

**Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Social  
Services 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 Services 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 dated 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 (Head 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	Ph.D. student (Psychology), University of Cambridge (UK)

3. Tallinn University submitted the following Doctoral study programmes for assessment in the Social Services Study Programme Group:  
**Social Work**  
**Well-Being and Health Behavior**
4. 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.
5. The assessment visit to Tallinn University took place on 14.-15.11.2018.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. The Secretary of the Assessment Council forwarded the final assessment report and self-analysis report to the members of the Assessment Council on 14.02.2019.
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 Services 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**

- 1) The limited budget forces universities to develop comprehensive plans to ensure the sustainability of teaching and research (including Doctoral study). The management 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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 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: the 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 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 Social Services 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 environments.
- 2) Doctoral schools and seminars provide a good opportunity to meet other doctoral students and lecturers from other universities.

### **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 Sciences and Health offers excellent opportunities to create new unique lines of research. On student admissions, more attention should be paid to 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) 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.
- 8) Students who have an external supervisor must also be provided with a supervisor from Tallinn University.
- 9) 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.

- 10) A more transparent workload model that ensures a better balance of supervision responsibilities.

## **SOCIAL WORK**

### **Strengths**

- 1) The study programme is interdisciplinary, which also reflects the nature of social work. Several activities bring together lecturers from different fields, partly at the level of the institute, partly also through the doctoral school.
- 2) Although it is a small doctoral programme, it also attracts students from other Baltic countries thanks to the expertise at Tallinn University.
- 3) The use of co-supervisors supports interdisciplinarity, internationalization, and staff development.
- 4) The pre-doctoral course is a great initiative. It helps to manage students' expectations for doctoral studies and brings them together with existing research teams while maintaining the possibility of accepting candidates with personal interests.
- 5) Three years ago, a new and comprehensive strategy was implemented to address low completion rates and high drop-out rates.
- 6) Students have many choices in research topics, research methods, and subjects offered.
- 7) There is access to the necessary library resources, including e-journals and databases.
- 8) Given the shortage of social work specialists with a doctorate, the programme has made good use of the resources provided by SOGOLAS, and a strategy to increase the research capacity of social work staff is being followed.
- 9) Students use the resources available to participate in conferences and mobility. Foreign lecturers and supervisors are also involved.
- 10) Students and faculty form a cohesive team that creates a positive research environment.
- 11) Lecturers participate in several international activities and use international resources to develop social work practices and services that are important in the Estonian context.
- 12) The multidisciplinary nature of lecturers is a real strength. Given the heterogeneity of social work, it is very good to have supervisors from different backgrounds. It is also useful to have a researcher who can cover different aspects of social work.
- 13) The staff is fully competent and motivated. There is cooperation between lecturers; the division of roles is clear.
- 14) Admission requirements, including for international students, are well set out on the university's website.

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- 1) Although it is a small programme, it is important that social work retains its identity while forming part of the interdisciplinary vision of the institute and the university.
- 2) The doctoral programme in social work plays an important role in Estonia as a welfare state. Its potential could be better realized through closer cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and other external stakeholders.



- 3) The shortage of lecturers of social work with a doctorate is a problem that needs to be addressed seriously. This is necessary to create a living scientific culture and to ensure that supervisors are competent in the topics they supervise.
- 4) The Committee recommends that consideration be given to setting up an industrial doctorate to support the existing system. Study programme developers could study different models across Europe (for example, the United Kingdom) to see what works best for Tallinn University.
- 5) The study programme has an important role to play in demonstrating the value of science in the development of various practices, services, and social welfare policies. Students should be encouraged to disseminate the results of their research more widely.
- 6) Social work staff should consider how they can apply for funding for team-based research so that students can collaborate in a team, thus expanding their research skills.
- 7) As doctoral students value their work outside academia, which is also the basis of their own research, the university should consider recognizing them as part-time students.
- 8) Many students have been forced to seek expert advice on their dissertation from outside the university. They often do so on their own initiative. The university should facilitate and support students' access to a variety of resources (including experts), especially on very specific topics.
- 9) As students often read and write in a language other than their mother tongue, they should be provided with more language courses and individual support.
- 10) Consideration could be given to creating e-courses that would be of particular benefit to students and practitioners living outside Tallinn.
- 11) The Psychology Study Programme offers courses in statistical and quantitative methods. They should also be open to doctoral students in social work.
- 12) Although the Social Work Study Programme has begun to present the results of research to the public and practitioners, the range of beneficiaries should be further expanded.
- 13) The teaching workload of lecturers is high and leaves relatively little time for research and supervision of doctoral students. Recruiting new lecturers would help to balance the workload.
- 14) Through active mentoring and reduction of workload, support should be continued for young workers to help them complete their doctoral studies and thus increase their research capacity.
- 15) Since 2006, 25 doctoral students have been admitted to the study programme, and 17 of them have dropped out.
- 16) Student mobility, teamwork, and career guidance could be further supported; especially for careers outside academia.

## **WELL-BEING AND HEALTH BEHAVIOR**

### **Strengths**

- 1) It is a truly interdisciplinary study programme that allows students to address issues that solve real-life problems.
- 2) The seminar on interdisciplinarity is very interesting and promotes dialogue on this issue. This is highly valued by both lecturers and students. The flexibility of subject courses is necessary to ensure interdisciplinarity and is also available in the study programme.
- 3) The study programme makes good use of the resources of other study programmes (such as chemistry and ecology), which in turn supports interdisciplinarity. The diversity of the teaching staff from different disciplines and lecturers presenting in seminars also contributes to the broad-based nature.

- 4) Students are very supportive of each other, which is the result of the culture designed in the study programme.
- 5) Doctoral students often work in different fields and bring to the university expertise and experience in their field, which helps to deepen discussions and add value to the projects they are working on. The doctoral students who met with the Committee are very enthusiastic about their research topics and have practical ideas for developing research in their field. This is a very commendable and good example of how doctoral projects can have a significant impact on society.
- 6) The study programme unites students from different backgrounds. Most of the doctoral students met by the Committee are so-called unconventional and are likely to continue working outside academia.

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- 1) Connections with other fields of study must be continued. More international contacts, national and international networks, and links with external stakeholders should be established in order to increase funding opportunities and help develop project ideas.
- 2) The Master's programme in Social Entrepreneurship could be used to help build links with external stakeholders. It would also help to increase the awareness of Master's students of the doctoral programme in Well-Being and Health Behavior and thus increase their admission to doctoral studies. However, this should not jeopardize the admission of external candidates.
- 3) The Committee encourages the development of an ethics course in cooperation with other institutes. This course should also be made available for other doctoral programs.
- 4) Although the programme manager and lecturer are motivated, the study programme would benefit from the involvement of supervisors from other areas as well.
- 5) There is room for improvement in the social elements of projects. For example, there could be more collaboration with social science study programmes, and students who work more on technical projects should be helped to better understand the social impact of those projects.
- 6) The workload of lecturers is high. It is recommended to work with external organizations and other university staff to enable each employee to engage in research and development and participate in mobility.
- 7) A plan should be developed to facilitate internationalization, provide an alternative to long-term mobility and ensure that employees participate in internationalization and broaden their horizons (e.g., by attending lectures, short-term collaborative projects, short-term study visits, etc.).
- 8) The study programme leader must be recognized for creating and implementing a forward-looking study programme. The Committee recommends thinking about a mentoring program for the Deputy Head of the Study Programme to ensure persistence and sustainability of the vision.
- 9) While it is encouraging that the study programme already has a potential doctoral candidate, the Committee strongly recommends assessing the readiness of students and materials before the defense. Using articles from previous Master's or Doctoral studies to defend a doctoral degree may reduce the value of the degree. The use of previous publications is only justified if they are an integral part of the doctoral thesis.
- 10) As a large proportion of doctoral students are unlikely to continue their work in academia, the Committee also recommends that they be introduced to the possibility of a monograph and a single publication to ensure graduation with the nominal time.

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 (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 curriculum, 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 Services 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**