

Report doctoral students 2021

Student and doctoral student ombudspersons
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Background – role and working method

Medicinska Föreningen (MF) has two employed student and doctoral student ombudspersons (hereinafter ombudspersons) to whom all who are admitted¹ to first cycle, second cycle and doctoral studies at Karolinska Institutet (KI) can turn to with questions or problems. All students and doctoral students, independent of membership in MF, can contact the ombudspersons and the ombudspersons handle all matters with confidentiality. The ombudspersons main tasks are the following, in order of priority:

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

The ombudspersons' primary work task is individual meetings/interactions with students and doctoral students, as well as the program or department in question. Regarding doctoral students, the ombudspersons are part of the compulsory introduction day for all newly admitted doctoral students (seven times per year) and the doctoral supervisor training (four times per year), in order to introduce the ombudspersons' role and function. A focus area for the doctoral supervisor training is to provide information regarding the problems that the ombudspersons have experience of and how these can be prevented/resolved.

Furthermore, the ombudspersons have a standing invitation to meetings with the Student Health Centre, the Doctoral Students' Association (DSA), internal meetings at MF and OF and can choose to partake in meetings with the Committee for Doctoral Education (KFU) and the Work Environment Council (AMN). Besides these meetings the ombudspersons are regularly in contact with employees at KI, mostly study directors, heads of departments and administrators at the different departments, but also the central administration.

Finally, the ombudspersons shall 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 through networks with other ombudspersons in Sweden and other countries.

Reporting to the Committee of Doctoral Education

The ombudspersons present an annual report to the Committee of Doctoral Education (KFU). The report summarizes the past year's doctoral cases in numbers, broken down by department, gender and origin. Furthermore, the report covers the most common categories of problems that doctoral students tell the ombudspersons about. Other observations and recommendations regarding doctoral students' situation at KI are also summarized.

¹ Or aspire to be admitted.

Case management

Cases that are dealt with by the ombudspersons 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 requests, for example to be listened to and/or get more support, such as taking part in meetings etc.

Since 2021, the ombudspersons use a case management system developed together with ombudspersons from other universities in Sweden, in which all cases are registered. This has contributed to a safer and more efficient recordkeeping. The former definition of "smaller questions" vs. "larger cases" is no longer in use which, as expected, leads to a higher number of cases in 2021.

Compilation of doctoral student cases 2021

This year's report is a compilation of the cases that the ombudspersons have worked on during 2021. There is a total of 61 cases, of which 56 were new cases and five remained from the year 2020. The majority of the doctoral students who contacted the ombudspersons were women (69%) and/or international (59%) (see table 1)². This means that the group of international students that contact the ombudspersons is much over-represented, even if the number is lower than previous years. One way of handling this, is that the ombudspersons mention these students' vulnerable position during the supervisor training, as a way of stressing that they might need extra support, especially during the beginning of their time in Sweden.

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

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of cases (n)	64	28³	27	44	42	40	61⁴
Amount of women	64%	82%	63%	75%	71%	70%	69%
Amount of men	36%	18%	37%	25%	29%	30%	28%
Amount of other⁵	-	-	-	-	-	-	3%
Amount of international⁶	-	-	-	64%	71%	70%	59%
Amount of Swedish	-	-	-	36%	29%	30%	41%

² The corresponding statistics among all active doctoral students at KI is 61% women (data from KI, 2020) and 32% of foreign origin (data from UKÄ, 2020).

³ The drop in number of cases may be caused by different ombudspersons defining cases in different ways. It should also be added that scholarship-funded postdocs are not represented in the statistics after mid-2016.

⁴ Since 2021 all cases are registered. Thereby, the former definition of "smaller questions" vs. "larger cases" is no longer in use which, as expected, leads to a higher number of cases from this year.

⁵ Since 2021, doctoral students can themselves define their gender as woman, man, other or don't want to specify.

⁶ Since 2021, doctoral students can define themselves as international students, before that the definition was "communicates in English".

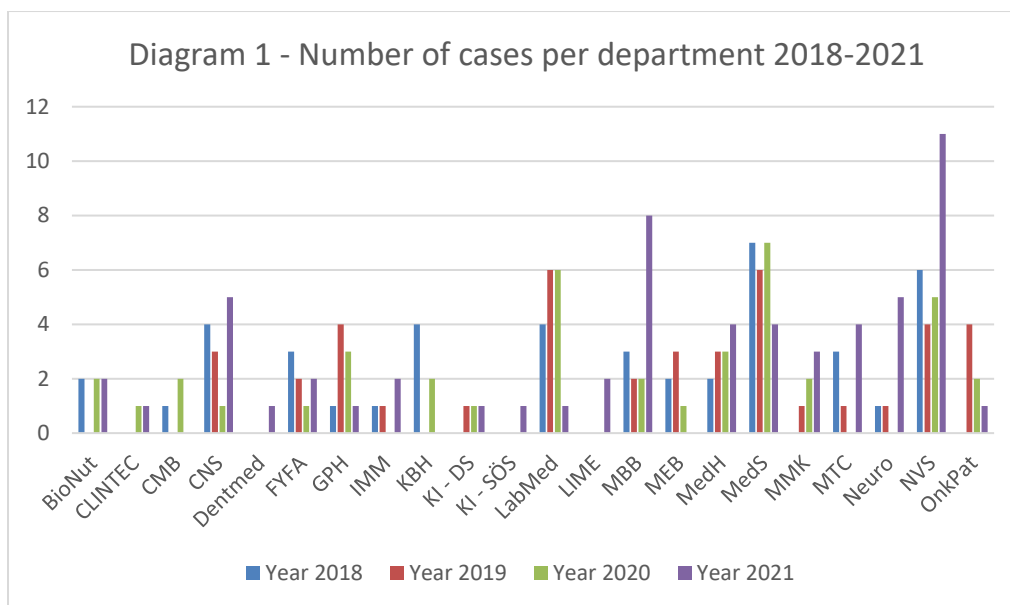
When looking at how the cases were distributed across departments, one can see that 19 out of 22 departments have had cases in 2021. The number of cases is spread quite evenly, but when shown in percentage, the department of Neuroscience (Neuro), the department of Medical Biochemistry and Biophysics (MBB) and Neurobiology, Care Sciences and Society (NVS) somewhat stand out (see table 2).

Table 2 – Number of cases per department in percentage 2021

Department	Number of cases	Number of active doctoral students ⁷	Cases/active students (%)
BioNut	2	47	4%
CLINTEC	1	145	1%
CMB	0	45	0%
CNS	5	222	2%
Dentmed	1	33	3%
FYFA	2	86	2%
GPH	1	84	1%
IMM	2	56	4%
KBH	0	149	0%
KI - DS	1	84	1%
KI - SÖS	1	90	1%
LabMed	1	67	1%
LIME	2	40	5%
MBB	8	87	9%
MEB	0	69	0%
MedH	4	96	4%
MedS	4	193	2%
MMK	3	152	2%
MTC	4	67	6%
Neuro	5	42	12%
NVS	11	130	8%
OnkPat	1	106	1%
Totalt	59	2090	3%

It is not possible to see a pattern regarding the number of cases and departments, since it varies a lot (see diagram 1). The ombudspersons can therefore not determine whether the number of cases at each department reflects any general problems. The ombudspersons 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 ombudspersons experience that reoccurring contact with a department makes the ombudspersons role and function more visible and the doctoral students/administration thereby become more inclined to contact the ombudspersons.

⁷ Data from Ladok, winter semester 2021.



Categories of cases

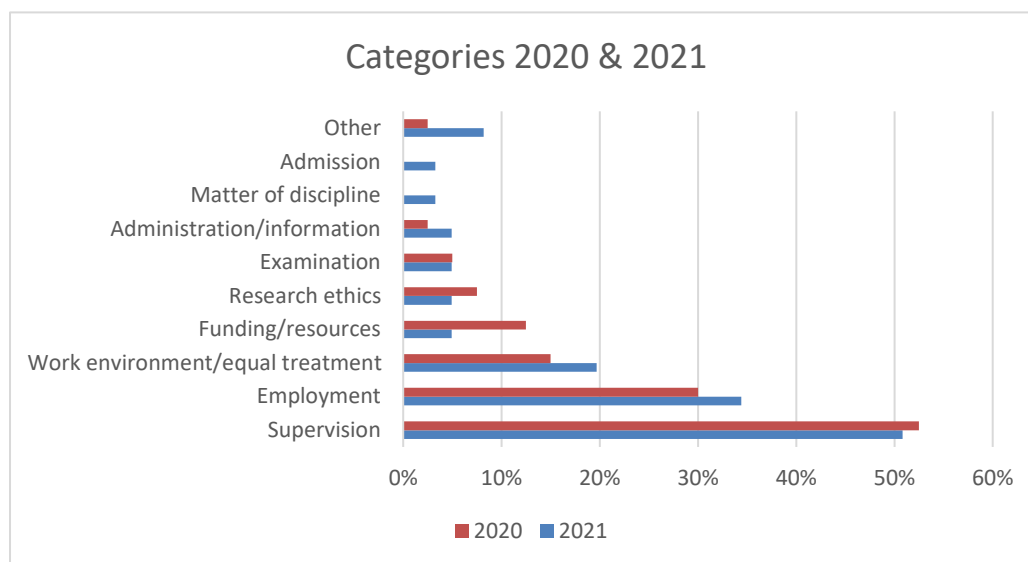
This section describes the most common types of problems that doctoral students contact the ombudspersons about (see table 3). As were the case previous years, issues concerning supervision is the most common type of problem that doctoral students have (31 out of 61 cases⁸), and treatment/relationship and change of supervisor stand out among the subcategories. Many of these cases also include problems with the study and work environment and this is often connected to the relation between supervisor and doctoral student. Problems concerning employment are relatively common and within this category, the issues are connected to prolongation and leave of absence/termination of studentship. It is important to remember that many of the cases are connected to several main and subcategories.

Table 3 – Categories of cases 2021

Case category	Number	Subcategories
Supervision	31	Treatment/relationship (20), change of supervisor (9), lack of supervision (1), discrimination (1)
Employment	21	Prolongation of employment (7), leave of absence/termination of studentship (5), salary (4), sick leave/rehabilitation (3), parental leave (3), external employment (1), vacation (1)
Study and work environment/equal treatment	12	Organizational and social work environment (11), discrimination (1)
Funding/resources	3	Withdrawal/renewal of resources (1)
Research ethics	3	Complaint from doctoral student (3)
Examination	3	Dissertation (3)
Administration/information	3	Documentation (1)
Disciplinary matter	2	Misleading (2)
The admission process	2	Change/discontinue studies (2)
Other	5	Migration issues (2)

⁸ Corresponding numbers for 2018, 2019 and 2020 is also ca 50%.

Diagram 2



General observations and recommendations

During the last year, the student ombudsperson and the doctoral student ombudsperson started to share work tasks, which means that both ombudspersons can work with student and doctoral student related matters. This has led to a more evenly spread workload and the possibility to discuss cases with each other, to cooperate in particularly difficult cases and to cover for each other in case of absence. It also means that both ombudspersons can collaborate with KI in student and doctoral student matters.

In this year's report, the ombudspersons would like to bring attention to the fact that KI is working on several of the recommendations from earlier reports. Among other things, KI is in different ways trying to make sure that doctoral students know who their immediate manager is. Many students confuse their supervisor for their manager and thereby do not understand who is responsible for their employment and thereby work environment. KI is further planning on making the information concerning how employment for doctoral students work after four years clearer, which has also been mentioned in previous reports.

Something that was also mentioned in last year's report, was that KI's rules for doctoral education corresponds with the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) concerning prolongation of employment on special grounds which states that "the total period of employment may, however, exceed [four years] 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". This means that it is *possible* but not mandatory, to prolong the employment due to these reasons.

This year's report particularly mentions parental leave since the ombudspersons have been following a case concerning this. According to the Parental Leave Act section 16, an employer may not disfavour an employee for reasons related to parental leave. This would mean that a doctoral student's study time and employment should be prolonged with the amount of days that the student has been on parental leave. The ombudspersons experience is that this is not how it is being done at KI for the moment. The question should therefore be raised centrally with the HR department.

Further, the ombudspersons notice that doctoral students are afraid to discuss problems with for example their supervisor or study director, as has been reported before. The most common reason for contacting the ombudspersons (50% of the cases) is problems related to the relation between the doctoral student and the supervisor. Many ombudspersons in Sweden have the same experience. One step in the right direction is the Green Light⁹ and the doctoral supervisor training¹⁰, that have been initiated by KI.

Two problematic areas in the future, are changes in Sweden's Aliens Act and the Employment Protection Act.¹¹ KI and MF (especially DSA) are trying to influence the decision makers, and at the same time efforts are made on how to support doctoral students in finishing their studies within four years. The ombudspersons have not yet had any cases related to these issues but are of course following the processes.

⁹ A Green Light is an assessment of the suitability as supervisor with focus on track-record and time to supervise.

¹⁰ The aim of this training programme is to support the doctoral supervisors through development of skills and approaches in teaching and leadership.

¹¹ The new Aliens Act makes it more difficult getting a permanent residence, which can affect doctoral students' possibilities to continue their research in Sweden after four years. The suggestion on changing the Employment Protection Act includes that the time for temporary employment (ALVA) is shortened to 12 months instead of 24, which will also affect doctoral students' employment after four years.