

# CONNECTING THE DOTS

TURNING DATA INTO EFFECTIVE WELLBEING  
POLICY FOR EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

EUA-CDE, June 2024

# A STORY OF THREE DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS



ECR mental health is in decline



Mental health issues drive lower individual performance

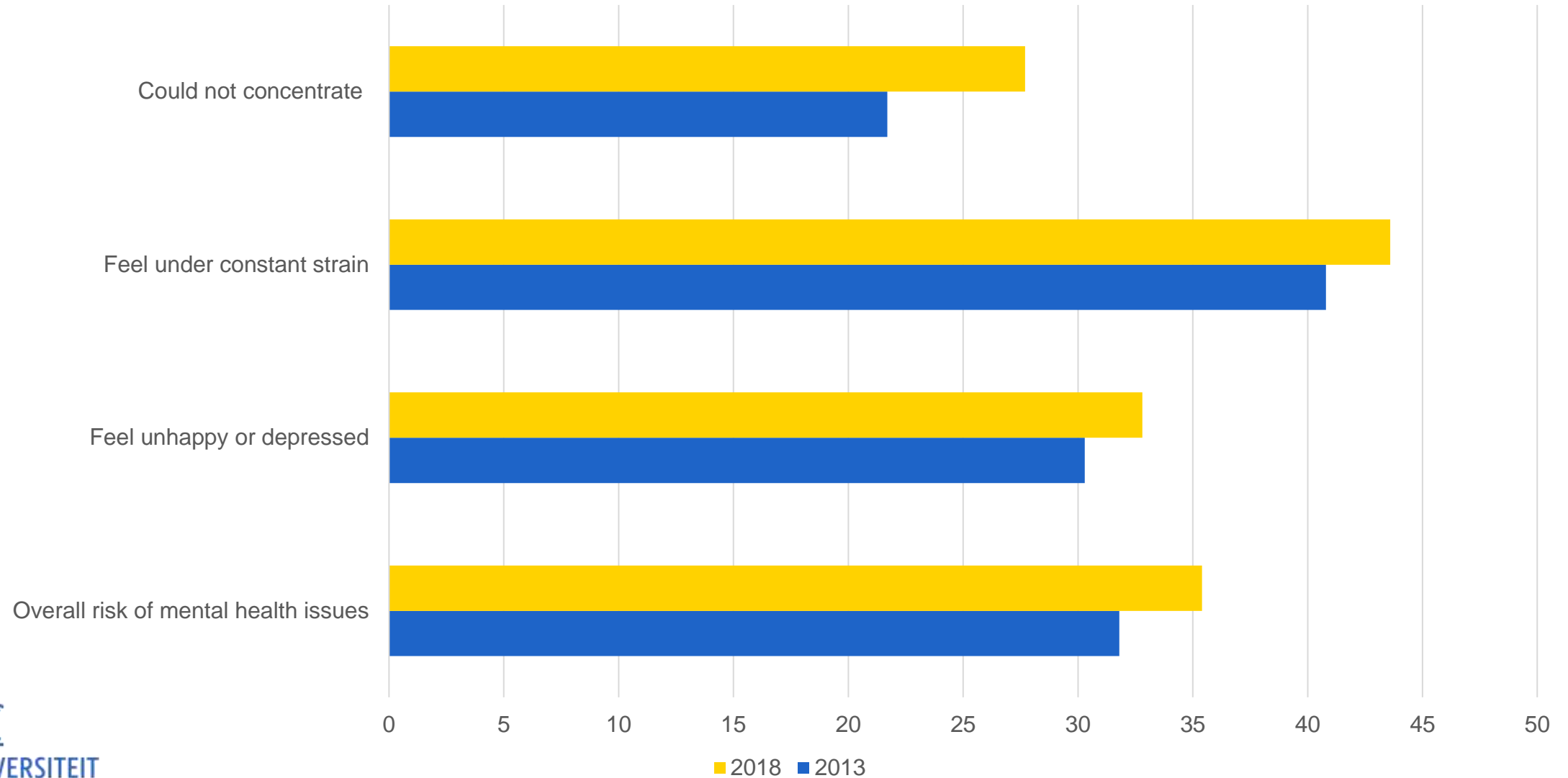


Maintaining negative working cultures is costly

**(In)effective wellbeing policy**

# ECR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN FLANDERS

Survey of young researchers 2013 and 2018 - ECOOM



# MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING AT UGENT

## Wellbeing survey UGent 2023

### Entire organisation

- 1 in 4 experience or witness transgressive behaviour
- 1 in 8 at risk of burnout

### ECR vulnerability

- 50% less likely to report wellbeing issues
- Fearful of reprisals

# ECR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING AT UGENT



# THE INSTITUTIONAL COST: WHY SHOULD WE CARE

## Loss of talent

300 PhD candidates / year do not re-enroll

Question: how many at least in part due to mental health-related issues  
Policy response: exit surveys and interviews



## Loss of research output

1 in 3 remaining ECRs feel mental health affects their performance at work

Question: what is the opportunity cost of lost publications, research quality, etc.  
Policy response: improve working culture

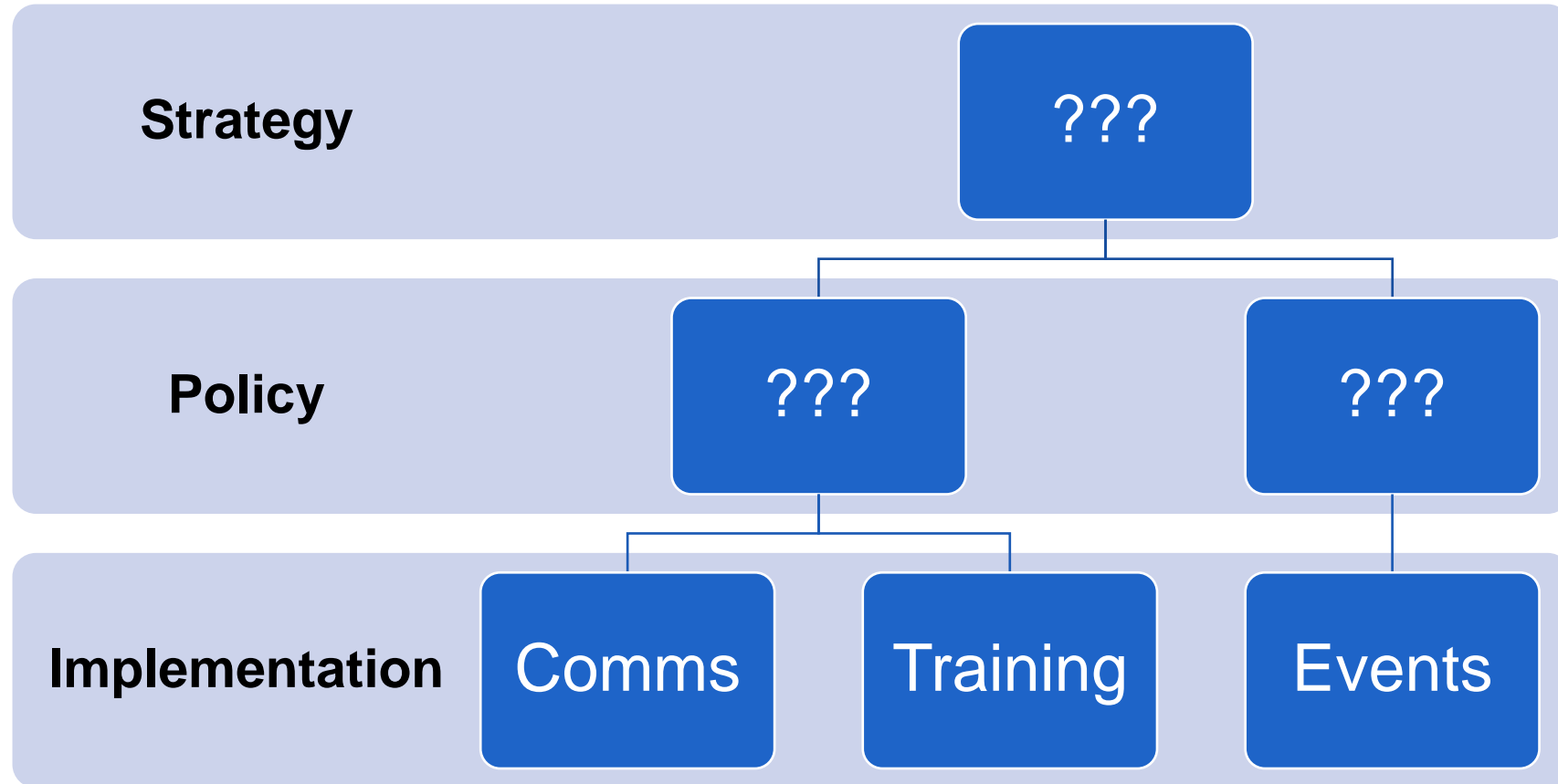


## Loss of awarded PhDs

Number of awarded PhDs drives UGent's share of government university funding

Question: how much does each lost awarded PhD cost UGent?  
Answer: €7000/year directly(!).

# WHAT IS AN INEFFECTIVE POLICY RESPONSE?



# WHY WE FAIL: INEFFECTIVE POLICY CYCLE

## Ignoring the data

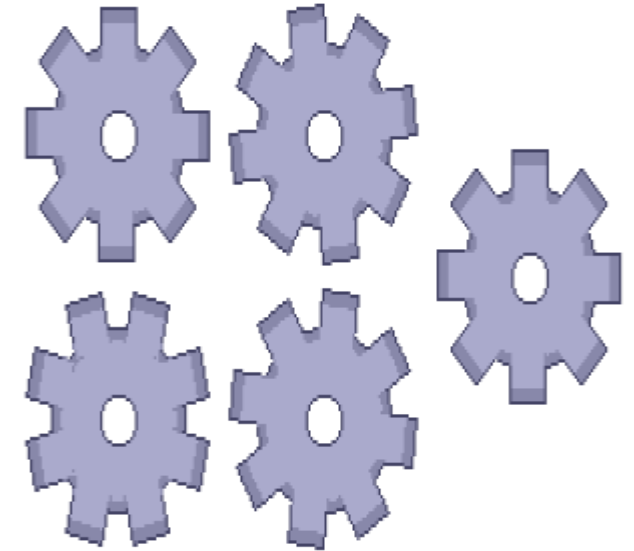
- Blind to **structural, widespread** and **cultural** nature of issue
- Fail to understand requirement for **systemic response** to drive organisational change

## Isolated actions

- Focus on one-off comms emphasising **existing** processes
- Incoherent series of **crisis-driven** ad hoc policy 'fixes'

## Lack of monitoring

- Policies have **no impact** on ECR working environment
- Policies exist alongside **local working culture** instead of shaping it





# WHY WE FAIL: EXAMPLES OF POLICY FAILURES

What we did	Why it failed
Institution-wide charter PhD candidate-supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not built into working culture</li><li>• Not binding on anyone involved</li><li>• Not applied to real-life situations</li></ul>
More regulations on wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not universally applicable</li><li>• Insufficiently embedded and thus not 'claimable'</li><li>• Not mainstreamed, but developed in crisis</li></ul>
Comms drive on reporting channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Too victim-driven</li><li>• Too legalistic</li><li>• Not sufficiently trusted</li></ul>

# WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

## Data-driven

- Data tells us issue is **structural, widespread** and **cultural**
- Data pinpoints **what matters** to stakeholders

## Connected actions

- **Tie actions** to processes stakeholders trust / use
- Wellbeing '**mainstreamed**' across policy work

## Consistent monitoring

- Policies **intervene** in ECR working environment
- Policies **shape local working cultures**



# TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE POLICY RESPONSE

## Support for ECRs

Tangible descriptions for ECR actors

Recognise contributions by ECRs

Broader supervisory support

## Working culture

Mentor for non-supervisory support

Universal rights and obligations

Tone from the top: shape the culture

## Onboarding

Baseline information across ECRs

Additional support for internationals

Accessible student centre

## Diversity and inclusion

Raise awareness of policy

Active bystander training

Stronger institutional voice

## Respectful behaviour

Revised disciplinary process with externals

Independent reporting channel

Audit of reporting channels from user perspective

## Feedback culture

Normalise feedback on ways of working

Integrate in supervisor training

Integrate in evaluation of supervisors

# SOME INTERESTING REFERENCES

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