



JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY
PHD STUDENT ASSOCIATION

Advantages and disadvantages of doctoral studies: report on the opinion poll of PhD students of the Jagiellonian University

Authors:

Doctoral Candidates Opinion Research Committee

The Jagiellonian University PhD Students Association

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Table of contents

The Commission for Research and Opinion of Doctoral Students.....	3
The Course of the Research	3
Research Participants	4
Overall assessment of doctoral studies	5
Advantages of education in doctoral schools and doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University.....	7
Negative surprises of PhD students	9
Disappointment of PhD students	11
Research on the opinions of PhD students of the Jagiellonian University - developing open-ended answers (advantages and disadvantages of studying at the JU)	11
Scholarship System.....	14
Research Conclusions.....	16
Imperfections in the implemented study	17

The Commission for Research and Opinion of Doctoral Students

The Commission for Research and Opinion of PhD Students is one of the committees active within the organizational structure of the Society of PhD Students of the Jagiellonian University.

The task of the Commission for Research and Opinion of PhD Students is obtaining information on the current trends, opinions, and attitudes in the PhD student community. Reports, analyses, and recommendations are prepared based on the collected data, which may constitute the basis for a discussion on the substantive, organisational, and financial conditions at third-cycle studies and Doctoral Schools.

The Course of the Study

Consultations on the need to conduct a survey began on 01/07/2021. The Commission for Research and Opinion of PhD Students, which was reactivated at that time, held a series of meetings the aim of which was to determine the thematic scope of the survey. The survey connected with this topic was conducted in the academic year 2017/2018. It was considered important to update this knowledge - taking into consideration in particular the introduction of doctoral schools to the education system.

The questions were consulted and translated into English and handed over to competent judges from the Society of PhD Students. Surveys - in the Polish and English language versions – were prepared using the MS Forms tool. All PhD students of the Jagiellonian University who had an e-mail box in the @doctoral.uj.edu.pl domain could take part in the study. Each PhD student had the ability to submit her or his responses only once. On 18/10/2021, the survey was sent to the PhD students via a newsletter, and on 03/12/2021 invitations to the survey were sent to all doctoral schools and doctoral study secretary's offices. Gathering of the responses ended on 31/12/2021.

In the survey used in the study, the PhD students assessed overall the doctoral studies on a scale from 1 to 10, indicating the advantages and disadvantages of education in doctoral schools and doctoral studies.

The answers of Polish and English-speaking PhD students are presented together.

Participants of the Study

221 PhD students participated in the study (including 58% women, 6.3% did not answer this question), aged 23-59 ($M = 28.13$, $SD = 3.97$). Fifty-six PhD students are first-year students and 165 doctoral students are enrolled in the higher years of education (in Doctoral Schools and at third-cycle studies). PhD students who participated in the study represented all faculties of the Jagiellonian University, with less than 5% of PhD students of each individual faculty participating in the survey (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Faculties represented by PhD students who participated in the study

Faculty	Percentage among the surveyed PhD students
Faculty of Biochemistry, Biophysics, and Biotechnology	15.8%
Faculty of Chemistry	13.6%
Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Applied Computer Science	9%
Faculty of Polish Studies	8.6%
Faculty of Philosophy	8.6%
Faculty of Philology	8.1%
Faculty of History	7.7%
Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science	6.8%
Faculty of Management and Social Communication	6.3%
Faculty of Geography and Geology	4.5%
Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences	4%
Faculty of International and Political Studies	2.3%
Faculty of Law and Administration	1.8%
Faculty of Pharmacy, JUMC	1.4%
Faculty of Medicine, JUMC	1%
Faculty of Health Sciences, JUMC	0.5%

Table 2. Fields represented by the PhD students who participated in the study

Field	Percentage among the surveyed PhD students
Humanities	27.6%
Science and Natural Science	51.6%
Social Sciences	17.2 %
Medical Sciences and Health Sciences	3.2%
Technical Sciences	0.4%

Overall assessment of doctoral studies

Figure 1. Assessment of education at the Jagiellonian University by Year 1 PhD students of doctoral schools

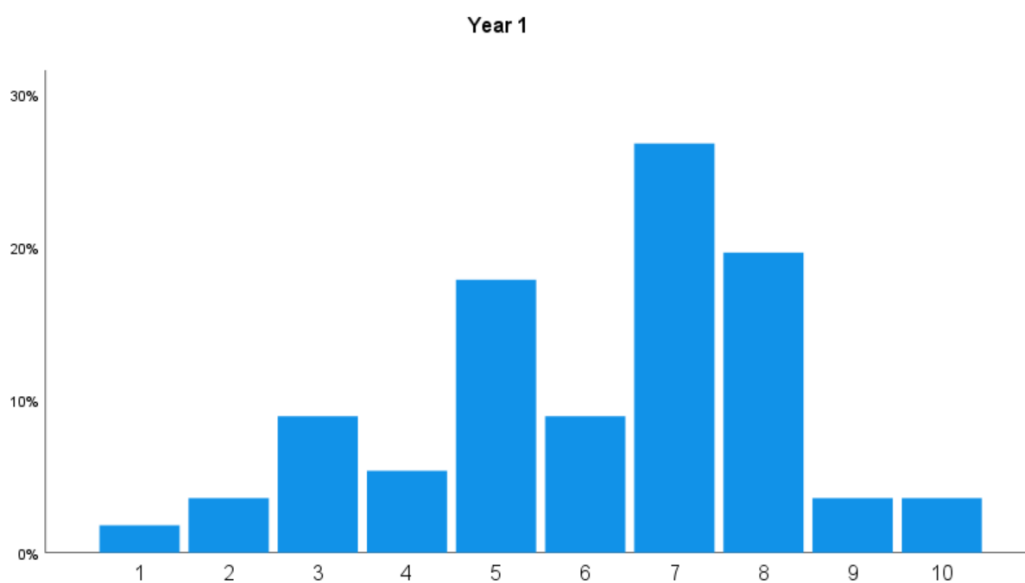


Figure 2. Assessment of education at the Jagiellonian University by Year 2 and 3 PhD students of doctoral schools

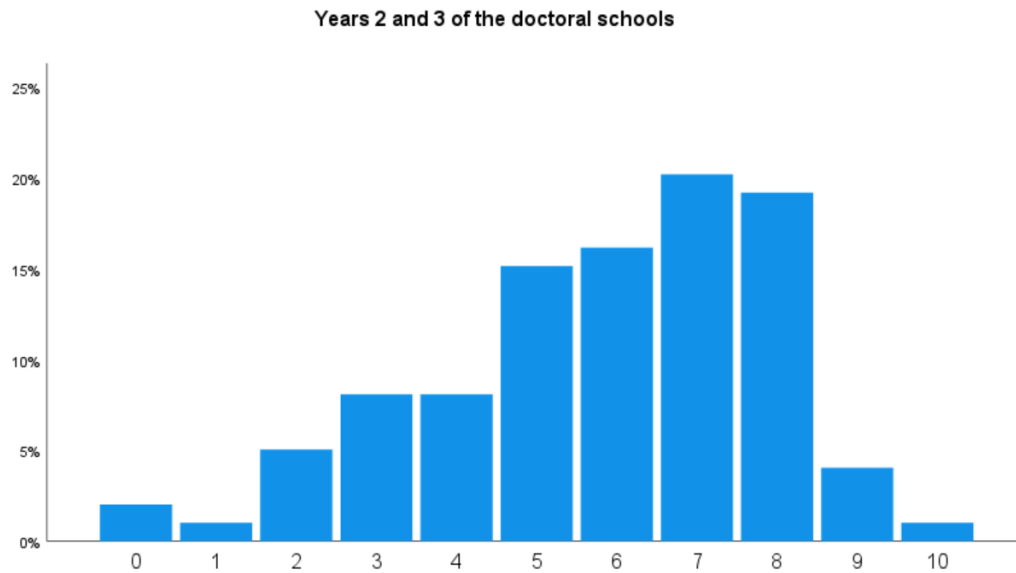
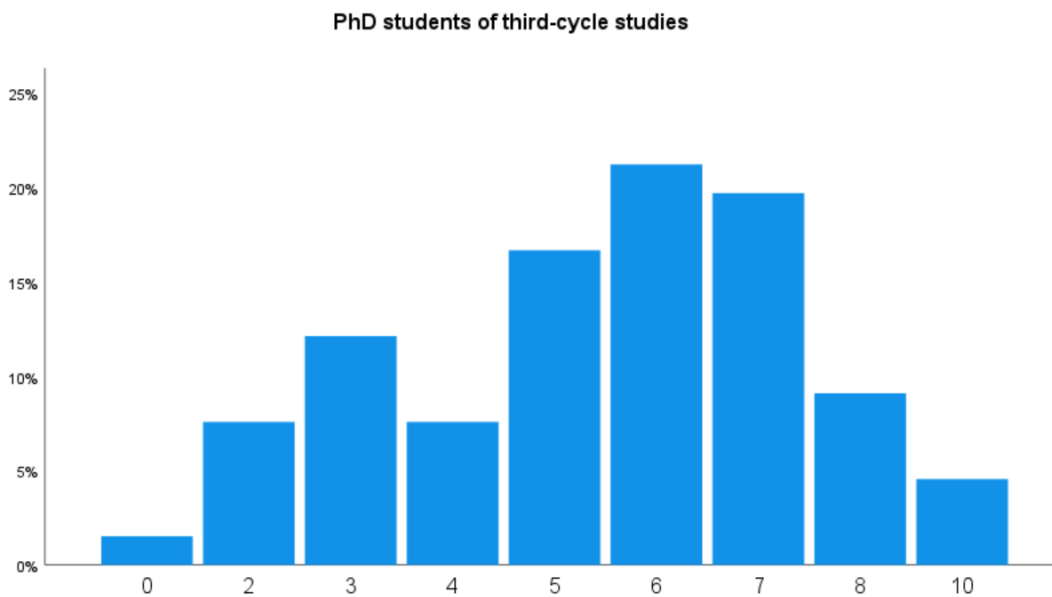


Figure 3. Assessment of education at the Jagiellonian University by PhD students of third-cycle studies.



Note: the graphs present the percentage of surveyed PhD students assessing their doctoral studies on a scale from 0 - *the worst doctoral programme imaginable*, to 10 - *the best doctoral programme imaginable*. The graphs are presented separately for first-year PhD students (doctoral schools), second and third-year PhD students of doctoral schools, and third-cycle PhD students. Year one in doctoral schools: 100% = 56 people, Year 2 and 3 in doctoral schools: 100% = 99 people, Year 4 and extensions at doctoral studies: 100% = 66 people

Advantages of education in doctoral schools and doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University

Table 3. The most frequently indicated advantages of education at the Jagiellonian University by PhD students

Advantages of doctoral studies at the JU	Percentage of surveyed PhD students indicating a given advantage		
	at doctoral schools		at third-cycle studies
	Year 1	Year 2 and 3	Year 4 and extensions
Clear expectations of the promoter towards the PhD student	73,21%	63,64%	78,79%
Support and kindness from academics	75,00%	65,66%	65,15%
Collaboration with the doctoral committee	21,43%	17,17%	4,55%
Participation in events which integrate the community of PhD students, e.g., trips and integration events	23,21%	15,15%	13,64%
Participation in classes enabling the acquisition of new professional competences	48,21%	37,37%	40,91%
Providing free access to scientific journals	50,00%	65,66%	63,64%
Prestige of studies at the Jagiellonian University	28,57%	40,40%	40,91%
Clear information about what to do in order to complete doctoral studies	46,43%	46,46%	59,09%
Health insurance paid by the university	55,36%	46,46%	60,61%
Possibility of doctoral studies' extension	41,07%	39,39%	78,79%
Support from other PhD students	39,29%	38,38%	36,36%
Making friends with other PhD students	48,21%	43,43%	39,39%
Research supervisor of a recognised authority in the community	41,07%	43,43%	59,09%
Participation in foreign exchange	35,71%	31,31%	31,82%
Support of the promoter in preparing the doctoral thesis	73,21%	73,74%	68,18%
Taking care of my interests by representatives of PhD students in the Institute / Faculty Council	26,79%	30,30%	30,30%
Support from administration employees in solving problems connected with the studies	53,57%	45,45%	62,12%
Co-financing of the scientific activity of PhD students by the Society of PhD Students	41,07%	34,34%	45,45%

Possibility of collaboration with outstanding specialists in the field in which doctoral research is conducted	39,29%	38,38%	46,97%
Grouping of buildings where I study and work in one place	3,57%	3,03%	4,55%
Classes in small groups	26,79%	24,24%	25,76%
Access to computer software necessary for scientific work	51,79%	50,51%	51,52%
Discounts in public transport	60,71%	62,63%	65,15%
Guarantee of receiving a scholarship from the moment of beginning doctoral studies	89,29%	75,76%	51,52%
I do not see any of the above claims as an advantage to doctoral studies	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%

Notes: Year 1 at doctoral schools: 100% = 56 persons.

Years 2 and 3 at doctoral schools: 100% = 99 persons.

Year 4 and extensions at doctoral studies: 100% = 66 persons.

Disadvantages of education in doctoral schools and doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University

Table 4. The most frequently indicated disadvantages of education at the Jagiellonian University by PhD students

Disadvantages of doctoral studies at the JU	Percentage of surveyed PhD students indicating a given disadvantage		
	at doctoral schools		at third-cycle studies
	Year 1	Year 2 and 3	Year 4 and extensions
The academic staff lacks ambition to compete with the best universities in the world	28,57%	21,21%	28,79%
No courses and classes developing research work ability	32,14%	37,37%	54,55%
Treating PhD students as "cheap labour"	44,64%	50,51%	74,24%
Inability to reconcile professional work with doctoral studies	51,79%	54,55%	54,55%
Too much workload of the promoter/supervisor with scientific work	26,79%	26,26%	28,79%
No access to a well-functioning Wi-Fi	25,00%	27,27%	25,76%
Necessity to participate in classes which teach nothing, but only fill up time	62,50%	56,57%	78,79%

Classes take place too early or too late	16,07%	8,08%	15,15%
The number of scholarships received is unsatisfactory	64,29%	44,44%	68,18%
Lack of support in the preparation of a doctorate from the promoter/research supervisor	21,43%	28,28%	37,88%
Inability to reconcile professional work with the doctoral studies	35,71%	24,24%	37,88%
Inappropriate work of the university's administrative staff	30,36%	36,36%	31,82%
Too many PhD students under the supervision of one promoter	5,36%	6,06%	16,67%
Strong competition between PhD students	17,86%	14,14%	34,85%
Being overburdened with duties connected with participation in courses as a student	41,07%	30,30%	40,91%
Too little contact with outstanding scientists	26,79%	29,29%	31,82%
Failure to take into account the opinions of PhD students when making decisions by the authorities of the faculty / institute	26,79%	37,37%	43,94%
No remuneration for conducting classes with students	62,50%	49,49%	63,64%
Disrespect for PhD students on the part of research workers	17,86%	24,24%	40,91%
Lack of the supervisor's / research supervisor's time for the PhD student	17,86%	24,24%	30,30%
Lack of information about possible career paths after completion of the doctoral studies	50,00%	49,49%	50,00%
Disadvantageous arrangement of buildings. in which classes are held	12,50%	10,10%	7,58%
No funding for the publication of scientific articles	44,64%	33,33%	42,42%
No classes conducted by outstanding world class specialists	25,00%	28,28%	28,79%
No information about grants and scholarships available for PhD students	33,93%	34,34%	25,76%
Not enough information in English	19,64%	11,11%	16,67%
I do not see any of these statements as a disadvantages of doctoral studies	1,79%	4,04%	3,03%

Notes: Year 1 at doctoral schools: 100% = 56 persons.

Years 2 and 3 at doctoral schools: 100% = 99 persons.

Year 4 and extensions at doctoral studies: 100% = 66 persons.

Negative surprises of PhD students

Negative surprises of PhD students are problems/disadvantages that first-year PhD students expected to experience to a much lesser extent than those of senior PhD students actually experienced while studying at the JU. We present six disadvantages of doctoral studies, where there were the greatest discrepancies between senior year doctoral students and first-year doctoral students assessing them.

Table 5. Negative surprises of PhD students

Disadvantages of doctoral studies at the JU	Percentage of surveyed PhD students indicating a given disadvantage			Deviation (pp)	
	At doctoral schools		At third-cycle studies	DS	T-c.
	Year 1	Year 2 and 3	Year 4 and extensions		
Disrespect for PhD students on the part of research workers	17.86%	24.24%	40.91%	6.38	23.05
Lack of the supervisor's / research supervisor's time for the PhD student	17.86%	24.24%	30.30%	6.06	17.86
Too many PhD under the supervision of one promoter	5.36%	6.06%	16.67%	11.31	10.61
Lack of support in the preparation of a doctoral thesis from the promoter / research supervisor	21.43%	28.28%	37.88%	16.45	9.6
Treating PhD students as "cheap labour"	44.64%	50.51%	74.24%	29.6	23.73
No courses and classes to develop research work ability	32.14%	37.37%	54.55%	5.23	22.41

Notes: Tables 5 and 6: Year one in doctoral schools: 100% = 56 people, Years 2 and 3 in doctoral schools: 100% = 99 people, year 4 and extensions at doctoral studies: 100% = 66 people. Symbols in the table: pp = percentage points, column SD = percentage point difference between year one and higher years at the doctoral school, column 3 = percentage point difference between year one of the doctoral school and third-cycle studies (year 4 and extensions)

Disappointment of PhD students

Disappointment of PhD students is the potential advantages of doctoral studies, in regards to which the responding first-year PhD students expected to be supportive for them to a much greater degree, which was less confirmed by senior PhD students. We present five advantages of doctoral studies, in the assessment of which there were the greatest discrepancies between the expectations of first-year PhD students and the declarations of senior PhD students.

Table 6. Disappointment of PhD students

Advantages of doctoral studies at the JU	Percentage of surveyed PhD students indicating a given advantage			Deviation (pp)	
	At doctoral schools		At third-cycle studies	DS	T-c.
	Year 1	Year 2 and 3	Year 4 and extensions		
Guarantee of receiving a scholarship from the moment of beginning doctoral studies	89,29%	75,76%	51,52%	13,53	37,77
Participation in events integrating the community of PhD students, e.g., trips and integration events	23,21%	15,15%	13,64%	8,06	9,57
Participation in classes enabling the acquisition of new professional competences	48,21%	37,37%	40,91%	10,84	7,3
Support and kindness from academics	75,00%	65,66%	65,15%	9,34	9,85
Collaboration with the doctoral committee	21,43%	17,17%	4,55%	4,26	16,88

Study on the opinions of PhD students of the Jagiellonian University - developing open-ended answers (advantages and disadvantages of studying at the JU)

The respondents gave 111 answers to open-ended questions on the advantages and disadvantages of studying at the JU, including 35 questions about the advantages and 76 questions about the disadvantages. Responses were often extensive with more than one advantage/disadvantage. The presented study is the result of an analysis of the statements in terms of the issues raised in them. The responses of the respondents were divided into three main topics: financial resources, university, and courses (didactic classes).

Table no. 7. Advantages of doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University - answers and comments based on an open-ended question.

Advantages of doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University broken down into thematic categories	Number of responses
Financial resources	
Permanent scholarship	3
financing of trips to conferences	1
Awards for publications/achievements	1
Scholarship programmes and grants	2
University	
Good class schedule	2
Acquiring didactic experience (possibility to choose whether you want to)	1
Individual working time organisation/Remote work possibility	10
Collaboration with the promoter	4
Courses	
Scientific development (seminars, courses, and webinars)	3
Rooms for scientific work	2
Creating research teams and centres	2
Reliable and helpful administration	4
Access to library collections	2
Supportive head of doctoral studies	5
Possibility of international collaboration	4

Table no. 8: Disadvantages of doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University – answers and comments based on an open-ended question.

Disadvantages of doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University broken down into thematic categories	Number of responses
Financial resources	
Incomprehensible criteria for awarding scholarships	1
Too low scholarships	2
Financial instability	3
The need to combine studies and professional work	2
No valorisation of the scholarship amount (inflation)	3
Unfair financial differences between Doctoral Schools and doctoral studies	1
Financial resources – for scientific activity of PhD students	
Lack of full financing of conference trips	1
Limited grant offer with surveyed persons' funding	1
No rector or quality-oriented scholarships	2
Courses – for PhD students	
Overload with compulsory courses (as a participant), which offer little	6
No courses offering specific skills for a research workshop	1

Lack of or too late preparation for teaching	2
No emphasis on high language skills	1
No possibility to participate in language courses and ZintegrUJ project	2
No classes to develop fund obtaining skills	1
Very small selection of specialist courses (for the dissertation being written	2
Compulsion to participate in classes conducted in English or their excess	3
A small number of places in the obligatory courses	1
Courses – conducted by PhD students	
Excessive workload ("cheap labour") or lack of teaching hours for PhD students	3
No possibility of conducting classes after completing the internship	1
Lack of support from course coordinators during the internship	1
Lack of possibility of conducting any kind of course within the unit	1

Table no. 8. Disadvantages of doctoral studies at the JU – cont.

University – administration and bureaucracy	
Problems with administration, too much bureaucracy ("excessive paperwork")	5
Lack of clear procedures for settling invoices, delegations, etc.	1
Disrespect for PhD students on the part of administrative staff	7
Organizational chaos, decision announcements at the last moment	11
Lack of support in internship organisation	1
No two extensions possible	1
Combination of the Polish and philological faculties within the Doctoral School in the Humanities	1
University - supervisors of doctoral studies and research supervisors	
Lack of support, incompetence on the part of the research supervisor	1
Scientific misconduct (falsifying research results)	1
Using of the results of the PhD student's work by the promoter	1
University – general problems with the PhD students at the JU	
No information about alternative career paths	1
No annual leave	1
Difficulties in reconciling work and studies	1
Lack of integration of PhD students in the scientific community (during department meetings, scientific meetings in departments)	1
Mobbing towards PhD students	2
No employment prospects	2
Lack of support for young mothers – female PhD students (unpaid maternity leave)	1
Putting pressure on the number of publications and attending conferences	2
A sense of alienation in the scientific community	2
University – general problems of the JU	

Lack of library resources, no access to foreign literature	2
A small number of guest lectures	1
No space for own work	3
Problems connected with the PhD Student Society of the JU	
Lack of support for PhD students	2

Scholarship System

195 PhD students (88.2%) declared that they received a doctoral scholarship in the 2020/2021 academic year (see Figure 1). 17 PhD students (7.7%) declared that they received a social grant in the same academic year (see Figure 2).

Doctoral scholarship

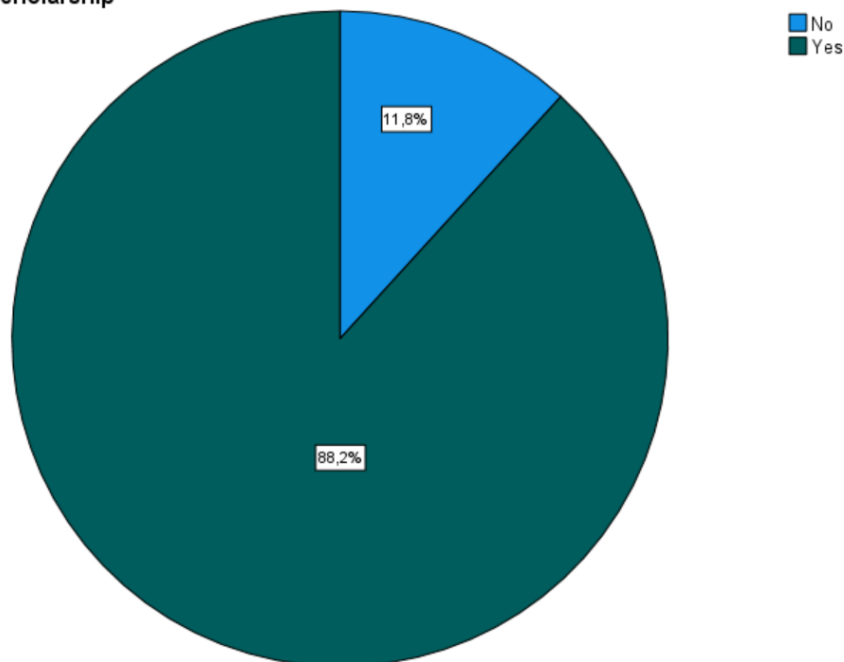


Figure 1. Percentage of PhD students receiving a doctoral scholarship.

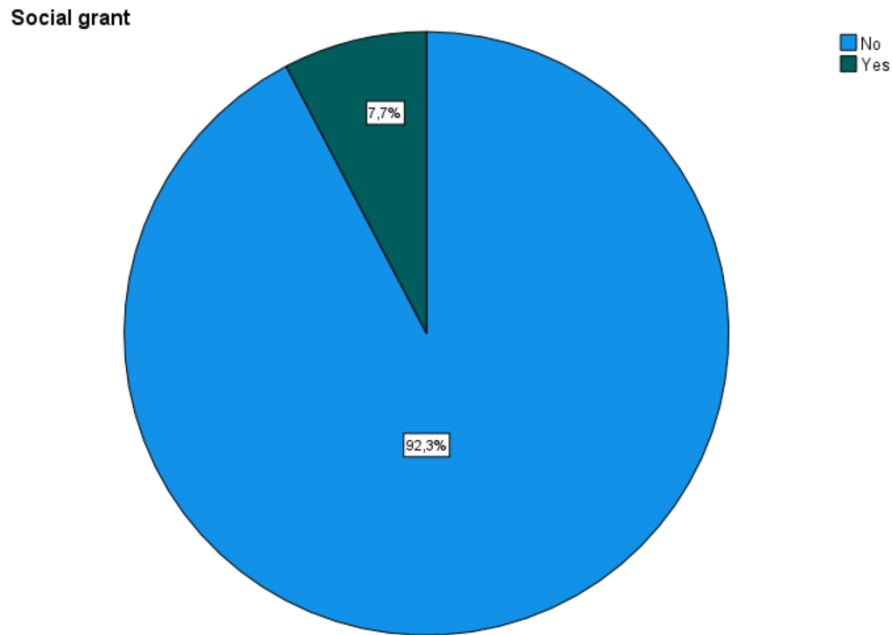


Figure 2. Percentage of PhD students receiving a social grant.

103 PhD students (46.6%) declared performing paid employment outside their doctoral studies and research work in the academic year 2020/2021 (see Figure 3).

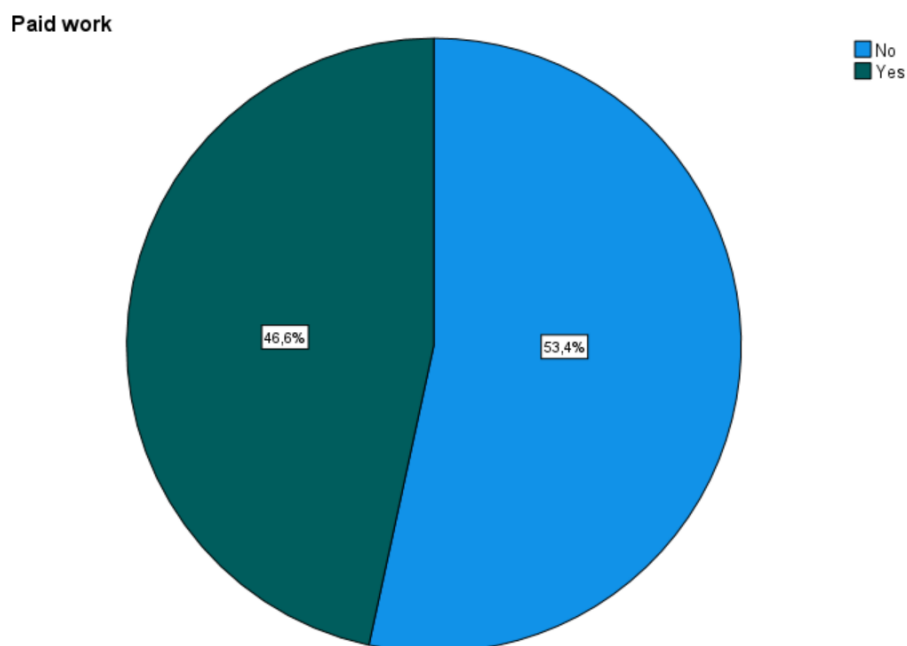


Figure 3. Percentage of PhD students declaring that they perform paid work unrelated to the doctoral thesis.

Study Conclusions

It is very difficult to conduct a thorough analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of education in doctoral schools and at doctoral studies (third-cycle studies). It stems from differences in the way education is organised; different legal regulations and other organisational structures envisaged for these two education modes.

In the case of the analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of education in doctoral schools and at doctoral studies, there are noticeable discrepancies in the problems of PhD students of the so-called old mode and PhD students from doctoral schools. This is due to, inter alia, certain solutions in doctoral schools that guarantee support from the beginning of education - e.g., the introduction of universal scholarships. What seems to be disturbing, however, is the perception by PhD students of contact with their promoters, tutors, or university administration, which in the following years of education is rated lower and lower.

In the question about the advantages of doctoral studies at the Jagiellonian University, the respondents most often pointed to the important role played by the individual organisation of working time, the possibility of choosing remote work, as well as proper collaboration with the head of doctoral studies and with the promoter. Other aspects indicated by the PhD students as being an asset include the creation of research teams and centres, participation in various seminars, courses, or webinars, the possibility of international collaboration and access to library collections. In regard to financial matters, respondents from doctoral schools appreciate receiving a permanent scholarship and the opportunity to participate in scholarship programmes and grants.

Among the disadvantages that were mentioned by PhD students in the open-ended question (see Table no. 8), the dominant issue seems to be the ubiquitous information chaos – where decisions are given at the last moment, it is too often unclear what documents should be submitted or what are the formal requirements to pass the year completion audit. Another significant problem is the unwillingness and disrespect of research workers towards PhD students. In the free responses, the Doctoral School in the Humanities was given as an example (4 responses). There is also a concern among PhD students about their future employment opportunities and not getting them involved in the activities of institutes. Many a time, attention was also drawn to the uselessness of the courses provided as part of doctoral studies, and PhD students of Doctoral Schools pointed to the compulsion to take part in classes conducted in English with a questionable substantive level.

Imperfections in the implemented study

The implemented study was not error-free. Despite the conducted pilot study and the use of the competent judges' procedure, whose task was to assess the correctness of the survey, there was an error in question No. 5 consisting in using the wording to make it easier - rather than to make it more difficult. It appeared in both the Polish and English versions of the survey. After 8 days from its launch, it was corrected. However, taking into account the nature of the question and the cafeteria of multiple-choice answers, the question was understandable to the people participating in the survey.

Moreover, the old classification of scientific disciplines was used in question 11 (personal data) and scientific disciplines and artistic disciplines. However, this did not have an impact on the quality of the responses since all the respondents provided a reply to this question. A new classification was used in the preparation of the questionnaire, in line with the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 20th September, 2018 (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1818). The disciplines used in the survey - which are currently scientific disciplines – were summed up within the existing disciplines. This was the case in the field of medical and health sciences and in the field of science and natural science.