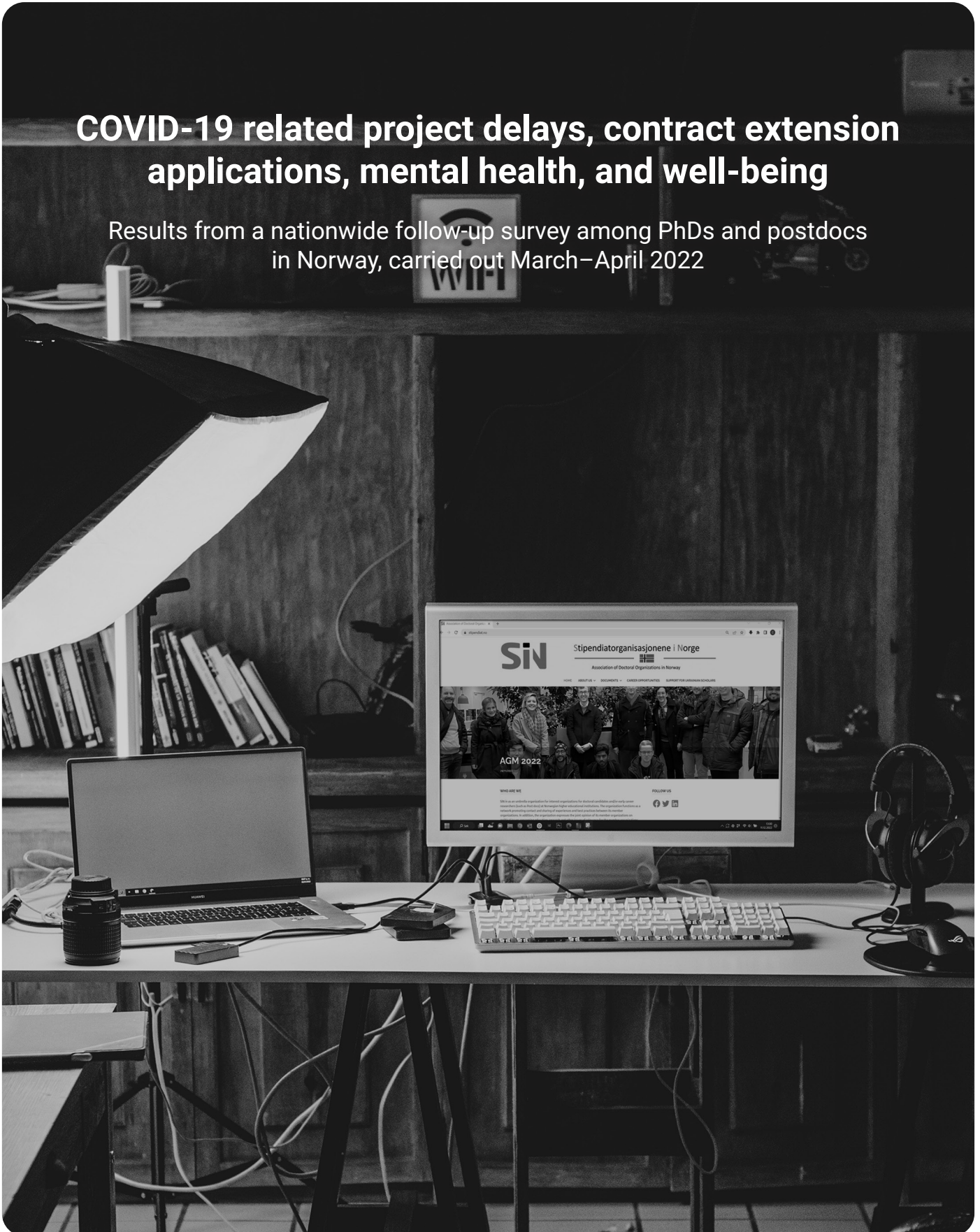


SiN The Association of Doctoral Organisations in Norway

COVID-19 related project delays, contract extension applications, mental health, and well-being

Results from a nationwide follow-up survey among PhDs and postdocs in Norway, carried out March–April 2022



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1 INTRODUCTION

SiN conducted the first survey on the effect of the pandemic on PhDs and postdocs in Norway in fall 2020¹. Two years later (April 2022), this follow-up survey aimed to give us updated knowledge about the effects of the pandemic for PhD fellows and post docs working at Norwegian research and educational institutions. The survey was disseminated from 15 March 2022 to 30 April 2022 through our network of local member organizations and social media.

1.1. Data and methods

1.1.1. Data collection

The data on which this report is based was obtained using an electronic survey sent to PhD research fellows and postdocs employed at Norwegian universities and university colleges. The survey was disseminated to all local SiN member organisations, which have forwarded it to their members at their registered email addresses. The survey was also promoted through SiNs' social media channels.

In total, 1,260 people responded to the survey. Not everyone answered all the questions, and not everyone completed the entire survey. 1,028 did complete the survey, which corresponds to 81.59% of the sample. The number of respondents therefore varies somewhat between the various questions.

The response rate in this survey could have been better but is still considered acceptable. The number of respondents in this survey represents only a small part of PhD students and postdoctoral fellows at Norwegian research and educational institutions. The possibilities for generalizing this report's findings to apply to the entire current population of research fellows/post-docs are therefore limited, although the report can give us good indications of tendencies in the population as such.

The survey was sent out to the local organizations in mid-March 2022, followed by two reminders in April.

1.1.2. Strengths and weaknesses

SiN represents approximately 70% of all PhD research fellows and postdocs working in Norway, a proportion that is constantly decreasing. This is mainly due to an increasing number of PhD fellows and postdocs working outside universities and university colleges. We can assume that PhD research fellows and postdocs who are not employed at a university or a university college may have different experiences and challenges than those who are. This is not captured by the data, and thus represents a weakness of the survey.

Furthermore, the percentage of those who have responded to this survey in relation to the entire population of PhD fellows and postdocs represented by SiN is relatively low, at around 20%. This can lead to a selection bias where, for example, those with greater challenges than the average may also be more inclined to answer. This is something that must be considered when interpreting the results.

This is a quantitative survey, providing us a broad insight into the challenges PhDs and postdocs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the period after it. This represents a strength of the survey and enables us to see trends and developments across all units. At the same time, the survey has several qualitative features in the form of open-ended questions, which give respondents the opportunity to answer particularly relevant issues in more detail. Overall, this gives us a good basis for assessing the experiences and challenges of PhD fellows and postdoctoral fellows in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

¹ [Delayed PhDs are experiencing lack of possibilities for compensation from institutions during COVID-19 – Association of Doctoral Organizations in Norway \(stipendiat.no\)](https://www.stipendiat.no/en/delayed-phds-are-experiencing-lack-of-possibilities-for-compensation-from-institutions-during-covid-19)

2 HIGHLIGHTS

- A total of 1260 responses were collected of which 1028 were completed and 234 were partially completed. PhD student responses represented the higher proportion of the total with 86% (1085), postdocs 11% (143), and other positions represented 2% (32).
- The highest number of responses corresponded to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) with 33%, followed by UiT with 11%, and 19 % for UiB (figure 1).
- The majority (71%) of respondents have reported delays in their projects due to COVID-19. Of the respondents that suffered delays, reported either delays before the first survey 68% (August 2020) or after 79%.
- A high number of respondents (60%) reported the possibility to apply for extensions in their institutions, 14% reported that their institutions did not offer extensions, and 26% have no information regarding extensions. When extensions were offered, 44% of the respondents reported that these were applicable before August 2020, while 57% were applicable after August 2020, and 28% of the respondents reported that the applications were open during this survey (April 2022).
- Due to the long delays, most of the respondents have applied for extensions (73%), but 27% have not applied.
- Most respondents that have applied for extensions have got 2 month extensions. Yet, there is great variation in the length of the extensions, from one week and up to 10 months.
- Sick leave related to COVID-19 was the case for 35% of the respondents.
- A total of 679 respondents are non-Norwegian residents, from which 163 (24%) have experienced difficulties in issuing VISA/residence permits in connection with COVID-19
- Regarding workspace, the great majority of respondents have shared offices. Nevertheless, there were 17 respondents (2%) that mentioned not having a desk at work.
- During the pandemic, 75% of the respondents did not get help to set up an appropriate home office workspace.
- Physical discomfort such as neck or back pain was an increasing discomfort during the home office for more than half of the respondents (56%).
- Mental health stroke many people during the pandemic, and feelings of loneliness/isolation increased quite a lot or to a high degree for 45% of the respondents. Similarly, feeling of stress and anxiety were reported by 54% of the respondents, and feelings of sadness and depression were reported by 40% and 30% of the respondents respectively. 18% of the respondents reported an increase in other mental health issues. As a result, 21% (229) of the respondents have sought professional help.
- Among the participants who wrote comments regarding the general situation along the pandemic reflect the efforts that institutions, departments, and supervisors did during the pandemic to ameliorate the situation of PhDs students. However, there are many PhD students that shared their concerns regarding the time lost, the effect on their final dissertation, and their future careers.
- There are many respondents who expressed their discontent with the way extensions have been assigned. Thus, the uncertainty about whether they will finish on time is an additional worry to the already challenging situation for many PhDs.

3 RESULTS

3.1. Background information of the respondents

Q1. Which temporary research position do you hold? (n=1260)

A total of 1260 responses were collected from which 1028 were completed, and 234 were partially completed. Ph.D. student responses represented the higher proportion of the total with 86% (1085), Postdocs 11% (143), and other positions represented 2% (32).

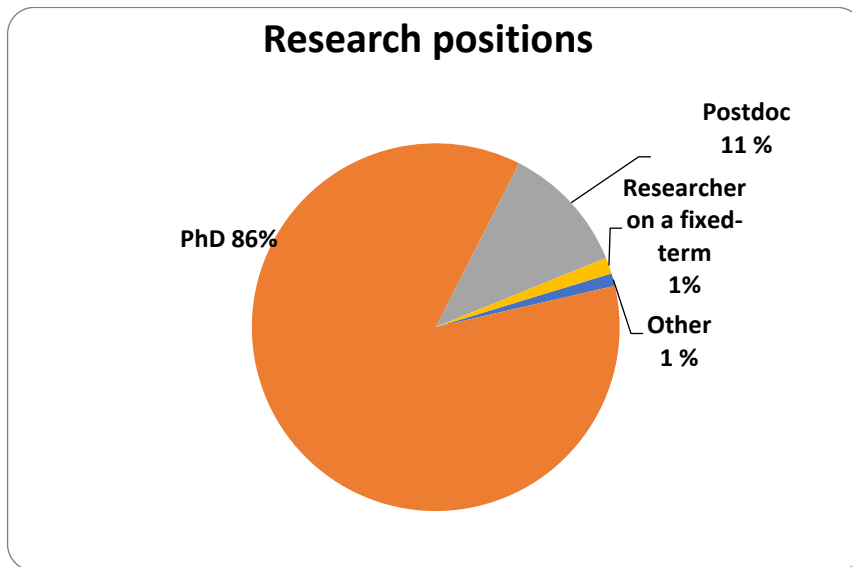


Fig. 1 Research positions

Q2. Which education/research institution are you affiliated with? (N=1260)

We collected responses from ten institutions, in seven institutions the number of responses was at least 50.

Table 1. Respondents' affiliation

INSTITUTION	ABBREVIATION	N=
Norwegian University of Science and Technology	NTNU	413
University of Bergen	UiB	240
The Arctic University of Norway	UiT	144
Oslo Metropolitan University	OsloMet	99
University of Stavanger	UiS	89
Norwegian University of Life Sciences	NMBU	76
University of Agder	UiA	73
University of Oslo	UiO	64
Norwegian School of Economics	NHH	26
Other	-	22
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences	NIH	11
Prefer not to say	-	3
Total	-	1260

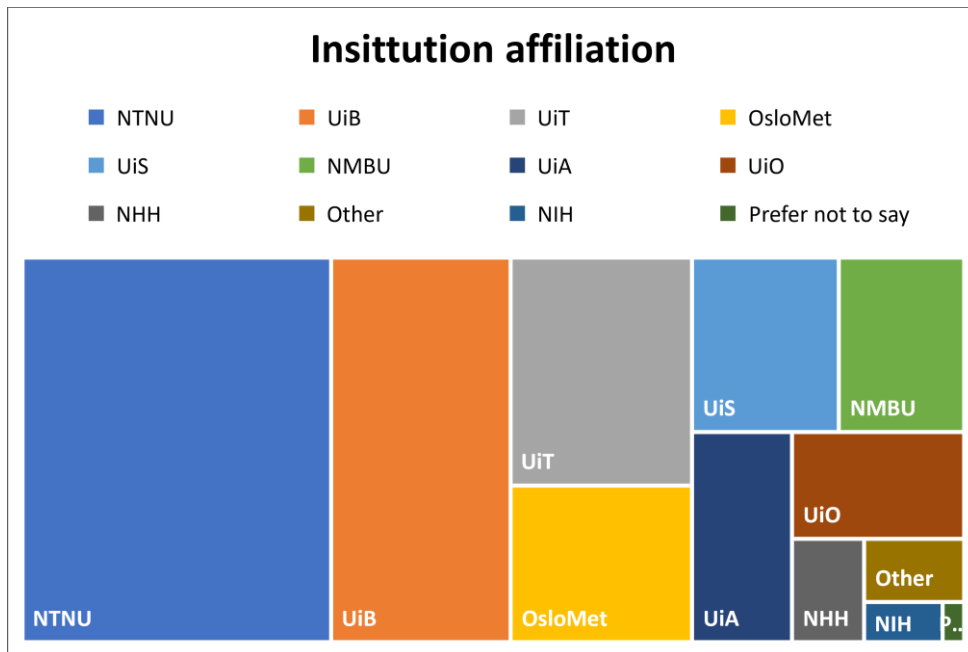


Fig. 2 Institution affiliation

3.2 Project delays due to COVID-19

Q3. Did you suffer delays in your research due to COVID-19?

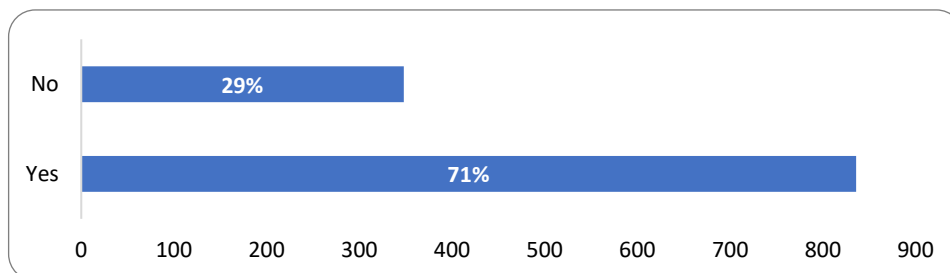


Fig. 3 Delays due to COVID-19

Q4. When were you delayed?

After two years of the beginning of the pandemic 836 of 1184 (71%) respondents suffered delays in their projects. Respondents were affected during the first and second waves of the pandemic by 68% (566) and 79% (660) respectively.

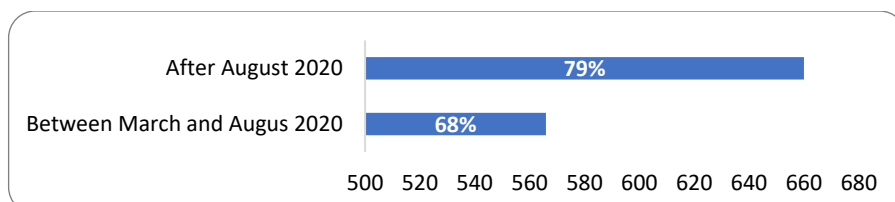


Fig. 4 Time of delay

3.3. Information about COVID-19 related contract extensions

Q5. Has your institution offered any possibility to apply for an extension regarding COVID19?

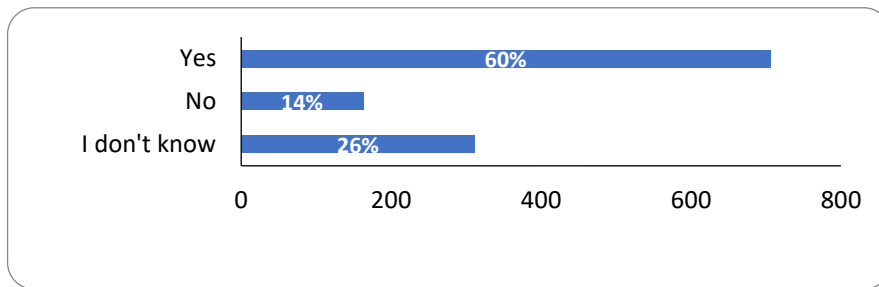


Fig. 5 Information about extension

Q6. If yes, when were the extensions applicable?

The mean of extensions reported by the respondents was 2 months. Yet, there are cases of extensions of one week to 10 months of extension.

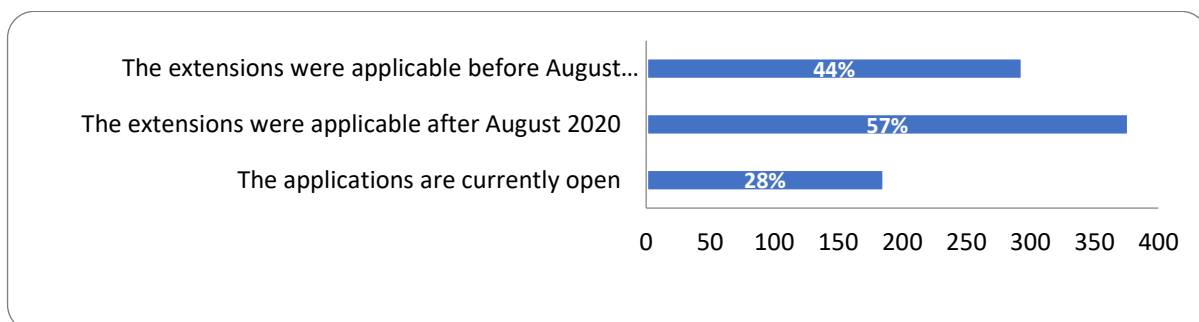


Fig. 6 Extension

Comments about delays and extension policies

The comments from our respondents reflect the differences in procedures, policies, eligibility criteria, information availability, deadlines, and length of extensions among institutions, faculties, and departments.

"Very uncertain criteria's in the beginning. All applications were evaluated individually, and it took a long time to receive any response, which created a lot of uncertainty (had little time left). Got less time than I applied for. I found the process of applying for extension to be time consuming and characterized by mistrust from the faculty – as if they feared that some candidates would exploit the extension for their benefits."

"Unclear policies, difficult to understand how some of the phd candidates from other departments get significantly larger extensions while others don't. We've also been told that we can apply for extensions caused by the pandemic after August 2020 not earlier than 6 months before the end of the contract. Administration at our institute doesn't have information about that and couldn't answer our questions about the extensions."

Positive comments indicate that in some institutions or faculties the extensions were well established as well as their application.

“The first round of extensions - during the summer of 2020- were well structured, application offered to all via a form and resulted in a high degree of extensions ranging from a few days to well over 30 days.”

“They give everyone 2 months no questions asked. We can apply for more if we have specific reasons for why we were delayed longer.”

Nevertheless, many respondents expressed their discontent regarding the length of the extensions. In some cases, the amount of time lost due to the pandemic did not correspond to what they were granted.

“You only get 1 month extension, regardless of the magnitude of the delays caused by the covid-19 pandemic.”

“The data collection for my project is delayed by appx. 1 year because of the pandemic. Although I am grateful for the extension of 3 months, I am still worried about completing my PhD on time because of these delays. I had applied for an extension of 8 months. All applicants were given a maximum of 3 months extension.”

Another concern raised with the uncertainty of whether they will get an extension at the end of their Ph.D.

“We are told to apply for an extension at the end of the phd-period. Therefore I have not applied yet”

The respondents would like to make their voice to be heard

“Ease the worry and finish on time by creating categories of different extension packages (depending on how severe research has been impacted a little - a lot -severely) and facilitate a general extension application again.”

3.4. Mental health and well-being

Q7. Have you taken leave from work since March 2020 in connection with Covid-19?

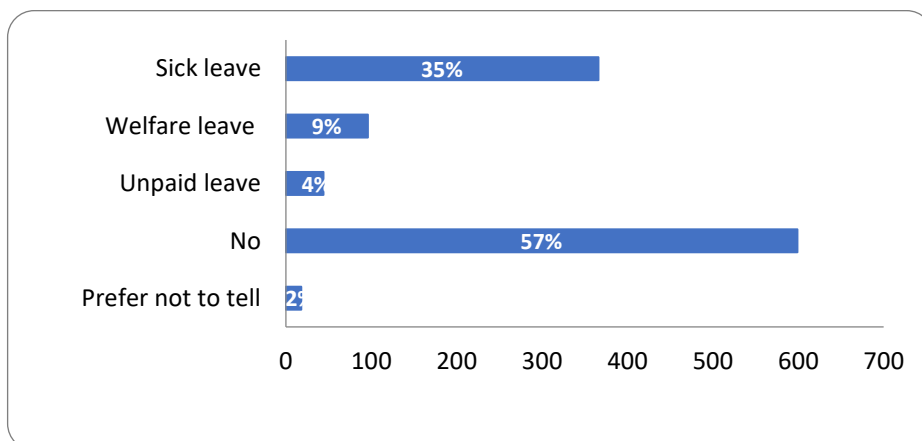


Fig. 7 Leave from work

Q8. To what extent have the following factors related to COVID-19 delayed your research? (1 = not all, 5 = severely)

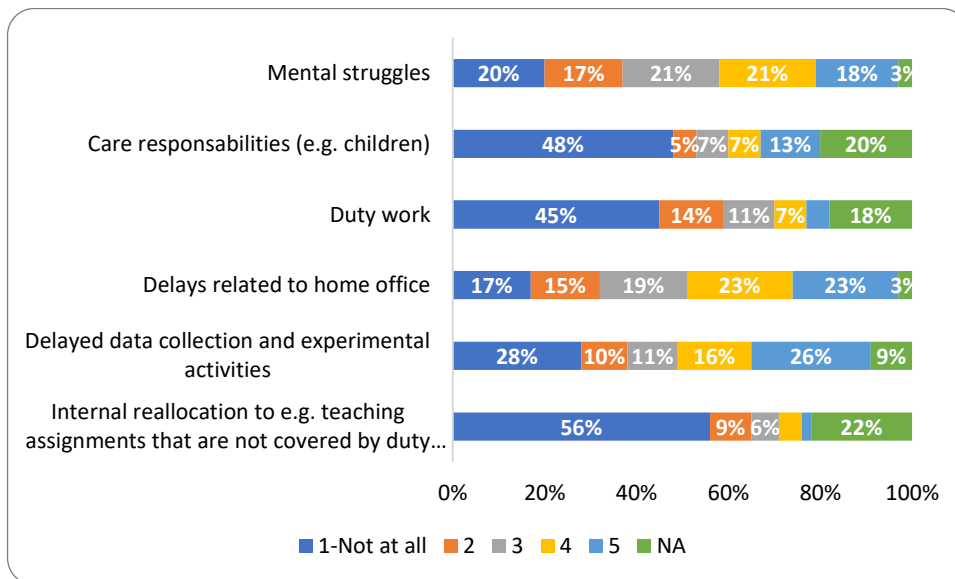


Fig. 8 Factors related to delays

Q9. If you are a non-Norwegian resident, do/did you have difficulties issuing VISA/residence permit-related with the delays in connection to COVID-19?

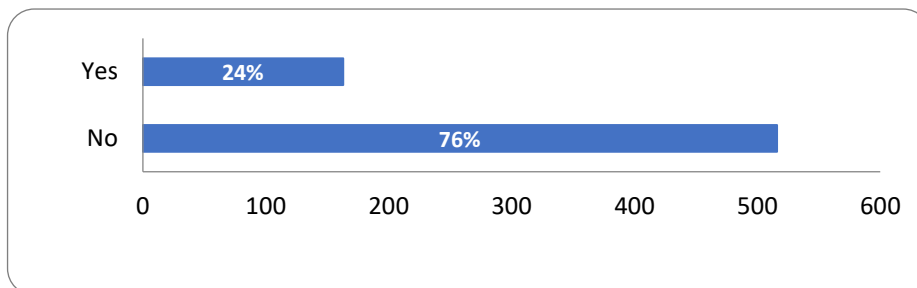


Fig. 9 Struggles with getting residence permits

Q10. At your institution, do you have your own workspace?

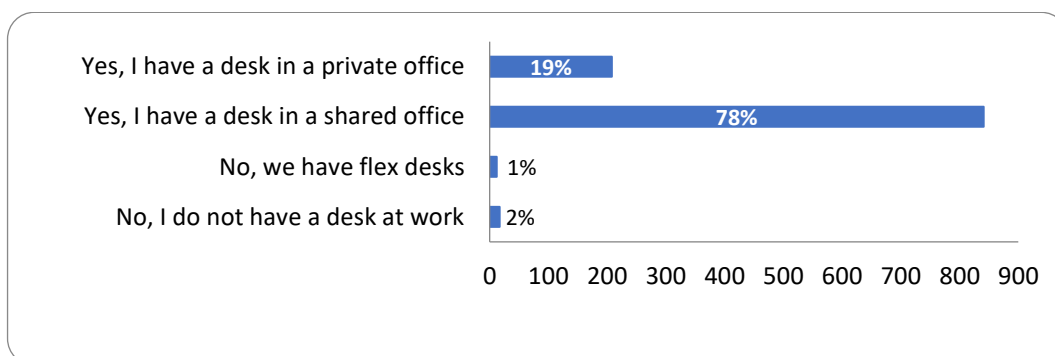


Fig. 10 Workplace facilities

Q11. How good are the working conditions in your home office compared to the work office at your institution? In my home office, the following conditions are ...

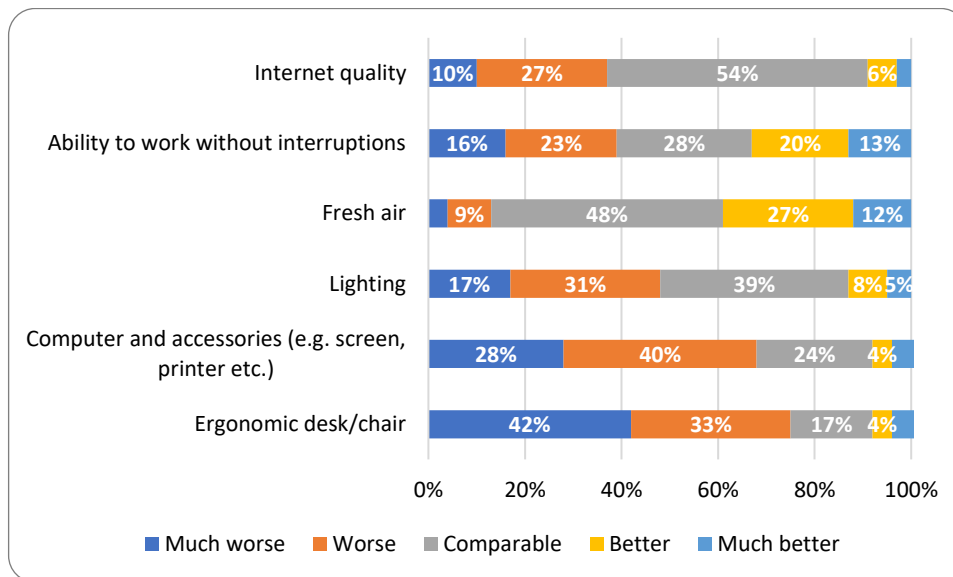


Fig. 11 Home office facilities

Q12. Has your institution helped you in setting up a home office?

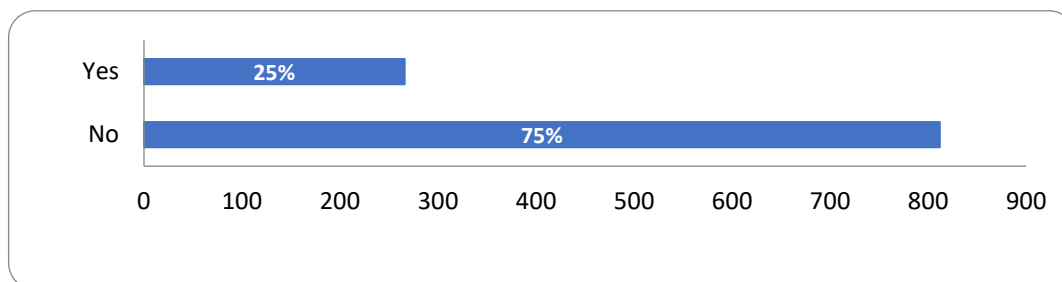


Fig. 12 Help from institution in setting up a home office

Q13. Please indicate the extent to which the pandemic has impacted your ability to satisfy the following needs

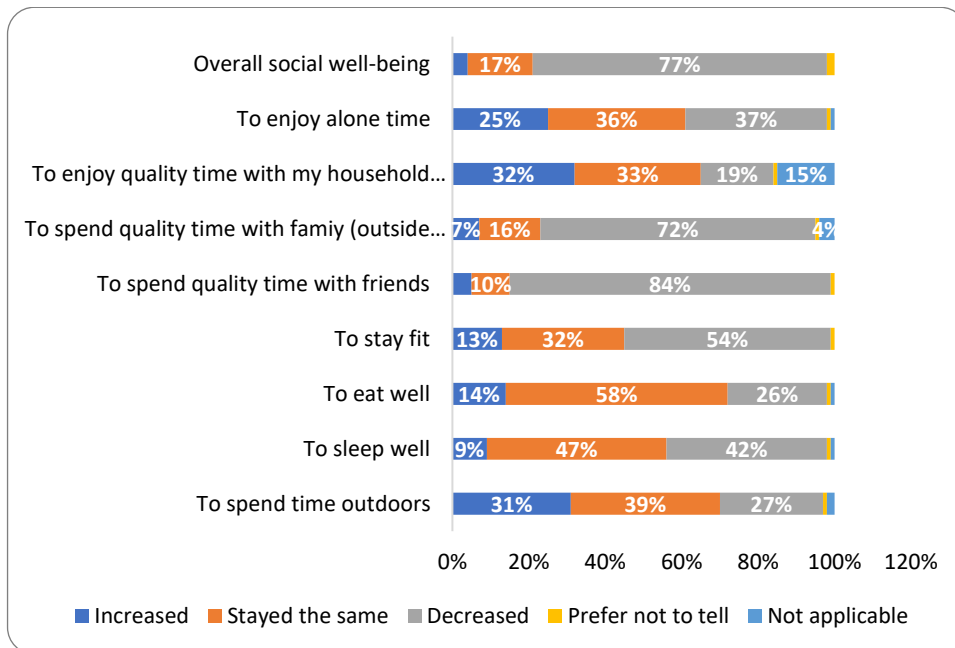


Fig. 13 Needs affected by the pandemic

Q14. Has the use of a home office caused you physical discomfort?

Almost half of the respondents (493/1074) reported physical discomfort when working from home.

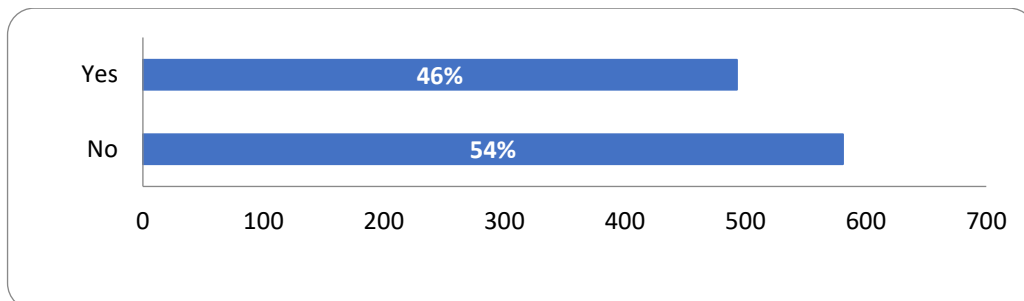


Fig. 14 Home office discomfort

Q15. Have you ever sought any help for work-related physical health issues during your current position as PhD/postdoc?

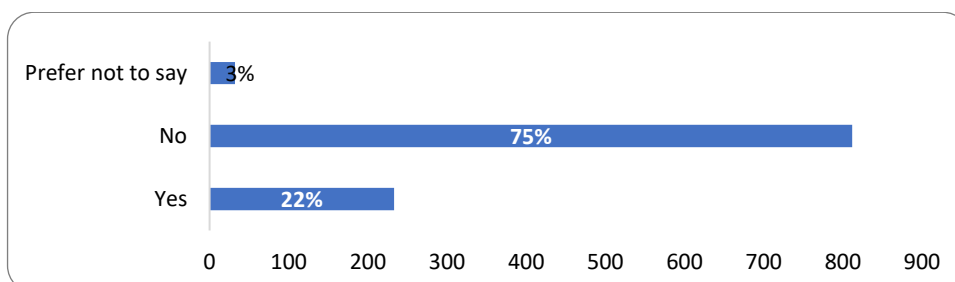


Fig. 15 Help received for work-related physical health issues

Q16. Have you ever sought any help for mental health issues during your current position as PhD/postdoc (in relation to covid)?

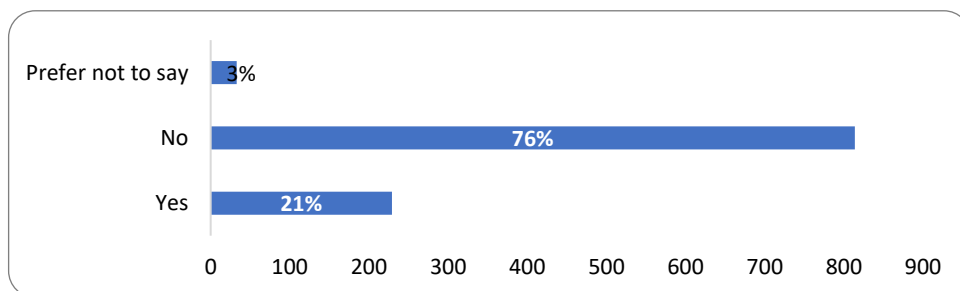


Fig. 16 Help received for pandemic-related mental health issues

Q17. Do you have any suggestions on what your institution could do to improve the physical and psychosocial well-being of PhDs and postdocs, in general or during the pandemic?

“Communication directly to PhDs in a more personal, supportive way would be a great start. If I feel the university is concerned about our situations directly, I would immediately feel more supported. I don’t appreciate being sent a ‘general’ information sheet loaded with information where I should pick and choose what applies to me. I want to feel that the University has specifically kept PhDs in mind when making decisions.”

“Check in with your candidates, see if there is anything they could do to help.”

“Mental health support” “Host courses on mental health and coping strategies”

“Better keep the communication open, regular check-in from the faculty when in home office, offer more resource regarding mental health (who to reach, how to find help, etc)”

“Campus psychologist for individual consultation, and for leading group sessions.”

Q18. Extent to which the pandemic has increased the experience of the following feelings:

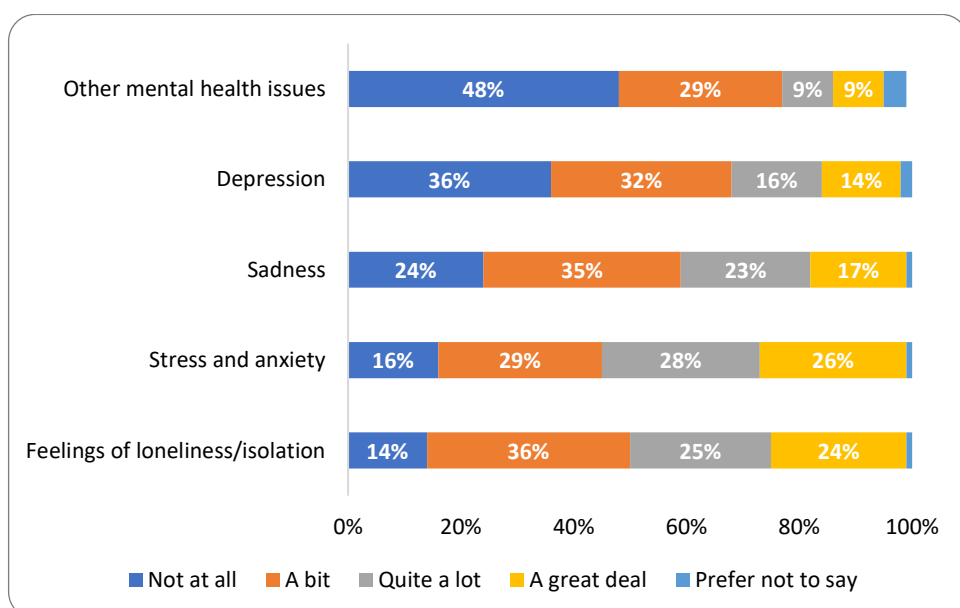


Fig. 17 Increased issues due to the pandemic

Q19. How has the pandemic influenced your ability to carry out the following research activities?

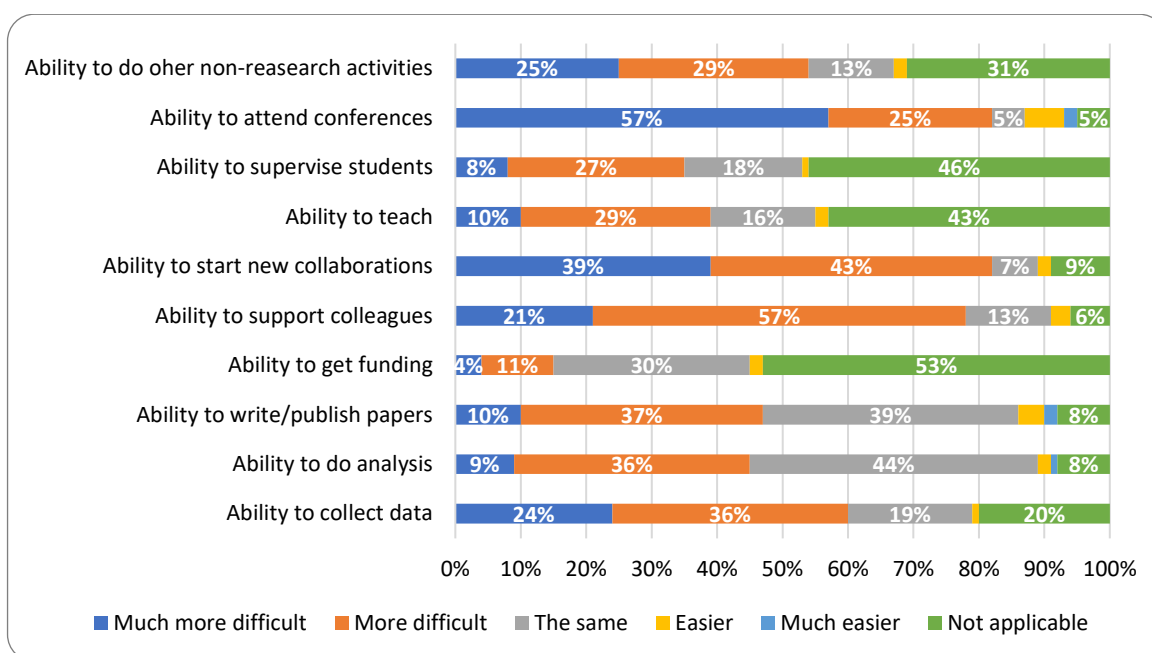


Fig. 18 Research activities affected by the pandemic

Q20. How has the pandemic influenced your general work performance?

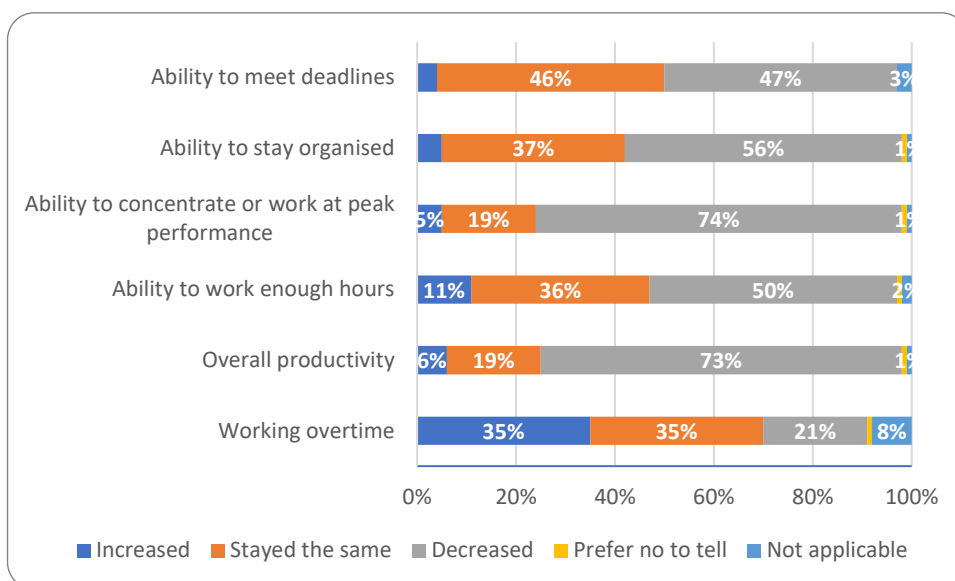


Fig. 19 General work performance affected by the pandemic

Please specify which other non-research activities were affected by the pandemic, if applicable:

The depletion of social interactions affected the well-being and the work-life balance of all respondents. As expected, non-research activities as groups meetings, social gatherings with colleagues, visits to family and friends, social events were the most mentioned by the respondents

“All the university events made to build a stronger group went missing during pandemic, this caused to newly arrived people to feel extremely lonely in a country where they know no-one”

“...work-life balance (work was little effective, and free-time was did not give as much rest either - it all blurred together)”

Q21. If you feel your overall productivity has decreased during the pandemic, what do you think are the main factors contributing to this change? You have to select at least one option.

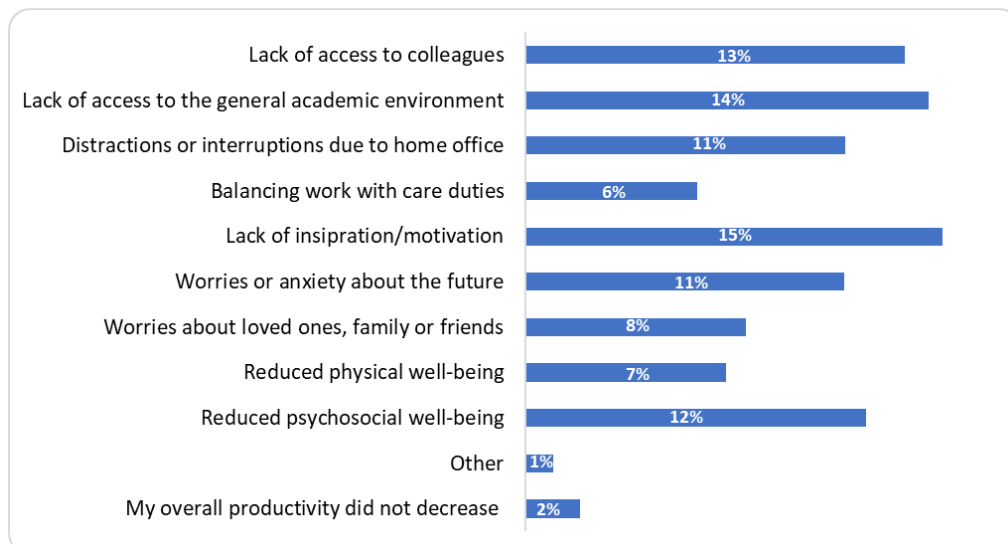


Fig. 20 Main factors contributing to less productivity

Q22. In general, how satisfied are you with your current position at the moment?

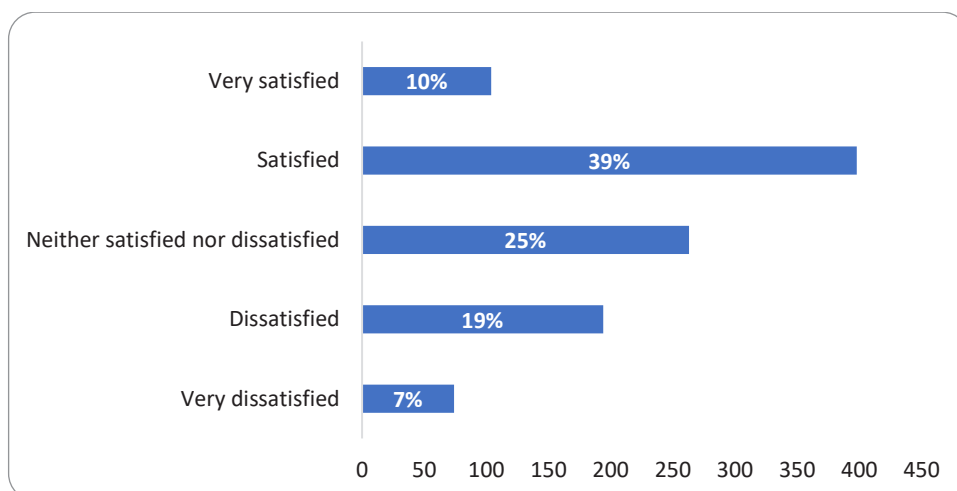


Fig. 21 Satisfaction with current position

Q23. After the pandemic started, how would you rate the following aspects of your (post-) doctoral training position? Please give your general impression during the pandemic, or since you started your position

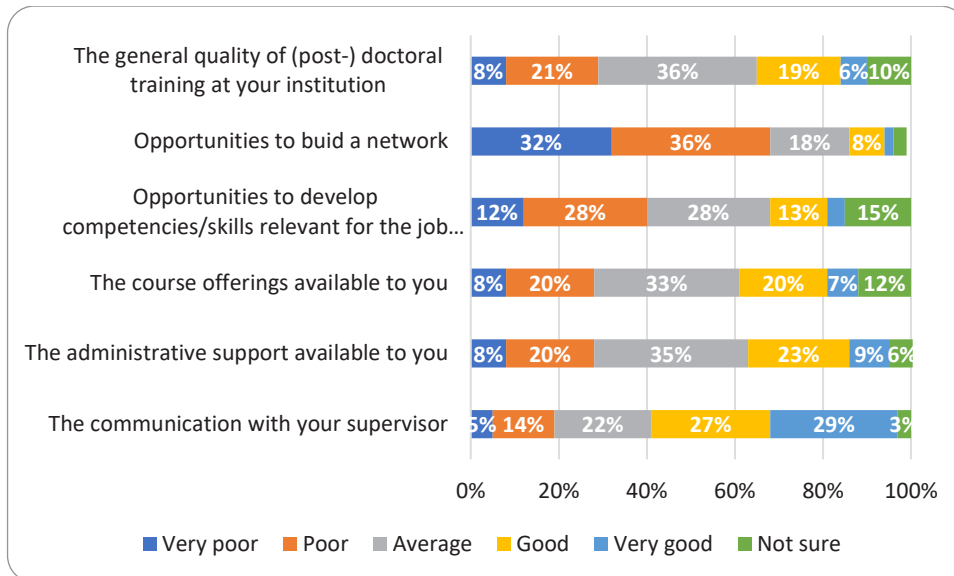


Fig. 22 Rating of (post-)doctoral training

Q24. Has the pandemic changed your willingness to stay in academia?

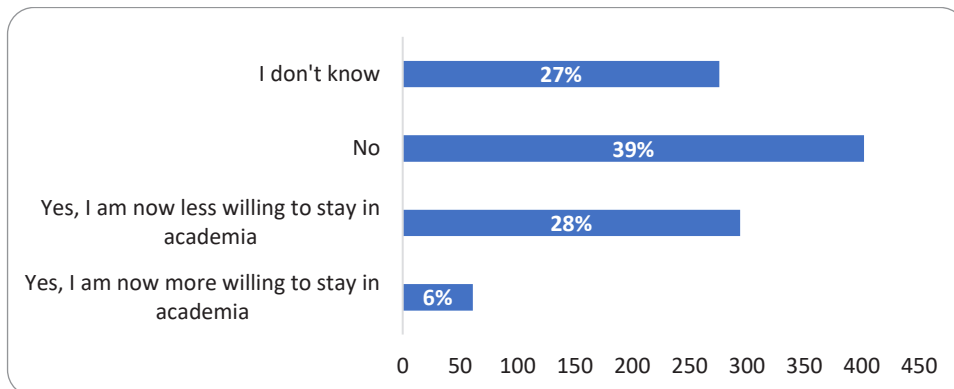


Fig. 23 Willingness to stay in academia in light of the pandemic

Q25. Given the effects of the pandemic, would you do this PhD/postdoc again under the current conditions if you had the choice?

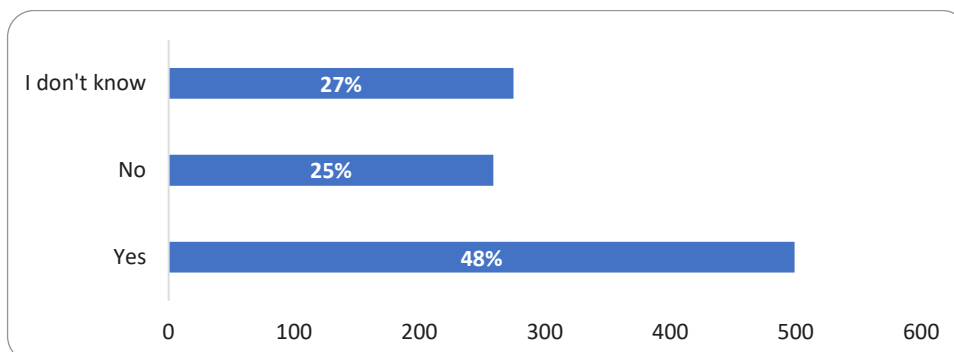


Fig. 24 Willingness to do the PhD/postdoc again under current conditions

Q26. Would you like to share anything else about the effects the pandemic has had on your PhD/post-doc experience?

Of the respondents to this survey, more than one hundred provide comments and express their opinion, concerns, and feelings. We received positive feedback which reflect the efforts that some institutions, departments, and advisors have made to handle the crisis and support Ph.D candidates. On the other hand, there is an enormous concern and feelings of frustration from many candidates who started their contracts during the pandemic because they are uncertain the degree in which the pandemic affected their doctoral work and their future careers. It is difficult to measure the lost of time, research opportunities, efficiency.

"I have been fortunate to belong to a department that has really supported me during the pandemic. I have been able to spend more time in my office than others I know at different universities/workplaces. However, I find the lack of support and acknowledgement from my university to be disheartening. Since giving me a 4-week extension almost two years ago, they have offered little, beyond a 2-hour seminar on how to handle stress ..."

"A lot of delays are not that easily calculable. Also while at the middle of doing a PhD it is not yet so visible what really is delayed. In my case, I have spent a lot of time for planning, changing plans, re-organising. Thereby, I lost some time that I could have used for my project better. In addition to that, worries, uncertainties, frustrations have certainly caused a more difficult research environment. These effects cannot be calculated in hours and minutes but overall affected mental health, motivation and efficiency. I would like to mention these difficulties because they are often overlooked."

4 DISCUSSION

4.1. Comparison with the first report

This survey is a follow-up to the first one², which was conducted in 2020, the year the COVID-19 pandemic began. The initial survey received 790 responses, while the follow-up survey received 1260 responses. Nonetheless, in comparison to the current number of PhDs and postdocs in Norway, the sample remains unrepresentative. PhDs, as expected, have the highest number of responses in both surveys. However, we continue to believe, as stated in the first report, that there is no reason to assume that the situation for postdocs is any different than that of PhDs, and that they are likely to face many of the same challenges in completing their projects. The distribution of affiliations is similar to the previous survey, with the most notable difference being significantly higher participation of UiB in the follow-up survey (the initial n=5, the follow-up n=240). The slight drop in number of PhDs and postdocs who experienced delays in the follow-up survey, might be attributed to some PhDs and postdocs finishing their contracts between the two surveys.

The results of the follow-up survey confirm the widespread delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and show that the majority of PhDs required an extension to finish their project. Although many were delayed between March and August 2020 at the start of the pandemic, the majority were delayed after August 2020. Many PhD students report that their institutions provided them with extensions. The mean of extensions (2 months) shows that it roughly corresponds to the need demonstrated in the first survey, where most respondents stated that they experienced a 1-2 month delay. Still, this should be considered with caution. While we see some good practices in providing extensions (see comments in Section 3). Our respondents report getting uneven extension periods from 1 week to 10 months. It also remains concerning that a significant number of respondents in the follow-up survey have no knowledge whether an extension was offered in the first place. This raises the issue of institutional communication effectiveness. Some of the potential reasons for this lack of information can be found in our respondents' comments. They report on differences between institutions, faculties, and departments in terms of procedures, policies, eligibility criteria, information availability, deadlines and length of extensions. This is completely consistent with our first survey, which listed a number of factors, including narrow eligibility criteria, a lack of information about the application process, poor application handling, and decentralized accountability resources.

4.2. Where are we standing now?

We decided to broaden the scope of the current survey in order to better understand the challenges that PhDs and postdocs faced and continue to face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial survey, conducted in September 2020, focused primarily on project delays and contract extension applications, but we included a number of questions addressing the mental health and well-being of PhDs and postdocs in the follow-up survey. The responses to these questions shed light on some important topics that are not often discussed.

We can see that 48% of PhDs and postdocs took time off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of them took sick leave, but some took unpaid leave or welfare leave. Further, we wanted to investigate the major reasons hampering their research. Most reported home office delays, delayed data collection and experimental activities, but also mental struggles as key factors contributing to research delays. Although a fewer number reports on factors such as care responsibilities and duty work, we must consider that a number of PhDs and postdocs do not have children or do duty work (collecting this data was out of scope of this survey). As a result, this aspect of the results should be treated with caution. In addition, one of the key issues affecting international (non-EU) PhDs and postdocs was difficulty in obtaining visa/residence permits with 24% reporting difficulties in this regard.

² The first report from 2020 can be found here: [Delayed PhDs are experiencing lack of possibilities for compensation from institutions during COVID-19 – Association of Doctoral Organizations in Norway \(stipendiat.no\)](https://stipendiat.no/en/delayed-phds-are-experiencing-lack-of-possibilities-for-compensation-from-institutions-during-covid-19)

We hoped to gain a better understanding of the challenges associated with the home office. The majority of PhDs and postdocs who responded to the survey have a desk in a shared office. Even so, when compared to their regular offices, most respondents report that their home offices offer poorer conditions. The only two factors that could be seen as being equally good or slightly worse than in regular offices were internet quality and fresh air. The ability to work without interruptions and lighting were not rated as the most important, in contrast to the ergonomic desk/chair and computer accessories, which were rated as much more severe in home offices. In both cases, nearly 70% of respondents described the situation in their home offices as “worse” or “much worse”. To add to the challenge, 75% of total respondents did not receive assistance from their institutions in setting up their home offices, leading to 56% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the overall use of home offices.

In terms of well-being, the majority of respondents (77% reported this) report a significant decrease in their ability to satisfy their overall social well-being. Furthermore, the opportunity to spend quality time with friends and family has significantly decreased. Many respondents found it difficult to stay fit and sleep well. Respondents report that the pandemic has significantly increased their feelings of loneliness and isolation, stress, anxiety and sadness. Nonetheless, many report an increase in depression and other mental illnesses. We find this question particularly relevant because the response rate for the increase of all listed feelings was more than 50% (only for other mental health issues, it was slightly lower at 47%). Respondents attribute their decreased productivity to a lack of inspiration, motivation, access, reduced psychosocial well-being, disruptions due to home office, and worries or anxiety about the future. As a result, only 39% of respondents are satisfied with their current situation. If they had a choice, 25% would not do the PhD/postdoc under the same conditions, and 27% are unsure whether they would begin the same endeavour again. Most notably, 28% report that the pandemic made them less willing to stay in academia, whereas only 6% report the opposite effect, namely that the pandemic encouraged them to stay in academia.

Over 75% of respondents did not seek assistance for work-related physical health issues during their PhD/postdoc contracts, nor did they seek assistance for their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of respondents consider communication to be the most important factor in improving institutional strategies during the pandemic. They would have preferred to be contacted with more support and someone checking in on them on a regular basis from their institutions, rather than through generalized e-mails sent to all employees.

Another major issue for PhDs and postdocs, it appears, was their inability to attend conferences, form new collaborations, engage in non-research activities, support colleagues, and collect data. The ability to teach, supervise students, and obtain funding appears to be less affected by the pandemic period. On the other hand, it is important to note that, while many respondents report poorer opportunities to build a network, many also believe that communication with their supervisors was good or very good throughout the crisis.

Many respondents expressed support for their institutions’ efforts to deal with the pandemic and provide them with assistance throughout the process. However, we note many respondents’ concerns and frustrations about the high levels of uncertainty and their general insecurity about how the pandemic affected their doctoral work and future careers.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SiN would like to thank all PhD students and postdocs who participated in the survey. The survey was designed after identifying a need for a follow-up survey concerning the COVID-19 response at Norwegian universities with representatives from the local PhD and postdoc interest organizations.

Chris Hagen Magnussen (UiBDoc), Andrea Vallejo Vargas (SODOC) and Sanja Mrkšić Kovačević (UiSDC) were responsible for conducting the survey and analysing the results. This report is part of the SiN Working Group on Mental Health & Wellbeing. Useful comments were provided by all members of the SiN 2022 board and representatives from the local PhD and postdoc organisations.

SiN

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