

# PNN Monitor

INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP  
PHD CANDIDATES

With a contribution by The Young Academy





2023 Promovendi Netwerk Nederland

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the first detailed study examining the working and living conditions of international scholarship PhD candidates (ISPCs) in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has several PhD trajectories, which differ from one another in terms of funding and the candidate's employment status at the relevant institution. Approximately 3800 international PhD candidates receive a scholarship instead of a salary. While these candidates do similar work to employed PhD candidates, their financial compensation and employment benefits are considerably different.

Public data on the working conditions, experiences, and problems of international scholarship PhD candidates is scarce. To better understand the challenges and needs of this group, Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (PNN) conducted a survey between 20 March and 15 May 2023. PNN obtained data from 250 international scholarship PhD candidates in the Netherlands, approximately 7% of the total population of ISPCs.

The working conditions and experiences of ISPCs and their supervisors have been on the radar of The Young Academy [*De Jonge Akademie*] for many years as well. This report also presents the results of a survey that The Young Academy conducted between June and October 2018 focusing on the same group of PhD candidates and their supervisors.

The main findings of the PNN survey show an *urgent need for fundamental restructuring to ensure fair employment conditions* guaranteeing fair living and working conditions for all ISPCs in the Netherlands. Given the precarious situation of these candidates, however, PNN also makes several short-term recommendations for immediate action based on the findings presented in this report.

## Main findings:

### 1. The financial situation of ISPCs is alarming.

The vast majority of ISPCs who participated in the survey are worried about their financial situation and struggle to make ends meet. On average, our respondents' monthly income is 1,402 euros, with a median of 1,350 euros. Some scholarships are as low as 700 euros per month. A few respondents received a top-up grant (363 euros on average). The average scholarship is therefore significantly lower than the Dutch minimum wage (1,995 euros gross monthly salary in June 2023) and much lower than the average gross monthly salary of an employed PhD candidate at a university in June 2023 (which starts at 2,541 euros, increasing to 3,247 euros in the fourth year of employment). Many ISPCs would be unable to make ends meet without an additional income, which is often provided by their family or by undertaking other employment beyond their PhD work.

### 2. Scholarship and employed PhDs are treated differently, something that is not clear to many ISPCs before they come to the Netherlands.

Most candidates only became aware of such differences in working conditions after they started working on their PhD. Once they had become aware of the differences, the vast majority said they would have preferred an employed position.

### 3. The position of ISPCs is unclear. They are neither student nor employee.

The undefined position of ISPCs affects many important aspects of living in the Netherlands, including access to healthcare insurance, housing, and social-security benefits. Their position within the university leads to ambiguity regarding the allocation of facilities, budgets, and teaching and other duties.

### 4. Scholarship conditions differ vastly depending on the scholarship provider and the host institution, highlighting the lack of regulation.

While some ISPCs have side jobs in addition to their PhD work, others are prohibited from undertaking extra employment. Some ISPCs report not being allowed to teach to earn additional income, while others report performing teaching duties without this being part of their contract.

### 5. ISPCs face additional stressors – in some cases leading to existential problems – beyond completing a PhD.

A substantial proportion of scholarship PhDs do not expect to finish their PhD in the allocated contract time. Extensions are difficult, and in some cases impossible, to obtain. As their residence permit is tied to their guest agreement, ISPCs are under extreme pressure. Many experience their workload as high or very high. Additional difficulties stem from navigating a new culture and handling discrimination and occasionally racism. These difficulties affect their mental health, sometimes severely.

## Fundamental restructuring is essential for inclusive and fair academia

Dutch institutions currently have limited control over the scholarship conditions set by the various providers. **Rather than treating the symptoms (e.g., providing top-ups), then, what is required is a national solution to the root problem, specifically the way in which international scholarship programmes are embedded in Dutch academia.** PNN is not against foreign institutions awarding scholarships to individual PhD candidates, but believes that these scholarships should be paid directly to the PhD candidate's research institute. The institute can then hire the PhD candidate as an employee and use the scholarship to pay part of their salary, similar to the procedure when a researcher obtains a grant that they then use to hire PhD candidates. This practice will ensure fair financial compensation and basic employment rights for all PhD candidates.

### Short-term recommendations:

- **Institutions should offer a top-up** that ensures scholarship PhDs of a minimum wage at the very least but ideally matches the salary of employed PhDs. This would alleviate the financial pressure on candidates and their families, who often share the burden with them. In addition, formal sick and pregnancy leave agreements should be established as well as opportunities for extensions.
- **ISPCs need to be informed before being accepted into a doctoral programme about the differences between employed and scholarship candidates** in salary, employment rights, teaching obligations, access to facilities, and requirements regarding Dutch proficiency. The information should also include a reliable estimate of the cost of living in the Netherlands.
- **Guest agreements should be more standardised and comprehensive** and include the rights and responsibilities of ISPCs with regard to recommended working hours, holiday leave, training and supervision, teaching, budget, and contact information for support if they have questions about their situation.
- **In efforts to monitor PhD wellbeing and social safety, ISPCs** should come in for specific attention because they face more pressure than employed PhD candidates. Social safety for PhDs must be improved, with a particular focus on discrimination and racism. Institutions should guarantee that the social safety structures put in place for their employees also cover scholarship PhDs.

# SAMENVATTING

In dit rapport presenteren we het eerste uitgebreide onderzoek specifiek gericht op de werk- en leefomstandigheden van internationale beurspromovendi in Nederland. In Nederland bestaan verschillende soorten promotietrajecten, afhankelijk van de financiering en arbeidsrechtelijke positie binnen een instelling. Er zijn ongeveer 3800 internationale promovendi die een beurs ontvangen in plaats van salaris. Deze beurspromovendi doen in feite hetzelfde werk als promovendi met een dienstverband, maar qua financiële vergoeding en arbeidsvoorwaarden is hun situatie heel anders.

Er zijn nauwelijks algemeen toegankelijke gegevens beschikbaar over de arbeidsomstandigheden, ervaringen en problemen van deze promovendi met een beurs. Om meer inzicht te krijgen in de problemen en behoeften van deze groep, heeft het Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (PNN) een enquête gehouden, die tussen 20 maart en 15 mei 2023 kon worden ingevuld. PNN kreeg reacties van 250 internationale beurspromovendi in Nederland, ongeveer 7% van het totale aantal.

Ook bij De Jonge Akademie zijn de arbeidsomstandigheden en ervaringen van internationale beurspromovendi en hun begeleiders al jaren een punt van aandacht. In dit rapport wordt daarom ook ingegaan op de resultaten van een enquête die tussen juni en oktober 2018 door De Jonge Akademie is gehouden en op dezelfde groep promovendi en hun begeleiders was gericht.

Uit het onderzoek van PNN blijkt dat, om eerlijke leef- en werkomstandigheden te garanderen voor alle internationale beurspromovendi in Nederland, *een fundamentele herstructurering hard nodig is*. Gezien de precare situatie waarin deze promovendi zich bevinden, geeft PNN echter ook een aantal aanbevelingen voor de korte termijn, zodat er onmiddellijk een aantal concrete maatregelen kan worden genomen naar aanleiding van de bevindingen in dit rapport.

## De belangrijkste bevindingen zijn:

### 1. De financiële situatie van internationale beurspromovendi is zorgwekkend.

Verreweg de meeste internationale beurspromovendi die deelnamen aan de survey maken zich zorgen over hun financiële situatie en hebben moeite om rond te komen. Gemiddeld hadden de respondenten in ons onderzoek een maandinkomen van 1402 euro, met een mediaan van 1350 euro. Er werden beursbedragen genoemd van slechts 700 euro per maand. Sommige respondenten ontvingen een aanvulling (*top-up*) van hun beurs (gemiddeld 363 euro). Daarmee is de gemiddelde beurs aanzienlijk lager dan het minimumloon (1995 euro bruto in juni 2023) en veel lager dan het gemiddelde brutosalaris van promovendi die in juni 2023 bij een universiteit in dienst waren (beginnend bij 2541 euro en oplopend tot 3247 euro in het vierde jaar). Zonder extra inkomen, dat ze vaak krijgen van hun familie of via een bijbaan naast hun promotietraject, hebben veel internationale beurspromovendi moeite om de eindjes aan elkaar te knopen.

### 2. Promovendi met een beurs en promovendi in loondienst worden verschillend behandeld – wat voor veel beurspromovendi niet duidelijk is voordat ze naar Nederland komen.

De meesten werden zich pas bewust van deze verschillen in arbeidsvoorwaarden toen ze al begonnen waren met hun PhD. Achteraf gezien zou de overgrote meerderheid liever een dienstverband hebben gehad.

### 3. Internationale beurspromovendi hebben een onduidelijke positie: ze zijn geen studenten en ook geen werknemers.

De onduidelijke positie van internationale beurspromovendi heeft in allerlei belangrijke opzichten invloed op hun leven in Nederland, zoals toegang tot een zorgverzekering, huisvesting en sociale uitkeringen. Hun positie binnen de universiteit leidt tot onduidelijkheid over de toewijzing van faciliteiten, budgetten en (onderwijs)taken.

### 4. Afhankelijk van de beursverstrekker en de gastinstelling zijn er enorme verschillen tussen beurzen, wat het ontbreken van regels nog opvallender maakt.

Sommige internationale beurspromovendi hebben een bijbaan naast hun PhD, maar anderen mogen dat niet. Sommige internationale beurspromovendi laten weten dat ze niet mogen bijverdienen met lesgeven, terwijl anderen juist moeten lesgeven zonder dat dit in hun contract staat.

**5. Naast de afronding van hun PhD heeft deze groep promovendi ook vaak te maken met extra stress of zelfs existentiële problemen.**

Een aanzienlijk deel van de beurspromovendi verwacht de PhD niet binnen de duur van hun contract te kunnen afronden. Het is echter lastig of soms onmogelijk om verlenging te krijgen. Omdat hun verblijfsvergunning is gekoppeld aan hun gastovereenkomst, levert dit voor hen extreme druk op. Velen ervaren de werkdruk als hoog of zeer hoog. Bovendien moeten ze hun weg zien te vinden in een nieuwe cultuur en kunnen ze te maken krijgen met discriminatie en soms racisme. Al deze problemen zijn van (grote) negatieve invloed op hun mentale gezondheid.

## **Een fundamentele herstructurering is essentieel voor een inclusieve en eerlijke academische wereld**

Op dit moment hebben Nederlandse onderzoeksinstituten maar weinig controle over de beursvoorwaarden van de verschillende beursverstrekkers. **Dus in plaats van symptoombestrijding (zoals het geven van een aanvulling op de beurs voor een leefbaar inkomen) is er behoefte aan een structurele oplossing voor het echte probleem: de manier waarop internationale beursprogramma's zijn ingebed in de Nederlandse wetenschap.** PNN is niet tegen buitenlandse beurzen voor individuele promovendi, maar vindt dat deze beurzen bij voorkeur rechtstreeks aan de onderzoeksinstituten van de promovendus moeten worden betaald. De instelling kan de promovendus dan in dienst nemen en de beurs gebruiken om een deel van de salariskosten te dekken, vergelijkbaar met de situatie waarin een onderzoeker een subsidie heeft gekregen en daarmee een promovendus wil aanstellen. Deze gang van zaken zorgt voor een eerlijke financiële vergoeding en basale arbeidsrechten voor alle promovendi.

### **Aanbevelingen voor de korte termijn:**

- **Instellingen moeten beurzen aanvullen** tot ten minste het minimumloon, maar idealiter tot een niveau dat aansluit bij het salaris van promovendi in loondienst. Dit zou de financiële druk wegnemen voor de beurspromovendi en voor hun familie, die vaak bijspringt. Daarnaast moeten er formele afspraken worden gemaakt over ziekte- en zwangerschapsverlof en moeten er mogelijkheden komen voor contractverlenging.
- **Voordat ze worden aangenomen voor een promotietraject, moeten internationale beurspromovendi worden geïnformeerd over de verschillen tussen promovendi in loondienst en beurspromovendi** als het gaat om inkomen, arbeidsrechten, onderwijsverplichtingen, gebruik van faciliteiten en vereiste



beheersing van het Nederlands. Hierbij moet ook een realistische inschatting worden gegeven van de kosten van levensonderhoud in Nederland.

- **Gastovereenkomsten moeten meer gestandaardiseerd worden en uitgebreid** met informatie over de rechten en verantwoordelijkheden van internationale beurspromovendi ten aanzien van aanbevolen werktijden, vakantiedagen, opleiding en begeleiding, onderwijstaken, budget en een aanspreekpunt voor vragen over hun situatie.
- **Bij het monitoren van het welzijn en de sociale veiligheid van promovendi moet speciale aandacht uitgaan naar internationale beurspromovendi**, omdat zij meer druk ervaren dan promovendi in loondienst. Er dient te worden geïnvesteerd in de sociale veiligheid van promovendi, met name op het gebied van discriminatie en racisme. Instellingen moeten garanderen dat voorzieningen op het gebied van sociale veiligheid waar werknemers gebruik van kunnen maken, ook toegankelijk zijn voor beurspromovendi.

# FOREWORD BY THE YOUNG ACADEMY

Training PhD candidates to becoming independent scientists and scholars is one of the most important tasks of universities and research institutes. It involves educating the next generation of professionals who will contribute to society with their skills and knowledge from a variety of different perspectives. Training scientists and scholars is also a way of ensuring the advent of the next generation of university teachers, staff, and professors. Positive experiences during their PhD training can encourage them to invest a great deal of their time in building robust universities, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The PhD candidates of today form the community of researchers of tomorrow. They will decide how research is carried out and determine how it can be most reliable by questioning and redesigning policy, the rewards structure, and the culture. But above all, PhD candidates constitute a group of highly motivated (mostly young) people who wish to learn and grow, with high hopes for their own future and that of society.

In 2022 37,105 PhD candidates were affiliated with Dutch universities and university medical centres, thus forming a substantial part of the workforce of Dutch academia. These candidates are crucial for advancing research, for teaching university students, and for communicating about science and scholarship with various different parties within society. The Netherlands is one of the few countries in which a large proportion of PhD candidates are directly employed by universities or research institutes and are therefore on a temporary employment contract with full employee status and associated social security benefits. Dutch universities and research institutes are also very much internationally oriented, as becomes evident from the many scholarships provided by national governments or partner universities across the world for students to study here for their PhD. These allow ambitious scholars from all over the world to seek training in the Netherlands and to become significant members of the global network of science and scholarship.

In previous years, ample attention has been paid to scholarship PhD candidates because of a PhD scholarship experiment that enabled Dutch universities to also provide scholarships to PhD candidates irrespective of their country of origin (i.e. including the Netherlands). These candidates received a scholarship that was initially comparable to the salary of employed PhD candidates and with some, but not all, social security benefits. The experiment generated a great deal of discussion, with many people expressing disapproval of the inequality between scholarship PhD candidates and employee PhD candidates. The scholarship experiment did indeed lead to inequality because of the two types of contracts involved. What is often overlooked, however, is that universities not participating in the PhD scholarship experiment also allow there to be inequalities between PhD candidates. This concerns PhD candidates who come from abroad with a scholarship from their home country or institute, referred to in this report as International Scholarship PhD candidates (ISPCs). Inequality as regards salary and working conditions amongst ISPCs often varies to a greater extent than that between employee PhD candidates and PhD candidates participating in the PhD scholarship experiment. PNN estimates that some 3,800 candidates in the Netherlands fall within the definition of an ISPC. It is this group of knowledge workers who are the subject of the present report.

The working conditions and experiences of ISPCs and their supervisors have been on the radar of The Young Academy [*De Jonge Akademie*] for many years. Training ISPCs is of special relevance to researchers at an early, mid, or late stage of their career, who often depend on ISPCs for high-quality work and smooth PhD trajectories for the advancement of their research and career. In 2016-2018 we undertook a similar survey (yet to be published) to that which the PhD Network Netherlands (PNN) presents in the present report. In our frequent contacts with the board of PNN we discussed a proposal to publish our results as an addendum to their report, to comment on our joint observations, and to add our views from the perspective of the supervisors of the PhD candidates. That addendum can be found on page 58.

We hope this report can help prioritise reduction of the inequality between ISPCs and employed PhD candidates, as well as improving the working conditions for all of them. That is crucial for their wellbeing and should therefore be our number-one priority. Improving their working conditions and wellbeing is also in the interests of society in general, as well as of science and scholarship. It is a prerequisite for achieving the optimum training outcome and the best possible quality of research. We rely on the scientific and scholarly community to promote the interests of ISPCs and to ensure optimal working conditions for them.

Marie-José van Tol  
Chair, The Young Academy

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# INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands has a number of trajectories towards gaining one's PhD, differing from one another in terms of funding and the candidate's employment status at the relevant institution. The majority of PhD candidates are in an employment relationship, but about one in ten receive a scholarship instead of a salary. These "scholarship PhD candidates" are neither employees nor students. While considerable attention has focused on the working conditions and financial situation<sup>1</sup> of scholarship PhD candidates with a Dutch scholarship, little attention has been paid to the large number of such candidates with an international scholarship.

*International scholarship PhD candidates* (ISPCs) carry out similar work to employed PhD candidates, but under very different conditions. Their financial compensation is often much lower compared to a PhD salary, and their non-employed status means that these candidates often miss out on provisions and rulings to which employed PhD candidates are entitled. While awareness<sup>2,3</sup> of the precarious situation of these candidates has increased in recent years, public data on their working conditions, experiences, and problems is scarce. To better understand the challenges and needs of this group of PhD candidates, Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (PhD Network Netherlands, PNN) conducted a survey.

For the purposes of this report, we define international scholarship PhD candidates (ISPCs) as PhD candidates who do not hold Dutch nationality and who fall within the category "scholarship PhD candidate other provider" as defined by the Universities of the Netherlands umbrella organisation (UNL).<sup>4</sup> Indicators include: (a) the candidate does not receive a salary from the university, university medical centre (UMC), or research institute (or only a top-up grant); (b) the candidate has an

<sup>1</sup> <https://hetpnn.nl/kennisbank/persberichten-over-het-experiment-promotieonderwijs/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.delta.tudelft.nl/article/phd-candidates-scholarships-fall-between-cracks-they-are-beyond-vulnerable>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/chinese-onderzoekers-uitgeknepen-door-nederlandse-universiteiten>

<sup>4</sup> [https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Feiten\\_en\\_Cijfers/Typering\\_promovendi\\_2019.pdf](https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Feiten_en_Cijfers/Typering_promovendi_2019.pdf)

agreement to obtain a doctorate; and (c) the candidate obtains funding to pursue their PhD through a scholarship provider. In 2022, UNL registered 4,175 scholarship PhD candidates at Dutch universities and UMCs, but that number includes approximately 400 PhD researchers who are part of the Dutch PhD scholarship experiment. We therefore estimate that some 3,800 candidates in the Netherlands fall within our definition of an ISPC.

The survey was distributed online via social media, by PhD councils, and by various graduate schools at some universities. Graduate schools at UMCs did not proactively distribute the survey. The purpose of this report is to present the results of the survey, offering detailed insights into the demographics, PhD conditions, working conditions, immigration, financial situation, and wellbeing of this specific group. The report also presents the results of a survey conducted in 2018 by the Dutch Young Academy (De Jonge Akademie) that focused on the same group of PhD candidates and their supervision teams. Those results have not been published up to now but they provide additional insights that we believe will enrich the findings of this survey of international scholarship PhD candidates.

Based on the findings of these surveys, we make recommendations for improving the living and working conditions of ISPCs in the Netherlands. Fundamental restructuring is needed to ensure fair employment conditions. Given the precarious situation of these candidates, however, short-term measures should also be implemented urgently.

# METHODS

## Design

The survey consisted of a mix of questions addressing topics relevant to all PhD candidates, such as workload, wellbeing, supervision and finances, as well as questions addressing topics that explicitly concern ISPCs, such as immigration. Some of the more general survey questions were taken from previous PhD surveys by PNN or were prompted by earlier surveys by other parties.<sup>5</sup> Given, however, that this was the first national survey explicitly targeting international scholarship PhD candidates, many of the questions were drawn up from scratch.

The survey was constructed using LimeSurvey. Other than the confirmation of informed consent and selection questions at the beginning, none of the questions required an obligatory answer. This meant that participants were free to skip any questions that they preferred not to answer. Before distribution, the survey was tested extensively, both by PNN board members and a number of ISPCs.

Our target population consisted of international scholarship PhD candidates only. PhD candidates who were part of the scholarship experiment<sup>6</sup> [*Experiment Promotieonderwijs*] and who received their scholarship directly from the University of Groningen were therefore not among the intended survey respondents. To ensure that we only included respondents who were part of our target population, we asked five filter questions at the beginning of the survey. These are listed below, together with the possible answers. If a participant selected one of the answer options that are crossed out in the list, the survey was terminated immediately.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://hetpnn.nl/kennisbank/phd-survey-2020/>  
<https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/promovendisurvey.html>  
<https://open.overheid.nl/repository/ronl-6905b7e058e4b3b2cd0004e6d41e354aa5d34foe/1/pdf/eindevaluatie-experiment-promotieonderwijs.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat\\_en\\_vergadering/commissievergaderingen/details?id=2015A00635](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat_en_vergadering/commissievergaderingen/details?id=2015A00635)

- “Doing your research in the Netherlands, do you consider yourself to be an international PhD Candidate?” (Yes / ~~No~~)
- “Are you currently working on your PhD project?” (Yes / No, I recently finished (6 months or less) / No, I recently quit (6 months or less) / ~~No (none of the above)~~)
- “Are you a salaried employee at the University, University Medical Centre or research institute that you are affiliated with?” (Yes / No)
- “Do you receive a scholarship from the University of Groningen directly to conduct your PhD research?” (Yes / No)
- “Do you receive a scholarship to conduct your PhD research?” (Yes / ~~No~~)

## Informed consent

Before participating in the survey, all respondents were asked to give informed consent for doing so. Respondents were asked to confirm that they understood and approved the following statement:

*“I have been informed of the different parts of this study and know what this study is about. My participation in this study is completely voluntary. I can withdraw from participation at any moment, and this will not have any negative consequences for me. I give consent to the research team to analyze my answers for publications. Data from this study will be stored and analyzed anonymously. When data from this study are published, they will not be traceable to individual persons. I am aware that I can contact PhD Network Netherlands if I have questions or complaints.”*

If a respondent did not give their consent, the survey was terminated.

## Distribution

The survey could be filled in between 20 March and 15 May 2023. PNN distributed the survey link among its members, the local PhD organisations. These were asked to circulate the survey among the PhD candidates at their institution. PNN also actively promoted the survey on its social media channels (LinkedIn and Twitter).

On May 3, PNN sent an e-mail to all graduate schools for which it had contact details. In addition, The Young Academy sent a letter of support for the survey to Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Dutch Research Council (NWO), and all Dutch graduate schools. This greatly increased the response rate in the final two weeks that the survey was open.



## Response and completion

Seven hundred ninety-five people started the survey. After the initial filter questions, 310 respondents remained. Of these, 60 did not answer any of the content-related questions (i.e. any questions after the demographic questions). These people were excluded from all subsequent analyses, leaving a final sample size of  $N=250$ .

It is difficult to determine what percentage of all ISPCs completed the survey. As explained in the introduction, we estimate that there are currently about 3800 ISPCs in the Netherlands. We also allowed people who had recently gained their PhD to complete the survey, but their total contribution to the sample size was minimal (6 out of 250). We therefore estimate that approximately 7% of all current ISPCs completed the survey.

## Analyses and reporting

All analyses were carried out in the statistical programming language R by the board members of PNN. We will be happy to share our syntax files on request.

For each question we report the number of respondents who skipped it; this is because that number is in itself informative: sensitive questions may have been skipped more often. However, the percentages reported are relative to all respondents who answered a particular question, not with regard to the total sample size. For example: our total sample size is 250. If 50 respondents skipped a particular question and 100 responded “yes”, the “yes” is reported as ( $n=100$ , 50%) in this report, where the 50% is calculated as  $100/(250-50)$ . The number of respondents who skipped the question can be found in the main text, and often also in the corresponding figure.

## Data availability

Due to the sensitive nature of this survey, and the vulnerable position of ISPCs, we will not share the data with third parties, nor will we present any results that allow for individual participants to be identified. Parties interested in a particular research question not addressed in this report can contact PNN to discuss the possibilities for additional analyses.

# RESULTS

## 1. Demographics

### 1.1 General demographics

The majority of respondents were female ( $n=160$ , 66%) and 34% ( $n=81$ ) were male. Nine respondents skipped the question. The option “non-binary” was also available but none of the respondents ticked it.

Chinese PhD candidates are the most represented ( $n=135$ , 59%), followed by Indonesian ( $n=22$ , 10%) and Turkish ( $n=11$ , 5%) candidates. The China Scholarship Council (CSC)<sup>7</sup> is a well-known funder for ISPCs in the Netherlands; however the results showed a great diversity of nationalities represented in the sample. This can be seen better in Fig. 1, which displays the other reported nationalities.

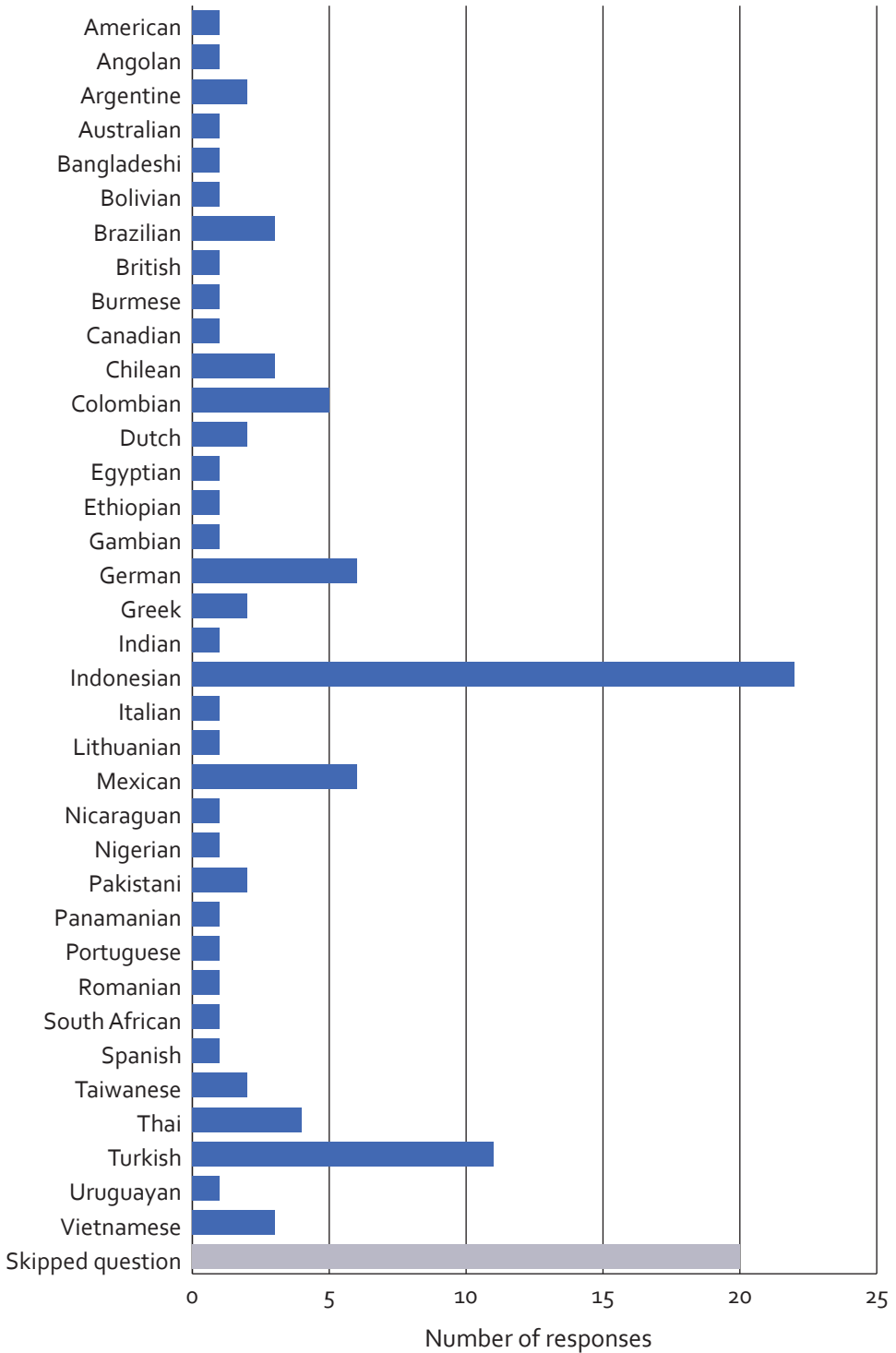
### 1.2 PhD related demographics

Based on the answers to the question “When did you start your PhD research?” and considering the closing date of the survey, the respondents were on average 34 months (i.e. almost three years) into their PhD programme (median of 29.9 months) with a standard deviation of 18 months, and a range from 0 to 90 months (i.e. 7½ years).

Of the respondents who answered the question “At what kind of institute are you doing your PhD?”, most ISPCs are doing research at universities ( $n=195$ , 78%), followed by university medical centres (UMCs) ( $n=21$ , 8%), research institutes affiliated with a university ( $n=20$ , 8%), independent research institutes (not affiliated with an university) ( $n=8$ , 3%), companies ( $n=2$ , 1%), and other organisations ( $n=3$ , 1%). One respondent skipped this question.

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<sup>7</sup> Several universities have a dedicated section in their webpages for the CSC programme, for example [Utrecht University](#), the [University of Groningen](#), the [University of Leiden](#) and the [University of Amsterdam](#).



**Figure 1.** Bar chart of the nationality of respondents (excluding Chinese).

Table 1 shows the response rate per university and UMC for the 216 respondents that are affiliated with a university or UMC.

**Table 1.** Number of respondents affiliated with every university and UMC in the Netherlands.

Institute employed	Response (n)	Response rate (%)
<b>Universities</b>		
University of Amsterdam	23	11%
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	18	8%
Delft University of Technology	14	7%
Eindhoven University of Technology	3	1%
Erasmus University Rotterdam	5	2%
University of Groningen	11	5%
Leiden University	33	15%
Maastricht University	11	5%
Radboud University Nijmegen	4	2%
Tilburg University	1	1%
University of Twente	8	4%
Utrecht University	10	5%
Wageningen University	42	19%
No response	11	5%
<b>UMCs</b>		
Academic Medical Centre Amsterdam	4	2%
VU University Medical Centre	2	1%
Erasmus Medical Centre	4	2%
University Medical Centre Groningen	1	1%
Leiden University Medical Centre	4	2%
Maastricht Medical Centre	0	0%
Radboud University Medical Centre	4	2%
University Medical Centre Utrecht	2	1%
No response	1	1%

The responses to the question “Within which domain do you carry out your PhD?” are distributed as shown in Table 2. Four respondents skipped this question.

**Table 2.** Number of respondents per domain.

Domain	Responses ( <i>n</i> )	Response rate (%)
Behavioural and social sciences	76	31%
Natural sciences	34	14%
Agricultural (life) sciences	33	13%
Engineering	28	11%
Medical sciences	28	11%
Humanities and linguistics	12	5%
Law	8	3%
Economics	7	3%
Education sciences	2	1%
Other domains	18	7%

## 2. ISPC conditions

### Main findings

- Most ISPCs have a training and supervision plan (TSP) (87%).
- The majority of ISPCs co-design their project together with their supervisor(s) (44%).
- Most ISPCs have a standard 4-year duration of their scholarship contract (97%).
- Most ISPCs believe that they can finish within the given time (54%); however a third expect they will not and others are not sure (14%).
- Of the ISPCs that need additional time to finish their PhD project, the majority need an additional 6-12 months (60%). Many do not know if they will be able to extend their guest agreement (42%) while a third are certain that it will not be possible. If they need additional time, many candidates must pay for it themselves.

#### 2.1. Project design and TSP

Of the respondents who answered the question “Who designed your PhD project at the beginning of your project?”, the majority responded that they co-designed the project together with their supervisor(s) ( $n=108$ , 44%), followed by respondents whose project was mainly designed by the PhD candidate ( $n=59$ , 24%), mainly designed by the supervisor ( $n=34$ , 14%), completely designed by the supervisor ( $n=17$ , 7%), and completely designed by the PhD candidate ( $n=18$ , 7%). Three respondents (1%) had their project designed by a national or international consortium and 5 respondents (2%) had it designed in another manner. Six respondents skipped the question.

When asked “Do you have a Training and Supervision Plan?”, most PhD candidates indicated that they do have such a plan ( $n=212$ , 87%) while a few do not ( $n=21$ , 9%) or do not know ( $n=11$ , 5%). Six participants skipped the question.

## 2.2 Contract duration and extensions

Of the respondents who answered the question “What is the official duration of your PhD project as agreed upon at the start?”, the majority have a standard duration of 4 years ( $n=237$ , 97%). Only 3 respondents (1%) have a 3-year contract, and 5 respondents (2%) have other agreements or no determined duration yet. Five respondents did not answer the question.

When asked “Do you expect to finish your PhD trajectory within the agreed time frame?” 59 respondents (24%) indicated “definitely yes”, 76 respondents (31%) indicated “probably yes”, 40 respondents (16%) indicated “probably no”, 39 respondents (16%) indicated “definitely no”, and 34 respondents (14%) were not sure. Two respondents skipped the question.

When asked “How much extra time do you expect you need to finish your PhD project?”, 47 respondents (60%) indicated that they need 6-12 months extra time, 18 respondents (23%) need 12-18 months extra time, 7 respondents (9%) need 18-24 months extra time, and 7 respondents (9%) need more than 24 months extra time. A total of 171 respondents skipped this question.

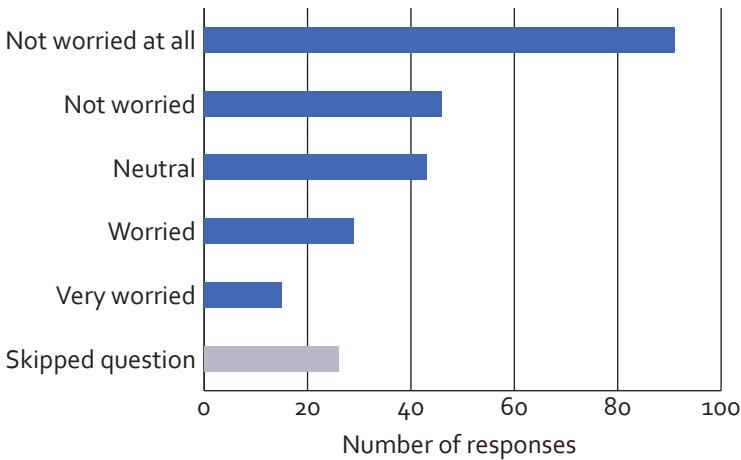
When asked “Is it possible to extend your contract/guest agreement if you do not finish your PhD in time?” most respondents ( $n=103$ , 42%) did not know, followed by 81 respondents (33%) who answered yes, and 59 respondents (24%) who answered no. Seven respondents skipped the question.

In response to the question, “Who will pay for the extension?”, most respondents ( $n=30$ , 38%) said they would pay for it themselves, followed by 21 respondents (27%) who will get financing via their funding agency, 8 respondents (10%) do not know, 7 respondents (9%) will get it via their employer or institution, 4 respondents (5%) via family and/or friends, and 8 respondents (10%) will have other means of funding such as arrangements whereby their funder pays half and so does the PhD candidate. One hundred seventy-two respondents did not answer this question.

## 2.3 Interim reports

Various media outlets have reported about PhD candidates having to write reports on their progress for their scholarship provider. We therefore included a question to determine the extent to which this occurs in practice. Most ISPCs who responded to our survey said they were required to provide interim reports or evaluations to their scholarship provider ( $n=199$ , 80%), 22 respondents (9%) responded “no”, and 29

respondents (12%) indicated that the question was not applicable to them. It should be noted that the survey did not ask about the content of such reports, and that provision of progress reports to funding providers is in fact common practice. When asked “To what extent do you worry that the topic you research or publication you wrote may have negative consequences for yourself when you return to your home country?”, most respondents ( $n=137$ , 61%) were not worried about negative consequences when they return to their home country stemming from their research topics/publications, 19% ( $n=43$ ) were neutral, 12% ( $n=29$ ) were worried, and 7% ( $n=15$ ) were very worried. Twenty-six respondents skipped this question. These results can be found in Fig. 2.



**Figure 2.** Bar chart showing how worried scholarship PhD candidates are about negative consequences related to their PhD research upon return to their home county.

### 3. Working conditions

#### Main findings

- The actual number of hours that ISPCs work is often higher than the number they are required to work. The majority of respondents (61%) have to work between 35 and 40 hours per week according to their contract or agreement. 39% do so, but 28% work between 40 and 50 hours, and 10% work even more than 50 hours per week.
- ISPCs do not receive much supervision. Thirty-six percent of respondents meet with their supervisor(s) between 3 and 5 hours a month to discuss their project (corresponding to about one hour a week); an even larger group (45%) receive less supervision than this.

- The vast majority of ISPCs would prefer an employed position (76%); only 10% prefer a scholarship. While ISPCs chose a scholarship position, many did not experience this as an active choice but rather as the result of a lack of alternatives.
- Before starting their PhD programme, most ISPCs are unaware or neutral as regards the difference between employed and scholarship PhD candidates (57%). After starting, almost all ISPCs are aware of differences (93%).
- ISPCs who are aware of the difference between employed and scholarship PhD candidates feel the financial situation of employed PhDs is much better than their own situation. Many ISPCs experience unequal treatment, not only financially but also with regard to recognition and feeling valued.
- The guest agreement, assuming it exists, does not always contain necessary information and agreements. This includes topics such as the expected working hours for successfully finishing a dissertation, access to facilities, and teaching responsibilities. ISPCs are often expected to teach, sometimes many hours a month.
- The unclear position of ISPCs as neither employees nor students affects many important aspects of living in the Netherlands, including access to housing, healthcare insurance and social security benefits, and can result in problems regarding residence permits.

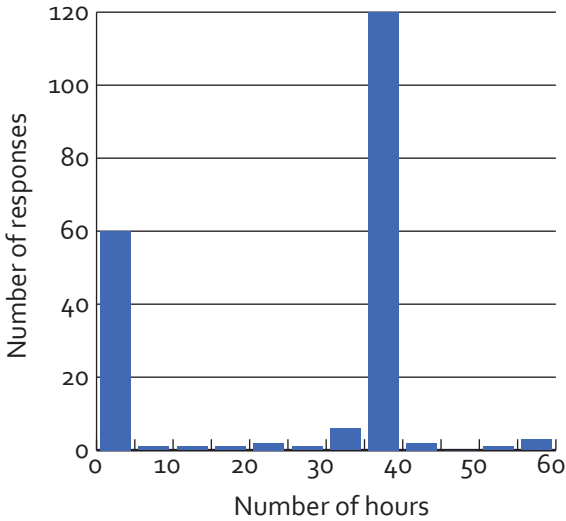
### 3.1 Working hours

Of the respondents who answered the question “How many hours per week are you supposed to work on your PhD project according to your contract or agreement?”, 61 percent ( $n=120$ ) indicated that they were supposed to work 35-40 hours per week. Six respondents (3%) answered more than 40 hours per week. Twelve respondents (6%) answered between 10 and 35 hours per week. Sixty respondents (30%) filled in a 0 (we suspect that their agreement does not specify an exact number or they do not know the exact number). Fifty-two respondents skipped this question. They may not have been aware of the exact number either. These results can be found in Fig. 3.

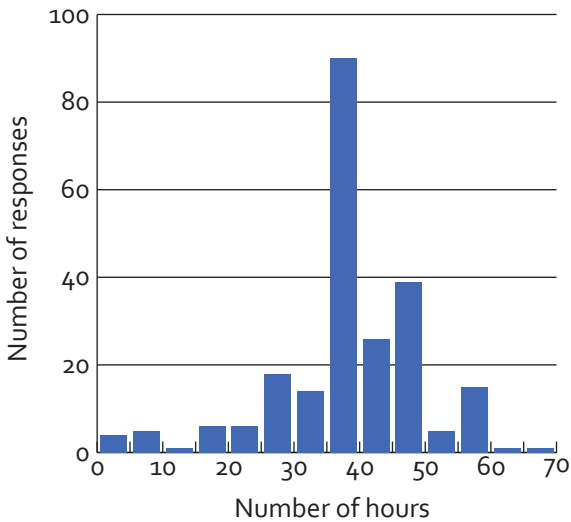
When asked “How many hours per week do you actually spend on your PhD research on average?” Ninety respondents (39%) answered that they work between 35 and 40 hours a week. Sixty-five respondents (28%) work between 40 and 50 hours, and 22 respondents (10%) indicated that they work between 50 and 70 hours. Thirty-two respondents (14%) work between 25 and 35 hours per week and 13 respondents (6%) work between 10 and 25 hours per week. The responses for the remaining 10 respondents seem unlikely: 4 reported that they worked 0 hours per week and an additional 5 specified that they worked fewer than 10 hours per week. One respondent indicated that they worked 400 hours a week, which is impossible and was thus excluded. Eighteen respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 3.



How many hours per week are you supposed to work on your PhD project according to your contract or agreement?



How many hours per week do you actually spend on your PhD research on average?



**Figure 3.** Histograms of the hours required to be spent on a PhD project according to contract or agreement (upper panel) and actual weekly hours spent (lower panel).

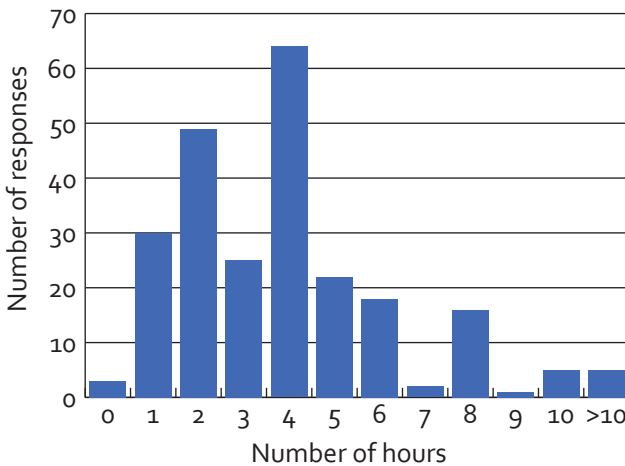
### 3.2 Supervision and go/no-go moment

The following responses were given to the question “How many hours per month do you meet with your supervisor(s) to discuss your PhD project?”:

- 3 respondents (1%) receive 0 hours of supervision a month,
- 30 respondents (13%) receive between 0-1 hours of supervision a month,
- 74 respondents (31%) receive between 1-3 hours of supervision a month,
- 86 respondents (36%) receive between 3-5 hours of supervision a month,
- 20 respondents (8%) receive between 5-7 hours of supervision a month,
- 22 respondents (9%) receive between 7-10 hours of supervision a month,
- 2 respondents (1%) receive between 10-20 hours of supervision a month,
- 2 respondents (1%) receive between 20-70 hours of supervision a month.

One respondent gave the improbably high number of 190 hours per month: this record was excluded. Ten respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 4.

How many hours per month do you meet with your supervisor(s) to discuss your PhD project?



**Figure 4.** Histogram of supervision hours per month.

When asked “Did you have or will you have a go/no-go assessment?”, 197 respondents (81%) indicated that a go/no-go interview would take place or had taken place. Thirty-two respondents (13%) indicated that this was not the case, and 13 respondents (5%) did not know. Eight respondents skipped this question.

### 3.3 Scholarship versus employed position

Respondents could select from several responses to the question “Why did you choose to do your PhD with a scholarship arrangement?”. The following reasons were selected:

- 124 respondents indicated that no other position was available,
- 91 respondents could not obtain an employed position,
- 25 respondents wanted to write their own proposal,
- 28 respondents liked the freedom it would offer,
- 60 respondents were not aware of other types of PhD positions,
- 40 respondents indicated their supervisor offered this position,
- 21 respondents responded to the “Other, namely...” option, as listed below.

A number of issues are raised repeatedly in responses to the “Other, namely...” option. Respondents indicated that they could not find a funded position; that they did not feel they would be able to get a employed position as a foreigner/non-Dutch speaker (“*Because employed positions are predominantly offered to Dutch-speaking candidate*”, “*Because it was recommended by my former supervisor [...] and seniors I know told me that international students have less opportunities to win contract position*”); that their supervisor had suggested they apply for a scholarship (“*The supervisors suggested to apply for the scholarship, and they told me they do not have money to support us. It seems to be the requirement to get the offer from them*”); or they did not try to become an employee because they were awarded a scholarship by the government or an institution in their home country.

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they preferred an employed position ( $n=184$ , 76%). Twenty-five respondents (10%) preferred a scholarship; 31 respondents (13%) had no preference. One respondent mentioned that they could not decide until they had tried both options. Nine respondents skipped this question.

As for perceived differences, most responses to the question “To what extent do you think that the following matters are better for employed PhD candidates or scholarship PhD candidates?” centre around “no difference”, with a slight skew towards the situation being better for employed positions, as shown in Fig. 5. This is the case for the themes *Education-research balance*, *Educational track*, *Research track*, *Scientific quality*, *Talent* and *Work-life balance*. For the *Independence* theme, there is a slight skew towards the situation being better for scholarship candidates. The only theme that clearly deviates from this pattern is *Finances*: the situation is perceived to be much better for employed candidates.

To what extent were you aware of these differences between scholarship and employed PhD candidates when you started your PhD?

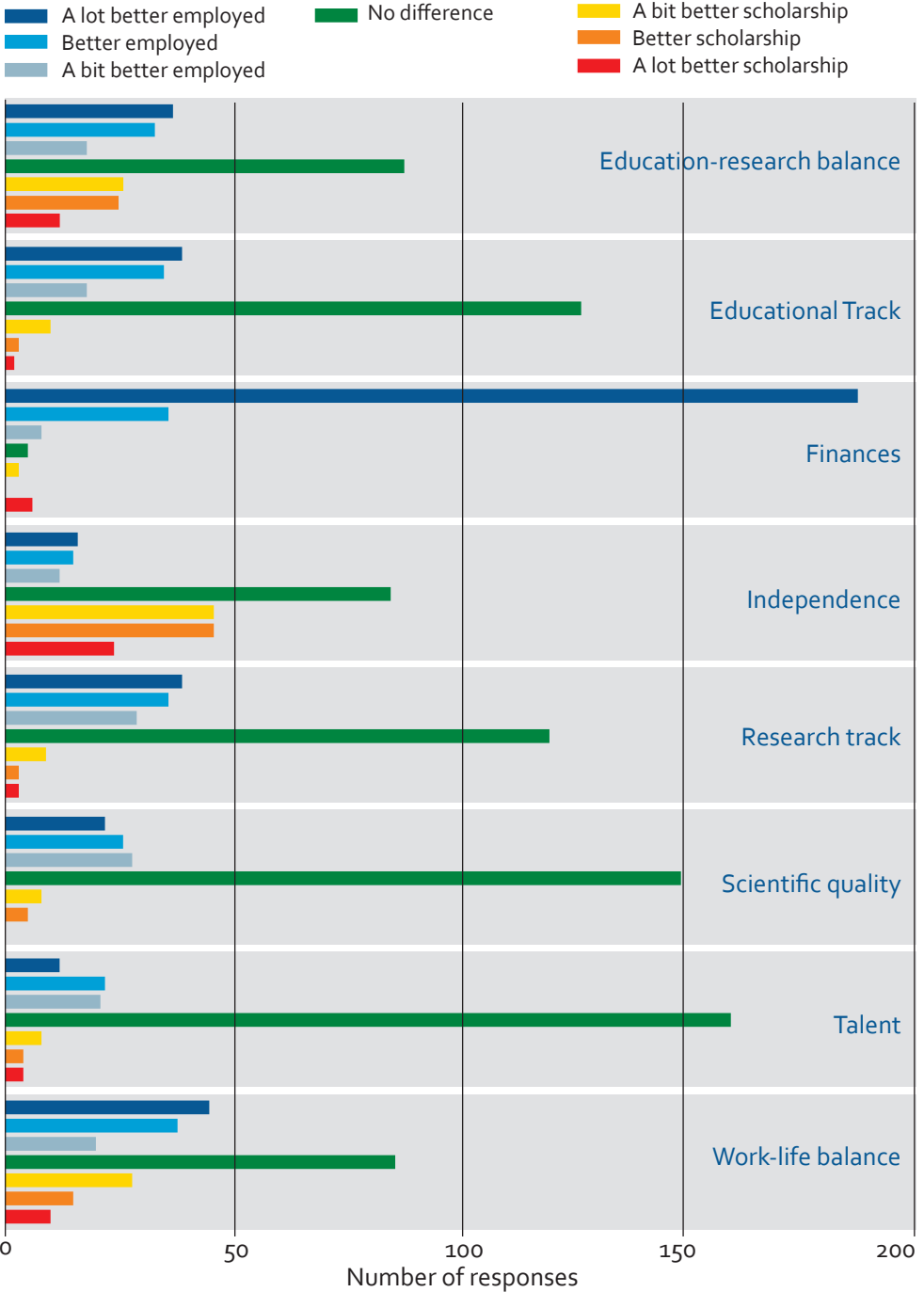


Figure 5. Bar charts showing the perceived differences between internal scholarship candidates and employed candidates.

As regards awareness of differences between employed and scholarship PhD candidates, the following responses were given to the question “To what extent were you aware of these differences between scholarship and employee PhD candidates when you started your PhD?”

- 53 respondents (22%) were very unaware of the differences,
- 42 respondents (17%) were unaware,
- 26 respondents (11%) were a bit unaware,
- 17 respondents (7%) were neutral,
- 50 respondents (21%) were a bit aware,
- 33 respondents (14%) were aware,
- 21 respondents (9%) were very aware.

Eight respondents skipped the question.

To the follow-up question “How aware are you now?”, respondents answered as follows:

- 9 respondents (4%) are very unaware of the differences,
- 3 respondents (1%) are unaware,
- 2 respondents (1%) are a bit unaware,
- 5 respondents (2%) are neutral,
- 23 respondents (10%) are a bit aware,
- 84 respondents (35%) are aware,
- 116 respondents (48%) are very aware.

Eight respondents skipped the question.

The responses to the open questions show a similar view: ISPCs criticise the lack of transparency and information before starting their PhD programme. Many ISPCs did not anticipate these issues when deciding to come to the Netherlands (*“I had no idea about this difference before coming to the Netherlands, if I knew I would have tried a position with another type of contract because I’m confident that I deliver more than what I’m paid for.”*) and feel taken by surprise (*“I also don’t like that sometimes the inequality is really hidden. Colleagues or even supervisors were not aware of them until I encountered problems.”*).

Many ISPCs report a lack of guidance at the start of their PhD programme, especially regarding integration: *“Particularly, [...] when I brought my family here, administrative tasks (registrations, many of them) really gave pressure on me. It was quite complicated.”*

Many ISPCs report coming up against a language barrier and would have preferred to be informed that Dutch language proficiency was required: *“People in the institution seem to interact with Dutch people and relatively ignore us, and sometimes they start talking in Dutch. We are also employees in the institute. Some of my friends*

*and I experience people asking/forcing us to study Dutch. The workload has been high. If universities don't welcome international PhD students and only want Dutch speakers, please make it explicit in official website and recruitment advertisement."* Many also mention wanting to learn Dutch but that they received no support for this.

Based on the qualitative responses, many ISPCs experience unequal treatment. This becomes apparent not only in their financial situation ("I do exactly the same work or even work more compared to my colleague but my income is 800 or 1000 euro lower than theirs. I feel inferior everyday"), but also with regard to recognition and feeling valued: "Coming here, to be stuck in a pandemic, making less than minimum wage [...] after all the effort of obtaining these grants [...] and not being able to afford a coffee with your colleagues or knowing that the only way to go back home in Christmas is that my family would help me financially is sad, humiliating (making between 4-5 euro/hour) and negatively impacts your mental health (all the worries for the financial situation) and in the end the PhD. Also, you need to consider that after 4 years of working in the country, we can't benefit from pension or unemployment and in general is difficult to apply for subsidies. That makes things harder once you need to finish your thesis and have no savings (or worse, debts). Scholarships should be encouraged, and institutions should cover the difference with other PhDs. It is also really depressing to work to the same extent that your colleagues and get 1/3 of the income. Sometimes I think what's the point...".

These two aspects are often also interrelated ("At times I felt like "cheap labor" for my supervisor."). A symbolic illustration of the low level of recognition that ISPCs receive is the absence of the end-of-the-year gift that employees receive ("Currently, the university have cancelled Christmas gift for us, which to me is totally confusing. Since we are also part of the research team and make the same amount of contribution as employed PhDs, it's not necessary to do that and it to some extent hurt our feelings.").

ISPCs also perceive unequal opportunities regarding their future career (in the Netherlands): "I find the differences between scholarship PhD and employed PhD not ideal for anyone. Sometimes I feel that employed PhDs and lecturers do not like it when they are burdened with huge teaching tasks while we are not. In the meantime, [we] worry that a lack of teaching experience makes us disadvantaged on the job market, and we suffer from worse financial situations for not teaching. Not to mention that I feel disposable at work when I'm irrelevant to most work talks and meetings. I once received valuable but harsh feedback in my yearly report that my research output does not seem sufficient considering that I do not teach. While I appreciate it that I need to work hard in my research, I find it slightly irritating that I'm judged for not teaching, not even by choice."

In the case of some scholarship providers, future career options in the Netherlands are categorically excluded in the first place (*"For Chinese scholar PhD, we have to be return to China and work in China 2 years that is in line with our agreement. We can choose to stay in other countries as postdoctoral for about an extra 2 years, but after the extra 2 years, we HAVETO be back."*).

### 3.4 Access to facilities

The answers to the question "Do you have access to the following facilities?" are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Response rates of the access to facilities.

	Access	No access	Uncertain
Library	225 (97%)	0 (0%)	8 (3%)
Printer	226 (95%)	6 (3%)	5 (2%)
Free coffee	223 (94%)	8 (3%)	6 (3%)
Workspace	219 (92%)	4 (2%)	14 (6%)
Computer	201 (85%)	30 (13%)	6 (3%)
University (medical centre) account	173 (75%)	27 (12%)	31 (13%)
Christmas gift	159 (69%)	49 (21%)	24 (10%)

### 3.5 Guest agreement

When asked "Do you have a guest agreement with the institute where you do your research?", 164 respondents (66%) replied that they have a guest agreement. 50 respondents (20%) replied that this was not applicable. Thirty-six respondents (14%) have no guest agreement.

Respondents with a guest agreement were then asked "Which of the following elements were clearly established in the guest agreement?". Table 4 shows the responses to that question.

**Table 4.** Overview of response rate for elements that are established in the guest agreement.

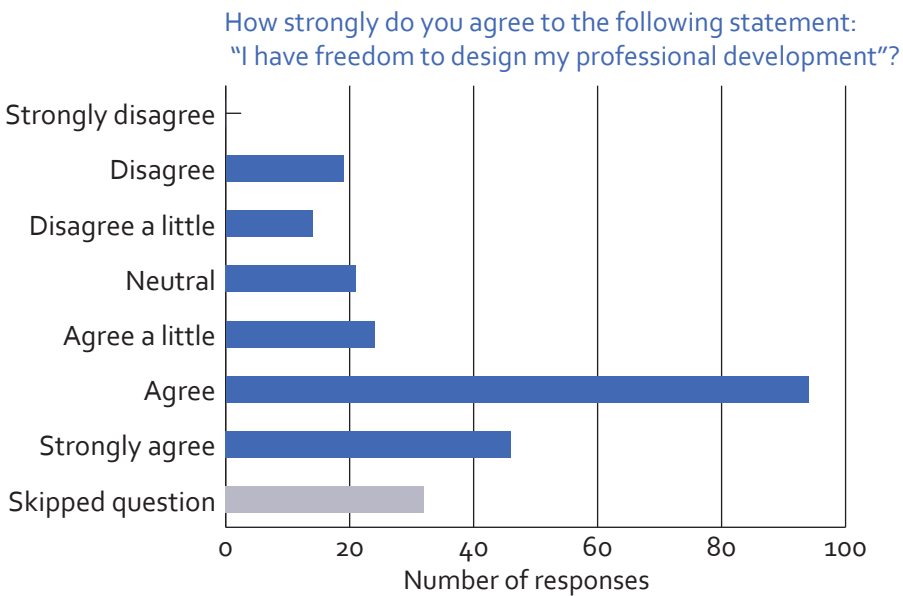
	Established	Not established	Uncertain
Teaching obligations	32 (22%)	79 (53%)	37 (26%)
Working hours	51 (34%)	64 (42%)	36 (24%)
Budget	53 (36%)	59 (40%)	34 (24%)
Access to institute facilities (workspace, gym, etc.)	91 (59%)	31 (20%)	32 (21%)
Library	96 (63%)	31 (20%)	26 (17%)
IT facilities	102 (67%)	31 (20%)	20 (13%)

### 3.6 Freedom

We asked the respondents whether they agreed with the following statements. To the statement “I have freedom to design my professional development” respondents gave the following answers:

- 19 respondents (9%) disagreed,
- 14 respondents (6%) disagreed a little,
- 21 respondents (10%) felt neutral,
- 24 respondents (11%) agreed a little,
- 94 respondents (43%) agreed,
- 46 respondents (21%) agreed strongly.

Thirty-two respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 6.



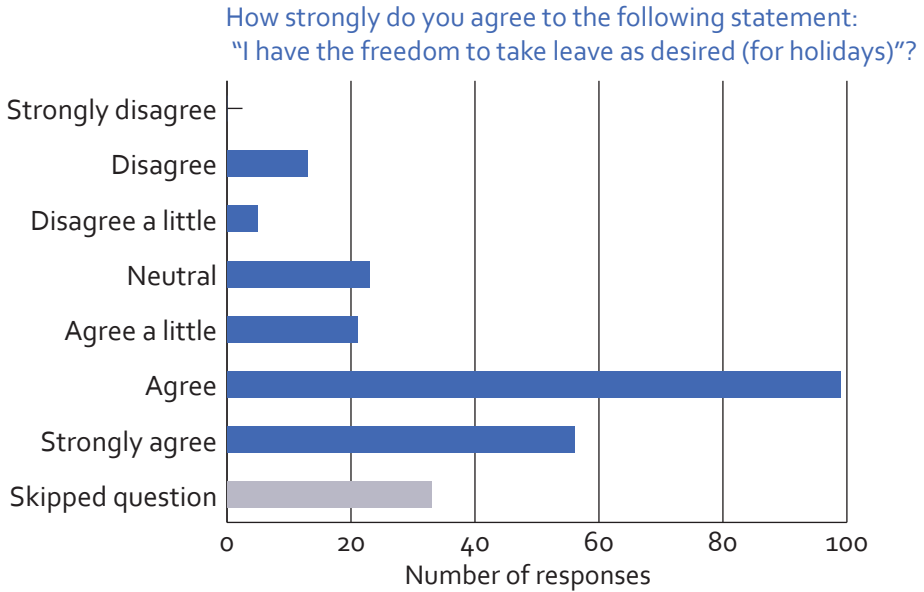
**Figure 6.** Bar chart showing the degree to which ISPCs agreed with the statement “I have freedom to design my professional development”.

To the statement “I have the freedom to take leave as desired (for holidays)” respondents gave the following answers:

- 13 respondents (6%) disagreed,
- 5 respondents (2%) disagreed a little,
- 23 respondents (11%) felt neutral,
- 21 respondents (10%) agreed a little,
- 99 respondents (46%) agreed,
- 56 respondents (26%) agreed strongly.

Thirty-three respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 7.

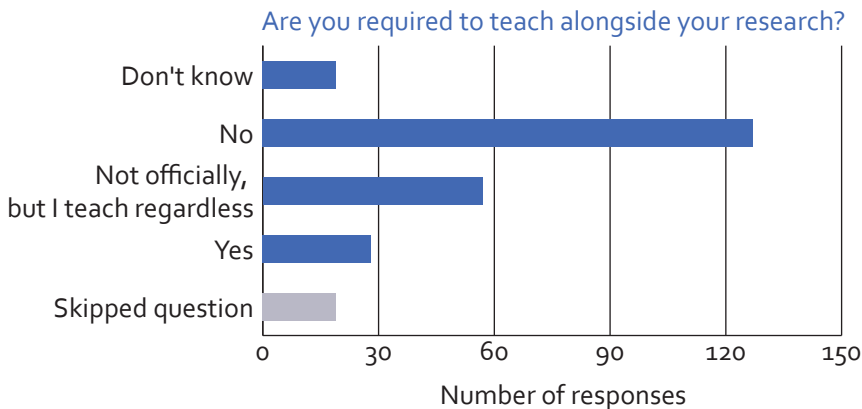




**Figure 7.** Bar chart showing the degree to which ISPCs agreed with the statement "I have the freedom to take leave as desired (for holidays)".

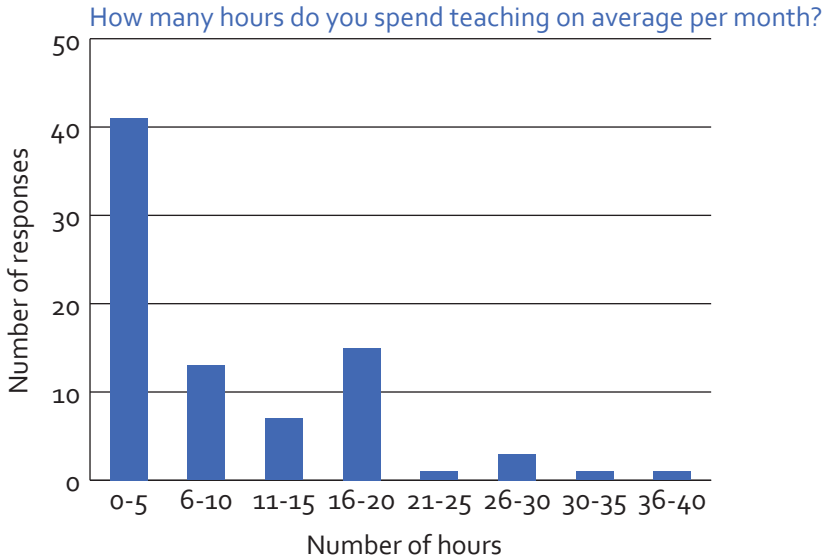
### 3.7 Teaching

When asked "Are you required to teach alongside your research?", 28 respondents (12%) replied that they have obligatory teaching responsibilities. The largest group, namely 127 respondents (55%) do not teach, while 57 respondents (25%) do teach although they are not required to, and 19 respondents (8%) do not know whether they are obligated to do so. Nineteen respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 8.



**Figure 8.** Bar chart of the extent to which ISPCs were obliged to teach during their PhD programme.

We asked the 104 respondents who teach “How many hours do you spend teaching on average per month?”, 12 respondents (15%) teach 20 hours a month. Seventy-eight percent of respondents ( $n=64$ ) teach fewer than 20 hours, with the bottom half, containing 41 respondents (50%), teaching 5 hours or less. Six respondents (7%) teach more than 20 hours, with 1 respondent (1%) teaching 40 hours per month. Three respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 9.



**Figure 9.** Histogram of the average number of hours ISPCs have to teach per month.

As regards the responses to the open questions, there appears to be considerable variation in ISPCs' experience, depending on the sponsor and also the Dutch host institution: *"[Regulations are] non-existent and without any actual information. You \*might\* have benefits, but they are never made explicit or concrete in a formal document. [...] Information and services differing between the university and the UMC also leads to ridiculous and unnecessary confusion. Even if I spoke fluent Dutch, I would still have to ask 50 different people 10 different questions each to find out what I'm entitled to, or convenient services and benefits from the organisation."*

Differences seem to be especially prevalent with regard to teaching duties, with some ISPCs being prohibited from teaching altogether and others being required to teach despite lack of compensation for it: *"Also I tried to look for a teaching assistant job at the teaching center of the university. But I was told that as a scholarship PhD I am not allowed to do such jobs to increase my income. This is clearly a double standard and unfair."* or *"Sometimes the faculty demands all PhDs to take on supervision of students and teaching involvement without any monetary compensation. However,*

*scholarship PhDs are sometimes making less than half the salary of employed PhDs and have to take on side jobs, being demanded to teach and supervise in addition to our research seems excessive if not abusive."*

Some ISPCs also appear to be prohibited from taking employment alongside their PhD contract ("*Legally, my sponsor does not allow me to take a side job, so I have to survive with what I got. Although it is a bit difficult, I am trying to keep my commitment to my sponsor not to take a side job as best as I could.*"), while others take jobs alongside their PhD work so as to make ends meet.

### **3.8 The formal position within the organisation**

It becomes apparent from the responses to the open questions that the ISPCs' unclear formal position is a major concern. Are they employees or students? ISPCs feel that their position is such that they do not fit into either category ("*My position is so in the middle. If it serves the purpose, I am treated as an employee, otherwise I am just a student. However, I am never a colleague.*").

They perceive that their position is interpreted in one way or the other depending on what is in the interest of the institution ("*I've been treated in a different way and cannot get any benefits because I'm not an "employee". But whenever the university (or the faculty) needs me, then I have to put my energy and efforts in because I'm a part of the university.*"), illustrating the potential for abuse of such a scholarship set-up.

From responses to the open questions, it becomes apparent that the unclear position of ISPCs – as neither employees nor students – affects many important aspects of living in the Netherlands:

1. **Housing** ("*The housing has been the main problem. I tried to switch my working place to my home country [...], of course, reducing the funds needed, but the grant institution said they could only pay the grant if I was in The Netherlands. Before this year, we could stay in the student studios from 550-600 euros with furniture, but they said we are PhDs and we are supposed to make more than the MSc, so we are not allowed to stay there anymore. Now, the lowest housing price that we have now is from 700-800 euros with no furniture. None of these issues were informed before applying to the PhD.*"),
2. **Residence permits** ("*We hope that the department could give us an additional fee for us because of the low scholarship income every month, and also it's not enough to extend our residence permit because it's lower than the request of the lowest income in the Netherlands.*"),
3. **Receiving benefits** ("*unable to bring kids along as just cannot get support from child care allowance or insurance allowance (nothing benefit for international students" or "It is usually considered that PhDs in Netherlands are employee where*

*as scholarship holders don't receive money as salary hence not an employee which is confusing sometimes. Also they don't have the benefits like employees e.g., 30 percent ruling since they don't pay any taxes.”),*

4. **Healthcare** (*“The university and our department HR advice us to take out student health insurances instead of getting Dutch healthcare insurance. However, the ambiguity in our employment status causes potential troubles in this regard. Sometimes the healthcare authority issue fines because they do not consider PhD with student insurance as properly insured. Sometimes Dutch insurance denies us because we do not pay income tax and do not have payslips. Many student insurances are not welcomed by Dutch Huisarts [general practitioner], and that results in some scholarship PhD students not registered for Huisarts.”*).

ISPCs with families highlighted the lack of support with childcare and parental leave: *“I think the institute or the government should consider the life of scholarship PhD families with kids, could be super hard if they cannot apply for the allowance to daycare. It will influence the working time and also give higher financial pressure.”* or *“The biggest challenge of being a PhD student with a scholarship, while also being a mom, is not entitled to childcare allowance. My partner is also a PhD student with a scholarship. Given the limited budget, we cannot afford childcare and therefore every day is a real struggle to balance the work and domestic roles.”* This sometimes has serious consequences, such as a partner and child having to stay behind in the home country.

ISPCs have difficulty finding housing. This is partly due to their weak financial position. They also report experiencing discrimination against non-Dutch speakers (*“extreme issues finding housing, discrimination for not speaking Dutch (e.g., response rate to my housing requests significantly increased when starting to write in Dutch)”*).

## 4. Immigration

### Main findings

- The majority of respondents need a visa to come to the Netherlands (92%) and they do not have to pay for it themselves (78%).
- As regards whether they meet the income requirement for a visa, there is a difference between those with a scholarship high enough to cover it (47%) and those without (38%). The majority of those whose scholarship amounts to less than the minimum income requirement receive financial assistance from their family (48%).
- After coming to the Netherlands, the majority of ISPCs shift from being “a little informed” (21%) about their residence permit rights and obligations to being “informed” (36%). Once in the Netherlands, however, there are still some

candidates who are “very uninformed” (3%), “uninformed” (9%) or “a little uninformed” (6%), adding up to a total of 18%.

- Forty-one percent of respondents state that they are satisfied with the help received from the immigration office, but some say that they are “very dissatisfied” (8%) or “dissatisfied” (4%).
- The majority of candidates come to the Netherlands alone (77%), but there are some who come with a partner (12%), with a partner and children (11%), or with a different companion or in a different situation (1%).
- Before coming to the Netherlands, most respondents already had a rental contract for housing (65%) and were therefore registered at that address with the municipality (81%). However 27% of the candidates did not have a rental contract and were registered with the municipality under a different arrangement.
- After arriving in the Netherlands, the ISPCs can register temporarily with the municipality at the address of the university (this was the case for 13% of respondents). Subsequently however, they must have a permanent address (for at least one year) or they will face a fine. Four respondents (2%) were not registered at all. This is prohibited by law and can lead to a fine.

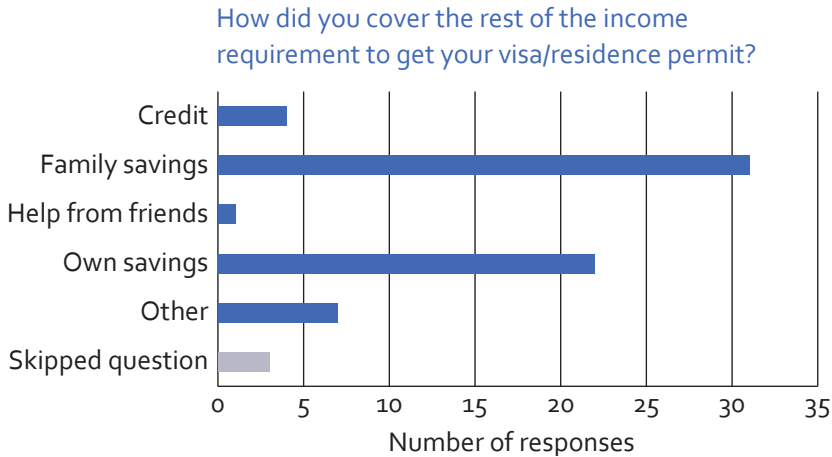
#### 4.1 Visa and residence permit

Answers to the question “Did you need a visa/residence permit to come to the Netherlands?” revealed that the majority of respondents needed a visa to come to the Netherlands ( $n=204$ , 92%), 17 respondents (8%) did not need a visa and 29 respondents skipped the question.

The remaining questions about a visa/residence permit were put to the 204 respondents who needed a visa/residence permit to come to the Netherlands. They were asked “Did you have to pay for the visa/residence permit yourself?”. Most respondents did not have to pay for the visa themselves ( $n=158$ , 78%), while the rest did have to pay ( $n=42$ , 21%). Four respondents skipped this question.

Eighty-three respondents (47%) answered “yes” to the question “Was your scholarship enough to cover the income requirement to get your visa/residence permit?”, and 68 respondents (38%) answered “no”. For some respondents this requirement did not apply ( $n=27$ , 15%) and 26 respondents skipped this question.

Those whose scholarship was insufficient ( $n=68$ ) were asked “How did you cover the rest of the income requirement to get your visa/residence permit?”. Thirty-one respondents (48%) covered the rest of the income requirement from family savings, 22 respondents (34%) from their own savings, 4 respondents (6%) with credit, 1 respondent (2%) with help from friends, and 7 respondents (11%) from other sources. Three respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 10.



**Figure 10.** Bar chart of how ISPCs met the income requirement for receiving a visa/residence permit if their scholarship was insufficient.

When asked “To what extent did you know the rights and obligations that come with your residence permit before you came to the Netherlands?”, respondents gave the following answers:

- 29 respondents (15%) were very uninformed,
- 34 respondents (17%) were uninformed,
- 20 respondents (10%) were a little uninformed.
- 26 respondents (13%) were not uninformed and not informed,
- 40 respondents (21%) were a little informed,
- 36 respondents (18%) were informed,
- 10 respondents (5%) were very informed.

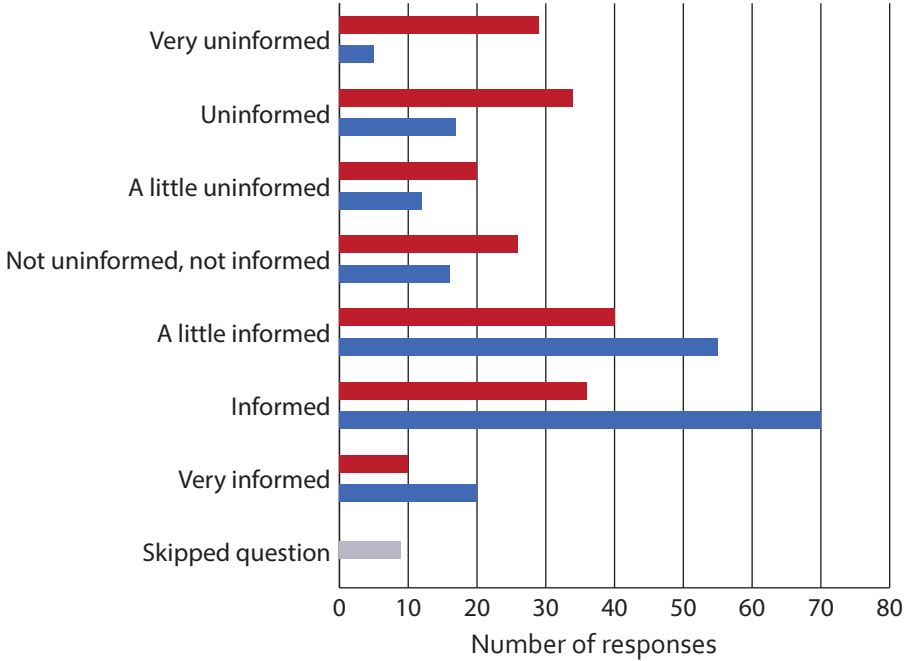
Nine respondents skipped this question. The results are shown in Fig. 11.

Similarly, the ISPCs were asked “To what extent did you know the rights and obligations that come with your residence permit after you came to the Netherlands?”. The answers were as follows:

- 5 respondents (3%) are very uninformed,
- 17 respondents (9%) are uninformed,
- 12 respondents (6%) are a little uninformed.
- 16 respondents (8%) are not uninformed and not informed,
- 55 respondents (28%) are a little informed,
- 70 respondents (36%) are informed,
- 20 respondents (10%) are very informed.

Nine respondents skipped this question. The results are also shown in Fig. 11.

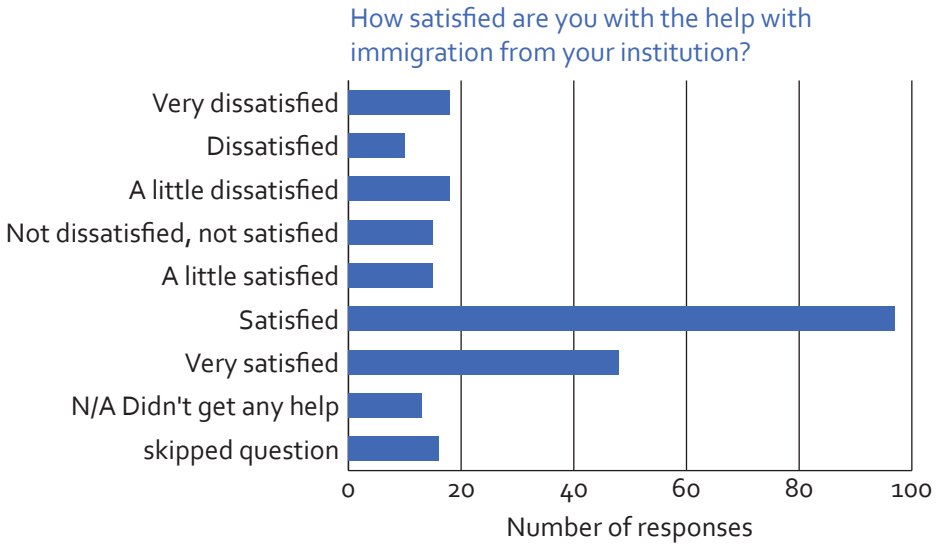
To what extent did you know the rights and obligations that come with your residence permit before and after you came to the Netherlands?



**Figure 11.** Bar charts of the extent to which ISPCs were informed about the rights and obligations linked to their visa/residence permit before (in red) and after (in blue) coming to the Netherlands.

#### 4.2 Help from institution

When asked “How satisfied are you with the help with immigration from your institution?”, 48 ISPCs (21%) were very satisfied with the support they received, 97 respondents (41%) were satisfied, 15 respondents (6%) were a little satisfied, 15 respondents (6%) were neutral, 18 respondents (8%) were a little dissatisfied, 10 respondents (4%) were dissatisfied, 18 respondents (8%) were very dissatisfied, and 13 ISPCs (6%) did not receive any help. Sixteen respondents skipped this question. The results can be found in Fig. 12.



**Figure 12.** Bar chart showing the level of satisfaction with the help received from universities for immigration matters.

ISPCs were also asked “How would you rate the help provided by your institution regarding housing, mental health, and integration?”. About *housing*, 37 respondents (17%) were very satisfied with the support, 58 respondents (27%) were satisfied, 34 respondents (16%) were neutral, 26 respondents (12%) were dissatisfied, 33 respondents (16%) were very dissatisfied, and 24 respondents (11%) did not access help from the institution. Thirty-eight respondents skipped the question. The results can be found in Fig. 13.



**Figure 13.** Bar chart showing the level of satisfaction with the help received from universities for housing matters.



As regards Mental health, 12 respondents (6%) were very satisfied with the help they received, 47 respondents (24%) were satisfied, 66 respondents (33%) were neutral, 24 respondents (12%) were dissatisfied, 11 respondents (6%) were very dissatisfied, and 40 respondents (20%) did not access help from the institution. Fifty respondents skipped the question. The results are shown in Fig. 14.



**Figure 14.** Bar chart showing the level of satisfaction with the help received from universities for mental health.

The final topic was *Integration*, where 21 respondents (11%) were very satisfied with the support they received, 58 respondents (29%) were satisfied, 59 respondents (30%) were neutral, 28 respondents (14%) were dissatisfied, 14 respondents (7%) were very dissatisfied, and 20 respondents (10%) did not access help from the institution. Fifty respondents skipped the question. The results are shown in Fig. 15.

Some responses to the open questions reveal a lack of support by the host institution for communication/arranging improvements with the scholarship provider: *"The health insurance funding, which specified in the scholarship contract that host institute is responsible to provide, has not been received. I have emailed relevant departments since last year, but this issue still has not been solved."* or *"I asked my institution (university) to send a letter to my sponsor explaining the current economic situation in the Netherlands to support my proposal for a living allowance adjustment. My university (international affairs) declined my request, and I received no response from the Graduate School."*



**Figure 15.** Bar chart showing the level of satisfaction with the help received from universities for integration.

### 4.3 Arrival

When asked “With whom did you come to the Netherlands?” 173 ISPCs (78%) responded that they came alone, 26 respondents (12%) came with a partner, 24 respondents (11%) came with a partner and children, and 3 respondents (1%) came with a different companion. Twenty-four respondents skipped the question.

The following responses were given to the question “How did you register yourself with the municipality (*gemeente*) after you came to the Netherlands?”:

- 187 respondents (81%) registered with their own address,
- 31 respondents (13%) registered with the address of the university,
- 6 respondents (3%) registered with the address of a relative/friend,
- 4 respondents (2%) did not get registered,
- 3 respondents (1%) had another situation.

Nineteen respondents skipped the question.

When asked “Did you have a rental contract for housing before coming to the Netherlands?” 162 respondents (65%) answered that they already had a rental contract for housing, 67 respondents (27%) did not have one, and for 21 respondents (8%) this was not applicable.

## 5. Financial situation

### Main findings

- The financial situation of ISPCs is alarming; they struggle to make ends meet. About two-thirds (64%) of respondents find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet with their scholarship alone. Another quarter (23%) find this a little difficult. A majority of 149 respondents (65%) are worried or very worried about their financial situation. An additional 57 (25%) are a little worried.
- The majority of ISPCs receive their scholarship from their home country ( $n=201$ , 86%). The median monthly net scholarship amount is 1,350 euros. Only 14% receive a top-up grant, with a median amount of 200 euros per month.
- Bench fees are encountered but are not really standard. About 24% of respondents indicate that there was a bench fee associated with their PhD programme, on average 10,349 euros. In almost all cases, the bench fee is paid in full by the body that finances the ISPC.
- Mostly, host institutes or scholarship providers pay for research, conferences, and courses. Nevertheless, some ISPCs either have to pay for these themselves or have no funds available for research (13%), courses (5%), or conferences (12%).

#### 5.1 Sources of income

When asked “Where does your scholarship come from?”, the vast majority ( $n=201$ , 86%) of respondents indicated that they receive their scholarship from their home country, followed by scholarships from an NGO ( $n=12$ , 5%) or from a country other than their home country ( $n=7$ , 3%). Two respondents (1%) receive a scholarship from a for-profit organisation and 11 respondents (5%) receive their scholarship from other sources (e.g. external organisations, European Union). Seventeen respondents did not give an answer to this question.

When asked “How much does your scholarship pay you monthly (net, in euros)?”, the median monthly net scholarship income indicated by respondents is 1,350 euros. The mean lies a bit higher at 1,402 euros, and the range is between 700 euros and 2,800 euros a month.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Six respondents indicated that their net scholarship amount was 0 or 1 euro per month. One respondent stated that it was 6,000 euros per month; we interpreted this as a misunderstanding of the question. These seven respondents were excluded when calculating any monthly income amounts, because they would severely skew the results, but their answers to other questions were included.

When asked “Do you receive any top-ups or other funds directly from your research institute?”, a few respondents replied that they receive a top-up grant ( $n=34$ , 14%). The median top-up amount is 200 euros, with an mean of 363 euros.

When asked “Do you use additional sources of income or savings to make ends meet?”, most respondents ( $n=197$ , 79%) said that they make use of additional sources of income such as savings ( $n=41$ , 18%), side jobs ( $n=27$ , 12%), and contributions from friends or family ( $n=58$ , 25%). Eighteen respondents (8%) indicated that they had additional income from sources other than these. Twenty-one respondents skipped this question.

Overall (including both scholarship and additional sources of income), the medium monthly net income is 1,600 euros and the average monthly net income is 1,740 euros. The range is from 1,000 to 4,300 euros.

## 5.2 Making ends meet

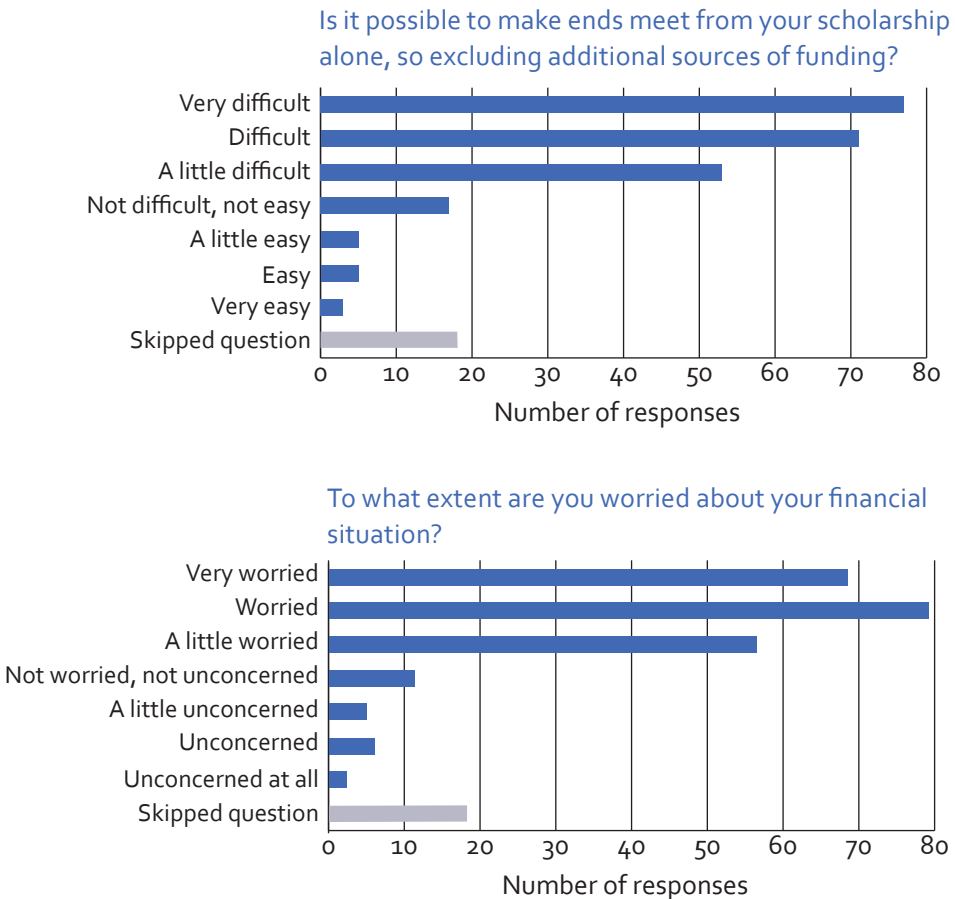
When asked “Is it possible to make ends meet from your scholarship alone, excluding additional sources of funding?”, most respondents said that they worried about making ends meet from their scholarship alone. About two-thirds ( $n=148$ , 64%) find this difficult or very difficult and 53 respondents (23%) find it a little difficult. All together, a majority of respondents ( $n=201$ , 87%) therefore find it difficult to make ends meet from their scholarship alone. A total of 13 respondents (6%) find it a little easy, easy, or very easy to make ends meet from their scholarship alone and 17 respondents (7%) indicated that they are neutral. The results are shown in the upper panel of Fig. 16.

Finding it difficult to make ends meet can cause financial worries and stress. When asked “To what extent are you worried about your financial situation?”, about two-thirds ( $n=149$ , 65%) say they are worried or very worried about their financial situation, and an additional 57 respondents (25%) are a little worried. A majority of respondents ( $n=206$ , 90%) therefore worry about their financial situation. Only 12 respondents (5%) are neutral. The remaining 13 respondents (5%) are not concerned and 19 respondents skipped the question. The results are shown in the lower panel of Fig. 16.

Responses to the open questions reinforce the conclusion that ISPCs experience difficulties in making ends meet. Many respondents state that they wish to be paid for additional duties that are not included in their contract, such as teaching. ISPCs themselves suggested several (short-term) solutions for improving their current situation:

1. Top-ups of the scholarship by the institution;
2. Providing lunch vouchers to scholarship PhD candidates;<sup>9</sup>
3. Providing reimbursement for public transportation;
4. Adjusting the scholarship for inflation.

PNN believes these suggestions illustrate the pressing need for financial aid. We see them, however, as merely tackling the symptoms rather than as a solution to the actual problem, namely the difficult formal position in which ISPCs find themselves, given the current situation regarding international scholarship programmes in Dutch academia.



**Figure 16.** Bar charts showing ability to make ends meet with the PhD scholarship alone (above) and the extent to which PhD candidates are worried about their financial situation (below).

<sup>9</sup> We consider this suggestion alarming because it shows that people struggle to pay for food.

### 5.3 Bench fee

A bench fee is a charge that institutes make for use of the facilities provided for PhD programmes. In the survey, we provided the following definition: “A *bench fee* is a payment to be allowed to do PhD research at the host institution.” While bench fees are frequently encountered, most ISPCs in our survey ( $n=120$ , 53%) said that they do not have to pay a bench fee. This was in response to the question “Does your academic institution ask you or your funding organisation to pay a bench fee for your PhD project?”. Fifty-four respondents (24%) indicated that their academic institution does ask for a bench fee. For 19 respondents (8%) the fee was waived and 32 respondents (14%) indicated that they did not know whether the academic institution required a bench fee. Twenty-five respondents skipped the question.

When asked “How much is the bench fee of your academic institution?”, the 54 respondents who indicated that their institution requires a bench fee reported a median bench fee of 10,500 euros and a mean of 10,349 euros.<sup>10</sup> The maximum bench fee reported was 48,000 euros. Of these 54 respondents, only 2 (<1%) indicated that they pay the full bench fee themselves. For those two respondents the bench fee was between 500 and 600 euros. One respondent indicated that they shared the cost with the body that finances them. For this respondent the bench fee was 13,000 euros.

### 5.4 Who pays?

When asked “Who pays for the following things, research activities/courses/conferences?”, the majority of respondents answered that all three activities were mostly paid for by the host institute. See Table 5 for detailed results per category.

**Table 5.** Who pays for the following activities?

Who pays?	Research activities	Courses	Conferences
Host institute	135 (62%)	165 (76%)	149 (68%)
Scholarship provider	44 (20%)	36 (17%)	38 (17%)
Own funds or income	12 (6%)	4 (2%)	13 (6%)
Nobody, unavailable to me	17 (8%)	6 (3%)	12 (6%)
Other sources	10 (5%)	5 (2%)	6 (3%)

Based on responses to the open questions, ISPCs face issues related to their budget for research and education. Due to their unclear formal position, it is often also unclear who is responsible for covering research and education costs, which sometimes results in a complete absence of funds for this (“*In principle, my first supervisor (from the host university) is supposed to cover research costs (e.g.,*

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that 2 respondents indicated that their bench was less than 100 euros. Eight respondents skipped this question.

*recruitment-related, data collection) and conferences, however, they do not have or provide the funds required to cover this.”).*

It becomes apparent from the responses of ISPCs to our survey questions that there are major differences between departments or even research groups. Some departments or groups attempt to remedy the shortcomings of the scholarship contracts and find individual solutions: *“Funding for different activities during the PhD (research activities, courses, conferences) actually came from a variety of sources, with some conference expenses and courses paid by my department and some via scholarship funds. Same for different research activities, some of which were covered with scholarship funds, some with research grants my supervisor and I applied for. The survey question related to this did not allow for answers that indicate the creativity we sometimes need to make funding for these kinds of activities work.”.*

The financial compensation paid to ISPCs is a particularly pressing issue. Not only does the low payment lead to a feeling of being undervalued but many ISPCs earn too little money to make ends meet (*“Monthly fixed expenses [...] are more than 75% of my monthly income”*). Their income increasingly fails to meet national requirements (*“We hope that the department could give us an additional fee for us because of the low scholarship income every month, and also it’s not enough to extend our residence permit because it’s lower than the request of the lowest income in the Netherlands.”*).

## 6. ISPCs’ wellbeing

### Main findings

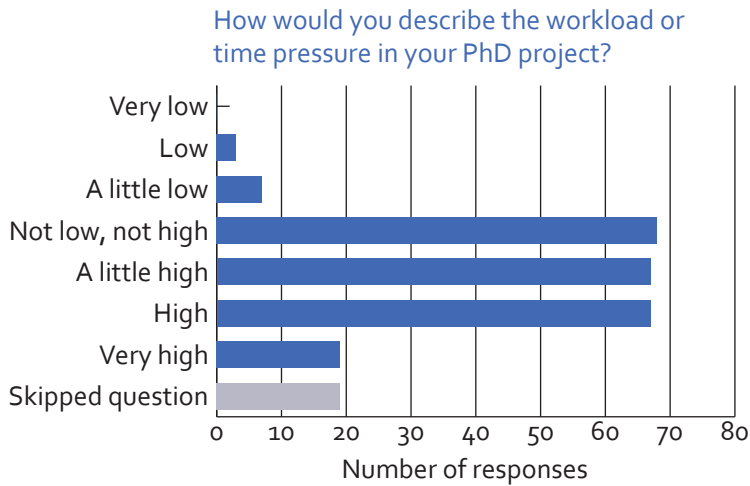
- More than a quarter of ISPCs (26%) rate their mental health as poor or very poor.
- Two-thirds of ISPCs rate their workload as high or very high and only 4% as low or very low.
- Many ISPCs report that they experience discrimination, racism, and unequal treatment.
- On average, ISPCs give their PhD trajectory a 6.42 (SD=1.55) with most respondents giving it a 6 or a 7.
- Almost half of respondents (44%) consider quitting their PhD programme, at least sometimes. Some ISPCs report that they cannot quit without significant financial consequences.

#### 6.1 Mental health

When asked “How would you rate your general mental health?”, most ISPCs rated it as “Not poor, not good” ( $n=83$ , 36%), or “Good” ( $n=71$ , 31%). Nevertheless, a

substantial proportion rated it “Poor” ( $n=52$ , 22%) or “Very poor” ( $n=9$ , 4%). Only 17 (7%) rated their mental health as “Very good”. In other words, more than a quarter of responding ISPCs rated their mental health as poor. Eighteen respondents skipped this question.

Workload appears to be a major issue. When asked “How would you describe the workload or time pressure in your PhD project?”, two-thirds of responding ISPCs considered their workload to be high or very high, a few found it low or very low ( $n=10$ , 4%), and 29% of respondents ( $n=68$ ) found it just right (see Fig. 17). Nineteen respondents skipped this question.



**Figure 17.** Bar chart of responses to the question about workload.

## 6.2 Social safety

When asked “Did you experience any kind of harassment at the workplace?” most ISPCs ( $n=187$ , 75%) reported that they had not experienced any form of harassment. The following forms of harassment were reported<sup>11</sup>:

- 8 respondents (3%) reported bullying,
- 2 respondents (1%) reported scientific integrity violations,
- 3 respondents (1%) reported sexual harassment,
- 38 respondents (15%) reported discrimination.

The responses to the open questions highlight unequal treatment linked to cultural discrimination. This is often language-based (*“The institute didn’t make enough effort to get to know international PhDs’ situations. We were excluded from some meetings/*

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that it was possible to select yes or no per option; percentages were calculated in relation to the total number of respondents ( $N=250$ ).



*events as they were in Dutch. A lot of emails from the institute were in Dutch so we missed quite some (important) emails. They didn't consider the necessity of English emails for the small amount of non-Dutch PhDs."*

Scholarship PhD candidates also felt isolated and discriminated in other contexts too. Most respondents are from Asia, and some noted specifically feeling isolated and discriminated against due to their ethnicity: *"The managers of the university (not the department) have systematic discrimination against the Chinese. They claim they cannot help students from China ("this kind of country with the human rights issue" they said). But they are still receiving students from China"* or *"I have experienced serious racial discrimination as I am Asian. I reported it but the university in the end could not do anything."*

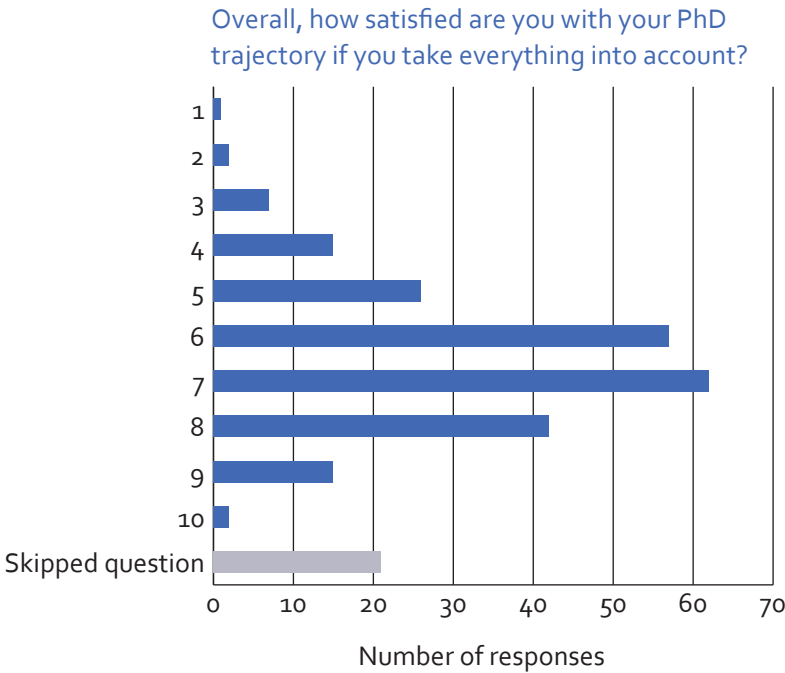
Discrimination and isolation also occurred due to the position of ISPCs in their department/research group and financial hardship: *"As scholarship PhD candidates in the department, we do not have teaching obligation, therefore, have less interaction with colleagues professionally and socially. It causes the feeling of isolation and being treated invisibly and subtly different than other PhDs."* or *"I can only pay the rent and buy my groceries. The activities that I liked to do during my free time now are gone. Now I have to think twice if I want to do simple things like a short trip to another city, or attend a classical music concert, or to pay a dish or more than 15 euros. I am not sure if I will be able even to save money for my plane tickets to visit my parents this year. I am most of the time at the office or at home because, what else am I supposed to do with 100 free euros per month?"*

ISPCs are particularly vulnerable to poor supervision and their position makes possible the abuse of power: *"[...] some professors immediately send you to that scholarship even when they actually have the money to hire a PhD. Furthermore, some PIs are abusing these scholarships: they give offer to a dozen of applicants even when they know one PI can only get one or two quota, which wasted the applicants' time and put them at high risk. Or, some professor who are forbidden from supervising students because of misconduct are not forbidden from getting these scholarship PhDs. These PI's should really be regulated."* or *"I think most of my pain came not from the job itself or financial problems, but from my boss's personality and management style."*

Scholarship PhD candidates also reported that they felt it was unsafe to report issues: *"I have felt very uncomfortable while voicing my concerns about international PhDs under a scholar. I have been explicitly told that we are a big cost to the university. Also, there is a certain pressure to voice these concerns, because we have been told that the university might not accept any more external PhDs as a consequence of this inequality, which is a way of keeping the problem shut."*

### 6.3 Satisfaction with the PhD trajectory and likelihood of quitting it

We asked PhD candidates to rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, their response to the question “Overall, how satisfied are you with your PhD trajectory if you take everything into account?”. The mean level of satisfaction with the PhD trajectory is 6.42 (SD=1.55) with most participants rating it 6 or 7. A few respondents were highly dissatisfied with their PhD trajectory. These results are shown in Fig. 18.



**Figure 18.** Bar chart showing satisfaction with the PhD trajectory.

When asked “Have you ever considered to quit your PhD project?”, the majority of respondents ( $n=128$ , 56%) said they had not thought about quitting their PhD project, although a large portion ( $n=80$ , 35%) had done so sometimes, with 13 respondents (6%) indicating “Often” and 7 respondents (3%) indicating “Very often”. 22 respondents skipped this question.

Alarming statements in the responses to the open questions show that some PhD candidates feel trapped. For some scholarship contracts, quitting the PhD trajectory is not possible without significant financial and mental hardship: *“My scholarship is a credit, it will become a scholarship when I will finish my PhD/when I get the PhD degree. Therefore, it is an emotional pressure to think about the amount of money that I will have to pay if for any reason I cannot finish.”*

## 7. Comparison to The Young Academy's ISPC survey (2018)

In 2018, The Young Academy distributed a survey via a number of platforms, including its own website and Twitter, asking PhD candidates and their supervisors to fill it in. The survey focused on the background of the ISPCs, the fees they had to pay, the negative and positive aspects of their position, and their satisfaction with the supervision they received. A total of 469 PhD candidates responded, of whom 336 provided information about their funding. Of those 336, 150 were ISPCs, 95% of whom indicated that they came from non-EU countries, 41% of them from China. The fields of social sciences and natural sciences hosted most ISPCs (43% and 45%, respectively) and only 13% worked in the humanities.

In the supervisor survey, the focus was on how valuable ISPCs are considered by their supervisors and on the latter's satisfaction with their skills and knowledge. A total of 140 supervisors of ISPCs responded to the survey.

Of the ISPCs, 61 % indicated that a formal go/no-go decision was made, and 26% indicated that that did not happen. In the PNN survey 13% indicated this did not or would not happen, which is an improvement. The majority (71%) of ISPCs rated the assessment criteria as clear. Sixty-one percent of the ISPCs had never considered quitting their PhD project, although 39% had done so sometimes; this is similar to the corresponding figure (44%) in the PNN survey. A training and supervision plan had been drawn up by 89% of the ISPCs, which is similar to the result in the PNN survey (87%). Although this is the great majority, it nevertheless indicates that a significant number still do not have a training and supervision plan.

The Young Academy's survey asked respondents to grade their level of satisfaction with their supervisor according to several factors. The results are shown in Table 6, as the average response (standard deviation) on a scale from 0 to 7.

**Table 6.** Contentment with different aspects of supervision.

	ISPC	Employed
Quality of feedback:	5.9 (1.3)	5.6 (1.3)
Frequency of contacts:	5.6 (1.4)	5.7 (1.4)
Frequency of evaluations:	5.2 (1.5)	5.2 (1.4)
Content of evaluations:	5.1 (1.6)	4.9 (1.5)

When asked whether they were happy with their supervision they responded as follows: 93% of the ISPCs were happy with their supervision, 3% were neutral, and 4% were unhappy. For employed PhDs the results were 90%, 9%, and 1% respectively. The PNN survey asked only about supervision hours and not satisfaction, so no comparison is possible here. ISPCs who responded to the Young

Academy survey did feel the need for additional support with practical matters (66%), integration (70%), and academic skills (80%). This is similar to findings in the current survey, given that most respondents were dissatisfied with the help provided by their institution with housing (45% either satisfied or very satisfied) and integration (40% either satisfied or very satisfied).

As regards finances, The Young Academy survey found similar results to those of the current survey if we compare tuition fees to the bench fee. In the survey of The Young Academy, 46 ISPCs (30.7%) said that they had to pay a bench fee, with the largest group of respondents ( $n=22$ , 48%) paying more than 10,000 euros in tuition fees. Twelve respondents (26%) paid between 5,000 and 10,000 euros, 6 respondents (13%) paid between 2,000 and 5,000 euros, 2 respondents (4%) between 1,000 and 2,000, and 2 respondents (4%) less than 1,000. In the PNN survey, 54 respondents (24%) said they had to pay a bench fee. The median bench fee was 10,500 euros and the mean was 10,349 euros. It should be noted, however, that the bench fee and tuition fee may overlap but do not necessarily do so. The PNN survey did not include a question about tuition fees; any comparison here is therefore tentative. The Young Academy survey did not deal with the amount of the scholarship or whether it was sufficient to cover ISPCs' living costs.

## 7.2 The Young Academy Survey: Supervisor survey

The Young Academy survey also highlighted supervisors' perspective regarding supervision of ISPCs.

In that survey, the majority of supervisors were in the natural sciences ( $n=43$ , 46%), followed by the social sciences ( $n=34$ , 36%), and the humanities ( $n=17$ , 18%).

The ISPC supervisors' attitude towards ISPCs is generally positive or very positive ( $n=63$ , 74%), somewhat positive ( $n=10$ , 12%), neutral ( $n=4$ , 5%), and 8 supervisors (9%) have a somewhat negative attitude. No supervisors showed a negative or very negative attitude towards ISPCs.

The departments' attitude towards ISPCs overall is positive. Specifically, The Young Academy asked supervisors how they viewed the attitude of their department towards ISPCs. They generally considered it to be positive or very positive ( $n=49$ , 57%), somewhat positive ( $n=20$ , 24%), neutral ( $n=10$ , 12%), and 4 departments (5%) had a somewhat negative attitude. Two departments (2%) had a negative or very negative attitude towards ISPCs.

Supervisors rated several negative aspects of ISPCs on a scale of 1 to 7 (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree). The eight aspects were: "insufficient theoretical knowledge" ( $M=4.2$ ,

$SD=1.7$ ), “insufficient methodological knowledge” ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=1.6$ ), “low level of English” ( $M=4.7$ ,  $SD=1.6$ ), “did not integrate” ( $M=2.9$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ), “research topic too distant” ( $M=2.3$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ), “not able to construct logical argument” ( $M=3.5$ ,  $SD=1.8$ ), “poor presentation skills” ( $M=3.4$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ), and “not able to work in a team” ( $M=2.9$ ,  $SD=1.8$ ).

Regarding insufficient theoretical and methodological knowledge and command of the English language, 38%, 45% and 48% of supervisors indicated they either somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed, respectively. When the same question was phrased positively, 50%, 45% and 70% of supervisors indicated that they somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed that ISPCs have a high level of theoretical, methodological, and practical knowledge. It would seem that supervisors experience may vary. In view of these findings, The Young Academy recommended that special attention be paid to the selection process and that it should be made more equivalent to the selection process for employed PhD candidates. It did, however, note that ISPCs’ motivation and eagerness to learn often outweigh weaknesses in academic skills.

Supervisors also rated several positive aspects of ISPCs. The five aspects were “diversity” ( $M=6.5$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ), “contribution to the department” ( $M=6.1$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ), “theoretical knowledge high” ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ), “methodological knowledge high” ( $M=4.1$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ), and “practical knowledge high” ( $M=5.1$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ). Supervisors agreed most frequently that ISPCs contributed positively to the research environment, especially regarding diversity, contribution to the department, and practical knowledge.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We obtained data from 250 international scholarship PhD candidates (ISPCs) in the Netherlands, which is approximately 7% of the total population of ISPCs. Most of the respondents hold a Chinese scholarship (59%) and are doing their PhD research at a university (78%). A wide range of other ISPCs – in terms of nationalities and PhD host institutions – are represented in our sample as well, highlighting the diversity of ISPCs. The ISPCs mostly design or co-design their PhD trajectory together with their supervisor and have a training and supervision plan. For the majority of participants, the scholarship is paid by their home country, and the scholarship provider generally pays the bench fee (if this is not waived).

The present report presents the first detailed study examining the working and living conditions of international scholarship PhD candidates in the Netherlands. We distributed the survey online via social media channels. In addition, we asked graduate schools at both universities and UMCs to distribute it. However, it was only some graduate schools at universities and none at UMCs that proactively reached out to their ISPCs with the survey. As a result, some universities are better represented than others, while UMCs are underrepresented. Although we cannot account for the selective nonresponse, we believe that the main findings of this report show that there is an urgent need for improvement of the living and working conditions for all ISPCs in the Netherlands. The report compared findings to The Young Academy's 2018 survey, which arrived overall at comparable results. It would have been interesting to compare the results collected by universities in the national PhD survey<sup>12</sup> on PhD trajectories; unfortunately, the publicly available data does not allow for disentangling ISPCs from PhDs on a Dutch scholarship.

Fundamental restructuring is needed to ensure fair employment conditions. Given, however, the precarious situation in which these candidates find themselves, we also offer a number of recommendations for immediate action based on the findings presented in this report.

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12 <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/promovendisurvey.html>

## Main findings:

### 1. **The financial situation of ISPCs is alarming.**

The vast majority of ISPCs are worried about their financial situation and struggle to make ends meet. On average, our respondents' monthly income is 1,402 euros, with a median of 1,350 euros. Some scholarships are as low as 700 euros per month. A few respondents received a top-up grant (363 euros on average), which somewhat improves their situation. Many ISPCs would be unable to make ends meet without an additional income, which is often provided by their family or by their undertaking other employment beyond their PhD work.

In June 2023, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) stipulated a minimum gross monthly income of 1,354.08 euros (not including a holiday allowance) as a requirement for a residence permit to conduct research in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> Based on their PhD-related income, many ISPCs (38%) do not meet the visa and residence permit requirements and therefore have to rely on savings or financial support from family and friends. It should be noted that even when it is sufficient to qualify for a residence permit, the average scholarship is significantly lower than the Dutch minimum wage (1,995 euros gross monthly salary in June 2023) and much lower than the average gross monthly salary of an employed PhD candidate in June 2023, which, for example at universities, was 2,541 euros at the start of the PhD trajectory, increasing to 3,247 euros during the fourth year.

### 2. **Scholarship and employed PhDs are treated differently – something that is not clear to many ISPCs before they come to the Netherlands.**

Most candidates only became aware of such differential treatment after they had started working on their PhD. Once they become aware of the differences, the vast majority (76%) said they would have preferred an employed position. Our findings suggest that although scholarship PhD candidates chose a scholarship position, many did not view this as an active choice but rather as the result of a lack of information about other alternatives.

### 3. **The position of ISPCs is unclear – they are neither student nor employee.**

The undefined position of ISPCs affects many important aspects of living in the Netherlands, including access to healthcare insurance, housing, and social-security benefits such as healthcare, housing, or childcare benefits. This also results in problems in finding affordable housing because they cannot meet the financial requirements imposed by landlords, nor qualify for student housing. Moreover, their position within the university also routinely leads to ambiguity regarding the allocation of facilities, budgets, and teaching and other duties.

<sup>13</sup> <https://ind.nl/en/required-amounts-income-requirements>

4. **Scholarship conditions differ vastly depending on the scholarship provider and the host institution, highlighting the lack of regulations.**

While some ISPCs have side jobs in addition to their PhD work, others are prohibited from undertaking extra employment, making them dependent on support from family and friends. Some ISPCs report not being allowed to teach to earn additional income, while others report performing teaching duties without this being part of their contract.

5. **ISPCs face additional stressors – in some cases leading to existential problems – beyond completing a PhD.**

A substantial proportion of scholarship PhD candidates do not expect to finish their PhD within the allocated contract time. Extensions are difficult, and in some cases impossible, to obtain. Given that their residence permit is tied to their guest agreement to conduct their PhD research, ISPCs are under extreme pressure. This is especially the case for those with a scholarship that is credit based, meaning that if they do not finish their PhD within the agreed period they will have to pay it back. This is apparent from the work hours that scholarship PhD candidates say they put in, with almost two-thirds of respondents reporting that they work more than a regular 35 to 40-hour week. Many thus experience their workload as high or very high. These difficulties affect their mental health, sometimes severely.

Moreover, this group are particularly vulnerable to abuse of power due to their dependent position, which goes beyond that in the normal supervisor-PhD candidate relationship. Additional difficulties stem from navigating a new culture and facing discrimination and occasionally racism.

### Short-term recommendations:

- **Institutions should offer a top-up grant** that ensures scholarship PhD candidates of a minimum wage at the very least but ideally matches the salary of employed PhDs. This would alleviate financial pressures on candidates and their families, who often share the burden with them. In addition, formal sick and pregnancy leave agreements should be established as well as opportunities for extensions.
- **ISPCs need to be informed before being accepted for a doctoral programme about the differences between employed and scholarship candidates** in terms of salary, employment rights, teaching obligations, access to facilities and



requirements regarding Dutch proficiency.<sup>14</sup> The information should also include a reliable estimate of the cost of living in the Netherlands.

- **Guest agreements should be more standardised and comprehensive** and include the rights and responsibilities of ISPCs with regard to the recommended working hours needed to gain one's PhD in the Netherlands, holiday leave, training and supervision, access to facilities, teaching, budget, and contact information for questions about their situation.
- **In efforts to monitor PhD candidates' wellbeing and social safety, ISPCs should come in for specific attention** because they face more pressures than (Dutch) employed PhD candidates. Universities have commenced a collective initiative to monitor the wellbeing of PhD candidates at universities by means of a bi-annual PhD candidate survey.<sup>15</sup> While we appreciate this important step, the questions asked in this survey do not do sufficient justice to the problems experienced by ISPCs in particular. Social safety for ISPCs must be improved, with a particular focus on discrimination and racism. Institutions should guarantee that the social safety structures put in place for their employees also cover scholarship PhD candidates.

## Fundamental restructuring is essential for inclusive and fair academia

Dutch institutions currently have limited control over the scholarship conditions set by the various providers. **Rather than treating the symptoms (e.g. providing top-ups), then, what is required is a national solution to the root problem, specifically the way in which international scholarship programmes are embedded in Dutch academia.** PNN is not against foreign institutions awarding scholarships to individual PhD candidates, but believes that these scholarships should ideally be paid directly to the PhD candidate's research institute. The institute can then hire the PhD candidate as an employee and use the scholarship to pay part of their salary, similar to the procedure when a researcher obtains a grant that they then use to hire PhD candidates. The agreement would thus be entered into with the ISPC directly, preventing them having to adhere to agreements with their home country regarding reporting requirements or the need to pay back their scholarship. This practice will ensure fair financial compensation and basic employment rights for all PhD candidates.

<sup>14</sup> The University of Groningen has produced an overview of conditions per type of PhD category, which may serve as an example: <https://www.rug.nl/education/phd-programmes/phd-scholarship-programme/conditions-application/overview-conditions-phd-students-ug-en.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/promovendisurvey.html>

# ADDENDUM BY THE YOUNG ACADEMY

International scholarship PhD candidates (ISPCs) make up a large proportion of the PhD candidates working in the Netherlands. In the survey that The Young Academy conducted in 2018, information on the number of ISPCs was only available from two technical universities, suggesting that about 25% of PhD candidates are on an international scholarship. Currently, the Dutch universities organised in the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) have a better overview of this group of PhD candidates, leading to a robust estimate that 10% of the PhD candidates working at all Dutch universities are on an international scholarship. Even though the proportion of ISPCs seems to differ between these inventories – either as regards the selection of institutes or a change in attitude towards ISPCs on certain scholarships – it is evident that this group of PhD candidates are important for Dutch academia. They are often considered crucial for “capacity building”, meaning that – often due to a scarcity of research funding – they are an important resource for keeping research lines going. This is especially relevant in the case of mid-career researchers who have built up their research group but lack the structural funding needed to keep the research going. When host labs offer an inspiring and stimulating environment within which ISPCs can contribute their expertise and skills and help build an international university, this is basically a win-win situation. However, given our 2017 survey results and those of the current PNN survey, one cannot conclude that the situation is win-win for everybody.

We are worried to see that a vast majority of ISPCs cannot make ends meet and experience serious financial stress. An income below the minimum wage, a lack of proper housing and the inability to buy food... in our view these are unacceptable. We are worried about the wellbeing of ISPCs, which probably relates to financial stress, discrimination, and for some stress about being unable to finish their PhD research, with the potential consequence of having to pay back their scholarship.

As members of The Young Academy, we strongly advocate internationalisation and global knowledge exchange. It is clear that we cannot resolve major societal

issues alone and that we need perspectives from all around the globe. This means that we need to establish global networks that allow Dutch researchers to gain international experience, to ensure that we create an inclusive environment in Dutch academia within which we can attract and retain international talent, and to offer training opportunities for EU and non-EU PhD candidates. We are therefore not against scholarship constructions but feel that as an academic community we should discuss openly what we consider to be a desirable and undesirable situation for individual ISPCs. Numerous Dutch universities currently have agreements with many countries on accepting ISPCs. However universities often fail to ensure that top-up grants are available for them, which ultimately leaves responsibility for deciding to host an ISPC with the individual researcher or department. Given the current incentive structures for promotion and the lack of structural funding, an individual early- or mid-career researcher may feel pressured to accept an ISPC so as to meet the institutional requirements for promotion (e.g. number of publications, number of supervised PhD candidates), without having the luxury of not accepting an ISPC on principle because of moral reasons (for example finding it unjust that someone has to live on less than the minimum wage). When everyone has to make this decision for themselves, those who are prepared to accept ISPCs may end up more successful. Having principles may simply seem unaffordable for an individual tenure-track researcher.

We therefore feel strongly that Dutch universities and research institutes – collectively – should come up with a structural solution whereby ISPCs receive a fair income, and with accepting and rewarding the hosting of ISPCs becoming part of institutional policy. We therefore strongly support the recommendations formulated by PNN. Additionally, we advocate initiating discussion on the topic of ISPCs, involving all academic staff. Why do we find it important to train ISPCs? What constitutes acceptable working conditions? What responsibility do universities have as regards allowing ISPCs to bolster Dutch research capacity? What role do ISPCs play in promotion decisions and ensuring income via promotion bonuses, and what other “perverse incentives” play a role?

We wish to thank PNN for undertaking this work as volunteers. They are a group of dedicated individuals who invest a great deal of time in improving the working conditions of PhD candidates – which the latter are unable to do for themselves. They do this from the belief that a fair and motivating working environment brings out the best in people, thus generating the best possible knowledge. They are entirely right about that and they deserve our support and action. We count on Dutch academic staff to do everything possible to provide fair and motivating working conditions for all members of the academic community.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSC – China Scholarship Council

IND – Immigration and Naturalisation service [*Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst*]

ISPC – International Scholarship PhD Candidate

PNN – Promovendi Netwerk Nederland [*PhD Network Netherlands*]

UMC – University Medical Centre

UNL – Universities of the Netherlands [*Universiteiten van Nederland*]