

Survey for PhD students at the University of Helsinki

Spring 2018

The survey was carried out by HYVÄT, the University of Helsinki PhD Students' association. It was distributed to the mailing lists of all the Doctoral Schools and Programmes at the University, as well as to the mailing list and social media channels of HYVÄT.

The purpose of the survey was to find out the current situation, challenges and most appreciated aspects of the doctoral education at the university. It complements the evaluation of doctoral education, which was carried out by an external evaluation group during the autumn 2017. Details about this evaluation can be found here:

<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/phd-association/3166/>

A similar survey was conducted by HYVÄT (then Helsingin yliopiston jatko-opiskelijat, HYJO) in early 2015. Its results can be found here:

<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/phd-association/survey-of-doctoral-student-challenges-final-results/>

One objective with this new survey was to also reflect on how the answers have changed in the last three years, during which the university has undergone many changes and been struggling to keep up with the previous quality of research and teaching with more limited resources.

In this year's survey, we received answers from 508 PhD students on the 41 questions of the form. This is around 12 % of all the potential respondents. Because no questions were mandatory to answer, the actual answer counts for each were a bit smaller. The question form can be found here: <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/phd-association/files/2018/03/HYVÄT-survey-form.pdf>

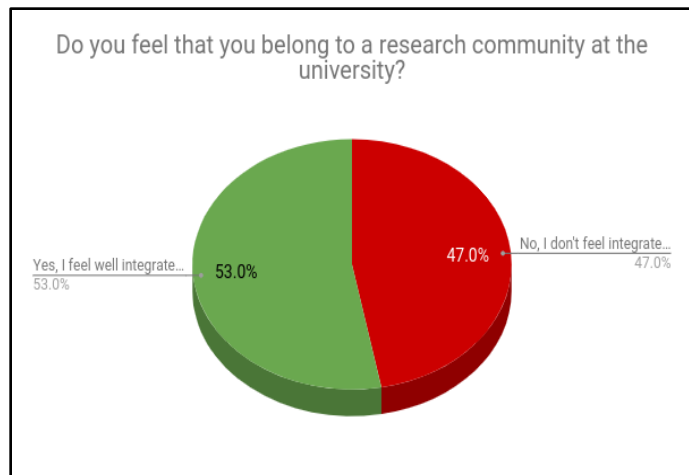
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2. Key findings

When we asked what the most important matters in advocacy are now, the respondents mentioned funding, supervision, and equality between doctoral students. The answers to the other questions in the survey reflect the same three matters.

Another alarming finding was that 47 % of the respondents did not feel that they were integrated in the research community, as the chart shows. This did not vary much between doctoral schools, but it was extremely connected to having an office at the university.



Funding is probably the largest reason for inequality between the PhD students. In the graph for the source of funding (page 9) for each Doctoral School, we can see that there is quite a lot of variation between the schools. Most alarming are the portions of respondents who use their own savings or unemployment benefits to finance their living. In HYMY this was 25 % of the respondents.

Supervision got an overall good score in the survey, but even in cases when the respondents reported that supervision is fairly good, they often said that there were problems too. About one out of six gave a negative opinion about their supervision. What makes the situation even more complicated for those who have problems, is that the university as whole does not provide any assistance or systematic way of solving the problems. This is something that the university clearly needs to pay attention to, and provide some practical solutions for. Electronic follow-up with for example Thessa is one improvement but it is not enough. Also practical ways to intervene in problematic supervision relationships are needed.

Working for the equality between doctoral students was one of the most frequently mentioned issues on the question of most important topics for HYVÄT's advocacy. The respondents reported that the inequality between doctoral students with different sources of funding creates three classes of doctoral students that have very different opportunities to do their research. The inequality shows in many practical ways in the everyday work-life of doctoral students. Depending on their source of funding, some doctoral students have access to office spaces, healthcare, and courses, while others do not. These are all things that affect how well people are integrated into the research community.

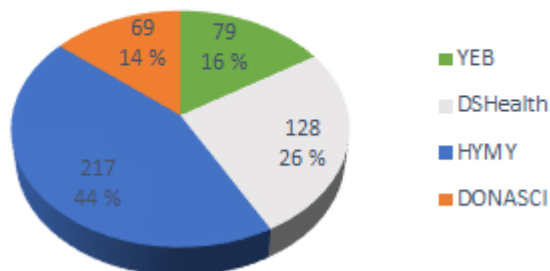
HYVÄT's theme in spring 2018 is mental wellbeing. Although the theme was selected before even launching the survey, the survey confirmed it to be a very important topic. Almost 10 % of the respondents brought up this matter in the free answers for the topics of advocacy. Many of them specifically mentioned mental health problems as a core issue. Around 2/3 have access to occupational health care by the university or some other job. Even though the rest are entitled to the communal health care, there were some people who did not know how to access it.

We also asked the respondents for comments to the PhD student representatives. The main issue that came up were a clear need to improve the communication between the representatives and those they represent. In addition, the respondents had specific suggestions on what issues the representatives could bring up in the steering groups. Many also generally thanked the representatives for their good work.

Lastly, we asked the respondents for comments to the university. At this point, the answers showed widespread disappointment and frustration with the university administration and management. Many felt exhausted by the constant changes and the lack of updated information.

3. Background of the respondents

Doctoral Schools

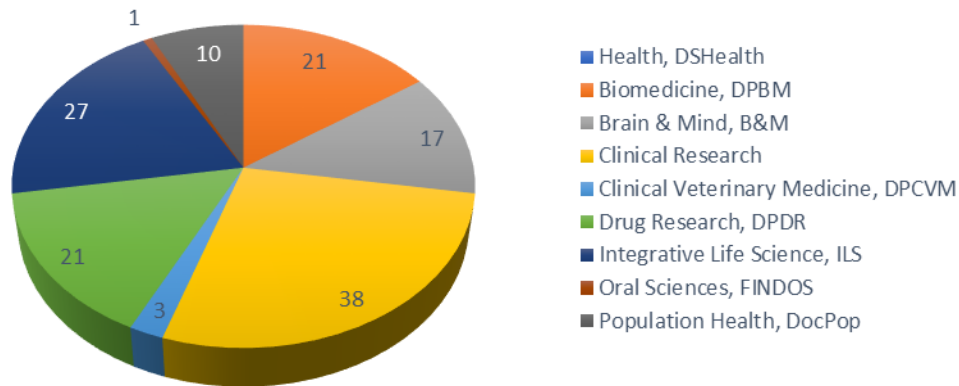


The proportion of each Doctoral school quite nicely represent the overall number of PhD students in the schools. This shows that the message reached all the Doctoral Schools equally despite their different levels of engagement with HYVÄT (which is seen further below). There were even answers from all the Doctoral Programmes, although there were only a few answers from some of them.

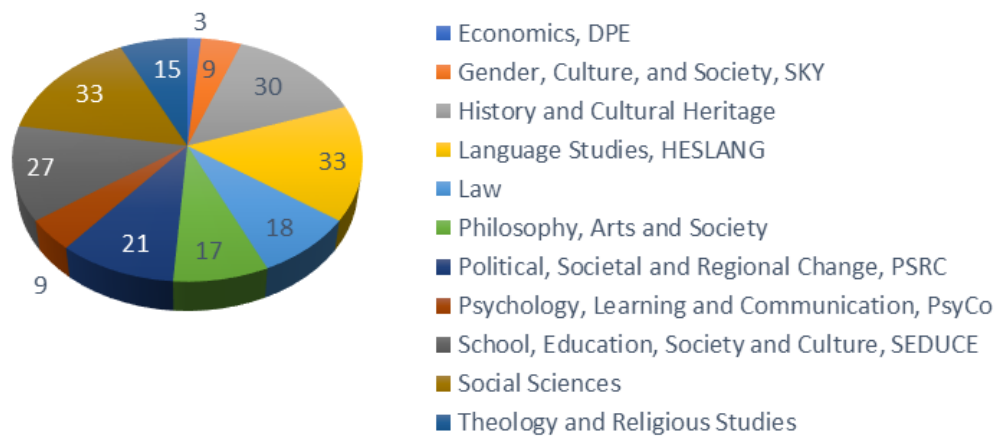
Environmental, Food and Biological Sciences, YEB



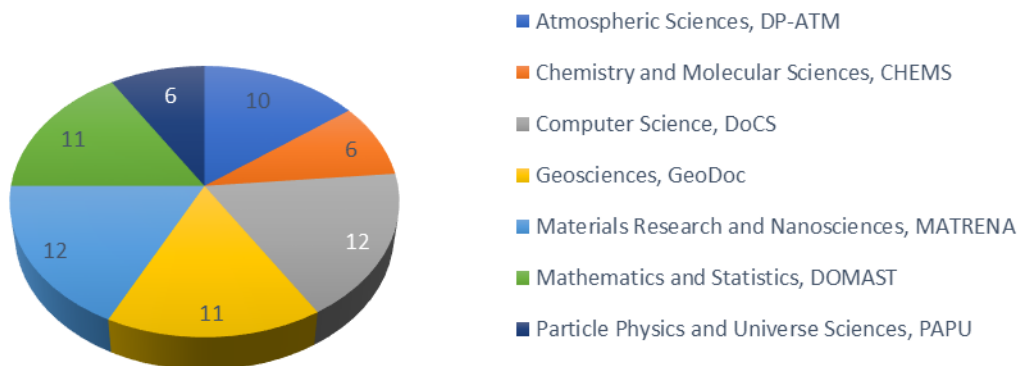
Health, DSHealth



Humanities and Social Sciences, HYMY



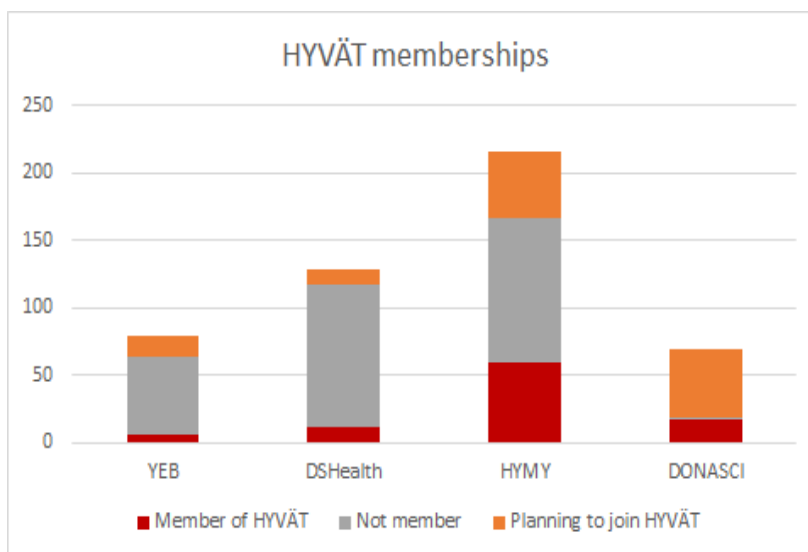
Natural Sciences, DONASCI



HYVÄT membership

In total, 19 % of the respondents were members of HYVÄT, but we are delighted to see how many are considering joining. There are huge differences between the campuses on how appealing they see the association, and if they had even heard about it.

The main reasons why people have joined were that they think it is important to have an association representing the doctoral students and supporting them (19), and because HYVÄT provides valuable information (4). People also joined because of the social events (8).

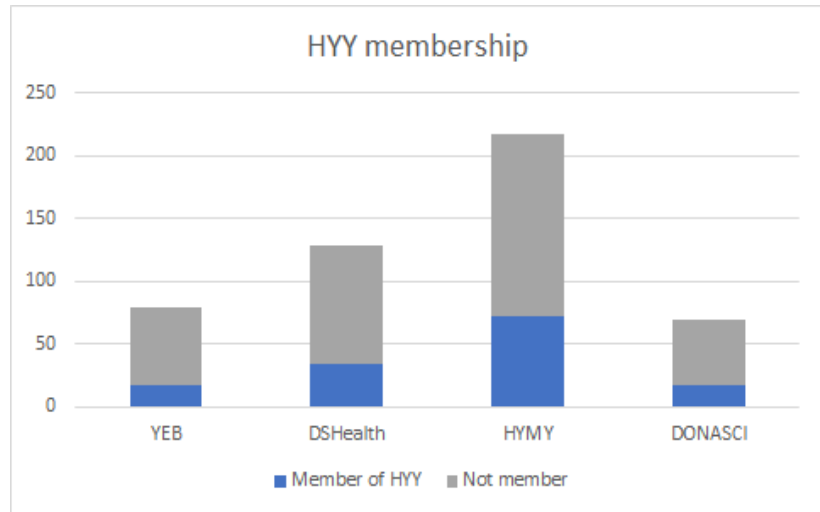


The main reason why people are not members is that they did not know about the association (150), and because they did not see the benefit (29). The respondents commented on not having the time for HYVÄT (17), for example because of another job. One person explicitly said that he did not agree with the association's opinions. Those planning to join were mostly unaware of HYVÄT (17) or had not gotten around joining yet (17).

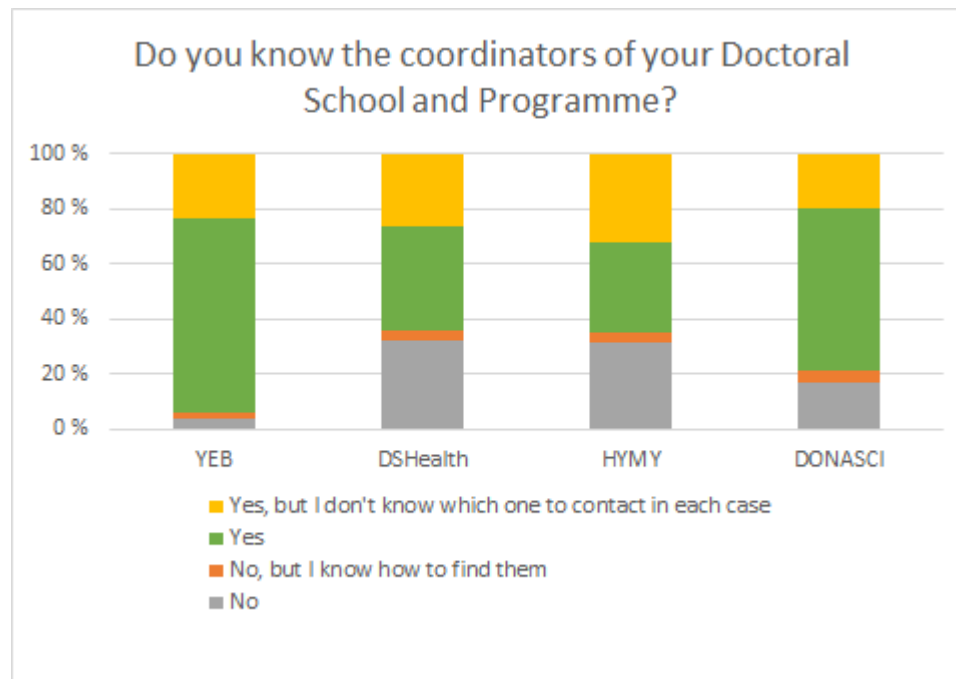
HYY membership

In total, 28 % of the respondents were members of HYY. The portions were quite similar across all the doctoral schools. It is surprising to see that the percentage is higher than that of HYVÄT membership.

The main ways HYY could become more relevant are to offer more discounts and benefits (167), specifically healthcare services, transport, and cheaper meals. There was no consensus on the most valuable existing benefits. In addition, many said that it seems that HYY does not care about PhD students or does not represent them. Some people asked for childcare services and help for PhD students to find a job.



School and Programme coordinators

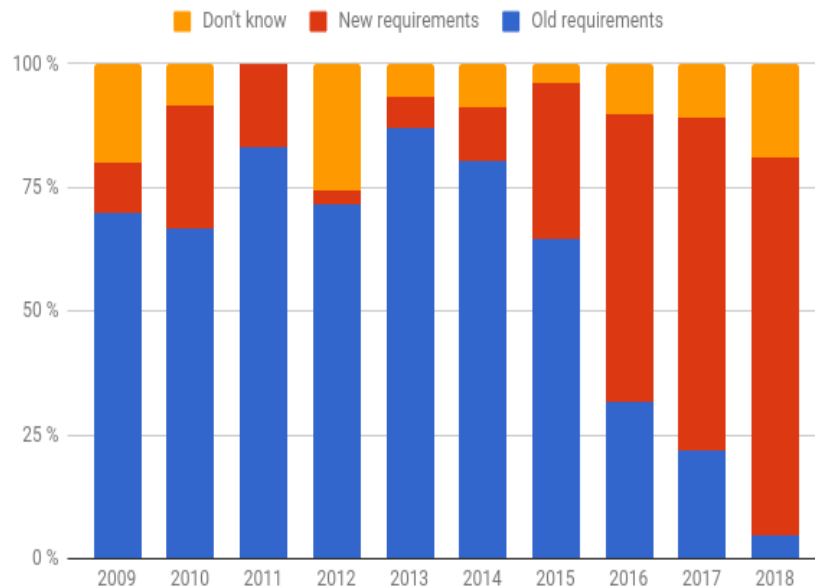


The coordinators were known relatively well, though there were some variations between the Doctoral Schools. There was still a lot of uncertainty related to the changes in the beginning of 2018. Many also did not remember the coordinators by name, but were confident that they could find them when needed.

Study requirements

The study requirements will change in August 2020 and everyone graduating after that will have to follow the new requirements. Those who are going to defend before can choose whether to switch to the new system or stay in the old.

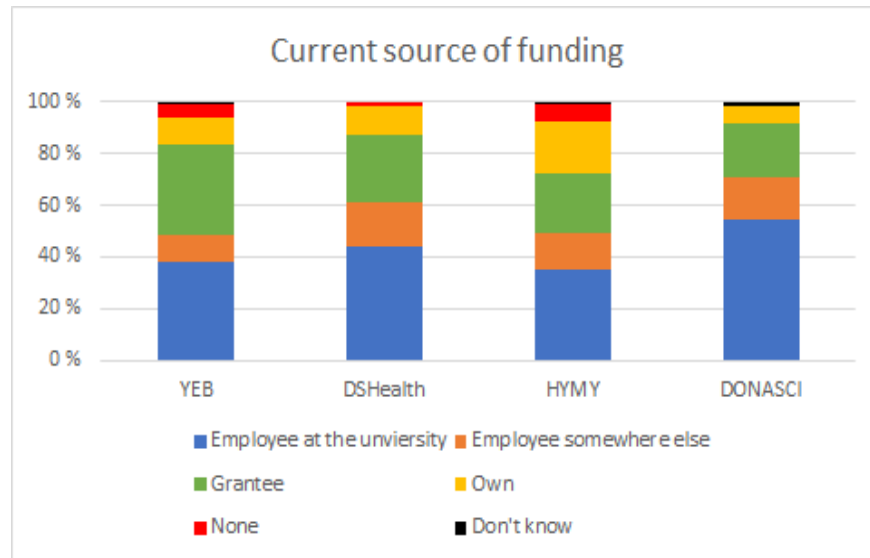
Grouping the share of both requirements by the starting year of the PhD studies shows that a vast majority of those who started before 2016 are planning to follow the old requirements, while the newest students are basically all following the new ones (exactly as they should). In addition, 11 % of the respondents either had not yet decided or do not yet know which ones to follow.



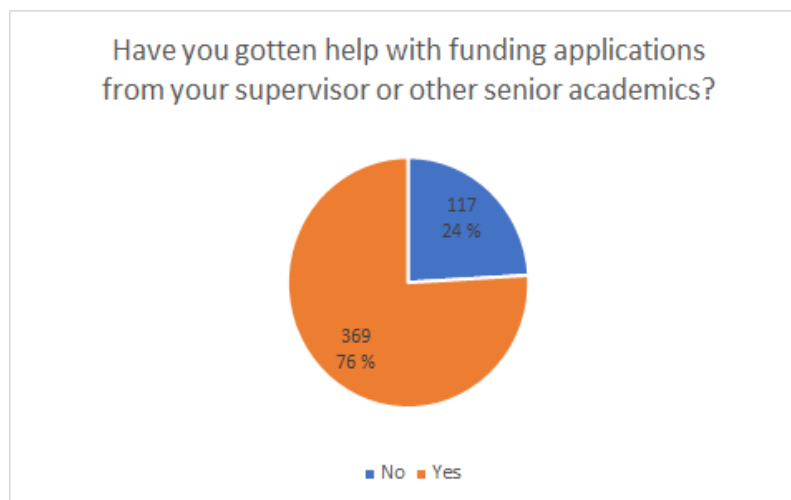
Children

149 people responded to have children. 43 people reported having problems in combining PhD and work life, but did not specify in which way. Some of the main difficulties reported were scheduling issues, i.e. having to attend lectures very early or very late or having to find a babysitter to attend lectures during the day. People also reported that the combination of PhD-work-family was very challenging. In addition, PhD work takes a lot of time, which takes time away from the families (10). Not everyone had difficulties, mostly due to having older children or a helpful spouse/family. 10 people reported that combining a PhD with a family is actually easier than combining regular work with family due to the flexible hours.

Source of funding

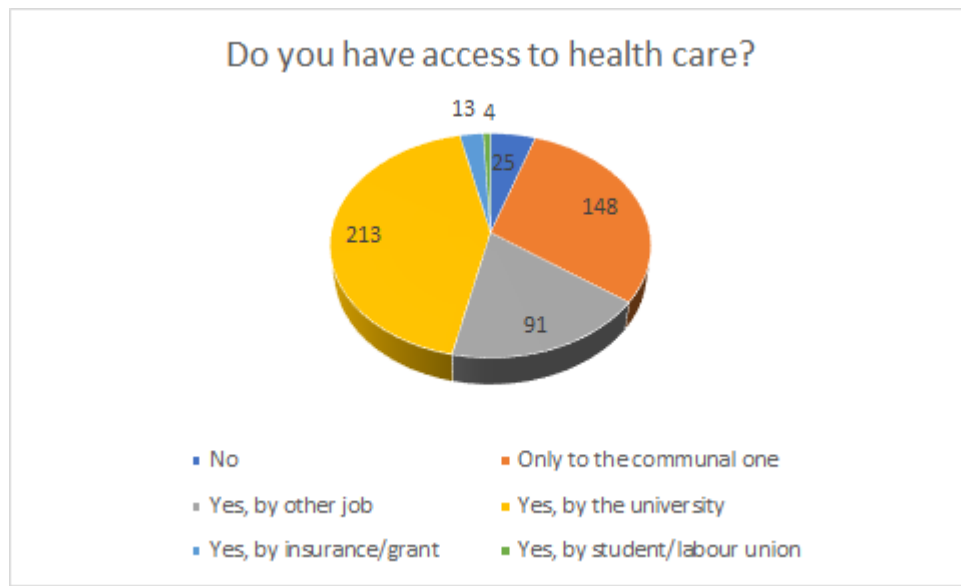


Funding is probably the largest reason for inequality between the PhD students. In the graph for the source of funding for doctoral students in each Doctoral School, we can see that there is quite a lot of variation between the schools. Most alarming are the portions of respondents who use their own savings or unemployment benefits to finance their living. Almost 25 % of the people in HYMY belong to the latter category. In more working-group oriented DONASCI and DSHealth the problem is smaller.



Most of the respondents answered that their supervisor or other senior academics have helped them with funding applications.

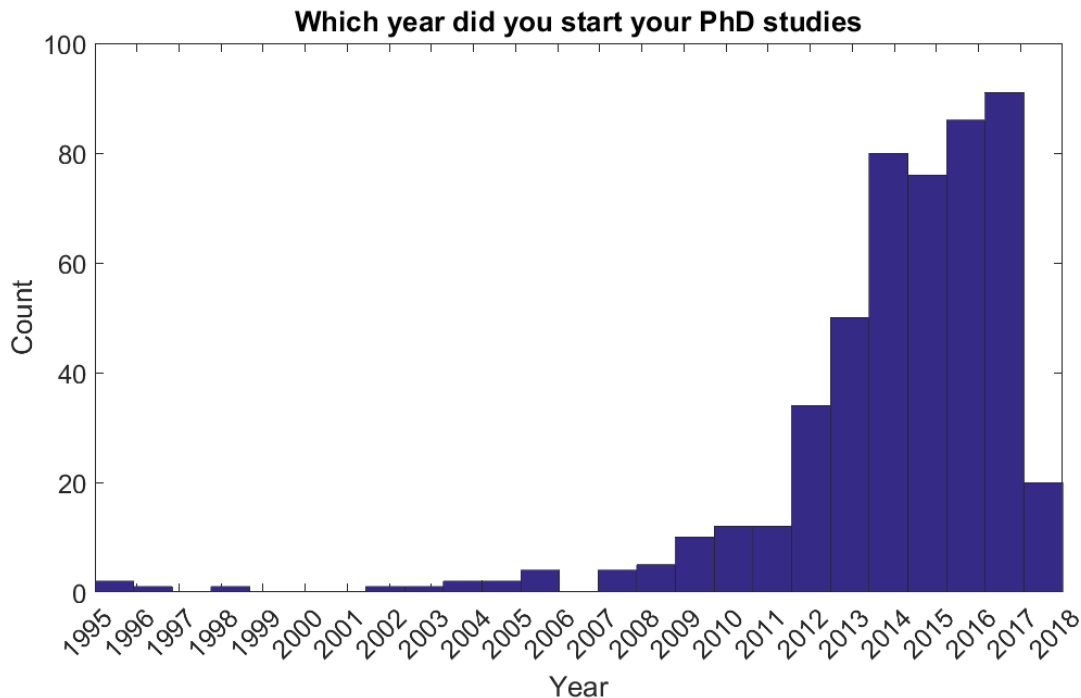
Health care



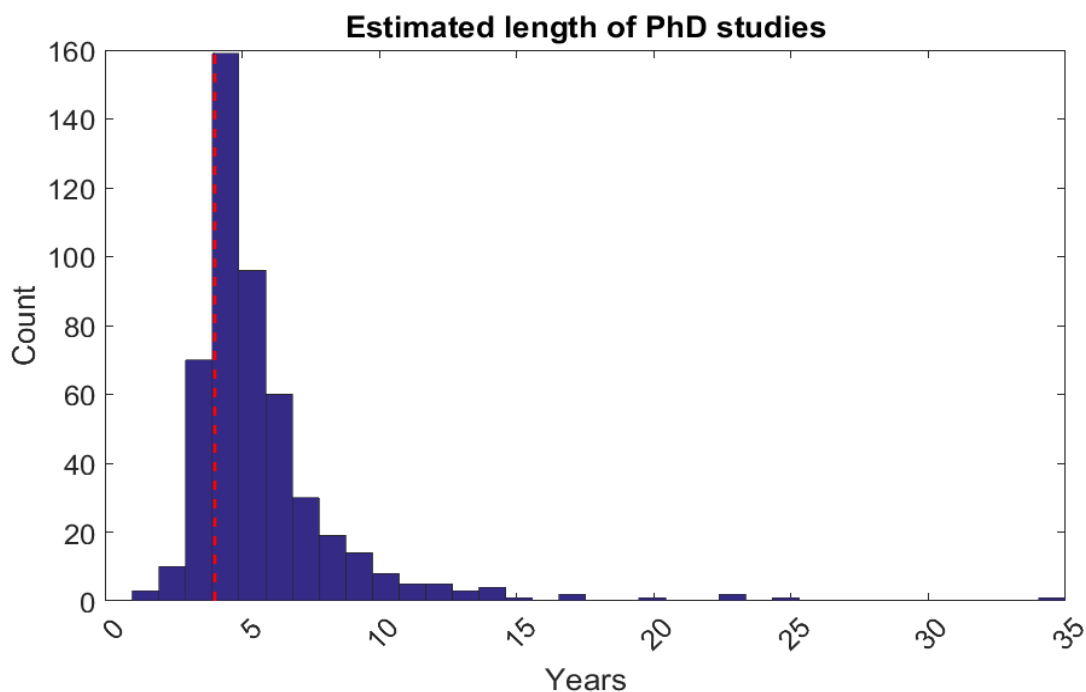
After funding, health care is another major divider. The lack of other than the communal health care often concerns the same people who have no funding or are working on a grant.

4. PhD progress

A vast majority of the respondents are currently enrolled at the university, only 1 % are not.

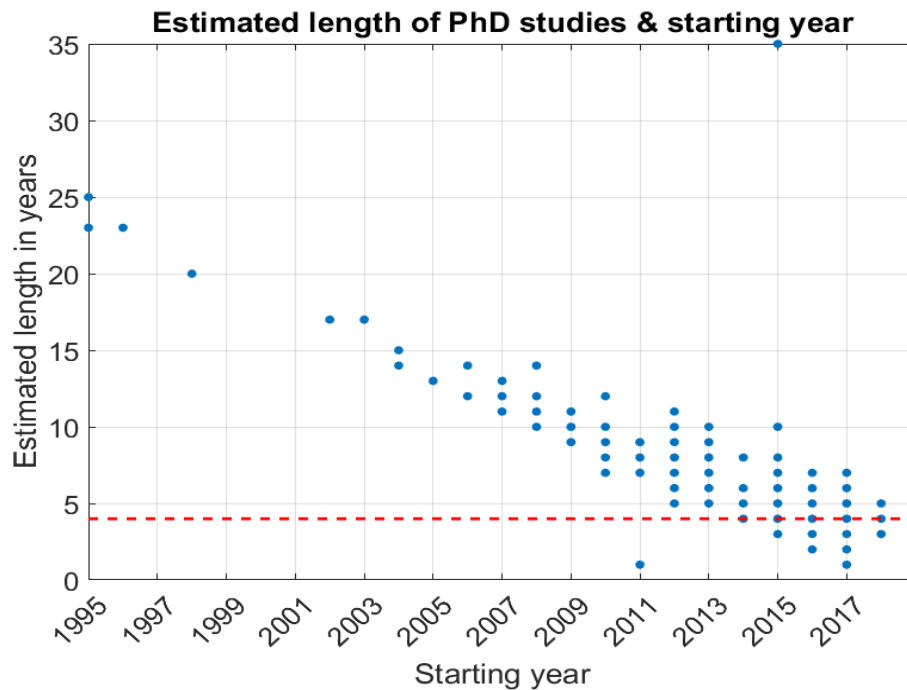


The starting year of the PhD studies shows the highest numbers between years 2014–2017, which is a good sign since all of them could still achieve the optimal graduation time. However, some had started over 20 years ago. There can be various reasons for the prolonged studies, but it should be in everyone's interest to follow a solid plan with a reasonable study time.



We also asked for the estimated year of graduation in the survey. From this, we can see that most of the people are aiming to defend in between 3 to 6 years since their start. On average, those who started after 2014 expect their PhD studies to last 4.27 years, which is only slightly above the target time. However, there are again some very long target times, which need to be inspected carefully.

The graphic below shows the estimated length of PhD studies against the starting year, which shows a nicely decreasing slope. The red dotted line shows the optimal graduation time of four years. Naturally, one must consider that those who have started earlier cannot any more reach the target time and some of the new students will most probably fail to meet it even though they are now planning not to. However, it seems that the new system for doctoral education introduced in 2014 has made a positive mark on the study times.

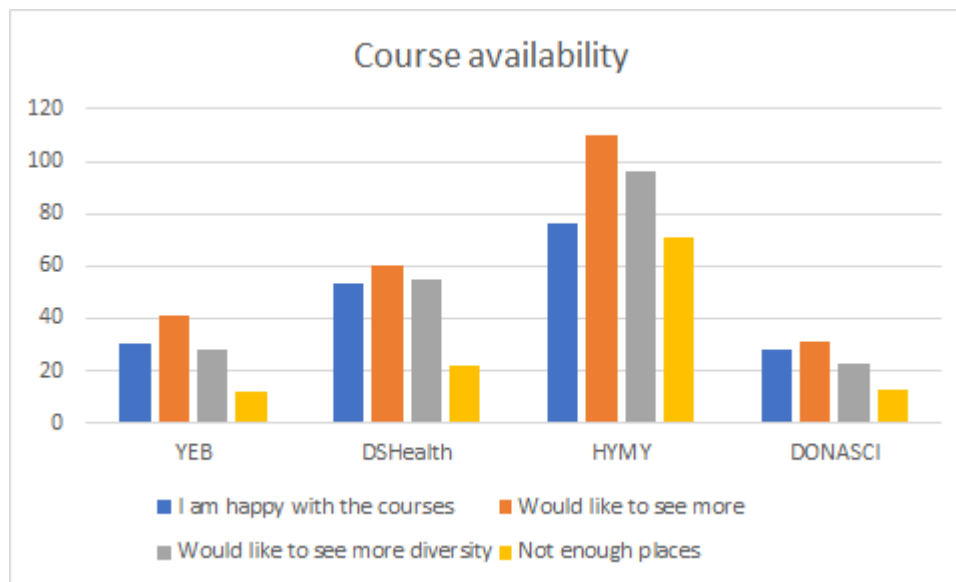
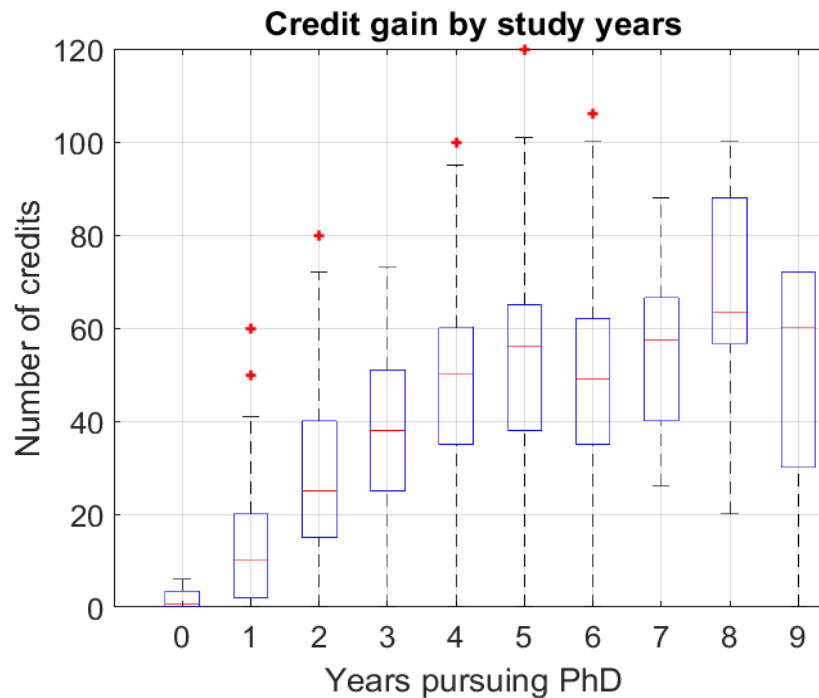


Courses

The credit requirement for PhD students depends on the study requirements they are following, which makes it more difficult to compare the amount of credits gained.

The figure below shows the number of credits gained during each year of PhD studies. The horizontal red lines show the median values, while the blue boxes show the bounds of the region between 25 % and 75 % of answers. The dotted whiskers show the extreme values in the data and red crosses are special cases excluded from the statistics.

In the graph we can see that the median value of course credits reaches almost the 60 credits of the old requirements in 4 years of PhD studies. However, still at 6 years there are some who have not completed any courses at all.



In general, the level of PhD courses was experienced to be good, although there were some differences between the Doctoral Schools.

In all the schools the respondents wished for

- More information on courses, their requirements, and level of challenge.
- More flexibility: both day courses and night courses were favoured and many suggested online courses to reach the masses of the busy PhD students.
- Courses about transferable skills were liked, but their goals should be informed more clearly.
- All the courses should be available for all PhD students, not just employees.
- Also, there were opinions for and against courses held in English.

The more school specific results show the following notes.

YEB

- More courses in English
- Courses only for PhDs (not for undergraduates)
- More methodological courses
- Some really long courses have mandatory participation

DSHealth

- Specific courses on own research topics
- More methodology courses
- It is difficult to combine the courses with family, work and working somewhere else
- Lack of information on the course schedules

HYMY

- More information needed, this was a major issue in the answers
- Many have not started with the courses
- Some unhappiness about the course content

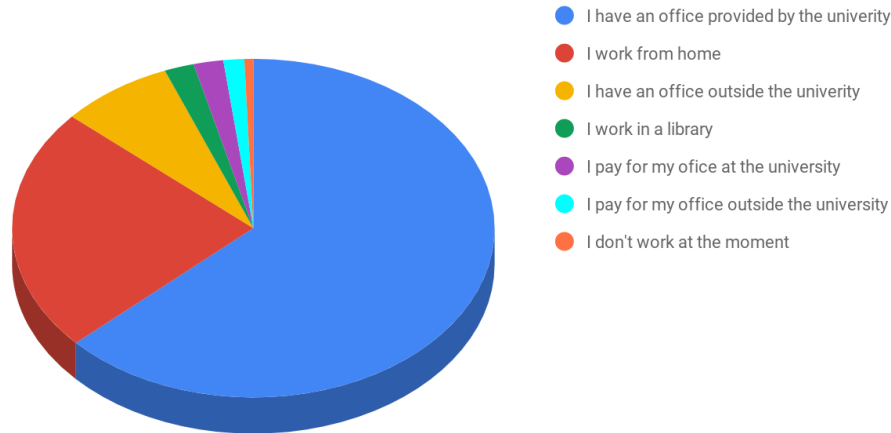
DONASCI

- More career and company oriented courses
- Information on the course schedules comes too late

5. Research

Office space

Office Space



Examples from the open answers

"I am applying for the University Socrates office space, but it takes time. I have got an expired link with the application form. It is complicated because have to meet the responsible person, emailing doesn't work."

"I had a shared office space provided by the university (which I found very useful) but was "kicked out" after a policy change regarding PhDs who did not have funding from the university."

"I had an office space provided by the university for the majority of my studies (when I was employed by the university). At the end, when I was working on a grant, I would have had to pay if I would have wanted an office for more than 4 months."

"I have gotten a key to the researcher's hall, but I got helped by another student, who had an old link for an application etc... I tried to get the key couple of times from my coordinator, but received a negative answer, since i did not have funding, despite the fact that the spaces have been made free, for all PhD candidates, and there were constantly free computers."

"I have office space by the university. I have to pay now because of my grant says so (Cultural foundation). I won't be paying when I start with another grant."

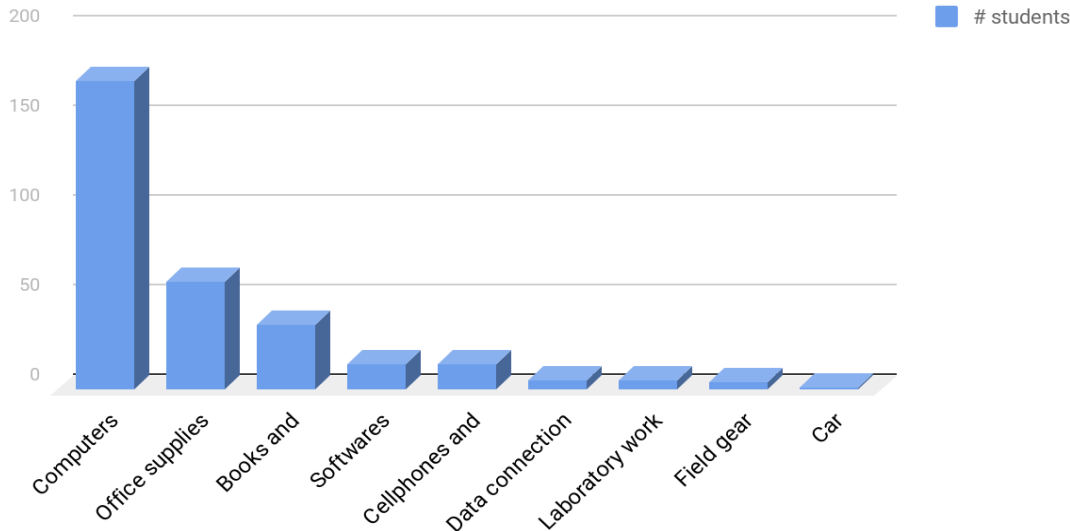
"I need to pay for the office space at the university but my grant included some amount of money for that."

"I pay for the office space somewhere else, which is ridiculous."

Research material and equipment

335 answered that they are provided with the necessary material and equipment by the university. However, many still must use some own equipment in their work, most commonly own laptop and office supplies.

Own equipment and material



Examples from the open answers:

"My project has no more research funding (laboratory chemicals etc.), I have to rely on our remainders and on other groups' mercy, supposedly one day also my private money."

"Sometimes I need to use cameras, camera stands and accessories that are not provided by the university. There should be some sort of a library for equipment to be loaned for PhD students, since at the moment specific equipment is allocated to specific research groups and it is difficult to arrange use of equipment with a different group. Buying equipment for your own group might not be a relevant option when you do very specific research with equipment others don't need, and you also won't after you're done."

"I acquire the tissue samples myself, and pay for the transport expenses myself."

"I do need to use my own laptop. In addition, the lack of access to proper databases is a significant problem in my research field. Doing empirical research with only publicly available data, not even having the same data access as the PhD students at Aalto, is sometimes a little bit daunting."

"I have my own laptop. I am also disabled so I need ergonomic solutions for my laptop; these I have bought myself. I need also a digital camera and other research equipment which I have to buy myself. There are also books which are not available in Finland and I have had to buy them myself or pay to borrow them from outside."

"I use my own laptop. I have a desktop machine at work. I have been promised a work laptop with the necessary statistics programmes, but (ten months and counting) they haven't turned up, yet."

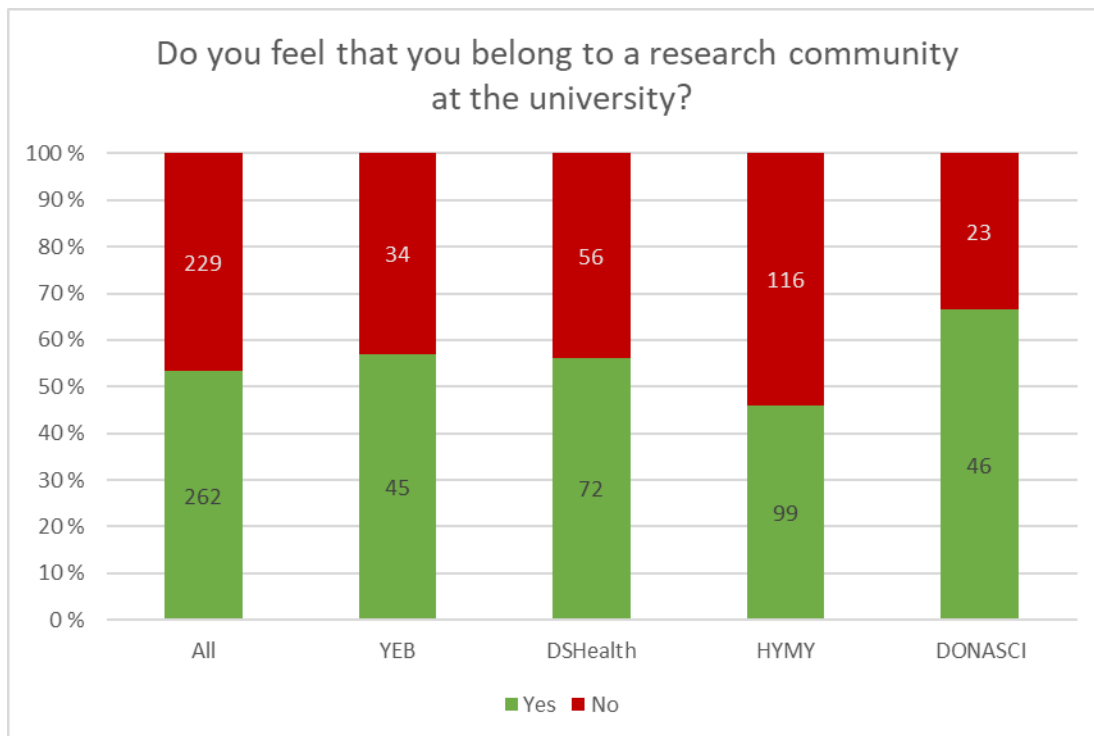
"I'm paying everything on my own. I think that the university should provide at least an office space to work in and to collaborate with other PhD students within my research area. More academic discussion and network possibilities are needed."

"In practice I have to use my own computer. We have old computers, but you can't take them home as they are not laptops, so there is no way I could rely on this equipment. The opportunity to get a new work laptop was offered about a year ago and we are still in the process of ordering the computers. This doesn't personally bother me as I am happy to use my own laptop but I have to say that this whole process has been ridiculous. My contract at the university ends this year, after which I can't probably keep the work laptop, so I probably will not have the opportunity to use my new laptop ordered for me at all. This problem is related to not having enough administrative staff, but nobody seems to care. "

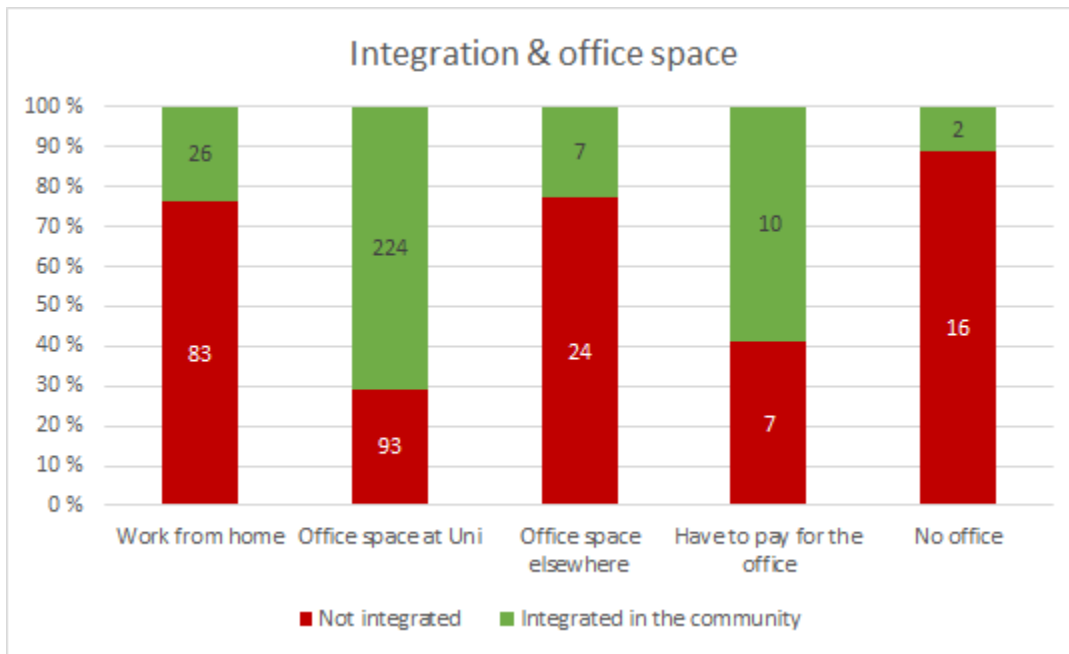
"I have a computer provided, but I use my own laptop, and I work a lot from home since I need my more powerful home PC for the heavy data processing and analysis I do."

"I use my own laptop. I have downloaded the SPSS from the university. I have a computer, that doesn't really work (it is slow, and doesn't include any programme I need and I would need to order someone to download them for me but I haven't found it necessary because the computer is generally so slow that I prefer using my own laptop)."

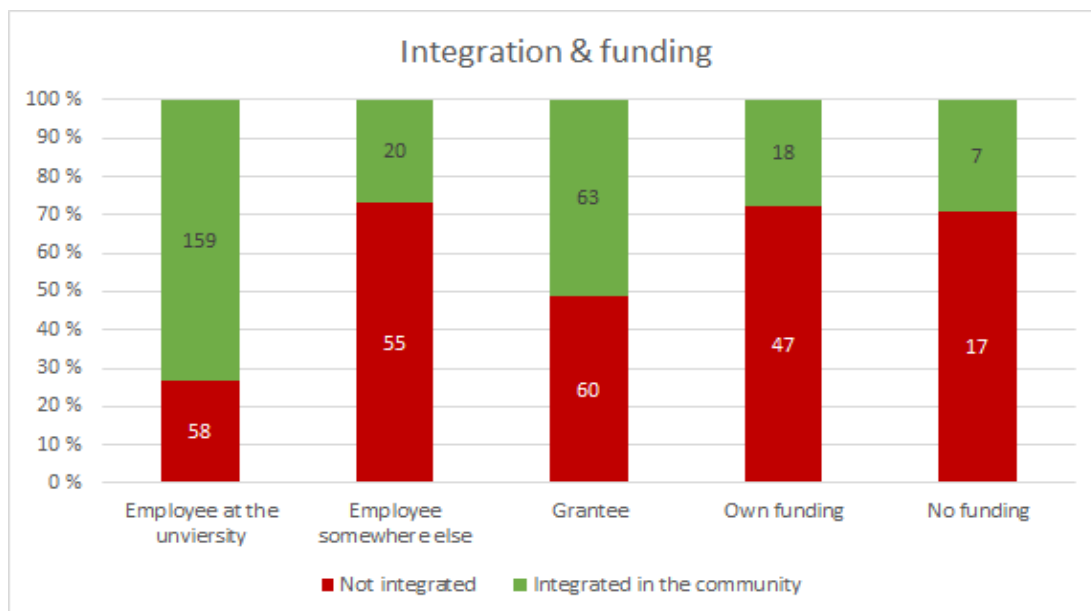
Integration into the research community



47 % of all the PhD students do not feel that they belong to the research community at the university. This is an alarming number and needs to be taken seriously and analysed carefully.

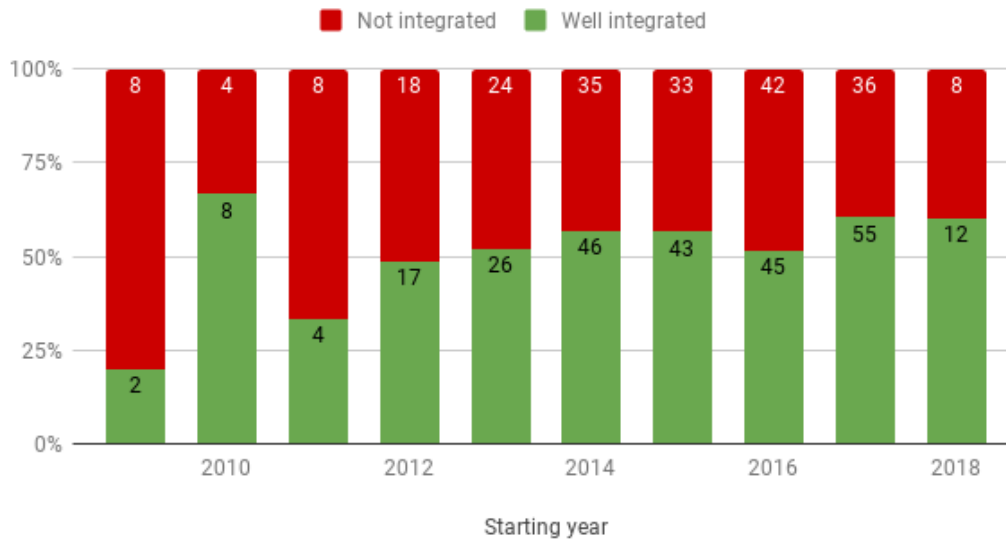


The graph shows how the integration correlates strongly with having an office space at the university. Those who work somewhere else than their research group or their colleagues at the department often reported feeling left alone by the community. Out of those with office space somewhere else, most of the people feeling integrated were working in institutes closely related to the university such as the Finnish Meteorological Institute.



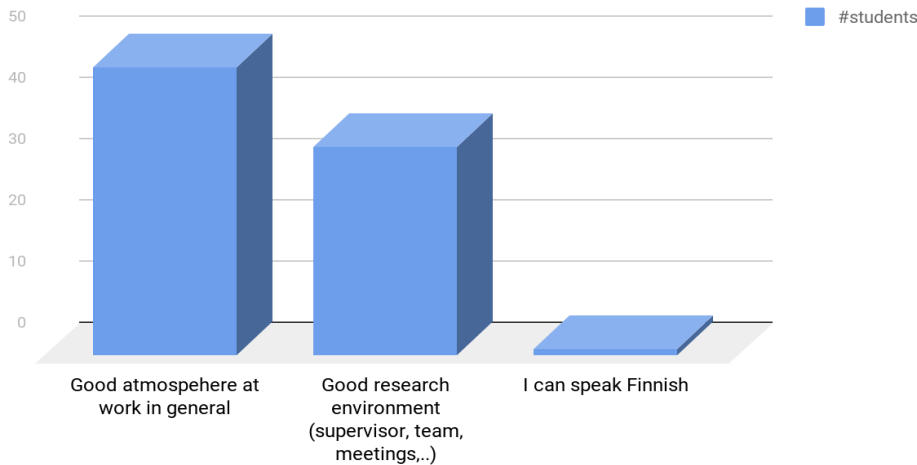
Not so surprisingly, a similar correlation can be seen between the status of funding and the integration, as the funding is usually a criterion for having an office space.

Integration against starting year

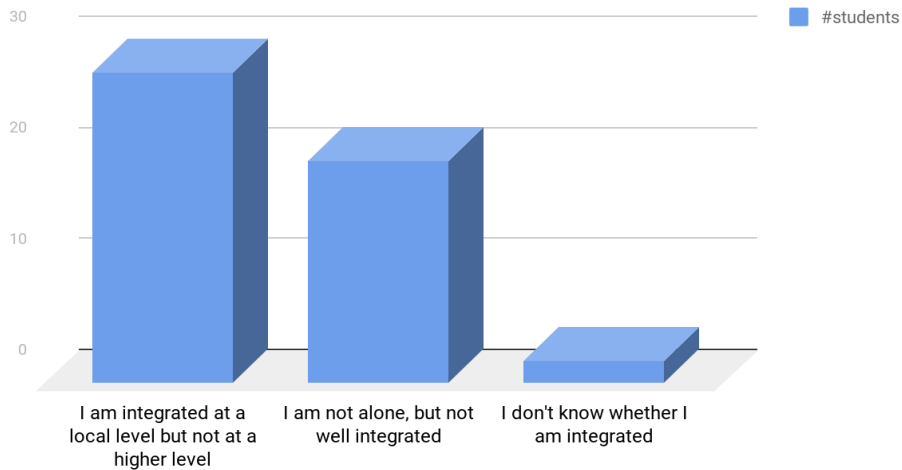


In this graph we see how the integration generally gets lower when the PhD work has lasted longer than the target time of four years. It is understandable that after the goal time is exceeded, the motivation drops and finishing the thesis takes even longer – especially with poor integration to the research community,

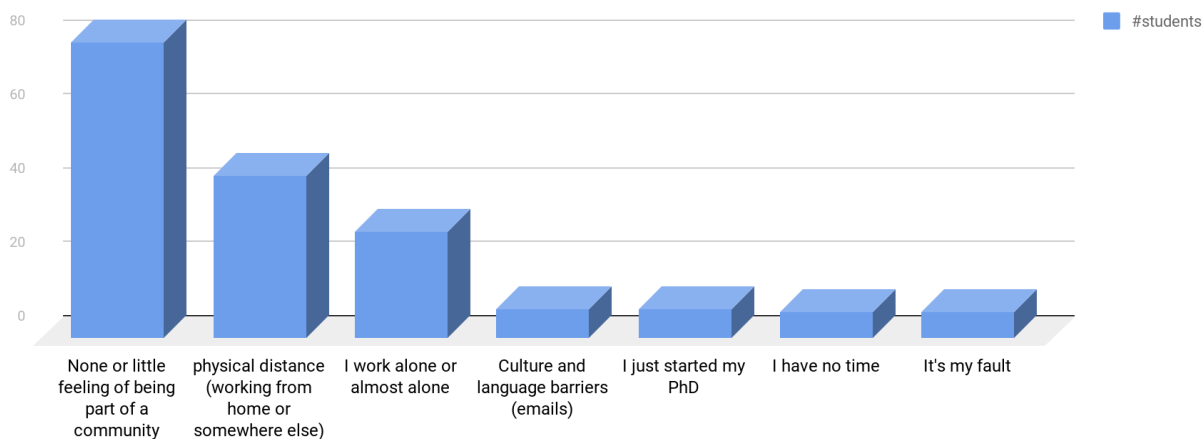
I do feel integrated because:



I feel so-so integrated because:



I do not feel integrated because:



Examples from the open answers:

"[I do not feel integrated] because I am not aware of what is going on; I do not know many people and have no chance to interact with them; the language is still a great barrier in my Faculty; there are no social events; communication does not flow properly; I have no space to work at the university; even though I volunteered for teaching, I have never been given any course; I do not know the administrative staff of my doctoral program and of the Faculty (I do not know who to contact in case I have questions)."

"Even when you're employed by the university, you don't get to participate in things like staff meetings - even if I did I still wouldn't feel like I'm on the same line with other 'full-member' staff, but it would be beneficial to be part of all the regular staff things, to see how things are done."

"Exactly how would one feel integrated when there are no courses, everything changes all the time and the University does not seem to care about the quality of research or teaching but of constant re-arranging of everything with no clear plan of anything?"

"I believe there are not many spaces to integrate Finnish and non-Finnish communities, we are quite separated."

"I don't think that PhD students matter in the university. No one really cares how they are doing, or do they have problems with their projects."

"I feel like us who work on grants do not really belong to the research community."

"I feel that the other PhD students in my department are competitive and either indifferent or hostile towards me. I don't respect them and have no desire to compete with them. I have little or no contact with the staff of my department."

"I was workplace bullied. Now I don't have any contact with the so-called community."

"It is a horrible environment, almost no interaction, I regret to be here. Even though I try to interact, it does not help much."

"It is changing but we had almost no English social event. Most of emails are in Finnish. We (international students) tried to discuss these issues and it has changed a bit. They try to provide emails in English too. "

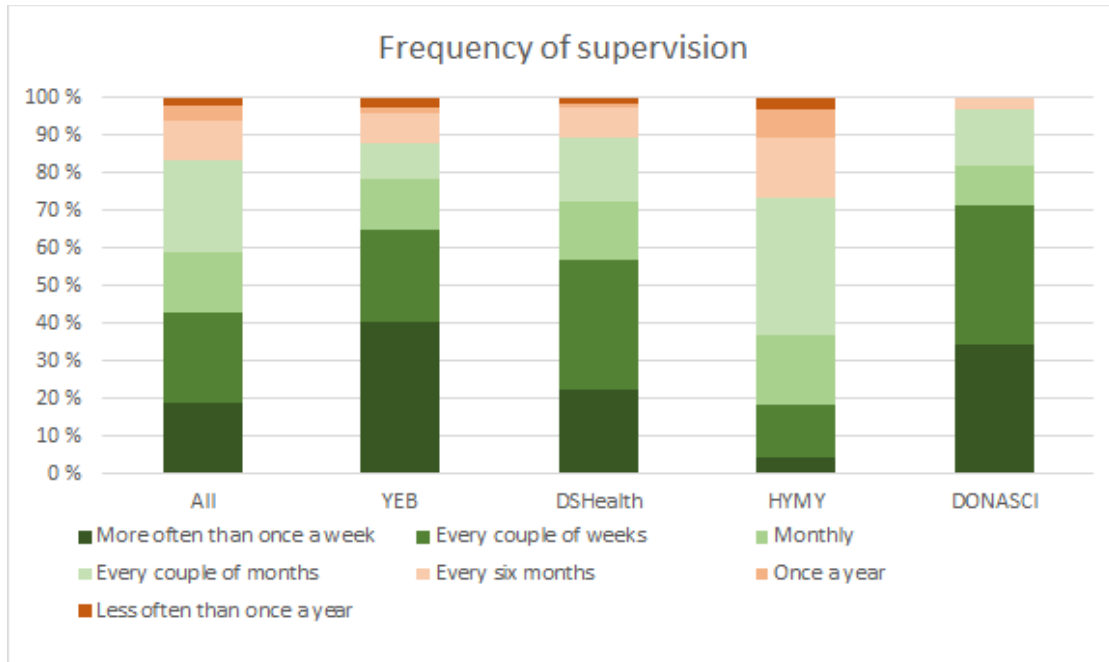
"No-one cares about anything I do, or even whether I exist or not."

"Our seminar sucks in the sense that there is no feel of unity. I never got a working space at the uni. And the grantee PhD students in my program are not integrated with those working at the department."

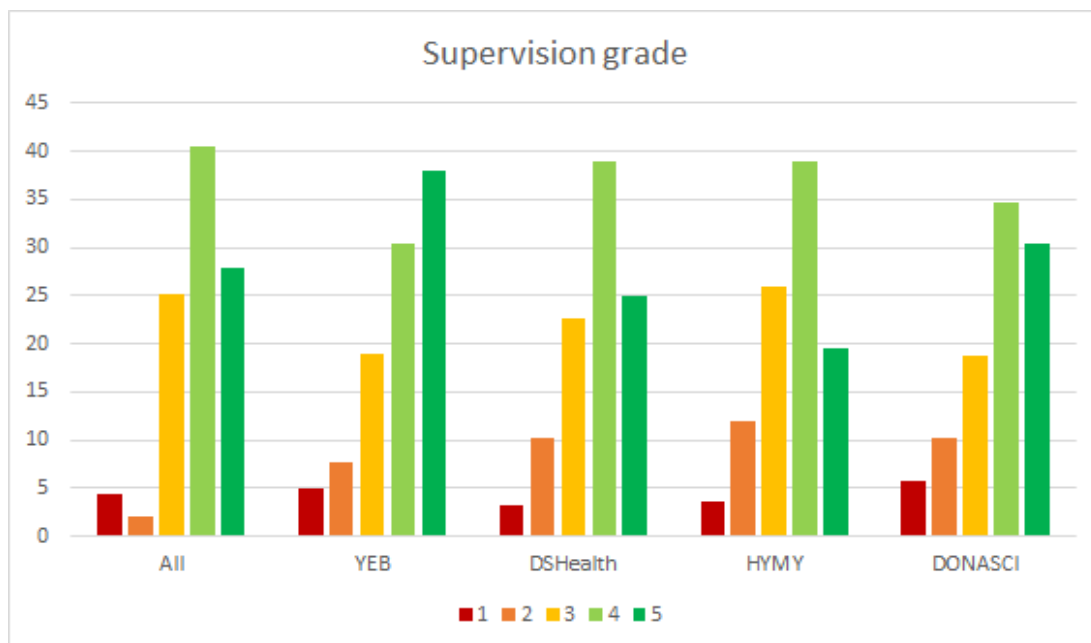
"The neuroscience community is full of corruption and bullying and I feel mentally sick from it."

"We have a great and inspiring atmosphere among the doctoral students, but I feel rather disconnected from the other members of the faculty/my department."

6. Supervision



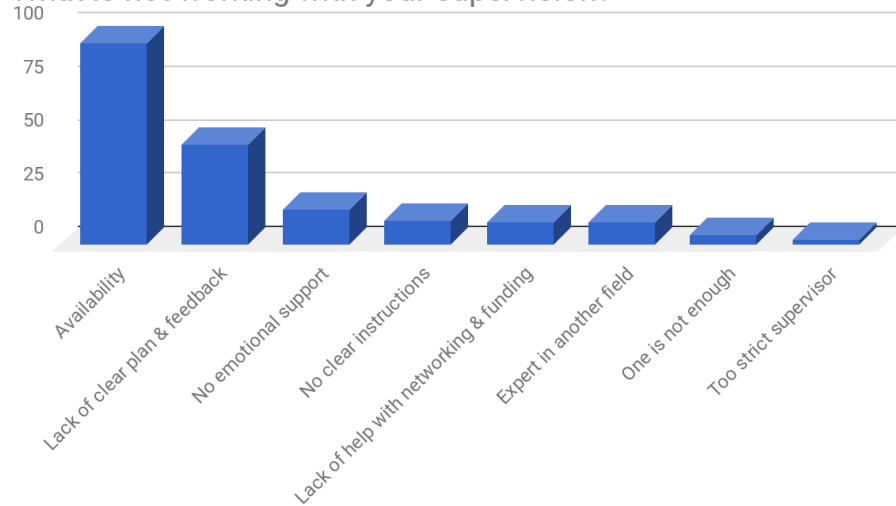
There were large variations in how often the PhD students meet their supervisors. Many see them every day, while some do not meet even once a year. Again, there are large differences between the Doctoral Schools as, not surprisingly, the employment status greatly affects how often the meetings take place. It is noteworthy that there are also people that in principle see their supervisors very often, but only seldomly speak about their thesis work.



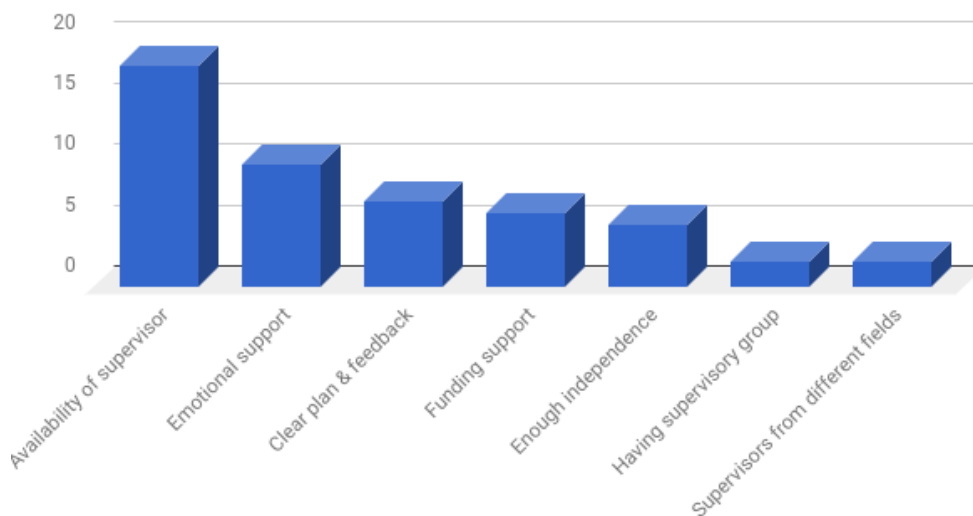
In general, the supervision received good grades across all the Doctoral Schools. The average score was 3.7/5. Out of the schools, YEB received the highest score and HYMY the lowest, but the difference is only 0.3 points. Nevertheless, it is important to focus on the lowest red tails of the graphs, as there are around 5 % of the respondents who gave the lowest possible grade.

What is working and not working with Supervision?

What is not working with your supervision?



What is working with your supervision?



According to these two graphs, one of the main concerns of doctoral students is having regular meetings with their supervisors more often in order to plan their work and receive clear instructions and feedback. They believe that besides the practical issues they need to be connected to their supervisors emotionally since doing a PhD is very challenging and emotional support and encouragement is needed. They expect the supervisors not to look at them as only producers of articles but as human beings who have feelings. They explained in their comments that these practical issues plus lack of emotional support could lead to stress, anxiety and burnout.

Examples from the open answers:

"If I could even see my supervisors sometimes. I've been supervised by a postdoc that is not my official supervisor and is not obligated to do so. But that is all I have because my other two supervisors don't simply care."

"No complaints. Sure, sometimes I feel like I've been dropped into the deep end but I think the help would be there if I really felt like cracking. Supervisors answer my mails as quickly as they can be expected and are very supportive."

"We have a personal 1h meeting every two weeks. I can visit my supervisor whenever I want. We also have our group meetings twice a month so there is ample opportunities to address issues or new ideas (NOTE: we have a group of 6 PhD students and still all works nicely)"

"My supervisor has supported me financially and scientifically and has done everything in their power to create a nice progressive and meaningful study environment for me and for our research group."

"My supervisor is competent and helpful, but also seems to be quite busy, and sometimes I'm not sure she has the time and effort to really help me where it would be necessary. Furthermore, I am worried that while supervisors usually have multiple students, they might favor some of them."

"My supervisor has little time to spend on my research project. And the feeling is he does not care about me and my research. But he is very helpful in offering me all the financial support I need to travel and collaborate with other researchers."

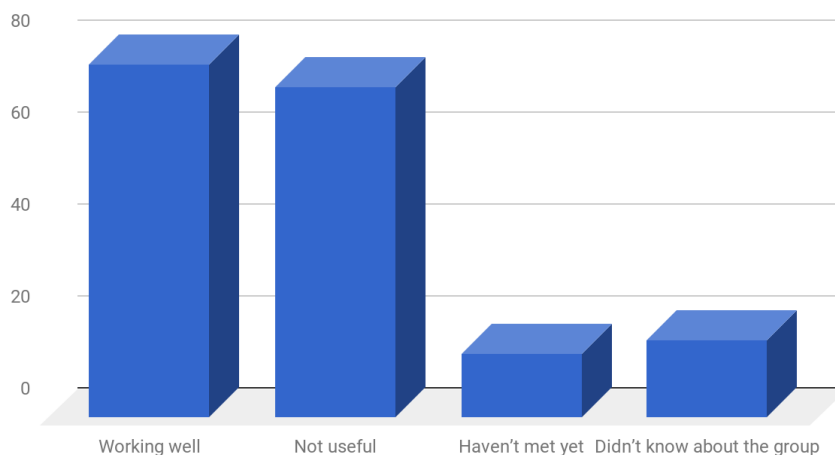
"We do not have time to discuss and I do not feel the supervisor being supportive."

"I don't always get answers to my questions. The plan is not clear."

Supervisory group functioning

The supervisory groups will be implemented in all the programs by 2020 August, but 180 of the respondents already have experience of the groups. Their comments showed mixed opinions: some found the groups working well, while others found them problematic.

How is your supervisory group functioning?



Working well because of

- Regular meetings
- Useful feedback
- Planning for future
- Encouraging
- Supporting

Not useful because of

- Too much bureaucracy
- No flexibility
- Not based on needs
- Not organized
- Confusing
- Supervisors do not relate to my field
- Busy irresponsible supervisors

Examples from the open answers:

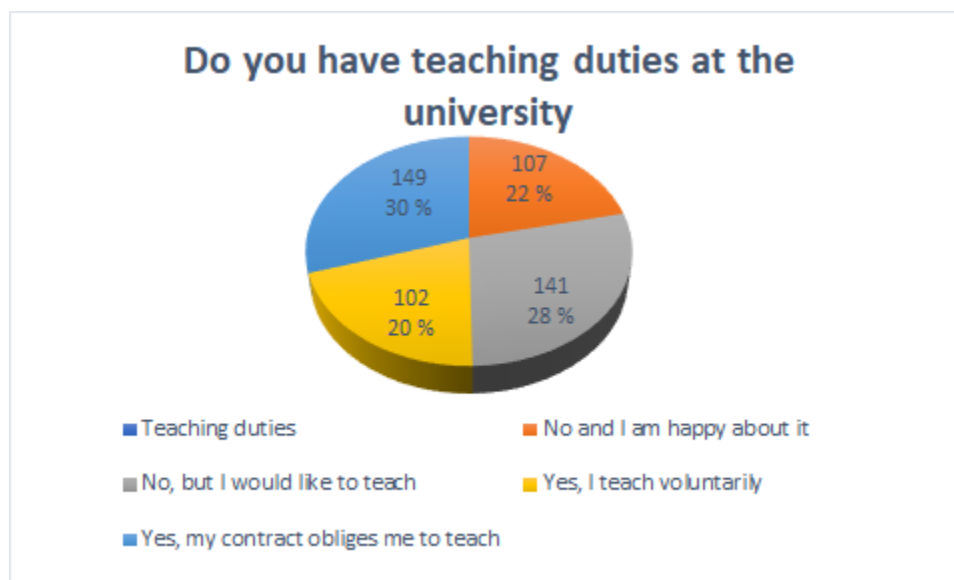
"I find it bureaucratic and not useful. The idea is good, but in practice not so much."

"It feels like a pointless obligation. Out of the two people in my group, one is involved in so many international activities that he can never be present at the meetings, so he just signs the papers, and never even gives any feedback. According to my primary supervisor, this is normal and not a problem."

"I have two people in my supervisory group that are not my supervisors. It has proven to be useful. We've had good discussions and both persons seem also able to evaluate the progress of the project critically."

"This is the first time I hear about this but I expect to have completed by PhD before 2020 so I guess it does not really concern me. Based on the above, sounds like a good concept."

7. Teaching



- Approx. ½ of the respondents have teaching duties.
- Approx. ¾ of the respondents teach or are willing to teach
- Only approx. ¼ of the respondents are not willing to teach

Different kinds of teaching duties

- The respondents often take part in teaching as assistants or share their duties with someone else
- 36 % of the respondents have had full responsibility on courses
- Many of the respondents are taking part in supervising bachelor (36 %) or master (38 %) theses
- The respondents have different kinds of teaching / supervising duties at the same time

During the last year...

- Most of the respondents have been in charge of not more than one course
- According to open-ended answers the respondents, generally, have had not more than one or two master level theses to co-supervise
- Very few of the respondents were "*Involved with half of a dozen courses and two master's theses*", had "*opetusta 4 kurssilla, 4 kandityötä*" or informed of "*About 30*" units of this kind

How much time teaching takes on yearly average

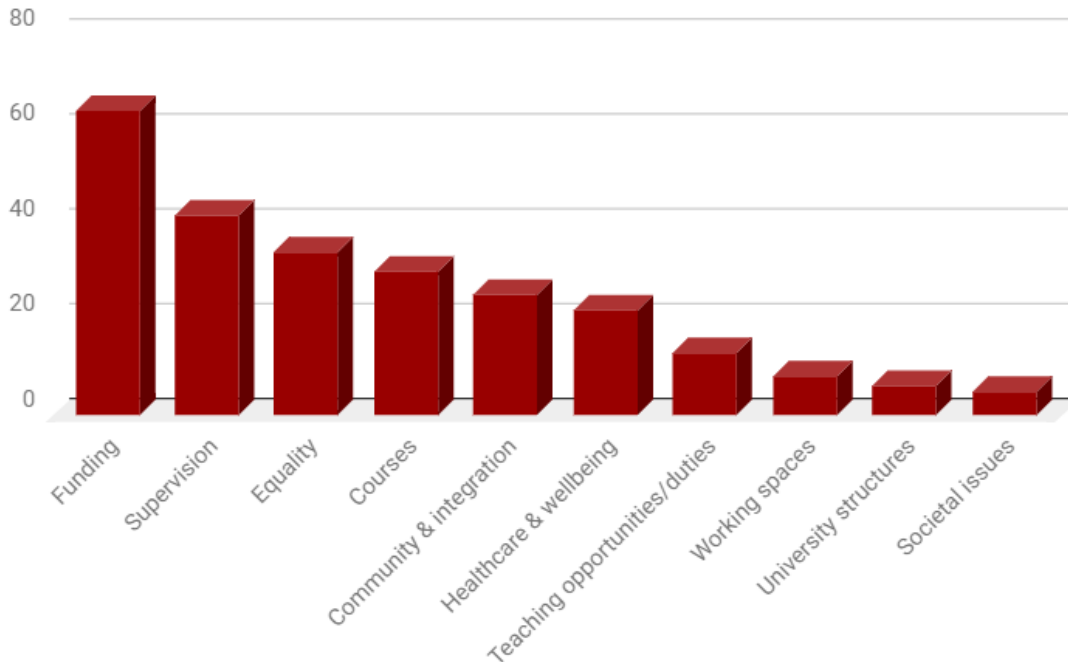
- 70 % of the respondents who teach spend about 10% of their time on teaching
- 18 % spend about 20% of their working time
- 11 % spend more time, e.g. 2,7% - 50%
- In the advocacy part some commented that they are asked to teach for free, and that they are used too much as a free teaching resource, which then takes time from their research

8. Advocacy

260 of the 506 persons answered this question.

Most respondents mentioned more than one thing as the most important topic for advocacy. The three topics that clearly are seen as the most pressing ones are: 1) funding, 2) supervision, 3) equality between doctoral students. In addition, also many other topics were brought up. All the different topics are being presented in detail below, in the order of how many times they were mentioned.

Most important topics for advocacy



Funding

In total, 64 persons mentioned funding as the most pressing issue. Mainly these answers were concerned about the lack of funding and the short-term funding so many PhD students are working on. This was seen as both stressful and time consuming because the writing of grant applications is time consuming, and therefore time not spent on doing research. Many also asked for help and support with the funding applications. Many hoped for more stability and long-term funding, and four-year paid positions were seen as the most appropriate solution. Not only the lack of funding, but also the very small salaries and the varying non-transparent university practices of determining the amount of salary were seen as problematic.

Some respondents also mentioned the need for travel money and funding for fieldwork.

A few respondents also hoped for support with the costs for language check and printing the thesis.

Examples from the open answers:

"Increasing the salary! PhD students are barely making ends meet. Also, having more consistent and reliable contracts. So, a PhD student does not expend 30 percent of their time applying for different funds and applications and always being worried if they are going to have funding for the next year or not."

"I would recommend taking action on looking at how other countries have organized PhD candidates and bring more practices to here. In Sweden for example there is required to have a certain funding before starting. Despite this would probably lower the amount of candidates, it could make the PhD process more straightforward. Each student would have certain fixed amount of travel funding per PhD student and they could use it as they see fit. This would reduce the time to applying and uncertainty, which is currently a challenge."

"The most important long-term topic is the situation of precarious PhD students on short grants or even no funding. They need lenient policies regarding workspaces and opportunities to make contacts more widely than with just their supervisor, who may him or herself be overwhelmed with supervising other, better funded PhD projects. In relation to this, maintaining as many directly funded (by the university) PhD positions as possible."

"Equal status between salaried PhD students and grantees (currently works ok, but vigilance is needed so that grantees are not considered second class students), proper pay for TA:ing courses (and at least clearer information on what is included in the salary so that it is easier to stand up for oneself), clearer guidelines on how salaried positions are decided on (current system seems unfair, since it is not clear why some people get a 4 year (or even 2 year) paid position while others have to write crazy amounts of grant applications every single year - in my experience it is not based on merit, but rather on who needs it and who the professors like. An additional issue is that you cannot in general apply for both a working grant and a travel grant from the same foundation, meaning that the salaried PhD students always get more travel grants as well."

"Salary equality among PhD students! Even though the salary should be based on similar standards, it seems to me that depending on the faculty/department/professor in charge, the standards are understood/applied in different ways leading to differences in salaries of PhD students."

"It would be great if it would be free to graduate. I'm paying for language checks and the printing of my book, which is hugely expensive."

Supervision

In total 42 respondents wrote that supervision is the most important topic in advocacy. Some only answered the question with one word "supervision", but many gave specified explanations on the problems with supervision and among these the need for help and support for solving conflicts with the supervisor was often mentioned.

- 42 called for improved supervision, among these
 - 14 mentioned support for better supervisor relationships, creating a system for solving supervisory conflicts
 - 2 mentioned education for supervisors
 - 2 mentioned that international students are in an extra vulnerable position in relation to supervisors, and that they may need extra support
 - 1 mentioned supervisory groups

These comments illustrate the difficulties that exist in supervision:

"There seems to be increasing amounts of dissatisfaction between supervisor and student relationships and more and more rumors about students being fired. Perhaps better agreements, checkpoints and contracts between students and supervisors are needed. In any case, this issue should be investigated more thoroughly."

"Harassment suffered by students at the hands of important professors should be discussed, it is a reality ... but is not reported enough; not only sexual harassment but in the sense that someone forbids ... PhD candidates to advance in their careers."

"Making sure PhD students have a system to support them in cases of bullying/harassment or bad supervision. This can be a person to call and ask for advice, or any other system. At the moment there are only worker's unions, and I think connecting those is often a bit too extreme. Especially foreign students should have someone to ask in case of a problem."

Equality

34 respondents brought up the inequality of doctoral students with different sources of funding as a major problem. The significant difference between the working conditions of employees and those working on a grant or with no funding is perceived to be unfair. The various ways in which this inequality shows (the right to working spaces, health care, etc.) were mentioned by many. One person also noted that the university is offering the undergraduate students more services than the PhD students, and hoped that this would be improved.

A selection of the comments:

"Equality: unfortunately, those PhD students working with a grant (not employed by the faculty or a project) have the same rights (teaching obligation, free facilities at the university, healthcare, mobility budget, etc)."

"PhD students are not equal since some have salary and the benefits that come with the salary, and others have only a grant and no healthcare or other benefits."

"Minimizing the differences between how employees, grant receivers and the not (yet) funded PhD students are given support by the university. This needs to change and everyone regardless of their funding needs to be given equal possibilities to do their PhD. The departments (especially in the humanities need to find ways to integrate all their PhD students and invite them as equal parts of the community."

"Grant researchers should be on an equal footing with employed PhD students in terms of compensation, benefits, health care, teaching duties."

"There is a great difference between PhD's who have contract and those who don't. There should not be... the university should provide services for both, specially assistance when it comes to potential publications. For instance, I am currently asking in my doctoral school if I am entitled to language checks for my articles. It would certainly improve the chances to get published, but it is a tricky question because I am not hired, there are no clear guidelines on this."

"Working possibilities (including travel funding [liikkuvuustuki], workrooms and equipment for unpaid researchers too) for PhD students in all faculties."

"The same benefits for PhD students as masters and bachelors, better organised PhD courses, more teaching opportunities."

Courses

The need for more courses or more diversity in courses was mentioned 30 times.

- 14 respondents wanted more available courses in general, most of them mentioned the need for methods and theoretical courses (also during the evening hours)
- 7 specifically wanted more career courses and improved networks to professional life outside academia
- 3 thought courses should be better coordinated with the studies
- 2 wanted improved access to university pedagogy courses for everyone
- 2 wanted more online courses
- 1 wanted more opportunities for students to participate in planning and arranging courses
- 1 wanted more structured training regarding practical skills: reference management software; data management; open access policies; process writing; conference presentations; application for funding; cv clinics; prez clinics; social media presence; press interviews; etc.

Community, integration, and introduction to doctoral studies

"If it wasn't for the monthly pub nights and occasional HYVÄT events, I would attend zero uni related events, because there is zero happening outside of the association."

- 25 mentioned the importance of integrating PhD students into the research community, preferably early on. The following specific suggestions and observations were among these answers:
 - Weekly/monthly lunches/coffees would be great
 - Parties and events
 - Integrating those not working at the department
 - Focusing specially on international PhD students
 - Getting parents together
 - Peer-mentoring
 - Common spaces for PhD students
 - Having keynote speakers, seminars, talks, panels would be nice in addition to gathering for a drink only
- 2 mentioned proper introduction to the PhD studies
- 2 mentioned housing for international doctoral students: *This issue should be raised because all the international researchers suffer from this and it is very very difficult to get apartments with "Non-Finnish" surnames in Helsinki.*

Health care & wellbeing

22 persons mentioned the health care and wellbeing as the most pressing matter for advocacy. Among these 12 wrote about general health care and wellbeing, while 10 especially highlighted mental health issues.

The inequality of PhD students was mentioned by four persons who were explicit about offering health care for *all* PhD students and pointed out the precarious position of the grantees compared to the employed PhD students.

In the comments both the considerable workload, stressful working conditions, as well as lack of funding were mentioned as reasons for the need of better healthcare.

A selection of the comments:

"Terveysthuollon ja muun elämän perusinfraan saaminen jatko-opiskelijoiden ulottuville."

"If there is any possibility that PhD students could be allowed to use YTHS in the future this should be something to work towards."

"Mental issues of doctoral students. Except for the MeWe group in Facebook and the coaching sessions organized by HR, I see little support from HY towards doctoral students suffering from serious mental issues."

"Recognizing and helping with PhD students' well-being, workload and coping. It seems like PhD students who are (in addition to the poor salary) expected to cope with any circumstance with little "heads-up"-time and excess work. It seems like all "dirty work" can be thrown at PhD students. Some tools to cope with the continuous stress would be helpful."

"There seems to be a huge percentage of PhD students struggling with mental/emotional issues. Problems regarding funding, career perspectives or conflicts with the supervisors etc. contribute to it largely. University of Helsinki doesn't much address this problem. Shouldn't there be any support scheme if someone gets into trouble? Any first contact person for counselling? To my knowledge something like that exists for Bachelor/Master students, but not for postgraduates."

Teaching

- 5 wrote that the amount of unpaid teaching should be controlled
- 5 mentioned the importance of getting teaching opportunities, including PhD students who do not speak Finnish or Swedish
- 3 mentioned the too heavy work load induced by too much teaching duties, including exam duties

"Lisäksi jonkun ulkopuolisen pitäisi tarkkailla, ettei yksikään jatko-opiskelija joudu opettamaan yli 5 % työajastaan vuodessa. Minullakin lukee työsopimuksessa, että max 5 % opetusta, mutta eihän se toteudu."

Working spaces

Eight persons mentioned the importance of having an office space at the university. The following comments articulate why the working spaces are so important:

"I think the University should be committed to offering a work space to all of the PhD students that are accepted to the programmes, regardless whether they have funding or not."

"I would like all the PHD students to have a possibility for an office space. For instance, Sokrates is at the moment underutilized. The clean desk system doesn't seem to work. Why not give students/researchers proper places of their own instead?"

"PhD students should be able to have office space with their research group and feel they belong to that community. Now new students or some of them are just been put somewhere, and this creates new hierarchies into existing groups."

University Structures

Several of the answers brought up problems in the university structures. These answers mention above all the lack of information, but also issues concerning how doctoral education is organised, and how things are working

at the university in general. Some mentioned for example the need of improving democratic decision-making. See list for a more detailed description of the issues mentioned.

- 11 thought that the information flow should be improved (concerning study requirements, university webpages, constant changes, contact to coordinators, graduating, etc.). *New systems are employed, so communication is probably important to avoid confusion/misunderstanding.*
- 6 mentioned disappointment with the university management and the need for better university democracy
- 3 mentioned the importance of independent (not business/money led) research and the possibility for researchers to do nonpartisan research (research that is not guided by business/politicians).
- 2 mentioned the difficulty in combining family life and research, for example regarding grants and childcare leaves etc.
- 2 mentioned the need for stability, clearness, and keeping the quality
- 2 asked for better doctoral student services/support structures
- 2 mentioned getting basic resources taken care of: rooms, supervisors, courses, computer programmes, other equipment
- 1 mentioned: *Changing the Finnish title "tohtorikoulutettava" into "väitöskirjatutkija". This would cost the university absolutely nothing, but it would be very helpful for the Doctoral Candidates. We would not be regarded outside the university as "students" but as researchers and experts, as that is what we are.*
- 1 mentioned fluency of change to new degree structure.
- 1 mentioned problems with the air quality that causes health problems in university buildings (in U37)
- 1 mentioned making the doctoral programs more relevant.
- 1 mentioned protecting and appreciating Finnish as a scientific language
- 1 wrote that PhD students should have adequate time to finish like in the old system

A selection of the comments

"Since there is a lack of support staff, PhD students are seen as fit to clean the labs, organize Christmas parties, seminars, conferences, they teach lab courses, send packages, order chemicals, worry about Erasmus students (even their healthcare access) etc. and all together it's really a lot. Then one has to study and or work during the weekend to make up the time as only publications matter when the assessment is done. We need the support staff!"

"More quality and less quantity. We (PhD students + everybody studying, teaching and researching in Uni) need protection and guarding against our greedy economy & efficacy oriented, hostile-to-university -government (I know, I give you a big task!). HYVÄT can do this by boldly keeping on the side of the PhD students, the side of the education, AND by defending those areas of the University that cannot – and seek not – contribute to the national economic growth in a materialistic sense. We feel that University's own leaders have failed in this job. University's administrative management have completely forsaken us, their own people; they have sold us, and the rich valuable culture we represent, to ecologically catastrophic & mind dulling economic growth. It feels like nobody protects our vision, not the country's government (which is an unusual historic situation) but not even the university (= the management) itself!!! Therefore, we need HYVÄT -kind of parties to talk FOR us, to protect us, and our cause. By writing comments, participating public conversation, by sending comments inside and outside of University, by hearing the students, seeking audiences with the powerful, by organising public debates, by inviting the bosses to meet us – the students and researchers – and to hear what we think of the world...."

Societal Issues

- 3 mentioned the lack of proper social security: (possible exclusion from unemployment benefits for PhD students who have no funding)
- 2 thought that science and scientists should be made more visible in the media and more appreciated in society
- 1 mentioned the problem with academics leaving academia because of the bad working life prospects

9. Open comments about the survey

Positive feedback

15 persons reported that they appreciated the survey and thanked HYVÄT for conducting it. According to these comments the questions and scope of the survey were good:

"This was a surprisingly good survey. I enjoyed the variety, scope, and focus of the questions and genuinely feel that I am being listened to."

"The questionnaire addresses important issues related to the status and wellbeing of PhD candidates. Thank you for conducting it."

Critical comments and specific suggestions

There were a few critical and even pessimistic comments:

- 2 were pessimistic that change for the better is possible at all
- 2 thought that the survey was too long
- 2 thought that the questions were hard to answer for a beginner
- 1 wrote that s/he had never heard of HYVÄT

Eight respondents had specific suggestions for how the survey could be improved:

- Three persons asked for the results to be published - something that could be mentioned in the survey's introduction in the future.
- The question of work-life balance should be directed to everyone, not just those with children. For clarity, the question could also have had the alternative "I don't have children" -
- Some of the yes/no questions could have had more alternatives to avoid oversimplification.
- The course credits section could have been better formulated so that it clearly states if only actual courses or also credits that one has earned for other activities should be included.
- The google docs format with questions in English and lines for answering in Finnish ("Kirjoita vastauksesi tähän") can be confusing.
- Some questions had two or more issues in them, which made answering difficult.

Language

The survey's questions were in English, but instructions that one could answer it in either Finnish, Swedish, or English, were added after the survey had been open for one day. This information might therefore not have reached everyone, but it did reach most respondents, and we did have answers in all three languages.

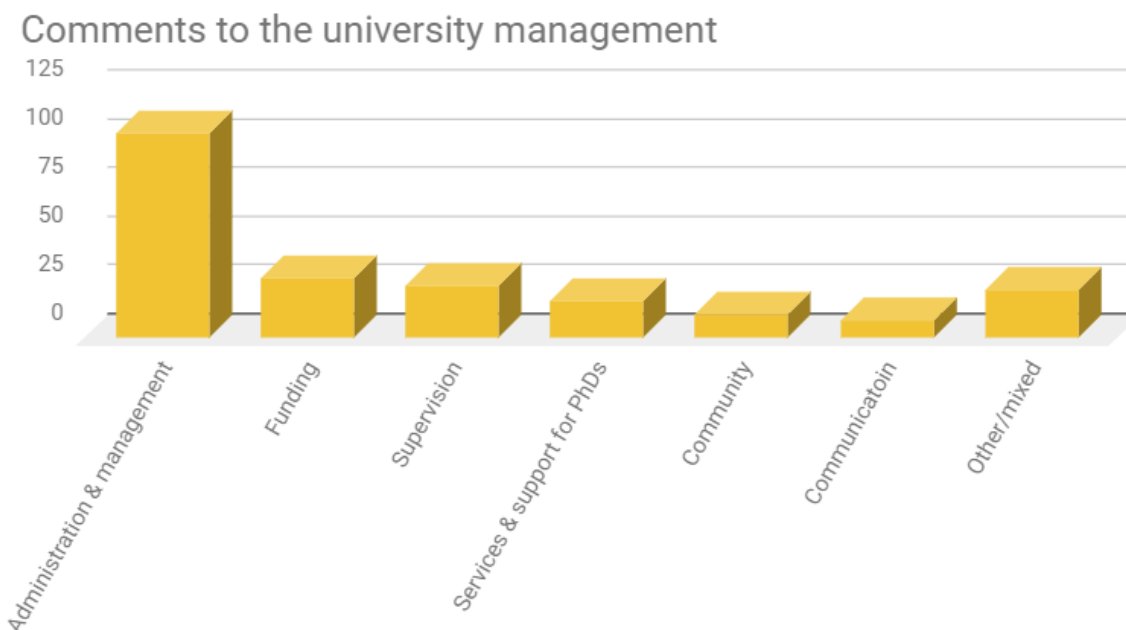
Nevertheless, six respondents wrote either that they would have liked to answer in Finnish or that they would have liked to have the survey in Finnish. This indicates that HYVÄT's decision to communicate in English irritates some PhD students. The language issue was brought up also in the section "General questions/comments to HYVÄT".

"I would have preferred to answer in Finnish for dozens of reasons."

"Ymmärrän rajalliset resurssinne, mutta suomenkielinenkin versio kyselystä olisi ollut paikallaan."

10. Comments to the university management

217 answered this question. Some gave bullet points answers, dealing with different topics in one comment, so i have counted 221 responses.



With issues relating to administration and strategy, most concern is directed to the quality of education the university is offering. Many (20) feel that the present university strategy is not promoting high quality research, nor appreciating academic work.

"I am glad that I don't have to continue my studies at the University of Helsinki. It was great during the first years, since academic work seemed to be appreciated. But the government cuts are a disaster, basic sciences are not appreciated anymore. And this implies that many scientists are not appreciated anymore here in Helsinki! I have the impression that certain University leaders are welcoming the trend of diminishing basic research, so they just can get rid of research that has, in their opinion, no real value. I am sad and disappointed about this trend."

"Do you no longer consider education to be intrinsically valuable? Are not education and research the basis for Finland's healthy economy and standard of living?"

The relevance of the management is being questioned, and in some cases (2), there is lack of information on who is actually managing the University. University reforms have gotten criticism, in their pace (6), their nature (6), couple are questioning the necessity of reforms. There are, however, some positive comments (8) for example:

"Ohjausryhmä jokaiselle jatko-opiskelijalle on todella hyvä uudistus. Toivottavasti tämän toteutumisesta pidetään kiinni"

"This "lähiesimies" change is a good thing. Administrative issues get taken care of and the time of my supervisor is only for my thesis, which is an improvement. "

"Thank you for increasing incentives and opportunities for open science."

Respondents were emphasizing promoting the work of PhD students (7); equality between PhD students (14); increasing transparency in the decision-making process as well as taking into consideration the feedback of staff as well as students (9); amelioration of the working conditions in general, not only with increase of resources and administrative staff, but by creating a sense of community.

Increase of funding and resources is considered crucial (21). A few respondents (4) suggest cutting down the number of accepted PhD students, in order to provide more equal possibilities for all, while others (3) ask for an increase of salaried positions.

Integration to the community is deemed important, and is jeopardized by (1) unequal status and resources of PhD students (between employees, grant researchers and self-funded students), (2) lack of communication and the way information is propagated, with inefficient websites (3) lack of transparency, (4) the feeling of not being valued and well-being issues.

"Please create even one thing that would give us sense of being valued. "

"Why does the university not try to care more for the PhD students working with their own funding?"

"Make PhD candidates feel worthy! UH should be proud of its PhD candidates, and PhD candidates should be proud of being affiliated to the UH. Unfortunately, this is not always the case."

"They should improve transparency. This does not mean that they are corrupt or anything, but I do not feel that the university has put efforts to develop guidelines and criteria that are fair and transparent for certain key decisions. Among them, the selection of candidates for hired positions. When I participated in one of this calls, I had a great score and was the leading candidate for a position (there were 7 positions opened). However I was not hired, and that is ok, but I was never given a clear answer as to why. When I inquire about the regulations and criteria for the decisions, they said there was no such thing. I find this unacceptable for a big university."

Supervision is one the most mentioned issues as well. There are a few trends in the responses. Some point out the need for more administrative staff for supervisors to have more time for supervision. Others emphasize the need for supervisors to be more involved and interested in supervision, whilst others still, demand support for supervisors and professors as the builders of the research community.

"Please insist on supervisors giving better academic guidance to their students."

"Please hold on to your brilliant professors. Many great fields of study are fading away, because of temporal professorships. Even a career academia seems far more likely and appealing almost everywhere else in the world, than in Helsinki/Finland. Much of the scientific community in Finland is based on our professorships, don't forget that."

Other issues specific issues were mentioned:

- More equality between languages at the university (1) and more visibility for Finnish language (2)
- Post-doc opportunities (1)
- Realistic possibilities for graduation (3)
- Career and future (2)
- Tuition fees (1)
- Fixed-period contracts (1)
- Faculty related comments (4), such as the location, campuses, measures.

Most of the comments conveyed a sense of mistrust, disappointment and puzzlement in how the university is being run. There seems to be a correlation between the lack of transparency, ineffective communication, difficulties in building a community, and work overload the staff is experiencing and these feelings of mistrust. Some comments conveyed the sense of deep frustration, disappointment, anger, and resentful regret of choosing the University of Helsinki.

11. Comments to the PhD representatives

48 out of 506 answered this question

Lack of communication

10 persons emphasized the need for more communication between the representatives and the other PhD students in the doctoral schools and programmes. The comments followed these lines:

"En ole heistä kuullutkaan, eli viestintään voisi panostaa hieman enemmän."

"I would like to get their names, e-mails, and phone number to get easily contact when I need something to ask them."

"Who are they? Where can we meet? What do they do?"

"Maybe PhD representatives could be active themselves? Introduce themselves on relevant mailing lists and tell their interests and topics that they feel important to influence. They could also send information to the list when something important occurs"

Specific suggestions

Many had specific suggestions for the representatives – one more reason to improve the communication between representatives of those they represent. The issues mentioned in the answers included things such as:

- improving the equality between PhD students
- the need for more courses or a greater diversity in courses, workshops, and seminars
- clearer information about the language check services
- improving the community, opportunities to get to know the others in the school or programme
- chances to meet with the staff
- funding, and support for those who are applying for grants
- improving the university's bad websites
- improving orientation for new PhD students
- providing more career support
- making the thesis committee reports electronic

General support to the representatives

12 persons explicitly wished to thank their representatives for doing a good job:

"I think they are kind people to take care of students' affairs, thanks for the efforts!"

"Jaksamista!"

"Keep it up! I know it is challenging to improve the school all the time :)"

"My current PhD representatives are doing an excellent job and I simply want to applaud them for that."

"I think things are handled well in DENVI."

"Be bold, be idealistic. You have to: it is young people's strength against the materialistic cynicism ("realism")."

12. Comments to HYVÄT

58 out of 506 answered this question.

Lack of information/visibility

25 persons had not heard about HYVÄT until now, and asked for more frequent information about HYVÄT, and that HYVÄT would in general be more visible at the university. The association's difficulty of reaching people is especially well expressed in these two comments:

"Could you please advertise yourself more, also through emails? This was the first time I heard of you and I have studied for over 7 years."

"Maybe there could be more information about HYVÄT more frequently... Now, after this survey, I do remember to have had some e-mails, but for some reason I have not found any interest to look more closely what HYVÄT actually is."

Positive feedback

25 persons explicitly wanted to thank HYVÄT for the good work:

"I wish there had been some initiatives like HYVÄT when I started my PhD studies. Better late than never :-)"

"Thanks, and keep up the good work! :)"

"Teette tärkeää työtä tärkeän asian puolesta! Arvostan!"

HYVÄT's language policy

Four were critical of HYVÄT's decision to communicate in English. Because there are no resources to continue tri-lingually, the association needs to take extra care to communicate why the decision to use only English has been made, and to remind members that they are always welcome to use also Finnish and Swedish in our events.

A selection of the comments on language policy:

"Your English only -policy in informing is quite alienating: it seems that you are here only for international students."

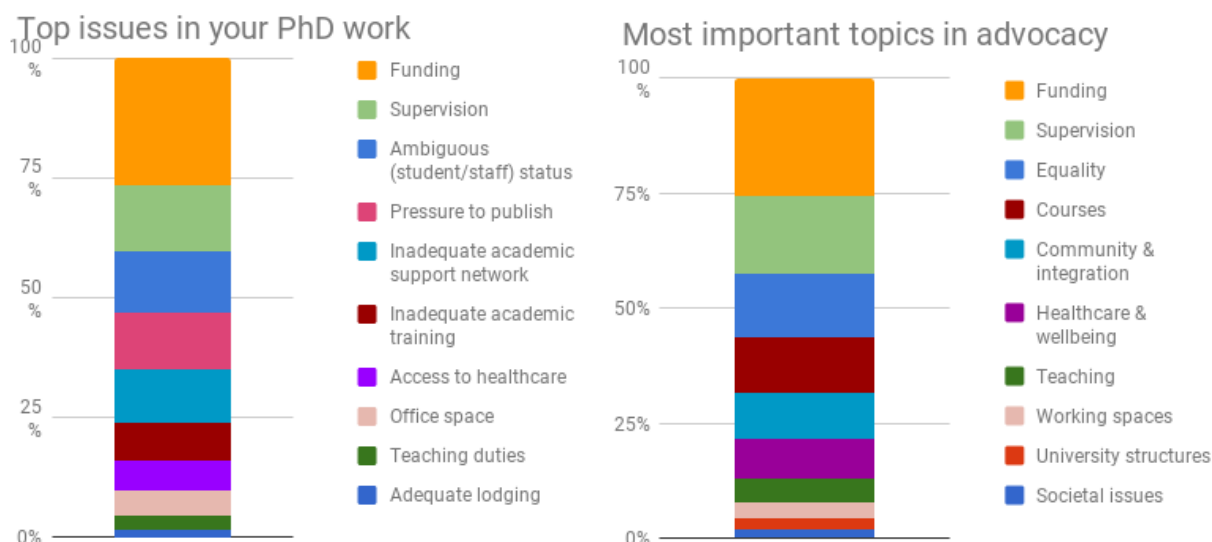
"Keep doing whatever it is you do, but I'd appreciate tri-lingual communication. Even important mails might be disregarded if they only contain the message in English, because overall many people find that the language of the message reflects rather well the general relevance and the quality of the matter in question, and the "English-speaking spam" (including e.g. experiment subject requests, exchange infos, etc.) easily gets ignored."

Other comments to HYVÄT

- We need to communicate more clearly that HYVÄT is about more than beer and parties, so those interested in more serious activities also get reasons to join.
- Benefits for doctoral students is something we could discuss with the Student Union.
- We got one comment saying that the last election was not handled well at all. Although the elections overall went well, we do know about the problems that surfaced in a few programmes, and should make plans on how to avoid them in the future.

13. Conclusions and HYVÄT's planned actions

The survey did not reveal too many surprises. On the contrary, it is interesting to see how similar the results are to those from the associations 2015 survey, although the questions were slightly different. For example, in 2015, there was a list where the respondents could choose the three most pressing issues in their PhD. This time, there was an open text question about what the PhD advocacy should focus on. Below, to the left you can see the survey results from 2015 and on the right those from 2018. The results are more or less identical, concerning both topics and their proportions.



One clear conclusion is that there are as many issues as there are doctoral students. While funding, supervision, equality and integration are the top issues in all the doctoral schools, there is a lot of variation within schools and programmes. In addition, there are differences in how the actual research work is conducted. For this reason, pursuing university-wide changes or regulations is challenging. In some cases, it might even be harmful for those who are already doing well on a particular topic. Nevertheless, the university should be able to ensure that all PhD students, regardless of their source of funding and doctoral school or programme, have the same chances and the same support for doing their doctoral studies and research, and graduating on time.

Development of courses, integration into the research community, and improved wellbeing at work are all matters that the university should be able attend to, given that there is a will to do so. Chances to discuss with the department/doctoral programme/schools what sort of courses are needed could be one solution. Integration into the research community is crucial both for completing the studies on time and for building necessary networks for the future. Possible solutions include for example more working spaces, common spaces, and community-building activities like events, seminars, common lunches, peer mentoring, etc. PhD students need chances to meet both their fellow students and more experienced colleagues. Furthermore, improved integration into the community is likely to improve also the wellbeing at work.

HYVÄT believes that much can be done by improving the communication between doctoral students and their departments, doctoral programmes, and schools. Sharing information is a problem in every organization, large or small, and – perhaps not surprisingly – the university is no exception. A good and fairly efficient way to make the flow of information better is to make sure that new PhD students are properly introduced to their tasks and learn their rights and responsibilities from the beginning of their studies. That way they can focus their energy on doing their studies and research instead of spending time on trying to navigate chaotic university structures.

Immediate actions by HYVÄT

From the survey results, we have concluded that there are some immediate actions that HYVÄT can take to make PhD life better. These include working on:

- **Supervision:** more specific guidelines for supervision, education for supervisors (already piloted in Viikki), limits of how many supervisees a supervisor may have; assistance with funding applications (need not be only from supervisors).
- **PhD student rights:** A clear list that shows what all the PhD students are entitled to regardless of their funding. This list should be uniform all across the university. The list could be extended to show what kind of rights each type of funding gives in addition. In the longer run the gap between the funding types needs to be decreased.
- **Sharing information about HYVÄT on all campuses:** The results show that HYVÄT is still fairly unknown to many of the PhD students and that there is huge variation on how well the association has reached different the campuses. HYVÄT needs to introduce themselves to new students face-to-face, and visit events organised at the campuses. For example, these survey results will be shared as widely as possible.
- **More analysis on the survey results:** The amount of data collected in the survey is huge and people with different backgrounds want to know different aspects. Analysis will be extended to show more results specific to each campus. HYVÄT is also eager to hear further comments on what else to take into account.

Long term plans

- **Equality:** Right now, there is a big difference between the working conditions of those who are employed by the university and the rest. This gap needs to be gradually decreased as much as possible even though it would require money and other resources.
- **Community:** The results show that integration to the community is a huge factor in PhD life and it needs to be taken seriously. Doctoral students belong to different communities: research groups, departments, doctoral programmes, doctoral school, and faculties, and these have different significance in the daily research work. The closest and most important research community is still discipline-based, and integration in this environment is crucial because that is what ties doctoral students to the closest colleagues, supervisors, most relevant information, etc. Integration to the doctoral programme and school can likewise be very important, as these offer larger cross-disciplinary networks, but they cannot replace the immediate research community of the department/research-group.
- **Healthcare & wellbeing:** Universal healthcare for all PhD students – like YTHS for the undergraduate students – would be a huge nationwide debate and is out of reach of HYVÄT's resources at least for now. However, smaller improvements can be made within the university. One good example is HYVÄT's suggestion to extend the study psychologists' services to all PhD students.