

HYVÄT survey on COVID-19 impact on doctoral studies at the University of Helsinki

The survey was created, written and the data analyzed by the HYVÄT board. The report was written collectively by the board, and edited by Tommi Mäklin.

Introduction

During the exceptional circumstances of spring 2020, there were enormous changes introduced to the everyday work and studies at the University of Helsinki due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to understand both the immediate and long-term effects of these changes on the doctoral candidates at the University of Helsinki, the PhD student association HYVÄT conducted a survey focusing on the wellbeing of the doctoral candidates and how it can be improved during these exceptional times.

The survey was conducted between 7 and 19 April with questions available in Finnish and in English. In total, there were received more than 500 answers from all of the four doctoral schools, including at least one answer from each doctoral programme. We analyzed the results both as a whole and as grouped by the doctoral schools. Doctoral programme level analysis would have been possible for only a few of the largest programmes, but since the majority of them had less than 10 answers, we opted to perform the analysis only on the doctoral school level.

Results

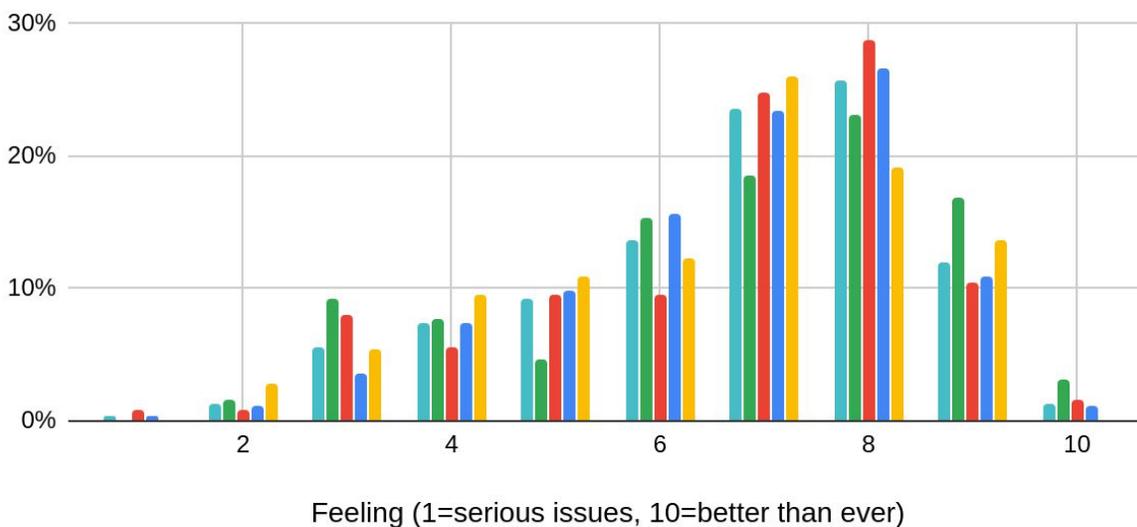
Wellbeing

Q1: How are you feeling right now? (Mentally and physically)
Kuinka voit juuri nyt? (Henkisesti ja fyysisesti)

How are you doing?

N=519

■ All: 6.7±0.2
 ■ YEB: 6.7±0.3
 ■ Health: 6.7±0.3
 ■ HYMY: 6.7±0.2
 ■ DONASCI: 6.5±0.3



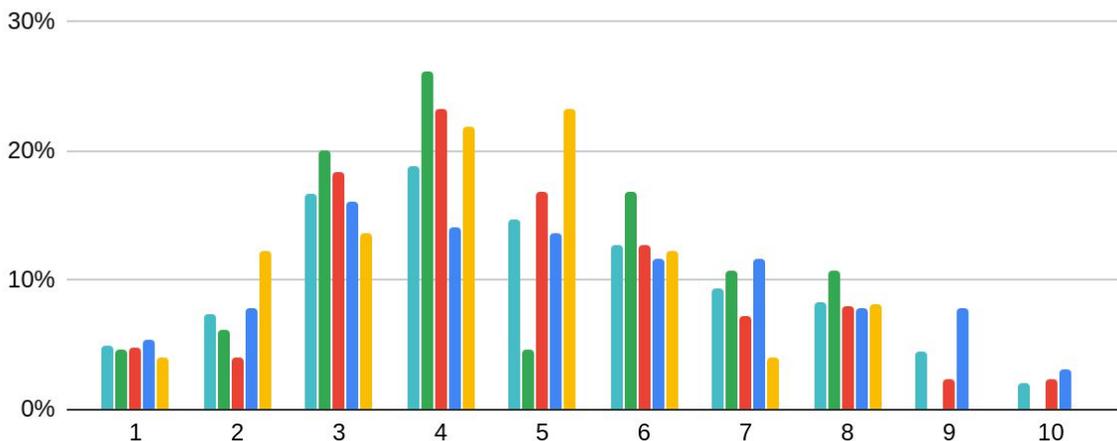
Students in DONASCI scored slightly lower on average, others equal, but the differences between the doctoral schools are not statistically significant. Those who answered the survey in English are doing statistically significantly worse than those who answered in Finnish ($p < 0.001$, Mann-Whitney U-test).

Q2: How has the corona situation affected your PhD progress
Miten korona-tilanne on vaikuttanut väitöskirjaprojektisi etenemiseen?

How has the corona situation affected your PhD progress

N=517

All: 4.9±0.3 YEB: 4.7±0.3 Health: 4.8±0.3 HYMY: 5.1±0.3 DONASCI: 4.4±0.2



1=progress halted, 10=better than before

Students in HYMY were observed to be doing significantly better than students in other doctoral schools ($p < 0.019$, Mann-Whitney U-test), while students in DONASCI were doing significantly worse ($p < 0.041$, Mann-Whitney U-test). In YEB and DSHealth, no significant differences were observed when compared to the other schools. Unsurprisingly, the doctoral candidates in all schools who report that they are affected by the situation more also reported worse wellbeing in Question 1.

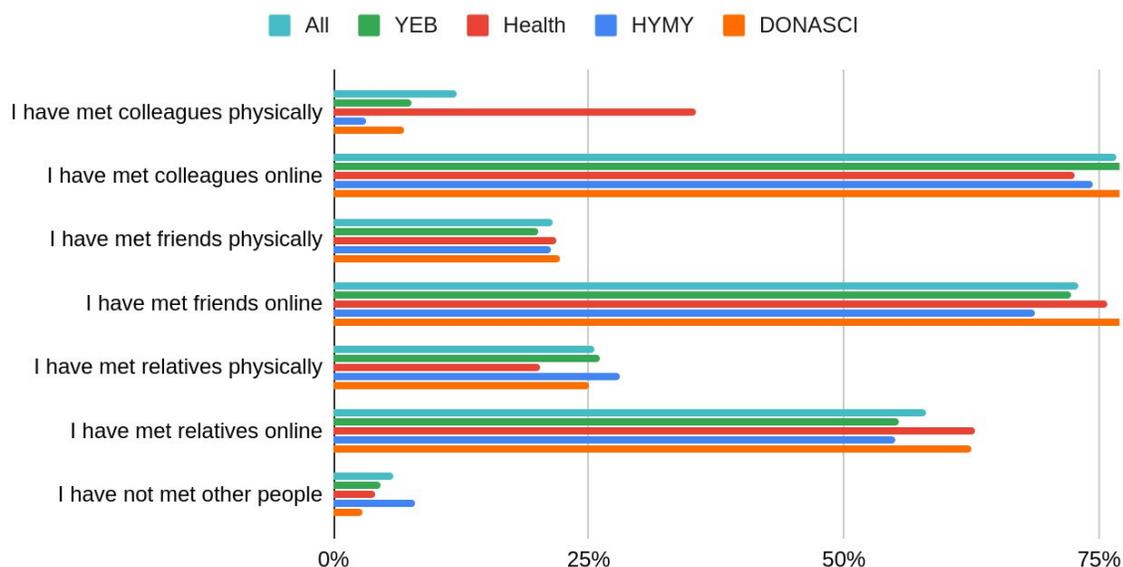
Short-term effects

Q3: Have you met other people during the recent weeks?

Oletko tavannut muita ihmisiä viime viikkoina?

Have you met other people during the recent weeks?

N=514

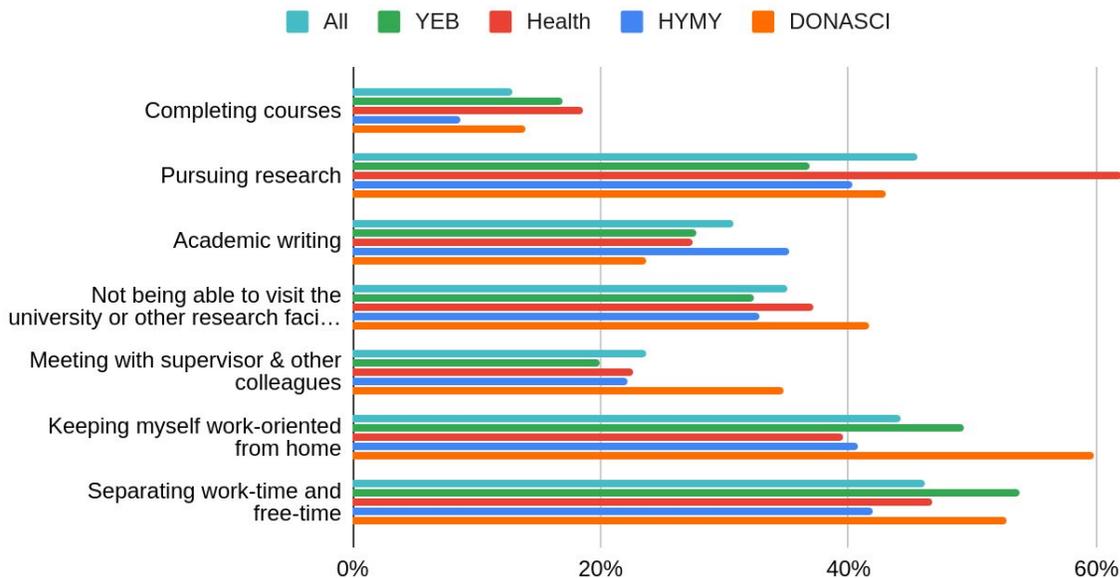


More than 70% have met other people online, and 6% have not met other people at all. Out of all 514 candidates who answered the question, 20 have met other people only physically, 239 only online, 230 both physically and online, and 30 have not met any people. However, the type of social contact during the situation, including no contact at all, was not observed to have an effect on the self-reported wellbeing levels in Question 1.

Q4: Where do you find the most difficulties during the situation?
Mikä tuottaa eniten haasteita nykyisessä tilanteessa?

Where do you find the most difficulties during the situation?

N=512



Overall the most difficulties were in separating work-time and free-time, and in staying focused when working remotely. Candidates in DONASCI also reported issues in meeting with supervisors and other colleagues. Additionally, many DSHealth candidates are now emergency staffing or otherwise working at hospitals, which naturally hinders their research. Many candidates also used the 'Other' option in this question to report issues (in order of decreasing frequency) with having to care for small children, issues in data collection and fieldwork, anxiety caused by the situation and reduced social interaction, and a lack of ergonomic work-space at home.

Q5: Describe in more details the difficulties that have arisen in your PhD work

Kuvaile tarkemmin väitöskirjatyössä esiin tulleita ongelmia

The answers to this question largely reported similar issues as those listed in Question 4, with the main concern being children at home. Additional issues were reported in finding a routine for working at home, and for experimentally

oriented scientists in adapting to work without lab access. Some students also reported issues in completing courses: some courses have been cancelled, and studying remotely was seen as difficult or unmotivating. A major, but seldom reported, issue was the supervisors of several students pressuring the students to be physically present at the University despite their research clearly being non-critical. Other issues with supervisors were also reported in lack of regular contact and difficulties in having remote meetings.

Q6: Is there something positive in working remotely?

Onko etätyöskentelyssä jotain positiivista?

The most commonly reported positive sides were the time saved from not having to commute to the campus and flexible working hours. Many students also reported less interruptions to their work, which has led to better focus and productivity. Some students see the situation as an opportunity to finish tasks that have been dragging due to a lack of time, or find that they have more time to focus on writing. Working from home is also seen by some as leading to better scheduling of their work, which in turn leaves more time for exercising and other hobbies. Contrary to the answers to the previous questions, some students with children view remote working positively because they are able to spend more time with their children and partners. Overall, a small but vocal group claims to prefer working from home.

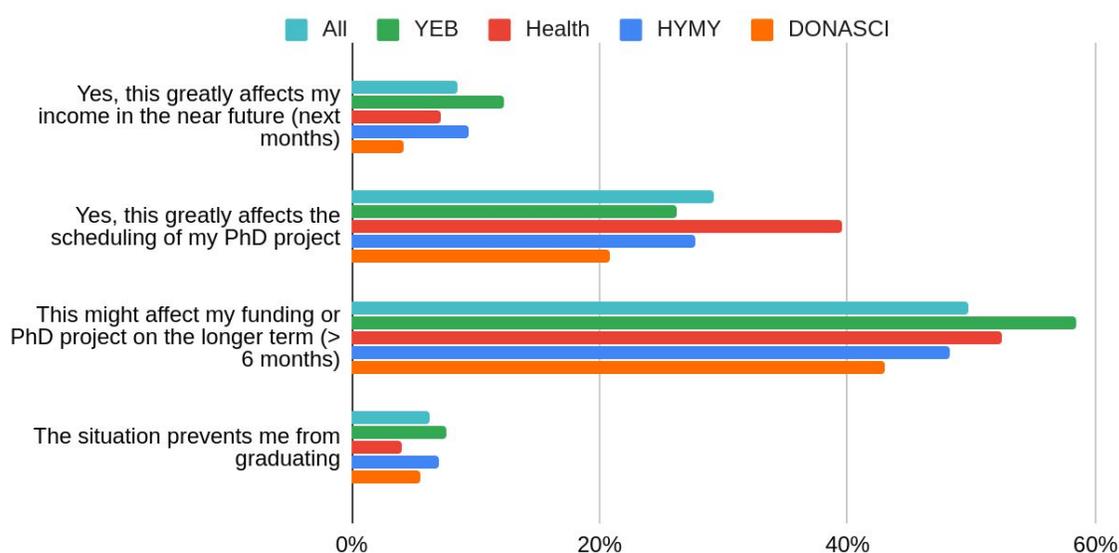
Long-term effects

Q7: Does the situation increase your concerns on funding or the future of your PhD project?

Aiheuttaako tilanne huolia rahoituksessasi tai väitöskirjaprojektin tulevaisuudessa?

Does the situation increase your concerns on funding or the future of your PhD project?

N=370



Many students reported concerns about the long-term future of their PhD projects due to running out of funding and worry about graduating on time. Students in doctoral schools that require more lab work (DSHealth and YEB) reported more concern about their long-term (> 6 months) funding prospects, with students in DSHealth also being more concerned about the scheduling of their project than students in other schools.

Q8: Please elaborate more on how the situation affects your funding or schedule

Kerro tarkemmin, kuinka tilanne vaikuttaa rahoitukseesi tai väitöskirjaprosessisi tulevaisuuteen

The most commonly reported issue was uncertainty about finding funding for research that has been delayed or completely prevented by the situation. The issue was especially pronounced in research that relies on fieldwork or experiments, where students were concerned about their funding expiring before they are able to graduate. There was also concern about the future prospects of research funding in general, and also more personal concerns about the negative effects of the delays in successfully applying for grants to complete the PhD or perform postdoctoral research. Some students reported more immediate concerns with projects being cancelled, or their funding period running out while the uncertainty about the situation persists. In addition to the uncertainty about funding, a few students voiced issues in the use of travel grants for 2020 or whether they could be transferred to 2021, a lack of clear policy about refunding or extending office leases for students who are not contract workers at the University, and several concerns about their graduation being delayed due to the inability to organize doctoral defenses at the moment due to for example wanting to hold the defense in person, difficulties in finding an opponent, or the bureaucracy of the situation.

Q9: What could be done to address your difficulties?

Miten tilanteesta aiheutuvia ongelmia voitaisiin ratkaista?

The most commonly reported solution was to extend the funding period of all current doctoral candidates by a few months. This could either be done in the form of an universal extension, or more extensive finishing grants. Some students also wished for the opportunity to either take unpaid leave or work part-time during the situation, and transfer the saved funds to the end of their funding period. Leniency in the terms of travel and institutional grants would also go a long way in helping the students. In general, some sort of financial support from the University is expected and seen as important for alleviating concerns.

Many answers also expressed a need for extending the various deadlines related to graduation. Extending the deadline for graduating with the old requirements beyond the current deadline at the end of 2020 was seen as particularly important. Some students suggested that the criteria for accepting a thesis could be relaxed in the form of requiring fewer published articles and accepting work that is in progress. Many also wished that the University would commit to providing work-spaces and equipment for students that run out of funding because of delays caused by the situation. In addition it should also be stressed that defending the thesis should be possible during the situation despite contrary wishes of the supervisor. Students working in experimental fields also mentioned that regulated lab access and the ability to perform non-critical experiments would greatly benefit their progress.

Among the less frequently mentioned miscellaneous solutions to the situation were improved supervision and guidance. Some students reported that they are not able to meet regularly with their supervisors, and wished that the University would provide guidelines relating to their situation. Students also wished for guidelines to be drafted for remote working and how to separate work and free time at home. Various other concerns were raised about easing the use of libraries and access to other physical materials stored at the University. In regards to completing coursework, students wish that the mandatory courses included in the graduation requirements would be turned into online courses, and the amount of online courses offered to doctoral students be increased.

Answers from students working on grants mentioned that they would benefit greatly from access to better occupational healthcare services. Mental healthcare services were seen particularly important. Other answers that mentioned mental wellbeing wished that the University would take a more positive attitude and try to lift spirits of the employees. Creating a more positive environment for research was also mentioned by a few.

Miscellaneous

Q10: What kind of topics would you like your PhD representative(s) to bring up for the Doctoral Programme/School/University level regarding the COVID-19 situation?

Millaisia aiheita toivoisit edustajien tuovan esiin tohtoriohjelman, tutkijakoulun tai yliopistotason keskusteluissa COVID-19-tilanteeseen liittyen?

The largest immediate issue to be brought to programmes' attention is that some doctoral students feel pressured to continue to work in-person despite their work clearly being non-critical. This seems to stem mainly from supervisor pressure but sometimes also from the doctoral student's perceived pressure to graduate before funding runs out. Concerns about running out of funding are also perceived as an issue of great importance, and students wish that the programs are aware of and take into account the delaying effects of the situation on their progress. In general, support — financial or otherwise — from the university is expected. Supervisors should also be encouraged or instructed to keep in touch with their students. There is also worry that acquiring the required study credits will not be possible during the corona situation, and that the programs are simply delaying arranging courses rather than trying to arrange them remotely. Remote courses in general are perceived positively, and many wish that the possibility to attend remotely is evaluated or continues after the situation resolves. The same wish is expressed for continuing remote participation in group meetings, seminars and so on. In general, flexibility and understanding is expected in all aspects and especially with regards to lowered productivity.

Q11: Open word

Vapaa sana

Some international students are feeling extremely lonely and isolated, and miss or are worried about their families abroad. Overall, there is a need for more information aimed at international students and their needs both currently and after the situation is over. Others, including both international and Finnish

national students, view the situation positively and are feeling more productive than before, or otherwise enjoy remote working. Lack of communication with supervisors is an issue in some answers, and it is expected that the university will be flexible with deadlines after the situation normalizes. The current practices, leadership, and informing by the University are seen as authoritarian and inflexible in some answers.

Many express difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance without the daily routine of going to the office. After the situation normalizes, some hope that the more relaxed schedules in terms of meetings, teaching, and so on will be the new normal instead of the return to the past manners which were perceived as hectic and stressful. Many answers express worry that the previously stressful and hectic life at the University has become normal and expected, and the current situation has caused them to view this past practice critically. The lockdown has additionally caused mental distress which should be taken into consideration and the necessary support extended to all students regardless of their employment status (grant or contract). Some students are also worried about the effect of the situation in their long-term job prospects and feel great anxiety as a result.

Some students working on grants expressed that they feel the situation has reduced the differences between them and contractually employed students. The differences are perceived negatively, and some grant researchers mention that remote work and isolation from the academic community was already the norm for them and hope that this situation may cause the contract employees to sympathize with their situation.

Conclusions

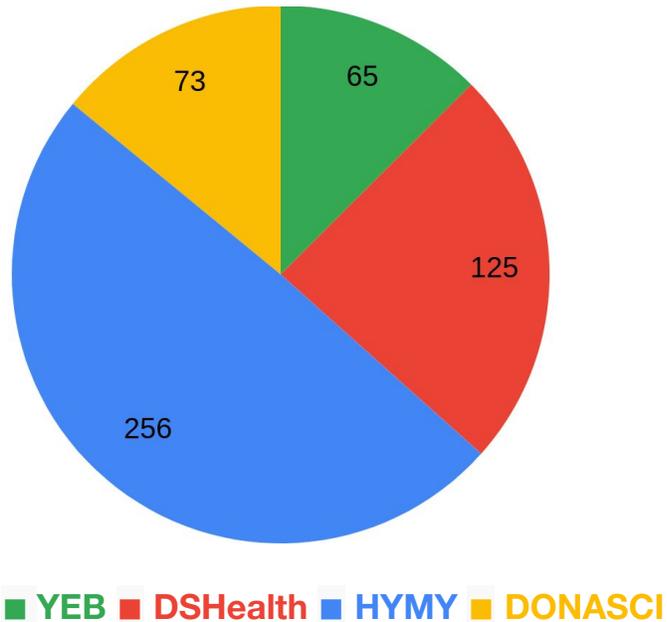
While the survey was performed during the early phase of the epidemic and some of the identified issues have already been resolved, many of them remain relevant and require attention by the University administration when moving forward with considering the consequences of the epidemic. Chief among these issues are the concerns about the continuation of funding to finish doctoral studies that have been delayed because of the situation, and the major negative effects on the mental wellbeing of the students. It is our hope that this survey

will aid in communicating the concerns of the students about the situation to the relevant parties, and that appropriate measures to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be drafted based on both the suggestions presented by the students and our analysis of the results.

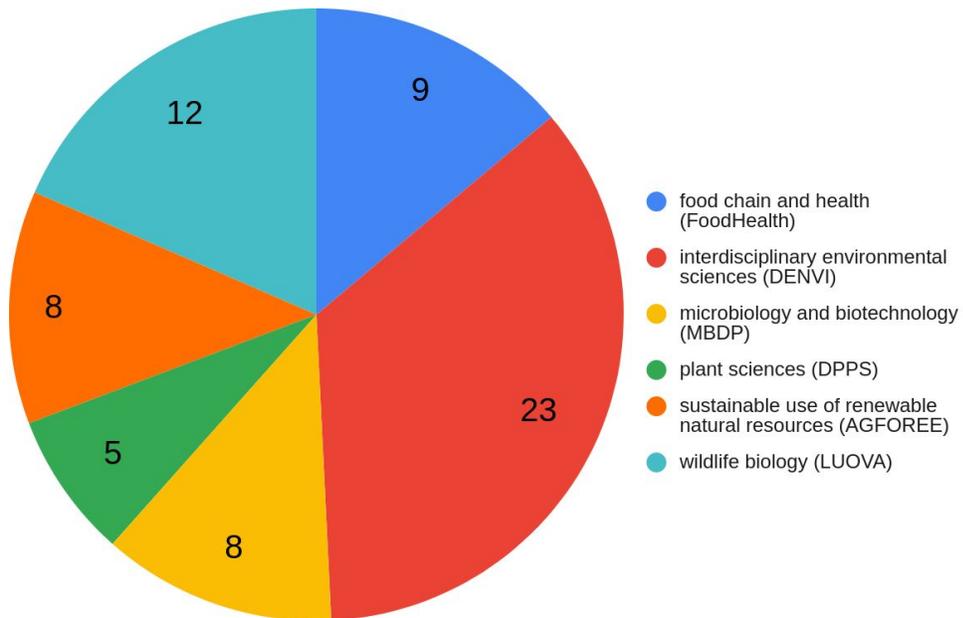
Supplementary information

Background of the respondents

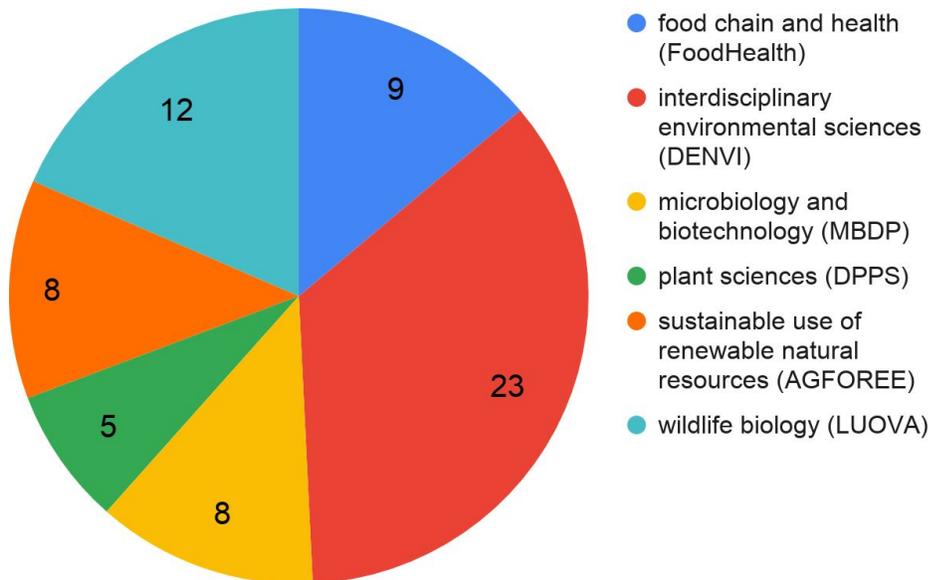
Doctoral Schools



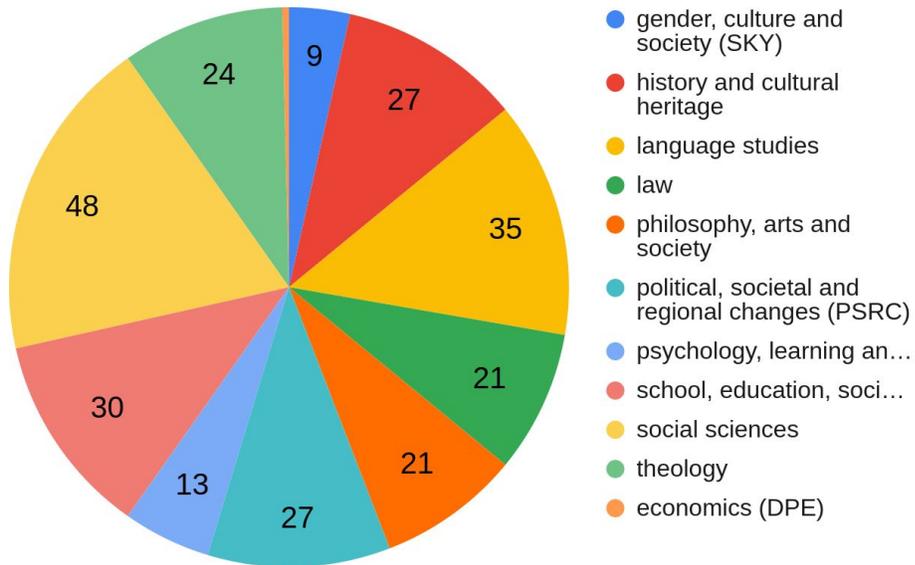
YEB



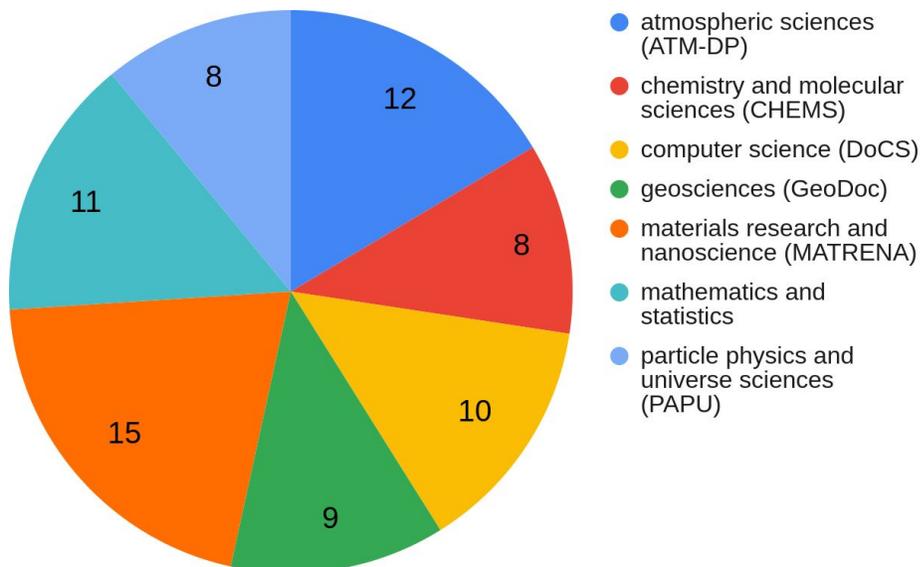
DSHealth



HYMY

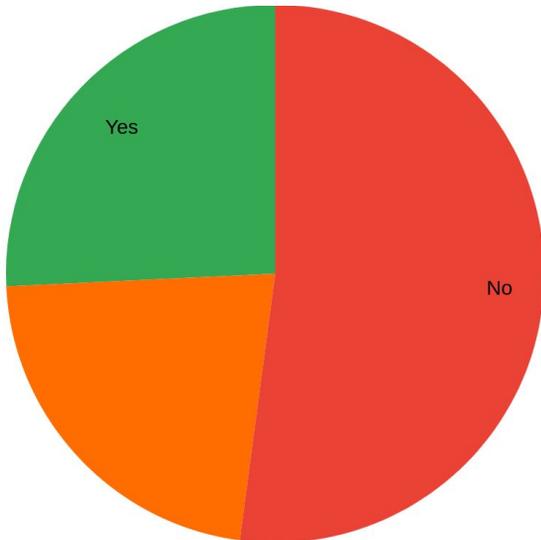


DONASCI



Organization memberships

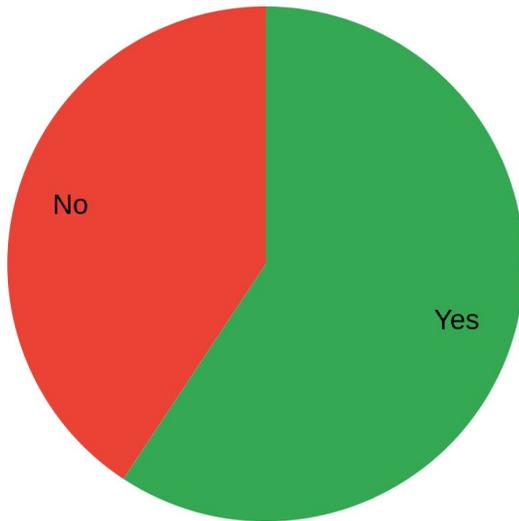
HYVÄT



Student union HYY



Labour unions



Questionnaire

A pdf-file containing the questionnaire in both English and Finnish is available as a supplementary file at the HYVÄT website through the link:

https://blogs.helsinki.fi/phd-association/files/2020/05/COVID_questionnaire_2020.pdf.