

## Decision Regarding Assessment of the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences Study Programme Group at the Level of Doctoral Studies University of Tartu

08.04.2019

**The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education at the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu in seven years**

On the basis of subsection 10 (4) of the Universities Act and point 40.1 of the 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies', authorised in points 3.7.3 and 3.7.1 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA'), the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 12.10.2017, the University of Tartu and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 13.09.2018, approved the following composition of the quality assessment committee for the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme groups at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

<b>Pavel Zgaga (Chair)</b>	Professor; University of Lubliana; Slovenia
<b>Raija Hämäläinen</b>	Professor; University of Jyväskylä; Finland
<b>Eleni Kyza</b>	Associate Professor; Cyprus University of Technology; Cyprus
<b>Tõnis Lukas</b>	Director; Tartu Vocational Education Centre; Estonia
<b>Joni Lämsä</b>	Doctoral student; University of Jyväskylä; Finland
<b>Peter van Petegem</b>	Professor; University of Antwerp; Belgium
<b>Rupert Wegerif</b>	Professor; University of Cambridge; United Kingdom

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following doctoral programme for evaluation under the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme group:  
**Educational Science**
4. The University of Tartu submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 24.08.2018, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 07.09.2018.
5. An assessment visit to the University of Tartu took place on 27 and 28 November 2018.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 16.01.2019, and EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 17.01.2019, and the University delivered its response on 1.02.2019.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 8.02.2019. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee's final assessment report along with the University's self-evaluation report to the Council members on 27.03.2019.
9. The Council, with 9 members present, discussed these received documents in its session on 8.04.2019 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu.

**The Committee pointed out the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations regarding the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University:**

**Strengths**

- 1) The doctoral programmes of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University have been newly reformed and updated and are of high quality. The study programmes are well set up and organised, enabling individual approaches, are flexible and meet the needs of PhD students as well as the Estonian society. Both universities have made considerable efforts to ensure optimum resources within the limited range of the possibilities of the study programmes.
- 2) Also, both universities have taken steps to ensure the students an additional income at the same level as the average salary in the country. This is very welcome since it allows the students to place the main focus on their studies. The universities have deployed various sources of funding, including EU funds, to be able to provide the additional income. However, ways must be found to make it more sustainable.
- 3) There is a tight and fruitful cooperation between the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, also involving the University of Helsinki. This kind of tripartite collaboration increases the critical mass for doctoral studies, ensures better quality, and, where necessary, support in the student's fields of study (e.g., co-supervision, joint seminars, and other). It also forms a wonderful basis for reinforcing international cooperation and engaging more international doctoral students from other, especially from European universities.

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- 1) It is evident from the data that over the past years, many students have discontinued their studies. Obviously, significant efforts have recently been made to prevent dropping out, e.g., the improved annual review procedures, additional allowances for students, wider uptake of a project-based approach. However, this issue needs further focus and efforts.
- 2) Both universities are committed to reorganising the doctoral programme to the direction of the so-called Doctoral Schools. The Assessment Committee had the impression that in practice, the use of this conceptual framework varies. To successfully realise this idea, the concept of Doctoral School needs a clear structure and formulation, primarily at the University's level. For the process of integrating doctoral programmes (mainly in organisational aspects), the Committee recommends finding a "golden middle way" while also preserving the identities of the postgraduate programmes of Educational Sciences.
- 3) Depending on EU funding is an obvious long-term risk. This could be mitigated by diversifying the sources of research funding, such as exploring opportunities to establish ties with the business sector, also applying for more funding from the government, various state institutions and non-governmental organisations.
- 4) There is a need to reinforce collaboration between the University and the external environment (schools, public and state institutions, economic sector).
- 5) It is advisable to assign a person all students can approach if they need desk-space, equipment, or other resources.
- 6) The options of long-term learning mobility (1 month or longer) are not sufficiently utilised. It would be worth considering alternatives ("mobility at home", e-mobility) that would enable setting up a network with international students and institutions.

### **The Committee pointed out the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations regarding the Educational Science study programme at the University of Tartu:**

#### **Strengths**

- 1) The subject courses are well developed and appropriately organised.
- 2) PhD students are integrated into research projects and groups.
- 3) Merging the Educational Science and Education of Natural Sciences study programmes is worthy of recognition.
- 4) Finances have been allocated for enabling international co-supervision and integrating PhD students into international research circles.
- 5) Appropriate methodologies are applied to supervising PhD projects. Supervision is also organised in small groups (e.g., monthly seminars with other PhD students with related projects). Many students have more than one supervisor, and students have an opportunity to negotiate the role of supervisors flexibly and/or ask for new, supplementary supervisors.
- 6) The selection procedure of candidates is well planned.
- 7) There is a shift towards a model where new PhD students begin their studies under a research project. It is a step in the right direction that can foster achieving many objectives of the

doctoral programme, such as reducing the sense of isolation during working on their doctoral thesis, fostering collaboration and other academic skills of students, enabling additional financial support, graduating during the standard period of study.

- 8) PhD students are satisfied with their supervisors and supervision.
- 9) There have been initiatives to recruit international doctoral students.
- 10) It is possible to start studies as an extern student, work with supervisors on elaborating a new research topic, and then continue in the status of a PhD student.

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- 1) When integrating students into research projects, their individual research would have to be ensured, too.
- 2) Additional ways of formative assessment should be considered during the evaluation of PhD students.
- 3) Gathering student feedback and using it for quality advancement is somewhat unclear, e.g., how feedback on supervision is collected from PhD students and how their opinions are considered in the quality advancement measures.
- 4) More focus should be given to integrating international students, their social life, and their specific academic and individual needs.
- 5) Some supervision-related ethical issues have not yet been clearly settled. The Assessment Committee recommends developing clear rules for solving possible conflicts of interest.
- 6) A small number of people is responsible for a wide range of activities carried out by the Institute of Educational Sciences. It is advisable to prepare a strategy for increasing the number of professors. The increased number of professors can foster a more even distribution of responsibilities. As an additional measure, visiting professors could be engaged in co-supervising PhD students more often.
- 7) Although the publications-based thesis is regarded as a strength, it is worrying that such an approach to theses has become a prevailing (only) choice. The Assessment Committee encourages students to defend their thesis as a monograph, especially in cases where it would be the most appropriate format for the given topic.
- 8) Creating a uniform culture of supervision seems to be an objective for the Institute of Educational Sciences, but it still poses a challenge. To foster establishing and reinforcing a tight-knit community, regular structured events could be helpful to discuss students' progress, share experiences of supporting and supervising students, and support one another as supervisors. In that regard, the Committee recommends considering a mentor programme, where less experienced supervisors could act as co-supervisors, while a more experienced scientist would be the principal supervisor.
- 9) The time spent supervising PhD students is not included in the overall workload of supervisors. However, including it could help to balance the workload.
- 10) According to figures from the past three years, the number of PhD students who discontinue their studies (16) exceeds the number of those who complete the programme (13).
- 11) The employment rate of the graduates outside the academy is low. It requires more attention and study programme's focus on professional competitiveness skills, including entrepreneurship.

10. Point 40 of the 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies' establishes that the Quality Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report

within three months after receiving the report. The Council shall weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations outlined in the assessment report and decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven, five or three years.

11. The Council weighed the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations presented in point 9 of this document and found that the study programme, the teaching conducted under these programmes, and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to the requirements, and

#### **DECIDED**

**to approve the assessment report and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Teacher Training and Educational Sciences study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu in seven years.**

The decision was adopted by nine votes in favour and 0 against.

12. The Council proposes that the University of Tartu will submit an action plan to EKKA with regard to the areas for improvement and recommendations pointed out in the report no later than 8.04.2020.
13. A person who finds that their rights have been violated or their freedoms restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

The Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee, who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.

A legal challenge to this decision is possible within 30 days after its delivery by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court under the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

**Eve Eisenschmidt**  
**Chair of the Council**

**Hillar Bauman**  
**Secretary of the Council**