

Report on problematic situations between supervisor and PhD candidate at NTNU

Based on results of the survey conducted by DION in the period 10.10-31.10.2023.

DION board 2023

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Trondheim, November 2023

Summary

In light of the ongoing discussion about whether there is a need for a stipendiatombud* position at NTNU, DION has conducted a survey in the period between 10th and 31st of October 2023 as agreed at the Forskningsutvalget's meeting on August 28th, 2023. The motivation for this survey was to get statistics on the number of PhD candidates who experience conflict with their supervisor(s). DION received 423 answers to this survey, and among these, 90 respondents indicated having a problematic situation, while additional 39 meant it was hard to say whether such a situation had occurred. Moreover, 66% of the respondents were not aware of the guidelines for handling problematic situation with their supervisor.

We see these numbers as strong indicators that the present guidelines are 1) not well known/not being communicated clearly, 2) not sufficient. In this report, we present a detailed overview over the results, provide the methodology, discuss possible sources of error, present challenges related to conducting of the survey, and finally suggest further actions to be considered by Forskningsutvalget.

Language policy statement: This report is written in English, as a significant number of DION members consisting of all temporary scientific employees at NTNU are not native Norwegian speakers, and the report is going to be published on DION's website.

*stipendiatombud is meant as an independent organ dealing with PhD related issues, which could for instance have in their mandate to help temporary scientific staff in conflict situations with their supervisors, having an overview over the rights and duties of temporary scientific staff etc. This role is similar to the role of studentombud, you can read more about it here: <https://i.ntnu.no/wiki/-/wiki/English/The+student+ombuds>.

1. Introduction

The debate on the need of a stipendiatombud was first brought up to NTNU Board's attention in their meeting in March 2023 by the temporary scientific staff representative, Unni Soltun Andreassen. Since then, there have been several articles, opinion pieces and reports in the media (listed in Appendix of this report), discussing cases in which such an organ could potentially be useful.

One of the key arguments from the temporary scientific employees' side is that the existing guidelines for handling problematic or conflict situation with one's supervisor are not considering the hierarchy of the academic system. This, according to temporary scientific employee's representatives, makes this group vulnerable and results in keeping silence, rather than speaking up if a problem occurs. They argue that having a designated person that is independent of one's department and faculty, would resolve the issue of being seen as problematic by their colleagues and supervisors. Another aspect that is often discussed by this group, is that they feel that reporting a problem with their supervisor could potentially slow down their progress, or that they feel that the issue is not serious enough to be taken up with the head of department. In these cases, having an independent organ designated solely to the rights of temporary scientific staff, could also help.

On the other hand, the arguments of the permanent staff, is that the existing guidelines are good enough to handle problematic situations between the supervisor and the candidate, and that it is better if the conflict is handled at the lowest possible level (department). However, many argue that the lowest possible level would be stipendiatombud if this role existed. Another argument from this side is that creating the role of stipendiatombud would not solve the problems related to hierarchy, and that it would probably be more beneficial if the existing guidelines would be strengthened.

During Forskningsutvalget's meeting in August 2023 a need for a more statistical overview was expressed by several council members, as the numbers provided while presenting the case were not matching the unofficial numbers provided by DION's president. DION has pledged to conduct a survey in attempt to map the scope of problematic situations experienced by PhD candidates at NTNU. These are going to be presented in this report together with future recommendations to be considered by the members of the council.

2. Methodology

The survey has been conducted using Microsoft Forms in the period between October 10th – 31st, 2023. The identity of the participants was anonymous, however, logging in with participant's NTNU account was required to secure receiving answers from within the institution only. The survey consisted of the following questions:

1. Your campus
2. Your faculty
3. Your department
4. Do you have duty work?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Which year of the PhD are you in?
 - First
 - Second
 - Third
 - Fourth
 - Other
6. Are you aware of the guidelines for handling problematic situations with your supervisors?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Have you ever been in a problematic situation or conflict with your supervisor(s)?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Hard to say.
8. If you have been in a situation like that, was it academic/personal base or other?
 - Academic
 - Personal
 - Duty work
 - Both academic and personal
 - Both academic and duty work
 - Both academic and personal
 - Other
9. Have you contacted anyone about this problem?
 - Yes
 - No
10. Why didn't you contact anyone?
 - I didn't know whom I could contact.
 - I was afraid to speak up.
 - I resolved it on my own.
 - Other.
11. If you contacted someone, who was it and how happy were you with the help you've received on a scale from 1 to 10?

12. Do you think NTNU should have a designated person that deals with this sort of conflicts, e. g. stipendiatombud (ombudsperson for PhD candidates and other temporary scientific employees)?
- Yes
 - No
 - I'm not sure.
13. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about? You can also give us your email address if you want to be contacted or talk more about this topic.

Questions 1-7 were mandatory to answer; questions 8 and 9 and 11 appeared if the respondent answered "Yes" or "Hard to say" to question 7; question 10 appeared only if the respondent answered "No" to question 9.

It is important to stress that although the survey required answers to the first questions, we are not going to present faculty or department specific numbers, as the intent behind those questions was to understand the faculty and department participation in order to improve our efforts of gathering higher survey participation in the future.

The participation in the survey was voluntary. We have informed about the survey through the common "Ph.d. og postdoc" channel on innsida. In addition, we have asked the temporary scientific staff representatives at each department to distribute the survey, however, we have no control over if this was done. One week before closing of the survey, we also asked the members of Forskningsutvalget to share the survey with their PhD candidates.

3. Results

In total we have received 423 responses to this survey. As the number of temporary scientific staff at NTNU is 2740 (data from Valgweb), this is a satisfactory number considering that more than 15% of all temporary scientific staff participated in the survey. Most of the participants are PhD candidates at NTNU Trondheim, followed by NTNU Gjøvik and NTNU Ålesund. This is summarized in Figure 1 (a). The participation by faculty is presented in the same figure. Due to the sensitive nature of this survey, we have received information that some of the participants did not want to specify either their department or their faculty. This is why we added a category for this case and named it XX.

The participation by department is presented in Figure 2: Number of participants in each department. XXX is used to account for participants who did not want to specify their department. Participants who did not want to specify their department affiliation are represented by XXX. We have received answers from almost every department at NTNU.

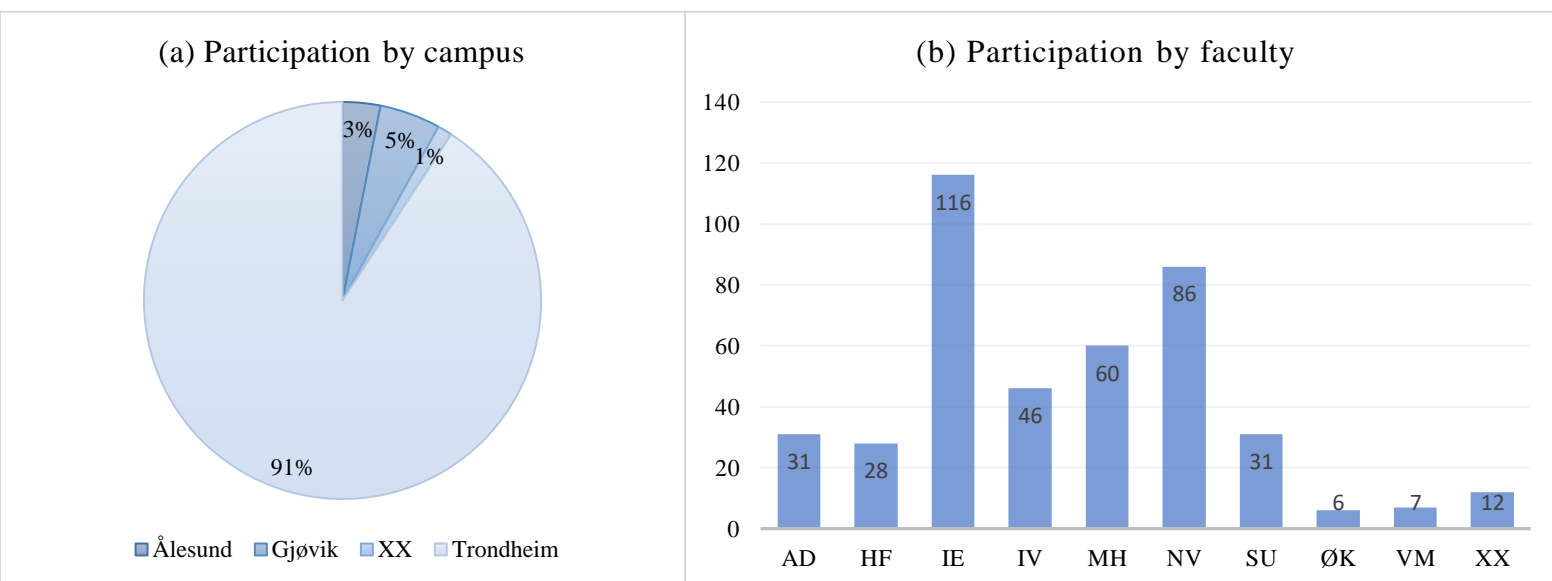


Figure 1: (a) Participants by campus, (b) participation in the survey by each faculty. XX is used to account for participants who did not want to specify their faculty.

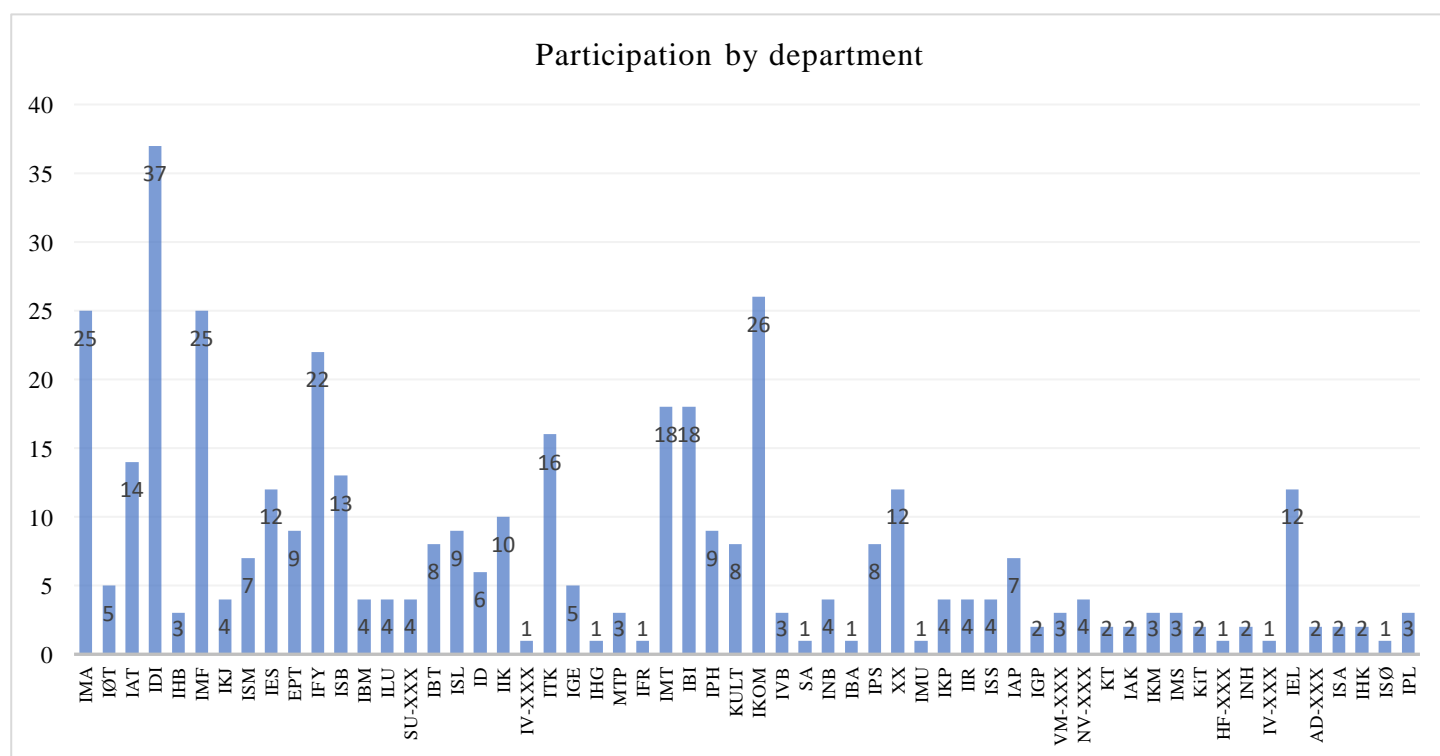


Figure 2: Number of participants in each department. XXX is used to account for participants who did not want to specify their department.

53% of respondents stated that they had duty work, as shown in Figure 3. The distribution among the year of PhD was quite even, with the most respondents (28%) in their third year. 10% of respondents chose “Other” as their answer, in which they specified that they have either been delayed, finished recently, or working as postdocs. This distribution is presented in Figure 3.

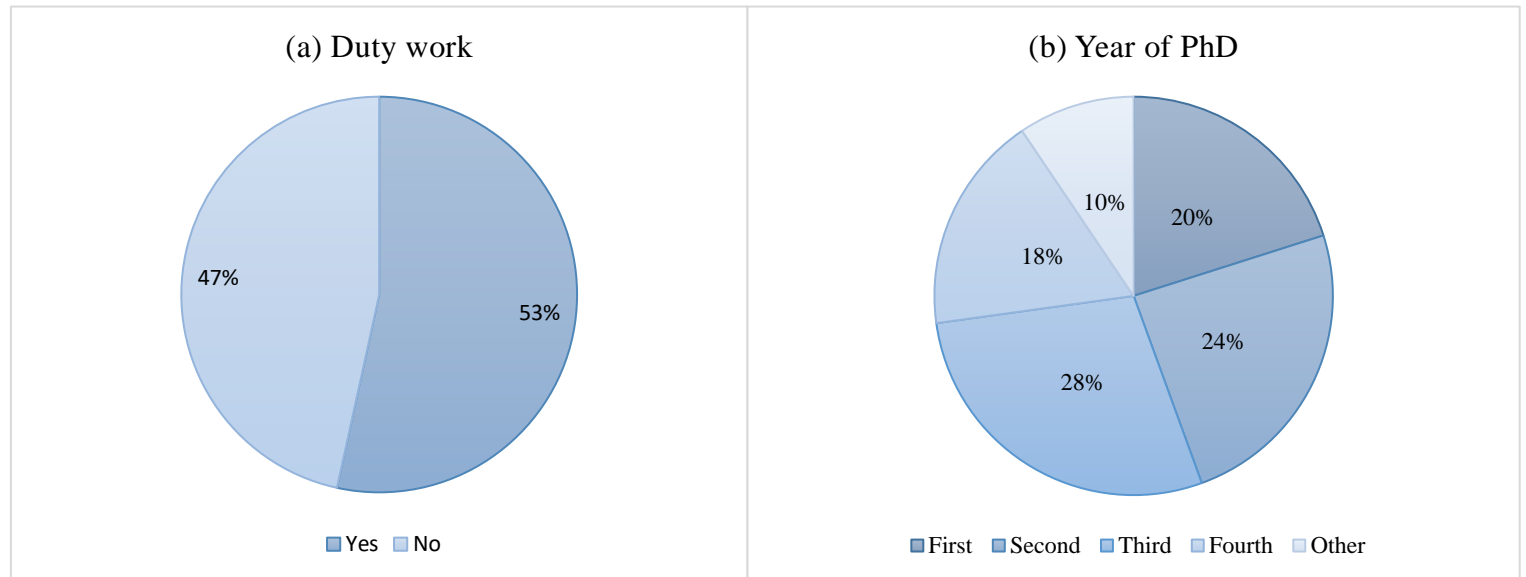


Figure 3: (a) Percentage of respondents with duty work, (b) The respondent's PhD year.

The next question in the survey was about whether the participants knew about the regulations/guidelines regarding problematic situations with supervisor(s). 2/3 of the respondents reported not knowing what the guidelines were. This is shown in Figure 4, and this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

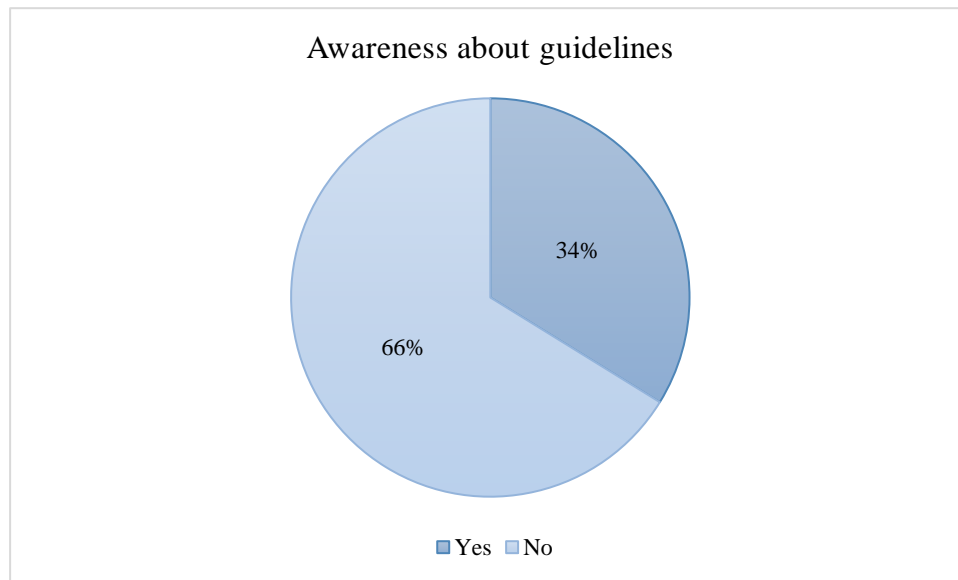


Figure 4: Are you aware of the guidelines for handling problematic situations?

Figure 5 summarizes the respondents answers to questions whether they've been in a problematic situation and what the nature of this conflict was. In total as much as 30% of participants experienced problematic situations with their supervisor, and most of the conflicts were a combination of academic and personal differences, followed by purely academic differences. Only a few cases were related to only personal or duty work conflicts.

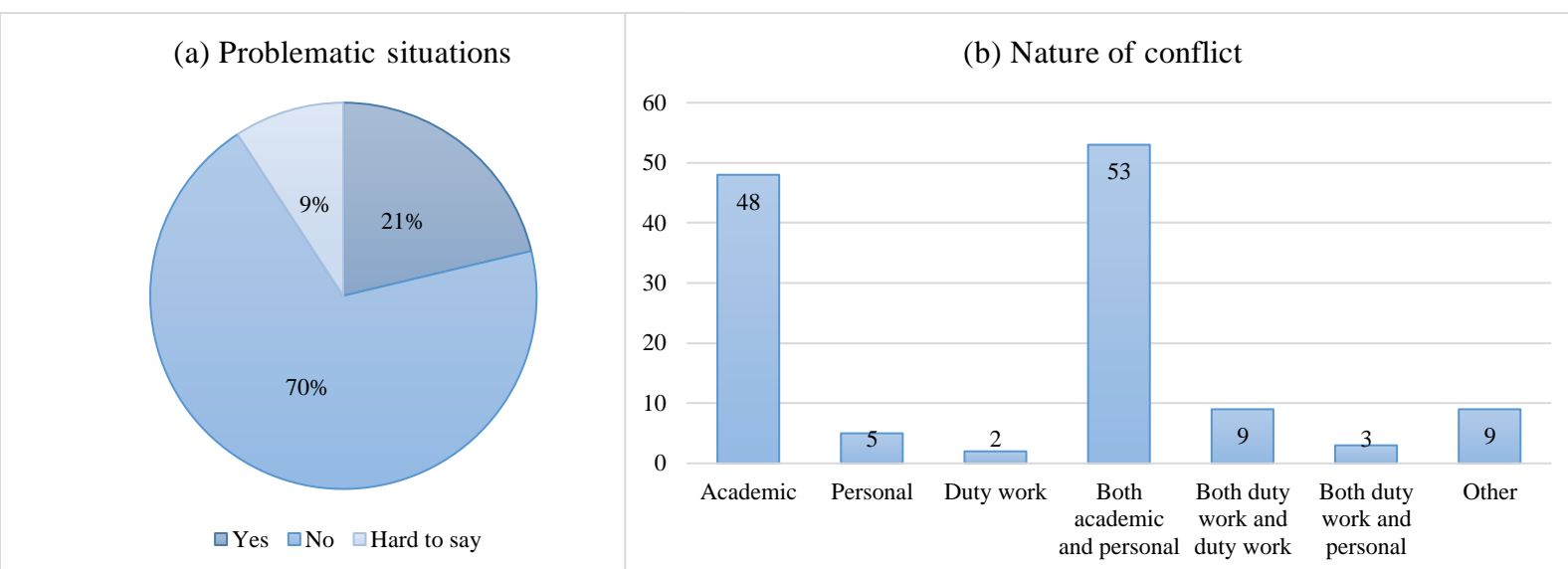


Figure 5: (a) Have you ever been in a problematic situation with your supervisor(s)? (b) What was the nature of this problematic situation?

The next step was to find out whether the participants who have experienced problems with their supervisors have contacted anybody about this issue. Here, the situation is split, meaning that 52% said they did reach out to other people. Participants who decided to not contact have in majority reported that it was due to not knowing who they could contact, which was followed by being afraid of speaking up and related consequences. 20% of participants who have not reported the issues have resolved the conflicts on their own, while another 20% gave other reasons for choosing for not reporting it. Here, many participants pointed out that the hierarchical system of the university does not make it easy to report the problems, and that it was a combination of not having enough resources about who they should contact and being afraid of speaking up. The numbers are shown in Figure 6.

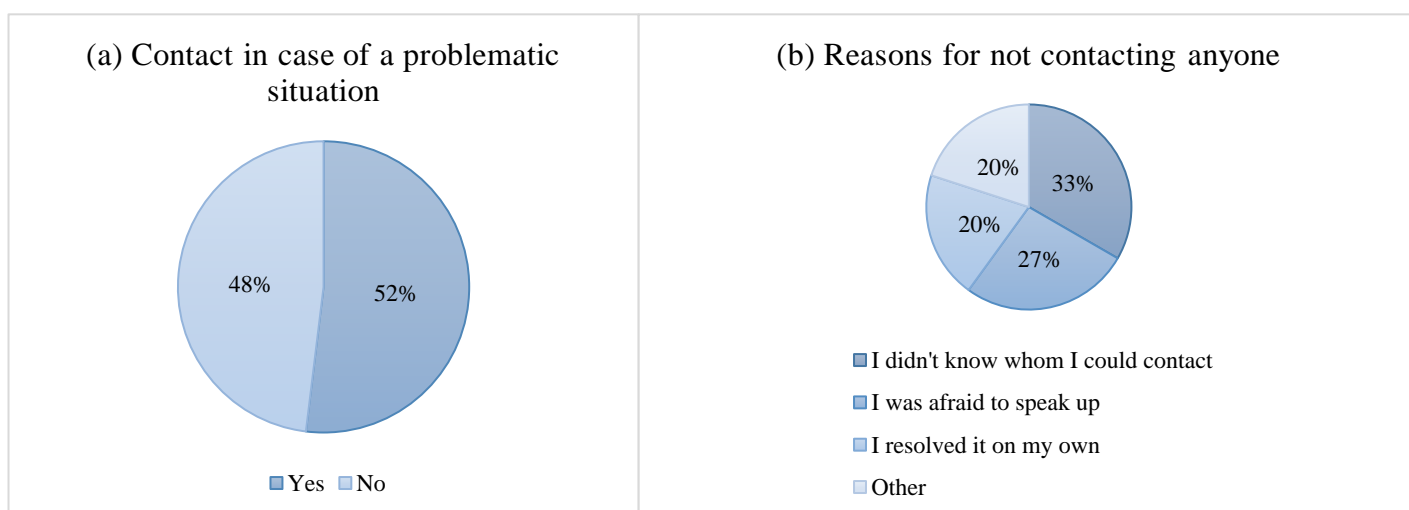


Figure 6: (a) Have you contacted anyone about the problematic situation? (b) For participants who answered no to the previous question: Why didn't you contact anymore?

The final graph presented in Figure 7 shows the participants opinion on the question if NTNU should have a stipendiatombud. 73% of respondents were positive, 5% said no, while 22% said that they were not sure.

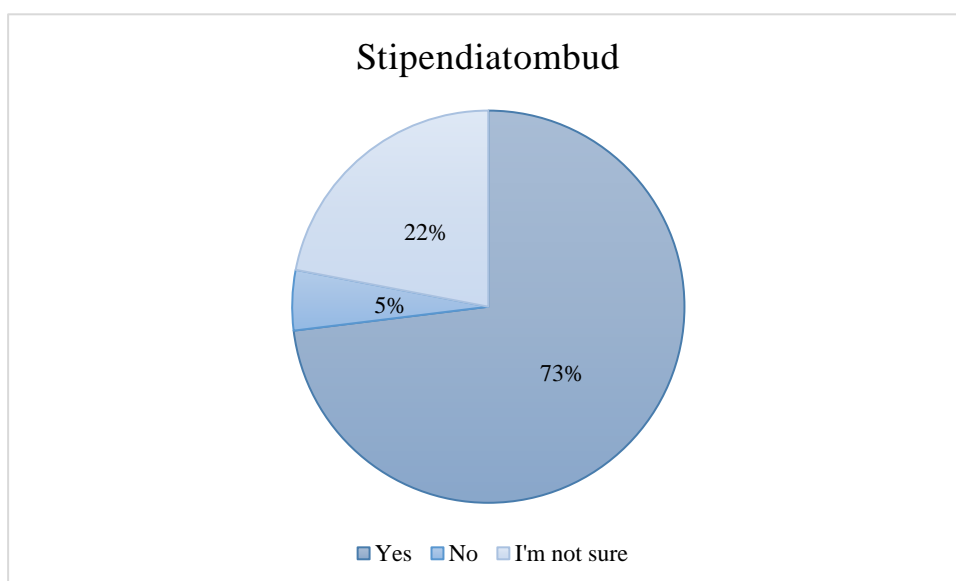


Figure 7: Do you think NTNU should have a designated person that deals with this sort of conflicts, e.g. stipendiatombud (omdpudsperson for PhD candidates and other temporary scientific employees)?

The final question in this report was an open question where the participants could provide their email addresses or share their stories anonymously. In that case, the participants were contacted and one on one meetings between the DION president and the people leaving their email addresses, were offered. 7 people chose to have this meeting. The contents of these meetings are confidential and will not be published in this report.

4. Discussion

We would first like to discuss the anonymity concerns regarding this survey. We have received in total 3 concerns regarding the privacy of this survey, considering the fact that it required logging in to be able to answer. We argue that this step was necessary to ensure that we do not receive answers from people outside of NTNU. In addition, the participants' identity appeared as anonymous, and the data gathered will be deleted after this report is published on DION's website (latest 31st December 2023). We have not made an official privacy statement in the beginning of this survey, as we saw this survey as a survey among colleagues. However, after being confronted about it, we decided to issue a privacy statement, and will pass on the recommendations to the new DION board.

As it was mentioned in the beginning of this report, we have received some answers where the participant was unwilling to provide their affiliation. We want to stress that we found it concerning that participants did not feel safe responding to this survey even when anonymity was provided. We have received concerning emails and comments in the last question on the survey, where people informed us of their concerned of being identifiable if they would have

provided their affiliation. We acknowledge that this is a survey of a rather sensitive nature, but we find it concerning that some people did not feel comfortable with providing their affiliation.

Moving on to discussing the actual results of this survey, it must be noted that 2/3 participants of this survey answered that they are unaware of the existing guidelines regarding handling problematic situations with one's supervisor. This is a highly concerning number, and it is in the direct opposition towards the argument that the existing guidelines are well known and sufficient. Therefore, we think that a lot of effort must be put into the strengthening of knowledge around the existing guidelines and potentially considering new and better guidelines and solutions.

Further, as much as 30% of all the respondents reported on ever having been in a problematic situation with their supervisor. This is an alarmingly high number. However, we would like to acknowledge that this number could be higher than the actual number, if we consider the fact that people might have been more likely to answer the survey if they had been in a situation like that. However, because of the high number of participants, we argue that this number is, unfortunately, representative.

The answers to the next question showed the distribution of the different types of conflicts. Most of the conflicts were reported to be a mixture of academic and personal conflicts, followed by purely academic conflicts. Through the information provided in the last question, we have also recognized a pattern of the conflicts: according to the respondents they start as purely academic, but further develop into more personal ones.

The next set of questions showed that out of the participants who reported on having a problematic situation, only 52% decided to inform anyone about it. The remaining 48% reported several reasons to not contacting anyone, but the majority of them (33%) reported not knowing whom they could contact. The second most reported reason was being afraid of speaking up, while 20% reported being able to solve it on their own. The rest reported that it was a mixture of the first two, or some other reasons.

We have also asked those who have taken the step to inform someone about the problem, to report who they contacted and how they would rate the help that they received. The participants reported the problems to different people, but of the most common answer was contacting the local PhD coordinators, heads of departments or unions. However, the average score of these resources was only 5.5 (on a scale of 1 to 10), which we find unsatisfactory. This proves that the existing guidelines are not good enough.

The last point in this discussion is related to the last graph presented in Figure 7, which shows that 73% of participants think that stipendiatombud at NTNU is needed, while only 5% is against the idea. This shows that there is a need for an independent organ at NTNU that could help in solving the conflicts professionally, not leading to their escalation. The remaining 22% of participants who answered not "I'm not sure" provided further inside, stating that they either did not know what exactly a stipendiatombud would be, or thinking that maybe a different solution would be reasonable. Many stated that a change in the handling of this type of situations is needed anyway.

The last question that gave the opportunity to tell us more about the situation, provided several comments from different participants that reported on knowing “many” (not specified how many) cases of PhDs quitting rather than solving the problems. Other stated that while their relationship with their supervisor was good, they knew cases of their colleagues where there had been long and ongoing conflicts. Therefore, we acknowledge that this survey does not capture all cases of PhD-supervisor conflicts.

5. Conclusions

This report presented the results of the survey on PhD-supervisor conflicts. The main conclusions are as follows:

- The existing guidelines are not well known among the PhD candidates, since 2/3 PhD candidates report not having knowledge about those.
- 30% of PhD candidates experience problematic situations with their supervisor(s).
- The existing guidelines are not graded well by people who have reported about their problems with an average score of 5.5 on a scale from (1 to 10).
- Only 52% of people experiencing difficult situations with their supervisor decide to report the problem. The majority of them do not know whom they can contact and are afraid to speak up.
- 73% of PhD candidates agree that a stipendiatombudsperson is needed at NTNU.

DION would like to suggest that NTNU takes the reported numbers into consideration when discussing the need for a stipendiatombud. In our opinion, an independent organ with the legal knowledge surrounding PhD positions is needed, as it is clear that existing guidelines are not satisfactory.

Moreover, we would like to recommend that every institute and faculty arranges at least one onboarding PhD seminar once a year where the candidates are informed about the existing guidelines and try to normalize speaking up about any issues. Every institute and faculty should also make it visible on their websites about how to handle conflicts between the PhDs and the supervisors.

We would also like to suggest that handling of conflict situations is a part of a mandatory PhD supervisor training. Finally, a mentor system should be put in place in each institute, for both the supervisors and PhD candidates. This is already done in some institutes, but it should be recommended by NTNU to each institute directly.

Appendix

Some of universitetsavisa's articles on the topic of stipendiatombud:

- <https://www.universitetsavisa.no/dion-forskningsutvalget-gabriela-kazimiera-warden/slik-vil-hun-trygge-stipendiatene-men-ntnu-tror-ikke-det-trengs/379200>
- <https://www.universitetsavisa.no/dion-gabriela-kazimiera-warden-midlertidig-ansatte/why-do-temporary-scientific-employees-need-an-ombudsperson/381369>
- <https://www.universitetsavisa.no/midlertidig-ansatte-stipendiater/gjor-det-trygt-for-stipendiater-a-si-ifra-om-kritikkverdige-forhold/382255>
- <https://www.universitetsavisa.no/annette-lykknes-ingfrid-thowsen-institutt-for-laererutdanning/stipendiat-i-konflikt-med-veileder-vi-ble-bare-bedt-om-a-slutte-a-snakke-om-saken/380625>

NTNU's faculties and departments including their respective abbreviations.

Faculty of Architecture and Design (AD)

- Trondheim Academy of Fine Art (KIT)
- Department of Design (ID)
- Department of Architecture and Technology (IAT)
- Department of Architecture and Planning (IAP)

Faculty of Humanities (HF)

- Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies (IFR)
- Department of Historical and Classical Studies (IHK)
- Department of Art and Media Studies (IKM)
- Department of Modern History and Society (IMS)
- Department of Music (IMU)
- Department of Language and Literature (ISL)
- Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture (KULT)

Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering (IE)

- Department of Computer Science (IDI)
- Department of Electronic Systems (IES)
- Department of Electric Energy (IEL)
- Department of ICT and Natural Sciences (IIR)
- Department of Information Security and Communication Technology (IIK)
- Department of Mathematical Sciences (IMF)
- Department of Engineering Cybernetics (ITK)

Faculty of Engineering (IV)

- Department of Energy and Process Engineering (EPT)

- Department of Marine Technology (IMT)
- Department of Geoscience and Petroleum (IGP)
- Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (IBM)
- Department of Structural Engineering (KT)
- Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering (MTP)
- Department of Ocean Operations and Civil Engineering (IHB)
- Department of Manufacturing and Civil Engineering (IVB)

Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (MH)

- Department of Health Sciences in Gjøvik (IHG)
- Department of Health Sciences in Ålesund (IHA)
- Kavli Institute for Systems Neuroscience (KISN)
- Department of Clinical and Molecular Medicine (IKOM)
- Department of Neuromedicine and Movement Science (INB)
- Department of Mental Health (IPH)
- Department of Public Health and Nursing (ISM)
- Department of Circulation and Medical Imaging (ISB)

Faculty of Natural Sciences (NV)

- Department of Biology (IBI)
- Department of Biological Sciences Ålesund (IBA)
- Department of Biotechnology and Food Science (IBT)
- Department of Biomedical Laboratory Science (IBF)
- Department of Physics (IFY)
- Department of Chemistry (IKJ)
- Department of Chemical Engineering (IKP)
- Department of Materials Science and Engineering (IMA)

Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences (SU)

- Department of Geography (IGE)
- Department of Teacher Education (ILU)
- Department of Education and Lifelong Learning (IPL)
- Department of Social Work (ISA)
- Department of Sociology and Political Science (ISS)
- Department of Psychology (IPS)
- Department of Social Anthropology (SA)

Faculty of Economics and Management (OK)

- NTNU Business School (HHS)
- Department of International Business (IIF)
- Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management (IOT)
- Department of Economics (ISO)

NTNU University Museum (VM)

- Department of Natural History (INH)
- Department of Archaeology and Cultural History (IAK)