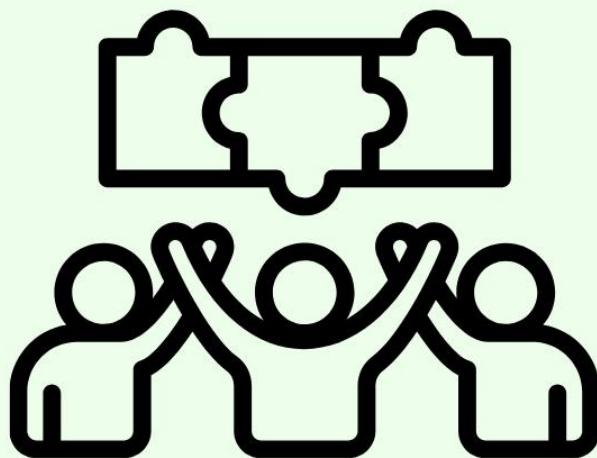




# **Verification of the Implementation of Additional Solutions for the Protection of Doctoral Candidates' Mental Health by Doctoral Candidate Self- Governments**

**Research Report**





**Survey preparation:** Adam Kamiński, MSc, Eng.

**Survey implementation:** Oliwia Frankiewicz, MSc, Eng.

**Data analysis:** Izabela Walendzik, MSc, Eng.

**Preparation of preliminary version of the report:** Wiktoria Weichbrodt, MSc, Eng.

**Proofreading and final version of the report:** Wiktoria Kanciak, MSc, Eng.

**Substantive consultations:** Rafał Muda, PhD

**Substantive supervision and coordination:** Wojciech Milczarski, MA; Monika Wilanowska, MA

**Translation into English:** Wojciech Milczarski, MA

**Graphic design:** Martyna Nowicka, MSc, Eng.

The research and report were implemented as part of the project "*PhD Well - Integrated Actions for the Mental Well-being and Development of the Doctoral Candidate Community*" - a task financed from the funds of the Minister of Science and Higher Education.

## Executive Summary

From August 4 to 27, 2025, the Polish National Association of Doctoral Candidates conducted a nationwide survey concerning the verification of the application of additional solutions by doctoral candidate self-governments in the area of mental health protection. The study involved 50 doctoral candidate self-governments representing diverse types of institutions in Poland, which provides a broad comparative perspective encompassing both large and small academic centers with different educational profiles.

The research results reveal that the topic of doctoral candidates' mental health is treated with moderate interest by self-governments, with most of them assessing this subject as medium or highly prioritized. At the same time, only a small portion of self-governments directly initiated solutions in this area, and most often higher education institutions and research institutes undertook actions independently or with limited participation from the doctoral candidate community representation.

The scale of independent actions by self-governments remains limited. The most frequently implemented initiatives are awareness campaigns, workshops conducted by doctoral candidates, support groups, and peer support, although their frequency is usually sporadic. Doctoral candidate mentoring systems and fundraising for psychological help were conducted extremely rarely or were not independently implemented at all. The vast majority of self-governments do not conduct regular research on doctoral candidates' needs in the area of mental health, and only 14 out of 50 surveyed self-governments declare having financial resources for activities in this area.

The main barriers in implementing activities for doctoral candidates' mental health include primarily the lack of interest from doctoral candidates themselves (60% of indications), lack of appropriate personnel, and shortage of financial resources. Despite these difficulties, most self-governments (33 out of 50) express the need to receive substantive or training support, and 29 self-governments declare full commitment to creating a nationwide cooperation network in this area.

The study also revealed significant deficits in the accessibility of information about forms of support. Only 32% of self-governments indicated the existence of a central place where doctoral candidates can find complete information about available forms of psychological help. The most effective forms of support, according to respondents, turned out to be access to individual psychological consultations, integration meetings, and crisis interventions.

This study provides valuable data for formulating recommendations regarding the strengthening of the role of doctoral candidate self-governments in the mental health protection system and identifies areas requiring urgent intervention, including the need for better communication of available support possibilities, increased financial resources, and building self-governments' competencies in recognizing and responding to doctoral candidates' needs.

# Introduction



The Polish National Association of Doctoral Candidates, implementing actions for equal treatment and the well-being of the academic community, regularly conducts research and project initiatives supporting doctoral candidates in various areas of functioning. One of the key issues that has gained particular importance in recent years is mental health protection in the doctoral candidate environment.

In response to the indicated need, from August 4 to 27, 2025, a survey entitled "*Verification of the Implementation of Additional Solutions for the Protection of Doctoral Candidates' Mental Health by Doctoral Candidate Self-Governments*" was conducted, implemented as part of the project "*PhD Well - Integrated Actions for the Mental Well-being and Development of the Doctoral Candidate Community*".

The aim of the study was to identify initiatives undertaken by doctoral candidate self-governments to support mental health. Particular emphasis was placed on recognizing innovative solutions developed bottom-up by the doctoral candidate community and on indicating good practices that can be adapted in other academic centers.

To ensure wide accessibility and include the perspective of both Polish and foreign doctoral candidates, the questionnaire was prepared in two languages - Polish and English. This also made it possible to examine whether doctoral candidates from different backgrounds face different problems in terms of support and equal treatment.

In the following part of the report, the most important conclusions from the analysis of the conducted research are presented, which may inspire the implementation of systemic solutions and local actions to improve the mental well-being of doctoral candidates.



# I. Characteristics of the Research Group



## Institutional Structure of Surveyed Entities

In the survey entitled "*Verification of the Implementation of Additional Solutions for the Protection of Doctoral Candidates' Mental Health by Doctoral Candidate Self-Governments*", 50 doctoral candidate self-governments representing diverse entities conducting doctoral education in Poland participated. Universities were most numerously represented, constituting 52% of all entities covered by the study. The next group consisted of technical universities constituting 26% of the surveyed sample, while institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences (12%) and arts and physical education universities (10%) had a smaller share. Such diversity ensures a broad perspective, allowing comparison of the functioning conditions of doctoral candidate self-governments in large and small academic centers and in units with different educational and scientific activity profiles.

## Size of the Doctoral Candidate Community

In terms of the number of doctoral candidates, the surveyed entities showed significant diversity. The smallest units, numbering fewer than 50 doctoral candidates, constituted 18% of the sample, which corresponded to 9 entities and mainly included research institutes and arts universities. The largest group consisted of medium-sized institutions with a population of 50-199 doctoral candidates, constituting 42% of all responses, i.e., 21 entities. The next category consisted of entities numbering from 200 to 499 doctoral candidates, which accounted for 26% of the surveyed sample, translating to 13 units. Large centers educating 500-999 doctoral candidates were represented by 10% of respondents, i.e., 5 entities. Meanwhile, only two entities, constituting 4% of the sample, exceeded the number of one thousand doctoral candidates.

The presented data indicate significant diversification in the scale of operation of doctoral schools in Poland, from very small units to the largest centers gathering over a thousand doctoral candidates. This diversification is reflected in the scale and nature of doctoral candidate self-government activities.

## Structure and Activity of Doctoral Candidate Self-Governments

In the largest higher education institutions, self-governments bring together several dozen actively operating members, which enables conducting broadly conceived initiatives, such as organizing training sessions, conferences, or integration projects. In medium and smaller units, self-government activity is usually based on several or a dozen people, while in the smallest entities conducting doctoral education, this activity is often limited to single individuals.

Analysis of the proportion of the number of doctoral candidates to the number of active self-government members indicates that engagement in self-government activity usually encompasses from 2 to 8% of the doctoral candidate community. In large centers, the absolute number of active doctoral candidates is greater, which favors task specialization and undertaking initiatives on a broader scale. In turn, in smaller units, self-governments rely on the activity of a small group of leaders, which creates a risk of excessive concentration of responsibilities and limited representativeness of the community.

The presented data show diverse organizational conditions and the scale of operation of doctoral candidate self-governments, which constitute an important interpretative background for the results of the conducted survey.

## II. Role and Engagement of Doctoral Candidate Self-Governments



## Prioritization of Mental Health

Most respondents assessed that the topic of doctoral candidates' mental health is treated as medium or highly prioritized in their self-government, with a predominance of indications for levels 3 and 4 on a five-point scale. A relatively large group also chose the highest priority, i.e., level 5. Only a few considered this topic to be of little importance, choosing levels 1 or 2. These results indicate growing awareness of the importance of mental health in the doctoral candidate environment, although this does not always translate into concrete actions.

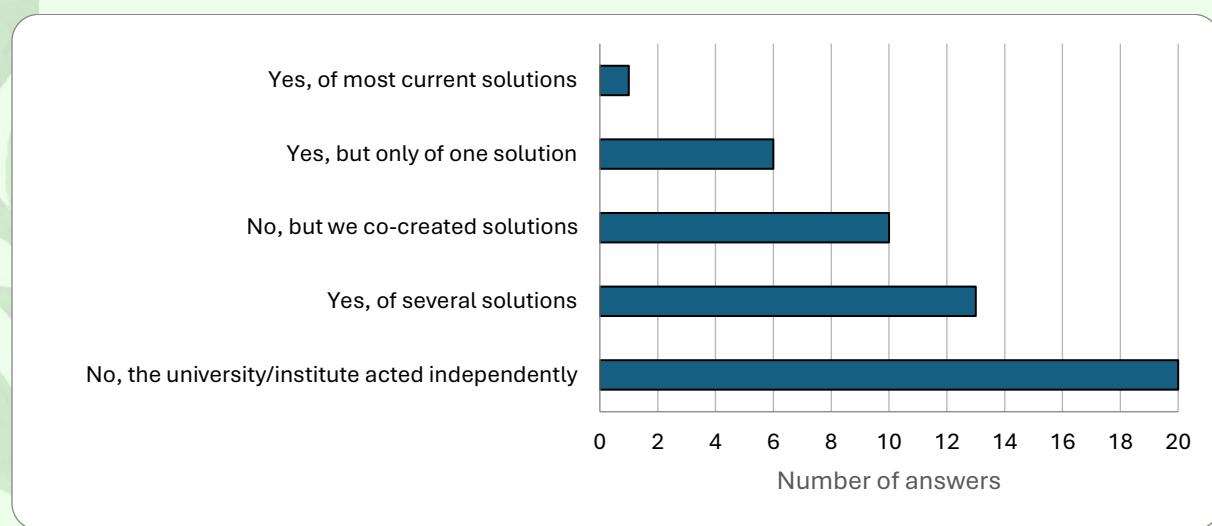
## Doctoral Candidates' Requests for Help

In the last 12 months, most doctoral candidate self-governments report not receiving any requests for help in matters related to mental health, which is reflected in the answer "0". A significant number of responses concern the range "1-5 people", which indicates that in some self-governments, individual doctoral candidates sought support. Responses concerning higher numerical ranges, such as "6-15 people", "16-30 people", or "over 30 people", appeared sporadically. Several responses indicate that it is difficult to estimate the number of doctoral candidates seeking help, while there is visible demand for doctoral candidate self-government activity in this area.

## Self-Government Initiatives

Moving on to assessing self-governments' engagement in initiating solutions, most doctoral candidate self-governments were not initiators of solutions concerning mental health. Responses indicating that the university or institute undertook actions independently predominate. Part of the self-governments co-created solutions, and a dozen or so indicate participation in the implementation of several such initiatives. Very few respondents declare that their self-government was the initiator of most current solutions, which clearly shows deficiencies in self-governments' engagement in this sphere.

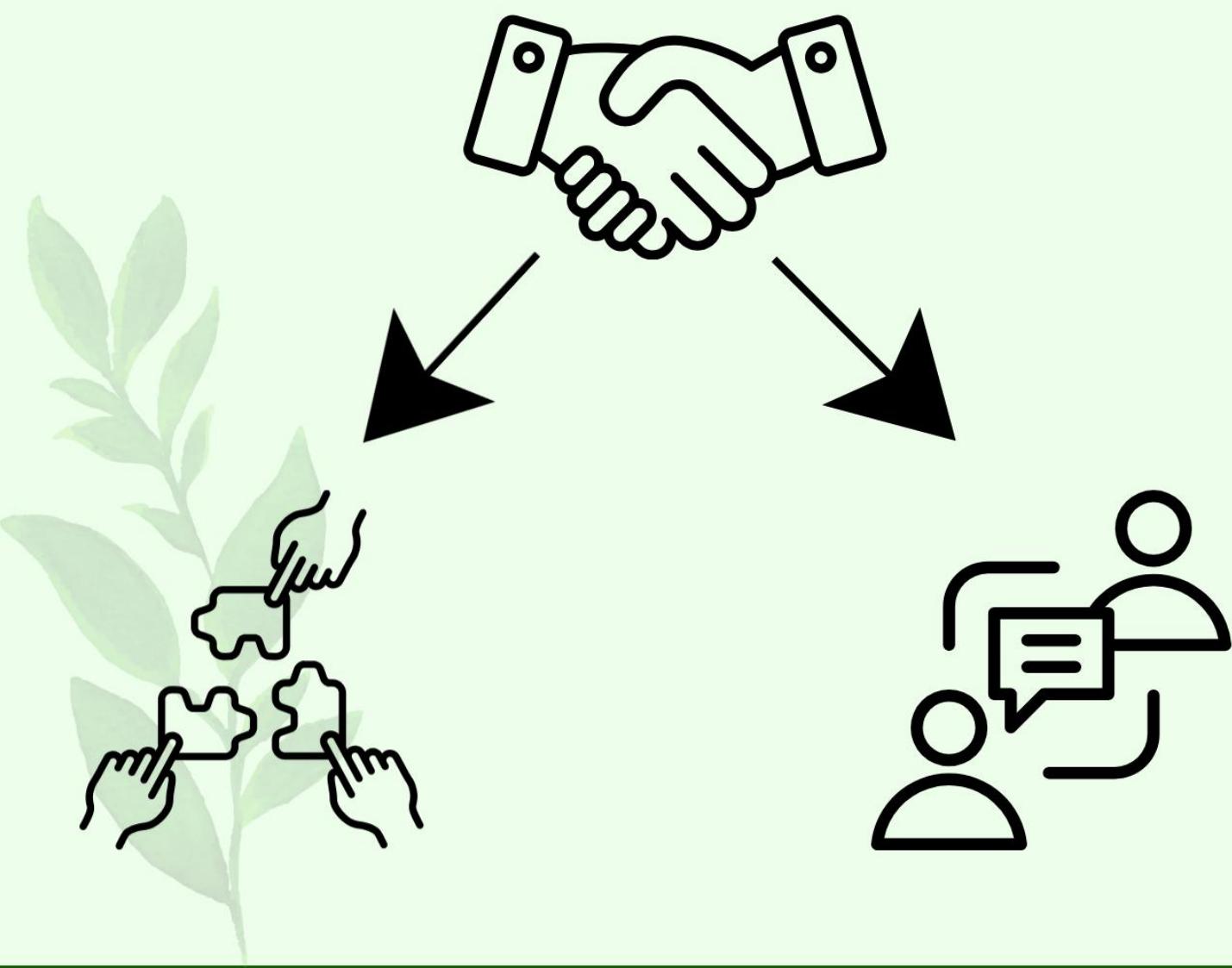
**Figure II.1. Self-government as an initiator of solutions in the area of mental health at the university/research institute.**



Survey results also indicate that most often psychological support for doctoral candidates is organized by the university or institute independently, without the participation of the doctoral candidate self-government. A considerable group of self-governments only reports comments and needs or has limited influence on actions supporting mental health. Only a few self-governments actually co-create solutions in this area, and individual indications concern independent actions by self-governments or complete lack of activity in this area.

## Cooperation with Universities and Institutes

Analysis of cooperation between doctoral candidate self-governments and universities or research institutes in the area of psychological support shows a diverse picture. Part of the self-governments declare active co-creation of solutions together with entities responsible for doctoral education, which indicates a partnership approach to mental health issues. Nevertheless, a significant number of respondents indicate that the role of self-governments is primarily consultative, limited to reporting comments and needs. Moreover, part of the self-governments emphasizes limited influence on actions undertaken by universities or institutes in this area. In the analyzed statements, signals also appeared that psychological support initiatives are implemented independently by universities or institutes, without self-government participation, and in individual cases self-governments undertake actions independently or there are no actions in this area at all.



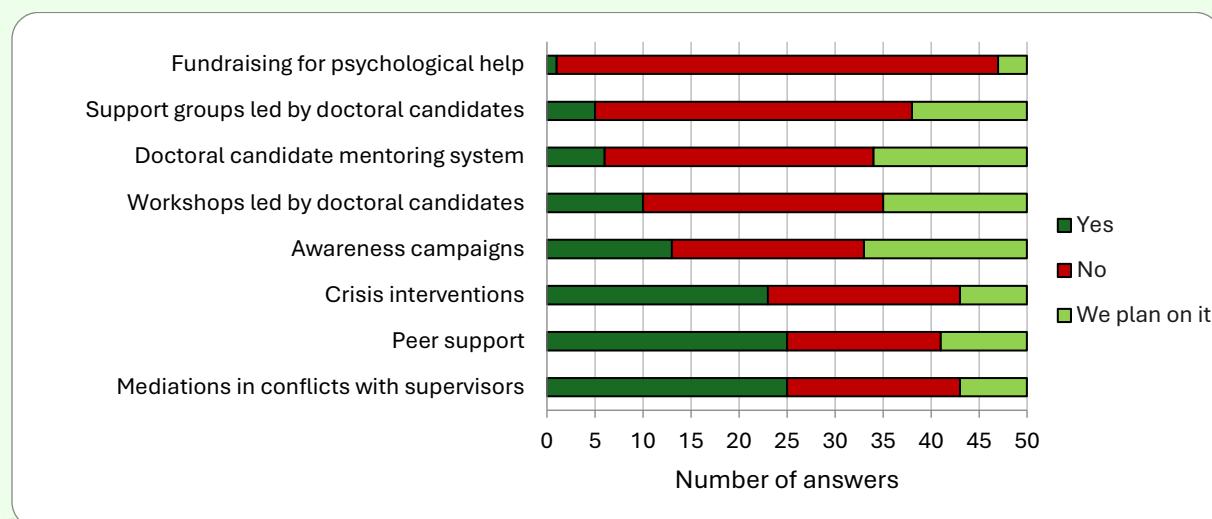
# III. Bottom-up Actions of Doctoral Candidate Self- Governments



## Independent Self-Government Initiatives

Analysis of actions independently implemented by doctoral candidate self-governments indicates that the most frequently undertaken initiatives are awareness campaigns, workshops conducted by doctoral candidates, support groups, and peer support. Nevertheless, their reach and scale remain limited - most often only individual implementations of these undertakings in the last year were recorded. Fundraising for psychological help and the doctoral candidate mentoring system were conducted extremely rarely or were not implemented independently by self-governments at all. It is worth noting that many of these actions were not undertaken at all or had a sporadic character, which indicates relatively little engagement of self-governments in independently supporting doctoral candidates' mental health.

**Figure III.1. Actions independently undertaken by doctoral candidate self-governments in the area of doctoral candidates' mental health.**



## Number of Beneficiaries and Frequency of Actions

Most doctoral candidate self-governments did not implement the forms of support indicated in the survey in the last year, hence the most frequent answer is "We do not conduct such actions" for each type of support. For existing initiatives, such as mediations, crisis interventions, awareness campaigns, workshops, or peer support, the largest number of responses concerned the ranges "0" and "1-5 people", which shows that very few doctoral candidates benefited from help. Cases of use by larger groups, numbering 6 or more people, are sporadic, and for some actions the answer "Difficult to estimate" appears, which may indicate a lack of systematic registration of the number of supported doctoral candidates.

For activities that were implemented, the most reports concern individual cases, where the action was carried out once or twice, or three to five times. Organization of support on a larger scale, i.e., six or more times, occurred very rarely, and in many cases the answer "Difficult to say" also appears.

## Communication and Promotion of Actions

The most common form of informing about independent actions for mental health was email communication and social media. Posters and announcements on the university or institute website appeared less frequently, similarly, to direct invitations. Mediations and responding in crisis situations were actions that were responded to on an ongoing basis, often in an ad hoc mode.

## Examples of Innovative Solutions

Doctoral candidate self-governments also organized various activities going beyond standard forms of help as part of supporting doctoral candidates' mental health. Among them can be mentioned integration meetings and events aimed at building community and counteracting social isolation. The project *PhD Well - Integrated Actions for the Mental Well-being and Development of the Doctoral Candidate Community* was also promoted, which offers comprehensive support for the doctoral candidate community. Meetings with first-year doctoral school students were organized, during which information was provided about free psychological help available at a given entity and information about support possibilities and ways to seek help in crises was provided. A particularly interesting initiative was the Doctoral Candidate Mental Health Day, including theoretical lectures and practical workshops.

Solutions developed by doctoral candidate self-governments include several categories of actions. In the area of creating documents and codes, tools such as the Doctoral Candidate Code of Ethics, Guide to good practices in the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship, and Guides to support from doctoral candidates for doctoral candidates in difficult and crisis situations were created. An anonymous survey for evaluating cooperation between a doctoral candidate and supervisor(s) with the possibility of individual case review was also introduced.

In the area of support functions and bodies, some self-governments appointed a Self-Government Plenipotentiary for Equality and Accessibility, Ombudsman for Doctoral Candidate Rights, and a Team for Doctoral Candidate Rights and Obligations with the participation of doctoral candidates, psychologists, and a mediator. Support groups for doctoral candidates were also organized, as well as training related to working with neurodivergent people. Workshops on responding to changes and emotions were implemented, and training for doctoral candidates educating neurodivergent people was planned. Campaigns about mental health on social media and stress management workshops in cooperation with specialists were conducted. Open discussion forums online and offline were also created to express opinions and develop positions.

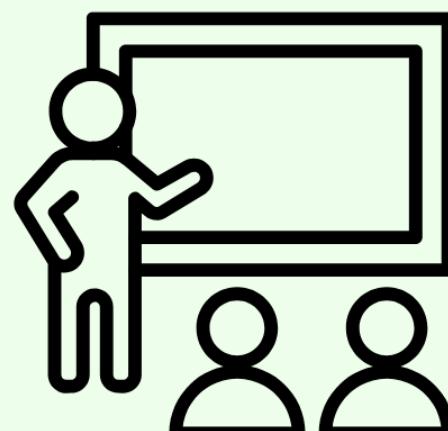
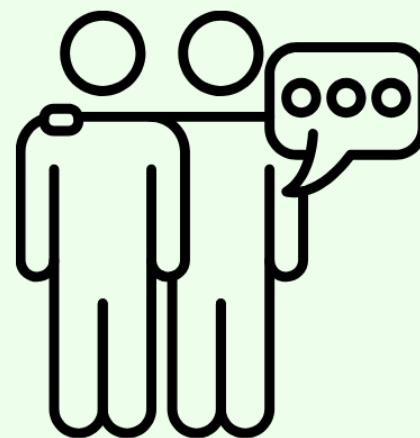
In the area of practical support and social actions, financial support was offered to doctoral candidates in transitional difficult socio-living situations. Strong cooperation with Accessibility Leaders was developed and people from the self-government were designated to supervise psychological help actions. The project *PhD Well - Integrated Actions for the Mental Well-being and Development of the Doctoral Candidate Community* was promoted and utilized, offering consultations, workshops, and training. Psychological consultations available at the university were provided and cyclical doctoral candidate well-being surveys were conducted. Annual meetings of first-year doctoral candidates with information about free psychological help were organized. "Silent intervention" was also introduced as a form of support in crises based on personal contact and strategies for help in self-government were established.

## Needs Research and Financial Resources

Research and surveys concerning doctoral candidates' needs in the area of mental health are conducted regularly by only a small part of self-governments, which was indicated in seven responses. The vast majority, 32 responses, declare that they do not conduct such research but plan it in the future. Meanwhile, 10 self-governments do not implement, or plan needs research in this area at all.

Only 14 self-governments declare having financial resources for implementing actions related to doctoral candidates' mental health. The remaining 35 indicate that they do not have such funds, which constitutes a barrier to actively supporting doctoral candidates in this area.

The collected data indicate that the topic of doctoral candidates' mental health is treated with moderate interest. Self-governments increasingly recognize the need for actions and conducting research, although real support is still limited. Lack of financing and lack of regular research on local community needs hinders systematic planning and implementation of effective solutions. Nevertheless, innovative initiatives appear, such as awareness campaigns, support groups, workshops, or developed codes and procedures. In many cases, lack of actions or difficulties in cooperation with universities are also visible, which indicates the necessity of further development and coordination of actions for doctoral candidates' mental health.



# IV. Assessment of the Effectiveness of Existing Solutions



## Practical Actions and Support Possibilities

Respondents assessed practical actions and support possibilities in the area of mental health available to doctoral candidates at their university or institute. The results indicate that although various forms of support are available, their effectiveness and recognition among doctoral candidates remain insufficient.

- On a five-point evaluation scale, where 1 means definitely poor and 5 means very good, the average rating for accessibility of information about forms of support was 3.44, which indicates a medium level with a tendency toward good. The ease of using available forms of help was rated on average at 3.36, which also falls in the medium rating range. The effectiveness of bottom-up self-government initiatives was rated at 3.25, with as many as 14 people indicating complete lack of such actions for this indicator. The matching of offered support to real needs of doctoral candidates received an average rating of 3.11, which may suggest significant discrepancies between offered help and actual needs of the doctoral candidate community. Knowledge of available forms of support among doctoral candidates was rated lowest, where the average was only 2.81, which indicates serious deficits in communication and promotion of available solutions.

**Table IV.1. Average rating of practical actions and support possibilities in the area of doctoral candidates' mental health.**

	Average rating
Accessibility of information about forms of support	3.44
Ease of using available forms of help	3.36
Effectiveness of bottom-up self-government initiatives	3.25
Matching of offered support to real needs of doctoral candidates	3.11
Knowledge of available forms of support among doctoral candidates	2.81

The obtained research results suggest the need for better communication of available possibilities, matching the offer to real needs of doctoral candidates, and strengthening bottom-up actions within self-governments.

## Most Effective Forms of Support

As part of the study, self-governments were asked to indicate three forms of support operating at their university or research institute that they consider most effective. The greatest effectiveness was enjoyed by access to individual psychological consultations, integration meetings, and crisis interventions. Among additional proposals, the activity of Accessibility Leaders and financial support were mentioned, among others.



**Figure IV.2. Most effective forms of support in the area of doctoral candidates' mental health.**



### **Actions Best Received by Doctoral Candidates**

In response to the question concerning actions best received by doctoral candidates, most respondents indicated integration meetings, which regularly appeared as the most willingly accepted initiatives conducive to establishing contacts and exchanging experiences.

Support in crisis situations and mediations also received high ratings, both in the context of conflicts with supervisors and other academic problems. Self-governments emphasized that the possibility of quick contact and intervention is particularly valued by doctoral candidates.

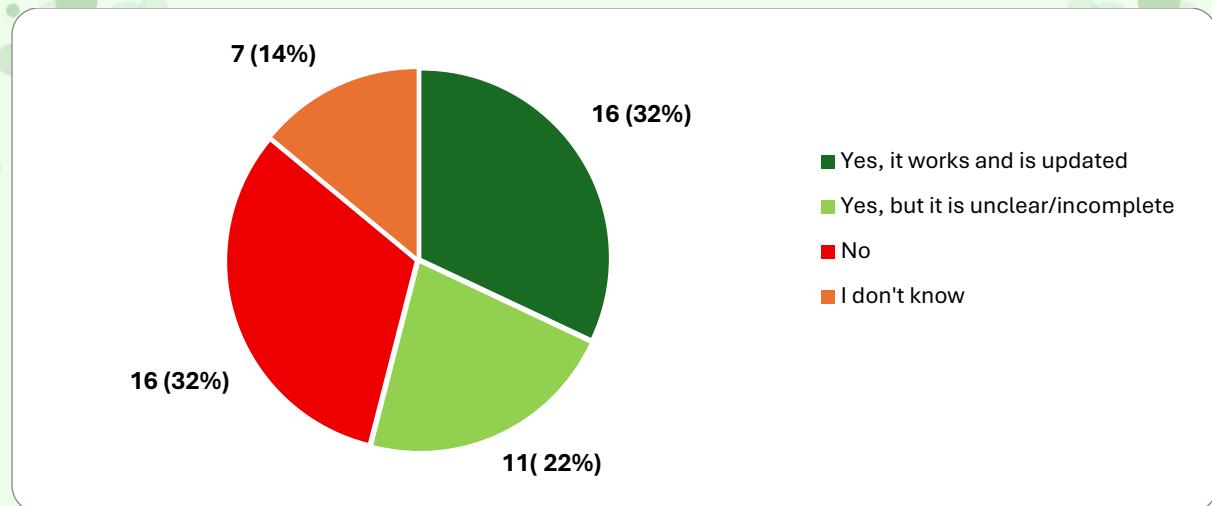
Organized workshops, support groups, and direct contact with other doctoral candidates also enjoyed recognition, creating space for mutual support and exchange of experiences. Informing about available forms of help also played an important role, implemented through mailing, information meetings, and actions raising awareness about psychological consultations and peer support.

It is worth noting that in 22 cases, self-governments reported lack of conducted actions, and part of the responses indicated diversification of needs depending on the year or group of doctoral candidates, which makes unambiguous assessment difficult.

### **Availability of a Central Information Source**

Analysis of the availability of a central information source on forms of support reveals significant deficits in this area. Only 16 self-governments, which constitutes 32% of the surveyed group, indicated the existence of a functioning and regularly updated website or platform where doctoral candidates can obtain complete information about available forms of support. In the next question, only 3 self-governments declared active engagement in creating or reviewing such an information source.

**Figure IV.3. Availability of a central information source on forms of support for doctoral candidates.**



Self-governments indicated the following website addresses containing information about available forms of support for doctoral candidates:

- <https://pwr.edu.pl/studenci/pomoc-psychologiczna-i-psychoterapeutyczna>
- <https://doktoranci.uni.wroc.pl/>
- <https://doktoranci.uwr.edu.pl/aktualnosci>
- <https://cwn.uph.edu.pl/psycholog>
- <https://up.lublin.pl/blog/bezplatne-porady-i-pomoc-psychologiczna/>
- <https://put.poznan.pl/dzial-rownosci>
- <https://put.poznan.pl/node/59129>
- <https://cwpt.uni.opole.pl>
- <https://pb.edu.pl/pomoc-psychologiczna/>
- <https://sggw.edu.pl/studenci/wsparcie-dla-studentow/pomoc-psychologiczna/>
- <https://bon.uksw.edu.pl/pl/>
- <https://bon.zut.edu.pl/strona-glowna/wsparcie-psychologiczne.html>
- <https://cwr.up.poznan.pl/>
- <https://pg.edu.pl/osoby-z-niepełnosprawnościami/pomoc-psychologiczna>
- <https://bezbarier.gumed.edu.pl/83140.html>
- [https://wsparcie.umk.pl/pages/main\\_page/](https://wsparcie.umk.pl/pages/main_page/)
- [https://www.pum.edu.pl/studenci/wsparcie/biuro\\_ds\\_osob\\_niepełnosprawnych/wsparcie\\_psychologiczne/](https://www.pum.edu.pl/studenci/wsparcie/biuro_ds_osob_niepełnosprawnych/wsparcie_psychologiczne/)
- [https://www.pum.edu.pl/po\\_studiach/szkola\\_doktorska/parlament\\_doktorantow\\_pum/](https://www.pum.edu.pl/po_studiach/szkola_doktorska/parlament_doktorantow_pum/)
- <https://awf.poznan.pl/wsparcie-psychologiczne-dla-studentow-doktorantow-i-pracownikow-awf/>
- <https://port.ump.edu.pl/>
- <https://centrumwsparcia.ug.edu.pl/o-nas/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/CentrumWsparciaPsychologicznegoPO/>
- <https://www.cwm.pw.edu.pl/Studenci-miedzynarodowi/Wsparcie-psychologiczne>
- <https://sowa.uj.edu.pl/dla-pracownikow-i-doktorantow>
- <https://www.umcs.pl/pl/akademickie-centrum-wsparcia,7589.htm>

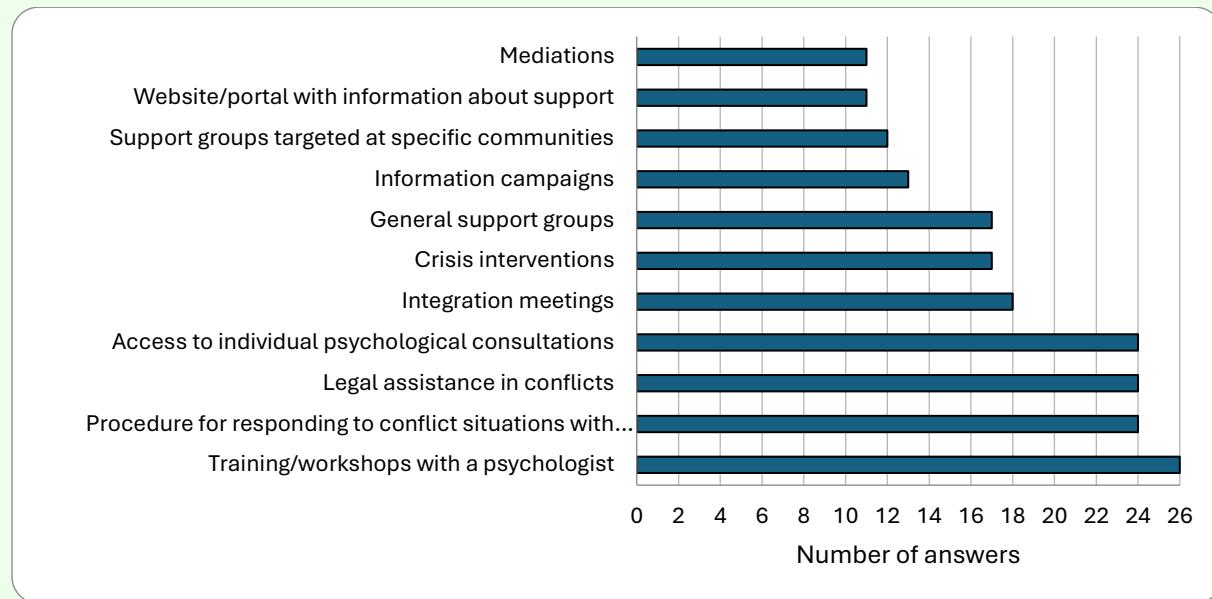
## V. Gaps and Needs



## Areas Requiring Solutions

Analysis of areas where solutions are most lacking shows clear prioritization of self-governments' needs. Most often, lack of training and workshops with a psychologist was indicated, which was mentioned in 52% of responses. In further places were procedures for responding to conflicts with supervisors, access to individual psychological consultations, and legal assistance. Other categories, although important, received significantly fewer indications.

**Figure V.1. Respondents' responses to the question "In which areas are solutions most lacking?".**

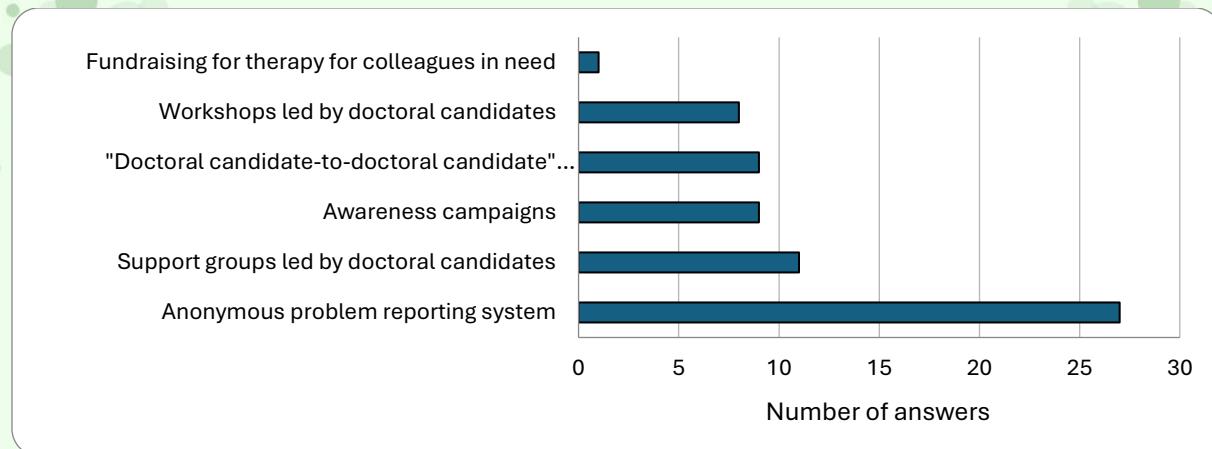


Less numerously, but still significantly, the need to organize integration meetings, crisis interventions, information campaigns, support groups dedicated to specific communities, as well as mediations and creating portals containing information about available forms of support was indicated.

## Planned Initiatives Encountering Obstacles

The study also showed what bottom-up initiatives self-governments would like to launch but encounter various kinds of obstacles. The most frequently mentioned solution was an anonymous problem reporting system, indicated by over 50% of respondents. The fundraising for therapy for colleagues in need received one response.

**Figure V.2. Respondents' answers to the question "What bottom-up initiatives would you like to launch but encounter obstacles?".**

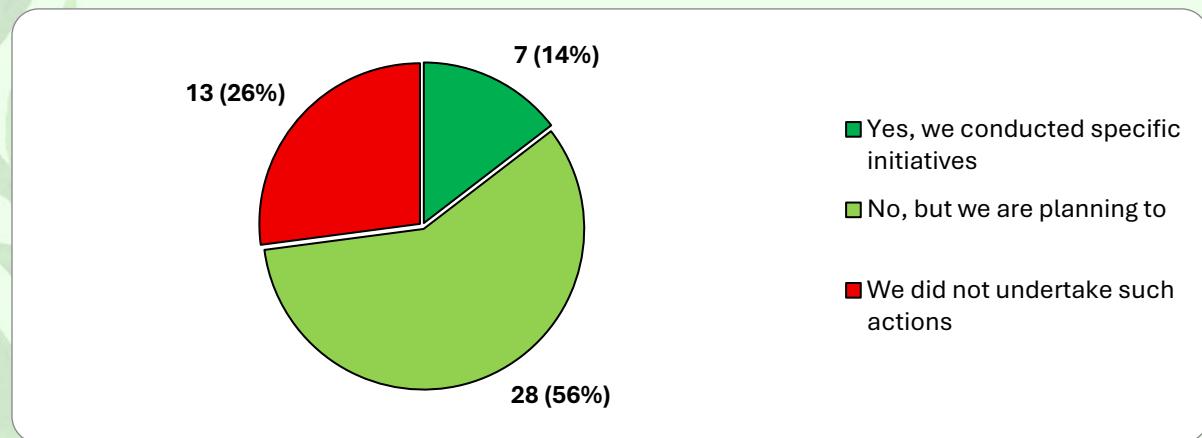


In addition to the indicated response options, two open responses were obtained. One of them indicated that the only problem encountered in actions is lack of reaction from the doctoral candidate community to proposed initiatives, nevertheless self-government bodies are working on developing further initiatives and tools. The second response referred to the mediation system between supervisor and doctoral candidate and to problems related to limited time resources of doctoral candidates actively engaged in doctoral candidate self-government activities.

### Remedial Actions Undertaken

Analysis of actions undertaken to fill gaps shows that less than half of self-governments indicated that they did not undertake such actions, although at the same time expressed a desire to change this state of affairs. Out of 7 affirmative responses, only 5 self-governments completed the text field, indicating specific examples.

**Figure V.3. Respondents' answers to the question "Have you undertaken actions to fill gaps?".**



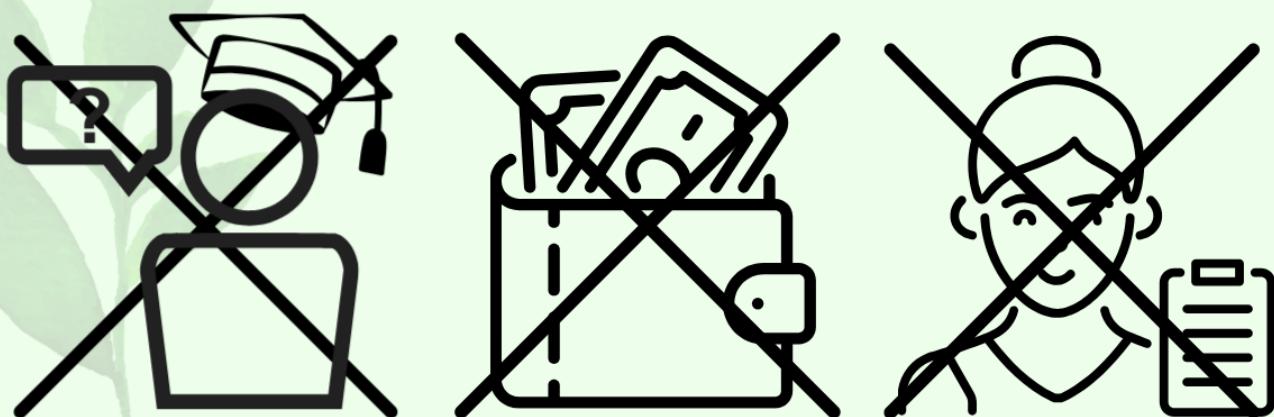
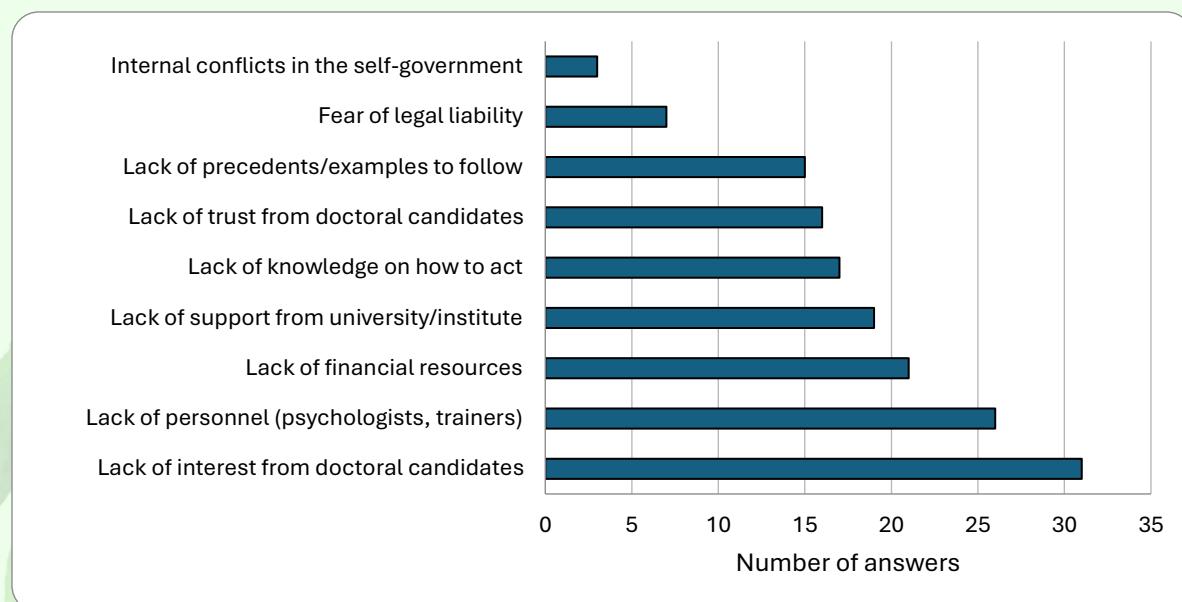
The obtained responses that were provided in text fields included, among others, ensuring psychologist response within 24 hours, unifying the psychologist appointment system with the student system with an increased number of slots for doctoral candidates, meetings at first classes with Accessibility Leaders, creating a document concerning conflict resolution on the supervisor-doctoral candidate line, and creating a new document of good practices in supervisor-doctoral candidate contacts. Currently, one of the self-governments is preparing to open a support group and working on a unified website informing about all possibilities of obtaining help.

Other self-governments indicated conducting numerous conversations with the office for people with disabilities, consultations with the doctoral school director to introduce changes in report formats, where the doctoral candidate could anonymously write an opinion about the supervisor. One project was stopped by higher education institution authorities due to lack of funds but is to be implemented if sufficient financial resources are obtained. One of the self-governments conducted mediation with authorities about organizing psychological help for institute employees.

### Barriers in Implementing Actions

Analysis of barriers in implementing actions for doctoral candidates' mental health shows a comprehensive picture of difficulties that self-governments struggle with. Most often, lack of interest from doctoral candidates was indicated, which was mentioned in 60% of responses. In further places were lack of appropriate personnel and lack of financial resources. Additionally, 3 self-governments drew attention to the occurrence of internal conflicts, which hinder the implementation of planned actions.

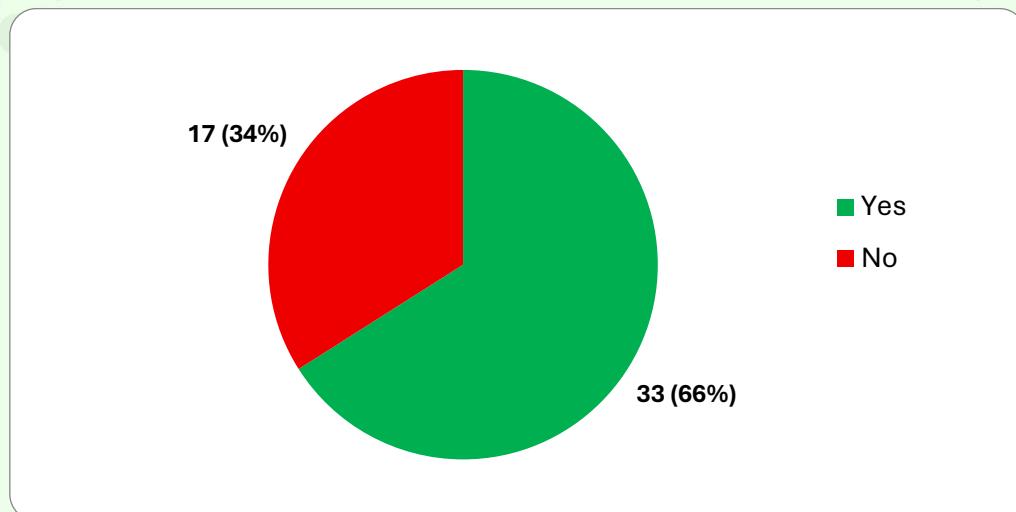
**Figure V.4: Most frequently mentioned barriers in conducting actions for doctoral candidates' mental health.**



## Support and Cooperation Needs

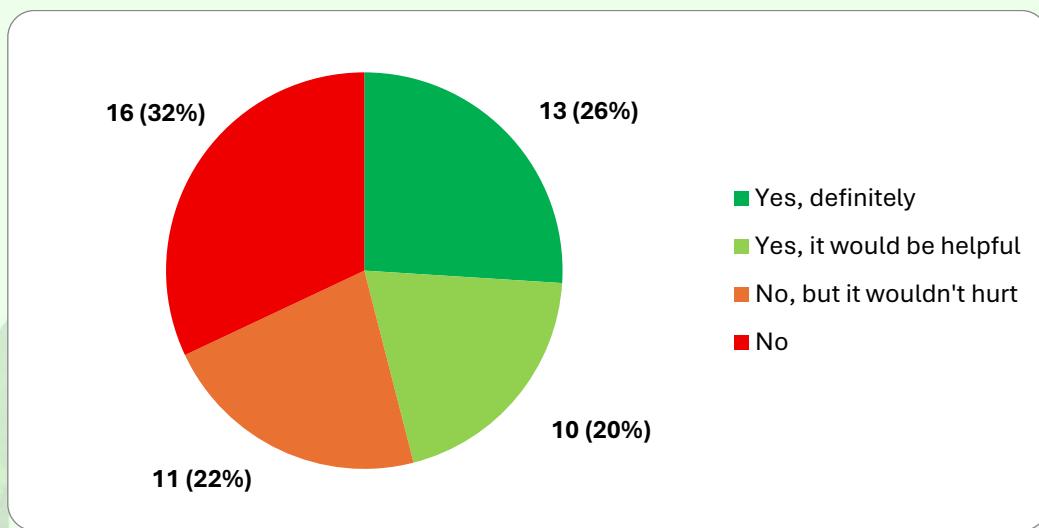
The vast majority of self-governments, 33 out of 50, declared a desire to receive substantive or training support in the area of developing psychological help.

**Figure V.5. Respondents' declarations concerning the need for substantive or training support in developing psychological care.**



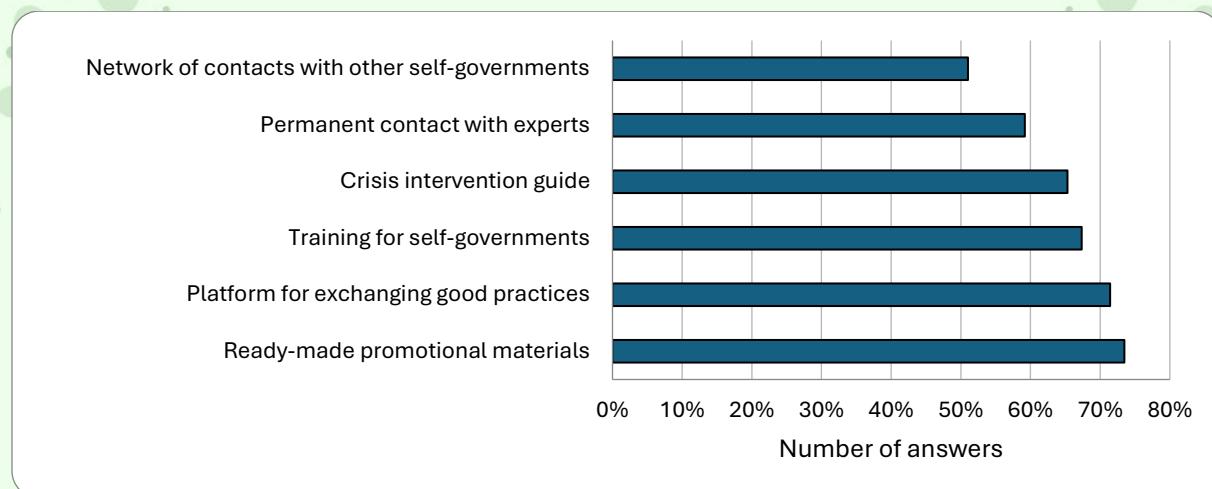
At the same time, more than half of respondents, i.e., 27 self-governments, declared lack of need to create a network of contacts with other self-governments operating in the area of mental health support. Simultaneously, it is worth emphasizing that 47% of self-governments indicated benefits resulting from expanding cooperation and contacts between self-governments.

**Figure V.6. Respondents' answers to the question "Do you need a network of contacts with other self-governments operating in this area?".**



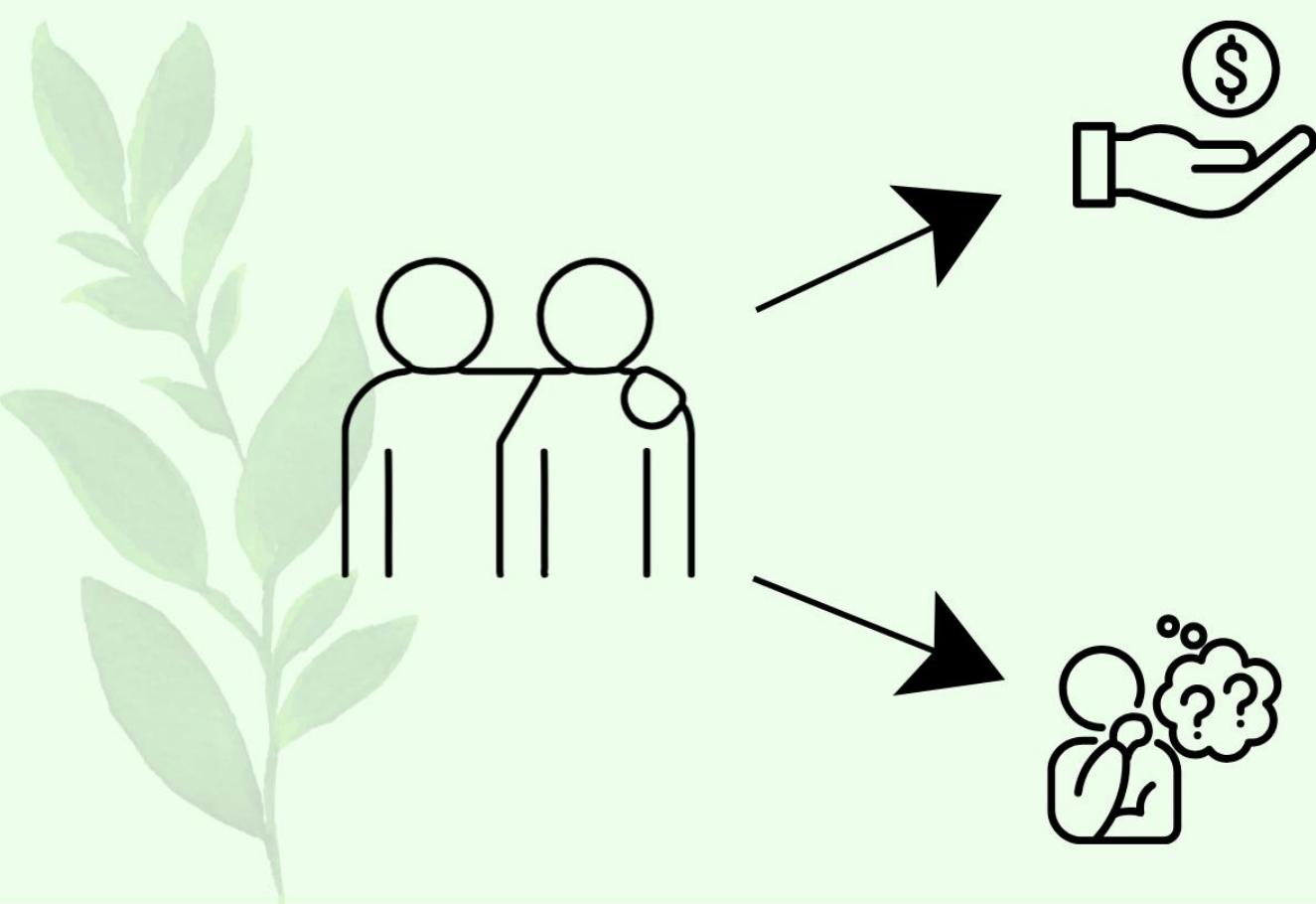
Analysis of forms of support at the nationwide level that respondents considered most useful shows great interest in all proposed solutions. None of the options received less than 50% of indications. The platform for exchanging good practices and ready-made promotional materials were rated highest. Other forms of support, such as training for self-governments, crisis intervention guide, permanent contact with experts, and a network of contacts with other self-governments, received similar, though slightly lower numbers of votes.

Figure V.7. Forms of support from the nationwide level that respondents considered most useful.

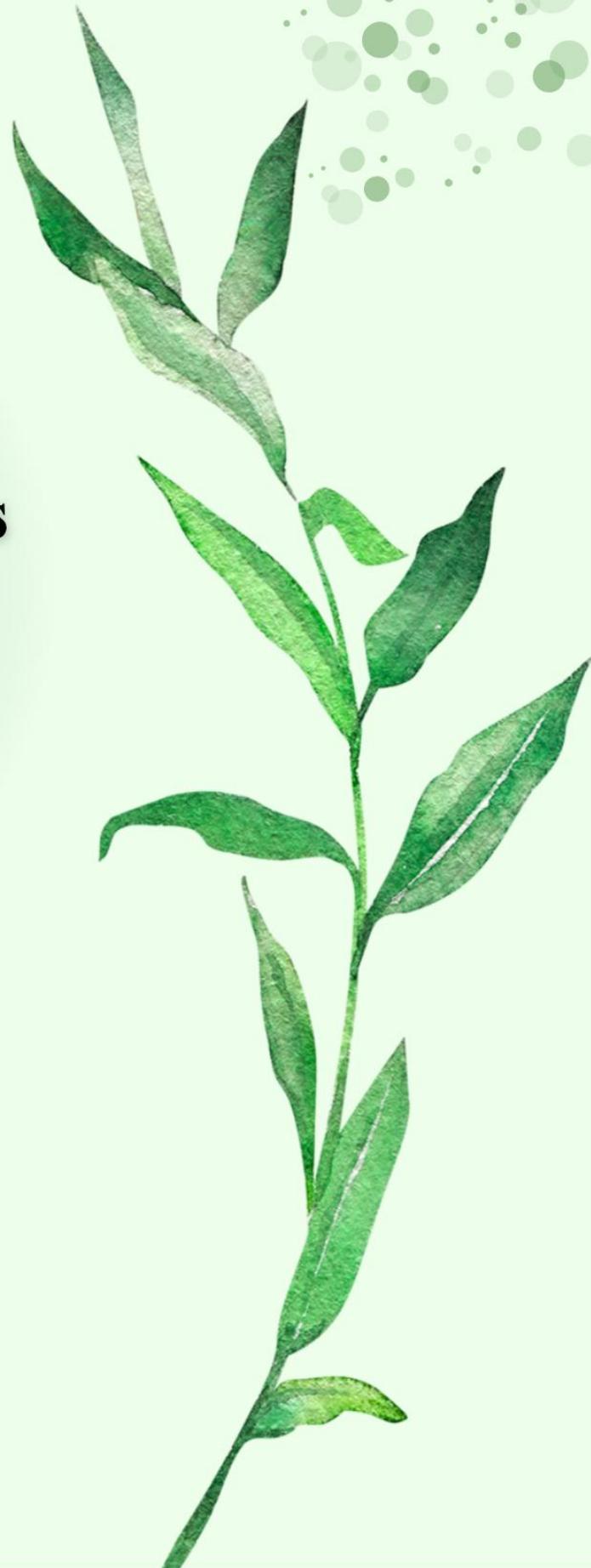


## Summary

Most self-governments declared interest in developing actions in the area of psychological support. The main barriers in this area remain lack of interest from doctoral candidates and limited financial resources. Additionally, the occurrence of internal conflicts in self-government structures was indicated relatively often. At the same time, self-governments express readiness to use support offered at the nationwide level.



# VI. Specific Practices and Cooperation



## Effective Self-Government Interventions

24 doctoral candidate self-governments responded to the open question concerning examples of effective interventions. Analysis of the obtained responses allowed three basic areas of actions to be distinguished.

The most frequently indicated form of support was mediation with supervisors, which included assistance in resolving disputes, conducting dialogue with doctoral school authorities, and participating in mediation meetings.

The second important area was directing doctoral candidates to specialists and providing psychological support, including contacting them with specialists and the office for people with disabilities. The third area concerned material assistance and support regulations.

Selected important examples, preserved in original wording but with anonymity maintained, include various situations. One of the self-governments indicated that if interventions took place, they were reported only to the chair of the doctoral candidate self-government council or doctoral school director, sometimes also to an employee of the doctoral school office. The chair and director cooperate in this area, however, developed procedures in such specific situations have not been constructed. These cases were considered individually, however doctoral candidates whom this concerned often refused mediation and resigned from education or did not want to involve university authorities, fearing that they would not be anonymous and that this situation would negatively affect them. In certain cases, it is also difficult to maintain this anonymity. Very often these are delicate situations, and it would be worthwhile to develop certain systemic actions of nationwide scope.

Another self-government indicated that thanks to adopting regulations for providing financial support to persons in transitional and difficult material-living situations, it was possible to support at least 3 people declaring finding themselves in a mental health crisis. Yet another self-government, together with the Local Agreement of Doctoral Candidates, organized Mental Health Days, which enjoyed great interest from doctoral candidates and allowed integration of the local community.

In another entity, a self-government member, most often the chair, is present during mediation meetings in doctoral candidate-supervisor or doctoral candidate-supervisor-doctoral school conflicts.

## Unusual and Creative Support Methods

10 self-governments responded to the question about unusual or creative support methods used by self-governments. The mentioned forms of support include, among others, mindfulness workshops and others supporting doctoral candidates' mental regeneration and building awareness in the form of practical workshops.

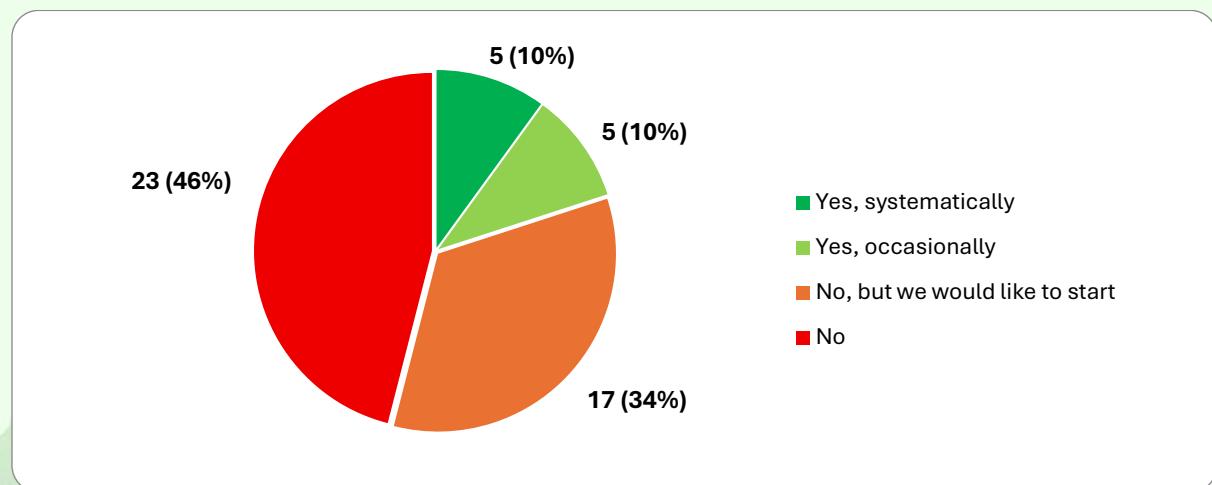
One of the self-governments indicated direct preliminary or emergency help from a person responsible for psychological help in the self-government and meetings with Accessibility Leaders and people from the self-government at mandatory classes. Due to the intimate character of one of the doctoral schools, the self-government undertakes direct contact actions with doctoral candidates, communicating their readiness to support and remaining at their disposal. During organizational meetings for individual years, doctoral candidate self-government representatives participate to provide current information and conduct an information campaign about available forms of support.

Unusual methods include, among others: using the institution of Local Ambassador for Doctoral Candidate Rights, organizing training focused on issues related to working with people belonging to broadly understood neurodiversity, creating an informal WhatsApp group serving for free exchange of memes and other content, accepting every report - regardless of its character - and seeking possible solutions in cooperation with the Doctoral School. Additionally, individual interventions by the Chair are also used and each case is considered separately, without applying one universal action path.

## Documentation and Evaluation

In response to the question concerning documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of conducted actions, most self-governments - as many as 80% - admitted that they do not conduct either documentation or evaluation of the effects of their initiatives. Part of them, however, declared a desire to start such actions in the future.

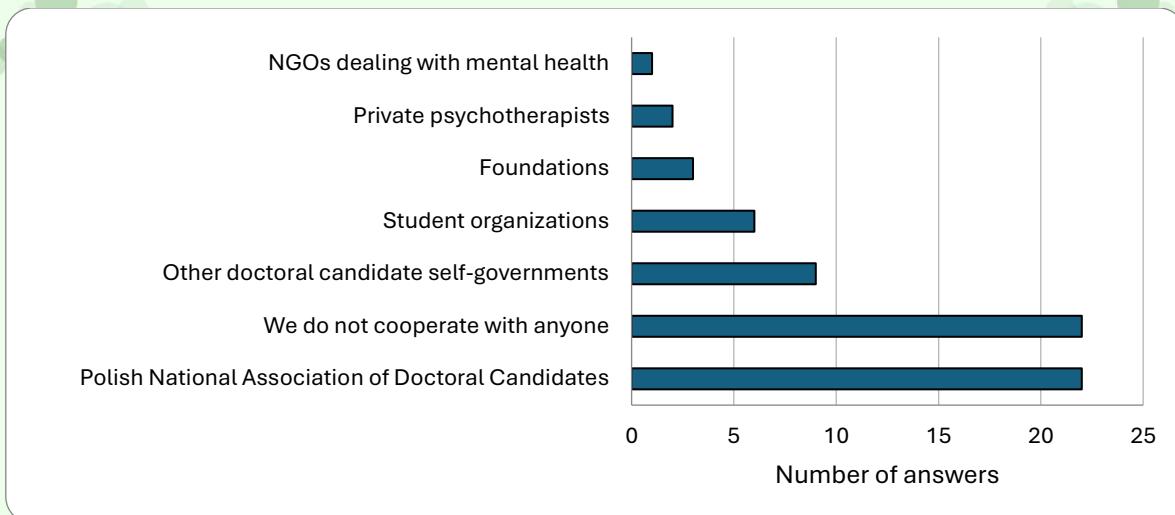
**Figure VI.1. Answer to the question: "Do you document/evaluate the effectiveness of your actions?"**



## Cooperation with External Entities

Analysis of self-governments' cooperation with external entities in the area of mental health indicates that the most frequently mentioned partners were the Polish National Association of Doctoral Candidates and other doctoral candidate self-governments. Among additional institutions, the office for people with disabilities appeared, among others.

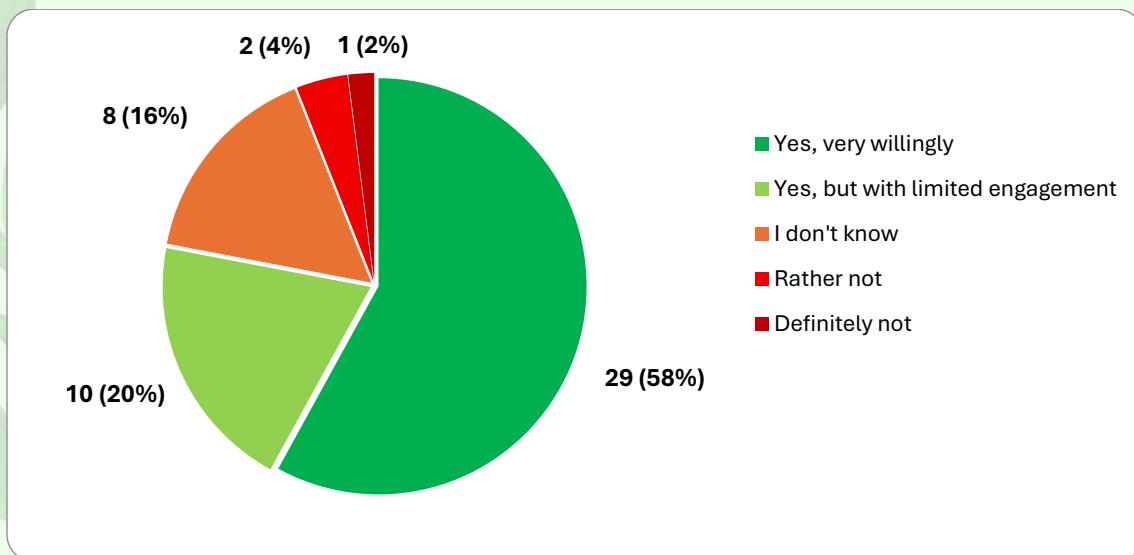
**Figure VI.2. Answer to the question: "With what entities outside the university/institute do you cooperate in the area of mental health?".**



### Nationwide Cooperation Network

Respondents were asked whether they would be interested in participating in a nationwide network of self-governments operating for doctoral candidates' mental health. The results indicate that most self-governments expressed such interest: 29 responses (58%) declare full engagement, and another 10 (20%) consider participation with limited engagement. In total, therefore, 78% of surveyed self-governments express a desire to participate in this type of initiative, which emphasizes the significant need for coordination of actions and exchange of good practices at the nationwide level.

**Figure VI.3. Answer to the question: "Would you like to be part of a nationwide network of self-governments operating for doctoral candidates' mental health?".**



## VII. Additional Information



In the survey, the possibility of providing additional comments, suggestions, and comments in the form of an open question was provided. The aim of this part was to capture aspects not included in the main part of the questionnaire, but important from the perspective of respondents. 10 doctoral candidate self-governments took advantage of this possibility. Although the number of statements was limited, they provide valuable information supplementing the picture of self-governments' functioning in the area of mental health and indicate areas requiring further reflection.

One of the most frequently raised threads was the lack of formal documents and procedures supporting self-governments' actions. Respondents emphasized that in many units, self-governments' activity is limited to an informational function, not a systemic approach to mental health issues. Lack of formalized mechanisms hinders consistency of actions and may reduce their effectiveness.

Another group of responses concerned the role of institutions conducting doctoral education. It was indicated that responsibility for doctoral candidates' mental health should primarily rest with universities and their specialized structures, and self-governments should fulfil a supporting, not leading function.

Some respondents expressed concerns about excessive burden on self-governments with responsibility for an area that requires professional knowledge and competencies. Attention was drawn to the risk of overload with tasks exceeding the scope of duties and the necessity of clear delineation of roles between self-governments and institutions such as psychological counselling centers or academic psychologists.

The thread of the need for inter-university cooperation also appeared in responses. Respondents see potential in creating nationwide cooperation networks and exchange of good practices, which corresponds with earlier research results. This indicates self-governments' readiness to undertake coordinated actions exceeding the framework of individual universities or institutes.



## VIII. Conclusions



The study shows the current state of doctoral candidate self-governments' actions in the area of mental health and identifies main challenges and development possibilities.

## Key Findings

The study showed that although the topic of doctoral candidates' mental health is increasingly recognized by self-governments as important, real engagement in this area remains limited. Most self-governments do not initiate systemic solutions, and undertaken actions usually have a sporadic and reactive character. The main barriers include lack of financial resources, insufficient substantive competencies, and what is particularly important, low interest in this topic from doctoral candidates themselves.

However, a positive signal is the growing awareness of the need for actions and self-governments declared readiness to participate in a nationwide cooperation network and use expert support. In some centers, innovative solutions also appear, such as ethical codes, mentoring systems, or information exchange platforms, which may become inspiration for other units.

## Perspectives for Further Research

The current study constitutes an important step in recognizing the situation of doctoral candidate self-governments in the area of mental health. However, for fuller understanding of the issue and monitoring the effectiveness of implemented solutions, conducting further research is indicated.

It is recommended to conduct a similar study in one or two years to assess progress and identify new challenges. In-depth qualitative research is also indicated, e.g., in the form of interviews or case studies, which would allow better understanding of the mechanisms of self-governments' functioning and barriers in their activity. Comparative research taking into account different types of institutions, sizes of doctoral candidate communities, or scientific fields would also be useful. Another important direction is research on the perspective of doctoral candidates themselves concerning self-governments' actions and their needs in the area of psychological support, which would allow better matching of the offer to real expectations.

## Summary

This study indicates that doctoral candidate self-governments currently face the challenge of growing awareness of the importance of mental health with simultaneous limitations in action possibilities. Further progress in this area requires coordinated and complementary actions at the local, regional, and national level, as well as unambiguous determination of roles and scope of responsibility between self-governments, universities, and national institutions. Only with such an approach will it be possible to establish a comprehensive psychological help system for doctoral candidates in Poland.

## Appendix. Research Questionnaire

As part of the research, a detailed questionnaire consisting of seven thematic sections was used. The questionnaire was prepared in two language versions: Polish and English, to ensure access to both Polish and foreign doctoral candidates operating in Polish self-governments.

The first section concerned basic information about the entity conducting education and the doctoral candidate self-government, including questions about the name of the university or institute, the size of the doctoral candidate community, the number of active self-government members, and the functioning of units dealing with doctoral candidates' mental health.

The second section focused on the role and engagement of the doctoral candidate self-government, examining the number of doctoral candidates seeking help, prioritization of the mental health topic in self-government activity, and the level of initiative and cooperation with the university or institute.

The third section concerned bottom-up actions of the doctoral candidate self-government, where it was examined in detail which forms of support are independently implemented by self-governments, how often and by how many doctoral candidates they are used, and how they are promoted and communicated.

The fourth section was devoted to assessing the effectiveness of existing solutions, where respondents assessed various aspects of the support system's functioning, identified the most effective forms of help, and indicated the availability of central information sources.

The fifth section focused on gaps and needs from the self-government's perspective, identifying areas requiring support, planned initiatives encountering obstacles, main barriers in action, and needs in the area of substantive support and cooperation.

The sixth section concerned specific practices and cooperation, where self-governments shared examples of effective interventions, unusual support methods, information about documenting actions, and cooperation with external entities.

The seventh section constituted space for additional information, where respondents could share best practices, indicate the possibility of making available developed materials, and express interest in participating in a nationwide cooperation network.

The detailed content of the questionnaire, containing all questions in both language versions along with completion instructions, was attached to the report as a link to a separate document.



## Appendix: Research Questionnaire

