

Report Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force

Context

To develop an institutional strategy for mental health and promote the well-being of its community, EPFL established a Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force in early 2022. This initiative was led by Kathryn Hess Bellwald, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Outreach (AVP-SAO). The student community strongly supported the creation of a comprehensive initiative related to mental health.

Since its inception, the Task Force has included members from the student and doctoral communities, faculty, and administrative and technical staff.

Survey

In November 2022, the Task Force conducted [a survey](#) to assess the mental health and well-being of the entire EPFL community and better identify needs and necessary measures. The questionnaire was designed by a working group from the Task Force and Unisanté (University center for general medicine and public Health), which also collected and analyzed the data. All responses were anonymized, and no individual data was shared with EPFL. Approximately 4,300 individuals (23% of the EPFL population), representing all parts of the community, responded to the survey. Results indicated that 52.7% of respondents exhibited one or more symptoms of burnout, with higher rates among women (55.8%) compared to men (49.6%). Students were particularly affected, with rates exceeding 60%. Negative stress related to workload and performance expectations was identified as a predictor of burnout.

Bullying/mobbing cases were also concerning, with 23.5% of respondents possibly or definitively victims. Non-teaching scientific collaborators and doctoral students reported such behaviors more frequently, with rates of 28.3% and 31.5%, respectively. The survey results were presented to the management team in summer 2023.

A new survey will need to be conducted to assess the impact of implemented measures.

Objectives

Based on the survey results, the Task Force has outlined the following objectives:

- Reduce burnout rates.
- Lower the proportion of the EPFL population in psychological distress.
- Reduce bullying/mobbing rates across all groups, particularly among doctoral candidates.

- Decrease negative stress, primarily related to workload and performance expectations.
- Increase trust in the institution, especially among teaching staff.
- Improve work-life or study-life balance.
- Enhance the sense of control over one's work, especially for administrative and technical staff.

Implemented Measures

Mental Health Week/Health Days

From November 21 to 25, 2022, a Task Force working group organized a Mental Health Week on the EPFL campus, featuring conferences, round tables, workshops, and wellness activities to inform, raise awareness, and encourage open discussions about mental health issues. In 2023, it was decided to partner with the Service Sport Santé UNIL + EPFL (SSUE) and the University of Lausanne to offer an annual event dedicated to both mental and physical health on the Lausanne campus. This initiative led to the merging of Mental Health Week and Health Days, which were previously organized by SSUE and focused solely on physical health. Thus, from October 2 to 13, 2023, a new version of [Health Days](#) was born. The goal of this entirely free event is to raise awareness among the entire academic community about health issues in their entirety (both physical and mental), through round tables, conferences, health assessments, sports and wellness sessions, dialogue and outreach stands, and workshops. In 2024, Health Days took place from September 30 to October 10.

Autumn break week

At the start of the 2024 academic year, a break week was introduced in the fall semester (to do this, the start of the semester was moved up by a week). This action was widely welcomed by students, who were happy to have a break in the middle of a dense semester followed by the winter exam session. To ensure this week represents a real break, teachers were also asked not to schedule assignment deadlines or mid-term exams immediately after this break.

Study breaks

To allow students to slow down, EPFL also removed the rule that required Bachelor students to earn 60 credits every two years (the duration of the Bachelor cycle remains a maximum of 4 years). It is now possible also [to take a break of up to one year](#) between the end of the Master's cycle and the start of the Master's project, provided the maximum duration of the Master's cycle has not been reached.

Installation of BoxUp stations

To promote movement, which is essential for maintaining both physical and mental health, [two BoxUp stations](#) were installed in the spring of 2024 near the Rolex Learning Center. One is in front of the Montreux Jazz Café and the other in front of Epicure. These stations each contain six lockers with equipment for engaging in sports or recreational activities alone or in groups.

Tenure Track Assistant Professors (PATT) interviews

In collaboration with the EPFL Teachers Council (CCE), interviews (via two focus groups) were conducted with PATTs in June 2024 to better understand the well-being and mental health situation of this group. It was noted that there are a lot of positive aspects of the PATT experience in EPFL including excellent resources, a culture based on a passion for

scientific inquiry and a lot of collegial support. However, some features were identified which may be contributing to greater stress than is necessary. These included (i) a lack of clarity as to the criteria against which PATTs are being assessed and a perceived lack of feedback on how they are progressing with respect to these criteria (ii) a lack of clear differentiation between mentoring and evaluation by institute colleagues contributing to considerable ambiguity, and (iii) a lack of transparency in distribution of teaching and administrative duties and resources.

Course "Intervene and Prevent in Mental Health"

To provide everyone with tools to support people in difficulty and guide them to the right resources (without replacing therapists), it was decided to set up a "mental health first aid" course lasting 2.5-3 hours in person. A pilot version of this course, coordinated by Dr. François Candaux, occupational physician and head of psychotherapeutic consultation at EPFL, will be tested at the beginning of 2025. It is then planned to offer this course every 3 months to the EPFL community.

Thematic Focus Groups

In February 2024, three thematic focus groups, including members from all EPFL bodies, were created to formulate concrete proposals to achieve the objectives set by the Task Force. These proposals were submitted to the Management in July 2024. Below are the three groups and the main proposed actions.

1. Studies and Teaching

- **Creation of an exam management entity:** Create a centralized structure to reduce the administrative burden on the teaching staff and standardize practices.
- **Increased administrative support:** Increase administrative resources for the teaching staff to free up time for teaching and research activities.
- **Revision of ECTS credit allocation:** Reevaluate the number of work hours per ECTS credit, in coordination with the ETHZ PAKETH project, to reduce the workload of students.
- **Improvement of submission and exam coordination:** Make all important dates visible at the bachelor level to allow students to plan their time effectively.
- **Change of narrative:** Restore a positive dimension to teaching and learning by presenting them as sources of interest and pleasure, rather than sources of "suffering."

2. Physical Environment

- **Improvement of cleanliness:** Maintain clean and well-maintained work and training spaces.

- **Increase in equipped outdoor spaces:** Install more outdoor tables and seats on campus to offer alternatives to indoor spaces.
- **Reorganization of internal courtyards:** Arrange and green the internal courtyards of buildings to make them pleasant places to work and relax.
- **Creation of rest rooms:** Provide calm spaces that allow for a moment of isolation.
- **Adaptation of dining areas:** Allow the use of cafeterias as study spaces outside mealtimes.

3. Personal, Professional Development, and Training

- **Clarification of expectations:** Clearly define objectives, priorities, and tasks, especially for doctoral students.
- **Selection criteria for managers:** Integrate management and leadership skills into the selection criteria for all positions with a people management component, including professorships.
- **Promotion of a culture of constructive feedback:** Encourage regular and supportive feedback and acceptance of the risk of failure.
- **Development of agile career plans:** Offer flexible and individualized career paths for scientific staff and administrative and technical staff.
- **Encouragement of personal and professional development:** Allocate financial and organizational resources to allow everyone to train and acquire new knowledge and skills.

Assessment and Next Steps

After conducting an assessment of the mental health and well-being of the entire EPFL community in 2022, the Mental Health Task Force identified the main needs and implemented several concrete projects and initiatives between 2022 and 2024. To measure the impact of these measures, a second survey will need to be conducted among the entire community. However, it can already be noted that by highlighting the theme of mental health, the Task Force has encouraged discussion around the various facets of health.

Additionally, by bringing together individuals from the student and doctoral communities, the teaching staff, and the administrative and technical staff, it has also facilitated better information flow among the different entities carrying out projects aimed at improving the well-being of the EPFL community (Doctoral School, Faculty Conference, Teaching Support Center, Trust and Support Network, Social and Psychotherapeutic Consultation, Human Resources, Associate Vice Presidency for Education, and Associate Vice Presidency for Student Affairs and Outreach). In this sense, it has played an essential coordinating role.

Starting January 1, 2025, with the inauguration of EPFL President Anna Fontcuberta i Morral, the management of mental health-related projects is entrusted to the "Well-being and Inclusion" unit of the new Vice Presidency for Human Development (VPH). It is proposed to evolve the Mental Health and Well-being Task Force into a permanent structure in the form of a "Mental Health and Well-being Council" composed of representative members from all parts of the EPFL community. To implement the actions proposed by the focus groups, some of which require structural changes, human and financial resources are crucial.