

# Republika e Kosovës

Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo

Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju Kosovo Accreditation Agency



STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES

# **REVISED VERSION**

KOSOVO ACCREDITATION AGENCY

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# PREAMBLE

Higher education in Kosovo has changed significantly in recent decades, achieving significant improvements in the quality of programmes offered and the overall quality of institutions delivering a large number of programmes at bachelor's and master's level. As a country undergoing change that is still facing various societal challenges, and a country whose population is predominantly young and has huge potential for further societal development, it is important that higher education institutions support the role of the knowledge society and creators of knowledge. Good quality doctoral education can contribute significantly to this mission.

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

These Standards aimed to enhance the quality of doctoral programmes. The new standards are also expected to provide a framework that will facilitate the establishment of more doctoral programmes

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 for the evaluation of doctoral programmes retained the same format, with a reduced total number of standards distributed 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. While some of the standards form a group of so-called core standards that are obligatory for a positive evaluation, the other group of so-called supplementary standards allow for institutional and programme development.

## INTRODUCTION

This year marks twenty years since the so-called *quiet revolution* in doctoral education began, supported by the Bologna Process, the European Commission, and other relevant European institutions such as the European University Association. Almost all universities across Europe have participated in this transformation. The first milestone document to be recognised and implemented widely was the *Salzburg Principles for Doctoral Education*, which laid the groundwork for significant changes.

Since 2005, European doctoral education has been in a continuous process of reform. Universities have focused their efforts on restructuring and enhancing doctoral programmes to reflect the increasingly diverse career paths that doctorate holders pursue. A key development has been the establishment of dedicated doctoral schools, which now exist in over 85% of European universities, providing structured support and fostering high-quality research environments.

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 authorised 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.

Doctoral education is research training for research, and it is fundamentally different from the first two cycles, which focus on teaching. It should also be highly adaptable to individual needs, enabling doctoral candidates to select their own path and navigate their chosen field of research. It is an extremely demanding part of the higher education process, requiring all stakeholders to be well-prepared and equipped with the necessary skills and tools. Doctoral education is equally important for institutions that are developing and nurturing research, as well as for supervisors and supervisees, i.e. doctoral candidates.

Effective supervision is central to the success of doctoral education. The relationship between supervisor and 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 diversify, supervisors must also be equipped to mentor students for a range of career trajectories, both within and beyond academia.

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 in supporting a knowledge-based society. While doctoral graduates were once expected to remain largely within academia, today they are increasingly pursuing 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.

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, evidencebased 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.

An analysis of the existing standards was performed during the workshop with stakeholders from different higher education institutions, members of the State Council of Quality (SCQ), and KAA representatives. Additional feedback was obtained when the draft of the new standards was presented to the SCQ and the KAA, and after comments were collected when the proposed new standards were made publicly available on the KAA website. The final version of the Standards was adopted by the State Council of Quality on XXX 2025 and came into force on XXX 2025.

The revised Standards for the Evaluation of Doctoral Programmes (sometimes called abbreviated PhD programmes) are applicable to all research fields. These standards are based on relevant European policy papers, recommendations and guidelines on doctoral education, as well as good practices at European institutions.

# **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.

#### FULLY COMPLIANT

All core standards must be met by a doctoral programme if it is to be **fully compliant**, as well as at least **14** of the supplementary standards.

#### 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.

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.

# 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	
FULL	SUBSTANTIAL	PARTIAL
Core <b>26</b>	Core <b>26</b>	Core <b>26 or fewer</b>
+	+	+
Supplementary	Supplementary	Supplementary
14 or more	Between 1 and 13	Any number

#### PERIOD OF ACCREDITATION

For programmes that are fully compliant, accreditation will normally be granted for three or five years.

Programmes that are **substantially compliant** will normally receive accreditation for a period of **three years**. Programmes that are **partially compliant** will **not be awarded accreditation**. Programmes that are not compliant will not be awarded accreditation.

# THE STANDARDS

# 1 INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND FUNDING

#### CORE

- **1.1** The institution<sup>\*</sup> has established institutional regulations for doctoral programmes<sup>\*\*</sup> that are either as a separate named section of the existing regulations or as a free-standing document.
- **1.2** The institution has sufficient allocated resources, including spatial, financial and designated administrative support.
- 1.3 The institution employs sufficient academic staff with doctoral degrees to deliver at least 50% of its doctoral-level courses. Furthermore, at least three academic staff members who will be programme holders must have a PhD in the research field of the doctoral programme, hold at least the 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 particular field of science ( indexed in WoS<sup>1</sup> and/or SCOPUS<sup>2</sup>). An additional two members of academic staff should hold a PhD in this field.

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

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

- **1.4** The institution conducts regular reviews and updating of the programme.
- **1.5** Doctoral education is presented on the institutional website in Albanian and English, and contains all the relevant information.
- **1.6** The institution has a clear strategy for delivering its doctoral education. If it is embedded in a general institutional strategy, this is explicitly recognised in a separate section.

<sup>1</sup> WoS (SCIE, SSCI and AHCI)

<sup>2</sup> SCOPUS (excluding predatory journals or publishers)

# 2 SELECTION AND ADMISSION CRITERIA

## CORE

- 2.1 Doctoral candidates must be selected through a competitive and transparent process. Grades cannot be the only criterion. Applicants must have an educational level equivalent to a master's degree, amounting to at least 300 ECTS credits.
- **2.2** Doctoral candidates should demonstrate their research potential and identify a supervisor willing to oversee their doctoral research. Supervisor commitment must be documented and signed prior to final enrolment on the doctoral programme.

- **2.3** Applicants must be able to demonstrate a strong working knowledge of English.
- **2.4** Doctoral candidates must have a clearly defined completion timeframe for their studies (four to six years).

#### **3** DOCTORAL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE/CONTENT

#### CORE

- **3.1** Doctoral programme must be research-based, although they may include coursework and other activities that contribute to critical thinking and the development of research skills. The majority of course work should be based on tutorials, seminars, discussion groups, workshops and individual work.
- **3.2** 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.
- **3.3** The programme should encourage mobility and participation in research opportunities at other institutions.
- **3.4** The programme must have established procedures in place to monitor the progress of doctoral candidates.
- **3.5** If the initial supervisor who agreed to supervise the candidate during enrolment changes, a doctoral candidate must be assigned a supervisor within the first 12 months.

- **3.6** Doctoral candidates' representatives should be involved in institutional bodies relevant for doctoral education.
- **3.7** Doctoral candidates should be permitted to take courses outside the institution. Other relevant experience, such as presentations at scientific conferences, workshops, science popularisation and public speaking, should also be recognised.
- **3.8** Data on cohorts of doctoral candidates should be collected with the aim of informing evidence-based decision-making and enhancing the overall quality and effectiveness of doctoral programmes.

# **4 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT/CAPACITY**

#### CORE

- **4.1** Infrastructure and facilities must be up to date and compatible with the research area of the entire doctoral programme and its research projects.
- **4.2** Research must be performed in accordance with international ethical standards, and this fact must be evident and clearly documented.
- **4.3** 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.

- **4.4** The institution should ensure that the ratio of supervisors to doctoral candidates does not exceed 1:3.
- **4.5** Taking into account the field of research, employment opportunities, and its research capacity, the institution should consider the scheduling of enrolment of new cohorts of students.
- **4.6** The institution should support research quality by requesting and reporting on research-paper quality and publication, external research funding, the establishment of research groups, etc.

## **5** SUPERVISION

#### CORE

- **5.1** To ensure that all research areas are covered, each doctoral candidate must have one or more supervisors who specialise in the research area/topic that forms the focus of their doctoral research.
- **5.2** Supervisors must be members of the institution's academic staff, 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 can supervise only one doctoral candidate at a time.

All supervisors must be active researchers who have participated in or led research projects, and who have at least three years' 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 in relevant international publications within the last five years. (relevance of publications is defined according to international criteria for the particular field of science-indexed in WoS and/or SCOPUS).

- **5.3** The number of doctoral candidates per supervisor should be compatible with the overall workload of a supervisor.
- 5.4 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.

- 5.5. 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.
- 5.6 The institution should organise training for supervisors, especially those who are supervising for the first time.
- 5.7. The doctoral programme should provide an opportunity for doctoral candidates to evaluate their supervisors' performance. Adequate tools and processes must be developed and documented.
- 5.8 Participation in international academic networks and similar activities should be documented.

CORE		
	6.1	Doctoral candidates are supported and required to publish at least one paper as the 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.
	6.2	Doctoral candidates must sign a statement confirming that the research and thesis they have presented is their own original work.
	6.3	The institution must have clear criteria for assessing doctoral theses. All members of the committee responsible for evaluating the public defence must be recognised experts in the field of research. The committee must include at least one external member from another institution.
	6.4	Doctoral candidates must submit their thesis to the doctoral committee within the stipulated timeframe, and participate in a public oral defence of their thesis.
	6.5	The institution must have clear regulations in place for instances where an assessment is negative.
	6.6	Institutions must have clear policies and procedures in place to address any kind of misconduct, such as unethical practices, plagiarism and the fabrication of data.
	DV	

- 6.7 The supervisor(s) should not be a member of the evaluation and defence committee, but must provide an assessment of the thesis' readiness for evaluation.
- **6.8** The institution should have assessment protocols and be able to document the defence process.

## 7 DOCTORAL RESEARCH OUTCOME

#### CORE

- **7.1** 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.
- **7.2** Doctoral programmes must equip successful candidates with the skills and competencies to pursue a variety of career paths.

- 7.3. Where a doctoral candidate does not successfully complete their studies, the institution may issue a certificate recording the courses they attended.
- 7.4. A defined procedure should be in place for the assessment and defence of theses in the event that the results can be patented.

# GLOSSARY

- 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.
- 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.
- \*Critical mass. In doctoral education, the size and number of resources (equipment, facilities, students, academic staff, supervisors, etc.) needed to produce top-quality research.
- \*Doctoral (PhD) candidate. A person enrolled on a doctoral programme, conducting research and aiming to defend a thesis and to be awarded a doctorate.
- \*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.
- \*Doctoral programme. An organised 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).
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- \*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.
- \*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 organisations. They make it possible to develop, and apply, both subject-specific and researchrelated skills effectively.

\* 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).

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