

VUB PhD survey 2018 – Compendium 1

This is the first compendium of the PhD survey 2018. After a successful pilot survey in 2017, doctoral candidates of all faculties were invited to take part in the survey of 2018. For background information as to why this survey was set up, we invite you to read earlier contributions on our [webpages](#) – it contains all the necessary information regarding the goals and the people/services involved in collecting, analyzing and communicating the results.

In this first compendium we will shed light on the response rates to the survey, will give insight into the characteristics of those who participated in the survey, will reflect on what PhD-candidates' research plans have in common, and lastly we will discuss the doubts respondents had about finishing their PhD trajectory successfully.

Response

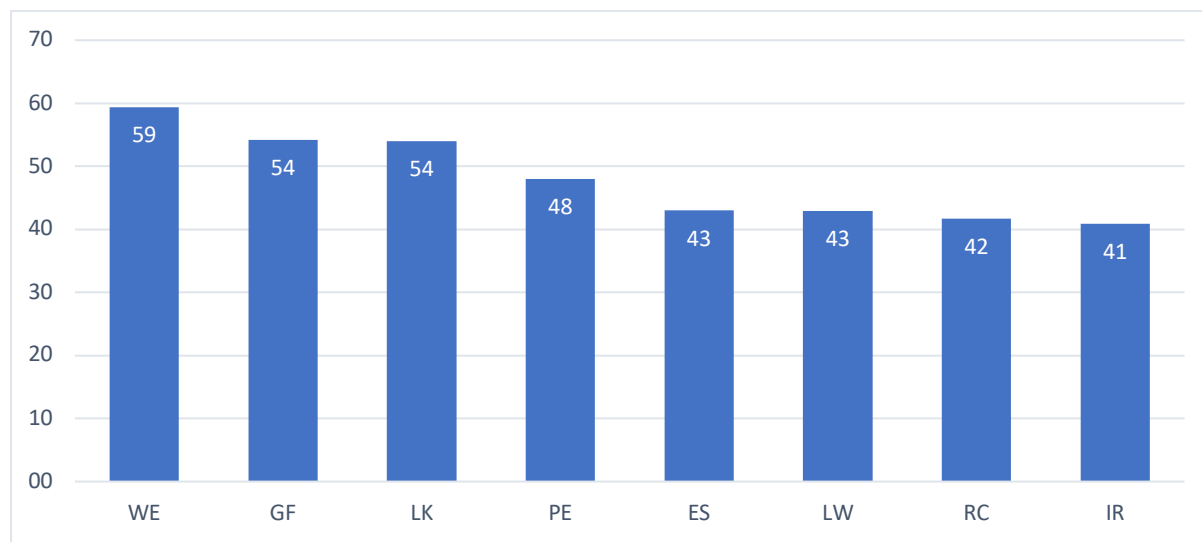


Figure 1: Percentage response per faculty¹

You massively responded to the open call to participate in the PhD survey. Overall, there was a response rate of 53% and a full-completion rate of 48%. As you can see in Figure 1, there are some differences according to the faculties: the highest response rate is found amongst doctoral candidates from the Sciences (WE) faculty, whilst the Engineering faculty had the lowest response rate in contrast to their very high response rate in the pilot study of 2017. Several factors could have led to this outcome: the fact that they had to fill out similar questions as in the first survey and the fact that the list of questions is quite long could have

¹ WE=Sciences, GF=Medicine & Pharmacy, LK=Physical Education and physiotherapy, PE=Psychology & Educational Sciences, ES= Economic and Social Sciences & Business Solvay School, LW=Arts & Philosophy, RC=Law & Criminology, IR=Engineering

contributed to their lower response rate. We are working on a new shortened version of the current 2018 questionnaire in order to mitigate the risk of low response rates.

We don't see a drop in response rates among the other faculties who had also participated in the pilot survey, so other factors might come into play as well.

The url to the survey is not being a VUB-address, for example, might have led doctoral candidates to conclude that it was phishing – which it was not! To prevent distrust, the next invitation you will receive, will have a VUB-url.

Are you in a faculty with a lower response rate, and you want to inform us why you did not collaborate? Please mail to phd@vub.be to let us know what we can do to include your feedback in our next survey!

Characteristics of the respondents

Female doctoral candidates are slightly overrepresented in the total survey population. When looking at the distribution according to Doctoral School, candidates from Life Sciences and Medicine are somewhat overrepresented as well. About one in five respondents is in the starting phase of their research, more than half in the executing phase and somewhat more than one in four is working towards completing their PhD. More than half of the respondents started their PhD right after obtaining their MA degree, about 37% gained some prior **work experience**, and slightly less than 10% is combining doing a PhD with another job. An important characteristic of the respondents who already had some work experience before the PhD, is that they seem to be more **passionate** about their research, and more resilient compared to those without earlier work experience (see Figure 2). The majority of candidates with previous work experience had worked at another university or in the private sector, in (partly) research-related functions. Looking at passion at a more general level, we can say that VUB PhD candidates seem quite passionate overall, regardless of prior work experience, with a mean score of 8 on a scale of 1 to 10.

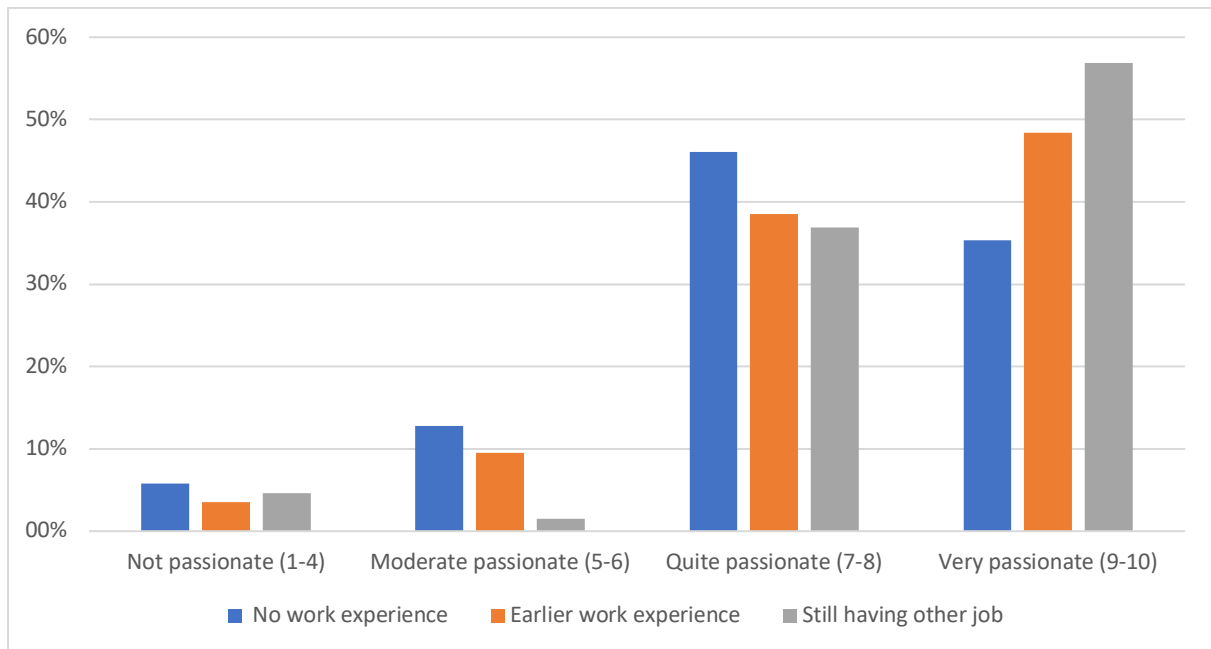


Figure 2: Passionate levels according to (earlier) work experience or not in percentages

The most common **contract type** PhD candidates are employed in is project funding (32,3%), mostly through FWO or VUB. One in four PhD candidates have obtained personal mandates and thus have funding specifically assigned to themselves. One in five are working as research and teaching assistants, and about 17% has no funding for their research. This is more common in DSh than in other Doctoral Schools. The majority of the respondents without funding also have a foreign nationality. Often, it concerns people that combine their PhD with another job, for example psychologists with their own practice, lawyers, or people who want to work on a specific topic during their retirement. About one in five has a **joint phd** contract with another university, of which half are in collaboration with another Flemish university.

Research plans

The respondents were asked to what extent they had a detailed research plan. About 40% stated they developed a research plan with both short and long term goals, while 19% didn't have a research plan (yet).

Table 1 Elements included in research plan by doctoral school

	Sig.	DSH		NSE		LSM		Total	
		N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Research goals	**	202	83,8	225	94,1	123	89,8	555	89,1
Yearly milestones	n.s.	158	65,6	155	64,9	85	62,0	403	64,7

Publication strategy	**	127	52,7	151	63,2	96	70,0	377	60,5
Conferences to attend	n.s.	122	50,6	103	43,1	55	40,1	283	45,4
Monthly milestones	*	92	38,2	63	26,4	41	30,0	199	31,9
Dissemination of research results to a larger audience	n.s.	60	24,9	70	29,3	44	32,1	174	27,9
Specialist training schedule	n.s.	50	20,7	31	13,0	20	14,6	101	16,2
Transferable skills training schedule	n.s.	31	12,9	34	14,2	20	14,6	85	13,6
Other	n.s.	8	3,3	7	2,9	3	2,2	19	3

Only respondents with a research plan are included. 146 respondents are not included.

*/** indicates significant difference between the different categories of one indicator (* $p < 0,05$ or ** $p < 0,001$)

Table 1 details the typical elements of a research plan by doctoral school. As you can see, research goals are the most commonly defined part of this research plan, and this is even more so among respondents from NSE than among DSH respondents. A publication strategy is more commonly included as a research plan element in the doctoral school of LSM. Less frequently added to a research plan are training activities (both specialist or transferable), and dissemination of results to a layman's audience.

Please note that you can use this list of typical research plan elements as a checklist to further develop your own, including training and science outreach activities, and discuss this with your supervisor to receive feedback.

Likelihood of successfully completing PhD

Overall, respondents feel that they are (rather) on track with their PhD project. Only 12,8% mentioned feeling (rather) not on track. Moreover, respondents are quite confident about their chances to successfully defend their PhD: the large majority deems it rather likely ('likelihood' score of 7 out of 10) to totally likely (score of 10) (Table 3). Doctoral candidates from NSE are somewhat more confident than respondents from DSh, LSM is in-between these Doctoral Schools.

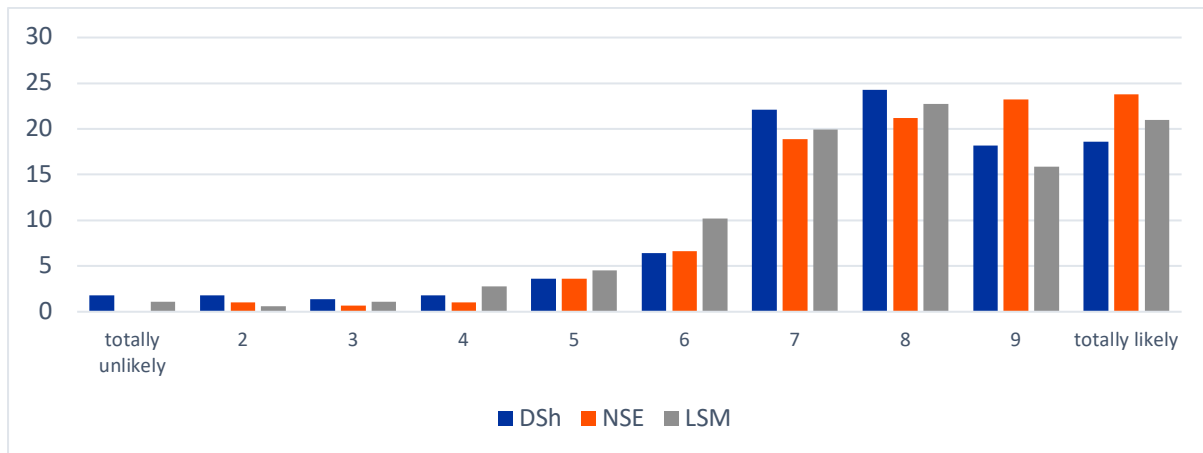


Figure 3 Distribution of the response to the question “To what extent do you think you will successfully defend your PhD on a scale of 1 (totally unlikely) to 10 (totally likely)”, in %, by Doctoral School.

When asking doctoral candidates what they perceive as the most important obstructions to finishing their PhD, doubts about research results or failed experiments are the most commonly mentioned. Often doctoral candidates perceive negative results or no differences in their results as not interesting enough, while it is often still an important finding that should be communicated.

There are two main sources of doubt mentioned by respondents, with several underlying components: 1) personal doubts, which relate to work/family balance, ambition to do a PhD and doubting one’s own capabilities, while 2) research doubts concern not only results, but also a lack of guidance and/or a stimulating working environment, as well as the research topic that turned out not that interesting after all. Fortunately these doubts are rather rare. What we do see is that doctoral candidates from DSh have more personal doubts than respondents from NSE. Whether this is discipline specific or rather related to the fact that female researchers are overrepresented in the human sciences, it is something we will take a closer look at in the next survey.

In the compendium of March, we will discuss other elements of work satisfaction, including the role of the supervisor and the research environment. If you can’t wait, you are invited to read the [full report](#).

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