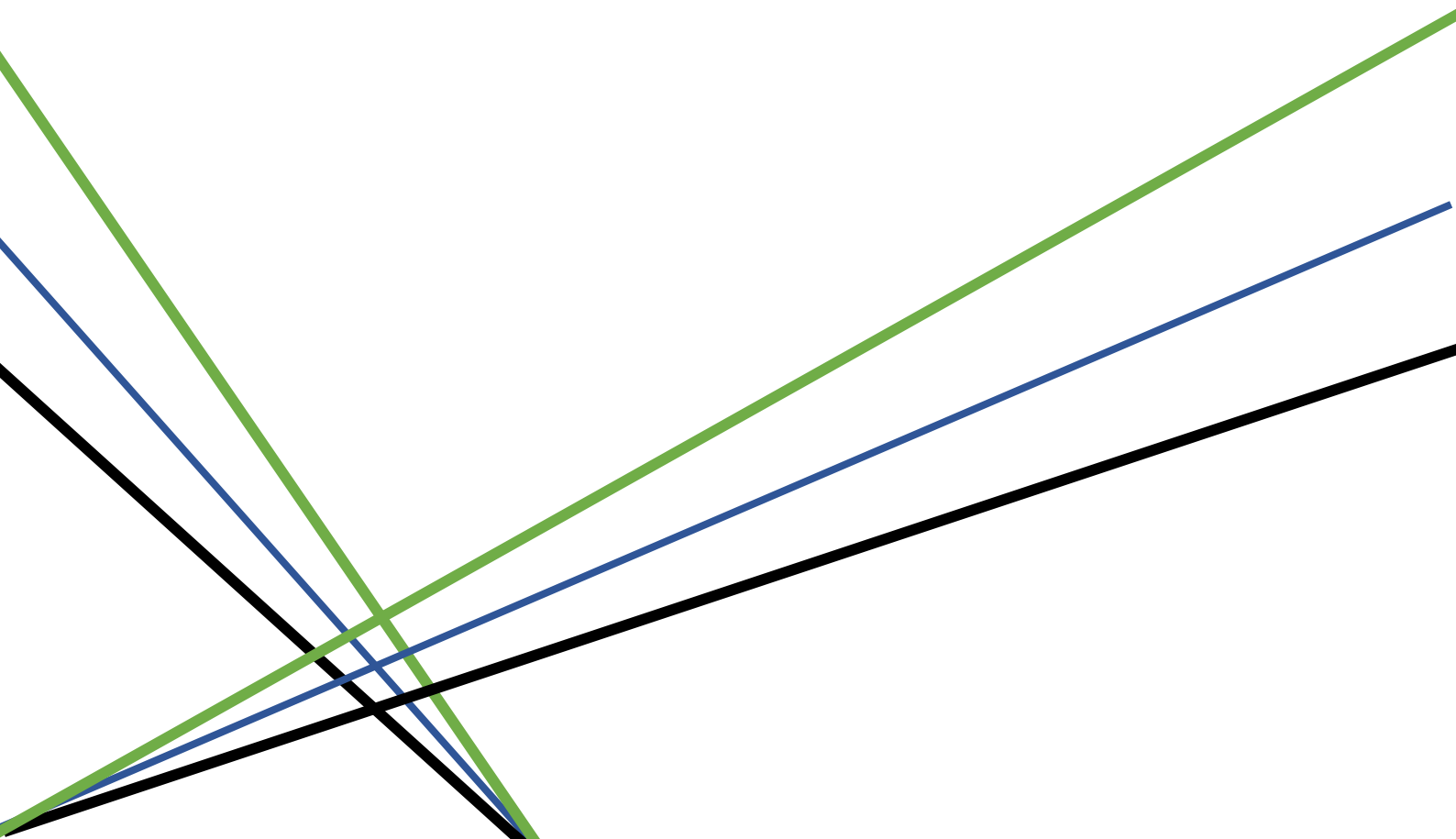




Report on doctoral students' situation during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March – October)



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Introduction

This survey presents the doctoral students' experience due to the restrictions implemented by the university due to the covid-19 pandemic. This survey illustrates the effect of restrictions on doctoral students' academic situation.

The purpose of this report is to map doctoral students' experiences of their work situation at Umeå University. This is done in order to be able to propose measures and create a discussion about how to move forward and improve the situation for doctoral students during the rest of their education.

This report is based on a questionnaire constructed by the Doctoral Council which consists of doctoral representatives from all faculties as well as Umeå School of Education at Umeå University. The questionnaire was sent out by email 6/10- 2020 to all doctoral students registered in Ladok. The questionnaire was sent out to 690 people and received 278 answers, resulting in a response rate of 40%.

Summary

The doctoral education is an education. And it is an education with a time limit. When doctoral students get affected by the Covid-19 pandemic they get affected both as researchers and as students. At the end of the doctoral education the doctoral student has to graduate, if the quality of education is not good enough, the degree is what is at risk.

The implemented restrictions by Umeå University due to the Covid-19 pandemic have affected both the doctoral students' studies and work situation. Information to the doctoral students on how to describe the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the ISP as well as specific information to the doctoral students during this time has been lacking and insufficient.

The feeling of stress and uncertainties over the situation and lack of information has also influenced productivity in a negative way as well as when it comes to mental health. The access to supervision has mostly been adequate during this time but access to labs and the library have been insufficient.

Keeping up an academic network have been harder due to working from home as well as feeling that the doctoral student is part of a research environment. Productivity have also decreased due to working from home. Due to the transition to working from home the access to an ergonomic workplace has been lacking.

It is important to foresee possible complications that can occur due to the extent of the Covid-19. The University should take the appropriate measures to prohibit any major problems for the doctoral students that will have to much of an effect on their PhD-studies.

Suggested measures

Individual study plan

- The faculties should formulate clear and specific guidelines on how to document the short-term and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the individual study plans. These guidelines should be communicated to the PhD students and supervisors before the start of the autumn semester 2021.
- The faculties should be asked to make sure that any guidelines or additional information about the ISP and the documentation of the effects of pandemic on doctoral studies or projects are made available in English.
- Umeå University should review the ISP guidelines of each faculty to make sure that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on PhD student projects are being dealt with in a fair and equal manner, regardless of faculty affiliation.
- Umeå University should as soon as possible inform all doctoral students on how the planned follow-up of the ISP:s during 2021 will be conducted.

Academic network and information

- Create a better flow of information to and from doctoral students. This can be created by establishing an information network between the supervisors or by newsletters directed specifically to the doctoral students. Important information should always be provided in English.
- Each faculty should provide possible ways to help PhD students compensate for the loss of academic networking during the pandemic. This might include facilitating digital networking, social events, cross-faculty events, publishing workshops, support for young researchers post-defence etc.

Mental health

- Umeå University should initiate a new survey, focusing on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on PhD students' mental and physical health. The survey should aim to identify possible measures to mitigate the negative effects on PhD students' health following the pandemic.

Teaching duties

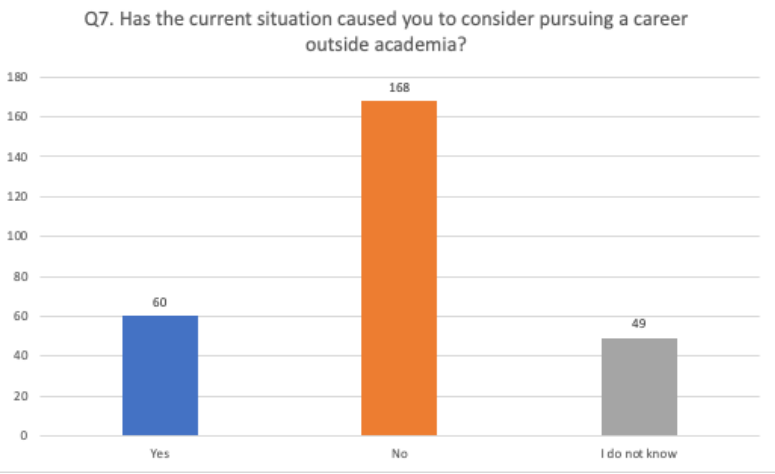
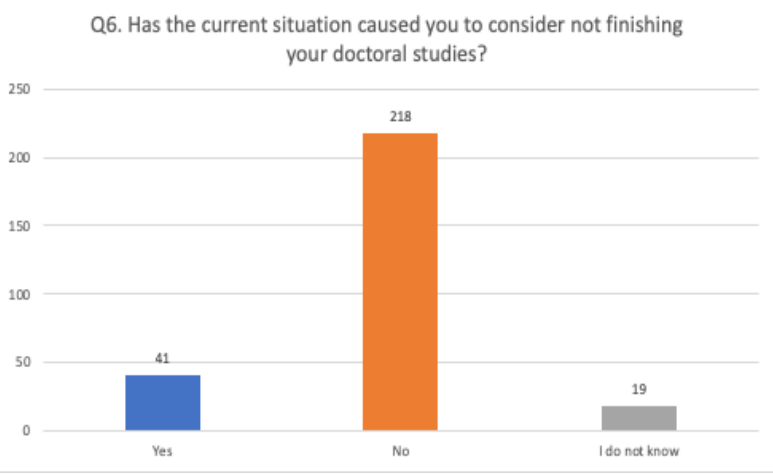
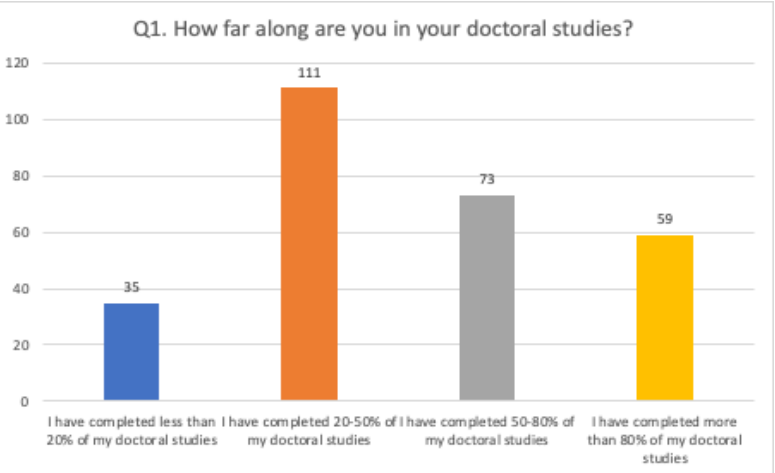
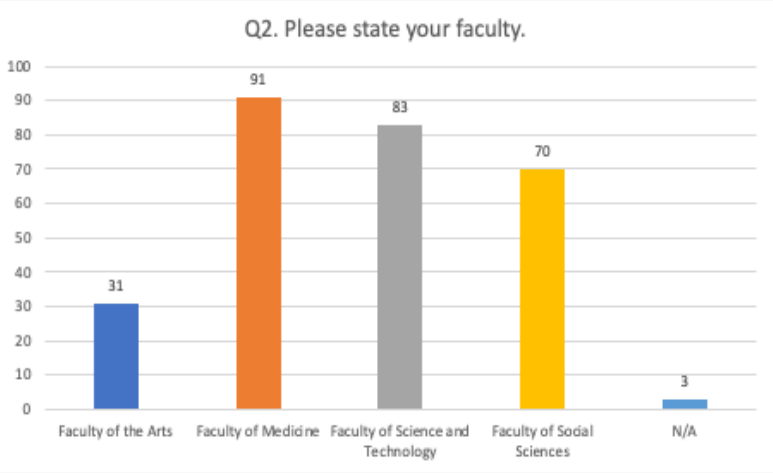
- Doctoral students should receive the rightful amount of overtime due to teaching duties taken up more time than usual due to the transition to digital teaching.

Prolongation

- It is Umeå University's responsibility to provide prolongation to those doctoral students which have been decided is in need for prolongation. If faculties do not have the funds to provide rightfully prolongation it is Umeå University responsibility to allocate funds to this. Umeå university should begin a discussion on the topic of funding prolongation with the faculties.

Introductory questions

There was a higher respondent rate from the Faculties of Medicine and Science and Technology, but these faculties also have a higher number of doctoral students. Most respondent have completed 20-50 % of their education. A small part of respondents answered that they have considering not finishing their doctoral studies, but most respondents have not considered it. Some respondents have considered pursuing another carer outside of the academia, but the majority have not considered it.



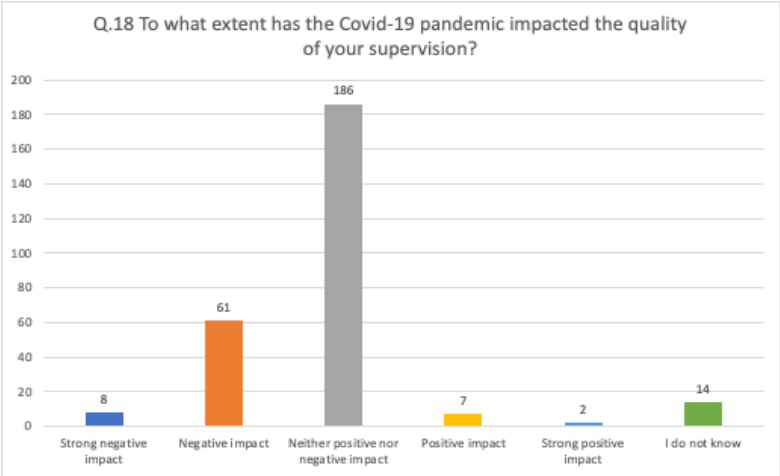
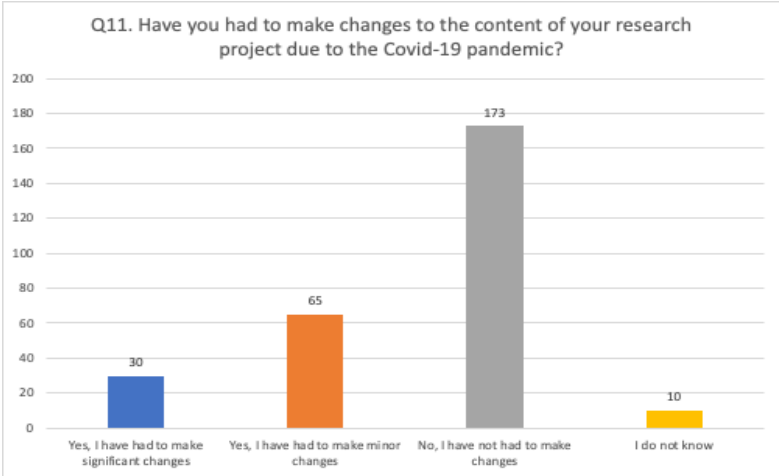
The impact on doctoral studies

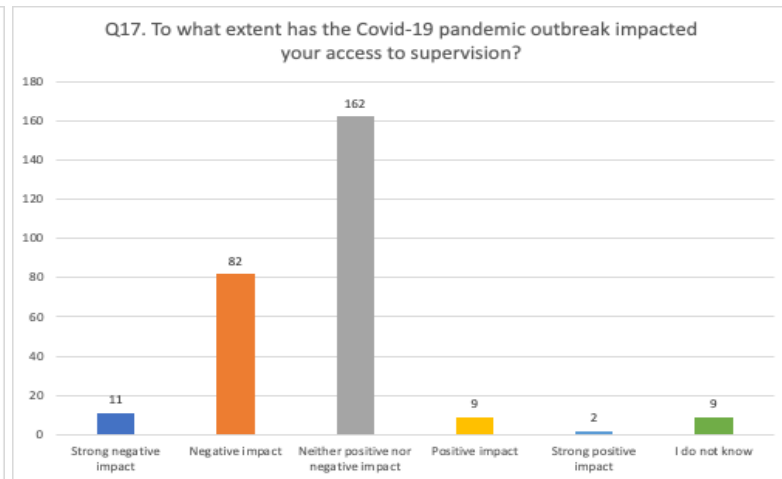
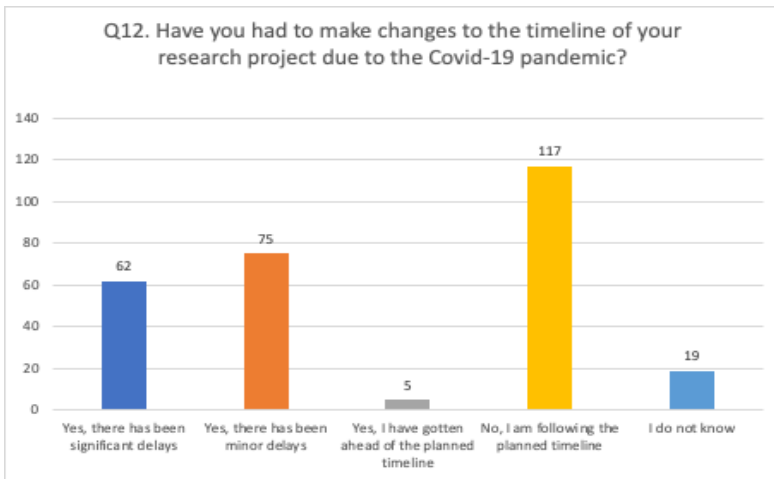
The following charts show that a predominate amount of doctoral student have experienced significant (62 answers) and minor (75 answers) delays in the timeline of their research project and have therefore been forced to alter the timeline for their research. 117 doctoral students responded that they are following their set timeline and 5 doctoral students responded that they have gotten ahead of their planned timeline. 19 doctoral students answered that they do not know.

Most doctoral students answers that they have not been forced to make changes to the content of their research project due to the pandemic. However, several doctoral students have been forced to make minor and or significant changes to their content of research.

Most doctoral students have experienced neither positive nor negative impact on the quality or access to supervision due to the pandemic. But there are more doctoral students that responded that supervision has been negatively impacted due to the pandemic then people responding that it has improved.

To conclude, one can ascertain that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on research project timelines, but supervision has not been negatively affected to the same extent. Most doctoral student have not made chances to their research content, but some have experienced the need to make changes. The fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing and that a predominant number of doctoral students have already been forced to make changes in their timeline, might be an indicator on the effects of the restrictions. Supervision still needs to improve somewhat so that it can be effective in a new set-up such as digital, and not be dependent on daily contact with the supervisor.

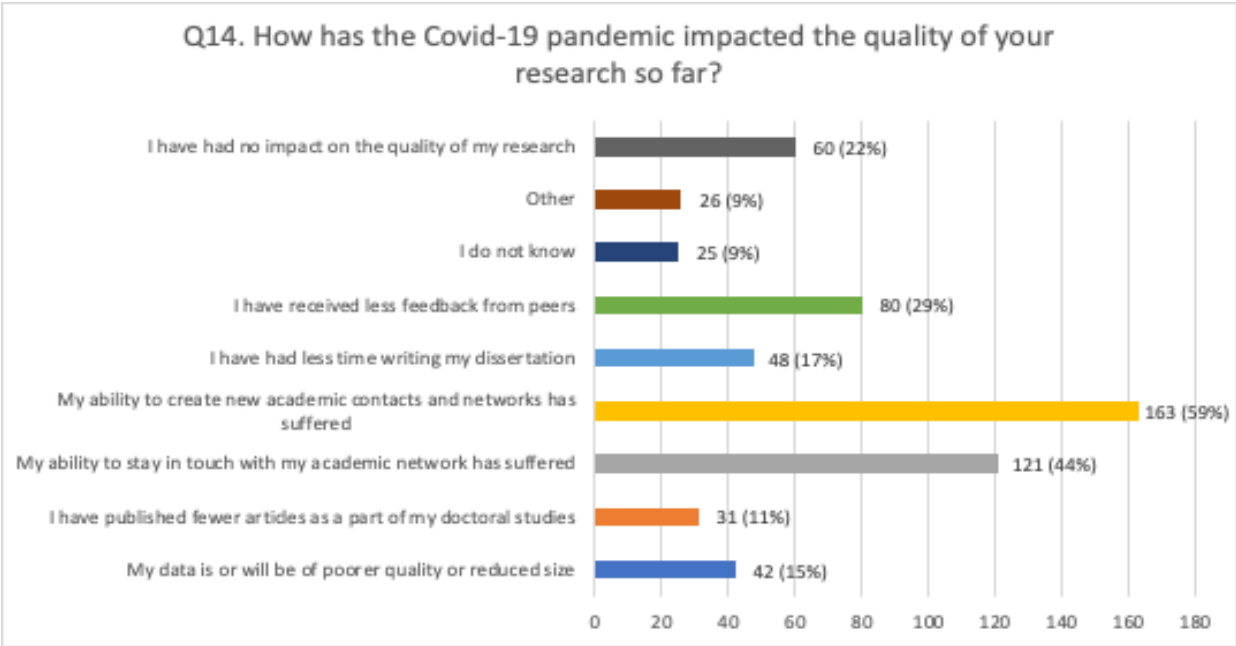
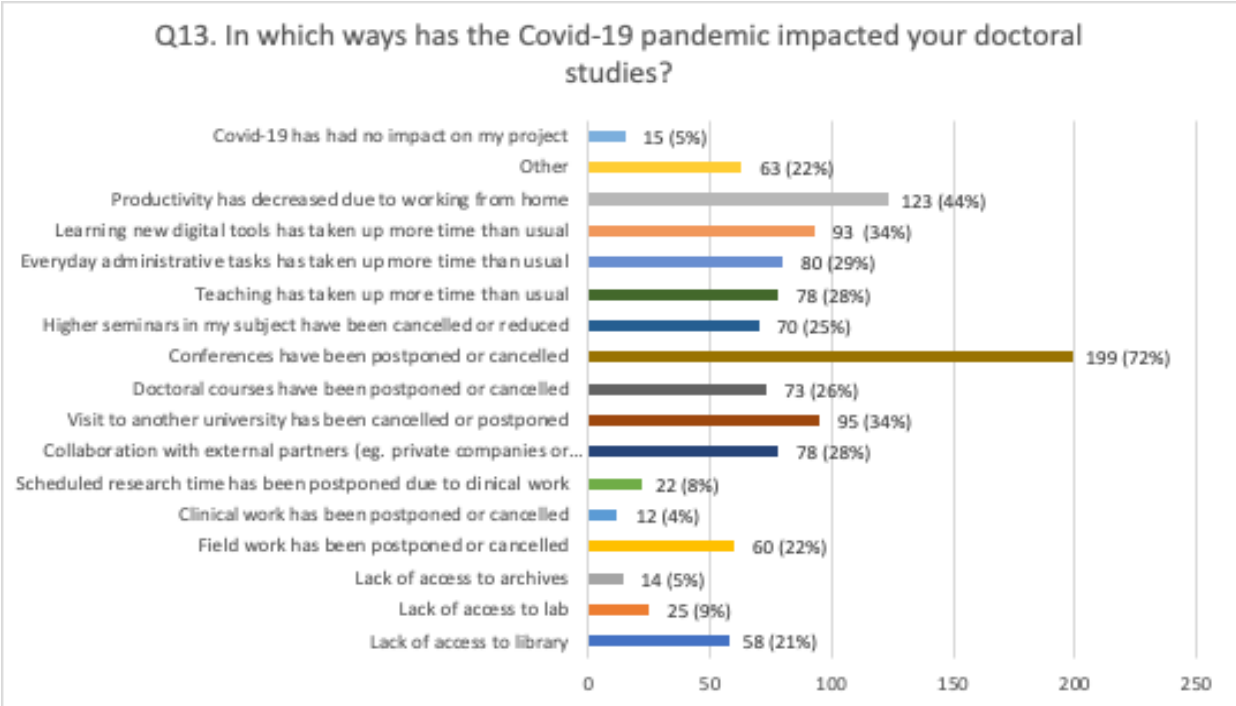




The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the work of doctoral students in different ways, as can be seen in the chart below. The most significant impact is cancelled or postponed conferences which 199 doctoral students have experienced. The second most frequently reported impact on doctoral students' studies is decreased productivity due to working from home while the third is postponed and cancelled visits to other universities. Many also respond that learning new digital media, administrative work and teaching takes up more time than usual.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted the quality of doctoral students' research besides the already mentioned effects on timeline and research content. The most common response was that the ability to create new academic contacts and networks has suffered. Many also respond that the ability to stay in touch with their academic network has decreased. Receiving feedback from peers have decreased for some.

To conclude, doctoral students have not been able to attend conferences or visit other universities while administrative work and teaching has taken up more time than usual. When it comes to how the Covid-19 has had an impact on the quality of research for doctoral students, one can see that a majority has experienced decreased participation in academic networks and difficulties creating new contacts as well as keeping in contact with already established academic contacts. Working from home and not being able to attend the workplace or conferences has had a major negative impact on establishing and keeping an academic network. To be in and experience an academic environment is a great part of the doctoral studies, and the pandemic has greatly affected the opportunities to do so. The adjustment to working from home has resulted in more time spent on teaching and administrative work which could have an impact on stress levels and time spent on research. Many of the things, such as delayed data inquiries and difficulties bringing research material home, can be seen in charts 13 and 14 are also stressed in the free text answers.



Problems related to specific faculties.

Almost half of the doctoral students at the Faculty of the Arts experience a greater lack of access to the library and archives than doctoral students of other faculties. Doctoral students from the Faculty of the Arts have experienced a higher frequency of cancelled or postponed doctoral courses than others. Field work has been postponed or cancelled to a higher degree. Administrative duties have taken up more time and experiences of decreasing productivity from working from home is in a somewhat higher degree than at other faculties.

Doctoral students at the Faculty of Social Science have experienced extra time-consuming teaching duties than normal compared with other faculties, more than half of the respondents said so. The ability to carry on with field studies has also affected doctoral students in Social Science to a higher degree, with them being either postponed or cancelled.

Doctoral students at the Faculty of Science and Technology have to a greater extent experienced a hindrance in collaborations with external partners as well as access to labs. Teaching has also taken up more time than usual.

Some students at the Faculty of Medicine have experienced, to a higher degree, scheduled research time being postponed due to more time spent on clinical work and administrative tasks.

Doctoral students from all faculties are united in their experiences of postponed or cancelled conferences, cancelled visits to other universities, and decreased productivity.

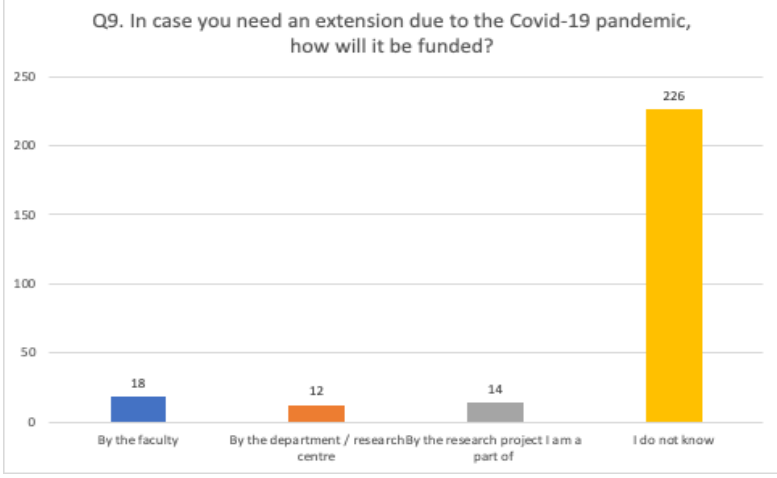
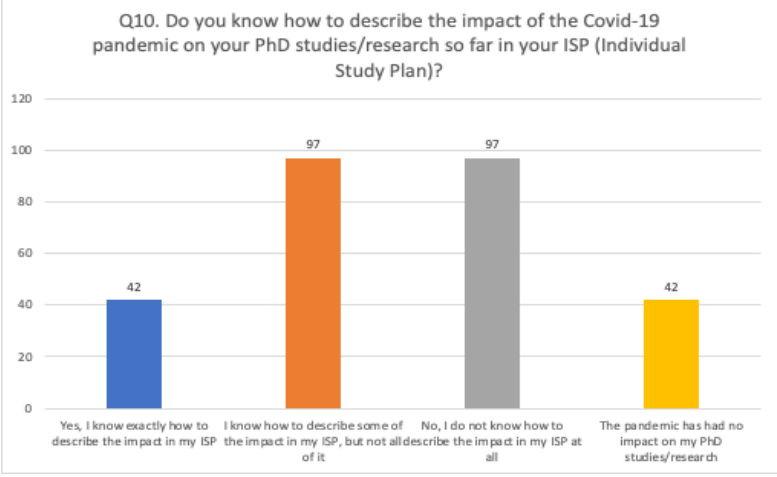
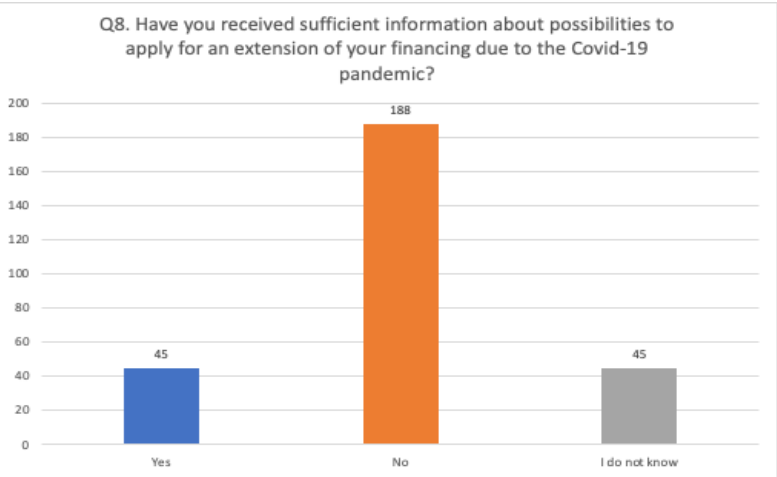
Information, prolongation, and the ISP

When it comes to information about possibilities to apply for extended financing due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a majority responded that they have not received sufficient information. A majority of doctoral students answered that if they would be in need of an extension that they do not know how it will be funded. When asking if the doctoral students knew how to describe the impact Covid-19 has had on doctoral studies or research in the ISP, most responded that they do not know, or to some extent do not know, how to describe it.

To conclude most of the respondents experience a lack of either instructions or information about how to describe the Covid-19 pandemic in their ISP. The insufficient information on the possibilities to apply for extension could be a cause of stress or uncertainty in the daily working life especially combined with not knowing how to describe it in the ISP. A doctoral student should not be worried over how a potential extension should be founded. If a doctoral student is in need of an extension as inquired from the ISP it is up to the faculties and University to provide the funds.

In the open question at the end of the questionnaire many specifically voice the lack of information from the university to doctoral students and its consequences, “The lack of communication regarding the situation for PhD-students from the university has also added stress”, and “It’s very stressful that the university don’t have any guidelines on what calls for prolonged time for PhD students.” These two examples summary the responses concerning information.

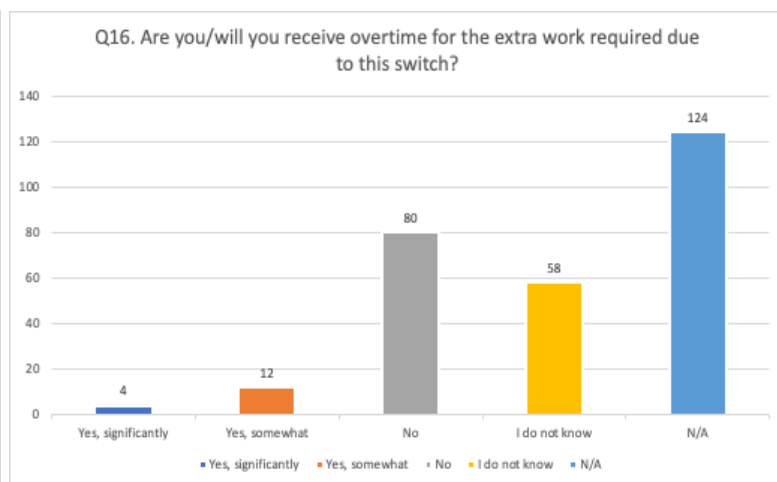
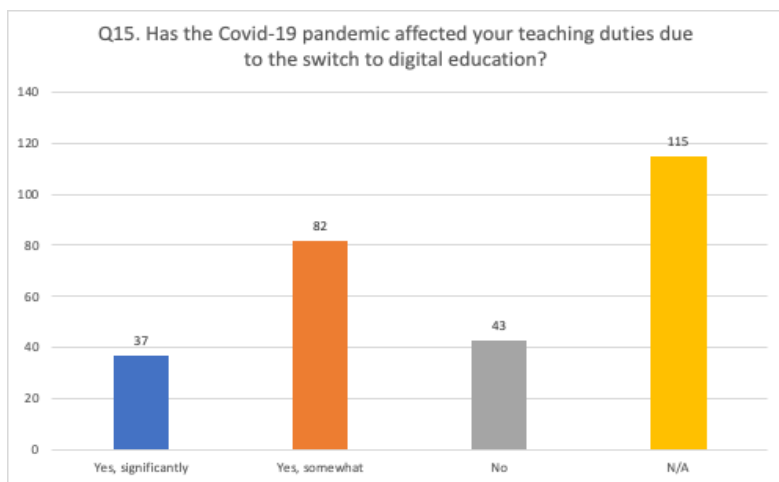
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Changes due to digital teaching.

On the question of whether the switch to digital teaching has affected the doctoral students' teaching duties most responded with N/A. But 119 responded that it has somewhat or significantly affected their teaching duties while 43 stated that it has not affected their teaching duties. A majority also responded that they will not or do not know if they will receive overtime for the extra work required due to the digital switch.

Not all doctoral students have teaching duties which explains the high number of N/A answers to question 15 and 16. But apart from that the switch to digital teaching has resulted in teaching requiring more time than usual as can be seen in graph 13. Everyone has, of course, been affected by the digital switch, but doctoral students as oppose to other teachers have a time limited employment. The increased time spent on teaching has therefore a significant effect on the doctoral students' workload.



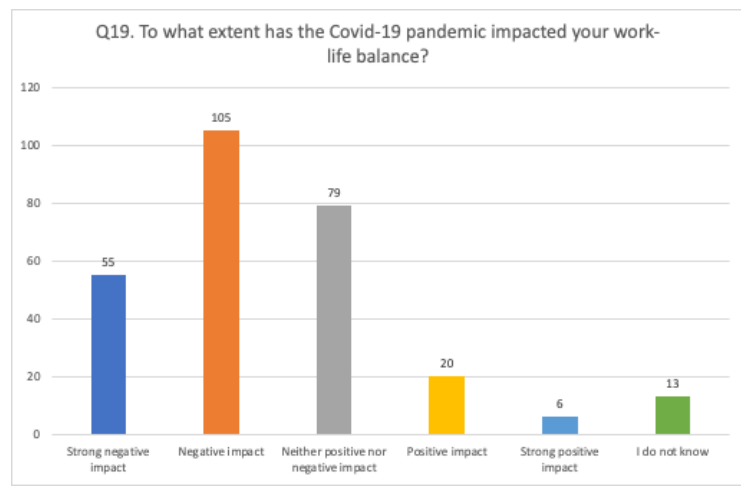
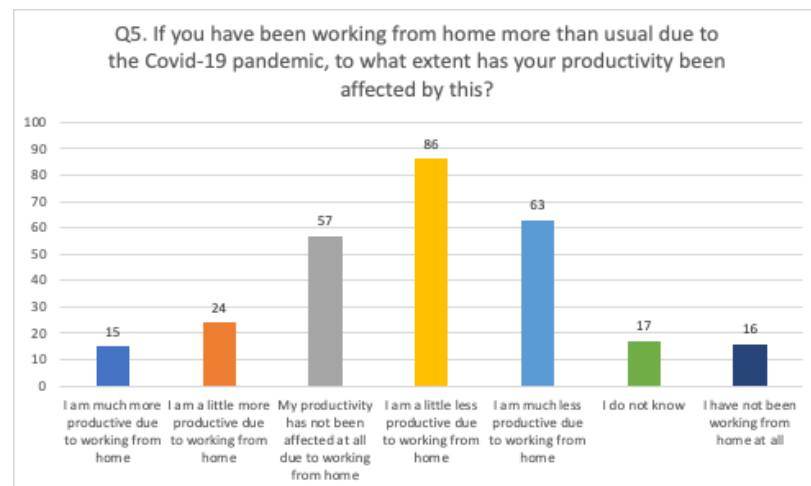
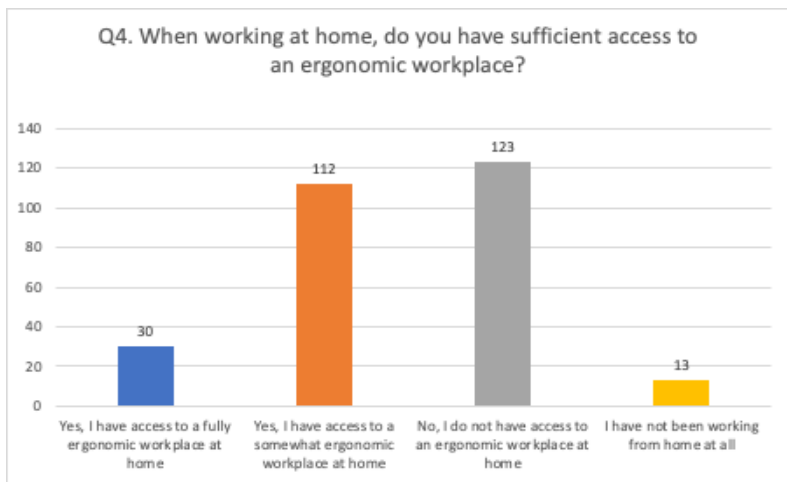
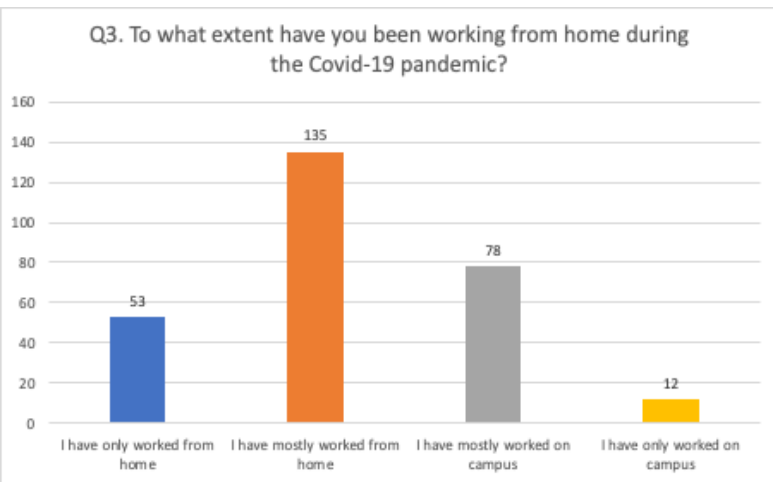
Working from home

Most doctoral students respond that they have mostly worked from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some answered that they have mostly worked on campus. Regarding access to an ergonomic workplace while working from home, the respondents are divided with a majority having some access to an ergonomic workplace. However, 123 respondents answered that they do not. On the question if working from home has affected productivity, most responded that it has. Predominantly the respondents answer that they are a little less productive. The impact on work-life balance have mostly been negative, but a part of the respondents answered with that it has not had a positive nor negative impact.

To conclude most doctoral students have been working from home and when doing so about half have had access to an ergonomic workplace. Due to working from home many doctoral students experience a decrease in productivity. One effect of working from home is the difficulty of separating free-time and work, especially if you live in a smaller place, which many doctoral students do. This can have an impact on stress levels or the ability to put work aside after working hours.

In the open question many responded that the increased need for VAB has affected the productivity, “The constant interruptions of workflow due to having to stay home to take care of kids with mild symptoms is also very stressful”, and “During the pandemic the kids were often not accepted in preschool due to "mild" symptoms. It is true that we could use VAB, but some deadlines do not wait.”

There are also a few of open question answers stating that working from home has led to a higher efficiency due to less travelling time. But there are also respondents saying that although they initially experienced a higher degree of efficiency, this has somewhat worn off during the extent of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Symptoms of stress

Concerning symptoms of stress many respondents answered that they have felt some of the symptoms they were asked about. Predominantly they have experienced difficulty focusing.

In the open question directly related to these questions many voice an experience of loneliness and lack of contact with colleagues or/and other people, “Not meeting people physically is challenging. Feeling alone at times and helpless”, “Feeling of depression due to the total lack of social contact”, “First and foremost, lack of inspiration due to lack of physical contact on campus and discussions with colleagues etc.” Many also voice the lack of an ergonomic workplace leading to muscle aching. Also, in the open question many voice a general concern for their well-being during the pandemic, expressing feelings of stress or anxiety in their daily life.

