

Decision regarding Assessment of the Social Sciences 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 reports by the Assessment Committees and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Social 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 6.10.2017, the University of Tartu and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. Formation of Assessment Committees
 - 2.1. With her order of 23.08.2018, the Director of the EKKA approved the following composition of the quality assessment committee for the **Business and Administration (including Economics) and Law** doctoral study programmes at the EBS, University of Tartu, and Tallinn University of Technology (hereafter Committee 1), who assessed the University of Tartu **Economics** study programme

Roger Levy (Chair)	Professor, London School of Economics, United Kingdom
Andrew Clark	Professor, Paris School of Economics, France
Aalt Willem Heringa	Professor, Maastricht University, Holland
Per Læg Reid	Professor, University of Bergen, Norway
Maris Moks	PhD student, Hertie School of Governance, Germany

Janek Uiboupin	Member of the Board, Coop Pank AS, Estonia
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- 2.2. With her order of 23.08.2018, the Director of the EKKA approved the following composition of the quality assessment committee for the **Social Sciences and Journalism and Information** doctoral study programmes at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University of Technology (hereafter Committee 2), who assessed the University of Tartu **Sociology and Political Studies** study programmes

Jonas Hinnfors (Chair)	Professor, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
Suzanne Franks	Professor, City University London, United Kingdom
Emily Grundy	Professor, University of Essex and London School of Economics, United Kingdom
David Inglis	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
Knud Erik Jørgensen	Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark
Mart Laatsit	PhD student, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark
Jaanika Puusalu	PhD student, University of Exeter, United Kingdom

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following doctoral programmes for evaluation under the Social Sciences study programme group:
Sociology
Political Science
Economics
4. The University of Tartu submitted self-evaluation reports to the EKKA Bureau on 12.07.2018, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 13.08.2018.
5. The assessment visits to the University of Tartu took place on 16 and 17 October 2018.
6. The Committee 1 sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 21.11.2018, and EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 21.11.2018, and the University delivered its response on 7.12.2018. The Committee 2 sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 30.11.2018, and EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 5.12.2018, and the University delivered its response on 17.12.2018.
7. Committee 1 submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 11.12.2018. Committee 2 submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 21.12.2018. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The reports are available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee's final assessment reports along with the self-evaluation reports to the Council members on 14.02.2019.

9. The Council, with 8 members present, discussed these received documents in its session on 26.02.2019 and decided to highlight in the assessment report the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Social Sciences study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu.

I. Conclusions of Committee 1

Committee 1 highlighted the following areas of improvement and recommendations for the Business and Administration (including Economics) study programmes at EBS, University of Tartu, and Tallinn University of Technology:

- 1) In cases where research grants are available for the activities related to the doctoral programme, PhD students' fields of research are more specific, and requirements to the outputs/publications are more aligned with the funding conditions of research grants. In other cases where research grants are not available and the research has a more reactive nature driven by problems defined by PhD students themselves, research activity lacks focus. Therefore, there is a lot of variation in the content of doctoral programmes and a lack of a clear academic profile or approach.
- 2) Cooperation within and between different structural units, as well as between universities, is below par. Cooperation is not favoured by competition over research funding or by the small number of highly qualified supervisors and admitted doctoral students. There are very few examples of good cooperation.
- 3) Most students attach low value to a doctoral degree outside the academic career. The industrial PhD programme has not been successfully implemented so far.
- 4) While the full-time students very much appreciate the additional income, they still do not consider €660+€400 a sufficient living, which is why many of them have one or even several jobs in addition to their studies. The new admissions and funding system of PhD students tends to exclude the option of pursuing doctoral studies part-time. Considering that the number of PhD students is low and that local talents from Estonia are not numerous, the system should also be adapted to allow pursuing part-time doctoral studies. In this context, new research applications should include the possibility of funding both full-time and part-time PhD students.
- 5) Learning mobility is mostly short term, and mobility options are often non-existent for part-time students. This is a problem for Estonian doctoral students, many of whom study de facto part-time and have other responsibilities besides studying.
There is a need to develop new opportunities to increase the longer-term international mobility of doctoral students. Requirements and financial stimuli in relation to the above should be reinforced.
- 6) Supervision practices and evaluation processes vary greatly. For example, not all students have a co-supervisor. Some supervisors meet their students once a week, some once a month or twice a year. There are no uniform standards for supervision apart from the requirement of annual accreditations. The requirement of co-supervision should apply to all students. Universities should be more active in developing supervisors' skills. Engaging active researchers as supervisors should be prioritised more.
- 7) Regarding the choice of reaching a PhD in the publication or monograph format, the Committee suggests offering future PhD students an equal choice between the two alternatives. PhD students who opt for three publications must be the sole authors of at least one paper, and the supervisor should not co-author more than one paper. Papers/monographs should fulfil the

requirements of peer-reviewed articles, but according to the Committee's judgement, they do not necessarily have to be published before the thesis is submitted.

- 8) Performance indicators should be developed and specified for all study programmes, and there should be regular monitoring of compliance. At least targets for admission, progress, and completion, as well as satisfaction and international mobility, should be established, and also indicators for research and standards of supervision. Supervisors' workload should be explicitly defined, and targets set for the development of supervision skills. Universities' action plans must be linked to these indicators and targets. SMART objectives should be set in order to reach the targets and integrated into the action plans.
- 9) Since reaching a critical mass seems to be a challenge in most areas, the Doctoral School of Economics and Innovation should be reinforced and include research groups to promote more cooperation between the academic units and universities.
- 10) Since preliminary examination of the thesis has a critical role, two external evaluators should also be engaged at this stage. Naturally, the same opponents can also be used during the official defence.

Committee 1 highlighted the following strengths, areas of improvement, and recommendations for the Economics and Law doctoral programmes at the University of Tartu:

Strengths

- 1) A comprehensive system of performance indicators is in place at the university level, enabling to plan the development of Schools/Faculties and is also used for the allocation of PhD positions.
- 2) There is a broad range of well-funded opportunities for the mobility of PhD students.
- 3) The learning experience of PhD students is analysed in-depth, without fear of addressing complex issues.
- 4) The University ensures an additional €400 income for all full-time PhD students.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The level of quality of supervision is uneven. The survey among PhD students carried out in the Faculty of Social Sciences in 2016 refers to the same. There are commendable steps taken to improve the situation: review is carried out twice a year, and co-supervision is fostered.
- 2) The Faculty of Social Sciences has the lowest efficiency indicators of doctoral studies in the University. Further measures are required to increase the efficiency of graduation. This implies setting clear goals, e.g., improving the ratio of discontinuing studies and completion from 2:1 to 1:1.
- 3) A fundamental issue is reaching and maintaining a critical mass required for doctoral studies. Increased interdisciplinary work and cooperation within the University, with other Estonian, as well as foreign universities is needed and would enable obtaining more grants and fostering innovative research.

ECONOMICS

Strengths

- 1) The increase in the number of international students demonstrates that the study programme is also attractive outside of Estonia.
- 2) Numerous research projects support the study programme. 31% of PhD students are employed by the University. Supervisors are highly qualified.
- 3) Various students' research topics have an interdisciplinary focus. This allows engaging co-supervisors from outside of the faculty and the University itself.
- 4) The updated study programme is flexible and allows transferring credits earned elsewhere.
- 5) Junior researcher positions allow for an extra year of financing in order to complete the PhD thesis.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The selection criteria of PhD thesis topics are unclear, although it was explained to the Committee that project-related topics are preferred in order to ensure funding, but new and innovative research topics are also considered. Supervisors themselves propose relatively few topics, and these may not match the student's own interests.
- 2) The study programme action plan should also contain performance indicators linked to specific deadlines.
- 3) The Programme Director should manage the study programme in a more forceful manner, especially when it comes to supervision-related problems.
- 4) The age profile of full-time lecturers and supervisors is worrying. For this reason, it is advisable to expand co-supervision and the engagement of younger lecturers in the management of research projects. In order to plan and smoothly hand over the role of Programme Director, younger lecturers should be deployed as Deputy Programme Directors.
- 5) It is advisable to draw up a more systematic staff development plan that brings together all existing but as yet non-formalised efforts to improve the effectiveness of doctoral studies.
- 6) Annual review does not seem to reduce the level of drop-outs. The main problem lies in students' commitments that are non-related to the PhD thesis. The new system of funding based on full-time study may solve this problem, but it is still advisable that more efforts are made to ensure that doctoral students' other commitments support the objectives of PhD studies.
- 7) According to doctoral students, the content of research methodology subjects should be updated. While the flexibility of the study programme has increased, students felt that the choice of subjects at the doctoral level could be even wider in order to support their specialisation.

II. Conclusions of Committee 2

Committee 2 highlighted the following strengths, areas of improvement, and recommendations for the Sociology, Political Science, and Media and Communications doctoral programmes at the University of Tartu and for the Social Sciences study programme group at Tallinn University:

Strengths

- 1) Structural reforms carried out at both universities have contributed to the development of a modern social sciences education and research system, of which dedicated lecturers and students are an essential part.
- 2) Both lecturers and PhD students contribute strongly to the development of the Estonian society.
- 3) Graduates are highly valued in the labour market (in ministries, the non-governmental sector, etc.) for their analytical and presentation skills, among others.
- 4) Study programmes are very well managed. The heads of study programmes are highly qualified, proactive, well-connected outside the academy, and with brilliant teaching and research backgrounds.
- 5) The doctoral seminar system is well functioning. Both PhD students and lecturers regularly present their research there and provide each other with feedback. Seminars, therefore, constitute a supportive addition to regular supervision and assessment.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) One of the main challenges is the fact that students take rather long to graduate. While draconian measures are to be avoided, all relevant parties should consider the priorities regarding the time it takes to graduate and how realistic they are. Just formulating a target does not change anything. Financing, clear procedures for all stages of PhD projects, and a sensible balance between the doctoral project and other tasks are essential factors to consider.
- 2) A general feature of the programmes of social sciences is a certain lack of fully transparent guidelines, rules and procedures for staff and students to follow. Without making the system unwieldy and bureaucratised, it would be welcome if some of the rather implicit regulations and policies were made more transparent and accessible.
- 3) The Committee strongly recommends all responsible parties – from the university management down to individual programmes – to clarify workload expectations for supervisors, expected graduation time, and conditions for part-time study. Since many PhD students also have non-university jobs, the possibilities for part-time study should be officially and clearly regulated. Also, the effect and consequences of the new funding scheme should be analysed.
- 4) Many PhD students do not know each other. Universities should find ways to boost PhD community ties.
- 5) Universities should review their selection/admissions criteria and make them more focused on applicants' objective merits and less on their pre-established ties with a supervisor.
- 6) The requirement of having published at least three peer-reviewed international journal articles in order to defend a PhD thesis entails certain risks. The graduation process is too time-consuming, the co-authorship of PhD students and supervisors can go too far, and papers may be published in rather low-ranked journals. It is recommended that publication requirements be changed.

Committee 2 highlighted the following strengths, areas of improvement, and recommendations for the Social Sciences study programme group (Sociology and

Political Science) and the Journalism and Information study programme group (Media and Communications) at the University of Tartu:

Strengths

- 1) The institutes have good collaboration links with international networks.
- 2) Potential employers appreciate graduates' analytical, presentation, and time management skills.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) PhD students being too integrated into the daily activities of the Institute can have unintended consequences: students becoming too tied to supervisors as co-authors (and lack independence), students being overburdened by teaching and other tasks, which takes focus away from their PhD research.
- 2) It is quite common that students are personally invited to apply for the programme by their MA supervisors. In the long run, this may not be beneficial to the quality of the candidates. A lack of transparency and objective criteria regarding the application process can be sensed.
- 3) The Committee was surprised to find that there are no university/faculty/institute-level tools in place to monitor the effect of policies and reforms on the principle of equal opportunities. It is not always clear whether students have access to desk-space, software and other resources.

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Strengths

- 1) The compulsory dissertation seminar is an exemplary display of best practices.
- 2) The compulsory international conference participation with a presentation is a display of best practices.
- 3) The Institute has taken a clear direction to fund students' participation in research projects.
- 4) The teaching staff is very dedicated, and PhD students are engaged in different activities of the Institute.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The Committee recommends finding improved resources to fund teaching, learning, and research so that the objectives set out for study programmes can be more sustainable and less dependent on windfall project funding.
- 2) Teaching and supervision duties at the first and second cycle of university studies should be more evenly distributed among PhD students, and guided by clear procedures, so as not to compromise the time required for research.
- 3) Although supervisors are offered training courses, the level of participation is low. The Committee recommends making supervisors' training compulsory.
- 4) Only 8% of students graduate in 4+2 years. The drop-out rate is very high (on average, 2–5 PhD students per year). An in-depth analysis is needed in order to identify reasons for dropping out

and for slow progress. In order to secure constant progress, an annual review of the study programme could be considered.

SOCIOLOGY

Strengths

- 1) PhD students who are engaged in research projects led by supervisors make remarkable progress.
- 2) Completion rates have improved in recent years.
- 3) There is a synergy with the Media and Communications study programme, which allows economising on resources.
- 4) The integration of students into the national-level Doctoral Schools seems to have been successful, and different components of the Schools, such as academic writing sessions, have been particularly appreciated by students. There is a good level of support for student attendance at conferences and other events.
- 5) There is a wide range of courses available, which helps broaden students' employability options.
- 6) Increased engagement of visiting scholars has been a positive development.
- 7) International students are well integrated into the Institute of Social Studies.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The content of subject courses should be reviewed, and students given more freedom to select subject courses.
- 2) The selection criteria and procedures for state- and university-funded PhD positions need to be more clearly regulated. A formal peer review of applications for PhD positions would be advisable and should be organised not only at the study programme but also at the School/Faculty level. This would help avoid potential conflicts of interest in situations where a supervisor has already got personal contacts with a prospective PhD student.
- 3) There is currently no monitoring of equal opportunities issues, as regards, for example, the consequences for students of different genders of the introduction of specific policies and practices. This shortcoming should be rectified at the School/Faculty level.
- 4) The University should allow for the registration of PhD students on a part-time basis, probably involving double the amount of years of the current nominal period.
- 5) There should be a better overview of agreements between supervisors and students – for example, in terms of how many hours and what type of supervision will be offered. This would minimise the risk of poor supervision not being identified by the Programme Director. Regular records should also be taken of supervision meetings and their content. Some supervisors require more than 3 publications, which creates inequalities between students and could defer completion of the PhD. Any extra requirements should be discussed with the Programme Director, who should have the power to cancel such requirements if need be.
- 6) There is a need to define more clearly the expectations (especially in terms of working hours and external work commitments, as well as completion times) for students who receive both state and university funding.
- 7) There is a lack of clarity among students as to the availability of software, especially regarding off-campus licenses. Students should be more clearly informed about what is and is not possible in this regard.

- 8) Student dissatisfaction – with supervision, supervisor or other matters – is generally handled informally. While this is in part inevitable and to some degree desirable, written rules are needed in order to guide all parties as to how to proceed in cases of dissatisfaction. The same applies to supervisor dissatisfaction with a PhD student's performance.
 - 9) The monograph format of a PhD is under-utilised since it is assumed to be old-fashioned and unhelpful in the labour market, especially the academic labour market. But this is not necessarily so, for it is a common format in various other countries. The advantages of the monograph format should be considered more by the Programme Director and supervisors, and the monograph option offered as a viable one to all students at the start of their studies. The assumption that the PhD by publication is the only route for all PhD students should be avoided.
 - 10) There should be an established upper limit of the number of supervisees any one supervisor may have, e.g., 5 PhD students per supervisor.
 - 11) Various students viewed the current annual review as a box-ticking exercise rather than substantive feedback to their progress during the year. The Institute should look for ways to improve the review as regards offering more substantial and useful feedback to students.
 - 12) It should be a general rule to assign a co-supervisor to all students.
 - 13) The programme should have more explicit forms of cooperation with partners and employers in both the public and private sectors. There is scope for more input from partners into the programme in terms of teaching and careers advice.
 - 14) The scope and nature of the Programme Director role are too vague; the post requires a more straightforward definition of responsibilities, opportunities and expectations. This would also ensure consistency in case of staff changes.
 - 15) Given the new funding model, students should receive more assistance in formulating independent, non-project-based PhD topics. PhD students need more explicit guidance for finding post-doctoral positions in Tartu, Estonia, and beyond. Guidance in relation to non-academic career paths is also needed.
- 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 Social Sciences 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