

Finland

I. General information and application procedure

Which institutions award doctoral degrees?

The Finnish higher education system is divided into universities and universities of applied sciences (the latter so-called vocational universities or high schools), yliopisto and ammattikorkeakoulu in Finnish (universitet and yrkeshögskola in Swedish). In all branches of science, only universities may award licentiate and doctoral degrees in Finland, whereas universities of applied sciences have a more vocational focus and function.

What forms of doctorate attendance are available?

Contracts can be full-time or part-time. In general there is no formal requirement on actual hours worked but the regular full-time working contract in a university means 1624 hours of work in a year.

What is the formal length of time foreseen for completing a doctorate?

The study plan is usually made for four years in agreement with supervisor but in practice the time to complete a PhD project depends especially on one's funding. University funding is normally granted for longer periods e.g. 2-4 years, while working with grants usually consists of numerous short-term grants, meaning more work on applying for funding, thus taking more time to complete the degree. In the FUURT² survey for early career researchers in 2017, typical time required to complete a doctorate was on average 6,3 years³. There is no legal minimum or maximum length for completing a doctorate. It is also possible to have a break during doctoral training (e.g. military service, parental leave, sick leave). Sometimes the lack of funding leading to unemployment forces breaks of varied length.

What is the status of the doctoral candidates?

The law defines doctoral candidates as students based on their relationship to a university as being accepted to a degree programme. However, some universities have taken steps to treat (salaried) doctoral candidates as "doctoral researchers", signalling higher appreciation than usually associated with student-status. Depending on an issue in university practices and everyday life, doctoral candidates can be considered either as university staff or students.

¹ **Doctorate** is understood as the institutional frameworks and processes geared towards the completion of a doctoral degree.

² [FUURT](#) - Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers.

³ [Survey for ECRs in Finland by FUURT 2017](#)

What are the social benefits for doctoral candidates with student status?

Doctoral candidates in Finland do not have any discounts or student benefits concerning healthcare, travelling etc. They are allowed to apply for student allowance for maximum nine (9) months (available for any second degree if not used previously) if they do not have other funding for their doctoral research. If a doctoral candidate is on an employment contract, he/she is usually entitled to occupational healthcare. Outside employment contract, a doctoral candidate can use the Finnish public healthcare system.

How are doctoral candidates financially supported?

The study plan is usually made for four (4) years in agreement with the supervisor but in practice the time to complete a doctoral project depends especially on funding. In most cases doctoral candidates are funded either through salaried university contracts (sometimes also as project researchers within a project at a university) or through grants and scholarships that must be applied for different foundations and associations. A minority of doctoral candidates are self-funded or do their doctoral research part-time, alongside their other work/job position.

University contracts have a recommended (maximum) duration of four (4) years but shorter contracts are still common. A typical university contract for a doctoral candidate can be anything from couple of months to four years maximum. The working contracts for doctoral candidates are always fixed-term, which is explained in legal terms based on the "nature of work" i.e. doctoral project is a temporary job. If a doctoral candidate has had other funding before a university contract, this is normally reduced from the university funding (e.g. 4 years minus previous funding). Scholarships are usually for 6-12 months at a time (sometimes less depending on the foundation), most often without a guarantee for continuation. Thus, doctoral candidates working with a grant need to re-apply for funding each year through a time-consuming process. Universities and doctoral programmes also make limited grants available for application for all doctoral candidates (regardless whether they work as employees or as grant researchers) for travel costs (field work, conference trips) or language proofreading for international publications.

According to different FUURT surveys, the average gross salary of a doctoral candidate in university employment is c. 2400 euros per month. The average amount of scholarship is c. 2000 euros per month. Scholarships are tax free until about 20.400 euros per year. There is no fixed minimum or maximum sum for scholarships and thus, there is a lot of variation among foundations: bigger foundations have scholarships of c. 2000 euros or more per month, whereas smaller foundations may have much smaller grants. It needs to be noted that living costs in Finland are rather high. In the FUURT survey for early career researchers in 2017, about 60 % of the grant recipients and 68 % of ECRs in employment contract reported that their income was sufficient to cover their living costs. However, 18 % of grant recipients and 14 % of employees had difficulties to make ends meet. Especially single parents and those living with a spouse and children had financial difficulties more often than others.

Doctoral candidates on a university contract are supposed to use five per cent (5 %) of their working hours for teaching or other department duties. If doctoral candidates working with a grant teach, they are paid separately by the university according to their teaching hours. In some universities, doctoral candidates working with a grant need to pay rent if they want to have an office at the university. However, there is a lot of variety in this policy between universities.

What are the admission requirements for a doctorate?

One can be accepted for doctoral training only after completion of a higher university degree (Master's degree or equivalent in a relevant field). Each university and their doctoral schools and programmes have application periods and quotas how many candidates they can take in annually. The candidates are evaluated (in some programmes even interviewed) based on their research plan and plan to complete their doctoral training. Also the grade of the previous degree and Master's thesis should be at least good. The decision to accept/reject a candidate for a doctoral programme is done separately from funding decisions. The official permission to a doctoral programme is applied and received from one's own faculty.

II. Progression

How is a doctorate organized in your country?

Doctoral programmes are organised a bit differently in each university, though there are also general practices. Previously in Finland there were national doctoral programmes: network programmes between the universities focusing on a certain field. These doctoral programmes were funded by the Academy of Finland (mainly by state funding). They also offered a few salary based positions for doctoral candidates. On the positive side, these programmes created a national network within your own field and in joint seminars you could get in touch with professors and fellow doctoral candidates from different universities and thus create your own networks more easily. On the negative side, doctoral programmes were led and organized very inconsistently; some had more activities and planned programmes, others very little support for their doctoral candidates. Each doctoral candidate of course was doing his/her degree to one's own university, despite the national programme.

During 2010-2015 these national programmes were discontinued and state funding support was allocated to universities with the requirement that each university starts its own doctoral school that serves as the higher organization for doctoral programmes in each university. This had the positive outcome of each university taking more responsibility in organizing its doctoral programmes, usually by regularized recruitment and enrolment policies/systems, creating "good practices" of doctoral training concerning e.g. study plans and supervision (typically it is recommended to have two supervisors or a follow-up group instead of just one supervisor), and offering joint PhD courses on e.g. research ethics, academic writing and different transferable skills.

How is doctoral supervision provided?

The university/doctoral programme considers if they can offer required/relevant supervision for the research plan in question. Typically a doctoral candidate has two or even three supervisors. Still especially in some smaller fields of study there might be just one (official) supervisor to a doctoral candidate. Usually at least one of the supervisors is a full professor and the other one(s) can be associate professor(s), or senior or postdoctoral researcher(s). In case of several supervisors, division of work and responsibilities between the supervisors varies depending on the situation of supervisors and the doctoral candidate.

What are the main obligations of doctoral candidates?

The main obligation consists of publishing in journals or conferences, writing a dissertation (a monograph, an edited collection of previously-published papers, or an edited collection of previously published and to be published papers). Teaching duties vary per university, research group, and the doctoral candidate.

A doctoral degree is normally 240 ECTS which can be divided a bit differently into different requirements in different universities and fields of research. Here is one example of content: a) participation in joint courses offered by the university doctoral school or programme 20-30 ECTS, b) "deep knowledge" in your own field 30-40 ECTS, c) doctoral dissertation and its public defence 180 ECTS. The joint courses by the university's doctoral school, e.g. research ethics and different transferable skills, are targeted for all doctoral candidates of the university. The "deep knowledge of your own field" consists mainly of a PhD seminar at your own department that the doctoral candidates are supposed to attend during their whole doctoral programme. In the seminar they present their work as it progresses to professors and fellow doctoral candidates, discuss and receive feedback. The "deep knowledge" can also include courses and other "regular studies". It is also possible to attribute ECTS points for conference presentations or publication of scientific articles (if these articles are not included in the doctoral thesis) etc. with the agreement of one's supervisor and/or doctoral programme.

Is any mobility compulsory?

Typically there is no compulsory mobility. Most researchers would like to work abroad but, once again, it depends on the money. It is particularly difficult to go abroad when there is no necessary guarantee of having a position or funding to return to. Family mobility for doctoral candidates remains to have limited financial support, so it is not easy for researchers with family to be mobile. Intersectoral mobility is a rising topic, but so far there is little experience and practices on this.

How are courses in transferable skills provided?

Most of the courses in transferable skills are voluntary and/or optional and they are provided by the doctoral candidate's own university using different teaching methods.

How is the progress of the doctoral candidate evaluated?

Doctoral candidates are to be evaluated at least once a year but there is lot of variation in how to do this. Most often the supervisor with whom the candidate is working closely is following the progress at the same time when he/she is supervising the thesis. In some

universities there is a recommendation and a practice to have at least one official (documented) discussion between the candidate and his/her supervisor(s) and/or a follow-up group in a year, where the progress of work is discussed and evaluated. If the doctoral dissertation will be a collection of articles then it is possible to evaluate the progress by following the article publishing process.

Is it possible for doctoral candidates to change supervisor(s)?

It is possible to change supervisor(s), but it is not usual. Most common causes to change a supervisor are practical: a supervisor changes university or retires, or the doctoral candidate changes his/her focus of research and thus needs another supervisor. In addition, if a research group runs out of funding, a doctoral candidate might be forced to change research group and supervisor. In rare occasions, also personal reasons can lead to a change of supervisor.

Are supervisors required to have training in order to supervise doctoral candidates?

There are some training courses for supervising but training specifically for supervising doctoral candidates is not currently mandatory. In general, universities offer courses and training for university staff members to improve their teaching, supervision and leadership skills.

III. Defence procedure

What requirements should be met to receive acceptance to enter the defence procedure?

The doctoral defence is entered when all the educational requirements have been fulfilled. A doctoral thesis can be either a monograph or a collection of articles and their introduction. The requirements for articles vary from one university to another, but the usual number is 3-5 articles in a thesis, majority of which need to be published before the completion of the thesis in "respected and recognized scientific journals".

The evaluation process in Finland is rather long: the pre-evaluation of a doctoral thesis often takes three (3) months after which one usually needs to do at least minor changes or corrections, depending on the statements. There are usually two (2) pre-evaluators outside of the doctoral candidate's university (or at least outside his/her faculty). Then there is the public defence in which there is usually one and in some cases (especially interdisciplinary works) two opponents, again outside of the candidate's university. The Finnish system tries to be rather strict in not having close colleagues evaluate one's thesis. However, having all those evaluators from outside your university and not being involved in your work before its completion takes time for the evaluators to read and evaluate and then to set up the time for the defence. After the defence the faculty (or relevant administrative body) still needs to receive statements from the defence (typically from the opponent) and officially grant the doctorate (barring holiday season, this should take only a few weeks).

Thus the four years in a doctoral programme can be enough for you to give your manuscript to the pre-evaluation process, after which point it can take anything from 3-12 months before you actually get your degree papers out.

What documents are required to start the defence procedure?

All doctoral dissertations in Finland are public in way that there is a certain amount of copies held at one's own university and one copy at the National Library of Finland. Most often doctoral theses are published by the university's own university press (nowadays mostly online and open access). If the doctoral candidate wants to have another publisher for the work (considers mainly monographs and international publishing houses), one can first have the defence with a printed manuscript and after that look for a publisher. However, most universities today wish to have all doctoral theses published quickly and as open access through their online databases. Thus, separate publications of doctoral dissertations are becoming more rare.

What is the defence procedure?

The examination of a doctoral dissertation is always open to the general public. The event is also a visible and festive way to publish research results. The public examination is usually held in approximately one month of the faculty's permission to defend the dissertation. This gives enough time to print and publish the dissertation and to inform the media about the upcoming public examination. The defence is held in Finnish, in Swedish or in English.

The public examination includes the following sections:

- opening of the public examination;
- the candidate's introductory lecture, i.e. lectio praecursoria;
- the opponent's opening statement;
- public examination of the doctoral dissertation;
- the opponent's final statement;
- the candidate's concluding words;
- possible audience questions;
- closing of the public examination.

A custos (a professor that is often the candidate's supervisor) acts as an academic official of the defence and opens the public examination. After the public examination has been opened, the candidate stands up to give a short introductory lecture, so-called lectio praecursoria, in which he/she introduces the dissertation's background and its connections to scientific and/or practical problems. The lectio praecursoria may not last more than 20 minutes. The introductory lecture is usually given in the language of the dissertation.

After the lecture, the opponent stands up in turn to give an opening statement on the dissertation under examination. After the opponent has given the opening statement, the opponent and the candidate sit down to examine and discuss the dissertation in more detail. If there is more than one opponent, the opponents will have to agree on a division of tasks and announce this in their opening statement(s).

In the actual examination of the dissertation, the opponent first makes a general overview by discussing the choice of the topic, methods and data, and then moves on to a more detailed examination. At the end of the examination, the opponent makes a summary of the results of the dissertation to the discipline in question. The defence usually takes about two (or 2-3) hours and there needs to be some time for possible questions from the audience. If the examination seems to take long (more than three hours and maximum six hours), the custos may announce a short break.

After having examined the dissertation, the opponent stands up to deliver the final statement. The candidate also stands up to listen. After concluding, the opponent then sits down. The candidate thanks the opponent and then faces the audience to say: "If anyone present wishes to make any comments concerning my dissertation, please ask the custos for the floor." After the possible audience questions are discussed, the custos stands up to announce the public examination completed.

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