

Decision regarding Assessment of the Psychology Study Programme Group at the level of Doctoral Studies University of Tartu

26.02.2019

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 Psychology 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 1.10.2018, approved the following composition of the quality assessment committee for the social services, and psychology study programme groups at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

Cathy M. Craig (head of the Committee)	Professor of perception and action psychology, former Dean for the Master programme in the Department of Engineering and Physics; Queen's University Belfast (North-Ireland), currently the CEO of INCISIV Ltd
Marian J. Jongmans	Professor of special education; Associate Dean and Director of Graduate Education of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University (Holland)
Juha Hämäläinen	Professor of Social Work, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland (Finland)

Karen Lyons	Emeritus Professor of International Social Work, School of Social Professions, London Metropolitan University (United Kingdom)
Ain Aaviksoo	CEO, VIVEO Health OÜ (Estonia)
Gabrielle McHarg	doctoral student (psychology), University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)

- The University of Tartu submitted the following doctoral programme for evaluation under the psychology study programme group:

Psychology

- The University of Tartu submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 19.09.2018, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 1.10.2018.
- An assessment visit was made to the University of Tartu on 13.11.2018.
- The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 8.12.2018, and EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 12.12.2018, and the University delivered its response on 21.12.2018.
- The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 11.01.2019. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
- 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 14.02.2019.
- The Council, with 8 members present, discussed these received documents in its session on 26.02.2019 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the psychology study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu.

The Committee pointed out the following common strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the Psychology study programme group at Tallinn University and the University of Tartu and the Social Services study programme group at Tallinn University:

Strengths

- Due to budgetary limitations, the universities have to draft extensive plans for securing the sustainability of education and research (including doctoral studies). The management of both universities are well aware of the need and have taken preventive steps to solve these problems. Both universities have adequate infrastructure for conducting studies.

- 2) In general, the study programmes are relatively stable and well-developed, except for the Health Behaviour and Welfare study programme at Tallinn University, which is open for its third year and stands out for being highly interdisciplinary.
- 3) The Committee recognises the efforts made by both universities in internationalisation.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) A key challenge seems to be the poor financial support of doctoral students. Indeed, the state doctoral allowance was recently increased but is still not sufficient. While the University of Tartu pays an additional 400 euros to all full-time PhD students, it is not the case for Tallinn University. The Committee recommends raising the state doctoral allowance for full-time PhD students. Furthermore, there should be a contractual restriction on having a full-time job outside the University simultaneously. The Committee recommends both universities to investigate alternative sources of financing to support PhD students.
- 2) A common thread through the evaluation was, among others, the devaluation of a PhD degree. The degree is necessary to pursue a career in the academy, but considering the fact that teachers in general education have a higher income than university lecturers, devaluing a career in higher education entails certain dangers. According to both alumni and employers, holding a PhD could have a negative effect because employers often deem such specialists to be over-qualified and are reluctant to pay them a higher salary. Such extremely narrow and limited understanding of doctoral studies should be handled by all key stakeholders: the Government of Estonia, universities, employers, employees and students themselves.
- 3) The quality of research is only measured by publications. The Committee finds that it is inappropriate to use just one indicator to define top-level research. The universities should be aware that the level of research could also be measured by its social and economic effect in the research environment where new and exciting fields of research organically emerge. The Committee strongly recommends reconsidering the goals of doctoral studies so that they would be better aligned to the ones of Europe and North America.
- 4) The Committee estimates that the number of subject courses is too high in comparison to other European universities. The Committee strongly recommends revisiting the content and the extent of subject courses. The number of compulsory subjects should be reduced, and more elective courses should be made available to foster the development of transferable skills.
- 5) Bearing in mind the small size of Estonia, ties with the outside world is of the essence. The Committee recommends both universities to work harder to recruit international PhD students and staff. Also, international mobility should be continuously encouraged and supported.
- 6) The activities of the Doctoral School should be widened beyond the primary role of distributing financial means. The Doctoral School should be at the heart of their doctoral studies for both local and international students. More international summer schools, international scientific conferences and workshops should be organised, top foreign experts should be invited to give talks in Estonia.
- 7) Both universities should formalise their relations with external supervisors, thus recognising their contribution and establishing more formal cooperation with other HEIs.
- 8) The completion rate for all doctoral programmes is low, and sometimes the drop-out rate is twice as high.
- 9) In general, the level of supervisors is high. On the other hand, the time devoted to supervision varies greatly. A more stringent system should be developed, also setting out a minimum volume of contact lessons, so that the insufficient time devoted to supervision would not translate into poor completion rates.

The Committee pointed out the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations regarding the Psychology study programme group at the University of Tartu:

Strengths

- 1) The level of publications and research is generally high. The alumni and doctoral students have a high potential in research. The alumni are satisfied with their education and employment outlooks.
- 2) While the volume of subject courses is high, the study programme is flexible enough to allow for developing solid transferable skills in programming, data analysis and statistics.
- 3) The University's apparent devotion to increasing the support for doctoral students is very commendable.
- 4) The students have access to excellent resources for conducting their research.
- 5) Some students have used the opportunities of internationalisation, and these are well-funded.
- 6) The students are involved in the work of Programme Councils and study programme development.
- 7) Supervisors take part in the work of international research networks and projects. Research results are published in esteemed peer-reviewed international journals.
- 8) The students interviewed by the Committee were in general very satisfied with their supervisors, with whom they had established links already during bachelor's or master's studies.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) For doctoral students who conduct teaching, it is advisable to ensure support for developing their relevant skills.
- 2) More focus should be put on the content of the offered subjects, so they would also advance the careers of PhD students.
- 3) The requirement of three publications is burdensome and feeds into a low completion rate. For publications, the focus should be on their quality, not quantity.
- 4) Additional opportunities should be explored for opening PhD places funded by the state or companies.
- 5) The volume and quality of supervision is insufficient for some PhD students (as indicated by the high rate of discontinuing studies). To prevent drop-out, there is a need for more active supervision and its monitoring. Furthermore, supervisors should be offered relevant courses, and systematic communication with the students should be required.
- 6) A competitive allowance should be ensured to full-time students so that working outside the University would not be necessary. The current system tends to encourage part-time studies.
- 7) New efficient measures should be deployed in order to reduce drop-out. The duration of study is quite long in international comparison.
- 8) PhD students' general and transferable skills should be improved to support them in completing their PhD studies and preparing for a career outside the academy.
- 9) International benchmarking, collaboration, and international exchange would make the doctoral programme more attractive.
- 10) The students' skills in preparing the applications for research grants should be improved, and students should receive relevant support. That would also assist them with finding post-doctoral positions.

- 11) The Committee is under the impression that the joint Doctoral School with Tallinn University rather means competition than cooperation. There seems to be no intellectual dialogue between the two universities. Therefore, the Committee recommends developing a mutual culture of collaboration.
 - 12) Younger supervisors should be encouraged to engage in international networks and projects for advancing their careers.
 - 13) Career counselling should be better developed together with external partners, students at other universities, and other study programmes.
 - 14) An alumni network should be established to help students find international collaboration opportunities after graduation from the doctoral programme.
 - 15) Any simultaneous employment should have direct links with the doctoral project of the PhD student. The positions of Junior Researchers should be used for recruiting PhD students to work in labs where they would work on their PhD project.
- 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 Psychology study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu in seven years.

The decision was adopted by 8 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 26.02.2020.
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