

Internal Consultation Report for HRS4R, Initial Phase

The University of Bucharest

Final (4 November 2023)

Contents

Introduction	2
The focus group consultations.....	3
A. Methodology.....	3
B. Findings	5
1. Recruitment, selection, admissions to doctoral studies	6
2. Career prospects and human resources policies	7
3. Supervision and coordination	9
4. Administrative services for researchers.....	11
5. Research infrastructure	14
The UB opinion barometer (2023): a brief summary	17

Introduction

This report outlines the consultations undertaken at the University of Bucharest (UB) in 2023 as part of the initial phase of the *Human Resource Strategy for Researchers* (HRS4R) process. The objective of this phase is to secure the initial certification enabling the extended process to continue over the following stages.

One of the conditions for the successful completion of the HRS4R initial phase is to consult the community of UB academics involved in research. This report provides an overview of the consultation process, which consisted of two main parts. In one stage, we carried out a set of focus groups with UB researchers from a variety of disciplines and with different levels of experience. In the second stage, the UB Office of Statistics conducted an online survey. This so-called “UB Opinion Barometer” takes place yearly; the questionnaire is sent to all academics of the University.

The focus groups and the online questionnaire overlapped in terms of time frame (early summer of 2023). The former were designed specifically with the HRS4R process in mind, as detailed below. The focus groups provide an in-depth look at the perceptions and experiences of UB researchers covering several relevant areas of academic life; and collected quite a number of proposals towards the future betterment of these experiences.

This report summarizes findings from the six focus groups, concentrating in particular on views and experiences shared by researchers across disciplines and levels of expertise; as well as on perspectives that are specific to particular areas or categories of expertise. An extensive report, detailing the conversations in each of the focus groups, has been compiled and can be consulted in Romanian on the UB’s HRS4R webpage (<https://unibuc.ro/cercetare/hrs4r/>).

The UB opinion barometer comprises a set of standard questions and has been administered in the same format for several years now. For the HRS4S consultation process, we have essentially piggybacked on this survey, out of which we selected several items of interest, as reported below. We found this instrument useful as a bird’s-eye-view of the place of research in the academic careers of UB members; of their attitudes towards the administration; and of their proposals concerning key areas for improvement.

As of this writing, the full results of the barometer have not been published. The results below have been prepared especially for this report.

This document has been drafted by the team implementing the initial phase of the HRS4R.¹

¹ This HRS4R-initial-phase Working Group consists of Liviu Andreescu, Gabriela Blebea-Nicolae, Valentin Bottez, Ilinca Busurcă, Camelia Cmeciu, Elena Ionică, Lidia Istrate, Rodica Olar, Camil Pârvu, Violeta Rotărescu. We wish to thank Bianca Mihăilă and Iulian Oană, both with the UB Statistics Office, for kindly preparing the UB barometer data well in advance of the official publication of the survey.

The focus group consultations

A. Methodology

Why focus groups?

We set up a set of focus groups as part of the HRS4R consultation process in order to gather data on the views and perspectives shared by UB researchers across disciplines and levels of expertise; as well as data on the variety and multiplicity of their opinions and experiences.

Given the conversational, lightly directed, relatively free-ranging nature of focus groups, we considered this technique to be particularly promising for eliciting personal experiences, both of the more and of the less pleasant type. We aimed to offer participants the comfort and the assurance of being among their peers as they examined their careers and the relevant practices at the University.

Group structure and participant selection

The consultation was designed to encompass 6 focus groups consisting of 6-8 members each. All members were employees of the UB, either on a professorial position (i.e., with a load that includes teaching and research) or on a researcher position (typically part of an externally funded project, or on a fellowship or grant). We also invited doctoral students and young PhDs (“postdocs”).

Since professors (“teaching staff”, as they are officially called in Romania) are the predominant category of academics at the University, and since the large majority of research positions are in fact held by that category, most of the participants were tenured teaching staff. That said, during the selection process we invited especially academics involved in research at the UB research centers / labs; or at least having a proven research track-record.

This resulted in a total of 34 participants across the 6 focus groups – between 5 and 7 individuals per group.

We aimed for relatively homogeneous groups with sufficient internal variety in order to provide a common basis for conversation, while also offering room for the expression of a diversity of concerns and experiences. To set up the 6 groups according to this logic, we combined two variables:

- research field or discipline: *exact, experimental and natural sciences* and, respectively, *social sciences and humanities*;
- level of expertise in research: *budding researchers* (research assistants, doctoral students, postdocs); *aspiring researchers* (assistant lecturers, assistant professors, level-III researchers); experienced researchers (associate professors, full professors, level-II and level-I researchers).

Age was not a direct criterion in making the selection, though, predictably, it correlated somewhat with the level of expertise.

All groups included participants of both sexes in roughly comparable proportions, although we did not specifically aim for gender parity.

To achieve variety within groups, we invited representatives from as many faculties as possible in each broad disciplinary area (i.e., exact, experimental and natural sciences, and, respectively, social sciences and humanities). Not all faculties were represented, and some were represented more than others.

As to the selection procedure, we started from a list of all staff hired on research positions in the UB or on ICUB (UB Research Institute) grants. We then narrowed down the list after discussions with and recommendations from several faculty vice-deans for research and other researchers, as well as from other UB researchers. For doctoral students and postdocs, we asked for recommendations from vice-deans and doctoral schools. Most of the prospective participants were then contacted via institutional email and on the phone.

The rate of refusal was relatively high, most likely due to the difficulties in harmonizing invitees' timetables.

Changes in the composition of several groups had to be made at the last moment due to the last-minute unavailability of previously confirmed participants. As a result, two of the latter were reallocated to another group in the same broad disciplinary area. Therefore, two focus groups had one participant with a somewhat mismatched level of expertise.

The organization of events

Six focus groups resulted from the process outlined in the previous subsection:

- Group 1: Advanced researchers in the exact, natural, and experimental sciences.
Participants from the Faculties of Chemistry (3) and Biology (3).
- Group 2: Aspiring researchers in the exact, natural, and experimental sciences.
Participants from the Faculties of Chemistry (3), Biology (2), and Geography (1). (One participant, a full professor, was reallocated from Group 1.)
- Group 3: Budding researchers in the exact, natural, and experimental sciences.
Participants from the Faculties of Chemistry (2), Physics (1), and the Center for Integrated Analysis and Management at the Faculty of Geography (2).
- Group 4: Advanced researchers in the social sciences and the humanities.
Participants from the Faculties of Political Science (1), History (1), Foreign Languages and Literatures (1), Roman-Catholic Theology (1), Public Administration and Business (1).
- Group 5: Aspiring researchers in the social sciences and the humanities.
Participants from the Faculties of Journalism and Communication (1), Orthodox Theology (1), Foreign Languages and Literatures (1), Public Administration and Business (1), Sociology and Social Assistance (1). (One participant, a doctoral student, was reallocated from Group 6.)
- Group 6: Budding researchers in the social sciences and the humanities. Participants from the faculties of Political Science (1), History (1), Philosophy (1), Orthodox Theology (1), Psychology and Education Science (1), Journalism and Communication (1), Sociology and Social Assistance (1).

The focus group events were held on 6, 7 and 8 June 2023, in the afternoon, in the building of the UB's Research Platform in Biology and Systemic Ecology.

Each event was facilitated by one or two members of the team that implemented the initial phase of the HRS4R process. The participants and the facilitator(s) were seated around a large table, on well-spaced chairs, and were provided with paper, pens, and water.

Each meeting was planned to last for 90 minutes. In several cases, the duration was extended by around 10-20 minutes.

The meetings were audio or audio-and-video recorded, after permission from each participant. All participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality. There were no withdrawals during events and no objections were raised either during the focus groups or subsequently.

Event structure

The events followed a typical focus-group structure. After participants were seated, the facilitator(s) opened the event by presenting the framework (HRS4R) and the goals of the discussion. They continued by detailing the terms and the format of the conversation; and asking for the explicit consent of each participant to be recorded. The participants then introduced themselves. The ensuing discussions were lightly moderated by the facilitator(s) in line with the pre-established focus group guide.

The discussion guide – designed by the HRS4R implementation team and shared in advance among the facilitators – followed broadly the issues of interest in the Gap Analysis form (and, implicitly, in the European Charter of Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers). The following classes of issues were pursued:

- Procedures and experiences during hiring, conditions of recruitment at the UB, the University's personnel policy;
- Career prospects and the research environment at the University, including administrative services for researchers, working conditions, and research infrastructure and support;
- The University's research policy (including its broader context in Romania);
- For young researchers, supervising during doctoral studies and coordination in research labs, including publication practices.

The participants were encouraged to engage in a natural conversation, to ask questions of each other, and to share experiences that were either similar or dissimilar to those of other speakers. The facilitators strove to keep a neutral position and moderate the discussions with restraint.

B. Findings

Below is a systematic analysis of the conversations in the 6 focus groups. The analysis follows the main themes of interest across the groups, identifying the shared perspectives and experiences; concerns that are specific to particular (categories of) participants; and proposals related to said perspectives and concerns.

A more detailed, less systematized summary of the discussions in each of the focus groups is available [here](#) (in Romanian).

1. Recruitment, selection, admissions to doctoral studies

Highlights

- The regular recruitment / selection process, through open competition, is generally perceived as satisfactory and transparent
- When the participants themselves needed to hire researchers, however, they reported an excessive bureaucracy, with convoluted rules
- The recruitment system was considered particularly cumbersome and uninviting for foreign researchers

Proposals

- Simplify and clarify conditions for recruitment on research projects, including on the hiring of doctoral students
- Simplify recruitment procedures for foreign candidates for research positions, including by removing conditions requiring them to be available in-person at various points in the process
- Provide individual feedback to candidates after admissions to doctoral programs

The hiring procedures at the UB through open competition was perhaps the issue on which, as a whole, participants expressed comparatively the largest degree of satisfaction or, at least, the lowest degree of concern. Regardless of area of research or level of expertise, the hiring process was considered by researchers **transparent and based on merit**.

Some of the stories told by participants suggested that, implicitly, competition practices in other Romanian universities were taken as a standard – and the UB was considered comparatively better. (Note, that, as members of the UB community, all focus group participants were successful applicants.)

“There were no problems with the hiring process when I was in this position.” [FG1]

“The competition for my assistant lecturer position was OK. ... I didn’t see any issues.” [FG3]

“I was a member of several selection committees at the University where local candidates, who are informally favored, lost to outsiders who had better CVs, so I believe there is a real openness here...” [FG4]

„The tendency of [academic departments in Romania] is to be exceedingly rigid – if the candidate does not have a degree in the respective field, they’re rejected... This was a good experience for me, because they did not reject me, they did not tell me: *You’re not one of us...*” [FG5]

“I came [to the University and the doctoral school] as an outsider ... From what I’ve heard, my adviser rejected some people coming from the inside...” [FG6]

One of the features of the admissions process that was considered praiseworthy was the UB’s **policy of transparency**, whereby all candidate files and evaluation results are posted online by the university. When a participant [FG4] recounted her hiring horror story well over a decade before, everybody in the group agreed such a thing would not be possible today, as everything is open and on display online.

Still, some discussants noted that **opening new positions** for promising researchers is often not possible [FG2, FG4].

Admissions to doctoral programs offer a more complex picture, in part because, as it emerged repeatedly from the conversations, many practices differ substantially among doctoral schools. This includes admissions. Some doctoral students expressed concerns that the admissions process favors insiders (graduates of the faculty at the UB). Others noted that, though they were admitted, they received little feedback on their performance during admissions and on the final ranking of candidates. One participant complained about the non-transparent way in which doctoral advisers select their students.

While the selection itself is considered adequate, participants were much less satisfied with the hiring process when they themselves opened researcher positions as project coordinators. The general feeling was that the **procedures are still too complex**, especially for candidates coming from outside the University. As one participant put it, “I feel lost. Whenever I hire somebody, I feel like crying.” [FG2] Another complained that, due to some implausibly sounding regulations raised by the HR Department, he could not hire doctoral students on an externally funded project, despite the fact that other Romanian universities part of the project consortium did so easily [FG2]. Also, the procedures for temporarily suspending the contract of a researcher hired on a project were, according to one discussant, exceedingly convoluted – even when the interruption was due to maternity leave [FG4]. Last but not least, still working with documents printed on paper felt archaic to several participants.

One issue raised repeatedly by the more experienced participants across the focus groups were the difficulties **in hiring foreign researchers** on externally funded projects (but also, in the social sciences and the humanities, as teachers). The procedures are too convoluted and unclear to foreigners, who receive little administrative support in applying [FG1]. Additionally, the obligation to sign off on the candidate file in person is effectively onerous [FG4].

2. Career prospects and human resources policies

Highlights

- Researchers across the focus groups expressed emphatic concerns about career unpredictability, said to afflict young researchers on short-term contracts, experienced researchers who find themselves between grants, and research teams
- The fellowship and grants programs of the UB Research Institute improved somewhat career prospects by, among others, providing stopgap funding for the categories above
- Low wages render it difficult to either bring promising researchers in or to keep them; this combines with the unappealing short-term employment contracts offered to researchers
- Socialization among researchers was found wanting and drew unfavorable comparisons with experiences abroad
- Teaching and administrative duties were often described as burdensome – as well as very unevenly and inequitably distributed

Proposals

- Modify the ICUB fellowships and grant system to one in which interested researchers apply and are taken in on a rolling basis
- To increase career predictability, both the University and individual faculties / departments should devise explicit HR plans based on clear, projected needs

- All departments where substantial research is conducted should set aside funds to support, between outside grants, research teams with a proven track-record
- Extend the duration of researcher employment contracts and offer more permanent positions – and counterbalance the risks with periodic assessments
- Create the institution of a mediator for newly recruited academics to ease them into their research environment and assist with bureaucratic hurdles
- Set up courses / programs at the UB to train technicians for complex equipment

While the recruitment process itself was generally considered satisfactory, the human resources policies at the UB came under concerted criticism. Positions for teaching-and-research staff were considered appealing because they usually imply a form of tenure – but they remain scarce. This renders the career prospects of many young researchers quite dim, according to several participants.

The latter raised the issue of **career predictability**, with limited resources devoted by faculties and departments to ensuring continuity for researchers and research teams after the expiry of project grants and before new grants are secured [FG1]. As one participant who runs a research center noted, “I cannot promise anything beyond three or four years.” [FG2]

It was remarked, in this context, that neither the University, not the faculties have adequate long-term projects for their HR needs. The unpredictable national research funding schemes vastly complicate this issue, according to quite a few of the discussants [FG1, FG5].

Several participants [FG1, ...] noted that this situation has been improved somewhat by the **fellowships and grants programs** of the ICUB, which were especially designed to provide continuity to researchers whose externally-funded projects came to an end. Still, these measures were considered insufficient. The faculties and departments themselves should do more to keep productive research teams together, it was said.

Salaries for researchers as well as tenured teaching-and-research staff were widely considered, across the focus groups [FG1, FG2, FG4], as demotivating. Wages were seen as one of the major barriers to bringing good researchers in. Especially in the more technical or data-savvy fields, young graduate students find much better offers on the open market.

Additionally, under these circumstances employment contracts that do not extend beyond a period of two or three years were thought to be particularly unappealing to young researchers, not to mention more experienced ones [FG1, FG2].

Several participants pointed to the demoralizing culture of research at the UB, in particular to **poor exchange of ideas and lack of socialization**. “We don’t know what our colleagues are doing. The world [of research at the UB] is very atomized”, one researcher said [FG1]. Several researchers drew unfavorable comparisons with the working atmosphere abroad [FG2, FG3]. This is true in some doctoral schools as well [FG3].

That said, young researchers working in research center / lab teams – rather than with individual doctoral advisers – reported a comparatively vibrant group life (see following subsection).

One proposal made in this context was to create the institution of a “mediator” for researchers [FG1] – an office tasked with orientation and onboarding for researchers coming from outside the University. The office would assist the latter in navigating the bureaucratic hurdles and even in socializing at the place of work.

Another serious obstacle before enticing proficient researchers into the University or increasing the output of those already in was the substantial **burden of teaching and administrative work** [FG2, FG4, FG5]. One participant noted that faculties are not incentivized in any way to reduce the teaching loads for the productive researchers, especially in the social sciences and the humanities [FG4].

“The University is not interested in identifying the people with research potential ... in supporting them by unloading some of their tasks. ... Those who won’t and can’t do, do no administrative work, and those who can do it also publish.” [FG5]

This often leads to either burnout, or to productive academics dropping out of research for extended periods. “Ever since I got there,” one researcher said, referring to an administrative position he assumed unwillingly, out of collegiality, “I have done nothing else. I did not attend even one single conference.” [FG5]

3. Supervision and coordination

Highlights

- The experiences of doctoral students vary substantially depending on the doctoral program attended – within the same broad area group (social sciences and natural sciences)
- Young researchers working mostly on externally funded projects in research centers / labs reported better supervision, publication opportunities, and work environment, as well as participation in the lab’s operational decisions
- In the natural sciences, there is relatively good access to research labs for doctoral students; this is less the case in the social sciences and humanities, where participants reported limited involvement in larger research projects
- Doctoral courses in both social and natural science programs were considered mostly irrelevant, taxing, and a distraction from PhD students’ own research projects
- Doctoral students’ interaction with their advisory committees was often described as mostly pro forma
- More generally, some participants in the social sciences and humanities group felt insufficiently familiarized with publication practices and opportunities
- Teaching activities was described as a great opportunity – unless it becomes a burden

Proposals

- Make the offer of doctoral courses more flexible – a broader menu out of which students can pick courses that interest them directly
- Focus the doctoral curriculum on research methods and practical skills, such as preparing papers and presentations and dealing with the publication process
- Generalize the practice of frequent collective meetings between the doctoral adviser and his/her student group

The two focus groups with doctoral researchers and postdocs suggested that their **experiences vary substantially** depending on the doctoral program they attend. This applies within the same broad area group, i.e., within the social sciences and humanities and, respectively, the natural and experimental

sciences. It seems that doctoral schools have their own particularities in terms of both the organization of doctoral activities and local culture.

Additionally, at least in the social sciences and humanities participants' stories suggested substantially different practices of doctoral supervision and care.

When encouraged to describe their own interactions with the supervisors, most participants reported **relative satisfaction with the coordination experience**, or even excitement.

"My relationship is OK, professional. When I have a problem or when I need help or guidance I can always go and ask." [FG3]

"I had to send my adviser an activity report every month, or I would not get my scholarship..." [FG6]

"Whenever I send something for verification, it's checked in red pen, underlined, crossed..." [FG6]

"For me, my adviser was essential. For a while we had monthly meetings, not just with me, with the whole group." [FG6]

Still, some participants did report a sense of perhaps excessive distance: "This business is much more relaxed in [the West]. ... In my case, I keep some distance from my adviser." [FG3] Others noted that they get the right supervision – but from an unofficial coordinator, not the official adviser.

That said, when asked whether their relatively good experiences were, as far as they knew, shared by colleagues, several participants painted a different picture.

"I know from some of my colleagues that advisers did not bother with them, or that some got as late as the third year without having received any assistance, and the advisers had been unreachable. ... Many colleagues dropped out." [FG3]

"Generally speaking, based on what I've heard from others, ... [working with the adviser] is difficult. ... *I don't have time right now; Send it by email; We'll see in a couple of weeks; Maybe we should meet.* Then they don't answer their phones... I was lucky..." [FG6]

Additionally, with one exception, participants in the social sciences and humanities group reported **close to no interaction with their doctoral dissertation advisory committees**.

"I have absolutely no relation to committee members." [FG3]

"Some of them check my papers, some others just sign my yearly report – and it's OK this way." [FG3]

"The members [of the advisory committee] have a very vague and undefined connection with my research subject, there is not much of a match... It's totally confusing." [FG3]

A significant difference emerged, particularly in the natural and experimental sciences group, between doctoral students working in cohesive groups in research centers / labs, and those for whom most of the interaction with the doctoral program is intermediated by the adviser. By comparison, few doctoral students in the social science and humanities group were involved in broader research projects.

Notably, young researchers working in teams in research labs or centers reported a more **collegial environment** and general satisfaction with their work / research experience.

“At first, we were very tense. ... As time went by, the vibe became cheerful and relaxed. In the mornings, we come together for breakfast and discuss things to do, deadlines, tasks – how we share everything. At 12:30 or 13:00, during lunch, we go out to buy food and, again, we talk. We all take part in meetings with outside collaborators. ... It’s very nice in our lab.” [FG3]

“In our Center, we go together to movies and plays, and when traveling abroad on projects we visit as a group; but respect is respect, work is work. ... It’s much more collegial, it’s relaxed, we joke a lot, tell stories, go out for a barbecue, visit each other to bake pizzas.” [FG3]

One issue that was raised in both groups of budding researchers and on which participants opined with particular enthusiasm was doctoral school curricula. Again, there is considerable variety among doctoral schools in this respect, at least judging by what the discussants reported. Still, with a few exceptions (typically students who could choose their courses), most young researchers were deeply **dissatisfied with the curriculum**.

They reported having to take courses that were irrelevant for their projects or interests, and even to their disciplinary area; requiring a lot of studying and difficult to pass; occasionally rehearsing materials they had encountered during their BA or MA programs.

Few among the participants seemed to appreciate the courses. It was suggested that the course offer should be broader, so that students can choose what they find relevant for their own purposes; and that it should be more focused on methods and techniques, on the publication process, on preparing papers and conference presentations.

Doctoral students’ **involvement with teaching activities** varied substantially according to what emerged during the conversations. Some reported teaching a lot – and in lot of fields. Others would have wanted to teach, but did not have the opportunity.

This variety applies to formal teaching *duties* as well: in some doctoral schools there is no obligation; in others, PhD students have to teach, with the obligation being specified in their doctoral contract with the University. This can result in **burnout** (“Doctoral courses, seminars, projects, everything else... It’s physically impossible.” [FG3]) and a **sense of inequity** among doctoral students (“You can’t say no, and it’s very unjust.” [FG3]). Both are compounded by unpredictability.

“Sometimes you’re called two days before the start of the semester and you’re simply told: *This semester you’ll teach seminar X*. ... Tough luck!”

4. Administrative services for researchers

Highlights

- The UB bureaucracy was perceived to be often unfriendly and uncommunicative, and sometimes downright adversarial
- Some services in particular, such as procurement, were singled out as a major impediment to successful research and a source of endless headaches
- The plethora of regulations and procedures invoked by administrative services – and the corresponding tasks – appeared baffling to researchers, who expressed disbelief that the rules were genuine rather than made up locally
- Quite a few participants nevertheless acknowledged that the bureaucracy had improved over the past decade; the institution of the project officer was particularly praised

Proposals

- Use framework contracts in procurement services in order to simplify and speed up purchases
- Faculties should hire (more) administrative officers of their own in order to assist their academic members in interactions with the University's central bureaucracy
- Improve the dissemination of information on research funding opportunities by better targeting active researchers
- Introduce a grant-writing service for researchers by leveraging, among others, existing skills among the UB's experienced researchers

By far the most frequent target of the complaints heard during the focus groups was the UB bureaucracy. To summarize a complicated picture, most researchers felt they lacked adequate assistance throughout their administrative tasks related to research and beyond; were frequently confronted with rules that seemed absurd and improperly explained or justified; experienced long waiting times for even basic procedures; and, in the case of young researchers, felt treated with indifference – unless the senior researchers intervened directly.

Not a few participants expressed feelings such as the following:

“You often have to deal with different offices, and one tells you something, the others something else... You then have to ping-pong among the offices until they sort out the matter among themselves...” [FG1]

“In my research center, I employ two people who essentially shadow the functions of the University of Bucharest [administration], so as to be able to ensure the workflow of 31 people and a load of projects.” [FG2]

“I am absolutely sure that they make procedures up.” [FG2]

“I had some good encounters with the bureaucracy, and some not so good ones. Get out, wait at the door. ... You don't always have the time to call in advance, especially when you're working on short deadlines.” [FG3]

“You have to check what's a real piece of regulation and what's a rule invented locally to ensure the survival of the offices...” [FG4]

At the same time, most participants who commented on the issue acknowledged that things have improved substantially over the past decade or so.

“Things have changed in the administration. ... Does anyone remember what it was like to stand in the doorframe of the Financial Department? ... It was horrible, and I had to go there weekly... A real nightmare, which I experienced for years...” [FG4]

The introduction of the **project officer** by the Department for the Management of Research Projects was particularly praised, as several participants felt it had massively simplified some of their tasks.

Perhaps the most discussed service, and the most roundly reviled, was **procurement**. The procurement process was described repeatedly as extremely sluggish and run by an obstructionist department raising all sorts of implausible legal objections (such as “festive dinners”, a term actually used in a procurement template form, not qualifying [FG4]). Quite a few procurement horror stories were recounted.

“I submitted a request last fall, in September, and I have just received the products now, in June.” [FG1]

“I would love not to have to draft detailed documentation with specifications for every little product.” [FG1]

“[Our request during the pandemic lockdown for a laptop capable of processing large volumes of visual data] was blocked by the Procurement Department, headed by a vice-rector, who said that you cannot spend 4.000 Euros on a laptop just to waste your time on Facebook.” [FG2]

As one participant put it, they ask you for countless schedules of specifications and for several offers for every product, “until you give up”. [FG4] The Department of Procurement was said to sometimes venture into cheaper alternative solutions that don’t fit the bill: they “tell us it’s the same thing, when it’s definitely not the same thing” [FG1]. This leads to a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust, noted by several participants.

“On the other hand, you don’t feel like entrusting them with your schedules of specifications, lest you end up with some big surprise...” [FG4]

One frequently heard proposal was to expand the use of framework contracts in procurement in order to simplify and speed up purchases, especially of consumables used on a regular basis. However, one participant noted – not in the context of this proposal – that framework procurement agreements may lead to inflated prices and to difficulties in purchasing specialized products that are only manufactured by one or a few companies worldwide [FG4].

Researchers across the focus groups identified a number of other respects in which the bureaucracy could do more to support them. One proposal made during several conversations concerned a more “proactive” [FG1] Research Management Department, providing **information on research funding opportunities**. While this information is available in the electronic newsletters, catalogs, and bulletins dispatched regularly by the PR Department, one young and very busy researcher noted that he expected a more targeted approach.

Several participants, senior researchers among them, noted that the University does not provide any **grant writing services**. Such a service would increase the chances of success and would also free up a lot of time for research, as “not everyone has the time and the dedication” [FG1] for the complicated “bureaucratic” sections in grant applications.

Another participant observed, in this context, that there is a substantial but idle skill set at the University, in particular the people who evaluate projects in the major international competitions: “This considerable experience at the UB has never been used.” [FG1] Among the other related suggestions was organizing systematic mock-up project evaluations [FG4] to increase the chance of success.

When asked about their experience with **knowledge transfer services**, most researchers – including those in the natural and experimental sciences – seemed either unaware or dimly aware of their existence. An experienced researcher confessed during the conversation that they were not entirely sure if this service actually worked [FG2]. Another noted: “We have it, but in name only, not in competence.” [FG1]

A couple of researchers reported that University assistance with patenting had recently picked up, not so much the administrative process, but rather covering the patent costs (in which case, rights are

transferred to the UB). According to one participant this recent support was, however, directly attributable to the personal efforts of the vice-rector for research.

To sum up, the topic seemed, among participants, rather arcane.

A related issue was raised during one of the focus groups: administrative assistance for researchers' **consulting services for third parties**. Here, once again, the competence of the bureaucracy was called into question. "It was a full-scale war in the Legal Department to get over the hurdle" of concluding contracts with outside parties, one experienced researcher recounted [FG2]. Consulting fees were reportedly lost. The UB's effort to remedy this situation by creating *Unibuc Consult*, an office serving as a convenient mechanism for consultancy services to third parties, was reportedly long in the making and, as yet, untested.

The same participant noted, however, that the administration was always swift to assist him in the conclusion of **international collaboration agreements**.

In terms of the consequences of this state of affairs, several participants suggested that the underperforming bureaucracy left researchers with a **sense of insecurity**, especially as grant holders and project coordinators.

Some recognized, nonetheless, that part of the problem lay with the faculties as well. The latter are not incentivized to support researchers with funds, lower teaching loads, and administrative assistance.

In assessing the recent initiatives to fix some of the perceived dysfunction of the UB bureaucracy, a participant remarked that these efforts typically consisted of "piecemeal fixes" rather than systemic solutions [FG4]. The absence of a strategic approach to supporting research dominated participants' perspectives on the state of UB research infrastructure.

5. Research infrastructure

Highlights

- With many old, historical buildings, the University is experiencing a severe scarcity of adequate facilities of all types, which negatively impacts research, teaching, and the work life of academics
- The yearly lump sum for participation in scientific events and the funds for publication fees, both available to all UB academics, were welcomed by participants – though the amounts were considered insufficient
- In the natural sciences, equipment maintenance remains a critical problem; in the social sciences, access to adequate libraries, especially books, is inadequate

Proposals

- A de minimis financial assistance scheme from the University in support of active research teams during periods between external grants
- Reducing the geographical dispersion of major equipment to make it more accessible to interested researchers
- A centralized scheme to service equipment across the UB faculties
- Involving the UB in a nation-wide network of existing major research infrastructures, with servicing ensured through a national scheme

As in the case of support services, participants' perspectives on research infrastructure at the University was overwhelmingly negative.

Perhaps the main issue raised across the focus groups was the **dearth of adequate building facilities** – lecture halls and classrooms, labs, offices, storage rooms, libraries, cafeterias and lounge areas. As one participant observed, most spaces are now improperly multifunctional.

“All our buildings are historical and old.” [FG2]

“The place where I work is both an office and a research lab.” ... “I work in a small room under an amphitheater, where I have most of what I need, except for ventilation.” [FG2]

“A good portion of our doctoral students have no place to work in.” [FG2]

“In my faculty, we refurbished a small building – and did it poorly... Then the rooms were reallocated... We do not even have rooms for our research centers, a place where to leave our folders. We don't even have that, though some four or five rooms are still not used...” [FG4]

Besides the negative impact on carrying out research and teaching duties, this state of affairs was said to seriously hamper socialization among researchers. A few participants reminisced on the friendly and inviting spaces they enjoyed while working abroad.

Other missing infrastructure mentioned by participants included a supercomputer to process large amount of data; specialized statistical software for professors as well as students; and books and other types of bibliographical resources in the humanities that are not available through the online databases which mostly provide access to articles.

Participants working in the natural sciences expressed concerns about **equipment maintenance**, citing technical infrastructure that lies idle due to lack of servicing or of skilled technicians able to operate it.

One proposal was to create an integrated scheme to maintain equipment across all UB faculties. A similar suggestion was to involve the University in consolidating a national network of significant infrastructures, for which servicing and consumables would be ensured through national public funding schemes.

As noted previously, participants in the natural science focus complained about problems with obtaining consumables for their regular research activities, which the sluggish procurement process aggravates. Conversely, other researchers remarked that, as of recently, their faculties had stepped up financial support in this respect.

A researcher signaled, in this context, a deeper problem with the inefficient use of resources: pieces of equipment that are costly to operate are currently scattered around the University in buildings where they are difficult to reach by other interested researchers. “There is no plan for [large equipment],” one participant noted, “we have this, then this is what we must support.” [FG1]

The recent initiative to grant all UB academics a yearly **lump sum for participation in conferences** and other scientific events was considered very helpful and “a major plus” by some of the participants. One noted that, for his research center, it was useful in establishing contacts and increasing “the number of collaborations ... with very strong teams abroad.” [FG2] Nevertheless, the current amount was considered somewhat insufficient, especially for travel across continents and longer mobilities.

Doctoral students and young researchers also appreciated the mobility opportunities, especially when they involve exchanges of larger groups and work in important international research centers.

“It was a unique experience. I would not repeat it soon [because the work schedule was infernal], but it was an opportunity to see how researchers work in other institutes. ... I was, however, beat after 3 months of that.”

Some doctoral students also considered the UB’s **support for article publication fees** – also a lump sum accessible annually by all, under specific conditions – to be somewhat insufficient, given the high cost of publishing open access in some journals.

Another issue raised in several conversations was the lack of financial support for research teams when grant money runs out and before it can be secured again. One proposal was a sort of de minimis financial assistance scheme, whether from the UB and/or the faculties or both, designed specifically to support active research teams during such periods. A participant pointed out that UB researchers participating in prestigious global projects such as the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey could not be supported with internal UB funds.

As one participant summed up the conversation in his group: “Steps were made in the right direction, but many more steps have to be made.” [FG1]

The UB opinion barometer (2023): a summary of key items

The UB opinion barometer is a set of surveys conducted annually by the University Statistics Office. One survey targets the UB students, the other UB academics conducting teaching and research. Below, we report some of the data in the latter survey (the full results will be published at a later date). The survey and the focus groups in the previous section were carried out around the same time – the early summer of 2023.

We include below the survey items that were of direct interest to us while drafting the HRS4R documents, including the Plan of Actions. These items offer a general sense of the concerns of UB academics. We do not provide any narrative analysis beyond what the descriptive statistics suggest directly.

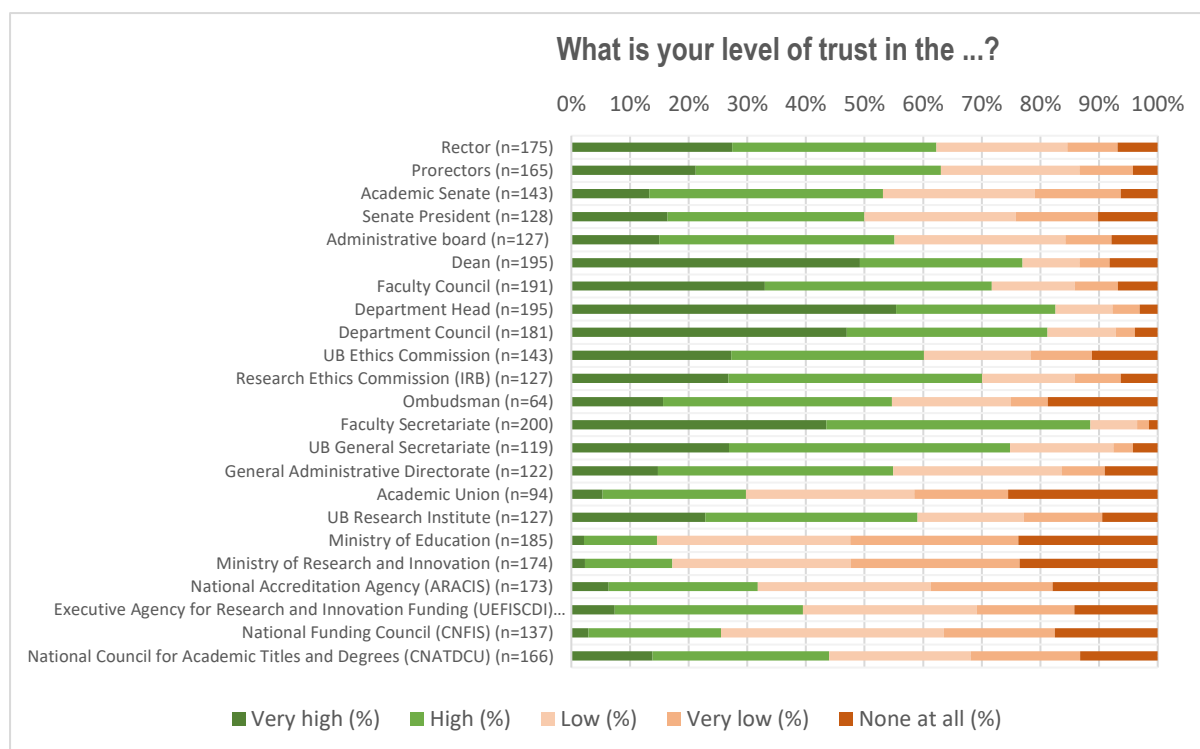
In total, 401 UB academics, including a small number of adjuncts, answered the survey – out of close to 1,300 academics at the University (excluding adjuncts). However, “Don’t know” (D/K) responses and non-responses (N/A) to many items frequently summed up to around 50% of the cases. In some of the descriptive analyses below, the D/K–N/A answers were not included.

Overview of the sample of respondents

Respondents (by academic rank)		
<i>Academic rank</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Assistant lecturer	44	10.97
Assistant professor	118	29.43
Associate professor	90	22.44
Professor	59	14.71
Adjunct professor	34	8.48
D/K N/A	56	13.97
Total	401	100

Respondents by sex and by area of science (where declared)			
<i>Area of science</i>	<i>Sex</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	
Exact and natural sciences	32	25	57
	56.1 %	43.9 %	100 %
	19.6 %	15.3 %	34.9 %
Social sciences	44	22	66
	66.7 %	33.3 %	100 %
	27 %	13.5 %	40.5 %
Humanities	27	13	40
	67.5 %	32.5 %	100 %
	16.6 %	8 %	24.6 %
<i>Total</i>	103	60	163
	63.2 %	36.8 %	100 %
Black = count Blue = F/M percentage within area of science Red = F/M percentage of total			

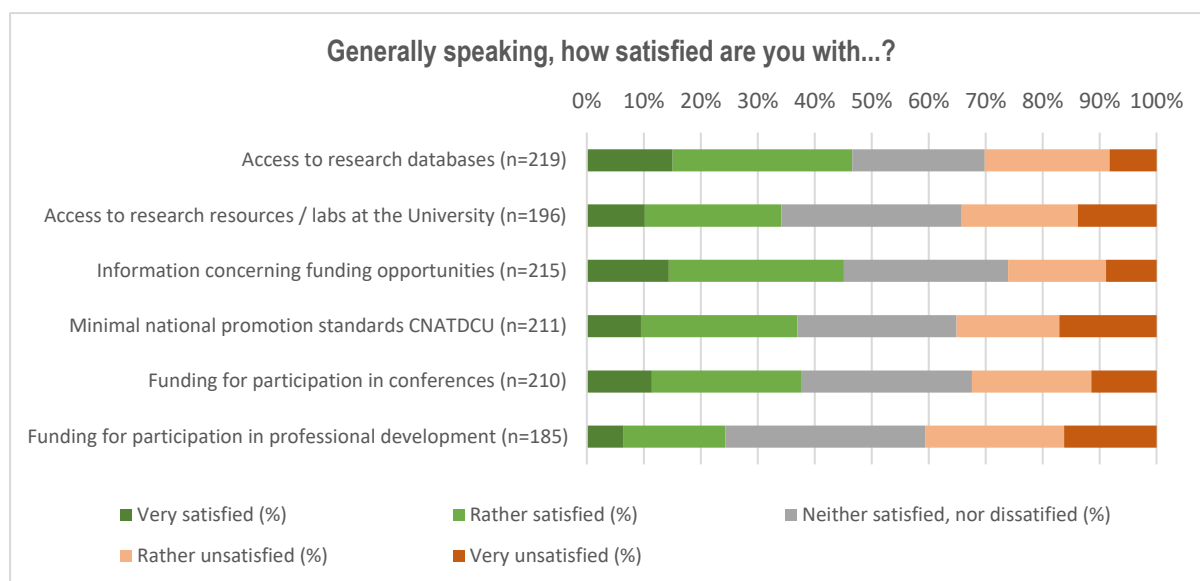
Trust in University leadership, faculty management, and national professional bodies



Ethics-related concerns

Are you aware of ethics issues in your faculty (multiple answers)?			
	No (%)	Yes (%)	Total n
Issues related to publications	94.51	5.49	401
Plagiarism	90.52	9.48	401
Issues related to teaching	90.77	9.23	401
Issues in relations with students	85.54	14.46	401
Issues in relations with other academics	88.78	11.22	401
None of the above	91.52	8.48	401
D/K; N/A	82.54	17.46	401
Others	99	1	401

Satisfaction with research-related services and standards



Participation in scientific events

While 74% of all respondents (n=192) claimed they had participated in at least one international conference in 2021, a much smaller share of around 15% (n=190) stated that they had attended a research or training stint abroad during the same year.

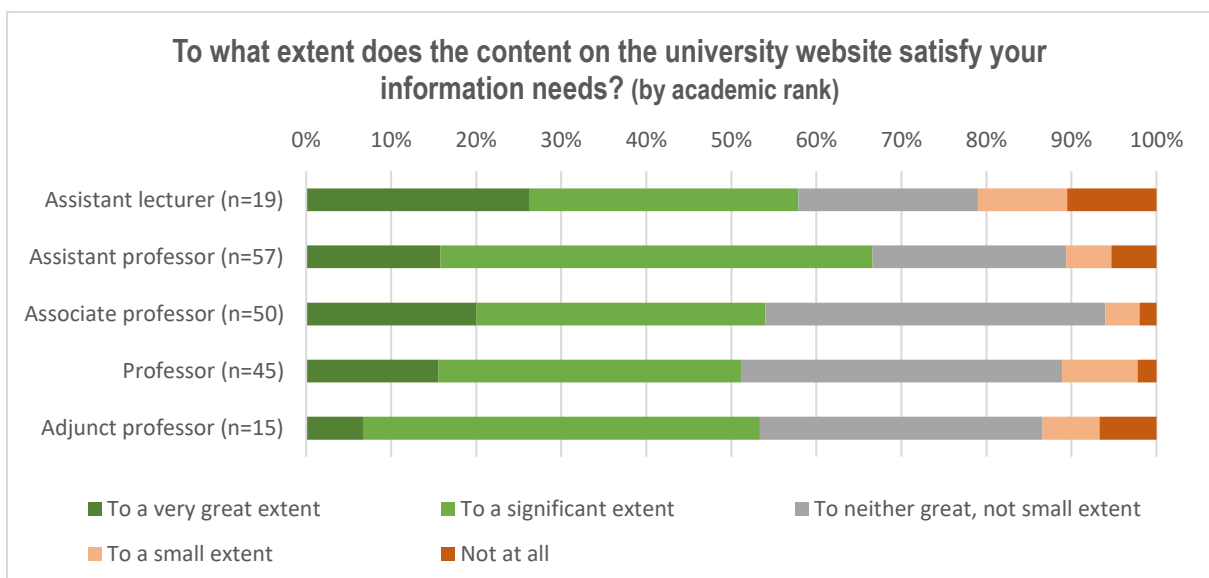
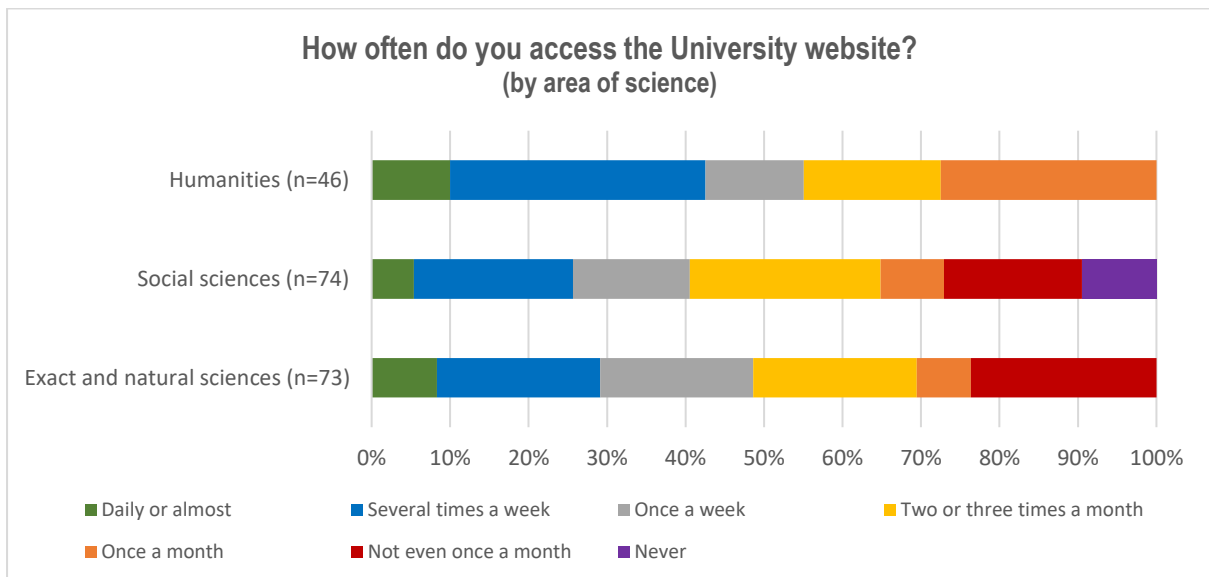
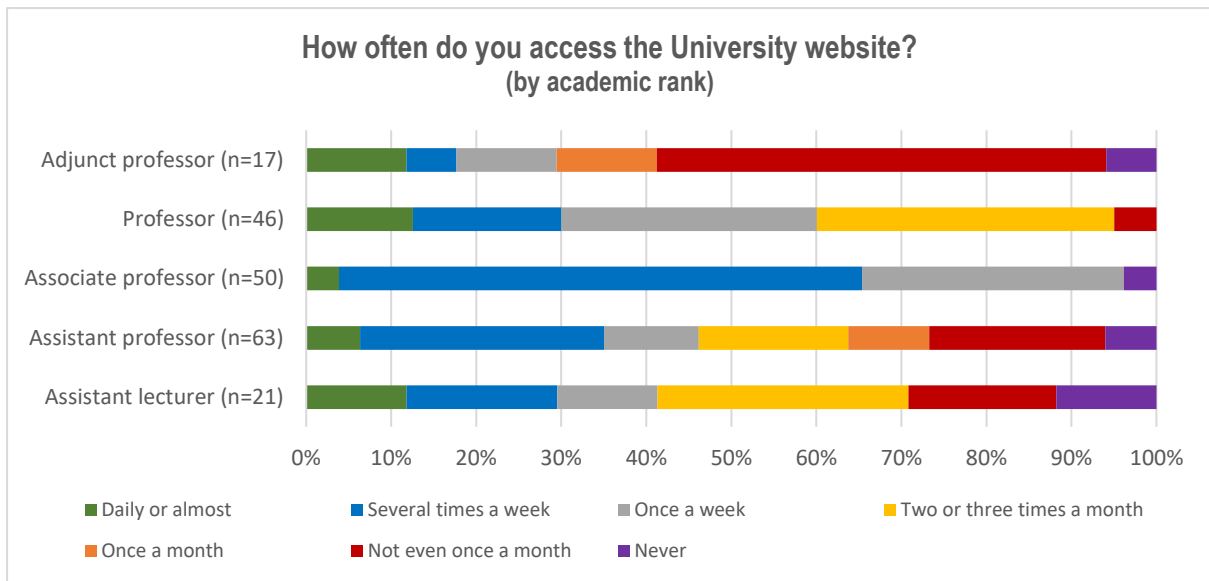
Did you participate in any international conference in 2021? (by academic rank)			
Academic rank	No	Yes	Total
Assistant lecturer	4	17	21
	19 %	81 %	100 %
	8.5 %	12.2 %	11.3 %
Assistant professor	17	44	61
	27.9 %	72.1 %	100 %
	36.2 %	31.7 %	32.8 %
Associate professor	14	34	48
	29.2 %	70.8 %	100 %
	29.8 %	24.5 %	25.8 %
Professor	8	33	41
	19.5 %	80.5 %	100 %
	17 %	23.7 %	22 %
Adjunct professor	4	11	15
	26.7 %	73.3 %	100 %
	8.5 %	7.9 %	8.1 %
Total	47	139	186
	25.3 %	74.7 %	100 %
	100 %	100 %	100 %

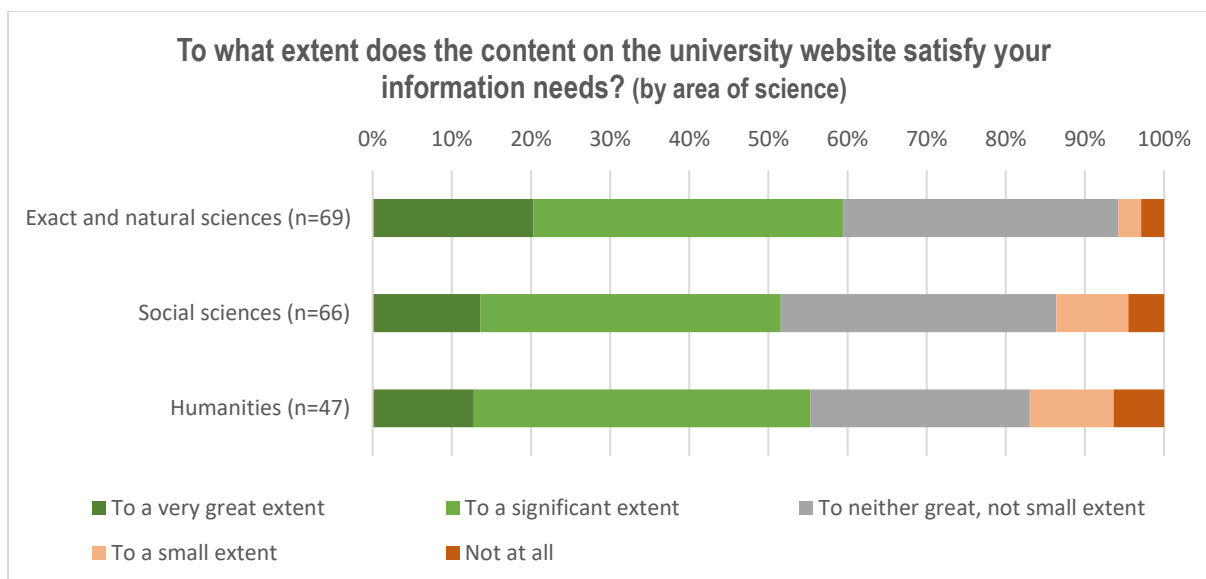
D/K and N/A not included
 Black = count
 Blue = percentage of academic rank
 Green = percentage of total

Did you participate in any international conference in 2021? (by area of science)			
Area of science	No	Yes	Total
Exact and natural sciences	21	48	69
	30.4 %	69.6 %	100 %
	42.9 %	35.8 %	37.7 %
Social sciences	19	50	69
	27.5 %	72.5 %	100 %
	38.8 %	37.3 %	37.7 %
Humanities	9	36	45
	20 %	80 %	100 %
	18.4 %	26.9 %	24.6 %
Total	49	134	183
	26.8 %	73.2 %	100 %
	100 %	100 %	100 %

D/K and N/A not included
 Black = count
 Blue = percentage of academic rank
 Green = percentage of total

The UB website: frequency of access and levels of satisfaction





Proposals on improvements

Proposals concerning areas of improvement were provided in response to the open question below. The answers were coded into the following categories.

In your view, what types of changes need to happen at the University to improve the current state of affairs?		
<i>Categories of changes</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
N/A	291	72.6
De-bureaucratisation, digitalisation and more efficient procedures	44	11
Resources for research, access to publications and software	26	6.5
Investment in infrastructures and equipment	22	5.5
Career training and performance criteria	20	5
Improving the human resources in administration	18	4.5
Improving communication	14	3.5
Salaries, bonuses, and perks	13	3.2
Changes or improvements in administrative management	13	3.2
Changing the representation or financing of faculties	11	2.7
Collegiality / collaboration / networking	9	2.2
Resources for travels abroad or inside the country	7	1.7
Information and mentoring on research opportunities	6	1.5
Relations with external environment (outreach, market)	5	1.2
Internationalisation (human resources, programs, research)	4	1
Lowering administrative and teaching duties	4	1
Changing the current [i.e., per capita] higher education funding system	4	1
Better representation of STEM faculties in university decision-making	3	0.7
Lowering the number of students per teaching staff	2	0.5
Additional resources for events	1	0.2