

Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies

Approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment
Council for Higher Education
on 13 June 2016



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I. General Provisions

1. On the basis of clause 10 (1) 2), subsection 10 (4) and § 12² of the Universities Act and subsections 14 (6) to (8) of the Private Schools Act, as well as taking into account the Republic of Estonia Standard of Higher Education, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area; the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA') shall establish and disclose the conditions and procedure for quality assessment of study programme groups.
2. Quality assessment of study programme groups in doctoral studies is an external evaluation, assessing compliance of doctoral programmes and the instruction based on them with legislation, national and international standards and trends; with the aim to make recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.
3. Universities have an obligation to undergo assessment of the quality of their study programme groups at least once in seven years.
4. No later than six months prior to the assessment visit, EKKA and the university shall agree upon a time frame for assessment. The assessment is based on the university's self-evaluation of the study programme group.

II. Assessment Areas and Standards

5. EKKA shall assess the quality of doctoral programmes and the conduct of doctoral studies, including their compliance with national strategies, economic environment needs and global trends, in terms of the following assessment areas and standards:

5.1. Study programme

- 5.1.1. The launch and development of the study programme are based on the Standard of Higher Education and other legislation, national strategies, university development plans, the performance of research and development, various analyses (including labour market and feasibility analyses); striving for the best overall programme quality.
- 5.1.2. Doctoral programmes contain at least 70% research, development or other creative work by doctoral students, making the results thereof public in international peer-reviewed research journals or in other ways that have international dimensions.
- 5.1.3. Study programmes incorporate doctoral student participation in conferences and/or other professional activities, and are counted towards completion of the study programme.
- 5.1.4. Doctoral programmes enable doctoral students to acquire leadership and teamwork skills, develop coaching and teaching skills as well as a proficiency in foreign languages at the level needed for successful participation in international working environments.
- 5.1.5. Different components of a doctoral programme form a coherent whole supporting the personal development of each doctoral student.
- 5.1.6. Study programme development takes into account feedback from doctoral students, supervisors, employers, alumni and other stakeholders.

5.2. Resources

- 5.2.1. In conducting doctoral programmes, an adequate number of teaching staff and researchers participate, who hold the appropriate qualifications required to carry out doctoral studies and supervise doctoral theses in a given study programme.
- 5.2.2. Universities shall ensure that sufficient funds are available to conduct doctoral studies, to provide development activities associated with doctoral studies and research, and to support the professional development of teaching staff and researchers.
- 5.2.3. Resources (teaching, learning and research environments; libraries; resources required for teaching, learning and research) support the achievement of objectives set out in study programmes as well as the actual teaching, learning and research at the level of doctoral studies. Resource development is sustainable.
- 5.2.4. Trends in the numbers of current learners, admitted learners and graduates (by study programme) in doctoral studies under the study programme group during the last five years indicate sustainability.

5.3. Teaching, learning, research and/or creative activity

- 5.3.1. Uniform principles, based on best international practices and agreed upon at the university level, shall be followed while implementing doctoral programmes and assuring the quality of the doctoral studies (including supervision of doctoral theses).
- 5.3.2. Doctoral studies support students' personal and social development, including creating an environment which will prepare them to successfully participate in international working environments at research and development institutions, as well as in the business and public sectors.
- 5.3.3. Supervision of doctoral theses; modern methodology used in teaching and research; organisation of studies; and doctoral students' professional research, development and/or other creative activities all support achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of doctoral studies.
- 5.3.4. Assessment of outcomes of the learning, research and creative work done by doctoral students is relevant, transparent and objective, and supports the development of doctoral students.
- 5.3.5. Doctoral students are asked for feedback regarding supervision on a regular basis and the results of these surveys are taken into account for quality improvement activities.
- 5.3.6. The effectiveness of doctoral studies is analysed and such analyses serve as a basis for planning quality improvement activities.

5.4. Teaching staff¹

- 5.4.1. Teaching staff participate in research, development and/or creative activity at the level of and to the extent sufficient to conduct doctoral studies in the curriculum group and to supervise doctoral theses.
- 5.4.2. Teaching staff develop their supervisory competences and share best practices with one other.

¹ For the purposes of this document, 'teaching staff' means all university employees who conduct teaching or supervise doctoral students in study programmes at the level of doctoral studies within a given study programme group, regardless of their positions.

- 5.4.3. Teaching staff collaborate in fields of teaching, research and creative work within the university and also with stakeholders outside the university (public sector organisations, enterprises, other research and development institutions).
- 5.4.4. Teaching staff further their skills at foreign universities or other research institutions, participate in international research and creative projects, and present papers at high-level conferences.
- 5.4.5. Qualified foreign and visiting teaching staff are involved in conducting doctoral studies, participating in doctoral thesis defence panels and/or reviewing doctoral theses.
- 5.4.6. When assessing the work of teaching staff (including their evaluations), the effectiveness of their teaching as well as of their research, development and creative works is taken into account; including the effectiveness of their student supervision, development of their teaching and supervisory skills, and international mobility.

5.5. Doctoral students

- 5.5.1. When admitting students to doctoral study, their suitability for successful completion of their studies is assessed on the basis of transparent criteria.
- 5.5.2. Doctoral students plan their studies as well as research and development activities in collaboration with their supervisor(s), setting out specific objectives for each year and taking responsibility for achieving these objectives.
- 5.5.3. Evaluation of doctoral students is transparent and impartial. Its purpose is to support development of the doctoral students, provide an opinion regarding the effectiveness of their work to date, and assess their capabilities to complete their studies on time and successfully defend their doctoral theses.
- 5.5.4. Universities offer doctoral students counselling on completing their studies and planning their further careers.
- 5.5.5. Doctoral students' extracurricular teaching, research and/or creative activities or other work-related activities at the university support successful completion of their doctoral studies.
- 5.5.6. Doctoral students participate in international mobility programmes or take advantage of other opportunities for learning or research at foreign universities and/or research and development institutions².
- 5.5.7. Alumni are regularly asked for feedback on the quality of the doctoral study, and employers are asked for feedback on the preparation of the graduates.

III. Self-Evaluation and Preparation of a Report

- 6. Universities shall conduct self-evaluation in a study programme group incorporating all study programmes belonging to that study programme group, and prepare a self-evaluation report on that study programme group by assessment area and standard as specified in points 5.1 to 5.5 above.
- 7. Self-evaluation reports for study programme groups shall contain:
 - 7.1. a brief introduction of the university;
 - 7.2. the relative position of study programmes under evaluation in the context of that university, as well as in an Estonian and/or international context;

² In the context of this document, 'research and development institutions' denote both research institutions and research-intensive companies.

- 7.3. a description of the structure and area of responsibility of structural units responsible for the quality of each study programme under evaluation;
 - 7.4. aggregate data on study programmes (a list of study programmes, responsible units, and the number of students by study programme at the time of conducting the self-evaluation);
 - 7.5. a brief description of trends in the study programmes during the last five academic years (comparison with similar study programmes at other universities, if appropriate), and an overview of more important changes within the study programmes since the previous assessment thereof (including transitional evaluation, assessment of the quality of instruction);
 - 7.6. an overview of research, development and/or creative activities supporting the conduct of studies (research, development and creative projects associated with the study programmes, publications, student involvement in research groups, etc.);
 - 7.7. self-evaluations of study programmes by assessment area;
 - 7.8. summary of the strengths and areas for improvement, as shown in the self-evaluations of study programmes, and their analyses.
8. Annexes to the self-evaluation report on a study programme group shall include:
- 8.1. study programmes under evaluation, setting out their objectives and expected learning outcomes at the levels of the study programmes and their modules;
 - 8.2. information on the teaching staffs of all subjects in each study programme, in the form of a table (including the name, year of birth, position, workload at the university, qualifications, subject taught and its credit value, link to his or her CV in English on the Estonian Research Portal [hereinafter referred to as 'ETIS']);
 - 8.3. doctoral thesis topics and supervisors in the form of a table (name of doctoral student, study programme, year of enrolment, names of supervisors with links to their CVs in English on the ETIS, thesis topic);
 - 8.4. a list of defended doctoral theses during the past five years in the form of a table (name of doctoral student with link to her/his CV in English on the ETIS, years of enrolment and defence, thesis topic, names of supervisors with links to their CVs in English on the ETIS, composition of defence panel, names and workplaces of opponents/reviewers);
 - 8.5. a selection of extracts of minutes of doctoral student evaluation committee meetings during the last three years (3 to 5 evaluation examples for each study programme).
9. Universities shall submit their self-evaluation reports in electronic format to EKKA no later than three months prior to the assessment visit.
10. The length of reports depends upon the number of study programmes to be assessed. The maximum length of the general part is 15 pages, and the estimated length of a self-analysis of one study programme is 10 pages.
11. Self-evaluation reports are presented in English.
12. Evaluation reports on the research fields associated with study programmes under evaluation, and the data based on those reports, are made available by EKKA to the assessment committees.
13. EKKA provides two free trainings a year to assist universities in conducting their self-evaluations of the study programme groups and in preparing the reports. Universities may

apply for additional self-evaluation trainings if needed; the content and terms for such trainings are determined in an agreement between the university and EKKA.

14. EKKA shall send self-evaluation reports to assessment committees no later than two months prior to assessment visits.
15. EKKA shall not publicise self-evaluation reports.

IV. Formation and Functions of Assessment Committees

16. EKKA shall start forming an assessment committee (hereinafter referred to as 'committee') no later than five months prior to the assessment visit and, when determining the composition of the committee, EKKA shall, if possible, take into consideration reasoned proposals by the university under evaluation, regarding committee membership candidates and/or emphases arising from development needs of the university.
17. EKKA shall form assessment committees based on the following principles:
 - 17.1. A committee includes internationally recognised specialists from universities or other research and development institutions who have prior experience in successful supervision of doctoral theses.
 - 17.2. A committee includes at least one expert from outside of universities.
 - 17.3. A committee includes at least one doctoral student or a person who has completed his/her doctoral studies within the previous year.
 - 17.4. The minimum size of a committee is three members.
18. Requirements for membership in a committee:
 - 18.1. Members of a committee shall be independent; they shall not represent the interests of the organisation they belong to.
 - 18.2. Members of a committee shall be unbiased in their assessments, without conflicts of interest as defined by point 22 below.
 - 18.3. Members of a committee shall have the necessary teamwork skills to implement the work.
 - 18.4. Members of a committee shall be proficient in English.
 - 18.5. Members of a committee shall preferably have previous experience in external evaluation of higher education or research.
 - 18.6. Committee members from outside of universities are recognised experts in their fields and, in general, have experience in teaching or research at a university.
19. EKKA shall send information about the preliminary composition of a committee to the university, who then has ten working days to ask for additional members or the removal of a member, when justified.
20. The Director of EKKA shall approve the final composition of a committee by his or her order and appoint a chairperson for the committee and an assessment coordinator.
21. An assessment coordinator (hereinafter referred to as 'coordinator') shall be an EKKA employee. The coordinator is a support person of a committee and an administrator of the assessment process whose main duty is to ensure smooth functioning of the assessment

process on the basis of the requirements and the timeframe provided in this document. The coordinator is not a member of a committee.

22. Members of a committee shall confirm by signature an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them in the course of evaluation, and a lack of conflicts of interest. In the case of a conflict of interest, committee members shall immediately notify the Director of EKKA of it and remove themselves from the work of the committee. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:

- 22.1. A committee member has had an employment relationship with the university under evaluation within three years prior to the assessment visit, and/or he or she is during the assessment period³ participating in joint RDC projects with that university (including the supervision of doctoral theses).
- 22.2. A committee member is during the assessment period participating in the work of a decision-making body of the university under evaluation or an advisory body of that university related to the study programme group under evaluation;
- 22.3. A committee member is studying at the higher education institution under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years prior;
- 22.4. The membership connected with the study programme group of the university under evaluation includes a person closely related to a committee member (spouse or life partner, child or parent).

23. The working language of committees shall be English. If universities want to use interpretation services, they shall notify the EKKA Bureau of this no later than one month prior to assessment visits. According to EKKA, interpreters must meet the following requirements: they have the necessary preparation for consecutive interpretation in Estonian-English-Estonian (master degree studies in interpreting, in-service training in interpreting, interpreting as an additional specialty, etc.), past experiences in consecutive interpretation, and they command the terminology regarding higher education. Costs of interpretation services shall be incurred by the university under evaluation.

24. Duties of members of a committee include the following:

- 24.1. reviewing the self-evaluation report of a university;
- 24.2. examining documents that regulate quality assessment of the study programme group and completing assessment training provided by EKKA;
- 24.3. participating in the meetings and discussions of the committee;
- 24.4. participating in wording recommendations and preparing the assessment report;
- 24.5. examining the comments of the university on the assessment report and considering them when coordinating the output of the final assessment report;
- 24.6. performing other tasks related to assessment activities according to a division of tasks among the members of a committee;
- 24.7. adhering to the agreed committee deadlines.

25. Duties of the chairperson of a committee include the following:

- 25.1. chairing the meetings of the committee;

³ In the context of this document, 'assessment period' denotes the time period between the approval of the assessment committee and the adoption of the assessment decision.

- 25.2. dividing tasks among the members of the committee;
 - 25.3. leading the committee during the visit;
 - 25.4. after the visit, providing an overview of provisional conclusions of the committee to the university;
 - 25.5. ensuring that the opinion of the committee is justified;
 - 25.6. preparing and confirming the assessment report.
26. EKKA shall enter into contracts for services with members of a committee and compensate them for transportation and accommodation costs related to performing their duties.

V. Assessment Visits

27. Universities who receive a committee shall, no later than one month before a visit, appoint a person who is responsible for the smooth process of the visit and who ensures appropriate working conditions for members of the committee at the university.
28. No later than one month prior to the assessment visit, the coordinator shall, based on the proposals by members of the committee, prepare questions and/or comments on the self-evaluation report, a list of additional materials to be requested and a list of individuals whom the committee would like to meet during the visit.
29. The coordinator shall, in collaboration with the chairperson of the committee, prepare the schedule for the visit and start to coordinate it with the university under evaluation no later than three weeks prior to the visit.
30. A visit shall last for one to four days. In justified cases, a member of the committee may be excused from participation in the visit. If the university conducts studies at different locations, the committee may be divided into corresponding parts.
31. In the course of a visit, the university shall make working space available to the committee members and allow the committee to:
- 31.1. observe academic activities;
 - 31.2. access doctoral theses;
 - 31.3. interview employees and students of the university at the choice of committee members;
 - 31.4. meet employers or other stakeholders of the study programme group;
 - 31.5. access internal documents that provide for and govern the activities of the university;
 - 31.6. access data and information systems related to teaching, learning, support services and the students;
 - 31.7. access information related to employees of the university (their CVs, job descriptions, etc.);
 - 31.8. examine the infrastructure available to the university.
32. Within five days after the visit, EKKA shall ask the university for feedback on the apparent preparation of members of the committee, the relevance of their questions and other pertinent issues according to the form established by EKKA. The results of the feedback shall be taken as a basis for choosing members of committees for subsequent assessments.

VI. Assessment Reports and Recommendations by Assessment Committees

33. In their assessment reports, committees shall:
 - 33.1. point out the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes submitted to the assessment by five assessment areas, based on standards provided in points 5.1 to 5.5 above, and preferably with international comparisons;
 - 33.2. present concise analyses on the study programme groups of universities and their recommendations for improving the quality of doctoral studies.
34. Assessment committees' recommendations shall preferably be adopted by consensus. If consensus is not reached, the dissenting view(s) together with the reason(s) shall be included.
35. Committees shall submit their assessment reports to EKKA by the end of the fourth week after the visit. In cases where committees assess study programme groups at more than one university, they will submit their assessment reports by the end of the sixth week. EKKA shall forward these reports to the universities within one week after receipt of the reports.
36. Universities shall have the opportunity to submit their comments on assessment reports within two weeks after receipt of the report. Committees shall review the comments received and consider them while preparing their final reports.
37. The chairperson of a committee shall forward the electronic version of the final assessment report, signed by the chairperson, to the EKKA Bureau no later than by the end of the ninth week after the visit, which the EKKA Bureau will immediately send to the university under evaluation.
38. The EKKA Bureau shall forward the committee's assessment report and the comments by the university to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as 'the Assessment Council').

VII. Decision by the EKKA Assessment Council

39. The Assessment Council shall base its decision on the self-evaluation report of a university, the assessment report, the comments by the university received in a timely manner, and on additional materials submitted at the request of the Assessment Council. If necessary, the Assessment Council may ask the chairperson of the committee or a member of the committee assigned by the chairperson to attend the session for explanations.
40. The Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Assessment Council shall weigh the strengths and areas for improvement pointed out by an assessment committee and its recommendations, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group:
 - 40.1. in seven years where the study programmes, the teaching conducted under these programmes and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to legislation, national and international standards and trends;
 - 40.2. in five years:

- 40.2.1. in the case of a field where, according to the Assessment Council's reasoned assessment, rapid development prompts the need to receive feedback from foreign experts in less than seven years; and/or
- 40.2.2. in case there is some nonconformity of the study programmes, the teaching conducted under these programmes and development activities regarding teaching and learning with legislation, national and international standards and trends, the elimination of which, in the opinion of the Assessment Council, needs feedback from foreign experts and/or
- 40.2.3. in case there are some other reasons resulting from the specifics of the study programme group and international requirements;
- 40.3. in three years where, in the opinion of the Assessment Council, the majority of study programmes and/or assessment areas reveal substantial nonconformity with legislation and/or national and international standards.
41. According to § 53 of the Administrative Procedure Act, the Assessment Council may, in justified cases, impose a secondary condition on its decision if a study programme group has any specific noncompliance with legislation and/or national and international standards, which in the opinion of the Assessment Council could be eliminated within two years.
42. The EKKA Bureau shall electronically forward a final decision by the Assessment Council to the university within two weeks after the date the decision was adopted.
43. Within one week after a decision and an assessment report were forwarded to the university, EKKA shall publicise both the decision and the assessment report on its website.

VIII. Contesting of Assessment Proceedings Conducted by EKKA and Decisions by the Quality Assessment Council

44. A person who finds that his or her rights are violated or freedoms restricted by assessment procedures conducted by EKKA or by a decision made by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council may file a challenge, pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Procedure Act. The challenge shall be filed 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.
- 44¹. The Assessment Council shall forward the challenge to the Appeals Committee who provides the Assessment Council with an unbiased opinion regarding the validity of the challenge within 5 days after receiving the challenge. The Assessment Council shall adjudicate the challenge within 10 days after the challenge is delivered to the Council, taking into account the justified opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be further examined, the Assessment Council may extend a term for review of the challenge by up to 30 days.
45. A decision by EKKA Quality Assessment Council may be challenged within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

IX Follow-Up Activities

46. EKKA assumes that the responsibility for resolving problems pointed out in assessment reports as well as for continuous quality improvement activities lies with the university. EKKA shall regularly organise workshops where universities provide feedback on the process and results of quality assessments of study programme groups. EKKA shall ask that a university having undergone the assessment process submit a written overview to the Assessment Council listing post-assessment activities and their results as planned and implemented, based on recommendations of the assessment report, one year or in justified cases two years after the decision on quality assessment of the study programme group was adopted.

X. Involving Competent Evaluation Authorities from Foreign Countries

47. When assessing the quality of study programme groups, it is possible to take into account the assessment reports approved by international professional organisations or other competent assessment authorities which include the analyses and opinions described in point 5 above.
48. If a university desires a competent foreign assessment authority (hereinafter referred to as 'assessment authority') to conduct quality assessment of its study programme group with the costs thereof to be covered by the state budget of Estonia, the university shall submit a well-reasoned request to EKKA to employ that assessment authority. This request shall contain the following information:
 - 48.1. the name and contact details of the proposed assessment authority;
 - 48.2. consent of the proposed assessment authority to conduct the quality assessment of the study programme group, along with a cost estimate;
 - 48.3. a description of the planned assessment procedure (including a schedule) and requirements.
49. An assessment authority must meet the following requirements:
 - 49.1. The assessment authority has experience in assessing study programmes of universities.
 - 49.2. The procedure and requirements for an assessment are transparent and in conformity with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
 - 49.3. The assessment is conducted by an international expert committee.
 - 49.4. The assessment report points out the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes within a study programme group, including international comparisons, and makes recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.
50. Within one month after receipt of the request, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall make a reasoned decision on the suitability of the proposed assessment authority to conduct quality assessment of the study programme group.
51. If EKKA approves the use of a proposed assessment authority, it shall conclude a tripartite contract with the university and the assessment authority, establishing the rights and

responsibilities of the parties during the assessment process and the procedure for reimbursement of expenditures.

52. An assessment authority shall submit its assessment report to EKKA.
53. If a university requests that the result of a previously conducted assessment should be taken into account as quality assessment of a study programme group, the university shall submit an appropriate request to the Assessment Council, including the assessment report previously approved by a competent assessment authority.
54. If an assessment report does not include all aspects described in point 33 above, and it is impossible to make a final decision that would be in accordance with the procedure outlined in this document, the Assessment Council shall have the right to return the report to the assessment authority for modification and improvement, or to not make an assessment decision on the quality of the study programme group based on the submitted assessment report.
55. If it is possible to make a final decision that would be in accordance with the procedure outlined in this document, the Assessment Council shall approve the assessment report, weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations pointed out in the assessment report, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven years or, in justified cases, in less than seven years.
56. The proceedings described in this chapter and the decision by the Quality Assessment Council may be contested following the procedure provided for in Chapter VIII.