

# Report of Survey Results -Consequences of COVID-19



*Provided by the PhD Chapter Board*

*The Phd chapter at KTH/ Doktorandsektionen vid Tekniska Högskolans Studentkår*

## Background

As soon as the spreading of COVID-19 was declared to be a pandemic and KTH campus closed for students 18th of March, the PhD Chapter also started to get questions and reports of concerns and issues that had arisen due to the COVID-19 situation. We wanted to gather all of these concerns and issues in one place. Further, we also wanted to make it possible for all doctoral students to express their concerns in a structured way, so they could be brought forward to the discussion at KTH central level and school level. To facilitate this, the PhD Chapter board constructed a small survey, in a similar manner to what THS had already done (but they focused solely on courses, directed at first and second cycle students).

The survey was distributed through our webpage, Facebook page, and emails to the PhD school councils at all the schools of KTH. Some of the school councils also distributed this survey through their doctoral students' email lists directed at doctoral students belonging to specific study-programs, departments, or in some cases for the entire school. The survey was first distributed on 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2020, but has been accepting responses throughout the semester. A majority of the responses were collected in April, which should be considered as an important factor while evaluating the results from this survey. It is possible that some effects were not apparent to the doctoral students during the early stage of the fast evolving pandemic. The situation might look different now, as the pandemic has been ongoing for a longer period of time. A follow-up survey might need to be distributed during the next semester for a more updated picture.

## Results and Analysis

The survey consisted of three multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions. The answers to the open-ended questions consist of short text statements. All the text answers have been read through and the mentioned issues and concerns are presented in an aggregated form.

The first question of the survey was a background question regarding which school the respondents belong to. The EECS school students are represented to a higher extent compared to the other schools. We also know that CBH school council chose not to distribute the survey through their email lists, which explains the very low number of respondents from CBH. Due to the uneven distribution of respondents between the schools we have chosen to present the data solely in an aggregated way in this report. The raw data has been however been shared with the school councils and directors of third-cycle education (FAs), to allow them to make further analysis of the data from their particular schools, if they wish to do so.

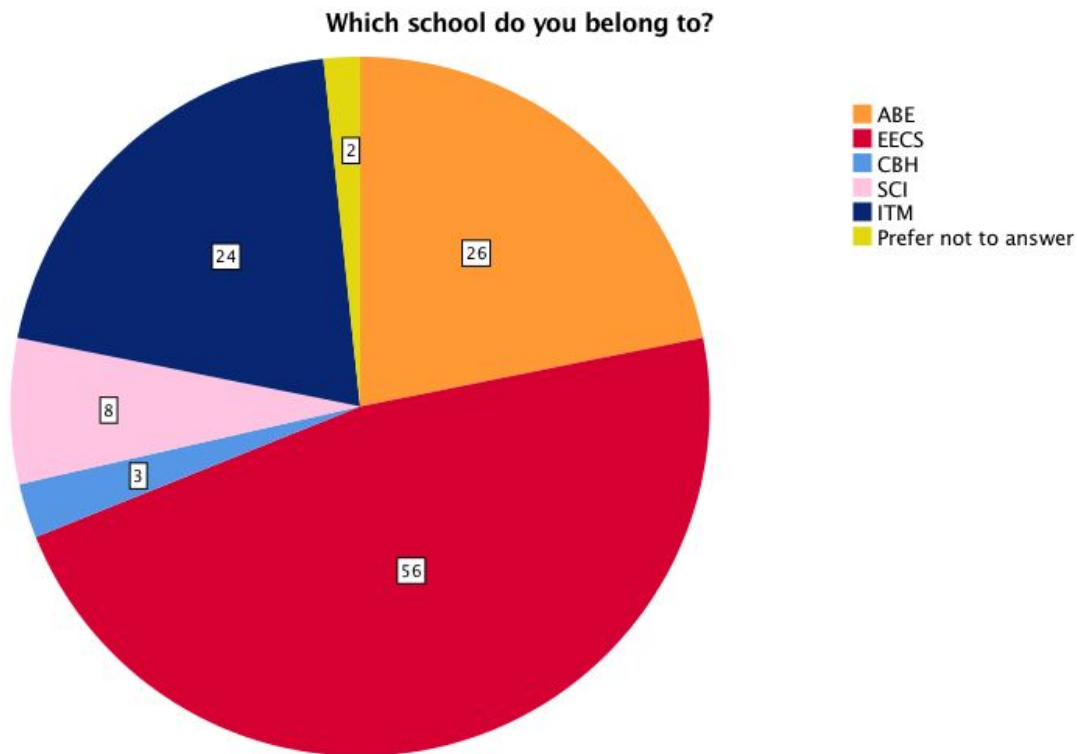


Figure 1. Shows the distribution between the schools among the respondents.

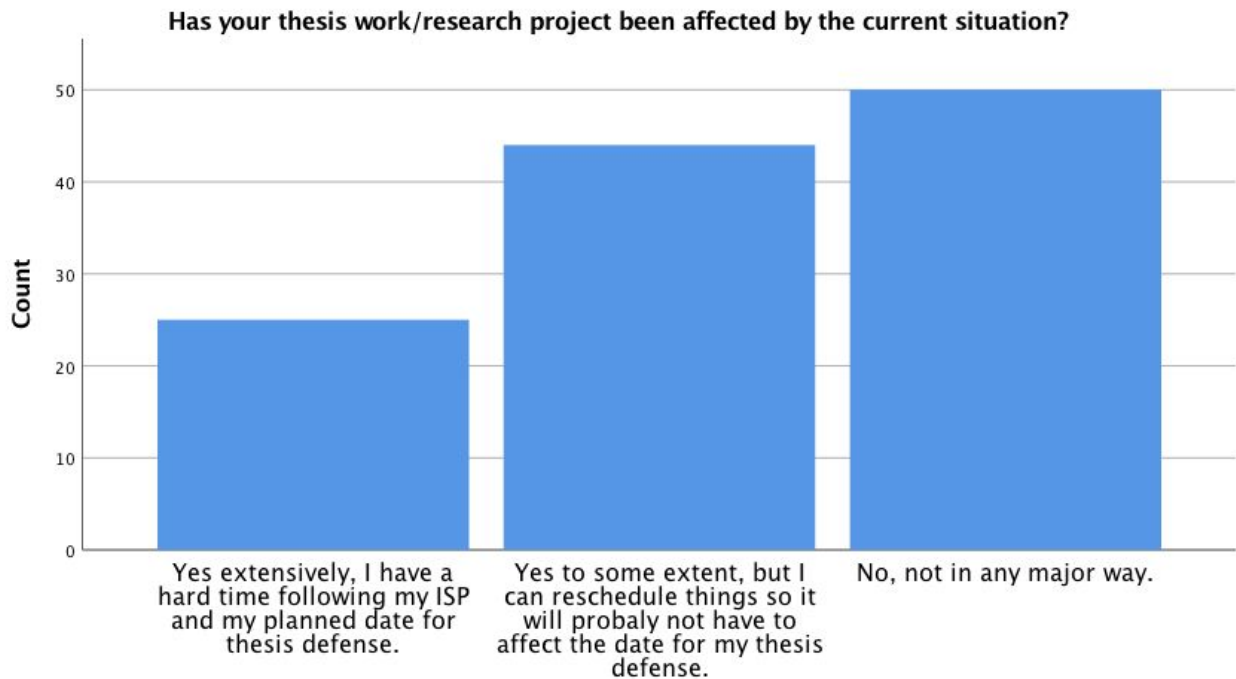
### Implications on Third Cycle Courses

The second question of the survey was: *“If you are enrolled in one or multiple courses, how has the transformation to digital education worked within the course(s)? Please specify the course codes and names of all the courses you are enrolled in. If a course is working well, that is also important feedback.”*

In general, the respondents report that the courses they have enrolled in have moved to a digital format (Zoom/Canvas) and were working well. A few respondents reported that courses/part of a course got postponed and that labs have been more problematic. Some respondents also expressed that they, as well as the course responsables, were a bit unfamiliar with the new format and that the interactions/discussion/lectures were not as good as they would have been face-to-face.

### Implications on Research and Thesis Work

The third question was a multiple-choice question, regarding impacts on the research project/thesis work. As seen in Figure 2, 50 respondents (42%) stated to not be affected in a major way, while 44 (37%) stated to be affected to some extent, but they can reschedule things so it would not impact their planned defence date, and 25 (21%) stated to be affected in a major way, such that it is hard for them to follow their ISP and it will be hard to defend their thesis on the planned date.



**Figure 2. Shows to what degree the respondents' thesis work/ research project has been affected.**

The fourth question was an open-ended question: *“Please elaborate in what way the COVID-19 situation has affected your thesis work/research project. What have you not been able to do and which implications are you foreseeing?”*

The mentioned issues included:

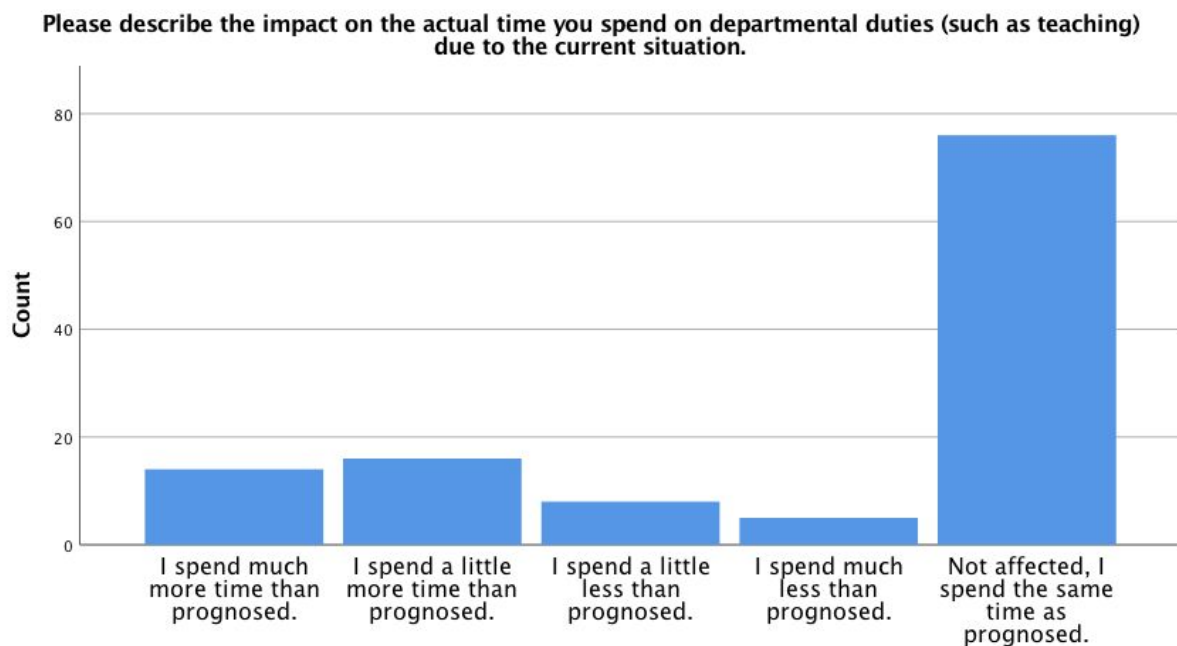
- Cancelled or postponed research activities such as conferences, seminars, workshops, summer schools, research visits, field trips, meetings, experiments, and data collections.
- Less social interaction is happening due to physical distancing. It is harder to meet and discuss research with colleagues and supervisors. This was also said to lead to isolation and depression.
- The work environment at home is not experienced to be ideal. Including lack of good workspaces such as not having suitable chairs or desks or access to a printer. Lack of space and that you are more easily disturbed, have also been reported as issues as other family members or flatmates are also working from home. It was also said to be harder to distinguish between work and private life as they now take place in the same physical space.
- Lack of structure and focus when the routine of going into work has stopped.
- Supervision and discussions are not as good virtual as face-to-face.
- Some labs had hard restrictions preventing doctoral students from going to the lab, and on the other hand, some doctoral students reported feeling unsafe going to the labs even though they had the possibility to do so.
- Less supervision time.
- Some archives and libraries are closed.

- Companies and industries are closed, which makes it hard for doctoral students who have such collaborations where their research depends on them. Some industry employed doctoral students have also been put on leave from their company employment.
- Hard to reach respondents for the doctoral students who collect data through interviews.
- Learning new IT-tools and technology to run experiments remotely takes time and causes stress.
- Hard to focus and concentrate on work during these circumstances.
- An increase in teaching duties results in less time for research.
- Newly employed doctoral students have not been able to meet colleagues and start their projects.

A couple of doctoral students did also report that working from home has made it easier for them to focus on writing papers.

### Implications on Departmental Duties

The fifth question was a multiple-choice-question concerning the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the hours of departmental duties, see Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Shows to what degree the respondents' hours spent on departmental duties have changed.**

A majority of the doctoral students that answered the survey stated that the hours they spend on departmental duties has not been affected by COVID-19. A number of respondents did, however, stated to spend more time than prognosed (16 respondents stated to spend a little more than prognosed, and 14 much more than prognosed). The PhD Chapter is also aware of the fact that many doctoral students later volunteered (or were asked to) help out as invigilators during the Zoom exams at the end of period 4, which would have

added to their departmental duties workload. Since we know from our other survey results<sup>1</sup> that many doctoral students do not report the hours they spend on departmental duties, it is not apparent how doctoral studies can report and get compensated for the extra hours spent. A smaller number of respondents (13) also stated that they spent fewer hours than prognosed.

## Other Implications

The final question of the survey was: *“Do you have any other concerns regarding the situation that you like to bring to our attention?”*

The answer to this question included the following:

- How to act if you belong to the group of people at a higher risk of complications from COVID-19.
- That the possibility to still go to the office is good.
- General concerns about how Sweden is handling COVID-19.
- That doctoral students are coping and handling this in different ways and it affects us differently.
- Mental health issues and additional stress caused by this crisis. Changed plans can affect both the possibility to finish the thesis on time but it could also affect the whole family when longer visits that have been planned are cancelled.
- Colleagues and students not following the recommendations.
- Lack of decision regarding if doctoral students could be given a prolongation due to COVID-19, how to report and calculate the effect. This is an added stress. Specially scholarship funded doctoral students are wondering about their options and possibility for prolongation.
- Cannot collect data as planned.
- To not report the hours spent on departmental duties is a bad practice also when there is no crisis.
- How can KTH make sure our workplaces are safe when we are working from home? How to solve the issue of not having a proper home office. Bringing home office supplies was reported as good, if that is allowed and feasible.
- Isolation and mental health issues caused by that.
- How to account for extra teaching hours is unclear.
- The situation is slowing down progress and doctoral students are experiencing to lose time.
- Workplace guidelines (such as when you are allowed to go to the lab or office) are unclear and can cause discrimination when some are allowed to and others not.
- This survey was expressed to be a good initiative.

## Recommendations Based on Results

In light of the presented results, the PhD Chapter would recommend KTH to follow the recommendations put forward by SFS-DK in their report<sup>2</sup>. For KTH that would mean:

1. To facilitate and communicate that any changes that had to be made due to COVID-19 are accounted for in the doctoral students' ISPs. When the ISPs are updated they should include information on how the doctoral education

<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://www.dr.kth.se/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/06/Report\\_on\\_Survey\\_Results.pdf](https://www.dr.kth.se/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/06/Report_on_Survey_Results.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Available at <https://sfs.se/new-report-consequences-for-doctoral-students-due-to-the-corona-pandemic/>

was affected by the corona pandemic, what measurements that were taken, and if the doctoral education has been delayed in any way.

2. That the universities keep track of the consequences that the corona pandemic has for doctoral students' situation. In the long run through monitoring the information that should come in from the ISP, but also on a short term scale by initiating university level investigations of the doctoral students' situation.
3. That KTH should clarify under which circumstances prolongation can be given due to the corona pandemic, and that the financing of prolongation is handled at the central KTH level. In other cases, we might end up having similar cases from two different schools or departments that are handled differently, which would not be fair.
4. That KTH provides guidelines to doctoral students (and supervisors) for how to apply for prolongation due to the corona pandemic, including information about what documentation the doctoral student should include.
5. That KTH clarifies if the corona pandemic can be counted as a "Särskild skäl" for prolongation.
6. That doctoral students who are experiencing an increase in departmental duties hours, are given information on how to document this.
7. That the KTH specifically addresses the question about the mental health of doctoral students.

In addition, the PhD Chapter would also recommend KTH to further address the issues concerning workplace environments. If the recommendation would still be to work from home, the survey results clearly show that not all doctoral students have a sufficient workplace at home. For guidelines regarding workplace safety precautions when going back to the office, KTH should also note that many doctoral students share offices and labs. If for instance, restriction to a certain lab would make it impossible for a doctoral student to follow their ISP and carry out their work task, that should be taken into consideration and be addressed.