

Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre

Evaluation of Research in Social Work in Estonia

Institute evaluated

Tallinn Pedagogical University

Department of Social Work

Evaluation dates:
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Expert team:

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Part I

General Overview

At the request of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre, Tallinn (EHEAC), the evaluation team (hereafter named the “Team”) visited an institute in Estonia, carrying out research activities in social work. The evaluation team comprised Prof. Michael Stein (University of York), Dr. Gillian Bridge (London School of Economics), Dr. Beth Crisp (University of Glasgow) and Prof. Katja Forssén (University of Turku).

The institution to be evaluated was:

Tallinn Pedagogical University (TPU)

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences

- Chair of Social Work (Head: Prof. Taimi Tulva)
- Chair of Social Policy (Head: Prof. Kyösti Urponen)
- Lectorate of Social Pedagogy (Head: Lector Mare Leino)
- Centre of Training and Research (Head: Prof. Taimi Tulva)

The Team was provided in advance with a self-assessment report from the institution, prepared by the members of their research groupings.

After a brief orientation meeting at EHEAC, the Team visited the institution over two days. At these meetings staff members of the various Departments presented their work. During these presentations as well as during the subsequent discussions additional information about the research activities was provided. This included additional documents such as copies of published papers.

Approach to the evaluation

The Team was asked to:

1. Judge the activities of research and development in the units evaluated and the research topics implemented by them to ensure the governmental funding for internationally recognised research and development.
2. Identify deficiencies in the activities of research and development unit.
3. Give recommendations on the development concerning research and development and research areas to the state of Estonia.

The Team received the following materials: A working schedule, principles and criteria for evaluation of the research units, evaluation guidelines for the ranking of research units, and a self-evaluation report created by the Department.

On a first evaluation point, the *quality of the research activities* was considered. This assessment is largely based on the records of scientific publications.

<i>Excellent</i>	<i>The majority of the submitted works are at a high international level and virtually all others at a good international level.</i>
<i>Excellent to good</i>	<i>At least one third of the submitted works are at a high international level and many others at a good international level, these together comprise a clear majority.</i>
<i>Good</i>	<i>The majority of the submitted works are at least at a good international level and virtually all others at a fair international level</i>
<i>Good to satisfactory</i>	<i>At least one third of the submitted works are at a good international level and many others at a fair international level, these together comprise a clear majority</i>
<i>Satisfactory</i>	<i>The majority of the submitted works are at least at a fair international level</i>
<i>Satisfactory to unsatisfactory</i>	<i>A minority of the submitted works are at a fair international level</i>
<i>Unsatisfactory</i>	<i>None, or virtually none, of the submitted works are at a fair international level</i>

Regarding the grading of the research activities, the Team was instructed by the EHEAC to reserve the term **excellent** for groups, which were found to be among the best 10% of the European groups in the corresponding field. Similarly, the term **excellent to good** should be used if the evaluated group was found to be among the best 25 % of corresponding European groups. The full scale comprised 7 levels, in addition to the highest ones the grades are **good**, **good to satisfactory**, **satisfactory**, **satisfactory to unsatisfactory**, and **unsatisfactory**.

Secondly, the *over-all capability* of a research unit was evaluated based on a the combined assessment of the following criteria (each graded in three levels):

	Grade 0	Grade 1	Grade 2
Originality/novelty of past and ongoing research activity	descriptive, no novelty	some novelty/originality	original/novel
The strategy and perspective of research	no or bad strategy, no or unclear perspective for further research	fair strategy and perspective for further research	clear strategy and very perspective for further research
Multidisciplinarity and relevance for other research areas	no multidisciplinarity, no relevant for other research areas	some multidisciplinarity, some relevance	good multidisciplinarity, good relevance for other research areas
The competence of research groups and their capability for development	low competence	there is competence, but no young postgraduate and postdoctoral students	there is competence and postgraduate and postdoctoral students
National and international co-operation	no particular national and international co-operation	some national/international co-operation	good or tight national/international co-operation
Success in applying for funds and grants	no particular success	fair success	applying successfully for grants and funds

Excellent - 12-10 (total grade), **Good** - 9-7 (total grade), **Satisfactory** - 6-4 (total grade) and **Unsatisfactory** - 3-0 (total grade).

As the result of this assessment one of the four grades **excellent**, **good**, **satisfactory** or **unsatisfactory** was given for the group.

Thirdly, the *implementation opportunities* for the research results and their importance for the Estonian society were commented.

Finally, on a fourth evaluation point *the critical comments and recommendations* were asked to given by the expert team.

Part II

General Comments

The Team had the task of reviewing the research at the Department of Social Work at Tallinn Pedagogical University. The Department had provided a self-assessment report for the use of the Team. While it was generally well prepared, it would have helped if the structure adopted in Appendix 1 regarding the typology of output had been applied to individual curriculum vitae and the research groupings. The Team also noted that there was some confusion regarding the typology of publication outputs, especially as to what constituted a peer reviewed article (for example, page 86 of the self assessment report included three book chapters within the category of peer reviewed articles in international scientific periodicals).

We found the site visits very informative about the workings of the discrete research areas. An additional visit needed to be scheduled to explore more general research issues. The three agency visits to innovative projects provided the Team with background on the context of social work research and practice in Estonia including the potential for future research directions.

We appreciated the time put into the presentations and the production of the documentation. We found these very helpful in our deliberations.

The Team were very impressed by how much had been achieved since the establishment of the new subject area in 1993, in relation to both the volume of research output and the development of the research groupings. We were enthused by the commitment to research of the staff and postgraduate students we met.

Part III

Evaluation of institution

Department of Social Work (*Head: Ass. Prof. Anne Tiko*)

The main fields of scientific work of the Department include:

1. Professional development and professional identity in social work.
2. Conceptual bases of child protection policy, protection of children's rights, taking into account their needs and supporting their coping.

3. Development of Estonian senior policy: coping of the elderly and their need for services.
4. Actual problems of social health care – challenge for social work.
5. Poverty as a social problem in transitional society.

Research Grants from Estonian Science Foundation

1. **Emotional problems and crisis situations of Estonian school children and strategies for avoiding and coping with them** (Grant No. 2939). Research team: **A. Tiko** (grant holder), T. Tamm, M. Paats, I.-E. Rannala, M. Voogre, L. Kivi, S. Väljataga. Duration: 1997-1999. Finances: 230 000 EEK
2. **Occupational therapy in social pedagogy** (Grant No. 3803). Research team: **M. Leino** (grant holder), I. Viiralt. Duration: 1998-2001. Finances: 143 000 EEK
3. **Conceptual bases of child protection policy and developing the networking model: Intervention and prevention in child protection** (Grant No. 3482). Research team: **T. Tulva** (grant holder), M. Leino, I. Viiralt, A. Niinemets, A. Kiis, S. Väljataga, M. Voogre, L. Vahesaar. Duration: 1998-2001. Finances: 183 600 EEK
4. **Aging as a gender phenomenon: Coping of the single elderly and its support** (Grant No. 5079). Research team: **T. Tulva** (grant holder), A. Kiis, I. Viiralt, K. Lai, L. Kaarna, M. Pihlak, K. Luik, J. Luus, G. Hiedel. Duration: 2002–2005. Finances: 120 000 EEK (2002–2003)

General Comments

1. It is a remarkable achievement to have recruited 18 PhD students, the largest number within the Faculty of Social Sciences.
2. We note the success in obtaining grants from the Estonian Science Foundation, especially given that social work is not recognised as a discipline in its own right.
3. It is notable that nearly all the publications in peer reviewed journals have been derived from grants obtained from the Estonian Science Foundation. These grants have enhanced the international contribution of the research groupings to which they were awarded. However we note the uneven outputs in quantity and quality of publications from the research groupings.
4. We have concerns about the continuity of research development given that there is only one current grant from the Estonian Science Foundation.
5. We note the progress in development of international collaborations. However, in the main this has concentrated on links with Finland and we feel that the research groups would benefit from a wider range of international cooperation.

Evaluation of Research Activities

The Team of evaluators judged the overall quality of the research to be *Satisfactory*.

Evaluation of Overall Capability

The Team of evaluators judged the overall capability of the research to be *Good*.

	Grade
Originality/novelty of past and ongoing research activity	1
The strategy and perspective of research	1
Multidisciplinarity and relevance for other research areas	2
The competence of research groups and their capability for development	2
National and international co-operation	1
Success in applying for funds and grants	1

The implementation opportunities for the research results and their importance for Estonian society

The Department has devoted considerable energies to disseminating their results within Estonia, and there is evidence that it has impacted on the development of both national and local policies and social work practice. In addition, the success in recruiting postgraduate research students is, and will continue to make a substantial contribution, to the development of a research literate work force in Estonia.

Recommendations

Our recommendations need to be considered in the context of the strengths and areas for development identified by the Team.

In terms of strengths, the Team were impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff group; the number and range of PhD students recruited – the largest number of any Department within the Faculty of Social Sciences; the research culture within the Department as exemplified by Bachelors and Masters dissertations as well as participation in the Erasmus program; the close links between ongoing research and course development; and the interdisciplinary and international collaborations. The Team noted the range of demands on a relatively small *full-time* staff group of four, especially in having responsibility for combining teaching (including postgraduate supervision), administration and research.

However, we have also identified a number of areas for development which need to be addressed in order for the Department to reach its potential and close the gap between its capability and performance as identified above.

First, in relation to funding opportunities, it is critical to the development of the discipline that social work is identified as a category in its own right in terms of eligibility for grant funding from the Estonian Science Foundation. The Team were also made aware of the very limited funding currently made available by the Ministry of Social Affairs, especially given the significance of much of the work undertaken for policy and practice.

Second, the quality of research will be improved by increased methodological sophistication. This will require improved research design, especially through the development of more intervention and outcome studies, and the development of longitudinal cohort studies. Also, more sophisticated statistical techniques, including multivariate analyses, will enhance the work. These changes may be achieved by accessing expertise from other departments within the University, or in our view, by the appointment of a specialist lecturer in research methods.

Third, it was noticeable that the majority of publications fall within the professional category. There were only seven peer reviewed articles between 1999 and 2003. We think it is important that staff and postgraduate students should be encouraged to publish in international peer reviewed journals and generally the Department should achieve a better balance between academic and professional publications, and between international and national audiences. The Team felt that there was a lack of confidence by some staff in the relevance of their research findings within the context of transitional economies, to an international audience.

Fourth, the Team noted that the prominent role of Professor Tulva in the development of social work research in Estonia, including leadership of three of the Department's research groupings. In addition, the two remaining research groups are also led by senior members of staff. Given these key roles and the age profile of these leading staff, it is important that succession planning takes place as early as possible to ensure the sustainability of the work.

Finally, the Team noted some of the limitations on research infrastructure including the cramped office accommodation for staff and the lack of facilities for postgraduate research students. The Team also recognized the major achievements in developing library and information resources in such a short period of time.

Part IV

Summary of evaluation

The process of evaluation was facilitated by a well organized program for the evaluation team, which included the self assessment report, presentations, discussions with researchers and informative agency visits. This was accompanied by an impressive range of documentation about the work of each of the research groupings. The staff were very responsive to the Team's requests for further information, including an additional meeting with the Team.

Overall, we found the staff group enthusiastic and committed to the development of a research profile, including a very impressive record in recruiting postgraduate research students. The research outputs were in the main reflected in professional publications which contribute to the development of policy and practice in Estonia. As identified above, there is a gap between the capabilities and the research quality, especially reflected in the number of articles in international peer reviewed journals. Implementation of the recommendations of the Team in this report should potentially close this gap.

Part V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Team recognized the tremendous achievement in establishing a culture of social work research within a relatively short period of time. The discipline was established within the University only in 1993 and since that time the staff have had to balance major developments in learning and teaching in connection to the profession, as well as the demands of developing a research program.

The Team propose the following recommendations:

- **Funding:** Social work as a discipline is recognized as a category in its own right for grant funding from the Estonian Science Foundation;
- **Research methodology:** There is a need for improved methodological expertise, especially in quantitative design and analysis;
- **Publications:** Staff and postgraduate research students should be encouraged to publish in international peer reviewed journals;

- **Strategic planning:** Given the impressive range of research groupings that have developed in a relatively short space of time, it is imperative that planning for the future leadership of these groups takes place as soon as possible;
- **Research infrastructure:** Improve the infrastructure for supporting research including accommodation for staff and postgraduate research students, and the ongoing development of library and information technology resources.

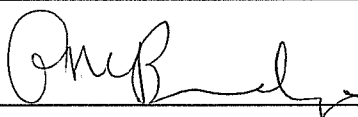
VI. Acknowledgements

We thank the staff of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the staff of the Tallinn Pedagoical University. They provided us with a detailed self-assessment report, were most hospitable, demonstrated their facilities and engaged in enlightened discussion about the future potential for their research. They made our stay a most enjoyable experience. We wish them all the very best in their future endeavours.

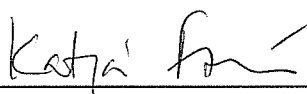
Tallinn, 21.02. 2004

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