

**Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Social
Sciences 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 in the Social Sciences 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 6.10.2017.
2. By the order of 23.08.2018, the Director of EKKA approved the Committee for Quality Assessment of the Doctoral Study of the Social Sciences Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter the Committee) in the following composition

Jonas Hinnfors (Chairman)	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	Ph.D. student, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

3. Tallinn University submitted the following Doctoral study programmes for assessment in the Social Sciences Study Programme Group:
Government and Politics
Sociology
Demography
4. Tallinn University submitted a self-analysis report to the EKKA office on 13.07.2018, which was sent to the Committee by the assessment coordinator on 13.08.2018.
5. The assessment visit to Tallinn University took place on 18.-19.10.2018.
6. The Committee sent the draft assessment report to the EKKA office on 30.11.2018, which EKKA forwarded to the institution of higher education for comment on 5.12.2018 and to which Tallinn University submitted a reply on 17.12.2018.
7. The Committee submitted the final assessment report to the EKKA office on 21.12.2018. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Assessment Council forwarded the final assessment report and self-analysis report to the members of the Assessment Council on 14.02.2018.
9. 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 Social Sciences Study Programme Group of Tallinn University.

In the case of the Social Sciences Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, as well as the Media and Communication of the University of Tartu, the Committee identified the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations:

Strengths

- 1) The structural reforms carried out at both universities have contributed to the development of a modern social science education and research system, of which dedicated lecturers and students are an important part.
- 2) Both lecturers and doctoral students make a strong contribution to the development of Estonian society.
- 3) Graduates are highly valued in the labor market (e.g., ministries, non-governmental sector, etc.), including for their analytical and presentation skills.
- 4) Study programme management works very well. Study programme managers are highly qualified, proactive, have good connections outside academia, and have a good background in teaching and research.
- 5) The system of doctoral seminars works well. Both doctoral students and lecturers regularly present their research there and provide mutual feedback. The seminars, therefore, have an additional supporting function for regular mentoring and evaluation.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) One of the most important challenges is the protracted graduation of students. While extreme measures should be avoided, all parties should review their priorities for timing and how they can be achieved. Nothing changes from purely formulating goals. Funding, clear procedures for all phases of the doctoral project, and a reasonable balance between the doctoral project and other work are important factors.
- 2) A common feature of social sciences study programmes is the lack of transparent guidelines, rules, and procedures for staff and students. It would be welcome if some of the self-evident rules and procedures become more transparent and accessible without the system becoming too complex and bureaucratic.
- 3) The Committee urges all responsible parties, from university management to individual study programmes, to specify expectations for supervisors' workload, graduation time, and part-time study. As many doctoral students also have out-of-university employment, part-time study opportunities should be formally and clearly regulated. The impact and consequences of the new funding scheme also need to be analyzed.
- 4) Many doctoral students do not know each other. It is recommended that the university thinks about possible activities to strengthen the links between doctoral students.
- 5) It is recommended that universities rethink the principles of admission and make it more focused on the objective indicators of the candidates and less on the already established links with supervisors.
- 6) The requirement for three published articles to defend a dissertation involves a number of risks. The graduation process is too time-consuming, co-authorship of doctoral students and supervisors can go too far; articles are published in low-level journals. It is advisable to consider changing the publication requirements.

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

Strengths

- 1) Supervision generally works well. The co-supervision system is also well developed.
- 2) Many students attend conferences, and the necessary funding is available (although it turned out that not all students are aware of this).
- 3) The university library is adequately staffed and resourced.
- 4) Social science study programmes have good relations with the outside world and employers. Contrary to what was said in the self-assessment, employers and alumni believe that the doctoral degree is valued and benefits society. However, some employers would like more outreach work and better cooperation from the university.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Issues related to doctoral student status should be more clearly defined: full-time and part-time study and related time frames; expectations for the volume of studies conducted by the doctoral student; different funding opportunities for doctoral students; expectations for the transferable skills to be achieved by doctoral students.
- 2) Doctoral students should be better advised on the selection and planning of subject courses.
- 3) It must be ensured that both lecturers and doctoral students are informed about the existing regulations and rules concerning doctoral studies.
- 4) Although resources are generally quite good, they are not always equally available, for example, for software. Doctoral students' work premises are almost non-existent. In order to improve the efficiency of doctoral studies, the social well-being, and integration of doctoral students, it is recommended to provide doctoral students with their own premises.
- 5) Language editing training is available but too late in doctoral studies. As most doctoral theses are written on the basis of articles, language editing and assistance are important throughout the doctoral studies.
- 6) The university offers health and psychological counseling and support to students, but there are no such opportunities for doctoral students. The university could also consider offering such services to doctoral students.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Strengths

- 1) The share of students graduating in the 4 + 2 format is clearly increasing.
- 2) The time for supervision (50 hours per year) is clearly regulated. The number of staff with a doctoral degree (13) is well above the critical threshold.
- 3) The procedures for reviewing and defending doctoral theses are at a very good level.
- 4) Most lecturers and supervisors regularly publish their work in international journals.
- 5) In cases where doctoral students work either as lecturers or researchers, this contributes to the integration into the academic community of the institute and provides an opportunity to work in a field related to their project.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Consideration could be given to including more compulsory courses on research methods in the study programme and conduct them in cooperation with the Demography and Sociology study programmes.
- 2) The study programme is sometimes too flexible, which makes it difficult for students to plan their studies.
- 3) The university's self-analysis suggests that there is a need to improve the involvement of some lecturers in research. The Committee urges that teaching and research be a natural part of the work of all academic staff.
- 4) It is not clear to what extent lecturers participate in supervision training. The Committee recommends making the training of trainer's compulsory.
- 5) The university has developed a student support system that includes counseling at both the university and academic unit level. However, the feedback received indicated that not all students were aware of these opportunities or were dissatisfied with the quality of the support provided. It is therefore recommended that information be made available to students on a

regular and comprehensible basis. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that the quality and availability of counseling on learning issues is in line with the standard.

- 6) Student participation in long-term international mobility programs is very low. This is probably due to family responsibilities or working outside the university. Therefore, improving support opportunities for participation in short-term mobility and conferences can also be beneficial. However, not all students were aware of the different support options. Students involved in research projects are in a better position because they have access to additional sources of funding. It is recommended to regularly and comprehensively inform students about different sources of funding.
- 7) A regular feedback mechanism should be established for both alumni and employers.
- 8) The direction is already taken to recruit doctoral students as junior researchers should be continued.

SOCIOLOGY

Strengths

- 1) Lecturers, students, and managers are very committed to promoting the Sociology Study Programme. Employers and stakeholders are well involved.
- 2) The study programme attracts high-level candidates. There is also evidence of successful alumni whose doctoral dissertations are of very high quality.
- 3) Supervision is of high quality. The co-supervision system works; foreign instructors are also involved.
- 4) Students, alumni, and employers are generally satisfied with the content of the study programme and the skills that the study programme offers to students.
- 5) Students value the annual assessment as an opportunity to reflect and set goals for the coming year.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) With regard to the co-authorship of articles (especially with a supervisor), clearer rules and guidelines should be established to avoid potential conflicts.
- 2) Students need to be better informed about the requirements, opportunities, and consequences of part-time learning.
- 3) Students should be better informed about the procedures related to research ethics.
- 4) The maximum number of supervised students should be formally set - no more than five if possible. Younger lecturers should also be involved in supervision so that they can gain experience in supervision.
- 5) A co-supervisor should be assigned to each student.
- 6) Various stakeholders (e.g., ministries, Statistics Estonia, private-sector research institutions) are interested in research projects and their results so that the results of the research can be used in policy-making both in Estonia and at the wider EU level. The exchange of information and its impact could be further enhanced by giving individual employees responsibility in this regard. Non-university stakeholders could play a greater role in the institute's board.

- 7) Compulsory supervision training could be considered, at least for early-stage researchers. Further training could be provided for experienced staff.
- 8) Students need to be made more aware of the expectations for timely completion and to be also introduced to the steps a student can take to ensure timely completion.
- 9) The Committee recommends establishing procedures for monitoring equal opportunities, especially in view of the number of students working in parallel with their studies and the increase in the number of international students.

DEMOGRAPHY

Strengths

- 1) There is a good working relationship between students and academic staff. Students and alumni have had the opportunity to discuss their dissertation issues and receive advice from all staff, not just from their supervisors.
- 2) International conferences are followed by meetings where lecturers and students discuss new substantive and methodological developments in the field. These activities, together with the annual evaluation of doctoral students, provide input for further developments and help to create a common identity between the members of the institute.
- 3) Students have good opportunities to participate in international conferences and benefit from research networks. These activities make it possible to achieve the goals of promoting teamwork, leadership, foreign language skills, and personal development.
- 4) Most students receive demographic training through the European Doctoral School on Demography (EDSD). It is an internationally recognized high-quality program, and participation in it (which includes a year's absence from Estonia) helps participants to create an international network. The participation of Tallinn University in this program is a reasonable way for a small country to satisfy the need for demographic training.
- 5) The institute has its own professional library and data sources, and students have access to them with expert assistance on their use.
- 6) Students have good opportunities to participate in conferences. Employers, partners, and alumni are satisfied with the skills and knowledge of graduates.
- 7) Lecturers have international teaching experience.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Students who do not participate in the ESDS program are offered subject courses by university faculty. In terms of resource use, this is difficult given the very small number of students. It is also difficult to cover all the subjects included in the study programmes (incl. electives) in each academic year. It is recommended to offer students residing in Estonia, for example, free online courses developed by the *United Nations Fund for Population Activities* and the *International Union for Scientific Study for Population*. Cooperation with the Population Research Unit of the University of Helsinki would also be a good way to enable students who cannot go on long-term mobility abroad to take part in appropriate training.
- 2) The Estonian Institute for Population of the university is small, as is the number of doctoral students (4). This is a major challenge and makes the doctoral program vulnerable. Demographic specialties are generally also small internationally. The Institute has rightly decided to focus on research concerning Estonia. Based on the existing ties with other Baltic countries, the Institute

could try to become the Baltic leader in the field and recruit doctoral students from Latvia and Lithuania, as well as from Russia. Priorities should be clearly defined, as senior lecturers, in particular, are overburdened.

- 3) Supervision practices at the Institute vary widely, and students see this as a problem. The proposed solution is the involvement of a co-supervisor, although it is important to further establish some common standards and expectations for supervision practices.
 - 4) The part-time study should be formally provided for doctoral students. Supervision should be more proactive to ensure timely completion.
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 three 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 Social Sciences Study Programme Group of Tallinn University in seven years.

The decision was adopted by nine votes in favor, and 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 thirty (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 five (5) days of receipt of the challenge. The Assessment Council shall resolve the challenge within ten (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 thirty (30) days.

Contestation of a decision in court is possible within thirty (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