

Report on the SSPH+ Initiative for Students' Mental Health

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Background:

Mental health is best conceived as a public good worth investing in for sustainable development. Mental health is, notoriously, also an integral component of health, and it is a universal human right, which may be defined as the capacity of thought, emotion, and behavior that enables individuals to cope with the normal stressors of life, to contribute to community and social life, thrive, and nurture and enjoy well-being¹. Poor mental health may result in psychological distress and mental disorders, which affect a person's thinking, feeling, mood, behavior, and function in daily life, and lead to disruption of social interactions. Mental disorders can cause a variety of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms associated with substantial mental and emotional discomfort, suffering, pain, and functional impairment. Already, before 2020, prevalence studies estimated that in youth aged 25 years or less up to 1 in 5 would have experienced some kind of mental health disorders, psychological distress, or both². Moreover, recent data and models from the global burden of disease studies (GBD) indicate that a third of the overall burden of mental disorders (according, for example, to DALYs) concentrates in the age-group 15 to 24 yrs³. "Emerging adulthood", spanning from 18 – 29 years, is considered a vulnerable time period with many transitions and expectations to manage. It is also the period in life of educational attainment, access to job market, and social and family setting. Swiss data indicate that students rate their subjective health lower and report symptoms of depression more frequently than the same age group in the general population^{4, 5}. The latest national Student Surveys (SSEE⁴) and Swiss Health Survey data 2020⁵ also highlight a higher burden in females than men. Universities carry a responsibility for providing healthy educational and research environments and should take ownership of this responsibility.

Aims

In response to the evidence and necessity voiced by SSPH+ students and faculty in the Academic Board of IGC, we developed the project "Mental Health of Students" which had three aims:

- 1) clarification of scope
- 2) overview of current offers and interventions to support or promote student's mental health -
- 3) a joint list of items and instruments regarding student's mental health and wellbeing

¹ WHO Fact sheet Mental Health, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

² Kessler RC, et al.. Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2005. doi: 10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593..

³ Armocida B et al., Burden of non-communicable diseases among adolescents aged 10-24 years in the EU, 1990-2019: a systematic analysis of the Global Burden of Diseases Study 2019. doi: 10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00073-6.

⁴ Studien- und Lebensbedingungen an den Schweizer Hochschulen, <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/personen-ausbildung/tertiaerstufo-hochschulen/soziale-wirtschaftliche-lage-studierenden.assetdetail.18584280.html>

⁵ Medienmitteilung SGB 2022: erste Resultate, file:///C:/Users/drat/Downloads/2023-0115-d.pdf

Results and main outputs

Regarding the clarification of scope it was decided to be inclusive and address mental health on Bsc., MSc. and PhD levels of all fields of studies in all Swiss Universities. We successfully involved various universities (BFH, CHUV; EPFL, UniFr, USI, UZH, ZHAW) and students, mainly PhDs, in the project. Collaborators participated in online sounding meetings, in which intermediate results were presented and discussed, as well as in a half-day workshop in Bern. The workshop was dedicated to identify relevant topics and areas of mental health.

Further, an **informative padlet** has been developed which provides an overview of activities and interventions offered to support mental health of students. The content was filled in representatives of all universities involved in the project and can be accessed by anybody with the link (see page xx): (<https://padlet.com/fphgesundheits/mh-interventions-offers-at-swiss-universities-mwy3yfsdh40l4b7h>).

Lastly, a joint questionnaire on mental health and well-being and related individual and structural factors was developed. The questionnaire is the **main outcome** of the current project. The choice of mental health conditions and determinants was based on the Study-Demands-Ressources Model (see page xx) and a participative process with iterative prioritization rounds. We further, differentiate in a core questionnaire, and additional optional items e.g. related to specific educational levels or conditions. Some items are solely addressed to PhDs other more to students. Given the modular structure, the questionnaire may be extended, e.g. should a stakeholder university wish to add additional aspects.

We **disseminated** our intermediate results at the SSPH+ retreat 2025 and final results were presented at the SPH 2025.

Next steps

In a workshop in March 2025, the project team together with students and staff representatives from different universities discussed the next steps to take:

Step 1 aims to **establish an online RedCap questionnaire** in all three languages plus English that can be implemented at any time by the SSPH+ universities. For this we need to

- a) translate all instruments and scales not yet available in the national languages (German, French and Italian). We will translate and back-translate, as needed, the selected assessment tools with mother-tongue speakers at each step.
- b) program the questionnaire on RedCap, with multi-lingual and other functional options, importing existing assessment tools from the RedCap repository.
- c) test and pilot the online questionnaire and hold cognitive interviews with PhDs (N= 3 PhD per language) to evaluate length, understanding, clarity and relevance of the items.

Further, we propose to run a pilot study among the PhDs of the Swiss Public Health IGC.

The pilot study allows to test the implementation across different universities of the survey and signals the needed fixing and optimization. In addition, it will provide initial, representative and valid data on the mental health of the PhDs of the SSPH+ to be used by the IGC Board for developing actions to improve mental health of their constituency.

Step 2 concerns **advocacy and concept for monitoring and research on mental health of students**. Next to activities of the project groups we consider to ask the institutional SSPH+ board to engage with the different universities and swissuniversities to prompt collaborations at the institutional level.