Survey PhD candidates at VU and Faculty of Science

2021-2023

Author: Ruurdtje Hoekstra, onderzoek.beta@vu.nl

Aim

Evaluate how PhD candidates experience their doctoral program and gain insight into how working conditions, facilities and regulations can be improved

Background

Since 2016, VU has been conducting surveys to evaluate how PhD candidates experience their PhD trajectory

Many questions in this PhD survey are the same as in previous PhD surveys

This allows trends to be detected

Method and target group

The 2023 survey was conducted online by Ruigrok
Questionnaire sent to all VU Amsterdam PhD candidates, including Faculty of Science (Beta)
22% of VU PhD candidates completed the questionnaire in full, making the sample representative
The sample is also representative by faculty of the VU; share of PhD students by faculty
corresponds to the share of PhD students in the group of respondents

Number of respondents

Survey 2021 (Faculty of Science)	Survey 2023 (Faculty of Science)	Survey 2023 (VU)
164	201	672

Data in this presentation:

Faculty of Science 2021
Faculty of Science 2023
VU-broad 2023

Well-being
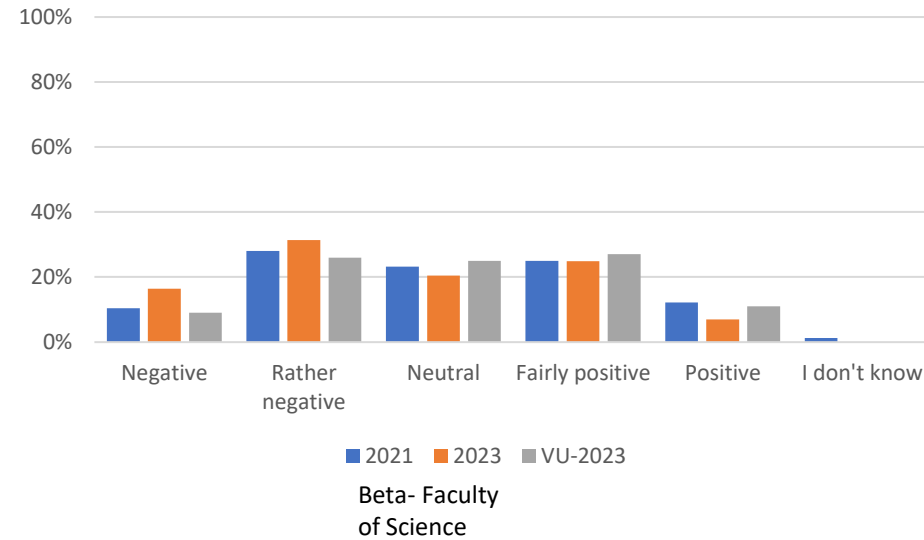
General well-being

Beta- Faculty
of Science

Legend: 2021, 2023, VU-2023
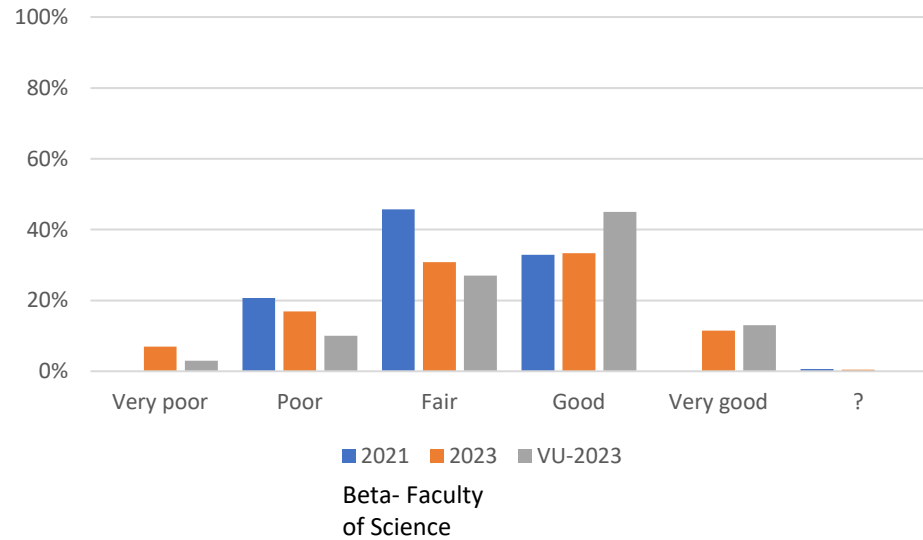
24% poor-very poor well-being at Beta (VU: 13%)
45% (very)good, this was in 2021: 33% (VU: 58%)

Impact PhD project on general well-being

Beta- Faculty
of Science

Legend: 2021, 2023, VU-2023

For 48% the PhD project negatively affects well-being at Beta(VU: 35%)

Onboarding

Onboarding process

Who was part of onboarding process
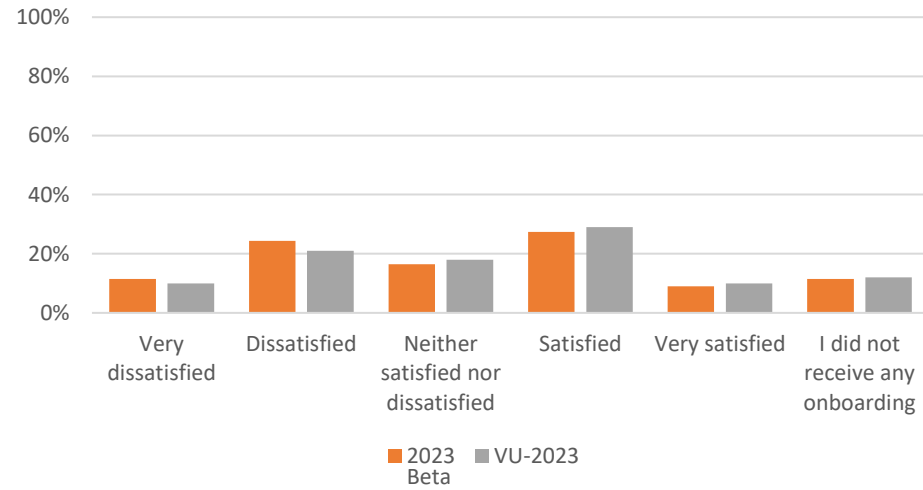
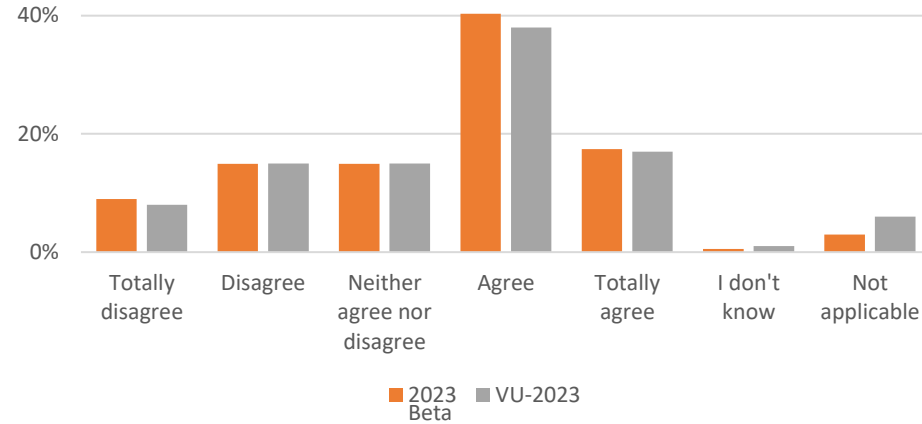46% dissatisfied or no onboarding at Beta (VU: 43%)
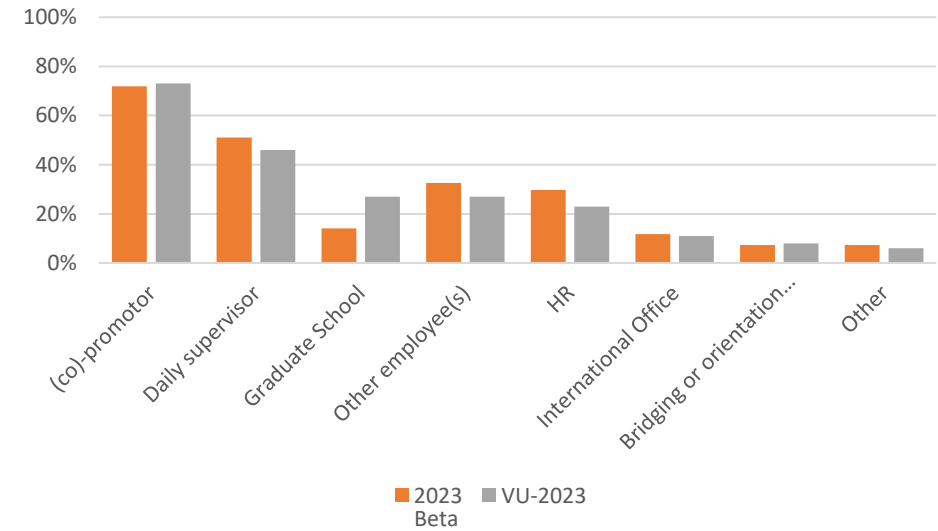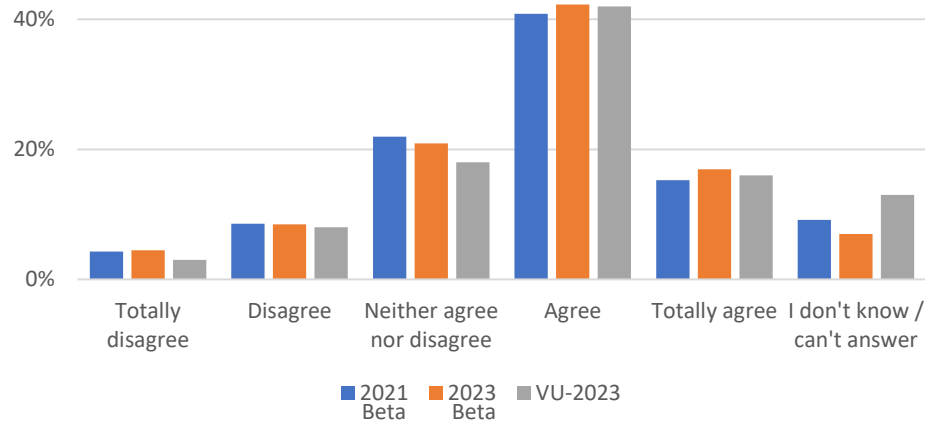
Research environment
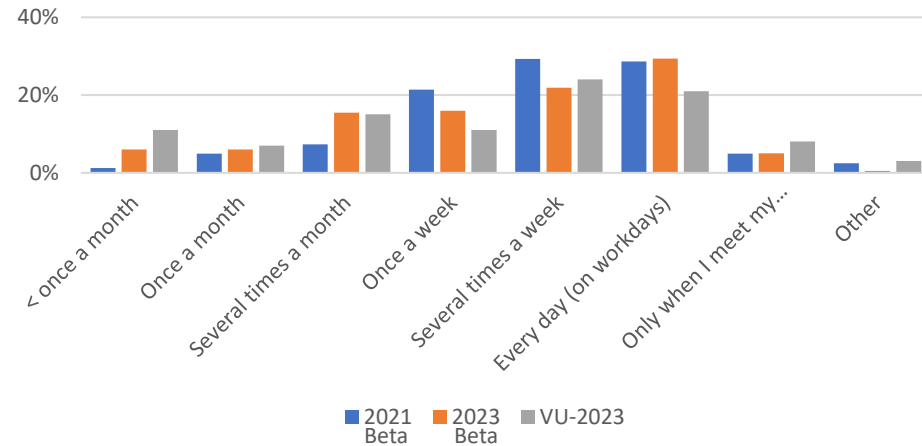

Research facilities
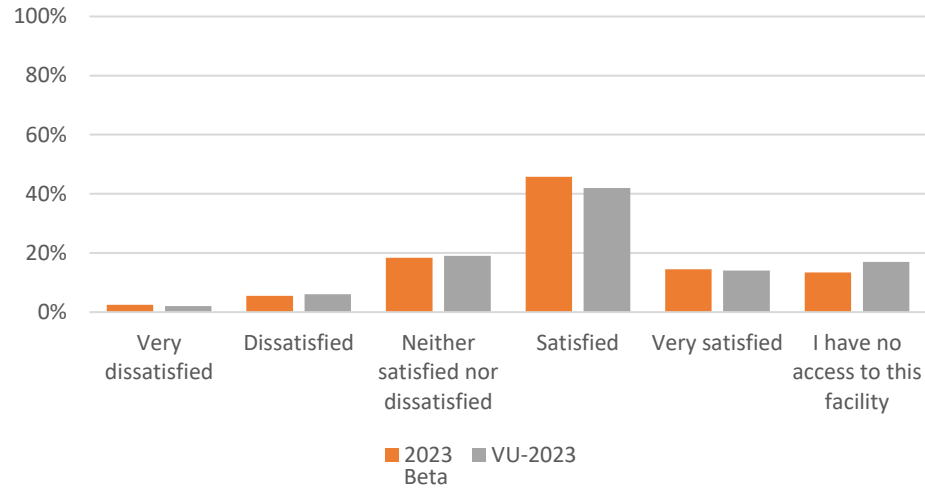
Feel integrated in department
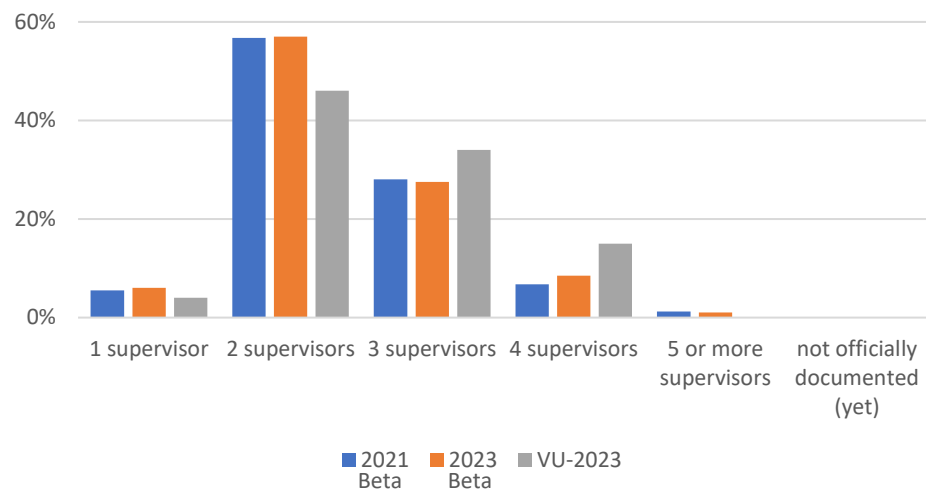
Integrity issues are discussed openly
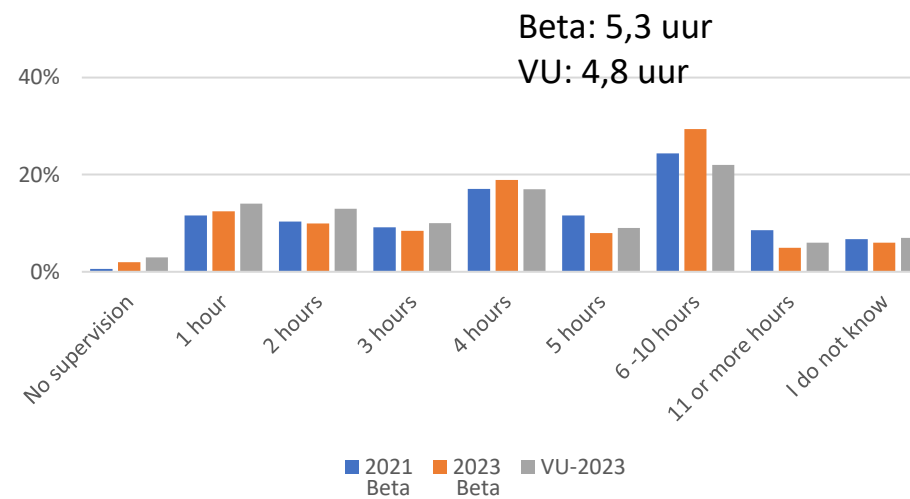
Contact with researchers

Majority positive about research facilities, sense of integration, opportunity to discuss integrity at Beta and VU
At Beta relatively frequent contact with researchers

Supervision

Supervision team

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023

Hours supervison per month

Beta: 5,3 uur
VU: 4,8 uur

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023

Quality of supervision

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023
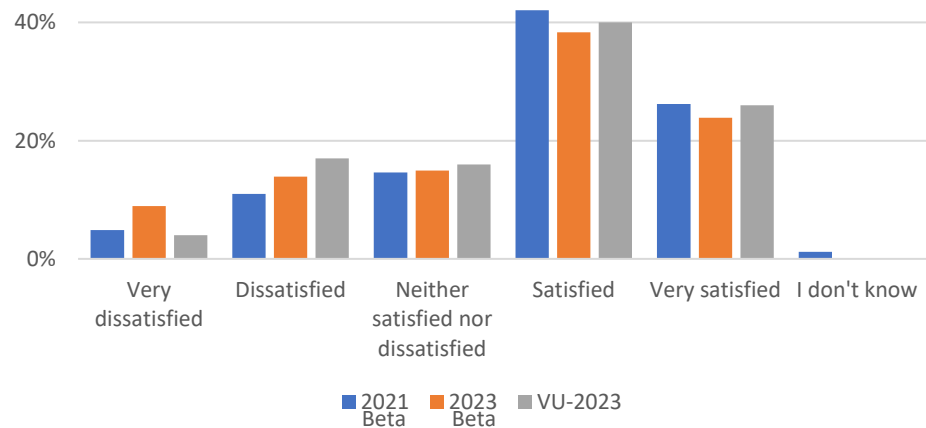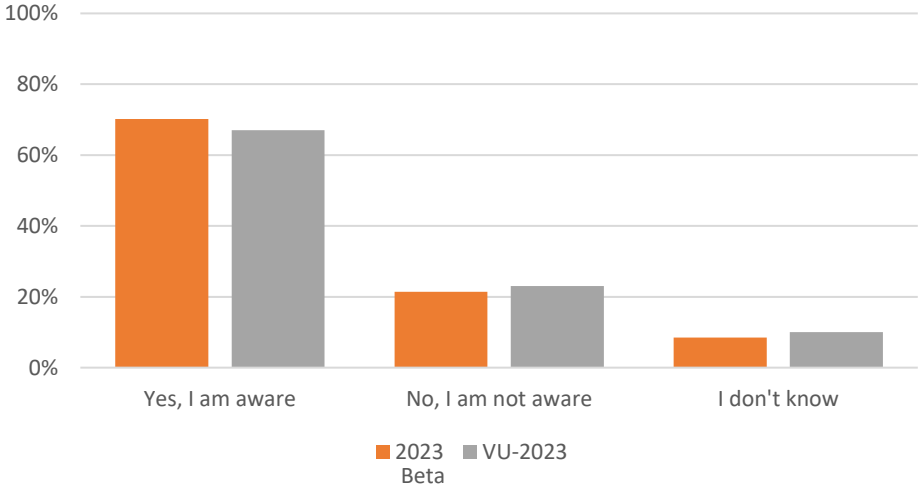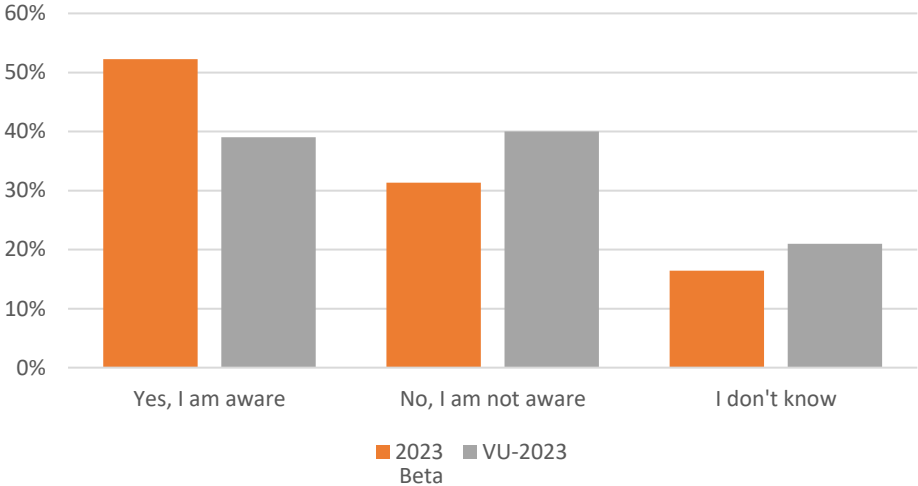
Majority positive about supervision (62% at Beta, 66% at VU)
Trend toward more dissatisfaction with supervision at Beta: (2021: 16%, 2023: 23%)
At Beta, relatively many hours of supervision (5.3 hours) (VU: 4.8 hours)
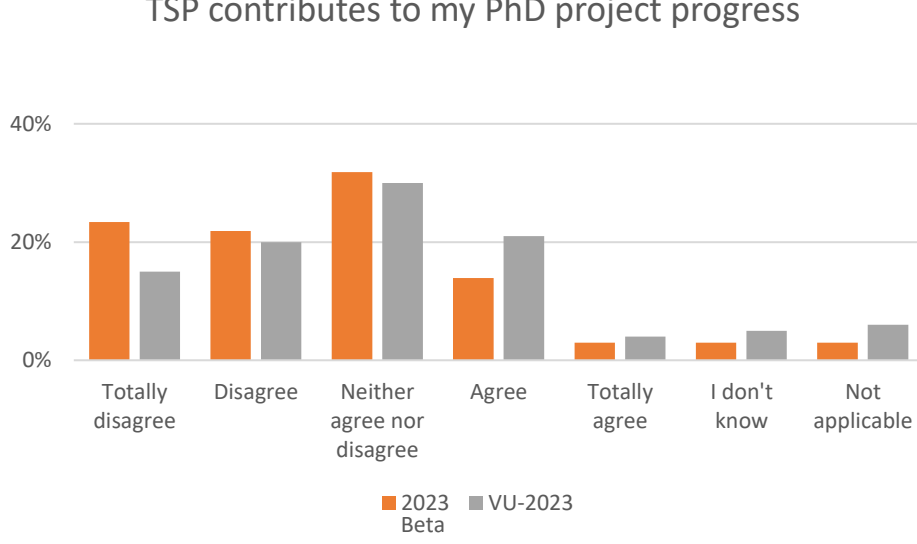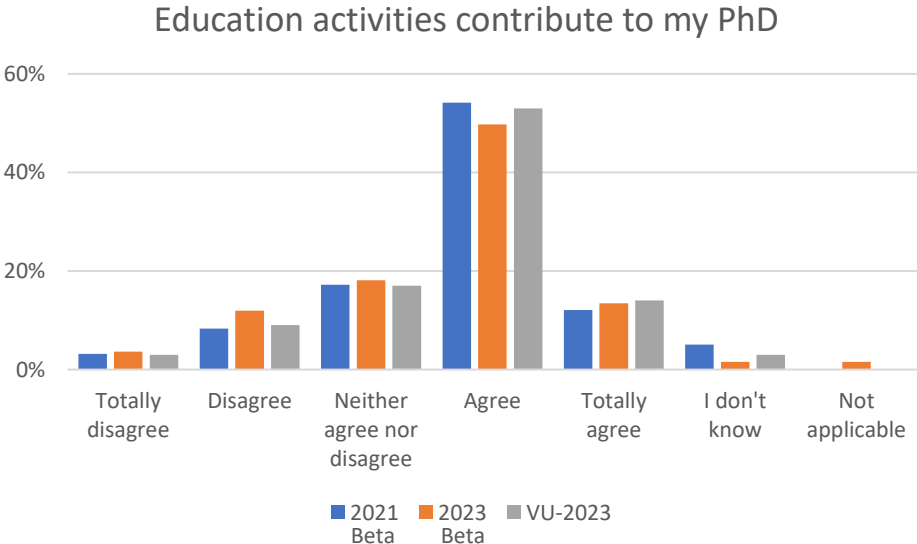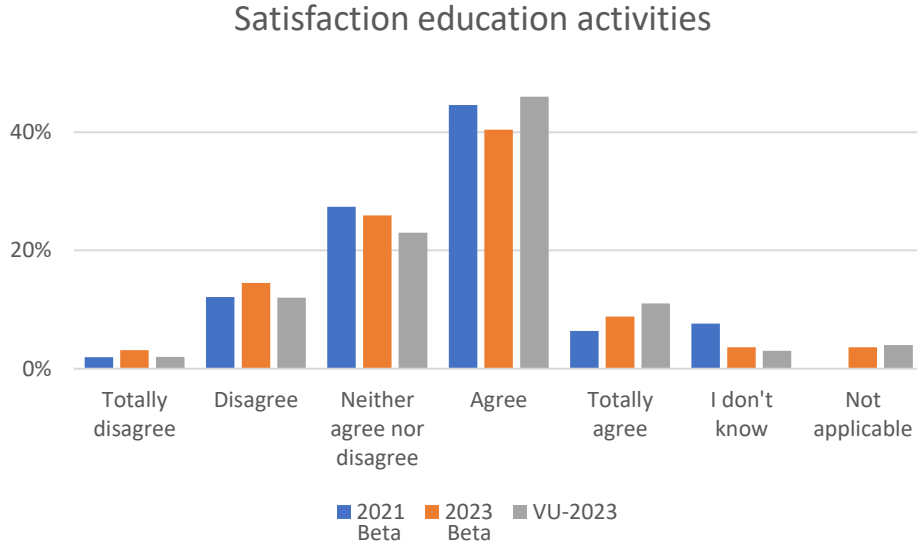
Support

Majority familiar with possible help, yet large minority not familiar with it

Education (1)

Access to education activities

100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%

Discipline-specific... / General skills courses... / Scientific Integrity... / Seminars and... / Teacher training... / Career orientation... / Other education... / I don't have access to...

■ 2023 Beta   ■ VU-2023

Satisfaction education activities

40%
20%
0%

Totally disagree / Disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Agree / Totally agree / I don't know / Not applicable

■ 2021 Beta   ■ 2023 Beta   ■ VU-2023

Education activities contribute to my PhD

60%
40%
20%
0%

Totally disagree / Disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Agree / Totally agree / I don't know / Not applicable

■ 2021 Beta   ■ 2023 Beta   ■ VU-2023

TSP contributes to my PhD project progress

40%
20%
0%

Totally disagree / Disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Agree / Totally agree / I don't know / Not applicable
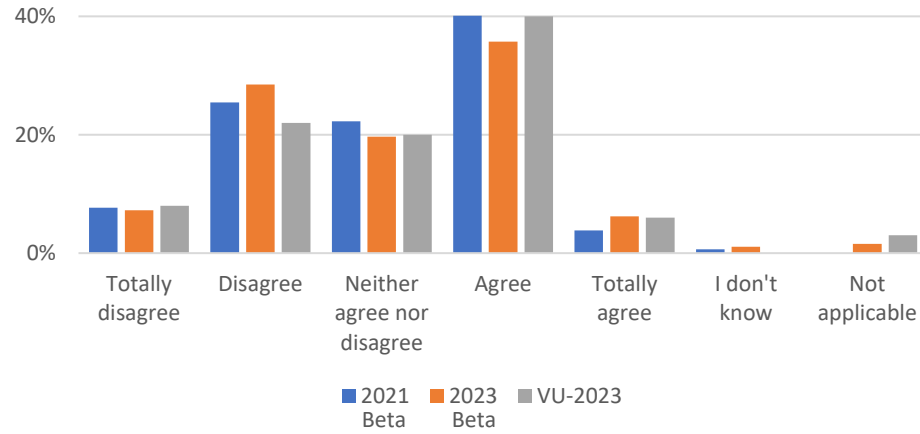
■ 2023 Beta   ■ VU-2023

TSP=teaching and supervision plan

Majority positive/neutral about education activities (Beta 85%, VU: 80%)
Only 17% (Beta) and 25% (VU) experience TSP as positive contributor to the project
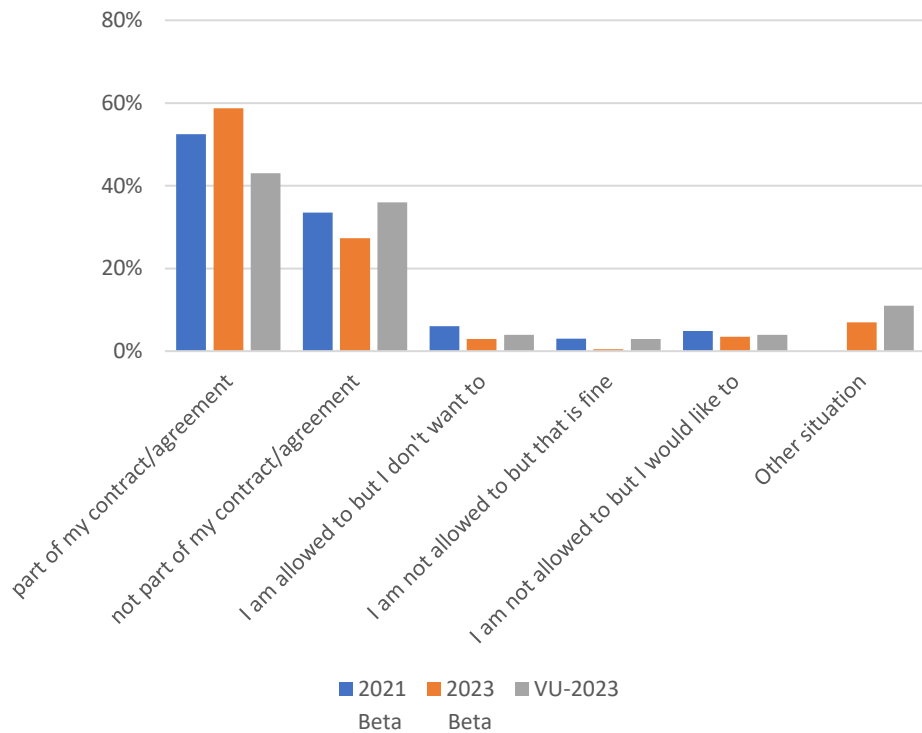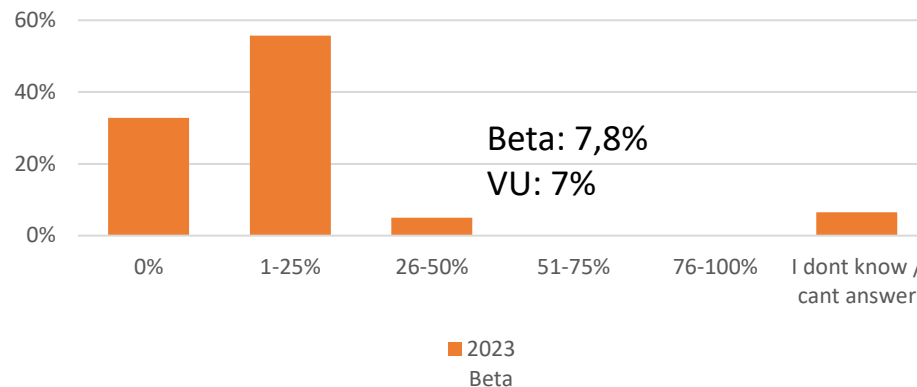
Education (2)

Sufficient time for educational activities

42% has sufficient time for education activities at Beta; 36% not (at VU resp: 46% vs 30%)
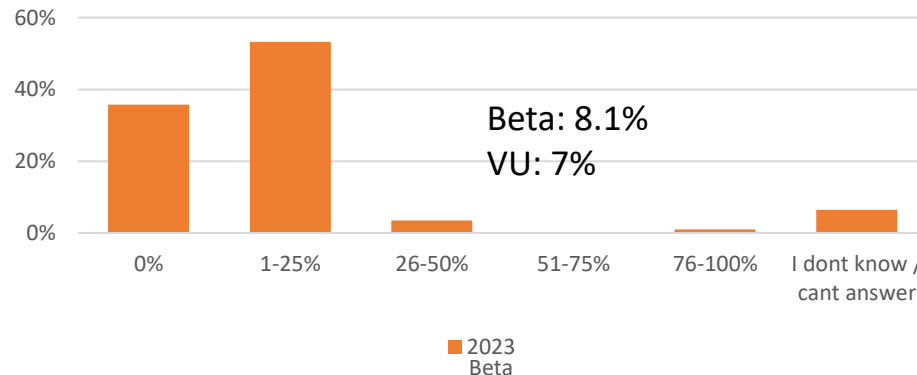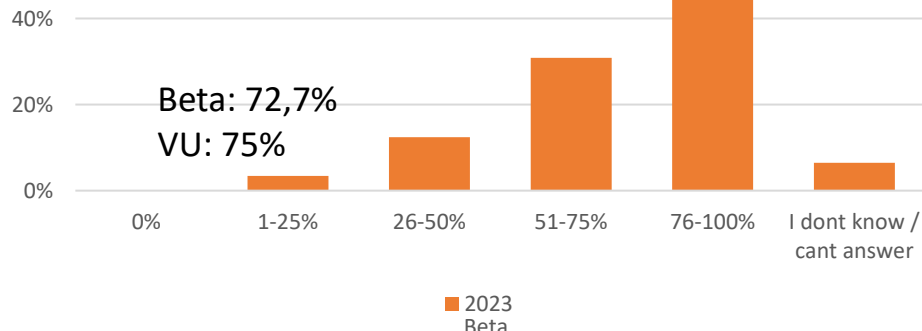
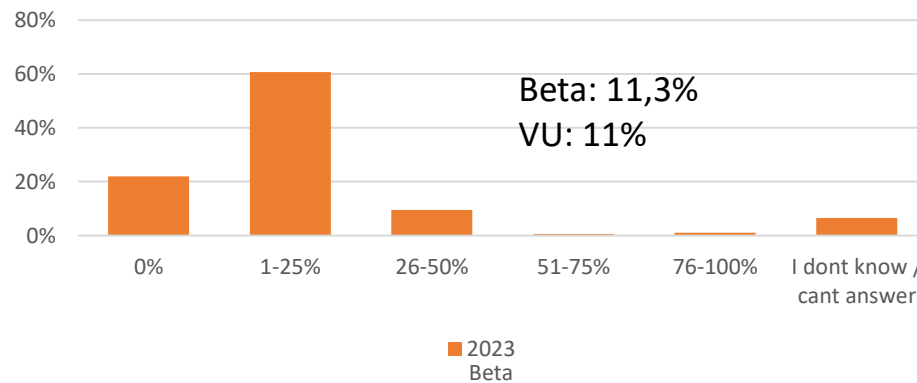# Teaching activities

Teaching and supervision

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023

Categories: part of my contract/agreement; not part of my contract/agreement; I am allowed to but I don't want to; I am not allowed to but that is fine; I am not allowed to but I would like to; Other situation

Time allocated to supervision

Beta: 7,8%
VU: 7%

Categories: 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, I dont know / cant answer — 2023 Beta

Time allocated to teaching

Beta: 8.1%
VU: 7%

Categories: 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, I dont know / cant answer — 2023 Beta

Time allocated to research project

Beta: 72,7%
VU: 75%

Categories: 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, I dont know / cant answer — 2023 Beta

Time allocated to other activities

Beta: 11,3%
VU: 11%

Categories: 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, I dont know / cant answer — 2023 Beta
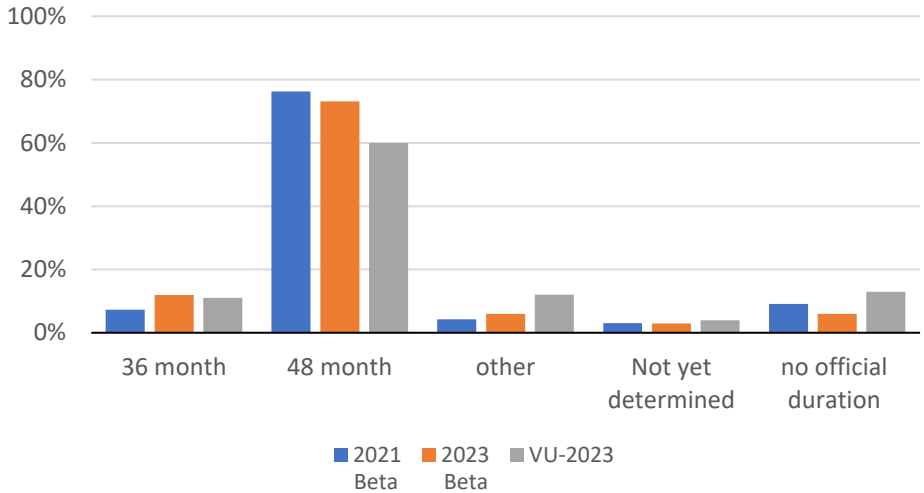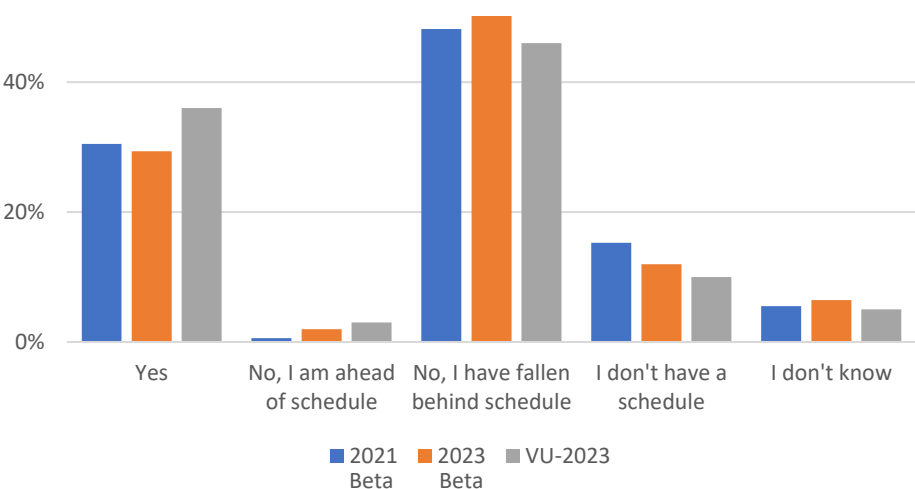
Teaching is part of contract at majority at Beta: 59% (VU: 43%) (was 52% at Beta in 2021)
Time for teaching and supervising: 15.9% (Beta), 14% (VU)
Notable: 36% do not teach at Beta 2023 (possibly external PhD students?) was in 2021: 6%)

Progress
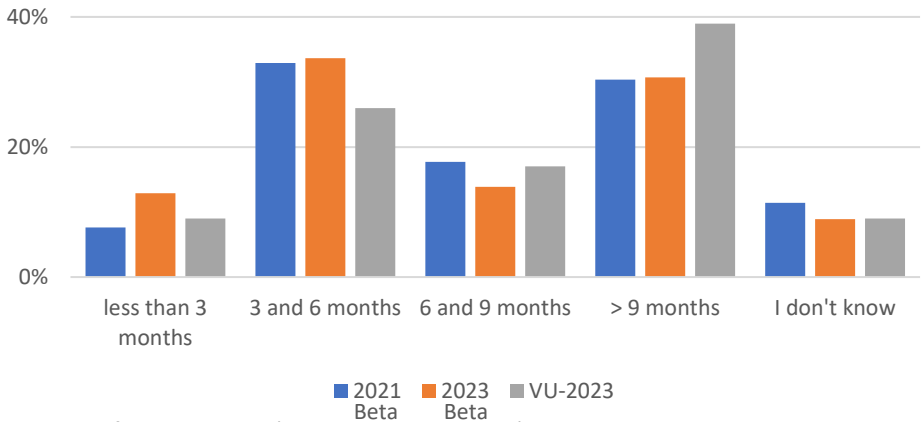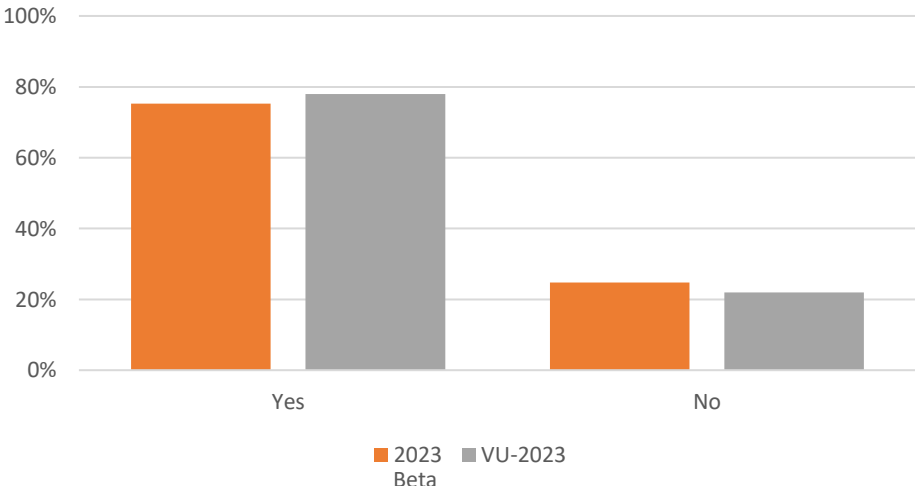

Official duration PhD project

Progress PhD project: on schedule?

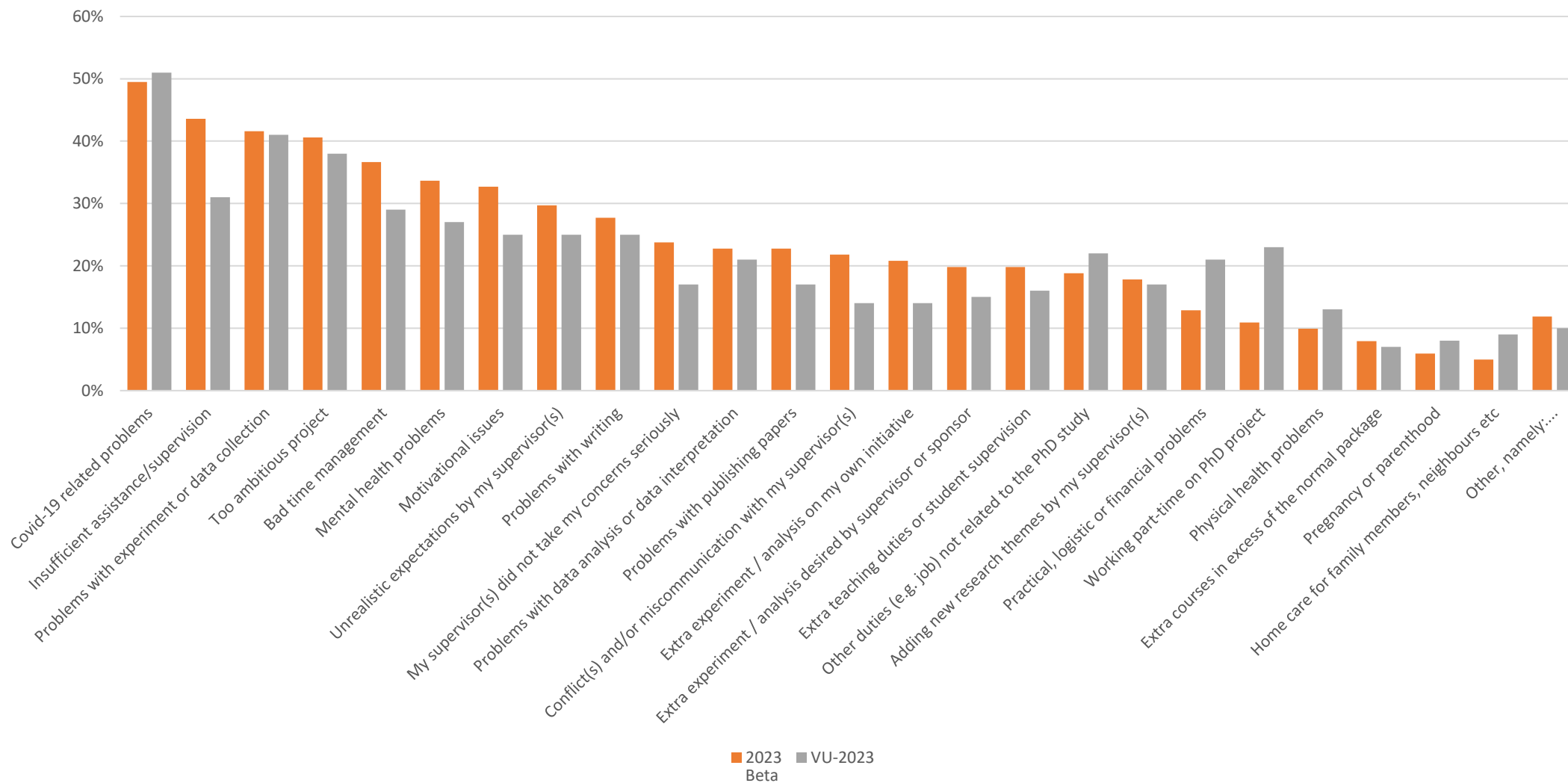## Expected delay

Did you discuss delay with your supervisor(s)

Half are delayed (Beta: 50%, VU: 46%)

Expected delay for 31% (Beta) and 39% (VU) is >9 months

Reasons for project delay

Main reasons for delay

Legend: ■ 2023 Beta ■ VU-2023

COVID-19 most mentioned as cause of project delay, followed by supervision/assistance (at Beta) and problems with experiments/data collection

Workload

Type of PhD position
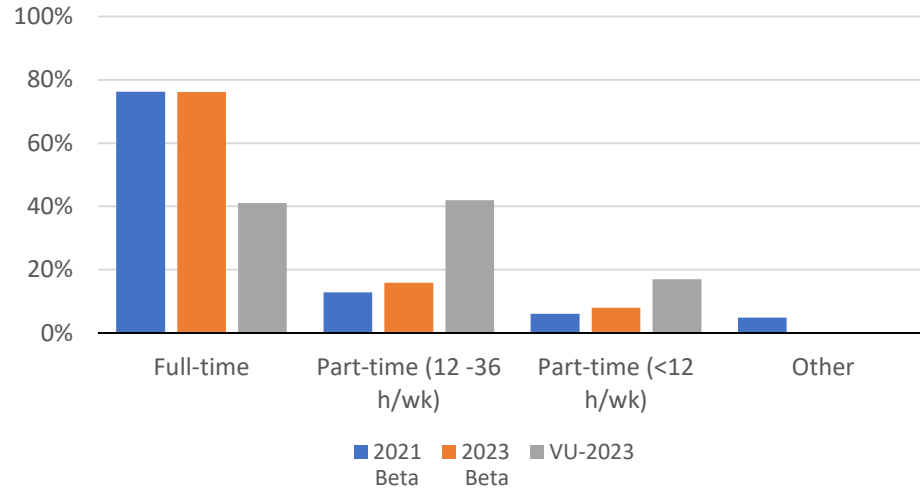
Experienced workload
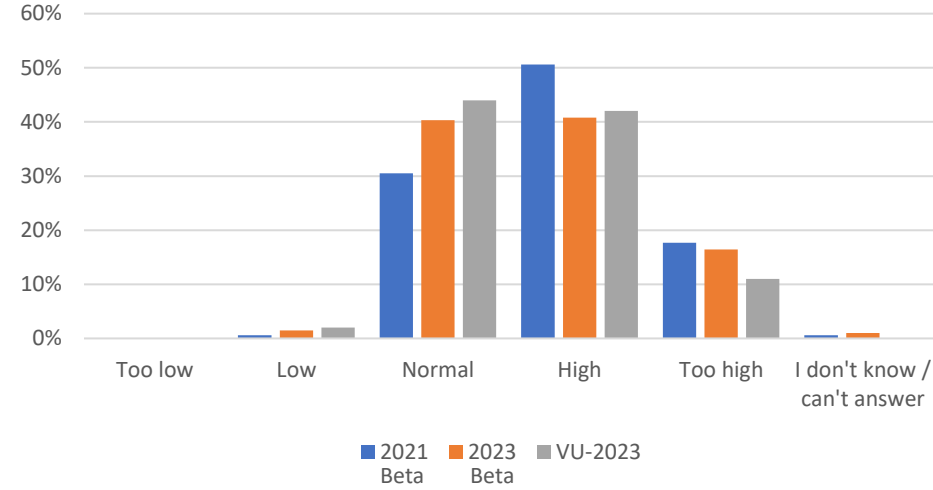
Time spent on PhD project
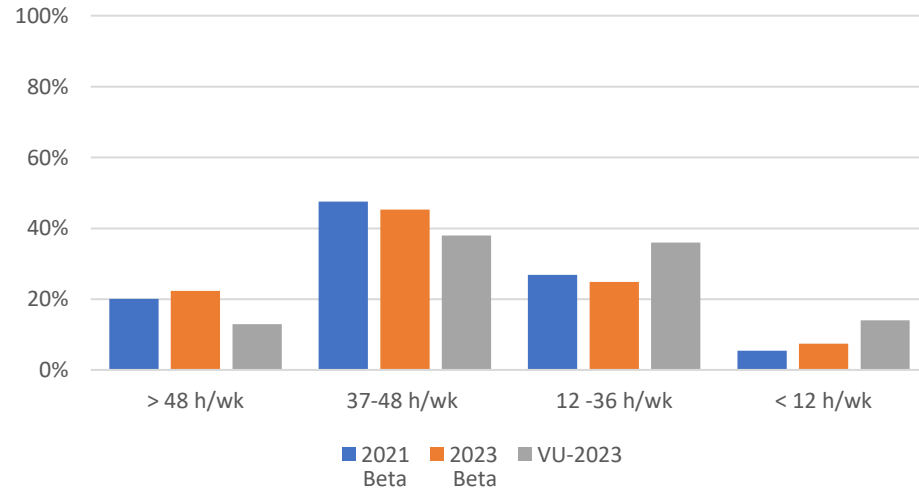
Majority experience high workload (Beta: 57%, VU: 53%)
At Beta there is a trend to reduced experience of workload
Majority work >37 hours/week on the PhD project (Beta: 67%, VU: 51%, but at VU there are more part-timers)

Reasons high workload

High workload due to
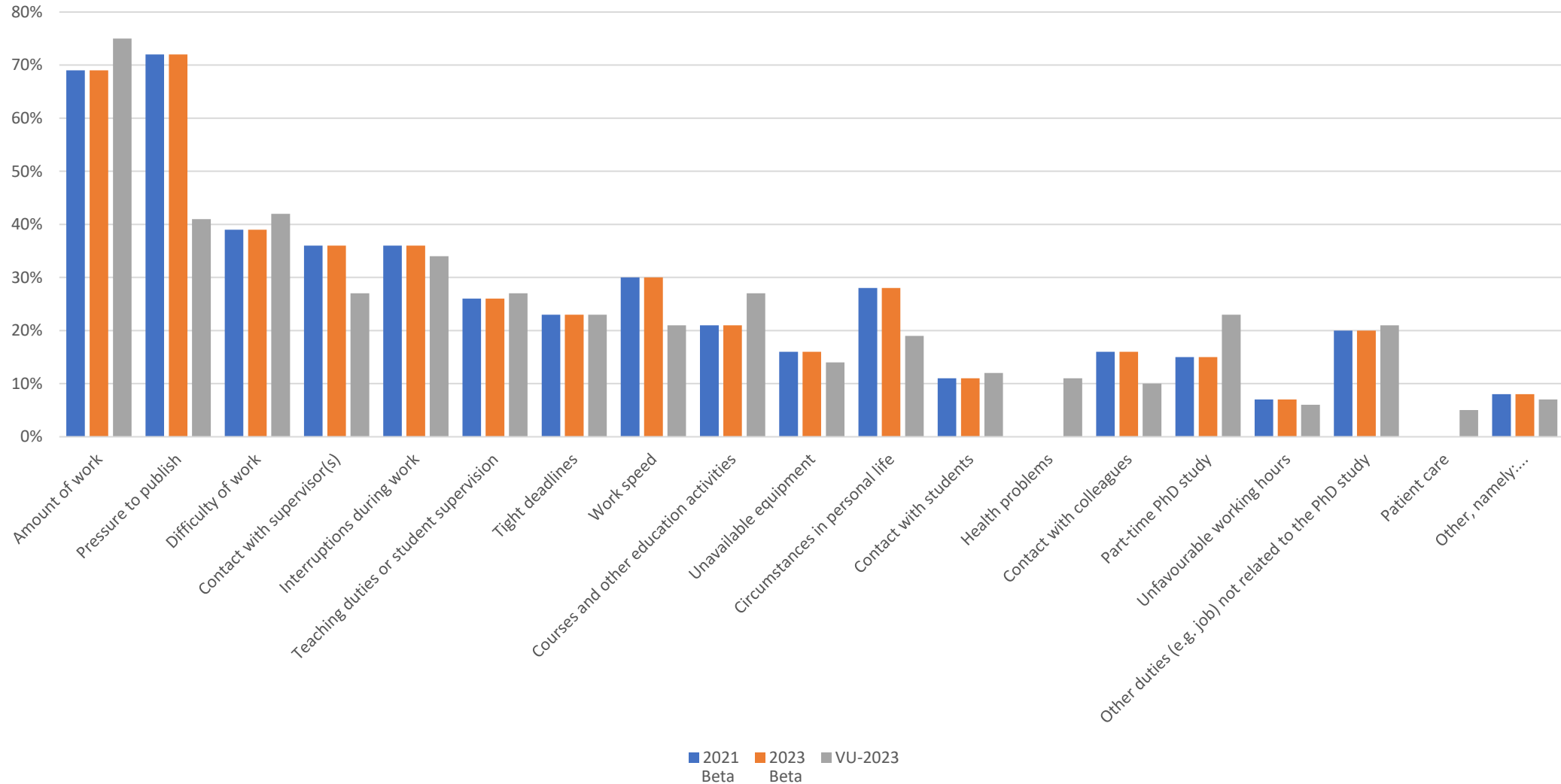
At Beta, amount of work and pressure to publish is main reason for high workload
At VU, pressure to publish contributes less to perceived workload

Social safety (1)

Experience undesirable behavior

Legend: 2023 Beta (orange), VU-2023 (grey)

Categories: Never, Sporadically, Monthly, Weekly, Daily, I prefer not to say

People showing undesirable behavior

Legend: 2023 Beta (orange), VU-2023 (grey)
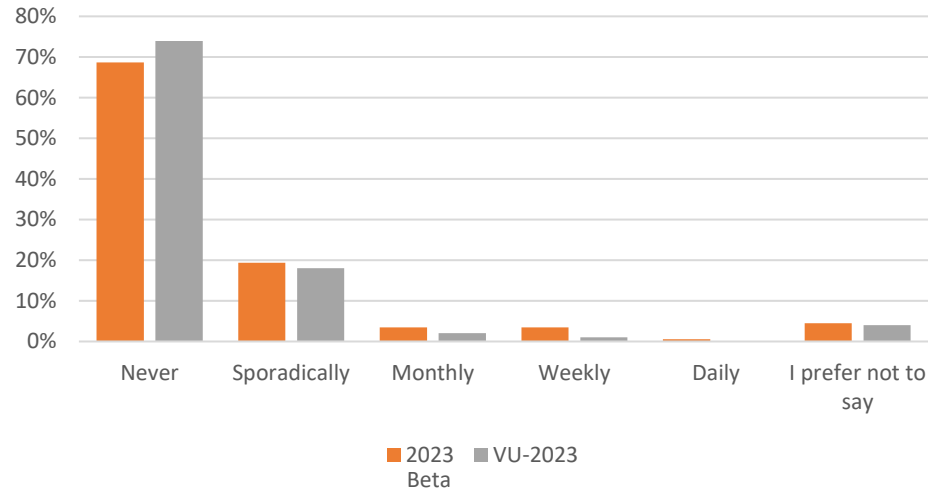
Categories: Supervisor(s), More senior colleague(s), Other colleague(s), Fellow PhD candidate(s), Other relationship, I prefer not to say
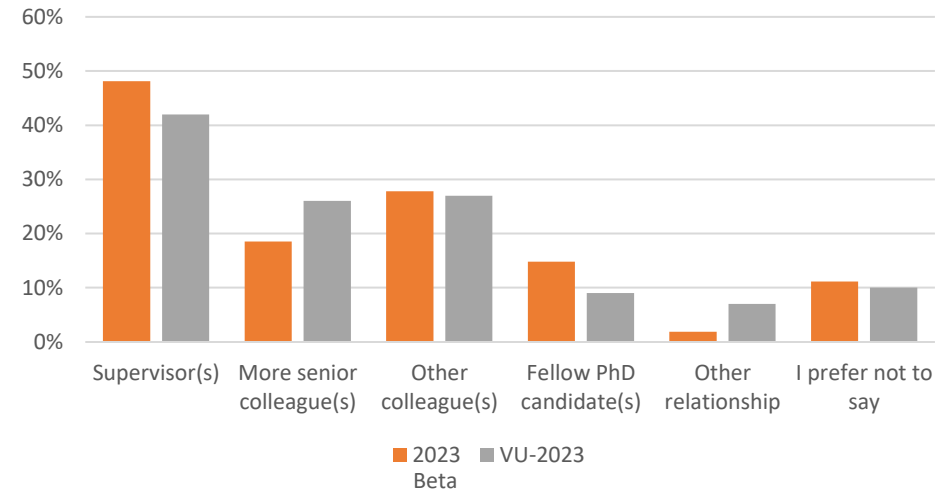
If you have experienced discrimination, it was because of:

Legend: 2023 Beta (orange), VU-2023 (grey)

Categories: Prefer not to answer, Gender, Ethnicity, Appearance, Race, (political) views, Sexual orientation, Disability
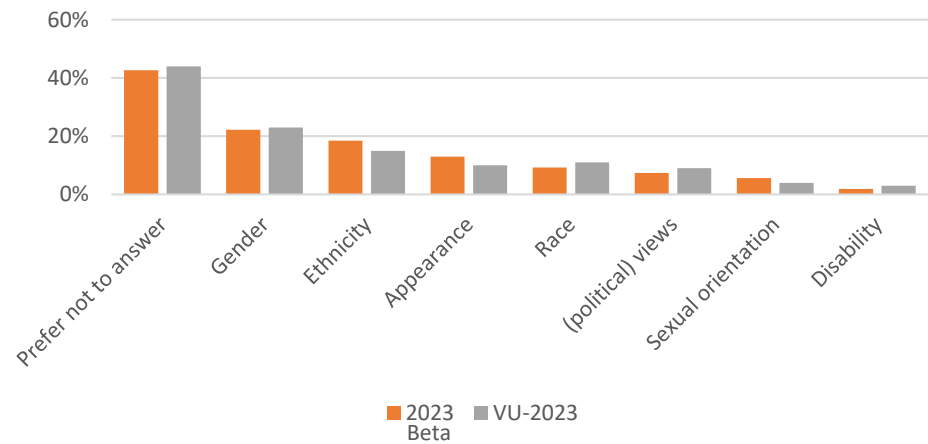
Majority did not experience undesirable social behavior in the last year (Beta: 69%, VU:74%) →
yet high % did experience undesirable behavior (Beta: 25%, VU: 21%)
Often this was exhibited by a supervisor (Beta: 48%, VU: 42%)
Diverse reasons for discrimination

Social safety (2)

What actions did you take?

Legend: 2023 Beta (orange), VU-2023 (grey)
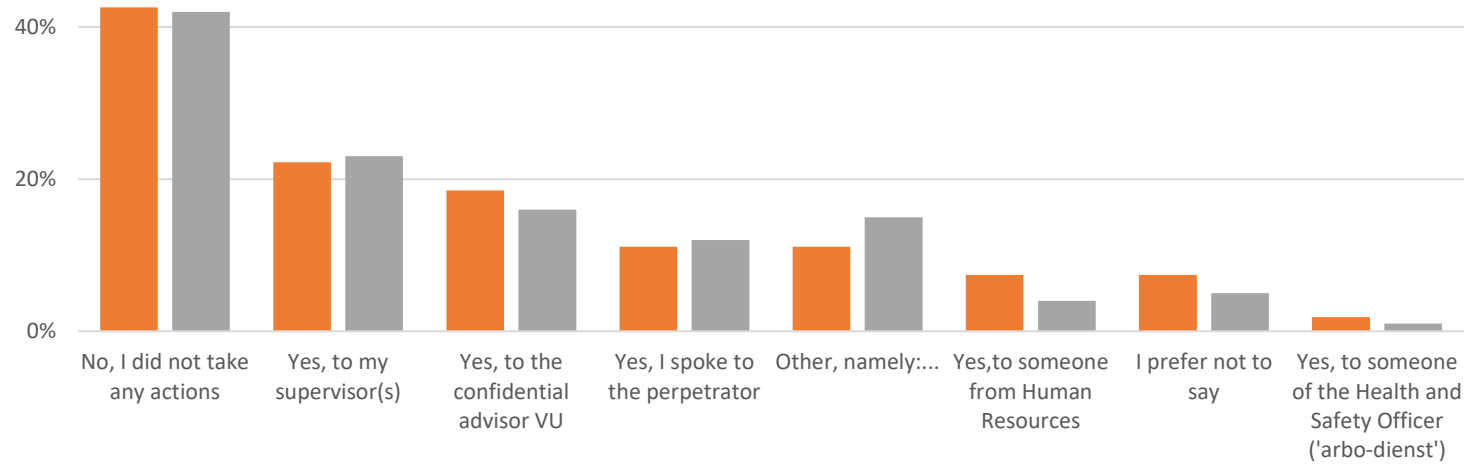
Did you feel protected/supported after experience of undesirable behavior?

Legend: 2023 Beta (orange), VU-2023 (grey)
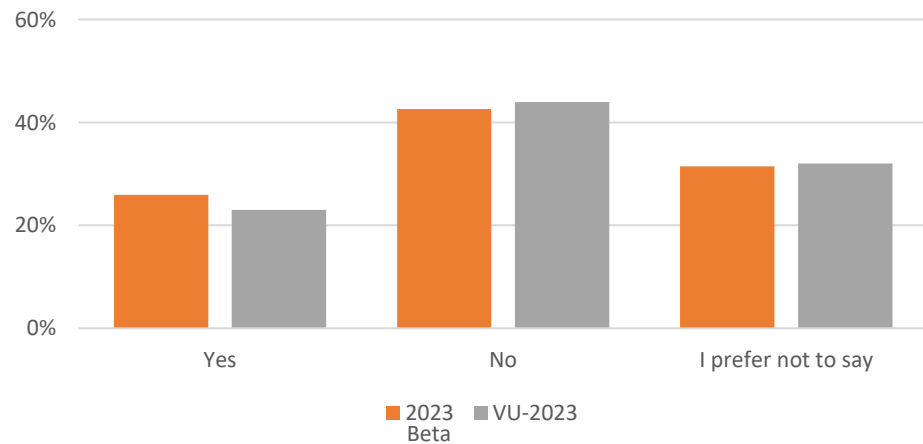
At Beta, 50% took action (54% at VU)
However, the feeling of support from the university was experienced as low (Beta: by 26%, VU: by 23%).

Requirements PhD thesis and satisfaction PhD trajectory

Are the scientific requirements of your PhD thesis clear to you?

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023
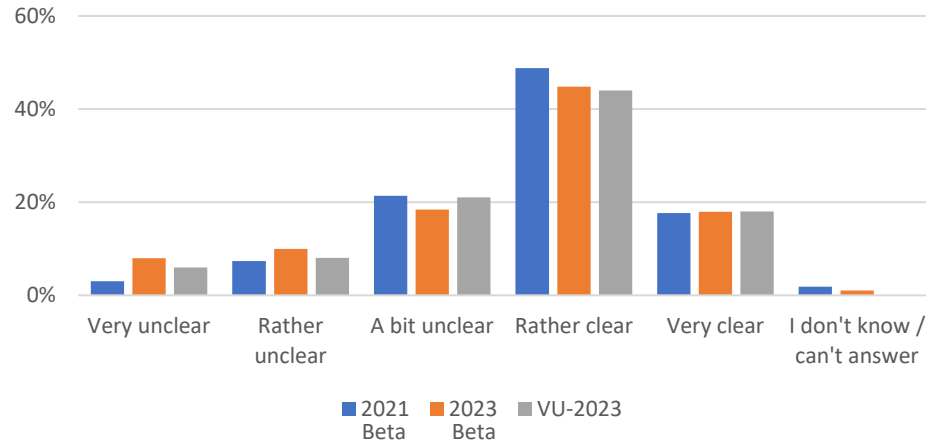
Have you discussed the scientific requirements of your PhD thesis?
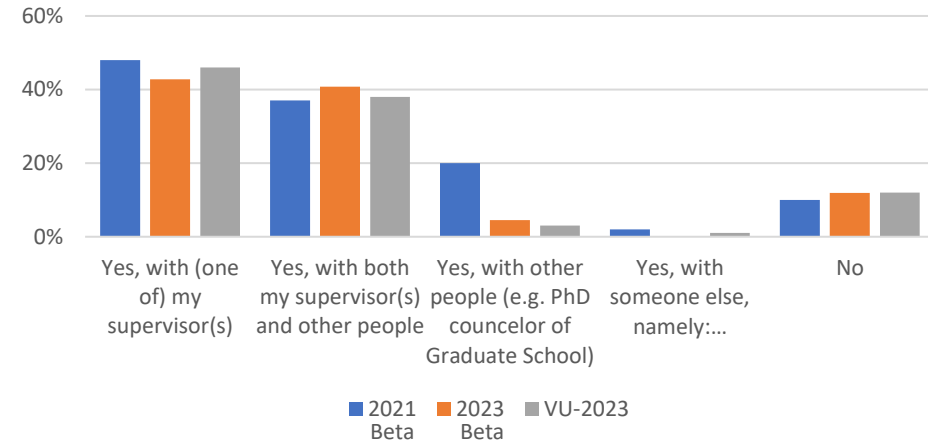
Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023

How satisfied are you with your PhD trajectory on a scale of 1 to 10?

Beta: 6,4
VU: 6,7

Legend: 2023 Beta, VU-2023

How satisfied are you with your PhD trajectory on a scale of 1 to 10?

Legend: 2021 Beta, 2023 Beta, VU-2023
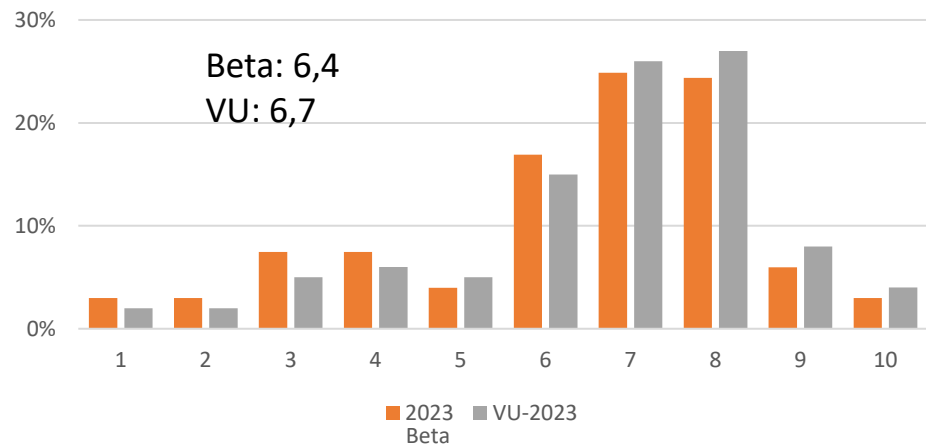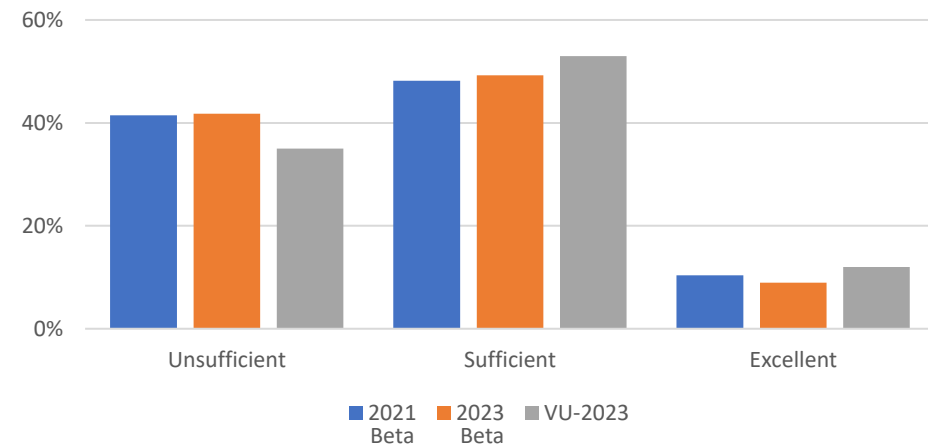
Relatively high % find dissertation requirements little-very unclear (Beta: 36%, VU: 35%)
Satisfaction with PhD trajectory: 58% (Beta) and 65% (VU)

Major conclusions

- For 48% of the respondents of Beta, the PhD project has a negative impact on well-being (VU: 35%)
- Half experiences delays in the PhD trajectory, due to COVID-19, supervision/assistance and problems with experiments, among others; expected delay is >9 months for 31% (Beta) and 39% (VU)
- Majority experiences a high workload, due, in part, to pressure to publish and difficulty of work
- Information is not always sufficient: onboarding, support opportunities, dissertation requirements
- Time spent on teaching and supervising (15.9% (Beta), 14% (VU)) is reasonably in line with KUOZ numbers (20% teaching, 80% research (still including 10-20% organizational tasks and development time) (KUOZ: Kengetallen Universitair Onderzoek)
- Drafting & maintaining TSP is not seen as a tool to smoothen the pathway, only 17% is positive about this at Beta (25% at VU)
- Majority positive about supervision, facilities, training opportunities
- There is a relatively high % that experienced undesirable behavior: 27%. In most cases this has to do with a supervisor/senior. Half of these respondents undertook action (Beta: 50%, VU: 54%). Only 29% feel supported by the university (at Beta, 26% at VU)

Main conclusions (comparison Beta vs VU)

Overall, Beta Faculty scores slightly worse than VU wide, sometimes differences are small.
>10% negative difference for:
- well-being
- satisfaction with PhD track
- contribution TSP to project
- time for education
- number of PhD candidates with project delays
- workload
- social safety

On average a more favorable score at Beta (>10%) for:
- number of hours of supervision
- contact with other researchers
- teaching duties in contract
- number of PhD students with a delay>9 months

Trends at Beta (2021 vs 2023)

- Positive trend: reducing workload, sense of well-being, teaching task in contract
- Negative trend: appreciation of supervision
- Notable: 36% do not teach at Beta 2023 (possibly external PhD students?), was in 2021: 6%

What next?

- Share results with stakeholders (FB, AHO, PhD council, PhD coordinators)
- Collect feedback from stakeholders
- Discuss survey with other faculties in Network of Graduate Schools
- Define priorities
     -short/long-term goals
     -groups involved
- Work out priorities

Short term measures

Improve information provision, shorten duration of PhD trajectories and improve supervision by:
• Appointing PhD candidate advisors (Nov 2023), organizing kick-off meeting with instructions/discussion
• Establishing guidelines for dissertation content
• Set up guidelines for time dedicated to teaching
• Improve visibility and organization of BETA graduate school(s) (draft webpage created: discuss with PhD coordinators)
• Evaluation implementation go/no-go procedure

Realized: Onboarding document that will be sent by PhD council to new PhD candidates starting Nov 2023