

No cause for alarm about graduate students' mental health

24 May 2021



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Talk of a graduate student mental health crisis is abundant in academic and popular media, but a University of Otago study has found no evidence of one in New Zealand.

The study, published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, used data from the Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand to compare the mental wellbeing of students who did, and did not, transition into Ph.D. study after completing their undergraduate degree.

Co-author Dr. Damian Scarf, from the Department of Psychology, says the researchers found poor [mental health](#) is not an inevitable consequence of Ph.D. study in New Zealand.

This is despite numerous studies out of the US and Europe reporting the opposite.

"There is a plethora of editorials, career features, empirical papers, etc. that talk of a [graduate student mental health crisis](#). One paper in the US reported that graduate students were six times more likely to experience anxiety or depression than the general population—that is alarming," Dr. Scarf says.

However, no New Zealand-based study had been done into graduate student mental [health](#), so the researchers wanted to plug the gap.

"To date, quantitative studies on graduate student mental health have looked at one particular point in time, limiting any discussion about temporal links between entry into graduate education and mental health. The Graduate Longitudinal Study provides a super unique dataset in this regard, allowing us to track the mental health of graduate students before and after they enter a Ph.D. program."

The GLSNZ conducted baseline sampling across all eight New Zealand universities in 2011, following up in 2014. For the study, the researchers compared 269 students who transitioned to Ph.D. study, with 4230 who did not.

"Unlike data on graduate student mental health from Europe and the US, it seems that entering graduate study in New Zealand does not lead to a big drop in mental health," Dr. Scarf says.

The difference in outcomes for students may be the structure of New Zealand Ph.D. programs which have little, if any, course work, take fewer years to complete, and have higher completion rates.

Dr. Scarf says the problem with coverage of a supposed [graduate student](#) mental health crisis is that it may lead people, including students, to think that poor mental health is just part of being a Ph.D. student.

"This belief can have several negative effects, including Ph.D. students being less likely to seek professional help for any mental health problems, because they think poor mental health and Ph.D. study go hand in hand."

More information: Taylor Winter et al, A Longitudinal Study of Mental Wellbeing in Students in Aotearoa New Zealand Who Transitioned Into

PhD Study, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). DOI:
[10.3389/fpsyg.2021.659163](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.659163)

Provided by University of Otago

APA citation: No cause for alarm about graduate students' mental health (2021, May 24) retrieved 7 June 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-alarm-students-mental-health.html>

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