

**Assessment decision for Doctoral Study in the Theology
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 Theology 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. The 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

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	Ph.D. student, University of Helsinki (Finland)
Anca Greere	professor, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania;

	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 (Suurbritannia)

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following Doctoral Study Programme for evaluation in the Theology Study Programme Group:

Theology

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 Theology 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 Study 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 programmes.
- 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 programme 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 Theology Study Programme Group

Strengths

- 1) The University of Tartu has strong academic traditions in the field of theology.
- 2) The cooperation and integration of theology and religious studies in the Study Programme deserve recognition.
- 3) Doctoral school courses, small conferences, and seminars provide a suitable framework for doctoral students to develop their academic and professional skills.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) In the field of theology and religious studies, it is recommended to deal with the strategic planning of research directions in order to plan new doctoral thesis topics and to develop the research capacity of lecturers. Consideration could be given to linking doctoral theses to the general research plan of the Faculty of Theology.
 - 2) It is strongly desirable to further develop interdisciplinary research models in the field of religious studies.
 - 3) The Faculty of Theology should clearly define the responsibilities of the supervisor after the end of the nominal period and after the sixth year of study.
 - 4) The Study Programme needs to place more emphasis on the societal importance of research in the field of religion and to help doctoral students better understand how the acquired academic and professional skills will benefit their future roles in religious communities and society at large.
 - 5) It is recommended to organize meetings of lecturers, during which the topics of supervision are discussed (for example, how the supervision of doctoral theses differs from the supervision at the master's level) and peer-to-peer support is given to each other.
 - 6) In the interests of equal treatment of doctoral students, it would be necessary to formalize the principles concerning the organization of supervision (incl. frequency of supervision meetings, provision of feedback). It is recommended to set a certain limit on the teaching load of doctoral students.
- 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 in 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 Theology 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