Evaluation of Doctoral programmes in Estonia

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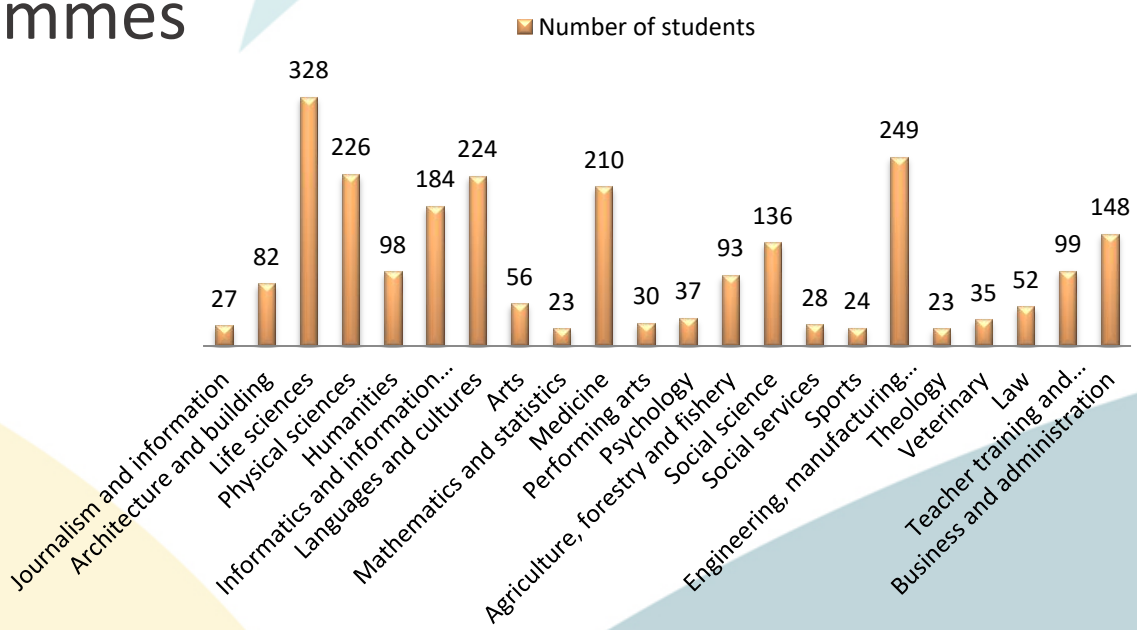
Overall statistics

- 7 universities providing doctoral programmes
- 2412 doctoral students
- 67 study programmes



Quality assessment of Doctoral programmes 2017-2019

- Assessment requirements: universities, MoER, Estonian Research Council
- Enhancement led assessment with the main aim to make recommendations for improving the quality of instruction
- All aspects of PhD education: the experiences of students and supervisors, the recruitment and selection of PhD students, PhD courses in the doctoral schools, the evaluation of PhD progress, and the research impact and employment prospects of PhD graduates. Resources for operating a successful doctoral studies program
- 90 experts involved

Strengths

- Different strategies to cope with the overall sub-critical expenditure of national finances on science and education of PhD students
- Many good steps towards efficient resource use
- Students are satisfied and content with their research and studies
- Flexibility and freedom to make their own choices in terms of research and study curriculum
- The interactions between supervisors and their PhD students are appropriate, stimulating and generally inspiring
- Experts are generally impressed with the high quality of the universities' research infrastructure with respect to their capacity to support and supervise PhD students

Challenge: The link between the PhD programmes, PhD degrees and society

„The valuing of research degree outside the academia and in the labor market forms a challenge for the universities. The doctoral degree is not as much valued in the labor market as it potentially could. To change that belief requires joint effort from universities and other institutions.“

EKKA

- Most of the PhD students indicate that their future career aspiration focused on academia.
- Even though PhD graduates generally focus on a detailed or specialized research topic in their thesis, they have had a broader education and have developed many skills that could be much appreciated outside the academia.
- The evaluation committees therefore suggest **to better demonstrate the presence of these high-level skills as the main asset of PhDs to the various societal sectors**.
- Industry Doctorates

Challenge: The national and European funding trends

„The EU development and structural funds, which effectively helped to create the excellent research infrastructure and effective doctoral schools in Estonia is very likely to decline in the near future. The net outcome of these trends remain uncertain and will influence the vitality and future of the Estonian PhD programs.“

EKKA

Challenge: The inadequate state stipends causing discontinuation of individual PhD studies

„A culture has grown up of „hobby PhD students“.

This describes a situation whereby it is deemed acceptable for PhD student to be in full-time employment outside the university for economic reasons, even if the time available for research is restricted to weekends.

These individuals neither benefit from the research training aspects of doctoral studies nor do they contribute to the life of the university community.“

EKKA

- As the availability of financial resources (i.e. government stipends, scholarships and project employment) is limited, PhD students can rarely focus full-time on their PhD studies.
- This leads to unnecessary delays, reduced motivation, increased work stress and sometimes constraints on participation on courses or seminars, because of the need to prioritize external work or family duties.
- Sometimes the teaching load of the doctoral students is too heavy to enable to graduate in time.
- These challenges are compounded by the fact that PhD students, by virtue of their Master degrees, can often secure relatively well-paid and secure jobs outside academia. This makes an academic PhD position unattractive from both a financial and a peers' perspective, and leads to excessively long PhD trajectories (i.e. more than six years) and very high drop-out rates.

EKKA

Challenge: Mobility and international cooperation

„The recommendation is to develop an action plan of proactive measures to promote an inclusive study environment for doctoral students that will harness the integration of diverse cultures and varied prior graduate educational experience as an every-day part of a challenge and thought-provoking collegiate PhD study environment.“

Challenge: How to ensure the scientific quality of the PhD-thesis?

EKKA

„ The criterion of defendable thesis is the publication of three peer-reviewed papers in recognized international journals. However, the Committee believe strongly that it now acts as a straightjacket, leading to delays in graduations and probably unnecessary

drop-outs. This is believed that the criterion guarantees a certain proof of quality, while it actually can reduce the quality because the three papers can generally published in less impactful journals. “

EKKA

- The time from manuscript submission to acceptance can extend to a year or more. Unfortunately this process is outside the control of the PhD student or his/her supervisor.
- Since rejection is more likely to occur at high-impact journals, this can lead to reluctance to submit their work to leading international journals.
- The evaluation committees recommend that **the three-paper-publication rule is reassessed and that more flexible rules are introduced**.
- Shifting to a model that de-emphasizes the quantity of published work will inevitably put more responsibility on the PhD supervisors, the opponents and the defense committee.

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Red indicates negative effects, green positive effects and black indifferent effects

Challenge: Future of the Doctoral Schools

„ Over the last decades these schools have provided the means to internationalize PhD education and to provide high-quality training. These schools inter alia promote interdisciplinary research projects of doctoral candidates, co-operation between the private and public sectors and facilitate the mobility of doctoral candidates.“

EKKA

- The continuation of the national Doctoral School is also vulnerable because it depends on EU structural funds and its consequent project-based structure.
- Suggestion is that **the directors of the PhD programs of the different universities develop strategies to hedge against possible decreasing funding of these schools**. Also to ensure that the cooperation and funding between partner universities will take place on the fair grounds.
- The doctoral schools could develop joint e-courses, that would be possible to participate for all students from participating universities. The e-learning component could reduce the dublication of the limited resources and ensure the critical mass of participating students.

EKKA

Thank you!

Assessment decisions and reports:

http://ekka.archimedes.ee/en/assessment-results-phd/