

Doctoral students' ombudsperson's report – the fiscal year 2020

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Background – role and working method

Medicinska Föreningen (MF) has an employed Doctoral Students' Ombudsperson (DO) to whom all who are admitted¹ to doctoral studies at Karolinska Institutet (KI) can turn to with questions or problems. All doctoral students, independent of membership in MF, can contact the DO and the DO handles all matters with confidentiality. DO's main tasks are the following, in order of priority:

- 1) Ombudsperson in doctoral students' individual matters
- 2) Information to doctoral students
- 3) Strategic work and feedback to MF and KI
- 4) Monitoring the area of doctoral students' related matters

DO's primary work task is individual meetings/interactions with doctoral students and the department in question. Besides this, the DO is part of the compulsory introduction day for all newly admitted doctoral students (four times per semester) and the supervisor training (two times per semester), in order to introduce the DO role and function. A focus area for the supervisor training is to provide information regarding the problems that the DO has experience of and how these can be prevented/resolved. In addition, a group discussion is held around previous DO cases.

Furthermore, the DO has a standing invitation to meetings with the Work Environment Council (AMN), the Student Health Centre, the Doctoral Students' Association (DSA), and to internal meetings at MF. Besides these meetings the DO is regularly in contact with employees at KI. This mostly means interactions with study directors, heads of departments and administrators at each department, but also with the central administration. The latter especially concerns cooperation with the central study director for doctoral education, Ingeborg Van Der Ploeg and vice director for doctoral education, Robert Harris.

Finally, the DO shall, if time allows, engage in monitoring the area of doctoral students' related matters. For example by keeping up to date with new national rules/guidelines, reports, etc. and also by keeping in touch with other SO's (students' ombudspersons) and DO's in Sweden and other countries. The latter includes, among other things, participation in national and international conferences² for ombudspersons in higher education.

Reporting to the Committee of Doctoral Education

The DO presents an annual report to the Committee of Doctoral Education (KFU). The report summarizes the past year's cases in numbers, broken down by department, gender and origin.

¹ Or aspire to be admitted.

² During 2020 the DO participated in the Scandinavian conference for ombuds in higher education 21 October and the European conference for ombuds in higher education 10 December. Because of Covid-19, these were organized digitally.

Furthermore, the report covers the most common categories of problems that doctoral students tell the DO about. Other observations and recommendations regarding doctoral students' situation at KI are also summarized.

Case management

Cases that are dealt with by the DO concern different matters, but there are some reoccurring themes. Timewise, the issues can take a few days up to several years and the workload can vary due to more or less intense periods of contact with the doctoral student. The workload also depends on what type of support the doctoral student wants from the DO, for example to be listened to and/or getting more active support in moving forward with the issue.

The definition of a case is: *"contact with the DO initiated by a doctoral student, that has not been limited to simple answers to questions, reference to other executives/functions within KI or help with problems that could not be solved with advice to a lesser extent"*. However, this definition does not allow a clear distinction between a simple case that can be solved with a minor information effort and a timewise longer and more resource-demanding case.

During 2020, the students' and doctoral students' ombudspersons have been part of a workgroup together with ombudspersons at other universities in Sweden, in order to create a case management system specifically developed for the type of cases that reach them. The system is completed and will be implemented during the spring of 2021. The case management system will contribute to a more efficient and safe recordkeeping and simplify the compilation of data on a local as well as on a national level. In this year's report, the case categorization that the workgroup has worked out is being used. The workgroup has also decided on categorizing all cases that reach the DO as cases and thereby stop using the distinction between a case and a question (see above).

Compilation of DO cases 2020

This year's report is a compilation of the cases that the DO has worked on during the fiscal year 2020. There is a total of 40³ cases, of which 29 were new cases and 11 remained from the year 2019. The majority of the doctoral students who contacted the DO were women (70%) and/or had foreign origin⁴ (70%) (see table 1)⁵. This means that the group of students of foreign origin that contact the DO is over-represented. One way of handling this, is that the DO mentions these students' vulnerable position during the supervisor training as a way of stressing that they might

³ 35 of these cases (88 %) were closed in 2020.

⁴ Definition of foreign origin: "communicates in English".

⁵ The corresponding statistics among all active doctoral students at KI is 60% women (data from KI, 2020) and 32% of foreign origin (data from UKÄ, 2019).

need extra support, especially during the beginning of their time in Sweden. The average handling time for the cases that were closed in 2020 were 79 days (minimum 1 day, median 42 days, maximum 370 days).

In addition to the 40 cases, the DO has registered 21 questions from doctoral students or others who are connected to the doctoral education, via e-mail and phone calls. The questions concern e.g. the local rules for doctoral education, employment contracts, scholarships, vacation or the terms and conditions for clinically active doctoral students, etc. Sometimes doctoral students get in touch with the DO during trainings/lectures and such. However, the DO has decided not to register these questions.

Table 1 – Number of cases in total and divided into gender/origin

Year	2015	2016⁶	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of cases (n)	64	28	27	44	42	40
Amount of women (%)	64	82	63	75	71	70
Amount of men (%)	36	18	37	25	29	30
Amount of foreign origin⁷ (%)	-	-	-	64	71	70
Amount of Swedish (%)	-	-	-	36	29	30

When looking at how the cases were distributed across departments, one can see that 16 out of 22 departments had cases in 2020. As shown in diagram 1, it is mainly the larger departments, such as MedS and NVS, that stand out in the statistics. However, when presented as number of cases in relation to how many active doctoral students there are in each department, the pattern looks a bit different (see table 2). The department with the highest number of cases in relation to the amount of active doctoral students is LabMed (8%), which is the same as in 2019. Three departments have not had any cases since 2018: LIME, KI SÖS and Dentmed (see diagram 1).

The DO cannot determine whether the number of cases at each department reflects any general problems. The DO can however state that when a doctoral student from a group chooses to try to solve her/his situation, the person is often not the only one experiencing difficulties in the research group. Furthermore, the DO experiences that reoccurring contact with a department makes the DO's role and function more visible and that doctoral students/administration thereby become more inclined to contact/ask for assistance from the DO.

⁶ According to MF, there has been a decline in the number of cases when employing a new DO in 2016. This may have to do with the former DO (2009 - mid-2016) defining a case in a different way. It should also be added that scholarship-funded postdocs are not represented in the statistics after mid-2016.

⁷ Definition of foreign origin: "communicates in English".

Diagram 1 – Number of cases per department 2018-2020

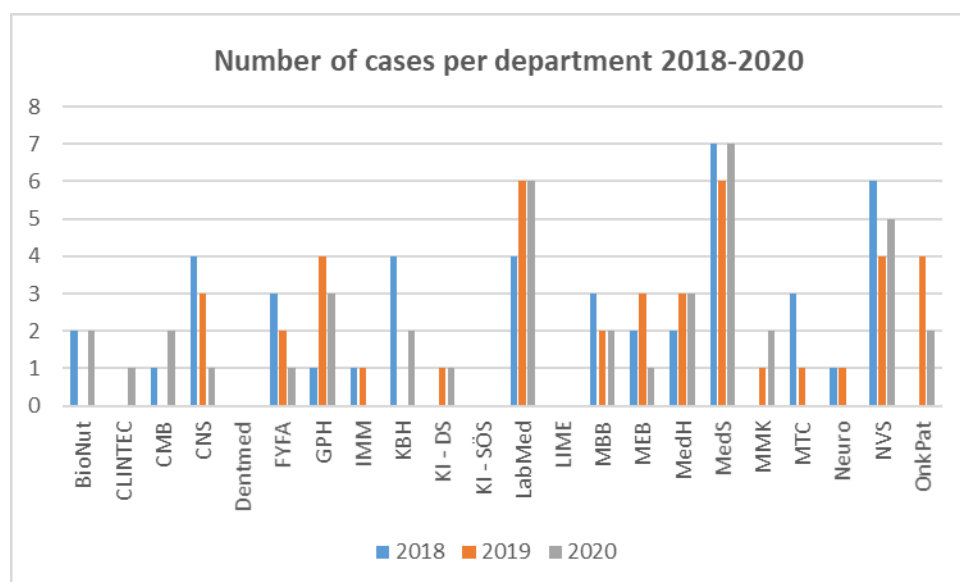


Table 2 – Number of cases per department in percentage 2020

Department	Number of cases	Number of active doctoral students ⁸	Cases/active doctoral students (%)
BioNut	2	45	4%
CLINTEC	1	154	1%
CMB	2	47	4%
CNS	1	236	0,4%
Dentmed	0	37	0
FYFA	1	85	1%
GPH	3	89	3%
IMM	0	54	0
KBH	2	134	1%
KI - DS	1	85	1%
KI - SÖS	0	68	0
LabMed	6	72	8%
LIME	0	46	0
MBB	2	85	2%
MEB	1	68	1%
MedH	3	89	3%
MedS	7	210	3%
MMK	2	127	2%
MTC	0	62	0
Neuro	0	38	0
NVS	5	138	4%
OnkPat	2	117	2%
In total	41⁹	2086	2%

⁸ Data from Ladok, winter semester 2020.

⁹ One doctoral student has belonged to two departments, which gives a higher total than the number of cases.

Categories of cases

This section describes the most common types of problems that doctoral students contact the DO about (see table 3). In this year's report, the DO has used the categorisations that have been worked out within the new case management system described above, that will be implemented in 2021. This will lead to a more simple way of finding patterns in the statistics over time. As in the previous years, supervision is the most common problematic area for the doctoral students (21 out of 40 cases¹⁰), where treatment/relationship and change of supervisor stand out among the subcategories. With this new way of categorising the cases, different problems with employment are made visible and in relation to this main category, prolongation of employment, sick leave/rehabilitation and parental leave are the most common subcategories. It is important to remember that many of the cases may have elements of several main and subcategories.

Table 3 – Categories of cases 2020

Case categories	Number	Subcategories
Supervision	21	Treatment/relationship (10), change of supervisor (10), lack of supervision (4), harassment/sexual harassment (2), administration (1)
Employment	12	Prolongation of employment (4), sick leave/rehabilitation (3), parental leave (3), leave of absence/termination of studentship (1), external employment (1)
Study and work environment/equal treatment	6	Organizational and social work environment (3), physical work environment (1), harassment/sexual harassment (1)
Funding/resources	5	Withdrawal/renewal of resources (3), external funding (1), access to study place/resources (1)
Research ethics	3	Complaint from doctoral student (3)
Examination	2	Dissertation (2)
Administration/information	1	Affiliation (1)
Other	1	Migration issues (1)

General observations and recommendations

The DO has given recommendations to KI in the reports from 2018 and 2019. These remain as desired improvements and are as follows:

- Adoption of a central procedure on how to change supervisor (2018)
- Clarification regarding KI's policy concerning financing after four years of full-time studies (2018)
- Clarification regarding the employer's responsibility for doctoral students (2018)

¹⁰ Corresponding numbers are 22 out of 42 cases in 2019 and 20 out of 44 cases in 2018.

- Strategy between KI and Region Stockholm to improve the situation for clinically active doctoral students, as well as clear information from KI regarding this group (2019)
- Adoption of a central procedure on leave of studies/termination of doctoral education (2019)
- Pointing out the advantages of extracurricular activities for doctoral students to KI's research groups (2019)

The current DO started in August 2020 and has handled cases that have concerned several of the points above and therefore still find them relevant. Since the background of these subjects have already been presented in the earlier reports, it is not necessary to go through all of them again. However, the DO will in this report once again raise the question about employer's responsibility, give recommendations on prolongation of employment due to special grounds and describe observations of doctoral students' concerns to raise issues at the workplace.

Employer's responsibility

The DO would once again like to raise the issue concerning a clarified employer's responsibility, and thereby work environment responsibility, for doctoral students, since this still seems to be unclear for doctoral students and other KI staff.¹¹ This problem has for example come up when a doctoral student is asked to contact the closest manager when additional appointments with the occupational health care Avonova are to be confirmed¹², and the doctoral student assumes that this means the main supervisor. However, the responsibility usually lies with the head of unit or head of department, which should be made clear for doctoral students and other staff.

Furthermore, it is not always clear who is responsible of paying for the doctoral student's additional appointments. The DO finds it very important that the departments inform the doctoral students of the employer's responsibility upon the start of their employment and perhaps remind them further ahead, and that KI makes this clear on the website (preferably in relation to the information about the occupational health care).

Prolongation of employment

When it comes to prolongation of employment due to special grounds, KI's rules for doctoral education corresponds with the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) and states that "[t]he total period of employment may, however, exceed that if special grounds exist" and that "[s]uch grounds may comprise leave of absence because of illness, leave of absence for service in the defence forces or an elected position in a trade union or student organisation, or parental leave".

¹¹ This problem is also raised in "How healthy are our doctoral students?", a report by Fackförbundet ST and STS doktorandkommitté, April 2021.

¹² This concerns the additional appointments beyond the two appointments per year that all employees at KI, as well as scholarship-funded doctoral students, have the right to.

According to the rules, it is *possible* but not mandatory, to prolong the employment due to these reasons. In most cases, the employment is most probably prolonged, but the doctoral students at KI do not have a guarantee. As an example, a doctoral student was worried that her supervisor would make her work faster with her project than planned if the student told her supervisor that she was pregnant, the reason being that the doctoral student would in that case not need a prolonged employment after going on parental leave. In the light of this, the DO recommends something more in the lines of University of Gothenburg's rules and regulations for third-cycle studies, which state that "[a] doctoral student with a doctoral studentship is *entitled* to have their period of study extended if there are special reasons to do so", the reasons being the same as in the Higher Education Ordinance and KI's rules, and the extension "shall correspond to the number of days that the student has been absent for these reasons". The example with Gothenburg concerns the period of study, but an assurance for KI's doctoral students regarding either a prolongation of the period of study or employment would be considered as positive.

Doctoral students' concern to raise issues at the workplace

The DO wishes to draw attention to a problem that has been reoccurring in several cases but will not give any recommendations on how this is to be solved in the best way. According to the statistics, half of the cases from 2020 concern problems with supervision, which is in line with previous years. In many of these cases, the problems have been ongoing for a long time but the doctoral student says that she/he does not dare/want to discuss the problem with the supervisor or other staff (e.g. other supervisors or the study director) since the student is afraid of being punished or that there will be no efforts made to improve the situation. This attitude is in line with data from KI's Exit poll¹³, where the majority of the doctoral students that have experienced discrimination or harassment at the workplace do not contact anyone at KI regarding this¹⁴. Many of these do not answer the follow-up question concerning why they do not contact anyone, but half of the ones that do so choose "risk for me/afraid of consequences" or "wouldn't help/in KI you don't tell" as their answer. As one doctoral student told the DO:

"You have to be a bit careful if you are striving towards a career within the academia".

It is difficult to say exactly where the problem stems from, but the reasons for concern that are often mentioned are the students' own experience or similar situations that colleagues have been in. It is of course impossible to know if the concerns will become a reality, but the DO is of the opinion that the doctoral students' experience of this situation is very important to acknowledge. Further, the DO is aware that it is perhaps not possible to draw any general conclusions from the

¹³ Data from 2018.

¹⁴ This is similar to data presented in "How healthy are our doctoral students?", a report by Fackförbundet ST and STS doktorandkommitté, April 2021.

number of cases that reach the DO, but would like to point out that there is the possibility that there are many more doctoral students that experience problems but never reach out to the DO.

The ones that choose to initiate contact with the DO are recommended to raise their problems in order to be able to change the situation, but in many cases the doctoral student choose not to move on:

"I have managed the situation for so long and have so little time left – I might as well continue like this until the end".

When it comes to different types of problems with supervisors, the green light¹⁵ is an important barrier, but it only works if the information concerning the doctoral student's difficult situation is brought up to the right level. The DO would therefore like for KI to address the problem explained above, in order to encourage the doctoral students to raise their concerns.

¹⁵ A Green Light is an assessment of the suitability as supervisor with focus on track-record and time to supervise.