

**A letter from LSA and Alys to the World Bank expert Andrée Sursock:  
On the doctoral study and promotion process,  
following her visit in Riga, September 26-27**

The doctoral study and promotion process in Latvia is capable of preparing doctors of good quality in the various disciplines present. However, young scientists and students find it too complex and in many cases formal, often also challenging for students and somewhat limited in study opportunities. As recent, current and future doctoral students we would like to inform you about the current state, as seen from our perspective, and try to indicate possible solutions that we find the most reasonable. This letter starts with a description of current situation, which is followed with a future outlook defining aims, criteria for doctoral studies, the needed changes in the regulation and organization of doctoral studies and final comments.

**Current view**

In the current situation doctoral studies are split from the promotion only because of historic reasons. We see no need for such a split, which causes bureaucratic strain, as we believe that the defense of one's thesis to be an integral part of doctoral studies. Another problem currently is that lectures in doctoral studies exist only on paper, meaning that, even though higher education institutions usually say that they provide lectures for doctoral students, in reality these lectures do not occur, this is due to the fact that the priority of doctoral students is considered to be the production of scientific work, and lectures are a distant second priority. However, in order to test the aptitude of the doctoral students, there are doctoral exams at the end of the program, these exams are usually for the whole field and test the knowledge in that given field. The problem here is that if a doctoral student chooses to specialize in one specific part of the field, he may not need or even know the intricacies of the rest of the field.

The promotion process itself is too complex, with several organizations doing the same tasks, too many people voting for the thesis decisions, often with a limited expertise of the specific field where the thesis is written. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency with respect to fate of national budget assignments for specific doctoral position. There is no clear information available in universities how this money (several thousand EUR/ doctoral position coming from state budget) is spent. In a situation where there is an enormous lack of finances in the system, we should spend the money as effectively as possible. Currently there are serious doubts whether this money is spent purposely (for benefit of doctoral students), as, due to the lack in the financing of higher education as a whole, this money is usually redistributed within the higher education institution to finance bachelor's and master's studies. There are many instances of small and/or ineffective doctoral

schools. Part of them function just episodically (once per semester or year) and don't have any added value to doctoral students (no actual transferable skills, nor advancement of science).

In august, LSA and ALYS created a small survey for doctoral students and young scientists to evaluate the process of doctoral studies and promotion. The survey had over 350 participants from 7 higher education institutions. However, the data is not highly representative, as, due to time constraints, we were not able to ensure an ideal sample. We do, however, believe that the results shed some light on the problem and thus would like to present them.

The main findings were that not all promotional councils support all promotion work types that are regulated nationally. Thus, some councils do not accept a set of publications as a promotional work. Another identified problem was that finding information on the doctoral and promotional process was very difficult and led to confusion. Furthermore, not all promotional rules of higher education institutions are publicly available, which leads to a lack of transparency.

The requirements for the promotional works also greatly vary, some higher education institutions require that the aspirant has at least 10 publications, while other require none. This is exacerbated by the problem that all doctoral works have to be written in Latvian, which makes the internationalisation of science highly difficult.

Many respondents highlighted that another problem is the lack of quality discussions during the defense of the thesis. This is caused by the lack of experts in specific fields and the fact that the whole council does not familiarise itself with the work. Some respondents suggest that a requirement for thesis defense would be to not only to present it in conferences, but also to experts.

Regarding mobility, only two in three of those surveyed were aware of their possibilities to use mobility, but only one in four respondents had actually used mobility. The main problems with using mobility was that they could not leave their families, that they lacked the finances for it and that they could not leave their work.

However, almost all respondents reported that mobility was a positive experience for them. The main causes were that they broadened their horizons, had competent teachers and colleagues, as well as access to quality literature, which was not available in Latvia.

Respondents were free to leave the comments about their experience during their studies or promotion process. Part of respondents were disappointed about doctoral studies as they could not devote all their efforts to research due to the need to work a full time job, not related to their research. Part of respondents were disappointed due to low quality of supervision they experienced. Many young researchers would not suggest doctoral studies to their peers in Latvia, rather they encourage to do doctoral studies abroad.

Another problem is the fact that not all students even have the possibility to obtain a doctoral degree. Due to the fact that a doctoral work needs to be a written research, art students do not have the possibility of continuing their education.

However, in recent years there have been positive trends. For example, funding from the European Social Funds for doctoral studies in the form of scholarships allowed to increase the number of new doctors. Furthermore, students are well represented and have defined rights within the higher

education institution, allowing them to work with internal quality assurance and to work with improving the quality of studies for all levels. Furthermore, as you have seen, students are working with the ministry and trying to bring about change also through this direction.

### **Future outlook - general opinion and aim**

As the main aim we see globally recognized doctoral studies that create doctors with a proven research potential in the field of studies, experience of mobility and a skillset that is valid both for industry and academia. This should be done in a single study process that results with a defense and a doctoral title.

Although the current funding for doctoral studies is not large, it could be used more effectively in order to slowly move towards this aim. We would like to eventually reach a point that doctoral studies can't be started, if there is no funding ensured for the study period (project or scholarship).

In order to make the system less rigid, we also suggest the implementation of OECD fields of science in place of the current classification. Decrease of the different specific fields would allow a greater freedom in performing inter-disciplinary science.

To improve the education during doctoral curriculum, larger and more regular doctoral schools (50 doctoral students or more) should be formed. Currently even 5-10 doctoral students can form a doctoral school, which is not a critical mass necessary for discussions or beginning of new ideas, etc. This would be the place to obtain the extra skillset that is not provided during research training. We also believe that, given the status of English as the *de facto lingua franca* it is important to ensure that doctoral works are written in English, except for special cases, such as in philology.

However, a better interuniversity cooperation is needed. For example, if a small institution can provide research training but does not have the critical mass, it should have a mechanism that allows it to do doctoral training by collaborating with the larger university that has promotion rights. Also, mechanisms for double degree programs, exchange and other interactions with other higher education institutions should be encouraged, not remaining bureaucratic and challenging.

An essential part of the doctoral studies is the defense. We would like that this stage becomes more professional and focuses on the discussion of research performed by the student. This asks for a high quality review, for which the experts of the field are necessary. As Latvia is small, they mostly should come from abroad. To have a high quality promotion committee, the members and reviewers could be recommended by the student and his supervisor, as they are better aware of the field. Of course, members and reviewers should fulfill a predefined criteria and approved by promotion council.

An important question is professional doctoral studies in Arts. We strongly support this, however, it should be clearly defined how this is evaluated.

### **Regulation of the doctoral and promotional process**

In order to improve the quality of studies, we believe that there is a need to define principles on a national level, which would resolve several of the aforementioned problems. First of all, due to the

fact that there is a critical shortage of funding for science, we believe that doctoral studies should become more concentrated in several higher education institutions. We believe that higher education institutions should be able to show that they have some minimum critical scientific mass, before they can be allowed to create doctoral programs.

Furthermore, the current system where doctoral student admission is regulated is good for bachelor's and master's students, but should not be applicable to doctoral students. This would allow higher education institutions to matriculate doctoral students for set projects, which do not always coincide with the matriculation dates for other cycles.

Due to the problem with doctoral studies being separate from promotion, we believe that by only allowing doctoral studies in those higher education institutions, that have their own promotional rights in that field, we would ensure the quality and critical mass of doctoral studies.

As the doctoral survey showed, mobility is a great benefit to doctoral students, therefore compulsory mobility (at least a research visit) should be part of the doctoral process to increase its quality. Furthermore, due to the lack of courses for doctoral students, it should be allowed that doctoral students can take master's courses with exams for a certain amount of credit points instead of a final exam, as well as implementing a soft skills module. Of course, this has to be controlled, for example, by the director of the doctoral study program.

In order to increase the soft skills of doctoral students, it should also be compulsory that doctoral students have to teach students, or work as a laboratory supervisor or at least provide supervision for two lower level students. As research has shown that the greatest amount of information is retained when teaching others, this would also work to increase their understanding of their fields.

### **Organization and structure of the promotion process&defense**

Due to the large amount of institutions, we believe that there is no need for SSQC(VZKK). Also a large promotion council is a waste of resources. Instead, 2 high level reviewers with a set of quality criteria (e.g. not connected to the institution, no common publications, experts of the field with publications in recent years) could provide a suitable evaluation, of course, with . The study process should finish with a defense, allowing the person to remain a student until the degree is obtained. The decision of the promotion jury should be made in a closed discussion, where reviewers have the most important say. Hence, the two level promotion process consisting of doctoral studies and promotion process should be combined in one.

Articles published in internationally peer reviewed journals should form a compulsory part of the doctoral studies. The fact of such publications ensures that certain quality criteria are met (no need for the SSQC, international journal peer review is sufficient). A harmonisation or criteria throughout the field is needed, defining at least a common minimum. The current situation where, for example, students studying the same field in different higher education institutions face completely different requirements for their promotion is unfair and absurd.

### **Final comments**

Currently doctoral studies in Latvia largely depends on the quality of the supervisors. There is a number of problems in doctoral study programs in LV, but they can be alleviated if student works in scientific group with a competent supervisor in place. If a doctoral student does his research under the supervision of a poor supervisor, then he or she is left rather helpless (no system exists that would compensate students for poor supervision received and a lack of scientific discussions, also no mechanisms of supervisor training exist). Poor supervision, lack of funding and no clear framework for study/ research path in doctoral studies lowers the quality of science in general in Latvia and the quality of higher education in particular. We believe that the main solution for these problems would be an increase of the effectiveness. For that defining the rights and duties of all members of the system is essential. A probable solution is strengthening doctoral schools, if sufficient rights and tasks are given to them by law. They could be responsible for organizing competitions of the state funded scholarships, general field training and soft skill training, which is otherwise excluded. However, it is important to keep the functions clear and without doubling.

Furthermore, it is important to put in place a system for allowing the implementation of professional doctorate studies for arts and architecture students, which would allow them to further their knowledge of the field through practical work. We believe that such a system would work to boost the global competitiveness of Latvian arts and architecture students.

We thank you for your time and hope to have fruitful discussion regarding the future of Latvian doctoral programs and promotional process!

President of the Latvian Student union

M. Belova

Chairman of the board of the Association of Latvian Young Scientists

I. Krūmiņa