

Mental Health in Academia: The Hot Potato #2 – Conference Review and Analysis



Mental Health in Academia Conference Sparks Dialogue on Well-Being in Research



Zadar, Croatia – In a pioneering effort to address the often overlooked issue of mental health in academic settings, the University of Zadar hosted the second “**Mental Health in Academia: The Hot Potato**” conference. The conference was organised by Penkala Association, the OUI Association and Student Counseling Center - UNIZD.

Over two days, a dedicated group of around 40 participants (about 20 in person and 20 online) gathered to share personal stories, engage with research findings, and discuss solutions for improving well-being in academia. Despite the modest attendance, the conference delivered a powerful message: mental health in academia can no longer be treated as a “hot potato” – an uncomfortable topic tossed aside or left for someone else to handle – but must be confronted openly and compassionately.

Organizers acknowledged the lower-than-hoped turnout with honesty. “*We hoped to reach more people and help them open up about this topic,*” the organizing team noted. However, they emphasized a different kind of success: an outpouring of anonymous testimonials from academics detailing their “**real-life horror stories**” of stress, anxiety, and workplace mistreatment. These candid accounts – collected via an anonymous survey – underscored the urgency of the issue and set an emotional tone for the event. One harrowing testimony read, “*I am witnessing a situation where a colleague has been enduring mobbing by the administration for years... By remaining silent, we all support the violence... I feel uncomfortable... and I am ashamed.*” Another scholar described suffering daily psychological abuse by a PhD supervisor – being insulted, micromanaged, isolated from colleagues, and threatened with dismissal – leading to “**severe depression and anxiety**” that took years to overcome. Such stories of **academic pressure, bullying, overwork**, and desperation (one person confided, “*I feel there is no escape*”) brought home the human cost of academia’s high-stress culture. By sharing these testimonies, the conference gave voice to experiences

usually swept under the rug, validating participants' feelings and fueling a collective call for change.

Day 1 – Expert Insights and Community Discussion: The first day of the conference featured a series of 5 formal presentations by experts from Croatia and across Europe, each shedding light on different facets of mental well-being in academic life. Assistant Prof. **Stefan Mol** (University of Amsterdam) opened with preliminary findings from the **STAIRCASE study**, an international survey examining how academic working conditions impact mental health. His talk hinted at data showing academia's unique stressors and the prevalence of issues like burnout and anxiety among researchers. Following that, Dr. **Maja Tadić Vujčić** from the Ivo Pilar Institute in Zagreb presented "*Challenges and Resilience: Understanding the Well-Being of Young Researchers in Croatia*," sharing research on how early-career scholars cope with pressures and what can be done to foster resilience.

Another pressing topic addressed was the violation of personal boundaries in academic hierarchies. **Assoc. Prof. Marina Nekić** (University of Zadar) delivered an eye-opening talk on **sexual harassment and boundary violations** in mentor–doctoral student relationships – a problem that, as she noted, is too often swept under the carpet in academia. This was followed by practical career-oriented insights: psychologist **Emina Zoletić, mag. psych.**, gave a presentation on navigating PhD applications for international fellowships (highlighting a Fulbright scholarship case study), and **Kristijan Žibrat, M.A. psych.** (University of Zadar) spoke about "*Myths and Realities of Academic Self-Efficacy*," exploring how academics perceive their own capabilities under pressure. These sessions not only provided information and tools for personal development but also acknowledged the institutional challenges scholars face, from intense competition to unclear expectations.

Midday, attendees took a break to explore Zadar's historic old town for lunch, taking advantage of the coastal city's lovely scenery to recharge. (Many converged at a local vegan restaurant The Botanist, finding that a relaxed meal and sea breeze offered a welcome mental break after the weighty morning discussions.)



In the afternoon, attention turned to collective dialogue. A **panel discussion on “Mental Health in the Academic Community”** brought multiple perspectives to the table and actively involved the audience. Moderated by Dr. **Mia Čović** (from Association OUI, one of the event organizers), the panel featured **Luka Savić** (University of Zagreb, representing the Faculty of Textile Technology and the Penkala Association), Dr. **Maja Tadić Vujčić**, Prof. **Rozana Petani** (University of Zadar’s Student Counseling Center), and **Frederico Epalanga Albano Israel**, a PhD candidate from the University of Debrecen in Hungary who provided an international early-career perspective. Panelists tackled tough questions like how to combat **mobbing (workplace bullying)**, ways to reduce the stigma around seeking help, and strategies for creating healthier work–life balance in research careers. The discussion was frank and solution-oriented – panelists and attendees exchanged ideas on instituting better support systems, encouraging open communication, and holding institutions accountable for toxic environments. The interactive format allowed many in the audience to pose questions and share input, turning the session into a communal brainstorming about making academia a healthier place.



The day closed with a sense of solidarity and determination, capped off by an evening networking gathering at Zadar's famous Sea Organ and Greeting to the Sun waterfront installations. There, participants watched a stunning sunset and continued their conversations in a relaxed setting – reflecting on the day's lessons and forging new supportive connections within the academic community.



Day 2 – Workshops, Wellness Activities, and Final Reflections: If the first day built awareness around problems and research, the second day focused on hands-on coping strategies and inclusive practices. The morning began with a talk by **Ivana Sučić Šantek, B.A.**, a student counselor at University of Zadar, on *“Inclusion of Students with Disabilities – A Counseling Perspective.”* She highlighted the often-neglected challenges faced by students with disabilities in academia – noting that many university buildings (particularly in Croatia’s older institutions) lack adequate accessibility features like elevators or ramps. Her session called for universities to become more **inclusive and accessible** environments, not just structurally (for wheelchair users or the visually/hearing impaired) but also in mindset, ensuring students with disabilities receive support rather than feeling like an afterthought. This broadened the conference’s mental health focus to consider how physical infrastructure and inclusive policies contribute to the well-being of the academic community.

Next, Assoc. Prof. **Marina Nekić** returned to discuss **stress management for PhD candidates and young researchers**, in a talk aptly describing the PhD journey as a rollercoaster. She addressed common stressors – such as the pressure to publish, financial insecurity, and juggling teaching or work responsibilities – and offered evidence-based tips on how individuals and institutions can help alleviate these pressures. Her advice ranged from time management techniques and seeking mentorship to the need for universities to provide better mental health resources for graduate students.

The remainder of Day 2 shifted to interactive workshops aimed at empowerment and skill-building. In one session, Emina Zoletić led participants through the intricacies of applying for prestigious international grants (like Fulbright and Guggenheim), even simulating parts of

the application process to build confidence. In another, Kristijan Žibrat and Dr. Mia Čović hosted an informal **“experience exchange”** workshop, where young academics shared insights from attending summer schools and training programs abroad – a peer-to-peer learning opportunity that also helped attendees form networks and break the isolation many feel in academia. The day’s capstone was a pilot workshop on **“job crafting”** for doctoral students, conducted by Dr. Maja Tadić Vujčić. In the tranquil setting of a small campus garden, participants engaged in exercises to proactively redesign aspects of their PhD work and environment to better suit their strengths and well-being. **This activity encapsulated the conference’s proactive approach: encouraging academics not only to talk about mental health challenges but also to experiment with concrete changes that could improve their daily academic lives.**



To conclude the event, organizers and attendees gathered for closing remarks and reflections. There was a palpable sense of accomplishment and hope as the group discussed what they had learned and how they planned to apply it moving forward. The conference's key takeaway was clear: **openly addressing mental health in academia is both essential and achievable**. The conversations over the two days – from the anonymous stories of suffering to the expert talks and collaborative workshops – all pointed to the need for cultural change within universities. *“PhD life can be both a horror story and a beautiful story,”* one speaker noted, *“and we want more of the beautiful and less of the horror.”* By the end, many participants expressed feeling less alone and more empowered to advocate for themselves and others. Organizers encouraged everyone to continue the dialogue beyond the conference and to spark initiatives at their own institutions.



Fittingly, the event ended with an immersive wellness activity: a calming **“Gong Bath”** facilitated by a local group, Sound Therapy Zadar. In a garden behind the University of Zadar with a fantastic view from the walls of Zadar, attendees lay down on yoga mats as resonant gong sounds washed over them – a meditative experience to release tension and soothe the mind after two days of intense discussions. This gentle finale reinforced an important message: recovery and self-care are not luxuries but necessities in high-pressure academic careers.



As participants departed, the conference team offered heartfelt thanks. The University of Zadar was lauded for hosting the gathering in its beautiful seafront campus hall, and appreciation was given to the **Croatian Psychological Chamber**, the event's sponsor for a second year running, for recognizing the importance of this mission. The organizers – volunteers from academic circles – also thanked each other for persevering in bringing “The Hot Potato” to life again. Organizing a conference on mental health, they admitted, can itself be challenging and emotionally taxing, yet they remain committed to growing this movement. They expressed hope that next year's event will draw more attendees and resources, enabling even greater impact. With more support (for example, funds to assist travel and accommodation for participants), they aim to make it easier for people to attend and share their stories.

In the end, the **Mental Health in Academia: The Hot Potato #2** conference succeeded in breaking a stubborn silence. It created a compassionate space where problems were acknowledged and ideas for solutions took root. For both the general public and the academic community, the message was resounding: it's time to hold onto the “hot potato” of mental health in academia and address it – not drop it out of fear. By facing this uncomfortable issue together, academia can become a place where the well-being of students and staff is as valued as their scholarly achievements.



Mental Health in Academia: The Hot Potato #2

Penkala, Eurodoc's Croatian member organisation recently organized the second version of the conference "**Mental Health in Academia: The Hot Potato**" in an effort to address the often overlooked issue of mental health in academic settings.

Over two days, a dedicated group of around 40 participants (about 20 in person and 20 online) gathered to share personal stories, engage with research findings, and discuss solutions for improving well-being in universities. The conference was held in *Zadar, Croatia* and besides the Penkala Association the conference was organised by OUI Association (an organization that xx) and the Student Counseling Center - UNIZD at Zadar University.

The conference consisted of a mix of lectures, panel discussions, and workshops, and have a unique approach on how to address how to improve the mental health of academics by both raising their awareness of the topic as well as empower them to act as positive drives of change in their own environments and universities.

From the perspective of Eurodoc what makes Penkala (and their collaborators) approach inspirational is especially the latter. The way they have structured the conference and especially the workshops ensure that the participants get some hands on tools to take home with them that they can then implement in their own environments.

With the workshop on "**experience exchange**". The participating ECRs shared their insight to foster a peer-to-peer learning opportunity. This structure allows for the formation of stronger networks between the participants and can help them break the isolation that many doctoral candidates feel while pursuing doctoral education. It is a simple workshop to implement, but an important one because by being so simple it can be scaled and readapted in a multitude of settings, and it counteracts one of the most common and damaging feelings among doctoral candidates that of being alone.

In the conference's closing workshop which was on "**job crafting**". The participants, who were mostly doctoral candidates, engaged in exercise to proactively redesign aspects of their PhD to better suit their strengths and well-being. The workshop was set in the the tranquil setting of a small campus garden. Of all the activities this one, perhaps highlighted the best the conference's proactive approach: encouraging academics not only to talk about mental health challenges but also to experiment with concrete changes that could improve their daily academic lives.

In Eurodoc we are inspired by this conference and we encourage everyone to read the full conference report which you can find [here](#).