

Results PhD Survey 2025

Table of contents

- **Research Methodology**
- **Management summary**
- **Results:**
 1. **Profile respondents**
 2. **General satisfaction**
 3. **Onboarding and social contacts**
 4. **Supervision**
 5. **Education and training**
 6. **Teaching and other duties**
 7. **Progress and workload**
 8. **Wellbeing**
 9. **Social safety**
 10. **Finish & later career**

Research methodology

Background

- Since 2016, VU conducts surveys to evaluate how PhD candidates experience their PhD trajectory.
- This research is one of the tools VU has to find out about the experiences of PhD candidates. The results, as presented in this report, will assist in further developing PhD policy at VU to improve PhD trajectories at VU.
- Anticipating a general (national) PhD survey in 2027, a 2025 VU PhD survey was conducted in a somewhat streamlined way.

Research question

- The goal of the survey is to evaluate how PhD candidates experience their PhD trajectory, and therefore gain insight in how to further improve working conditions, facilities and regulations. The VU PhD survey addresses several topics, including (but not limited to) questions about wellbeing, supervision, education opportunities, progress of the PhD trajectory, work environment, and whether PhD candidates are involved in teaching and supervising. This research focuses on the following main question: *How do VU PhD candidates view their current PhD trajectory?*

Method and target group

- The quantitative study was conducted online.
- The survey was open in November and December 2025.
- A total of 543 PhD candidates completed the questionnaire. This is 17,1 % the PhD candidates that have been contacted (3121) for this survey.
- The survey's target group consisted of PhD candidates at the VU Amsterdam.
- The questionnaire was sent to all PhD candidates registered in the PhD tracking system at the VU.

Reading guide

- In this report we refer to the participants in the survey as PhD candidates.
- In this analysis, we considered all the participants as a single group. We examined the differences between subgroups from different types of employment and PhD phases.

Management summary

1. Profile of respondents

- Out of 543 participants, 61% identify as female, 36% as male, with small groups identifying as non-binary or “prefer not to say”.
- Respondents are predominantly younger than 30 years (46%), with 35% aged 30–40 and 18% older than 41.
- In terms of nationality, 61% hold Dutch citizenship, while others come from the EEA (18%) or non-EEA regions (19%).
- More than half are in the intermediate phase (54%) of their trajectory, followed by 39% in the graduation phase. Only 7% are in their first year.
- With regard to type of employment, nearly half of respondents are VU-employed PhD candidates (48%), whereas 13% are PhD candidates on a grant, 19% are externally funded, and 20% do not know their employment type.
- The distribution of respondents across faculties is broad and well-represented for the entire PhD population.
- Employed PhD candidates (type 1 UNL category) are somewhat overrepresented amongst respondents; scholarship PhD candidates (type 2 UNL category) and externally funded PhD candidates (type 3 UNL category) are somewhat underrepresented.

2. General satisfaction

- Overall, satisfaction with the PhD trajectory is sufficient (7-8, 57% (2023: 53% ↑)). Most candidates selected scores between 7 and 9, with 8 as the most common rating (33%). Only a small proportion express low satisfaction, marking it with a 4 or lower (12%).

3. Onboarding and social contacts

- Onboarding is primarily facilitated by the promotor or co-promotor (79%), often accompanied by daily supervisors (44%) and other services.
- Satisfaction with onboarding is generally positive (59%) (2023: 39 % ↑)
- PhD candidates feel most integrated within their research group (67% agree), but integration decreases at the level of graduate school (28%), faculty (37%) and university (22%).

4. Supervision

- Supervision is evaluated positively across the board. Satisfaction ratings cluster around 7-9. 75% of respondents mark their satisfaction with supervision with a 7 or higher (2023: 67% ↑)
- Most candidates receive 1-4 hours of supervision per month (53%) (2023: 54% →), followed by 5-8 hours (36%).
- Awareness of available support is high: 80% know how to reach a confidential advisor (2023: 67%↑).

5. Education and Training

- A Training & Supervision Plan (TSP) is in place for 97% of respondents. However, only around 30% feel the TSP contributes to smooth PhD progress (2023: 25% ↑). Roughly one-third is neutral and one-third disagrees.
- Views on supervision related to training and development vary. 42% agree they have enough time for educational activities (2023: 46% →), while 23% disagrees. 57% feel encouraged by their supervisory team to participate in training and courses (2023: 60% →); the remainder is neutral or negative.

6. Teaching and other duties

- 45% of PhD candidates are engaged in teaching and supervising (2023: 43% →).

7. Progress and workload

- Progress varies greatly among candidates. About 45% report being on schedule, while 47% indicate they are falling behind (2023: 46% →).
- Main reasons for delay:
 - Project-related issues (36%)
 - Personal circumstances (24%)
 - Supervision-related issues (16%)
- Workload is a noticeable concern. Half of respondents report a high workload, and 12% even describe it as too high (2023: 11% →). Only 7,6% indicate a lower-than-expected workload.
- Key causes of high workload include
 - Amount and complexity of work (46%)
 - Publication pressure and deadlines (34%)
 - Teaching or supervision duties (26%)
- Although 36% discussed workload issues with someone at the university or UMC, nearly one-third did not.

8. Wellbeing

- Overall, wellbeing is moderately positive. 43% rate their wellbeing as good, 14% as very good, while 9% indicate poor wellbeing (2023: 58% (very) good →)
- The impact of the PhD trajectory on well-being is mixed:
 - 41% report a fairly or strongly positive influence (2023: 39% →)
 - 30% experience a negative influence (2023: 36 % →)
- More than half (57%) have not discussed their wellbeing with anyone at the university or UMC.

9. Social safety

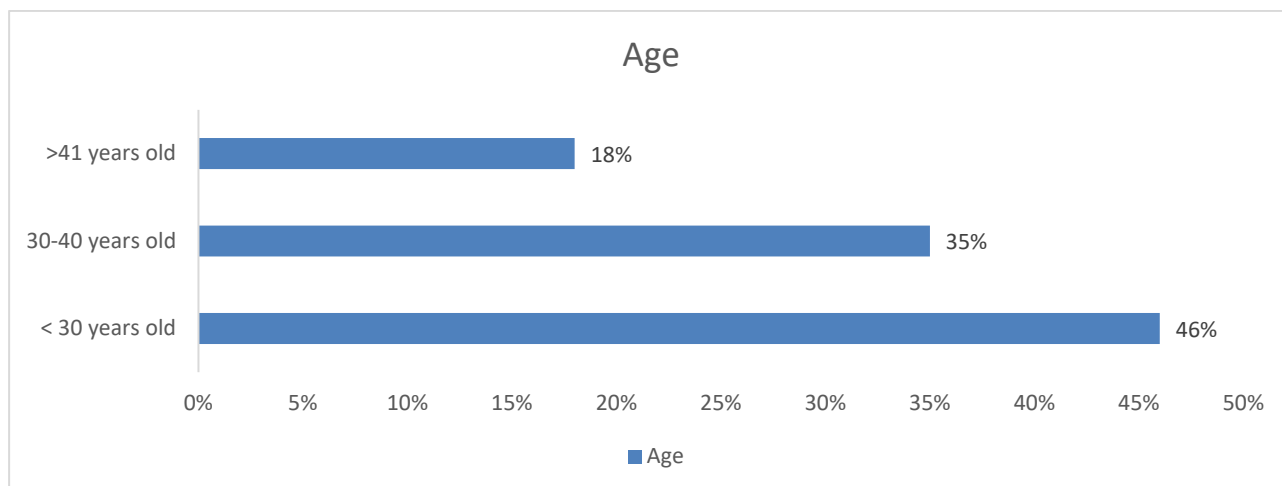
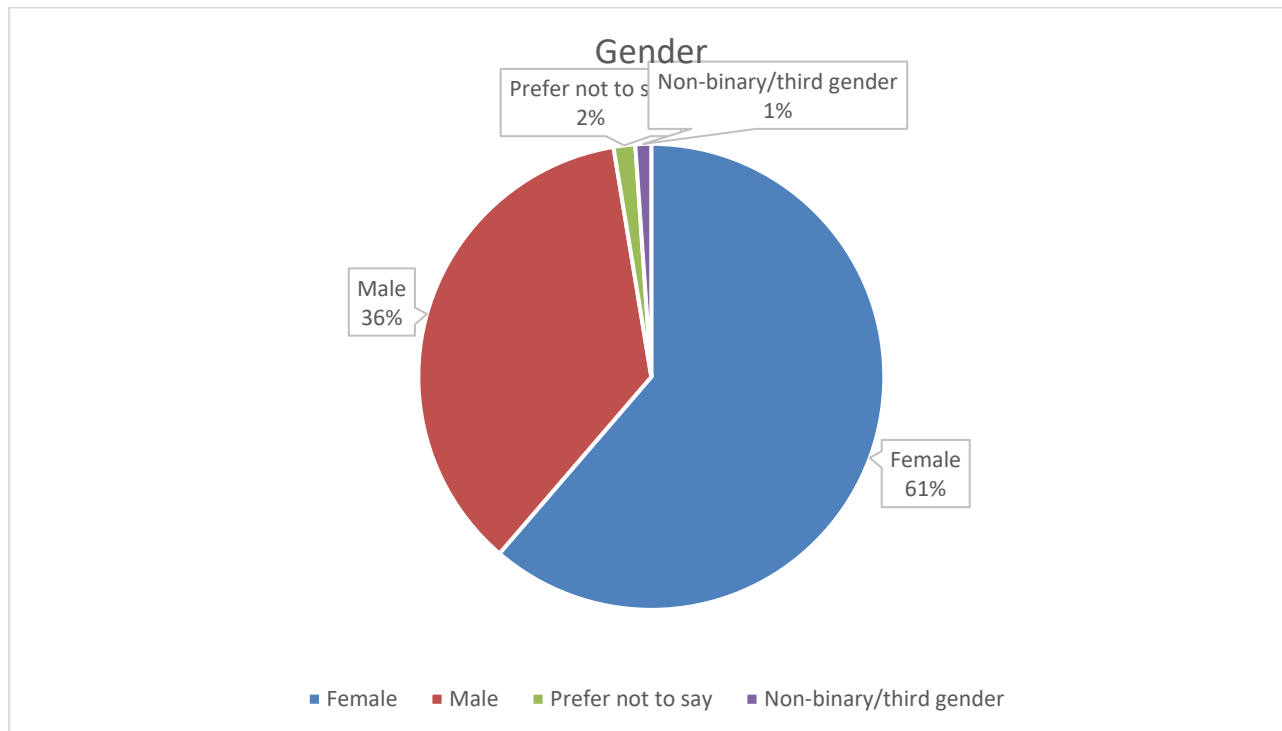
- A quarter of respondents (25%) experienced some form of undesirable behaviour during the past year, ranging from incidental to regular occurrences (2023: 26% →).

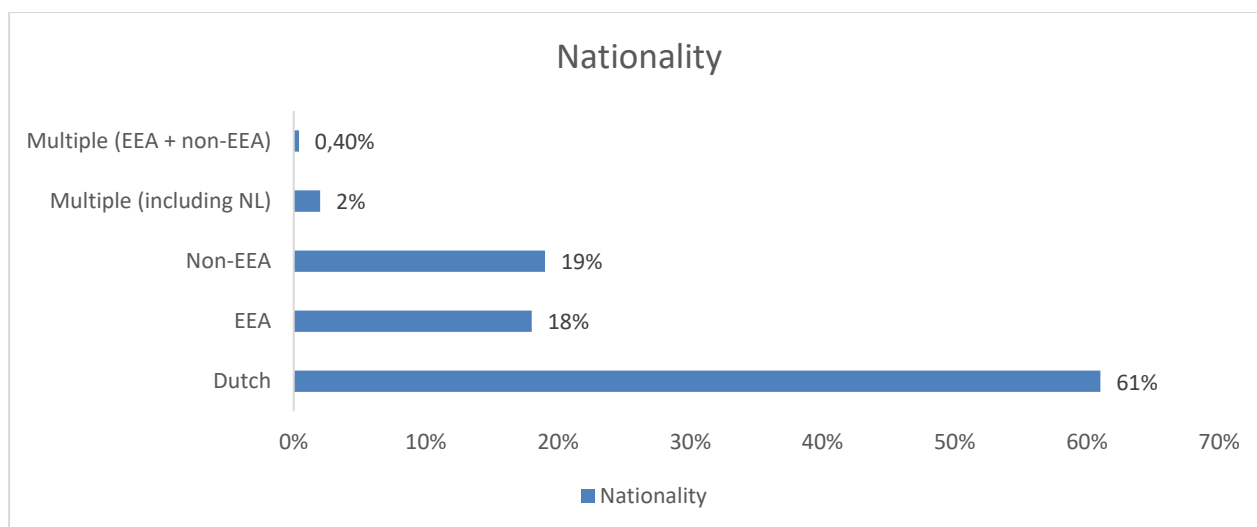
- Reported behaviour include abuse of power, gossip, discrimination or racism and exclusion.
- Those involved in these behaviours are most often supervisors, senior colleagues or fellow PhD candidates.
 - Perceived institutional protection is low: half of those who have experienced undesirable behaviours feel protected, half of those do not.

10.Finish and later career

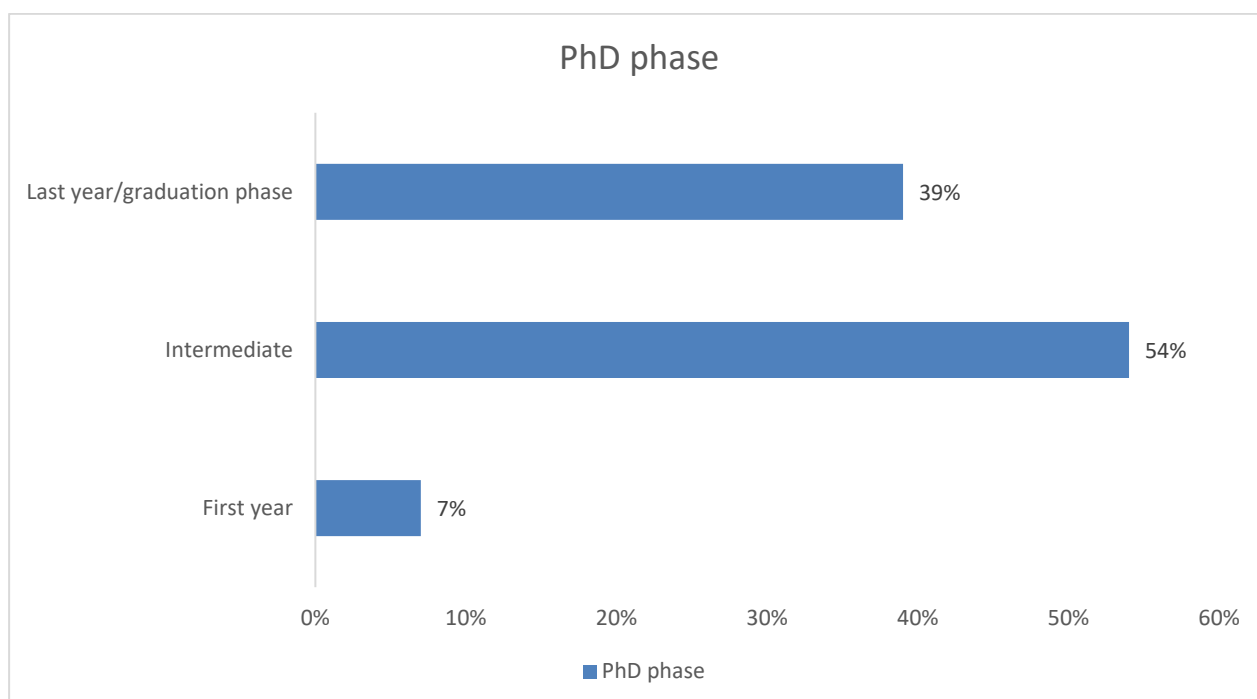
- For 59% of the PhD candidates, the scientific requirements are clear (2023: 46% ↑).
- PhD candidates demonstrate broad career interests:
 - Within a university (58%)
 - As a researcher outside academia (53)
 - In government (31%)
 - In NGOs and other non-profit organisations (30%)
 - In health care (30%)
 - In industry (25%)
 - As an entrepreneur (12%)

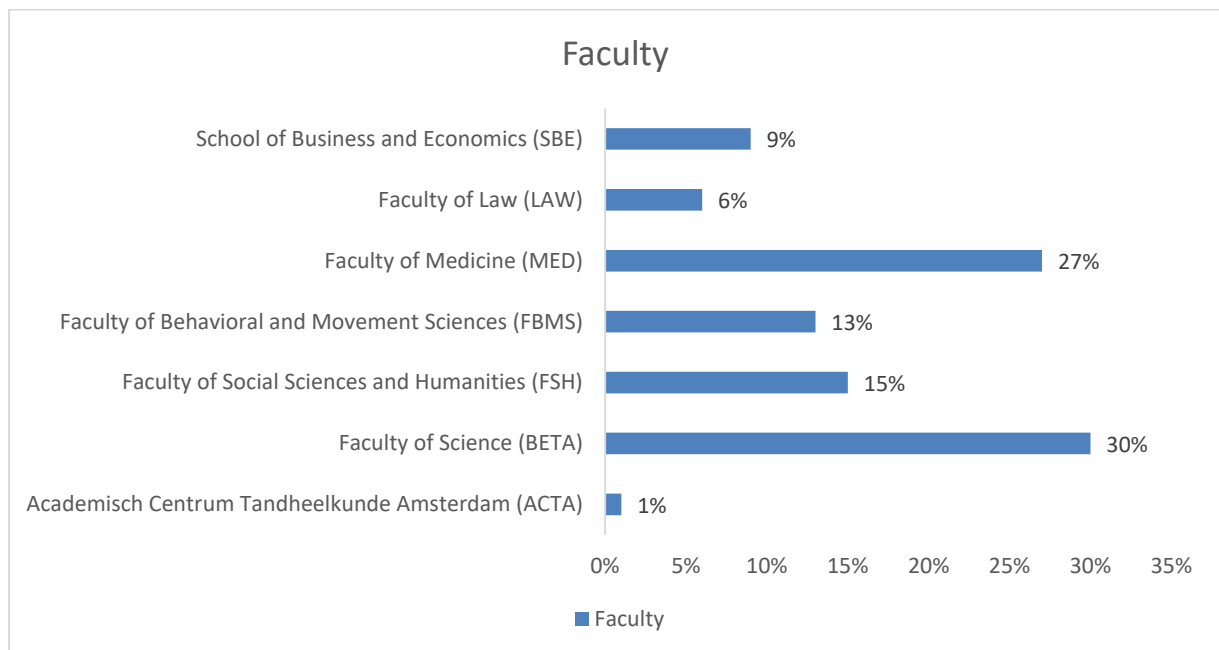
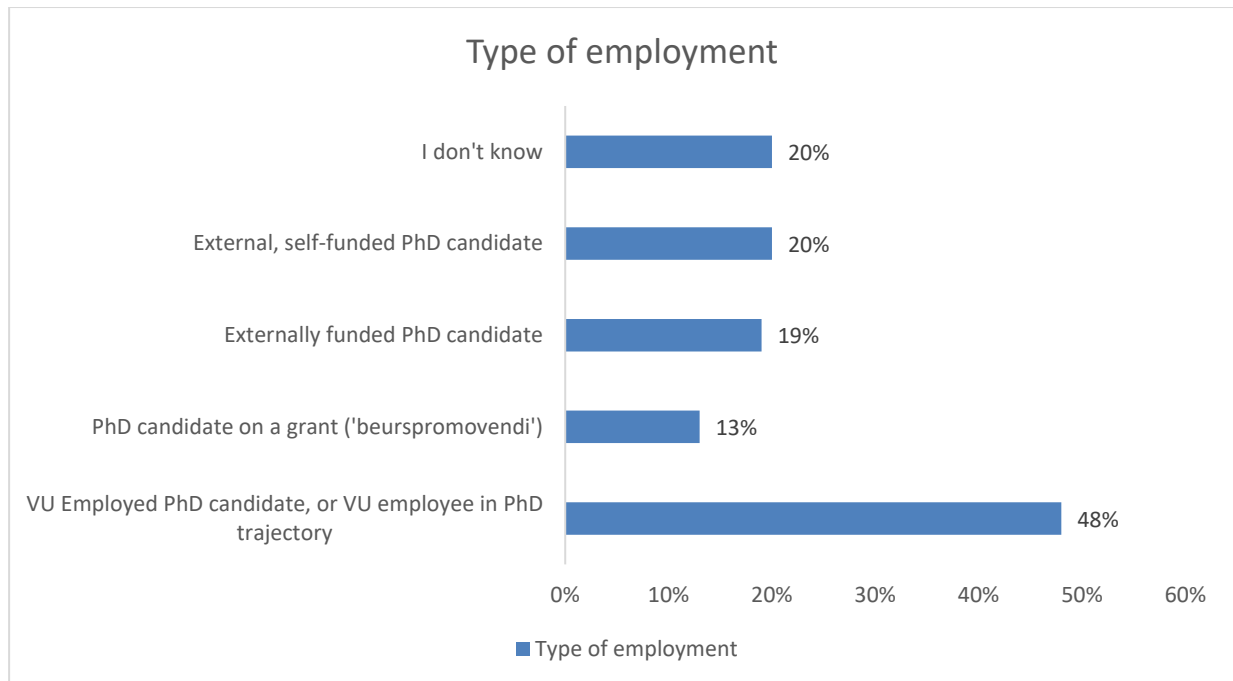
1. Profile respondents (n=543)

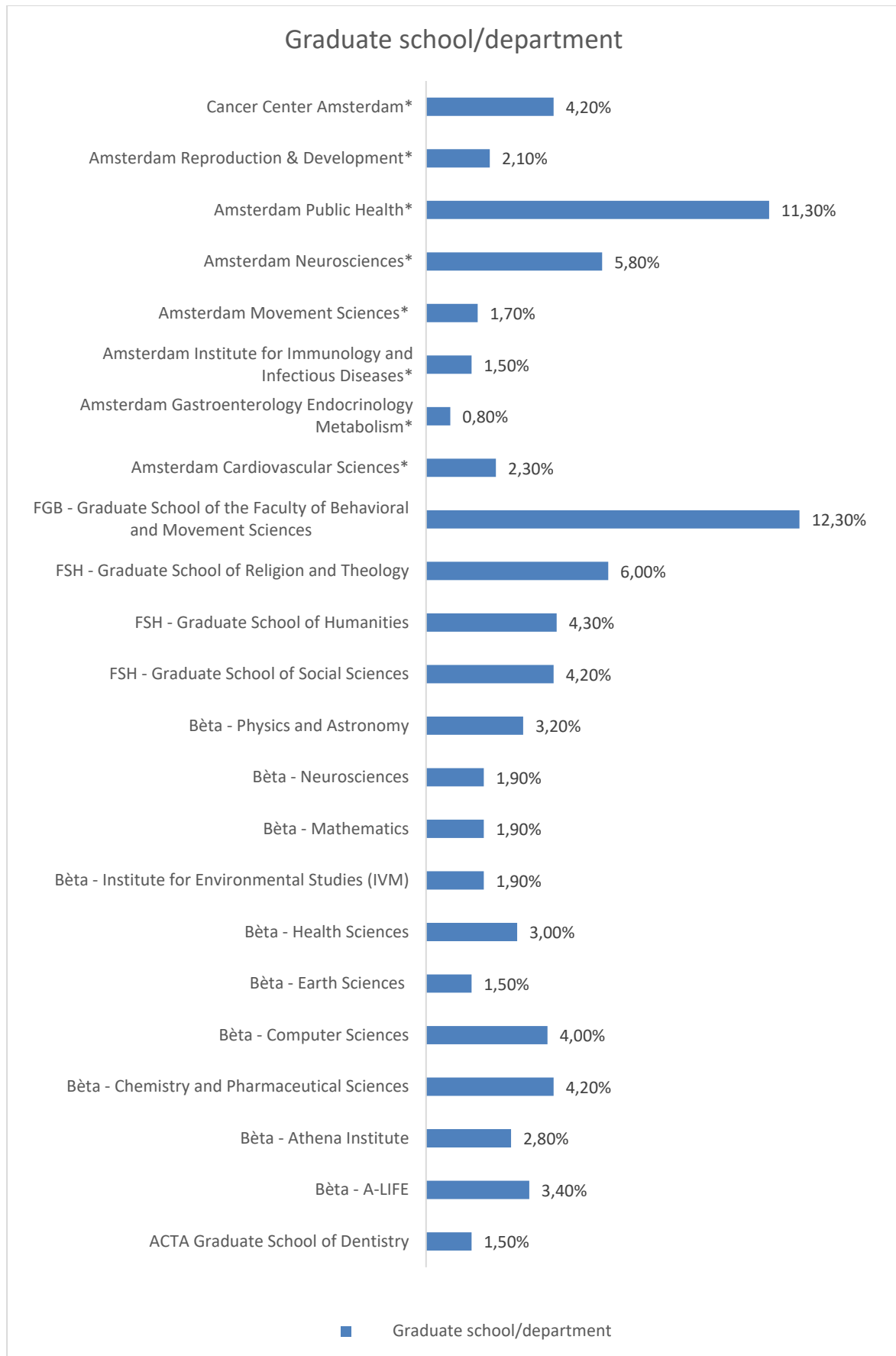




Background information

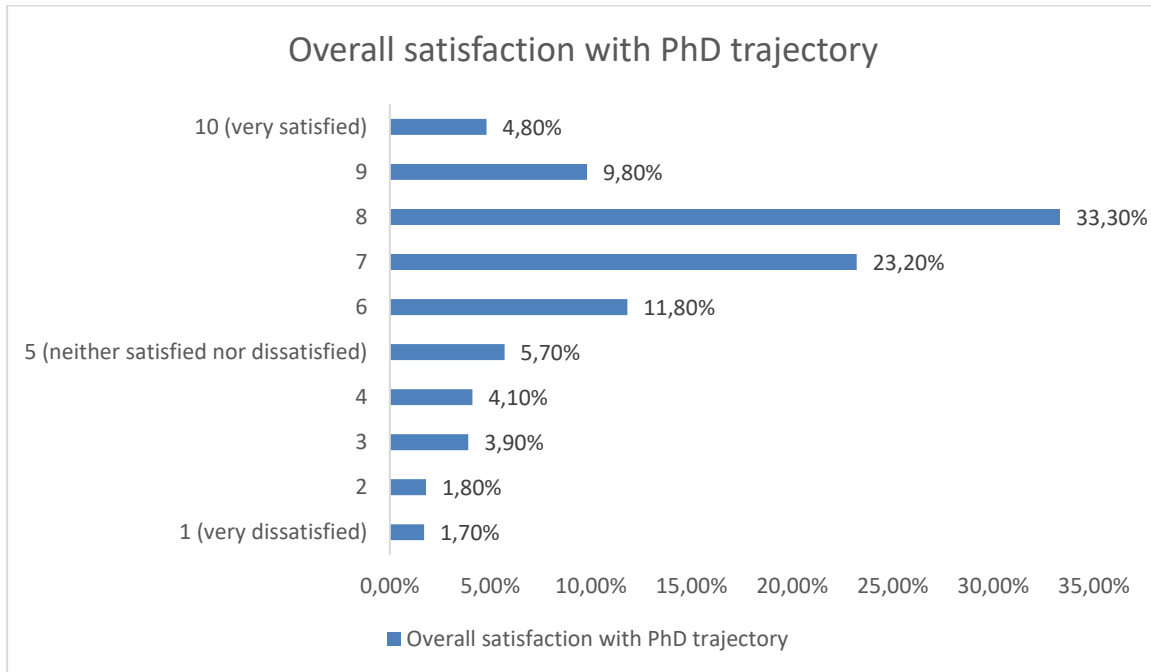






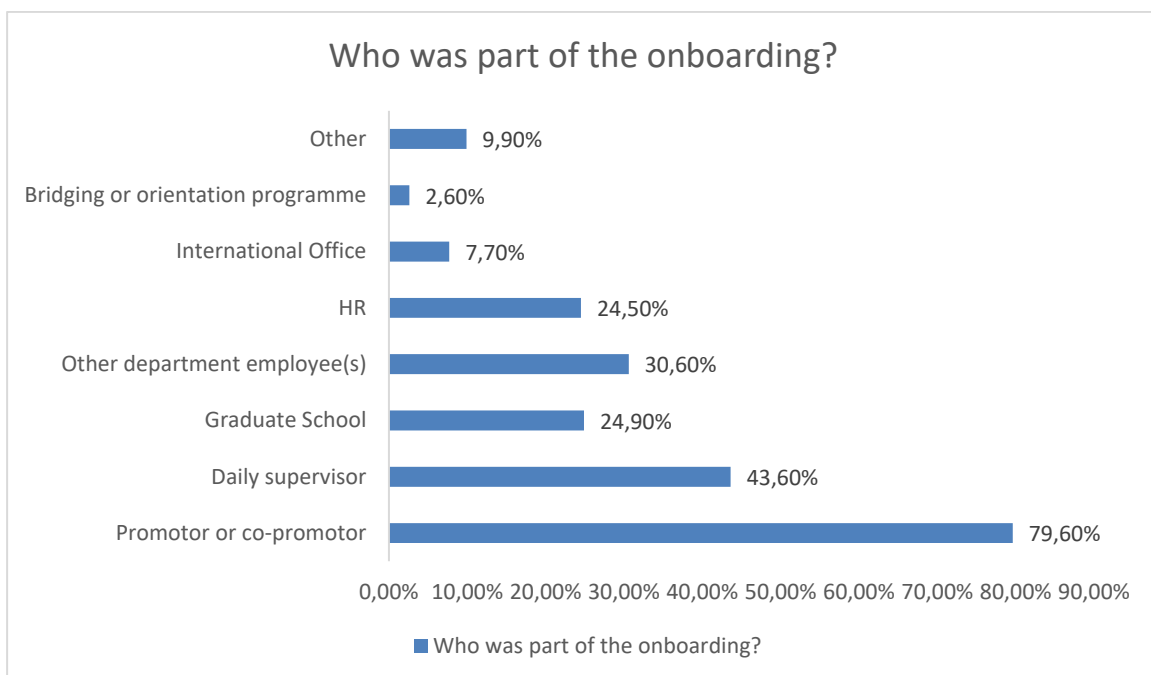
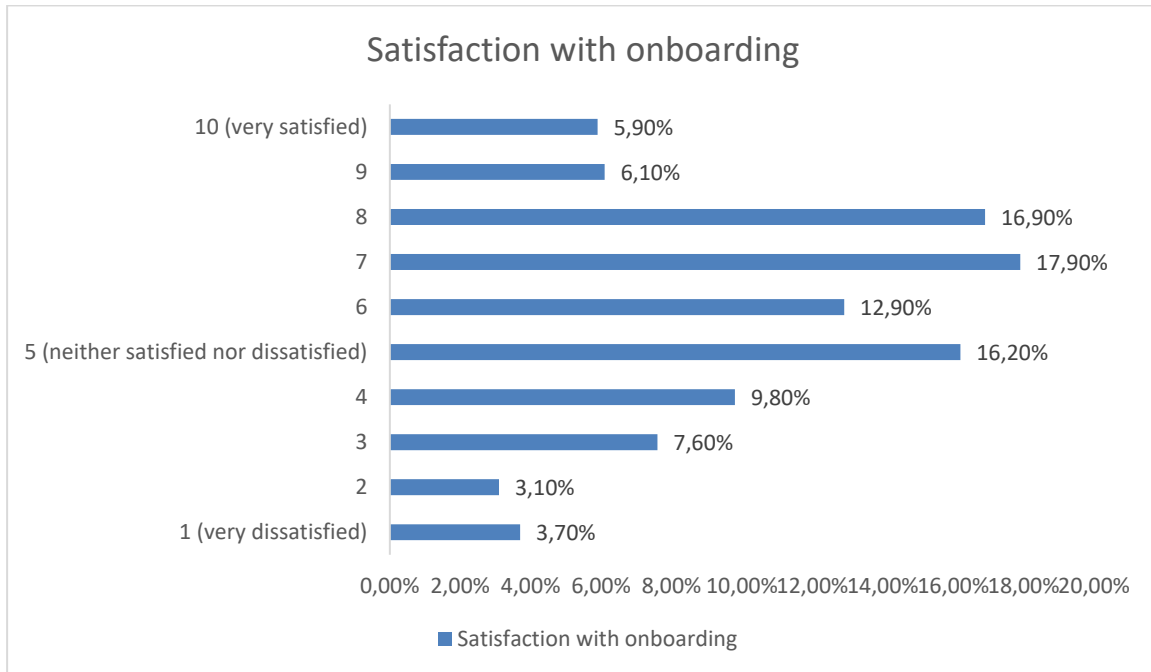
* Graduate School/department at VU Faculty of Medicine

2. General satisfaction

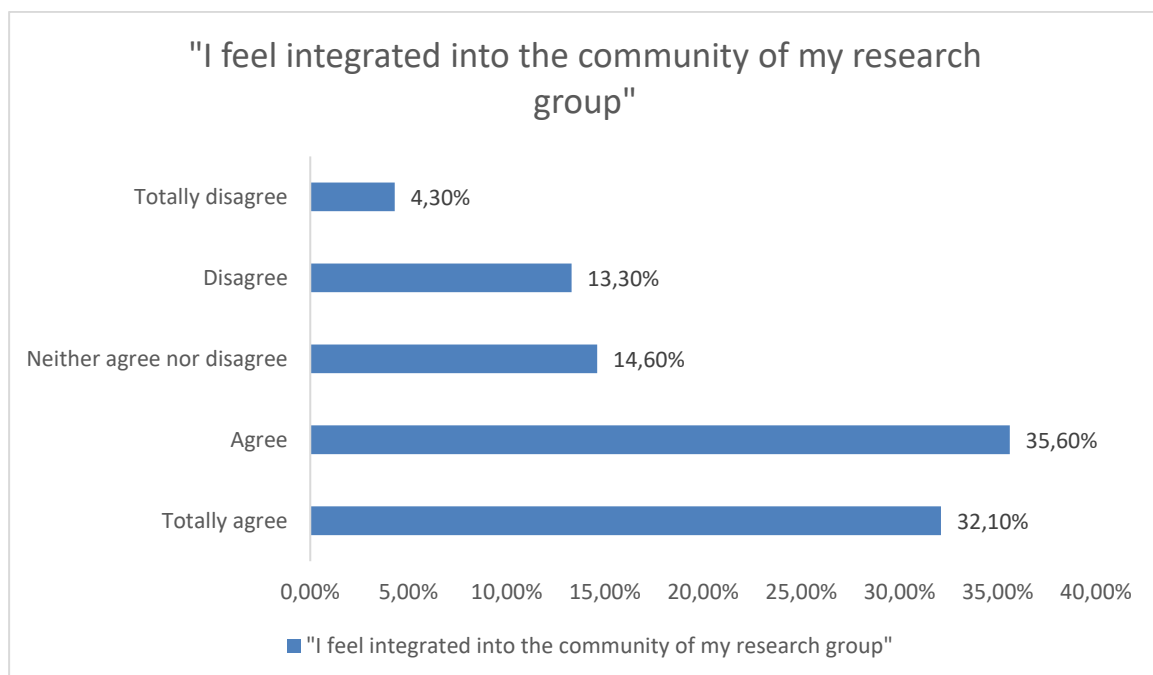
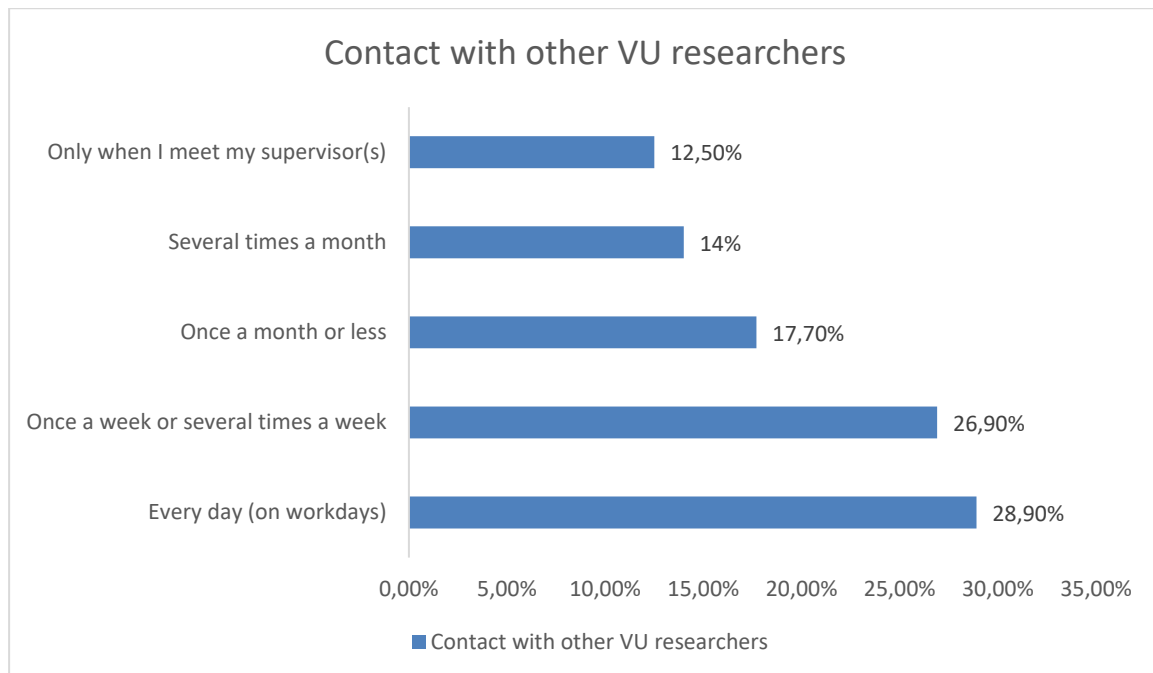


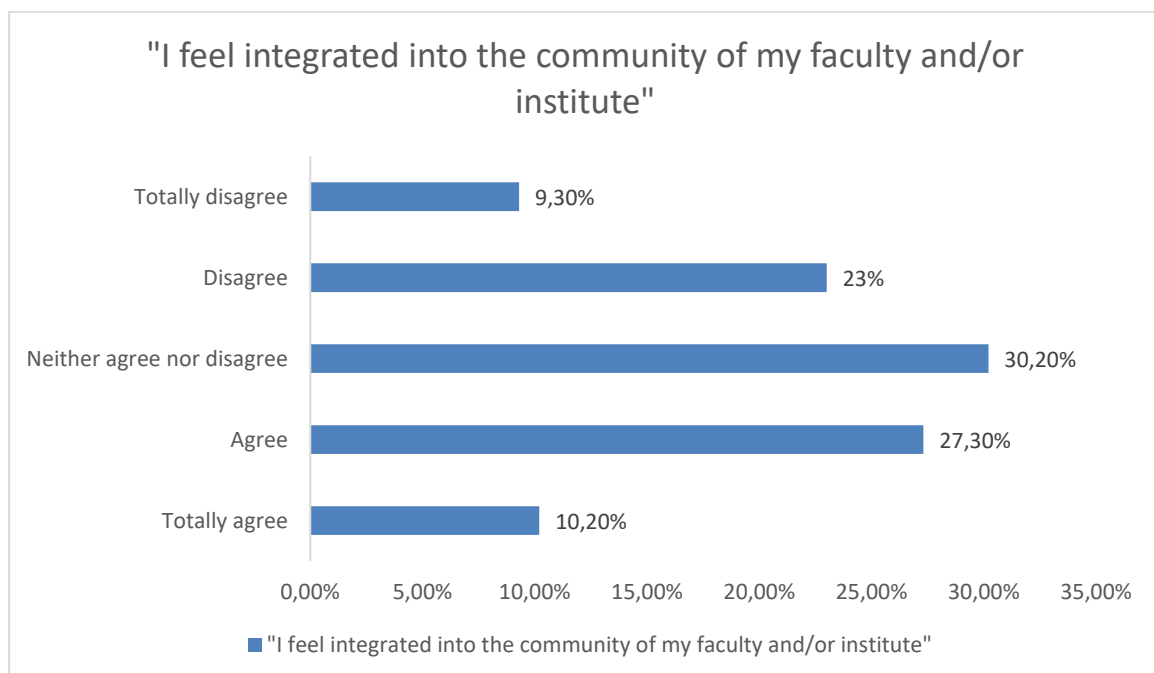
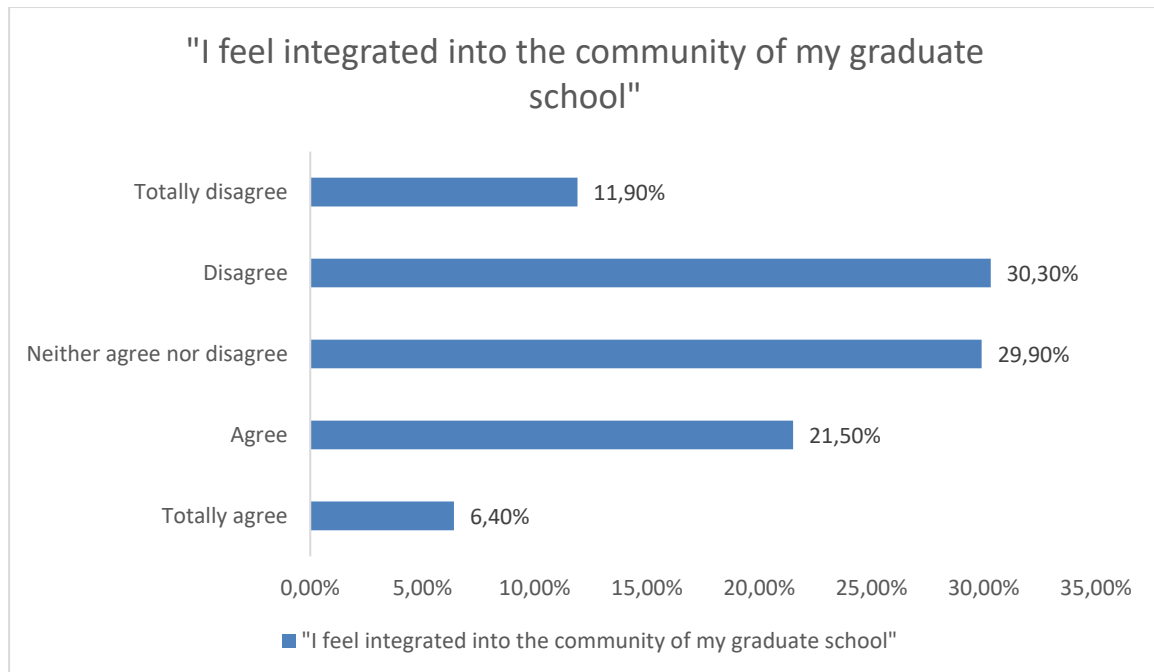
- Satisfaction differs modestly between the four PhD registration types. VU-employed candidates report the lowest mean satisfaction score (6.86). Self-funded candidates score slightly higher (6.96). Externally funded candidates show higher satisfaction (7.13), and grant-funded candidates 'beurspromovendi' report the highest satisfaction (7.22) and are also the only group with a median score of 8, while the other groups have a median score of 7.
- First-year candidates report the highest satisfaction with a mean of 7.87, and have a median score of 8. The intermediate phase shows a moderate satisfaction level (7.15), with a median score of 8. Candidates in the last year of their PhD rate their satisfaction the lowest, with a mean of 6.56.

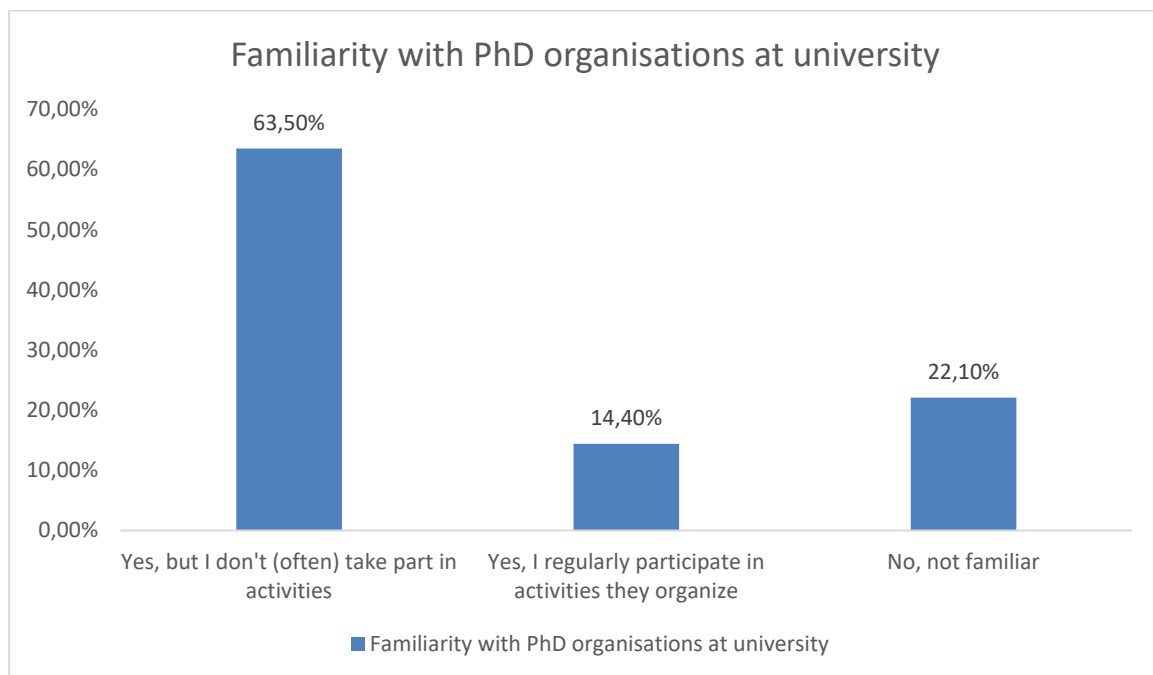
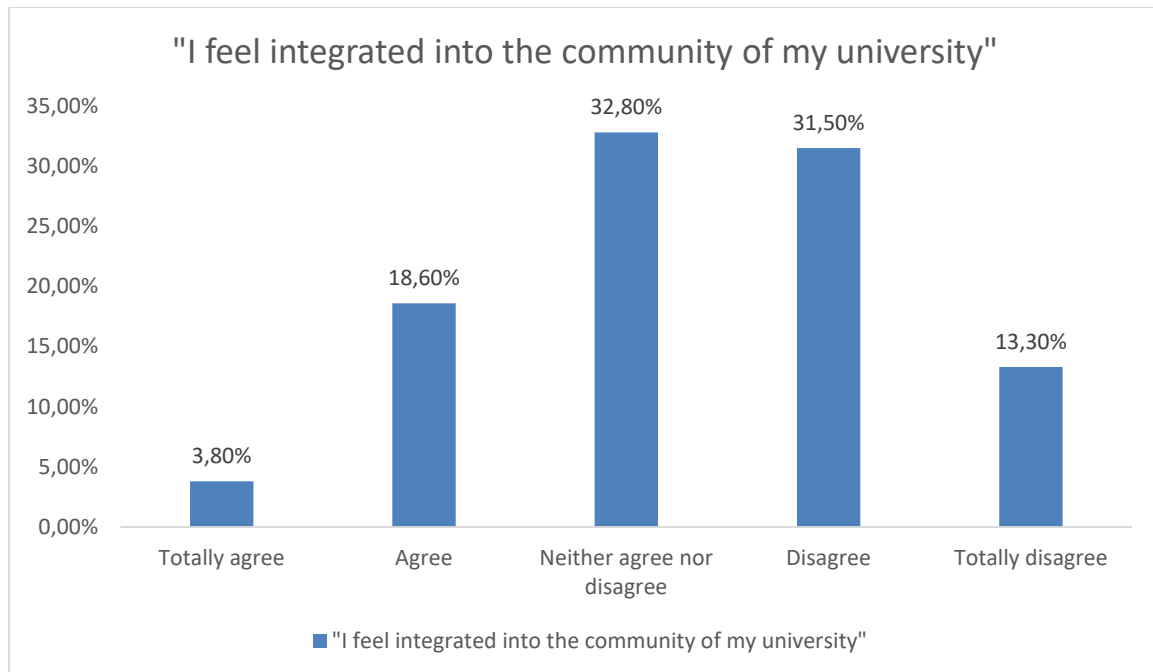
3. Onboarding and social contacts



- VU-employed candidates rate their onboarding lowest, with a mean score of 5.77. Self-funded rate highest, with a mean score of 6.35. Externally funded (6.32) and beurspromovendi (6.16) sit in between.



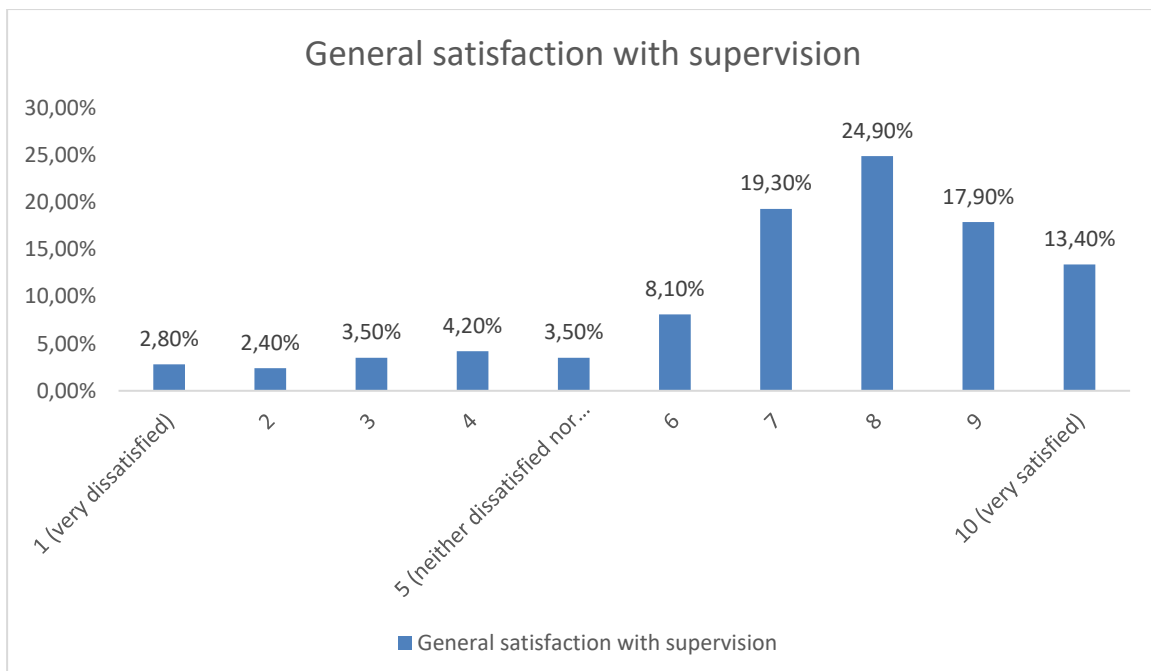
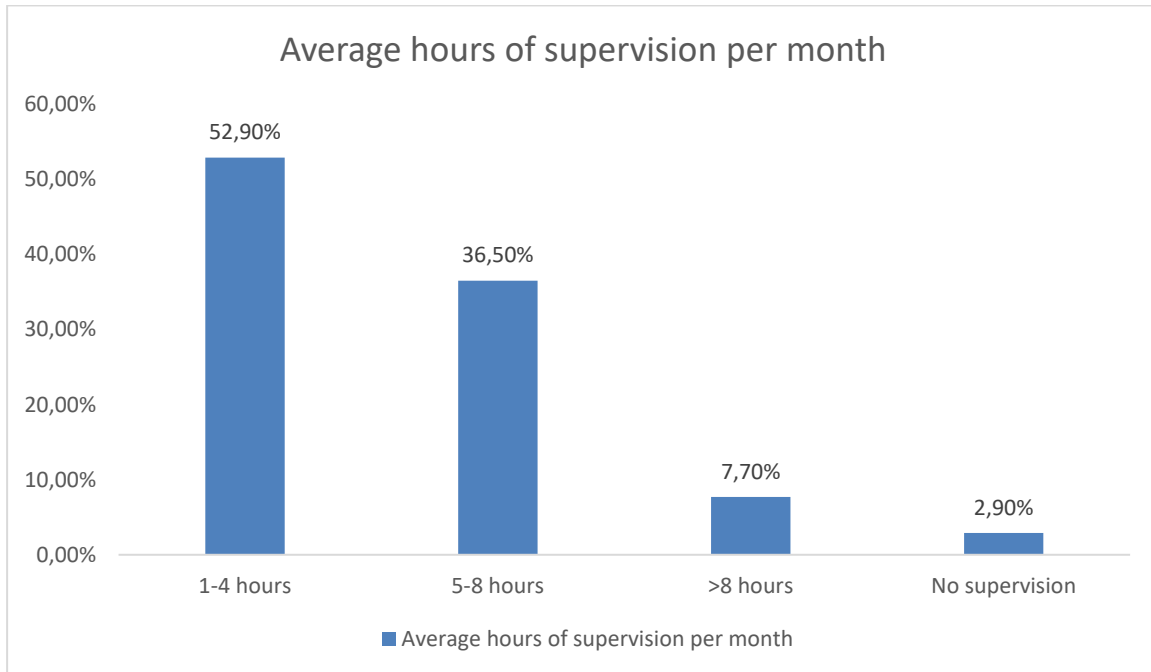


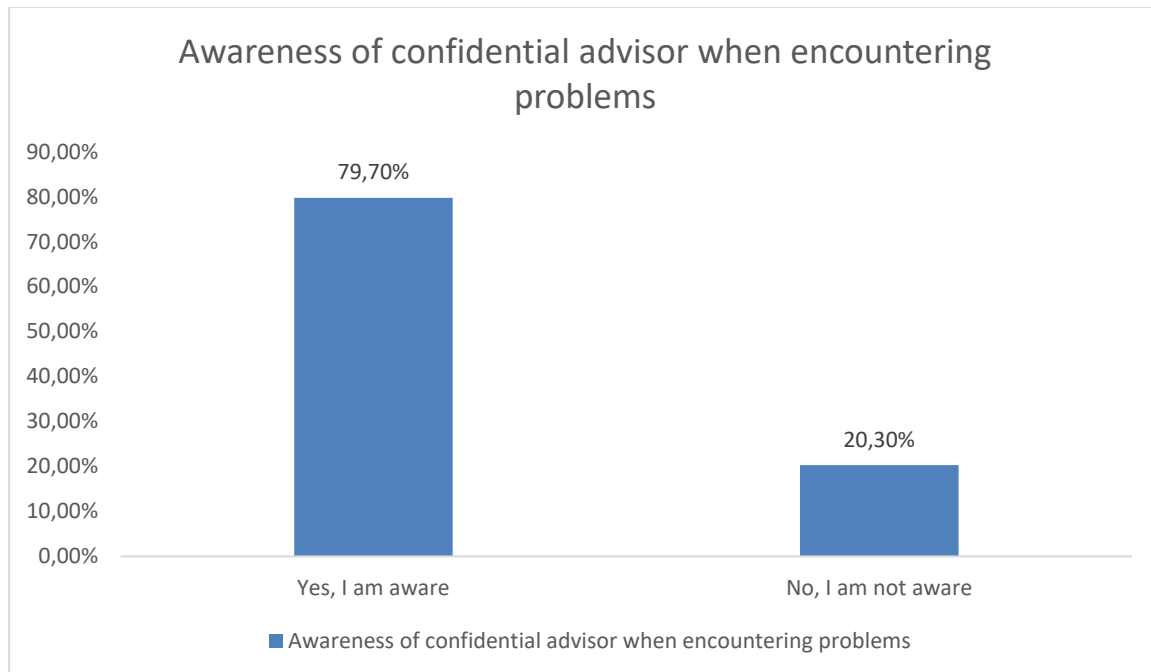


- First-year candidates feel more integrated in the research group (47% agree) than intermediates (30%) and final-years candidates (28%). Externally funded (39%) and grant-funded (38%) candidates feel more integrated than VU-employed candidates (26%).
- First-year PhDs feel most integrated (71%) in the graduate school, compared to intermediates (52%) and seniors (53%). Externally funded candidates (62%) report stronger integration than self-funded (52%) and VU-employed candidates (52%).

- First-years score highest (55% agree), followed by intermediates (51%) and seniors (46%). Externally funded candidates (58%) feel more integrated in the faculty/institute than self-funded candidates (36%) and VU-employed candidates (50%).
- First-year candidates feel much more integrated (87%) than intermediates (58%) and seniors (51%) in the university. Externally funded candidates (67%) rate integration higher than grant-funded (58%) and VU-employed (55%) candidates.

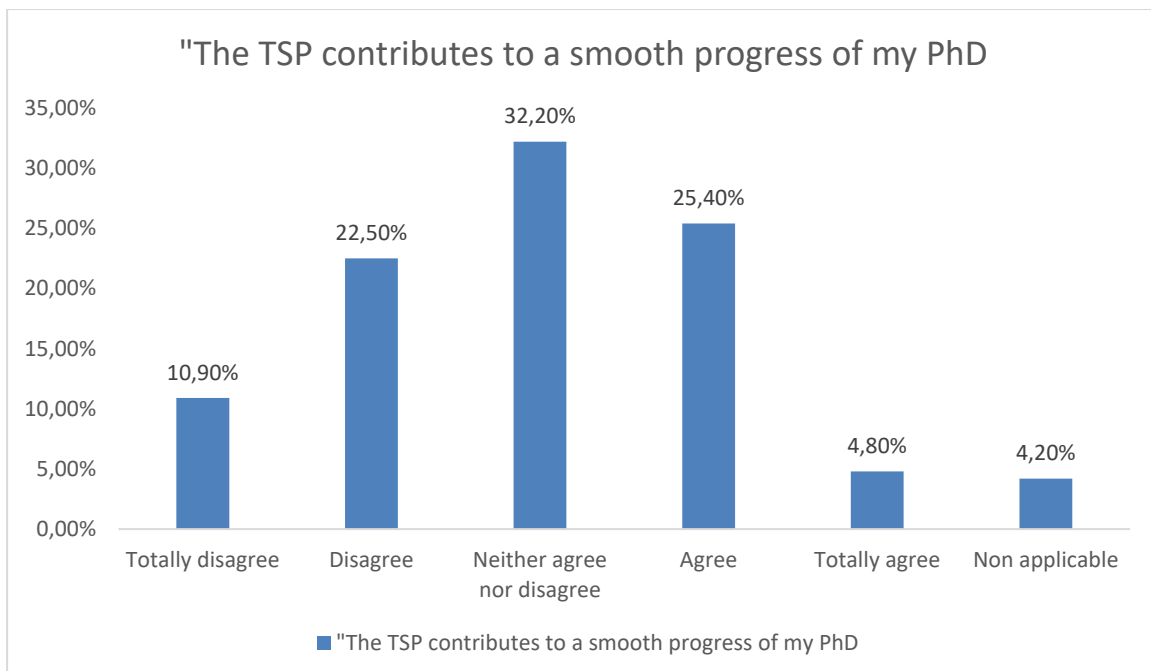
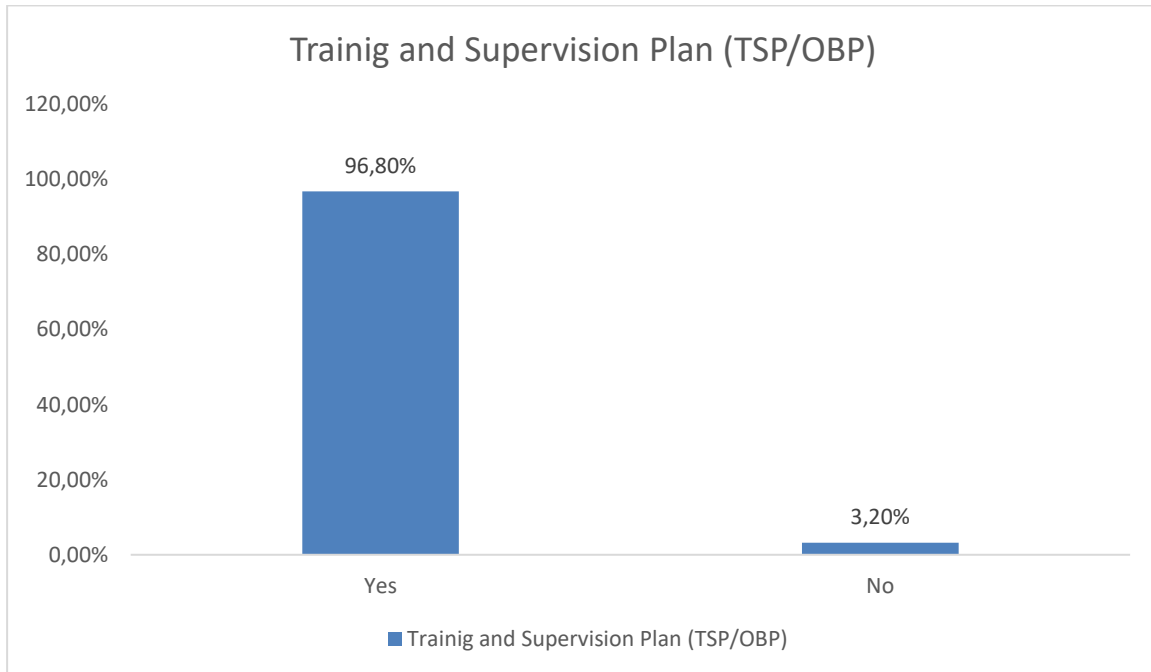
4. Supervision





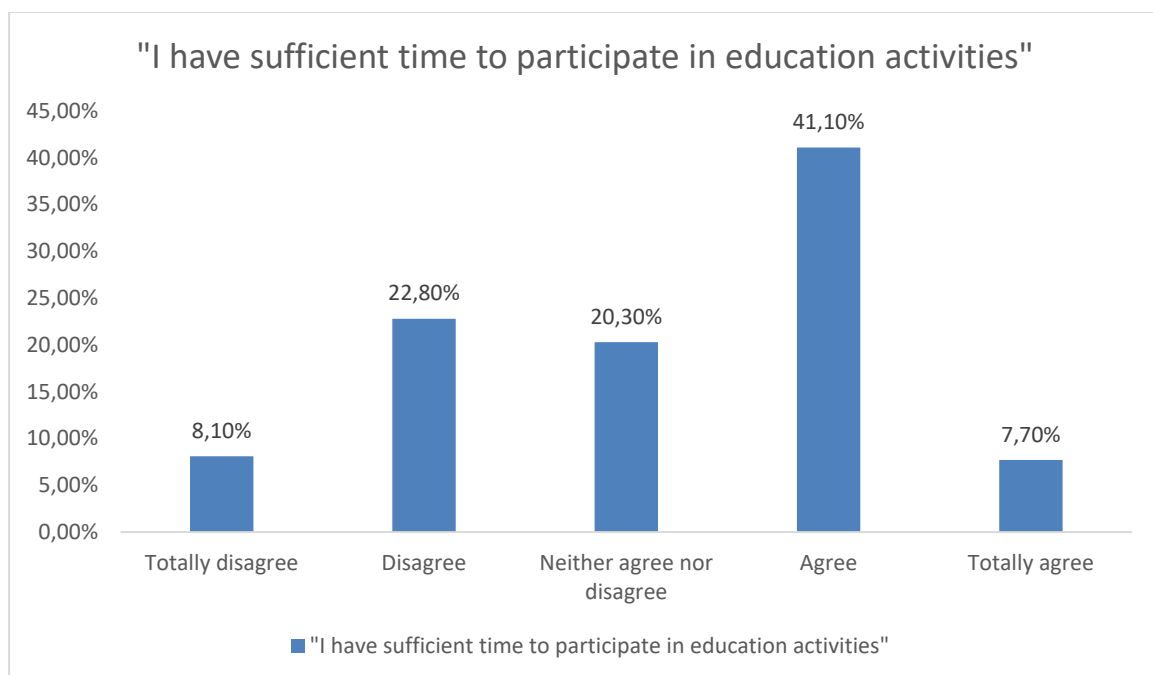
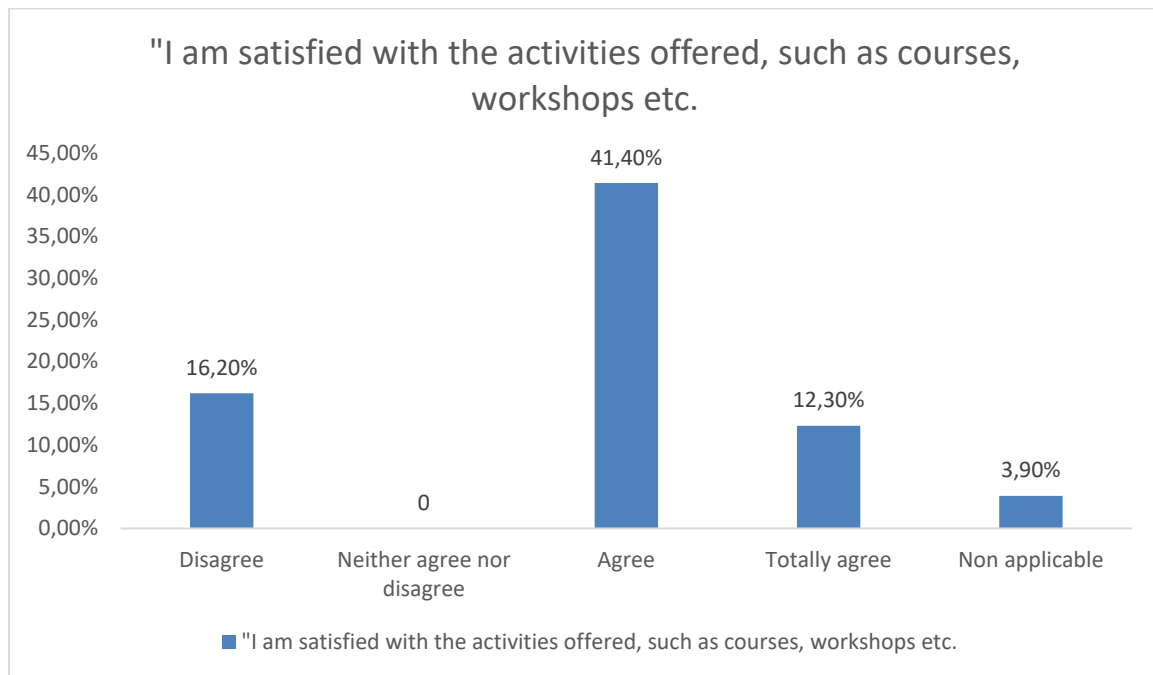
- Employed and grant-funded candidates receive more supervision hours (4.7-5.1) than externally funded and especially self-funded candidates (3.5-4.5). First year candidates receive more supervision (4.8 hours) than candidates in their final years (3.9 hours).
- First year candidates are more satisfied with supervision (8.0) than candidates in the last phase of their PhD (6.9). Externally funded and grant-funded candidates report slightly higher supervision satisfaction (7.5) than VU-employed candidates (7.2).
- Grant-funded (91%) and VU-employed candidates (87%) are most aware of the confidential advisor, while self-funded candidates are least aware (58%). Awareness is highest among intermediate stage candidates (82%) and lowest among first-years (71%).

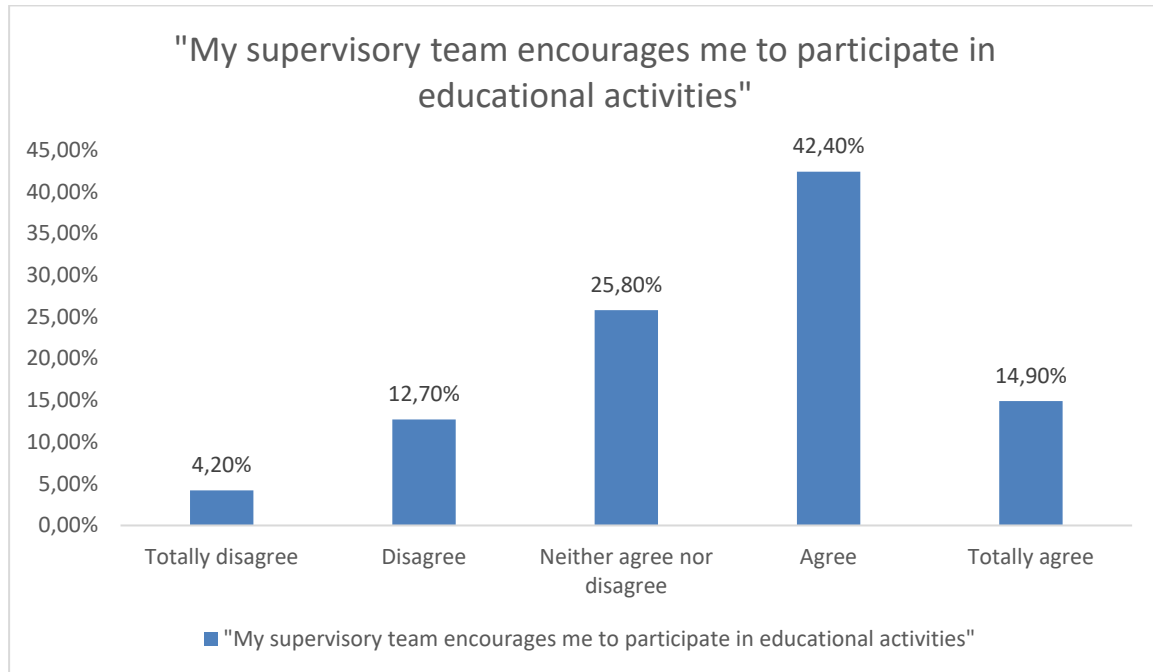
5. Education and training



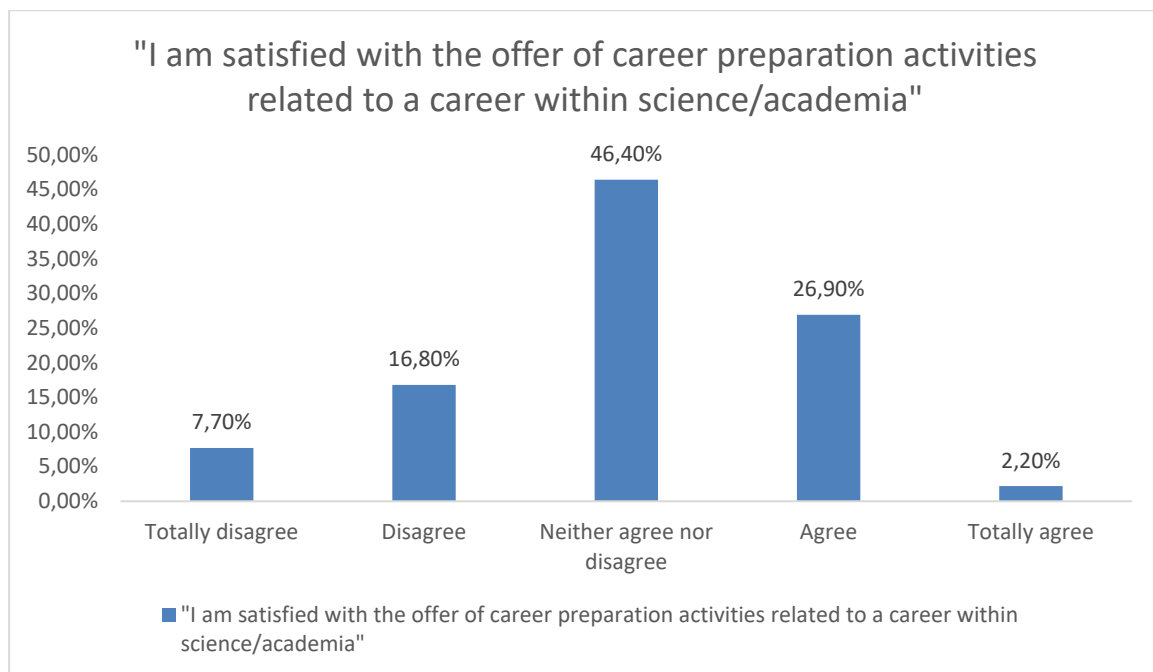
- A small share of first-year candidates (15.8%) feel strongly that the TSP supports smooth PhD progress, and another 31.6% feel it helps to some extent, meaning nearly half experience it positively. In later stages, this positive share drops: only 5.2% of final-year candidates feel strongly supported and 23.2% moderately so, while a growing group (15.2%) strongly disagrees, showing that the perceived value of the TSP declines as candidates progress.

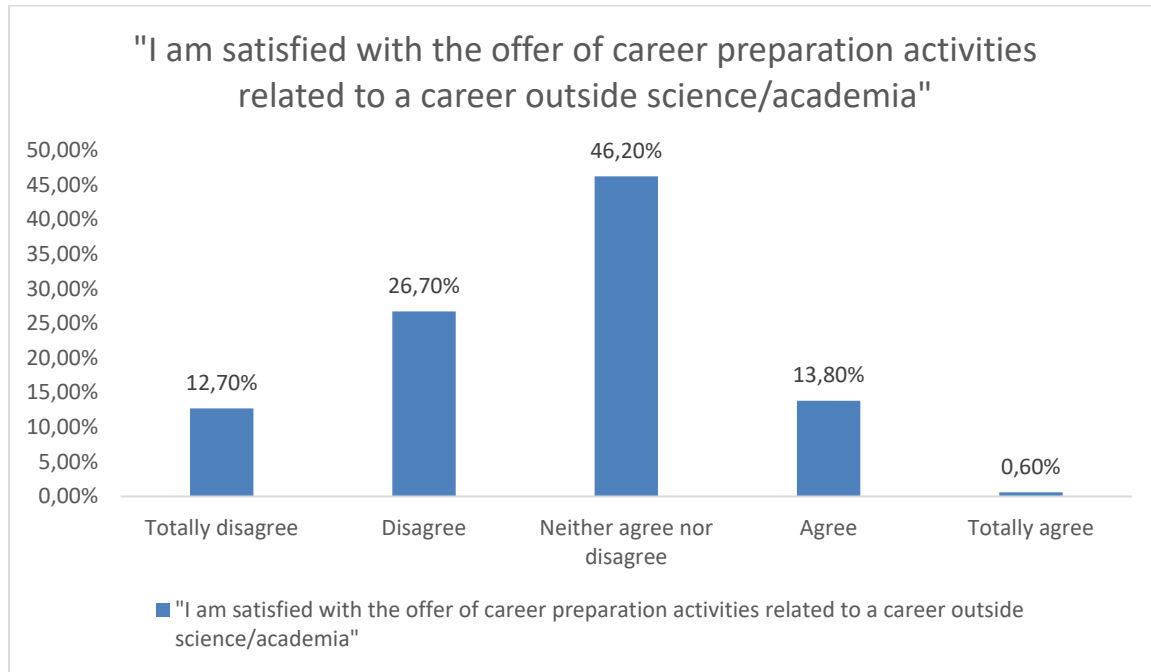
- Among self-funded candidates, only 6.9% feel strongly supported by the TSP and 10.8% even find it not applicable, indicating that many do not experience the TSP as relevant or helpful. Externally funded candidates show somewhat more confidence (11.5% strongly agree), though the largest group (35.4%) remains neutral, suggesting uncertainty about its contribution. Grant-funded and employed candidates show both agreement and relatively high disagreement (up to 12.5% strongly disagree), meaning experiences are mixed and often divided.





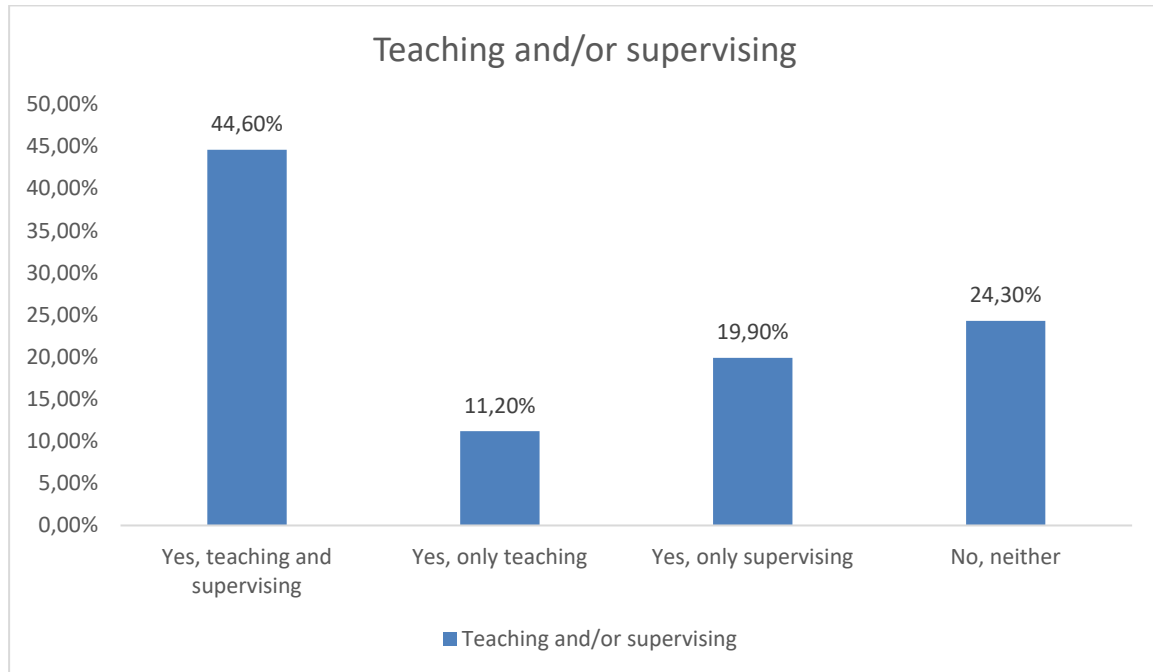
- First-years (34% agree) and grant-funded candidates (34%) feel they have more time for education compared with seniors (27%) and VU-employed candidates (28%). Externally funded candidates fall in between (32%).
- First-years feel most encouraged (26% agree), compared with intermediates (13%) and seniors (15%). Externally funded (17.7%) and self-funded (17.6%) candidates feel more encouraged than VU-employed candidates (9.8%).



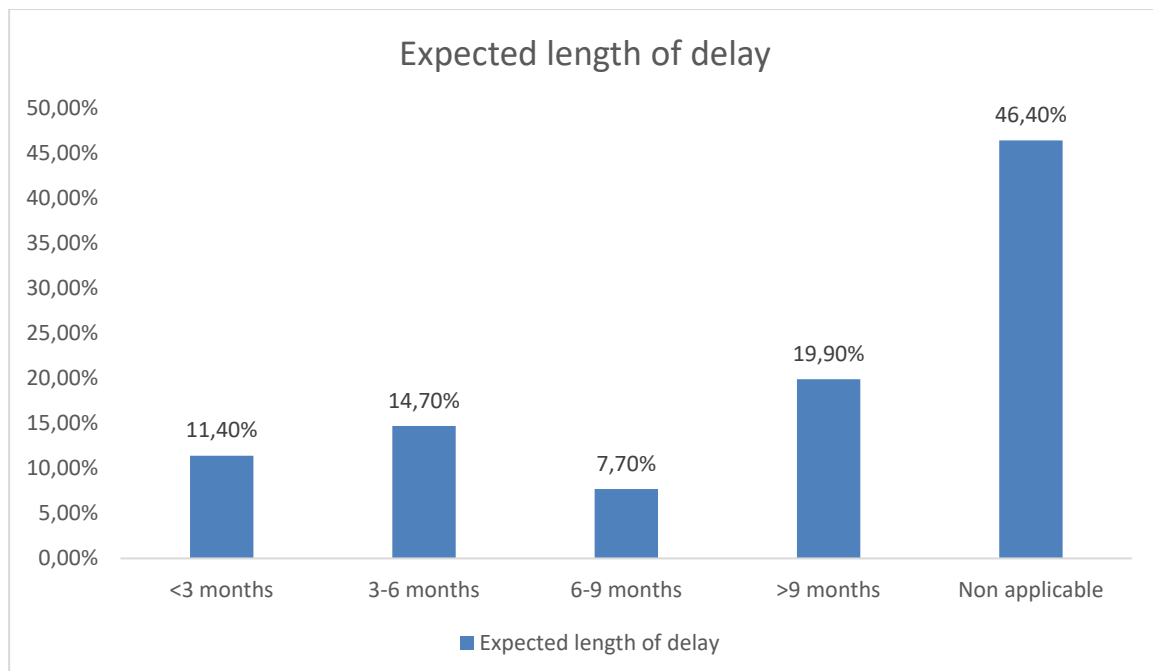
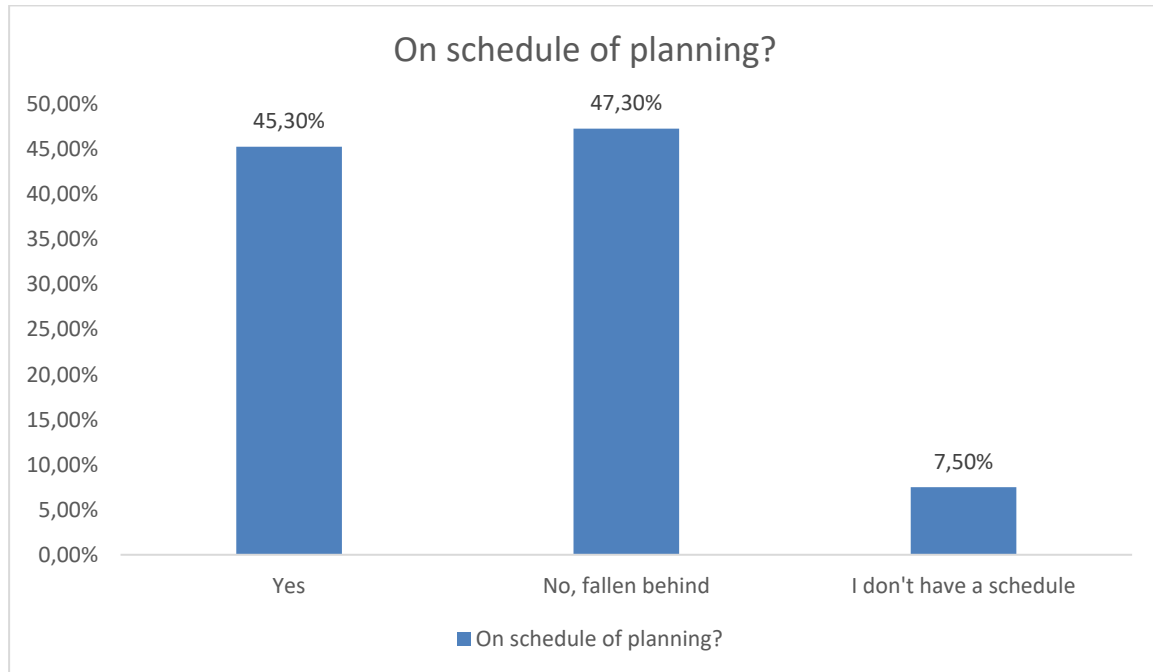


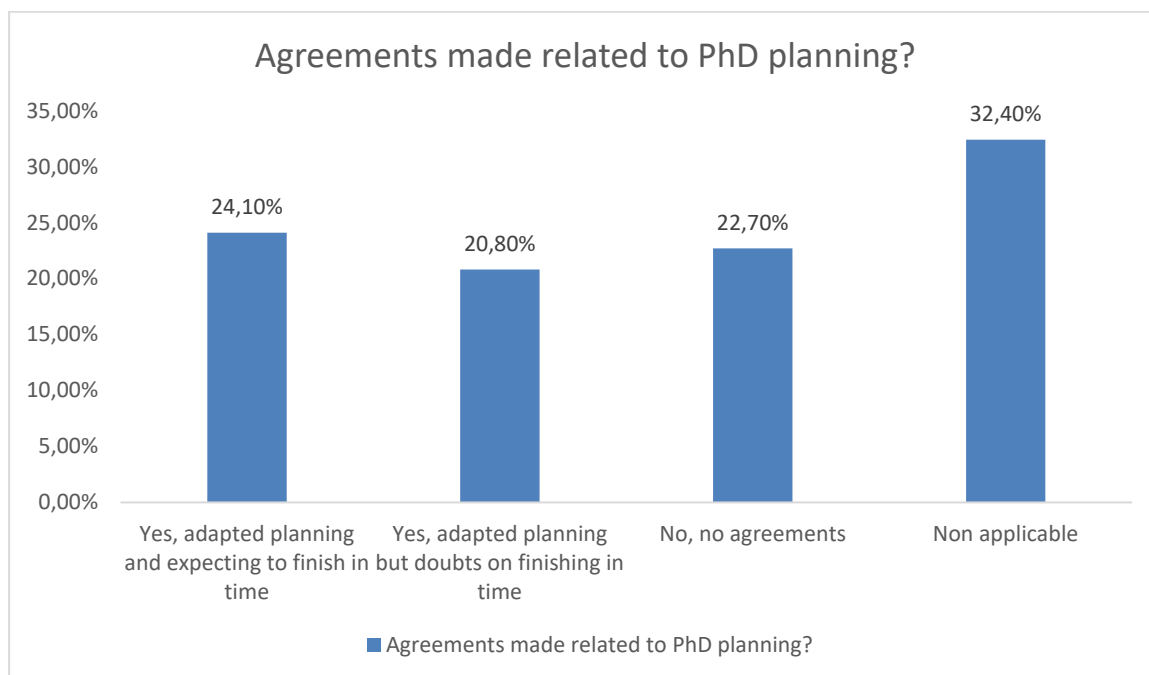
- First-year PhD candidates are mostly neutral (63%) and only a modest share (34%) feels satisfied with the academic-career preparation offered. Final-year PhDs show even lower satisfaction (27%) and more dissatisfaction (34%), indicating that the offer feels increasingly insufficient as candidates progress. Across employment types, satisfaction remains limited (21–31%), with a large neutral group (41–59%). Employed and self-funded candidates show the most dissatisfaction (up to 28%), suggesting the offer does not meet their academic-career needs.
- Satisfaction with non-academic career preparation is low across stages: only 26% of first-years and 14% of final-years agree the offer is sufficient, while dissatisfaction grows notably in the final year (44% disagree/strongly disagree). Across employment types, agreement is very low (10–17%) and many stay neutral (38–61%). Employed and grant-funded candidates show the most dissatisfaction (47–50%), indicating that many feel insufficiently prepared for careers beyond academia.

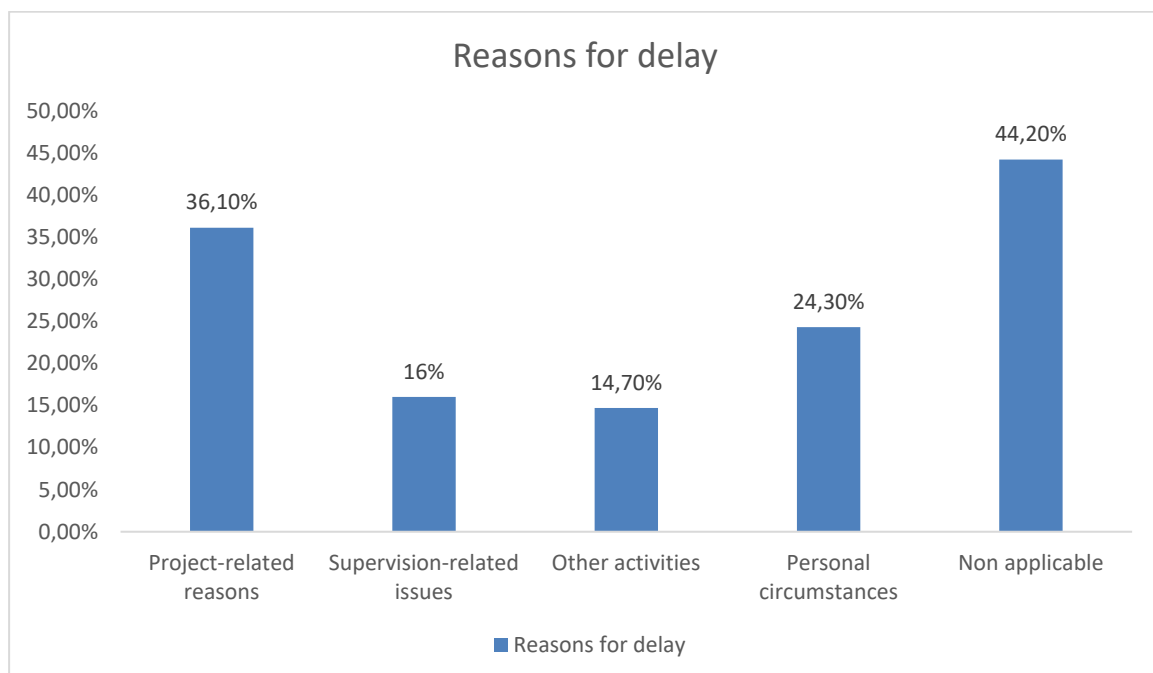
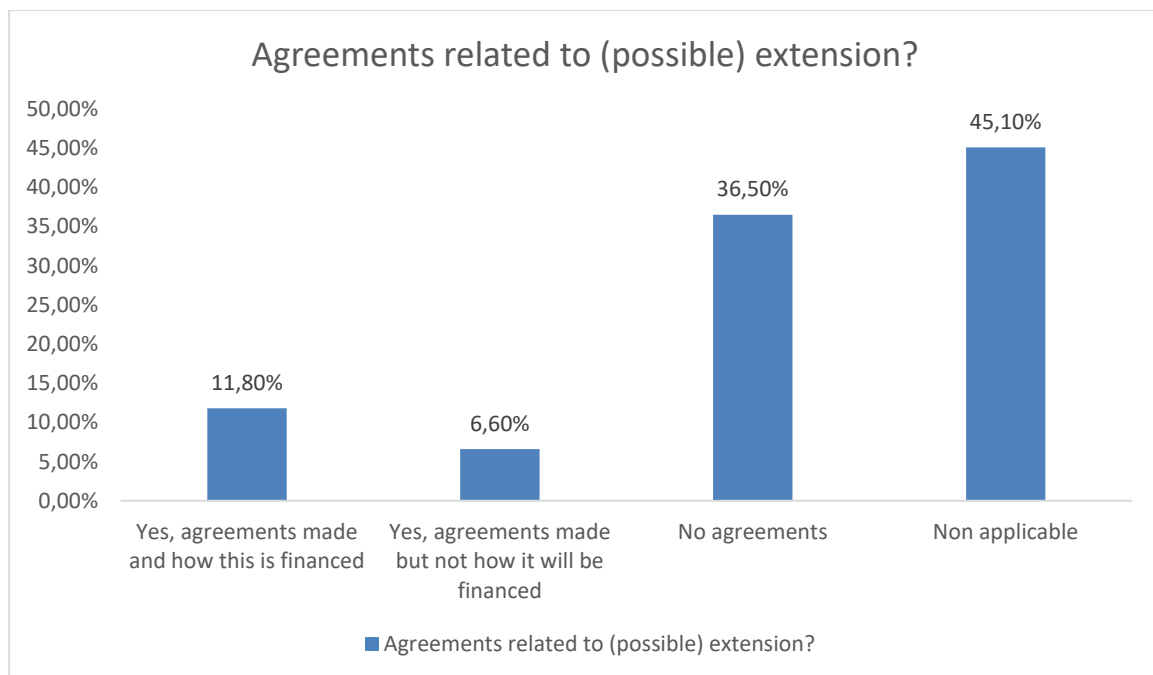
6. Teaching and other duties



7. Progress and workload



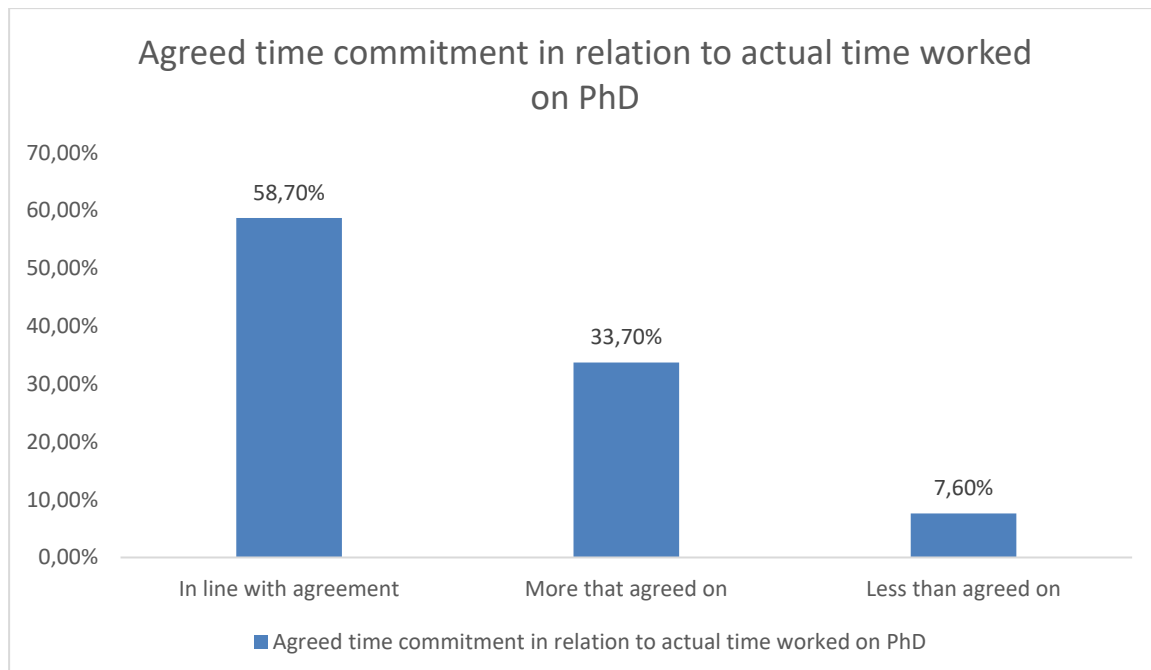


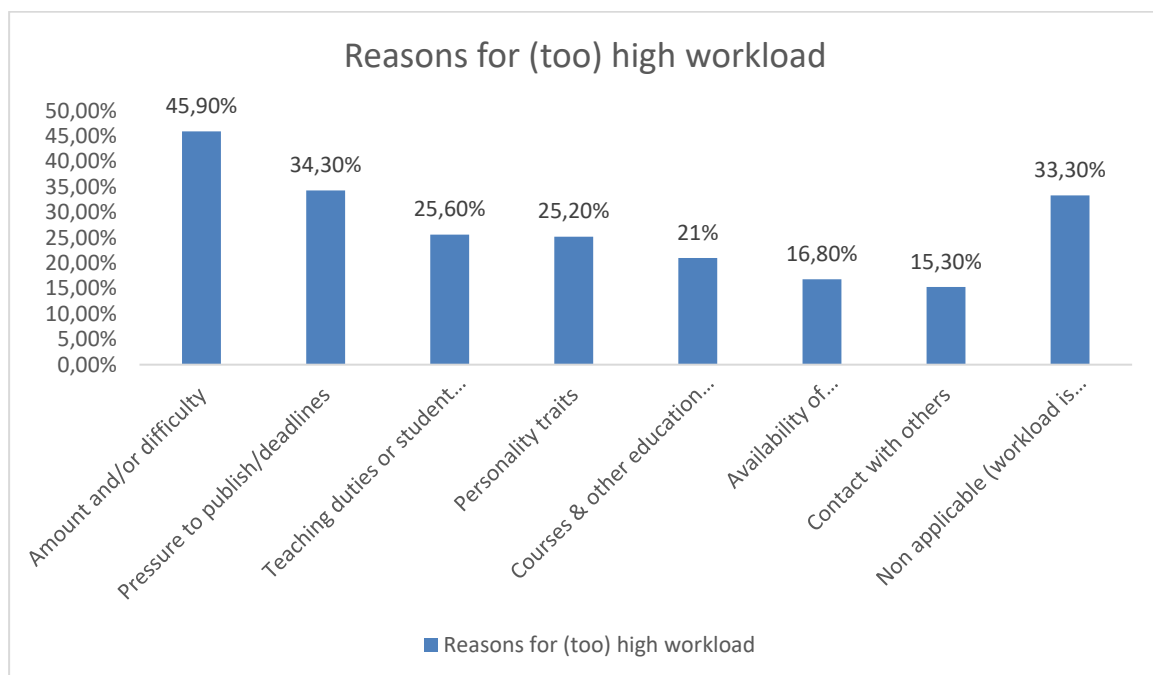
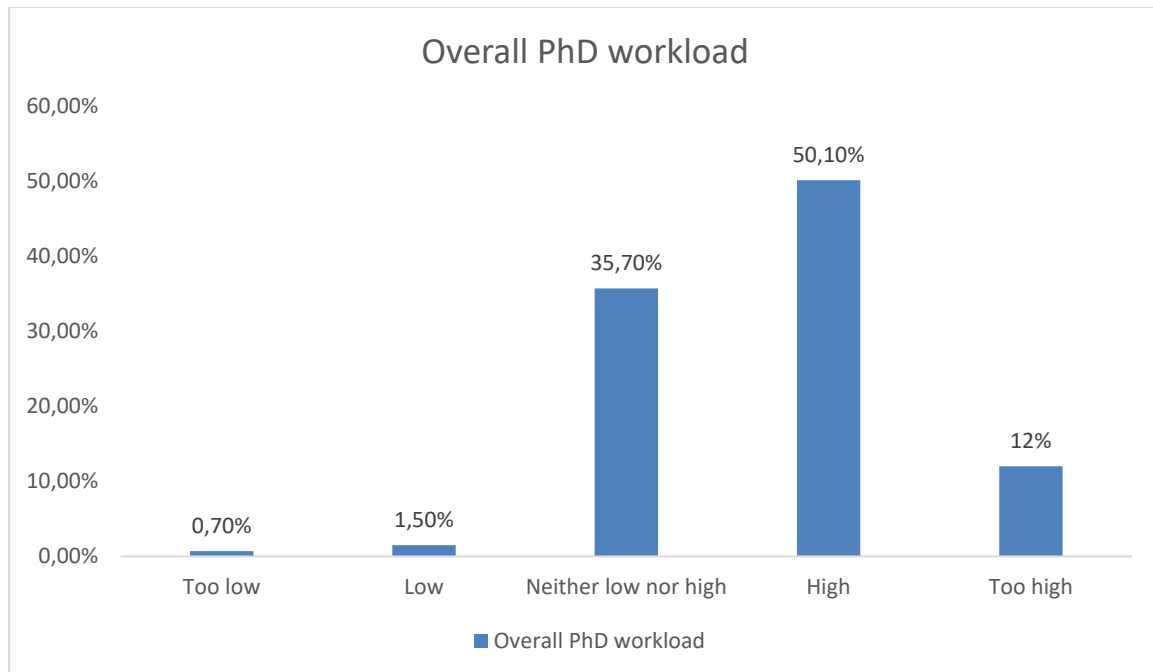


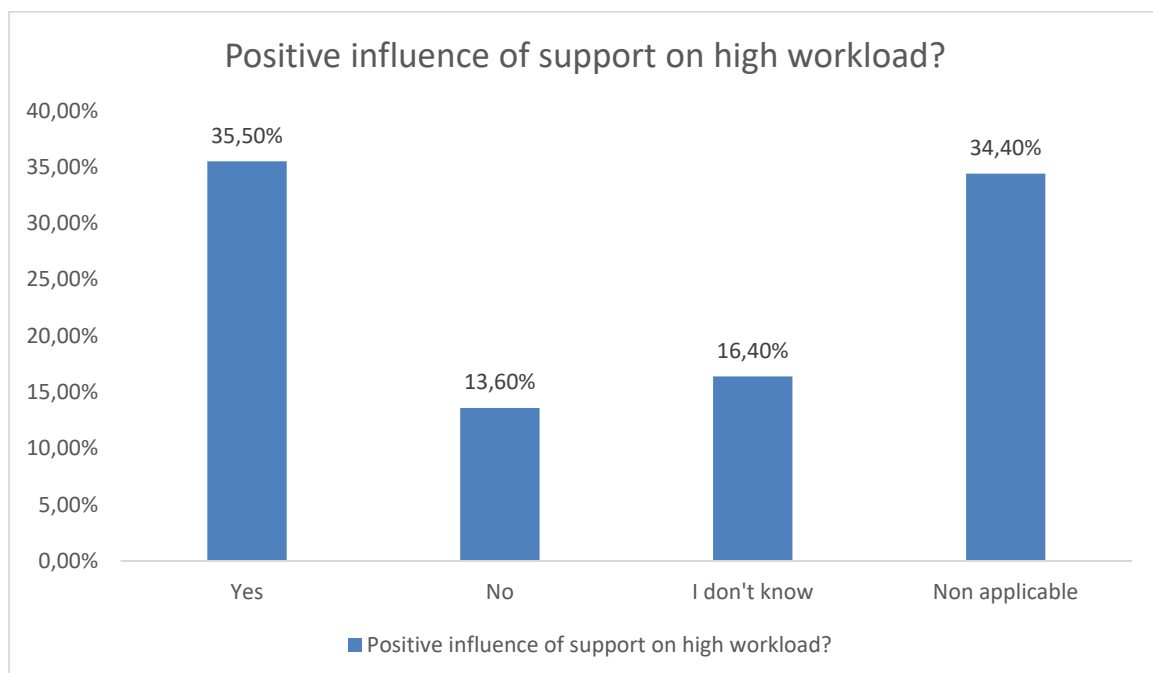
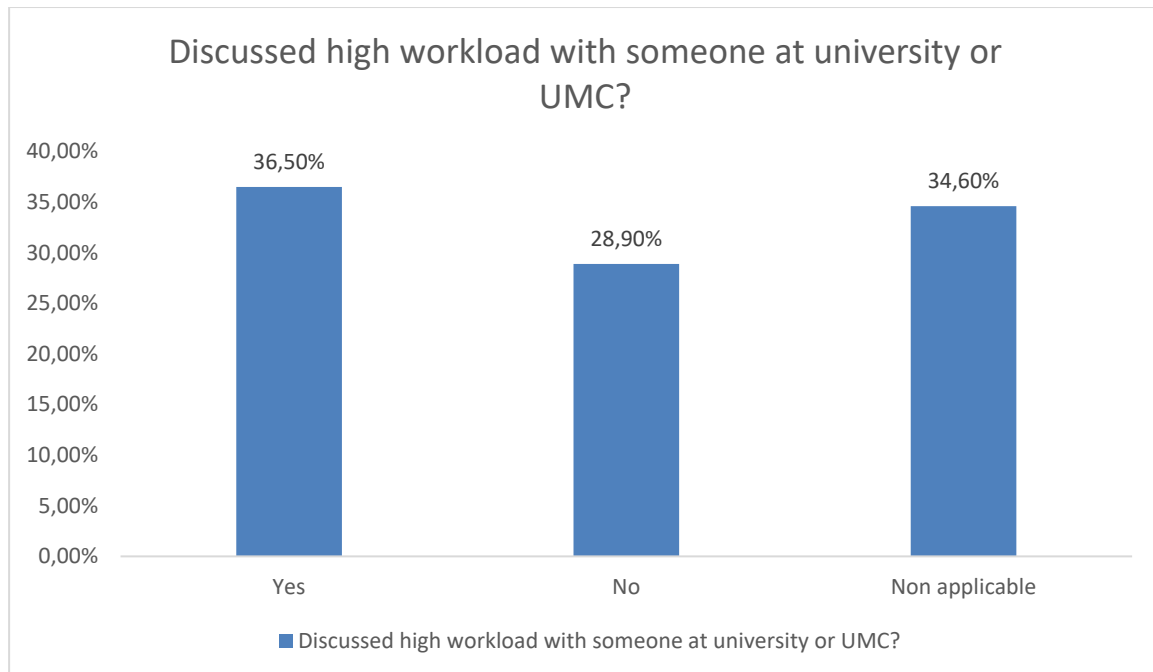
- The share of candidates who report falling behind rises sharply across stages: from 21% in the first year to 59% in the final year, while those still on schedule drop from 74% to 32%. Across employment types, the pattern is similar (46–52% falling behind), with externally funded candidates reporting the highest delays (52%).
- Most first-year candidates mark non-applicable (72%), but delays become common later in the PhD: in the final stage, 34% report >9 months delay and 15% report 3–6 months. Self-funded

candidates report the highest severe delay (>9 months: 31%), compared to 14–22% in other groups.

- The proportion who discussed their schedule increases strongly over time: from 29% in the first year to 70% in the final year. Employment types show similar levels (48–56%), with only minor variation.
- Plan adjustments become increasingly common: 24% in first year vs. 29% in final year, while doubts about finishing in time rise steeply (0% → 27%). Externally funded candidates most often adjust their planning confidently (34%), while grant-funded PhDs express most doubt (23%).
- Extensions are rare in the first year (5%) but more frequent in the final stage (21% with financing agreements; 13% without financing clarity). Externally funded candidates have the highest share of fully financed extension agreements (14.6%), compared to 7.8% among self-funded PhDs.
- Project-related reasons increase through the PhD: 8% in first year, 18% in intermediate phase, and 13% in the final phase. Personal-circumstance-related delays increase as well (0% → 6–9%). Across employment types, project-related reasons are common in all groups (14–19%). Personal circumstances play a larger role for self-funded (10%) and externally funded candidates (9%).



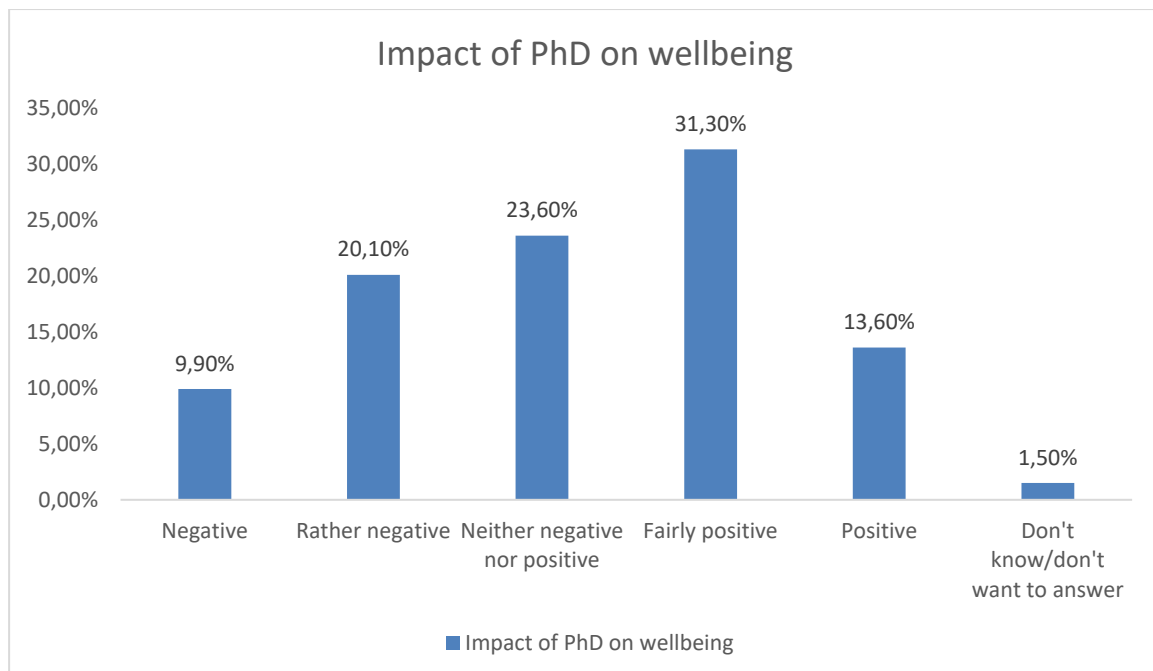
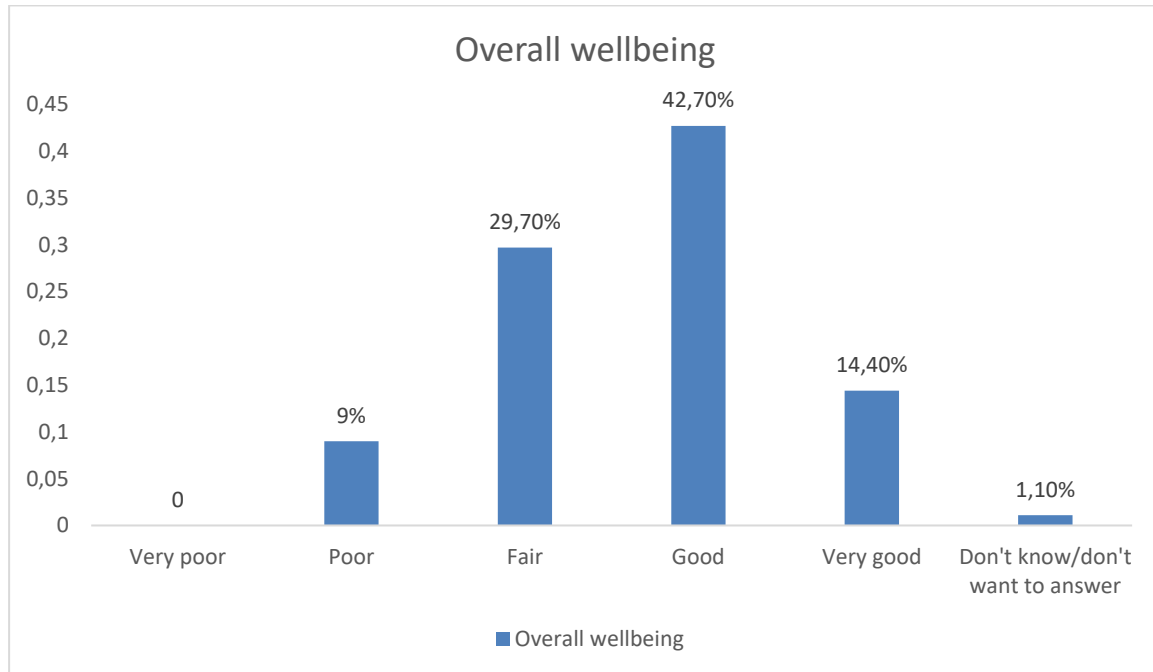


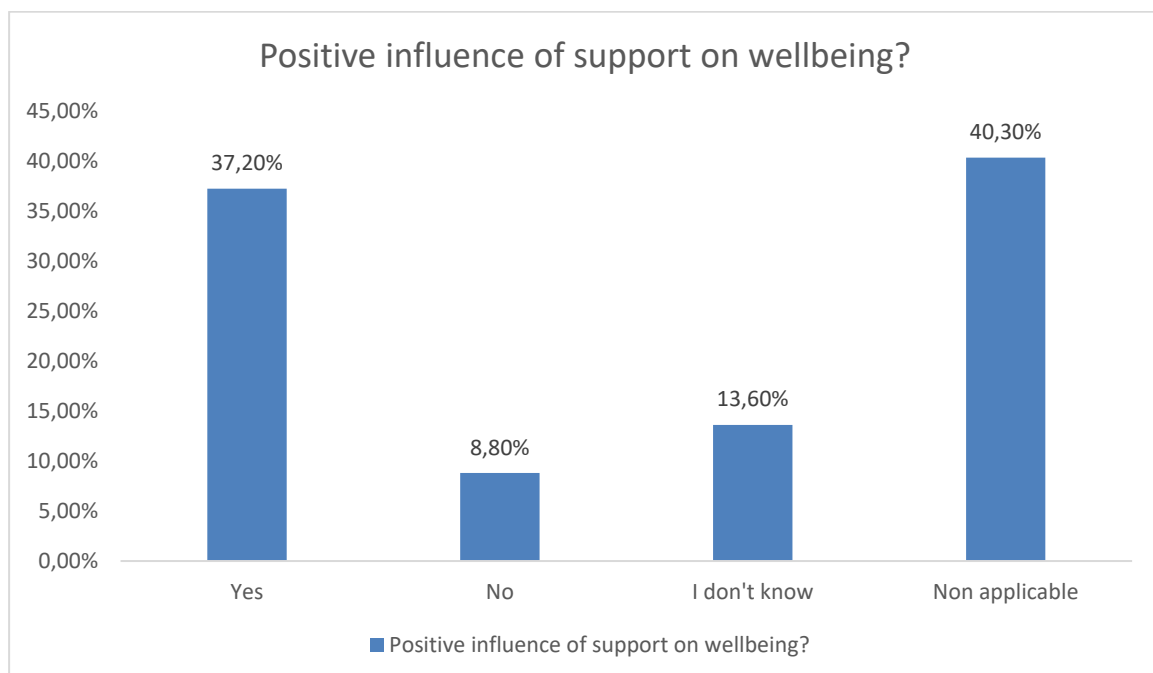
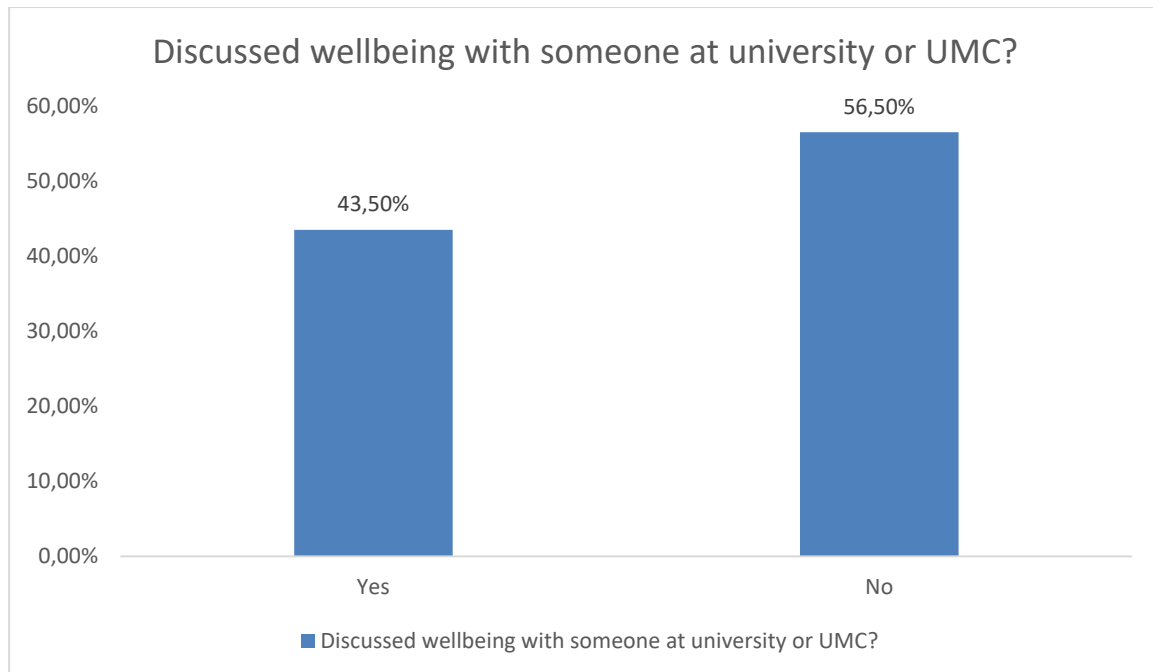


- The further candidates are in their PhD, the more they report spending more time than agreed (from 13% in the first year to 43% in the final year). Employed, grant-funded and externally funded PhDs show similarly high levels of extra hours (28–38%), suggesting that for most candidates the workload intensifies regardless of employment type.
- Across all PhD stages, about 47–52% describe their workload as high, with the share saying too high increasing towards the end (up to 18%). Employment types differ only slightly, with 44–54% calling their workload high, showing that a demanding workload is common across groups.

- The main workload drivers—such as amount/difficulty of work and pressure to publish—appear consistently across all stages, with slightly higher percentages in later phases (e.g., difficulty of work rises from 2.6% to 5.7%). Employment groups show similar patterns, with no major differences besides slightly more amount/difficulty of work among grant-funded candidates (~8%).
- Later-stage PhDs more often discuss workload (43% in final year vs. 18% in first year), while early-stage candidates more often indicate workload is not high (61%). Across employment types, discussions range narrowly (33–38%), showing that workload concerns are broadly shared.

8. Wellbeing

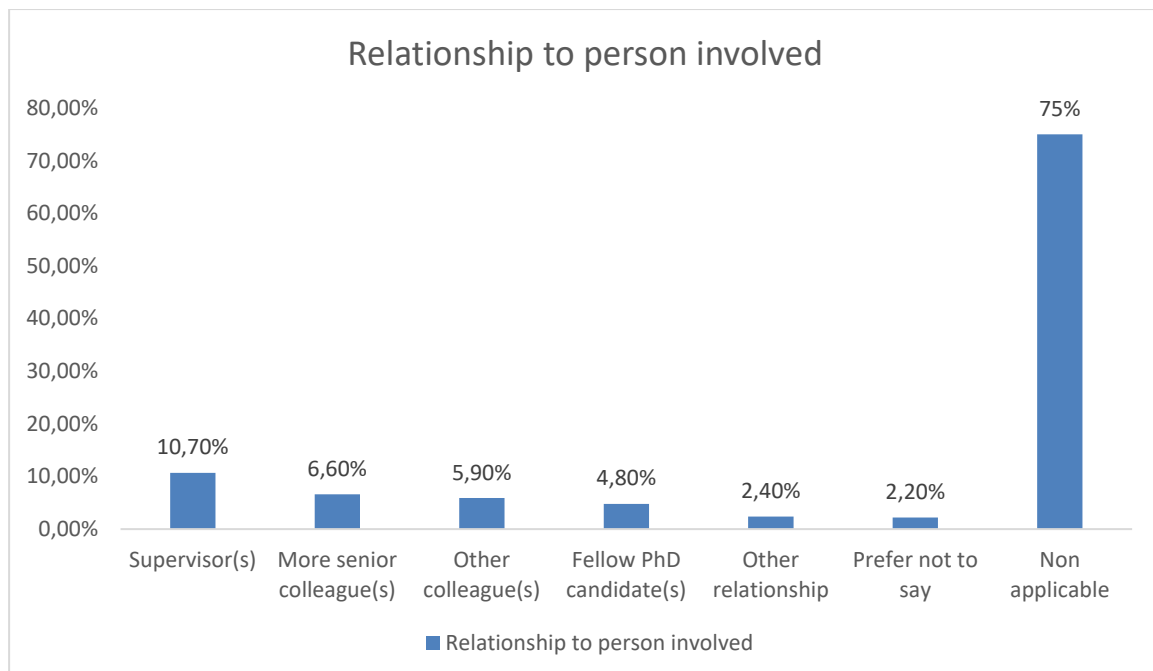
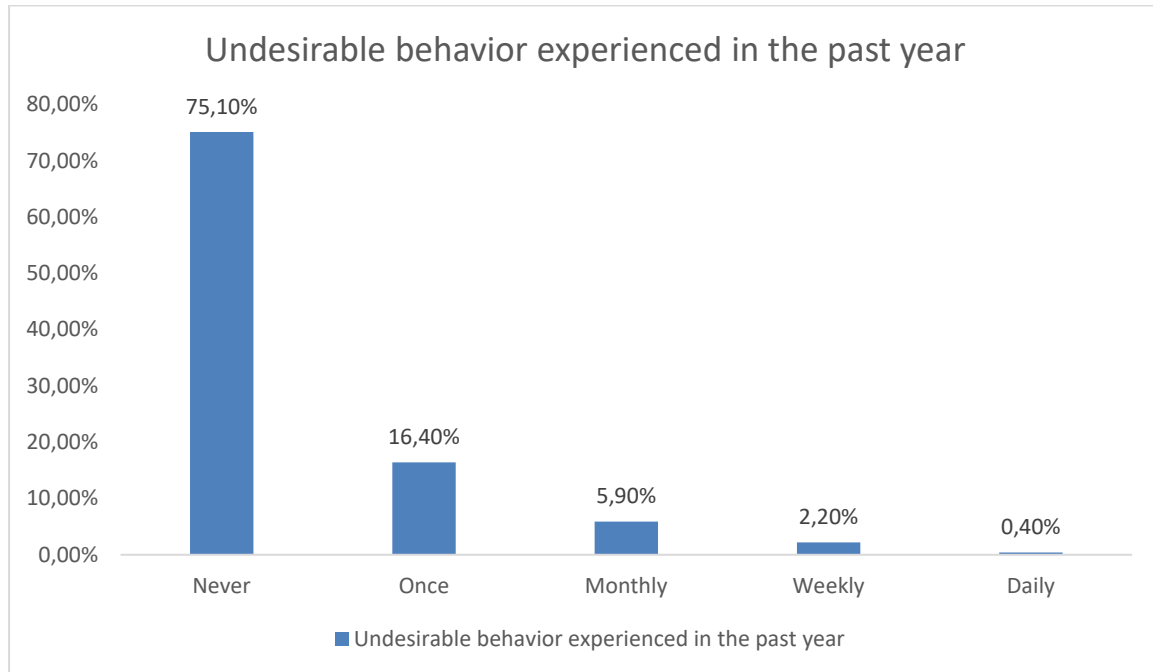


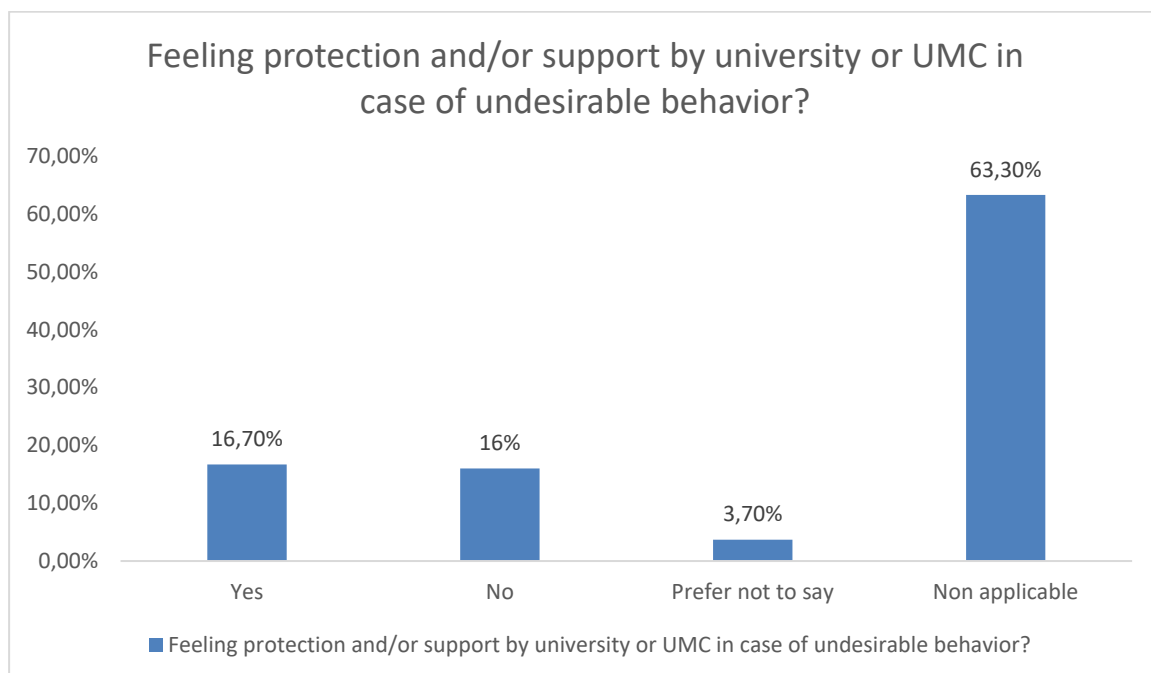
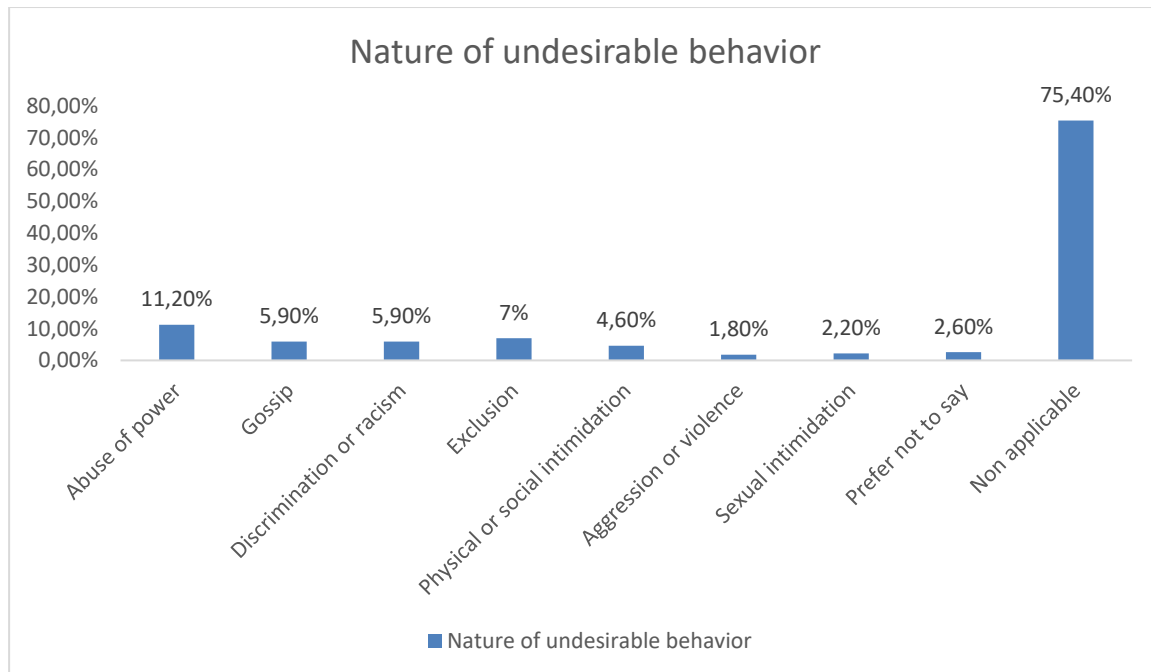


- Later-stage PhD candidates give more Fair/Poor ratings (46%) compared to first-years (18% Fair/Poor). External/self-funded PhDs show a higher share of Poor/Very poor (~10%) than employed PhDs (~15% Good/Very good but 15% Poor/Very poor).
- Final-year PhDs report Rather negative/Negative wellbeing far more often (44%) than first-years (5%). Grant-funded PhDs show more Rather negative responses (23%) than externally funded (14%) and employed PhDs (24%).

- Final-year PhDs discuss wellbeing slightly more (46% yes) than first-years (42% yes). Grant-funded PhDs discuss wellbeing most often (48% yes), while external/self-funded PhDs discuss least (37% yes).
- First-years report Non-applicable most often (50%) compared to final-years (33%), meaning later-stage candidates discuss wellbeing more. Grant-funded PhDs report Yes most frequently (48%), while externally funded PhDs report Yes less often (43%) and employed PhDs even lower (35%).

9. Social safety

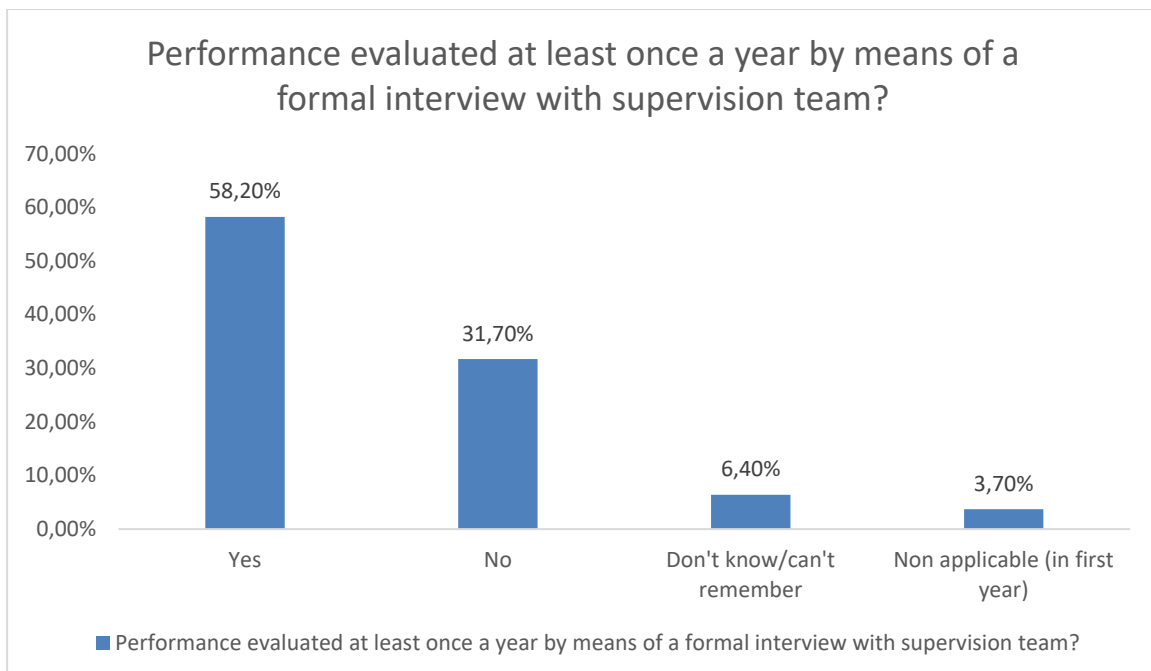
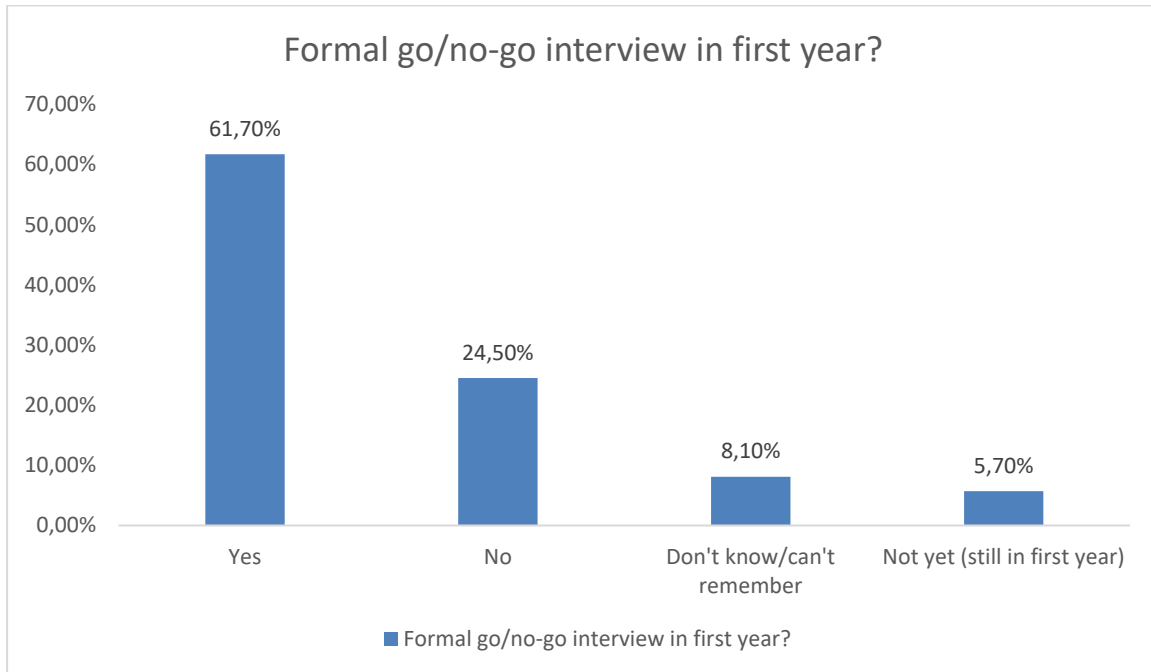


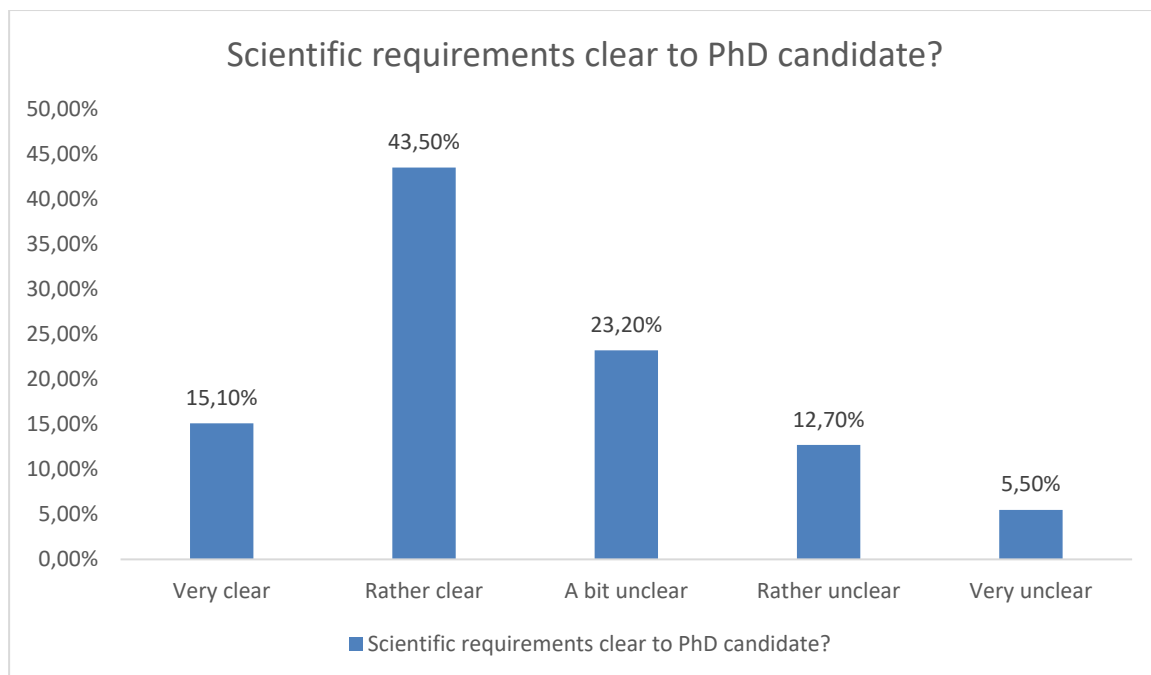


- Final-year PhD candidates report undesirable behavior more often than other groups, with 34.0% experiencing it at least once (20.5% once, 8.4% monthly, 3.2% weekly, 1.1% daily), compared to 15.8% among first-years and 21.1% among intermediates. Grant-funded (34.4%) and VU-employed candidates (28.9%) report higher rates of incidents than self-funded (17.6%) and externally funded candidates (17.7%).

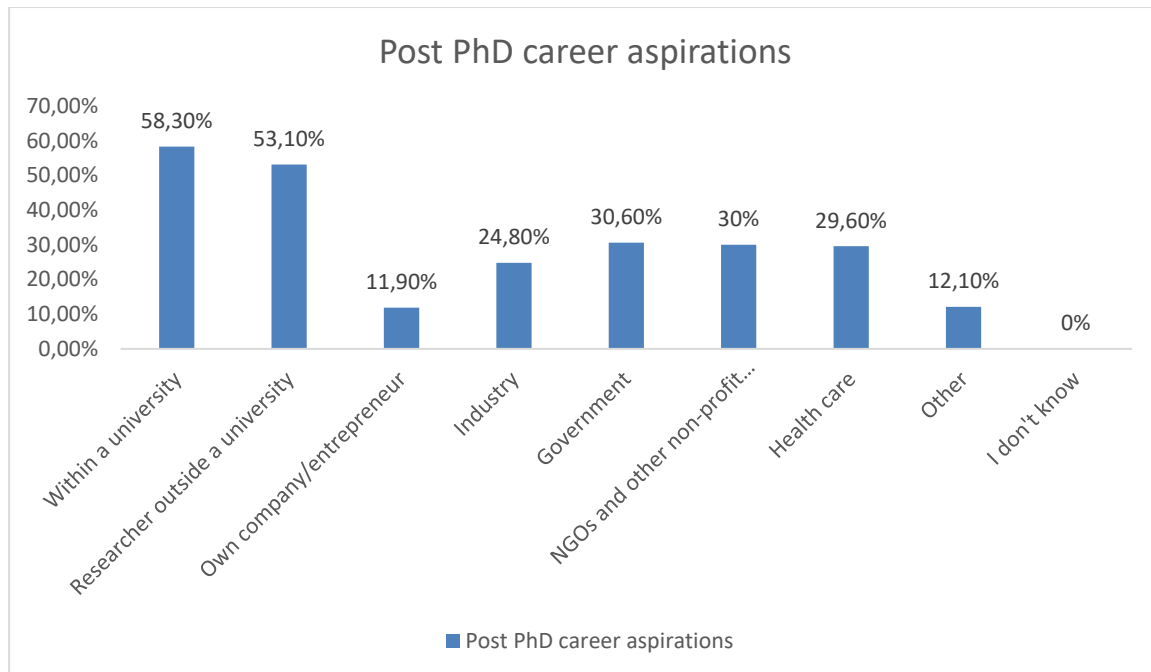
- Among those who reported incidents, supervisors are named most often by final-year PhDs (15.3%) compared with intermediates (6.8%) and first-years (5.1%), while “more senior colleagues” also appear more frequently among final-years (7.6%) than other stages.
- First-year (21.1%) and intermediate candidates (19.6%) report feeling protected slightly more often than final-year candidates (13.2%), who also have the highest share of negative responses (24.2% “No”). Most respondents across all stages select “Non applicable” (59–68%), suggesting many did not experience a situation where institutional protection was relevant. Grant-funded (20.3%) and VU-employed candidates (18.3%) report the highest levels of feeling protected, while externally funded candidates report the lowest (13.5% “Yes”).

10. Finish and later career





- Early-stage PhDs most often haven't made agreements yet (79% in the first year), while this drops later in the PhD, where instead clear agreements increase (71% in intermediate, 56% in final-year candidates). Across employment types, most candidates report having agreements (42–72%), though self-funded PhDs show the lowest clarity (42% yes, 40% no), indicating more uncertainty in this group.
- By employment type, externally funded and employed candidates show the highest level of agreements (64% and 64%), while self-funded candidates are notably lower (41%), suggesting more informal or absent arrangements in that group.
- Across PhD stages, most candidates rate their agreements as rather clear (40–46%) or very clear (14–18%), though final-year candidates also report more “very unclear” (8%) than first-years (3%). By employment type, clarity is broadly similar, with 42–51% saying agreements are rather clear; self-funded PhDs show more variation, with both higher very clear (25%) and slightly higher very unclear (5%), indicating uneven experiences within this group.



- Across all PhD stages, candidates most frequently aspire to careers within a university (18-21%) and research outside a university (18-19%), with first-years showing slightly more interest in health care (13.5%) and NGOs (12.5%).
- Across contract types, all groups show the strongest interest in university careers (19-22%) and research outside academia (18-20%), while self-funded PhDs display relatively higher interest in health care (13.3%) and NGOs (11.8%) compared to VU-employed candidates.