

HOW SATISFIED ARE PHD CANDIDATES ABOUT THEIR PHD PROGRAMME?

Quantitative survey among VU Amsterdam PhD candidates

HANS ONKENHOUT
LIANNE WORRELL
TESSA DE KRUIJK

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ABOUT THE SURVEY



BACKGROUND

Around 2,500 PhD candidates are currently following a PhD programme at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam). In 2015, new regulations were introduced that require each PhD candidate to gain 30 credits (ECTS) at VU Amsterdam throughout their entire programme. But how do PhD candidates themselves feel about the training programme that is offered?

This year, several Dutch universities, including VU Amsterdam, staged a national PhD survey. The goal of this survey was to assess the level of satisfaction among PhD candidates about their situation in general and about the training programme in particular. The results should provide a clear idea of the strengths and weaknesses of VU Amsterdam's PhD programme, and give the university the opportunity to further optimize the programme.

Research question

How do PhD candidates at VU Amsterdam feel about their PhD project in terms of training, supervision, research environment and planning?

Methods

The quantitative study was conducted online. Data was collected from 12 October to 7 November 2016. This survey's target group consisted of PhD candidates at VU Amsterdam. A total of 467 PhD candidates responded to the questionnaire.

READING THIS REPORT

This report starts with the main conclusions of this survey. These conclusions provide an answer to our research question, which was: *How do PhD candidates at VU Amsterdam feel about their PhD project?*

The conclusions relate to four main topics: Supervision, Training/Education, Research Environment, and Planning. The following section of the report sets out details of our vision, together with our recommendations, which are based on the results.

The report then presents a profile of the respondents in this survey, to clarify details of their backgrounds. The following section covers the results of each main topic in more detail.

In the analysis, we considered all of the respondents as a single group. We examined the differences between subgroups from different starting years and faculty domains. In accordance with VU Amsterdam, the following domains were used:

Beta	Earth and Life Sciences and Sciences
Medic	Medicine VUmc
Alpha-Gamma	Behavioural and Movement Sciences, Economics and Business Administration, Theology, Humanities, Law and Social Sciences

The answers to open questions were analysed qualitatively. We have highlighted the most frequently made comments, and have made a content-based analysis. Any relevant quotes in the report are printed in *italics*. Any differences between the groups were tested for statistical significance.

A detailed explanation of the research method used can be found in the appendix, as can the questionnaire itself, the tables and a list of answers to the open questions.



MAIN CONCLUSIONS & OUR VISION



PhD candidates at VU Amsterdam are satisfied with the supervision they receive and with their research environment. The programme of training and education, and participation in these activities, could be improved.

<p>1. The majority are satisfied with the supervision they receive, although a lack of time and attention is a point of concern</p> <p>Pages 17–20</p>	<p>2. Participation in courses could be improved</p> <p>Pages 21–25</p>	<p>3. The research facilities are adequate, but the training programme is not considered to be very inspiring</p> <p>Pages 26–29</p>	<p>4. Many PhD candidates find it difficult to keep up with the schedule</p> <p>Pages 30–34</p>
<p>Seven out of ten respondents are satisfied to very satisfied with the supervision they receive.</p>	<p>Almost half of the respondents feel strongly encouraged to participate in educational activities. But less than half feel they have sufficient time for these activities.</p>	<p>Most of the facilities provided are adequate, research facilities are less adequately provided.</p>	<p>Half are on schedule, 'Beta' candidates tend to fall behind schedule more often than the other groups.</p>
<p>Respondents who have regular meetings and who receive meaningful feedback tend to be satisfied to very satisfied. Where this is not the case, respondents tend to be dissatisfied to very dissatisfied.</p>	<p>The most highly appreciated courses are those that are discipline-specific and that involve generic skills. Those relating to future careers are less highly appreciated. It is unclear if this is due to the fact that they are not offered frequently.</p>	<p>The budget provided for research, training and travel is considered sufficient.</p>	<p>Practical setbacks are the main cause of delays.</p>
	<p>'Beta' students are less satisfied than those in other groups about teaching and training activities.</p>	<p>Some respondents find the training programme uninspiring, stating that it lacks freedom of choice and quality.</p>	<p>More than half of the respondents classify their work pressure as normal to high, but not excessive. The reasons given for high work pressure are mandatory activities and the need to publish.</p>



OUR VISION: FOCUS ON TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Offer more freedom of choice in training courses and educational programmes

The current training programme does not engender much satisfaction among the respondents. Indeed, they find it particularly uninspiring. The PhD candidates feel limited by the programmes and training courses VU Amsterdam has on offer, in general, or by the range of programmes from which they can choose. They would like more freedom of choice.

Make training and education accessible to all PhD candidates

Although the training programme is compulsory for all PhD candidates, only four in ten have enough time to actually participate in training and education. Furthermore, only a slim majority are strongly encouraged to participate in educational activities. Thus, if supervisors could be induced to give their students more encouragement in this regard, it might boost course attendance.

Greater focus on career prospects

The respondents are least satisfied about the career orientation courses. A minority state that these do not help them prepare for a future career. Given that many PhD candidates are uncertain about the next step after their PhD, it is recommended that greater emphasis be given to courses of this kind.

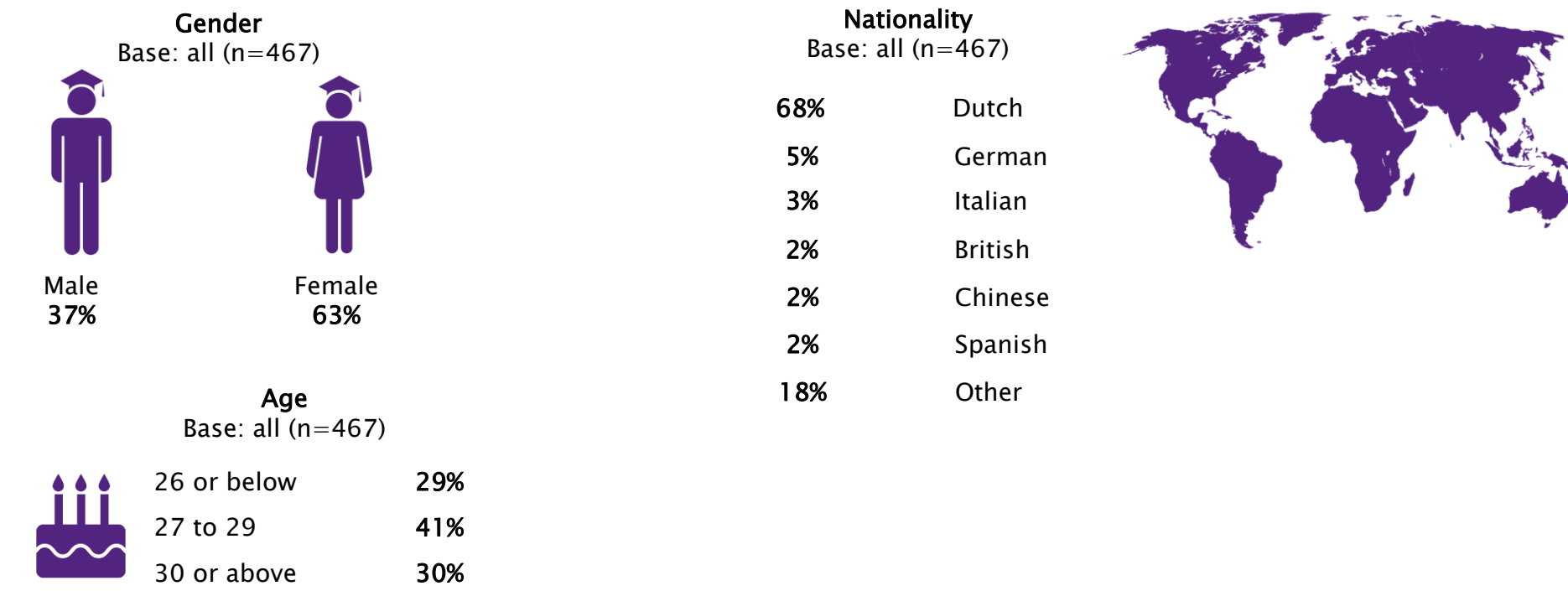
A greater focus on training and education for 'Beta' candidates

Compared to 'Medic' and 'Alpha-Gamma' candidates, 'Beta' candidates are far less satisfied with the training and education they receive. This is especially the case for educational programmes and career orientation. The 'Medic' candidates, on the other hand, are highly satisfied. Interdisciplinary meetings between these two domains, focusing on training and education, might help to improve the programme for 'Beta' students.

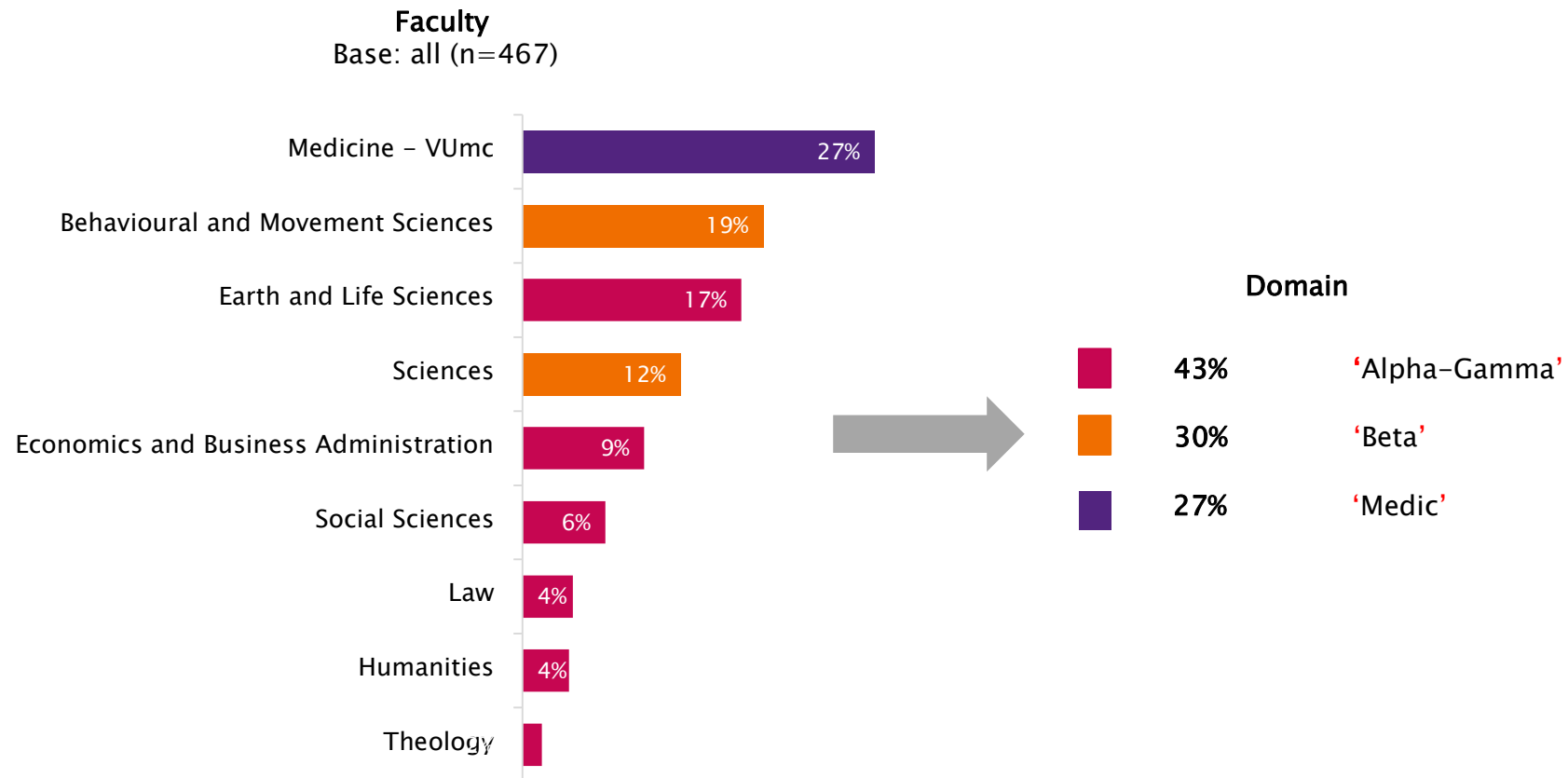
RESPONDENT PROFILES



DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS: MOSTLY DUTCH, FEMALE AND AGED 27 TO 29



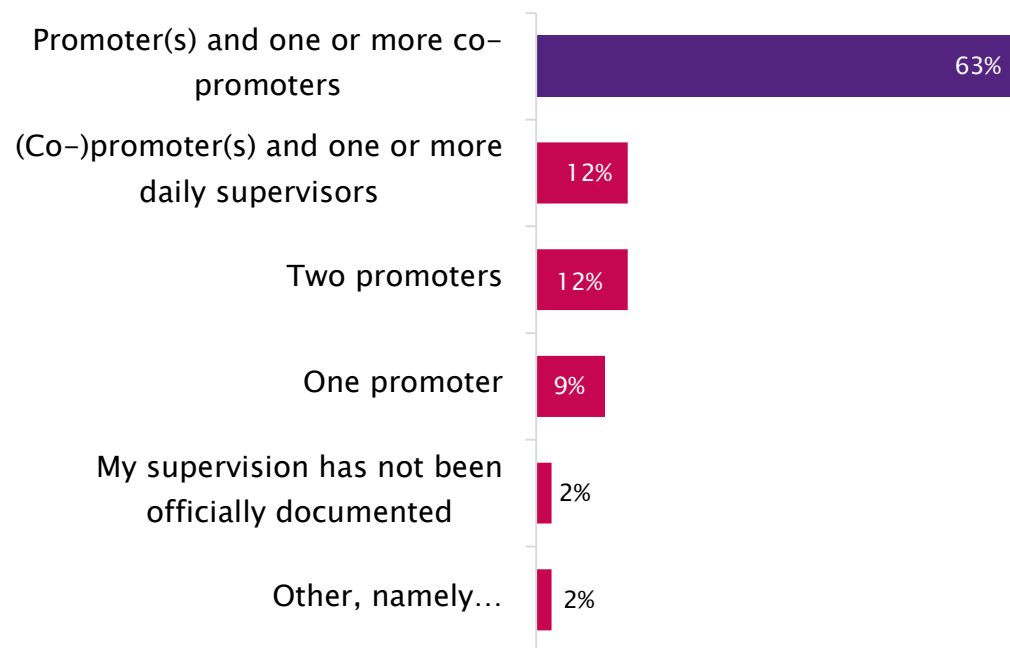
MOST RESPONDENTS ARE FROM THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE, WHICH IS IN KEEPING WITH THE PERCENTAGE OF PHDS IN THE MEDICAL DOMAIN



MOST PHD SUPERVISION TEAMS CONSIST OF ONE OR MORE SUPERVISING PROFESSORS AND CO-SUPERVISORS. HALF OF THE RESPONDENTS INDICATED THAT THEIR CO-SUPERVISOR WAS ALSO THEIR DAY TO DAY SUPERVISOR

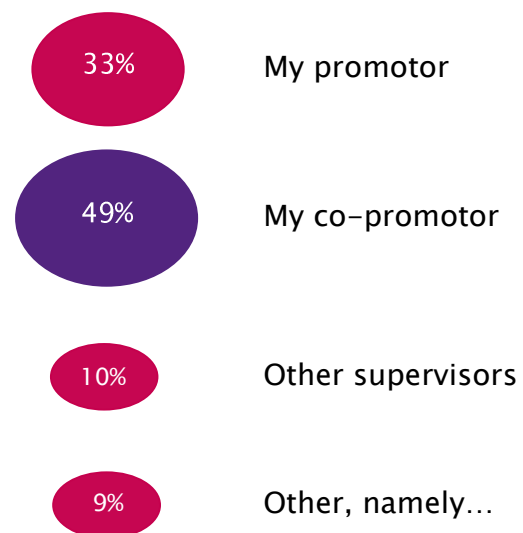
What is the composition of your supervision team?

Base: all (n=467)



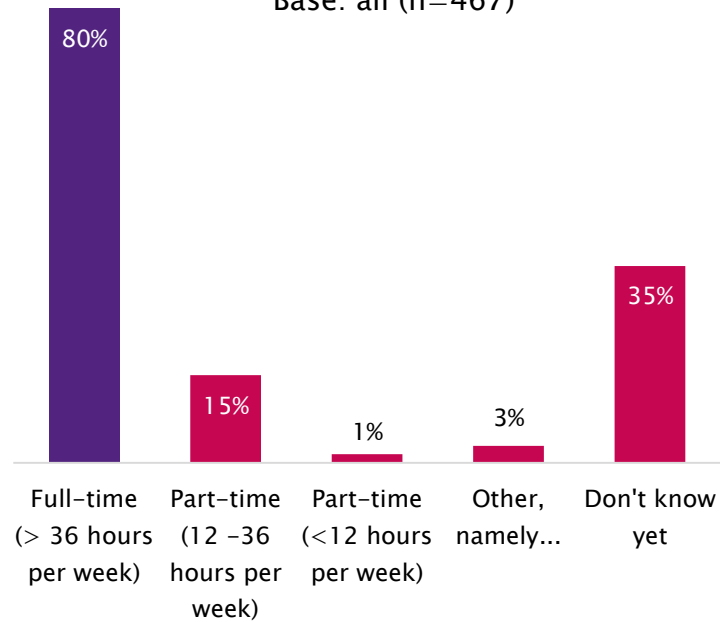
Who is your daily supervisor?

Base: all (n=467)



THE MAJORITY OF THE RESPONDENTS WORK FULL-TIME ON THEIR PROJECT, ALMOST HALF STARTED IN 2014-2015 AND THE OFFICIAL DURATION OF A PROJECT IS USUALLY 48 MONTHS

How many hours a week do you officially work on your PhD project?
Base: all (n=467)



In which year did you start your PhD?
Base: all (n=467)



Before 2014	34%
2014-2015	46%
2016	20%

What is the official duration of your PhD project?
Base: all, except those who do not know (n=434)

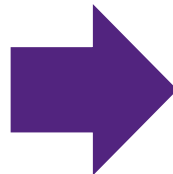
1-35 months	17%
36-47 months	17%
48 months or more	67%

THE MAJORITY OF THE RESPONDENTS TEACH OR SUPERVISE STUDENTS. THESE ACTIVITIES EACH ACCOUNT FOR 10% OF THE RESPONDENTS' TOTAL TIME

Do you teach and/or supervise students?

Base: all (n=467)

- 53% Yes, it is mandatory
- 28% Yes, voluntarily
- 3% I'm not allowed to teach
- 16% I don't teach



Percentage of your time spent on teaching

Base: PhD candidates who teach (n=199)

0-4%	7%
5-10%	40%
11% or more	53%

Mean time spent on teaching:



Percentage of your time spent on guidance and supervision

Base: PhD candidates who supervise (n=190)

0-4%	4%
5-10%	42%
11% or more	54%

Mean time spent on guidance and supervision



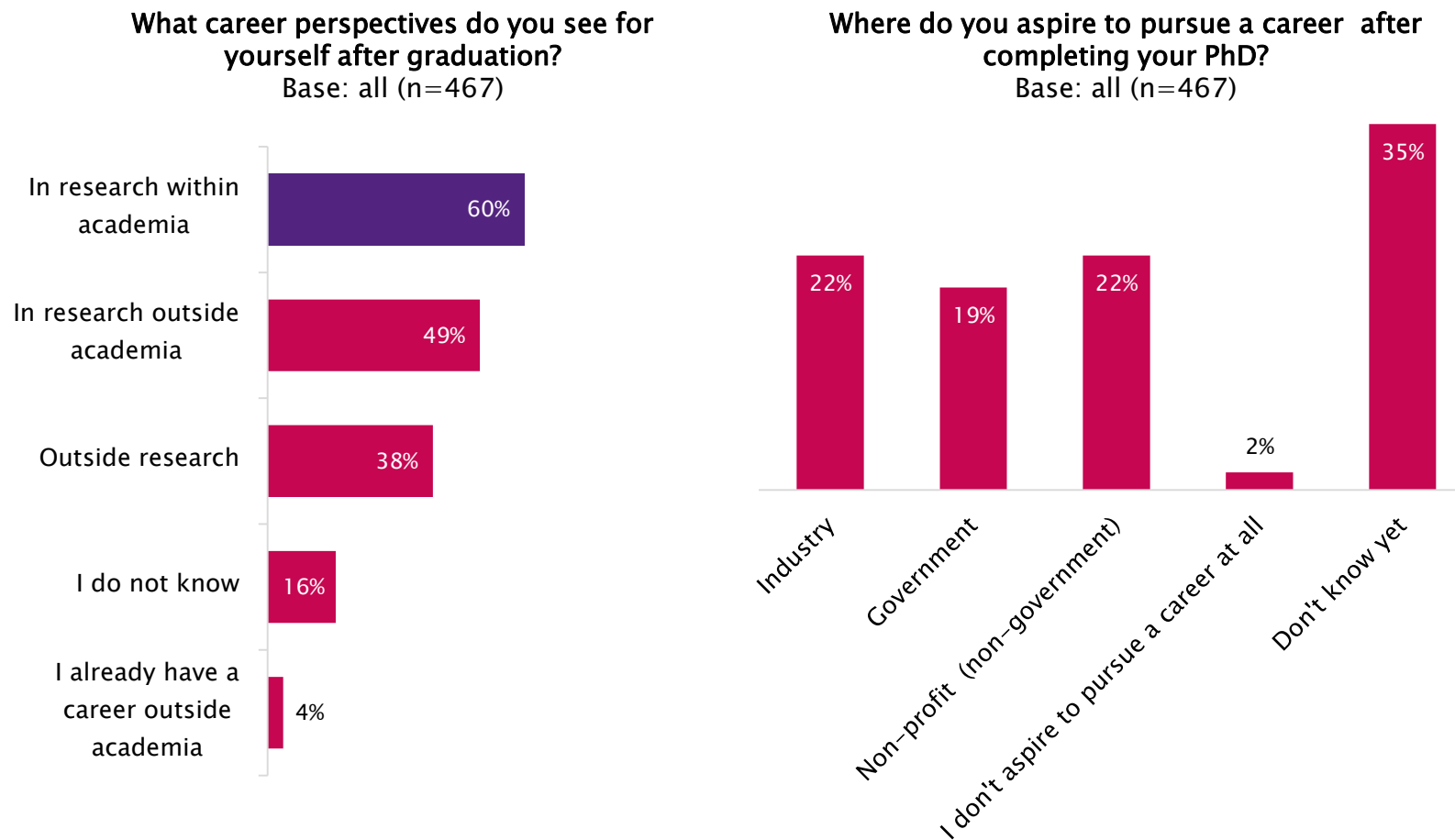
MOST OF THE FUNDING FOR PHD PROJECTS COMES FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Where does the funding for your PhD project come from?

Base: all (n=467)



THE MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS WANT TO PURSUE A CAREER IN RESEARCH AFTER GRADUATION. ONE IN THREE DOES NOT YET HAVE A SPECIFIC CAREER GOAL.



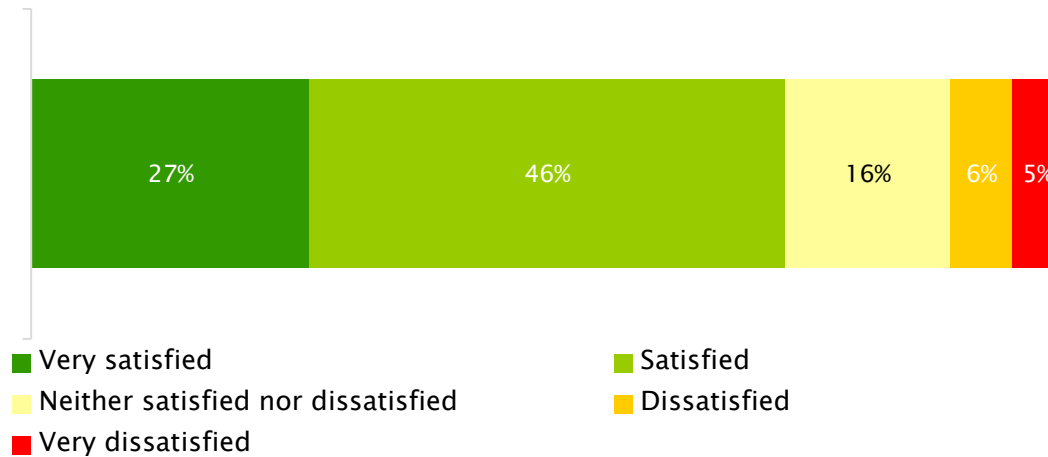
SUPERVISION



SUPERVISION

SEVEN OUT OF TEN RESPONDENTS ARE SATISFIED TO VERY SATISFIED WITH THE SUPERVISION THEY RECEIVE

How satisfied are you overall with the supervision you receive?
Base: all (n=467)



- All respondents ('Medic', 'Beta' and 'Alpha-Gamma') are equally satisfied with the supervision they receive.



SUPERVISION

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE REGULAR MEETINGS AND WHO RECEIVE MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK TEND TO BE SATISFIED TO VERY SATISFIED. WHERE THIS IS NOT THE CASE, RESPONDENTS TEND TO BE DISSATISFIED TO VERY DISSATISFIED.

Those respondents who are satisfied to very satisfied about the supervision they receive say they **receive useful feedback** and they have **regular meetings** with their supervisor (or supervisors):

- *Although both my supervising professor and co-supervisor are very busy, they always take the time to answer my questions.*
- *I am satisfied with the supervision I receive. I can always reach my supervisors and I receive good feedback.*
- *I have plenty of opportunity for feedback. Because I have multiple supervisors, I can always turn to the nearest one when it's urgent.*



Those candidates who are dissatisfied to very dissatisfied with the supervision they receive, attribute this to a **lack of time** on the part of their supervisor. This sometimes causes delays in the project:

- *I do not get the help I was promised and my supervisor misrepresented the work expected of me in the lab.*
- *I have lost precious time due to a lack of supervision.*
- *I feel that the supervision I receive is too remote (maybe once a week with the supervising professor, who is largely unaware of what's going on in the lab).*



Some other candidates feel they receive too little **meaningful advice** from their supervisor:

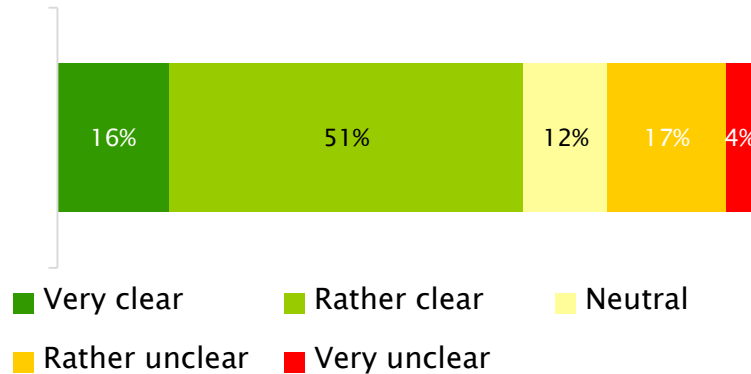
- *The supervision given mainly relates to the day to day activities. There is never time to discuss 'the big picture'.*
- *I feel/felt that there was a lack of daily supervision, and that I constantly need to reinvent the wheel instead of being able to ask others who do similar work/tests.*
- *There is no proper supervision with regard to content.*
- *On the one hand there is too little involvement by the supervising professor and co-supervisors. On the other hand, the day to day supervisor is too controlling (e.g. insists on checking all the emails I want to send).*

SUPERVISION

TWO THIRDS OF THE RESPONDENTS KNOW WHAT THE SCIENTIFIC REQUIREMENTS OF THEIR THESIS ARE, THESE REQUIREMENTS ARE MOST OFTEN DISCUSSED WITH THEIR SUPERVISING PROFESSOR OR DAY TO DAY SUPERVISOR

Are the scientific requirements of you PhD thesis clear or not clear to you?

Base: all (n=467)



With whom did you discuss the scientific requirements of your PhD thesis?

Base: all (n=467)

75% My promotor
61% My day to day supervisor
15% Other, namely...

Nobody

Colleagues

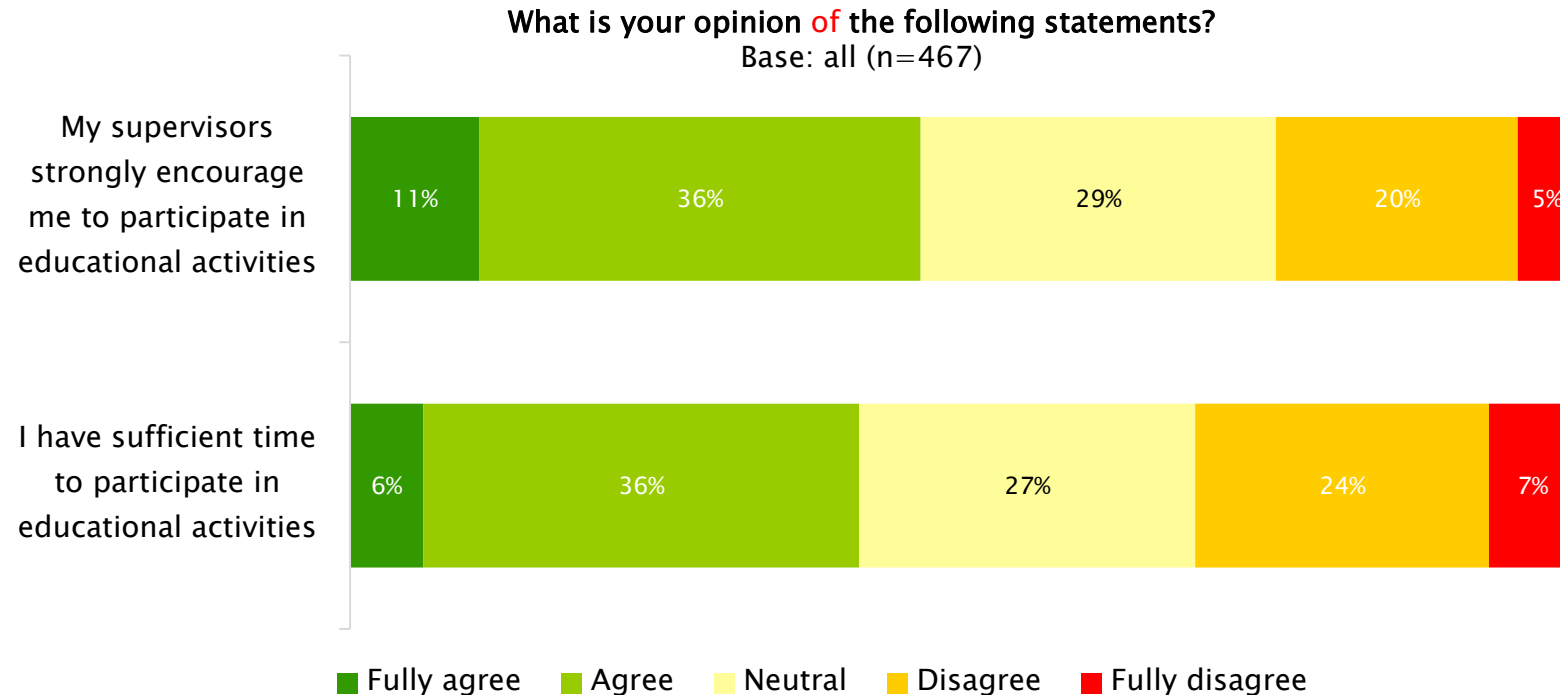
- Respondents from the 'Medic' domain discussed scientific requirements with their day to day supervisor more often (72%) than was the case for candidates from the 'Beta' or 'Alpha-Gamma' domains (60% and 56%, respectively).

EDUCATION



EDUCATION

ALMOST HALF OF THE PHD CANDIDATES FEEL STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES. LESS THAN HALF FEEL THEY HAVE SUFFICIENT TIME TO DO SO.

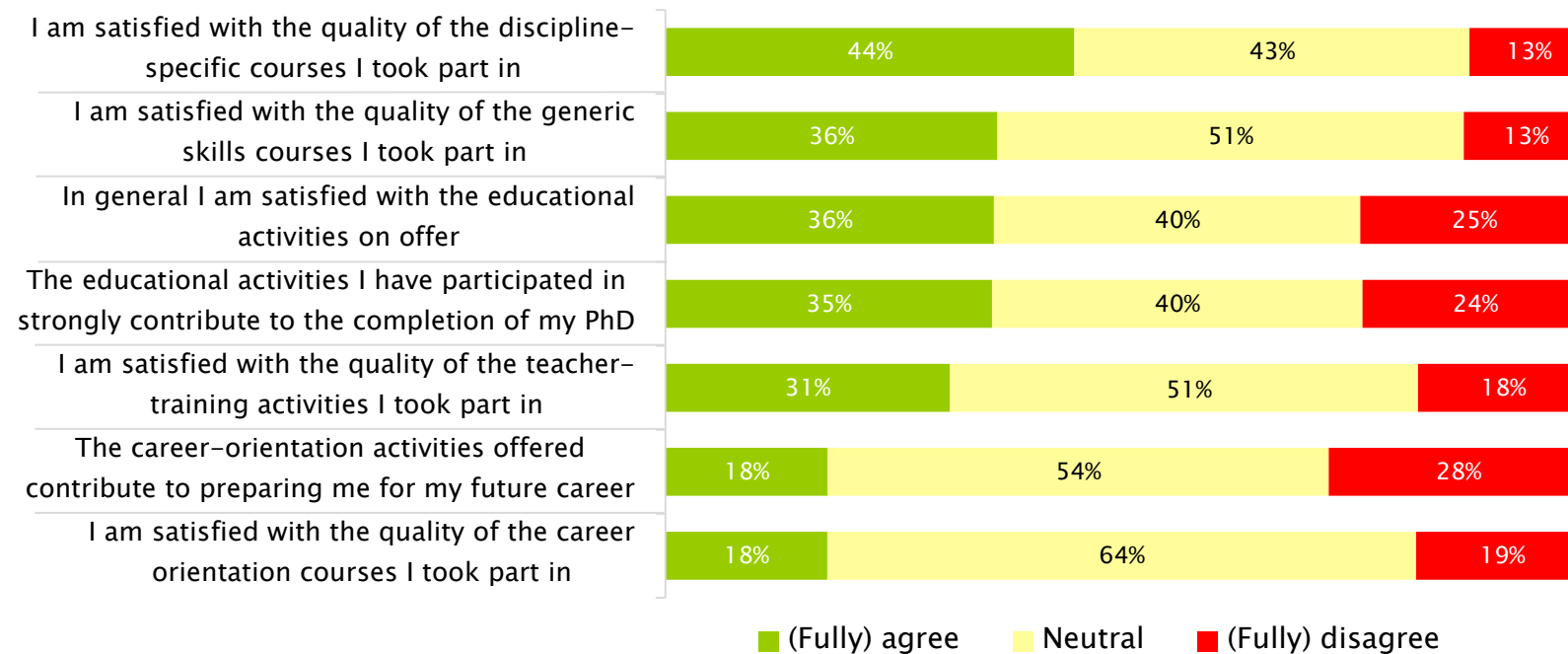


- The later the date on which they started their project, the more respondents feel that their supervisors encouraged them to participate in educational activities: 2016 (61%), 2014–2015 (50%), before 2014 (34%).

RESPONDENTS ARE MORE SATISFIED WITH DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC AND GENERIC SKILLS COURSES. THEY ARE LESS SATISFIED WITH COURSES RELATED TO FUTURE CAREERS

What is your opinion about the following statements?

Base: all (n=467)



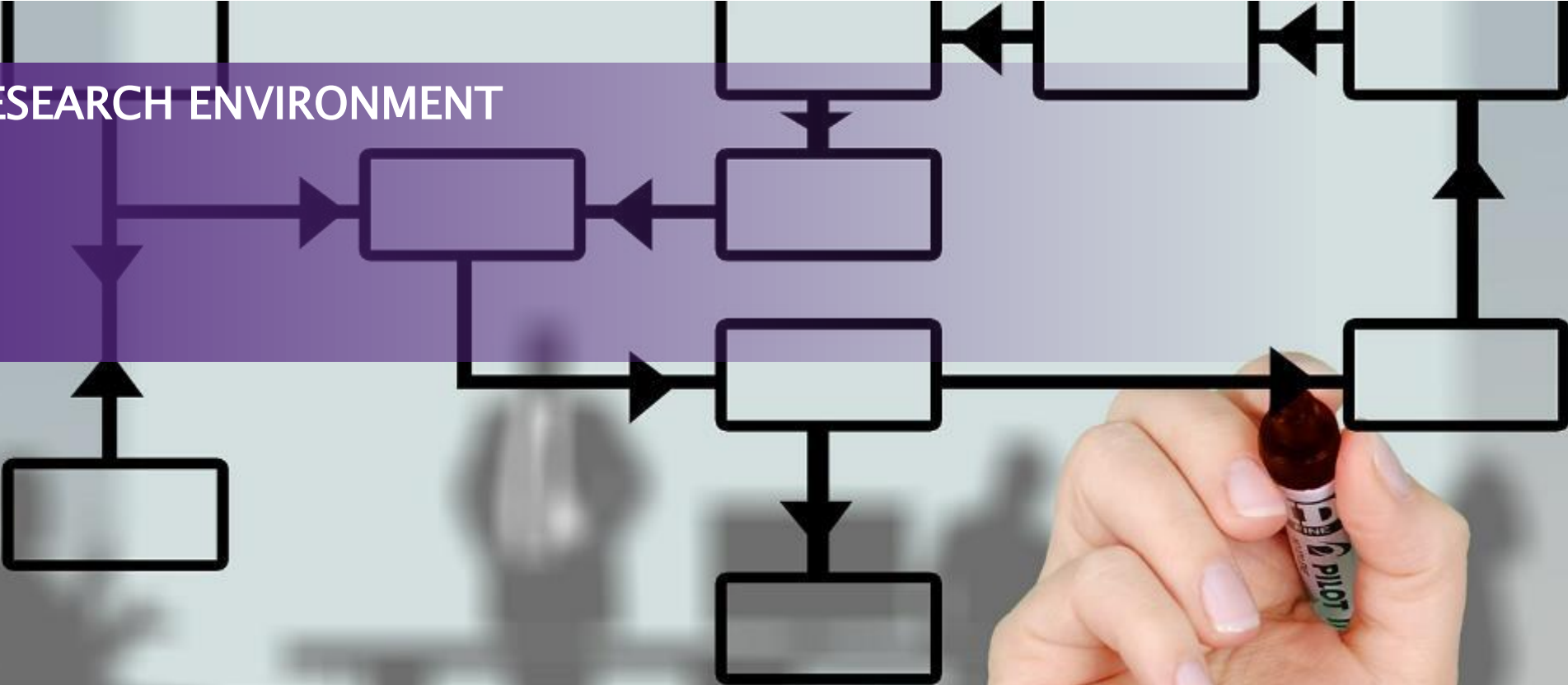
'MEDIC' PHD CANDIDATES EXPRESSED THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH TEACHING AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES, 'BETA' PHD CANDIDATES WERE THE LEAST SATISFIED

(Fully) agree (calculated without 'neutral')	Beta	Medic	Alpha-Gamma
I am satisfied with the quality of the discipline-specific courses I took part in.	36%	52%	45%
	(n=72)	(n=75)	(n=119)
I am satisfied with the quality of the generic skills courses I took part in.	26%	41%	39%
	(n=55)	(n=64)	(n=111)
In general, I am satisfied with the educational activities on offer	27%	46%	34%
	(n=82)	(n=83)	(n=116)
The educational activities I have participated in strongly contribute to the completion of my PhD	29%	46%	33%
	(n=76)	(n=83)	(n=120)
I am satisfied with the quality of the teacher-training activities I took part in.	21%	38%	33%
	(n=62)	(n=64)	(n=103)
The career-orientation activities offered contribute to preparing me for my future career	30%	53%	36%
	(n=66)	(n=57)	(n=90)
I am satisfied with the quality of the career orientation courses I took part in.	15%	20%	17%
	(n=53)	(n=42)	(n=73)

Green is significantly higher than Red and Yellow
 Yellow is significantly higher than Red



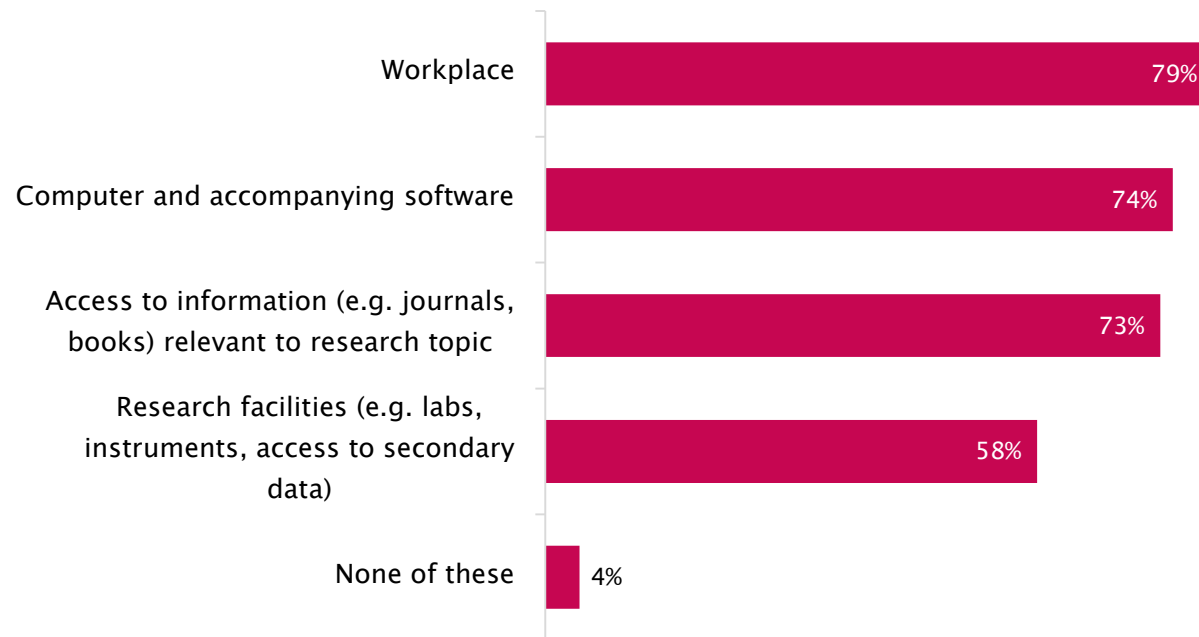
RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT



WHILE MOST RESPONDENTS FEEL THE AVAILABLE FACILITIES ARE ADEQUATE, MANY CONSIDER THE RESEARCH FACILITY TO BE INSUFFICIENT

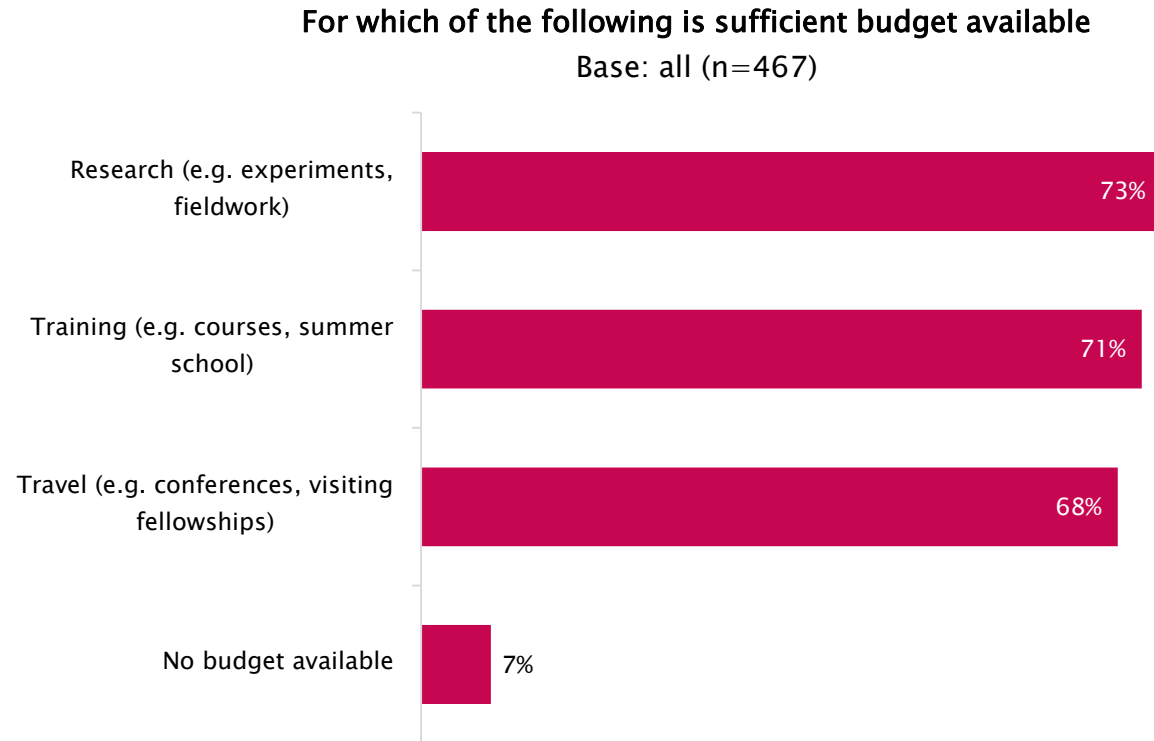
To what extent are you satisfied with the following facilities?

Base: all (n=467)



- Respondents in the 'Medic' domain (69%) are more likely to consider research facilities adequate than are 'Beta' (57%) and 'Alpha-Gamma' (52%) candidates.

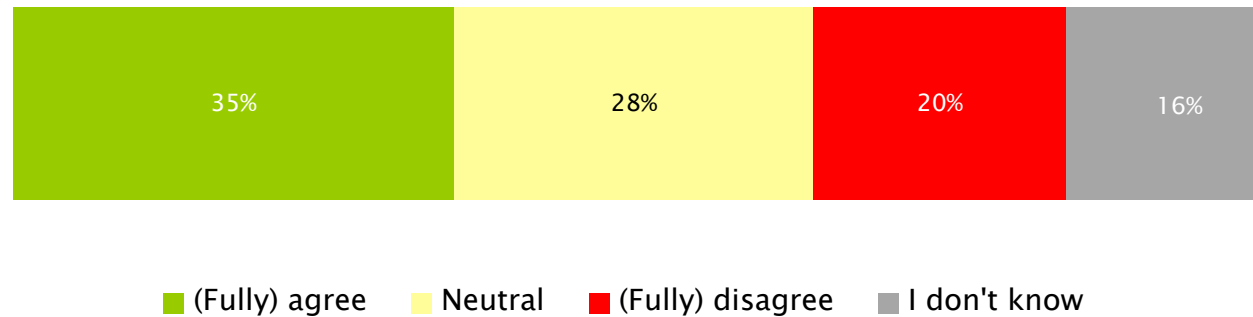
MOST RESPONDENTS THINK THAT THE RESEARCH, TRAINING AND TRAVEL BUDGETS ARE ADEQUATE



- More 'Medic' candidates (80%) than Alpha-Gamma candidates (66%) feel that the research budget is sufficient for their needs.

MOST RESPONDENTS DO NOT CONSIDER THE TRAINING PROGRAMME TO BE VERY INSPIRING

The training programme for PhD candidates is inspiring
Base: all (n=467)



- More students who started in 2016 (46%) consider the programme to be inspiring than those who started before 2014 (29%).
- More 'Alpha-Gamma' respondents (26%) than 'Medic' respondents (13%) consider the programme to be uninspiring.

WHILE PHD CANDIDATES ARE POSITIVE ABOUT THE TRAINING PROGRAMME AS SUCH (THEY FIND THE COURSES RELEVANT), THEY SAY IT LACKS FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND THE COURSES ARE OF POOR QUALITY.

Respondents who find the training programme inspiring say that it offers them many relevant opportunities:

- *Until now the training provided has been relevant and useful.*
- *I think the courses provided are of good quality.*
- *I would not call them 'inspiring' but I have to say that the obligatory Graduate School courses are useful and helpful.*
- *The mandatory training programme and training courses are usually in keeping with, and supplementary to, my research topic.*



PhD candidates who do not feel the training programme to be inspiring would like to have **more freedom** in choosing topics for their courses:

- *The mandatory courses are not very informative and way too expensive!*
- *There is sufficient variety in terms of subjects, but I think a PhD candidate should have more freedom of choice regarding courses.*



Some respondents either consider **the quality too poor** or do not find the courses **useful**:

- *I took several courses elsewhere, because the courses offered at VU Amsterdam were not useful.*
- *It's not a bad training programme, but I wouldn't call it inspiring.*
- *I wish there were more courses on statistics presentation, network activity and other soft skills.*

A number of candidates have **never heard** of the programme, **nor are they familiar with the courses**:

- *What training programme? Do you mean the efficacy course?*
- *I am a part-time PhD candidate. I already have extensive experience of academic work and research, so I do not have to follow the training programme.*
- *I have no idea what this 'training programme' is.*

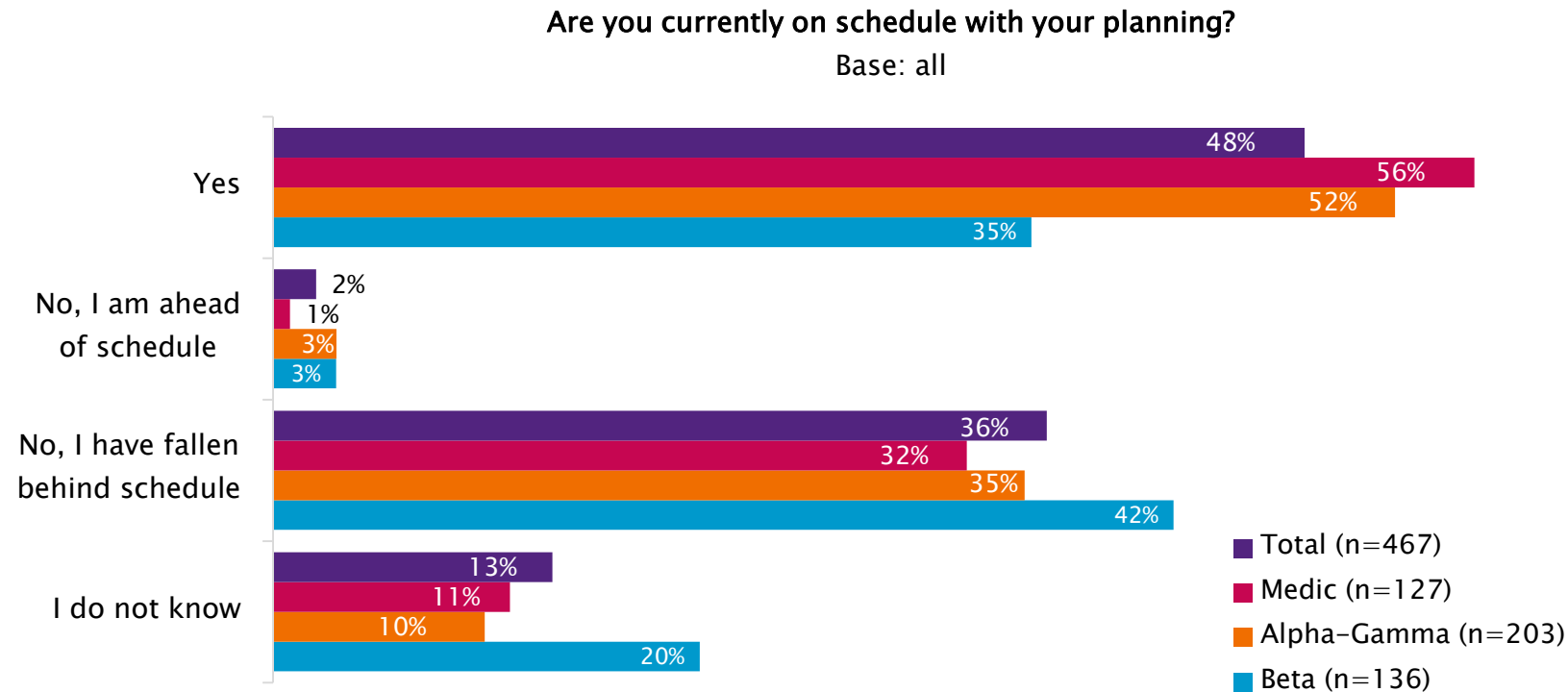


PLANNING



PLANNING

HALF OF THE RESPONDENTS ARE CURRENTLY ON SCHEDULE WITH THEIR PLANNING. BETA PHD CANDIDATES ARE RELATIVELY MORE LIKELY TO BE BEHIND SCHEDULE.

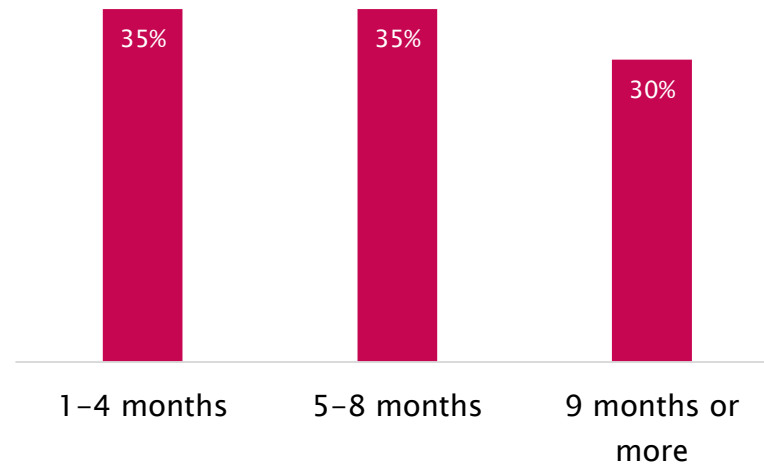


- Unsurprisingly, those respondents who started before 2014 (55%) and in 2014–2015 (32%) are more likely to have fallen behind schedule than candidates who started in 2016 (14%).



ON AVERAGE, RESPONDENTS EXPECT TO FINISH EIGHT MONTHS LATE

How many months is the expected delay?
Base: Expected delay, with the exception of the 'Don't knows' (n=100)



Average time overrun:

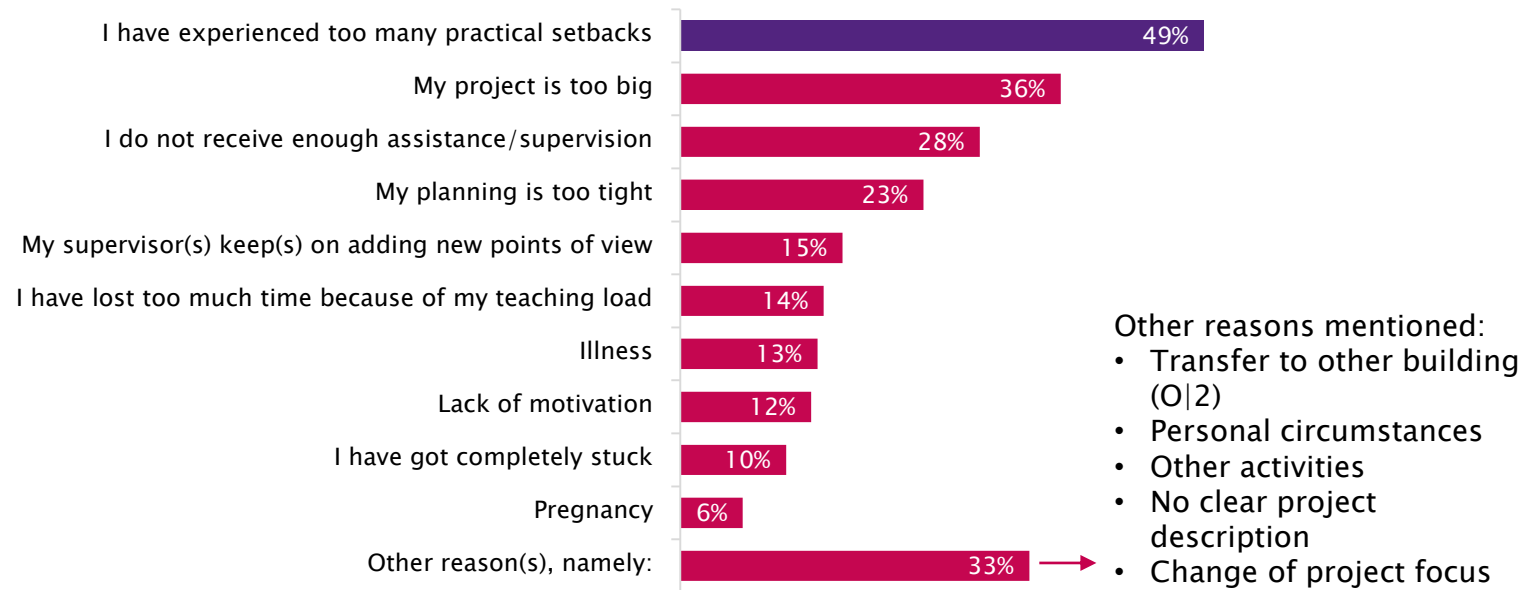
8 months

- On average, respondents from the 'Medic' domain expect to have a longer time overrun (10 months) than respondents from the 'Alpha-Gamma' domain (6 months).

DELAYS ARE MOST OFTEN CAUSED BY PRACTICAL SETBACKS

What are/were the main reasons for your delay?

Base: When expected delay (n=170)

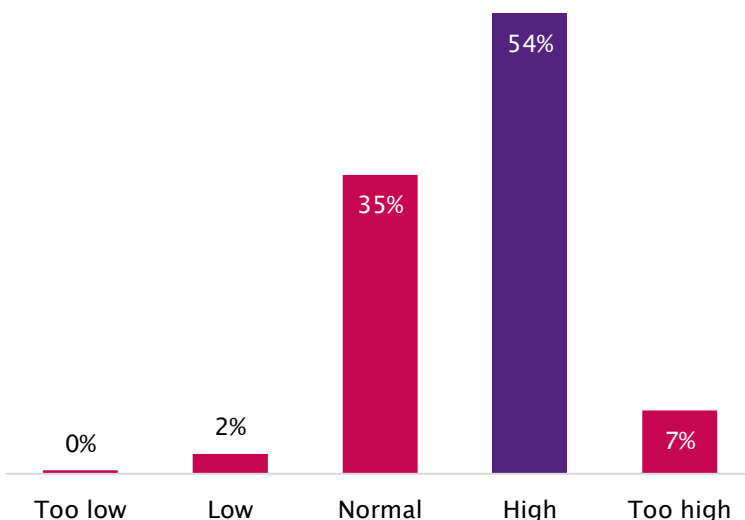


- More 'Beta' (18%) and 'Alpha-Gamma' (17%) respondents attribute their delay in finishing to their teaching load than is the case with 'Medic' PhD candidates (2%).
- More 'Beta' (37%) and 'Medic' (34%) respondents attribute their delay in finishing to a lack of assistance or supervision than is the case with 'Alpha-Gamma' candidates (18%).

MORE THAN HALF OF THE RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF WORK PRESSURE

How would you describe the work pressure during your PhD project?

Base: all (n=467)



- Fewer of the respondents who started in 2016 experience high levels of work pressure (2%) than those who started in 2015 or earlier (9%).

Those respondents who felt that their work pressure was high find it hard to **combine their research** with other **mandatory** activities.

- *Numerous obligations in addition to the research, including teaching duties and the supervision of Master's students.*
- *For me, personally, it is a challenge to combine research and teaching.*
- *Many requirements: research, teaching, training, conference visits, publishing et cetera.*

Others attribute high levels of work pressure to the **need to publish** one or more articles:

- *Time pressure. The combination of fieldwork and writing scientific articles.*
- *Pressure to publish multiple papers in good journals to be eligible to defend my thesis.*

A low workload is explained by **excessive flexibility** in working hours and deadlines:

- *I don't think the workload is low. However, if you are not able to finish up a task before the deadline, the deadline will just be pushed back.*
- *Flexibility in working hours and in organizing work. No-one expects you to work crazy hours.*

APPENDIX



METHODS AND QUESTIONNAIRE

Methods

The quantitative research was conducted online. Data collection took place from 12 October to 7 November 2016. The survey's target group consisted of PhD candidates at VU Amsterdam.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was initially put together by a group consisting of representatives from several Dutch universities. It has been slightly adapted by Ruigrok NetPanel. The questionnaire consisted of obligatory benchmark questions (*kernvragen*) and a library (*bibliotheek*) of other questions from which each university could choose. The final questionnaire for VU Amsterdam consisted of 42 questions. On average, it took respondents eight minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Sample size and reliability

Not everyone in the target population completed the questionnaire. Reliability margins should be taken into account when publishing statements about the target population, based on the outcome of this survey. At a sample size of $n=467$, the maximum margin amounts to 3.12%.

Sample and sampling frame

For our sampling frame we obtained the email addresses of all current PhD candidates from VU Amsterdam's database. Emails were sent to all those whose addresses were found in the database, asking them to participate in this survey. In addition, an open link was disseminated via an email newsletter, and published on VU Amsterdam websites.

APPENDIX

RESPONSE

Response

A total of 887 PhD candidates were invited to take part in the survey, of whom 467 actually completed the questionnaire. A reminder email was sent to any candidate who had not responded to the request. Of those candidates who were invited to take part, 47% responded.

Description	Amount
Invitations sent (gross sample)	887
Bouncers (not reached)	5
Started the questionnaire	579
Incomplete	106
Qualified respondents directly invited	411
Respondents via open link*	56
Qualified respondents (net sample)	467





In opdracht van VU Amsterdam, 17-11-2016

Hans Onkenhout, hans@ruigroknetaanel.nl



Lianne Worrell, lianne@ruigroknetaanel.nl



Tessa de Kruijk, tessa@ruigroknetaanel.nl



Silodam 1a, 1013 AL Amsterdam, Telefoon 020-6238512, e-mail: info@ruigroknetaanel.nl, KvK 34135878, BTW 809001469B01, Bank 659170264

