

Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Psychology Study Programme Group Tallinn University

26/02/2019

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) decided to approve the report of the Assessment Committee and to carry out the next quality assessment of the Doctoral Study of Psychology Study Programme Group of Tallinn University in seven years.

Pursuant to clause 40.1 of the document “Quality Assessment of the Study Programme Groups at the level of Doctoral Studies” established on the basis of the authorization contained in § 10 (4) of the University Act and clauses 3.7.3 and 3.7.1 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter the Council) states the following:

1. Tallinn University coordinated the quality assessment period of the study programme group with EKKA on 12.10.2017.
2. By the order of 1.10.2018, the Director of EKKA approved the Committee for Quality Assessment of the Doctoral Study of the Social Services and Psychology Study Programme Groups of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter the Committee) in the following composition

Cathy M. Craig Chair of the Committee	Professor of Psychology of Perception and Action, former Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physics; Queen's University Belfast (Northern Ireland), currently CEO of INCISIV Ltd.
Marian J. Jongmans	Professor of Special Education; Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences and Director of Master's Studies, Utrecht University (Netherlands)
Juha Hämäläinen	Professor of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland (Finland)

Karen Lyons	Professor Emeritus of International Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, London Metropolitan University (UK)
Ain Aaviksoo	CEO, VIVEO Health OÜ (Estonia)
Gabrielle McHarg	PhD student (Psychology), University of Cambridge (UK)

- Tallinn University submitted the following doctoral study programme for assessment in the Psychology Study Programme Group:

Psychology

- Tallinn University submitted a self-analysis report to the EKKA office on 19.09.2018, which was sent to the Committee by the assessment coordinator on 1.10.2018.
- The assessment visit to Tallinn University took place on 14.-15.11.2018.
- The Committee sent the draft assessment report to the EKKA office on 8.12.2018, which EKKA forwarded to the institution of higher education for comment on 12.12.2018 and to which Tallinn University submitted a reply on 26.12.2018.
- The Committee submitted the final assessment report to the EKKA office 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 Assessment Council forwarded the final assessment report and self-analysis report to the members of the Assessment Council on 14.02.2019.
- The Council discussed the received documents at the meeting of 26.02.2019 with the participation of 9 members and decided to highlight the following strengths, recommendations and areas for improvement concerning the Doctoral Study of the Psychology Study Programme Group of Tallinn University.

In the case of the Psychology Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University and the Social Services Study Programme Group of Tallinn University, the Committee identified the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations:

Strengths

- The limited budget forces universities to develop comprehensive plans to ensure the sustainability of teaching and research (including Doctoral study). The managements of both universities are aware of this need and have taken preventive steps to solve the problems. Both universities have sufficient infrastructure to conduct quality teaching.
- In general, the study programmes are relatively stable and well developed, with the exception of the Well-Being and Health Behavior Study Programme of Tallinn University, which is in its third year and differs from the others due to its strong interdisciplinarity.
- The Committee acknowledges the internationalization efforts of both universities.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The lack of financial support for doctoral students is one of the main challenges. The state support for doctoral students has recently increased, but it is not enough. If the University of Tartu provides additional funding in the form of 400 euros for full-time doctoral students, it is not being implemented at Tallinn University. The Committee recommends increasing the national scholarship for full-time doctoral students. At the same time, there should be a contractual ban on working at the same time with a 100% workload outside the university. The Committee also recommends that both universities explore alternative sources of funding to support doctoral studies.
- 2) The loss of the value of the Doctoral degree was also a cross-cutting theme in the assessment. A doctorate is necessary to pursue a career in the academia, but given that general education teachers earn more than university lecturers, the devaluation of a career in higher education is dangerous. According to both alumni and employers, having a doctorate can have a negative effect, as employers often consider such professionals to be overqualified and do not want to pay them higher salaries. This very narrow and limited understanding of doctoral studies needs to be addressed by all key stakeholders: Estonian government, universities, employers, employees and students themselves.
- 3) The quality of research is measured only on the basis of published articles. The Committee considers that it is wrong to use only one indicator to define scientific excellence. Universities should know that the level of science can also be measured through its social and economic effectiveness in a research environment where new and exciting research topics are emerging organically. The Committee urges that the objectives of the Doctoral study be reconsidered so that they are more in line with those in Europe and North America.
- 4) The Committee considers that the number of subjects in study programmes is too high compared to other European universities. The Committee urges universities to review the content and scope of subject courses. Compulsory subjects should be reduced and more electives should be provided to more efficiently ensure the development of more transferable skills.
- 5) Considering that Estonia is a small country, the connection with the outside world is of critical importance. The Committee recommends that both universities make more efforts to recruit foreign doctoral students and staff. Encouragement and support for external mobility should also continue.
- 6) The activities of the doctoral school should be expanded so that it is not limited to the distribution of funds. The doctoral school should be the center of the Doctoral study for both local and foreign students. More international summer schools should be held, international scientific conferences and workshops should be organized, and top foreign specialists should be invited to give lectures in Estonia.
- 7) Both universities should formalize their relations with external supervisors in order to recognize their contribution and also to establish more formal partnerships with other universities.
- 8) The completion rate of all doctoral programmes is low, and sometimes the drop-out rate is twice as high.
- 9) In general, the level of supervisors is high. However, the time devoted to supervision varies widely. In order to ensure that too little time devoted to supervision does not negatively affect the completion rate, it is necessary to develop a stricter system that also fixes the minimum number of contact hours.

The Committee highlighted the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the Psychology Study Programme Group of Tallinn University:

Strengths

- 1) The opportunity to participate in research projects offers doctoral students additional support in both financial and research environment.
- 2) Doctoral schools and seminars provide a good opportunity to meet other doctoral students and lecturers from other universities.
- 3) The Psychology Study Programme focuses on individual scientifically strong areas, such as educational and school psychology, cultural psychology, developmental and neuropsychology. This means that admitted students often work on funded research projects.
- 4) The study programme is flexible and takes into account the different needs of students. The programme offers appropriate courses in statistics and research methods that students value.
- 5) Doctoral theses are of a good standard and help maintain the quality of university research.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The Committee welcomes the Estonian government's decision to increase the doctoral student grant to € 660, although this is not enough to ensure completion with a nominal time and does not rule out the need to work alongside studies. The university management must clearly formulate its position on additional grants. Unlike the University of Tartu, Tallinn University has not allocated resources to provide additional funding for doctoral students.
- 2) At the study programme level, there is no clear strategic vision for the focus of research. The recently established Institute of Natural and Health Sciences offers excellent opportunities to create new unique lines of research. On student admissions, more attention should be paid on involved students in research projects.
- 3) Study programmes would benefit from more strategic relationships with various employers, NGOs and the world of work.
- 4) The Committee considers that the requirement for three publications should be relaxed. Supervisors should introduce students to the possibility of a monograph and a single publication, especially if the student wishes to pursue a career outside academia.
- 5) Although internationalization is taking place, it is very unstable and highly dependent on the student. Tallinn University should establish official guidelines for cases where the supervisor of the doctoral thesis is from outside of Estonia. This could include a formal letter acknowledging the supervisor's work and an invitation for the supervisor to meet with his/her student and, if possible, the co-supervisor. This would show the external supervisor that his/her input and assistance is appreciated.
- 6) Doctoral schools could contribute more to raising the international profile of Estonian science by organizing summer schools in scientifically strong areas, but also to developing general skills, such as data analysis and methodology, in which foreign experts could also participate. This would provide an opportunity to introduce the strengths of Estonian science in the world and enable the promotion of communication between doctoral students from Estonia and other countries.
- 7) Research topics and areas should be diversified and more interdisciplinary research promoted.
- 8) Students who have an external supervisor must also be provided with a supervisor from Tallinn University.
- 9) It is recommended to add practical elements to the subject "Learning and teaching in an institution of higher education" (which is compulsory in the Well-Being and Health Behavior

Study Programme, but not in Psychology). Students want to develop their pedagogical skills and monitoring/feedback on teaching would help.

- 10) Students of psychology should be motivated to participate in the seminars offered by the Well-Being and Health Behavior Programme, and the broadening of horizons should be encouraged by both supervisors and the institute at large.
 - 11) Courses in statistical and data analysis methodology could be shared with the doctoral program in education and possibly others. Psychology students should also be introduced to qualitative courses at the Institute of Educational Sciences in order to diversify their skills.
 - 12) The doctoral school should be used to develop closer cooperation between the doctoral programs of Tallinn University and the University of Tartu. This would help, among other things, to create more opportunities for exchanging experiences in a free environment, not just once a year to present your work.
 - 13) To encourage students to introduce the importance of their work and the wider impact to the general public, building on the existence of good practices already observed in some Master's degree study programme.
 - 14) The feedback mechanism should be more systematic; including that it should be clear to students and supervisors how their input is taken into account and used.
 - 15) A more transparent workload model that ensures a better balance of supervision responsibilities.
 - 16) Co-supervision should be more widely used (or even made compulsory), which would allow more feedback to the doctoral student and the development of supervision skills for younger lecturers.
 - 17) More linguistic support and 'team writing' to help students develop these skills.
10. Clause 40 of the document “Quality Assessment of the Study Programme Groups at the level of Doctoral Studies” stipulates that the Assessment Council shall approve the assessment report within 3 months after its receipt. The Council will consider the strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations identified by the Assessment Committee and decide to carry out the next quality assessment of the Study Programme Group in seven, five or three years.
11. The Council considered the strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations set out in point 9 and found that the study programme, the studies provided on it and the development activities related to the studies meet the requirements and:

DECIDED

To approve the assessment report and to carry out the next assessment of the quality of the Doctoral Study in the Psychology Study Programme Group of Tallinn University in seven years.

The decision was adopted by 9 votes in favor. None opposed.

12. The Assessment Council proposes to Tallinn University to submit to EKKA no later than 26.02.2020 an action plan on taking into account the areas for improvement and recommendations presented in the report.
13. A person who considers that the decision has violated his or her rights or restricted his or her freedoms may file a challenge with the Assessment Council of EKKA within 30 days after the appellant became aware of or should have become aware of the contested act.

The Assessment Council shall send the challenge to the challenge committee of the Assessment Council of EKKA, which shall submit a written, impartial opinion to the Assessment Council on the reasoning of the challenge within 5 days of receipt of the challenge. The Assessment Council shall resolve the challenge within 10 days of receipt, taking into account the reasoned position of the appeal committee. If the challenge needs to be further investigated, the Assessment Council may extend the term for reviewing the challenge by up to 30 days.

Contestation of a decision in court is possible within 30 days as of its service by submitting an appeal to the Tallinn Courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Court Procedure Act.

Eve Eisenschmidt
Chair of the Council

Hillar Bauman
Secretary of the Council