

Decision Regarding Assessment of the Journalism and Information Study Programme Group at the Level of Doctoral Studies University of Tartu

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 the Journalism and Information Study Programme Group at the level of Doctoral Studies at the University of Tartu 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 6.10.2018, the University of Tartu and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 23.08.2018, approved the following composition of the quality assessment committee for the Social Sciences and Journalism and Information study programme groups at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

Jonas Hinnfors (Chair)	Professor, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
Suzanne Franks	Professor, City University London, United Kingdom
Emily Grundy	Professor, University of Essex and London School of Economics, United Kingdom
David Inglis	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
Knud Erik Jørgensen	Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark

Mart Laatsit	PhD student, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark
Jaanika Puusalu	PhD student, University of Exeter, United Kingdom

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following doctoral programme for evaluation under the journalism and information study programme group:

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4. The University of Tartu submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 12.07.2018, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 13.08.2018.
5. An assessment visit to the University of Tartu took place on 16 and 17 October 2018.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 30.11.2018, and EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 5.12.2018, and the University delivered its response on 17.12.2018.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 21.12.2018. 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 14.02.2019.
9. The Council, with 8 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 journalism and information study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu.

The Committee pointed out the following common strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the doctoral programmes of Sociology, Political Science, and Media and Communication at Tartu University and for the Social Sciences study programme group at Tallinn University:

Strengths

- 1) Structural reforms carried out at both universities have contributed to the development of a modern social sciences education and research system, of which dedicated lecturers and students are an essential part.
- 2) Both lecturers and PhD students contribute strongly to the development of Estonian society.
- 3) Graduates are highly valued in the labour market (in ministries, the non-governmental sector, etc.) for their analytical and presentation skills, among others.
- 4) Study programmes are very well managed. The heads of study programmes are highly qualified, proactive, well-connected outside the academy, and with brilliant teaching and research backgrounds.

- 5) The doctoral seminar system is well functioning. Both PhD students and lecturers regularly present their research there and provide each other with feedback. Seminars, therefore, constitute a supportive addition to regular supervision and assessment.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) One of the main challenges is the fact that students take rather long to graduate. While draconian measures are to be avoided, all relevant parties should consider the priorities regarding the time it takes to graduate and how realistic they are. Just formulating a target does not change anything. Financing, clear procedures for all stages of PhD projects, and a sensible balance between the doctoral project and other tasks are essential factors to consider.
- 2) A general feature of the programmes of social sciences is a certain lack of fully transparent guidelines, rules and procedures for staff and students to follow. Without making the system unwieldy and bureaucratised, it would be welcome if some of the rather implicit regulations and policies were made more transparent and accessible.
- 3) The Committee strongly recommends all responsible parties – from the university management down to individual programmes – to clarify workload expectations for supervisors, expected graduation time, and conditions for part-time study. Since many PhD students also have non-university jobs, the possibilities for part-time study should be officially and clearly regulated. Also, the effect and consequences of the new funding scheme should be analysed.
- 4) Many PhD students do not know each other. Universities should find ways to boost PhD community ties.
- 5) Universities should review their selection/admissions criteria and make them more focused on applicants' objective merits and less on their pre-established ties with a supervisor.
- 6) The requirement of having published at least three peer-reviewed international journal articles in order to defend a PhD thesis entails certain risks. The graduation process is too time-consuming, the co-authorship of PhD students and supervisors can go too far, and papers may be published in rather low-ranked journals. It is recommended that publication requirements be changed.

The Committee pointed out the following common strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the study programme group of Social Sciences (study programmes of Sociology and Political Science), and the study programme group of Journalism and Information (Media and Communication study programme) at Tartu University:

Strengths

- 1) The institutes have good collaboration links with international networks.
- 2) Potential employers appreciate graduates' analytical, presentation, and time management skills.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) PhD students being too integrated into the daily activities of the institute can have unintended consequences: students becoming too tied to supervisors as co-authors (and lack

independence), students being overburdened by teaching and other tasks, which takes focus away from their PhD research.

- 2) It is quite common that students are personally invited to apply for the programme by their MA supervisors. In the long run, this may not be beneficial to the quality of the candidates. A lack of transparency and objective criteria regarding the application process can be sensed.
- 3) The Committee was surprised to find that there are no university/faculty/institute-level tools in place to monitor the effect of policies and reforms on the principle of equal opportunities. It is not always clear whether students have access to desk-space, software and other resources.

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Strengths

- 1) The Programme Director is a remarkable researcher with a coherent vision and sets a brilliant example to her colleagues. It is due to her efficient work that identifying and solving problems also functions by unofficial means.
- 2) Doctoral students enjoy excellent conditions for top-level international mobility.
- 3) Both PhD seminars and collegial preliminary defence are very valuable. The PhD seminar is a helpful tool that offers the students an opportunity to present their work and receive feedback.
- 4) Good desk-space has been made available to students. The library and information resources are suitable for an extensive and modern programme.
- 5) There is a good level of supervision, which both students and alumni are generally satisfied with. The lecturers are clearly competent in that regard.
- 6) The study programme has some remarkable alumni whose contribution to society is very valuable.
- 7) International students have been received well and integrated.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The content of subject courses should be reviewed, and students given more freedom to select subject courses.
- 2) In some cases, it would be worth considering offering financing so that extern students could participate at conferences.
- 3) The requirements for receiving a full doctoral allowance (together with additional funding by the University) should be better explained to postgraduate students.
- 4) Making part-time doctoral studies available, accompanied by proportional support and duration, should be considered.
- 5) It would be beneficial if the expectations towards supervision were clearer to both parties (in the form of official documentation). It should cover both workloads of supervisors and supervisees in order to guarantee realistic expectations. It should be a general rule to assign a co-supervisor to all students.
- 6) The students lack experience and training in applying for funding. It would prove a priceless help first and foremost to those students who want to pursue an academic career.
- 7) Some students would benefit from receiving more career counselling.

- 8) Both students and the study programme, in general, would benefit from maximising the use of local and international ties with partners.

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 receiving 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 to conduct the next quality assessment of the Journalism and Information study programme group at the level of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu in seven years.

The decision was adopted by 8 votes in favour and 0 against.

12. The Council proposes that the University of Tartu will submit an action plan to EKKA with regard to the areas for improvement and recommendations pointed out in the report no later than 26.02.2020.

13. A person who finds that their rights have been violated or their 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