



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Council for PhD Education (FUR)
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REPORT

6 December 2023

2023 Doctoral student survey report

The doctoral student satisfaction survey – an essential tool in quality assurance work since 2006

Since 2006, SLU has regularly conducted a doctoral student satisfaction survey. The questions have changed slightly over the years, however it is still possible to follow doctoral students' experiences of their studies over time.

The survey is an essential tool in the work with the quality assurance of third-cycle courses and study programmes and is used by the PhD Student Councils, faculties and operational support to improve the education provided.

Many of the questions in the 2023 survey had answer options with a five-point scale. Typically the question was posed as a statement and the doctoral student was asked to decide how much they agreed with the statement.

Low response rate for 2023 and results analysis

A total of 172 doctoral students completed the 2023 survey, resulting in a response rate of 33 per cent. Due to this low percentage, there is no indication to perform any in-depth statistical analyses. Therefore, it is important to remember that the results presented in this report only reflect the experiences and opinions of the 172 survey participants. They do not speak for the remainder of the university's doctoral students.

The results are presented in figures and text below. Free-form text responses were compiled using Chat GPT 3.5 <https://chat.openai.com/chat>. They were then manually edited to better represent any differences in the frequency of comments and overarching themes.

Results

Programme introduction

A suitable introduction is essential for providing doctoral students with the best start to their studies. Introductions are to be held by both the department and faculty, and for the past few years, SLU has provided an additional university-wide online introduction course for doctoral students.

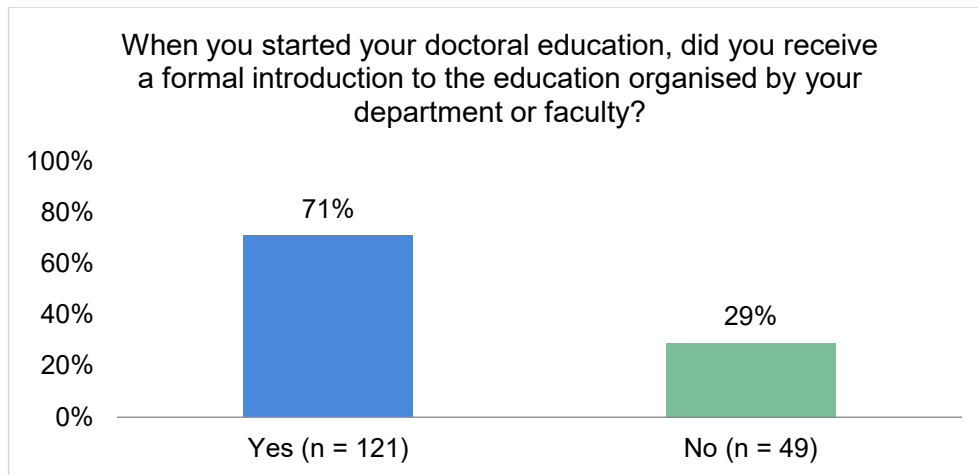


Figure 1. Introduction to the education.

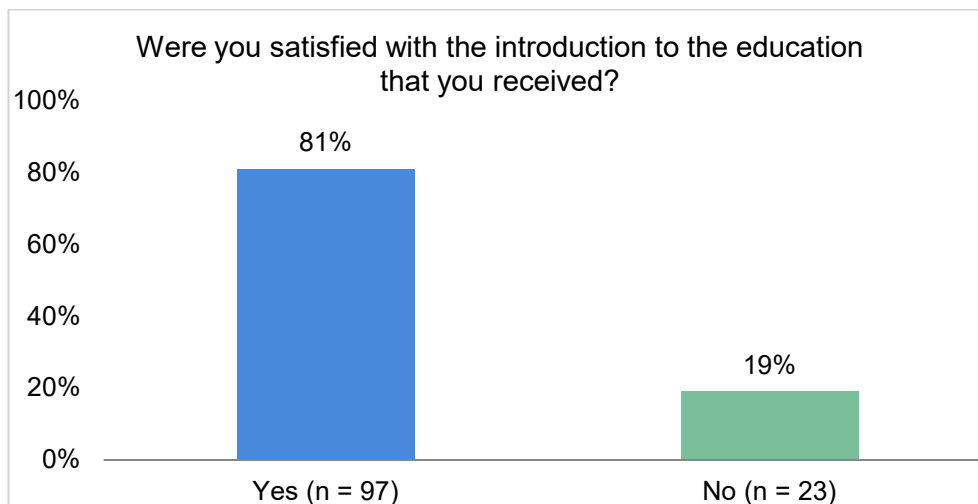


Figure 2. Introduction to the education – satisfaction.

A follow-up free-form response question asked why students were not satisfied with the introductions they were offered. Generally, the respondents felt that for the introduction to be useful, it should have taken place earlier. Additionally, students stated that the information received was too brief or generalised and lacked essential details.

Departmental introductions were deemed the least successful compared to those offered at faculty level. Some respondents felt that important information about a person's rights in Sweden and immigration-related topics were missing.

A number of respondents felt that they had not received enough support from their head of department or unit, and that the formal introduction tended to focus on administrative elements rather than matters relating to doctoral studies.

In summary, the majority of doctoral students were offered introductions at departmental and faculty level, and most were satisfied with what they received. The most common criticism was that the introduction took place too late, or that its content was too general.

Planning and follow-up of their studies

A well-structured plan provides doctoral students with clear direction and targets for their studies and helps them understand what is expected of them and how to meet their targets. Follow-ups of third-cycle courses and study programmes enable monitoring of the quality of the education being offered. This provides the students and their supervisors with the possibility of identifying and acting on any problems at an early stage.

Doctoral students who are active in the planning of their education are often more dedicated and motivated, and participating in planning reduces the risk of misunderstanding or having unrealistic expectations. Students have a clearer understanding of what is expected, which can reduce stress and dissatisfaction.

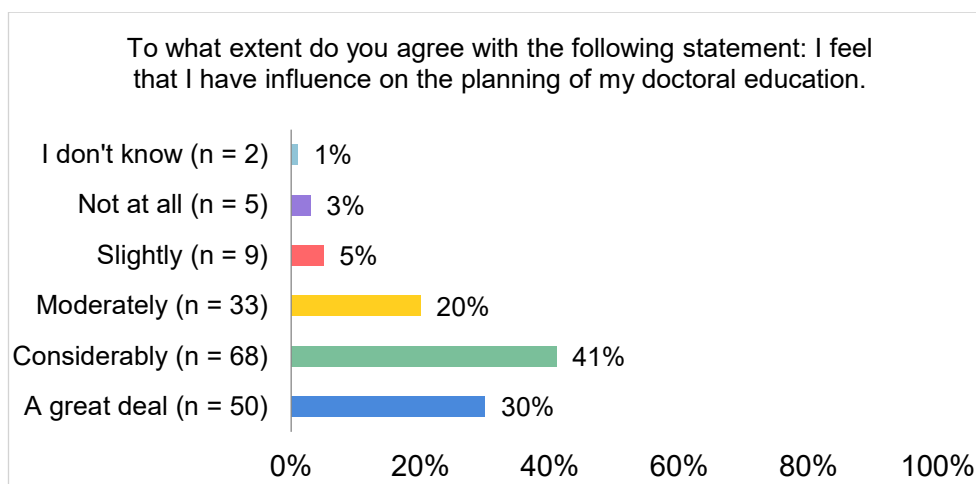


Figure 3. Feelings of being able to influence the doctoral education.

The individual study plan (ISP)

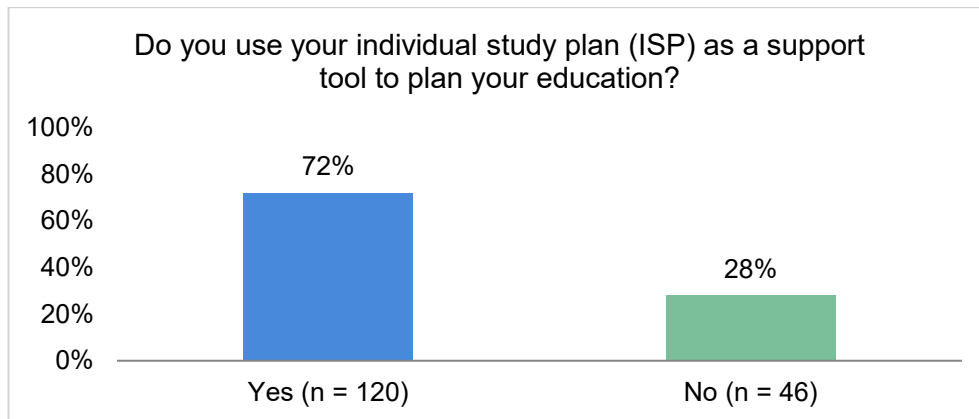


Figure 1. Using the ISP as a planning tool.

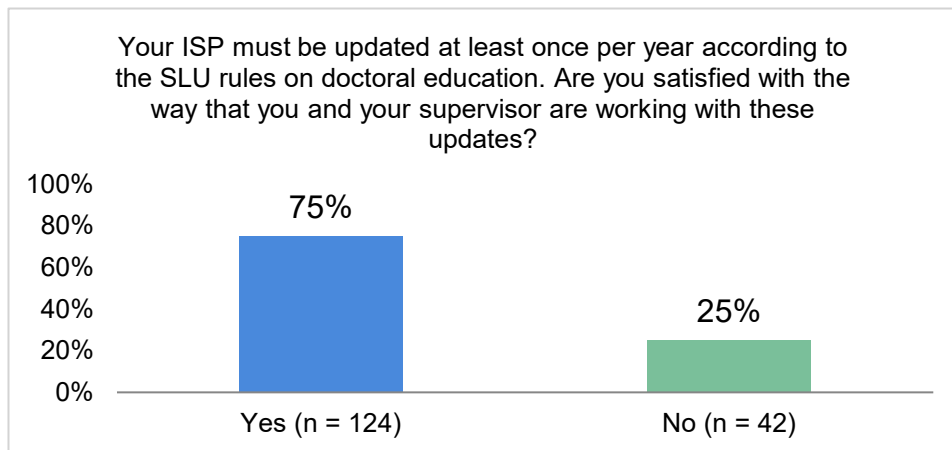


Figure 5. Update of the ISP.

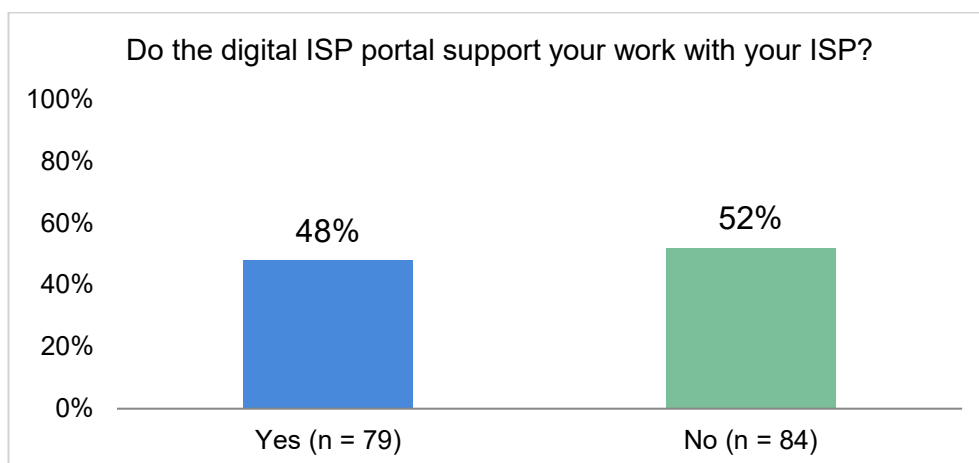


Figure 6. The digital ISP portal as a support for planning.

Students were asked to complete free-form responses to the following question about planning their studies and the ISP:

“Do you have any general comments on the processes for planning doctoral education and/or the ISP?”

The responses criticise the lack of user-friendliness of the online ISP portal. Some respondents believe that the ISP is not an effective planning tool, viewing it as more of a compulsory administrative task rather than a support for their doctoral studies. The efficacy of the ISP depends significantly upon the commitment of both the student and their supervisor. The ISP format and export options were criticised for being inadequate, meaning there is room for improvement with the PDF version that can be downloaded for sharing with people who are unable to access the ISP in its electronic format.

Several students expressed the need for clearer guidelines and instructions to be able to use the ISP effectively. Opinions on the usefulness of the ISP vary, with some students seeing the value in being able to follow their progress, whereas others find it more of an administrative duty. We can assume that the supervisor’s attitudes towards the ISP and planning teaching may ‘rub off on’ the student in this respect.

In summary, the comments highlight a need to improve the ISP system, both in terms of usability and its role in facilitating planning and following up on the studies.

Mid-way review and follow-up

Sixty-two per cent of survey respondents state having completed their mid-way review, with 89 per cent being satisfied with the way it was organised. Those who were not satisfied mentioned issues including supervisors not being involved in the preparations, with it ultimately being the student’s responsibility to find a suitable reviewer and arrange the practical elements of the seminar. There also appears to be uncertainty surrounding when the mid-way review is to take place and salary increases implemented. The SLU guidelines for doctoral education require the mid-way review to be held after two years of the actual period of study, but before the mid-way follow-up. The doctoral student salary agreement stipulates that *‘salaries will be paid retroactively following completion of the mid-way review. The payments will begin in the first month of the second half of the actual period of study.’* Thus, once the doctoral student has completed their mid-way review and follow-up (these often align), the salary increase is to be paid retroactively starting in the month in which two years of study have elapsed.

Programme content

Many of the survey questions addressed the programme content, whether students are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and the requirements for a doctoral degree. The majority of students are, to a certain extent, aware of the general

qualitative targets for third-cycle courses and study programmes. The majority also believe they know what is required for the degree of doctor and that they are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

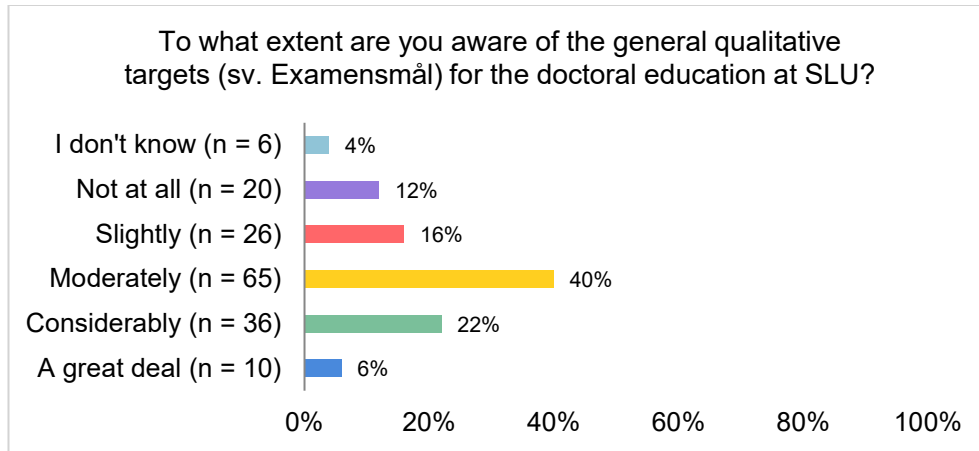


Figure 2. Knowledge of qualitative targets.

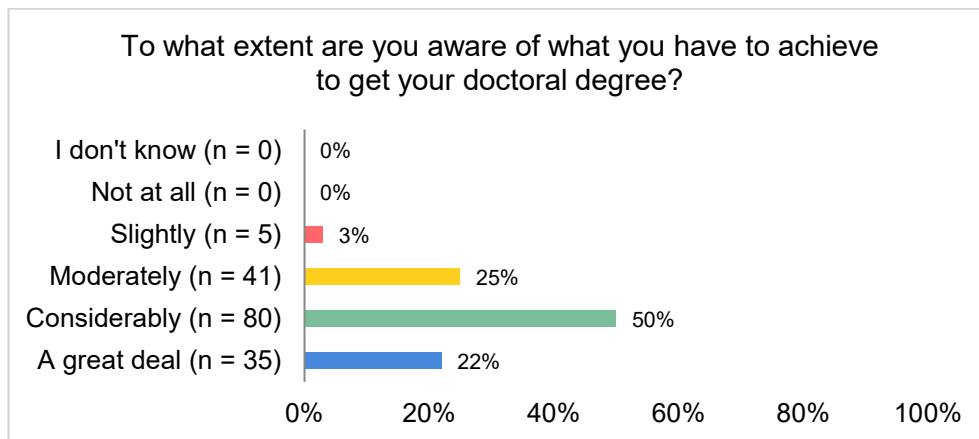


Figure 8. Knowledge of what you have to achieve to get a doctoral degree.

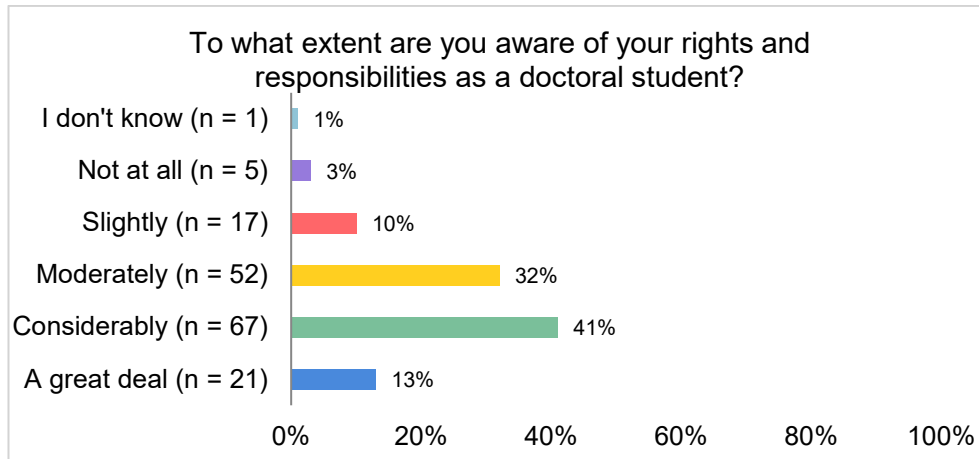


Figure 9. Knowledge about rights and responsibilities.

Doctoral courses help the students develop both general research skills and those required for their subject. General skills include reasoning relating to research ethics and writing articles. Access to suitable, high-quality courses is essential.

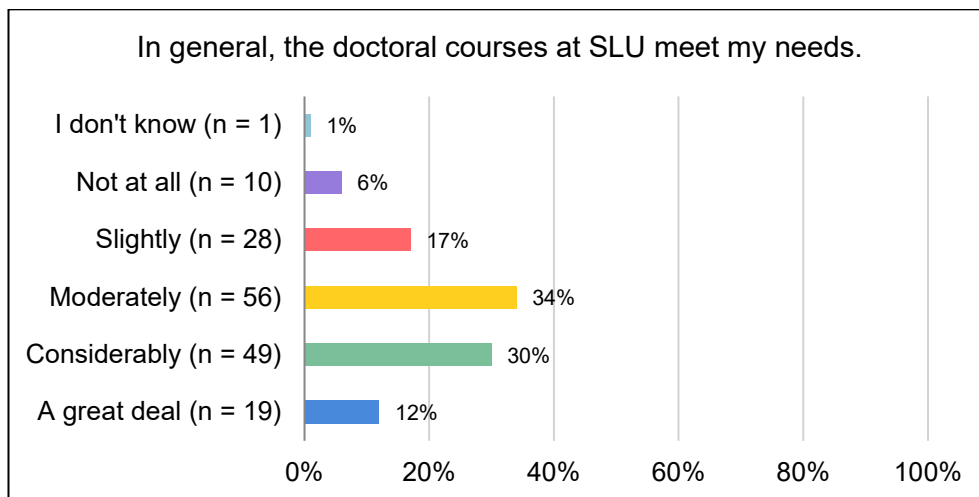


Figure 10. Doctoral courses – meeting the need?

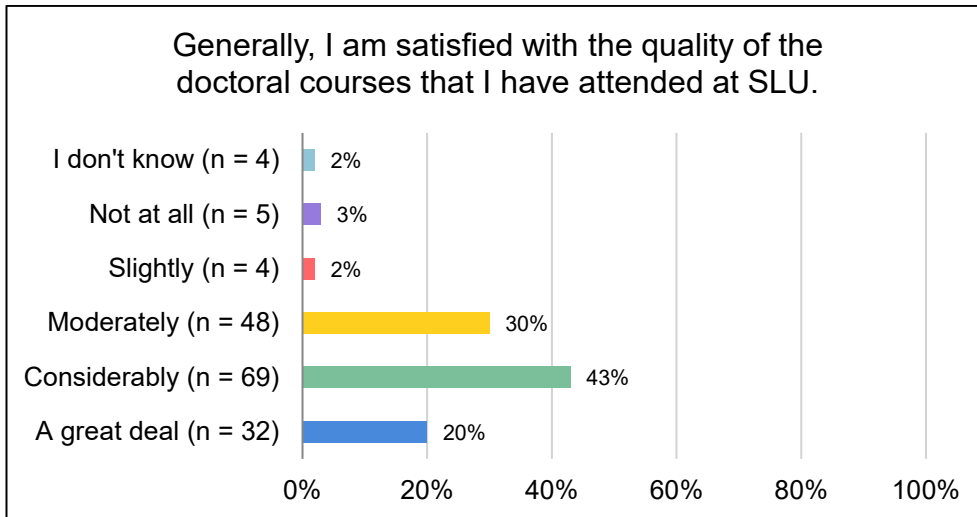


Figure 11. Perceived quality of SLU's doctoral courses.

Access to research seminars varies depending on the department or research environment, although they are regularly offered within various subjects. Doctoral students and researchers should be encouraged to participate in seminars as an important element of their academic training and research activities. Additionally, seminars create an opportunity to share individual research findings and practise scientific communication in front of an audience.

It is evident from the responses presented in the figures below that the number of seminars arranged by each department varies. A relatively large proportion responded 'I don't know' which can be interpreted as seminars not being arranged on a regular basis.

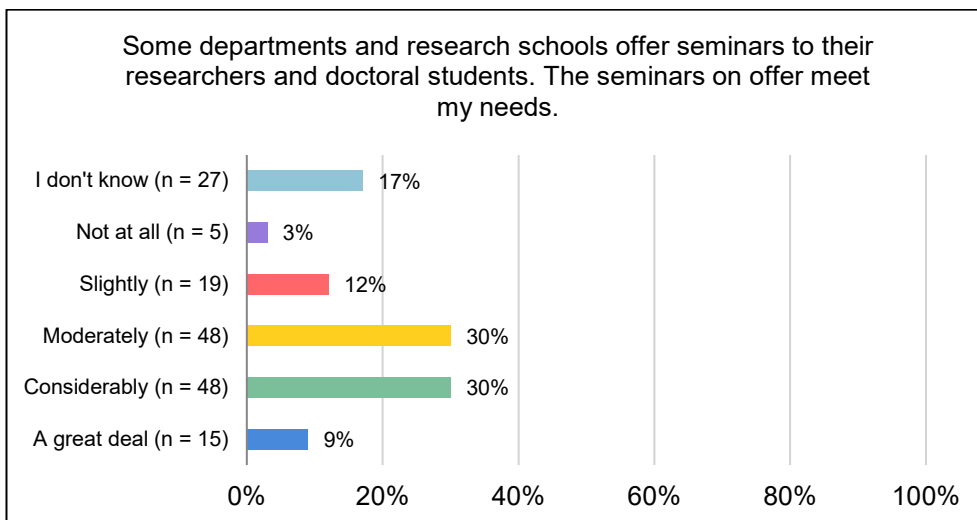


Figure 12. Seminars for researchers and doctoral students.

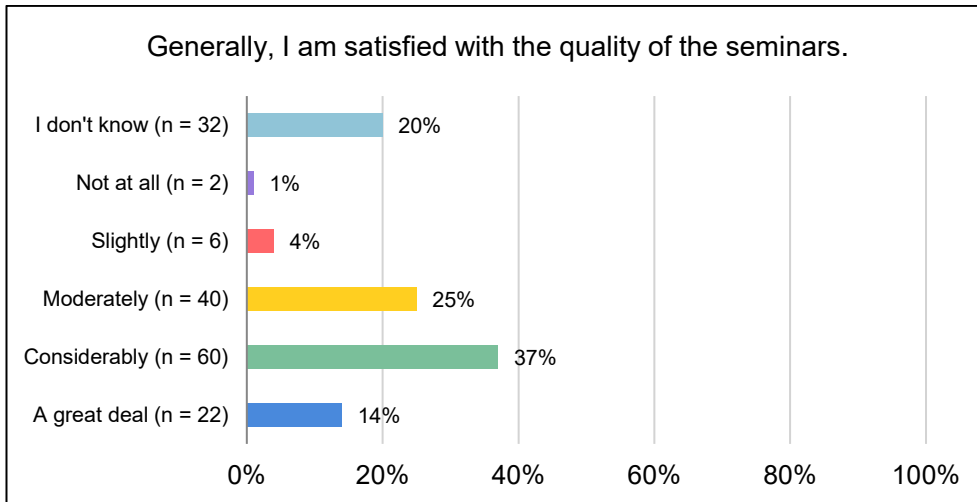


Figure 13. Perceived quality of research seminars.

Supervisor and supervision

The supervisor-student relationship is unique and builds upon mutual respect, trust and cooperation. It is vital that there is a balance between the supervisor’s guiding role and the student’s independence and creativity. A good working relationship between the student and supervisor is critical to the student’s success and for a positive and productive research environment.

The responses show that a clear majority are satisfied with both the amount of supervision and its quality.

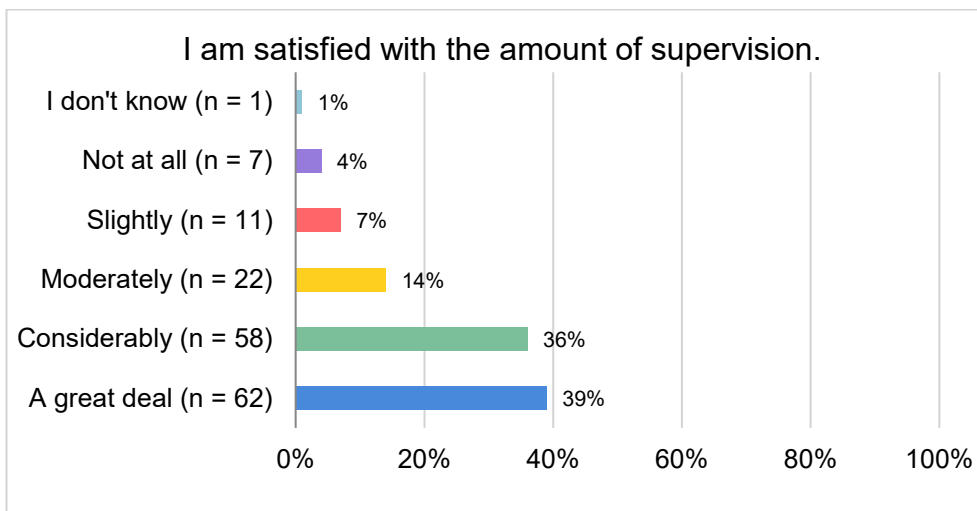


Figure 14. Satisfaction with the amount of supervision. Here, the respondents were asked to count on supervision from all supervisors.

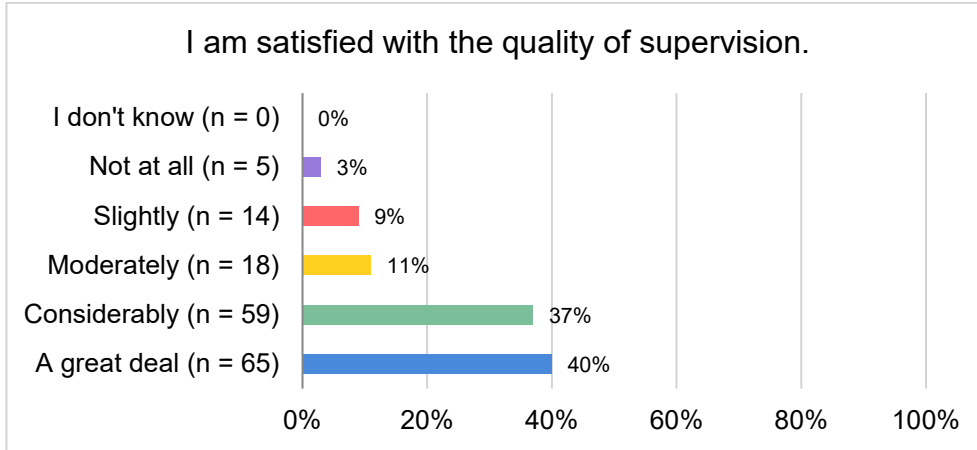


Figure 15. Satisfaction with supervision quality. Here, the respondents were asked to count on supervision from all supervisors.

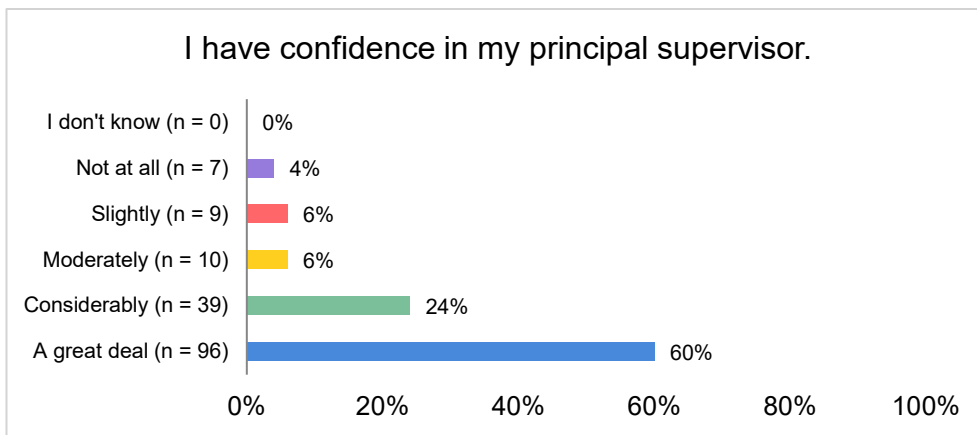


Figure 16. The doctoral student's confidence in the principal supervisor.

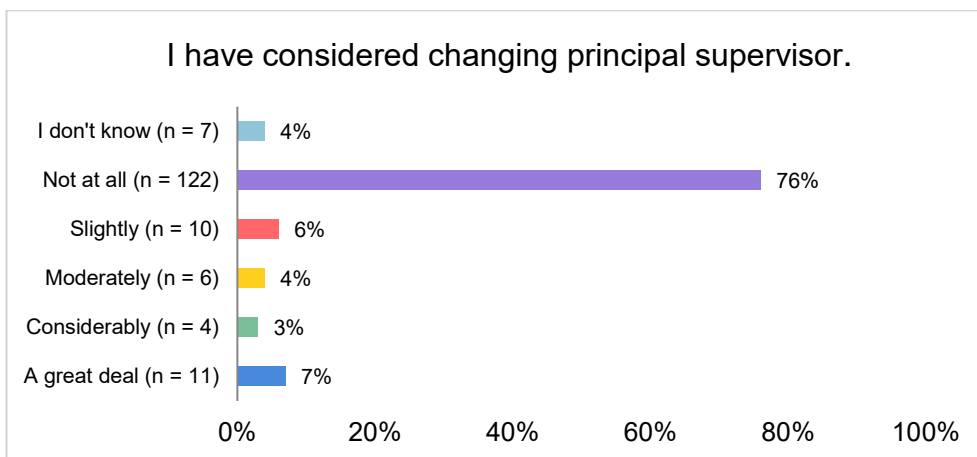


Figure 17. To what extent has the doctoral student considered changing the principal supervisor?

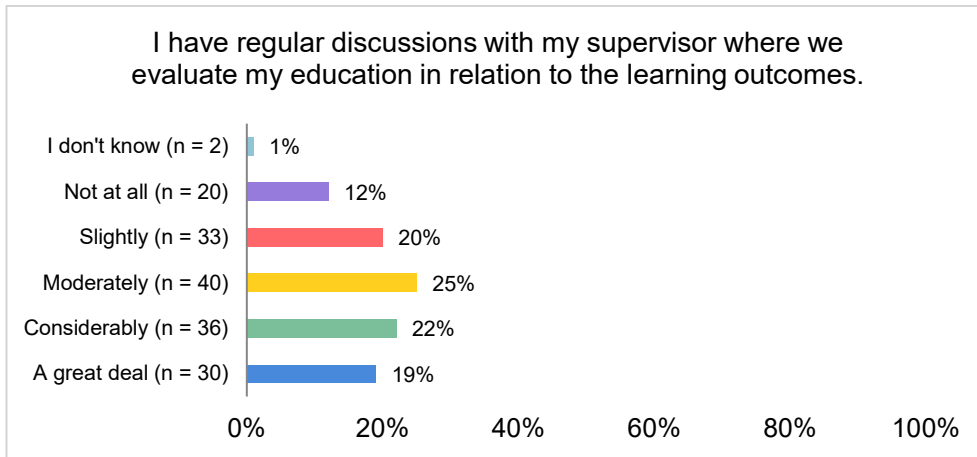
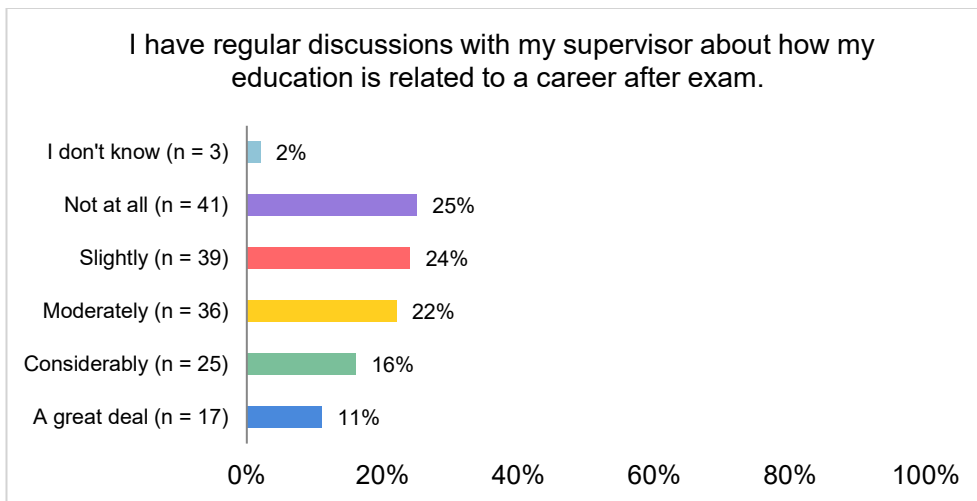


Figure 18. Supervisor discussions where the education is evaluated in relation to the qualitative targets.



Figur 3. Supervisor discussions on how the education is related to future career options.

Discussions are ongoing throughout SLU to address the best way to shape career support for doctoral students and determine what should be included. Figure 19 illustrates how common it is for students and their supervisors to regularly discuss career opportunities upon graduation. Approximately half of the doctoral students to have responded to the survey state they have never or seldom discussed this with their supervisor.

Work and study environments

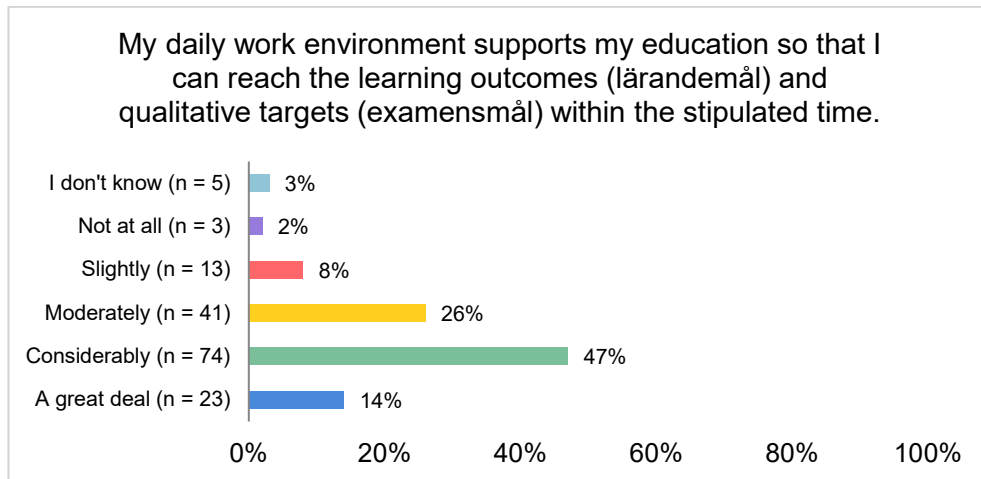


Figure 20. Do the work environment support the education?

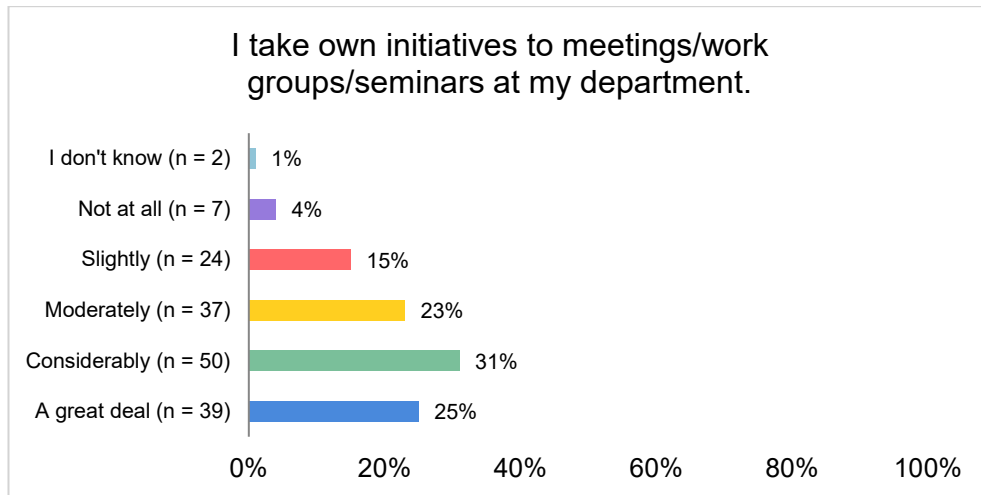


Figure 21. Do you take own initiatives to meetings etc. at the department?

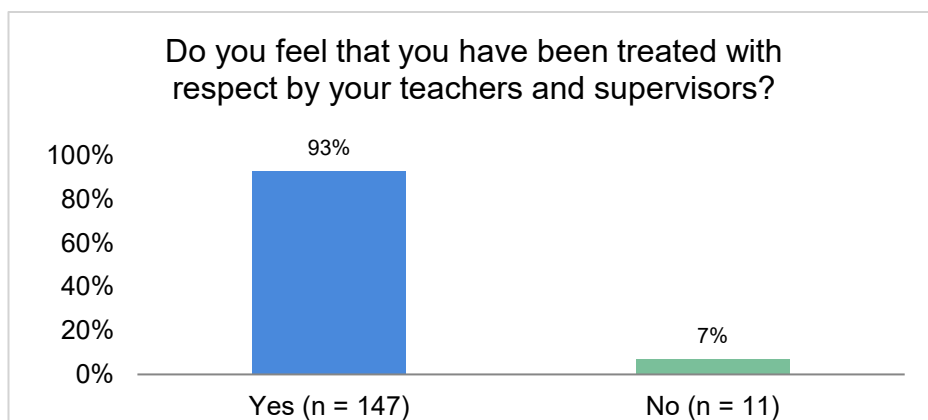


Figure 22. Do you feel that you have been treated with respect by your teachers and supervisors?

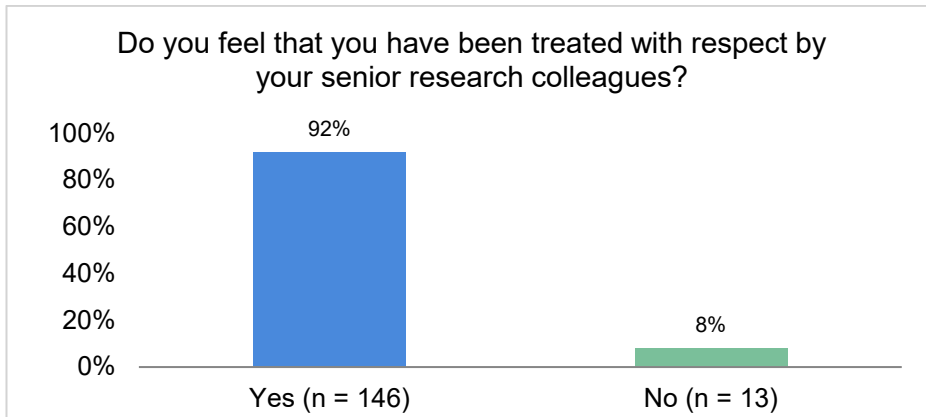


Figure 23. Do you feel that you have been treated with respect by your senior research colleagues?

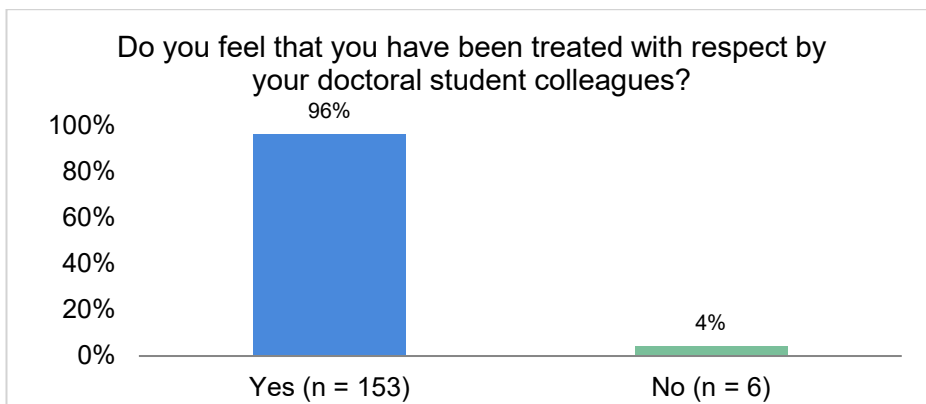


Figure 24. Do you feel that you have been treated with respect by your doctoral student colleagues?

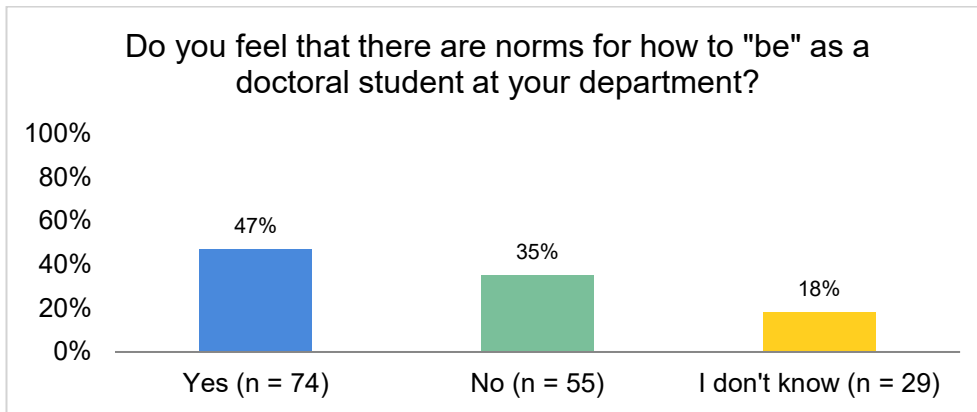


Figure 25. Do you feel that there are norms for how to "be" as a doctoral student at your department?

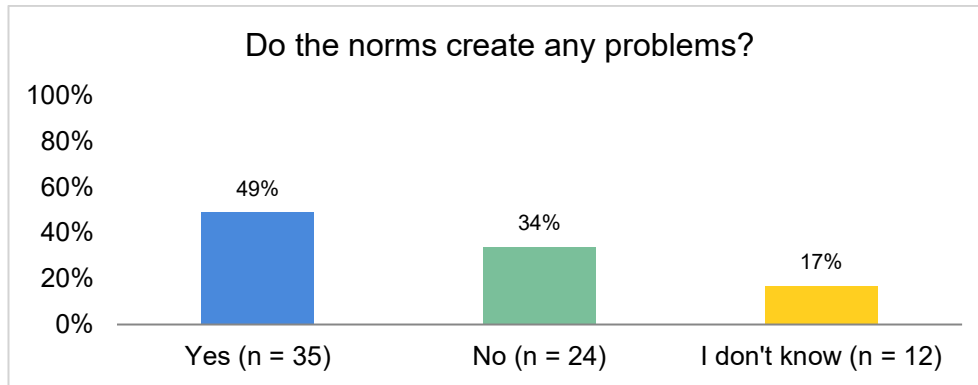


Figure 26. Do the norms create any problems?

Doctoral students were also able to provide free-form responses to elaborate on whether and/or how they believe norms create problems. The text below describes a selection of these opinions and comments that arose.

Upon examining the responses, it becomes clear that doctoral students are often compared and compare themselves against each other, which may lead to feelings of imposter syndrome and the belief that they never do enough. The students feel pressured to work long hours and always be available for activities including presentations and administrative tasks. Only working the standard hours can be viewed as laziness or having a lack of ambition and occasionally, unhealthy work habits are glorified among the students, creating unrealistic workload norms. They are expected to be absolutely dedicated to their research and taking breaks or time off can result in feelings of guilt. Doctoral students can feel exploited, especially when it comes to taking responsibility without enough support or the chance to say no.

The free-form responses also indicate that extrovert behaviour is often favoured, with introverted people feeling excluded from social activities. There was also a desire for inclusion among those who do not participate in all social events. Norms and expectations linked to age, family status, gender and nationality also appear, which could lead to inequalities and exclusion.

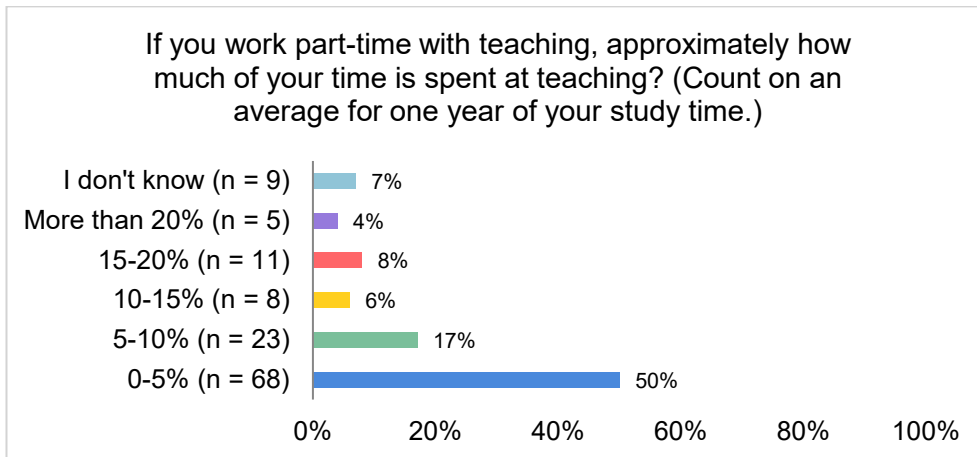


Figure 27. How much time was spent teaching?

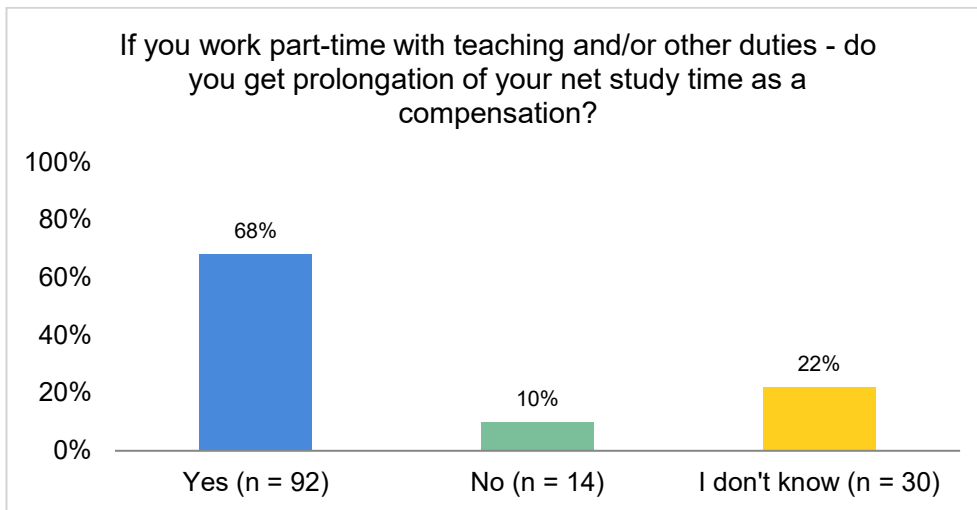


Figure 28. Extension of study time due to teaching and/or other duties?

Do you perform any other tasks at your department (other than teaching) alongside your doctoral studies? If yes, what?

(Below is a summary of the responses)

- Active participation in the PhD Student Council, various departmental roles such as being a representative at meetings and on boards.
- Active involvement at departmental or faculty level (boards, management groups, etc.) and participation in graduate schools.
- Organising departmental activities, managing administrative tasks. Technical maintenance of lab instruments.
- Participating in gender equality representation and seminar organisations.
- Translation work.
- Clinical work at the University Animal Hospital.

Discrimination and victimisation

Discrimination and victimisation are two closely-related issues and are often used synonymously, however they have some significant differences. It is possible to say that all discrimination is a form of victimisation, although not all victimisation is necessarily discrimination. The term ‘discrimination’ is regulated in the Discrimination Act and acts of discrimination must link to one of the grounds of discrimination named in the Act. Victimisation includes all forms of negative and harmful behaviour – regardless of reason. [Read about the grounds of discrimination on the Equality Ombudsman’s website.](#)

Discrimination

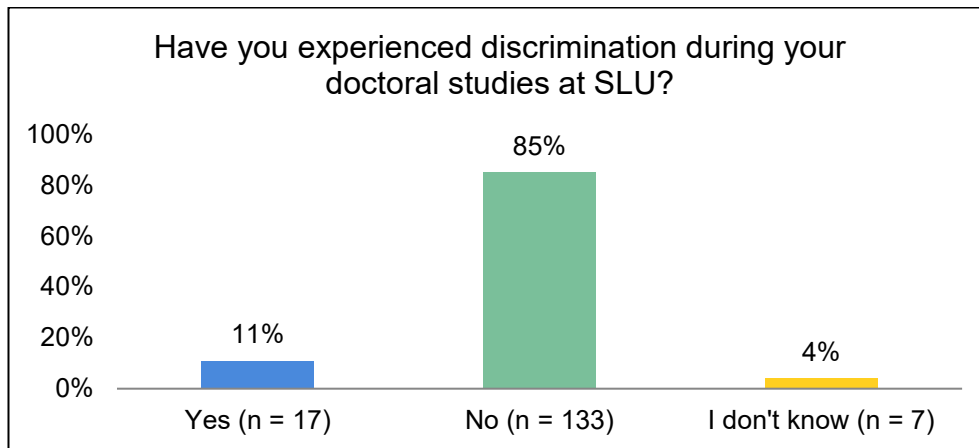


Figure 29. Have you experienced discrimination during your doctoral studies?

Those who responded ‘yes’ to the above question (17 respondents, fig. 29) were also asked if they had reported the discrimination to somebody at SLU. Seven people (38 per cent) stated they had reported the incident, whereas 61 per cent had not. They were also asked about the ground of discrimination that links to their experience, see Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of number of respondents to the seven grounds of discrimination.

Ground of discrimination	Number of respondents
Sex	6
Transgender identity or expression	1
Ethnicity	3
Religion or other belief	0
Disability	3
Sexual orientation	1
Age	2

Victimisation

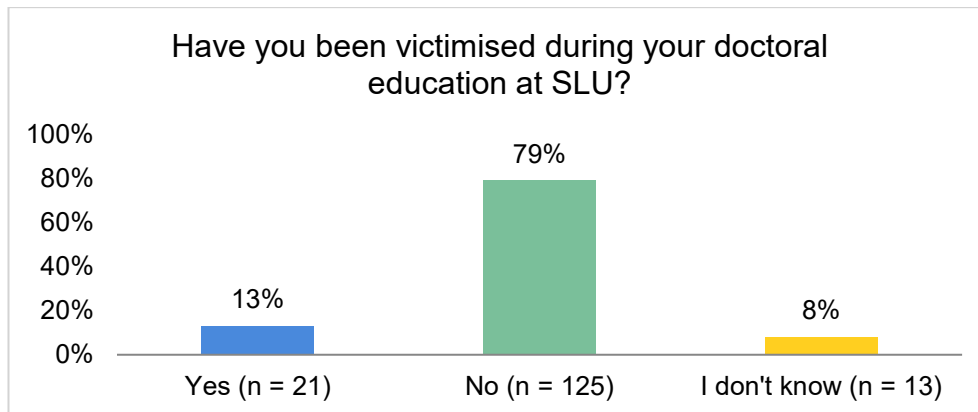


Figure 30. Have you been victimised during your doctoral education at SLU?

Those who responded 'yes' to the above question (21 respondents) were also asked if they had reported the incident to somebody at SLU. Of these students, 32 per cent (seven students) stated they had reported the incident, while 68 per cent (15 students) had not.

Various reasons why a student chooses not to report

Respondents who stated they had been subjected to discrimination or victimisation were also asked if they had reported the incident. Those who had chosen not to report were able to submit a free-form response explaining why. The text in this paragraph is a summary of the responses explaining why the students had chosen not to report the incident.

A number expressed their fears of reporting the incident as they were afraid it would lead to problems or have negative consequences, especially when the perpetrator had close ties to their supervisor or department. Students expressed fears about the potential negative effects on their work environment, emotional wellbeing and relationships with supervisors should they report the incidents.

Some students reported the incident but felt that their complaints were not taken seriously by management, or was dismissed as being a misunderstanding. This lack of response deterred them from reporting future incidents. Some stated that they did not believe reporting the incident would result in any meaningful change or improvement to their situation, leaving them to focus solely on their studies and plan for a future in a more supportive environment.

Some respondents questioned the difficulty in presenting tangible evidence of subtle forms of discrimination and exposure as incidents often involved implicit or indirect behaviours rather than explicit expressions. Some students mentioned that

they were perhaps being too sensitive or questioned whether their experiences even constituted victimisation.

Research environment

A strong research environment provides doctoral students with access to essential resources such as laboratories, library services, technical equipment as well as networks with other researchers and environments. A positive research environment promotes cooperation and interaction between doctoral students and other researchers.

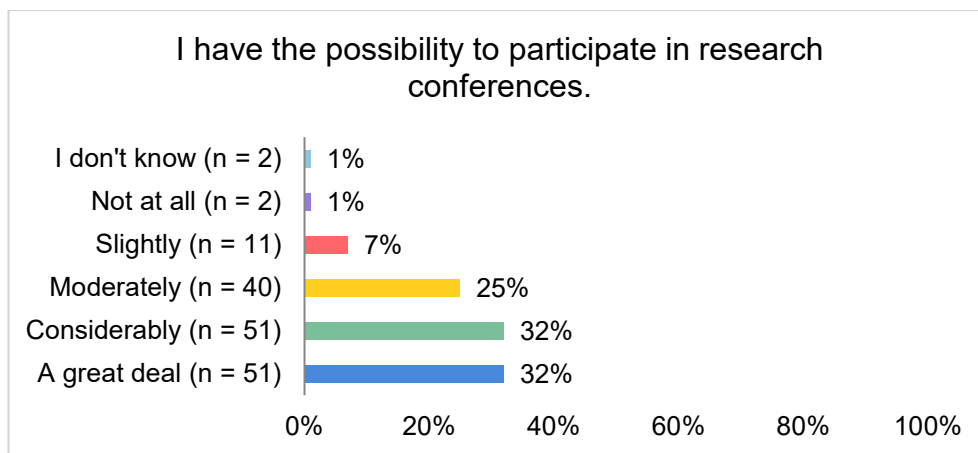


Figure 31. Possibility to participate in research conferences.

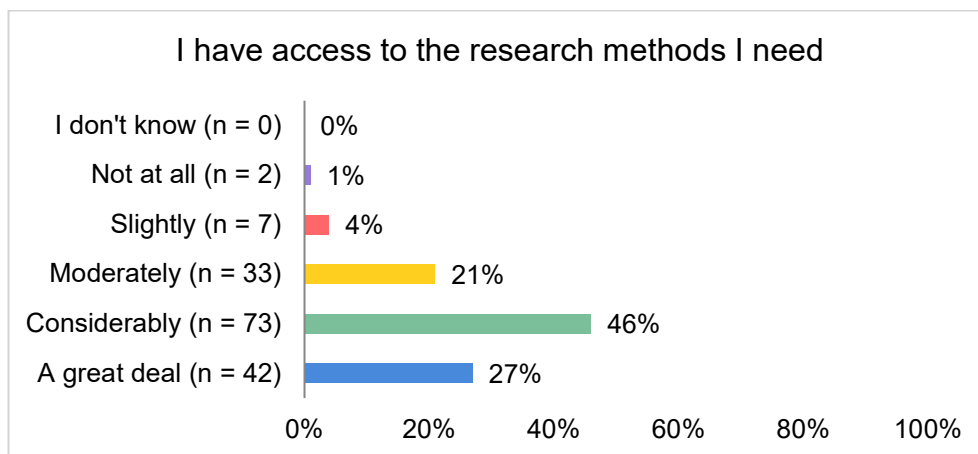


Figure 32. Access to research methods.

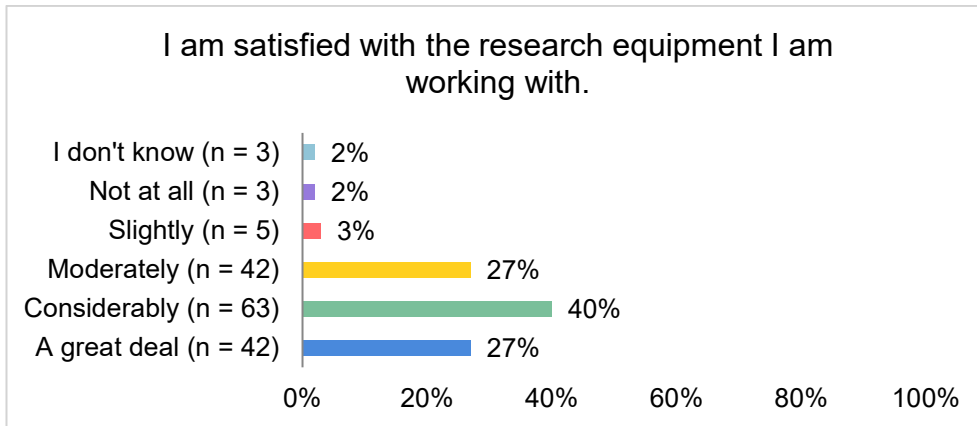


Figure 33. Satisfaction with research equipment.

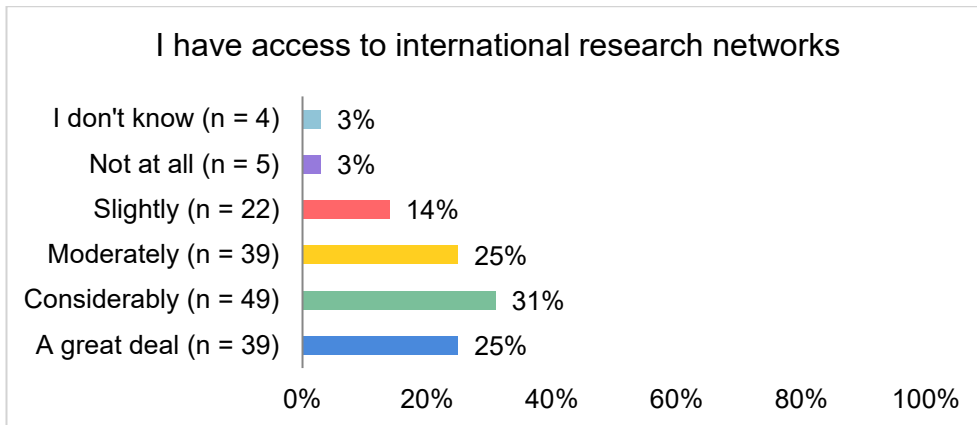


Figure 34. Access to international research networks.

Overall satisfaction and optimism

Several questions addressed the respondents' overall satisfaction and optimism. Studying towards a doctoral degree places high demands on a student, and so it is only natural that they may doubt their own ability and perhaps even contemplate dropping out of their studies. However, this is relatively uncommon. The figure below indicates that 58 per cent of respondents have not considered abandoning their studies, however 11 per cent report having seriously contemplated this option.

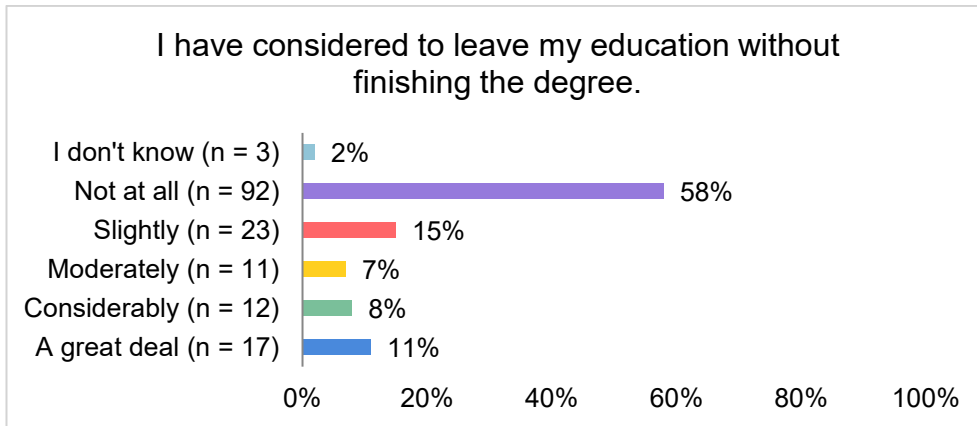


Figure 35. Considered leaving the education without finishing the degree?

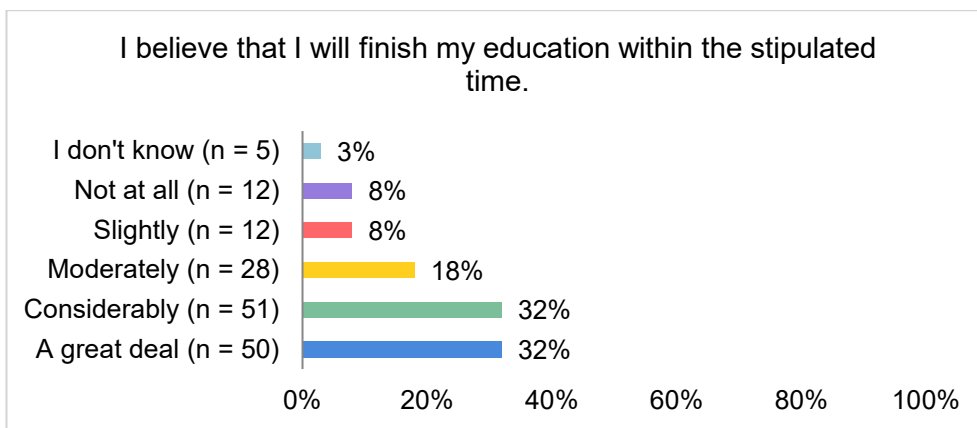


Figure 36. I believe that I will finish my education within the stipulated time.

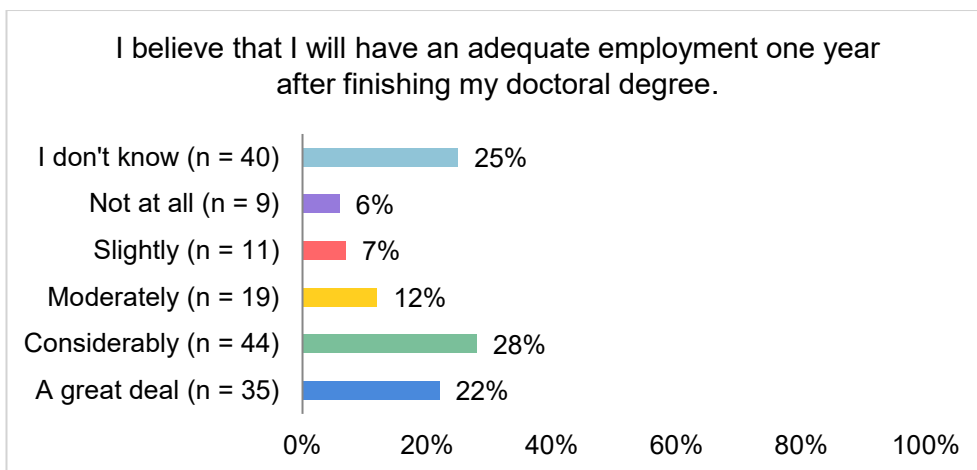


Figure 37. I believe that I will have an adequate employment one year after finishing my doctoral degree.

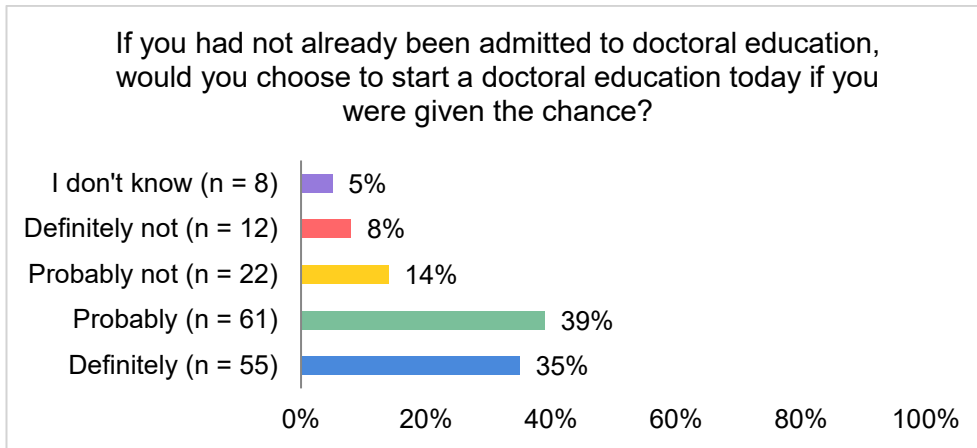


Figure 38. If you had not already been admitted to doctoral education, would you choose to start a doctoral education today if you were given the chance?

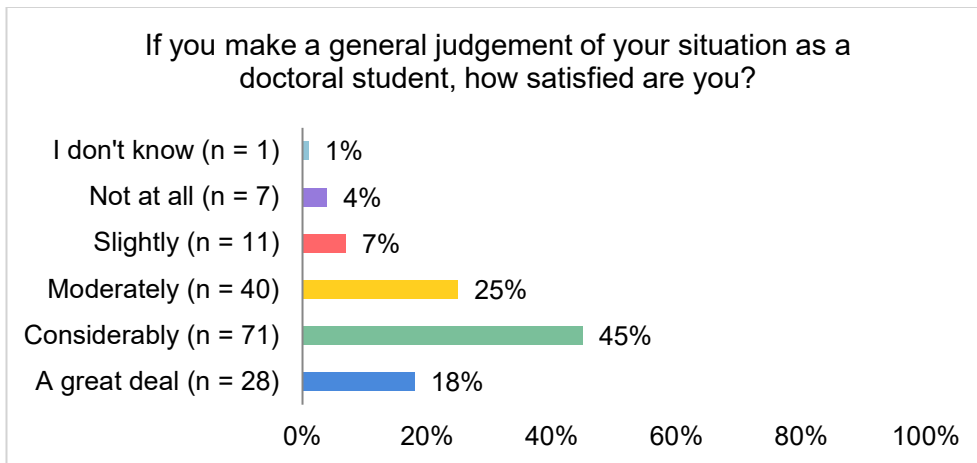


Figure 39. If you make a general judgement of your situation as a doctoral students, how satisfied are you?

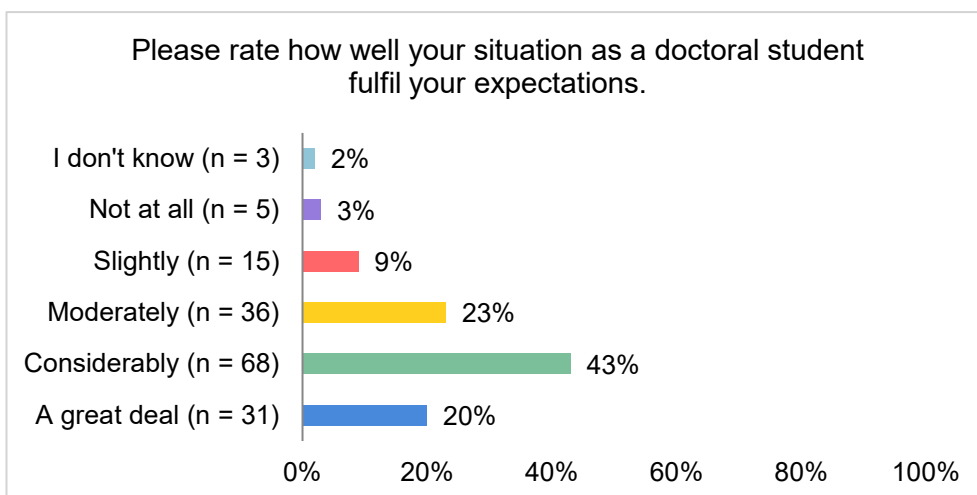


Figure 40. Please rate how well your situation as a doctoral student fulfil your expectations.

One question looked at how the pandemic has affected doctoral education, see below. Naturally, it may be difficult for doctoral students to assess the effects of the pandemic, especially if they were admitted while it was ongoing, and do not have any experience of academic life pre-pandemic. However the responses can also provide us with an idea of how the respondents felt the pandemic had affected their studies.

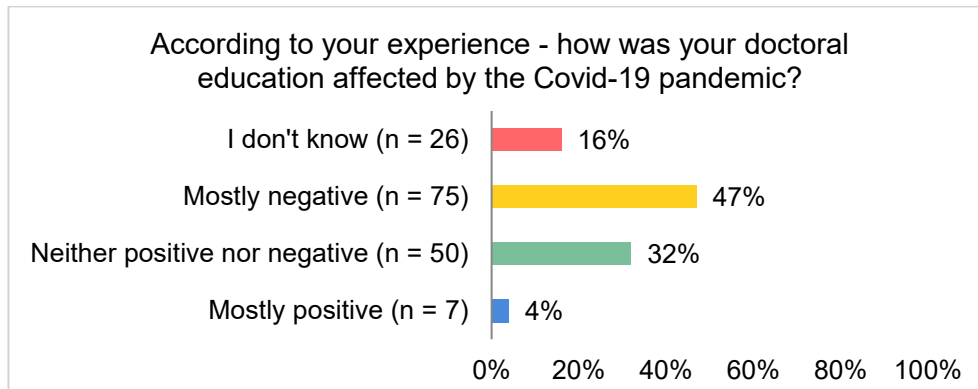


Figure 41. According to your experience – how was your doctoral education affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

The survey concludes with three questions with free-form text responses

1. I am very satisfied with:

Respondents mentioned several aspects they were satisfied with. Here is a summary of the most common comments:

Supervision: Many respondents were satisfied with their supervisors and the levels of support they received, including the guidance and the supervisors' subject expertise.

Work environment and colleagues: Several mentioned having positive work environments, friendly colleagues and support from fellow doctoral students as contributing factors. As was departmental support on issues relating to life as a doctoral student.

Freedom and flexibility: Respondents appreciated the freedom of being able to independently plan and pursue their studies, as well as the flexibility of the way research projects are structured.

Camaraderie and network: Many valued the feeling of camaraderie among doctoral students and the opportunity to network with researchers in their field.

Work-life balance: A work-life balance that reduces pressures and stress was highlighted as being a contributing factor to a positive work environment.

Support system for doctoral students: University support systems, such as mediators and the PhD Student Council, were seen as positive factors.

To summarise, the respondents highlighted how professional supervision, a supportive and cooperative environment and access to personal and professional development all formed factors contributing to their satisfaction.

2. I think the following aspect/s need/s to be improved:

Here is a summary of the most common categories that respondents believe need improving:

Supervision: Lack of support from supervisors, lack of involvement and interest. Some respondents would like to see compulsory courses in leadership and supervision for supervisors. They also noted variations in the quality of supervision and the need for support for supervisors. Concerns were expressed about the varying and unclear expectations and lack of standardised requirements for doctoral students.

Networking and cooperation: Many felt there was room for improvement in terms of access to networking, both within the university and with external partners. Some mentioned a lack of camaraderie and social activities at their departments, and would like to see more activities on a departmental level. Concerns about unhealthy work norms were expressed. Students would like to see a more inclusive and supportive work environment. Several respondents believed that more activities and collaborations between departments could improve the work environment.

Mental health: The respondents emphasised the need for regular meetings with somebody from outside the supervisor group to discuss mental health. They also mentioned a certain apprehension towards seeking help for mental health problems. Some respondents raised the need for mechanisms for managing conflicts involving doctoral students and support for solving these problems effectively.

Communication and information: Communication problems between heads of department, HR staff and doctoral students were mentioned. Some respondents struggled to find information about courses and doctoral studies on the SLU website.

Career support: Respondents would like to have greater insight into career opportunities after graduation, especially those outside of academia. They also expressed the need for more mentorship opportunities.

Support for international students: International students encountered challenges in terms of accommodation and financial matters, and there was a desire for better support in these areas.

3. *Further I want to add:*

The third and final open question intended to capture any additional opinions and comments that may not have been suited to any of the previous questions. Irregular answers are a natural consequence of an entirely open question. Some examples of matters raised in this section are presented below.

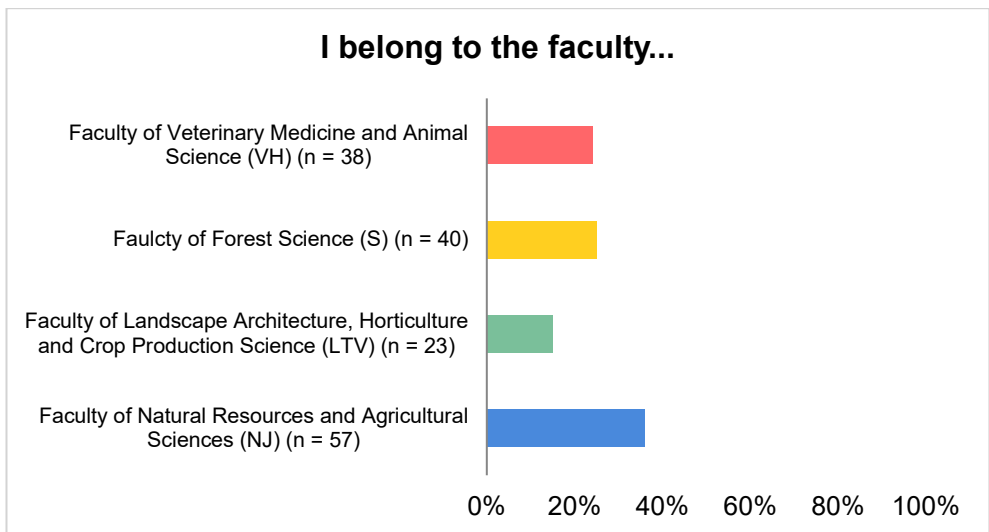
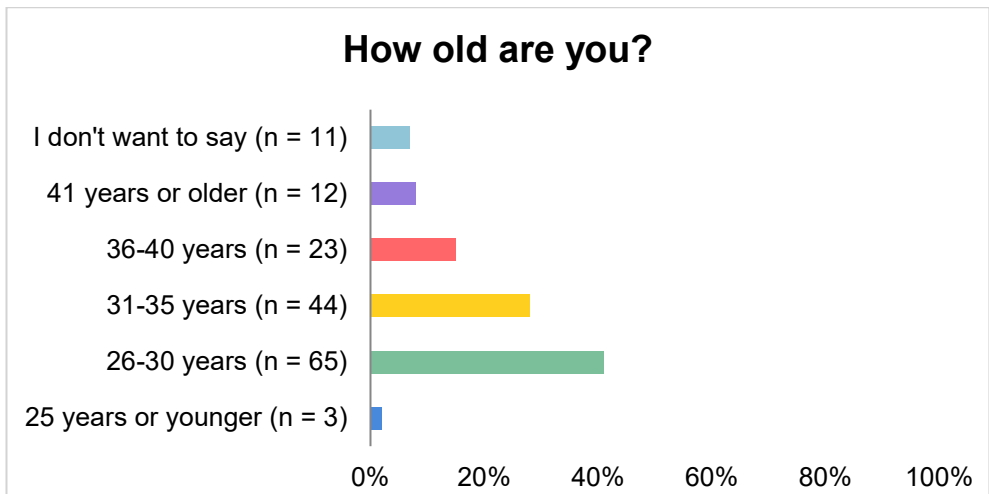
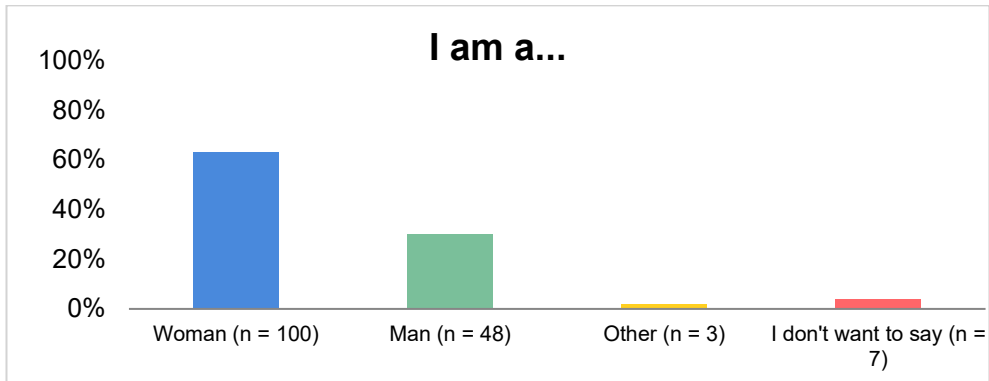
Supervision quality: Once more, the importance of a good relationship with the supervisor and their role in shaping the students' experiences was raised. Some respondents expressed thanks towards their supportive supervisors.

Emotional wellbeing: Several respondents shared their personal challenges related to mental health, stress and feeling overwhelmed. They stressed the need for better support and resources for managing these issues. The varying conditions under which different doctoral students conduct their studies were highlighted, and it was suggested that these differences should be taken into account when evaluating performance.

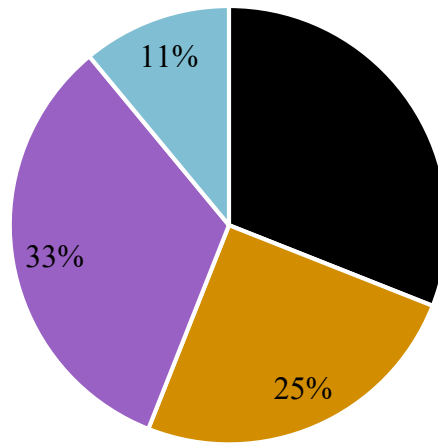
Language barriers: The use of Swedish in meetings and academic contexts were a concern for some, as this excluded students who could not speak the language. Language barriers were seen as a form of discrimination.

Alienation and discrimination: Concerns over discrimination based on nationality, religion and language were raised. Some respondents felt marginalised and undervalued at their departments.

Appendix 1. Background information about the respondents

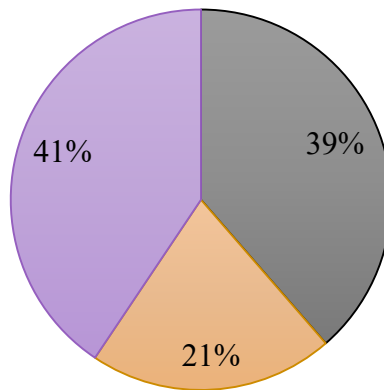


With my doctoral education I primarily aim for...



- An academic career at a university (n = 33)
- A career within a non-university organisation (n = 27)
- I don't know (n = 36)
- Other: (n = 12)

I completed my undergraduate studies at...



- SLU (n = 61)
- a Swedish university (other than SLU) (n = 33)
- a non-Swedish university (n = 64)

Number of respondents per SLU department

