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12/02/2021

Doctoral Student Survey 2020: Results and Analysis



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Creator of front page picture: Michael Kwick, SLU

2. Summary

In total, 55% (298 individuals) of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences' doctoral students responded to the Doctoral Student Survey 2020. On the whole, most respondents are satisfied with their education, the quantity and quality of supervision they receive and their work environment and level of collegial support. Responses to the survey also reveal areas in which there is room for improvement.

In recent years, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) has improved online information to newly admitted doctoral students and carried out a review of onboarding procedures in order to ensure that doctoral students are formally introduced to their departments and programmes. Despite this, one in three of respondents stated that they had not been formally introduced to the programme and one in three of those who had been introduced were dissatisfied with the introduction they received. As a result of the survey, an online introductory course has been created. This course describes third-cycle studies at SLU, the rules that apply, the rights and obligations of doctoral students and other important aspects of the education. [All newly admitted doctoral students receive an email with a link to the open online course – to be used as and when required.](#)

It is compulsory for supervisors and doctoral students to jointly plan and monitor the study programme with the aid of an individual study plan (ISP). Survey responses indicate that SLU needs to simplify and clarify procedures for how doctoral students and supervisors utilise the ISP tool. Work to implement these improvements began during autumn 2020 and the plan is that a user-friendly digital system for managing doctoral students' ISPs will be in place by summer 2021.

The survey included a couple of questions on discrimination and harassment. Sadly, 38 individuals reported that they had been discriminated against during their studies at SLU and 21 that they had been subjected to harassment. The majority of these incidents went unreported. In addition, the percentage of doctoral students who state that they know how to contact the doctoral student ombudsman at SLU continues to decrease. SLUSS (the collaborative body for student unions at SLU), the doctoral student ombudsman and SLU are working together to improve this situation.

Each third-cycle programme is tailored to and places great demands on the individual doctoral student. At the same time, these demands are not always clearly expressed, which may create unnecessary stress. The results of the survey show the need for clearer communication of the demands on doctoral students and supervisors respectively, as well as information on their rights and obligations. The recently established online introductory course and continuing professional development for supervisors with the emphasis on the role and responsibilities of the principal supervisor are two new ways to meet this need.

Faculties have been provided with their own results and have begun to analyse them in order to identify areas for improvement.

3. History and background information

For the purposes of this report, the term *doctoral student* also includes those admitted to third-cycle studies with a view to obtaining a Degree of Licentiate.

Since 2006, a survey has been regular distributed to all active doctoral students at SLU. The aim is to ascertain how doctoral students perceive their education and, at the same time, identify any problems and areas for development in third-cycle courses and programmes. Some of the questions have remained the same throughout the years, while others have been added, removed or altered, meaning that direct comparison over time is not always possible. [The results of previous years' surveys are available at the SLU Staff web.](#) The questionnaire was revised prior to the 2017 survey. Instead of a continuous scale from 1 to 10 (highly dissatisfied to highly satisfied), for some of the questions five discrete response alternatives were introduced: Very little/not at all; Not very much; A great deal; To a very great extent; and Don't know. This change means that some results from this year's survey can only be compared with the 2017 survey.

The survey was conducted at the end of February 2020, when all doctoral students who had been active during 2019 (at least 1% activity reported in Ladok during the spring or autumn semester) were sent an email requesting them to answer a questionnaire. Their answers were registered anonymously in a database. It should be noted that the survey was conducted before third-cycle studies were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The response rate for the 2020 survey is comparable with previous years' surveys, with 55% (298) of the doctoral students to whom the questionnaire was sent responding (Table 1). A comparison between the composition of the group of respondents and the group of all doctoral students according to SLU's Annual Report 2019 shows an equal proportion of women and of those with first and second-cycle degrees obtained at foreign higher education institutions. The proportion of respondents per faculty is also comparable with active doctoral students at the faculties (Table 2). Despite the quantitative representativeness of some variables, it cannot be assumed that the 294 individuals who failed to respond share the perceptions, experiences and assessments of the group of respondents.

Aside from providing a snapshot of the respondents' perceptions of their situation at the time of response, the survey is also valuable in that it allows for comparisons over time. The results of the survey indicate which components of third-cycle programmes' content, form and implementation fail to meet the respondents' expectations and needs. Subsequent follow-ups and evaluations are required to unravel the causal relationships behind these indications and to decide on appropriate measures.

Table 1. Background information on those responding to the survey in each year.

	2006	2009	2011	2014	2017	2020
Total number of respondents	343	416	403	336	282	298
Response rate (%)	52	60	57	48	53	55
Background variables						
Women (%)	59	63	58	61	54	59
Over the age of 35 (%)	23	24	25	29	31	19
First and second cycle education from SLU (%)	39	33	25	23	33	28
First and second cycle education from other Swedish university (%)	39	36	41	37	23	27
First and second cycle education from foreign university (%)	22	31	34	40	44	45
Participates in research school (%)	28	42	65	65	67	70
Has used more than half of the actual period of study ("nettostudietid") (%)	66	58	60	71	69	50

Table 2. Background information on those responding to the survey, broken down by faculty.

	LTV	NJ	VH	S
Total number of respondents	49	116	50	52
Response rate (%)	59	51	41	44
Andel av svar per fakultet (%)	16	39	17	17
Andel aktiva doktorander av SLU total (%)	15	41	22	21
Background variables				
Women (%)	52	58	69	60
Over the age of 35 (%)	26	8	41	15
First and second cycle education from SLU (%)	25	45	73	35
First and second cycle education from other Swedish university (%)	24	32	12	33
First and second cycle education from foreign university (%)	51	52	39	32
Participates in research school (%)	40	85	71	69
Has used more than half of the actual period of study ("nettostudietid") (%)	44	48	57	54

Answer alternatives were deliberately chosen to offer a choice between "Good" or "Bad"; i.e., it was not possible to choose something in between. Most of the questions offered the alternative answers Yes/No or one of the following:

- Very little/not at all
- Not very much

- A great deal
- To a very great extent

In this document, the alternative answers and usually reported and discussed in aggregated form; i.e., “Very little/not at all” aggregated with “Not very much” and “A great deal” aggregated with “To a very great extent”.

Statistical analyses have been performed using chi-square tests in SPSS of gender deviations, faculty deviations and deviations regarding higher education background (foreign background). In order to make the tests sustainable, with sufficient answers in each cell, some answer alternatives have been grouped. In most cases, “*Not very much*” has been aggregated with “*Very little/not at all*” to form a common group.

4. Introduction to doctoral education

Of those who responded, 68% stated that they had been formally introduced to the department and programme. Of these, 70% say that they are satisfied with the introduction they were given, which is in line with the results of the 2017 survey. Compared to doctoral students at other faculties, those at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science (VH) are most satisfied with their introduction, with 90% responding that they are satisfied. Statistical analyses found no significant gender disparities. The percentage who expressed satisfaction with their introduction was however higher among graduates from SLU than graduates from other Swedish or foreign higher education institutions. It is noteworthy that the percentage of doctoral students with a first and second-cycle degree from SLU is higher at the VH Faculty, the faculty at which the highest percentage were satisfied with their introduction.

Free text answers to the question on introductions show that the most common reasons for not being able to participate in introductions at faculties was that they did not fit with the date on which the doctoral student’s third-cycle studies began or that they had not been notified that the introduction was to take place. Those who were given an introduction but were not satisfied called for more tangible information. Some said that they had received incorrect or conflicting information, while others said that, while information was relevant and correct, it came far too late in their studies.

5. Planning and following up doctoral education

One vital aspect of third-cycle education is how it is planned and monitored. The most important document in planning third-cycle studies is the individual study plan (ISP). According to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100), all doctoral students are required to have an ISP. The doctoral students who responded to the question of whether they have an individual study plan (291

individuals) replied that they did have an ISP, with 72% expressing satisfaction with how it has been updated.

The free text answers show a certain amount of uncertainty regarding how ISPs should be followed up and revised, and indeed what their function actually is. Several doctoral students wrote that their ISP was largely viewed as a necessary evil, a bureaucratic formality, by their supervisors – an attitude that seems to rub off on the doctoral students themselves. Many find the template repetitive and complicated, with several pointing out that some form of digital ISP would be more relevant.

The fact that all respondents stated that they have an ISP is good, given that the Higher Education Ordinance requires all doctoral students to have one. SLU does however need to make efforts to ensure that the information contained in the ISP document itself is more accessible and to better explain how and for what purpose the plan should be used.

Approximately half of respondents stated that they have had a midway review, with the majority (87%) of these expressing satisfaction with how this was conducted. That said, some of the free text comments did mention that it was felt that they received too little feedback given the amount of work put into preparation and presentation.

On the question of whether they are aware of the general qualitative targets for third-cycle studies, 56% responded that they are. Here, it is possible to discern a significant gender disparity, with men more likely to respond “To a very great extent” than women. In answer to another question, a total of 86% responded that they know what they need to achieve in order to obtain the Degree of Doctor. A relatively large proportion (44%) of respondents are however uncertain of their rights and obligations as a doctoral student. All of 88% feel that they are able to exert influence over how their education is planned. A sense of being able to influence one’s education/work is something that can reduce stress and foster a feeling of being in control over one’s situation.

Of those who responded to the survey, 85% stated that they take the initiative to organise meetings/working groups/seminars. It did however emerge in subsequent free text answers that such initiatives are not always well received by (senior) colleagues, as this is not considered something that doctoral students should engage in. This may seem strange, given that one important element of third-cycle studies is to gradually become more autonomous, to learn to take the initiative in research activities and discuss research results.

6. Courses, seminars and research schools

According to 63% of respondents, the range of courses corresponds to their needs, while 33% do not feel that the available courses are sufficient. Here, there are significant deviations in terms of faculty affiliation: doctoral students at the Faculty of Landscape Architecture, Horticulture and Crop Production Science (LTV) are less likely to agree to the proposition that the range of courses corresponds to their needs than those at other faculties.

The majority (77%) are satisfied with the quality of the courses they have participated in. There are also significant deviations in satisfaction with the quality of courses, with doctoral students at the VH Faculty expressing greater satisfaction while those at the LTV Faculty are less satisfied.

No significant gender disparities were apparent regarding either the range of courses or their quality. Nor were there significant disparities based on different higher education backgrounds, although it is possible to discern a tendency for doctoral students with first and second-cycle degrees from foreign institutions to agree to a greater extent that the course range corresponds to their needs.

As regards access to suitable seminars, there appears to be a greater disparity between departments/research groups, although even here the majority (66%) are satisfied with the quality. In free text answers, some were unsure which seminars were being referred to, which may of course be because the department in question has not arranged any suitable seminar series that doctoral students have the opportunity to attend. While no significant differences can be seen with regard to gender or higher education background, here too there is a tendency for doctoral students with first and second-cycle degrees from foreign institutions to feel that there are suitable seminars available to them.

Of the respondents, 70% say that they belong to a research school and 74% of these that they are satisfied with the educational activities (e.g. courses, seminars and study visits) arranged by research schools.

7. Supervision and supervisors

Supervision is a vital element of third-cycle studies and it is important that the doctoral student and their supervisors enjoy a good collaboration. Of those responding to the survey, 81% state that they are satisfied with the amount of supervision. Doctoral students from the LTV Faculty who responded to the survey are significantly less satisfied with the amount of supervision than those from other faculties. The survey also reveals that 79% of respondents are satisfied with the quality of supervision. With regard to these two questions, doctoral students were urged to include both their principal supervisor and other qualified individuals in the term *supervisors*.

Of those responding to the survey, 84% say that they have confidence in their supervisor, while 58% write that they have regular discussions with their supervisor during which they jointly evaluate the programme in relation to qualitative targets. A significantly lower percentage (34%) state that they have regular discussions with their supervisor regarding their postdoctoral career. With regard to these three questions, doctoral students were urged to respond based on the person who they consider to be their de facto supervisor, who need not be their principal supervisor. Graduates of foreign higher education institutions are more likely to discuss the programme with their supervisor in relation to qualitative targets. Graduates of SLU are less likely to discuss their postdoctoral career with their supervisor.

No significant gender-based disparities were identified in any of the above areas.

8. The everyday work, research and study environment

Discrimination, harassment and norms

Of the respondents, 78% agree with the proposition that they are a respected member of the working group/division/department, while 74% state that their education is supported by the everyday work environment.

The percentage of respondents who have experienced discrimination at SLU during their studies is 14% (38 individuals). The majority of these doctoral students report discrimination based on sex* (14 individuals) or ethnicity* (12 individuals). Other reported grounds for discrimination are:

- age*;
- sexual orientation*;
- their position as a doctoral student (hierarchical structure);
- inability to speak Swedish;
- transgender identity or expression* (*reported by 1 individual*);
- appearance (*reported by 1 individual*);
- not working in Uppsala (*reported by 1 individual*); and
- political opinions (*reported by 1 individual*).

**According to the Swedish Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567), the seven grounds for discrimination are sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age. These are marked with an asterisk in the above description.*

The majority (80%: 36 of the 45 people who answered the question) have chosen not to report this discrimination to SLU. The most common reasons for not reporting discrimination are that it is difficult to prove, it was not experience as

being “that bad”, that doing so would be detrimental to their education, or the fear of not being believed.

The next question asks whether doctoral students have experienced harassment during their studies at SLU, with 9% (21 individuals) responding that they have been harassed. Sexual harassment is the most common cause, with almost half of those answering yes citing that as the basis (10 individuals). In the 2014 survey, 30 respondents replied that they had been subjected to harassment. Other grounds are sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and position as a doctoral student. Individual respondents state that they have been harassed due to transgender identity or expression, or appearance. Once again, 80% of respondents who experienced harassment chose not to report the matter (27 of 34) for the reasons stated above.

One new question this year is whether there are norms in the study programme relating to how one “should” be: 64% answered yes to this question, with 41% of respondents perceiving such norms as problematic. The most common norm mentioned is that doctoral students are expected to work around the clock, “live and breathe their dissertation”, always be highly motivated and never complain. One should spend a great deal of time on studies and talk about how much there is to do. Research must be placed above all other considerations (family, friends, leisure). There is an apprehension that one should be able to do everything, know everything, cope with everything and never ask for help or advice. Competition often arises and it is considered important not to show “weakness”. This leads to stress, exhaustion and a feeling of never being quite “good enough”. Doctoral students are expected to intuitively grasp the demands placed on them during their studies.

Another norm that comes up, and that is related to the above, is a hierarchical structure within which doctoral students are expected to be “grateful” to the department and demonstrate exaggerated respect for more senior researchers. For example, it is mentioned that in certain quarters it is frowned upon for a doctoral student to express opinions that contradict those of a professor or to take the initiative to arrange meetings, seminars, etc.

While it would be remiss not to give these opinions all due consideration, it should be noted that 88% of respondents feel that they are treated with respect by teachers and colleagues and 94% that they are treated with respect by fellow doctoral students.

Access to conferences, research methods and international networks

Limited opportunities to participate in research conferences is a concern for 16% of respondents. With regard to access to necessary research methods, 12% stated that they do not have access to the methods they require. Doctoral students at the LTV Faculty are the less satisfied and those at the Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences (NJ) more satisfied. In addition, 13% express dissatisfaction with the research equipment they have at their disposal.

One third of respondents (34%) do not believe that they have access to necessary international networks. That such a large proportion experience this limitation is a matter that warrants further investigation. Doctoral students at the Faculty of Forest Sciences (S) and the NJ Faculty are more likely to feel that they have access to international networks than those at other faculties.

9. Contact, advice and support

It should be noted that the survey was conducted before third-cycle studies were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Doctoral Student Ombudsman (DO) provides support and counselling and where necessary represents the interests of individual doctoral students in matters related to third-cycle studies. When asked whether they know how to contact the DO, 61% answered yes. This question has been included since the first survey in 2006, when 90% of respondents stated that they knew how to contact the DO. This percentage has decreased by a few percentage points in every subsequent survey. Knowledge of how to contact the Doctoral Student Council has remained steady between 80 and 90% in all surveys with the exception of 2014, when 76% answered in the affirmative. On this occasion, 81% of respondents were aware of how to contact the Doctoral Student Council.

One question concerned support for doctoral students with disabilities, with 12% responding that they are aware that support is available, 34% that they were unaware and 52% that the question is not relevant to them. Here, one can see a significant gender-based disparity, with men answering yes to a greater extent. A follow-up question concerned the experiences of those who have utilised this support. Of the 27% who responded that they had taken advantage of the support, the majority said that it works OK (52%) or well (41%); however, according to the Division of Educational Affairs, only one doctoral student was registered as a user of support in 2019, which means that those rating the available support in this survey have been rating something other than that referred to in the question. The conclusions one can draw from this is that: i) the support is not widely known and ii) it is easy to misunderstand what support the question is referring to.

10. Going forward

Of those who responded, 85% have given little thought to changing their principal supervisor. The percentage of respondents who have seriously considered changing their supervisor(s) increased from 11% in 2017 to 15% in 2020.

The percentage of respondents who have considered dropping out of their studies without graduating has also increased, from 13% in 2017 to 16% in 2020. Here

there is a significant disparity based on higher education background, with graduates of foreign institutions less inclined to drop out of their studies without graduating than others.

Just like previous surveys, a majority (76%) believe that they will graduate within the stipulated period.

As regards the proposition that they will have adequate employment within one year of graduating, 56% of respondents agree, 17% have a more negative attitude and a relatively large percentage (27%) do not know. In the 2017 survey, a somewhat lower percentage (52%) were confident of having adequate employment, the percentage of negative responses was higher (26%) and the percentage of don't knows lower (22%).

11. Overall satisfaction

When asked whether they would begin third-cycles today had they not already been admitted, a total of 75% replied that they would either probably or definitely choose to do so. Only 5% stated that they definitely would not choose third-cycle studies today, while 14% would probably choose not to. A smaller proportion (6%) are unsure what their decision would be.

Among those responding, 77% state that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their situation as a doctoral student taking everything into account. Here, there are significant disparities between faculties: Doctoral students at the LTV Faculty are less satisfied, while those at the S Faculty and VH Faculty are more likely to be very satisfied.

The majority consider their situation as a doctoral student to fulfil their expectations, while 21% respond "not very much" and 5% "very little/not at all". Here too there are significant disparities between faculties: Doctoral students at the VH Faculty are most satisfied and those at the LTV Faculty least satisfied.

Another question was: "Imagine the perfect third-cycle programme in the perfect work environment at the perfect department: how close do you feel you are to this perfect situation?" Responses to this question were: 12% "to a very great extent", 47% "a great deal", 28% "not very much" and 8% "very little/not at all". On this question too there are significant disparities between faculties: Once again, doctoral students at the VH Faculty are most satisfied and those at the LTV Faculty least satisfied.

No significant disparities could be detected based on gender or higher education background.

On comparing the answers to the above questions in the 2017 survey, we see that the percentage that would begin third-cycle studies today if not already admitted has declined from 83 to 75% (Table 3). A similar downward trend is also seen on the question of the level of satisfaction with one's situation as a doctoral student and how well this situation fulfils expectations. The proportion of respondents

who feel that their programme, study environment and situation are perfect increased from 57 to 59%. Due to changes to the answer alternatives, it is not possible to compare answers to these questions with pre-2017 surveys.

Table 3. Questions on overall satisfaction: percentage of respondents during the years 2017 and 2020 respectively.

	2017	2020	2017	2020	2017	2020
If you had not already been admitted to the doctoral education, would you choose to start a doctoral education today?	Definitely not/Probably not		Probably/Definitely		I don't know	
	14	19	83	75	4	6
If you make a general judgement of your situation as a doctoral student, how satisfied are you?	Very little/not at all/Not very much		A great deal/To a very great extent		I don't know	
	20	21	80	77	0	2
Please rate how well your situation as a doctoral student fulfil your expectations.	Very little/not at all/Not very much		A great deal/To a very great extent		I don't know	
	25	26	73	70	3	4
Imagining the perfect doctoral education and the perfect work situation at the perfect department. Please rate how close to this perfect situation yours is.	Very little/not at all/Not very much		A great deal/To a very great extent		I don't know	
	40	36	57	59	3	4

12. Concluding free text questions

The survey concludes with three free text questions intended to capture viewpoints, opinions and suggestions that might not have an obvious place among the other questions. The propositions listed below have all come up in answers to these questions. Much of what is mentioned is also apparent from previous questions in the survey.

“I am very satisfied with:”

The free text answers to this question can be divided into three groups. The answers are summarised below. The vast majority of responses relate to the work environment and supervision.

Work environment and colleagues

Many doctoral students mention a good work environment and support from competent, helpful colleagues as something they very much appreciate. They feel like members of a research group on equal terms and do not perceive there to be a strongly hierarchical structure inhibiting their progress; rather, there is an open-minded atmosphere in which everyone’s opinion is valued. Working hours are flexible and they feel in control of their duties. They have access to the methods and equipment they need and receive help and support as and when necessary.

Supervision and supervisors

Many respondents write that they appreciate the commitment, encouragement, support and help they receive from their supervisors. The fact that supervisors are available for discussion and rapid feedback is appreciated, as is the opportunity to influence their education. The opportunity to test their own ideas is highly valued.

Dissertation project

Many of the comments demonstrate that there is great commitment to one’s own research subject and dissertation project. Flexibility in terms of being able to control the direction of research is much appreciated. Many write of the pleasure in feeling that one is doing something important – with interesting and enjoyable duties.

“In my opinion, this needs to be improved:”

In many respects, the responses to this question are the polar opposite of those to the above question (“I am very satisfied with”). Here too, many of the responses relate to the work environment and supervision, although flawed communication/information and general conditions also receive a good deal of comment.

Work environment

Many of the comments deal with stress and a poor balance between work, study and leisure. Concerns are also expressed regarding the difficulty of balancing research, education, teaching and other administrative duties within third-cycle studies. Several comments suggest that more support is required for stress management. Some of the comments highlight the existence of strongly hierarchical structures in which doctoral students are viewed as cheap labour rather than colleagues. There is room for improvement in both the departmental and interdepartmental collaborative climate. The situation of doctoral students is not always taken seriously. As Human Resources and the university's occupational health service do not always have the requisite knowledge of the specific situation of doctoral students, it is sometimes difficult to implement the right support measures.

Research and education climate

According to many of the comments, the research climate would benefit from being more stimulating and creative. *"It feels as if I've learned how to conduct research, but not necessarily how to be a researcher,"* writes one doctoral student. Lack of networks and inadequate access to scientific seminars and discussion forums may make it difficult for doctoral students to learn to exchange scientific thoughts and concepts, making the scientific life a lonely one. This is especially characteristic of doctoral students who, for example, lack a departmental research context as part of a larger research group and so forth. Some respondents say that they feel unprepared for postdoctoral life. Some comment that they lack access to any network, do not know how to apply for grants or what is expected of them as a researcher over and above conducting research.

Some doctoral students comment that third-cycle studies at SLU are more like a regular job than education at the highest level. They write that a doctoral student should be taught to be more autonomous, to take more responsibility and be given the opportunity to test their own theories, at least towards the end of their studies. It is noted that there is a lack of courses and seminars, especially subject courses in the social sciences. Information on available courses could be improved and disseminated further in advance. Career development and guidance is lacking at a central level, leaving it up to the supervisor group to discuss these issues with doctoral students.

Supervision and supervisors

While it is crucial that communication between supervisor and doctoral student works well, this is unfortunately not always the case. This leaves the doctoral student in a highly vulnerable position given their dependence on their principal supervisor. It may sometimes be difficult to understand and communicate

expectations, especially at the start of a third-cycle programme. Several doctoral students write that supervisors should be better equipped to support and advise those with stress management issues. Continuous professional development in supervision and pedagogy should be compulsory for supervisors. Some respondents also call for a limit on the how many doctoral students a supervisor can have at any given time.

Some supervisors would benefit from regular reminders about the rights of doctoral students in order to understand that they should not be treated as research assistants. A doctoral student must be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them, with space allowed for creativity and problem-solving. Some supervisors show a lack of commitment and interest in their doctoral students and third-cycle studies in general. Some doctoral students also state that problems are sometimes swept under the carpet and not taken seriously.

Communication and information (introduction)

Responses to this question also reveal that some doctoral students are dissatisfied with the introduction they received to their programme, with some even reporting that they were not offered any form of introduction when commencing their studies.

Graduates of foreign higher education institutions may feel excluded due to a lack of information, for example, regarding how third-cycle studies work at SLU (and in Sweden in general). This group may also require more support and information regarding day-to-day life in Sweden and the mandatory steps required by Swedish authorities in order to be able to study and work here.

“And I would like to add:”

As expected, this open question resulted in hundreds of different more or less clearly formulated opinions, comments and suggestions. Many respondents have also provided answers to other questions in the survey. The following points describe themes common to several of the comments or aspects not touched upon by other questions.

- Shortcomings in supervision – some supervisors should not be permitted to supervise. Some supervisors are unfamiliar with the guidelines and rules. A faster, simpler process for changing principal supervisor is required. Some form of follow-up should be implemented, particularly to investigate the cause when a doctoral student drops out of their studies. Stress, relationships and lack of communication.
- In some cases, doctoral students are viewed as second-class members of staff. It emerges that some doctoral students have not had performance

- reviews and that, in some cases, their department has failed to implement salary increases in accordance with the salary scale for doctoral students.
- Several doctoral students highlight the need to improve the organisation of first and second-cycle teaching. Some doctoral students are not given the opportunity to teach even though they would like to, while others are so overwhelmed with teaching that they find it difficult to keep up other duties and their own studies. It has been pointed out that, at departments with many doctoral students from a foreign background, there can be a lot of work for those who speak Swedish as certain courses must be given in Swedish.
 - Several respondents mention a lack of clarity regarding employment conditions for doctoral students who do not have a doctoral studentship, externally funded and scholarship doctoral students, for example. There are no questions in the survey on this subject.
 - Licentiate admissions: there are examples of individuals admitted to study for a degree of licentiate on the understanding that they would be granted an extension to complete a doctorate, only for this undertaking to be withdrawn. Several doctoral students affirm that this is a problem but that there is a risk that it will not come to light if such issues are not specifically addressed in the survey.
 - Foreign doctoral students require more information about life in Sweden and administrative processes, such as how to obtain a personal identity number and bank account.

13. Overall conclusions and comments

Faculties organise formal introductions for newly admitted doctoral students, the form and scope of which differ from one faculty to the next but that all aim to ensure that all new admissions receive general information regarding third-cycle studies and have the opportunity to meet the vice dean for doctoral education and the faculty's directors of third-cycle studies. As a result of assessments of the quality of introductions by respondents to the 2017 survey, in 2018 the Council for Doctoral Education (FUR) prepared the document [*Recommendations for Introduction of Doctoral Students to Doctoral Education and SLU*](#). The [*Checklist for Introduction of New Doctoral Students to Doctoral Education*](#) was also prepared in order to achieve greater uniformity in introductions at departments.

Despite these measures, a large percentage of respondents remain dissatisfied with their formal introduction. Not only that, but the percentage of respondents who did not receive any introduction remains as high as in the previous survey. For this reason, introductory meetings/courses are now supplemented with an online introductory course for all doctoral students at SLU. [A link to the course](#) is sent to all doctoral students on admission. This is an open online course for doctoral

students, as well as supervisors and other interested parties. The information can be accessed as and when required throughout the third-cycle programme.

A relatively large proportion (44%) of respondents remain uncertain of their rights and obligations as a doctoral student. An equally large percentage state that norms about doctoral students create problems, among other things because they remain unspoken. More or less unspoken demands and expectations may complicate how a doctoral student views their own situation and, in combination with uncertainty regarding rights and obligations and a perceived lack of clarity regarding conditions, can create stress. SLU can inform doctoral students about their rights and obligations during third-cycle studies via introductory meetings at faculty level and minimise any differences in the commitment and knowledge of supervisors via the online introductory course at university level.

Approximately four of five doctoral students responding to the survey state that they are satisfied with the amount and quality of supervision, while 84% express confidence in their supervisors. That said, 15% state that they have seriously considered changing supervisor, which is an increase from 11% in the 2017 survey. This should give us pause for thought. One might assume that it is not unusual for doctoral students to question the competence and suitability of their supervisors once they reach the half-way mark in their studies. If this questioning coincides with a lack of communication due to pressure of time, personal chemistry and/or other factors, it is reasonable to consider a change. On the other hand, one cannot deny that it is unacceptable that 44 individuals are so concerned about the state of their studies that they are considering changing their principal supervisor, a course of action that may lead to all sorts of unpredictable and potentially socially costly side-effects. As a benchmark, almost 150 of the respondents to this survey have completed half of their studies.

Irrespective of which of the above arguments one adheres to, doctoral students who are considering changing their principal supervisor, or even dropping out of their studies without graduating, need the advice of people without any direct connection to either the supervisor or the department. In this respect, SLU's Doctoral Student Ombudsman (DO) is one obvious resource and SLU needs to improve the knowledge of doctoral students regarding the DO's role.

As a step towards improving supervision, SLU has developed a continuing professional development course in the supervision of doctoral students, which it is proposed to make compulsory for anyone wishing to supervise a newly admitted doctoral student unless they have participated in a relevant research supervision course within a given period of time. The continuing professional development course focuses on the role and responsibilities of the principal supervisor.

A number of doctoral students responded that they have experienced discrimination (38 individuals) or harassment (21 individuals) during their studies at SLU. It may be that the same individual responded that they have been subjected to both discrimination and harassment. Gender and ethnicity are the most commonly

reported grounds for discrimination. The most commonly stated form of harassment is sexual harassment. Generally speaking, questions regarding the doctoral student's work environment are not study-related, meaning that heads of department have the same work environment responsibility for the doctoral student as for any other employee. In order to ensure that this responsibility also encompasses externally employed doctoral students, since 2018 the following clarification has been included in the vice-chancellor's delegation of authority to heads of department: *"to ensure that all doctoral students who are not employed by the university are offered the same conditions and opportunities as university employees to the extent possible"*. Subsequent to the 2019 quality dialogues, it was decided to: *"develop the compulsory course SLU Leadership to include the component 'The manager's responsibility for third-cycle studies', with the emphasis on how supervisors are prepared for and perform their assignment."*

Individual study plans (ISPs) are one of the most important documents in third-cycle studies. The survey has revealed obvious potential for improvement in ISPs and how they are managed and revised. During 2020-2021, SLU is working to create system support for an entirely digital process for dealing with ISPs, with the aim of having the system up and running before summer 2021. As part of this work, the ISP template has also been simplified and improved. The aim is that digitising ISPs will lead to a more efficient, uniform and fit-for-purpose process.

Although the majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the range and quality of third-cycle courses offered at SLU, some subject courses are lacking, especially in smaller subject areas in which it can be difficult to achieve a sufficiently large group of doctoral students. By arranging thematic graduate schools, SLU has attempted to increase the possibility of offering a good range of subject courses. SLU has taken the initiative to renew the Nordic Forestry, Veterinary and Agricultural University Network (NOVA) in order to increase opportunities to hold courses in minor subject areas in cooperation with other Nordic agricultural universities. Finally, SLU has developed a searchable online portal containing information on all third-cycle courses, course syllabuses, course coordinators and locations. The next step will be to link a digital application function to the portal.

The results of the Doctoral Student Survey 2020 will now form the basis for improvement measures for third-cycle courses and programmes at various levels within SLU. In conclusion, the results of surveys from 2006 onwards have, in combination with other documents, led to improvement measures within a number of areas. In designing the surveys, collaboration with SLUSS-DN has been one way of ensuring that the questions asked have been relevant and comprehensible to students.

This survey has proved to be an extremely useful tool for examining how successfully SLU's third-cycle courses and programmes meet the expectations and needs of doctoral students. SLU is therefore planning to conduct the next survey in 2023.