



Qualitative Analysis of comments
EPFL Culture of Respect Survey
2021

Report

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1. Summary

Introduction: The text responses collected by the ‘EPFL Culture of Respect Survey’ of 2021 complement the statistics presented in the survey report, which is available [here](#). There were two types of text responses; these are short and additional comments. The EPFL Culture of Respect Survey aimed to establish a benchmark for understanding how community members experience life on our campus, and to gain an understanding of their experience of harassment, violence, and discrimination where relevant. The results contribute to the current work of the Task Force on Harassment as well as to the initiatives for Promoting a Culture of Respect on campus.

The paragraphs below describe the data collection process of the EPFL Culture of Respect Survey, where the text responses presented in this report were gathered. The excerpt is taken from the [summary of the main results](#), you can consult it to know more about the survey.

‘The survey was launched on 3 June 2021 by the Vice-Presidency for Responsible Transformation. Reminders included an email from the EPFL Presidency, and two emails sent by Unisanté, on 15th June and 29th June. Responses were collected until 5 July 2021.

Out of the 18,650 people who received the questionnaire via email, (all students and employees of the school), 3,121 opened the link to the questionnaire (16.7%). Of these, 297 did not proceed beyond the ‘informed consent’ page. A further 312 entered some data but did not confirm that they wanted the data included in the study (and this data was therefore excluded). This left **2,512** people who completed the survey and consented to their data being used (an overall effective 13.5% response rate).

The composition of the 2,512 respondents was: 1,187 (48.2%) students, 367 (14.9%) doctoral assistants and, 907 (36.9%) teachers, administrative, technical, or scientific staff¹. This means the respondents are broadly representative of the overall EPFL community. It is worth noting that, for staff, students, and doctoral assistants, women are over-represented in the survey respondents.’

Overall, there were only a few reports of incidents of harassment, violence, and discrimination on campus in the text answers. The 42 open questions in the survey generated **1,695** text answers, which gives a mean response rate of around 2% per question. The text answers were given when respondents were asked to expand previous answers such as ‘Other’, for example: *“How often have you been on the receiving end of discrimination during your work or studies at EPFL ...[for reasons of your sex]?”*. In addition, questions such as *‘You have answered that you are unsure whether you have witnessed discrimination; please explain your answer’*, also generated answers.

Of particular note are the handful of testimonials and stories which were given; these are powerful because they uncover delicate, intimate and sincere accounts of memorable incidents.

Most of the quotes presented here were taken from answers to the two type of open questions which received the most responses: a) those asking to clarify the reasons for being unsure of whether discrimination, physical or psychological harassment or violence were witnessed and b) questions asking for the reasons for not reporting incidents. About 57% of respondents provided answers to these questions.

It should be noted that several written answers potentially reference the same act of discrimination, physical or psychological harassment or of sexual violence. This is because the questions generated

¹ In EPFL, doctoral assistants are ‘staff’. However in the survey report doctoral assistants are distinguished from other staff and reported separately. Where doctoral assistants are included in the general category ‘staff’ it will be explicitly identified.

answers which could have referred to the same incident from different perspectives. In other words, the number of times an incident is mentioned in the responses *is not equivalent* to the number of individual acts of discrimination, violence or harassment.

Aim: The analysis of written answers (accounts, explanations and comments) aimed to support the statistical results presented in the EPFL Culture of Respect [Survey report](#). With this in mind, the analysis of written answers attempted to explain the mechanics of discrimination, harassment and violence.

Methodology: The written answers were categorized and explored using four psychosocial themes and their subsequent categories. The themes are:

- 1) Belonging to and identifying with the EPFL community
- 2) Competition and pressure to perform
- 3) Status and power
- 4) A constructive perspective

The analysis followed the same structure as the survey report and split into sub-categories. All comments were placed in at least one category.

When appropriate, the charts from the survey report are shown accompanied with supporting or illustrating comments. The text indexed to a category is highlighted in **bold** for easier reading.

Conclusion: The analysis provides a glimpse into what are apparently rare, yet consequential witness or first-hand experiences of discrimination and harassment affecting those studying or working at EPFL. With this in mind, this report contributes to the ongoing efforts of the Task Force on Harassment and to the initiative for Promoting a Culture of Respect at EPFL.

2. Belonging to and identifying with the EPFL community

Overall, comments support the general feeling of safety on campus agreed to by 85.4% of respondents. However, results also showed that around 39% disagree or strongly disagree with statements relating to feeling part of a community, feeling close to other people or feeling valued in their place of work / study. Such disagreement suggest a weak sense of belonging that builds on acceptance, inclusion and identification with a community.

The answers to the question about why respondents felt unsure whether they witnessed discrimination and psychological harassment on campus, suggest the respondents wonder whether other members of the EPFL community also perceive the incident as problematic. Their ability to identify discrimination within the community is impeded by confusion with impolite comments or culturally insensitive jokes. It could be said that respondents avoid making themselves vulnerable by instead turning a blind eye to incidents of harassment and discrimination.

The comments below illustrate the sense of distance from the person at the receiving end of discrimination:

- a) *'What **may be seen as discrimination** for one person **may be seen as clumsiness, ignorance or meanness for others.**' Original text: ' **Ce qui peut être vu comme de la discrimination pour l'un peut être perçu pour de la maladresse, ignorance ou de la***

méchanceté pour d'autres'.

- b) 'Sometimes people make jokes and it depends on how they **are interpreted** by another person.'
- c) 'A witness won't step in because it's **difficult to distinguish** acts of discrimination, violence or harassment from bad jokes or bad manners.'
- d) 'Some phrases **can be misunderstood** by some people, but sometimes it's hard to be in their position and realize it. I think we have all witnessed discrimination during our studies, but **until we are aware** that these words can be discriminatory and not 'funny' we don't necessarily pay attention to them.' Original text: 'Certaines phrases **peuvent être mal perçues** de la part de certaines personnes, mais parfois il est dur d'être à sa place et s'en rendre compte. Je pense qu'on a toutes été témoin de discrimination au cours de notre cursus, mais **tant qu'on est pas consciente** que ces mots-là peuvent être discriminatoires et non 'drôle' on n'y a fait pas forcément attention'.

3. Discouraged to react

In addition to the sense of belonging, respondents were asked if they think that people would intervene to help when witnessing discrimination, violence and harassment. This is called the bystander effect, a term used after studying people's discouragement to react when witnessing actions they identify as serious ([Psychology Today](#)). Psychologically, the greater the number of people not reacting (bystanders), the harder it is for someone to step in to help the person in distress.

Below is the chart showing respondents' perception:

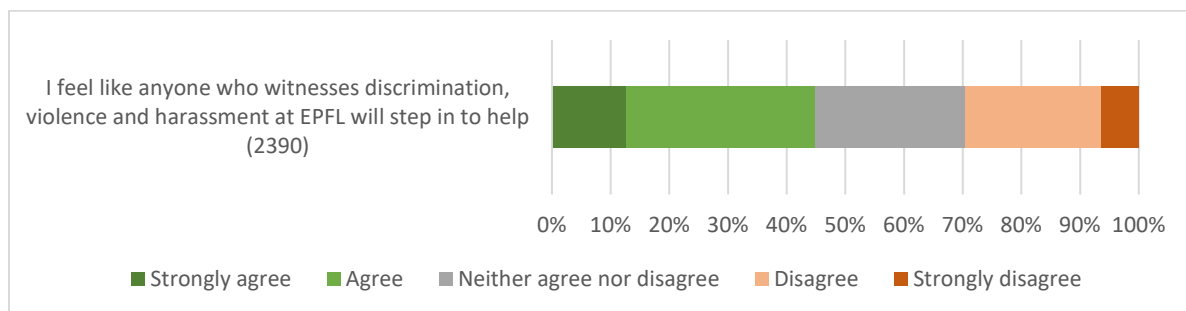


Figure 1: Bystander effect in EPFL

The chart above shows that in the EPFL survey, more than half of the respondents think that people will not intervene in a situation of distress.

This is important because the most commonly cited locations for having witnessed discrimination, sexual harassment or sexual violence in an EPFL affiliated event on campus were the classroom and offices or conference rooms. By definition, these spaces include several bystanders.

Answers to the question to why they did not react or report discrimination, physical or psychological harassment or sexual violence clearly show the influence of the group for not reacting.

- a) *'In some cases (sexist zoom messages), these behaviors are tolerated by an entire class. It's hard to know if it's worth doing anything about these'. Original text: 'Dans certains cas (messages sexistes sur zoom), ces comportements sont tolérés par une classe entière. C'est difficile de savoir si ça vaut la peine de faire quelque chose'.*
- b) *'As an introvert person who comes from a Non-European country, I was often mentally harassed and **bullied** during my doctoral research. They clearly took advantage of my personal politeness and of the fact that **it was hard for me to force my ideas on others** and argue with them, so they never took my concerns and issues into consideration which in the end resulted in an unbearable working environment for me and I resigned from my PhD after few months'.*
- c) *'Only minor events that one recovers from, I don't know if it's really about the forms of violence or if "**it's just how it is**". Original text: 'Seulement des évènements mineurs dont on se remet, je ne sais pas s'il s'agit vraiment des formes de violence ou si "**c'est comme ça**".*

A respondent gave the below description of sexual violence in an EPFL related event. In this story, the bystander effect appears when describing feeling untargeted. The narrator was unsure to react but felt uncomfortable enough to report it in the survey:

- d) *'At a section party, some students who had drunk a little too much found themselves half naked and took the liberty of exposing their penises to several groups of people. **I was not directly "targeted" but was aware enough of what was going on and close enough to them to feel uncomfortable.** I feel like this doesn't really fit into the category mentioned in this section of the questionnaire, **but I find this behavior disturbing enough to mention anyway**'. Original text: 'Lors d'une soirée de section, des étudiant-e-s qui avaient un peu trop bu se sont retrouvé à moitié nu et ont pris la liberté de venir exposer leur pénis vers plusieurs groupes de personnes. **Je n'ai pas directement été "visée" mais suffisamment consciente de ce qu'il se passait et proche d'eux pour être mise mal à l'aise.** J'ai l'impression que cela ne rentre pas vraiment dans la catégorie mentionnée dans cette section du questionnaire mais je trouve ce **comportement suffisamment dérangeant pour malgré tout être mentionné**'.*

4. The classroom under inspection

Students composed the majority of respondents to the survey, that is 48.2% and when asked, they identified the classroom as the place where most discrimination and harassment happen. In addition, 79.4% of students signalled being a target of inappropriate remarks and agreed that these took place in a classroom, only 12.6% signalled them at EPFL office or conference room.

Interestingly, comments mentioning the classroom as a space where these acts take place uncovered a variety of perceptions. For instance, some actions considered not to deserve reporting are minor and other seem more important.

Below are clear example of an important and frequent form of gender discrimination:

- a) *'I witnessed a lot of **sexism on a daily basis in lectures, or exercise sessions**, but I cannot remember them clearly, maybe just this one, where the teaching assistants bet that I and another girl were going to a certain faculty just because we didn't understand the exercises well'. Original text : 'J'étais témoins de pleins de **sexisme au quotidien lors des cours en amphis, ou des séances d'exercices**, mais je ne pourrais pas les citer, peut-être juste qu'un des assistant-e-s avait parié que moi et une autre fille allions à une certaine faculté juste parce qu'on comprenait pas bien les exercices'.*

The comments below are answers to the question 'why are you unsure to have witnessed discrimination', and point towards the classroom, although not explicitly:

- b) *'The **purpose of some of the comments was not clear** (objective criticism of performance by a teacher or affected by the gender/origin of the recipient of the criticism)'. Original text : 'La **cause de certains propos n'était pas claire** (critique objective de performance par un-e professeur-e ou impactée par le genre/origine receveur de la critique)'.*
- c) *'I **don't know** if the way some teachers behave or communicate is **mistreatment** of the students attending class.' Original comment: '**Je ne sais pas** si la façon de se comporter ou communiquer de la part de certain-e-s profs est **maltraitante** à l'égard des élèves en classe.'*
- d) *'..remarks that **made me feel uncomfortable**, but that were not directed at specific people (mostly homophobic remarks, use of "slurs")'. Original text: '**remarques qui m'ont mis mal à l'aise**, mais qui n'étaient pas adressées à des personnes en particulier (remarques homophobes pour la plupart, utilisation de "slurs")'.*

Below is a rather important form of sexual violence starting from the classroom and spreading into the virtual space:

- e) *'A classmate was **sending pictures** of his penis to some girls **in the class** without their consent'. Original text: 'Un camarade de classe envoyait **des photos** de son pénis à certaines filles **de la classe** sans leur consentement'.*

5. Competition and pressure to perform

In the survey, it was not clear if the degree of competition characteristic of the EPFL culture is a good or a bad thing. This is shown in the chart below:

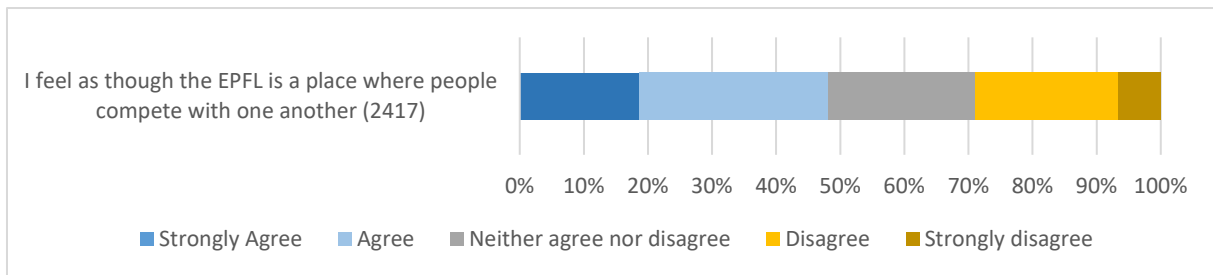


Figure 2: Culture of competition at EPFL

As we can see in the chart above, almost half of respondents identify that EPFL is a place of competition, about 20% were unsure and about 30% disagreed. In contrast to the results, the few comments related to competition and pressure speak of it negatively, even as a threat. The rare accounts identified in the analysis of comments also support the results showing that teachers and doctoral assistants constitute the population feeling the strongest competition. A more detailed look into their accounts of competition will follow.

5.1 Pressure to perform and be productive

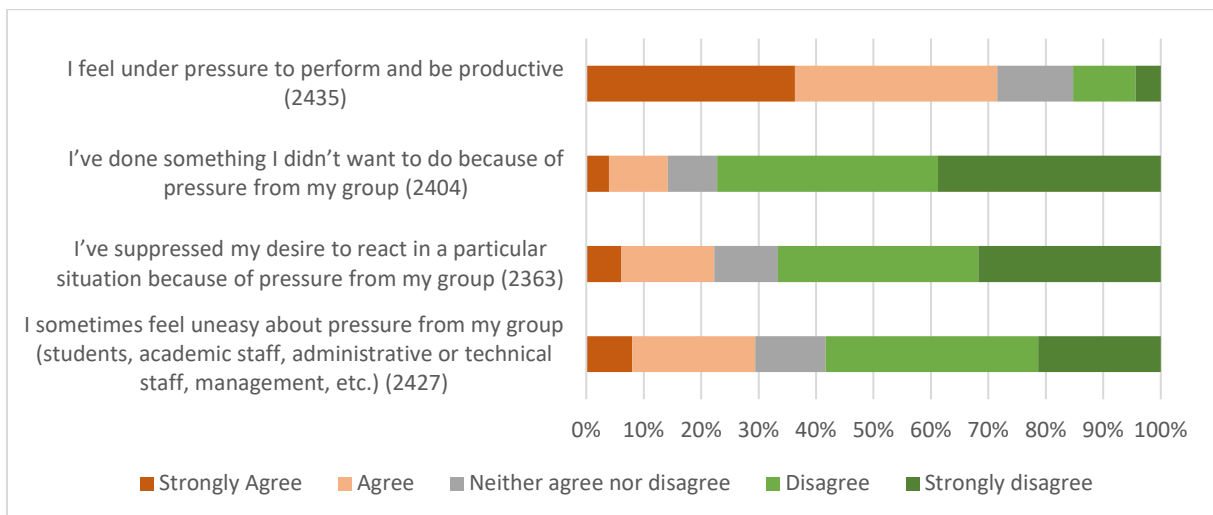


Figure 3 : Peer pressure on the EPFL community

The comments below illustrate well the general result showing over 70% of respondents feeling under pressure to perform and be productive in EPFL while almost 30% say they feel uneasy about pressure from their group. The selected comments illustrate that pressure affected respondents' performance.

All the accounts below were answers by different respondents to the question 'why are you unsure whether to have been at the receiving end of psychological or physical harassment'. The answers clearly show that competition has a negative impact on the respondents.

- a) 'I think that the **pressure of productivity in studies** can quickly become a form of psychological harassment (induced by the amount of work, teachers' and students' attitude) but I find it difficult to draw the line between "intense stimulation" and

"psychological violence. Original text : Je pense que la **pression liée à la productivité dans les études** peut rapidement devenir une forme de harcèlement psychologique (induite par la masse de travail, l'attitude des enseignant-e-s et les autre étudiant-e-s) mais je trouve qu'il est difficile d'identifier la limite entre "stimulation intense" et "violence psychologique".

- b) 'I don't know if the **pressure and the climate of competition during studies at EPFL**, which are constant and unhealthy, may be considered as psychological harassment'. Original text: 'Je ne sais pas si la **pression ainsi que le climat de compétition lors de la formation à l'EPFL**, qui sont constants et malsains, peuvent être considérés comme du harcèlement psychologique'.
- c) 'To me, **EPFL perpetuates a work climate that can be psychologically violent** for everyone; some people live it better than others. I'm not sure if that counts as discrimination because it's really directed towards all students'. Original text : 'Pour moi, **l'EPFL perpétue un climat de travail qui peut être violent à vivre** psychologiquement pour tout le monde, certaines personnes le vivent mieux que d'autres. Je ne suis pas sûr-e que ça compte comme discrimination car c'est vraiment envers tou-te-s les étudiant-e-s'.
- d) 'I **was pushed psychologically to produce results** in order for my contract to be renewed. In fact, I was pushed to work without payment/contract until I get the desired results'.

The single account below was an answer given to the question on 'why are you unsure whether to have been on the receiving end of discrimination':

- e) 'I don't know what will be considered discrimination. There are days where **I feel there is undue pressure** and a sense to prove myself just because I am a recent addition to the group and have to earn my place.'

5.2 Competition amongst teachers and within research groups

As said before, a series of answers support the statistical result showing that those feeling the greatest sense of competition are **teachers**; as 58.9 % of those responding 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to say that EPFL is a place where people compete with one another². **Doctoral assistants**, who by 54% agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement were second and closely followed by **scientific staff**, who agreed by 50.7%.

Below are answers to the question asking to expand the 'other' previous answers to describing forms of discrimination witnessed during their work or studies at EPFL. Some answers also explanations on the frequency for witnessing acts of discrimination. It is important to note that teachers, doctoral assistants and scientists phrase discrimination as an integral component to competition:

² In the survey report, in reference with responses from teachers, care must be taken as the confidence interval is wide because the number of respondents is relatively low.

- a) *'Being an external lecturer, a professor told me: 'But you are nobody'. Original text : 'Etant chargé-e de cours externe, un-e professeur-e m'a dit: mais, tu n'es personne'.*
- b) *'A senior scientist gives pressure to the PhD students'.*
- c) *'A professor considering that researchers have no word to say and just agree with her/him.*
- d) *'To me, what psychological harassment means is unclear. The pressure associated to me doing a doctorate, seems almost normal'. Original text : 'Le harcèlement psychologique est pour moi une notion qui n'est pas si claire. Etant en doctorat, la pression associée me semble presque normale'.*

Lastly, the answer below is a response to the question of why the respondent did not report the harassment, the answer shows that the doctoral assistant prefers to produce rather than to report an incident:

- e) *'It will hold prejudice for my future and against my thesis'. Original text : 'Ça va me porter préjudice pour mon avenir et pour ma thèse'.*

A respondent speaks of a professors bragging about the level of productivity in their units and in doing so, the respondent also draws a parallel with psychological harassment and discrimination:

- f) *'I heard professors at a meeting make some shocking comments about their doctoral students. For example, some were "bragging" about making them work every weekend, others about not allowing them to take vacations'. Original text: 'J'ai entendu des professeur(e)s, lors d'une réunion, tenir des propos choquants concernant leurs doctorant(e)s. Par exemple, certains se « vantaient » de les faire travailler tous les week-ends, d'autres de leur interdire de prendre des vacances'.*

5.3 Competition and pressure felt by students

Less than half of students agreed to feel that EPFL is a place where people compete with one another and a small number of answers suggest that when present, competition is associated to the choice of program and to gender. The few accounts on sex-based discrimination support 25% of respondents claiming to have witnessed some form of sex-based discrimination. The written comments render visible that discrimination is mostly directed towards female students. Likewise, the 20% claim to have witnessed any rate of competition to someone's level of studies and is illustrated by comments on competition between study programmes.

The answers below refer to competition and discrimination targeting the level of studies, and female students:

- a) *'The first one is the near constant looking down on UniL students and considering them and their curricula to be inferior to what we do at EPFL'.*
- b) *'As a Life Sciences Engineering student: the other students depreciate our Bachelor's degree saying that it is 'easy' for the girls and for the boys saying "that they chose this section*

because there are many girls". Original text : 'Etre étudiant-e en "Ingénierie des Sciences du vivant" : les autres étudiant-e-s dévalorisent ce Bachelor, pour les filles en disant que c'est une section "simple" et pour les gars en disant "qu'ils ont choisi cette section parce qu'il y a beaucoup de filles".

6 Two sides to every story; hierarchy and power

In addition to the bystander effect presented before, the answers to why participants did not report the discrimination, physical or psychological harassment witnessed by the respondents referred to power and the EPFL hierarchy.

Comments referring to academic status put professors and teacher as standing above in the hierarchy and describe those using adjectives such as arrogant, superior and exempt from punishment. Consequently, students, doctoral assistants and employees who are below in the hierarchy could be seen as weak, frail and fearsome.

Perceptions of power and a conformist attitude are perceptible in the three sections that follow.

6.1 Sex-based and ethnic-based discrimination as a socially accepted norm

As the chart shows below, specific comments illustrated the relatively infrequent acts of discrimination that respondents reported to have witnessed 'very often' or 'often'. The categories that are supported by single comments or short stories are related to someone's sex (identified by 12%), someone's romantic or sexual orientation (identified by 5.7%), level of studies (identified by 9.1%) and ethnic origin (identified by 5.6%). Being a parent is not identified in the chart below, but as a few people described it, it was perceived as a disadvantage by respondents.

Here is the results chart, followed by the comments illustrating them:

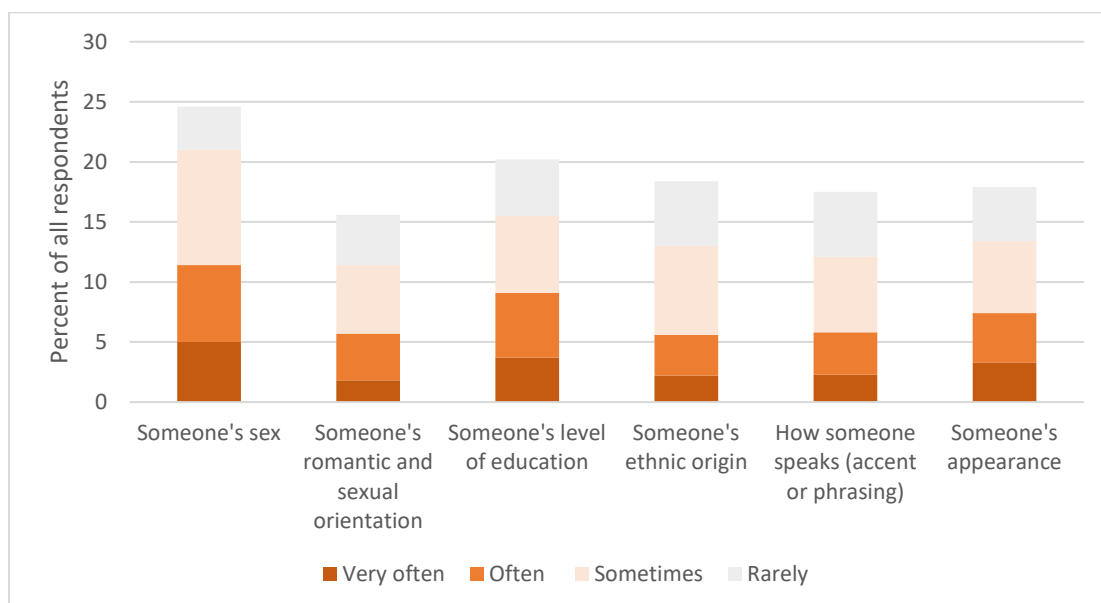


Figure 4 : Responses to the question “How often have you witnessed discrimination during your work or studies at EPFL (including an exchange, internship or student social activities) for the following reasons?”

The text below describes a socially accepted gender-based discrimination or psychological harassment.

- a) ‘Questioning my **ability to pursue a career and have children**. Inappropriate comment due to the fact that I am a woman, more room in the meeting room and proposal that I sit on a colleague's lap. During exercise sessions, proposal of assistant to go for a drink or something when I was a student’. Original text: ‘**Remise en question de mes capacités à mener une carrière et avoir des enfants**. Commentaire déplacé due au fait que je suis une femme, plus de place en salle de réunion et proposition que je m'asseye sur les genoux d'un collègue. Durant les séances d'exercices, proposition d'assistant-e pour aller boire un verre ou autre quand j'étais étudiante’.

The following account on cultural and ethnic-based discrimination portrays it as a socially accepted norm from the eye of the beholder:

- b) ‘How can I take courage to report these few instances of **discrimination against immigrants by few Swiss people at EPFL**? Also I am forever indebted to Swiss taxpayers and EPFL for my studies. EPFL has always being amazing and it has been the best experience of my life doing research at EPFL. These are very few people who are racist. Most probably these people don't even know it. Also after seeing acts of discrimination, I started even questions subtle acts of discrimination in my own home country. We need to learn and adapt to not offend others. One time is a chance mistake. Doing it often to offend others is wrong. These few Swiss people at EPFL need to be made acknowledged of their subtle acts of racism’.

Below is an example of discrimination, as felt by a parent:

- c) ‘Being a **father who is invested in the children is also perceived negatively** - as part of an idea that the husband is domineering and the burden is on him’. Original text : ‘**Le fait d'être un père de famille qui est investi auprès des enfants est aussi perçu négativement** – car s'inscrit dans une idée que le mari est dominateur et que c'est la charge’.

Following the results, a more detailed analysis allowed to separate comments referring to two main groups of perpetrators of such commonly seen discriminations.

6.2 Students as perpetrators sex-based and culturally-based discriminations

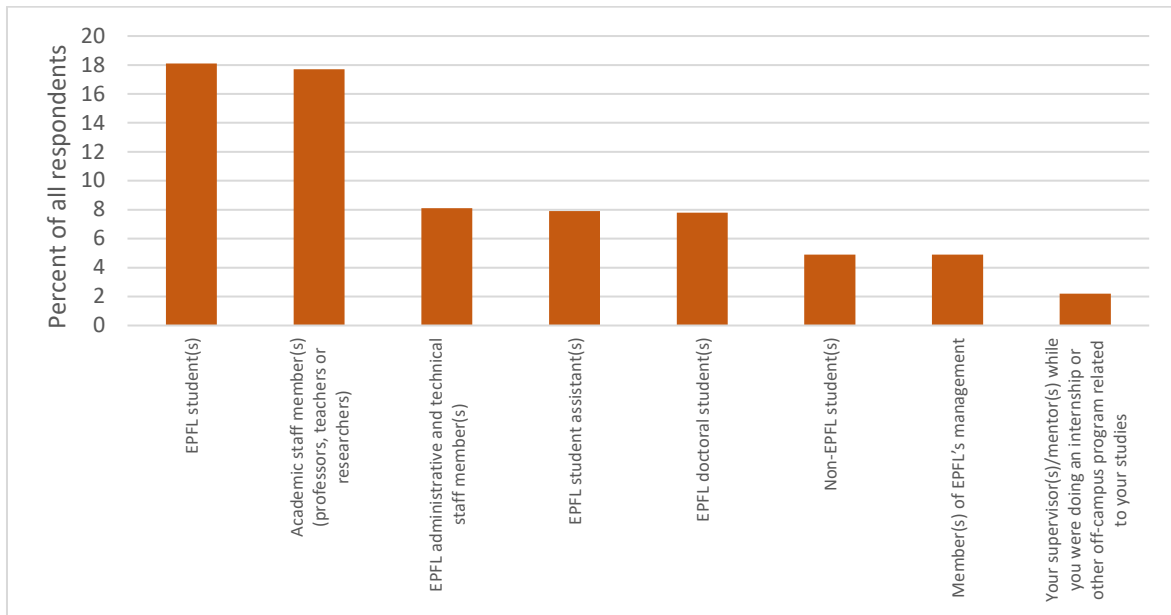


Figure 5 : Responses to the question “Who discriminated against the person in question? (Check all that apply)”

As shown of the chart above, students were identified as the most common perpetrator of acts of discrimination (18.1%), followed closely by teachers (17%). To a lesser extent, about 8.1 % of respondents cited administrative and technical staff and at 7.9% doctoral assistants.

Accounts of student-to-student discrimination and harassment were already shown in the section on competition felt by students. In addition to these, the citations below suggest that the students are probably unaware of the effect of their certain comments or actions.

The text below are accounts of student-to-student discrimination based on **someone’s sex** or **sexual orientation**:

- d) *‘I worked on a project in a group in which I was the only girl. I was offended several times by one of my teammates when I (politely) disagreed with him in certain situations’.*
- e) *‘Sometimes I feel other PhD students **treat me differently** in social situations **because** of my **gender**, but it's hard to be sure.’*
- f) *‘Being a **girl** at EPFL this kind of behavior is "normal". Original text: ‘Etre une **fil**le a l'EPFL ce genre de comportement est "normal"’.*

In a reversal of roles, a male student was discriminated:

- g) *‘I have witnessed discussions in an EPFL association of people who could not give their opinion because it was contrary to the ideas of the person in charge of the discussions. But **this was a man who could not speak** because his opinion on the issue did not raise any interest’ Original text : ‘J’été témoin lors de discussions d’une association de l’EPFL de personnes ne pouvant pas donner leur avis parce qu’il était contraire aux idées de la personne*

*en charge des prises de paroles. Mais **c'était un homme qui n'a pas pu parler** parce que son avis sur la question n'avait pas d'intérêt'.*

The derogatory comments about someone's sexual orientation shown below could be attributed to students speaking about others students on campus, but we cannot be sure:

- h) *'I've heard a lot of **homophobic jokes** on campus'. Original text : 'J'ai oui beaucoup **des blagues homophobes** sur le campus'.*
- i) *'...**inappropriate remark** made to a person from the LGBT community, pointing out that the person was homosexual in a mocking way'. Original text: '...**remarque déplacée** faite à une personne de la communauté LGBT, soulignant le fait que la personne était homosexuel d'une façon moqueuse'.*

The two comments below were given as examples of **discrimination to students' ethnic origin**:

- j) *'**Anti-French racism** is present (not only at EPFL) and is mostly not recognized as such by those who practice it'. Original text : '**Le racisme anti-français** est présent (pas que à l'EPFL) et est majoritairement non reconnu comme tel par ceux qui le pratique'.*
- k) *'During the presentation of the delegates the **French are booed...**' Original text: 'Lors de la présentation des délégués **les Français se font huer...**'*

6.3 Teacher impunity

In addition to the type of discrimination, written answers to the question '*what prevented respondents from reporting the act of discrimination, psychological or physical harassment or violence*'. These showed distrust to the existing processes at EPFL and respondents spoke of teacher impunity and fear of the consequences for reporting an incident involving a teacher or a professor. This perception could develop into fear and distrust.

To continue, the stories told by respondents confirm, once more, that sex-based discrimination is the most commonly cited discrimination, witnessed by over 20% of respondents who agreed to see it 'often', 'very often', or 'sometimes' (see figure 4). Also as a reminder, respondents referred to students and academic staff (professors, teachers or researchers) as the most frequent perpetrators (figure 5). While the section above presented accounts of discrimination from students, this section presents a selection of accounts of discriminations by professors and teachers.

The stories below, speak of discrimination by teachers and researchers towards students, employees and doctoral assistants, positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy. In addition to the types of discrimination and harassment, these stories suggest distrust.

- a) *'I had witnessed a case where a student was fired for a ridiculous reason by an absolutely arrogant advisor and EPFL could do nothing about it. The rule seems to be that **a Professor***

can do whatever he/she wants, while all a student can do is fill out surveys such as this one.'

- a) *'I think EPFL would do something but that thing would only be **firing me**. I just **cannot trust EPFL at all**. I believe that my professor would convince EPFL that I am 100% guilty. Because for a long while my professor made me think that I was guilty, which is a harassment itself that I realized after some times'.*
- b) *'A professor used to **single out girls from the first rows and joke about them, too much laughter of the majority male audience**. I have always felt highly disgusted by such acts and would have probably reported it had I been more mature at the time'.*
- c) *'I encouraged a colleague to report her own situation to the **director** of her doctoral program, and **nothing was done** other than blame her and tell her it was her fault. My situation was less serious than hers, and nothing was done about it, so **I didn't see how I could complain**'. Original text : 'J'ai poussé une collègue à signaler sa propre situation à la/au directeur-trice de son programme doctoral, **et rien n'a été fait**, sauf la culpabiliser et lui dire que c'était sa faute. Ma situation était moins grave que la sienne, pour laquelle rien n'avait été fait, **je ne voyais pas comment j'aurais pu me plaindre moi**'.*

The text below is a response to the question about why they were unsure to whether they were at the receiving end of inappropriate comments or behaviour. The student speaks of teachers' derogatory attitudes.

- d) *'Some **teachers explained that the students were lousy** without questioning the difficulty of the exam compared to previous years. Many students were also **told off** when they came to ask a question that was considered "stupid"'. (Original text: 'Certain-e-s professeur-e-s expliquant que la classe était nulle sans se remettre en question sur la difficulté de l'examen proposé par rapport aux années précédentes. Il est aussi arrivé a beaucoup d'élèves de se faire "rembarrer" lorsqu'elles/ils venaient poser une question jugée "stupide"').*

7. A constructive perspective

It would be misleading to end the report without looking into the comments that supported the constructive outcomes of the Culture of Respect survey at EPFL. As a reminder, in the survey over 80% of respondents claimed to be satisfied with the overall climate on campus and about 60.3% ($\pm 2.0\%$) indicate that they have not witnessed discrimination during their work or studies at EPFL. Positive comments about the culture of respect were rare and spoke of some satisfaction with the EPFL formal procedures. These accounts also show self-belief in being able to find solutions on their own and build on the existing support network.

It is important to note, that when asked about awareness to the process to address, investigate and sanction discrimination at EPFL's overall, less than half of respondents indicate that they are aware about or know the main elements of the EPFL procedures for dealing with discrimination. The awareness is lowest for procedures to report (23.6%, %, $\pm 1.7\%$ 'agree' or 'strongly agree'), investigate (15.2%, %, $\pm 1.5\%$), and sanction (11.7%, %, $\pm 1.3\%$) discrimination.

The results chart is below:

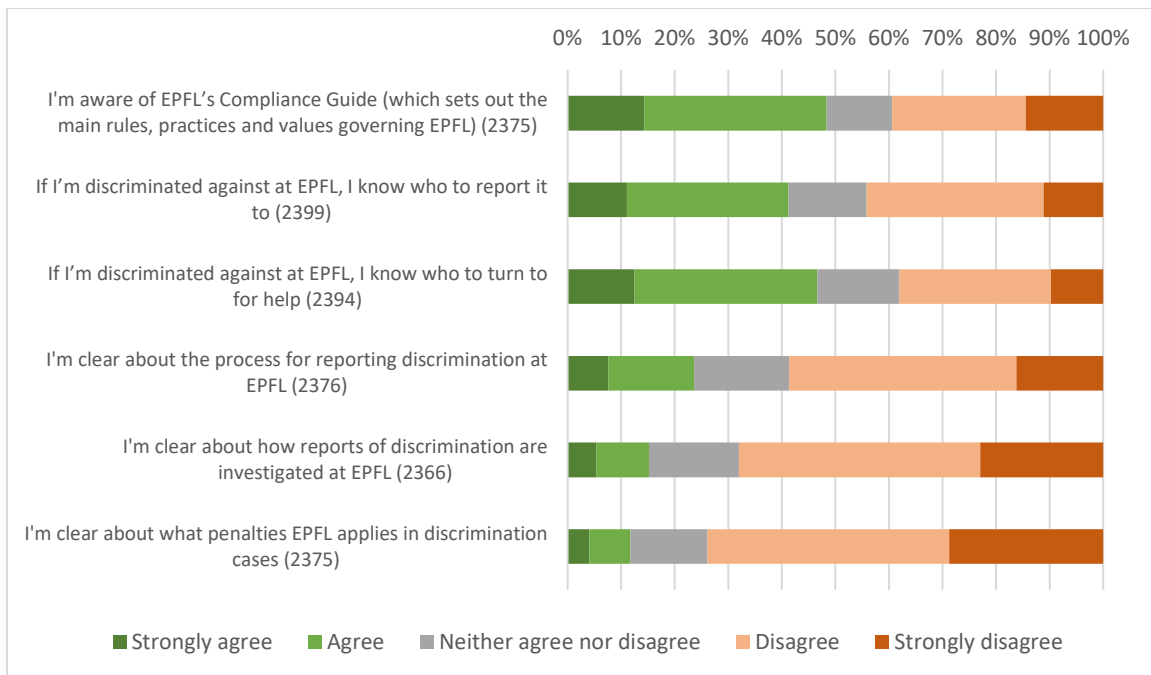


Figure 6 : Awareness of processes to address, investigate and sanction discrimination

The texts below refer to problems resolved informally through constructive discussion or formally following the EPFL procedures. These are worth highlighting because they show trust in people and in the procedures and they were provided as answers to the question 'What deterred from reporting the discrimination, physical or psychological discrimination or violence?'

- a) *'I asked my internship advisor for help and she helped me'. Original text : 'J'ai demandé de l'aide à ma/mon responsable de stage, qui m'a aidé'.*
- b) *'Situation discussed and resolved internally with the support of the HR manager'. Original text: 'Situation discutée et résolue en interne avec support du responsable RH'.*

Below are a series of comments suggesting that respondents are satisfied with an informal procedure:

- a) *'The (one-time) problem was with another doctoral student in the group, the problem was resolved by firm discussion with her/him and was mentioned to my supervisor so that she/he could react if the situation were to recur (which did not happen)'. Original text: 'Le problème (unique) était avec un-e autre doctorant-e du groupe, le problème a été réglé par une discussion ferme avec elle/lui et a été mentionné à ma/mon directeur-trice de thèse pour pouvoir réagir si la situation devait se reproduire (ce qui n'a pas eu lieu)'.*
- b) *'It really wasn't serious enough to be reported. I was able to handle the situation by myself'.*

Lastly, like the comment below, some respondents feel better on their own than in company:

- c) *'As far as I am concerned, I manage on my own, as mediation and HR, and even senior management, are not very competent in this area'. Original text: 'En ce qui me concerne je*

me débrouille seule, la médiation et les RH, voire le management supérieur n'étant pas très compétents en la matière'.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of written answers confirmed the statistical results presented in the EPFL Culture of Respect [Survey report](#). Indeed witness accounts and direct experiences of discrimination and harassment are rare but memorable to respondents. Even more, the few stories told disclosed personal opinions, they uncovered evidence from which interventions can build upon. The most salient one would be identifying the classroom as the space where students feel mostly exposed to discrimination and derogatory remarks.

As explained in the introduction, four psychosocial themes used to guide the analysis of written answers: sense of belonging and identity to the EPFL community, competition and pressure to perform, status and power and self-empowerment. This analysis helped to explain the hidden mechanics of the interaction permeated by the power asymmetry separating students, teachers and administrative staff.

In contrast, trust and self-confidence were identified as hidden strengths that can help to deal with discrimination, harassment and violence. Few and powerful comments show that personal drive and self-belief open a new perspective from which to counteract gender stereotypes and power struggles. It could be constructive to use these strengths to continue to promote a culture of trust and respect at EPFL.

To continue, a few stories narrated in the survey helped to understand competition and pressure to perform as damaging to the EPFL experience. Accordingly, competition and pressure to produce are felt as permanent and negative characteristics of study and work at EPFL because they are stressful. The current educational initiative promoting Project-Based-Learning could represent the right opportunity to shift focus on collaboration and away from competition and potentially improve the quality of study and work experience at EPFL.

Criticism and distrust to the existent policies and procedures to report and punish discrimination were explicit when teachers and professors are the designated perpetrators. These critiques endorse students and doctoral assistants' belief that academic staff won't be reprimanded not even approached. This belief is reinforced by fear and a perceived absence of governance in the virtual or physical classroom. Even more, answers point towards the classroom as the location for most incidents of discrimination and harassment.

The citations showing evidence of a weak sense of belonging and supporting the bystander effect raise the question of whether discrimination and harassment are a socially accepted norm. The extent to which respondents conform to a reality of their everyday where they are discriminated, degraded or ignored is worrying. Indeed, students, teachers and employees hesitate to recognise these acts and it leaves us wondering if this is an implicit part of the educational experience in the classroom, conference spaces or labs and corridors.

Certainly, as shown in the survey report, most discrimination and derogatory comments happen in the classroom, a space perceived as out of the radar. However logical; respondents found it unnatural to intervene inside the walls of the digital and the physical classroom. These finding makes it obvious to intervene within its walls and stand aside educational strategies promoting safe learning spaces. The challenge lies on the difficulty to implement visible and tangible strategies that would

raise awareness in teachers and students about the consequences for continuing to ignore discrimination.

In coherence with the statistical results, the written answers showed that women are the most common target of discrimination and harassment. Two types of gender discrimination predominate, the first is linked to power and status where women are depreciated by the hierarchy, like the professors as head of units or the managers in the administration. The second type of discrimination against women abounds in teaching and learning scenarios. Notably when female students are joked about or are ignored in class and in exercise sessions; or when their opinions are contested during group work. Whichever the domain and the form, it is important to remember that despite the progress made for women in science in the past decades, there remains a long road ahead.

On a more positive note, some citations speak of self-empowerment to deal with discrimination and harassment; or so suggest the apparent distrust to the EPFL procedures and the will to work out a solution by themselves or within the circle of trust. Actually, one could read the criticisms and anger expressed in the text with disappointment. Yet, I suggest another reading, the optimistic reading: respondents speak of believing in their own capacity to take charge of their destiny. I would suggest then, building on this drive as an opportunity to make explicit the discreet and efficient measures at hand. This will empower witnesses and victims of discrimination, physical and psychological harassment to respond. For instance, make visible the advantages and limitation from getting informal support from the Trust Support Network as from making a formal complaint to Cellule Respect.

In view of the results and the comments, we encourage the ongoing efforts and actions of the Harassment Taskforce to achieve a change of social attitudes and representations starting from the classroom. This endeavour is hard and is already underway. This calls for patience; social change has proven to succeed overtime and with constant optimism and cooperation.