

Slovenia

I. General information and application procedure

Which institutions award doctoral degrees?

Doctorates are awarded by universities and independent higher education institutions (HEIs) founded by the Republic of Slovenia, according to the Higher Education Act². Doctorates may also be carried out in cooperation with foreign HEIs that offer doctoral degree programmes with related contents (so-called double doctorates). According to law², doctoral degree programs “*provide students with in-depth understanding of theoretical and methodological concepts, the ability to independently develop new knowledge and solve the most demanding problems by testing and improving known solutions and discovering new ones, managing the most demanding work systems and scientific research projects from a wide professional, scientific, or artistic perspective, and developing critical reflections. Basic or applicative research theses are also a mandatory component of these programs.*”

What forms of doctorate attendance are available?

In comparison to Bachelor’s and Master’s degree studies, the study part of doctoral degree programmes is always part-time, enabling employed doctoral candidates to attend lectures. That includes also Young Researchers³, who are full-time employees and part-time students.

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

The standard length of a doctorate is 3 or 4 years according to law² and depends on the accreditation of given doctoral degree programmes. Doctoral candidates who fail to complete their doctorate during the expected period can request a 1-year extension or a re-evaluation of their thesis topic, depending on the cause. In the case of Young Researchers (see the section on financial support), the extension is not funded, so they lose their employment unless the supervisor offers them substitute employment through a different funding source. Doctoral candidates also have a right to extend their studies in the case of pregnancy and childbirth (standard 1-year maternity leave), debilitating illness, or severe injury. Multiple extensions are possible. Doctoral candidates retain their student

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

² Higher Education Act: <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO172> (in Slovenian), unofficial translation: <https://bit.ly/2zEfeDT>

³ **Young researchers** are doctoral candidates with a fixed-term employment contract provided by the Slovenian Research Agency.

status during that period, and Young Researchers retain their employment (because maternity and sick leaves are covered by the state, not by the Slovenian Research Agency). If doctoral candidates have fulfilled all the study requirements of their doctoral degree programme but failed to submit a thesis, they lose their student status. However, they can request a reevaluation of their thesis topic in two years after the loss. If the competent authority (usually a university body) rules that the topic is still relevant, students can be allowed an extension. The length of the extension depends on the competent authority's decision.

What is the status of the doctoral candidates⁴?

All doctoral candidates enrolled in doctoral programmes are officially students. However, in practice, the status of doctoral candidates depends on their employment. Only unemployed doctoral candidates have the student status in the narrow sense, meaning they are entitled to the state-funded social benefits. Employed doctoral candidates have the same status as any other employees, regardless of their employer (HEI or other).

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

Doctoral candidates are entitled to the same social benefits as other students as long as they are not employed or self-employed. As long as they are regularly progressing through their doctoral programme schedule and can obtain a valid enrolment confirmation, the state provides a discount on public transport (40–50 %), on tickets for events at public cultural institutions, and on meals at certain restaurants. Numerous private enterprises also offer student discounts (e.g., on mobile phone and internet subscriptions, bank account commissions, educational courses, photocopying and printing services, etc.).

Up to 26 years of age, the doctoral candidates can also transfer their health insurance to one of their parents' compulsory health insurance account, which is then paid by the parent's employer. Their parents can also apply for various social benefits. Doctoral candidates who are not employed can work through so-called Student Services, special employment agencies that mediate temporary and part-time work to high-school and university students. Student Services are a unique Slovenian invention, similar to the German "mini-job" system.

Doctoral candidates who are not employed and are older than 26 years lose the right to be insured through one of their parents, and their parents are not eligible for social benefits. They can request a citizen health insurance, but this is neither automatic nor guaranteed (eligibility depends on their household income – thus including their parents, siblings, spouse, etc. – and is judged on a case-by-case basis). The time spent studying for a doctoral degree does not count towards pension for those who are not employed.

How are doctoral candidates financially supported?

A number of doctoral candidates are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency through a funding instrument called Young Researchers⁵. The instrument runs since 1985 and funds

⁴ **Doctoral candidate** is a person enrolled in a doctorate.

⁵ Young Researchers: <http://www.arrs.gov.si/en/mr/>

their salaries, social contributions, as well as material and non-material costs (including tuition and enrolment fees, the supervision bonus, travel to conferences, literature purchases, printing, etc). The average annual cost for funding one Young Researcher is approximately 30.000 EUR and it is transferred to the HEI where the Young Researcher is employed, which in turn reports on the use of funds in accordance with the training plan. The gross salary (before tax) of a Young Researcher in 2017 was 1.373,40 € (30th salary grade in Slovenian public administration) for the first three years, and 1.485,46 € (32nd salary grade) for the last year. The net income (with general tax relief and without bonuses) for those the 30th salary grade is 928,85 €, while for those in the 32nd grade it is 992,57 €. The social contributions for-fixed term employees are 16,34% of the salary and the supervisor gets a mentoring bonus of 16,10% (70,87 € gross). The funds for the training of Young Researchers are allocated fixed-term, up to a maximum of 4 years.

The Young Researchers funding is not awarded directly to the doctoral student. Currently, there is a call every year for programme groups⁶ to apply for the positions (the rules change year by year). There is a limited amount of positions⁷ available for different research fields, and the Slovenian Research Agency uses a special formula to select the number of Young Researcher positions per programme groups. The programme groups that get awarded Young Researcher positions then publish calls to find the candidates. If several candidates apply, the programme groups need to make a selection based on predefined objective criteria. When the candidate is selected, the programme group's HEI notifies the Slovenian Research Agency about the selection and the doctoral programme where the candidate is going to enrol. The Agency then prepares a contract that is signed by the HEI. The HEI also prepares an employment contract for a Young Researcher to sign.

The main responsibility of Young Researchers is to fulfil the requirements of their doctoral degree programme, which differ between HEIs. The supervisor and the Young Researcher also submit the research training programme to the agency. Doctoral candidates have the right of withdrawal in the first three months without any financial consequences for the HEI of themselves. In case the Young Researcher defends the thesis before the end of the contract, he or she can get a financial reward. In case the Young Researcher does not defend the thesis in four years (plus 1-year extension), the HEI must return 10% of the funding received from the Slovenian Research Agency (or 20% in the case the Young Researcher had supplementary employment). The HEI may also demand from the candidate to contribute to that amount in full or in part.

In contrast, doctoral candidates without the Young Researcher status do not automatically become HEI employees, unless their supervisor offers them part-time or full-time employment on a research project. They also do not become research programme members. They may contend for the status of assistants/lecturers – they must fill a request for a habilitation, which must then be evaluated by at least three independent academics and confirmed by the HEI's competent body (such as a university's Senate).

⁶ Research programme is a special, long-term funding instrument for HEIs (not Young Researchers) that exists in Slovenia: <http://www.arrs.gov.si/en/progproj/rprog/>

⁷ Call for positions: <https://www.arrs.gov.si/sl/mr/razpisi/17/poziv-mentorji-rp-2017.asp> (in Slovenian)

Other doctoral candidates are left to their own devices. Tuition fees at the University of Ljubljana, for example, range from 3.000 € to 5.500 € per year.⁸ They can be paid by students themselves, by their employers, or doctoral candidates can request a study grant. The majority of funding bodies offering study grants are universities themselves, which receive the grant funds from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.⁹ Doctoral study grants are offered through public tenders and are thus competitive. The rules of the tenders depend on the university and change year by year. Material costs are not included in the tuition fee; the supervisor is responsible for covering any costs incurred during research work from other sources, such as national and international research projects (which is particularly relevant in STEM fields). It is up to the doctoral candidates to secure their means of subsistence. A small cost-of-living allowance may be included in the study grant, but not necessarily. Failure to complete the doctoral course usually means that the grantee must return the grant in full.

International candidates may obtain study grants also from The Public Scholarship, Development, Disability, and Maintenance Fund of the Republic of Slovenia¹⁰, but those are limited to certain countries (mostly Western Balkans).

What are the admission requirements for a doctorate?

To be admitted to a doctoral degree programme, the candidate must have obtained a MSc degree according to a 2-year programme following a 3-year BSc degree programme, according to a unified MSc degree programme evaluated with 300 credit points (ECTS)², or according to a pre-Bologna university degree programme (discontinued since approximately 2006). If the candidate obtained one of these degrees abroad, the degree must first be nostrified. The nostrification procedure is part of the enrolment procedure (leading to the so-called “decision on the recognition of foreign education”). The candidate submits the nostrification application together with the study enrolment application.

If the number of candidates is limited, HEIs can implement additional selection criteria, such as the average mark acquired in the MSc degree programme, scientific publications, awards and achievements, professional specialisations, interviews with candidates, entrance exams, and similar.

The candidate for a Young Researcher position must additionally exhibit an average grade for all examinations and coursework at the BSc and MSc degree level (together with the assessment of the BSc and MSc theses) of at least 8.00 on a scale of 5–10. The age of the candidate should not exceed 28 years, unless the student has already concluded one or two years of doctoral study without financial support. The rise of the age limit also applies in the case of parental care leave.

⁸ Tuition fee (cenik) https://www.uni-lj.si/studij/cenik_storitev_za_studente/ (in Slovenian)

⁹ Regulation on co-funding doctoral studies: <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=URED7501> (in Slovenian)

¹⁰ Scholarships for the Study of Foreign Citizens in Slovenia:

<http://www.sklad-kadri.si/en/scholarships/stipendije-za-izobrazevanje-v-tujini/stipendije-ad-futura-za-izobrazevanje-tujih-drzavljanov-v-sloveniji/>

Administrative procedures vary between HEIs. Generally, candidates must submit their applications through electronic submission systems that vary between HEIs. Those who obtained their required prior degrees at Slovenian HEIs must enclose with their applications documents such as:

- copies of all graduation documents;
- a confirmation the passing of examinations in the master degree programme, including the average mark;
- the future supervisor's statement that he or she is willing to undertake supervision;
- a short description of the anticipated research work.

Candidates who obtained their required prior degrees abroad must submit documents such as originals or duplicates of the final certificate(s), annual report cards, transcripts, a diploma supplement, or some other evidence on the contents and duration of education. Some of these documents are required to be translated into English and Slovenian and/or notarised.

II. Progression

How is a doctorate organized in your country?

The structure of the doctoral degree programme depends on the HEI. Generally, each year consists of required and/or elective courses, seminars, and individual research work. If too few doctoral candidates choose a particular elective course for public lectures to take place, the course is carried out in the form of consultations with the lecturer and/or seminar papers. Required and elective courses usually conclude with exams. However, individual research work is in focus, and doctoral candidates are expected to prioritize it over other requirements.

Research work, conferences, scholarly visits to foreign institutions, and cooperation with industry or other non-academic entities are planned individually with the supervisor.

Doctoral degree programmes conclude with a thesis defence, which takes place after all other requirements have been fulfilled. The thesis defence is public, oral, and is performed in front of a 4- to 6-member examination committee elected by the HEI's competent body (e.g., a university's Senate) upon the suggestions from the doctoral candidate and supervisor. The members of the examination committee must hold at least the rank of assistant professor (*docent/docentka* in Slovene); they can be foreigners. Some HEIs include the supervisor and/or the co-supervisor among the committee members, but some explicitly exclude them from the committee or final voting. Some HEIs also require one or two defences before the final thesis defence, such as a defence of the thesis proposal and a trial, non-decisive thesis defence ("pre-defence"), where the committee members give the candidate advice before the final act. The structure of the committees for such defences resembles that of the final defence committee.

Doctoral thesis are public and may be deposited to the HEI's online repositories in electronic form. An embargo period for online publication may be requested by the candidates in case the thesis contains results awaiting a patenting procedure.

How is doctoral supervision provided?

Doctoral studies are individual, provided under the direction of one supervisor (apprenticeship model). The supervisor must be an employee of the HEI where the doctoral candidate is enrolled, hold a doctoral degree, and, if the HEI is a university, also an upper-level teaching position (assistant professor – *docent/docentka* in Slovene – or higher).

The supervisor must also exhibit appropriate publication record. Employees of other Slovenian HEIs or foreign institutions are not eligible to become supervisors. There is also a possibility to obtain a co-supervisor if the topic is interdisciplinary and the student would benefit from additional help from another area of expertise, industry, or a non-academic entity. It is possible for the co-supervisor to be employed at another Slovenian HEI or abroad.

The supervisor and co-supervisor:

- ensure to the candidate access to all necessary research facilities and materials;
- monitor the candidate's work and progress throughout the study;
- give the candidate instructions and advice regarding research design, content, publication, and academic standards;
- introduce the candidate to the research community they are part of (e.g., inform him/her about the invitations to professional meetings and national or international conferences);
- must be available to the candidate for regular consultations by mutual agreement;
- depending on the HEI, are members of committees for the defence of the thesis proposal, trial thesis defence ("pre-defence"), and final thesis defence;
- must set an example for the candidate of quality and ethical research work.

The supervisor receives a salary supplement for carrying out the supervision.¹¹

What are the main obligations of doctoral candidates?

Doctoral candidates have a right to propose the topic of their doctoral thesis, and they have the following obligations:

- to cooperate with the supervisor and co-supervisor and consult them about the thesis content, research procedures, and academic standards;
- to report to the supervisor and co-supervisor on the work progress;
- to publicly acknowledge the research contributions of the supervisor, co-supervisor, and other collaborators;
- to promptly fulfil the requirements of the doctoral degree programme (attendance and completion of required and elective courses, participation in seminars);
- to conduct the experiments/research as well as to analyse the obtained results according to the plan established at the beginning of the doctorate and according to ethical standards;

¹¹ Temporary amount of training resources for young researchers:
<https://www.arrs.gov.si/sl/mr/akti/18/zacasna-visina-sr-MR-2018.asp> (in Slovenian)

- to publish at least one peer-reviewed, SCI-ranked research paper (however, some institutions require at least two);
- to write and defend a doctoral thesis.

Young Researchers must also attend an entrepreneurship course.

Is any mobility compulsory?

No, but it is highly recommended.

How are courses in transferable skills provided?

Transferable skills are usually not part of doctoral programme curriculums. Some courses may be provided by the universities' career centres or independent doctoral schools (such as Jožef Stefan International Postgraduate School¹² or The Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts – ZRC SAZU Postgraduate School¹³).

How is the progress of the doctoral candidate evaluated?

The progress of doctoral candidates without the Young Researcher status is not institutionally tracked, unless the doctoral candidates, the supervisor, and co-supervisor agree among themselves on a way and frequency of the doctoral candidate's progress reporting.

Slovenian Research Agency⁵ tracks the progress of Young Researchers. For this purpose, their supervisors must prepare yearly progress reports. These progress reports include:

- a realization of the research training programme for the period covered by the report;
- a description of the completed requirements of the doctoral study programme;
- a short description of the Young Researcher's planned activities for the next year.

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

In theory it is possible, but in practice it is extremely rare – less common than in Bachelor's and Master's programmes. The procedure varies between HEIs. The candidate needs to file a special form at the postgraduate administration office. Both the original and the new supervisor must agree to the change, and the reasons for the change must usually be noted. The decision must be usually supported also by one of the supervisor's superiors, such as the head of the chair, department, institute or doctoral programme, and confirmed by the HEI's competent body (such as a university's Senate).

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

No. However, the lowest academic rank the supervisor must hold to be eligible for this role is assistant professor (*docent/docentka* in Slovene). The supervisor must also exhibit appropriate publication record.

¹²The Jožef Stefan International Postgraduate School (IPS): <https://www.mps.si/en/>

¹³ The Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts: <http://www.ps-zrc-sazu.org>

III. Defence procedure

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

Doctoral candidates must fulfil all the requirements of the doctoral programme (pass all exams, attend all seminars), publish at least one or two peer-reviewed, SCI-indexed research papers, and have their thesis approved by the defence committee.

What documents are required to start the defence procedure?

It depends on the HEI and how many defence events the doctoral degree programme requires. At the University of Ljubljana, for example, more documentation must be provided for the defence of the thesis proposal than for the final thesis defence. Generally, the documents that are usually required include:

- a form containing information about the doctoral candidate, supervisor, co-supervisor, the name of the doctoral degree programme, and the title in Slovenian and English;
- a request for writing the thesis in English, if applicable (if the doctoral candidate, supervisor, co-supervisor, or any member of the thesis committee does not speak Slovene);
- the supervisor's and co-supervisor's statement that they consent to the thesis proposal;
- the candidate's CV;
- the candidate's bibliography;
- a short thesis description/proposal;
- consent of an ethical committee, if necessary.

What is the defence procedure?

Notification about the time and place of the defence must be publicly displayed at least one week before the event on HEI's bulletin boards and websites and sent through pertaining mailing lists. The defence event is also public. Doctoral candidate must distribute hard copies of the thesis to the committee members at least three days before the event.

Before the thesis presentation, the committee chair introduces the doctoral candidate to the audience by reading a short description of doctoral candidate's education path and most notable achievements. Then, doctoral candidate presents the results of his or her research to the defence committee and the audience in 30–40 minutes, usually with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation. Each committee member then asks the doctoral candidate questions from their field of expertise. Some HEIs allow the doctoral candidate to be given questions in written form and to take a short break (around 20 minutes) to prepare for the inquiry. The debate lasts until the committee has no more supplementary questions. Then, the members of the audience are also given the opportunity to pose questions to the candidate. The doctoral degree is awarded if the committee members agree unanimously on

the doctoral candidate's successful presentation. The committee must provide a written record of the decision.

Hard copies of the thesis must be distributed to the HEI's library and the National and University Library¹⁴ in Ljubljana.

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¹⁴ National University Library: <http://www.nuk.uni-lj.si/eng/>

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