



ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY
FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Report on Fulfilling the Requirements of the Secondary Condition

Business and Administration Study
Programme Group at the Level of Doctoral
Studies

Estonian Business School

2021

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Introduction

Background and aim of the assessment

Quality assessment of a study programme group involves the assessment of the conformity of study programmes and the studies and development activities that take place on their basis to legislation, national and international standards and developmental directions with the purpose of providing recommendations to improve the quality of studies.

The goal of quality assessment of a study programme group is supporting the internal evaluation and self-development of the institution of higher education. Quality assessment of study programme groups is not followed by sanctions: expert assessments should be considered recommendations.

Quality assessment of a study programme group takes place at least once every 7 years based on the regulation approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies*.

In 2019, an international expert panel assessed the quality of the study programme group of the Business and Administration Study Programme Group at the Level of Doctoral Studies. As a result, EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education decided at its meeting on 26.02.2019 that the next assessment is to take place in seven years if Estonian Business School meets certain requirements set by the Council.

The aim of the expert panel was to assess whether the requirements (secondary condition) set by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education have been met by EBS.

Study programmes under review

Study programme	Level	Unit responsible for the programme
Management	Doctoral studies	Department of Management

Expert panel

The expert panel consisted of the following members:

Roger Levy <i>Chair</i>	Professor, formerly of the London School of Economics, United Kingdom
Janek Uiboupin	Admirals Group AS, Business Developer, Estonia

Assessment process

The panel members based their assessment on two key sets of evidence. Firstly, the original assessment report from the visits in 2018 and also the response to the secondary conditions report from the university in 2021. Secondly, the panel sent some additional questions to the university. There were no online discussions.

In the following sections, the expert panel summarises their findings regarding the fulfillment of the secondary condition, and also provides feedback on the progress the institution has made in connection with experts' recommendations made in their previous report in 2018.

The current report is a public document and made available on EKKA website after EKKA Quality Assessment Council has made its decision.

The university did not submit any comments on the initial report. The panel submitted the final report to EKKA on 12.07.2021.

General progress report on the study programme group of Business and Administration since its previous assessment

The assessment report from 2018 regarding quality assessment of study programme group of Business and Administration is available on EKKA [website](#).

Following the decision of the EKKA Council of 26th February 2019 to adopt the recommendations of the Quality Assessment Committee (QAC) for PhD programmes in Business and Administration at the Estonian Business School (EBS), EBS has made significant progress in implementing changes. Based on the evidence submitted by EBS to the Expert Panel in 2021, the School has risen to the challenge with a range of measures designed to address the concerns of EKKA Council and the QAC.

Steps have been taken both to improve the level of full-time staffing and raise research activity amongst faculty, with substantial investment in new full-time posts on one side, and a pronounced uptick in research bids, external income, quality publication output and R&D, supervision and reviewing collaboration on the other.

EBS has increased full-time staff by 10 (77% increase) since 2018, and the number of co-supervised doctoral students has increased to 21 from 12 in 2018.

In addition, despite the restrictions imposed by the global pandemic on mobility, international collaboration, and ways of delivering teaching and learning to enrolled students, EBS has managed nevertheless to extend its reach and effect improvement via innovative means.

There has been a marked improvement in internal arrangements such as the level of co-supervision, the strengthening of the process for final defence, and the role of the R&D committee in the supervisory process.

To conclude this overview, the actions taken by EBS to support the Doctoral programme have been significant and wide ranging. EBS has clearly addressed concerns of EKKA Council and the QAC and has made solid progress in resolving both secondary conditions set. Even at this early stage, improvements are already in evidence from the data reviewed, and this upward trajectory will surely continue as the institution moves forward on its journey (see below, and under 'secondary conditions' for specifics).

Commendations

- Substantial investment in new full-time staff and adjunct staff, and the increase of the Junior Research Fellow cohort.
- The introduction of management tools including the appointment of a project manager, a tariff system for staff activities, and KPIs for improving research performance.
- The decision to move away from existing Research Groups to focus on projects and students.
- The rapid acceleration of co-supervision and the strengthening of the management of the Doctoral process via the R&D Committee and the final defence arrangements, growing involvement of both external supervisors and reviewers.
- Progress in integration of new full-time staff in the supervision process.
- The innovative use of the LMS Canvas distance learning platform during the pandemic to support the student learning experience.
- Active participation in research grants applications.
- The extension of collaboration within Estonia via the MIDOK Doctoral School and the offering of free places on EBS Doctoral course units to non-EBS students.
- The extension of external research, co-supervision collaboration via new partnerships with the Universities of Oulu and Turku, the greater involvement of externals in the final defence process and participation in virtual scholarly conferences and other events.

Report on fulfilling the requirements of the secondary condition

At its meeting on 26.02.2019, EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education decided that the next assessment of the study programme group of the Business and Administration Study Programme Group at the Level of Doctoral Studies will take place in 7 years (maximum term) but set a secondary condition that Estonian Business School should meet by 26.02.2021.

Based on the [Assessment Report](#) of the expert panel and the [Decision of EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education](#), Estonian Business School submitted the following document to EKKA in February 2021:

- 1) Interim Report for Quality Assessment of the Doctoral Program in Estonian Business School

The following are the two requirements set by the Quality Assessment Council to be met by Estonian Business School, and the panel's assessment on the developments the institution has made in this regard.

Secondary condition number 1

According to the Regulation of the Government of the Republic "Standard of Higher Education" subsection 6 clause 7 (1) *The conduct of studies conforms to the requirements if: Ordinary teaching staff and research staff are available for the studies, who meet the*

qualification requirements established in legal instruments and whose number is, based on their responsibilities, the volume of conducted studies and research and the number of supervised students, adequate for achieving the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme. The proportion of full-time teaching staff at the University is alarmingly low. **Immediate action is needed in order to recruit new, qualified teaching staff members. The age structure of PhD supervisors is also of concern. New teaching staff members would need to be integrated into the supervision process as quickly as possible.**

Assessment of the expert panel:

the secondary condition is substantially met.

Evidence and analysis

Since 2018, EBS has added 10 full time faculty including 4 Professors, one Associate and one Assistant Professor, a Senior Lecturer, a Senior Researcher, a Researcher and a Vice Rector (at 0.5 academic responsibilities), and 3 more adjunct faculty (according to data supplied by EBS in Answers to Additional Questions posed by this Panel). As there were no retirements or resignations, these 13 staff represent a real increase of core staff. That is a 77% rise, and at the Professorial level, an 81% rise taking account the fractional loads of some existing Professors. We also note that EBS is currently seeking to make a further Professorial appointment. The age profile of supervisors is also moving in the right direction (average is now 52 down from 55).

In terms of qualifications, all new staff engaged in teaching and/or supervision on the Doctoral programme meet the requirement of having PhDs themselves. Looking at the summary staff CVs on the EBS website confirms that their Doctorates are relevant and appropriate to management and economics. As EBS acknowledges, it will take time to fully integrate new staff into both the research and Doctoral supervision processes, but good progress is being made with a rise from 17 to 23 in the number of core staff involved in supervision. According to data supplied by EBS (Interim Report and Answers to Additional Questions), 5 of the new core faculty are already acting as Doctoral supervisors. This is an area where further progress can be made.

It is pleasing to note that 21 Doctoral students are now co-supervised compared to 12 in 2018, and the expansion of the core faculty will assist in further supporting Doctoral candidates in this way. The evidence submitted by EBS emphasises securing more external co-supervision through increased international partnership rather than simply allocating EBS staff, as it is argued that this will better meet students' specific needs. This argument has merit and such a strategy can also support the development of EBS staff through the iteration of *quid pro quo* arrangements with partner institutions. In the context of the establishment of new partnerships outlined in EBS' responses, we are confident this will happen.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence we have reviewed, we judge that the secondary condition is substantially met at this stage, and we anticipate further improvement if the current trajectories in staffing continue. EBS has fulfilled its commitment to recruit more relevantly qualified core staff and has added very significantly to the net total. The main task now is to integrate these new colleagues into the Doctoral programme. The data suggest progress has already been made. The decision to spread the supervisory net to academics in external University institutions is to be welcomed so long as these are for second supervisor roles.

Strengths

- The rapid and decisive action taken to recruit more full-time core staff following the recommendations of the 2018 review.
- The decision to increase partnership and co-operation via spreading the supervisory net for second supervisors to academics in external University institutions, strengthening of the role of externals in the defence process, and enhancing participation in the MIDOK Doctoral School.
- The offering of free places on the taught Doctoral programme to Doctoral candidates elsewhere (both Estonia and overseas).
- The innovative use of the LMS Canvas platform to support students during the pandemic and enable them to create their own learning communities.
- Broadened role of R&D committee and the head of doctoral programme to improve the supervision process.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- There are 2 PhD candidates whose main supervisors are not on the lists of either core or adjunct EBS staff (one is a Visiting Professor who has a full-time career and the other works at TUT). As it is normal for PhD candidates to be registered at the same institution as their first supervisor, this situation needs to be resolved either by (a) transferring the students' registration or (b) reallocating them to a new EBS first supervisor.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Given the opportunities for secondary supervision which remain, there is scope for accelerating the introduction of the new hires into the supervision process via the partnership route EBS wishes to follow (see above).
- As there is reservoir of highly experienced supervisory staff within the Professoriate, it makes sense to utilise this resource in the training and development of new faculty in all aspects of the Doctoral programme. This will be of most relevance to younger staff including Junior Research Fellows.
- EBS has faced relatively high drop-out rates of doctoral students (the number of dropouts in 2019 was 12 (highest since 2013) and 6 in 2020). Based on the evidence from Answers to Additional Questions it is not always clear what the base reasons for dropouts are. We suggest a deeper look on the reasons for dropouts and loss of motivation of doctoral students, and to make preventive steps, if applicable, to improve supervision and increase the efficiency of the Doctoral Programme.

Secondary condition number 2

According to (2) of the same clause of the Standard of Higher Education *a member of the teaching staff or research staff who conducts studies in a given subject has the necessary teaching competence (which according to clause 2 (6) of the Standard includes supervision) and his or her qualification supports achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme.* Clause 6 (7) 7) of SHE prescribes *that financing sources for conducting studies and for research and development activities related to Doctoral study and a strategy supporting their obtainment are in place.* Point 5.4.1 of the document „Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies“ states that *Teaching staff participate in research, development and/or creative activity at the level of and to the extent sufficient to conduct doctoral studies in the curriculum group and to supervise doctoral theses.* **Supervisors are engaged in very few research projects and there is no clear**

consensus on how or when a solution shall be found. Given the seriousness of the situation the research groups are in urgent need of consolidation. Investing into research groups, staff reinforcement, collaboration with other universities and junior researchers among doctoral students is of critical importance.

Assessment of the expert panel:

the secondary condition is substantially met.

Evidence and analysis

The research performance data supplied by EBS shows a broadly positive picture over the period since 2013, while it is difficult to establish a trend since 2019 based on only two years metrics. Nevertheless, we believe that there are many indications which justify that the output targets set by EBS for 2023 are likely to be achieved. EBS uses KPIs to measure its research performance, and these seven cover publications, Junior Research Fellowships, PhD students engaged in R&D projects, project value and international conference attendance.

For obvious reasons, international conference attendance was sharply down in 2020 due to the pandemic, a circumstance entirely outside EBS' control. There are positive numbers for practically everything else and even on conference attendance, opportunities have been taken to participate at virtual events. The number of Junior Research Fellows has increased from 3 in 2018 to 9 in 2020, while the monetary value of new R&D projects has risen from 33k Euro to c 303k Euro over the same period. It has to be said that the figure for 2018 was exceptionally low following a peak of c 365th euros in 2016 but there was also a trough of 0 Euro in 2014. High volatility in success of R&D projects comes partly from relatively small institutional resources of EBS, and we note the direction of strengthening of core staff and increasing engagement of PhD students into projects that will contribute to the success rate of R&D projects applications. The number of PhD students involved in such projects also peaked in 2016 but taken over the whole period, numbers are now twice as high as they were in 2014 despite the current difficulties created by the pandemic. The target of 20 for 2023 will take the figure above the previous peak. Given the upward trajectory in R&D income, this is achievable.

Extending collaboration with other universities is reported in the Interim Report. EBS is continuing participation in the MIDOK project, Doctoral School in Economics and Innovation and has opened its courses to partner universities' doctoral students offering two free places. EBS has also reported successful new partnerships with University of Oulu and University of Turku in terms of R&D and supervision. The outreach to partner institutions in the rest of Scandinavia for collaborative R&D project bids is a very positive development.

On publications, EBS' Interim Report notes that there has been a switch towards a focus on higher quality outputs in the ETIS classification system. The narrative reports some very positive contracts with major international publishers going forward which do not yet appear in the Table 4 and these should be considered in this judgment. The data in Table 4 show an increase in ETIS 1.1 journal articles output and a more stable picture for ETIS 3.1 outputs. The emphasis going forward is on ETIS 1.1 outputs and the numbers since 2018 suggest the target of 18 such publications for 2023 is realistic.

In our 2018 assessment, we were keen to know the involvement of core staff in funded R&D projects and to evaluate the worth of the Research Group structure. Data supplied to us in 2021 shows that there were 7 core staff engaged in the 11 projects running involving PhD students and core staff. This

number does not give the whole picture as other core staff are involved in yet-to-be-decided bids or have been involved in unsuccessful bids.

In this context, it is worth mentioning three initiatives taken since 2019 which are having a positive impact. The first was the decision to focus on projects and students rather than maintaining the formal research group structure. The others were incentives and support for staff to engage in project work through a tariff system to allow staff time to work on bids, and the appointment of a Project Manager to assist in the often time consuming and tiresome processes of bid applications. We commend these reforms.

Conclusion

While it is still early days given the lead and lag times for research activities and outputs, the evidence shows that EBS has substantially met secondary condition 2. In formal terms, EBS has implemented the recommendations of the QAC to EKKA on Research Groups and Junior Research posts in full and is making good progress on R&D funding and the engagement of more core staff in such projects. There is scope for further development in these areas which will have the additional benefit of engaging more of Doctoral students in funded projects, so enhancing their career prospects. The addition of a Project Manager post to support research is a very welcome innovation.

Strengths

- The use of KPIs to measure R&D performance is an excellent management tool and there is scope for further development of it (see below). The changes implemented since 2018 show that EBS has the capacity for critical self-reflection and an ability to find solutions to problems.
- We commend in particular the appointment of an R&D Project Manager, the outreach to external partners for R&D collaboration, the acceleration of the appointment of Junior Research Fellows, the re-focus on higher quality publications and the decision to move away from the research group structure.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Further opportunities should be explored to obtain feedback from failed bids and hold debriefing sessions for staff so lessons may be learned, good practices copied, and pitfalls avoided.
- We note EBS's active and growing participation in research grants. Given that 2020 R&D income stood at 303th EUR, the target of 1.5m EUR for 2023 is very ambitious. To achieve this target will require far greater numbers of core staff to participate in successful bids. In this case, consideration should be given to adding a further KPI which focuses on the number of core staff involved in these bids.