

# The Individual Study Plan

Information for new and current doctoral students and a survey on doctoral students' perceptions of the individual study plan

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**Published by the Swedish National Union of Students, Stockholm 2024**

**Author:** Mathilda Fredriksson

**Layout:** Leo Nyström

**Diary number:** P1-07/2324

**Media contact:** Leo Nyström, 073 041 33 25, [leo.nystrom@sfs.se](mailto:leo.nystrom@sfs.se)

[www.sfs.se](http://www.sfs.se)

## Foreword

The Swedish National Union of Students would like to preface this report by thanking everyone who has participated in the making of it. Through our work, many important lessons have emerged and made SFS more aware of the difficulties that can occur with the individual study plan. We would like to extend an extra big thank you to the SFS doctoral committee, which consisted of Topias Weckström Tolonen, Meryem Saadi, Sanskriti Chattopadhyay, Alexander Adler, Hanna Dort, Karl Kilbo Edlund and Carolina Aguiar, who throughout the work have supported us with their expertise and to Linnéa Carlsson who has also contributed with her perspectives.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all the doctoral students who answered our survey and thus made this report possible.



**Jacob Färnert, president**



**Klara Dryselius, vice president**

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## Introduction

The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) is an association of student and doctoral student unions at Sweden's higher education institutions (HEIs). SFS has around sixty member unions, representing approximately 390,000 students and doctoral students. Within SFS, we have a doctoral student committee (SFS-DK) that works on issues related to doctoral students and their education, as well as research and the general conditions within academia from a doctoral student perspective.

In 2021, SFS released the report *How healthy are our doctoral students?* (Swedish title: *Hur mår doktoranden?*) together with Fackförbundet ST (the Union of Civil Servants) which shows that the ISP is not without its problems. Although the result of the report shows that doctoral students are generally positive towards their ISP, it also shows that one third of them do not feel that the ISP is meaningful, and just over one tenth feel that it contributes to stress. It also shows that the process differs between HEIs. The report highlighted that HEIs should review the work on and around the ISP to ensure that it is regarded as the legal document that it actually is.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SFS and Fackförbundet ST, 2021, *How healthy are our doctoral students? - a report by Fackförbundet ST and SFS Doktorandkommitté into doctoral students' psychosocial work environment. Summary of the principal results.* [https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/how\\_healthy\\_are\\_our\\_doctoral\\_students\\_summary\\_of\\_the\\_principal\\_results.pdf](https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/how_healthy_are_our_doctoral_students_summary_of_the_principal_results.pdf)

SFS and Fackförbundet ST, 2021, *Hur mår doktoranden? - en rapport från Fackförbundet ST och SFS doktorandkommitté om forskarstuderandes psykosociala arbetsmiljö.* <https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rapport-hur-mår-doktoranden.pdf>

“An appropriate and legally secure ISP” has been a priority issue for SFS during 2023/2024, and the aim of this is to highlight the doctoral student's and the HEIs undertaking through and in the ISP, and facilitate a national exchange of experience and the dissemination of good examples of the establishment of and the work on ISP. Moreover, in their plan of operations for the academic year 2023/2024, SFS-DK has highlighted ISP as one of their focus points and to assist SFS in its priority issue. This report is the result of these.

Doctoral study plans consist of two parts, a general study plan (ASP) and an ISP. The ASP should provide an overview of what the doctoral education entails, while the ISP is a comprehensive legal document aimed at clarifying the obligations and rights of both the institution and the doctoral student, as well as describing how the education should progress up to the dissertation. In this report, we have only focused on the ISP.

It is important to note that in a Swedish context, the phrase used is usually doctoral student rather than PhD student or graduate student – we use the same in this report to refer to students who are pursuing a degree of PhD or a Licentiate in a Swedish Higher Education Institution..

## **Extracts from The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) chapter 6: Courses and study programmes**

### Individual study plans

#### Section 29

An individual study plan must be drawn up for each third-cycle student. This plan must include the obligations of the third-cycle student and the higher education institution and a timetable for the third-cycle student's study programme. The plan must be adopted after consultation between the third-cycle student and their supervisors.

The individual study plan must be reviewed regularly and amended by the higher education institution as necessary and after consultation with the third-cycle student and their supervisors.

The period of study may only be extended if there are special grounds for doing so. Such grounds may comprise leave of absence because of illness, leave of absence for service in the Swedish defence forces or an elected position in a trade union or student organisation, or parental leave.

*Ordinance (2010:1064).*

### **Entitlement to supervision and other resources**

#### Section 30

If a third-cycle student substantially neglects their obligations under the individual study plan, the vice-chancellor must decide that this student is no longer entitled to supervision and other study resources. Before such a decision is made, the third-cycle student and their supervisors must be given an opportunity to make representations. The case must be considered on the basis of their statements and other available records. The assessment must consider whether the higher education institution has fulfilled its own obligations under the individual study plan. The decision must be in writing and provide reasons.

Resources may not be withdrawn for any period in which the third-cycle student has been appointed to a doctoral studentship or is receiving a doctoral grant.

*Ordinance (2010:1064).*

#### Section 31

If educational resources have been withdrawn under Section 30, the third-cycle student may have their right to supervision and other resources restored after application to the vice-chancellor. The third-cycle student must then convincingly demonstrate, by presenting prospective study results of considerable quality and scope or in some other way, that they can fulfil their remaining obligations under the individual study plan.

*Ordinance (2010:1064).*

## Purpose and layout of the report

Our purpose is to support both new doctoral students as they prepare to fill out their ISP for the first time, as well as current doctoral students before they update their ISP. To achieve this purpose, we aim to develop a support document designed as a guide with advice.

In order to develop a support document that is grounded in reality and genuinely useful for doctoral students, we have chosen to gather advice from current doctoral students who have experience in filling out and updating their ISPs. To gather these insights, we conducted a survey.

This has led to this report consisting of two parts: Part 1: Information for new and current doctoral students, and Part 2: Survey.

Part 1 is primarily addressed towards newly appointed doctoral students, but also to current ones, as it presents advice for both those who are filling out their ISP for the first time and for those who are updating it. To dispel certain myths and misconceptions about the ISP, we also include a “true or false” section where we confirm or refute various claims about the ISP that doctoral students may encounter. We also address the content of the ISP.

In Part 2, we present the result of the underlying survey and the responses obtained from it. Despite the survey being conducted first, we have chosen to present it last because the survey itself is not our primary focus in our work with the ISP.

## Part 1: Information for new and current doctoral students

In this chapter, we have compiled information about ISP that may be particularly useful for newly appointed doctoral students, but also for current doctoral students.

### SFS advice for doctoral students writing their ISP for the first time

SFS has developed a number of advice aimed at doctoral students who are drafting their ISP for the first time. These are partly based on the survey study, which is also presented later in this report.

**1. Start early and allow your ISP work to take some time.** Sometimes this can be easier said than done. But the sooner you begin seeking information and planning your ISP work, the easier the process becomes.

Upon admittance to a doctoral program, you can ask your supervisor if they will prepare the first ISP draft for you, if you are expected to do it yourself, or if there's a template you can familiarise yourself with as soon as you begin your work as a doctoral student.

**2. Familiarise yourself with the form, purpose, and concept of ISP** in your studies so you gain an understanding of what it is, how it is used, and what is expected of you.

- Is there information available at your institution?
- Does your institution use a specific template?
- When does your department expect to update the ISP? Most often the ISPs are updated either annually or per semester.
- Information about ISP is also available in several places, for example, in the SFS PHD Handbook.

**3. Be aware that ISP is a legal document** regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance. It is helpful to have read through Chapter 6, Sections 29-31.

**4. Be thorough but leave room for the unexpected.** It is important that you fill out your ISP carefully with what is planned to be done and when. At the same time, your ISP is a living document that will be updated regularly. Try to have a certain degree of flexibility as things may need to change during your doctoral studies.

As research rarely can be anticipated perfectly, it is normal for the reality to deviate from the ISP to some extent, as long as you and your supervisor agree. You can update the ISP to match the reality.

**5. The ISP can be used as a planning tool.** You can use the ISP to plan your semesters, which courses to take, what to do next, and so on. Utilise your ISP to the fullest and use it regularly as a planning tool!

**6. Talk to your supervisor.** Your supervisor, and co-supervisor, should be available to support you in your doctoral studies and is responsible, together with you, for the establishment of the ISP.

**7. Talk to other doctoral students who have progressed further in their doctoral studies.** They have their own experience of recently writing and perhaps updating their ISP, and can hopefully give you advice.

- This is especially important if you feel that you are not getting answers from your supervisor.
- You can also try contacting your local doctoral student representatives or doctoral ombudsman if you have questions or concerns, if such are available at your institution.



**8. Ask to review other doctoral students' ISPs** or ask if your supervisor or institution has examples; this gives you an understanding of what a completed ISP may look like.

**9. Make it manageable for yourself.** The ISP is an important document, but it is not meant for you to spend so much time, energy, and worry on it that you feel unwell.

Some doctoral students are worried about or intimidated by potential legal consequences. Despite the ISP being a legal document, most of the time, for most of the doctoral students, there are no legal actions taken based on the ISP and in practice it is mostly used as a project management tool, and to measure the progress in your doctoral studies.

Occupational health services or student health services at your institution can be supportive if you feel unwell due to your doctoral studies.

**10. Is anything unclear? Do not hesitate to ask!**

It is important that you understand the content and purpose of the ISP and that you know what should be filled in where. Dare to search for answers in different places until you feel confident.

## SFS advice for doctoral students updating their ISP

Many of the advice above also apply when it is time to update the ISP, but below are some additional advice:

**1. Maintain a log** of your activities during the year (e.g. completed courses, conference participation, teaching hours, doctoral representation in boards, field work). This will help you remember, and make the process of following up and updating your ISP easier.

**Document** obstacles and **deviations** in schedules, and briefly explain why they have occurred. If you have deviated from the plan, it can be useful to be able to demonstrate how and why, as well as how it will affect your future plans.

**2. You can change and update your planning.** Things do not always go as planned, and new things may arise.

For this reason, it might be worthwhile to add only goals in ISP that are dependent on yourself: note, for example, the difference between a goal “Publish an article during the first year” and “Send a manuscript to a journal during the first year”.

**3. It gets easier – but can still feel difficult.** Many doctoral students find it easier to update their ISP compared to filling it out for the first time, but it is still not unusual to feel uncertain or to not know everything in detail.

**4. Check your progression against the ISP regularly.** The ISP documents the plan for your doctoral education that you and your supervisor have developed together. Therefore, it is good to regularly follow up the planning and progression in relation to the ISP, and not set it aside until the annual follow-up.

This is not only useful for the ISP, but also to measure your progress towards attaining your PhD!

## True and false about ISP

There are a few perceptions and statements about the ISP that doctoral students may encounter. Below, we go through some of these statements, to check whether they are accurate or not.

### **Statement: It does not matter what is stated in your ISP.**

**False!** The ISP should contain the institution's and the doctoral student's commitments as well as a timetable for the doctoral student's education.

### **Statement: The ISP should be followed up regularly.**

**True!** It is statutory that the ISP should be followed up regularly. At many institutions, this means that the ISP is followed up and updated annually or every semester.

### **Statement: There are no consequences for not following one's ISP.**

**False!** If a doctoral student significantly neglects their commitments as stated in the ISP, the doctoral student may lose their right to supervision and other resources for their education. However, this is often a last resort measure and is very rarely exercised. If one wishes not to follow the ISP, the first step would be to discuss it with a supervisor!

### **Statement: You can adapt your doctoral studies entirely with an ISP and it overrides all other documents.**

**False!** In general, doctoral studies are regulated by the Higher Educational Ordinance. In addition, there are general study plans (ASP), and possibly other rules and guidelines specific to your institution.

## The contents of an ISP

As a newly appointed doctoral student, it is not uncommon to wonder what an ISP actually looks like, both the template you need to fill in and the final product. Unfortunately, it is difficult to provide an example of a template that works for everyone. Both the template and the content of the ISP can vary greatly. We can, however, provide examples of headings that may occur.

These headers should at least be addressed in some form:

- General information of a student and the study program
- Summary of the thesis work
- Supervision
- Courses, seminars, possible intermediate goals and time frame
- Other duties (teaching duties, administrative duties, student representation and union positions) and possible prolongation
- Financing

Your ISP may not contain all of these headings. However, the information will likely be included in some way, perhaps under a different heading.

To get a more concrete idea of what the ISP template you need to fill in looks like, you can turn to your supervisor or institution. If you are curious about what a completed ISP may look like, you can, for example, ask a fellow doctoral student or ask if it is possible to request an ISP from your institution.

## Part 2: Survey

In this chapter, we present the results from the survey that we have conducted.

### Background

We have developed a survey with questions regarding drafting and updating the ISP from a doctoral students perspective. The survey was distributed during the late autumn of 2023 by SFS-DK to their members and to SFS member unions, and it was open for all doctoral students reached by it to respond.<sup>2</sup>

The survey contains a mix of open-ended questions with free-text responses and predefined answer options, some of which were mandatory while others were optional to answer. The survey is divided into three sections with associated questions:

1. Opening questions
2. Filling out the ISP for the first time
3. Updating the ISP

The presentation of the results from the survey in this report largely follows the same structure.

In compiling the responses to the open-ended questions with free-text responses, we have identified themes and categorised the answers. Each doctoral student may have mentioned multiple themes in their response. Questions with predefined answer options have been compiled statistically.

<sup>2</sup> The last day to answer the survey was 28 December 2023, but the survey was not properly closed for further answers. The survey received one final, somewhat unexpected response in April 2024, and was then finally closed.

### Information about those who have answered the survey

The survey was answered by 92 doctoral students from eleven different HEIs. Among these are both universities and university colleges in varying sizes, with geographical distribution from north to south and east to west.

The doctoral students who responded to the survey are at various stages in their doctoral studies, as illustrated by the diagram below (Diagram 1). The majority are between their second and fifth year of doctoral studies, ten doctoral students are in their first year, and six have completed their doctoral education. There is also a wide range across different academic disciplines

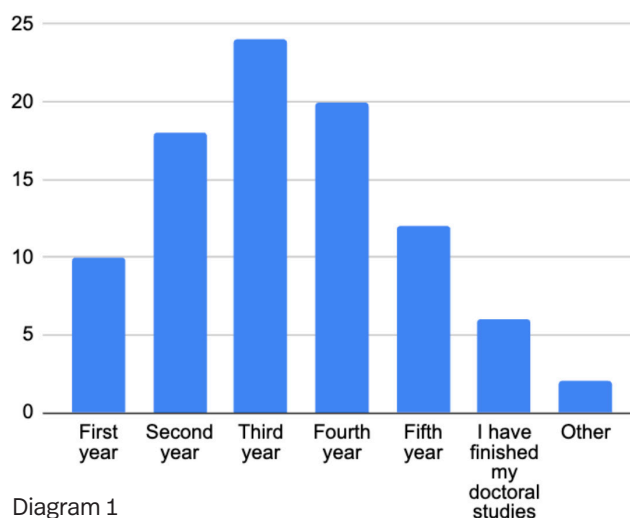


Diagram 1

## Views on the purpose of the ISP vary

The doctoral students were asked to describe the purpose of their ISP in free-text responses. The question was optional to answer, and was answered by nearly all doctoral students.

The two largest categories of answers concern planning and progression. Half of the doctoral students have answered that the purpose of the ISP is planning their doctoral studies, closely followed by the perspective that the ISP is a way to monitor or control progression. Several of the responses include both of these perspectives.

Other themes have also been identified, however, they have all received a lower number of answers compared to planning and progression.

Some doctoral students have responded that the ISP serves as a guide, guidance, or guideline, that it is a form of documentation, or that the purpose is goal-setting and evaluation.

There are also some doctoral students who describe the ISP as bureaucracy or a paperwork product, which we interpreted as something negative, while others have responded that the purpose is unclear or that they do not know.

Only a few doctoral students explicitly respond that the ISP is a legal document, agreement, or contract, a result that we perceive as noteworthy since it is important for all doctoral students to know about the legal standing of the ISP.

There is also a low number of doctoral students who have mentioned some of the following themes in their responses: clarification of responsibilities, information to the institution, job description, feedback, discussion material, organization, governance

documents, quality assurance, and familiarise oneself with the research area.

## How the ISP was first filled out

MOST FILLED OUT THEIR ISP TOGETHER WITH THEIR SUPERVISOR – BUT NOT ALL

The doctoral students were asked how their ISP was filled out for the first time. They were given three predefined options to choose from, with the opportunity to provide their own answer. The question was mandatory.

The majority of the doctoral students responded that they filled out their ISP together with their supervisor (71 responses), and 17 doctoral students stated that they filled it out themselves without supervision. Remarkably, one doctoral student responded that the ISP was filled out by the supervisor without the doctoral student having insight or the opportunity to influence it.

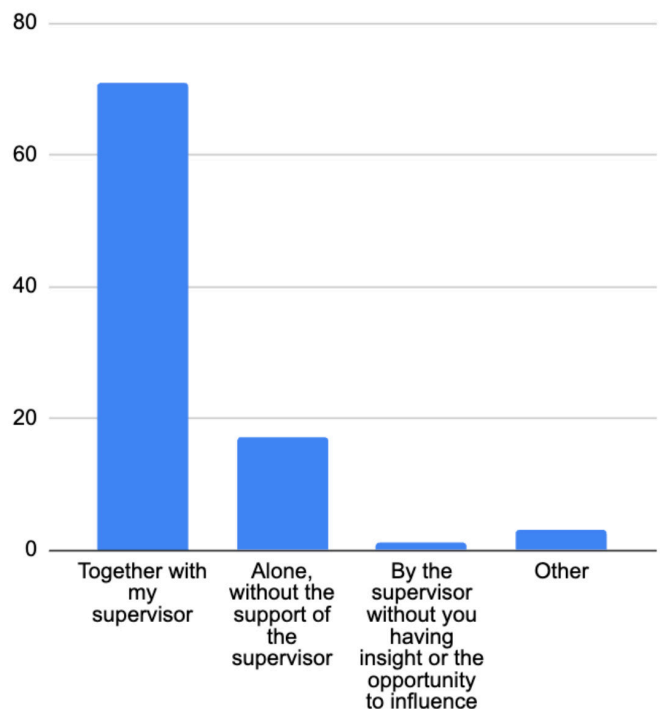


Diagram 2

## The circumstances around filling out the ISP

We then asked the doctoral students to further explain in free-text about the circumstances when their ISP was filled out for the first time. The question was optional to answer, and was answered by a majority of the doctoral students.

### CLARIFICATIONS REGARDING HOW THE ISP WAS FILLED OUT

One theme of answers consisted of clarifications regarding how the ISP was first filled out, and can be viewed as a complement to the answers to the previous question “How was your ISP filled out for the first time”.

The most common answer, both regarding this theme and the question in general, was that the doctoral students had filled out most of or all of the ISP by themselves, and out of these, 66 percent stated that their supervisor had reviewed their ISP before they submitted it, and 38 percent mentioned that their supervisor helped, guided, and explained the ISP to them in various ways. The majority of the doctoral students that had filled out most of or all of the ISP themselves had therefore received some form of support from their supervisors and were thus not completely alone in filling out the ISP. Only 10 percent of those who stated that they filled out most or all of the ISP themselves did not mention that their supervisor helped them or reviewed the ISP.

There are also some doctoral students who have responded that they drafted the ISP together with their supervisor.

A few responded that the supervisor drafted most or all of the ISP. A majority of these doctoral students chose the answer “Together with my supervisor” in response to the

previous question “How was your ISP drafted for the first time” (see Diagram 2), indicating that most of these doctoral students still had insight and opportunity to influence what was stated in their ISP.

### THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR MAY DIFFER

Another theme that can be identified are answers that focus on the role of the supervisor.

The most common answer in this category, and the second most common answer to the question, was that the supervisor helped, guided, and explained the ISP to the doctoral students in various ways, closely followed by answers regarding that the supervisor reviewed their ISP.

However, a few doctoral students indicated that their supervisor was not available or unwilling to help them.

### HELP FROM OTHERS

There is also one theme that concerns the assistance that doctoral students received from others besides their supervisors.

Some of the doctoral students responded that someone other than their supervisor, for example other doctoral students, helped, guided, and explained the ISP to them. The majority of these doctoral students do not mention anything about help from their supervisor or that the supervisor reviewed the ISP.

A few doctoral students also indicated that they were shown examples of other doctoral students' ISPs.

## FILLING OUT AN ISP IS DIFFICULT

A final theme is how the doctoral students perceived the filling out of the ISP.

Some doctoral students have mentioned in their responses that they did not understand, or experienced difficulty filling out the ISP. It is described as unclear, confusing, and overwhelming. Some of the doctoral students described that it was initially difficult, but it became clearer over time.

### The preparation before filling out the ISP for the first time

THE MAJORITY DID NOT FEEL ADEQUATELY PREPARED

The doctoral students were asked if they felt adequately prepared before filling out their ISP for the first time. They were given three predefined options to choose from, with the opportunity to provide their own answer. The question was mandatory.

Did you feel adequately prepared before filling out your ISP as a new doctoral student?

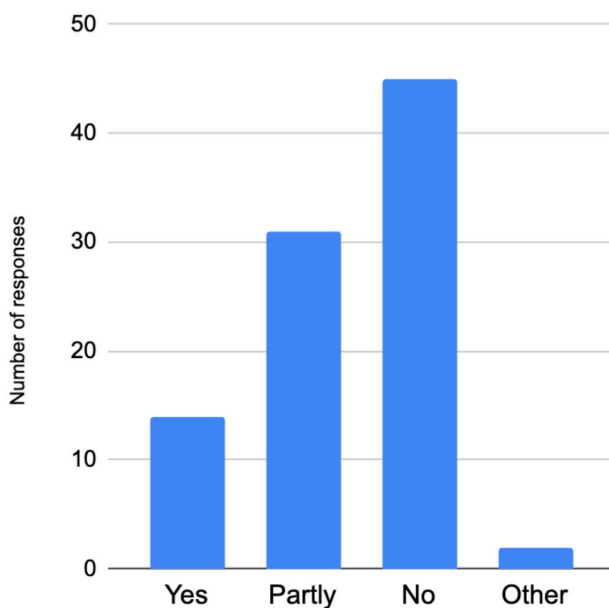


Diagram 3

Nearly half of all doctoral students responded that they did not feel prepared (45 responses) before filling out the ISP for the first time, and only 31 doctoral students felt partially prepared. This means that the vast majority of doctoral students did not feel fully prepared before drafting their ISP for the first time.

Only 14 doctoral students responded that they felt adequately prepared.

### Self-preparation

We asked the doctoral students to describe, in free-text, how they, as new doctoral students, had prepared themselves before filling out their ISP. The question was optional to answer, and was answered by a majority of the doctoral students.

The most common answer was that the doctoral students had not prepared, or only prepared minimally.

Two other quite common responses were to talk to either the supervisor or to others. Speaking with people other than the supervisor was the second most common response, and here the doctoral students mentioned, for example, that they talked to other doctoral students, colleagues, or study directors.

Some doctoral students responded that they, in various ways, read up about the ISP beforehand, for example, by reading through the information provided by the institution or searching for information on their own.

There were also doctoral students that stated that they prepared by focusing on their upcoming research, such as preparing their research plan and reading literature, and some who responded that they looked through

other doctoral students' ISPs, and searched for or checked out courses to take.

We compared the different answers to this question with how the same doctoral students had responded to the previous question "Did you feel adequately prepared before filling out your ISP as a new doctoral student?". No concrete conclusions can be drawn, but the result could indicate that speaking to the supervisor may have helped doctoral students to feel more prepared, since they had more frequently answered yes to the previous question. Those who had most frequently answered no to the previous question were the ones who had answered that they had not prepared, or only prepared minimally. It is reasonable that the lack of preparation also makes one feel more unprepared.

### **Preparation together with the supervisor**

We then asked how the doctoral students had prepared together with their supervisors before filling out their ISP. The question was voluntary to answer, and a majority of the doctoral students chose to answer it.

The most common response was that the doctoral students did not engage in any direct preparation with their supervisors before writing their ISP. When we compare those who answered this way with how they responded to the previous question, "Did you feel adequately prepared before filling out your ISP as a new doctoral student?", the vast majority of them had answered no (70 percent), 20 percent had answered partially, and only 10 percent had answered yes.

An almost equally common response is that the doctoral student and supervisor had discussions, meetings, or reviews before filling out the ISP. Here too, we compared how

these doctoral students had responded to the previous question, "Did you feel adequately prepared before filling out your ISP as a new doctoral student?", and we noticed a difference compared to the doctoral students who did not prepare together with their supervisor. There are still some who answered no (32 percent), but most felt partially prepared (54 percent), and a slightly higher amount responded yes (14 percent).

It is difficult to draw any definite conclusions based on this, but it is possible, and also reasonable, that preparation together with the supervisor contributes to the doctoral student feeling a bit more prepared, while the lack of joint preparation instead leads the doctoral student to feel more unprepared.

Two other types of responses that were mentioned by a few of the doctoral students were that the supervisor offered advice or that the doctoral student and the supervisor searched for information regarding the ISP together.

### **Higher education institutions support to doctoral students**

The doctoral students were asked to describe, in free-text responses, what support was available at their institution, and who provided support to them. The question was optional to answer, and was answered by a majority of the doctoral students.

#### **THERE ARE VARIOUS FORMS OF SUPPORT**

Support from supervisors is the most common response to this question.

However, some doctoral students explicitly answered that support was lacking, and this was the second most common answer to this question. One doctoral student mentioned



that support came later on in an introductory course, but that there was no available support when the ISP was to be filled out.

Another form of response is that the doctoral students could turn to an administrator or to the study director for help.

Some doctoral students mentioned that they could get help from other doctoral students. Turning to other doctoral students for assistance with the ISP is something that recur in several parts of the survey responses.

There were also doctoral students that described receiving information about the ISP at informational meetings, introductions, or workshops.

There are also other forms of support mentioned in the responses. For example, a few doctoral students mention websites or documents with information about the ISP, and that they could get help from committees or individuals responsible for overseeing the ISP, or by the examiner, doctoral ombudsman or doctoral union, student union, or a mentor.

### **Experiences from filling out an ISP**

THINGS DOCTORAL STUDENTS WOULD HAVE LIKED TO KNOW OR THOUGHT ABOUT BEFORE FILLING OUT THE ISP FOR THE FIRST TIME, TO BE EVEN BETTER PREPARED

We asked the doctoral students to describe in free-text what they would have wanted to know before filling out their ISP for the first time, to be even better prepared. The question was optional to answer, and it was answered by a majority of the doctoral students. The most common response is that the doctoral students would have wanted to know more about what an ISP is, what its purpose is, and how it can be useful during the doctoral studies.

Some would also have wanted to see examples of an ISP, either of other doctoral students' ISPs or examples of a correctly drafted ISP. On the same theme, some respond that it would have been helpful with instruction on how to fill in the ISP, and that it would be helpful if there was information or an orientation available for new doctoral students about the ISP. A few respondents write that they would have wanted more information about the courses that are included in their education, such as which courses that are available to choose from.

Some doctoral students emphasise on the importance of keeping it simple and taking it slow, and not getting too stressed out about the ISP.

Practical information, such as how to calculate activity in percentage and how to report absence or leave, is highlighted by some respondents.

Other things mentioned in the responses include wanting to know more about the division of responsibilities between the

doctoral student and the supervisor, what assistance is available, to know whether the supervisor actually does or does not have a right to intervene with what is written by the doctoral student, how to prepare, and what needs to be done in advance. Knowledge about prolongation is also highlighted.

Some doctoral students mention that they would have liked to be more involved in the project, to have filled out the ISP together with the supervisor, and to have talked to other doctoral students.

There are also some responses that concern changes to the ISP, where doctoral students mention various aspects, both that it is possible to change things in the ISP but also that changing things can be difficult.

A few doctoral students also took the opportunity to point out that they would have wanted a better ISP template.

#### ADVICE TO NEW DOCTORAL STUDENTS WHO ARE GOING TO FILL OUT THEIR ISP FOR THE FIRST TIME

The respondents were asked if they had any advice for new doctoral students who are going to fill out their ISP for the first time. The question was optional to answer. It was answered by a majority of the doctoral students, but the number of responses has decreased compared to the previous questions.

The doctoral students provide several pieces of advice. The two most common ones are to talk to, or write, the ISP together with your supervisor, and to talk to other doctoral students and colleagues.

The responses regarding talking or writing together with your supervisor mention that, for example, one can ask their supervisor to explain the ISP step by step, use the supervisor's knowledge, and fill out the ISP together.

In the responses about talking with other doctoral students and colleagues, the respondents mention that you can ask doctoral students who are further along in their studies for help or inspiration. Another related response was to look at other doctoral students' ISPs for inspiration on how to fill out the ISP.

Another advice is to keep the ISP overarching, flexible, and simple. On the same theme, a few respondents advise new doctoral students to consider the ISP as a living document and to bear in mind that things may change over time.

A final piece of advice is not to overwork the ISP but to keep it at a reasonable level.

#### Experiences from updating ISP

The final section of the survey is directed towards those doctoral students who have updated their ISP.

We asked the doctoral students if they had updated their ISP. If they answered yes, they progressed to the final part of the survey, while those who answered no were not asked any more questions.

84 of the 92 respondents answered that they had updated their ISP, and thus progressed to this final part.

## THINGS DOCTORAL STUDENTS WOULD HAVE WANTED TO KNOW OR CONSIDERED BEFORE UPDATING THEIR ISP FOR THE FIRST TIME

We first asked the doctoral students what they would have wanted to know or thought about before updating their ISP for the first time, to be better prepared. The question was optional to answer. It was answered by a majority of the doctoral students, but with a lower number of responses compared to the previous questions.

The most common response concerns knowledge about what exactly needs to be updated or filled in. Other related responses are about whether anything should be attached, and how to approach the update, with some respondents mentioning that feedback would have been helpful.

Two different perspectives on changes to the ISP are brought up. One perspective is from the doctoral students who would have wanted to know beforehand that their plans can change during their doctoral studies and that adjustments can be made to the ISP, and another perspective is from doctoral students who would have wanted to know more about how much that can be changed or added to the ISP.

A few things that doctoral students wished they had considered beforehand includes regularly reviewing and updating the ISP as needed, documenting what they have done each month, as well as starting early and not waiting until the deadline. Some responses emphasise keeping it simple, acknowledging that they do not know everything, and to take it slow, and some of the responses mention that it is easier to update the ISP than to fill it out from scratch.

Regarding the supervisor, it is mentioned that supervisors can assist and that developing a plan for the upcoming years with the supervisor will help you a lot. Another thing is understanding the division of responsibilities between the doctoral student and the supervisor regarding who is responsible for filling in what in the ISP.

An additional point that is raised is how prolongation works and how to approach it, as well as how it affects the end date of the research education. Another thing is to be aware of the fact that the number of credits earned in the first year will count.

Some of the responses also reflect on issues regarding the ISP template.

## ADVICE FOR NEW DOCTORAL STUDENTS WHO ARE GOING TO UPDATE THEIR ISP FOR THE FIRST TIME

Lastly, we asked the doctoral students if they had any advice for those who are going to update their ISP for the first time. The question was optional to answer. This question received the lowest amount of responses, but it was still a majority of the doctoral students who answered the question.

Some of the doctoral students emphasise the importance of discussing the ISP, such as talking to their supervisor, fellow doctoral students, or colleagues. They also suggest seeking help and feedback and asking an administrator or the HR department for help regarding any necessary information that they might need.

Other advice includes updating the ISP regularly, keeping it simple, comparing it with the previous ISP to ensure the plan is still feasible, reviewing the timeline, being open to making changes, documenting deviations continuously, distinguishing between mandatory and optional tasks, thinking ahead, and gaining an overview before starting.

A piece of advice is that things may change or take longer than expected, and it is okay not to know everything. A related suggestion is to review what needs to be changed in the planning.

## Final thoughts and reflections

### **Supervisors – and doctoral colleagues! – play an important role**

Two recurring themes in the survey responses are the importance of talking to and consulting with supervisors and doctoral colleagues, both when filling out and updating the ISP. For example, it was two quite common answers to the question about how new doctoral students prepared before filling out their ISP.

The results also suggest that preparation together with the supervisor could contribute to the doctoral student feeling a bit more prepared, while the lack of joint preparation instead could lead the doctoral student to feel more unprepared for the drafting process, which further highlights the importance of the supervisor.

### **The knowledge about the ISP needs to increase**

When asked about what the purpose of the ISP is, the most common answers were about planning the doctoral studies and that it is a way to monitor or control progression, which aligns well with how an ISP can be used. However, it is concerning that only a handful of doctoral students described the ISP as a legal document, agreement, or contract. This indicates potential deficiencies in the information that doctoral students receive about the ISP. Additionally, the majority of doctoral students felt unprepared or only partially prepared when they wrote their ISP for the first time. It is also concerning that the second most common answer to the question about what support the HEIs offered their doctoral students about ISP was that no support was offered.

The results in the report thus suggest there is uncertainty or a lack of knowledge about the ISP.

Here, our view is that the HEIs have an important role regarding the ISP. Do they offer sufficient support for new doctoral students? Are doctoral students informed about what the ISP is, why it is important, and how they can use it? The results indicate that this is an area that in some cases would benefit from improvement.

Of course, individual doctoral students have a responsibility to seek information and prepare themselves for the ISP, just as the supervisor has a responsibility to participate in the creation of the ISP and support the doctoral student.

Finally, we want to emphasise the importance of the doctoral student, the supervisor, and the institution all working together and taking responsibility regarding the ISP.