

More support needed for feminist PhD researchers at University of Helsinki

Forewords

Inclusivity is a core value of the University of Helsinki (UH). Despite the continuing efforts to develop doctoral education, many feminist PhD researchers at UH keep experiencing problems and challenges at different stages of their doctoral journey. Following the recent launch of the 14 new doctoral programmes, it is time to identify ways how to best support their training.

To map and highlight the shortcomings, the Horizon Europe project “CCindle – Co-Creating Intersectional Inclusive Democratic Spaces Across Europe” (www.ccindle.org) organised a Student Jury workshop for doctoral researchers at the University of Helsinki in November 2025. Student Juries are citizen assemblies-like events, in which students deliberate topical challenges and convey their recommendations to the university’s institutional actors. The broader aim is to give PhD students a voice in institutional policymaking on issues that directly concern them, and to help fostering a more inclusive and democratic university.

A group of 15 doctoral researchers from the University of Helsinki working on intersectional, feminist, queer, trans and critical race research participated in the workshop. Participants were personally invited based on the saliency of their research topic.

In three intensive rounds of discussions, following the format of a "world cafe", PhD researchers reflected, first, on the problems and challenges they face at different stages of their doctoral journey and, second, on the goals and solutions that could improve doctoral studies at the University of Helsinki. The three pre-selected themes of discussion were (1) Studies & Supervision, (2) Funding & Publications, and (3) Societal Dissemination. It resulted in an intensive dialogue between PhD researchers, who opened about their very concrete individual problems, revealing of persistent institutional challenges.

The workshop resulted in a list of key challenges and proposed solutions:

(1) Studies and supervision

Problems

The first challenge experienced by PhD students during their studies relates to the different consequences that funding situations entail. PhDs on grants experience their doctoral studies differently. They are less integrated within the university than those on a salaried position. A direct consequence is a heavier dependence on individual supervisors, which leads to an unequal distribution of information and learning opportunities. The lack of clear and harmonised guidance for PhD researchers, made available to them at the enrolment phase, means that the



quality of doctoral studies relies far too much on informal peer-to-peer support, with information about courses and opportunities coming generally too late and benefiting only a few.

Second, the lack of harmonised minimum standards of requirements for supervision lead to important inconsistencies and disparities in the support PhD researchers get from their supervisors. Power imbalances exacerbate this situation, notably by hindering feedback and complaints about supervision's dissatisfaction to the supervisor directly. A recurring problem remains one of authorship. Supervisors often expect to be co-author regardless of actual contribution. Such unequal practices, between fields and individual supervisors, go unnoticed as the university does not provide official guidelines.

Solutions

Crash course for PhDs. A “ready-to-start” course offered to all newly enrolled PhDs providing an exhaustive list of essential information before the program and research begins. This preparatory course would be developed together with PhD students and include concrete examples on how the university works and what tools can be used to facilitate studies and research. It would also include a presentation of what PhDs can expect from supervision (minimum standards of supervision) and where to find help and support when the supervisee-supervisor relationship face problems. Such course would also provide an important space for PhDs to network and build peer-to-peer solidarity.

Guidelines for supervision. Comprehensive university-level guidelines providing minimum standards on authorship practices, supervisee-supervisor relationship and supervision meetings. Together with information on the existing support mechanisms for complaints to foster better supervision. Should be made available on Thessa.

Complaint mechanisms. PhD researchers should be entitled to equal access to institutional support mechanisms, including complaint mechanisms when their relationship with their supervisors encounter problems. Such complaints should be made anonymous and entail concrete consequences. The current thesis committee is not enough.

Writing courses and networking. Doctoral studies would benefit from having more regular academic writing courses with a pro-active communication to all PhD researchers about the existence of such courses and deadline for enrolment. Regular writing retreat financed by the doctoral school would support networking between PhD researchers and the exchange of informal information. Field specific writing courses could be required as part of supervision responsibilities.



(2) Funding and publication

Problems

Here problems relate to the precarity of most funding mechanisms and on the complexity of different application templates. The lack of feedback loop is seen as a major issue in the application process. This gap creates a sense of unfairness in how research topics are deemed worth researching and funding. It raises unanswered questions on the reviewing process and whether unsuccessful applications reveal resistance to some research topics.

PhD researchers feel the pressure to know how to write and publish at the very beginning of their studies. Whilst academic course writing exists, students often do not hear about them in time to register. As PhD researchers on grants fall out of university mailing lists, information about such courses may never reach them.

Solutions

Equal Treatment. Different treatment of PhDs based on their funding needs to stop. All PhD researchers should be treated equally by the University regardless their source of funding. Whether on salaried or grant positions or self-funded, everyone should have access to the main mailing lists, workspaces and room booking services. “Lend your desk to a PhD” system.

Simplified application process. Centralising funding applications into one-system-one-template to avoid the multiplication of research proposals into different shape.

(3) Societal dissemination

Problems

PhD researchers suffer from a lack of training for the dissemination of their research. They are concerned with the violence and harassment that can come out of public appearances

Support provided by the university in cases of harassment is inconsistent, and existing guidelines are not being effectively implemented. Measures to proactively protect researchers working on contentious topics or belonging to visible minorities remain inadequate. Dissemination activities too often become mere tick-the-box exercises rather than community-driven, reciprocal efforts. Current funding practices fail to sufficiently account for the time and resources required for ethical and sustainable dissemination work.

Solutions

Safer societal dissemination of research. Pro-active support is needed for those who work with “risky” topics. The university should adopt a systematic approach and guidelines on how to disseminate findings and to receive support if problems arise (e.g., harassment). Guidelines need to be automatically provided, communicated and easily available, rather than available when asked for.

