

Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Languages and Cultures Study Programme Group Tallinn University

13/03/2018

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 Languages and Cultures 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 22.11.2016.
2. By the order of 31.08.2017, the Director of EKKA approved the Committee for Quality Assessment of the Doctoral Study of the Humanities, Languages and Cultures and Theology Study Programme Groups of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter the Committee) in the following composition

Martin Halliwell	Chairman of the Commission, Professor, University of Leicester (UK)
Kristian Bankov	Professor, New Bulgarian University (Bulgaria)
Anne Boddington	Professor, Kingston University (UK)
Barbara Burns	Assoc. Professor, University of Glasgow (UK)
Julia Dahlberg	PhD student, University of Helsinki (Finland)

Anca Greere	professor, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania and Assistant Director, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
Hans-Günter Heimbrock	Professor Emeritus, Goethe-University Frankfurt (Germany)
Gerrit Immink	Professor Emeritus, Protestant Theological University Groningen (Netherlands)
Jaakko Leino	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
Henrik Meinander	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
Irina Moore	Senior Lecturer, University of Wolverhampton (UK)

3. Tallinn University submitted the following study programmes of Doctoral study for assessment in the Languages and Cultures Study Programme Group:

**Linguistics
Studies of Cultures**

4. Tallinn University submitted a self-analysis report to the EKKA office on 28.08.2017, which was sent to the Committee by the assessment coordinator on 11.09.2017.
5. The assessment visit to Tallinn University took place on 30.11.-1.12.2017.
6. The Committee sent the draft assessment report to the EKKA office on 15.01.2018, which EKKA forwarded to the institution of higher education for comment on 16.01.2018 and to which Tallinn University submitted a reply on 30.01.2018.
7. The Committee submitted the final assessment report to the EKKA office on 11.02.2018. 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 6.03.2018.
9. The Council discussed the received documents at the meeting of 13.03.2018 with the participation of 9 members and decided to highlight the following strengths, recommendations and areas for improvement concerning the Doctoral Study of the Languages and Cultures Study Programme Group of Tallinn University.

With regard to the humanities, languages and cultures and theology study programme groups, the Committee identified the following cross-cutting strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for both the University of Tartu and Tallinn University:

Strengths

- 1) Doctoral study programmes are of high quality. Both universities are aware of the important role of the humanities both in the Estonian higher education system and at the national level.

- 2) Lecturers from the universities of Tartu and Tallinn are committed to supporting the intellectual development of doctoral students and encouraging them to participate in academic communities. Both universities attach importance to the international dimension of their doctoral study programmes and encourage their doctoral students to participate in foreign conferences and longer study visits.
- 3) Universities prepare graduates with a clear expression and self-reflection who have acquired all the knowledge and skills relevant to the doctoral level at the end of their studies. The degree enables graduates to pursue both academic careers and employment in various professions in the fields of culture, education and politics.
- 4) Both universities have their own distinctive strengths that make them known and recognized. For example, the wide-ranging study programmes of languages and cultures of the University of Tartu are impressive, while the specializations of the study programme of the Studies Cultures of Tallinn University make it possible to launch a creative dialogue between different humanity disciplines in a new way.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Doctoral student grants are currently below the subsistence level. As a result, many doctoral students have to work with a significantly higher load to survive. It is recommended to consider increasing doctoral grants at the national level so that doctoral students can commit to their studies without additional work.
- 2) When planning doctoral study places, it is recommended to take into account the resources available to the university, including the possibility to create junior researcher positions for doctoral students and to involve them in research projects.
- 3) It is desirable for both universities to take a more systematic approach to data collection in order to support successful completion of studies, curriculum development and to promote diversity and equal treatment in universities.

General strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations of Tallinn University Humanities and Languages and Cultures Study Programme Groups

Strengths

- 1) The strong interdisciplinarity of the study programmes stimulates fresh ideas and the use of innovative methods in doctoral research.
- 2) The study programmes relate well to the urban environment and culture of Tallinn.
- 3) Doctoral students are free to design their studies flexibly according to their academic needs and intellectual interests.
- 4) International cooperation promotes mobility and supports the professional and academic development of doctoral students.
- 5) There is a strong collegiality between supervisors and doctoral students. Supervisors are committed and well available to doctoral students.
- 6) Lecturers identify and become aware of the needs of society and plan research based on them.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) It is necessary to ensure the sustainability of the number and quality of doctoral students by, among other things, maintaining strong links with the world of work and taking advantage of the contribution of employers.
- 2) The workload of lecturers who have started doctoral studies must be planned so that they can complete their studies within a reasonable time.
- 3) It is recommended to consider strategic cooperation with non-university partners in Estonia and abroad in order to promote applied research.
- 4) At the existing level of doctoral student support, it is recommended to find ways to increase it, rather than creating additional doctoral student places.
- 5) It is recommended to develop an introductory course for doctoral students that would give them an overview of the practical aspects of doctoral studies.
- 6) All doctoral students need to be provided with suitable working conditions, including facilities for socialization and reflection, and the necessary technical resources.
- 7) Doctoral students should be given a clearer overview of the skills acquired during doctoral studies and the possible roles that they may play in Estonian society after graduation.
- 8) In the interests of equal treatment of doctoral students, clear rules must be defined regarding the organization of supervision (incl. frequency of supervision meetings, feedback). It is necessary to constantly monitor the workload of supervisors.
- 9) It is recommended that supervisors be provided with supervision training/continuing education, which is mandatory. How to support the professional development of trainers should be identified and the necessary tools and opportunities provided.
- 10) Obstacles to the co-supervision of doctoral students across study programmes and institutes should be removed in order to stimulate and foster interdisciplinarity.
- 11) It is advisable to establish rules that prevent an excessive number of doctoral students per supervisor.
- 12) The alumni network could be used to advise doctoral students on non-university career opportunities.
- 13) It is definitely necessary to involve foreign members in the doctoral student assessment committee. Feedback mechanisms for doctoral students should also be improved.
- 14) It is desirable to develop mechanisms for sharing good practice between different disciplines.
- 15) The risks associated with the fact that there is only one supervisor in the field, whose leaving the university would leave doctoral students without the necessary supervisory competence, must be identified and mitigated.
- 16) It is necessary to specify the rules concerning the registration for doctoral studies, part-time studies, the suspension of studies for a good reason (e.g., maternity leave or sick leave) and the expectations of lecturers and doctoral candidates regarding supervision.
- 17) The assessment committee was concerned about the lack of a common understanding of research ethics and its possible negative effects on research. It is desirable to establish mechanisms at the university that ensure a demanding and systematic approach to ethical considerations and issues in research, including the establishment of a committee to discuss ethical issues.

Strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations of the Languages and Cultures Study Programme Group

LINGUISTICS

Strengths

- 1) Supervisors are scientifically active and involve doctoral students in their research projects if possible. Doctoral students can use the resources provided by their supervisors through research grants.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Feedback mechanisms do not allow for the collection of sufficient information that can be used in study programme development. It is recommended to continuously collect feedback from doctoral students, lecturers and other stakeholders, analyze it and take it into account in study programme development.
- 2) Cooperation with employers is limited to co-supervision. Systematic cooperation with employers at the study programme level would be beneficial, especially as regards the practical application of linguistics.
- 3) Resource planning is not systematic and does not take into account developments in specific (including more applied) areas. Lecturers do not always have sufficient funds for individual research. It is advisable to establish a clear plan for the allocation of funds for research materials and resources.
- 4) The lack of supervisors poses a risk to the sustainability of doctoral studies. It is recommended to provide more support for teachers with supervision potential in entering doctoral studies and completing them on time. This would make it possible to offer a wider range of doctoral thesis topics to doctoral students in the future.
- 5) Students need more support in preparing articles for publication in international journals.

STUDIES OF CULTURES

Strengths

- 1) The strength of the Studies of Cultures Study Programme lies in its uniqueness and modern approach to interdisciplinary doctoral studies. The study programme is based on the disciplines of the humanities, which range from anthropology and cultural geography to literary studies, philosophy, cultural semiotics, and visual and material culture, through which cultural phenomena can be studied from different intellectual perspectives. The assessment committee was impressed by the diversity and commitment and clear expression of the group of doctoral students and alumni.
- 2) The study programme has a collegial atmosphere, enriched by co-supervision, regular dialogue and methodological diversity, which in turn motivates doctoral students and supervisors to develop different forms of research, basic research, applied research and innovative interdisciplinary research methods. Such developments not only benefit the specialization, but also have a positive effect on the implementation of doctoral studies in the surrounding cultural, social and business context.
- 3) Thanks to participation in EU-funded doctoral schools together with other partner universities, doctoral students studying in the study programme have access to additional resources, training and development opportunities. Doctoral schools also bring together lecturers and researchers from all over Estonia and also internationally.
- 4) The implementation of the study programme is innovative, challenging and effective, as evidenced by the increase in the number of nominal-time graduates and the ability of current doctoral students to think about their post-graduate careers outside the university.
- 5) The entry of lecturers for doctoral studies is encouraged in order to increase the long-term sustainability and reach of the study programme and to support its possible expansion.

- 6) Interdisciplinary seminars are conducted in Estonian and English, which are valued by both foreign and local doctoral students.
- 7) All supervisors are highly qualified and active researchers.
- 8) The responsibility for supervision is increasingly shared both in the study programme and in the entire humanitarian field.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Study programme leaders, supervisors and doctoral students acknowledged the need to raise public awareness of the value of the humanities and the potential social and cultural impact of the Studies of Cultures Study Programme.
- 2) It is recommended to look for more cooperation opportunities with non-university partners in order to expand the career opportunities of graduates also outside academia.
- 3) The university should review its mentoring regulations to ensure that maximum use is made of the mentoring capacity and competence. Lecturers who do not yet qualify as principal supervisors in terms of the level and scope of their research, but are potentially good supervisors, could be used as co-supervisors.
- 4) The quality of doctoral studies and its criteria need to be discussed regularly and in a structured way, and the results of the discussion need to be documented.
- 5) The proposal of doctoral students to conduct more subjects in English should be considered.
- 6) Given that many doctoral students are delayed in their studies due to financial difficulties, it is necessary to reconsider the principles of the distribution of doctoral grants in the humanitarian field at the university level.
- 7) The university needs to review its funding models so that their implementation does not lead to a decline in the quality or interdisciplinarity of the research carried out at the institute.
- 8) Given the constraints on funding doctoral schools, it is desirable to include more general skills subjects in the Studies of Cultures Study Programme in order to ensure its sustainability.
- 9) It is recommended to develop a doctoral study manual, which describes the main milestones and expectations related to doctoral studies from the perspective of both doctoral students and supervisors. This would contribute to the development of good practices by ensuring that all parties have a clear picture of each other's expectations and concerns.
- 10) The assessment of doctoral students should be better integrated into the supervision process and the views of the doctoral student, the supervisor and the impartial evaluator should be equally represented.
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 Languages and Cultures 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 13.03.2019 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