

**Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Humanities  
Study Programme Group  
University of Tartu**

**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 of Humanities Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu in seven years.**

Pursuant to clause 40.1 of the document "Quality Assessment of the Study Programme Group of the Doctoral Study" 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. University of Tartu coordinated the quality assessment period of the study programme group with EKKA on 18.11.2016.
2. By the order on 31.08.2017, the Director of EKKA approved the Committee for Quality Assessment of the Doctoral Study of the Languages and Cultures Study Programme Groups of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter the Committee) in the following composition

<b>Martin Halliwell</b>	Chairman of the Commission, Professor, University of Leicester (UK)
<b>Kristian Bankov</b>	Professor, New Bulgarian University (Bulgaria)
<b>Anne Boddington</b>	Professor, Kingston University (UK)
<b>Barbara Burns</b>	Assoc. Professor, University of Glasgow (UK)
<b>Julia Dahlberg</b>	Ph.D. student, University of Helsinki (Finland)
<b>Anca Greere</b>	professor, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania;

	Assistant Director, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
<b>Hans-Günter Heimbrock</b>	Professor Emeritus, Goethe-University Frankfurt (Germany)
<b>Gerrit Immink</b>	Professor Emeritus, Protestant Theological University Groningen (Netherlands)
<b>Jaakko Leino</b>	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
<b>Henrik Meinander</b>	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
<b>Irina Moore</b>	Senior Lecturer, University of Wolverhampton (Suurbritannia)

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following Doctoral study programme for assessment in the Humanities Study Programme Group:

**History**  
**Philosophy**  
**Semiotics and cultural theory**

4. The University of Tartu 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 the University of Tartu took place on 28. – 29.11.2017.
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 the University of Tartu submitted a reply on 26.01.2018.
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 8 members and decided to highlight the following strengths, recommendations, and areas for improvement concerning the Doctoral Study of the Humanities Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu.

**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. Graduates have the opportunity to pursue an academic career as well as work 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 of 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 study programme group of Humanities, Languages and Cultures and Theology of the University of Tartu**

#### **Strengths**

- 1) The academic level of the study programme, supervisors, and doctoral students is high.
- 2) Doctoral students have a positive attitude, and they are enthusiastic.
- 3) The cooperation between supervisors and doctoral students works very well. The supervisors are very committed to the doctoral students and take care of their well-being.
- 4) International mobility opportunities support the professional and academic development of doctoral students.

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

- 1) The role of different support structures of doctoral studies needs to be more clearly defined. The English terminology concerning the structural units of the university and the doctoral schools could be harmonized and unambiguous for everyone.

- 2) It is necessary to increase the efficiency of doctoral studies in order to ensure the completion of studies within a maximum of six (4+2) years.
- 3) It is necessary to develop a plan to ensure the stability and sustainability of the number and quality of doctoral students, taking into account, inter alia, the need to strengthen links with the world of work.
- 4) Doctoral students should be given a clearer overview of the skills acquired during doctoral studies and the possible roles that they may begin to play in Estonian society after graduation.
- 5) There is currently no systematic communication with alumni in the study programmes. The alumni network could be used for out-of-university career guidance for doctoral students. The development of doctoral study programmes could make better use of the experience of alumni and information regarding which positions the doctoral degree is relevant for employment.
- 6) It is necessary to ensure uniformly good working conditions (incl. jobs) for doctoral students in all departments and study programme.
- 7) There is a need to clearly define the rules for enrollment in doctoral studies, part-time studies, suspension of studies for a good reason (e.g., maternity leave or sick leave), and to specify the expectations for supervision for lecturers and doctoral students. In the interests of equal treatment of doctoral students, it is recommended to define clear rules regarding the organization of supervision (incl. frequency of supervision meetings, provision of feedback).
- 8) The maximum workload of supervisors per doctoral student should be formally defined and considered as part of the total workload of the lecturer.
- 9) It is recommended to develop mandatory training for supervisors. The principles of co-supervision should be clearly established to ensure the quality of the work of external co-supervisors.
- 10) Instead of the current system of awarding individual prizes to lecturers for doctoral dissertations defended over a six-year period, it would be useful to use the funds more strategically, reinvesting them, for example, in support of the research activities of doctoral students and their supervisors.
- 11) The workload of supervisors and the quality of supervision should be constantly monitored. At the university level, it is necessary to recognize and assess the teaching ability and expertise of lecturers.
- 12) The role of the annual evaluation of doctoral students in the "life cycle" of a doctoral student should be better understood. Consistency of evaluation in all study programmes should also be ensured.
- 13) Interviews with lecturers and doctoral students showed that clear guidelines on research ethics are not always clearly available to everyone, especially when it comes to human research. It is recommended to establish common principles and standards of research ethics at the university level. Lecturers and doctoral students should also be offered advice on research ethics, as appropriate.

## **Strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations of the Humanities Study Programme Group**

### **HISTORY**

#### **Strengths**

- 1) The study building is in a great location in the center of Tartu. The work premises of lecturers and doctoral students are new and well equipped.
- 2) The Department has numerous foreign-funded research projects involving many doctoral students.

- 3) The Department has three professorships permanently funded from the state budget.
- 4) The number of doctoral students graduating on a standard period of study has grown significantly in five years.
- 5) Doctoral students' satisfaction with teaching and supervision is somewhat higher than the university average.
- 6) The faculty has a wide range of academic competence and contacts, which creates an excellent environment for students (with a good level of infrastructure) for doctoral studies.
- 7) Younger lecturers often attend training seminars and value the new skills acquired during them.
- 8) The plan to develop doctoral students' study skills (incl. independent work skills) and to include a time planning course in the Study Programme deserves support.

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

- 1) It is advisable to ask doctoral students and lecturers for in-depth feedback on how they would like to improve the doctoral student evaluation process and clarify its central purpose. It is recommended to introduce a system that would also allow for regular and anonymous feedback between evaluations.
- 2) In order to take into account, the needs of the world of work in the studies, it is necessary to cooperate more systematically with the cultural sector and private companies, especially in the digital field.
- 3) It is recommended to systematically include English-language subjects and seminars in the Study Programme in order to develop doctoral students' language skills, prepare them for work outside Estonia and involve more foreign doctoral students in the Study Programme.
- 4) Even more, experienced lecturers would be advised to take an active part in the in-service training and share best practices.
- 5) Efforts should be stepped up to raise funds for the long-term external mobility of doctoral students, for example, through exchange programs with the Nordic countries and other EU countries, which could provide suitable co-mentoring opportunities and improve access to relevant resources.
- 6) It would be desirable for the Study Programme leader, supervisors, and doctoral students to develop closer and more structured cooperation with alumni and other strategically important persons and companies in Estonia and abroad.

## **PHILOSOPHY**

### **Strengths**

- 1) The Philosophy Study Programme is internationally recognized, being among the top 101-150 specialties in the *QS World University Ranking*.
- 2) The Doctoral Study Programme in Philosophy is clear, coherent, demanding, and inclusive.
- 3) Doctoral students convincingly described to the Evaluation Committee how doctoral studies have benefited their decision-making independence and broadened their intellectual perspectives, while participation in doctoral school activities has developed doctoral students' general skills and transferable competencies.
- 4) Study resources and doctoral students' working premises are at a good level. The study rooms are comfortable, and the Department has its own library with about 14,000 books.
- 5) Doctoral students have good electronic access to academic publications necessary for research, and the Department holds an annual international conference.

- 6) Teaching uses innovative learning formats that help doctoral students develop new subjects, define teaching methods, understand and apply assessment principles, and gain initial teaching experience.
- 7) Lecturers of the Department of Philosophy carry out research cooperation with the Institute of Humanities of Tallinn University, especially in terms of supervision.
- 8) The lecturers have successfully obtained institutional and personal research grants from various national and international funding sources.
- 9) Doctoral students are clearly considered an important part of the research community in the Department. Many doctoral students are actively involved in national and international research projects, and themselves actively organize events such as the Spring School for Career Planning.
- 10) The Philosophy Study Programme has successfully fulfilled the goal of sending doctoral students to study or do research abroad for at least one semester.

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

- 1) It is recommended to review the use and interpretation of the collected data and statistics - for example, the most successful students of the Philosophy Study Programme who have gone from Tartu to study at very reputable foreign universities are considered dropouts, which inadvertently have a negative impact on all statistics.
- 2) It is recommended that the Department clearly state its core strengths and competencies. This information would be especially useful for potential international students and lecturers. All the most important directions of philosophy that are reflected in research can be highlighted in the Study Programme.
- 3) Doctoral students, supervisors, and alumni raised the issue of valuing a doctoral degree, and especially a doctoral degree in philosophy, in Estonian society. Targeted efforts are recommended to emphasize the societal, social, and cultural value of learning at the highest level of the humanities, highlighting the significant impact of these disciplines on everyday life.
- 4) It is recommended to implement more innovative forms of learning and teaching so that all doctoral students can develop their leadership and teamwork skills.
- 5) It would be useful for all lecturers (and other potential supervisors) to introduce new methods and good practices of supervision, including how to take into account the feedback of doctoral students.
- 6) Career opportunities for graduates should be extended beyond academia, as the latter alone does not guarantee the sustainability of doctoral studies. A more strategic and effective discussion of the application possibilities of philosophy in Estonian society may be needed.
- 7) Doctoral students would like to receive more personal feedback from their supervisors on their work in the form of intellectual discussion.

## **SEMiotics AND CULTURAL THEORY**

### **Strengths**

- 1) The Study Programme is taught by a large number of qualified lecturers whose competence includes cultural and social semiotics and biosemiotics.
- 2) The Study Programme is strongly international - involving a large number of foreign lecturers, a lot of foreign students, and an international summer school.

- 3) The Department publishes one of the top international journals, *Sign System Studies*, which helps to raise the general level of all the Department's publications and in which doctoral students can also publish their work.
- 4) Doctoral students can obtain additional funding to participate in conferences, seminars, and international mobility.
- 5) The Doctoral Study Programme is supported by Bachelor's and Master's Study Programmes, which makes the study of semiotics at the University of Tartu unique in its scope. It also raises the expected level of admitted doctoral students compared to other European Doctoral programs.

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

- 1) The general problem is the relationship of the Study Programme with the world outside academia. It is recommended to consider (in addition to greater interdisciplinarity and cooperation within the university) systematic and effective cooperation with institutions and companies outside the university as one of the strategic goals. It would be advisable to focus not only on the research directions of the Tartu-Moscow school but also on applied topics. It would also be advisable to recruit students from more applied backgrounds to the Doctoral Study Programme.
  - 2) Only a few lecturers are involved in the implementation of the Doctoral Study Programme. It is recommended to involve more lecturers in doctoral studies in order to expand the circle of possible supervisors.
  - 3) It is recommended to consider the proposal of doctoral students to cooperate more with the Department of Philosophy within the Study Programme.
- 10.** Clause 40 of the document "Quality Assessment of the Study Programme Group of the Doctoral Study" 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 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 Humanities Study Programme Group of the University of Tartu in seven years.**

The decision was adopted by eight votes in favor, and none opposed.

- 12.** The Council proposes to the University of Tartu 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 five days of receipt of the challenge. The Assessment Council shall resolve the challenge within ten 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**