

survey report

2022

Central PhD Council



Central PhD Council Survey

PhD Candidate Experiences

2022

6.85

PhD candidates overall satisfaction with their PhD trajectory

Structure of PhD



72%

4 year contract



96%

2 or more supervisors



78%

teaching



77%

full-time

Social safety

99
422

experienced undesirable social conduct in the past year

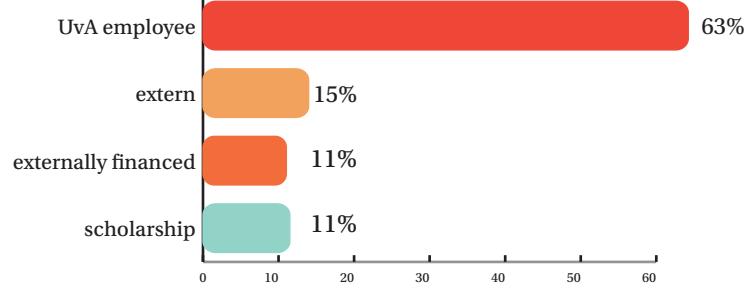
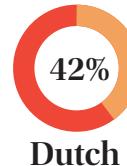
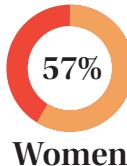
women reported **twice** as many incidents as men

find the full report and more information about the Central PhD Council



Sample

422 respondents



International PhD candidates

15%

did not feel integrated in their research group

are not satisfied with their social relations at work

21%

32% of the non-EEA PhD candidates earn less than 1500 euros a month

Wellbeing

16% reported poor wellbeing

impact of the PhD project on wellbeing

42% positive impact

32% negative impact

experience high workload

61%

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Introduction

The [Central PhD Council](#) (CPC) is the University of Amsterdam's (UvA) representative body for all PhD candidates. Each faculty of the university is represented in the Council, totalling more than 4116 PhD candidates. The CPC holds a bi-annual survey among all PhD candidates to monitor PhD experiences within the university. The results of the 2022 survey are presented in this report. Further, we have several recommendations to the university, faculties, and all those who work with PhD candidates to improve the PhD trajectory.

Background of the survey

To reach as many PhD candidates as possible, the survey was distributed through various channels at various points in time. PhD candidates were encouraged to participate by a lottery of a VVV-coupon worth 50 euros, which have been allotted to two random respondents. Before participating in the survey, PhD candidates granted permission for the use of the data for the goal of evaluating their experiences at the University of Amsterdam. Data was gathered using Qualtrics software.

The topics addressed in the survey are (1) starting and finishing of the PhD project, (2) research environment, (3) supervision, (4) education, (5) teaching, (6) support, (7) progress and wellbeing, (8) social safety, (9) career development and (10) COVID-19.

About the report

This report contains a brief analysis and report of most questions in the survey. We were not able to include all questions and have chosen to include elaborate analyses for some questions, but not for all. Faculty-specific analyses may be presented within the faculties.

Analysis was performed in Python, and all syntaxes are available upon request. All results in this report are purely descriptive. Limited response rates do not allow us to draw conclusions about all PhD candidates.

National PhD evaluation

Part of the questionnaire overlaps with a national PhD survey – to learn from PhD experiences across universities in the Netherlands. The responses from this survey will be shared for this goal. Participants were asked before starting the survey whether they permitted their data to be shared for this purpose.

Do you wish to learn more about the questions we asked during the survey, or do you seek specific information about a certain topic or group of PhD candidates? Feel free to reach out to the Central PhD Council on cpc@uva.nl.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the Central PhD Council bi-annual survey and our observations over the last years – including results from previous surveys - we have formulated several recommendations for the university to improve the social safety, work conditions and wellbeing of PhD candidates.

Social safety

A high number of PhD candidates face social safety issues. Over the past years, instruments to report social safety misconduct have been installed in our university, such as an ombudsman and confidential counsellors. The number of PhD candidates that experience socially unsafe situations has not decreased in recent years. Although we applaud the measures taken so far, we see that these measures are not always found by PhD candidates or are chosen not to be used. The awareness of these places needs to be significantly improved, by opening up the conversation on social safety. The UvA has to instil a sense of trust and independence in the institutions for them to be actually utilised by PhDs, not the least by demonstrating actions are indeed taken when approached with an issue.

The focus up until this point has been on reporting incidents rather than preventing incidents and changing the culture on the work floor. We see that first steps are being taken, yet we strongly recommend – in line with reports such as ‘Sociale veiligheid in de Nederlandse wetenschap’ by the KNAW – to keep on focusing on creating a university culture of social safety where incidents are prevented rather than reaching a point of reporting after the fact.

International PhD candidates

International PhD candidates quite often feel left out of their group and not well integrated within our university. In line with UvA's diversity and inclusion policy, we should put more effort to make international PhD candidates feel more included. We cannot make claims about diversity and inclusion if we do not properly include international PhD candidates. The onboarding process needs to be specifically aimed for those who come from outside of the Netherlands. Further, the workplace needs to improve their inclusiveness by evaluating their practices towards non-Dutch PhD candidates (i.e., social practices, language).

As per this year, new PhD candidates with a scholarship that do not meet the minimum level of 1500 euros are “topped up” to this level. For some faculties, this top-up is not given to current PhD candidates – those who started before March 2022 - creating a visible and arbitrary divide. We urge all faculties to consider instating the top-up for this group. Considering the cost-of-living-crisis, it has become very hard for some PhD candidates to make ends meet.

Wellbeing

Compared to the previous CPC survey, in which 6% of the respondents indicated their well-being as ‘poor’, this year 16% indicated their wellbeing as poor. This is a strong increase and needs attention. The student psychologists are one of the places a PhD candidate can go to for mental support. Yet, for many PhD candidates this is not known. We suggest considering a campaign specifically for PhD candidates, and further strongly urge the university to elaborate the current services of the student psychologists specifically aimed at PhD candidates. The trainings currently offered are in high demand.

PhD trajectory conditions

Currently, some new PhD candidates are still given three-year contracts. We would highly recommend making the four-year contract the universal standard within the university in line with the suggestions in the Collective Labour Agreement(s). Although some PhD projects require less extensive data collection, PhD candidates still need the time to develop as researcher, professionals, and critical thinkers. Contracts that deviate from the norm need to be carefully monitored by HR.

The results indicate that some PhD candidates do not or did not have an annual progress review. As argued for in previous CPC survey reports, we again strongly urge that each PhD candidate in our university, including external PhD candidates, have a yearly review. In this annual progress review, there should be room to discuss the professional and personal development of the PhD candidate. Preferably, other parties than the supervisor(s) take part in this review, to ensure that PhD candidates also have the opportunity to discuss the cooperation with their supervisor.

The Teaching and Supervision Plan (TSP) should be the starting point of the PhD trajectory, which it currently is for many PhD candidates. However, it should not remain solely a starting point. The TSP can be used as a way to track annual progress and focus on the development of the PhD candidate as a professional in- and outside of academia. This does mean the TSP should be more than a document that tracks the research: it must include learning objectives for the PhD candidate as a learning professional. We encourage all university employees that are involved in the supervision of PhD candidates, from supervisors to PhD mentors, to actively use the TSP in the PhD trajectory as a tool for professional development.

Working from home

With working from home regularly becoming the new standard, we see that many PhD candidates do not yet have proper work-from-home equipment – or do not have physical space at home to have this. We strongly encourage creative solutions to prevent PhD candidates from physical complaints. Further, working from home can be isolating – please keep an eye out for PhD candidates who might feel lonely, or unsupported.

The CPC acknowledges the work done by the university for PhD candidates. Nevertheless, precarious conditions are still very much prominent, and recommendations from previous surveys remain relevant. We look forward to cooperating with the university, faculties and colleagues with these recommendations and are willing to provide further information and experiences.

General characteristics

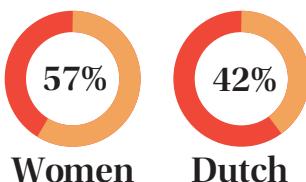
422 respondents

This is a response rate of **10%** - the university had 4116 PhD candidates as on 1 January 2022. This includes all PhD candidates, internal/external full-time/part-time.

Figure 1. Response rate per faculty

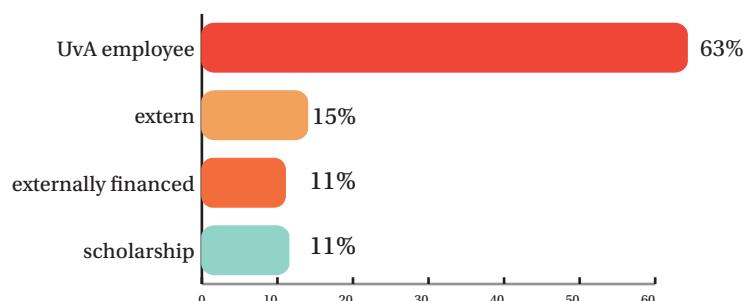
| Faculty of | Number of PhD candidates in 2022 | Number of respondents | Response rate |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| Medicine & Dentistry (AMC & ACTA) | 1903 + 122 = 2025 | 21 | 1% |
| Social and Behavioural Science (FMG) | 431 | 79 | 18% |
| Humanities (FGw) | 516 | 56 | 11% |
| Science (FNWI) | 871 | 177 | 21% |
| Law (FdR) | 139 | 37 | 27% |
| Economics and Business (FEB) | 134 | 44 | 33% |
| Dual Faculties | Unknown | 8 | - |

Depicted in Figure 1 is the response rate per faculty. The response rate in some faculties, specifically in the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry, was exceptionally low. Results might not be representative for the population.



- The largest group of respondents (42%) hold a Dutch nationality, whereas 30% holds a nationality from an EEA-country, and 28% holds another nationality.
- The majority of the respondents (51%) is between the age of 26 and 30, whereas only 6% is younger than 26, and just 8% is older than 40.
- Women show a strong majority with 57% of the respondents identifying as female.

The majority of the respondents (63%) is employed by the university. 15% of the respondents works on their PhD in their own time (buitenpromovendus), whereas 11% is supported by a scholarship and 11% is externally funded. The number of responses between categories are not an accurate representation of their proportion of the PhD population at the university.



The overall satisfaction of respondents regarding the PhD trajectory is 6.85 out of 10 with 35% attributing a score 8 or more.

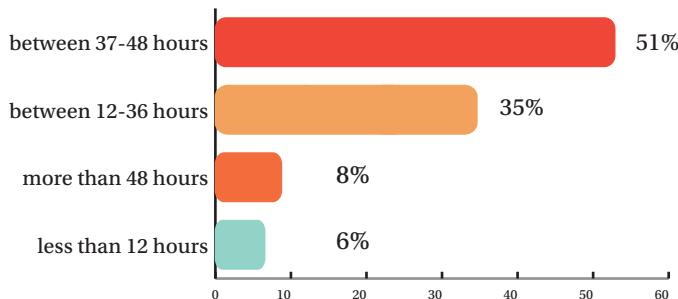
6.85

On average, PhDs with Dutch nationality were 10% more likely than other nationalities, especially non-Europeans, to report high satisfaction (8 and above).

Starting and finishing your PhD

Most respondents started their PhD within the last four years. However, 25% of the respondents started longer than 4 years ago, with the earliest starting year being 2012.

72% of the respondents have a four-year contract. This meets the Collective Labour Agreement(s), which describes that, ideally, a PhD project lasts four years (if working full time). Ten percent of the respondents have a three-year contract, which leaves less time for personal and professional development. A few respondents have a five- or six-year contract, or work on their PhD project in their spare time.



4 year contract



full-time

77% of the respondents work on their PhD full time. The other PhD candidates work part time. Once asked whether this number of hours was also an accurate reflection of practical reality, it became prominent that 5.7 percent work 48 hours per week, many more hours than their contract requires. Overworking is mostly prominent in the faculties of: Science, Economics and Business, Medicine and Dentistry.

- Most of the respondents (86%) receive some form of salary or bursary for the work they do. However, respondents who are a bit older than the average PhD candidate (41 years and older) and those who do their PhD within the Faculty of Humanities more often report not receiving some sort of funding.
- The Teaching and Supervision Plan is a plan made at the start of a PhD project, which indicates the education PhD candidates will follow, the objectives for their personal and professional development, and agreements about their work relationship with their supervisors. The results of the survey show that most PhD candidates (64%) do have a Teaching and Supervision Plan. A gap is visible between PhD candidates who started their PhD in the last two years, and those who did before. Respondents who started within the last two years ago more often indicate that they do have a plan.
- Respondents who started their PhD within the last two years are in general very satisfied about the university's information of their employment conditions, more so than their fellow PhD candidates who started before.
- Most respondents (69%) co-designed their PhD project with their supervisors, although for some the contribution of the supervisor was strong, and for others more modest. There are differences between faculties, however, with Medicine and Dentistry having the highest (86%) number of projects co-designed with supervisors and the Faculty of Law with the lowest (59%).
- Around 10% of the respondents, or their bursary/external employee, pay a tuition fee for doing their PhD at the University of Amsterdam. Information provision on this topic is considered insufficient by almost half of them.

Research Environment

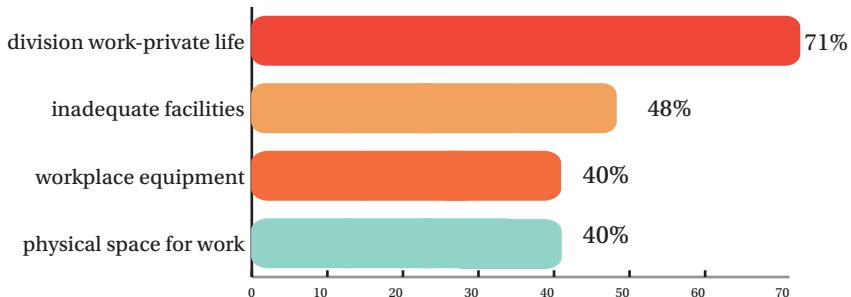
Looking at the research facilities for PhD candidates, it becomes visible that:

- Computer and software facilities are taken care of very well, with 73% being satisfied or very satisfied.
- Respondents were in general satisfied with their research facilities, such as their lab, instruments, field work, databases. Only 7% of the respondents were not satisfied with these facilities. This is also the case for library access, just 4% were not satisfied. For both facilities, some PhD candidates do not have access to them. We do not know whether they would need or like access.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, many PhD candidates work from home, and continue to do so. Only half of the respondents had a proper work-from-home setup, with equipment such as an office chair or an external display.

- One in four respondents indicates that they do not know how to request this type of set up, whereas almost half of the respondents are not provided with the equipment by their faculty or institute.

When working from home, the division of work and private life is hard for 71% of the respondents. Other difficulties reported were inadequate facilities (48%), workplace equipment (chair, external display etc.) (40%) and physical space for work (40%).



- Respondents mostly had sufficient budget for their research, travels, and training. Insufficient budget was most prominent for PhD candidates who do their PhD in their own time. Further, a large group (both internal and external PhD candidates) was unaware about their budget or did not have the right information. This is specifically the case for PhD candidates who started their PhD within the last two years.
- The majority of respondents (71%) had a net income of more than 2000 euros. For PhD candidates with a Dutch nationality, this number is even higher – 84% of them earn more than 2000 euros. Among respondents with a non-European nationality, only 40% earn more than 2000 euros. There are also some respondents who have less than 500 to a 1000 euros net income on a monthly basis.
- Supervisors, colleagues, and fellow PhD candidates are the ones that most often introduce respondents to their research institute. Only 18% of the respondents received information from HR.
- Most respondents (60%) feel integrated in their department or research group. PhD candidates who are not Dutch (57%) report lower numbers of integration in their local research community than their Dutch peers (65%).
- Respondents are also satisfied with their social relations at work (70%). Again, this is less likely for PhD candidates with other nationalities, especially for those outside of the EEA (61%).
- Research integrity is openly discussed in 51% of the cases but more importantly, 35% of respondents either do not seem to know nor have a strong opinion on this.

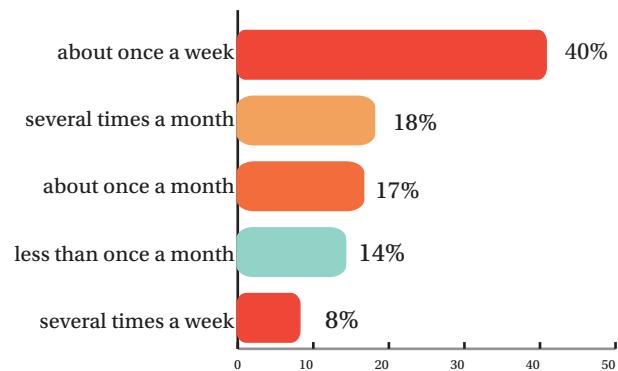
32% of the PhD candidates with a non-European nationality earn less than 1500 euros per month

Supervision

Most respondents had 2 or 3 supervisors. Just 17 respondents had 1 supervisor. The goal is that all PhD candidates have more than one supervisor.

Most often, their supervisor was also their daily supervisor, otherwise the co-supervisor is the daily supervisor. In some exceptions, a post-doc or another assistant professor is the daily supervisor. In 85% of the cases the supervisor is a professor.

- Most respondents receive 2 to 5 hours of supervision per month. 11% of the respondents are supervised for over 11 hours a month, whereas 15% gets less than 2 hours of supervision per month. Most respondents see their daily supervisors about once a week, or several times a month, although 14% sees their daily supervisors less than once per month.
- Female respondents indicated many more hours of received supervision than their male peers. Also, they meet their daily supervisors more often than their male colleagues.



Overall, PhD candidates are satisfied to very satisfied about their supervision (73%). 13% of the respondents were not satisfied. Respondents in the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Economics and Business are slightly more dissatisfied with the motivation and support they get from their supervisors than PhD candidates in other faculties.

Social safety

23% of the respondents have experienced some sort of undesirable social conduct. The university average of respondents experiencing social safety issues has remained constant since the 2020 CPC survey.

Female respondents are more likely to be affected by social safety issues than men (28% vs. 16%).

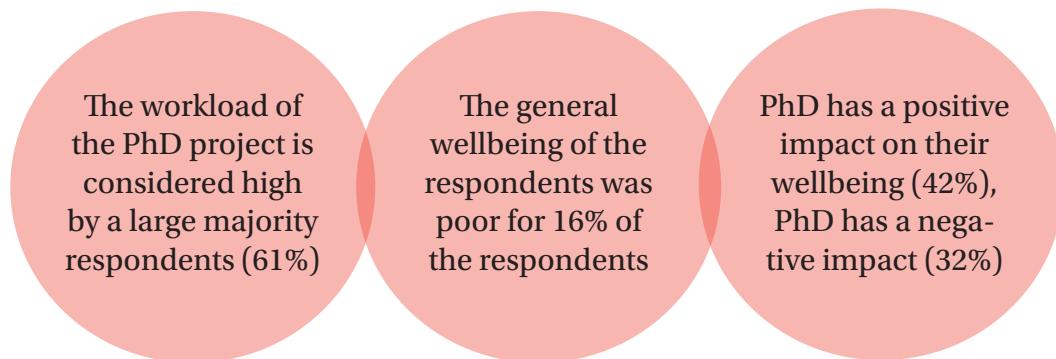
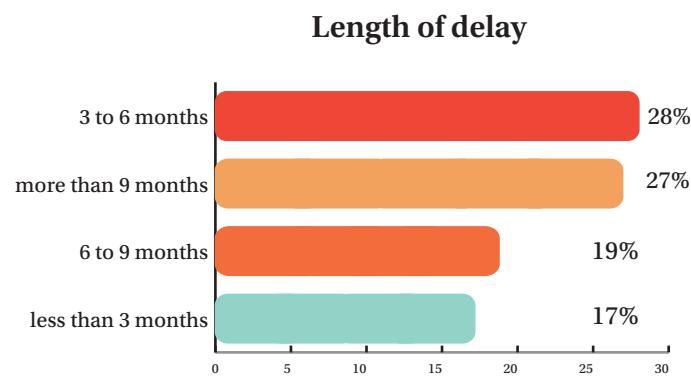
The Law Faculty has a significantly higher prevalence of social safety issues reported (38%) compared to the university average or to other faculties. The number of respondents experiencing social safety issues in the Law Faculty has increased since the last report in 2020.

- Most respondents who have experienced social safety misconduct have experienced this sporadically. However, twenty respondents experience social safety issues monthly, weekly, or even daily.
- In most of the cases, a high ranked colleague or supervisor was the perpetrator. Sometimes, it was fellow PhD candidates or some other colleague.
- Respondents who experienced undesirable social conducts most frequently did not take any action (42%). Others spoke to their supervisors (24%) or the perpetrator (15%). Merely 12% went to the trust person of the university.

Progress and Wellbeing

- The majority of respondents (60%) had a Go/No-go meeting in which their PhD trajectory thus far was reviewed.
- 25% of the respondents did not have an annual progress review. This meeting most often takes place with their supervisor(s), but for 15% of the respondents who have had an annual review, this was with others such as their manager, independent supervisor, or an external committee.
- Most respondents are satisfied with the way their progress is being reviewed, but for 24% of the respondents it would be preferred if this review were to be done by a PhD counsellor, a senior supporting staff member or another researcher within the department.

40% of the respondents are behind schedule. Just 9 respondents are ahead of their schedule. For those who are delayed, most (53%) have not (yet) made any agreements about a possible extension of the PhD project. There are many reasons why respondents experience delay: problems with data collection, a too ambitious project, personal reasons and so on. Many respondents also indicate that COVID-19, and the working from home because of it, caused a delay.



Some of the positive elements of the PhD project for respondents' wellbeing are contact with colleagues and supervisors, the research, courses, and teaching. Negative impact is considered to be practical, technical, or financial aspects, academic performance, and future employment.

- Interestingly, work-life balance is considered one of the positive elements for many, but also a negative element for a majority of the respondents.
- A majority (64%) of the respondents discussed their wellbeing with someone at the university, mostly with supervisors, confidential advisors, mentors, and other university personnel. This support was considered of positive influence on respondents' wellbeing for 62% of those who sought support.
- 60% of the respondents are aware that there are counsellors available in the university
- Most respondents do not know whether there are possibilities for an extension (61%).

Education

An overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) have access to education resources, either in the form of discipline-specific or general skills courses, teacher training or career orientation activities. There are, however, some who do not have access to any of these activities (4%) and some have limited access, including some full-time employees.

- For 62% of the respondents, some of the PhD education is obligatory. This is not the case in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and in the Faculty of Humanities. Most often, obligatory training entails training in general skills and teacher training.
- Most respondents indicate they have enough time to participate in educational activities and are quite satisfied with the education activities offered by their faculty. The level of satisfaction about the courses offered differs strongly between faculties.
- Most respondents have attended at least one seminar or conference. Especially local conferences are attended frequently.
- Male respondents have attended both local and national conferences more frequently than their female peers.

Teaching

Most respondents teach at the university (78%), except for PhD candidates in the Humanities Faculty.

- Most respondents who are employed by the university teach as a part of their contract. For externally funded PhD candidates and PhD candidates on a scholarship, teaching is more often voluntary. Respondents who do their PhD in their own time rarely teach.
- Most respondents do not spend a fixed number per week or month on teaching. Rather, they teach for a month or two, and then do not for the rest of the year.

COVID

In the past two-and-a-half years, PhD experiences are influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- In particular, 80% responded that they were negatively (or strongly negatively) impacted due to not being able to discuss findings with peers.
- Most respondents had their mental health (70%), progress in their PhD (67%), motivation to work and data collection (58%) negatively (or strongly negatively) impacted.
- In case of delays, 77% of cases report COVID-19 as the main reason for the stunted progress of the project.

