

**Decision Regarding Assessment of the Business and
Administration Study Programme Group at the Level of
Doctoral Studies
Tallinn University of Technology**

26/02/2019

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education at the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of doctoral studies in the Business and Administration study programme group at Tallinn University of Technology in seven years.

On the basis of subsection 10 (4) of the Universities Act and point 40.1 of the 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies', authorised in points 3.7.3 and 3.7.1 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA'), the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 12.10.2017 Tallinn University of Technology and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct the quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order of 23.08.2018, approved the following membership of the quality assessment committee for the quality assessment of the third cycle of higher education in the Law; Business and Administration (including Economics) study programme groups at Estonian Business School, University of Tartu and Tallinn University of Technology and Estonian University of Life Sciences (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

Roger Levy (chair)	Professor, London School of Economics, United Kingdom
Andrew Clark	Professor, Paris School of Economics, France
Aalt Willem Heringa	Professor, Maastricht University, The Netherlands
Per Læg Reid	Professor, University of Bergen, Norway
Maris Moks	PhD student, Hertie School of Governance, Germany

Janek Uiboupin

Member of Management Board, Coop Bank,
Estonia

3. Tallinn University of Technology submitted the following third cycle study programmes for assessment in the Business and Administration study programme group:
Public Administration
Economics and Business Administration
4. Tallinn University of Technology submitted the self-analysis report to EKKA on 16.07.2018, which the assessment coordinator forwarded to the committee on 13.08.2018.
5. Assessment visit to Tallinn University of Technology took place on 18.10.2018.
6. The committee submitted the draft assessment report to EKKA on 21.11.2018, which was sent to the university for comments by EKKA on 21.11.2018 and to which Tallinn University of Technology delivered its response on 4.12.2018.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to EKKA on 11.12.2018. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee's final assessment report along with the University's self-evaluation report to the Council members on 14.12.2018.
9. The Council with 9 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 26.02.2019 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Business and Administration study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at Tallinn University of Technology.

The committee listed the following transversal areas for improvement and recommendations concerning the Business and Administration (including Economics) and Law study programme groups at Estonian Business School, University of Tartu and Tallinn University of Technology:

- 1) Where research grants are driving the research agenda, PhD students are focussed on more specific topics and their activities are driven by outputs/publications required to achieve the outcomes set by grant holders. Regarding the content of the PhD programme, there seems to be a lot of variations and a lack of a clear academic profile or approach.
- 2) Collaboration between departments internally and between respective departments across the three institutions is generally weak, not helped by the competitive research funding environment and the small pool of qualified supervisors and eligible candidates for PhD studentships. Good examples of collaboration are few and far between.
- 3) A significant number of students think that outside of pursuing an academic career, the PhD has no real value in the marketplace. The launch of the Industrial PhD appears so far not to have been successful.
- 4) Although full time students appreciate the additional funding, they do not think that the €660 + €400 is enough to live on, which is why many of them work, some even having multiple jobs. The new system for admission and funding of PhD students more or less rules out the possibility of part time doctoral studies. Considering the small number of doctoral students and limited pool

of domestic talents, the system would also have to accommodate part time PhD studies. New research applications should provide for financing opportunities for full time as well as part time students.

- 5) In most cases, mobility is for short periods only and in the case of part time students, mobility opportunities are often non-existent. Given how many Estonian PhD students are de facto part time and have family responsibilities, this is a problem. New opportunities for longer-term international mobility of doctoral students should be sought. This could be achieved for example by strengthening the relevant requirements and monetary incentives.
- 6) There are varied practices within the supervision and assessment process. Thus, not all students are co-supervised for example. Some supervisors meet with their students once per week, others once a month, others twice per year. There are no common standards for supervision bar the absolute minimum of an annual Progress Review to prepare for the annual attestation/evaluation. The co-supervision requirement should apply to all students. Universities should be more active in enhancing the skills of supervisors. Involving active researchers as supervisors should be given more priority.
- 7) As to the 3 publications vs. monograph routes of study, the committee recommends that future doctoral students be given an equal choice between the two alternatives. Doctoral students that choose the 3 articles route would need to be the sole authors of at least one article and the supervisor should not be among co-authors of more than one publication. The publications/monograph should comply with the requirements set for peer reviewed research publications, however according to the committee need not necessarily be published before the submittal of the thesis.
- 8) PhD programme specific KPIs need to be developed, articulated, shared and monitored regularly. At the least, recruitment, progression and graduation targets, student satisfaction indicators, and international mobility targets should be included, as well as research excellence indicators, supervision standards. Supervisor workload and supervisor training goals need to be clearly defined. Universities' Action Plans need to be linked to these KPIs and objectives. In order to reach the targets, SMART goals need to be set and linked to the Action Plans.
- 9) As achieving critical mass is a challenge in most discipline areas, the role of the Doctoral School for Economics and Innovation (MIDOK) should be enhanced to include research groups in the institutions in order to foster greater departmental and institutional collaboration.
- 10) Given the importance of the pre-defence, the presence of two external (to the university) reviewers at the pre-defence is recommended. The same reviewers can also be used at the formal defence.

The committee listed the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the Business and Administration study programme group at Tallinn University of Technology:

Strengths

- 1) TalTech systems for doctoral studies are thorough and systematic. Departmental Action Plans have SMART goals and there is multiple evidence in the SER of a culture of continuous improvement.
- 2) €400 top-up for each full time PhD student.
- 3) The reorganisation of doctoral studies is well advanced and has delivered benefits in terms of intra-university collaboration.

- 4) The physical infrastructure is modern and of high quality. There are generous office facilities for PhD students, and excellent library and IT capabilities. The PhD students are provided access to all databases, materials and equipment necessary for their work.
- 5) The PhD student body in both study programmes participate actively in Doctoral Schools and more informal seminars and reading groups.
- 6) PhD students of both study programmes are in demand on the labour market. The students from the Doctoral Programme in Economics and Business have generally done well in the labour market and the broader community in Estonia. All Public Administration students have found jobs in academia, public sector or international organisations.
- 7) Supervisors are internationally recognized researchers, some have work experience from the private or public sector.
- 8) Supervisors are successful researchers of international repute involving PhD students in externally funded projects, and have strong academic profiles, outputs and networks. The international renown of supervisors and faculty members have contributed to the attractiveness of the study programmes by attracting very talented students. Funding opportunities offered by doctoral school and other mobility instruments have enabled the participation of PhD students in the work of research groups.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The student satisfaction survey is very superficial. It is recommended that an in-depth survey of PhD students using the Social Sciences survey at UT as its template, is carried out at TalTech.
- 2) It is too early to judge the success or otherwise of the new funding model for doctoral students. We recommend a permanent review group be established for the first five years to measure progress.
- 3) The new funding model is having a downward impact on total numbers calling into question the sustainability of programmes. It is thus vital that inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration be prioritised. The new funding model and the rules, regulations and procedures are aimed at full time students. Given the fact that most students are de facto part time because they have multiple jobs, the role of part-time and external students should be clarified.
- 4) Teaching and assessment by staff should be subject to the same level and regularity of evaluation as is the progress of PhD student work. Despite the existence of a formal student feedback system a systematic approach to development of staff teaching and supervising skills is lacking.
- 5) The uptake of medium and long-term international mobilities is still a problem, so new pathways need to be explored to enable greater access.
- 6) TalTech would seem to be well positioned to take advantage of the Industrial PhD system, yet there is little evidence so far of its use. In particular, better use could be made of the alumni network in this respect.
- 7) The department hosts a large number of research groups (21). An independent review of the 21 research groups should be carried out on the basis of activity and output measures, with a view to rationalisation.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Strengths

- 1) Deep internationalisation in all activities of the study programme. The programme is taught in English, and about 30% of the PhD students are from abroad. There is a strong element of international staff of high repute on faculty and as visiting staff. There are many international partnerships and active participation in networks for research, student and faculty exchange. The Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance has been very successful in applying for funding from international research programs. Faculty members have strong academic profiles and output.
- 2) PhD students are involved in departmental research projects as junior researchers.
- 3) Excellent quality of the PhD theses of graduates. Public Administration doctoral students have won 4 out of 6 best PhD thesis awards of the NISPAcee (*The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe*) during the past six years. In the Estonian context, the theses have also received several awards at competitions for best doctoral theses in social sciences.
- 4) The feedback system is comprehensive, taking into account the views of all stakeholders. It is very responsive to students, new elements in research project management, doctoral seminars, and quantitative methods have been introduced.
- 5) The annual evaluation committee for doctoral students includes an international expert.
- 6) The weekly PhD seminar allows doctoral students to get feedback from other faculty members and doctoral students and thus indicates a collective responsibility for the individual PhD projects.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) While many PhD students take advantage of short term international mobility opportunities, longer sojourns were rare, not least because of the demands of research projects.
- 2) There is a risk that the imperatives of grant funding take over as the *raison d'être* of the Department and core topics in the discipline are overshadowed. It is recommended that consideration be given to the future direction of the programme in this context within the framework of the curriculum development system.
- 3) Another consequence of the grant funded model of the Public Administration study programme is that many of the PhD topics seem to revolve around 'the case of Estonia'. While this fulfils the need to serve Estonian society, this could also be achieved with a comparative perspective going beyond Estonia.
- 4) The choice of courses in the study programme needs further development and their compliance with PhD standard should be ensured. More comprehensive research methods' courses should be developed first and foremost.

ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Strengths

- 1) The focus in the programme revised in 2018 on student choice and on offering courses, which will enhance students' transferable skills.
- 2) The competition between supervisors in terms of research topics is useful, and the evaluation of these projects by international reviewers is an example of best practices.
- 3) Supervisors are experienced researchers, some have work experience from the private or public sector. Supervisors participating in international research networks broadens opportunities for internationalisation.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The relative lack of project funding for Economics and Business Administration is a concern if PhD positions are to be funded in this way. The funding of PhD positions directly by the School is an alternative. Any insufficiency in the number of good-quality applications to the Doctoral programme can be addressed via the systematic advertisement of these positions abroad.
 - 2) Discussions with staff and students during the assessment visit indicated that there seems to be at present only limited collaboration between Economics and Business Administration.
 - 3) There was only limited contact with employers regarding the placement of PhD students, or the potential funding of PhD positions. Although a number of PhD students will be known to potential employers as this is a small labour market, this is less true for students coming from abroad.
 - 4) Clear metrics need to be established to measure the degree to which the objectives of new programme are being achieved. The present student survey is inadequate for this purpose.
10. Point 40 of the 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies' establishes that the Quality Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Council shall weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations outlined in the assessment report, and decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven, five or three years.
11. The Council weighed the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations presented in point 9 of this document and found that the study programme, the teaching conducted under these programmes, and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to the requirements, and

DECIDED

to approve the assessment report and conduct the next quality assessment of the third cycle of studies in the Business and Administration study programme group at Tallinn University of Technology in seven years.

Decision was adopted by 9 votes in favour. Against 0.

12. The Council proposes that Tallinn University of Technology submit an action plan to EKKA concerning the areas for improvement and recommendations pointed out in the report no later than 26.02.2020.
13. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

The Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.

A legal challenge to this decision is possible within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court under the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

Eve Eisenschmidt
Chair of the Council

Hillar Bauman
Secretary of the Council