



# **PNN PhD Survey**

## **Asking the relevant questions**

### **International PhDs**

**Promovendi Network Nederland**

[www.hetpnn.nl](http://www.hetpnn.nl)

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## Summary

- 40.2% of the PhDs in the survey are international PhDs. Most of them are from Germany (13%), China (7.6%) or Italy (5.6%).
- 41.9% of the international PhDs have received help with integration, such as access to a language course. This also means that 58.1% did not get help with integration. International external PhDs relatively least often receive help with integration.
- Of the international PhDs who did not receive help with integration, 68.6% indicate that they would have liked to receive such assistance. International PhDs with a non-western background in particular indicated to have liked to receive this kind of help (73.5%).
- The international PhDs who did receive help with integration, most often do so via their institution (87.8%). 16.7% of them also sought help from an external party. PhDs at UMCs get help from their institution (66.7%) less often than PhDs at universities (89.8%).
- 13.5% of the PhDs have to pay for the integration assistance themselves. For 66.8% of the PhDs, their institution pays for integration assistance.
- In general, international PhDs who received integration assistance from their institutions are satisfied with the help offered (67.7%). International scholarship PhDs are slightly more satisfied with the help offered than international employee PhDs.
- The challenges that international PhDs most frequently experience are cultural differences (49.8%) and language barriers (49.6%). 14.2% of the international PhDs do not experience any challenges. 19.5% experience financial difficulties, which is relatively often the case for both external PhDs (43.6%) and scholarship PhDs (29.9%).

## Recommendations

- When universities recruit international staff, they should make an active effort to assist them sufficiently with their integration into the institution and the host country. This should also apply to international PhDs, regardless of the type of PhD arrangement or country of origin. Ideally, integration assistance is organized within the institution itself, but for smaller institutions, collaboration with an external party can be an option too.
- Integration assistance should be accessible and affordable to PhDs. Also, universities, UMCs and research institutes should ensure international PhDs are aware of the existence of integration assistance services, and should preferably be offered from the start of their PhD trajectory. Institutions are encouraged to offer integration assistance services for free or for strongly reduced prizes.
- Institutions should make an effort to help their international PhDs (and other international staff) navigate Dutch society. Integration assistance services should ideally cover not just Dutch language classes, but also information about (bureaucratic) practicalities, such as housing, taxes and (mental) healthcare. Currently, this information is often unavailable in English. Universities, UMCs and research institutes are encouraged to include practical information on integration and Dutch society as part of an introduction or welcome package for international PhDs.
- To allow international staff to be fully informed and aware of the ins and outs of their institutions, all formal communication should also be available in English. It is unacceptable to ask international PhDs (or other international staff) to just 'Google translate' formal documents themselves. Instead, it is the task of the institution to properly inform their PhDs.
- At the department level, efforts to include international PhDs (and other international staff) into the formal and informal activities and events are highly encouraged. Feeling included can make all the difference for international PhDs' experience.

## Samenvatting

- 40.2% van de promovendi in de survey is een internationale promovendus. De meeste van hen komen uit Duitsland (13%), China (7.6%) of Italië (5.6%).
- 41.9% van de internationale promovendi heeft hulp gekregen bij de integratie, zoals een taal cursus. Dit betekent ook dat 58.1% van de promovendi geen hulp bij integratie heeft gekregen. Internationale buitenpromovendi krijgen relatief het minst vaak hulp bij integratie.
- Van de internationale promovendi die geen hulp krijgen bij integratie, geeft 68,6% aan dat ze deze hulp wel graag hadden willen krijgen. Vooral internationale promovendi met een niet-westerse achtergrond gaven aan deze hulp graag te hebben ontvangen (73,5%).
- De internationale promovendi die wel hulp bij integratie kregen, kregen deze meestal via hun instelling (87,8%). 16,7% van hen zocht ook hulp bij een externe partij. Promovendi aan UMC's krijgen relatief minder vaak hulp van hun instelling (66,7%) dan promovendi aan universiteiten (89,8%).
- 13,5% van de promovendi moet zelf betalen voor hun hulp bij integratie. Voor 66,8% van de promovendi betaalt de instelling voor de hulp bij integratie.
- In het algemeen zijn internationale promovendi die hulp bij integratie kregen van hun instelling tevreden over de geboden hulp (67,7%). Internationale beurspromovendi zijn iets meer tevreden met de geboden hulp dan internationale werknemerpromovendi.
- De uitdagingen waar internationale promovendi het vaakst tegen aanlopen zijn culturele verschillen (49,8%) en taalbarrières (49,6%). 14,2% van de internationale promovendi ervaart geen uitdagingen. 19,5% ervaart financiële moeilijkheden. Dit komt relatief vaak voor onder zowel buitenpromovendi (43,6%) en beurspromovendi (29,9%).

## Aanbevelingen

- Wanneer instellingen internationale medewerkers werven, moeten ze hen actief en voldoende ondersteunen bij hun integratie in de instelling en het gastland. Dit moet gelden voor alle internationale promovendi, ongeacht type promotieovereenkomst of land van herkomst. Idealiter wordt hulp bij integratie georganiseerd binnen de instelling zelf, maar voor kleinere instellingen kan samenwerking met een externe organisatie ook een optie zijn.
- Hulp bij integratie zou toegankelijk en betaalbaar moeten zijn voor promovendi. Ook zouden universiteiten, UMC's en onderzoeksinstituten ervoor moeten zorgen dat internationale promovendi op de hoogte zijn van het bestaan van deze hulp, en deze aan de promovendi aanbieden aan het begin van hun promotietraject. Instellingen worden aangemoedigd om deze hulp bij integratie gratis of voor sterk gereduceerde prijzen aan te bieden.
- Instellingen moeten hun internationale promovendi (en andere internationale medewerkers) helpen te navigeren door de Nederlandse samenleving. Hulp bij integratie bevat idealiter niet alleen taallessen, maar ook praktisch (bureaucratische) informatie, bijvoorbeeld over huisvesting, belastingen en (geestelijke) gezondheidszorg. Op dit moment is deze informatie vaak niet beschikbaar in het Engels. Universiteiten, UMC's en onderzoeksinstituten worden aangemoedigd om deze praktische informatie over integratie in de Nederlandse samenleving onderdeel te maken van de introductie of het welkomstpakket voor internationale promovendi.
- Om internationale medewerkers volledig op de hoogte te laten zijn van de ins en outs van hun instellingen, moet alle formele communicatie ook in het Engels beschikbaar zijn. Het is onacceptabel om internationale promovendi (en andere internationale medewerkers) te vragen om formele documenten maar zelf 'te Google-translaten'. Het is juist de taak van de instelling om hun promovendi te informeren.
- Op het niveau van de afdeling zouden inspanningen om internationale promovendi (en andere internationale medewerkers) te betrekken in formele en informele activiteiten en evenementen sterk aangemoedigd moeten worden. Het gevoel erbij te horen kan een wereld van verschil maken voor internationale promovendi.

## Introduction

The number of international PhD candidates in the Netherlands is relatively high. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), around 43% of all doctoral candidates in the Netherlands come from abroad, the fourth highest in OECD countries.<sup>1</sup> Internationally, Dutch higher education is known for its high quality, and many if not all graduate programmes and courses are fully offered in English. Moreover, Dutch universities are renowned for employing doctoral candidates, offering them a salary and employment benefits, making the Netherlands an attractive country to complete a PhD – even if this system is currently under threat.

In comparison to their Dutch peers, international PhD candidates often have to deal with additional challenges with regards to the PhD trajectory as well as being in the Netherlands, away from home. These may include many different issues, including language or cultural barriers, and loneliness and homesickness. In this report, we present the results of the PNN PhD Survey questions that specifically concern international PhD candidates. It addresses the demographic composition of international PhD candidates in the Netherlands, as well as issues around integration and the support international PhD candidates receive (or not) from their institution. In addition, it reports on the specific challenges international PhD candidates face at their institution and the Netherlands in general. More information about the PNN PhD survey can be found in the [PNN Survey report on Survey information, demographics and COVID-19](#).

## Methodology

### International PhDs

To determine whether PhDs were international PhDs, without determining this based on their country of origin, we asked them the following question: “Working in the Netherlands, do you consider yourself to be an international PhD?” Those who replied “Yes” to this question, were asked to indicate their country of origin (though it was stressed that they could skip this question if they did not want to answer it). The responses to this question showed that 87 PhDs indicated that they were from the Netherlands. These PhDs were re-classified as non-international PhDs. In the results, all countries selected by less than five respondents are grouped by continent. In a separate indicator, countries were furthermore grouped into western countries and non-western countries, following the definition from Statistics Netherlands.<sup>2</sup>

If respondents indicated to be an international PhD candidate, they were asked the following questions:

1. Do you get any help with integration (for example, language courses)? Yes/No
  - No → Question 2 was asked
  - Yes → Question 3 was asked
2. Would you have liked to get help with integration?
  - Yes → questions 3 to 5 were skipped
  - No → questions 3 to 5 were skipped
3. Who helped you with your integration? (Multiple answers possible)
  - The university/institution
  - An external party
  - Other, namely...

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2019). Education at a glance. [https://www-oecd-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019\\_CN\\_NLD.pdf](https://www-oecd-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_NLD.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CBS (2020). Begrippen: Persoon met een westerse migratieachtergrond. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onze-diensten/methoden/begrippen?tab=p#id=persoon-met-een-westerse-migratieachtergrond>

4. Who paid for your help with integration?
  - My university/institution
  - Partly by my university/institution, partly by myself
  - I had to pay myself
5. How satisfied are you with the help offered?
  - Very satisfied
  - Satisfied
  - Neutral
  - Dissatisfied
  - Very dissatisfied

In addition, the survey enquired into the challenges faced by international PhD candidates, whether at their university or in the Netherlands more broadly. They could select multiple from the following options:

- I do not experience any challenges
- Cultural differences
- Language barrier
- Missing home
- Contact with Dutch colleagues
- Different working style
- Other norms and customs
- Different academic style
- Financial difficulties
- Feeling at home in the Netherlands
- Unfulfilled expectations
- Other, namely...

## General variables

### *Type of institution*

The respondents were asked at what kind of institution they were doing their PhD. The respondents could choose between University, University Medical Center, non-University Medical Center, Research institutes connected to Universities, Independent Research Institutes Universities of Applied Sciences and Other. For those who answered “Other, namely...” and provided an open answer (n=22), we analysed the answers to see whether their institution could be categorized into one of the existing categories. This was the case for 9 respondents.

Due to small numbers in the categories other than University and UMC, we will use a 3-group classification of type of institution when discussing other survey results. In this classification, we combine the categories University and Research Institution affiliated to a university into one category, keep a separate category for University Medical Centers, and combine the independent Research Institutes, non-University Medical Centers, Universities of Applied Sciences and other into one category, labelled ‘Other’.

### *Type of PhD arrangement*

The type of PhD arrangements was measured using a complex procedure which allowed to capture the large variation in PhD arrangements that exist in the Dutch academic system. For this purpose, different classification questions were used for different types of institutions. These institution-specific typologies were subsequently combined into one overall typology of PhD arrangements. A detailed account of this procedure can be found in the [PNN Survey report on Survey information, demographics and COVID-19](#). The PhD typology used is the overall PhD typology that distinguishes between “Employee PhDs”, “Scholarship PhDs”, “External PhDs” and “Other” types of PhDs.

## Results

### Country of origin

40.2% of the PhDs in our survey are international PhDs (n=644). Table 1 provides an overview of international PhD candidates' countries of origin. All countries listed by less than five respondents, are grouped by continent instead. Most international PhDs candidates originate from Germany (13%), China (7.6%) and other European countries (6.5%). 38% of the PhDs has a non-western background, while 47.8% has a western background. 91 international PhDs used their right not to answer this question.

**Table 1: Responses to the question "What is your country of origin?"**

		<b>Number (n = 644)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Countries</b>	Germany	84	13.0%
	China	49	7.6%
	Italy	36	5.6%
	India	27	4.2%
	Spain	25	3.9%
	Indonesia	24	3.7%
	Greece	20	3.1%
	France	16	2.5%
	Belgium	14	2.2%
	Mexico	14	2.2%
	Brazil	13	2.0%
	Turkey	13	2.0%
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	13	2.0%
	Colombia	8	1.2%
	Ethiopia	8	1.2%
	Portugal	8	1.2%
	Russian Federation	8	1.2%
	United States of America	8	1.2%
	Nigeria	8	1.2%
	Kenya	7	1.1%
	Poland	7	1.1%
	Bangladesh	6	0.9%
	Canada	6	0.9%
	Chile	6	0.9%
	Iran	6	0.9%
	Uganda	6	0.9%
	Austria	5	0.8%
	Vietnam	5	0.8%
	Other European countries	42	6.5%
	Other African countries	26	4.0%
	Other Asian countries	16	2.5%
	Other South American countries	7	1.1%
Other North American countries	6	0.9%	
Oceanian countries	6	0.9%	
<b>Background</b>	Non-western background	245	38.0%
	Western background	308	47.8%
<b>Missing</b>	<i>No answer/missing</i>	91	14.1%

## Help with integration

All survey respondents who indicated to be international PhD candidates, were asked whether they had received any help with regards to their integration in the Netherlands. Figure 1 shows the responses to this question, in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement. Of the 621 PhDs who answered this question, 41.9% (n=260) stated they did receive help with their integration. PhDs with a western background get help with integration slightly more often (43.1%) than PhDs with a non-western background (41.2%). At UMCs, international PhDs get help with integration relatively more often than international PhDs at universities or other types of institutions. Finally, 77.5% of the international external PhDs indicated that they do not get help with integration, compared to 58.7% of the scholarship PhDs and 56.1% of the employee PhDs.

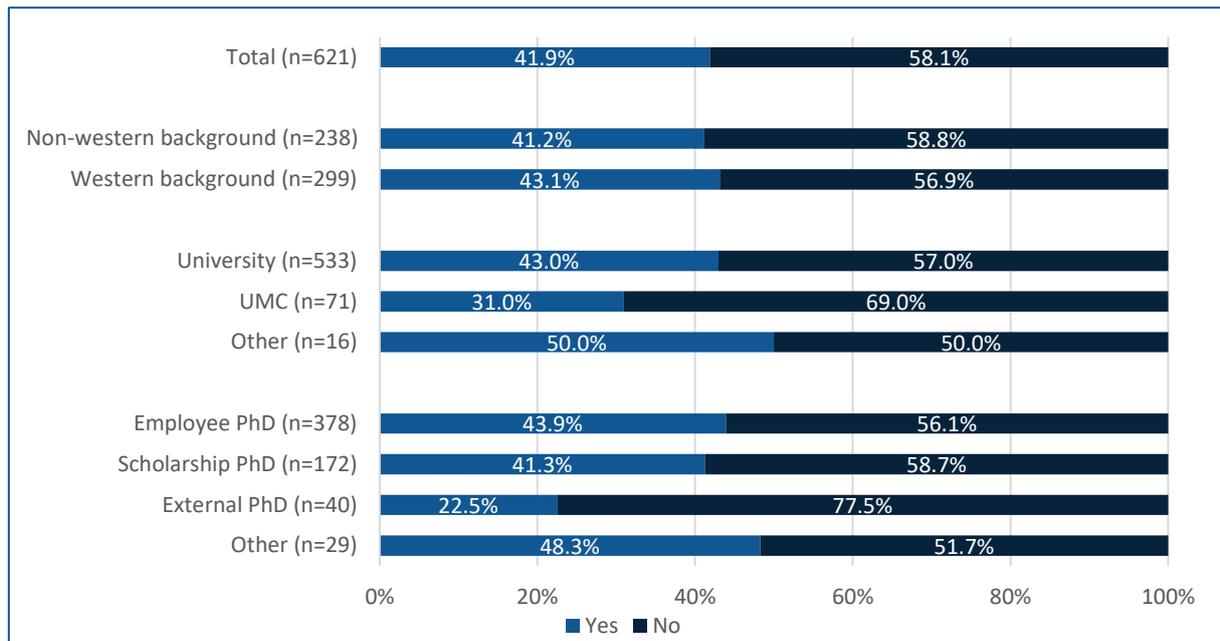


Figure 1: Responses to the question: "Do you get any help with integration (for example, language courses)?", in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement.

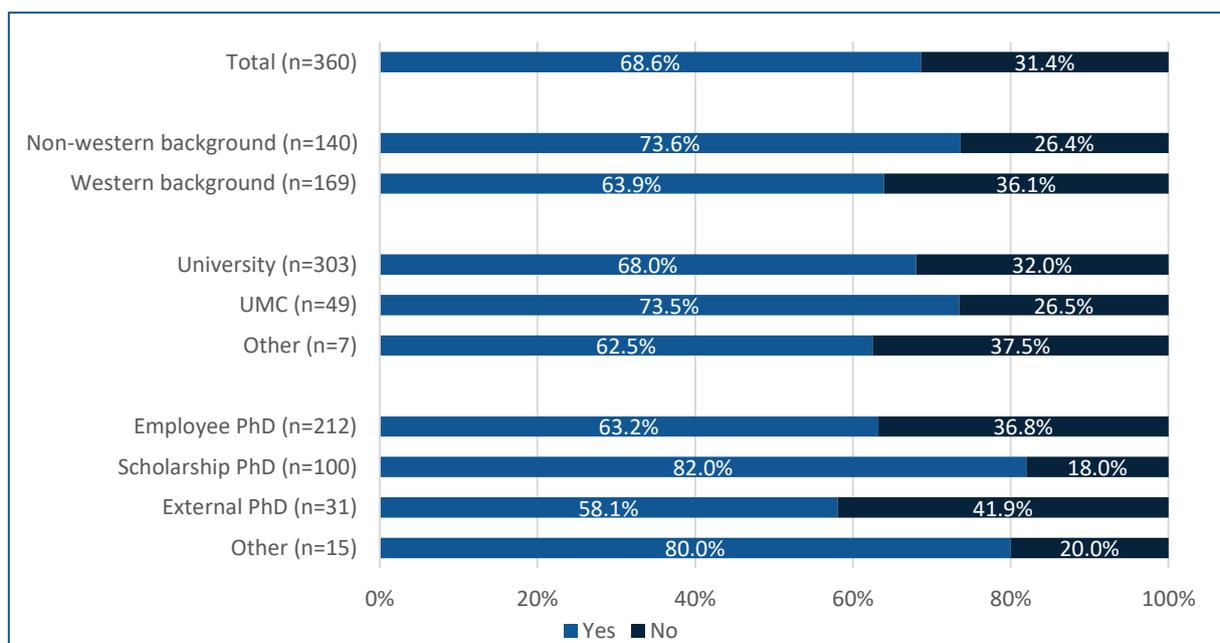


Figure 2: Responses to the question: "Would you have liked to get help with integration?", in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement.

All international PhDs who responded that they did not receive help with integration (n=360) were subsequently asked whether they would have liked to receive help (figure 2). 68.6% of the PhDs indicated that they would have liked to received help with integration. PhDs with a non-western background indicate to have liked to receive help relatively more often (73.5%) compared to international PhDs with a western background (63.9%). The differences between types of institutions are smaller, with 73.5% of the international PhDs at UMCs indicating they would have liked to receive help with integration, as well as 68% of the PhDs at universities. From here, the results for other types of institutions are omitted due to a small number of respondents (n=8). International scholarship PhDs most often indicated that they would have liked to receive help with integration. This is likely due to the fact that non-western PhDs are overrepresented amongst scholarship PhDs compared to the other three types of PhDs.

**Who provides help with integration**

International PhD candidates who were provided with integration assistance, mostly received it through their universities/institutions (87.8%) (figure 3). 16.9% of the PhDs had (also) sought help with integration externally, and 11% found other ways to get help with integration, for instance via friends or colleagues, or from having been in the Netherlands for a longer period of time already. International PhDs with a non-western background indicated having received help from their institution (92.8%) more often than international PhDs with a western background (85.7%). They seek help more often from an external party (19%) or another source (13.5%). While international PhDs at UMCs receive help with integration more often, they are less likely than PhDs at universities to receive help from their own institution (66.7% versus 89.8%). Scholarship PhDs slightly more often indicate that they receive help from their institution than do employee PhDs and other types of PhDs (91.5%). Employee PhDs relatively often find help at other sources (13.6%). Here, the results for external PhDs are not included due to a small number of respondents (n=9).

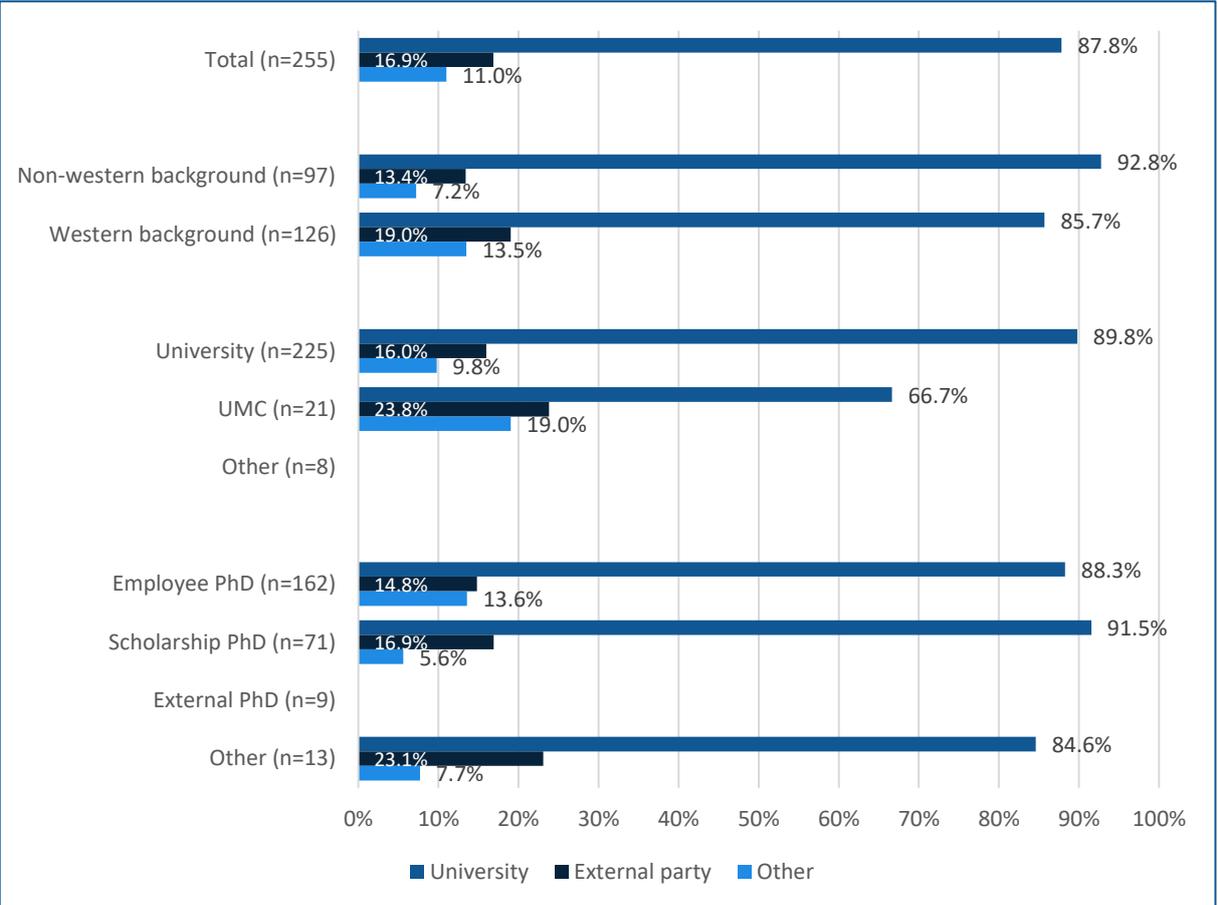


Figure 3: Responses to the question: "Who helped you with your integration?", in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement.

### Who pays for help with integration

International PhD were furthermore asked about who paid for the help with integration (figure 4). For 66.8% of the PhDs, their institution paid for the integration assistance, while 13.5% of the PhDs had to pay for the assistance themselves. 19.7% of the PhDs split the costs with their institution. International PhDs with a western background relatively more often have to pay for the assistance themselves (16.2%), whereas for international PhDs with a non-western background, more often the institution pays for it (80.5%). International PhDs with a western background also split the costs with their institution (22.5%) more often. International PhDs at UMCs often indicate that they have to pay these courses themselves. However, because the number of respondents is relatively small, these results should be interpreted with caution. For scholarship PhDs, the institution often pays for the courses (77.8%), whereas 16.3% of the employee PhDs indicated they had to pay for the courses themselves.

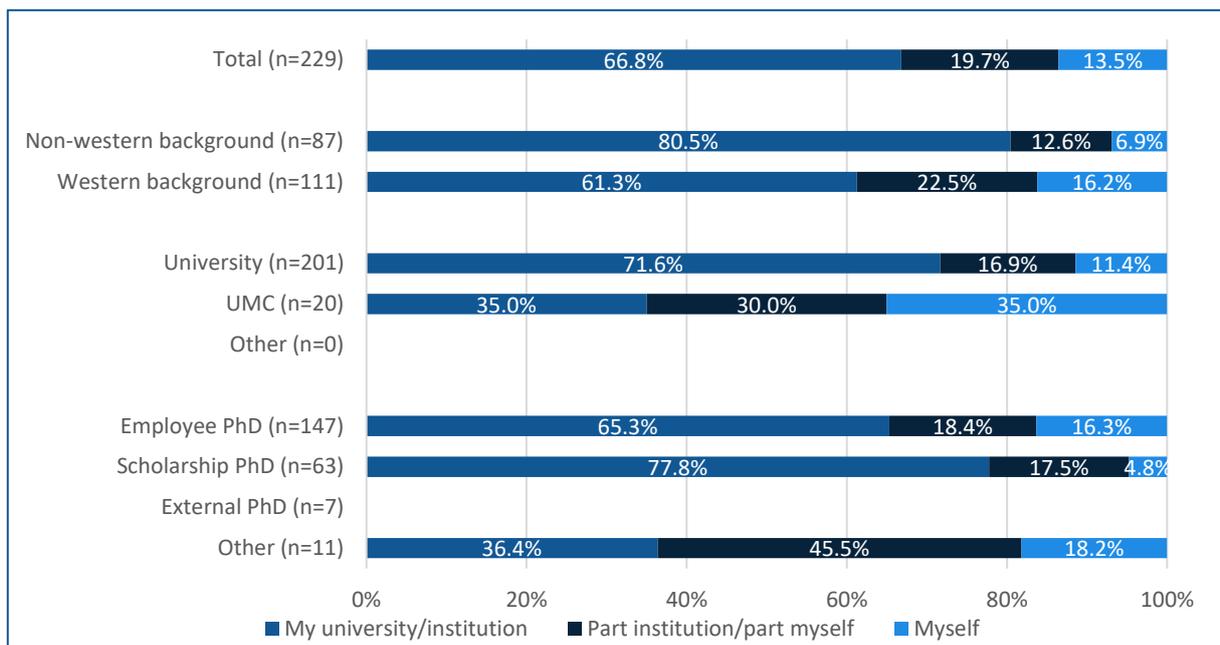


Figure 4: Responses to the question: "Who paid for your help with integration?", in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement.

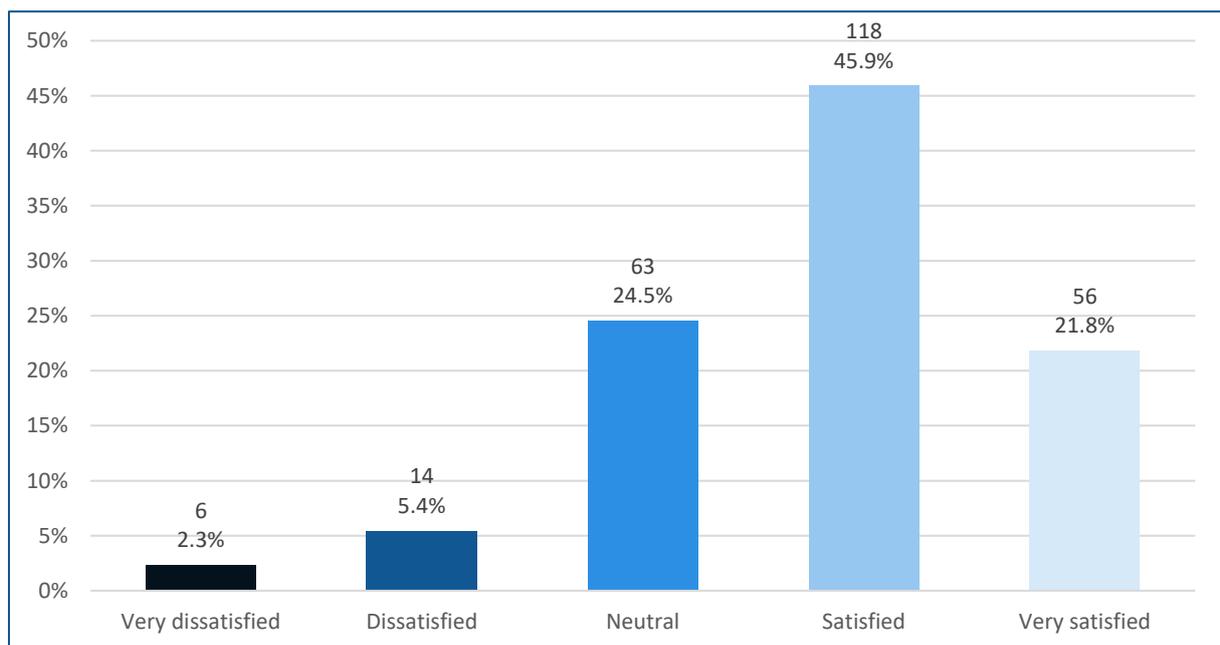


Figure 5: Responses to the question: "How satisfied are you with the help offered?" (n=257).

### Satisfaction with help with integration

Finally, we were interested in how satisfied the PhDs are with the help offered. The responses to this question can be found in figure 5. The largest share of the PhDs is either satisfied (45.9%) or very satisfied (21.8%) with the help offered. Only 8.7% of the PhDs is dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. 24.5% of the PhDs is neutral about the help offered.

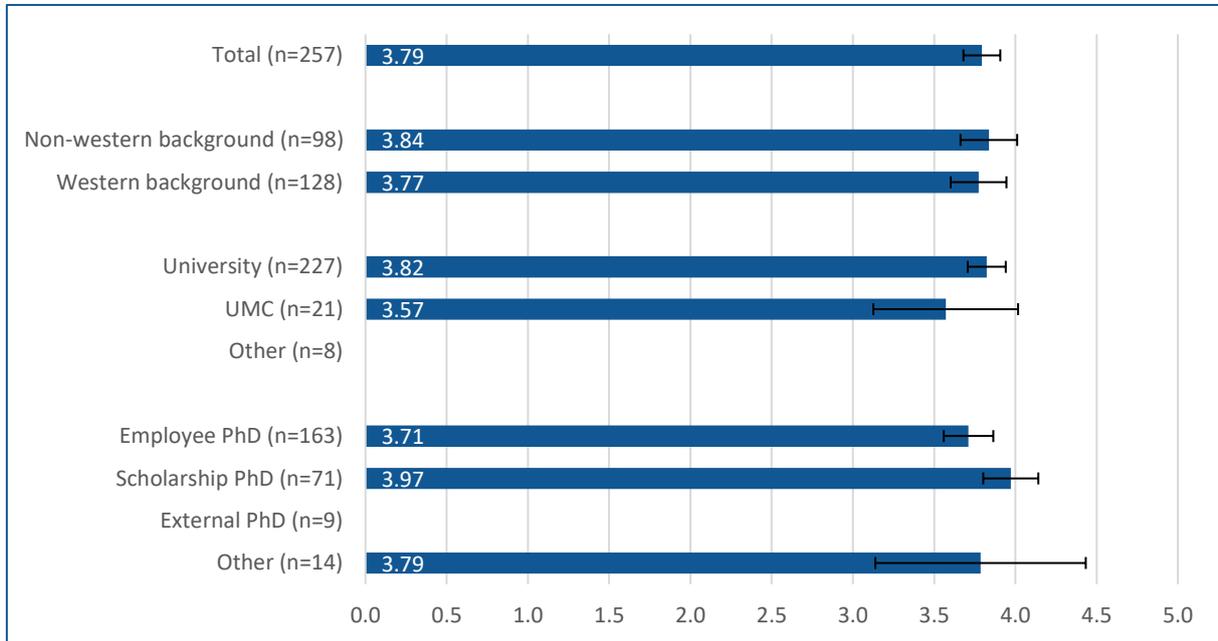


Figure 6: Responses to the question: "How satisfied are you with the help offered?", in total and per background, type of institution and type of PhD arrangement. Mean listed in graph.

Between groups of PhDs, there are only small differences in the satisfaction with the help offered (figure 6). International PhDs with a western background are equally satisfied with the help as international PhDs with a non-western background. International PhDs at UMCs are slightly less satisfied with the help offered, but this remains clearly within the margin of error. International scholarship PhDs are slightly more satisfied with the help offered (3.97 out of 5) than international employee PhDs (3.71 out of 5).

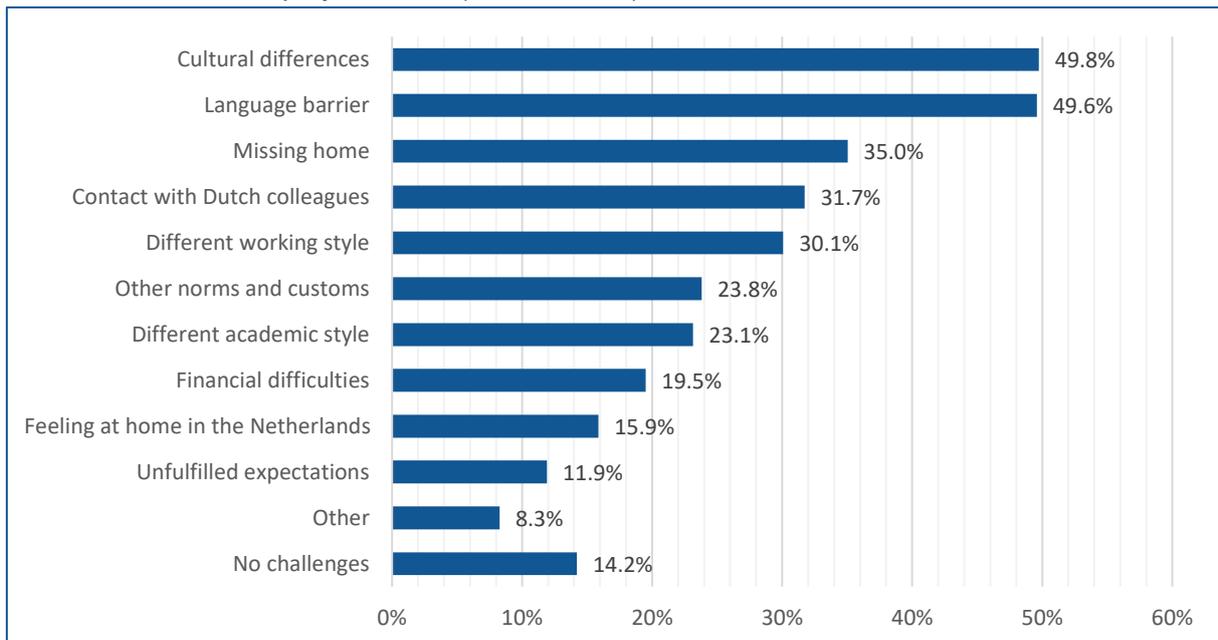


Figure 7: Responses to the question: "Do you experience any challenges, being an international PhD in the Netherlands?" (n=605).

## Challenges faced by international PhDs

All international PhD candidates were asked about the challenges they encountered at their institution or with regards to their stay in the Netherlands more broadly. The responses to this question can be found in figure 7. The challenges most frequently mentioned are cultural differences (49.8%) and language barriers (49.6%). The third most common challenge is missing home (35%). Subsequently, international PhDs mention challenges related to working at Dutch universities, such as contact with Dutch colleagues or a different working style. Furthermore, 19.5% of the international PhDs indicate that they experience financial difficulties. 14.2% of them indicate that they do not experience any challenges related to their international status.

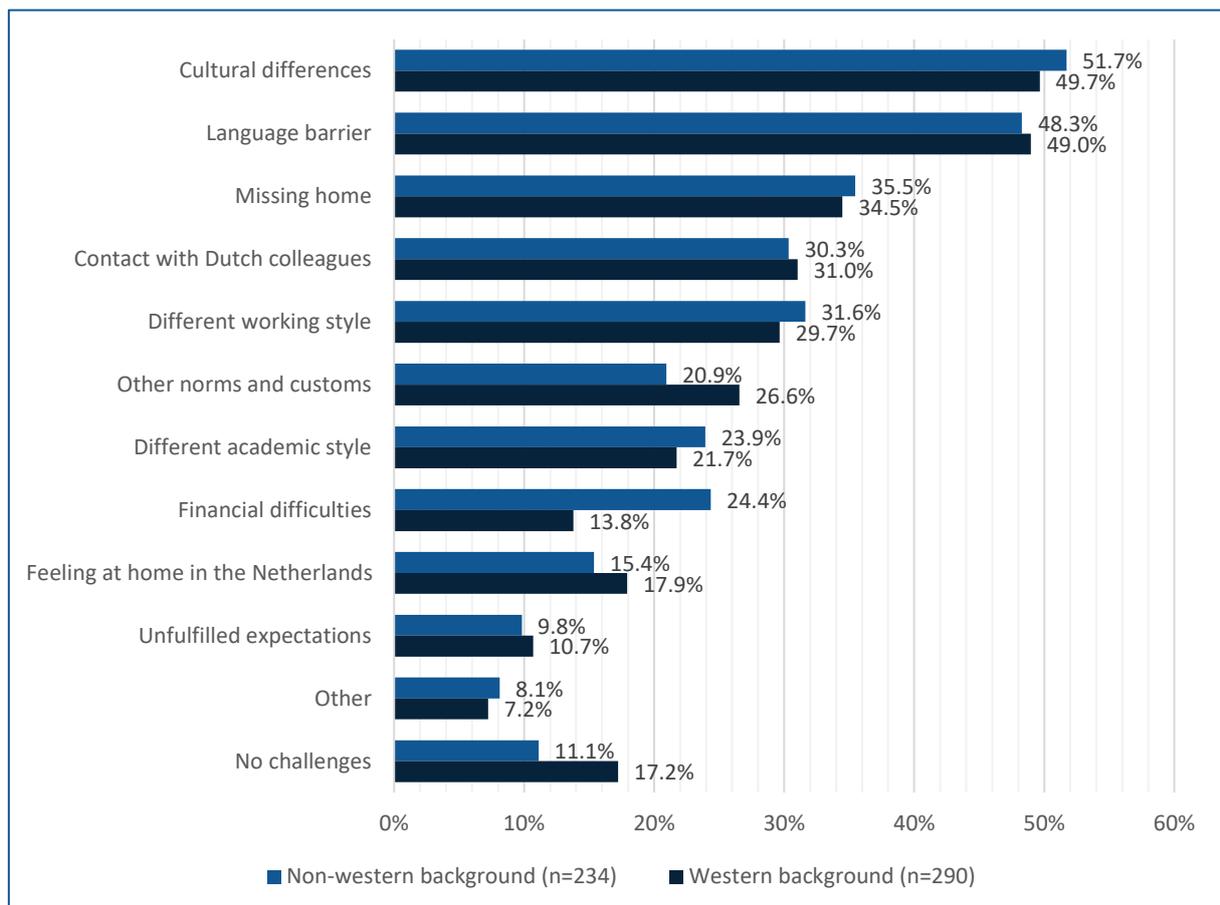


Figure 8: Responses to the question: "Do you experience any challenges, being an international PhD in the Netherlands?", per background.

There are few differences in the challenges faced between international PhDs with a western background and international PhDs with a non-western background (figure 8). The most striking differences are that those with a western background more often find the Dutch norms and customs a challenge (26.6% versus 20.9%), whereas international PhDs with a non-western background more often experience financial difficulties (24.4% versus 13.8%). International PhDs with a western background more often do not experience any challenges (17.2%) than those with a non-western background (11.1%).

Between types of institutions, the differences are limited as well (figure 9). While international PhDs at universities most often indicate cultural differences as a challenge (50.8%), PhDs at UMCs most often indicate that the language barrier is a challenge (64.3%). Furthermore, international PhDs at UMCs more often find contact with Dutch colleagues challenging (41.4%). International PhDs at other types of institutions often indicate that they are challenged by the different working style (31.3%), but due to the small number of respondents, the results for this group should be interpreted with caution.

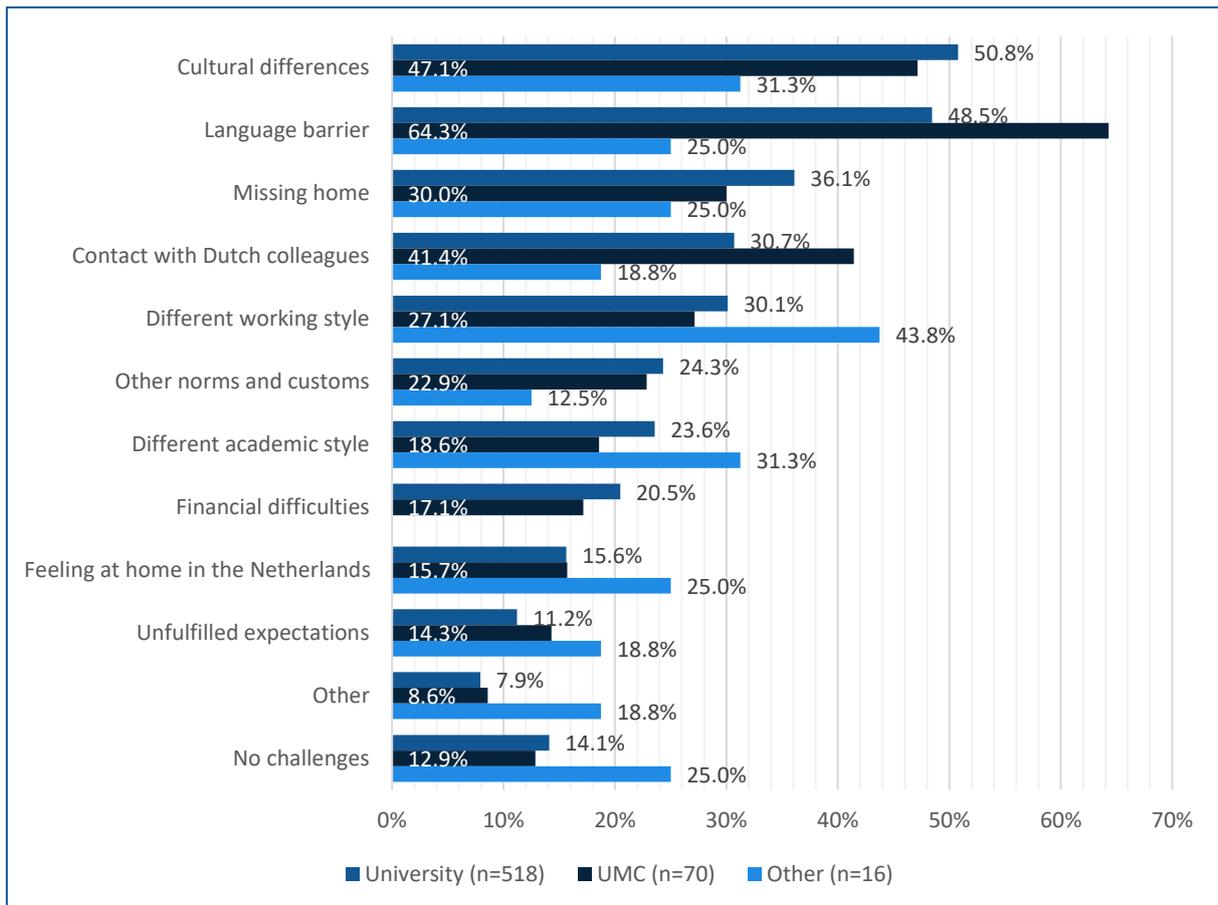


Figure 9: Responses to the question: "Do you experience any challenges, being an international PhD in the Netherlands?", per type of institution.

The differences between types of PhD arrangements are a bit more pronounced (figure 10). Whereas for international employee PhDs and international scholarship PhDs, cultural differences is the challenge most often experienced (49.5% and 56.3% respectively), international external PhDs mostly struggle with financial difficulties (43.6%). International scholarship PhDs often struggle with financial difficulties as well (29.9%). International employee PhDs less often struggle with differences in academic style compared to the other three types of international PhDs. International scholarship PhDs least often indicate that they face no challenges (7.8%).

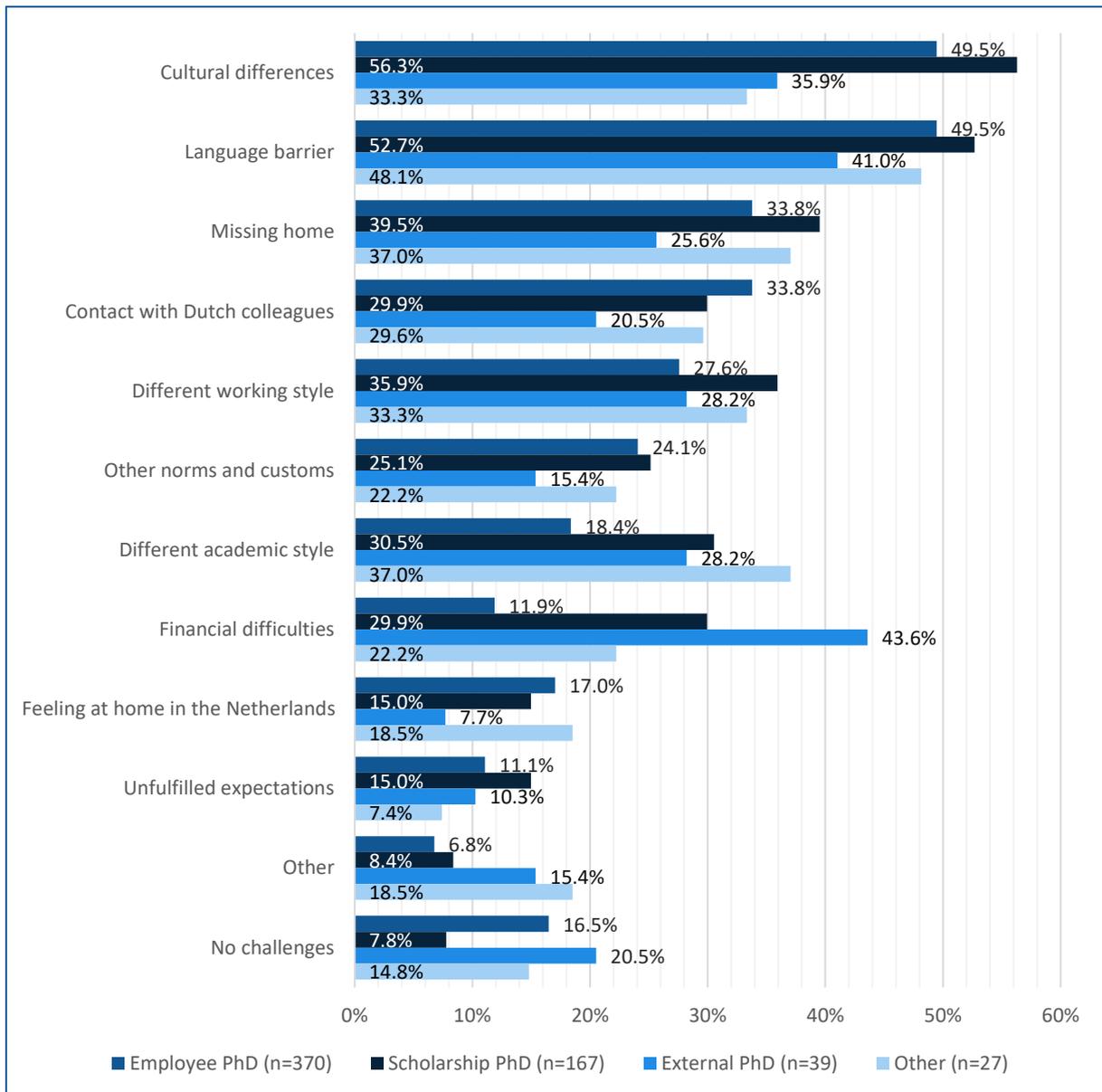


Figure 10: Responses to the question: "Do you experience any challenges, being an international PhD in the Netherlands?", per type of PhD arrangement.

### General experiences of international PhDs

At the end of these questions, we gave international PhDs the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences as international PhDs via an open question. 125 international PhDs wrote more about their experiences.

Language was the most commonly mentioned topic (n=27). Many international PhDs stated that they often struggle with Dutch colleagues speaking Dutch amongst each other, which makes them feel left out. However, some also experienced a sense of awkwardness when their Dutch colleagues switched to English because of them. Furthermore, some indicated that the language barriers also resulted in a social divide between international PhDs and Dutch colleagues.

*"[...] It has happened to me that when I am surrounded only by Dutch people they start talking in Dutch and I cannot understand anything, so this situation is so uncomfortable [...]" (R.15).*

*"[...] Even though colleagues did generally speak English when I was around, I felt conscious that their life would be easier if I wasn't there. [...]" (R.60).*

*“[...] It is easy to be acquaintances with Dutch colleagues and people, but anything deeper is very difficult. It seems that most already have an established group of friends and are not looking to make new ones. Also, the language barrier makes it very difficult for me. It is fine for general everyday operation, but if you want to make deep friends it is difficult. [...]”* (R.116).

However, language in some cases was not only an issue with informal conversations next to the coffee machine, but some also experienced that important news was only sent around in Dutch.

*“[...] International staff in my department are constantly asked to Google translate official documents if they are not proficient enough to understand bureaucratic Dutch.”* (R.13).

Quite a few of the international PhDs (n=21) indicated that they either had been in the Netherlands for quite some time and thus already knew the country, or that they were well integrated and spoke the language.

*“I did all my studies in the Netherlands, so I am already used to the culture and feel at home. [...]”* (R.34).

*“I learned to speak Dutch and integrated well, therefore I do not feel excluded from the society in the Netherlands. I consider myself partially local by now. [...]”* (R.53).

Many PhDs however indicated that the opportunities for them to integrate were limited, as courses to help them do so were either not offered or very expensive (n=19). Some also indicated that they could use help with practical issues related to living in the Netherlands, such as taxes (n=10).

*“My integration is harder than what I thought it would be. [...] I regret that Dutch courses are really expensive and at really unpractical hours at [my institution]. When I arrived, there was no integration week for the PhD students at [my institution] and I wish I could have participated in this (it now exists, but it also costs a lot of money, ~€1000, so I assume most internationals still do not attend it.)”* (R.100).

*“Universities overcharge for courses to learn Dutch, making it almost impossible to pay for one with a PhD salary.”* (R.121).

*“Some governmental issues like taxes or regulations are so hard to deal with and no one ever teaches you those.”* (R.108).

It was however not only the Dutch language or systems that international PhDs struggled with. Many PhDs wrote about the “Dutch directness”, stating that they did not or took a long time to get used to the relatively strong critiques their Dutch colleagues and supervisors may give (n=9).

*“The Dutch can be very direct and do not always provide positive feedback which for a PhD student can make a difference.”* (R.11).

*“[...] Although I don't mind directness, some things are too direct. Being from a different country, even when speaking the language, still makes you feel different from others.”* (R.72).

Several international PhDs further mentioned money-related issues, such as being paid less than colleagues who do the same work, or just receiving low pay (n=8).

*“I am lucky to have a PhD contract with the university. However most of my international PhD friends are under the PhD sandwich program. They work as hard as me (even harder many times because they usually have 2 jobs) but they get paid half of what I get. This is not fair considering that at the end chair groups receive the same amount of money for all PhDs (either staff or sandwich).”* (R.30).

*“The money given to Sandwich PhDs is too little and it is difficult to live with the current cost of living.” (R.111).*

Finally, 20 PhDs were also positive about doing a PhD in the Netherlands, finding it an enjoyable working environment or having a positive experience in general, though most still had some comments about working in the Netherlands.

*“I really appreciate the Dutch culture at work, although the lack of congratulations or cheerful inputs was slightly difficult to deal with in the beginning. However, I am mostly amazed by the work part of my life in the NL, there are so many features which I find great and so much ahead of time compare to most other country. For instance, I am thinking of the salary in the NL which is very good, the way you are treated, i.e. as a real worker, no as a student, and many other good things... The hardest part was actually the daily life outside my work. Dutch culture and social interactions can be pretty cold, and the weather slightly depressing, no offense :)” (R.61).*

*“I feel very welcome as a European colleague. Sometimes I can feel a bit left on the side of the conversation when they switch back to Dutch as a habit, but I'm trying to learn Dutch so it's also somewhat helping.” (R.47).*