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Best practice - Doctoral candidates' individual study plan

A focus group report



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A focus group report, 2023

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Best practice – Doctoral candidates’ individual study plan

In December 2022, the SULF Association Board set up a focus group to identify and compile examples of best practice for individual study plans. Here are the results of their work, which were presented to the Association Board in December 2023. The content and conclusions expressed are those of the focus group and opinions expressed are not necessarily shared by SULF of the Association Board members. The content will be the basis for further discussions within SULF regarding individual study plans.

Short summary

On the pathway towards PhD completion, the Individual Study Plan (ISP) is a crucial roadmap for a doctoral candidate. The ISP ultimately guides the doctoral candidate towards their thesis defence, but is at the same time an important legal document, regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance. Yet many doctoral candidates encounter problems completing the ISP, viewing it as an annual administrative burden rather than a useful roadmap, and few understand the impact it can have on their overall working time.

This report reviewed ISPs from universities across Sweden in combination with a national survey of doctoral candidates and supervisors who are SULF members, to develop a best practice for the Individual Study Plan. The majority of survey respondents were doctoral candidates and few judged the ISP to be an important document for their doctoral education. Yet at the same time, many highlighted the potential usefulness of the ISP as a planning tool if it was better designed and more effectively communicated to them.

The best practices proposed here aim to evolve the ISP into a student-centric planning tool that can be used as a living document, with a view to minimize administrative burden on doctoral candidates whilst continuing to serve its legal purpose. To achieve such an evolution, best practice will be to move towards a digital and integrated ISP, connected to Ladok and university administration so that doctoral candidates can truly utilise the ISP to plan and progress through their education. Rather than suggesting a one-size-fits-all ISP template, this report puts forward a set of ISP ‘must haves’, required to fulfil regulations, but also acknowledges the need for discipline-specific customizations to truly capture the variety of doctoral education pathways.

Background

The federal board decided on 9 December 2022 to set up a focus group with the task of developing best practices for doctoral candidates' individual study plans.

The starting point for the group's work has been the congressional decision to approve Motion 30:

Motion 30, first sentence: that SULF compile information about the content and format of individual study plans used at HEIs in Sweden and collects examples of best practices

Motion 30, second sentence: that SULF work together with HEIs to implement best practices regarding content and format of individual study plans.

But also for the implementation of, and to fulfil goal F4 in the federal board's plan of operations 2022:

The doctoral education is characterized by transparency, legal certainty and security.

Purpose

The mission of the focus group is to develop a best practice for doctoral candidates' individual study plans.

Goal

The focus group's work should result in:

- Suggestions for areas that a good individual study plan should cover
- Proposal for a good order for application and updating of individual study plan during postgraduate education.
- Suggestions for possible communicative efforts around the focus group's results.

Composition of the focus group

The focus group has consisted of both doctoral candidates and university teachers with experience as main supervisor. To capture several perspectives connected to the assignment. The recruitment of people for the focus group took place widely among all of SULF's members.

Participants in the focus group have been:

- Shelley Kotze, doctoral candidate in Human Geography at Gothenburg University
- Lise Benoist, doctoral candidate in Human Geography at Uppsala University
- Melissa Reidy, doctoral candidate in Physical Geography at Umeå University
- Miaoxin Gong, doctoral candidate at Lund University
- Marie-Louise Österlind, PhD in psychology Kristianstad University
- Per Boström, PhD in Scandinavian Languages at Umeå University

Catrine Folcker, ombudsman at SULF's office, has supported the group in their work. Additional office support has been Sara Paulson Nykäsenoja, communicator, Lotta Kamm, organizational secretary and Cecilia Lind, office coordinator.

During the period, the focus group had three physical and two digital meetings. The group has used TEAMS as a common platform for information exchange. At the meeting of the federal board in June 2023, an interim report of the focus group's work was submitted as well as information on the direction of the continued work.

Introduction

Many doctoral candidates experience problems with their individual study plans. It is unclear who should complete it and how, and it can also be difficult to understand who the individual study plan is for.

Few doctoral candidates know about the impact it can have on their educational time.

The individual study plan is an important document and a guide to the doctoral candidates' education and is regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance and the university regulation, which is explained in more detail below.

However, in current reality, the importance of the individual study plan is not always acknowledged, and the individual study plan is sometimes poorly used. Started from researching the personal experience of the focus group, the doctoral student members discussed their own experiences in different years of the doctoral study and shared our own individual study plans as examples. It was discovered that the formality of most of the existing individual study plans is not well-structured and thus leads to confusion. Improving the formality and structure of the document is needed, as well as the way it is used. Then we continued with a discussion on the best practices of individual study plans.

Regulations

There are two parts to being a doctoral candidate. As a doctoral candidate, you are enrolled on a doctorate level educational programme, but you are also employed as a doctoral candidate or receive a scholarship to complete your studies. Doctoral candidate employment and admission to doctoral programmes are regulated by the Higher Education Ordinance. Every higher education institution that provides doctoral education must have a general syllabus.

A general syllabus must state the following: the main content of the study programme, specific entry requirements and any other necessary regulations, this due to the higher education ordinance.

The Higher Education Ordinance also stipulates that the higher education institution has an obligation to ensure that an individual study plan is created for every doctoral candidate. This plan is both a timetable for the doctoral studies and a description of the obligation of the candidate and the higher education institution during the period of the program. The individual study plan is a legally binding document.

The individual study plan must be followed up regularly during the education period according to the Higher Education Ordinance. If conditions related to the studies change the individual study plan must be update with the new conditions.

If a doctoral candidate substantially neglects their obligations under the individual study plan, the higher education institution may decide to withdraw supervision and other resources. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that the individual study plan is well documented and updated throughout the entire education.

Higher Education Ordinance rules do not apply to non-state institutions such as the Stockholm School of Economics or Chalmers University of Technology. Regulations and conditions may therefore differ at these institutions.

Each university then has its own developed templates for the study plans and also its own guidelines for what applies to the doctoral candidates.

Material and methods

In order to suggest best practices when it comes to the individual study plan, getting an overview of the current practices – what works and what does not work – was necessary. To that end, we simultaneously conducted a two-fold research.

One the one hand, we retrieved 30 individual study plan documents currently in use within Swedish higher education institutions (see Appendix II). This allowed us to see a variety of individual study plan documents and notice their differences in both content and format. From there we could identify crucial and/or unnecessary and/or repetitive sections.

On the other hand, in order to get direct and concrete feedback on the use of these current individual study plan documents, we reached out to individual study plan users through a survey. The survey was sent by SULF to all its members and aimed at collecting answers from doctoral candidates, directors of doctoral studies and supervisors. The survey contained 13 both close- and open-ended questions (some solely aimed at doctoral candidate respondents) which covered the following themes: information on the position of the respondent; university affiliation; subjective evaluation of the importance of the individual study plan as a document; process of filling in the individual study plan; the recurrence of reviewing the individual study plan and for what purposes; satisfaction with the individual study plan document; and open questions on the positive and negative aspects of the individual study plan as it is as well as suggestions on the necessary improvements. As such, we aimed to gain insights on current (mis-) uses of the individual study plan, highlight what is working well and what needs to be improved to satisfy the involved parties' needs and contribute to our recommendations on how to enhance the important functions the individual study plan document ought to fulfil.

The survey was sent in April 2023 and answered by 415 respondents.

Results

When collecting the individual study plans from universities, one of the first things we noticed was the great variability and differences between them – information was basically the same, but the detail level and structure differed greatly. Intuitively, we assumed this before collecting, and our assumptions were correct. Trawling through this great variety of individual study plans, we did however, find common parts. Almost all individual study plans included the necessary information about the doctoral candidate, the planned thesis work and administrative aspects (courses taken, activity level, funding). Some individual study plans were extremely detailed, and looked more like Ladok, while others were scarcer. We could also see that GDPR aspects were not always adhered to, and we would strongly recommend not adding too much personal details to the individual study plan – these aspects should be used in a GDPR safe system. Further, we saw differences in how the individual study plan were used. Some had the structure of just reporting administrative aspects and the progress was not easily visible, while others were more of planning documents where we could follow the progress and timelines from beginning to end. We would here recommend that the individual study plan is focussed on being a planning tool rather than yet another administrative follow up/report – the individual study plan should not be a document where one (mainly) copies and pastes from other systems. It would be better that the systems are integrated – hopefully a transition to a Ladok-individual study plan could solve some of these issues. But the planning and project management aspects and of the individual study plan must not be forgotten.

Further, the overview provided us with ideas and suggestions for an individual study plan template, based on the must haves we have identified, this is included as Appendix IV.

The results from the survey are presented below, based on the themes in the survey.

On using the individual study plan

The respondents to the survey were overwhelmingly doctoral candidates (86%, at different stages of the doctoral candidates' program; 11% Supervisors and 3% Directors of studies), leading the following results to represent their experiences of the individual study plan – which is in line with our wish to focus on their perspectives. Furthermore, the biggest Swedish universities (Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm, Göteborg, Linköping, Örebro, Umeå) are overrepresented in the results.

First, the results show that few respondents judge the individual study plan to be an important document for doctoral studies. One third of the respondents deem the individual study plan as unimportant, and another third have a neutral opinion. While the majority of directors of studies respondents however emphasise its importance, more than half of the s are either neutral or consider it unimportant. This shows a clear discrepancy between how doctoral candidates perceive the individual study plan and the perception of the senior staff in charge.

Second, our results show that one third of doctoral candidates report not receiving any support in the process of filling in the individual study plan, combined with predominantly stating that they are expected to initiate the process. Such results points towards doctoral candidates the necessity to both clarify the roles of the protagonist involved with writing the individual study plan document, as well as to re-emphasise that it is meant to be a joint and collaborative process between the doctoral candidates and their supervisor beyond their signing capacity afterwards. Some respondents explain that they get support from a special doctoral candidate committee or an individual study plan representative who are/is neither their supervisor nor director of studies, which could be a good example of best practice that involves a third neutral party to support in the process.

Third, when asked about whether the individual study plan is used to track doctoral candidates' progress throughout the year, that is to say as the project management tool the individual study plan has the potential to be, almost 6 respondents (all positions) out of 10 reports not doing so. When respondents do use the individual study plan throughout the year, it is for the following purposes:

- Looking back: track achieved progress and summaries activities or cornerstones achievements (conferences, papers, course credits), assess the timeline of the past year(s) and if everything going to the plan;
- Looking forward: plan anticipated progress ahead (courses, conferences, papers, bud get if applicable, educational goals), have a timeline for the rest of the PhD education, have a long-term to do list;
- A tool for overview and reflection: if changes occurred, what happened? Address the 'why' question. Doctoral candidates furthermore emphasise the practical and psychological importance of being reminded of concrete achievements for motivational purposes. Having an overview is also mentioned to allow students to keep a balance: see how much

time is spent on what activities (teaching, research, etc.) some also appreciate the over view progress to keep track of their merits in order to build their CVs.

- Lastly, doctoral candidates emphasise that the individual study plan is used as a tool to eventually claim their rights: tracking carefully their progress enables doctoral candidates to claim their rights regarding, for example, salary raises.

However, there is again a discrepancy between directors of studies and supervisors on the one side, and doctoral candidates on the other, where more directors of studies and supervisor declare using it than doctoral candidates. Such results are arguably connected with doctoral candidates placing less value on the individual study plan as an important planning document compared to supervisor and director of studies. This may be due to supervisor and directors of studies having more regular and invested engagement in the individual study plan than doctoral candidates (who use it from a monitoring perspective). Moreover, it confirms the general observation that the individual study plan is not a living document while highlighting the potential of the individual study plan as an important project management tool for doctoral candidates' management and monitoring of the Doctoral education.

Fourth, while three quarters of respondents declare that the individual study plan is updated, as it should, once a year, almost 10% of doctoral candidates nonetheless report that it this is not the case, which is an issue. However, one third of doctoral candidates' respondents state that the individual study plan is updated more than once a year, highlighting that, in some cases, the individual study plan already used as a living document, what should be recommended.

On the satisfaction with the individual study plan: advantages, disadvantages and power relations

When asked about their subjective satisfaction with the individual study plan document, dissatisfaction dominates among doctoral candidates' respondents (4 out of 10), while only 3 out of 10 overall respondents declare to be satisfied with their current individual study plan document. These results not only reinforce the need for the current research and recommendations on best individual study plan practices, but they also call for a better understanding of the causes of such dissatisfaction. The last two open-ended questions of the survey aimed at identifying these causes.

First, respondents could elaborate on the positive aspects of the individual study plan document (230 responses). The following points are mentioned as aspects that should be maintained, enhance and/or encouraged, in line with the existing uses of the individual study plan mentioned above:

- That the individual study plan is a key tool to plan ahead, track progress, provides an extensive record of activities, goals, set priorities, but also to look back, evaluate, assess, and reflect on accomplishments and failures, track time use.

- That the individual study plan, in its legal document capacity, is therefore a central tool for holding accountability, and hence a good base to address issues that arise and discuss the format of supervision. On this last aspect, some mention that it is important that the individual study plan has a specific section on ‘evaluation of the previous year’s supervision’ (see however next section on this);
- Its central role for initiating discussion on demands, requirements and expectation from all parties involved. As such, it is its ability to be a mediating tool that is emphasised.
- Doctoral candidates further highlight the individual study plan being a tool to claim rights when it comes to prolongation, salary raise, evaluate external impacts (from covid-19 for example) as it provides evidence of what is done/completed. As such, it allows doctoral candidates to set boundaries by allowing them to, for example, say no to duties/activities that are not stated in the individual study plan.
- Lastly, respondents emphasise the need for a digital version of the individual study plan that allows easier access, filling in and making changes.

Second, respondents were given the possibility to elaborate on suggestions on how the individual study plan could be improved to better suit their needs (238 responses). Despite seeing a lot of current benefits ‘in theory’, many express that these benefits are hindered by the inadequacy of current uses or format of the individual study plan. Here follows the main criticism and suggestions:

- A need to move beyond seeing the individual study plan as a formality and an administrative/ bureaucratic burden. There is a widespread feeling among doctoral candidates that they need to fill it in for the university’s sake and that it is a mere bureaucratic formality that serves to concrete purpose. There seems to be a need to provide more clarity on the role, functions and goals of filling in an individual study plan, and the legal aspect of it.
- On the format, respondents express their need to digitalise the individual study plan document in order to facilitate making changes which cannot easily be made on a paper document. However, a digitalisation should be made in a user-friendly way that allows flexibility when filling in. Furthermore, it would be even more practical to have the individual study plan directly connected to Ladok so that the completion of course could be automatically updated. More generally, respondents suggest making sure all sections are actually relevant and detailed enough and that overlaps and (yearly) repetitions are avoided.
- Doctoral candidates furthermore request more support (at least from supervisor) in the process of filling in the individual study plan as well as a follow-up structure. Some responses testify of existing support structures with neutral advisors.
- Other general suggestions address the wish to emphasise and make use of the planning and evaluating tool that the individual study plan can be. This connects to the format issue, as the

individual study plan document should therefore be regularly accessed and reviewed. Additionally, if the tracked progress within the individual study plan has any implications for the evaluation of, for example, goal achievements or salary raises, it is important to clarify how these are measured.

- Last but not least, many doctoral candidate's respondents highlight the power dimensions inherent to the individual study plan document in relation to their S. Indeed, while reflection on supervision is often present as a section in the individual study plan, doctoral candidates emphasise the difficulty to address any potentially difficulties encountered in that matter ther due to the S eventually having to sign the document. A suggestion could be to have a separate section or document attached where doctoral candidates could reflect more freely, or that the supervisor doctoral candidates' relation is addressed in another outside of the individual study plan.

Summary and suggestions of best practice individual study plan

Respondents to the survey emphasized the potential that individual study plans have as a planning tool for the doctoral candidates that they actively and continually engage with. Another common theme in the feedback we received from survey respondents was a desire to reduce the bureaucratic burden on doctoral candidates from individual study plan completion. For example, from Question 13 of the survey, responses included:

“Administrative burden caused by the individual study plan to the students should be reduced to a minimum” and “Make it less of a bureaucratic necessity and more into a tool that’s useful for Doctoral candidates”.

With these themes in mind, we suggest that as best practice, an individual study plan should be:

- A student-centred planning tool.
- A living document including.
- Digital completion allowing prefilling of department and contractual information.
- Connected to Ladok so that courses and credits are pre-filled.
- Accessible to students to continually update and edit throughout their academic year.

The following section is formulated as two sections. The first, ‘statutory inclusions’ includes the aspects of the individual study plan that must be included as per the Higher Educational Ordinance. The second section details the additional components that the focus group have identified as being of equal importance to the individual study plan if it is to fulfil its function as a student-centred planning tool.

Statutory inclusions

Personal details

As best practice, the individual study plan should aim to include only those personal details that are pertinent to the individual study plan, and its use as a planning tool.

- Doctoral candidate Name
- Doctoral candidate personal number or birth date
- Department

In many individual study plans, details such as home address, mobile and email contact details are required. However, in the case that the individual study plan is in digital format, this could be pre-filled from the university's systems. In the case that the individual study plan is in paper format, storage of the paper individual study plan and security of personal information raises concerns of how these personal details are being handled.

PhD Management

Several individual study plans viewed require information to be entered or repeated in multiple different sections, increasing the bureaucratic load. We recommend that as a best practice, the individual study plan has, in conjunction with the personal details required on the first page, a short section which details the overall PhD structure and intention at the time of completing the individual study plan.

This should include:

- Licentiate or doctorate intention: A check box that indicates what qualification the student is working towards.
- Monograph or compilation thesis: A check box that indicates what format the thesis will take. As this can change over the course of a doctoral candidate program, it is vital that these changes are tracked and summarized as part of the PhD structure information.
- Number of course credits required for completion and number of credits completed to date: A clear indication of how the student is progressing in regards to their credit completion is a vital part of planning.
- Approximate end date: Whilst this can change during a doctoral candidate program, at the time that the individual study plan is completed, students should be able to receive this information from the university administration so that they are able to plan their work accordingly. This can be approximate. In digital format, this would optimally be self-populating. In paper format, this information would be provided to the student.

Timetable

Within all individual study plans analysed as part of this study, the sections that detailed doctoral candidates working time and funding was the most detailed part of the individual study plan. And in every instance the doctoral candidate was expected to complete all of the details themselves. Although 74% of students said they received help from their supervisor or someone else to complete their individual study plan, it is not clear what kinds of help they received, for what sections and who the 'others' are who may have assisted the students.

Whilst there is a great level of detail currently required within the schedule and funding sections of current individual study plans, this section also requires Doctoral candidates to replicate information that is held elsewhere, namely within HR and administrative functions. Given that the best practice for the individual study plan is that it is a student focused planning document, we suggest that the funding and schedule section to be significantly reduced in the level of detail required, and that it is the responsibility of the doctoral candidate and supervisors together to confirm the details that have been compiled by administrative or HR staff (whichever is appropriate within the organisation). What is important within this section, is that the doctoral candidate and supervisor agree upon time spent (and therefore time remaining) to complete the PhD education. Therefore, the section should be shortened to only include:

- A table that summarises (semester by semester) past, present and future (anticipated) percentage time that the doctoral candidate will spend on their doctoral candidate education.
- If different from 100%, brief explanations can be given as to where this time has been spent (e.g., taking care of sick child, teaching, parental leave or sickness).
- These details are to be collated by administration/HR and confirmed in the individual study plan by the doctoral candidate and supervisor.

Doctoral candidate thesis progress

As a student-centric planning document, the individual study plan should allow adequate space and section to detail the progression of the thesis. For a best practice individual study plan, we recommend the following sections.

- Short description of the thesis, working title, and general objective/overall goals/contributions
- Thesis work to date broken into chapters or papers: Depending on the format of the thesis this could include (but not be limited to):
 - o Status of each chapter/paper
 - o Status of data collection
 - o Status of data analysis
 - o What has been collected since the last individual study plan and what is planned for the next individual study plan?

- Deviations from activities planned in last individual study plan, and why: As the individual study plan is a living document with potential implications for completion dates, any time-delaying deviations should be detailed here.

As we emphasise a 'living document' approach to the individual study plan, best practice would be individual study plan 's that are completed and archived digitally rather than in hard copy. This way, students are easily able to prefill information from prior individual study plan 's and contribute to the document as progress occurs.

Courses

All individual study plan s that was viewed required the doctoral candidate to complete details of the courses taken in the past year, previous years and those that are planned in the coming year. These details were to include the title of the course and credits earned. However, there were limited numbers of individual study plan s which also included details on the number of course credits that are required in fulfilment of the doctorate or licentiate, and what the make-up of these course credits needs to be (for example, X no. of credits from methods courses).

As all of the sample individual study plan s received from universities were in a digital downloaded form, as a Word or PDF document, it was difficult to ascertain as to whether any of the individual study plan were using self-generating information from Ladok to complete the individual study plan. Yet this innovation would be deemed to be best practice. This would prevent the unnecessary duplication of documentation that doctoral candidates would be required to submit throughout the year and for the individual study plan.

A best practice solution would be:

- It should be stated very clearly within this section, by the department and not the doctoral candidate, not only the number of course credits that are required for completion of the doctoral programme, but it should be made explicit what 'types' of courses should make up the allocation, for example, X no. of methods course credits is required, X no. of external course credits etc.
- Details should be provided on the number of course credits required to pass a full doctorate and/or licentiate.

More specifically, the individual study plan should include sections that:

- Detail completed courses that are self-populated from Ladok
- Courses in progress (if applicable)
- Planned for courses should be the only section which the student will need to complete themselves.
- Course details should include Title, University, Date, and Course Credits
- A space should be included for the doctoral candidate to detail deviations, if they have occurred (course cancelations etc.)

National Guideline Fulfilment

Fulfilment of the National Goals is a requirement of individual study plans. Several survey respondents voiced negative opinions with how they are required to complete this section of their individual study plan 's and a lack of clarity as to how doctoral candidate activities fulfil these goals. For example, in response to question 13,

'The newly added part with the "Interpretation of the learning outcomes" is something that has caused a lot of confusion. There are (or were) no guidelines on how to handle that, there were no information on why they are important and overall created a lot of stress to doctoral students.'

Our comparison of individual study plan s from different institutions also highlighted the differences in how national goals and learning outcomes are presented and explained between different institutions. Best practice should include accompanying documentation to individual study plan 's be provided, following the example of Umeå universitet (attached). A clear explanation of the national goal, the progress of the student and examples of tasks and activities that contribute to that learning outcome and national goal would allow doctoral candidates to more clearly relate their PhD work to completion of national goals.

Additional recommendations for inclusion within best practice

Ethical permissions and data management plan

Currently absent from the 'must haves' of individual study plan best practice are details of the doctoral candidates' ethical permissions and details of data management. Whilst a number of sample individual study plan s did include some details on ethical permissions and data management, we would suggest that the inclusion this be made mandatory. This recommendation is based upon the importance of ethical permissions within current academic and political debate, and the impact that failing to complete the necessary permissions may have upon the successful completion of the doctoral candidate. Moreover, having these permissions within the individual study plan will give the doctoral candidate some reassurance that members of the supervisory team (and others) are aware of and agreed with the decisions that have been made with regards to ethical permissions and data management. This section should include:

- Are ethical permissions required? (Yes/no)
- If yes, have ethical permissions been applied for? (Yes/no)
- If yes, please provide details (where, when, with whom, status) (attach as appendix) or reasons as to why this is yet to be done.
- Has a data management plan been completed? (Yes/no)
- If yes, attach the plan in the appendix; if no, why not (to be done later in the doctoral candidate program, no information from supervisors etc.)

Supervision

Overall, existing individual study plans that were surveyed dealt well with considerations and documentation with regards to supervision. In all, supervisors' names and details, and supervisory roles, were detailed, and it was common for individual study plans to detail the percentage of a supervisor's working hours that a PhD student was entitled to.

Best practice would be to maintain all these details; however, we would suggest presenting time available for supervision in a more practical way for Doctoral candidates planning (as number of clock hours rather than percentages of a supervisors' time). Moreover, it should be made explicit how it is expected this time is to be spent on what activities and by what supervisor.

Whilst it is expected that no supervisors would be appointed to such a role without the appropriate training experience, from a PhD students' rights perspective, the details of this training should be clearly documented within the individual study plan. This would assist in safeguarding Doctoral candidates against potential issues when supervisors' training is outdated or not to the level as expected in the Swedish context.

- Names and details of all supervisor(s) and their supervisory role (main or co).
- Has the supervisor undergone training (Yes/no), if yes, when, and where. (for each supervisor).
- Number of hours that the student is entitled to, presented as actual clock hours and not percentage of supervisors' time.
- Plan for supervision - how, when and what) (reading when chapters complete; observation of data collection etc., all or selected supervisors).
- Has the plan for supervision from the previous individual study plan been followed? If not, why and what changes were made?
- And changes in supervisor(s) from the last individual study plan need to not only be detailed but include an explanation of why the changes were made and any impact this has had or may have upon the PhD student's progress and planning.

Work Environment

Work environment and provision of necessary equipment is a vital part of successfully working towards completion of a PhD. As such, we suggest an additional section of the individual study plan that specifies whether the student has access to the required environment and equipment they need for their research.

This could include (but not be limited to):

- Does the doctoral candidate have a working computer, monitor and required accessories Yes/No
- Does the doctoral candidate have access to necessary software or databases? Yes/No
- Does the doctoral candidate have a dedicated office/desk in the Department if it is required? Yes/No

- Does the doctoral candidate have access to and information about reporting lines for workplace issues e.g., Bullying, harassment, safety concerns? Yes/No
- Space for the doctoral candidate to specify areas of their work environment that could potentially affect their ability to work productively at their institution and how they suggest it be rectified.

Evaluation of individual study plan /doctoral candidate education

We would endorse including an evaluation section within the individual study plan, where the PhD student has an opportunity to answer questions which evaluate the role of the individual study plan and usage by them, their supervisor and within the department, as well as their wider doctoral education. This would act as a space for the doctoral candidate to document concerns or work practices that are working well, that the student may not have a chance to verbalise, let alone record, elsewhere in the doctoral candidate.

As an example of best practice, we would call particular attention to the sample individual study plan provided by Jönköping University. The questions from that section include:

Evaluation of the implementation of the studies and supervision, as well as a plan for possible changes to postgraduate education and supervision

- How is the postgraduate program progressing?
- What in postgraduate education works well?
- What in postgraduate education can be improved?
- What in the supervision works well?
- What in the supervision can be improved?
- Has the thesis work been delayed in any way? Yes/no
- If yes, why?
- How does the departmental service work in relation to the postgraduate education? (applies to only internally funded PhD students)
- Other comments
- Enter a plan for any changes regarding supervision and studies.

However, whilst best practice, we acknowledge that the inclusion of this section may prove difficult for some doctoral candidate, particularly if the responses are critical towards the doctoral education program and the supervision. As such, best practice would mean that this section be included but that it be separate to the main individual study plan and presented to the individual study plan review committee for discussion with the PhD student, rather than directly to the supervision team.

One notable omission from the best practice individual study plan presented here is the funding of the PhD position (salary). This is because it is not the responsibility of the doctoral candidate to secure funding and ensure it is available for the duration of the doctoral education. Moreover, funding for the entirety of the doctoral candidate must be secured before the appointment of the doctoral candidate can take place, as covered in the XX, therefore there is no reason for this to be included within a student-centred individual study plan planning document.

Communication

The results of the focus group are important for all doctoral candidates and supervisors and others in the university sector. These should be communicated within the sector and to different target groups. The target groups that are identified are primarily doctoral students, supervisors but also administrative staff as well as study directors, prefects, deans and vice-chancellor. In addition to these target groups, the information also needs to be made available to various education boards and various doctoral candidates committees.

Examples of information that may need to be produced are folders, brochures, but also information that can be used in social media and that can be for member recruiting purposes.

The information about the best practice individual study plan needs to be adapted for it to be received in the best way by the different target groups. The focus group wishes to continue work on together with SULF's communication department regarding these questions.

In order to achieve a good distribution of the information, the focus group also sees it as important that cooperation with other actors, for example, Sweden]united student unions (Sveriges Förenade Studentkårer,SFS).

Conclusion

This focus group was established in response to the call from SULF federal board. The focus group's task aimed at developing a best practice for doctoral candidates' individual study plans and a thorough report has been presented here, demonstrating the results. In order to cover the different perspectives regarding the task, representatives among both doctoral candidates and university teachers (supervisors of doctoral candidates) were selected to form the focus group. The focus group evaluated and aimed to improve individual study plans in Swedish higher education institutions. Research was conducted by analysing 30 individual study plans and surveying 415 respondents, primarily doctoral candidates.

Findings from the work suggests significant variation in individual study plan formats and content, with discrepancies in usage and perceived importance between the doctoral candidates and their supervisors. In specific from the survey results, it revealed several issues:

1. Few respondents viewed the ISPs as important documents
2. There is a need for clarified roles and collaborative efforts as one-third of the doctoral candidates' respondents lacked support in filling out the individual study plans
3. The individual study plans are not used as project management tools;

4. Dissatisfaction was prevalent among candidates due to bureaucratic burden and lack of clarity in the plans' purpose and functions;

5. A digital, user-friendly, flexible individual study plan system is highly desired by the doctoral candidates.

In response to these findings, as best practice, individual study plans should be doctoral candidates-centered planning tools, living documents, digitally accessible for continuous updates. It is also important to reduce bureaucratic burden, hence enhancing the individual study plans' utility for doctoral candidates and the related individuals. The focus group has also drawn up a proposal for Tampere best practice's individual study plan based on the results, included as Appendix IV.

Appendix I

Content of the questionnaire

Question 1: In which capacity are you responding to this questionnaire?

Question 2: Years of study on the doctoral program?

Question 3: Which university are you affiliated with?

Question 4: How do you evaluate the importance of the individual study plan (for your studies or for your supervision)

Question 5: Who takes the initiative to fill in the individual study plan? (multiple choice answer)

Question 6: Do you fill in your individual study plan in collaboration with someone?

Question 7: Do you fill in your individual study plan in collaboration with someone? (multiple choice answer)

Question 8: Do you use the individual study plan to track your own/doctoral candidates progress throughout the year?

Question 9: If yes, in which way?

Question 10: How often is the individual study plan updated?

Question 11: How satisfied are you with the individual study plan in general?

Question 12: Positive aspects about the individual study plan – what you like about it, what you find helpful (230 responses)

Question 13: According to your needs, how could the individual study plan be improved? (238 responses)

Appendix II

List of reviewed individual study plans

Blekinge Tekniska Högskola
Chalmers University
Försvarshögskolan
Gymnastik och idrottshögskolan (GIH)
Göteborgs universitet
Handelshögskolan i Stockholm (BA)
Handelshögskolan i Stockholm (Eco - Fin)
Högskolan i Borås (healthcare)
Högskolan i Gävle
Högskolan i Halmstad
Högskolan i Kristianstad
Jönköping University (School of Engineering)
Jönköping University (School of Health and Welfare)
Karlstads universitet
Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan (KTH)
Linköpings universitet
Linneuniversitet (samhällsvetenskap)
Lunds universitet (ekonomihögskolan)
Lunds universitet (juridiska fakulteten)
Lunds universitet (konstnärlig fakultet)
Lunds universitet (naturvetenskapliga fakulteten)
Lunds universitet (tekniska högskolan)
Malmö universitet
Mittuniversitet
Mälardalens högskola
Stockholms Konstnärliga Högskola
Stockholms universitet (humanvetenskap)
Stockholms universitet (naturvetenskap)
Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet
Örebro universitet

Appendix III

Example of National Goals matrix (from Umeå universitet)

Goal	Degree (0,1,2, 3)	Comment
NATIONAL GOAL	0 = pending 1 = started 2 = good progress 3= fulfilled	The right hand column lists activities that correspond to fulfillment of specific national goals.
Knowledge and understanding		
Goal 1a: Broad knowledge and systematic understanding of the field	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Book courses Conference presentations Seminar attendance Course Article/chapter completion
Goal 1b: Advanced and up-to-date specialised knowledge in the area of specialization	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Book courses Specialized courses or workshops Article/chapter completion
Goal 2a: Familiarity with research methodology in general and the methods of the specialization in particular	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Seminar attendance Data collection / lab work Specialized courses or workshops (e.g., stats) Conference presentations Article/chapter completion
Skills and Abilities		
Goal 3: Capacity for scholarly analysis and synthesis as well as to review and assess new and complex phenomena, issues and situations autonomously and critically	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Book courses Course Conference presentations Accepted publication (as lead)

Goal 4a: Ability to identify and formulate issues with scholarly precision critically, autonomously and creatively, and to plan and use appropriate methods to undertake research and other qualified tasks	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Planning/performing data collection/analysis Course Accepted publication (as lead)
Goal 4b: Ability to review and evaluate research work	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Manuscript reviews Accepted publication (as lead)
Goal 5: Demonstrate through a dissertation the ability to make a significant contribution to the formation of knowledge	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Article/chapter completion Annual and half-time seminars
Goal 6: Ability to present and discuss research and research findings in speech and writing	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Half-time seminar Presentation for stakeholders Presentation at a conference Research stay abroad Accepted publication (as lead)
Goal 7: Ability to identify the need for further knowledge	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Submitted proposal Funded proposal (as lead)
Goal 8: Capacity to contribute to social development and support the learning of others	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Outreach and stakeholder interactions Teaching Half-time seminar
Judgement and approach		
Goal 9: Ability to demonstrate intellectual autonomy and disciplinary rectitude and to make assessments of research ethics	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Manuscript reviews
Goal 10: Demonstrate insight into the possibilities and limitations of research, its role in society and the responsibility of the individual	Year 1: Year 2: Year 3: Year 4:	Course Outreach and stakeholder interactions

Appendix IV

Best practis - Individual study plan (ISP)

1. Personal details

Name: (text field)

Date of birth (personnummer): (text field)

University: (text field)

Department and unit: (text field)

2. PhD education outline

Licentiate: (checkbox)

Doctorate: (checkbox)

Monograph: (checkbox)

Compilation: (checkbox)

Number of course credits required for completed: (text field)

Number of course credits completed at time of current ISP: (text field)

Estimated public defence/end date:

Choose year: (scroll list)

Spring: (checkbox)

Autumn: (checkbox)

3. Time allocations

To be collected by HR/administration and confirmed within this ISP and confirmed by the candidate an supervisor.

2021	Spring:
	Autumn:
2022	Spring:
	Autumn:
2023	Spring:
	Autumn:
2024	Spring:
	Autumn:

Percent of PhD candidate time spent om PhD education.

If not 100%, please provide details per semester. For example:

2022	Spring:
	Autumn: 25% parental leave, 25% sickness
2023	Spring: 5% VAB
	Autumn:

4. PhD thesis progress

Short description of the PhD thesis: (text field)

Thesis work completed to date

(text field) in progress

(text field) and planned

Status and plan of each chapter/paper: (text field)

Status and plan of data collection: (text field)

Status and plan of data analysis: (text field)

Details of any deviations from the previous ISP: (text field)

5. Courses

(automatically filled in from Ladok, then checked by the candidate and supervisor)

To fulfil the requirements of a PhD in (text field) the candidate will complete (text field) course credits including (text field) from method courses, as well as compulsory courses as detailed below.

Compulsory courses

Course title	Credits	Complete	Planned for (?)
Text field	Text field	Checkbox	Text field

National course program (at least 15 credits)

Course title	Credits	Complete	Planned for (?)
Text field	Text field	Checkbox	Text field

Methods courses (at least 15 credits)

Course title	Credits	Complete	Planned for (?)
Text field	Text field	Checkbox	Text field

Elective courses

Course title	Credits	Complete	Planned for (?)
Text field	Text field	Checkbox	Text field

6. National guideline fulfilment

Goal	Description	Progression
1A	Broad knowledge and systematic understanding of the field	List of tasks completed here that fulfill the national goal
1B	Advanced and up to date specialised knowledge in the area of specialisation	List of tasks completed here that fulfill the national goal
2	Familiarity with research methodology in general and the methods of the specialization in particular	
3	Capacity for scholarly analysis and synthesis as well as to review and assess new and complex phenomena, issues and situations autonomously and critically	
4A	Ability to identify and formulate issues with scholarly precision critically, autonomously and creatively, and to plan and use appropriate methods to undertake research and other qualified tasks	

4B	Ability to review and evaluate research work	
5	Demonstrate through a dissertation the ability to make a significant contribution to the formation of knowledge	
6	Ability to present and discuss research and research findings in speech and writing	
7	Ability to identify the need for further knowledge	
8	Show capacity to within both research and education as well as other professional contexts contribute to social development and support the learning of others	
9	Ability to demonstrate intellectual autonomy and disciplinary rectitude and to make assessments of research ethics	
10	Demonstrate insight into the possibilities and limitations of research, its role in society and the responsibility of the individual	

7. Ethical permissions and data management plans

Are ethical permissions required?

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If yes, have ethical permissions been applied for?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, please provide the application (and approved if granted) as an appendix to the ISP.

No (checkbox)

If no, please give reasons as to why it has yet to be done and an anticipated date for the application.

(text field)

Has a data management plan been completed?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, please attach the plan as an appendix to the ISP.

No (checkbox)

If no, please give reasons as to why it has yet to be done and an anticipated date for the application.

(text field)

8. Supervision

Main supervisor

Name: (text field)

University: (text field)

Department: (text field)

Has the supervisor undergone training?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, when and where? (text field)

No (checkbox)

Number of supervision hours (per supervisor) that the PhD candidate is entitled to: (text field)

Co-supervisor (s)

Name: (text field)

University: (text field)

Department: (text field)

Any changes in supervision since the last ISP?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, which changes and why? (text field)

No (checkbox)

Plan for supervision

Supervisory activity	When	With whom	How	Number of hours
(text field)	(text field)	(text field)	(text field)	(text field)

Has the previous supervision plan been followed?

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If no, why not? What changes have been made for this ISP? (text field)

9. Work environment

Do you have access to a working computer, monitor accessories?

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If no, what are you missing? (text field)

Do you have access to necessary software or databases?

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If no, why not? (text field)

Do you have a dedicated work space, (office/lab) if required?

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If no, why not? (text field)

Do you have access to and information about how and where to report workplace issues?

For example bullying, harassment, health and safety issues.

Yes (checkbox)

No (checkbox)

If no, why not? (text field)

Do you want to raise any other questions about your work environment that affect your ability to complete your PhD education to the best of your ability?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, please write down the details. (text field)

No (checkbox)

10. Evaluation of ISP/PhD education

How is the postgraduate program progressing? (text field)

What in postgraduate education works well? (text field)

What in postgraduate education can be improved? (text field)

What in the supervision works well? (text field)

What in the supervision can be improved? (text field)

Has the thesis work been delayed in any way?

Yes (checkbox)

If yes, why?

No (checkbox)

How does the departmental service work in relation to the postgraduate education?

(applies to only internally funded PhD students) (text field)

Other comments (text field)

Enter a plan for any changes regarding supervision and studies. (text field)



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