VUB PhD survey 2018 – Compendium 2

This is the second compendium of the PhD survey 2018. It will focus on two key components of PhD candidates’ work satisfaction: support of the supervisor and the research environment. What do PhD candidates appreciate most about their supervisors and how do they perceive the assistance offered by the larger guidance network at the university?

The special bond between PhD candidates and their supervisors

Every relationship between a PhD candidate and her/his supervisor is unique in its own respect and generally grows stronger over the years. They share the highs and lows in a doctoral trajectory together, like brainstorming about theoretical models and practical implications, getting over a first rejection of an article, celebrating the first acceptance of an article, or getting stuck and suddenly coming up with a brilliant idea that saves the day. It is a rollercoaster of emotions, that’s for sure.

What do the numbers from the survey tell us about this relationship? First of all, that it is no longer a typical one on one: the majority of PhD candidates have at least two supervisors, 16% have even more than two supervisors (in most of the cases these are PhD candidates involved in a joint phd). Figure 1 shows that having more than one supervisor is more common in NSE/LSM compared to DSh.

Figure 1: Number of supervisors per PhD candidate: % per Doctoral School

In general, VUB PhD candidates are quite happy with their supervisor and give an overall score of 7.6/10. Satisfaction with the supervisor can be broken down into two components: the support they receive from the supervisor and the level of freedom they experience (see Figure 2). 82,4% are happy with the freedom they have in developing their own research ideas, and more than three in four are happy about the expertise, involvement and possibilities to attend conferences or specialist training courses. They are least satisfied with the introduction to other prominent researchers in the field and support in the writing process.

This might be the reason why PhD candidates in their finalizing phase perceive the support of

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1 DSh=Human Sciences, LSM= Life Sciences & Medicine, NSE=Natural Sciences and (Bio-Science) Engineering
their supervisors as less satisfactory compared to those in their starting phase, as writing then consumes most of the time. There are no differences across Doctoral Schools.

Figure 2: % of satisfaction with different aspects of supervision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support supervisor</th>
<th>Freedom supervisor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement 79.2%</td>
<td>Freedom to develop own ideas 82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise 76.6%</td>
<td>Possibility to attend conferences/specialist training 75.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of meetings 71.5%</td>
<td>Possibility to attend transferable skills training 65.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspiration to solve problems 67.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of the meetings 65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support in writing 62.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to network 51.5%</td>
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Box 1: Award in excellent supervision

Last year, the Doctoral Schools celebrated excellent supervisors for the first time via an award. Doctoral candidates could nominate their supervisor, a tandem of supervisor or supervisory team.

We’ve read many hymns about great supervisors… here is one about Prof. Eric Jespers:

"Admittedly, being a PhD advisor is fundamentally difficult. It is, in spirit, a little like parenting: while not much can be expected from too close a guidance, fostering a student’s talent requires the senior’s maturity to lighten up the path ahead. Allowing one to stumble, fail and become frustrated while at the same time providing a most intelligently balanced helping hand, is what Eric seems to be able to do so brilliantly and so easily. At the end of the hard path which represents a PhD program, Eric’s students own three most crucial things: their work, the researcher’s maturity and, in an indescribable but palpable way, his friendship.

Find out more [here](#)."
The larger guidance network

The respondents were asked if they had *other advisors* who they could turn to if they were stuck with their research (methodologically or theoretically), for example when their supervisor is was not available at the time. This could be another professor or postdoc within the own research group, even a fellow PhD candidate working on the same topic, or someone outside VUB with relevant expertise (see Figure 3). We can conclude that very few PhD candidates work in isolation all year long, as 97% state to have at least one other advisor (or advisory commission) they can turn to. 40% even have more than two other advisors/colleagues who they can turn to. Having internal advisors is more common in NSE/LSM than in Human Sciences, i.e. other professors or postdocs from own research group or VUB. These advisors also seem more involved in the research project and are consulted more in the hard/medical sciences compared to the human sciences. There is also a higher probability to have colleagues involved in the same research niche in NSE/LSM than in DSh. There is no such difference for external advisors.

![Figure 3: The guidance network of respondents (percent stating having this person/entity in their network – either formally through an advisory commission or informally)](image)

Quite a lot (41%) of the respondents state they don’t have an *advisory commission*, which is odd, since it is compulsory to have this commission set up within 18 months after starting your PhD (see also Box 2 for more info on the regulations). More than half of the doctoral candidates without an advisory commission would like to have one. In this regard it is
important to know that PhD candidates don’t have to wait until their supervisor prompts them. They can make suggestions for the composition of their advisory commission themselves. Preferably you would look for someone from outside your own research group or even VUB, who has additional expertise and/or can give you a different perspective on your research topic, leading to fresh ideas. The majority of the respondents state that they are (very) happy with the feedback they receive from their advisory commission.

**BOX 2**  
**Article 13 of the Central PhD regulations**

§1. Each PhD candidate is also supervised by an advisory commission comprising the supervisor(s) as defined in article 11 and at least one other member who, in principle, is the holder of a PhD degree based on a thesis. This other member shall preferably be from outside the department, the research group or the VUB.

§2. The advisory committee shall be constituted by the competent faculty body on the initiative of the supervisor(s). In any case, the advisory committee shall be composed within 18 months of the first registration of the PhD candidate. The supplementary faculty PhD regulations can specify the composition, powers and procedure of the supervisory committee in greater detail.

You don’t have an advisory commission yet? Check your faculty-specific regulations and talk to your supervisor who would be fit to be part of it.

**Broad research environment**

Let’s take a step back and have a look at the broader research environment PhD candidates work in. Important for this section is to know that only PhD candidates who have had a physical work space at VUB in the last year were selected for this analysis – the questions would make no sense for people not interacting with the broader environment on a day-to-day basis. Based on ten items, three components of working conditions were identified: the warmth of the work environment, the labour conditions and structural items (see Figure 4).
Figure 4: % satisfaction of key components of the research environment

Overall, the satisfaction with labour conditions is the highest (income and vacation especially) and also concerning the available space to work in. There is least satisfaction on infrastructure and the general support from the research environment. Respondents could further comment on this in an open answer. These findings will be summarized and further discussed in one of the next compendia.

Women are generally less satisfied with the warmth of the working environment and the structural aspects of the workplace. Respondents from NSE are more satisfied with the warmth of the working environment and labour conditions than those from DSh or LSM.

In the compendium of April, we will discuss the different groups that were identified based on their overall work satisfaction. Curious about the characteristics of “healthy doubters” and “lyrical” PhD candidates? If you can’t wait, you are invited to read the full report.

Acknowledgements We thank the researchers from TOR, and more specifically Anais Glorieux, Petrus Te Braak and Joeri Minnen for the data collection and analysis.