

# HumDok survey. Summary of results

## 1 INTRODUCTION/SUMMARY

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In this document we have summarized the main results of the HumDok survey that was carried out 6-17 October 2014. In total 63 PhD students at the Faculty of Arts participated (the official number of registered PhD students at the faculty is 102 which means the participation rate was 62 %). The participation was equally distributed over the different departments in relation to size of the departments. The survey was mainly geared for PhD students employed before September 2014, the results of the survey therefore is based on the 44 respondents employed before this date.

The survey was divided in two parts: one focusing on work-related health issues, and the second part concerns the experiences of the refurbishment of the Humanities building. Here follows a summary of the results and the board of HumDok's thoughts. Below you can read the results in more detail accompanied with a selection of comments (some in Swedish and some in English).

### 1.1 PART 1

The survey reveals that PhD students are ill more frequently than what is reported in PASS. Few report when feeling ill even when it affects their ability to work. The main reason is that it is difficult to get a doctor's certificate when you're ill for less than a week which consequently makes it difficult to get prolongation for the absence. Many report that they lose both valuable working hours and income when reporting ill for short periods. Instead, many state that they work from home or try to compensate for lost time later on. A picture of a specific academic "culture" emerges in the results, a culture where it is a norm to work when ill, during evenings and weekends and in extreme cases even whilst on vacation or parental leave.

Multiple - and simultaneous - demands and requirements (e.g. from supervisors, research schools, about publications etc.) and at the same time living up to the ideal of this culture, is experienced as stressful. As a consequence many PhD students feel insufficient, that they are not "good enough" PhD candidates.

Additionally, it is revealed that many PhD students are worried about the future after the public defense of their dissertation. This insecurity and worry must be acknowledged. An academic career after obtaining a PhD can no longer be taken for granted. Hence, there is a need to prepare PhD students for an alternative career. The new change-over agreement which comes into force at the shift of 2014/15 means substantially less support and coaching from Trygghetsstiftelsen through the new labelling of PhD students as "educational employees" (swe. "utbildningsanställda"). This new agreement reinforces the comments in the survey that depict an uncertain and insecure future.

Having said this, many PhD students do enjoy their work and their workplace.

### 1.2 PART 2

The results of the experiences of the refurbishment of the Humanities' building is not coherent. Not everyone has been affected. In general, several have experienced planned or unplanned evacuations of offices, interruptions of work due to noise and a fair amount of time have been spilt due to different factors.

## 2 HUMDOK'S REFLECTIONS

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The board of HumDok is very concerned about the results of the survey, especially about the stress related issues. The results show that many PhD students express feelings of insufficiency (not feeling "good enough", not being "productive enough" etc.) and loneliness. A culture of an idealized PhD student and academic who works more than 40

hours a week (and during evenings, weekends, during illness and sometimes during vacations and parental leave) is referenced and reproduced in the discourse of academic life and, to a certain extent, even in practice. This culture is perceived as “the normal”, and “failing” to live up to this ideal image, many PhD students feel stressed and insufficient. The board hopes that the results of this survey will bring these questions into light. Many PhD students express these feelings and thoughts, showing that this is not an individual problem; you are *not* alone! The results are consistent with national surveys and reports of PhD student’s work situation.

It is the board’s firm belief that PhD students would gain from reporting ill and take the time to recover without feeling guilty or stressed by loss of time. This calls for a change in the current system of prolongation where a doctor’s certificate is needed for shorter absences (which is practically impossible to get from the health care center).

Further, we wish that the academic discourse/culture made visible and questioned through the initiation of a critical discussion. Does intense productivity and a working week exceeding 40 hours always mean success? How can we be proactive and minimize stress during our PhD education?

Additionally, we note that the information and communication in English must be improved at the different departments in order to make international PhD students feel included in the work environment.

We would also like a discussion around the following questions: “What type of roles, knowledge and functions does Umeå University want their PhDs in humanities to contribute with in today’s society?”; “How can the university, faculty and departments improve the doctoral students in the humanities’ identity, faith in future and transferable skills?”; “What type of academic culture is preferred to have and to transmit?”

## 2.1 WHAT NOW?

The board of HumDok will present the results of the survey on all department’s APT, at the board of the Faculty (Fakultetsnämnden), the reference group of FADC, the supervisor’s collegium and to the unions. We hope that the faculty, the departments and supervisors will take our results into consideration and become aware of our situation.

Concerned with the feelings of loneliness amongst PhD students, HumDok will continue to organize social activities and meet-ups for PhD students with the aim to strengthen the PhD community. Through these activities we hope to strengthen the PhD community.

## 2.2 WHAT CAN YOU DO?

By being aware of how we talk about working hours, stress etc, we can avoid sending signals of a negative academic culture.

Join the board of HumDok to improve PhD student’s situation at the Faculty of Arts and contribute to a fruitful and inspiring community across departments. Don’t worry - you *will* be compensated for your work by prolongation!

If you want further results from the survey, please contact Per (per.bostrom@umu.se).

### 3 SURVEY RESULTS.

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#### PART 1: HEALTH, ABSENCE DUE TO ILLNESS AND PASS.

QUESTION 2. ESTIMATE HOW MANY TIMES A YEAR YOU HAVE BEEN ILL (COLD, FEVER, STOMACH FLU, ETC.) IN A WAY THAT AFFECTED YOUR ABILITY TO WORK.”

PhD Students are ill at least once a year. Some are ill considerably more often. 10 times is mentioned a few times. No one states that they are never ill. 16 of 44 =  $\frac{1}{3}$  are ill 4 times or more per year.

A selection of comments to question 2:

- “Hard to remember and hard to decide when you are sick or not. Often, I feel, one is going to work when possible because you won’t get prolonging of your doctoral time if you don’t have a certification from a doctor.”
- “Also important to recognize that for doctoral students maybe physical sickness isn’t the most common (at least from my experience). Instead it is the pressure and strains. When do you become sick from that?”
- **“I usually work when I'm sick. Unfortunately.”**
- “jag upplever det som att det ibland kan finnas en kultur att man jobbar fastän man är sjuk, eller att det är väldigt få doktorander som "Unnar" sig att stanna hemma vid snuva.”
- “Sjukdom kan vara många saker från förkylning till stress och problem i familjen. Jag har många gånger arbetat trots feber och läst nedbäddad i sängen.”

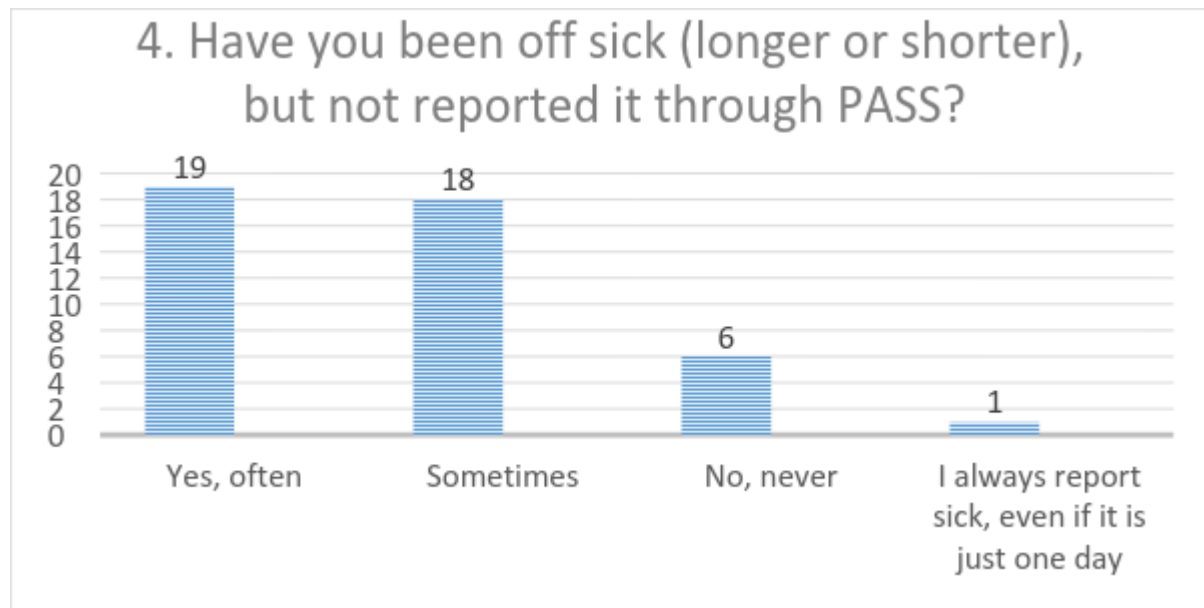
QUESTION 3 AND 3.1: HAVE YOU BEEN OFF SICK FOR LONGER PERIODS DURING YOUR DOCTORAL STUDIES?”; 3.1: “WAS THE REASON FOR YOUR ABSENCE WORK-RELATED STRESS SYMPTOMS?”

A third of the respondents state that they have been ill for longer periods (1 week or longer) during their time as PhD students. For some, this sick leave is not a direct work related cause. 10 people opted for “stress-related symptoms” as a reason to their sick leave. This does not necessarily mean that the stress is work related. Mentioned stress related symptoms are: sleeping problems, anxiety, depression, memory problems, concentration problems, writers block and migraine.

QUESTION 4 AND 4.1. “HAVE YOU BEEN OFF SICK (LONGER OR SHORTER), BUT NOT REPORTED IT THROUGH PASS?”; 4.1: (IF YES ON QUESTION 4): “WHY HAVE YOU NOT REPORTED SICK IN PASS?”

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The majority state that they don't always report their illness in PASS.



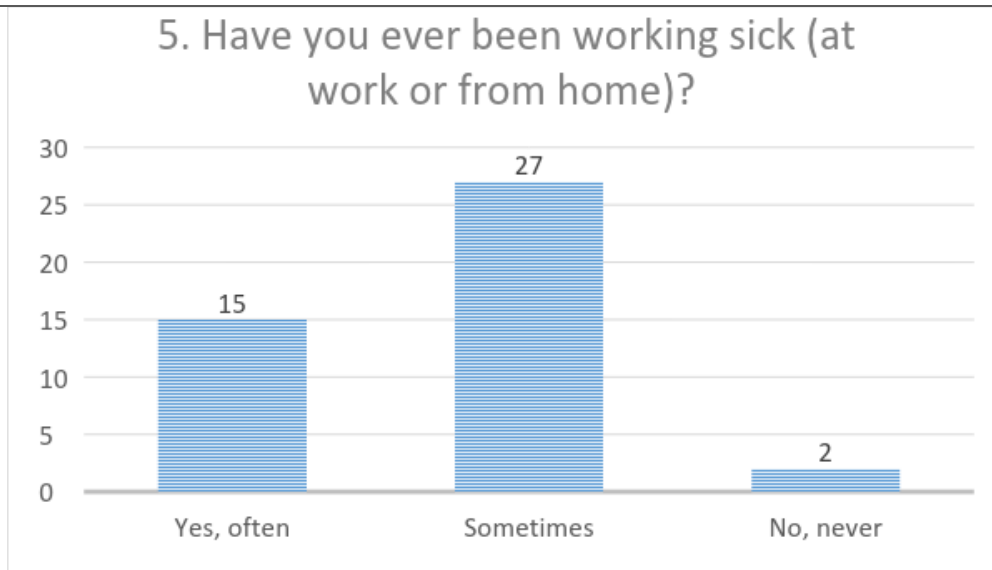
In response to why they don't report in PASS, many feel that doing so is an economic loss and that they won't get reimbursed for the time lost being ill. Many state that they plan to compensate by catching up later.

- "Because of lost days from my 4 years time. I figure I'll catch it up later, during weekends or evenings. Feels bad to loose both income and time since shorter sickness is not a reason for prolongation."
- "Jag förlorar ekonomiskt på att rapportera samt att jag på grund av tidsbrist ändå måste jobba på avhandlingen. Jag har inte tid att bara vara sjuk."
- "stress-related sickness comes part of the package in this job"
- "Used semester time that I had to take out during the summer, but had a deadline so I decided to work. Work from home, even though I'm sick"
- "Varför få avdrag för en kort förkylning när jag inte får tillbaka dagarna? Inledningsvis sjukskrev jag mig alltid men när jag insåg att jag om jag inte har läkarintyg själv får jobba in dagarna utan lön kändes det hela hopplöst och jag struntade i det hela."

As a response to the question if someone has encouraged them not to report in PASS, 40 % refer that other (most likely "older" generations of) PhD students have done so. In addition, some mention that they've been told or encouraged by supervisors, administrative staff and senior colleagues not to report when they are ill. One person mentions the trade union. A selection of comments:

- "It's a common sense. It has been suggested by both senior co-workers (including tutors) and PhD students, as well as others. I think I even remember individuals from higher administrative posts at the university mentioning this as a "tip" when I set out as a PhD student as well as later on".
- "supervisor said it was unnecessary, but I disagree"

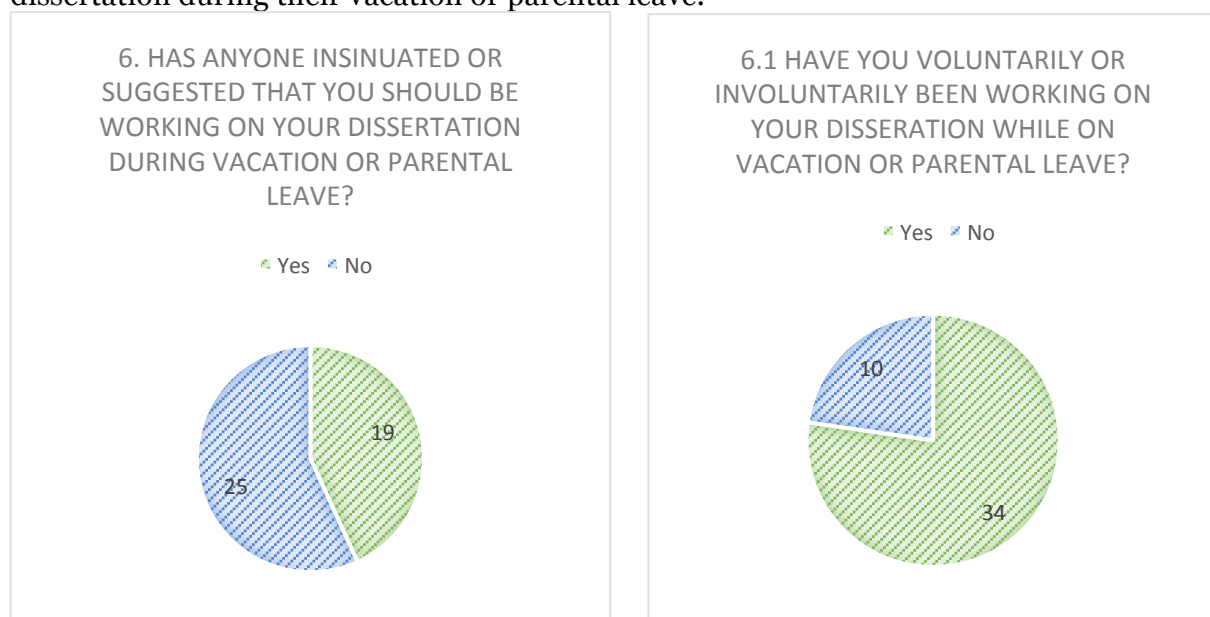
QUESTION 5. "HAVE YOU EVER BEEN WORKING SICK (AT WORK OR FROM HOME)?"



Note that only two have stated that they *never* work when they are ill.

QUESTION 6 AND 6.1. "HAS ANYONE INSINUATED OR SUGGESTED THAT YOU SHOULD BE WORKING ON YOUR DISSERTATION DURING VACATION OR PARENTAL LEAVE?"; 6.1: "HAVE YOU VOLUNTARILY OR INVOLUNTARILY BEEN WORKING ON YOUR DISSERTATION WHILE ON VACATION OR PARENTAL LEAVE?"

Approx. 40 % state that they have been encouraged to work during their vacation or parental leave. 77% claim that they - voluntarily or involuntarily - work on their dissertation during their vacation or parental leave.



## QUESTION 7. "DO YOU FEEL THAT BEING A DOCTORAL STUDENT IS STRESSFUL?"

Almost everyone feel that being a doctoral student is stressful. About 50 % experience their situation as stressful, and the rest experience this occasionally. Note that only two people do not sympathize with this statement.



Of those who responded "yes" or "sometimes" (=95 %) the majority (41 of 42) gave additional comments. The comments can be summarized in the following bullet points. Note that several of the points recurs in many statements:

- Feeling insufficient and doubting your ability. Your own results are not good enough. The wish to succeed. Being behind schedule. The pressure to work harder.
- It's a never ending job. Working hours and spare time blends together.
- Increased demands on PhD students: attend courses and conferences, publish = a lot to do at the same time.
- Unclear demands: the blurred line of being a job or education.
- Unclear goals and unclear contents, lack of structure of the research education. Some want to focus on their dissertations and see courses and research schools as interfering elements. The feeling or interpretation that it is more like a "productive workshop" (produktionsverkstad) rather than an education.
- Bad forwards planning from the research school and department.
- Supervision: communication problems and unclear supervision.
- Deadlines.
- Internationalization.
- Time limitations. Time pressure. The feeling that the time is running away.
- Difficulties planning far in advance.
- Sick leave and prolongation.
- The future: after the public defense. Employability.
- Your own responsibility.
- Restricted possibilities to teach.
- Low feeling of social community (amongst PhD students). Loneliness.
- Stress culture.

Some comments that highlights the trends that emerge in the survey:

- “Höga krav, ensamhet, känsla av att det man gör inte är tillräckligt bra, kritik som inte är konstruktiv och upplysande utan allmän utan att man får klart för sig vad som inte var ok”
- "Förväntningen om att man ska jobba mer än den tid man är betald för (från kollegor på olika nivåer), på kvällar, helger, semestrar osv. Svårigheten att sjukskriva sig och vara säker på att få tillbaka sina dagar. Ökade krav för doktorander: man ska gå fler bestämda kurser, skriva artiklar på sidan av, åka på konferenser osv. Jag upplever att kraven ökat på att utföra aktiviteter som går utanför avhandlingsarbetet. Stressen kommer också av att det är svårt att överblicka sitt arbete, förstå hur man ligger till i tid. Stressen kommer sig också till viss del av svårigheter att se hur man ska gå vidare efter man doktorerat."
- “Pressure of splitting time between teaching courses, taking courses, field work and thesis writing. The academic climate as such is often hard and criticising, not always in constructive ways. Difficulties with supervisors.”
- "The constant pressure of performing I think, and the weird lack of community spirit amongst the doctoral students.... and the weird social culture at university where you're supposed to lament the workload and toils of working at academia, but never in a serious way. It feels like the culture that we all uphold tells us or directs us to lament with a smile on our lips, to always talk about stress and anxiety as something that can be overcome. When someone actually admits being overwhelmed by stress at lunch for example, the conversation takes a very quiet turn. (...) Sick leave is definitely an elephant in the room when it comes to conversations at work."

#### QUESTION 8. “OVERALL - HOW DO YOU EXPERIENCE YOUR WORKING ENVIRONMENT AS A DOCTORAL STUDENT?”

This question received many comments, both positive and negative. Here is a selection:

- “Besides the academic pressure and norms that sometimes gets too much, I enjoy working here.”
- "Engagerande, intellektuellt eggande. Men samtidigt präglas miljön av ett hemlighetsmakeri. Det ""ska"" vara sena nätter på jobbet eller att du tar med dig jobbet hem. Mycket informell information och tillfälliga lösningar. Mer och större öppenhet behövs. Samt ett klagörande kring vad en doktorand är. Det här mellanlandet mellan att vara student och anställd kräver en svår balansgång av alla som ingen riktigt har lyckats hantera väl ännu. Jag vill att handledarna ska ta större ansvar för doktoranderna. Bli mer engagerade i arbetet, inte som examinatorer eller ""portvaktare"" men som HANDledare, någon som leder dig genom arbetet samt kan lotsa dig genom all informell information."
- "På sätt och vis är arbetsmiljön bra, men problemet är ofta hur man talar om arbetet: att man ständigt ska arbeta, samt att doktorander har små möjligheter att ställa krav på förändringar. Miljön kan förbättras genom att man aldrig uppmanar doktorander att arbeta utanför arbetstid, och genom att doktorander ges prolongering utan läkarintyg vid sjukdom kortare tid. Alternativt att doktorander får hjälp med att fixa ett intyg via företagshälsovården: ett ställa man kan ringa till där de vet vilka specifika regler som gäller för doktorander."
- “Really good, best work ever.”

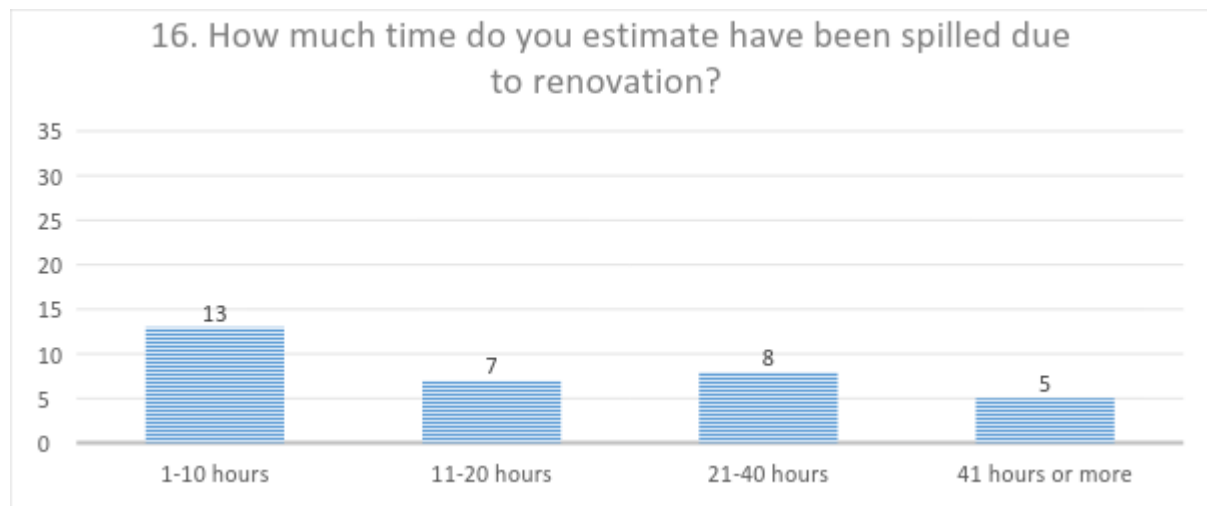
To summarize: PhD students seem to enjoy their work and their workplace, but there are many things that could be improved. E.g. language issues - the university employs PhD students from abroad but they often feel left out as they miss out on information or can't participate in committees on department and faculty level due to the norm of using Swedish as the language for communication.

Being a PhD students means a different kind of work situation: you are something in between of a student and an employee, which can be experienced as a difficult situation.

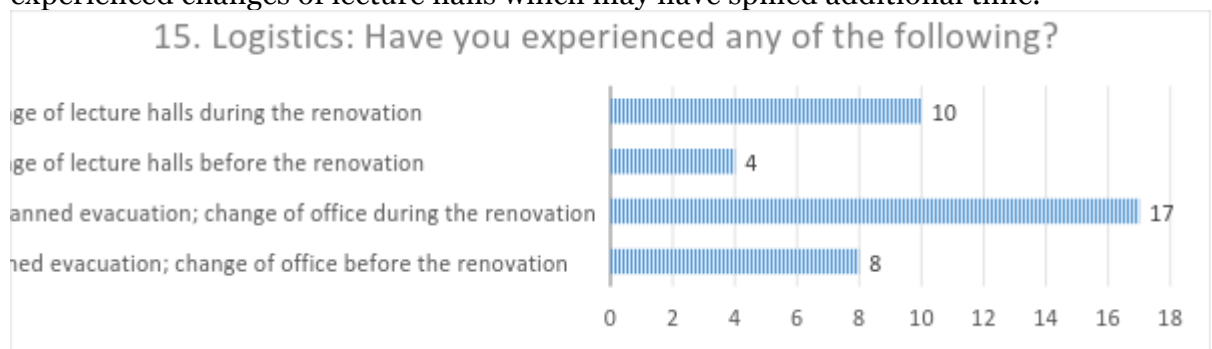
## PART 2: THE REFURBISHMENT

In the second part we asked questions related to the refurbishments of the Humanities building. We asked if temperature, noise, security risks, bad air and the refurbishment in general has affected the PhD students work and work environment. The results are shattered and it is difficult to give a coherent picture. However, a few points are worth noting.

NB: Not all PhD students have an office in the Humanities building.



- Loss of time is an important factor. 15 participants state that they have lost between 11-40 hours of work time due to the refurbishment. That equals to between a half and a whole working week lost due to the refurbishments. Five participants state that they have lost more than 40 hours.
- Evacuation: More than half of the PhD students that answered has had to relocate their offices, for most people this is a result of unplanned, rather than planned, evacuation. This can be connected to the issue of time loss. Some have also experienced changes of lecture halls which may have spilled additional time.



- One question dealt with the overall experience of well-being at work during the refurbishment. The majority have been affected, but in varying ways..



