

Evaluation report

Evaluated point	Grade	Comments
Scientific impact of research	Good	<p>There are some research teams that evidence clear excellence in research, by excellent publications, international grant-funding and scientific impact. Evidence from publications indicates that the quality of scientific output at TU is on an upward trajectory, with both the absolute number and the proportion of high-level publications rising over time. There has also been a consistent and steady annual increase in the number of high-level publications per FTE. ‘Category Normalized Citation Impact’ (i.e., correcting for recency of publication) also rose over the period, as would be expected of an indicator of improving scientific quality.</p> <p>Along with this increase in output quality, research income held steady in the face of what researchers perceived as significantly rising pressure. Furthermore, the proportion of project funding obtained in international competition is commendable.</p>
Sustainability and potential of research	Good	<p>The university is large and diverse, with an inspiring academic milieu. The recent reorganisation of Social Sciences into six schools and five Centres of Excellence has served to highlight priority areas, although this management structure has yet to be tested in practice. The explicit promotion of inter-disciplinarity is being well-received while the importance of maintaining strong discipline-focused training (particularly at the doctoral level) is still appreciated.</p> <p>The evaluation team commend the collective approach, offered within the scope of the new Centres, to the preparation of research proposals. It is to be hoped that this will introduce further efficiency in the development and preparation work for project-funding in order to maintain an appropriate balance between seeking resource to perform research and the generation of research outputs.</p> <p>In the Social Sciences, there is diversity among staff, with a positive emphasis on promoting internationality, including of personnel; research networks; research funding; and direct involvement of international academics in research activities. There is a good gender balance at all levels, including in visible management positions (approximately 50% of Centres and Institutes are led by men). The number of enthusiastic and engaged early career academic staff is high and active measures are being taken to increase the overall proportion of staff holding PhD degrees. This bodes well for the sustainability of research.</p>

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		<p>In terms of R&D revenue, there are a number of significant EU-funded projects and the proportion of revenue from international contracts has significantly increased in the period 2010-15. The evaluation team noted that development and networking activities associated with obtaining project funding are time-consuming. While these activities are essential in assuring societal impact of research and also an unavoidable precondition for establishing a place in EU-funded research projects, there will inevitably be a short-term cost in terms of research outputs. It is also important to protect teaching and to promote a sound career model as a good employer. The university has introduced a performance pay system, to incentivise high-level publications, which academic researchers were pleased with. There is still uncertainty, however, over how TU will respond to the legal requirement to give security of employment tenure and (in common with other academic institutions in Estonia) these requirements appear to be perceived as a threat to one of the levers that has been seen as an essential motivator of academic staff.</p> <p>In common with other academic institutions, changing demographics have resulted in a fall in undergraduate numbers. There was nevertheless a positive outlook about a career in academia amongst the selected PhD students whom the evaluators met.</p>
Societal importance of research	Good	<p>TU recognises societal impact as a core-operational aim: the TU mission is to 'promote intelligent lifestyle' by providing the research evidence to underpin evidence-based decision-making. This civic-mission was appreciated at all levels, including amongst doctoral students.</p> <p>The location of the University in the capital city and largest urban centre offers a good opportunity to serve the needs of various groups and to be involved in a dialogue with policy-makers and public agencies. This is acknowledged to be particularly the case in Social Science research. For example, the fact that the university is itself engaged in research in communication studies is being exploited for positive social impact.</p> <p>The Open Academy is a mechanism for a bi-directional interface between business and commerce and university activities. Social Science research in the university has also led to curriculum developments to promote entrepreneurial education at the undergraduate level and resulted in three different 'pre-incubation' initiatives. The extent of engagement of the doctoral programmes is less obvious, but this is an area that is clearly in active development and likely to deliver future benefit in the form of university spin-out activities.</p>

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<p>Scientific basis in the field is sufficient to conduct doctoral studies. (This question should be answered only if: a) institution being evaluated is conducting doctoral studies and; b) The field being evaluated is proposed to grant positive evaluation. If these conditions are met then: a) If the level of scientific basis is sufficient for conducting doctoral studies in every structural unit being evaluated, then the answer should be „yes“; b) If the scientific basis is not sufficient in some structural units, then those units should be listed.)</p>		<p>Evidence from the self-assessment materials, and confirmed in the site visit, demonstrates that TU is committed to excellence in the training of doctoral candidates in the Social Sciences. The opportunities offered by the Estonian Doctoral Schools are fully exploited by staff and students. This includes training in generic professional skills as well as funding opportunities to present work at international conferences and make international research visits.</p> <p>There is a good distribution of students throughout the units and Schools: the students do not perceive their supervisor to be overloaded with supervisory responsibility. Staff and students also reported a good sense of community and mentoring support. The evaluation team did note that the number of doctoral students is lower, as a function of doctoral supervisors, than at other institutions evaluated. It is not clear why this is the case or whether the numbers are accurate.</p> <p>Completion rates have been an issue in the past, but attention is being paid to improving this area. Annual Attestation interviews are taken seriously and their value in tracking progress is appreciated by supervisors and their doctoral students.</p>

Summary assessment

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<p>Areas of special note as appropriate (Where necessary indicate sub-fields, assessment criteria, and/or structural units which, in the committee's opinion, were of a notably high level.)</p>		<p>The Centres of Excellence are already evidencing value in providing strategic underpinning to the approach to grant funding. For example, there is evidence that they are taking bold and well-reasoned decisions about which calls to prioritise effort.</p>
<p>Areas in need of improvement as appropriate (Where necessary indicate sub-fields of the field being evaluated, assessment criteria, and/or structural units which, in the committee's opinion, revealed significant shortcomings.)</p>		<p>The evaluators noted no significant shortcomings in R&D in any specific unit or subfield at TU.</p>
<p>Assessment proposal to the Minister of Education and Research</p>	<p>To grant positive evaluation</p>	<p>TU has a strong tradition of social science research and provides a good intellectual environment for training doctoral students.</p>

Feedback

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<p>Feedback for institution (This question should be answered only if the institution asked for feedback from the evaluation committee in the self-report (about up to three specific areas of R&D which it finds to be currently important, e.g., related to its development plan).)</p>	<p>TU requested recommendations from the evaluation team in three areas.</p> <p>The first was with reference to the development of career models of academic staff. A Working Group has been formed and there is an on-going consultation with staff and external experts to develop an appropriate response to address the issues arising from insecurity of employment tenure. Specifically, moving staff currently on fixed-term contracts to open-ended contracts has implications for increased satisfaction, with implications for staff retention, and will also bring academic employment practices into line with other EU states. Precisely how this will be done and aligned with promotion procedures is yet to be determined. The evaluation team did not feel that there was much they could add to the deliberations of the Working Group. Our recommendation to management, therefore, is that the Working Group be encouraged to continue with its wide consultation and present its reasoned report and recommendations in due course. Furthermore, their work might be extended to include developing transparent criteria for promotion and career advancement.</p> <p>The second request was that the evaluation team make recommendations concerning strategic developments in R&D. The evaluation team cannot make well-informed recommendations because of the relatively limited scope of this exercise: we note that recent changes in organisational structure have been made strategically, with a clear vision for the intended consequences of the re-structuring. Only in time will it become obvious whether the strategic aims have been realised. What is clear is that there is good understanding – from the senior management team to the doctoral candidates – of the intention behind the restructuring. Furthermore, there is also evidence of widespread ‘buy-in’, suggesting that there has been effective communication during the development and on-going implementation of the plans. The evaluation team therefore recommend that senior management continue to monitor the impact of the organisational changes and remain responsive to the views of staff and students as the changes embed or as evidence for the need for further changes emerges.</p> <p>The third request for recommendations was ‘whether the merging of doctoral programmes is necessary’. The evidence from the site visit suggested that TU has struck an appropriate balance between the availability of</p>

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	discipline-specific doctoral training (as provided by membership of one of the Estonian Doctoral Schools, as well as by research groups within the Institutes and/or the Centres of Excellence) and generic doctoral training (as provided by TU for all of its doctoral candidates). There did not appear to be any desire, from doctoral students or staff, for either de-merging or further merging of doctoral programmes or doctoral training. In particular, doctoral students clearly appreciated the absolute necessity of having a strong disciplinary foundation to their training.
Suggestions for unit, institution, state etc. (As appropriate, committee can give additional feedback for the structural unit, the institution, or the State (please specify whom feedback is directed to) according to the directive assessment criteria for regular evaluation (article 7).	Institution: The relationships between the management of the Schools, institutes, and Centres of Excellence is complex and requires clear lines of communication to work. The efficacy of these relationships should be monitored.