

# How healthy are our doctoral students?

- a report by Fackförbundet ST and SFS Doktorandkommitté into doctoral students' psychosocial work environment

## SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPAL RESULTS



**SFS**



**FACKFÖRBUNDET ST**



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## Introduction

Being involved in and influencing the organisation of research is part of the social responsibility of Fackförbundet ST – the Union of Civil Servants – but there are several other reasons why the research world is of particular interest. Universities are not only educating the researchers of tomorrow – many of those currently conducting doctoral studies will also become future experts and leaders of companies and organisations, within national administrations and municipalities. Universities' provision of good working conditions and a democratic work environment is therefore of vital importance even beyond the academic world.

For SFS (the association of Sweden's student unions), which organises the national monitoring of research studies and promotes the interests of doctoral students, the importance of the work to ensure a good work environment and safe conditions requires no explanation. The reason for SFS's engagement is that research studies are a form of education, and SFS works to promote the situation of all students, including doctoral students. In order to be able to get the most out of their education, doctoral students require a good study and work environment, as well as receiving the appropriate support from the institution. SFS's constituent unions

and the SFS Doktorandkommitté (its committee for doctoral students) can testify as to shortcomings in today's research studies and the conditions within which doctoral students currently work. The issue of doctoral students' psychosocial work environment is therefore very timely.

There have been signals indicating the stressful work environment of doctoral students for some time. It has also been apparent in the work of local and student unions that many doctoral students are struggling, and experience stress and anxiety.

Yet another reason for our interest in doctoral students' work environments is that research studies play a key role in our society. Research results in the generation of new knowledge and ideas, which often spread far beyond the confines of the academic community. It is here that an important aspect of public society is initiated and conducted. Research is also attracting increased resources, and is expected to resolve many of the problems facing societies and the world in general. It is for these reasons, amongst others, that Fackförbundet ST and SFS Doktorandkommitté have commissioned this report. It was written by Inger Ehn Knoblock, an investigator at Fackförbundet ST.

## The results in brief:

- ▶ The majority of doctoral students have a doctoral studentship, and most felt that they had a good relationship with their supervisor.
- ▶ One in five stated that, on a couple of occasions each week, they found it difficult to sleep because of their work. This problem was more common among doctoral students at Stockholm University, where 30 per cent stated that they had problems sleeping.
- ▶ One in four stated that they have to work overtime several times a week. Of the non-Swedish doctoral students, 35 per cent stated that they work overtime several times a week.
- ▶ More than 35 per cent stated that, on a daily basis or several times a week, they found it hard to think of anything else other than their thesis work. This was particularly true among the female, the younger and the Swedish doctoral students.
- ▶ Ten per cent of respondents were contacted by their work when they were not working several times a week. Around the same number stated that they were contacted by their work once a week.
- ▶ One in five of all respondents stated that they had not had the opportunity to take a holiday.
- ▶ Almost one in four stated that they had always been able to influence their work, and more than 60 per cent stated that they mostly had this ability.
- ▶ Around 30 per cent felt that their research studies had not developed in accordance with their expectations.
- ▶ Around 30 per cent did not feel that their individual study plan was meaningful, and 10 per cent stated that their plan was a source of stress.
- ▶ Of all respondents, 15 per cent stated that they felt insecure due to conflicts at work.
- ▶ Sixteen per cent claimed that the pandemic had had a strongly adverse effect on their research studies. Almost half felt that the pandemic had had a certain negative impact.

## Proposed measures

- ▶ Establish doctoral studentships from day one!
- ▶ Provide managers with training on their managerial responsibility to ensure that they receive information about the particularly vulnerable position of doctoral students. It must be clear to the doctoral students as to who makes the decisions concerning their work environment.
- ▶ Offer an introduction to all newly employed doctoral students that includes information about doctoral students' rights and obligations. It is important that such an introduction is adapted to each individual institution.
- ▶ Create a national source of information concerning research studies and the conditions for doctoral students.
- ▶ Ensure compliance with the Working Hours Act and the Annual Leave Act for all doctoral students. The department heads must take their responsibility as employers, and established researchers should present a good example.
- ▶ The union organisations must engage in active monitoring to ensure compliance with the Working Hours Act and the Annual Leave Act for doctoral students.
- ▶ The union organisations must intensify their commitment concerning the conditions for doctoral students, and ensure the relevance of their work for doctoral students, and their awareness of it.
- ▶ Continue to invest in supervisor training. The training should address the challenges facing doctoral students, and should be conducted on an ongoing basis. National guidelines and follow-ups are to be desired.
- ▶ Increase information and knowledge of the significance of the individual study plan with regard to both rights and obligations – not least in order to create a supportive framework to ensure that thesis work can continue in accordance with expectations.
- ▶ Intensify the systematic work to improve the work environment. Focus particularly on the doctoral students' work environment. As trade and student union organisations, we must be prepared to state the need for this in all situations in which we meet with employers.
- ▶ Work more inclusively: create arenas where doctoral students are provided with genuine influence, both as employees and as students.
- ▶ Work to prevent the occurrence of violence, threats, harassment, demeaning treatment and discrimination. Institutions must review how they ensure that doctoral students are given a genuine opportunity to report all forms of harassment or threats.
- ▶ Focus on the present and previous consequences of the pandemic on research studies, and develop strategies for how institutions can ensure the continuation of high quality, and the minimisation of the negative consequences on doctoral students' already problematic work environment.

## Concluding reflections

For some time, research studies have been an important part of the knowledge and research policies in most countries. More and more students have also completed doctoral studies. Doctoral students represent our future expertise, and the provision of high-quality research studies is therefore of crucial importance to Sweden's future. These studies must not only maintain high academic quality, but must also present good working conditions.

Unfortunately, within the scope of this study, we are unable to confirm that there are any shortcomings in this regard. Today's doctoral students are working under challenging conditions. If not alarming, feeling compelled to work even while ill or having to stay at home due to work-related worry and anxiety represent a clear signal that there are serious problems with regard to doctoral students' work environment – not to mention the stress and pressure felt by all too many doctoral students. At the same time, a large proportion of them feel that they have control and influence over their work. Their relationships with supervisors are usually good, and the quality of the supervision is mostly satisfactory. The overall picture is, therefore, contradictory, and indicates both a source of concern and a source of hope for the future.

It is perhaps not so strange that doctoral students feel mixed emotions. Research studies are not like any other form of university education – they involve a highly specialised form of education that places great demands on students. Naturally,

doctoral students and researchers want to be at the cutting edge of research. It can also be hard to have to wrestle with the question of how well one can live up to expectations – both those of others and one's own. It is a form of education with peaks and troughs. Doctoral students must battle their own demons – do I have what it takes to complete this major challenge, or will I belong to that large group of students who never completed their thesis? They are pursued by self-doubt right up until they have completed the public defence of their work and the grading committee has given its approval. A doctoral student is also forced to master the difficult art of accepting criticism and not confusing critical opinions with a questioning of one's own self-worth. But research studies also represent a time when a doctoral student is able to devote up to five years studying the subject of their special interest. This is a long period of their life that can provide both the opportunity for personal development and the lesson that they can truly rely on their own ability.

We believe that it is high time for research studies to not only be brought up to date but also be prepared to meet the challenges of the future. Today's students who want to embark on a research career want more than previous generations of doctoral students did – or were allowed to express a wish for. Research students want to be able to have influence over their own workplace, to dare to express critical feedback, and to be able to combine their work with the opportunity to rest.

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