With this first brief, we summarize the background to the VUB PhD survey and zoom in on one part of the results. In the upcoming months, we will provide you with more remarkable finding from the study. If you want to find out about all findings at once, please send us an email and we will reply with a link to our full report.

This project was initiated to monitor and better support PhD candidates during their trajectory. Results of an ECOOM-study (Levecque et al., 2017), based on a survey in 2013, sketched a gloomy picture of PhD candidates with mental health burdens, a signal that the VUB didn’t want to ignore without further notice. Several initiatives are already in place to support doctoral candidates (the PhD buddy project, ombudsperson, Centre for mental health support,...). However, for some doctoral candidates, the threshold to these services remains too high. Therefore, the Doctoral Schools and the Central PhD Office decided to install an annual survey as their subjective counterpart of the annual report in which PhD candidates can detail the problems and doubts anonymously. They get the opportunity to leave their contact details in case they want an informal talk with the faculty representative or ombudsperson to resolve their problems. In 2017 a pilot survey was installed in three faculties – engineering (IR), psychology and educational sciences (PE), and physical education and physiotherapy (LK). After a positive evaluation at the end of 2017, the research council (OZR) gave green light to introduce the survey to all faculties in 2018. We will give more information about the procedure by the beginning of March.

The main goals of this annual PhD survey are threefold:

1. **Self-evaluation.** It gives the PhD candidate the opportunity to reflect on their PhD trajectory and to compare their own answers to that of other VUB PhD candidates.
2. **Early-problem detection mechanism.** It gives the opportunity to signal problems (concerning supervision, overall satisfaction with VUB, etc.)
3. **Feedback mechanism** to different services and entities within the university. The results will be used to adjust support offered by the Doctoral Schools & the Central PhD Office, its reports will be presented and circulated to all doctoral candidates and supervisors.

These goals are further detailed in Figure 1, a visual representation of all involved parties and the different layers of the survey. We observe the PhD candidate within the scientific guidance network, including the supervisor(s), advisory committee, buddy/colleagues. The PhD candidates answer the questions in the survey, which are collected and analysed by the research group TOR of the Sociology Department. The token to identify each individual respondent is stored in a separate database which is only accessible to one TOR member. The survey database and aggregated results are sent to the faculty representatives and the Central PhD Office. The list with contact details (if given by the PhD candidates themselves) is only available to their faculty representative and the ombudsperson. Those who remained anonymous but are identified as unsupported/uncertain through a thorough analysis, can be contacted through the separate database of TOR. However, the faculty representative doesn’t know the person’s identity as long as this person does not reply to the message. So we want to give plenty of opportunities for the PhD candidate to get back on track – if needed.
Figure 1: Feedback loops of the annual PhD survey

In total 540 PhD students were invited to participate in this project in 2017, 298 of them completed the survey. A **response rate** of 50% is quite high, and even amounts to 60% in IR. This faculty has a longer tradition of using a questionnaire to evaluate the progress and supervision. Having a faculty representative who is as active as the one from IR, is beneficial in terms of the response rate (as he promoted the survey almost from office door to door), as well as towards what happens after collecting the data. The main goal for the faculty representative is to identify those who are feeling lost and get them back on track!

Following the speech of the rector, we want to start 2018 with some **positive** news. The fact that we had such a high response rate for this survey already counts as a positive result in itself – PhD candidates want to be heard and welcome this tool to give their thoughts on the phd trajectory: what is already going well and what should be done better/differently.

VUB has **passionate** young researchers: three in four PhD candidates state that they are very passionate about their research and only 4% say they have little passion. **Self-efficacy**, the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to manage prospective situations (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001), grows when progressing through the PhD. The executing phase can be a troubling time, since both high and low levels of self-efficacy can be found here (Figure 2) and some people within this phase are faced with serious doubts about their own capacities. Once you got through this hurdle however, self-efficacy rises in the finalizing phase – as a treat for getting that far, it even seems!
Next to self-efficacy, PhD candidates seem very confident in their **belief to successfully complete their PhD**. On a scale of 1 to 10, about one in five found it was totally likely that this would be the case. Two out of three PhD candidates rated a likeliness of 8 or higher (see Figure 3). Differences between faculties seem to be focused between those who are confident (a score of 8, highest in PE) and those who are very confident (10 – more likely in IR and LK). Being confident about the likelihood of completing the PhD is furthermore linked with the phase of the PhD research (a high score is quite rare when still in the starting phase), and the confidence is higher when having an involved supervisor and if the PhD candidate was free to develop his/her own research proposal before/at the start of the PhD.

![Figure 2: Level of self-efficacy by PhD phase](image)

Through assessing the main reasons for **doubts** concerning successfully completing the PhD, the lack of results or failing of experiments was most often mentioned (30% thinks this might impact their PhD progression). The second reason is the imbalance between work and family (25%), followed by uncertainty concerning funding (22%), lack of guidance (17%) and doubts about one’s own capabilities (19%).

Having doubts about your results or experiments is a quite natural fear – most PhD candidate have had at least one moment of distress in which they doubted the technique or formula.
they have been using, the interpretation they had given to some results or being stuck with results that they had not anticipated. This is part of the PhD process. An important lesson here is that the PhD candidate shouldn’t walk around with it too long without talking to someone about these doubts – be it a supervisor or someone else from the scientific guidance network or a friend. After a talk, the problem might seem less insurmountable than at first!

The next compendium will focus on the importance of a research plan at the start of the PhD & the involvement of the supervisor.

Questions about the survey? See: https://student.vub.be/en/phd/phd-survey#the-phd-survey or contact the coordinator: Hannelore.de.grande@vub.be

References