

EGSH PhD satisfaction

Annual survey 2021-2022

Carried out by the EGSH PhD Council

September 2022

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Preface

The PhD Council of the Erasmus Graduate School for the Social Sciences and Humanities (EGSH) is an independent platform by and for PhDs and is part of the EGSH. The council was founded on the premise that the opinions, questions, issues and thoughts of each of its members merit being heard and discussed. To this end, each participating department in the EGSH has a seat on the council, represented by at least one PhD candidate.

With this report, the PhD Council presents the findings of the 2021–2022 PhD satisfaction survey. The objective of the survey is threefold. Firstly, the survey aims to gather feedback from PhD candidates on the available PhD services, such as the EGSH courses, mental health support, and the soft-landing programme. Secondly, the survey prompts respondents to evaluate required procedures and products of their PhD trajectory such as the Training and Supervision Plan (TSP) and Hora Finita. And finally, the survey collects input about the issues that should be addressed by the EGSH PhD Council during the next academic year.

We would like to thank all PhD candidates who participated in the survey. We will use your suggestions and opinions to guide our work in the academic year of 2022-2023.

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1 General information

1.1 Sample description

The ESGH offers doctoral courses and workshops that are tailored to different academic disciplines and different stages within the PhD trajectory. Its aims are: 1) to enhance skills and knowledge of methodology and philosophy of science; 2) to strengthen multidisciplinary thinking and collaboration; 3) to develop professional skills.

We distributed the survey widely to all schools affiliated with the ESGH. Our sample consisted of 74 respondents, at diverse stages in their PhD. The affiliation of the respondents in our sample is described in Figure 1. While we did achieve a broad range of responses throughout the member schools, we are unable to verify the representativeness of our sample since the ESGH does not hold records of how many PhD researchers are associated with it.

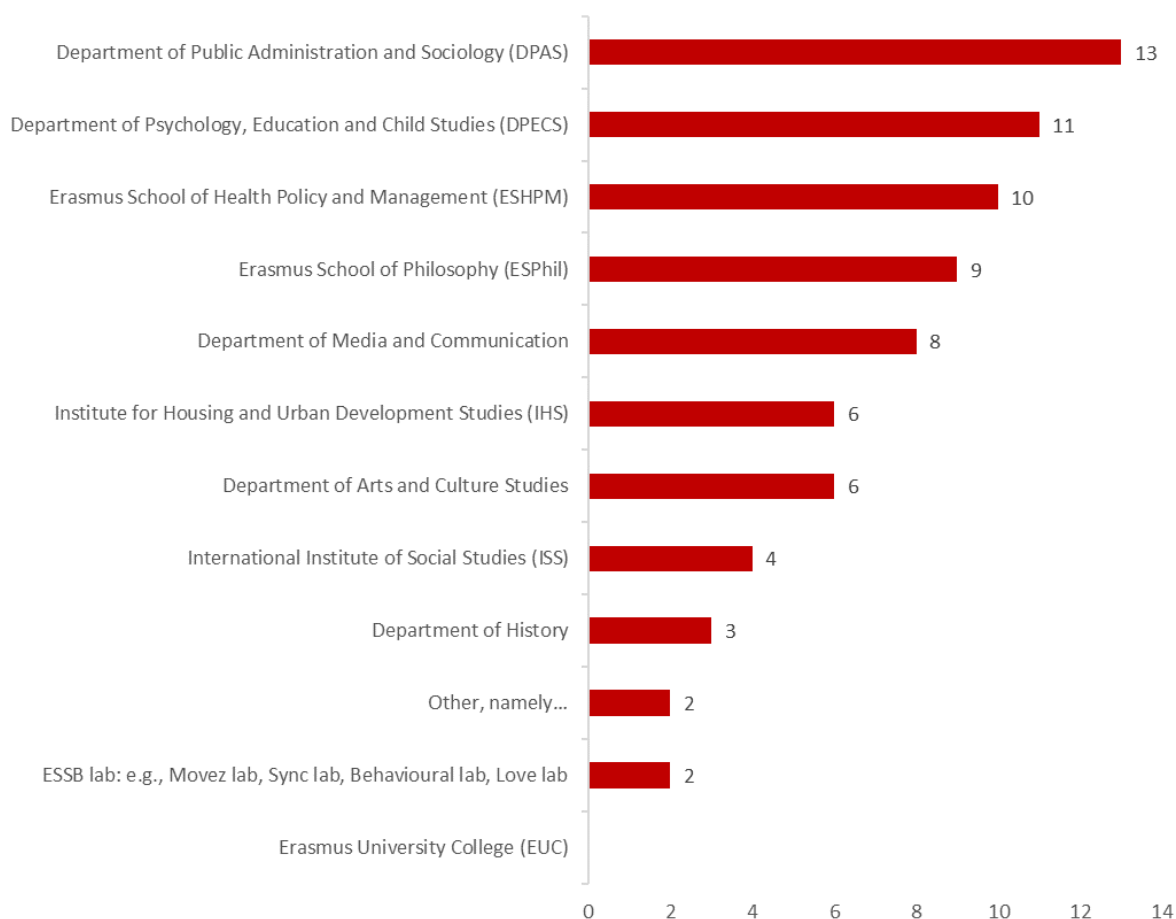


Figure 1. Affiliation of survey participants (N=73). Bars indicate number of respondents.

We had a varied sample when it comes to stages of PhD. Most respondents had started their PhD in 2019 (22%), followed by 2021 (20%), 2020 (19%) and 2018 (18%). A smaller number of participants had started their PhD in 2017 (11%) or 2022 (8%). One respondent had started their PhD in 2010 or earlier. Regarding the gender composition of our sample, 15% of our respondents (N=11) identified as male, 82% identified as female (n=61), one identified as other and another one did not provide any information on their gender. Regarding the nationality distribution of our sample, 62% of respondents (N=46) indicated they were Dutch, while 36% indicated they were international (N=27) and one did not provide any information.

PhD candidates that are funded by the university may have different needs compared to external PhD candidates, therefore we asked respondents about their source of funding. From our entire sample, 66% of respondents (N=49) were employed as PhDs by the University, 22% (N=16) were externally funded or funded through a mixed arrangement, 9% (N=7) were self-funded, and 3% (N=2) were funded through other arrangements.

1.2 EGSB PhD Council

In an attempt to better serve the interests of the PhD researchers affiliated with our graduate school, we asked the survey participants if they were familiar with our PhD council before receiving the request to fill in the survey. Most respondents (87%, N=60) were already familiar with the EGSB PhD Council, while 13% (N=9) were not.

We also asked participants to indicate what topics the PhD Council should attempt to address in the upcoming academic year. We provided a list of our already pre-determined focus areas, namely mental health and wellbeing, evaluation of EGSB courses, improvement of the soft-landing programme. We invited participants to comment on these four pre-determined focus areas and suggest other focus areas that they think we should prioritise. Figure 2 shows a word cloud representing all themes mentioned.



Figure 2. Suggestions for focus areas for the upcoming academic year. The size of each word or phrase represents the frequency in which it was mentioned by participants.

2 Evaluation of university services

We asked respondents what their thoughts were about certain services offered by the University for PhD researchers. They were asked to evaluate, on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), how much they agreed with the statement "I find (University Service) useful" for each university service. They were offered the opportunity to comment on their choice after filling in the scale. Their scores and comments are summarized below for each university service.

2.1 Training and Supervision Plan (TSP)

Most respondents (39%) indicated they agreed with the statement that the Training and Supervision plan (TSP) is useful, while 17% disagreed and another 17% were neutral. Some respondents commented on the lack of guidance in planning and filling in the document, mentioning that they are often not sure how it connects with their planned work or training trajectory. According to our respondents, supervisors are likewise not sure how or not willing to use the TSP to guide their relationship with the PhD researcher. Overall, the responses highlighted a need to revisit and clarify the role of the TSP in the PhD trajectory and the supervisory relationship.

Relatedly, participants reported understanding the completion of the TSP as a mostly bureaucratic exercise, which added administrative burden but little benefit for their PhD trajectory. Many felt like it was not clear what they were supposed to write in the TSP or how it should be used to guide their training. Some participants mentioned that their supervisors were not familiar with the purpose or format of the TSP and offered little guidance. They also commented on the lack of external checks of the TSP content, which made it less useful in their PhD trajectories. Finally, some remarked on the lack of flexibility of the TSP and mentioned that as they advanced in their PhD, the TSP became less relevant as it was not updated through the trajectory.

2.2 Hora Finita

Participants mostly indicated that they felt neutral (36%) towards the statement that they found Hora Finita useful. Other respondents either disagreed (22%) or completely disagreed (11%) with such a statement. Contrastingly, 14% of participants agreed with the statement. One respondent (1%) completely agreed. Interestingly, three respondents (4%) were not at all familiar with Hora Finita.

Among the suggestions and comments made by participants regarding Hora Finita, user-friendliness was a frequent complaint. It was pointed out that the platform is not easy to use or log into. Moreover, participants mentioned it is not very useful during the first few years of the PhD. Respondents also commented on the lack of integration of Hora Finita with the other reporting and reviewing mechanisms that are part of the PhD trajectory.

2.3 EGSB PhD Handbook

Most respondents agreed (41%) or completely agreed (15%) with the statement that the EGSB PhD handbook is useful, while only two respondents (3%) did not agree with such a statement and 17% felt neutral. Notably, 12% of participants were not familiar with the handbook.

The most frequent themes in the comments made by respondents were the availability and user-friendliness of the handbook. Some participants mentioned they had not received it or received it very late in their PhD trajectory, which limited how useful the handbook had been for them. Other respondents mentioned that the handbook lacks information that is specific to each faculty or department, which is also important for new PhD researchers to know. Other comments suggested that the information be kept up to date and that it be presented in a more interactive format, such as an online platform with videos and other dynamic content instead of a PDF booklet.

2.4 Support Services

Several services, personnel and workshops are available for PhD candidates at the EUR to deal with personal or professional issues. Respondents' awareness of the existence of services and their usage of them are summarized in Figure 3. Participants indicated that they mostly use the following services: the ethics review committee (54%), the data steward (49%), and the PhD psychologist (32%). As for the familiarity with these support services, it is concerning to see many external PhDs have not heard of these services or reported confusion on whether they are entitled to use these services.

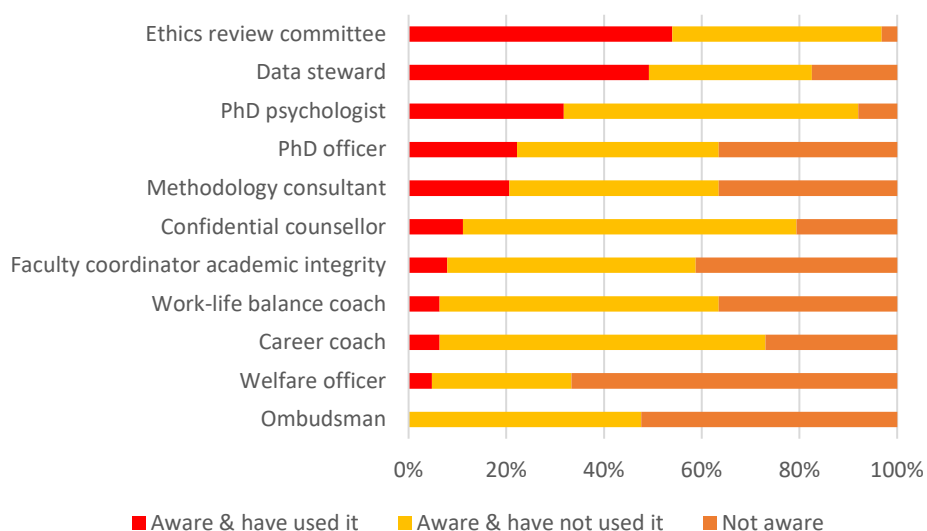


Figure 3. The familiarities towards different services answered by respondents.

3 Graduate School courses

We asked respondents what their thoughts were about courses offered by the Graduate School. They were asked about their attendance and about their satisfaction with the courses, evaluated on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) regarding how much they agreed with the statement "Overall, I am satisfied with (aspect) of the courses". They were offered the opportunity to comment on their choice after filling in the scale. Their scores and comments are summarized below.

3.1 Course attendance

67% of the survey respondents (N=46) reported that they have attended course(s) offered by the EGSH in the academic year of 2021-2022. Over half of these respondents attended 1 to 3 courses, while 1 respondent reported attending 6 courses and 2 respondents reported attending 7 courses. 33% respondents (N=22) answered that they did not attend any course in the academic year 2021-2022.

They were asked about their reason for not participating in the course programme. The most commonly reported explanations are: 1) not having enough time (N=14); 2) already obtained enough credits for finishing a PhD (N=7); 3) the course was full (N=5), or the available timeslots conflicted with other obligations (N=5). Some respondents answered that the EGSH did not offer any course of his/her interest or followed courses/ workshops elsewhere. No financial barriers to participation in the course programme were mentioned, and all respondents are familiar with the course programme of the EGSH. These results are in line with the findings from last year's survey.

3.2 Course satisfaction

Most respondents were overall satisfied with the course offered by the EGSH. To be specific, in terms of the level of difficulty of the PhD courses, 67% of the respondents (N=40) expressed their satisfaction, while 9 respondents reported 'neutral' and 6 respondents expressed their disagreement. Similarly, a majority of respondents expressed their satisfaction with the applicability of the courses (60%, N=36), the communication during and surrounding the courses (59%, N=35), the timing of the courses (50%, N=29), and the study load of the courses (67%, N=40). In particular, respondents were highly satisfied with the course instructor(s), and no respondent expressed any dissatisfaction in this regard. Overall, respondents found the courses interesting (68%, N=41). In terms of the absence policy or cancellation policy of the PhD courses, most respondents reported a neutral attitude, while external PhDs shows a strong opinion on disagreeing with these policies.

However, when it comes to the availability of the PhD courses, 46% of the respondents (N=27) were not satisfied and 17% (N=10) reported 'neutral'. In particular, external PhDs were generally dissatisfied with the course availability because they normally have other obligations that are in conflicts with the time when the courses are offered (weekdays). When it comes to specific feedback to this question, one respondent pointed out that the course 'discourse analysis' was cancelled in both 2021 and 2022, without any alternative instructor to be found to offer the course. Others pointed out that courses should be offered more regularly (especially in the case of mandatory courses in some departments), because sometimes PhD candidates need to wait for up to 8-9 months in order to register for available courses, which might not be useful or relevant for PhD candidates at that stage. The fact that open enrolment takes place once a year made all of the courses fully registered rapidly, leaving no possibility for new PhD candidates started their PhD trajectory in the middle of the year. Suggestion for changing the time of enrolment for spring/summer courses is also mentioned.

We asked respondents to reflect on which course they benefited the most from, and the result for the most popular courses are shown in the table below. What stands out the most is the course 'Professionalism and integrity in research' (N=12), which is a mandatory course for most PhD candidates. The second popular course (N=11) is 'Qualitative coding with ATLAS.ti' and the third popular course (N=8) is 'English academic writing for PhD candidates', which has been in demand for years. Respondents reported difficulty to register for this particular course. As we can see from the table, fundamental research training, particularly related to academic skills and data analysis, seems to be more popular among PhD candidates.

Table 1. The courses ordered by benefit answered by respondents.

| Which course did you benefit the most from? | N |
|--|----|
| Professionalism and integrity in research | 12 |
| Qualitative coding with ATLAS.ti | 11 |
| English academic writing for PhD candidates | 8 |
| Qualitative data analysis (QDA) with grounded theory | 7 |
| Self-presentation: focus, structure, interaction and visualisation | 6 |
| How to get your article published | 5 |
| Mixed method research: How to combine diverse quantitative and qualitative methods | 5 |
| Visual exploration of scientific literature with VOSviewer | 5 |
| Brush up your research design | 4 |
| Digital research methods for textual data | 4 |
| Doing the (systematic) literature review | 4 |
| Alumni dialogue | 4 |
| Q-methodology | 4 |
| The focus group method | 4 |

The new courses offered in the academic year 2021-2022 are: 'Ethnography', 'MATLAB data skills & tools for the Social Sciences', and 'Open science framework: A hands-on tutorial'. EGSH also offer new workshops in informal settings, including: 'Challenges for Supervisors, Conversations with the Dean' and the 'PhD Alumni Dialogue Series'. These courses all received good feedback from the respondents, especially the Alumni Dialogue Series is listed among the most popular course.

3.3 Online courses

Facing the uncertainty caused by covid-19, most of the PhD courses were provided as online courses in the academic year 2021-2022, with an exception for some courses that were offered an offline option. In this survey, we asked respondents about their experience with these online courses. 61 respondents answered this question, while 13 of them did not participate in any online course (see graph below). Among those who attended the online course, most of them were satisfied (N=24) or very satisfied (N=6); only 6 respondents expressed dissatisfaction.

Regarding the willingness of following courses online or offline for the next academic year, almost half of the respondents answered with "I'd prefer following courses predominantly offline" (N=30); while others prefer hybrid courses (N=14) or following online courses (N=10) (see figure 4). We would suggest the EGSB increase the options of attending courses in an offline setting but also keep some courses online for the next academic year. One respondent mentioned that for a 1-day course, online versions are more sufficient than in-person classes; but with in-depth courses, in-person classes work better. Another respondent expressed his/her opinion, as an external PhD candidate, that some courses should be offered on Friday nights or weekends.

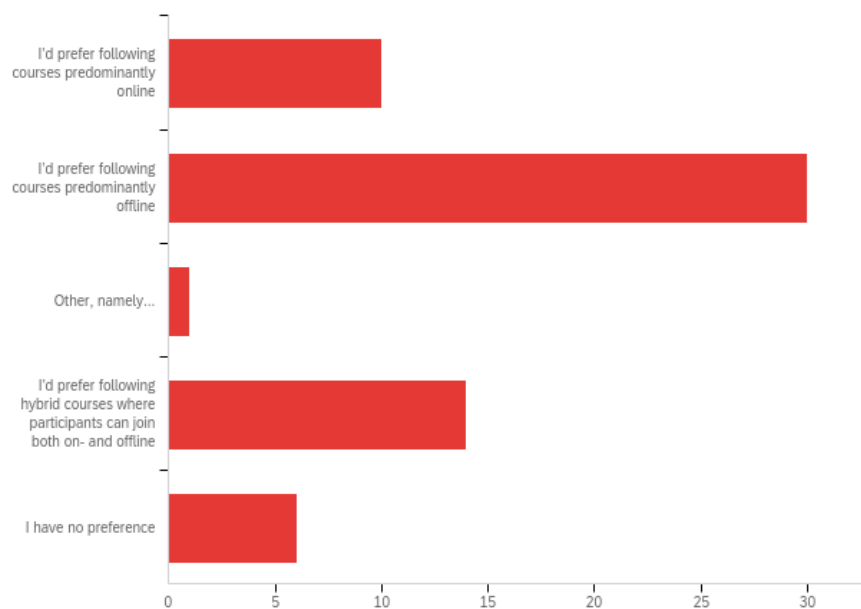


Figure 4. The preference of online or offline education for next academic year answered by respondents.

4 Mental health and wellbeing

We asked respondents what their thoughts were about PhD mental health and wellbeing, and causes of distress. They were offered the opportunity to comment on their experiences regarding mental health and wellbeing, and they did so extensively. Their scores and comments are summarized below.

4.1 Causes of mental distress

Mental health and wellbeing continue to be one of the more important topics among PhD candidates as 61% of the 66 respondents reported having experienced significant distress or other mental health issues as a direct result of their work as a PhD. These findings are consistent with last year's PhD survey where 57% of the 34 respondents reported experiencing mental health issues. The most reported reason for mental distress by the respondents is the experience of loneliness/ isolation, followed closely by the experience of insecurity about your capabilities. Compared with last year's report, this means an increase in the number of respondents who experience loneliness (see figure 5).

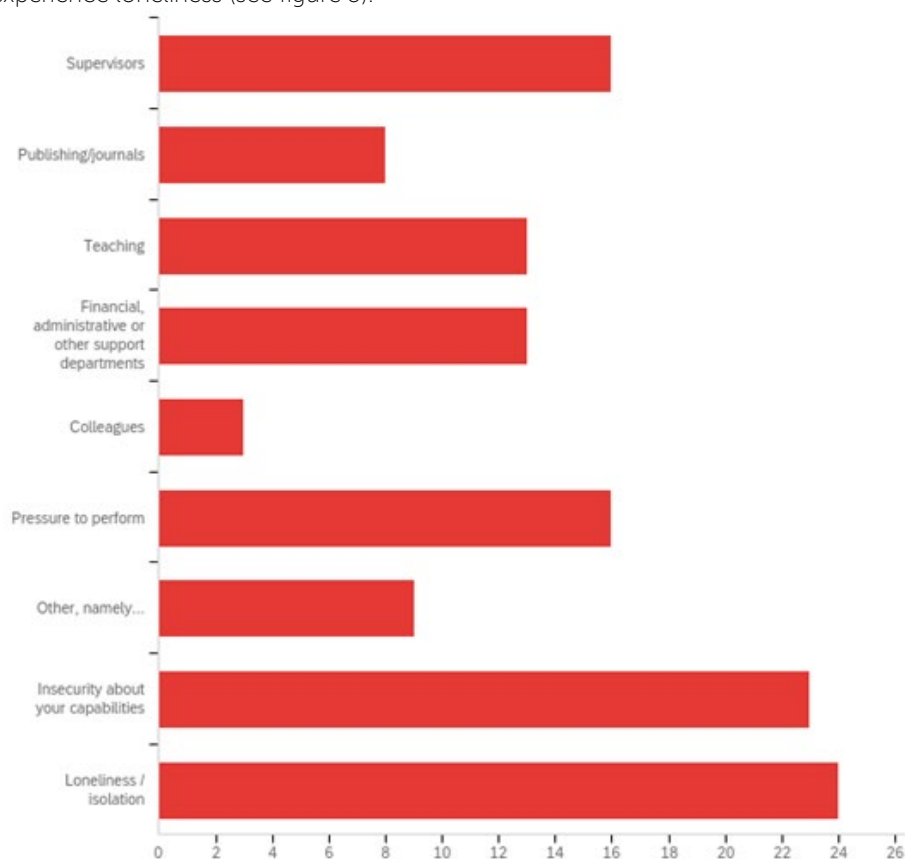


Figure 5. The different aspects that cause stress at work were answered by respondents.

When asked to elaborate on the distress or mental health issues they have experienced, many pointed to the COVID-19 lockdowns as a factor that exacerbates mental health issues, either due to an increase in workload, or the feeling of isolation and lack of support by the supervisors and/or the faculty or department they work in. In general, respondents reported distress and mental health issue due to high workload. In particular, three respondents mentioned their supervisor as contributing to stress and mental health issue, by either not providing aid in combatting loneliness as the result of the pandemic, creating a toxic workflow, or harassing the PhD candidate.

In addition, 67% of the respondents noted they do not think the EUR is doing enough to prevent or minimize mental health issues for PhD candidates. Upon being asked what they would like to see improved, many suggestions were offered. Four of these suggestions stood out due to the number of times they were mentioned: First, it's important to build a stronger sense of community in order to prevent mental health issues from arising. As one respondent described the matter in only three words: "More human contact!". PhD candidates were not able to talk with each other about work and private life in a more informal setting.

Second, yet related to the first suggestion in its focus on prevention, respondents emphasize the need to improve daily PhD life and the supervisors' role in this. "Well, they offer a lot of services, but it would be better to treat the issue itself (work/life balance, pressure, supervisors) rather than give us psychologists". Specific factors affecting wellbeing that are discussed include administrative/bureaucratic tasks, financial insecurity, a lack of positive feedback in the workplace, teaching requirements, and shortcomings of supervisors to attain a supportive attitude and pay attention to mental health. One respondent states that "an introductory event helping PhD candidates to understand their journey and their obligations" could help to set better expectations.

Third, the respondents also perceive an important role for their peers in terms of community and support groups. They advocate increasing the opportunities to meet amongst PhD candidates to discuss these topics. "Hard to say, but I think being more open amongst ourselves would be very good so you don't feel like you're the only one - cause you probably aren't". The Shut Up-and-Write sessions, which have been spreading since the covid lockdowns, are mentioned as a best practice for functioning as a support group as well as a work environment.

Fourth and finally, several respondents mentioned they would like to see an increase in resources dealing with the consequences of mental health issues. Specifically, they advocate for increased awareness about the resources already in place and more workshops focusing on wellbeing. It should be noted that, however, the majority of respondents focused on suggestions for prevention.

5 Onboarding

Regarding the onboarding (introduction/soft-landing) of PhDs, slightly over half of the respondents (N=39) reported that it was not sufficient to be fully prepared for their work at the EUR. Only about a third of the respondents (N=25) said yes, and ten people did not answer this question. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in the academic year 2021-2022, there was no soft-landing event organized by the EGSH and the PhD Council has been speaking with the EGSH as well as EUR HR with regards to the possibilities of an onboarding program.

5.1 Information to be included

In an open question, respondents were then asked what important types of information they think should be included to give them a good start on their PhD trajectory if an onboarding program was to be designed for them. More precisely, we asked them about important information that they only learnt later and wished they had known from the start. Below we summarize the answers:

- Two of the respondents complimented the EGSH PhD handbook, and one of them stated the onboarding was better than they had experienced in other jobs. However, the majority of other respondents suggested improvement points, often in addition to the handbook. Among the answers, the Hora Finita system was mentioned remarkably often.
- One of the main underlying issues is the fragmentation of knowledge due to various possible different PhD contact persons and different rules and expectations per department. There could be an online resource platform with information for new PhDs, and this could be separate from the EGSH website and/or an improvement of the current EGSH website.

According to the answers generated from the survey, we made the table below which indicates the needs of PhD candidates in the onboarding process. As the PhD Council, we recognize that some points that are mentioned here are the responsibility of the department/faculty; however, we would like to present these points in this report to raise further awareness of the lack of support for EGSH PhD candidates.

Table 2. Needs of PhD candidates during the onboarding process.

| What kinds of support are needed? | Details |
|---|--|
| Personal practicalities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggest PhDs start finding an apartment ASAP • Survival information • Rotterdam city • Dutch culture |
| Social aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddy system • Meeting other PhDs and having social activities • Getting to know other faculties (understand what they do) • Meeting people who offer services rather than finding a textual list somewhere |
| Day-to-day information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can be expected from a PhD candidate? (the rights of PhD candidate) • Clear information on the duties of a PhD candidate • Guides and regulations that are relevant to PhD trajectory (e.g. requirements dissertation) • What is considered a normal workload |
| Doctoral education and supervision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips & Tricks to sign up for EGSB courses • The roles and tasks of supervisors • Expectation management in relation to supervision: how to communicate/exchange expectations with the supervisors about (e.g. how often to meet) |
| Teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What to expect about teaching? (Amount of teaching, and types of teaching) • Teaching preparation |
| Career information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to determine “the why” behind the PhD project and what it means for research • Tips from newly finished PhDs regarding the PhD trajectory • More information about the organizational structure and opportunities for a PhD candidate to be involved |
| Administrative procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More information about the Annual Progress Report. The information about this report is poor. • How to deal with administrative tasks (leave, conference attendance, refunds, etc) • Who is my manager versus my supervisors |
| Services: what is available and how to contact? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical supplies (tags, printing, employee card, laptop, research tools like recorders and post-it notes) • Introduction to all university services, facilities and sources that are relevant to PhD (e.g. ethics review board, ESGH, library services, PhD council) • How to find things on the eur.nl website: myeur; was portal, Osiris, canvas, hora finita, pure portal etc) • Budgets that PhDs and, more generally, EUR employees can make use of, e.g., PhD bench fee, career budget, business OV-chipkaart., and how to make use of these budgets |

6 Suggestions

Throughout the survey, we asked respondents to reflect on their experience as PhD candidates and provide suggestions from different perspectives on a voluntary basis. Hereby, we organize the collected suggestion for the ESGH according to suggestions for improving the educational experience and suggestions for building a healthy environment for PhD candidates.

6.1 Suggestions for improving the educational experience

The majority of the respondents reported positive educational experiences with the EGSH. The fundamental and basic research training provided by the EGSH is popular among PhD candidates, and they wish to increase the availability of certain courses such as 'English academic writing for PhD candidates'. Regarding their specific suggestions for new courses or workshops, here are some suggestions:

- Decolonial and feminist research practices.
- Diversity and Inclusion in research (gender, ethnicity, etc.).
- Pedagogy-related training, such as how to motivate students and deal with uncomfortable situations in the classroom.
- Philosophical methodology.
- Quantitative research methods, such as statistics, SPSS, multilevel models, etc.
- How to write research grants.

In addition, we asked respondents for their specific suggestions for improvement of their experience with online courses. Many respondents expressed their strong preference for offline courses in their answers. In regard to what can the EGSH do to improve online courses, we found some suggestions:

- Planning more breaks for online courses or reducing section length to help participants concentrate.
- Communicate details and class information more in advance.
- Fewer group exercises and more individual exercises work better for online courses.

6.2 Suggestions for building a healthy environment

The majority of the respondents seem to be familiar with the services provided by EUR and the EGSH. However, many reported the experience of loneliness and lack of support in the survey. This is an issue that we, the PhD Council, are highly concerned with. We summarised the suggestions about what the ESGH can do to help build a healthy environment for PhD candidates:

- We need a stronger sense of community in order to make the support systems more visible and prevent mental health issues from arising (for more details, see page 13).
- Increase the resources for supporting PhD candidates in their professional career development, wellbeing, and mental health issues.
- Enhance EUR and the EGSH's ability to information provision, and to better inform PhD candidates about their duties, as well as their rights, specifically attending to their relationships with supervisors, and issues of teaching obligations and/or administrative tasks (for more details, see page 14-15).

Conclusion

We, the EGSH PhD council, are very grateful for the abundance of feedback that we received in this survey, and we will certainly take all the input on board when making our plans and priorities for the upcoming academic year.

We believe that our priorities lie in three main areas. Firstly, mental health and PhD wellbeing remain the most important topic which the survey respondents have asked us to prioritize next week. This is an issue that has been on the agenda for the PhD council since the establishment of the mental health committee. We will continue to address this topic by helping to increase the visibility of existing mental health-related support services, and pushing for the EGSH's further acknowledgement of the importance of building a healthy and inclusive environment for PhD candidates.

Secondly, receiving sufficient and quality doctoral education, training, and career-oriented guidance has been the main focus of survey respondents. We want to communicate PhD candidates' need for new courses and training, and their demand for academic career-oriented support. In addition, we wish to push for expanding the impact of the EGSH training for PhD supervisors, in order to help PhD supervisors understand their PhD candidates' needs and struggles.

Lastly, we continue to keep pushing for setting up a thorough and well-designed soft-landing/onboarding program for new PhD candidates, and wish to be engaged in the design process. By doing so, we aim to provide clearer explanations about obligatory procedures such as the TSP, Hora Finita, and other requirements, and to familiarize new PhD candidates with the possible supporting services provided by EUR and the EGSH. We believe such program will provide a stronger sense of community to PhD candidates.

Besides these three priorities, we will expand and build on our tasks and goals throughout the year in response to the PhD candidates' need and demand. We will also continue to evaluate the EGSH course program and supporting services with our annual survey and share the feedback from our PhD candidates with the EGSH. Hopefully together we can build a better environment for all PhD candidates.