



GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION SURVEY REPORT 2016

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SUMMARY

These are the results of the GSA PhD student survey conducted 2015. Generally, things have improved for Karlstad University's doctoral candidates when compared to the survey conducted in 2012.

Digging a bit deeper, detailed results can be found in the following pages. Here is a short summary of what we consider the most important results of the survey:

- The demographic distribution shows that Karlstad University is becoming more internationalised. In 2012, 77% of the respondents were born in Sweden. This number went down to 62% in 2015.
- The survey data show an increase of externally funded PhD positions (59%, up from 46%). This seems to reflect a changing academic landscape that has to rely more and more on external funding.
- 71% of the respondents plan to write a compilation dissertation. For the most part the articles will be written in collaboration with other researchers. However, a majority of respondents claim not to have received information about rules and policies regarding co-authorship.
- The responses reflect an increasing satisfaction with supervision
- Karlstad University's graduate students are generally highly dissatisfied (61%) with the research education course "History and philosophy of science".
- 63% of the students think that the graduate course portfolio at KAU does not correspond to their needs and preferences.
- A large majority of the doctoral candidates feel that teaching is stimulating and fruitful (86%). They also believe that they will benefit from the experience in their future careers.
- Our doctoral candidates are quite confident to find employment once they have completed their research education (62%). This means that there is also a substantial group of respondents who worry about unemployment after completing their research studies.
- PhD students have a positive view on their acquisition of methodological skills and scientific theories and they appreciate the ability to conduct research independently (87%).

INTRODUCTION

In May 2015, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) at Karlstad University (KAU) conducted a survey, GSA Graduate Student Survey 2015. The survey was distributed to all graduate students registered to a doctoral program at Karlstad University at that time. Similar surveys have been conducted previously, most recently in 2012. The purpose of these surveys is to gather information regarding the conditions for graduate students at KAU, and to find out how these graduate students experience their situation. This is one component of how the GSA works to improve the quality of research education and the working conditions for graduate students at KAU. A number of aspects were covered in the survey, such as physical and psychosocial work environment, funding, supervision, teaching or other departmental duties, and post-graduation career planning.

The set of questions in the 2015 survey differs somewhat from previous versions, above all when it comes to the scope of the survey. Following the recommendation of the previous GSA board, responsible for the 2012 survey, the present survey was trimmed down by approximately one quarter in length by the removal of low-priority questions. Further, several of the remaining questions have been reformulated to various extents with the aim of increasing clarity and precision. Because of these changes, the present survey is not precisely comparable with the 2012 survey. However, we, the board, have made the assessment that overall comparisons are still valid.

The present survey was conducted using Survey & Report, a tool provided by KAU for designing and managing web-based surveys. Participants were invited by email, using two email lists provided by faculty administration (one list per faculty). After the initial invitation and two reminders, the survey had 73 respondents (41 women and 32 men). This corresponds to a response rate of approximately 30-35%. It is impossible to give an exact percentage, as we cannot precisely determine how many of the recipients of the invitation were valid respondents; for instance, some recipients of the mailing lists were not active as graduate students at the time. Respondents were presented with the choice of responding to either a Swedish or an English version of the survey.

The main focus of the present document is to summarize overall findings and highlight selected individual questions that emerged as especially important to consider for the purposes of the GSA's scope of activity and that we may realistically address in practice. For several questions, we further present basic analyses of how responses were distributed across participant groupings, with a special focus on gender and faculty belonging. Some basic statistical analysis (Chi2 and ANOVA) was conducted, using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. The possibility of categorising participants on the level of department and subject was excluded during the design stage, because of a risk of compromising participant anonymity. Due to the relatively small sample size, it is difficult to assess the statistical significance of the differences we report between participant categories. We report statistical significance in relation to a conventional threshold of $p < .05$, but advise the reader not to attach too much weight to statistical significance when interpreting the findings, we report: while we are less certain about them, some of the non-significant differences may still be both real and consequential.

The survey was supposed to include several questions dealing with the university's organisation and goals, general employment conditions, the PhD salary progression ("lönestegen"), some key rights and obligations, research schools, familiarity with the Individual Study Plan, and familiarity with the GSA. Due to a technical mishap with the survey design in Survey & Report, several questions on these topics did not appear to the respondents, and we are therefore missing data on some important issues.

The 2015/2016 board of the Graduate Students' Association (Susanne Duek, Raul Ferrer Conill, Peter Wikström, Liselotte Olsson, Pyry Hämäläinen, Huan Shu, Reinhard Handler, Ilkin Mehrabov, Yana Petkova-Olsson, and Florian Sascha Benes) conducted the survey and jointly wrote this report.

This report will be distributed to all concerned parties, ranging from the graduate students to the leadership at KAU.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The survey was answered by 73 doctoral students at Karlstad University (41 women and 32 men; no respondents chose to respond with a non-binary gender descriptor). For the distribution of respondents by faculty, a slight majority of respondents are employed at the Faculty of Health, Science and Technology, as seen in Figure 1.

A majority of respondents (62%) were born between 1977 and 1987, followed by 22% born between 1966 and 1976. There are also smaller percentages of respondents born before 1965 (10%) and after 1988 (7%). The average age of respondents was 35 for male respondents and 39 for females. There was a similar difference in average age between the faculties. Out of the 73 respondents, 30 belong to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (HS), and 41 to the Faculty of Health, Science, and Technology (HNT), and 2 are unspecified. The respondents from the HNT faculty were on average 35 years old, and the HS faculty respondents 39. Both faculties had similar gender distribution. Almost half of the respondents (47%) have children below 18 years of age. There has been an 8 percent point decrease of PhD candidates with children under the age of 18, from 55% in 2012 to 47% in 2015. Further, while the difference is not statistically significant, it may be noted that a larger share of the female respondents have children (23 out of 41 female respondents, as compared with 11 out of 32 male respondents).

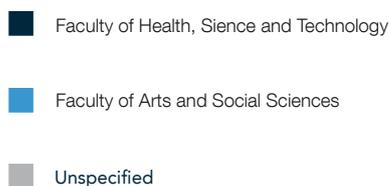
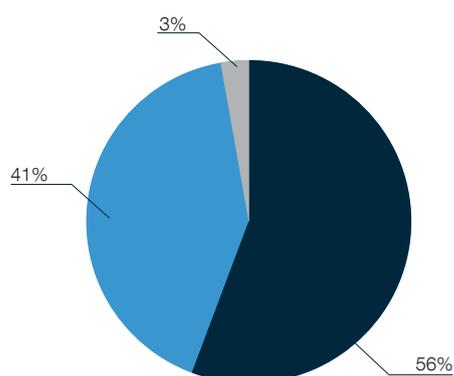


Figure 1 – Respondent faculty distribution

A majority of respondents were born in Sweden (62%), or within other European countries (21%). Almost a fifth of the survey respondents, 18%, were born outside of Europe (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that the notion of “Europe” was not contextualized in the survey, and thus the responses are of students who self-identify as Europeans. Compared with the results of the 2012 GSA survey, which showed that 77% of the graduate students were born in Sweden, the present distribution may be an indication that internationalization efforts at Karlstad University are having some effect on the composition of the graduate student corps. An alternative explanation for this change is the worsening conditions in academia in other countries and therefore Sweden becoming a more attractive setting for pursuing research education.

A clear majority of respondents born in Sweden are female (29 out of 45), while the respondents born outside of Sweden but within Europe are evenly distributed in terms of gender. Out of the 13 respondents born outside of Europe, 9 are male and 4 female, of which 7 men and 3 women can only communicate in English at work. A larger proportion of male respondents chose to take the survey in English. As the University’s official registry does not capture the doctoral candidates’ nationalities, the survey’s numbers can give us a hint about the ratio of Swedish and Non-Swedish PhDs at KAU.

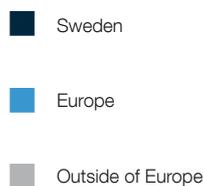
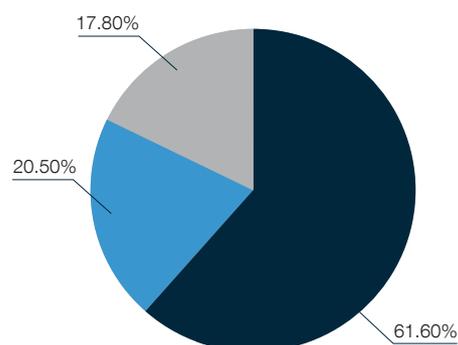


Figure 2 – Respondent distribution by place of birth

The majority of PhD positions (82%) were filled through formally advertised open calls, although an additional 4% do not know for sure whether their position was formally advertised or not. 84% of respondents are employed on a full-time contract, although what proportion is dedicated to research varies a lot. Only 41% are employed following the supposedly standard “80-20” scheme, and the rest conduct research to varying extents (see the section on workload).

When it comes to the financing of PhD positions (see Figure 3), external financing (in the form of industrial PhDs, project funding, and other variants) is more prevalent (59%) than internal financing, like faculty financed PhDs or adjunct PhDs (38% in total for both). Among the internally funded PhD students, 4% also work as adjuncts. In 2012 the percentage of externally funded PhD positions was only 46%, such results also seem to correlate with KAU’s strategic choice of gaining external research funding for research projects. A greater proportion of HNT respondents are externally financed (30 out of 41 HNT respondents, 12 out of 30 HS respondents).

SUMMARY

The survey was answered by a majority of women (56%). Also, the majority of respondents are between 30 and 40 years of age (62%) and many have at least one child under the age of 18 (47%). The response to the survey shows a trend towards an increase of doctoral students with a non-Swedish background. About 62% of respondents were born in Sweden, 20% in other European countries, and 18% were born outside of Europe. Most respondents are employed in the HNT faculty (56%). Finally, externally funding is increasing and is now the single most common form of financing for research education at KAU (59%).

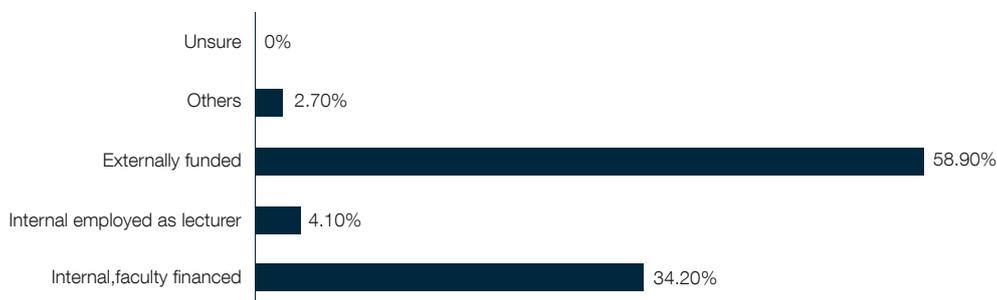


Figure 3 – Respondent financing sources

RESEARCH EDUCATION

KAU PhD students generally reflect positively on their graduate studies: 86% of the respondents assessed their graduate education as good or very good; while 14% considered their education to be bad or very bad (see Figure 4).

More specifically, a large majority of PhD students at Karlstad University agreed that they have acquired skills in scientific methods (87%) and the ability to conduct research independently (87%) to a high or very high degree. PhD students at KAU are more ambivalent on other issues. When asked if they acquired knowledge of scientific theories, 72% agreed, but 26% of the respondents disagreed. A similar pattern recurs when it comes to methods and theories that are used in other research fields: 63% of the respondents stated that they acquired knowledge about research fields other than their own to a high or very high degree, while 36% did not agree.

The PhD students are fairly evenly split regarding research ethics. 40% of the respondents claim that their understanding of research ethics has deepened only to a small or very small extent, 53% state that they understand research ethics better or much better than at the start of their graduate studies. Most respondents are enrolled in a doctoral programme (93%) while only 6% are pursuing a licentiate degree. Overall the respondents believed that they had enough funding to complete their research satisfactorily. When it comes to expenses,

79% of the respondents agree somewhat or entirely they had enough funding to buy literature, 79% for travels and lodging for PhD courses in Sweden, 75% for attending international conferences, 53% for conducting fieldwork and 38% for laboratory work and experiments. In contrast, the proportion of respondents who complained of inadequate funding for literature was 6%; for travel and lodging for national PhD-courses 3%; for conferences 6%; for fieldwork 6%; and for laboratory work and experiments 4%.

DISSERTATION FORMAT

In terms of format, a dissertation by a compilation of articles is the most common choice by the survey respondents. The majority of respondents (71%) answered that they are planning on writing a compilation of articles and 21% answered that they are planning on writing a monograph (see Figure 5). Therefore, most respondents know whether they are going to write a dissertation consisting of articles or a monograph. Some respondents (8%) answered that they didn't know at the time what format they would choose. There is a small difference between faculties: a greater proportion of HS respondents are planning to write monographs as opposed to compilation dissertations (37% of HS respondents vs 7% of HNT respondents).

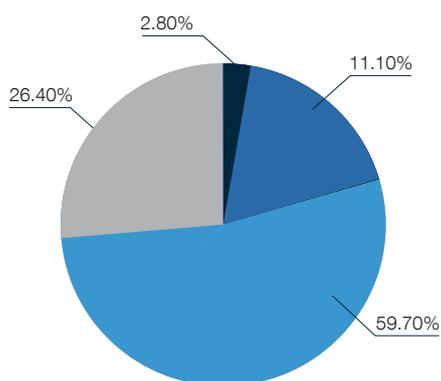


Figure 4 – Respondents' assessment of the quality of their research education

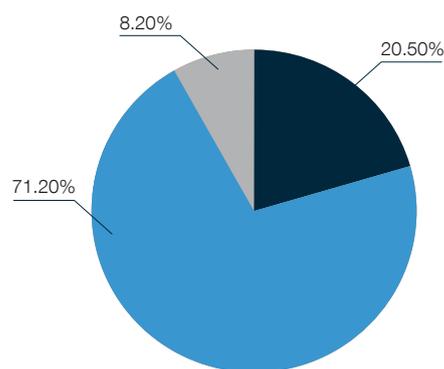


Figure 5 – Dissertation format

For the most part the articles will be written in collaboration with others and that is why it is important to establish whether the respondent has been given transparent information regarding rules and policies when it comes to co-authorship. The majority of the respondents (55%) answered that they believed they hadn't received any information about co-authorship; 30% answered they had sufficient information; and 7% were unsure if they had been given any information at all.

RESEARCH EDUCATION COURSES AT KAU

Karlstad University offers a selection of research education courses for PhD students. The majority of PhD students (59%) are satisfied with the quality of research education courses they have taken at KAU. That being said, approximately a third of respondents (36%) disagree somewhat or entirely that the quality of KAU PhD courses they have taken is consistently good. 63% of the students think that the course portfolio at KAU does not correspond to their needs and preferences. In terms of content, around half of the respondents felt that the research ethics (48%) and scientific theory (59%) were addressed during research education courses.

PhD students were also asked to evaluate four research education courses. Here, the research education course "History and Philosophy of Science" stands out. Out of the 41 respondents who have taken the course, 61% were somewhat

or very dissatisfied (see Figure 6; "Others" represents respondents who have not taken the course).

In contrast, most respondents are somewhat or very satisfied with the courses "To Communicate Science" (79%) and "Information Retrieval" (90%). Only five respondents had taken the course "Impact and Utilisation of Research and Science". Four out of those five evaluated the course as somewhat or very satisfactory.

Commonly, an important component of research education is the experience of other educational institutions, either by taking external courses or having longer stays elsewhere. A quarter of PhD student respondents (25%) reported not having had the possibility to do so. However, about 10% of those who had the opportunity to take courses outside of KAU voluntarily chose not to take any external courses. Two thirds of the respondents (66%) had taken courses or stayed longer periods at other educational institutions in Sweden or abroad. A clear majority of those respondents were women (86%).

Furthermore, when asked about ideas to improve the graduate education in their respective fields 9 free-text responses dealt with PhD courses, which is the most discussed topic.

"The workload of the courses should be reviewed. At present, the workload of the courses at the graduate studies I conduct far above what is specified by course credits."

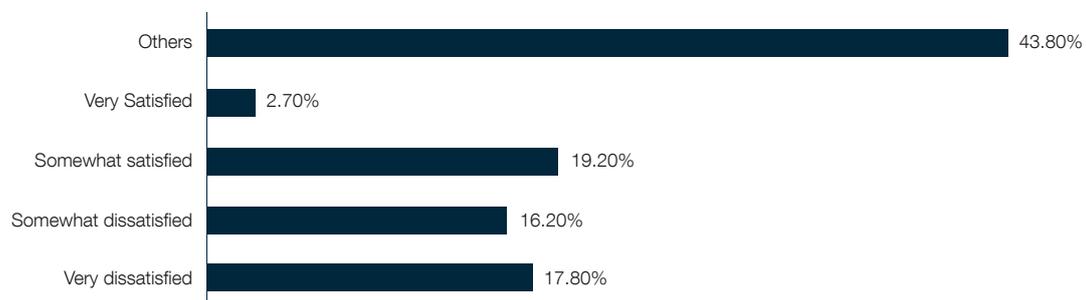


Figure 6 – Opinion about the PhD course "History and Philosophy of Science"

There are many different concerns about the courses: Students argue for putting a focus on quality rather than quantity, thus lowering the credit requirements. Some request more subject-specific courses while others complain about the courses' overwhelming workload and some complain about the lack in quality of the courses offered at KAU.

The most frequent concern brought up by the respondents is the difficulty of finding relevant courses. Some respondents request the implementation of some system (webpage, web portal, etc.) to help them to find courses not only at KAU but at other Swedish or Nordic universities as well. Since the survey was conducted and the publication of the results, KAU has created a web portal in which all doctoral courses offered at KAU are gathered. This web portal is updated by the administrators of the two faculties. The credit point requirements vary greatly at Karlstad University. The two most common requirements are 90 ECTS (47%) and 60 ECTS (38%) while 5.6% of the students reported their credit points requirement level to be 30 ECTS or even less.

At the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (HS), 80% of the doctoral candidates are required to earn 90 ECTS. By contrast, the most common amount of ECTS (69%) at the Faculty of Health, Science and Technology (later HNT) is 60 ECTS. Only 23% need to earn 90 points at HNT. Slightly over half of the PhD students (55%) feel that the balance between the course points needed and the thesis work is good for them whereas nearly one third (30%) feel

that too many credits are required. There is a significant gender difference regarding this issue. More female doctoral candidates assess the balance as good (females 75%, males 45%). By contrast, more male PhD students regard the balance as negative (males 55%, females 25%). This difference might owe to the fact that 74% of the respondents taking 60 ECTS are female while 61% of the students taking 90 ECTS are male.

SUMMARY

In general, the majority of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the research education offered at Karlstad University. The majority are pursuing doctoral as opposed to licentiate degrees, and are writing compilation theses. This is particularly the case at the HNT faculty where 93% of respondents plan to write a compilation thesis, while to the corresponding figure is 63% at the HS faculty.

When it comes to doctoral courses, the number of course credits required to complete a PhD varies. The most common requirement is 90 ECTS followed by 60 ECTS, there are some indications that students who are required to fulfil 60 ECTS are more satisfied with their work balance. In terms of quality, most respondents are happy with the quality of courses offered at KAU, with the exception of the course "History and Philosophy of Science", which is regarded as dissatisfactory by a majority of respondents who took the course.

SUPERVISORS & SUPERVISION

The structure of the supervising team is important for the quality of research education. PhD candidates at Karlstad University have varying number of supervisors. The responses to the survey show that an overwhelming majority of candidates has either one supervisor and one co-supervisor (51%) or one supervisor and two co-supervisors (44%). Only one respondent has only one advisor, and three have one advisor and three co-supervisors. Supervisors are predominantly academic (87%), but nine respondents have at least one industry-based supervisor.

For 23% of the respondents, one of their supervisors is also their examiner. This number has decreased 9 points from the 2012 survey, in which 32% of respondents had their main supervisor as examiner. Here, the GSA wants to point out that the internal KAU policy states that main supervisors should not have the role of examiners, except in extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, 11% of respondents report having one supervisor that is also their boss, either as head of department or dean.

To the question “To what extent are you satisfied with supervision in general?”, the response is remarkably positive (see Figure 7). Even though only 75% of the respondents replied to this question, 46% reported being very satisfied with their supervision in general; 35% reported being quite satisfied with supervision; 12.7% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 5.5% were quite dissatisfied with supervision; and 1.8% respondents felt very dissatisfied. These results show a very promising increase in satisfaction, from a 61% of candidates reporting quite high or high satisfaction in 2012 to 81% in 2015.

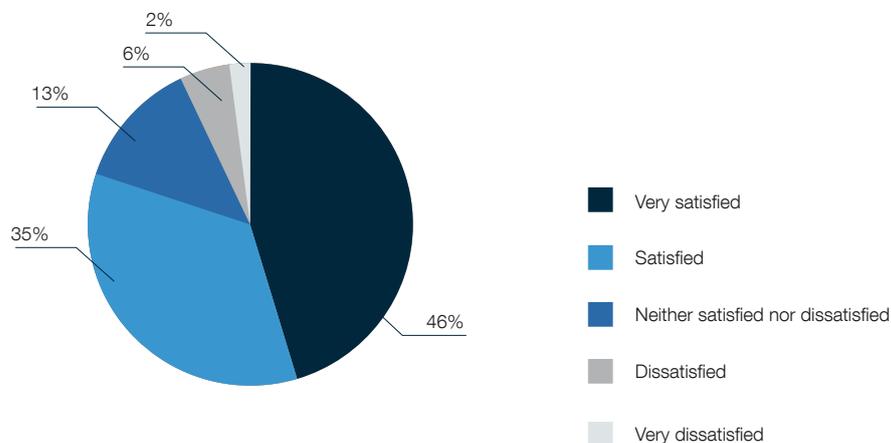


Figure 7 – Respondent satisfaction with supervision

Satisfaction levels are very similar at both faculties. It is perhaps noteworthy that only a single respondent (female, HS faculty) answered “very dissatisfied” (even though we could find no significant overall gender differences).

The open answers to this question confirm the positive trend, including a response that claims that the supervisor was the reason they chose KAU as the institution to apply for a research education position.

“I’m extremely happy with my supervisors. It was my main reason to come to KAU to be able to work with these people.”

The few problems pointed out by the respondents are mostly related to access to the supervisors (particularly those who are industry-oriented), and the supervisors competencies as regards the area of research of the respondents’ PhD projects. There is also one instance of an supervisor being married to the examiner, which could entail a conflict of interest.

While the satisfaction with supervision is generally positive, it is worth analysing this topic in detail to reflect on different situations and/or roles. The role of the main advisor is usually the most important for research students. The overall performance of main supervisors at Karlstad University, according to our student survey, is very positive. When it comes to accessibility,

constructive feedback, autonomy when taking decisions, showing interest, and competency in method- and theory-related questions, the performance of the main supervisor is usually regarded as being positive or very positive in around 90% of the cases.

These results are considerably higher than the previous survey where the average value was 72% for main supervisors and 79% for other supervisors.

The performance metrics are slightly less positive when it comes to two issues: receiving help to present research in conference and publications, and receiving help to contact and network with other researchers. Here the positive responses are 74% and 67% respectively. Respondents are still positive overall, but a stronger involvement of the main advisor in the academic life of PhD students beyond the context of KAU is encouraged.

The results on the same situations are considerably less positive for the perceived performance of the co-supervisors. The distributions of responses are very similar, but the positive overall responses are now around 65-70%. The reason for this could simply be that co-supervisors are commonly less involved in the PhD students' projects overall.

Assessments, however, are significantly less positive in the case of industry supervisors. A slight majority of respondents with industry supervisors are satisfied when it comes to these supervisors' capacity to give autonomy to the PhD candidates, and show interest in their projects. However, a majority of respondents are dissatisfied with their industry supervisors' capacity to handle theoretical discussions, their help to either spread the candidates' research in publication and conferences, and expanding the research network. This seems to be a logical result as industry supervisors might not be acquainted with (nor interested in) spreading research within academic contexts.

OTHER SOURCES OF FEEDBACK

While the task of providing feedback and giving advice is placed on the team of supervisors, there are several situations beyond supervision in which PhD candidates receive feedback. When asked about the possibility of presenting research in a seminar format, 79% of the respondents are either very (47%) or quite (32%) happy with this possibility. Only 13% were dissatisfied with their possibility to do so. A less positive response is given to the possibility of receiving feedback from

other research students. Here the level of dissatisfaction raises to 29%, whereas 34% are quite satisfied and 33% very satisfied. When it comes to getting feedback from other colleagues (non-supervisors, non-PhD candidates), there is even more dissatisfaction (very dissatisfied 5,5%; quite dissatisfied 30%; quite satisfied 29%; and very satisfied 29%).

This pattern may owe simply to the fact that seminars are specifically made to share research with others beyond the team of supervisors, while the competencies and available time of other colleagues are limited. However, there is room of improvement, considering the importance of receiving feedback from experienced researchers that are not necessarily invested in a particular project.

SUMMARY

The most common configuration of supervisors at KAU comprises a main supervisor and either one or two co-supervisors. In general, the degree of satisfaction with the supervisors is quite high in most regards, and it is mostly centred on the main advisor. Industry supervisors tend to be less positively regarded. The GSA recommends, however, that supervisors be encouraged to better help candidates to spread their research and network in academic contexts outside KAU. Further, since it is clear that PhD candidates are less satisfied with their industry supervisors, an evaluation or audit of industry supervision may be warranted.

Besides research and courses doctoral students at KAU often have the option to engage in teaching and administrative duties. In accordance with the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance full-time doctoral positions at Karlstad University are generally limited to four years. However, departments can prolong PhD positions for up to one more year if the PhD student also takes on such additional duties. Those tasks should not exceed 20% of the time of a full-time position. If a PhD student has a full-time research employment that includes 20% departmental duties, then the employment situation is what is usually called an 80-20 position.

DEPARTMENTAL AND TEACHING DUTIES

Additional duties are predominantly centred on teaching in undergraduate courses (72%). Proportionally, more male doctoral candidates (91%) have taught courses than female students (58%). Almost 60% of all respondents engage with other administrative tasks such as organising higher seminars, project coordination, participation in department meetings or acting as PhD representatives on various committees or boards.

"I like teaching. I find that I learn much better by having to explain to others."

A large majority of those who teach (86%) reported finding teaching was stimulating and fruitful in general. Further, 58% found teaching to be stimulating and fruitful specifically in relation to their research specialisation. Almost all respondents (88%) reported feeling that they will benefit from earning teaching experience at KAU in their future career. Teaching was also found to be useful in terms of processing and internalising acquired knowledge in order to be able to convey it to undergraduate students.

The majority (83%) is confident that they have the necessary skills to carry out their teaching tasks. While over two thirds (69%) did not have - nor received - any pedagogical education for teaching, half of the PhD students did not feel that they would need more pedagogical training in order to improve their teaching skills.

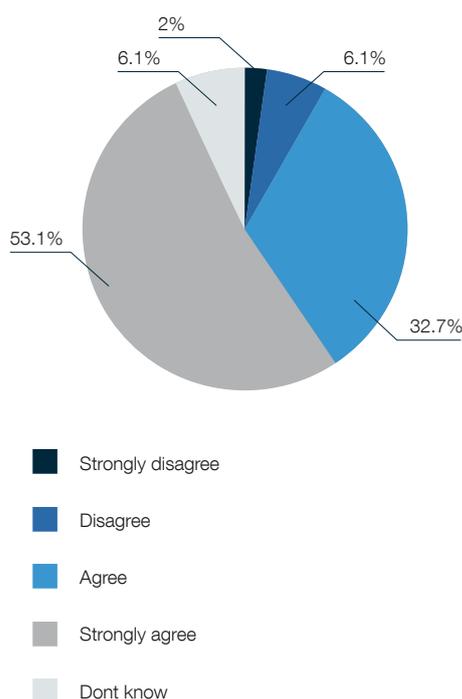


Figure 8 – Respondent satisfaction with teaching duties

However, some respondents who gave free-text answers complained about not receiving any guidance for teaching and noted that the course "Teaching at the university" ("Att undervisa på universitetet") has been only offered in Swedish. It is planned that this pedagogical course will be given in English as well, beginning in the spring of 2017.

"There is no form of supervision for teachers. There is no education for teachers that would include methods and required skills for teaching. The training courses are only offered in Swedish."

And while teaching is regarded as a rewarding activity, more than half of the doctoral candidates who teach (61%) experienced it to be an activity that requires a greater investment of time than expected, and that it was challenging to find the right balance between teaching and research. This can be seen by the fact that only 18% of respondents feel they have a reasonable workload regarding their teaching. Further, it should be noted that this number rose from 9.8% in 2012. Additionally, three respondents (6.1%) experienced teaching as socially and/or physically difficult to manage.

Most PhD students (76%) felt that their wishes and needs are respected when teaching duties are planned. Unfortunately the free-text responses also show that some PhD students would like to teach (or teach more) but are not given the possibility to do so. When it comes to departmental duties other than teaching, 68% of the respondents felt their wishes and needs were taken into account. Such duties were also predominantly seen as beneficial for one's future career. The most common departmental duty was to be a PhD-student representative (72%) in various boards and committees at KAU. Other tasks were, among others, research related tasks, responsibilities organizing seminars and department meetings, and administering web-related materials.

SUMMARY

KAU's PhD candidates are generally happy with their departmental and teaching duties. 88% expressed that they will benefit from their teaching experiences in their future careers, a large majority was also satisfied with other departmental duties. However, half of the respondents feel that they would need pedagogical training in order to improve their teaching skills. Considering the growing number of non-Swedish doctoral candidates, the GSA considers it problematic that the pedagogical course Att undervisa på universitet (Teaching at the university) so far has only been offered in Swedish, but it is positive that this issue is already being addressed.

Acting as PhD student representative was the most common departmental duty beyond teaching.

The GSA wants to thank its representatives for their valuable service!

CAREER PLANNING AND FUTURE OPTIONS

One of the areas in which there seems to be room for improvement is career planning beyond research education. When asked about whether PhD students had had any (formal or informal) conversation about career planning with their supervisors, only 26% of respondents answered that they had discussed career planning options with their main advisor, and 18% with the rest of supervisors. These worrying figures entail that 55% of the respondents have not had any type of career orientation discussion with any of their supervisors.

Furthermore, only 56% of respondents have had career planning conversations with anyone beyond the team of supervisors. The alternative participants in such discussions are other colleagues in their departments, other PhD students, former PhD students who have already finished their degree, and, most frequently, the head of department (prefekt). We believe that supervisors should take a more active role in the career planning of PhD candidates, and there is clearly room for improvement.

FUTURE OPTIONS

Regarding future scenarios after the PhD position, some respondents already have an employment arrangement while they conduct their graduate studies. Such arrangements are usually students with an “adjunkt” position (junior lecturer) at KAU or at another university, or other employment in the private sector. Those who do not have an employment option often do not have a clear idea of where will they work after completing their PhDs but are open to different options. However, it is noteworthy that about 61% of respondents are not actually worried about their employment situations after obtaining their PhD. Only 12% are very worried about the future options after their PhD employment at KAU. These results might be explained by the fact that most respondents (58%) feel that they have a high probability of securing a job within their subject KAU; 47% think there is a good chance of finding employment at some other subject within their depart-

ment; and 70% are confident that they could find a job at another university. We regard this finding as important, as PhD candidates overall feel they are well equipped to be competitive in the job market after their PhDs. However, it is not surprising that only a 23% of respondents think they could find a job in a different department within KAU, since the specialty of a PhD usually prevents a student to get a job in a different discipline.

“I am open for everything!”

When it comes to their personal preferences, a majority of respondents feel positively about continuing their professional employment within a higher education program at Karlstad University (62%), or at another institution in Sweden (52%), and many also like the idea of working at another institution abroad (45%). However, only 22% would like to transition to other types of education (i.e., non-university). A further 45% of respondents would find it interesting to work in other areas of the public sector (not connected to education), and 41% would consider working in the private sector as a good option.

SUMMARY

PhD students are not particularly worried about their employment after they have completed their research education. They are quite confident that they will either be able to secure a job in academia after completing their PhDs, either at KAU or in another university. This is possibly the reason that more than half of respondents have not discussed career planning options with their supervisors. However, we believe that regardless of degree of confidence shown by our respondents, supervisors should take a more active role to mentor PhD students on career planning, as well as other future options that might be available after graduation.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Karlstad University has a formalised introduction to the workplace for all new employees. The same introduction is given to all regardless of employment type. In the survey we asked if respondents had been given a formalised introduction to start their PhD studies and only 33% reported having participated in the introduction seminar. Interestingly, 33% answered that they had received an informal introduction to the university and 33% that they had been given no an introduction at all.

The inconsistent introductory process for new PhD students at KAU might be the reason for the varying views on the Individual Study Plan (ISP). When asked about the importance of the ISP, only 18% answered that it was very important; 37% thought it was fairly important; and 26% thought it was of no importance at all. Some of the introductory issues might be mitigated by the fact that the majority (38%) of respondents belonged to a research school and hence are in contact with other PhDs who can offer information informally. However, about 27% of respondents did not belong to any research school at all and did not have any opportunity to do so. We can expect some degree of isolation that, given the lack of formal introduction, could lead to future problems for PhD students.

PHYSICAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

Overall, the respondents were quite satisfied with their physical work environment. A large majority of 80% were either somewhat or very satisfied with the security of the premises while working outside of the regular office hours. Those who considered equipment (e.g. laboratory equipment) safety to be relevant to their working situation were satisfied with the equipment's safety (98%). Male respondents (81%) were more likely to consider equipment safety issues to be relevant compared to 50% of the female respondents.

The majority of respondents (84%) were either somewhat or very satisfied with their physical working environment. This is a major increase in satisfaction compared with the 2012 survey when approximately 60% of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their work environment. However, there are still some individual comments that need to be noted. Some respondents were dissatisfied with the quality of office equipment, such as monitors and other computer peripherals. Also, a number of students were unhappy with having to teach in classrooms far away from their offices – especially when specific teaching equipment was needed.

Doctoral candidates often have to share an office room with fellow PhDs. While some like sharing a room, others are less happy about it. It is often seen as an advantage in order to get help from more experienced colleagues and to socialise - especially at the start of one's employment. However, having to share an office can also be seen a burden because respondents feel they can get distracted more easily and lose focus.

PSYCHOSOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The psychosocial work environment is usually addressed across the university through the LMU survey and it is an important aspect of providing a good work environment for PhD students. The respondents were generally (90%) satisfied with their PhD student colleagues. Fewer respondents were satisfied with the general work environment in their departments, but a satisfaction rate of 76% can still be considered as positive. One case that stands out regarding the psychosocial environment is a female respondent who reported to have experienced sexual harassment at the workplace. This PhD candidate indicated she had experienced sexual comments and inappropriate jokes, twice from fellow PhD colleagues, as well as colleagues in managing positions in her department. 88% were "satisfied or very satisfied" with the way in which their departments showed understanding for personal circumstances such as parental leave, sick leave, or care for sick children. Similar findings were obtained in the 2012 survey when 90% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the same issue.

However, it is worrying that a relatively large proportion of respondents (24%) reported high levels of stress provoked by demands from external actors (see Figure 9).

WORKLOAD

When it comes to internal factors, 22% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the balance between their research and teaching workload. Furthermore, female respondents tended to rate their satisfaction approximately half a point lower than male respondents (on a four point scale). Three individual respondents were very dissatisfied with their research workload and all three of them were female PhD candidates.

In general, a majority of the respondents (52%) agree that there is an expectation or even pressure to work overtime (see Figure 10).

"In the context of PhD studies, I don't fully grasp the concept of 'working overtime'. For me this is more a lifestyle, than an 8-16 kind of a job. Hence, I work a lot, but that is mainly my own choice."

Based on the commentaries provided by the respondents, some respondents voiced that overtime spent on research is not problematic. One respondent puts it, PhD candidacy is not an "8-16 kind of a job". However there were some concerns that teaching could be the most problematic issue as regards overtime work. One free-text response complained that an insufficient allotment of teaching hours results in "bad courses and bad teaching".

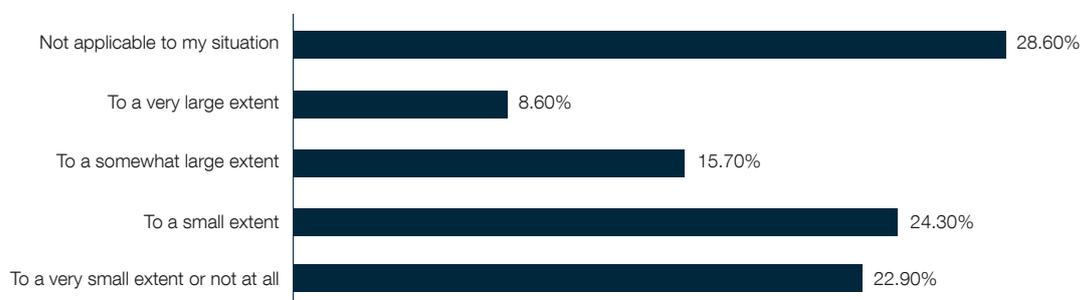


Figure 9 – Levels of stress experienced by the respondents

“A lot of people around me seem to expect me to work overtime, but this expectation is always implicit. This is very problematic, particularly in view of the fact that the time allotted for teaching is entirely insufficient. So what happens is that I feel an implied expectation to use either my research time or my free time to make up for that. And I refuse to do that. So in the end, this situation results in bad courses and bad teaching on my part. I give lectures without being prepared and without reading the course literature and I know other people who do the same. This is catastrophic.”

APPRAISAL INTERVIEWS

Appraisal interviews are a chance for PhDs to voice and address any concerns about their employment situation. According to the responses, the appraisal interviews unfortunately are handled differently from department to department. Instead of an annual meeting between a PhD student and the head of the department, some only ever had one interview in five years; others had a group meeting or small frequent talks over coffee while approximately 20% of the respondents were not given the opportunity to discuss their employment situation with their heads of department (or corresponding personnel within their department).

Further, there seems to be a lack of information about appraisal interviews within certain departments as some respondents thought that these discussions were

pointless. In order to improve PhD candidates' overall working environment, further investigation in why some PhD candidates were not offered the discussion, and in what way these discussion can be more beneficial to PhD candidates are needed. One reason for lack of interest in appraisal interviews might be the fact that PhD students follow a salary collectively negotiated by the unions. This means that many PhD students may not perceive any urgent reason to meet regularly with their head of department.

SUMMARY

How new PhD students get introduced to KAU as a workplace varies between formal introductions, informal introductions, and no introduction at all. This leads, among other things, to some confusion about the value of the ISP. Teaching is the biggest concern when it comes to workload among respondents, and there are divergent responses about the frequency and perceived usefulness of appraisal talks across KAU. In terms of physical workspace, the GSA recommends that PhD students should have the same entitlements as other employees when it comes to being able to choose whether to share an office or have an office of one's own. There was one instance of reported sexual harassment, and needless to say it is the GSA's opinion that there should be a zero tolerance for sexual harassment at KAU. In general, however, PhD students at KAU are satisfied with their work environment.

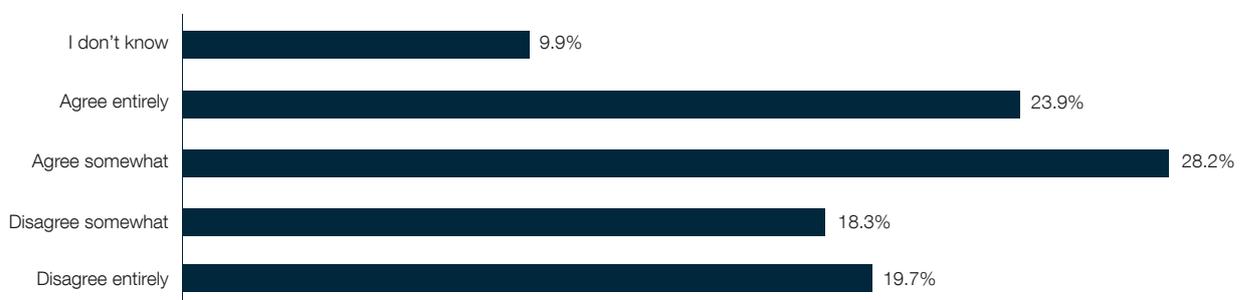


Figure 10 – Respondent perception of being expected to work overtime

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The GSA Graduate Student Survey 2015 aimed to capture KAU PhD candidates' perception and attitudes towards Karlstad University as an employer, and their degree of satisfaction with their research education. The results of the survey paint a largely positive picture when it comes to most of the topics addressed. In several regards, there is also a positive trend in comparison to the results of the 2012 survey. Overall, we can conclude that the general response is of moderate satisfaction among KAU PhD candidates regarding both their research education and their experience of the university as their employer. There is of course plenty of space of improvement in several areas, and hopefully KAU will continue to work to increase the quality of its research education and to improve working conditions for its PhD candidates.

At the GSA we want to put forward four major recommendations that should help improve the way in which PhD candidates perceive their work and studies at the university. First and foremost we consider the role of the supervisors as mentors to be crucial when it comes to preparing a research student for becoming a capable researcher beyond the scope of the PhD project. Therefore, we believe that supervisors should be encouraged to take a mentoring role in relation to their students and to be more involved in the career planning of PhD candidates with a view to their future prospects.

Second, the opportunity to be involved in teaching and other departmental duties is generally understood as a very positive addition to the PhD candidates' working situation. We encourage KAU's institutions and departments to try to secure higher participation of our students in various activities beyond research education. This does not only broaden their working experience in academic life, but also provides a better integration of the students with their colleagues.

Third, a substantial component of research education is dedicated to PhD coursework. Most respondents identify a lack of diversity of courses available at KAU and feel forced to find courses at different institutions. While attending courses outside of our university is an enriching experience, we would like to suggest an assessment of the current situation of research education offered at KAU to better meet the needs and demands of our students. We also would like to suggest crafting a set of guidelines to make course work requirements more unified across the different institutions of the university.

Finally, the so-called industry PhD candidates evidently tend to have a less positive experience throughout their research education. While we value the links between the university and the private sector, we feel that PhD positions resulting from partnerships between KAU and third parties should be better monitored and supported by the university.

