

Medicinska Föreningen – Annual report 2025

Student- & Doctoral student Ombud

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1. Introduction

The following document constitutes the annual report for the Student and Doctoral Ombudspersons at the Medical Students' Union (Medicinska Föreningen, MF) and summarizes the cases, issues, and trends that have characterized the year. The Ombudspersons' role is to provide independent support to all Karolinska Institute's students who experience difficulties in their study situation or work environment.

The purpose of this report is to present an overview of the problems faced by students by providing numbers and types of cases submitted to the Ombudspersons, as well as to analyze trends and developments compared with earlier annual reports. The report is intended to serve as a basis for continued dialogue and development within Karolinska Institutet (KI) and MF. By highlighting the perspectives of students and doctoral students, the report seeks to contribute to a healthy work and study environment and to promote a transparent and legally secure educational process. It also aims to raise awareness around recurring patterns and identify areas in which students and doctoral students request support or further development.

Throughout the year, the Ombudspersons have interacted with a wide range of students across programs, departments, and nationalities. The scope and nature of the cases have varied, yet they commonly concern issues related to interpersonal treatment, supervision, communication, workload, and clarity regarding rights and expectations. Recurring categories also include support in processes involving the Disciplinary Board and various administrative procedures.

The preparation of this report is based on compiled documentation of all cases submitted to the Student and Doctoral Ombudspersons during the year. The report contains no personal data or details that could be traced to specific individuals, departments, or supervisors.

Cases have been categorized by type of issue—for example, supervision, interpersonal treatment, work environment, and disciplinary matters. These categories reveal recurring themes and patterns.

In addition to case handling, the Ombudspersons have engaged in continuous dialogue with relevant university functions, such as directors of studies, postgraduate education coordinators, student health services, and other support units. These exchanges have contributed to a broader understanding of the structural factors affecting the work and study environment of students.

This report provides an overarching view of the issues for which students and doctoral students have sought support during the year. It should therefore be regarded as a compilation of individual experiences and needs, rather than a comprehensive mapping of the overall educational environment.

Statistics are presented separately for students and doctoral students. The two groups face distinct challenges; their study and work structures differ, and different functions within KI bear responsibility for them. A larger analytical section is dedicated to doctoral students, whose situation is more complex than that of students at the undergraduate and master's levels.

The two previous Ombudspersons left their positions during the first half of the year, and the posts were filled at the start of the autumn semester. Within the transition of personnel, all open cases handled by the previous Ombudspersons were closed. This resulted in a large number of cases being finalized over the summer, which is reflected in the statistics.

The statistics show a similar distribution of cases submitted during the spring and autumn semesters, with a peak in the middle of each semester, except for April, which had the lowest number of registered cases. Overall, more cases were submitted in 2025, with the highest rate in the autumn relative to the length of the semester (January–June: 6 months; August–December: 4 months). With full staffing in the autumn, new routines were established, the role and purpose of the Ombudspersons were reviewed, and instead of the previous system in which one Ombudsperson handled doctoral students while the other handled undergrads and masters' students, all cases—regardless of level—were handled jointly. This has proven beneficial, partly due to the Ombudspersons' complementary expertise and the ability to support one another in case discussions.

The material presented in this report is based on statistics, meetings, and conversations with students, doctoral students, and KI staff, as well as personal accounts shared by students and doctoral students. The statistical data primarily reflect registered cases and recorded descriptions of events in the case management system. However, the system is limited by a set of categories and subcategories that are broad and partly overlapping. Some cases are therefore classified as "Other", which include matters related to parking permits (which fall under the Ombudspersons' responsibilities) or cases that were redirected to another unit. Overlaps arise because many cases involve multiple issues. For example, a case beginning with support in a Disciplinary Board process may later involve assistance with appealing to a disciplinary decision. Another example is when a student fails a course and seeks help both with a request for a grade reconsideration and with an application for exemption from eligibility requirements for the following semester. For these reasons, some cases have been assigned multiple categories, and the total number of cases does not fully align with the figures presented in the categorization table.

The duration of each case is calculated from the date of registration to the date of closure. Some cases reach a natural conclusion when a student expresses satisfaction with the support received and indicates that no further assistance is needed. Others

lack a clear endpoint, and in some cases the Ombudspersons' emails receive no response. To establish clearer routines, the new Ombudspersons decided at the beginning of autumn to close cases after three weeks of inactivity unless otherwise agreed with the student. This rule is reflected in the average case duration reported in the statistics.

In 2024, a total of 149 cases were submitted. In 2025, 167 cases were submitted—an increase of more than 12% from the previous year. The rise may be attributable to earlier work aimed at strengthening communication and relationships, including increased presence at student introduction events, which has raised awareness and visibility of the Ombudspersons' function. Many departments, however, have yet to be visited.

2. The Ombudspersons' Mandate and Role

There are two appointed Student and Doctoral Ombudspersons at the Medical Students' Union (Medicinska Föreningen, MF). All students and doctoral students admitted to Karolinska Institutet (KI) have the right to receive support from the Ombudspersons free of charge, regardless of whether they are members of MF.

The Ombudspersons divide incoming cases between themselves based on current workload; however, they maintain insight into all cases and draw on one another's expertise, providing mutual support in more complex matters. Both Ombudspersons engage actively in professional development, for example by participating in courses and seminars, as well as through exchanges with Ombudspersons at other universities in Sweden. They also ensure that they remain informed about the situation of students and doctoral students at KI through regular contact with the Student Safety Officers (SSO) and Doctoral Student Association (DSA).

The Student and Doctoral Ombudspersons is an independent resource for all students who require support concerning issues related to their study situation or work environment. The Ombudsperson can assist when something feels unclear, difficult, or dysfunctional. This may include problems in the relationship with supervisors or teachers, shortcomings in interpersonal treatment, unclear rules or rights, or situations in which a student is unsure about how to proceed.

At the request of a student, the Ombudspersons have the mandate to contact and arrange meetings with KI staff. They always have the right to attend meetings in accordance with the student's wishes, and their presence may not be refused. The Ombudspersons are obligated to act impartially and professionally. Their role is to safeguard the student's interests, and in situations where proceeding with a case is not in the student's best interest, or where KI has acted correctly, they assist the student in understanding this and support them moving forward. Support includes clarification of applicable regulations, formulating questions, comments, or formal requests, preparing meetings, or having the Ombudsperson present.

A further responsibility of the Ombudspersons is to spread information about their role and the services they provide. This is done through presentations during introductory days for students, doctoral students, and supervisor training courses. Ombudspersons may also be invited to other events to introduce themselves and their work.

The Ombudspersons function as an independent authority. This means that they cannot accept instructions from any external party—KI or otherwise—regarding how to act in a specific case. Likewise, they cannot issue directives to KI or alter decisions made by KI or any other party.

Their independence and autonomy in relation to KI ensure that all contacts with the Ombudspersons remain confidential. They are bound by strict confidentiality and do not disclose information without the explicit consent or request of the student.

Each case brought to the Ombudspersons is unique. While the Ombudspersons remain neutral in relation to both the student and KI, their primary task is to support the student seeking assistance. They offer support with communication and conflict management but do not speak on behalf of the student. Instead, they help the student reflect on potential next steps, identify appropriate contacts, and arrange meetings; however, it is the student's responsibility to convey their own experience. This is connected to the neutrality policy. During meetings, the Ombudsperson may take on a mediating role and help guide the conversation, while the student expresses their perspective and arguments. As part of their support, the Ombudsperson may also clarify, question, or supplement information presented during the meeting—if the student wishes—particularly when the student is unable to articulate concerns that may affect their position or situation.

3. Statistics and Case Management

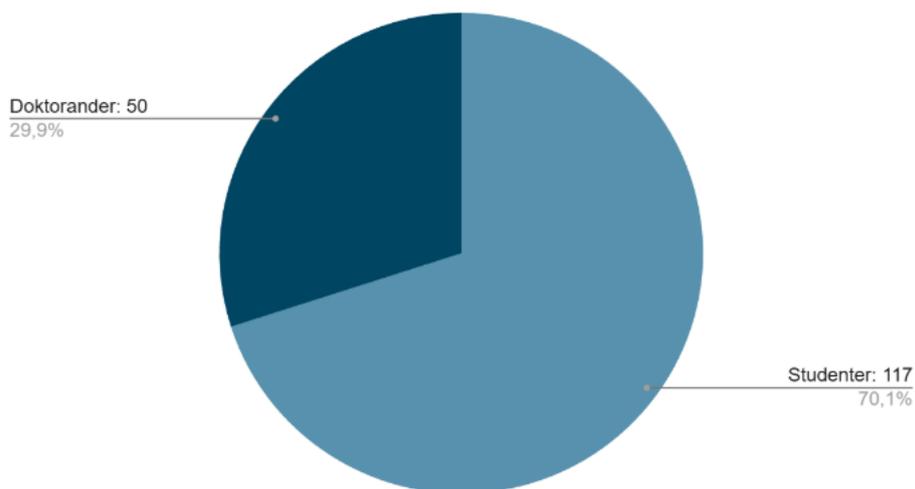
Number of Cases

Karolinska Institutet (KI) has approximately 6,500 students (around 76% of the total population of students and doctoral students) and more than 2,200 doctoral students (approximately 24%). In 2025, a total of 117 students (about 70% of all incoming cases) and 50 doctoral students (about 30%) contacted the Ombudspersons. The total number of cases for the year was 167.

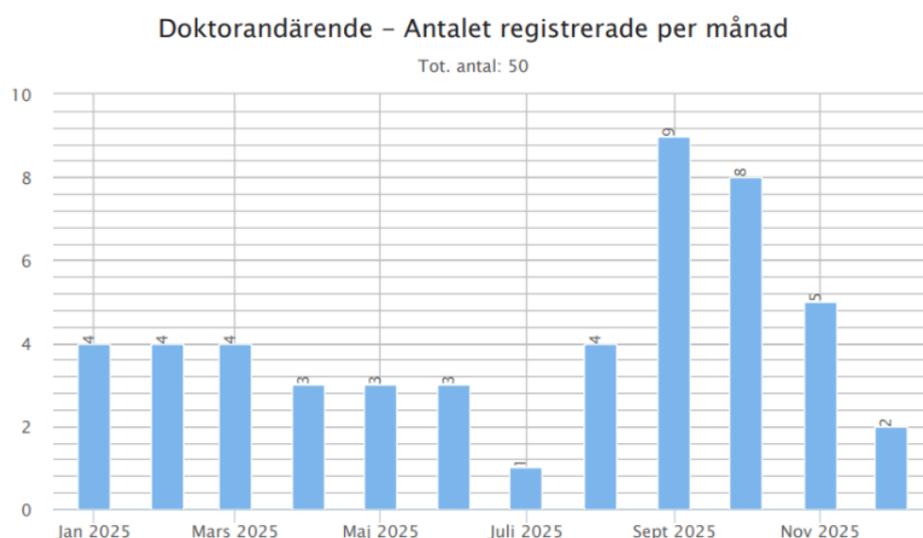
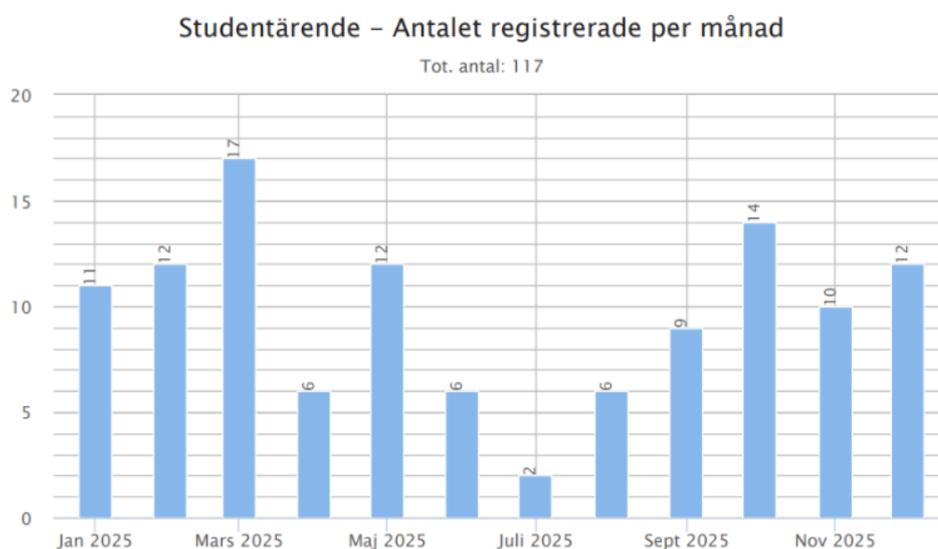
This represents an increase of approximately 12% compared with 2024, when 149 cases were registered—105 concerning students and 44 concerning doctoral students. The proportional distribution, however, remained consistent at roughly 70/30.

Number of Incoming Cases

Antal ärenden: 167



The following figures illustrate the monthly distribution of incoming cases during 2025.



Distribution Between National and International Students

KI does not systematically record the number of international students.

According to statistics from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), 1,230 incoming international students were registered at KI during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data from KI indicates that 6,483 fulltime students were registered in 2024, suggesting that approximately 19% of students that year were international. Of the 117 students who contacted the Ombudspersons in 2025, 15 (about 12.8%) were international. This suggests that international students may be slightly underrepresented in the Ombudspersons' registry.

UKÄ's statistics show that 710 international doctoral students were registered at KI in the autumn of 2024. KI's own data indicates a total of 2,230 doctoral students that year, meaning that roughly 32% were international. In contrast, 28 of the 50 doctoral students who contacted the Ombudspersons in 2025 (56%) were international, indicating a clear overrepresentation among users of the Ombudsperson service.

Gender Distribution

The most recent publicly available gender statistics from KI indicate that 73% of students are women and 27% men. Among the 117 student cases submitted to the Ombudspersons in 2025, 81 (approximately 69%) were women and 36 (about 30%) were men. Compared with KI's overall gender distribution, women are somewhat overrepresented among those seeking support.

The Ombudspersons also received updated and detailed data from KI regarding doctoral students in 2025: of 2,215 registered doctoral students, 1,377 (about 62%) were women and 838 (about 38%) men. Among the 50 doctoral student cases reported to the Ombudspersons, 37 involved women (74%) and 13 involved men (26%). This indicates that, as with the student population, female doctoral students are more likely— or possibly more compelled — to seek assistance from the Ombudspersons.

Average Case Duration

May 2025, with the start of the new Ombudsperson, tracking the duration of cases began. Between May and December 2025, the average case duration was:

- **53 days** for doctoral cases
- **33 days** for student cases

The “active” work phase is generally shorter than the total case length. The average duration of roughly six weeks includes a three week waiting period following the last communication with the student, after which the case is closed automatically unless agreed otherwise.

Certain types of cases, such as those involving the Disciplinary Board, tend to remain open longer. Students typically contact the Ombudspersons early in the process, often immediately after being informed by an examiner that a report will be filed with the President of KI. Students then prepare a written statement for the President, who determines whether the matter should be referred to the Disciplinary Board. Scheduling the disciplinary hearing can take a month or longer.

To increase efficiency and reduce the number of cases remaining open, the waiting period for closure will be reduced from **three weeks to one week** starting in 2026. Students will be informed of the one week closure rule in the final message sent by the

Ombudsperson. Closed cases may be reopened at any time if a student later wishes to pursue the matter further.

Departments

Not all students specify their department when registering a case, which limits the reliability of departmental distribution statistics. Nonetheless, certain trends can be observed. The Medical Program does not belong to a single department, but students are encouraged to indicate the department responsible for the course in question. Students enrolled in distance or standalone courses, or specialized programs, are often unaware of which department they belong to. The Ombudspersons have supplemented missing data where possible.

The departments with the highest number of student cases were:

- **Department of Medicine, Huddinge (MedH)**
- **Department of Medicine, Solna (MedS)**
- **Department of Dental Medicine**
- **Department of Neurobiology, Care Sciences and Society (NVS)**

Of the 117 students who contacted the Ombudspersons, only 81 specified their department (18 selected “Don’t know”).

Institution, Studenter	Antal ärenden
Institutionen för biovetenskaper och näringslära	0
Institutionen för cell- och molekylärbiologi	0
Institutionen för fysiologi och farmakologi	4
Institutionen för klinisk neurovetenskap	5
Institutionen för klinisk forskning och utbildning, Södersjukhuset	0
Institutionen för klinisk vetenskap, intervention och teknik - CLINTEC	0
Institutionen för kliniska vetenskaper, Danderyds sjukhus	1
Institutionen för global folkhälsa	1
Institutionen för kvinnors och barns hälsa	3
Institutionen för laboratoriemedicin	0
Institutionen för lärande, informatik, management och etik	1
Institutionen för medicinsk biokemi och biofysik	0
Institutionen för medicinsk epidemiologi och biostatistik	2
Institutionen för medicin, Huddinge	14
Institutionen för medicin, Solna	8
Institutionen för mikrobiologi, tumör- och cellbiologi	0
Institutet för miljömedicin	1
Institutionen för molekylär medicin och kirurgi	0
Institutionen för neurobiologi, vårdvetenskap och samhälle	10
Institutionen för neurovetenskap	0
Institutionen för odontologi	13
Institutionen för onkologi-patologi	0
Vet ej	18

Among doctoral students, awareness of department affiliation is naturally higher. The departments with the highest number of doctoral cases were:

- **Department of Clinical Neuroscience (CNS)**
- **Department of Medicine, Solna (MedS)**
- **Department of Neurobiology, Care Sciences and Society (NVS)**

These three departments accounted for **21 of 50 doctoral cases (42%)**.

Of the 50 doctoral students who contacted the Ombudspersons, 49 indicated their department (2 selected “Don’t know”).

Institution, Doktorander	Antal ärenden
Institutionen för bioteknik och näringslära	0
Institutionen för cell- och molekylärbiologi	2
Institutionen för fysiologi och farmakologi	0
Institutionen för global folkhälsa	1
Institutionen för klinisk neurovetenskap	8
Institutionen för klinisk forskning och utbildning, Södersjukhuset	0
Institutionen för klinisk vetenskap, intervention och teknik - CLINTEC	2
Institutionen för kliniska vetenskaper, Danderyds sjukhus	0
Institutionen för kvinnors och barns hälsa	2
Institutionen för laboratoriemedicin	0
Institutionen för lärande, informatik, management och etik	0
Institutionen för medicinsk biokemi och biofysik	4
Institutionen för medicinsk epidemiologi och biostatistik	2
Institutionen för medicin, Huddinge	3
Institutionen för medicin, Solna	8
Institutionen för mikrobiologi, tumör- och cellbiologi	3
Institutet för miljömedicin	2
Institutionen för molekylär medicin och kirurgi	3
Institutionen för neurobiologi, vårdvetenskap och samhälle	5
Institutionen för neurovetenskap	0
Institutionen för odontologi	0
Institutionen för onkologi-patologi	2
Vet ej	2

4. Types of Cases

Students

Many cases fall under multiple categories and subcategories in the Ombudspersons' case management system. Nevertheless, certain patterns can be observed. Student cases most frequently concern matters related to the Disciplinary Board, clinical placements (VFU/KFU), grade decisions and eligibility requirements, as well as the study and work environment within courses

Study and Work Environment / Equal Treatment

Problems related to the study and work environment involve issues concerning teachers, examiners, administrative staff at KI, as well as interactions among students. KI staff are often perceived as difficult to contact, unfair, or even condescending in their communication. Between students, cases frequently involve bullying, typically in the form of perceived cliques, exclusion, or derogatory talk that students experience as insults or defamation in the legal sense. The Ombudspersons have heard reports of students intending to file police reports, though the outcomes of such cases are unknown.

Reconsideration and Exemptions

A significant proportion of student cases involve questions regarding the grading of examinations. Students often question whether an exam has been assessed correctly, whether inconsistencies exist in the marking between students, and whether expectations or accepted answers were clearly communicated beforehand.

The Ombudspersons support students in submitting reconsideration requests by advising them on how to formulate their applications or by arranging meetings with the examiner to ensure clear communication regarding the assessment. Students who request reconsideration of a grade decision often simultaneously apply for an exemption from eligibility requirements for the subsequent course. Lacking eligibility may require a student to wait up to an entire academic year before the course is offered again, which can have serious consequences—including loss of eligibility for student financial aid (CSN) and student housing. Students also express significant anxiety about being separated from their cohort or disappointing family members, as a forced study interruption reveals failed examinations.

Disciplinary Cases

In 2025, 58 students received disciplinary actions—either suspension or a warning—by KI's Disciplinary Board. Of these, 31 contacted the Ombudspersons for support. Of the disciplinary cases handled by the Ombudspersons, 61% involved female students. Within the Disciplinary Board itself, approximately 70% of cases concerned women.

This distribution is broadly proportional to KI's overall gender distribution, where 73% of students are women.

However, male students appear more likely to seek support from the Ombudspersons relative to their proportion in Disciplinary Board cases: 39% of disciplinary cases managed by the Ombudspersons involved male students, compared with 29% within the Disciplinary Board.

Students commonly contact the Ombudspersons immediately after speaking with a teacher or examiner about a suspected violation—long before the formal summons from the Disciplinary Board. This suggests that teachers and examiners are well informed about the Ombudspersons and that students are aware of their right to support.

The sole category used for disciplinary cases in the Ombudspersons' system is *misleading*, usually involving suspected cheating in examination halls, unauthorized use of AI in home exams, plagiarism, or incorrect or unauthorized citation practices. A smaller number of cases involve unforeseen incidents where the student was unable to follow correct procedures; in these cases, the Board typically issued a warning rather than a suspension.

Clinical Placements (VFU/KFU)

Cases related to clinical placements primarily concern the work environment. Students frequently report inadequate treatment or insufficient supervision from clinical staff or supervisors within the regional healthcare system. Students who seek support from the Ombudspersons in relation to VFU are often at risk of failing—or have already failed—the placement, and they typically attribute this outcome to deficiencies in supervision or the clinical setting rather than their own performance.

Although KI is responsible for ensuring the overall educational environment, it does not have control over the workplace environment at clinical sites. As a result, responsibility for ensuring students' work environment during VFU often falls between institutional boundaries.

Doctoral Students

Of the 50 doctoral student cases received in 2025, **29 concerned the supervisory relationship and the work environment**. Issues relating to the work environment also include discrimination and harassment. Most discrimination cases that emerged in 2025 involved conflicts between doctoral students or between a doctoral student and other KI staff, rather than between doctoral students and their supervisors.

Challenges within supervisory relationships largely concerned psychosocial aspects of the work environment. Common issues included excessive expectations regarding

working hours or research output, unclear supervision, and excessively harsh or unconstructive criticism—both in private and public.

Doctoral students also raised questions regarding their employment at KI, including salary, benefits, vacation, parental leave, and the combination of part-time doctoral studies with clinical employment. Several cases concerned extensions of doctoral employment because the doctoral student had been unable to complete their work within the expected time frame.

Only a small number of cases involved questions about the process for applying for public defense (disputation), though these cases tend to be complex. KI has no clear internal guidelines on how many times a doctoral candidate may apply for a defense, and the Higher Education Ordinance provides no upper limit regarding time or number of applications.

No doctoral students contacted the Ombudspersons regarding Disciplinary Board matters.

Discrimination and Harassment

Only a small number of discrimination and harassment cases were submitted in 2025. As of February 2026, the Ombudspersons are still handling several cases received at the start of the autumn semester. No cases involving *sexual harassment* were submitted to the Ombudspersons. Instead, cases involved discrimination or harassment based on ethnicity or nationality, as well as degrading treatment in the form of exclusion and bullying. KI's incident reporting system (IA) registered 17 cases of discrimination or harassment in 2025, with none classified as sexual harassment.

5. Analysis and Reflection

Students

Disciplinary Cases

Students often experience significant stress when contacted by the Disciplinary Board or informed that a report has been submitted. It is therefore positive that students can reach out to the Ombudspersons at an early stage, allowing them to familiarize themselves with the process and understand its steps and implications. The Ombudspersons have had constructive collaboration with the legal officers associated with the Disciplinary Board, who have been clear, supportive, and helpful in addressing questions posed by both Ombudspersons and students. In many cases, students have wished for the Ombudspersons to accompany them to the Disciplinary Board meeting.

The Ombudspersons have consistently clarified to students that a six week suspension is the most common outcome in cases where cheating/misleading is confirmed. As a result, the Ombudspersons' work has centered on preparing students emotionally and practically for this possibility, and on supporting them in developing strategies for managing a suspension period that can affect up to an entire academic year. Students are encouraged to contact study counsellors for academic planning, and an overview of how their studies may be affected. In some cases, students have also required support from the student health service, to which the Ombudspersons have referred them.

Students frequently report that they were experiencing extreme personal stress or an overwhelming academic workload at the time of the alleged cheating. They often express deep remorse, and the consequences of a suspension are substantial: financial instability, potential loss of student housing, and delays in graduation. Many students are unaware of how the disciplinary process works or what consequences may follow a suspension. Feelings of shame are common—not least in relation to family and close relations—and students express anxiety about how a disciplinary action might affect their future studies or academic careers.

Reconsideration and Examinations

Requests for reconsideration and applications for exemptions frequently overlap. Students who have failed an examination—especially a compulsory barrier course—often seek reconsideration of the grade and subsequently request an exemption from the eligibility requirements for the upcoming term or next course.

It is common for students to have missed the passing grade by only one or two points, particularly, it seems, within the basic science phase of the Medical Program. Many students invest considerable effort in gathering evidence to support their reconsideration requests, such as screenshots or detailed comparisons of assessed answers. When possible and appropriate, the Ombudspersons have facilitated communication with examiners to clarify marking practices and interpretation of answers. The outcomes of reconsideration requests remain unclear, as students do not always report back.

Regarding exemptions, some students report being discouraged by study counsellors from submitting applications. In a few cases, students have informed the Ombudspersons that their exemption requests were approved.

It is understandable that reconsideration and exemption processes have high thresholds to ensure quality and academic integrity. However, a more robust safety net for students in such situations might reduce the number of reconsideration and exemption requests. For example, the introduction of an early warning system or a formalized review mechanism could be explored for borderline cases. Even decisions

that are formally correct can have severe consequences for individual students; therefore, discussions about strengthening student security may be warranted.

Clinical Placements (VFU)

The most common issues students raise regarding clinical placements concern interpersonal treatment by supervisors or clinical staff and reconsideration requests following a failed placement. Questions surrounding responsibility for students' work environment during VFU recur annually and remain unresolved. Although KI bears responsibility for students' educational environment, it lacks direct control over the clinical workplace, creating a gap where students' rights to a safe work environment are not always guaranteed.

Hierarchies and Communication Between Students and Staff

Students often feel isolated when navigating issues involving KI staff, who hold the formal authority to make decisions related to teaching, assessment, and course structure.

Students frequently report difficulty reaching KI staff despite sending multiple emails. As a result, they turn to the Ombudspersons for help in establishing contact. Students are often uncertain about whom to contact, as responsibilities within KI are sometimes unclear. This leads students to email multiple recipients "to be safe", hoping that someone in the chain will address the issue. The Ombudspersons have seen long email threads involving many recipients, which generate frustration and confusion not only for students but also for staff. The complexity of these conversations often diminishes clarity and understanding.

Students also report adding multiple recipients (cc:) to emails in an effort to create "witnesses" to their situation. They hope that increased visibility will lead to accountability and that someone will pick up the issue. The Ombudspersons have found that this strategy is seldom effective; instead, it often leads to confusion and a sense of defeat against an organization that feels distant and opaque. The Ombudspersons therefore advise against such strategies and instead emphasize the importance of identifying the correct contact person.

A more effective strategy is for students to contact the Ombudspersons as soon as an unclear situation arises. Together, the Ombudspersons and the student can identify the appropriate contact person and establish communication that is respectful and constructive. The Ombudspersons also require clarity regarding KI's internal distribution of responsibilities, as the boundaries between roles are not always obvious. A question that arises is whether it ever truly is the *wrong* person who receives a student's enquiry—should not goodwill, guidance, and respectful communication be a shared responsibility?

While creating clearer communication pathways for students may be challenging, it remains a meaningful ambition.

Doctoral Students

The extensive space devoted to doctoral cases in this report reflects the fact that these cases require more time and resources than student cases. Challenges faced by doctoral students are often complex and involve ongoing, asymmetric supervisory relationships characterized by power dynamics.

That said, some potential conflicts can be resolved quickly through brief consultations or supportive emails. Doctoral students often seek assistance with communication, interpersonal interactions, or clarification of employment rights. An increase in early stage support could potentially reduce the number of prolonged and complex cases. Experience shows that the earlier a doctoral candidate seeks support, the better equipped they are to manage emerging difficulties. With attentiveness and responsiveness, serious conflicts can often be avoided.

Employment Issues

Common concerns relate to employment terms and the work environment. International doctoral students often lack familiarity with Swedish labor laws and may have limited social support. Both national and international doctoral students worry about being dismissed or losing their doctoral position if they express dissatisfaction or discomfort. Uncertainty regarding employment stability contributes to an insecure work situation.

There is a clear need for improved communication regarding employment rights and protections. Many doctoral students are unaware of the job security provisions that apply to them, which exacerbates stress unnecessarily.

The Supervisory Relationship

Conflicts or misunderstandings in the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the principal supervisor are a recurring theme. Common sources of conflict include unspoken or unmet expectations, unclear communication, insufficient supervision (too little or too much guidance), and poor leadership.

Examples include:

- **Too little supervision:**
Supervisors are unavailable, fail to provide timely or clear feedback, or do not articulate what they find unsatisfactory or how it should be addressed.
- **Too much supervision (“micromanagement”):**
Supervisors provide excessively detailed control, override the doctoral

candidate's decisions, make changes to research materials without consent, or impede the candidate's academic independence.

Moreover, many doctoral students report experiencing condescending or hostile communication from supervisors, with comments such as:

“You will never be able to defend your thesis.”

“You are much worse than my other doctoral students.”

“You are not competent enough to be a doctoral student.”

Reports include shouting at students during meetings, public belittling, and exclusion—such as supervisors speaking about the candidate in their presence while deliberately not addressing them. Some supervisors have convened group meetings to criticize or threaten doctoral students collectively. Negative body language and dismissive gestures have also been reported. The Ombudspersons have met with several of the supervisors involved, and in many cases these problematic behaviors have been corroborated.

Unreasonable expectations regarding working hours and workload are also common. Some supervisors demand more than 40 hours per week, insist on evening and weekend availability, or require manuscripts within unrealistic deadlines. Leave requests are sometimes met with resistance or conditional approval. While doctoral students expect demanding work, the actual workload often greatly exceeds expectations.

Most doctoral students experiencing such problems request a change of supervisor. Although supervisor changes are permitted, they are not straightforward. The process is administratively complex and often financially complicated, as funding is commonly tied to the principal supervisor. Supervisors typically “own” the projects in which the doctoral students work, creating mutual dependency: supervisors need students to complete research projects, and students rely on supervisors to complete their education.

The Ombudspersons first attempt to help rebuild communication and repair the supervisory relationship, when possible. A functional collaboration is in everyone's best interest. However, in some cases the best long-term solution is to replace the supervisor, particularly when conflicts are deeply entrenched and impede progress.

A poor supervisor match is resource draining for all parties. It may disrupt focus, erode communication, and create avoidant or overworked patterns of behavior. Research quality, work environment, and study progress all suffer. In some cases, the defense (disputation) has been delayed or placed at risk. Prolonged conflict has led to sickness absence among both doctoral students and supervisors, and it negatively affects colleagues working in shared projects.

Many doctoral students describe these periods as the worst of their lives, characterized by psychosocial strain and disillusionment. Some refer to “trauma groups,” where doctoral students support one another in coping with supervisors perceived as unpredictable or excessively critical. KI staff have also confided to the Ombudspersons that certain supervisors are not suitable for supervisory roles but that they feel powerless to intervene, as these supervisors may possess key resources or occupy influential positions.

Discussions with DSA and doctoral students indicate that many more students experience difficult or harmful situations but choose not to seek support. Fear of reprisals is a major factor, as is the desire to remain anonymous. Many do not wish to involve their supervisor or colleagues. Instead, they develop personal strategies—some adaptive, others less so—to cope with toxic work environments. A cultural narrative persists in academia that hardship, “tough supervisors,” and emotional strain are simply part of scientific training.

Illustrative Quotes from Doctoral Students

To exemplify the accounts shared during autumn 2025, below are selected quotations from different students:

“If nothing is expected to change, I honestly wonder why I’m being asked to continue working under these circumstances... It’s a constant fight.”

“They cut the wings of many young people who were excited to become scientists.”

“I am not the same person I was when I came here. I am changed.”

“Four years ago, I thought this would be the best birthday present. Now it feels like the worst—for all the suffering I’ve been through.”

“I have been a medic in a warzone, but this is the worst experience of my life.”

“Please, I don’t want anything to happen to my PI.”

“After I finish my PhD here, I never want to do scientific research again.”

Despite these experiences, there are also positive examples—cases in which supervisors were open, curious, and willing to repair the relationship, or where a supervisor's change enabled new possibilities for progress.

Most doctoral students contact the Ombudspersons only once their situation becomes untenable. There is hope that more students will seek help earlier, when conflicts may still be resolved with minimal harm. Many students emphasize that they do not want their supervisors to face negative consequences; they often feel gratitude and a desire to preserve the relationship wherever possible.

Green Light / Red Light System — Follow-Up

The introduction of the “green light” approval for supervisors has been perceived positively. However, doctoral students frequently express uncertainty regarding the criteria for maintaining greenlight status. They report recurring problems with supervisors who, despite ongoing concerns, retain their approval. It is also unclear whether greenlight status can be revoked, and on what grounds. Mandatory supervisor training every five years is a positive initiative, but insufficient. Meetings with doctoral students, supervisors, and colleagues suggest a need for greater support, follow-up, and leadership development for supervisors. Although many supervisors are appreciated and competent researchers, increased pedagogical and communication competence is needed. The challenges highlighted by doctoral students point to an absence of robust leadership training for supervisors.

Supervisor Training

The Ombudspersons have participated in the larger supervisor training course, *Introductory Doctoral Supervision Course*, which is required to obtain greenlight status. During the course, the Ombudspersons present their role and common challenges encountered by doctoral students.

There is a need for additional training on topics such as discrimination, harassment, and bullying—specifically guidance on procedures, responsibilities, and support resources. A mandatory follow-up training would be beneficial. While an advanced supervisor course exists, covering topics such as conflict management, participation remains voluntary.

Relationship with HR

Doctoral students' experiences with Human Resources (HR) vary significantly, and the Ombudspersons' experiences are similarly mixed. In some cases, HR has been difficult to reach; in others, HR has been engaged, responsive, and instrumental in supporting doctoral students. Constructive collaboration with HR is particularly valuable, as HR provides authoritative guidance on rights and obligations and plays a crucial role in fostering healthy work environments. Several students have contacted both the Ombudspersons and HR. A review of communication processes may help identify challenges and improve collaboration between HR and doctoral students.

Co-supervisors

Co-supervisors can offer valuable support and reduce the burden on head supervisors. However, the Ombudspersons have observed that co-supervisors are often absent or rarely contacted. Some doctoral students have never met their co-supervisors, or hesitate to approach them out of fear that their head supervisor may react negatively. Clarifying the role and responsibilities of co-supervisors could improve accessibility, provide additional perspectives, and increase supervision capacity. When co-supervisors and head supervisors are close colleagues, the doctoral candidate may perceive a “two-against-one” dynamic, highlighting the need for transparency and trust.

Interactions Between Doctoral Students

Competition among doctoral students is high. The Ombudspersons have handled several long running cases involving discrimination or bullying within research groups. Reports include internal divisions, the formation of exclusive cliques with their own norms, and a lack of transparency. Despite the existence of overarching rules—such as KI's Code of Conduct—informal group norms often override institutional policies, undermining efforts to ensure fair and respectful treatment.

Language barriers can exacerbate exclusion, particularly when groups of colleagues or supervisors communicate exclusively in a shared non-Swedish language. This can form social and academic “islands” where integration and oversight are limited.

Incident handling practices vary widely across departments. Documentation is often lacking; some individuals are discouraged from submitting IA reports, and meetings addressing incidents may be undocumented, making follow-up difficult and allowing narratives to shift.

While cultural differences fall outside the scope of this report, they play a significant role in misunderstandings, discrimination, and interpersonal tension. Greater attention to cultural awareness may be beneficial.

The IA System — When and How It Is Used

The IA system exists to document incidents, generate statistics, assign responsibility, and ensure appropriate follow-up measures. Staff and students are expected to report “deviations” to contribute to a safe work environment and support KI’s goal of zero tolerance for discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and abusive conduct.

However, based on information received, the IA system is not functioning optimally. In several cases, it is not used at all, making it difficult for KI and MF to assess the true scope of incidents.

Some students report being discouraged—explicitly or implicitly—from submitting IA reports. They are sometimes told that informal communication “is enough” or that a formal report may escalate conflicts. Students facing difficult situations may interpret this as a signal not to report, increasing feelings of vulnerability.

Fear of reprisals is also common, despite explicit prohibitions against retaliatory measures. This fear reduces reporting rates and leaves serious incidents undocumented and inadequately addressed.

The IA system does not allow anonymous reporting, which is a significant barrier, particularly when the person responsible for processing the report is involved in the incident. This creates a conflict of interest and reduces trust in the process.

Together, these observations indicate a need to strengthen reporting culture, increase transparency, and ensure that the IA system is used consistently and safely as part of systematic work environment management.

Discrimination and Harassment

Cases involving discrimination and harassment are particularly sensitive and time consuming, and they place a heavy emotional burden on all involved. Even when a case is formally closed, the underlying situation may not be fully resolved.

When assessing suspected discrimination, the Ombudspersons must examine whether the case meets the legal criteria for discrimination. In some cases, a situation experienced as discriminatory lacks a legally defined discrimination ground and must instead be treated under headings such as degrading treatment or harassment. Some cases have involved clear and explicit discriminatory remarks based on ethnicity or sexual orientation. In other cases, discriminatory behavior was suspected but not accompanied by overt statements, leaving room for interpretation. Students in these situations often feel invalidated when their concerns are dismissed as miscommunication.

Even when a case does not meet the legal definition of discrimination, the harm to the individual is no less significant. Such cases often reveal deeper systemic issues.

The Ombudspersons' work involves clarifying the law, supporting the student, facilitating repair within damaged relationships, and confronting difficult realities at the departmental level. There are positive examples in which KI staff, directors of study, and HR have been highly supportive, responsive, and action oriented

The Ombudspersons have on several occasions raised the need for clear action plans and consistent protocols for handling discrimination and harassment. Although KI has a Code of Conduct, a comprehensive operational plan for responding to incidents is lacking or difficult to locate.

Students often express shock and disillusionment that such incidents occur at an institution like Karolinska Institutet. Bullying, discrimination, and harassment have profound psychological effects. A lack of knowledge, confidence, or willingness to engage with these issues appears to hinder effective responses. Avoidance behavior is common. The emotional and administrative demands of such cases are substantial.

No cases of sexual harassment were registered in the IA system during 2025, which is consistent with the Ombudspersons' own case data. However, based on conversations with Student Safety Officers, several cases of sexual harassment did occur. This raises important questions:

Why are these incidents not reported within KI's formal system? And why do those affected not seek support from the Ombudspersons?

International Presence

KI does not systematically track the proportion of international students and doctoral students; however, data from UKÄ provides some insight. A clear understanding of KI's international composition—overall and by department—could guide the development of targeted support measures. Without such data, important voices risk being overlooked.

While approximately 32% of KI's doctoral students are international, **56% of doctoral students seeking support from the Ombudspersons in 2025 were international.**

The Ombudspersons have not undertaken targeted outreach to international doctoral students, yet they are overrepresented in the case load. This suggests that international students either experience greater vulnerability or lack informal support networks. Feedback from DSA indicates that international doctoral students face greater difficulties navigating the Swedish academic and administrative system.

Distribution of Cases Across Departments

A review of doctoral cases for 2025 shows that more than 40% came from three departments: **MedS, NVS, and CNS**, all of which are among KI's largest departments with substantial doctoral populations.

The Ombudspersons have particularly strong collaboration with the Department of Clinical Neuroscience (CNS). They participate annually in CNS's "OneYear FollowUp Meeting" for doctoral students, presenting their mandate and offering early stage support. This repeated presence increases visibility and may partly explain the high number of cases coming from this department. CNS is also KI's largest department, with more than 250 registered doctoral students.

The concentration of cases within the largest departments reflects not only their size but also the presence of demanding educational and research environments, where high workloads, supervisory challenges, and communication issues are common.

6. Recommendations for Improvement Within the University

The cases received during the year reveal recurring challenges related to equal treatment, interpersonal conduct, and the handling of incidents within the educational environment. Many students express uncertainty about how to proceed when experiencing degrading treatment, discrimination, or other problems related to their study or work environment. It also appears that some students are discouraged—both directly and indirectly—from submitting formal reports through the IA system. In several cases, students have been told that verbal information “is sufficient” for initiating an investigation. For students who already feel unsafe or vulnerable, such signals may deter them from reporting incidents, which in turn risks obscuring underlying problems and complicating efforts to maintain a systematic work environment process.

To strengthen equal opportunities and enhance transparency, there is a need for regular evaluations and follow-ups that support leaders and supervisors in their work. These evaluations should not solely collect information but should also serve as tools for reflection and continuous improvement. For example, evaluation questions could be formulated to encourage active responsibility, such as:

“How have you worked with this issue during the past week?”

Such questions may help promote a more conscious and inclusive work environment.

There is also a clear need for written and easily accessible routines for addressing discrimination, harassment, and other forms of unacceptable behavior. The Ombudspersons, together with the Student Safety Officers (HSO and HSSO), could support the development of these process descriptions. Clear routines are essential to ensure that students understand where to turn, what happens after a report is filed, and what rights they have.

Furthermore, the experiences from this year show that supervisors often request more support in their leadership roles and pedagogical responsibilities. Strengthening support structures for supervisors could help prevent conflicts, clarify expectations, and improve conditions for both students and doctoral students.

Another important area for development is the enhancement of communication and collaboration between departments and support functions, including the Ombudspersons. A more structured and sustained dialogue may help identify problems earlier and enable departments to take well informed and timely action.

A recurring question concerns how to reduce the number of disciplinary cases. One key factor is ensuring that students receive clear information about the applicable rules and the consequences of violations, including suspension. Practical preventive measures could also reduce the risk of unauthorized aids during examinations, such as:

- use of colored or pre-stamped scrap paper
- requiring students to hand in mobile phones to invigilators,
- increased access to lockable storage outside examination halls.

Such measures can contribute to a more legally secure and predictable examination environment.

7. Collaboration and Communication

Throughout the autumn, the Ombudspersons have been featured on digital screens across the KI campuses, and they have identified additional forums in which their presence would be valuable—such as the Student Newsletter (*Studentnytt*). At the start of the autumn semester, the Ombudspersons participated in Welcome Day for both national and international students, where they had the opportunity to present available support services and activities. In collaboration with MF, the Ombudspersons also organised and participated in “Kårkaffe” events in Solna, and took part in similar activities held by the Odontological Association (OF) in Flemingsberg. The Ombudspersons have enjoyed a strong collaboration with OF, which invited them to the kickoff and introductory events for new dental students. The Departments of Clinical Neuroscience (CNS) and Oncology–Pathology (OnkPat) likewise invited the Ombudspersons to annual meetings and events for staff and doctoral students.

There remain several departments with which the Ombudspersons have not yet been in contact. Strengthening the presence and accessibility of the Ombudspersons to students at the bachelor’s and master’s levels is important. The physical facilities of MF in Flemingsberg have not been optimal, and delays in relocating to renovated premises have limited the Ombudspersons’ ability to maintain a consistent presence there. Meetings with students in Flemingsberg have, therefore, sometimes been conducted online, or held on the Solna campus or in booked meeting rooms in Flemingsberg according to the students’ preferences.

Relations and Communication with KI Staff

Overall, communication with KI staff has been positive, welcoming, and constructive. The Ombudspersons have been invited to and have participated in recurring meetings with KI representatives, where experiences and information have been exchanged. This has deepened the mutual understanding between students, MF, and KI, and has strengthened the Ombudspersons’ ability to support students effectively.

However, the Ombudspersons have observed that a certain tone or “jargon” occasionally appears in email correspondence or during meetings with KI staff—experienced as condescending or undermining by both Ombudspersons and students. Examples include students being described as “not very bright,” or Ombudspersons being criticized for their conduct and receiving responses that fall short of respectful professional communication. Some of these situations have been uncomfortable for all parties involved.

As all work involving human interactions inevitably includes the possibility of error, it is important to recognize that learning and development occur in relationships with

others. Being open, reflective, and willing to adjust behaviors is essential in fostering a respectful and supportive communication culture.

In cases where the Ombudspersons themselves were criticized for their actions, these situations were discussed internally at MF, and the conclusion was that the Ombudspersons had acted within their mandate and professional boundaries. Although such incidents are neither common nor representative, they are noteworthy and highlight the importance of examining prevailing norms and working actively to maintain an open and respectful dialogue.

Despite these isolated incidents, the Ombudspersons' overall experience of working with KI staff has been highly positive. KI has been generous with support, encouragement, and constructive feedback, and has shown strong appreciation for the Ombudspersons' role. The Ombudspersons have received consistent support from head of studies and engaged in meaningful conversations, which they hope to continue.

Collaboration with KI Support Units

Because many students and doctoral students who contact the Ombudspersons are experiencing emotional or psychological strain, the Ombudspersons have valued collaborative relationships with the Student Health Centre and Funka (the unit providing support for disabilities). These partnerships enable complementary forms of support for students. The Ombudspersons have also met with representatives from the Equal Opportunity unit, and see considerable potential for collaboration, as many of the issues the Ombudspersons address intersect with matters handled by Equal Opportunity.

Collaboration with Students and Doctoral Students

Throughout the year, the Ombudspersons have continued to strengthen their presence and availability to both students and doctoral students. Many express appreciations for the Ombudspersons' accessibility, support, and responsiveness, and the Ombudspersons have received numerous messages of gratitude.

As the Ombudspersons are organizationally placed within MF, establishing a close and collaborative relationship with the student union has been a natural development. During the autumn, the Ombudspersons focused on building internal routines, familiarizing themselves with MF's and KI's structures, and laying the foundation for a more systematic and longterm collaboration moving forward.

8. Future Outlook

Planned Initiatives for 2026

The Ombudspersons are planning several developmental initiatives aimed at strengthening preventive work and improving the support offered to students and doctoral students.

A central ambition is to deepen the collaboration with the Student Safety Officers (HSO) and the Head of Student Safety Officers (HSSO). Closer cooperation would enable these functions to complement one another in areas concerning equal treatment, work environment, and interpersonal conduct. Such collaboration would also provide greater oversight of existing initiatives within KI and help identify areas where further development is needed.

Another priority is to strengthen and expand contact with program directors and coordinators for undergraduate and masters' education across departments. This will help bring the Ombudspersons closer to the student community. The Ombudspersons also see value in participating in more departmental activities and events—such as annual meetings, program introductions, and other gatherings. A stronger presence would ensure that students and doctoral students learn about the Ombudspersons' role **before** problems arise, enabling earlier support and reducing the risk of escalating conflicts.

Additional initiatives include developing workshops and informational sessions in collaboration with MF to increase students' awareness of the Ombudspersons' role and available support pathways. The Ombudspersons will also work more closely with the Doctoral Students' Association (DSA) to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges specific to doctoral students.

A particular focus will be on establishing a more robust presence in Flemingsberg. At present, the lack of suitable facilities for confidential meetings limits accessibility for students based there. Establishing a stable, physical presence in Flemingsberg would significantly improve the ability to meet students in person and provide support in a secure and private environment.

Identified Risks and Opportunities

A recurring pattern observed in this year's cases is the absence of clear routines for both preventive work and incident management. This often results in **ad hoc solutions**, which carry the risk of:

- exacerbating conflicts,
- creating inconsistent handling of cases across departments, and
- reducing students' trust in institutional processes.

To mitigate these risks, clearer, well established, and easily accessible procedures are needed for addressing incidents and crises.

At the same time, there are significant opportunities. By integrating knowledge about equal treatment, work environment, and respectful communication into everyday practices—and by strengthening the support available to supervisors in their leadership and pedagogical roles—KI can cultivate more sustainable and inclusive educational environments.

The Ombudspersons foresee considerable value in contributing to this work through advisory support, educational efforts, and increased collaboration with departments and support units.