

# 19 The reconstruction of Swedish doctoral education over the past 50 years

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## Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

## Abstract

This paper presents results from a study on changes in Swedish doctoral education over a period of 50 years (Apelgren, Lindblad & Wärvik, 2022). Here we explore the restructuring of doctoral education through a review of Swedish national policy documents and a content analysis of twelve Swedish syllabi for a PhD in Education. Of particular interest is how governance and structure of doctoral research studies have changed and transformed the roles of supervisors and doctoral researchers. We identified three themes in this development: 'schoolification', increasing interest in stress management, and relevance in terms of professional competences. It was concluded that Swedish doctoral education is increasingly regulated at the cost of doctoral researchers' individual autonomy.

Apelgren, B-M., Lindblad, S. & Wärvik, G-B. (2022). Restructuring doctoral education in Sweden. In M-L. Österlind, P. Denicolo, & B-M. Apelgren (Eds.). *Doctoral Education as if People Matter - Critical Issues for the Future*. Brill Publishers.

## Full paper

Doctoral education is about how knowledge and certain codes of conduct are carried over from one generation of researchers to another. In this sense, doctoral education is vital for the formation and stabilisation of academic disciplinary traditions and for the training of university teachers and researchers who will be responsible for these in the future.

This paper presents some results on historical changes in doctoral education in Sweden (Apelgren, Lindblad & Wärvik, 2022). We have analysed changes from the 1960s leading to the doctoral research system we have today (see also Hamilton et al, 2003). Our object of study is the doctorate and its governance where doctoral researchers, and their supervisor are agents/performers/executers.

Doctoral education in various countries exhibits both similarities and differences (Cardoso et al, 2020; Yudkevich et al, 2020). The Swedish context is therefore both akin and dissimilar to changes in other regional settings. One major trend around the world is the way in which the knowledge society and the huge expansion of higher education have transformed doctoral education and increased societal demands, on policymakers, research funding agencies – and the doctoral researcher body itself. Economic incentives through funding and quality assurance are steering doctoral education in a way that was not common some thirty years ago. The globalised trend to regulate, systematise and evaluate doctoral education seems to have intensified during the years. Further, there has been a shift towards doctoral employment in some countries (i.e., the Nordic countries) which has led to doctoral researchers legally being public employees with salaries, legal rights, and duties.

Also Swedish doctoral education shows increasing numbers of regulations and formal procedures. Changes that have gone in parallel with the expansion of higher education. The developments in Swedish doctoral education follow the international transformation from an elite university to a mass university. This transformation can be traced in several public Higher Education inquiries during the post-World War II period and onwards, including the doctorate. In 1969, a doctoral degree was introduced and turned the informal doctorate into a formal four-year doctoral education (Government Bill 1969:31), resulting in a substantial increase in Swedish PhD examinations from less than 200 in 1960 up to more than 2 800 in 2020. Over some decades, doctoral education was transformed from being mainly an

academic affair with rather loose forms of governing towards a highly regulated education and a target for policy making and university management.

Through a content analysis of twelve General Syllabi for Degree of Philosophy of Doctor in Education 1979-2021 at one Swedish major university, we explore (1) the regulations and structures of the doctoral studies, and (2) the role of the doctoral candidate and the role of the supervisor. We have mapped the transformation of the Swedish doctorate by exploring how the thematic areas of 'regulation', 'funding', and 'independence' emerge in the documents. By 'regulation' we indicate to what extent the syllabus is overtly regulated, for example, through obligatory courses, seminars, and supervision. 'Funding' relates to if and how the funding of the doctorate is included in the syllabus, and 'independence' adheres to the individual doctoral researcher's autonomy and independence to decide on his or her research project and studies. In our results, we can see how in the 1970s, regulation and funding were not mentioned or given focus in the syllabi. However, the more regulated the doctorate becomes, the more formal, school lookalike, the education becomes, with highly regulated rules for courses, seminars and supervision. Funding is aligned with increased regulation, indicating that although the doctoral researchers are employed, there are today stricter rules and regulations for their doctoral research and studies, which results in less autonomy and independence for the doctoral researchers.

The three themes that we have identified as transformative aspects of the Swedish doctorate during the past 50 years are (1) "schoolification", (2) increasing interest in stress management, and (3) relevance in terms of professional competences outside the academy, indicate that regulation, funding and autonomy are intertwined in complex ways, having both intended and unintended effects on the doctoral researchers and doctoral education on institutional and departmental levels. Conclusions of these analyses that can be drawn are that regulation of doctoral research and the doctoral researchers' wellbeing are increasingly being emphasised in public discourses. Hence, there is a risk that the academic intellectual contributions are less focused. We argue that the tight string of learning objectives and rules and regulations may, in fact, hinder autonomy, creativity and individuality – which are at the core of an academic doctorate.

## References

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