Republika e Kosovës

Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo

Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim

Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju

Kosovo Accreditation Agency

REGULATION (AKA) Nr.03/2025 STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES

Manual of Doctoral Standards

[i] REGULATION (KAA) Nr.03/2025 STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES was approved at the 136rd Meeting of the SCQ with Decision Ref.:000 /25, dated 30.06.2025

State Quality Council,

In support of Article 11 paragraph 1.1, 1.8 and 1.9, Article 28 paragraph 1 and 19 as well as Articles 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 dhe 30 of Law no. 08/L-110 on the Kosovo Agency for Accreditation, at the meeting held on 30/06/2025, approves:

Regulation (KAA) nr.03/2025 standards for evaluation of doctoral programmes

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER I

GENERAL PROVISIONS

PREAMBLE

1. Higher education in Kosovo has undergone major changes in recent decades, with notable improvements in the quality of both programmes and the institutions offering them at the bachelor's and master's levels. As a country in transition, still facing societal challenges and with a predominantly young population that holds huge potential for further societal development, it is vital that higher education institutions foster a knowledge-based society and support knowledge creation. High-quality doctoral education can significantly contribute to this mission.

2. More than five years ago, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency identified the key challenges facing the nation's higher education provision, recognizing that doctoral education was one of these priorities. In June 2020, the first standards for evaluating doctoral programmes were created and adopted by the State Council of Quality. Soon after, the first doctoral programmes were evaluated and accredited.

3. The standards aimed to enhance the quality of doctoral programmes and are also expected to provide a framework that facilitates the establishment of additional programmes.

4. Five years after the standards were implemented, analysis performed by the Agency and State Council of Quality (SCQ) revealed that revising the existing standards would better respond to institutional needs and enhance quality. The revised standards retained the same format but reduced the total number of criteria, now organized across seven areas: institutional structure, administrative support and funding; selection and admission criteria; doctoral programme structure and content; research environment and capacity; supervision; assessment; and doctoral research outcomes. Some standards are categorized as core standards, which are mandatory for a positive evaluation, while others are considered supplementary and allow for institutional and programme development.

INTRODUCTION

1. This year marks twenty years since the beginning of the so-called “quiet revolution” in doctoral education, supported by the Bologna Process, the European Commission, and other key European institutions such as the European University Association. Almost all universities across Europe have taken part in this transformation. The first major milestone to be widely recognized and implemented was the Salzburg Principles for Doctoral Education, which laid the foundation for significant reform.
2. Since 2005, doctoral education in Europe has undergone continuous reform. Universities have concentrated on restructuring and improving doctoral programmes to better reflect the increasingly diverse career paths pursued by doctorate holders. One of the key developments has been the establishment of dedicated doctoral schools, now present in over 85% of European universities, which provide structured support and foster high-quality research environments.
3. Doctoral education represents a crucial component of the higher education system, connecting education, research, and innovation. It is deeply embedded in the traditional identity of the university, and in most European countries, only universities are authorized to award doctoral degrees. Due to its research-based nature, doctoral education must be distinguished from the first and second cycles—bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Its quality assurance processes differ accordingly, reflecting its unique purpose and structure.
4. Doctoral education is research training for research, and it is fundamentally different from the first two cycles, which focus primarily on teaching. It should also be highly adaptable to individual needs, enabling doctoral candidates to choose their own path and navigate their chosen field of research. As one of the most demanding phases of higher education, it requires all stakeholders to be well-prepared and equipped with the necessary skills and tools. Doctoral education is equally important for institutions developing and nurturing research, as well as for both supervisors and supervisees, i.e., doctoral candidates.
5. Effective supervision is central to the success of doctoral education. The relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate plays a critical role in shaping the research experience, supporting academic development, and ensuring timely progress.

High-quality supervision not only fosters intellectual growth and research integrity but also helps candidates navigate the challenges of independent research. As doctoral pathways continue to diversify, supervisors must be prepared to mentor students for a wide range of career trajectories, both within and beyond academia.

6. As the third cycle of higher education, doctoral education forms a bridge between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). It plays a pivotal role in generating new knowledge and supporting a knowledge-based society. While doctoral graduates were once expected to remain largely within academia, today they increasingly pursue careers in industry, policy, civil society, and beyond. To respond to these developments, doctoral education must be designed to equip graduates with a broad set of transferable skills and interdisciplinary perspectives.
7. In this context, the relevance of doctoral education in Europe has never been greater. As global challenges—such as climate change, technological transformation, and social inequality—demand innovative, evidence-based solutions, doctoral researchers stand at the forefront of addressing these issues. Ensuring the continued evolution of doctoral education, while maintaining research excellence and fostering inclusivity, is essential for Europe's competitiveness and societal well-being. The next phase of development must focus not only on structural improvements, but also on cultivating the conditions that allow future researchers to thrive.
8. An analysis of the existing standards was conducted during a workshop with stakeholders from various higher education institutions, members of the State Council of Quality (SCQ), and representatives of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). Additional feedback was gathered when the draft of the new standards was presented to the SCQ and the KAA, as well as through public consultation after the proposed standards were made available on the KAA website.
9. The revised Standards for the Evaluation of Doctoral Programmes (sometimes referred to as PhD programmes) apply to all research fields. They are based on relevant European policy documents, recommendations, and guidelines on doctoral education, as well as good practices from European institutions.

Article 1

Purpose

1. The primary purpose of this regulation is to define the mandatory standards and criteria for the evaluation and accreditation of doctoral programs in the Republic of Kosovo, with a focus on ensuring and advancing their quality.

2. These standards aim to guide the development, monitoring, and evaluation of doctoral programs, supporting higher education institutions in providing doctoral education of high standards, which contributes to the creation of knowledge and the development of a knowledge-based society.

3. Through these revised standards, the regulation seeks to improve the response to institutional needs and strengthen the overall quality of doctoral studies. This will be achieved by relying on the best European practices and ensuring alignment with relevant international frameworks, such as the Bologna Process and the European Research Area.

Article 2

Scope

This regulation defines the standards and procedures that higher education institutions in the Republic of Kosovo must follow for the establishment, accreditation, implementation, and monitoring of doctoral (PhD) programs. It governs all stages from the initial application to the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), the evaluation process by experts, to the accreditation decision by the State Quality Council (SQC), ensuring compliance with national and international quality standards in higher education.

Article 3
Fundamental Principles

1. Independence: The accreditation processes are conducted by an independent panel of international experts, who operate free from external influences and in accordance with the guidelines of international quality assurance institutions.

2. Transparency: Every stage of the accreditation process is accessible and clear to the stakeholders, including the procedures, standards, results, and complaint mechanisms.

3. Academic Integrity: The agency and the members of the evaluation panels commit to respecting the code of ethics and ensuring that all decisions are based on fair, clear, and verifiable criteria.

4. High Quality**:** Accreditation procedures comply with the best international practices and strive for the continuous improvement of quality.
5. Internationalization**:** Accreditation processes are based on international standards and practices, including interaction and cooperation with international quality assurance organizations and networks.

Article 4

Glossary

1. ***Active participation in a conference***. Taking part in a conference by presenting research (e.g. through an oral presentation, poster, or panel discussion), chairing a session, or contributing as a discussant. It goes beyond simply attending and involves engaging with the academic or professional community.
2. ***Corresponding author***. The author responsible for managing all communication with the journal or publisher during the publication process. This includes submitting the manuscript, coordinating revisions, and responding to editorial queries. The corresponding author is often a senior researcher or principal investigator who leads the project and ensures that all co-authors have approved the final version of the work.
3. ****Critical mass***. In doctoral education, the size and number of resources (equipment, facilities, students, academic staff, supervisors, etc.) needed to produce top-quality research.
4. ****Doctoral (PhD) candidate***. A person enrolled on a doctoral programme, conducting research and aiming to defend a thesis and to be awarded a doctorate.
5. ****Doctor of Philosophy (PhD***). Type of doctorate, and the highest academic degree, awarded by universities and which is a minimum requirement for starting an academic career or becoming a researcher in various scientific fields.
6. ****Doctoral programme***. An organized set of courses and research opportunities within one or more disciplines (e.g. a single-discipline programme in early modern literature, or an inter-disciplinary doctoral programme in computer linguistics).
7. ***Joint doctoral programme.*** A PhD programme that has been developed jointly by two or more universities; it is a doctoral degree awarded by two or more institutions who share the responsibilities of supervision, coordination and assessment, of doctoral candidates' research.

8. ***Mentor***. An experienced person who supports a doctoral candidate by offering guidance on personal and professional development, career planning, and navigating academic life. Unlike a supervisor, a mentor is not usually responsible for overseeing the research project.

9. ***Non-human participants***. Living beings or elements used in research that are not human, such as animals, plants, microorganisms, or environmental subjects like soil or water. Research involving non-human participants must follow ethical and scientific standards to ensure responsible and respectful treatment.

10. ***Research Integrity***. The adherence to ethical principles and professional standards essential for the responsible conduct of research. It includes honesty, transparency, objectivity, accountability, and respect for all participants and sources, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of scientific findings.

11. ***Research misconduct.*** This is unacceptable practice that occurs when an individual deliberately, dangerously or negligently deviates from the accepted practices to be followed in carrying out research. This may include plagiarism, fabrication and falsification of the data and results.

12. ****Supervision***. Interaction in the form of coaching, monitoring and support between responsible supervisor(s) and the doctoral candidate, as opposed to taught courses or technical activities.

13. ****Transferable skills***. Skills learned in one context (e.g. research) that are useful in another, including employment in the private or public sector, in areas such as science, business or governmental and local community organizations. They make it possible to develop, and apply, both subject-specific and research related skills effectively. [1]

[1] *This part of the Glossary is taken from the Further development of doctoral education, outcomes of the UZDOC project, Kovacevic, M. and Mihaljevic, S. (2016).*

Article 5

Compliance level

The standards are divided into two types: core and supplementary. In total, there are **44** standards: **26** core standards and **18** supplementary standards. All core standards must be met to achieve a positive evaluation. A doctoral programme can be accredited if there is full or substantial compliance.

1. **FULLY COMPLIANT:** To be **fully compliant**, a doctoral programme must meet all core standards and at least **14** of the supplementary standards.

2. **SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT:** To be considered **substantially compliant**, all of the core standards must be met. In addition, between **1** and **13** of the supplementary standards must be met.

3. **PARTIALLY COMPLIANT:** If the programme meets some, but not all, of the core standards, it will be evaluated as **partially compliant**, regardless of how many supplementary standards it meets. A partially compliant programme **cannot be accredited**, and the evaluation process must be repeated to achieve full or substantial compliance.

4. **NON-COMPLIANT: No** matter how many supplementary standards a programme meets, if it fails to meet any core standards, it will be evaluated as **non-compliant**.

COMPLIANCE		
FULLY	*SUBSTANTIAL*	*PARTIAL*
Core **26**	*Core* **26**	*Core* ***26 or fewer***
+	+	+
Supplementary	*Supplementary*	*Supplementary*
14 or more	Between 1 and 13	Any number

Article 6

PERIOD OF ACCREDITATION

1. For programmes that are **fully compliant**, accreditation is normally granted for a period of three or five years.

2. Programmes that are **substantially compliant** will normally receive accreditation for a period of three years.

3. Programmes that are **partially compliant** will not be awarded accreditation.

4. Likewise, programmes that are **not compliant** will also not receive accreditation.

CHAPTER II

THE STANDARDS FOR THE EVALUATION OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES

SECTION I

CORE STANDARDS

Article 7

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND FUNDING

1. The institution* has established institutional regulations for doctoral programmes** either as a clearly named section within existing regulations or as a standalone document.

2. The institution has sufficient allocated resources, including appropriate space, financial means, and designated administrative support.

3. The institution employs sufficient number of academic staff with doctoral degrees to deliver at least 50% of its doctoral-level courses. Furthermore, at least three academic staff members designated as programme holders must hold a PhD in the research field of the doctoral programme, hold at least the academic title of associate professor, and have at least three papers published in internationally relevant publications as first or corresponding author within the last five years. The relevance of the publications is defined according to international criteria for the specific field of science (indexed in WoS[1] and/or SCOPUS[2]). An additional two members of academic staff should hold a PhD in the field, and at least the title of assistant professor.

   3.1. * *The institution may be a university, faculty or department, depending on who is the main organizer and provider of the PhD programme. While disciplinary programmes are usually organized by the department or faculty, interdisciplinary programmes may be organized at departmental, faculty or university level.*

   *3.2. ** Standards for joint doctoral programmes will be developed as a separate set of standards.*

[1]WoS (SCIE, SSCI and AHCI)

[2]SCOPUS (excluding predatory journals or publishers)

Article 8

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. The institution conducts regular reviews and updates of the programme.

2. Doctoral education is presented on the institutional website in both Albanian and English, and contains all relevant information.

3. The institution has a clear strategy for delivering its doctoral education. If it is embedded within a general institutional strategy, this is explicitly acknowledged in a separate section.

SECTION II

SELECTION AND ADMISSION CRITERIA

Article 9

CORE

1. Doctoral candidates must be selected through a competitive and transparent process. Grades cannot be the sole criterion. Applicants must hold an educational qualification equivalent to a master's degree, amounting to at least 300 ECTS credits.

2. Doctoral candidates should demonstrate their research potential and identify a supervisor willing to oversee their doctoral research. The supervisor's commitment must be documented and signed prior to final enrolment in the doctoral programme.

Article 10

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. Applicants must demonstrate a strong working knowledge of English.

2. Doctoral candidates must have a clearly defined timeframe for completing their studies (four to six years).

SECTION III

DOCTORAL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE/CONTENT

Article 11

CORE

1. The doctoral programme must be research-based, although it may include coursework and other activities that contribute to critical thinking and the development of research skills. The majority of the coursework should be based on tutorials, seminars, discussion groups, workshops, and individual work.

2. The programme should enable individual research opportunities. Courses should not exceed one-fifth (36 credits) of the total ECTS credits or 20% of the total workload. The programme must develop transferable skills and provide sufficient training in research methodology, ethics, and research integrity.

3. The programme should encourage mobility and participation in research opportunities at other institutions.

4. The programme must have established procedures to monitor the progress of doctoral candidates.

5. If the initial supervisor who agreed to supervise the candidate at enrolment changes, a new supervisor must be assigned within the first 12 months.

Article 12

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. Doctoral candidate representatives should be involved in institutional bodies relevant to doctoral education.

2. Doctoral candidates should be permitted to take courses outside the institution. Other relevant experiences, such as presentations at scientific conferences, workshops, science popularization, and public speaking, should also be recognized.

3. Data on cohorts of doctoral candidates should be collected to inform evidence-based decision-making and enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of doctoral programmes.

SECTION IV

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT/CAPACITY

Article 13

CORE

1. Infrastructure and facilities must be up to date and compatible with the research areas of the entire doctoral programme and its research projects.

2. Research must be conducted in accordance with international ethical standards, and this must be clearly documented and evident.

3. The Ethics Committee should be responsible for approving research involving human and non-human participants (including animals). Its members should be active researchers who have published in relevant international journals and have no history of research misconduct, plagiarism, or other ethical issues. Conflicts of interest should be avoided, and members must be committed to data protection.

Article 14

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. The institution should ensure that the ratio of supervisors to doctoral candidates does not exceed 1:3.

2. Taking into account the field of research, employment opportunities, and its research capacity, the institution should consider the scheduling of enrolment for new cohorts of students.

3. The institution should support research quality by requesting and reporting on research paper quality and publication, external research funding, the establishment of research groups, and similar activities.

SECTION V

SUPERVISION

Article 15
CORE

1. To ensure that all research areas are covered, each doctoral candidate must have one or more supervisors who specialize in the research area/topic that forms the focus of their doctoral research.
2. Supervisors must be members of the institution's academic staff and hold a PhD and an academic title. In the case of an assistant professor, they must have supervised at least three successful master's theses and may supervise only one doctoral candidate at a time.
3. All supervisors must be active researchers who have participated in or led research projects and have at least three years of research experience following the award of their PhD. They must also provide proof of active participation in international conferences and workshops relevant to their field and demonstrate that they have published at least three papers as first or corresponding author in relevant international publications within the last five years. The relevance of publications is defined according to international criteria for the particular field of science—indexed in WoS and/or SCOPUS.
4. The number of doctoral candidates per supervisor should be compatible with the supervisor’s overall workload.
5. Supervisors and doctoral candidates must meet regularly — at least once a month — to discuss the candidates’ research and monitor their progress. These meetings must be documented.

Article 16

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. The institution could have contracts signed by the three parties – the institution, the supervisor, and the doctoral candidate – which describe the main expectations and responsibilities of each party.

2. The institution should organize training for supervisors, especially those supervising for the first time.

3. The doctoral programme should provide an opportunity for doctoral candidates to evaluate their supervisors' performance. Adequate tools and processes must be developed and documented.

4. Participation in international academic networks and similar activities should be documented.

SECTION VI

ASSESSMENT

Article 17

CORE

1. Doctoral candidates are supported and required to publish at least one paper as first author in a peer-reviewed journal relevant to their field (indexed in Web of Science and/or Scopus), and to actively participate in at least one international and one national conference.

2. Doctoral candidates must sign a statement confirming that the research and thesis they have submitted is their own original work.

3. The institution must have clear criteria for assessing doctoral theses. All members of the committee responsible for evaluating the public defence must be recognized experts in the field of research, and the committee must include at least one external member from another institution.

4. Doctoral candidates are required to submit their doctoral thesis to the designated doctoral committee within the prescribed timeframe. Additionally, they must participate in a public oral defense as part of the final evaluation process.

5. The institution must establish clear and transparent regulations to be followed in cases where the assessment of a doctoral thesis is negative.

6. Institutions must have clear policies and procedures in place to address any kind of misconduct, such as unethical practices, plagiarism and data fabrication.

Article 18

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. The supervisor(s) should not be a member of the evaluation and defense committee but must provide an assessment of the thesis's readiness for evaluation.
2. The institution should have assessment protocols in place and be able to document the defense process.

SECTION VII

DOCTORAL RESEARCH OUTCOME

Article 19

CORE

1. The final outcome of the doctoral programme is a thesis. There is no single stipulated format for the thesis. A copy must be made publicly available. It may be available online, but a hard copy must be held in the institution’s library and elsewhere as deemed appropriate.
2. Doctoral programmes must equip successful candidates with the skills and competencies to pursue a variety of career paths.

Article 20

SUPPLEMENTARY

1. Where a doctoral candidate does not successfully complete their studies, the institution may issue a certificate documenting the courses attended.

2. A defined procedure should be in place for the assessment and defence of theses in the event that the results can be patented.

Article 21

Transitional and Final Provisions

1. The amendment and supplementation of this Regulation may be carried out according to the same procedure as its approval.
2. * These standards do not apply to doctoral programs in the arts, joint degree programs, or dual degree programs.
3. The final version of the Standards was adopted by the State Council of Quality on 30.06.2025 and came into force on 30.06.2026.
4. This Regulation enters into force upon approval by the SCQ and signing of the approval decision by the SCQ President.