

## **SULF Association of Doctoral Candidates Management Report 2020-2021**

The Board of the SULF Association of Doctoral Candidates present the following Management Report for financial year 20/21 (up to 23 April 2021).

### **The Board**

During the year the Board has consisted of:

Erik Bergenholtz	Blekinge Institute of Technology
Juanita Vélez Olivera	Umeå University
Amineh Ghaderi	Karolinska Institute
Azeem Ahmad	Linköping University
Tim Roberts	Karlstad University
Sara Berglund	Stockholm University
Ryszard Bobrowicz	Lunds University
Khaled Elsamman Ahmed	Gothenburg University
Nataša Vukelić	Stockholm University
Niki Matinrad	Linköping University
Asif Huq	Dalarna University
Lukas Löfling	Karolinska Institute, dismissed at their own request on December 1st, 2020
Larysa Aleksenko	Lunds University, dismissed at their own request on February 12th, 2021

Other participants in the board's activities are:

Maria Mattiasson                      SULF

Nomination Committee:

Per Boström (Committee Convener)

Parisa Aasi

Benny Borghei

Sharmin Söderström

Asreen Rostami

## **Introduction**

Each year, the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association (the Association) centers its work around a theme chosen at the Annual General Meeting. For the mandate period of 2020-2021, the theme was Mental Health. Given this theme, the Association has focused on both how the mental health situation of the doctoral candidates of Sweden is, and also on potential stressors that can negatively affect mental health.

This Management Report will be presented based on the four operational objectives of the Association, and concludes with a financial overview, as follows:

Board operations

Membership activities

Recruitment

Advocacy and opinion building

Finances

## Board operations

### Board meetings and training of Board members

This year's board consisted of four returning members, and nine new members. Of this board, three members have nominated themselves to continue their work in the next board. Lukas Lövling and Larysa Aleksenko chose to leave the board on December 1st 2020 and February 12th 2021 respectively.

During the 2020-2021 mandate period, the board held seven board meetings. Unfortunately, all the board meetings were held online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also resulted in there being no opportunity to go on a retreat, or otherwise visit any universities.

A brief description of the board meetings is presented below.

- 1. June 5th:** The board's first meeting was held, where the focus was for the board to get to know each other a bit better, elect a secretary, and start planning for the coming year's work.
- 2. August 28th 2020:** This meeting focused mainly on the working groups, and their plans for the year's work. Several of the working groups reported to have a plan for what to look into over the year.
- 3. October 30th 2020:** The October meeting was preceded by a presentation on how SULF works, held by Maria Mattiasson. The meeting discussed the final details of the Contact Day, set a date for the Annual General Meeting (AGM), and discussed ongoing work in the board. Collaboration with SFS-DK was announced, and a published article was presented.
- 4. December 7th 2020:** In December, the meeting focused on reflections on the Contact Day. The board considered the day to be a success, despite being held online. The upcoming survey on mental health was discussed thoroughly.
- 5. January 28th 2021:** The first meeting of 2021 had the 2021 budget proposal as its primary focal point. It was thoroughly reviewed and approved by the board, before being sent to SULF. Further collaboration with SFS-DK on the COVID-19 matter was presented to the board. Contact with representatives of the doctoral candidates of Ireland was discussed.
- 6. March 18th 2021:** The main topic of the March meeting was the final preparations for the AGM, including the theme for next year's board, the plan of operations, and the management report.
- 7. April 21st 2021:** Informal final meeting before the AGM.

### COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of us in one way or the other. Throughout the year, the Association has looked at how the pandemic has affected doctoral candidates in Sweden. Our stance has been that doctoral candidates should get prolongation to compensate for the circumstances, both for tangible delays like studies being put on hold, as well as for intangible delays such as adaption time to working from home. This has been vocalized through two articles that were written in collaboration with the Swedish National Union of Students' Doctoral Committee (SFS-DK), two interviews, and

through attendance of a meeting with local doctoral candidate representatives, university seniors, and Sveriges universitets- och högskoleförbund (SUHF), organized by SFS-DK.

### **Mental Health**

As being a doctoral candidate is a work with relatively high stress level and indicated by surveys conducted recently on mental health of doctoral candidates, it is an issue that requires further investigation and deeper understanding. Thus, mental health was chosen as the theme of the year for the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association. Onset of the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 has also affected mental health of many including doctoral candidates considering the (extreme) changes in work- and lifestyle it caused.

In order to understand the mental health issues of doctoral candidate members of SULF, both in general and specifically related to the pandemic, the mental health working group was formed. The working group has met a number of times during the fall semester of 2020 and decided to conduct a survey by help of which we, hopefully, get a better understanding of how doctoral candidates are coping with work-related mental health problems. We also hoped to gain some knowledge about whether doctoral candidates are aware of (and using) any of the services provided by their universities for mental health or not. The working group decided to divide the survey into two groups of questions, one overall and one specifically related to the times of pandemic. The working group has then designed the survey, and after the approval process by central SULF, the survey was sent to doctoral candidate members in early February. After receiving the responses, the working group shall analyze the results and prepare an article regarding the issue and state of doctoral candidates to bring some light to the problems and raise awareness about it.

### **Career**

Finding a career after getting a doctoral degree can be challenging. The path that first springs to mind is to pursue an academic career, but this can be quite a convoluted journey as well. This is however the path most often focused on by universities. We were interested in finding out what kind of support the doctoral candidates of Sweden have received in finding a career after getting their degree, as not knowing where you are headed in life can be a stress factor. To facilitate this, a survey was created and sent out to our members. The survey received 100 answers. A common issue with pursuing a career outside of academia was not knowing the Swedish language. Another was not having a clear idea of what careers are available. The findings from this survey will be compiled into an article.

### **Language**

Access to learning Swedish and the implicit need for it during and after doctoral education is something that has been a concern for a long time. This group worked on the relationship with student unions, as it was established that they have more power to impact possibilities to take Swedish courses during studies. We particularly established a working relationship with SFS-DK to continue and develop this issue.

A debate article together with SFS-DK will be published where this issue will be brought up again as part of the decay on doctoral education during the pandemic.

### **Licentiate**

At universities around Sweden, it can occur that doctoral candidates are only employed and admitted up to a licentiate degree, when the true end goal for both candidates and supervisors is a doctoral degree. It is often phrased as “we hope it will lead to a doctoral degree”, or “you will get to continue after licentiate if there is funding”. This adds a lot of unnecessary stress to the individuals in question, since they now have to worry about whether or not they will be funded all the way through their education *in addition* to the usual stresses. In addition, there are cases where doctoral candidates that are hired for a full doctoral program are mandated/obligated/forced to do a licentiate. It is the opinion of the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association that these issues should not occur. People should only be obligated to obtain a licentiate degree if that is the intended end goal. This was also the intention from the Swedish government when they created the degree, and yet we have found that this occurs at several universities in Sweden.

An opinion article has been drafted on the topic, which is planned to be published in *Universitetsläraren*, to raise awareness of the issue and open up for discussion.

### **Supervision**

The supervisor team has an important role in doctoral education, and issues here can cause stress for the doctoral candidate. Issues can arise in many ways, shapes and forms, ranging from personal conflicts, to insufficient amount of supervision, or an insufficient understanding of what it entails to be a supervisor. We have chosen to focus on the latter, and looking into how the training of supervisors is handled at different universities in Sweden. We believe that as doctoral education evolves, supervisors should be trained on these changes as well, and how to relate to them. Therefore, simply being a professor should not be enough to become a supervisor.

An opinion article has been drafted on the topic, which is planned to be published in *Universitetsläraren*, to raise awareness of the issue and open up for discussion.

### **Teaching**

Teaching has been regularly contingent on the availability of courses to teach and proficiency in Swedish. There are departments where so many courses exist that it results in doctoral candidates teaching more than 20% and in other departments there is little to no possibility to teach because no courses exist or because doctoral candidates do not have the command of the language of instruction. This working group could not meet during this working year but we consider it is an important line to keep working on perhaps as part of the career planning and language working groups.

### **Revision of Vision Document**

The SULF Doctoral Candidate Association Vision Document is a document that outlines our vision for what doctoral education in Sweden should be like. The previous Vision Document has not been updated since 2017, and so it needed a revision. We have gone through the document thoroughly, updating and clarifying what our vision is. At the time of writing of this report, the Vision Document is in the final stages of being updated. The new Vision Document is valid for 2021-2024.

### **Handover to the 2021-2022 Board**

The Board plans to perform a self-evaluation of how the Board has operated during the past year in connection to the last board meeting, in order to see how the Board's work can be improved for the coming year. The chairperson updated the internal chair handover document, based on his experiences from the past year.

## **Membership activities**

### **Doctoral Candidate Contact Day**

On December 4th, the annual contact day for doctoral candidates interested in the work of the union was organized. In addition to board members of the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association, Per Boström and Asreen Rostami from the Nominations Committee joined. The annual contact day had 75 registrations from all around Sweden, of which around 40 joined the event. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Doctoral Candidate Contact Day was held online, making it difficult to know exactly how many doctoral candidates attended the whole day, and keeping track of where they were from. To make the event feel a bit more personal to the participants, there was an option to have fika sent to the participants by mail, which seemed very appreciated.

The theme of the Contact Day 2020 was mental health. Lectures were given by the chairperson Erik Bergenholtz, Catrine Folcker (SULF), Emily Freeland (Stockholm University) and Anna Peixoto (Gothenburg University). At the end of the day, the participants who had lasted the whole day were divided into groups of 5-6 for “round-table” discussions, centered around what stressors exist in doctoral education, and what support is available to help deal with this. Afterwards, the Zoom-room was held open for socialization.

### **Newsletters to members**

In 2020-2021, newsletters were sent out in October 2020, December 2020, and March 2021, to all members with registered email addresses. The newsletters were written in English, and consisted of information about the work in the board, upcoming events and surveys, as well as information about our work with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **SULF day**

The SULF Day was held on October 1st 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we did not do any in-person activities. Since SULF already had two webinars planned for the day, we promoted these webinars.

### **Annual General Meeting**

The AGM of the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association will be held on April 23rd, and will be online due to Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the association officials, representatives of the Nominations Committee and SULF board members and the SFS-DK Chair have been invited.

### **Facebook**

All membership activities have been mentioned on the association Facebook page. The Association’s Facebook page has also been updated with relevant news articles, and promotion of interesting events.

## **Recruitment**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not been able to visit any universities to recruit members.

### **The work of the Nominations Committee**

In 2020-21, the nominations committee consisted of Per Boström (Umeå University, convener), Behbood (Benny) Borghei (Linköping University), Asreen Rostami (RISE Research Institutes of Sweden), Parisa Aasi (Stockholm University), and Sharmin Söderström (Umeå University). The committee was elected at the AGM of the doctoral association on May 15, 2020. During this year, the committee had a one-day committee training with officials from SULF headquarters on October 29th, 2020, as well as several online meetings and email correspondence. The work of the nomination committee was advertised during the Contact Day, and Per and Asreen attended the annual Contact Day on December 4th, 2020.

For the nomination process, the committee created an online nomination form that was spread through different channels (e.g. mailing lists and newsletters, social media and SULF homepage). The impact was immediate, and the committee received 22 nominations.

The nominations committee has compiled a suggested list of candidates for the 2021-22 board, which will be sent to the representatives before the AGM.

## Advocacy and opinion building

Since the last AGM, the Association has advocated for the doctoral candidates of Sweden in several ways, through debate articles and participation in events. Unfortunately, there has been fewer opportunities for advocacy throughout this mandate period than usual, as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

- Following a survey on language related issues, the Association wrote an article on how the language barrier may exclude foreign doctoral candidates and how universities need to do more to include non-Swedish speaking colleagues. This article was published in *Universitetsläraren*<sup>1</sup>.
- The Association collaborated with SFS-DK on two articles about the effects of COVID-19 on doctoral education in Sweden. The first article discussed the delays caused by the pandemic, and argues that since there are many intangible ways that the pandemic has caused delays, all doctoral candidates of Sweden should receive a two month prolongation<sup>2</sup>. The second article, which at the time of writing of this report, is being drafted, will focus more on the loss of quality of the education, as well as the long term effects the pandemic will have.
- The Association attended a workshop organized by SFS-DK and SUHF, concerning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the doctoral education of Sweden. In particular, the focus of the workshop was on identifying what intangible delays the pandemic has caused. A delay was considered intangible if it is hard to measure the exact extent of it, and can range from lowered productivity due to additional stress, to delays caused by impaired communication with supervisors. Also joining the meeting were local student union representatives, as well as university seniors from around the country.
- Erik was interviewed in *Universitetsläraren*<sup>3</sup> regarding the fact that there will not be a blanket prolongation of doctoral candidates in Sweden as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interview, he points out that delays in the doctoral education of Sweden can cause significant stress, as there is a limit to how long someone can be employed as a doctoral candidate. This was also raised in the “En fråga, två svar” section of *Universitetsläraren* Nr 1 2021, where Erik appeared.

## Online visibility & Videos

As the Contact Day was held online this year, it allowed us to lift the usual limit to how many participants we accepted. In total we had 75 registered participants, out of which around 45 showed up. The event was advertised on Facebook.

## Saco Student Council

Erik, Juanita, Tim and Amineh attended the Saco Student Council Congress in 2020, which was held online and split into two sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Erik

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<sup>1</sup> <https://universitetslararen.se/2020/06/11/the-language-barrier-excludes-foreign-doctoral-candidates>

<sup>2</sup> <https://universitetslararen.se/2020/11/12/forlang-doktorandernas-utbildning-med-anledning-av-corona/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://universitetslararen.se/2020/12/10/ingen-allman-forlangning-att-vanta-for-doktorander/>

and Juanita attended the Saco Student Council's presidial council on November 19th, and Erik also attended the presidial council on January 21st 2021. Ryszard attended the member council on November 21st. The events are unfortunately still held in Swedish, which makes it harder for us to find people that are able to join. This has been communicated to the Saco Student Council.

Erik had a meeting with Mimmi Rönnqvist and Åsa Ström, chair and vice-chair of the Saco Student Council, on June 10th 2020, and discussed the role of the Saco Student Council, as well as the upcoming election at the congress of 2020. Mimmi and Åsa were both invited to the annual Contact Day.

### **SFS-DK**

The SULF Doctoral Candidate Association has had an ongoing collaboration with SFS-DK throughout this mandate period, focusing mainly on the effects of COVID-19 on doctoral education in Sweden. Through this collaboration, two articles have been written, and we attended one workshop organized by SFS-DK. The SFS-DK presidium was also invited to the annual Contact Day in December 2020.

### **Other activities**

Erik and Ryszard together with Karin Åmossa met with doctoral candidate representatives from Ireland on January 28th 2021. The doctoral candidates of Ireland are working on changing their status from students to employees, and wanted to discuss how this transition was made in Sweden.

### **SULF**

Throughout this mandate period, Erik has had several discussions with SULF staff, in particular Git Claesson Pipping and Maria Mattiasson, regarding different topics related to the work of the Association.

### **Central cooperation**

- During 2020/2021, Erik has represented the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association in the central SULF board. The purpose of the representation is to make communication between the two boards easier, and to provide a means to make the voice of the doctoral candidates heard on the central level as well. Erik has not had voting rights in the central SULF board.
- On September 17th 2020, SULF held their annual Organizational Council (Förbundsråd). This is an event that gives the central SULF board an opportunity to raise issues with local representatives, and vice versa. This event was attended by Erik and Nataša.
- Erik met with Git Claesson Pipping, Lotta Kamm, and Maria Mattiasson to discuss the ins and outs of SULF, and how they can support the Association in their work.
- On October 30th 2020, Maria Mattiasson held a presentation for the Association board on how SULF is run, and what the differences between SULF, Saco, and Saco-S are.

## Finances

The operational year of the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association starts in April/May after the AGM and lasts until April/May of the next year. SULF's financial year starts January 1st and ends on the last of December. This means that the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association operational plan is financed by two different budgets. This operational year used parts of the budgets for 2020 and 2021. The period from May until December 2020 were financed by the 2020 budget and the period January – April by the 2021 budget.

For 2020, the previous board had requested the sum of SEK 265 000 and was granted SEK 235 000. The budget cut concerned financial support for printing brochures (SEK 10 000) as well as budget restraint (SEK 20 000). We have adjusted the received amount, based on the board's activities. We have stayed within the financial framework we received for the operational year. We had to cancel and postpone a few of our on-site events. Of the SEK 235 000 awarded for 2020 the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association used SEK 63 112. This was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the board to cancel most plans for the year.

For 2021, the sitting board had requested the sum of SEK 265 500 and was granted SEK 233 000. The budget cut concerned financial support for printing brochures (SEK 10 000) as well as budget restraint (SEK 22 500) with the suggestion that meetings could be conducted in a cheaper and digital form. We have adjusted the received amount, based on the board's activities. As of March 1st 2021, the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association has used SEK 0 of the budget allotted for 2021.

## Conclusion

The departing Board would hereby like to thank the membership for their confidence during their period of service.