

Annual report 2021

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About the report

This report is a summary of the cases handled by the doctoral student ombudsman (DO) during 2021. (Due to professional secrecy, individual cases are not described.) At the end of the report, some general problems needing urgent attention are listed. The report can be used in the quality enhancement activities for doctoral studies carried out by the university and the students' unions.

Figures for 2021 (*SLU's 2020 annual report*) show that the distribution in per cent of the 535 active doctoral students was 59% women and 41% men. Approximately 44% of the active doctoral students had a foreign background.

It is not possible to directly compare the SLU 2021 annual report and the cases in this report as there are differences, e.g., "foreign background/international doctoral student" do not have the same definition. However, the summary of cases for 2021 shows an even distribution between female and male students. The share of women was 49% and men 51%. Of the DO cases, 69% concerned international doctoral students. During the year, around 7% of the active doctoral students contacted the DO because of problems they had experienced, not necessarily related to a single issue.

This report is shorter than previous annual reports. For more information on DO working methods etc., please refer to the reports for previous years, e.g. 2019 and 2020.

* There is no single definition of the concepts *foreign background* and *international doctoral student*. The definition used in SLU's annual report is from Statistics Sweden and defines *foreign background* as someone born abroad or with both parents born abroad. The DO does not ask individual doctoral students about where they were born or if both their parents were born abroad; instead, *international doctoral student* is defined as someone who communicates in a language other than Swedish, or in some other way makes it clear that they come from a country other than Sweden.

Summary of doctoral student statistics

- During the year, around 7% of the active doctoral students contacted the DO because of problems they had experienced, not necessarily related to a single issue.
- The share of women was 49% and men 51%.
- Of the DO cases, 69% concerned international doctoral students.

A selection of 2021 activities

The start of the year saw a continuing increased spread of Covid-19 and the restrictions and adaptations this brought with it. In January 2021, the DO made plans for several activities in February but, unfortunately, broke her arm and was on full-time sick leave for a month, followed by working 50% for one month and another at 75%. This meant that during spring, most of the time was spent on individual cases. Most meetings during the year took place online using Zoom and Teams or over the phone. Despite being on sick leave part of the time, the DO took part in a number of activities.

Network meetings, conferences, lectures, workshops and other meetings

- Regional network meetings* (5+3)
- SUHF conference, “Forskarutbildning i gränlandet”, 5 May 2021
- Introductory lecture** at the VH and NJ faculties, 6 May 2021
- Introductory lecture, LTV Faculty, 13 October 2021
- Introductory lecture, S Faculty, 21 October 2021
- Introductory lecture, VH and NJ faculties, 18 November 2021
- Webinar for the Scandinavian ombudsman network.
Theme: *The challenge of representing students on different programmes and at different HEIs*

Several update meetings with various instances and meetings with different bodies at SLU such as the Sluss chairs, the Sluss-DN and the Council for PhD Education.

*Exchange of experience and topical issues have been a theme at all network meetings. We have discussed the importance of the DO role being independent, the situation for doctoral students during the Covid-19 pandemic, confidentiality, new migration rules, etc.

**An information leaflet about the DO, the DO's mission and contact details was distributed at the various introductions.

Working groups and workshops/seminars

- International week (limited participation due to broken arm, took part in one planning meeting and participated in events during the week).
- Working group on equal opportunities - arranged two workshops.

Workshop 1: Discrimination, norm criticism and inclusive communication,
10 May 2021

Workshop 2: Master suppression techniques and counter strategies,
30 November 2021

The workshops were arranged in cooperation with the vice deans for gender equality and equal opportunities at the NJ Faculty (Marina Quieiroz) and the VH Faculty (Sofia Nyman), as well as the gender equality and equal opportunities officer for these two faculties (Malin Ekström).

The workshops were preceded by planning meetings, script writing, film recording and a pilot round.

Doctoral student newsletter

- During the year, the doctoral student newsletter, covering topical issues, was distributed using the doctoral students' distribution lists.

Cases*

- 35 cases and a significant number of individual questions from doctoral students on different issues.
- 49% women and 51% men
- 69% international doctoral students and 31% Swedish doctoral students
- Distribution by faculty: NJ: 65 %, VH: 7 %, LTV: 14 %, S: 14 %

*A case is defined as a contact with a doctoral student about a perceived problem that is followed by further contact. It is not a short, clearly delimited question solved by only providing advice.

Reasons for contacting the DO

- Perceived problems linked to supervision, absent supervisor, controlling supervisor, conflict with supervisor and/or disagreement within the research team.
- Stress, physical ailments, depression, burnout, sick leave, rehab
- Lack of motivation
- End of doctoral studies, extension
- Financial problems
- Parenthood
- Covid-19
- New migration rules

In 2021, the DO handled 35 cases from all four faculties. As stated above, the gender distribution* was equal.

The cases require varying amounts of time and levels of commitment as they cover problems both big and small. As an example, one case that was closed during the year but had been ongoing for some time involved over 200 emails and a considerable number of meetings with supervisors, unions, occupational health services, the Division of Human Resources, head of department etc.

Some other cases have involved a significant number of contacts with authorities, supervisors, heads of department, the Division of Human Resources, lecturers, senior university officers, union representatives, safety representatives, occupational health services etc.

*The 2019 annual report contains a reflection on the gender variable. More and more people are identifying as non-binary, and an important question for future statistics is how to report such a variable without compromising on confidentiality as the number of doctoral students in a given year is fairly small.

It is not uncommon for a single case to touch on several different problems.

Perceived problems with supervision remains the most common reason for contacting the DO. Health-related problems such as stress, physical ailments, depression and burnout remain relatively common, as does lack of motivation. Such problems are often linked to supervision not working, or other reasons related to the work environment. Some cases have concerned Covid-19 and concerns about the new migration rules.

Noted areas

During the year, the following areas are some of those that were noted. (See also the areas listed in previous reports.)

Covid-19

For a more in-depth reflection on the effects of Covid-19, see the previous annual reports. In short, Covid-19 remained an issue also in 2021. Both individual students and groups of doctoral students emphasised the need for extra time to complete their doctoral studies to compensate for the consequences of the pandemic. There are perceived differences in how extensions have been handled.

Green light system and supervision quality

The DO raised the issue of a green light system on the Council for PhD Education, and this met with interest. The DO and the Sluss-DN both contacted KI, and a KI representative was invited to the Council for PhD Education.

Over the years, preventive measures related to supervision quality have been implemented, including supervisor training, continuing professional development, seminars, better definitions of responsibilities, support for cooperation, more supervisors, ISPs etc. (For more information, see the reports from previous years.) The Sluss-DN has continued working on the issue of continuing professional development for supervisors and has brought the issue to the attention of the Council for PhD Education. This will remain an issue to monitor.

New migration rules

During the summer, changes to the Aliens Act that will affect doctoral students were introduced. As a result of these changes, several doctoral students contacted the DO after the summer. Only a handful of these contacts became actual cases. The DO informed about the rules through, e.g., emails to the doctoral students' distribution lists. The new rules have also been the subject of discussions at the DO network meetings. This is an important issue to monitor and follow up on.