

Policy for the Electrical Engineering doctoral programme - avoidance of unnecessary PhD student stress

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Electrical Engineering Doctoral Programme Council, EECS School, KTH

Employee surveys at KTH have shown that many PhD students experience stress. Difficulties to obtain free time, and feelings of constant pressure to deliver prevail. Some students experience problems with sleep due to their stressful situation. Reasons for this predicament were subsequently found in focus group interviews of PhD students, carried out in 2021 (report by Scheffel, Persson and Mård).

At the Electrical Engineering doctoral programme (E2DOC), one of four PhD programmes at EECS, *we now, through this document, take the initiative to form a policy for relieving stress among PhD students.*

The measures presented below have the purpose of acting as guiding lines for supervisors and PhD students at E2DOC. *The intention is that supervision in general will benefit from these and that a situation where the PhD students will be more comfortable in their studies should result.*

In parallel with the measures presented here, other measures are taken at E2DOC - like improvement of the PhD introduction to KTH and early information about stress. For supervisors, information regarding stress will be made available and elements of stress management is to be included in supervision courses.

It is our belief that a more inclusive and productive atmosphere for both PhD students and supervisors will be created by taking these steps. Should there arise any divergence or difficulties in the process, you as PhD student or supervisor are always welcome to discuss this with the programme director.

The policy for relieving unnecessary stress at E2DOC is manifested through the following recommendations.

Local mentor for the new PhD student

An experienced doctoral student should preferably be assigned as a mentor to each new doctoral student. Many PhD students are unaware of what their duties and rights are concerning their studies. This, accompanied by differences between programs, may create problems initially. The mentor could be helpful with contact points for various information, including doctoral education support as well as administrative support like HR contact persons, for invoicing, service center, and others. Some divisions have internal structures like wikis or lists of tasks that the new PhD student needs to be aware of. When needed, the mentor could help in guiding to relevant information in English.

The mentor thus, by helping in general to provide a more inclusive and structured atmosphere for the newcomer, has a wider function than relieving stress. Preferably the mentor has some seniority, but it is desired that the mentorship takes place at least during a year or two.

It is recommended that the division is helpful in supporting the mentor activities. This includes counting the time a PhD student spends on mentorship as departmental duty time ("institutionstjänstgöring").

Expectations should be discussed early

It is recommended that an "expectation form" is filled in at an early state by both the PhD student and the supervisors, and subsequently discussed jointly. Optimal and inclusive supervision is different for each PhD student; it is thus important that the parties learn to know what their expectations are. The supervisor can explain what is

generally expected of a PhD student. Misconceptions and misinterpretations can be avoided. The structure of the PhD education will appear more clearly for the student. Cultural differences can be sorted out; foreign students may, for example, not be accustomed to speak up when being dependent on a teacher or supervisor.

An expectation form template is available at the programme web pages, and is preferably used. Some topics relating to research, responsibilities and style of supervision are of major importance, as indicated in the form. Additional items to be discussed can be added by the supervisor. It is recommended that the expectations are reviewed also at a later time in the education.

Frequent supervisor and PhD student discussions of individual study plan

The individual study plan (ISP, in electronic form eISP) is a powerful tool for following up research and course work. The plans outlined in the ISP, when reviewed, should not come as a stressful surprise to the student. Thus it is strongly recommended that rather than having a single annual ISP discussion, at least *three* discussions based on the ISP should be held annually. All supervisors preferably take part in each of these discussions. This will provide the PhD student and the supervisors with better chances to overview and control the progression. Course status and research goals are reviewed, and plans can be modified due to recent developments.

The written revision of the ISP needs, however, only be carried out *annually* (unless there are specific reasons for extra revisions) in the designated period for this. The basic idea is thus to review the ISP more often, not to revise it more often.

Insight into departmental duty requirements

In order to optimize matching to teaching and other departmental duties, it is recommended that the PhD student obtains insight into the continual process of assigning these duties. It is also recommended that the doctoral student may take part in the discussion when selecting, for example, different subject courses for teaching or duties related to computer and web page maintenance. An expected positive effect would be that students who hesitate before teaching may become more comfortable with the task. The period for taking the compulsory pedagogical course is preferably matched to teaching duties.

It is also recommended that the procedure for how the PhD student may take part in discussions regarding departmental duties is communicated early on. Preferably a list of current departmental duties is presented, with estimates of time spent on each activity and when these are held.

Implementation of the doctoral ladder and promotion steps

The KTH central rules for the doctoral ladder must be followed by the supervisor. This means that promotions to levels 2, 3 and 4 are done when the corresponding requirements for 30 %, 50 % and 80 % of doctoral exam, as specified in the ISP, are reached. If requirements are not included in the ISP, promotion should be carried out at 30 %, 50 % and 80 % of planned study time, respectively. Details can be found at <https://intra.kth.se/en/anstallning/anstallningsvillkor/ion/doktorandstegen-1.572915>

The precise meaning of these levels is preferably made clear to the PhD student at an early stage. Once specified, the levels should not be changed unless the PhD student activity becomes limited due to unforeseen pressing circumstances. The plan can be referred to if HR contacts the PhD student and the supervisor regarding promotion. Whenever questions related to the exact time of studies arise, HR is preferably consulted rather than Ladok or the information in the ISP.

Course work has the same status as thesis work and must be included accordingly in the requirements.