



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

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Doctoral student ombudsman

2022 Annual report

About the report

This report is a summary of the cases handled by the doctoral student ombudsman (DO) during 2022. (For ethical reasons and due to the ombudsman being bound by professional secrecy, no individual cases will be reported here or elsewhere.)

Like in previous reports, some general problems requiring attention are listed at the end of the report. The report can be used in the quality enhancement activities for doctoral studies carried out by the university and the students' unions.

It is not possible to directly compare the SLU annual report and the cases in this report as there are differences in e.g. the definition of *foreign background/international doctoral student*¹. The annual report is also continually updated, which means a variable for one and the same year may have different values in different reports.

This report, like last year's, is shorter than previous ones. For more information on DO working methods etc., please refer to the reports for previous years such as the 2019 and 2020 annual reports, and the web pages of the Division of Educational Affairs.

Summary of doctoral student statistics

- During the year, around 6 per cent of the active² doctoral students contacted the DO because of problems they had experienced, not necessarily related to a single issue.
- The share of women was 69 per cent and men 31 per cent.
- Of the DO cases, 53 per cent concerned international doctoral students.

¹ 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.

² Based on the numbers in the SLU 2022 annual report. This figure is subject to change as registration takes place continually.

A selection of activities in 2022

In 2022, (doctoral) students and staff have all returned to the workplace to some extent. The pandemic and the closure of workplaces led to most staff and students becoming more comfortable with digital tools. This has been the case also for contacts with doctoral students as most meetings have taken place on Zoom regardless of the student's home campus.

Below is a selection of activities the DO was involved in during 2022.

Network meetings³, conferences, lectures, workshops etc.

- Took part in the SULF webinar 'The new rules regarding permanent residency confirmation', 11 February
- Regional network meeting, 15 March, Ultuna
- Introductory lecture at the NJ and VH Faculties, 6 May
- Introductory lecture at the NJ and VH Faculties, 20 May
- Lecture at the supervisor training, 'docent course', 24 May
- Regional network meeting, KTH, 25 August
- Zoom meeting with DOs at other higher education institutions on the theme 'Monitoring developments – how to keep ourselves and others updated', 29 August
- Interactive webinar: 'Mentimeter via Zoom', 31 August
- Introductory lecture at the LTV Faculty, Alnarp, 10 October
- Introductory lecture at the S Faculty, Umeå, 12 October
- Workshop 'Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the Swedish Higher Education Sector, 2 December
- Several meetings with various instances for updates, as well as other meetings with different bodies at SLU such as the Sluss chairs, the Sluss-DN and the Council for PhD Education.

Working groups, mentorship and workshops/seminars

- Digital mentor for the new DO and others at the University of Gävle, 4 February
- Equal opportunities working group, co-arranger of a workshop as well as several meetings planning the workshop 'Gender diversity: knowledge, policies and best practices', guest speaker Warren Kunce, gender diversity consultant, 2 June
- Mini survey to SLU doctoral students, 'Tips to your supervisors' about ensuring the doctoral student perspective and conveying what they see as most important in the student-supervisor relationship. Purpose: Adding a more direct doctoral student perspective in supervisor training.

³ Exchange of experience and topical issues have been a recurring theme at the network meetings. We have discussed the importance of the DO role being independent, being a doctoral student during the Covid-19 pandemic, confidentiality, new migration rules, etc.

DO newsletters

Regular DO newsletters covering DO-specific information; these are in addition to emails on issues such as scholarships. I set up these newsletters because I wanted to share more DO-specific information, anything from current events to regulations and information about holidays. These newsletters were sent out in 2021 as well.

Cases⁴

- 32 cases and a significant number of individual questions from doctoral students on different issues.
- 69 per cent women and 31 per cent men
- 53 per cent international doctoral students and 47 per cent Swedish doctoral students
- Faculty distribution: NJ 42%, VH 17%, LTV 24%, S 17%

In 2022, the DO handled 32 cases from all four faculties. Looking at gender distribution⁵, more women than men have been in touch during the year. Cases have involved slightly more international than Swedish doctoral students.

I want to point out that the cases handled by the DO are all different, require varying amounts of time and generate many contacts with other parties.

Reasons for contacting the DO⁶

Like in previous years, a common reason for contacting the DO is that the doctoral student has experienced some kind of problem in the relationship with their supervisor, or in the research team. In 2022, there were also some cases where private relationships affected the work situation in different ways. Poor self-confidence, time pressure, illness and other forms of health problems, including consequences of Covid-19, have also had negative effects. Concerns and worries linked to the reorganisation of VHC have primarily been brought forward in early 2023, however, there were also cases related to this at the end of 2022. 2022 also saw an increase in the number of students with disabilities that contacted the DO.

Noted areas

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

⁴ A case is defined as follows: A case is created when 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ As mentioned at the beginning of this report, for ethical reasons no individual cases will be described. To avoid making it possible to identify individuals, for a problem to be described, it needs to be reported in at least three separate cases.

Sick leave, rehabilitation and prolonged doctoral studies

SLU has procedures for illness, rehabilitation and work modifications; however, information on this is mostly available only to managers. Some information is available on the web, open to anyone. Occupational health services help prevent work-related ill health and, through adaptation of tasks and rehabilitation, enable employees to return to work. A problem for doctoral students is their fixed-time employment. When a doctoral student who has been on sick leave because of stress returns to work, their period of employment starts ticking by again, which in turn can lead to more stress.

If a doctoral student has not reported sick, this makes the situation even more difficult.

It is important that doctoral students report sick when they are unwell to prevent days from turning into weeks that cannot be reclaimed retroactively as a reason for prolonging their studies. Efforts to keep doctoral students from burnout are of utmost importance. Designing a rehabilitation plan that enables them to return to work, and by extension complete their thesis without jeopardising their health, is essential but also a challenge.

Private relationships

Over the years, there have been cases where private relationships affected the work situation in different ways. Private relationships are not unusual in the research community, but when one part is dependent on the other, this can cause complications. This is why SLU, like other higher education institutions, have rules for cooperation in governing documents for doctoral education. SLU's 2019 governing document states the following:

‘Two persons having a close personal relationship (e.g. married, cohabiting or close relatives) may not belong to the same supervisors’ group. The doctoral student and the supervisor, that is both the principal and the assistant supervisor, may not have a close personal relationship.’

Perhaps this is enough, but it is also important that all parties involved take care to handle the situation as professionally as possible.

Doctoral students with disabilities

The last few years have seen an increase in the number of undergraduate and Master's students who apply for study support for students with disabilities. This increase can also be seen at other higher education institutions as well as among doctoral students. This is an area where higher education institutions still have a lot of work to do.

Reorganisation of the VH Faculty

Individual doctoral students have expressed concern over the reorganisation of the faculty and the lack of information as this has a negative impact on their work. The VH Faculty's doctoral student council will continue to monitor this issue.

Green light system and supervision quality

Shortly after KI launched the green light system (see previous annual reports), the DO informed the Sluss-DN about this system. The doctoral student representatives in Sluss-DN showed an interest, and the DO and the Sluss-DN both contacted KI. A KI representative was invited to the Council for PhD Education. This was some

time ago. As KI now has more experience with the system, it may be of interest for the doctoral student councils to take another look at this tool, intended to promote quality.

Another quality-enhancing issue mentioned in previous reports is professional development for supervisors. 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. As a result of the 2021 quality enhancement activities, the EPU has presented a proposal for compulsory continuing professional development for experienced supervisors to strengthen them in this important task.

Faculty introduction for new doctoral students

The faculty introductions for new doctoral students are described in previous reports.