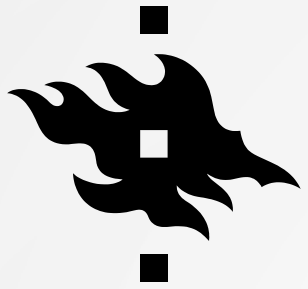




# FEEDBACK FROM PREVIOUS ERC GRANT HOLDERS

PI's lessons learned about grant management



# **PRESENTER: RIIKKA SARASJÄRVI**

Project coordinator at the University of Helsinki since September 2022

- Support for project coordination unit offers post-award support for externally funded projects
- Riikka focuses specifically on projects funded by the European Research Council
- AdvG Yamnaya impact on prehistoric Europe (YMPACT)
  - 2019-2024, 20 % working time, other colleagues involved before me
- AdvG GULAG ECHOES: historical and geographical influences on the identity and politics of ethnic minority prisoners
  - 2018-2024, 20 % working time, admin done by PI and a post-doc before I joined
- SyG LIFE PLAN: A Planetary Inventory of Life
  - 2020-2026, 20 % working time, transferred to a colleague
- StG IRRITATION and human cooperation
  - 2022-2027, 20 % working time
- AdvG Material and environmental LEGACIES
  - 2023-2028, 20 % working time
- CoG WEIRD: environmental justice through queer and disability perspectives
  - 2024-2029, 30 % working time

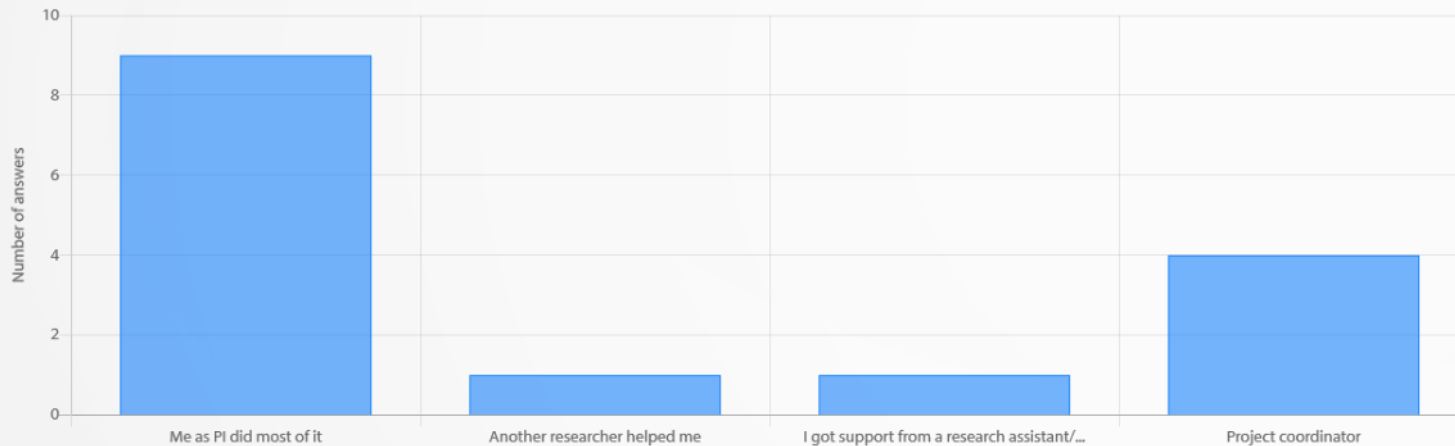


# QUESTIONNAIRE & RESPONDENTS

- Sent to 19 Principal Investigators at the University of Helsinki whose grant had ended in 2023, 2024 or early 2025
  - ERC grants from the Horizon 2020 framework programme
- Received 11 responses in total
  - Respondents from all campuses
- The respondents had received so far
  - 7 Starting grants
  - 3 Consolidator
  - 2 Advanced
  - 2 Proof of Concept
- They were asked to evaluate the most recently finished project



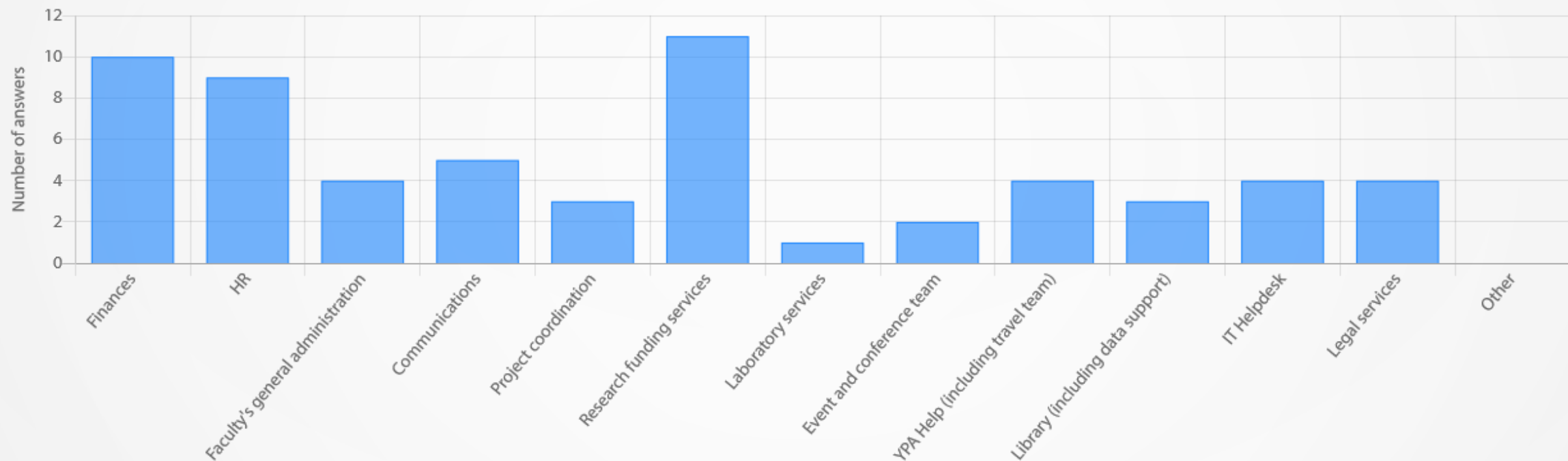
# WHO DID YOUR PROJECT'S ADMINISTRATION?

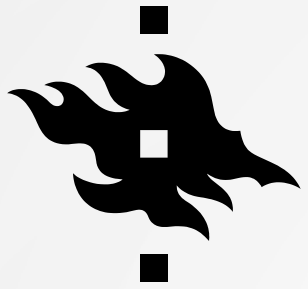


- Possibility to choose several options
- Number of respondents: 11
- Follow-up question asking the career stage of the researcher that helped
  - Post-doc
- “I did a lot of admin related to HR, finances, all the reporting, etc. My project coordinator did most of the smaller tasks, such as booking rooms, flights, accommodation etc., and looked after me especially in the first reportings. A research assistant helped the coordinator sometimes with the organization of larger events.”

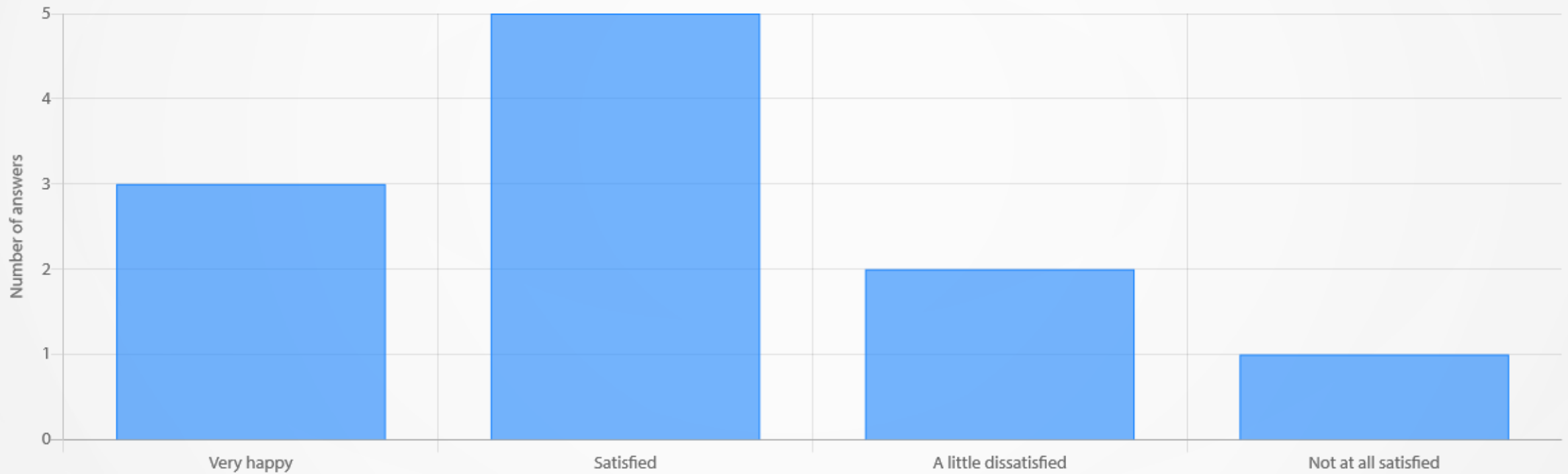


# WHICH UNIVERSITY SERVICES/SUPPORT SERVICES SUPPORTED YOU DURING THE PROJECT LIFE SPAN?

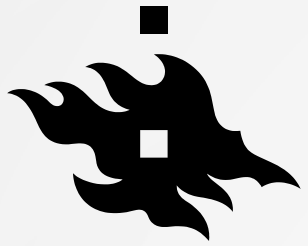




# HOW HAPPY ARE YOU WITH THE SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY?

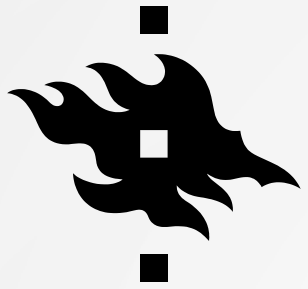






# WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR YOUR SATISFACTION OR DISSATISFACTION?

- + Project coordinator was **easily accessible**
- + I am mostly very happy. The services were **timely, professional, and helpful**.
- + The help is really needed, because the EU bureaucracy English not understandable. People who helped me **did very good job**, but I had an impression that they had too many tasks running in parallel, so sometimes I needed to **wait for the help**.
- + The help from Research funding services during **application preparation was really important**.
- The faculty's general administration has very **limited resources**. It has been crucial to learn to do most things without actual administrative support.
- My faculty finances were **not familiar with ERC budgeting and other admin** needs and hence many mistakes were made. These resulted in problems with PI contribution.
- The university took 100% of the **overheads** which is totally different at other universities in Europe where parts of the overheads are returned back to science. The only time I was advised by Funding Staff was to reallocate research service money that I needed for external services to the internal budget, turns out this advice was just to maximize overheads for the university.



# WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR YOUR SATISFACTION OR DISSATISFACTION?

- For the ERC StG when i applied in 2017, **I did not get that much help to writing.** The person who was helping the applicants at the time actually said to me that my ERC StG idea was not good enough - but I got the funding anyway. After I have received also 2 x ERC POC grants.
- The question of workspace is not one the administration can control, they just allocate what they have, but the matter of adequate, **sufficient working space in which long term projects could work in each others vicinity** should be solved at the university level.
- **Communications is what I have been the most dissatisfied** with. Every press release suggestion or request to disseminate information about project was met with a DIY request: write your own press release, event add, video script, etc. Most of our suggestions to publicize something - with topical themes, social media visuality and politics - have been turned down or ignored.
- There were a lot of mistakes made by admin, especially the SOLE worktime recording was a massive problem, and **I was always left totally alone** to deal with the ERC when my grant was flagged because of worktime allocation problems. **I had to invest a lot of working time to resolve these problems** that were 100% caused by the administration.



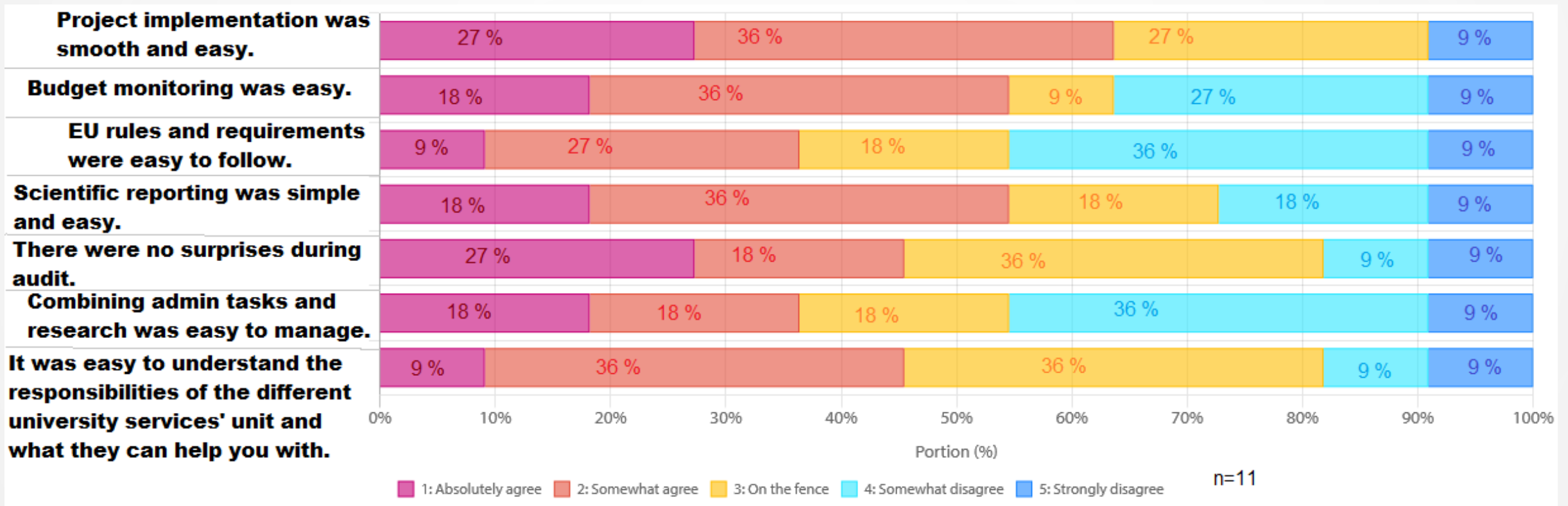


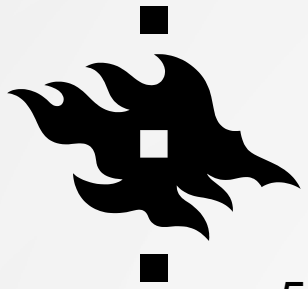
**“I ALSO WOULD HAVE VERY MUCH NEEDED  
ADVICE WITH COORDINATING PROJECT  
MANAGEMENT, OUTREACH, REPORTING ETC.”**

Respondent to the question **“What are the reasons for your satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the university services?”**  
(Had no coordinator, managed admin with the help of a post-doc)



# WHEN THINKING ABOUT THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN, HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?





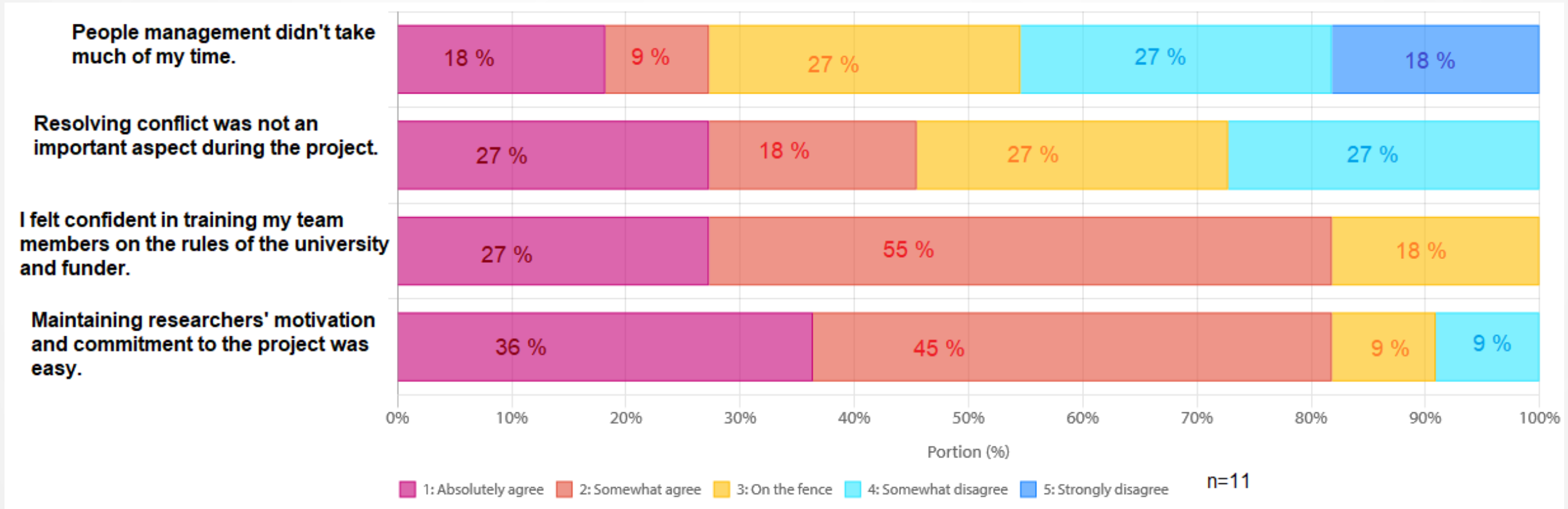
# HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE IN YOUR RESEARCH GROUP?

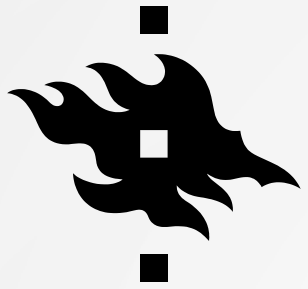
- 5
- 9: The number of people varied during the project, but at its height we were the PI, project coordinator, 3 postdocs, a technical assistant, and 3 research assistants.
- 10
- 10: 1 senior researcher in the beginning, 1 postdoc-project coordinator for the entire duration, 2 postdocs, 1 doctoral researcher for four years, the other left the project halfway, and 3 doctoral researchers for about a year each. 1 trainee for ca. 10 months
- ~10: 5 postdocs (1 fully on the project, other working with related projects). 4 doctoral researchers (1 fully working for the project, 2 partly). 1 technician. 4 Master students, working for the project and obtaining MSc thesis based on the project.
- The project was decentrally organised. In Helsinki were only 4 at maximum paid by the project: 3x post-doc, 1x RA, 1 Coord. Partners had another c. 4 researchers. In the project's orbit were many more, c. 20-30 at various roles and stages.
- 10-15
- 10-15
- ~15 (postdocs, doctoral researchers, research assistants)



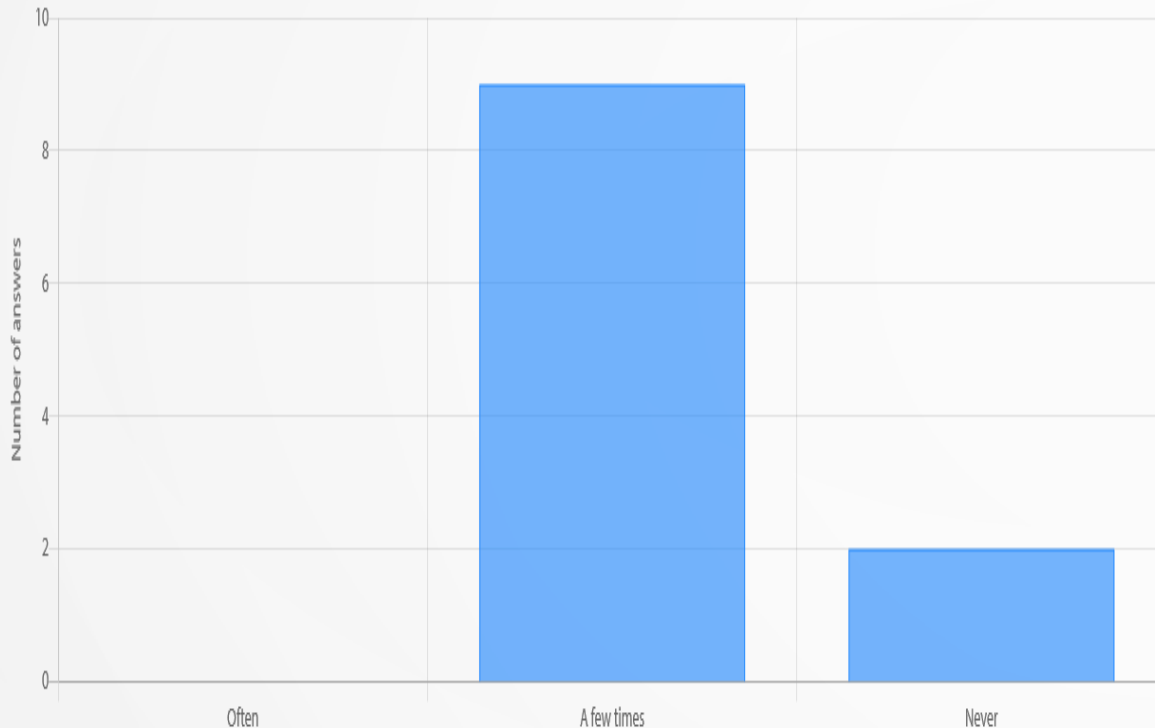


# IN TERMS OF MANAGING YOUR RESEARCH GROUP, HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?





# HAD TO ASK FOR ADVICE FROM THE ERCEA PROJECT OFFICER...



- Amendments
  - Extension
  - Guidance related to (potential) amendments
- Time commitments
  - Problems with reporting time commitment
  - Adjusting the personal commitment percentage
- Budget
  - Reallocating money to other cost categories
  - Purchase of (unforeseen) the major equipment
- Reports
  - Rejected reports due to worktime allocation problems
- Eligible costs
  - Whether it is ok to organize strategy day
  - Managing payments to foreign universities



**"I WISH THERE HAD BEEN ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO COPE WITH ERCEA, WHICH DOES NOT REALLY PROVIDE SUPPORT. ESPECIALLY THE ETHICS MONITORING WAS VERY BURDENSOME, AND WE WERE LEFT COMPLETELY AT OUR OWN TO LEARN HOW TO PROVIDE THE KIND OF REPORTS EXPECTED.**

**I ALSO THINK THERE SHOULD BE HANDS-ON SUPPORT FOR DEALING WITH THE ERCEA PORTAL WHICH IS HIGHLY UNINTUITIVE."**

Respondent to question **"What support you wish you had during the project?"**  
(Had a coordinator to deal with admin)





**“THE OLD WORKING TIME ALLOCATION SOLE WAS A HORRIBLE SYSTEM THAT CAUSED ENDLESS PROBLEMS.**

**IT WOULD HAVE BEEN GREAT THAT THE WORKTIME ALLOCATION (WHICH IS TOTALLY FICTIVE ANYWAY) WOULD HAVE BEEN PROPERLY AND CAREFULLY CALCULATED BUT THEY FAILED MULTIPLE TIMES.**

**EVERY TIME THERE WAS A PROBLEM THE PI HAD TO DEAL WITH IT ALONE ALTHOUGH ALL PROBLEMS WERE CAUSED BY ADMIN MISTAKES.”**

Respondent to question **“What support you wish you had during the project?”**  
(Had no coordinator, managed admin alone)



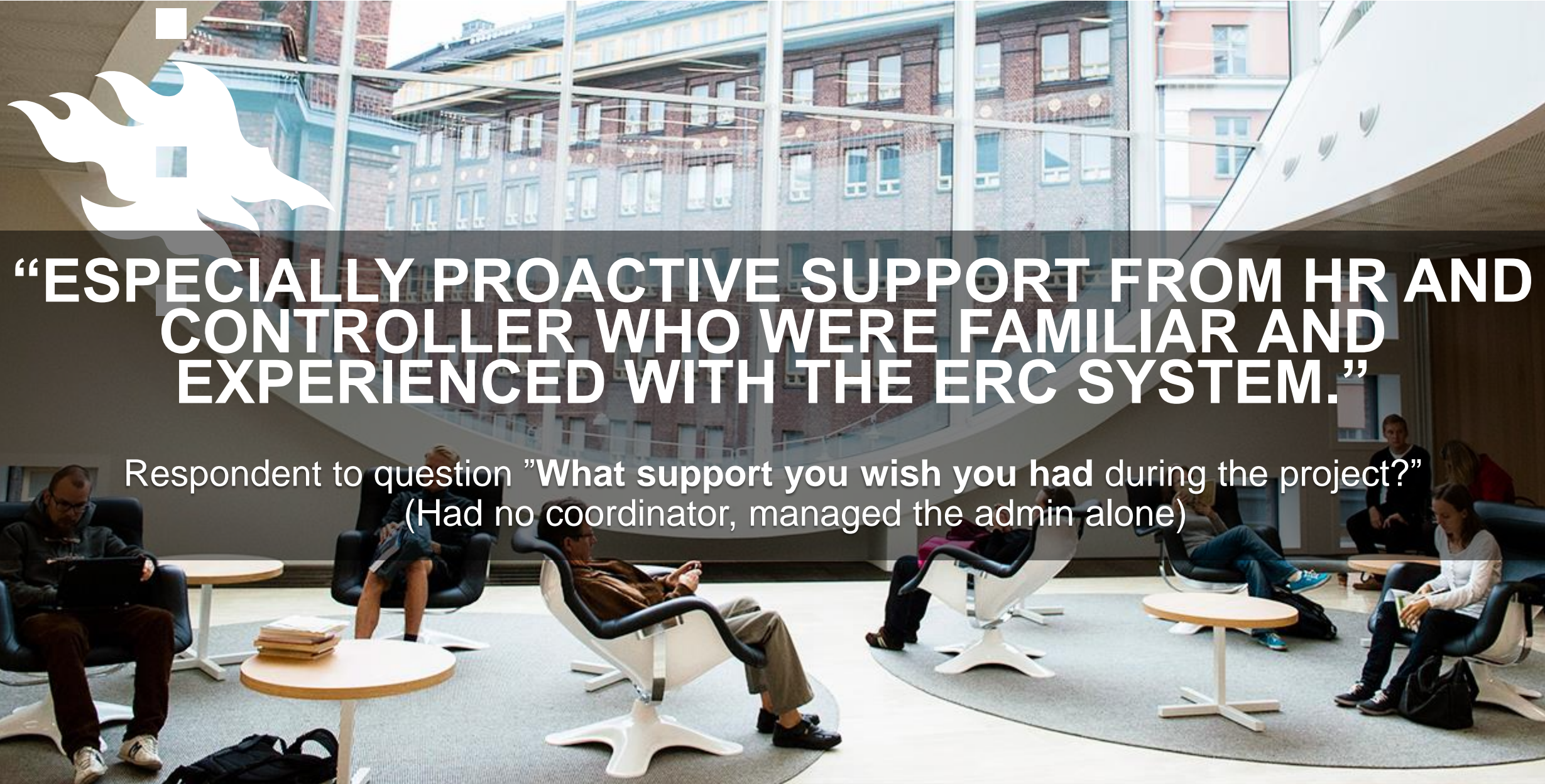


**“A GOOD FINANCIAL OFFICER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SUPPORT”**

**“I HAD VERY GOOD SUPPORT, BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO HAVE BETTER SUPPORT WITH FINANCES UP UNTIL THE FIRST REPORTING.”**

Respondents to “What support did you wish you had during the project time?”

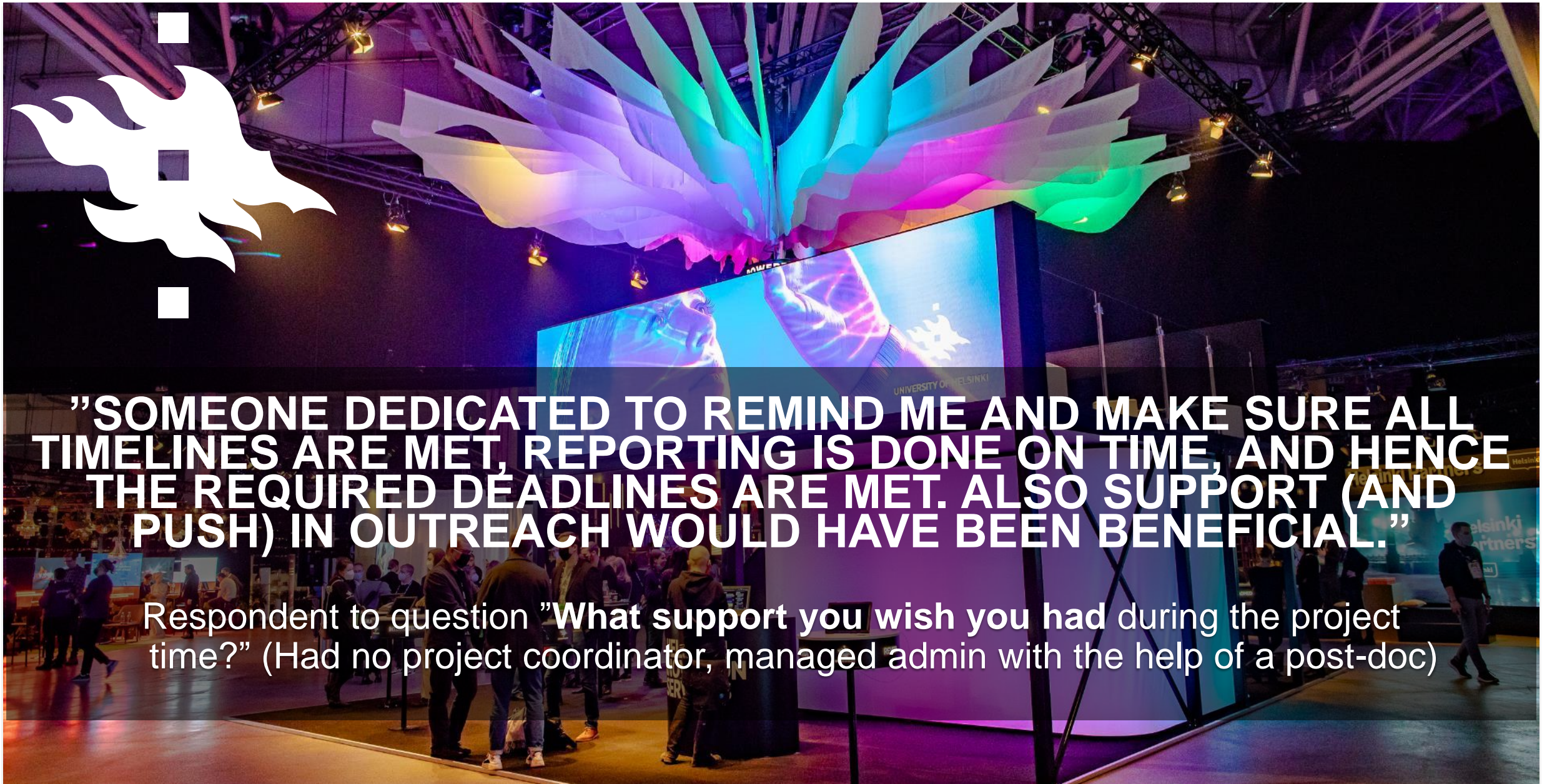




**“ESPECIALLY PROACTIVE SUPPORT FROM HR AND CONTROLLER WHO WERE FAMILIAR AND EXPERIENCED WITH THE ERC SYSTEM.”**

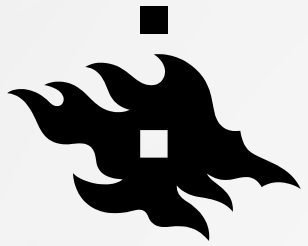
Respondent to question “What support you wish you had during the project?”  
(Had no coordinator, managed the admin alone)





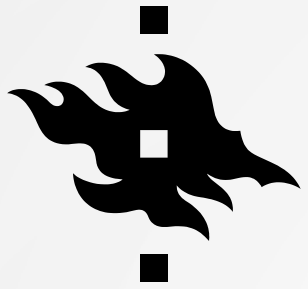
**"SOMEONE DEDICATED TO REMIND ME AND MAKE SURE ALL TIMELINES ARE MET, REPORTING IS DONE ON TIME, AND HENCE THE REQUIRED DEADLINES ARE MET. ALSO SUPPORT (AND PUSH) IN OUTREACH WOULD HAVE BEEN BENEFICIAL."**

Respondent to question **"What support you wish you had during the project time?"** (Had no project coordinator, managed admin with the help of a post-doc)



# WHAT SURPRISED YOU THE MOST DURING THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION?

- Unexpected tasks or complexity
  - “The budgeted salary costs and the expenses did not match. I was able to sort it out, but it took a long time and in the end I created my own shadow bookkeeping to be able to plan the project's spending.”
- Audit
  - “At the end the money used was checked extremely carefully. During the project the use of the money was very flexible, even between the categories, however, at the last project accounting a lot of detailed questions were asked with a need to explain money usage throughout the project.”
- Having to trust the process and amount of success
  - “Not everything can be done and plans can change and that's ok”
  - “How in the end the project accomplished as much as it did - we ended up completing all the main points I had written in the project plan (and many others that were originally not there). The most astonishing thing was to see how the team learned to work together and how each member excelled. This really made me think long-term projects are worth the trouble.”
- Amount of bureaucracy
  - “Relatively little bureaucracy”
  - “The very long legal partnership contract necessary to start the project.”

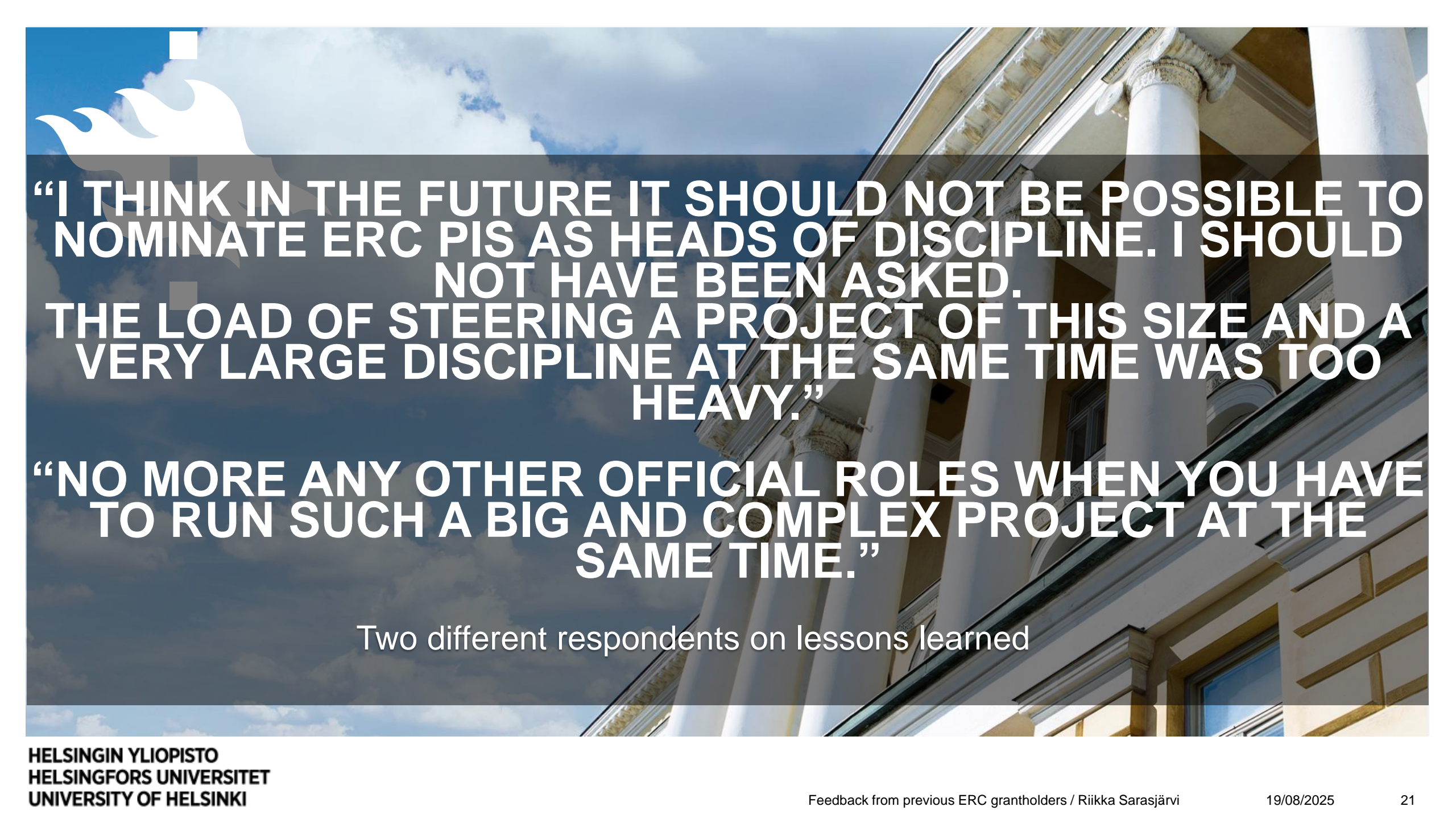


# WHAT LESSONS WILL YOU TAKE IN CONSIDERATION FOR YOUR NEXT PROJECT?

7 out of 11 respondents confirmed that they are planning to apply for EU or other large competitive funding soon.

- “No more official partnerships with foreign institutions; don't trust the words of presumably good colleagues; better keep tasks in own hand. I.e., better choice of close collaborators; no contracts longer than 2+1 Y.”
- “The idea of the project is the most important. It must be novel and groundbreaking, and it should be sold convincingly to the ERC panel. This is the most important - all other components (including my CV) are secondary.”
- “Hiring a senior post doc to take some burden off from me.”
- “There are many good practices we developed together with my post-doc project coordinator that I would consider necessary to replicate in the future. Especially, I think, the human-centered approach to creativity we developed that included taking different forms of well-being into account.”

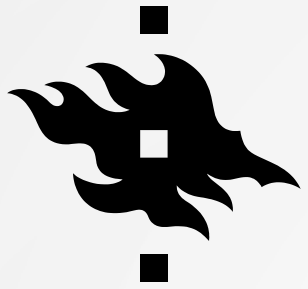




**“I THINK IN THE FUTURE IT SHOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE TO  
NOMINATE ERC PIS AS HEADS OF DISCIPLINE. I SHOULD  
NOT HAVE BEEN ASKED.  
THE LOAD OF STEERING A PROJECT OF THIS SIZE AND A  
VERY LARGE DISCIPLINE AT THE SAME TIME WAS TOO  
HEAVY.”**

**“NO MORE ANY OTHER OFFICIAL ROLES WHEN YOU HAVE  
TO RUN SUCH A BIG AND COMPLEX PROJECT AT THE  
SAME TIME.”**

Two different respondents on lessons learned



# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPLICATIONS ON PROJECTS

This question was asked to think about the risk assessment in cases of future pandemics

- “Challenges in the laboratory work and supervision, which affected the wellbeing of doctoral researchers”
  - Do we now have improvements in our remote supervision?
- “It prolonged the project a little bit, but luckily i did not need to euthanize any animals (which would have been a disaster and would have delayed my project a lot)”
  - Back-up measures at laboratories to ensure that science can be carried out even in special circumstances?
- “Significant practical and scientific impacts. We had to cancel an important workshop. Most significantly, we had to redesign the most important parts of our data collection.”
  - Highlights the importance of knowledge of relevant online workshop tools and of open-access data because data collection can be hindered





Thank you! Kiitos!

**#WeAreHelsinkiUni**

riikka.sarasjarvi@helsinki.fi





**WITH THE POWER  
OF KNOWLEDGE  
– FOR THE WORLD**