents of the survey indicated imposter syndrome as an existing challenge.

Since 60% respondents arrived at the current career decision via the internet, University initiated programs may provide better guidance.

Further, it was observed that 41% of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement that their current advisor supported them by contacting potential employers. Conversely, those in agreement on having open communication with their advisor about their career were high (59%). *Nature*, thus, reiterates the duty of the supervisor to advice students well in advance, to avoid unrealistic career expectations. However, it is also the duty of experienced researchers to ensure that the [next generation of scientists](#) are not lost.

The Big Picture

Although detail-oriented thinking plays a significant role, PhD students are encouraged to view the long-term outcomes. Most survey respondents for instance expected to secure a postdoctoral job in 0-3 years, despite a tough job market. A realistic overview of academic career opportunities may provide plenty of time/opportunity for graduates to consider alternative work in the industry. In reality, PhD students can seek challenging roles that pay higher as well. After all, it is important to see the distinction between a research career and "satisfying" career.

Fortunately, the survey results do indicate that respondents are aware of this difference. Overall, most PhD students are more satisfied with their decision to get a PhD degree and least satisfied with the career guidance. This has led to doctoral students taking self-directed initiative to organize career events; providing a variety of exciting professional options. Hopefully, this fresh approach to resolve

existing insecurities in career advancement will help.

What are your experiences with your PhD program? Do you think there should be adequate support from the university and the advisor to help you guide through and after the program? Share your thoughts with us in the section below!

Category

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