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**ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AT DOCTORAL LEVEL:
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PHD PROGRAMME IN EUROPEAN
STUDIES AT IVANE JAVAKHISHVILI TBILISI STATE UNIVERSITY**

Abstract

The article aims at contributing to the discourse related to the quality assurance in higher education institutions at the third cycle of education via highlighting the developments related to the elaboration of the assessment mechanism of learning outcomes at the Doctoral level in European Studies programme at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU). An accreditation /re-accreditation pressures -including the great scrutiny of learning outcomes by accreditors -as an external driving force aimed at, , influencing the enhanced use of the assessment results for the continuous improvements of the programme and the involved stakeholders' success levels, are duly emphasized. While the first part outlines the programme assessment as a broader process imposed and guided mostly through existing regulatory framework, the second part is dedicated to the reflections around the tools and strategies of assessment of clearly articulated learning outcomes of the programme which are aligned with the outcomes of the proposed courses and other components of the programme. This latter part stands as a unique case study based on the generalized data generated and aggregated at the Institute for European Studies of TSU during past five years of implementation of a Doctoral programme in European Studies.

Keyterms: *European Studies, Doctoral programme, assessment, learning outcomes, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

Introduction

The analysis provides the overview of changing assessment landscape based on the evidence of the student learning on the one hand and academic staff collaboration with administration, on the other. It aims at improving learning outcomes, making it transparent and measurable. Besides, it contributes to strengthening the doctoral education by sharing with the stakeholders the scheme of a mission-driven, meaningful and manageable learning outcomes assessment setting. In particular, it underlines that the process of strengthening doctoral education requires thorough determination about the types of data that are to be collected, the ways they are to be analyzed and the means they are to be used in order to create a holistic portrait of individual researcher's achievements as well as to mainstream the positive changes in the programme, - instead of getting the data shelved after each re-accreditation cycle is completed.²

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² Boud, David, and Alison, Lee. (2008). *Changing Practices of Doctoral Education*. Routledge; Sabic, Norbert. (2014). *Comparative Analyses of Doctoral Education in Europe*. *Annals of the University of Bucharest/ Political Science Series*, 16(1), 129-147; Sunrock, Andree, and Hanne, Smidt. (2010). *Trends 2010: A Decade of Change in European Higher Education*. Brussels: European University Association; EUA. (2007). *Bologna Seminar on Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society, Conclusions and Recommendations*. Salzburg, 3-5 February 2005 available at <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/salzburg%20>

Because there is no special centralized unit at Tbilisi State University which is in charge of assessment of teaching and learning, this process is directed by the programme administration with the involvement of the central quality assurance service of the university (TSU). Taking into consideration particular existing legislative framework, context and culture, shared goals and values of the colleagues working together, as well as faculty time and resources (to express it more precisely, the lack of resources), the evaluation process cannot be shaped as a top-down process. Rather, it is planned as a systemic and efficient consulting mechanism based on a constructive and reflective conversation, where mutual trust, honest inquiry, tailored-made approach, high level of autonomy and willingness to make visible improvements to individual researchers and learners are the main driving factors that leads towards both – a feeling of the joint ownership and the increased accountability, i.e. more shared responsibility on the learning outcomes. Usually, the successful evaluation of learning outcomes leverages the lead towards the accomplished results in the program re-accreditation process. Hence, if we take the accreditation pressure from the perspective of enhancement of learner and researcher success levels, it can be seen not only from the prism of externally imposed extensive bureaucratic burdensome process, but also considered as a genuine facilitator of the continuous undertaking of a bottom-up advancement.

Chapter 1. Review of the assessment mechanism of the Doctoral programme in the context of its structure and content

Interdisciplinary doctoral programme in European Studies at Tbilisi State University was elaborated within the frames of European Union funded project (ENPI/2012/306-124) and fully integrated into the interfaculty Institute for European Studies. The programme was asserted by the Academic Council of the University with the resolution no 20/2014 on 26 February 2014. The programme was asserted for the re-accreditation by the Academic Council of the University with the resolution no 25/2019 on 4 March 2019. The Programme was accredited with the Decision no 55 of the Accreditation Council on 25 March 2014.

Planning, implementing and improving of Doctoral programme is based on the principles of openness, transparency and cooperation among stake-holders. These principles ensured that the self-assessment process started from the initial stage of programme implementation. International and local experts, academic and administrative personnel, PhD candidates and visiting researchers had an outstanding opportunity to contribute to the development of the programme through sharing their experiences, suggestions and impressions in a continuous manner. Extensive cooperation with the partner higher education institutions of the European Union became very fruitful and result-oriented in this direction.

The programme self-assessment needs triggered the creation of informal consultative body with the composition of programme administrative and academic staff, international experts, students, graduates and two representatives of University quality assurance service.³ Eventually, it attained the function of friendly oversight. The genuine heavy workload had been split among administrative and academic staff with various tasks that include, but are not limited to the redefinition/re-description of programme goals and learning outcomes as well as their correspondence; Organization of teaching methodology, adequacy of mastering the program proposed content; Selection of relevant indicators and evidences; SWOT analyses; Evaluation of the syllabi of the embedded courses in the programme the purpose of which is definition of the adequacy of the proposed mandatory and optional literature as well as identification of the strengths and weaknesses; summarizing the achievements in research undertaken by academic staff; Appraisal of PhD candidates' involvement in scientific conferences and workshops; Analyzing the available material resources necessary for the programme implementation; Evaluation of availability of the student-centered environment; Summarizing quality assurance process; Quantitative analyses of involved PhD candidates vis-a-vis the responsible administrative personnel and academic staff; Reviewing student-staff mobility data; Evaluation of involvement in international projects; Assessment of available financial resources for the programme implementation, etc.

recommendations%202005.pdf, (last visited in April 2019). Bergen Communiqué (2005). The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005; European Commission (2011). Report of Mapping Exercise on Doctoral Training in Europe “Towards a Common Approach”. Brussels, 27 June 2011; EUA (2010). Salzburg II Recommendations. European Universities' Achievements since 2005 in Implementing the Salzburg Principles. Brussels: EUA; European Commission (2011). Report of Mapping Exercise on Doctoral Training in Europe “Towards a Common Approach”. Brussels, 27 June 2011; Caspersen, Joakim & Smeby, Jens-Christian & Aamondt, Per Olaf. (2017). Measuring Learning Outcomes, *European Journal of Education*, Volume 52, Issue 1, pp. 20-30.

³ Decision no 19/285 of the Academic Council of the Institute for European Studies of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 19.12.2018.

The self-assessment process and collaboration of stakeholders refined the programme content and structure. For example, the course under the name “Qualitative methods and research design in European Studies” was merged with “Applied Statistics/ Quantitative Methods” and the title of the course had been defined as “Research Design and Methods of Social Inquiry;” The course “Idea of Europe” was removed from the core curriculum which was the follow-up of the specific recommendation by the accreditation experts; The evaluation criteria of two seminar papers had been clarified; The list of elective course had been amended; The meaning of the mandatory component of Assistantship to Professor had been specified; Special rubric had been asserted for evaluation of dissertation during final defense, etc.

In the revised programme the reduced share of 55 ECTS are envisaged as mandatory for the taught component instead to previously defined ECTS 60. In the past the dissertation was allocated with ECTS 120 but currently it stands without credits as per new recommendations from the TSU Quality Assurance service. The taught component includes mandatory courses and research elements (Academic Writing – 5 ECTS, Teaching Methods – 5 ECTS, Research Design and Methods of Social Inquiry- 5 ECTS, two seminar papers – i.e. a small-scale research papers not related to dissertation – 10 ECTS and assistantship to Professor). The electives of the teaching component include three courses (1. EU Law - 5 ECTS; 2. European Economics - 5 ECTS; 3. Comparative Course on EU (Supranational) and UN (Universal) International Organization- 5 ECTS) and the extended Assistantship to Professor for additional 10 ECTS.

Due to extended number of recommendations accumulated during five years period of implementation of doctoral programme since its first accreditation, the revision of the component of Assistantship to a Professor became subject of particular attention: Because of the interdisciplinarity as well as of interfaculty stance of the Doctoral programme in European Studies at TSU, the decision was made not to restrict the potential researchers with the previous degree exclusively in MA in European Studies. Rather, the eligibility criteria/requirements to enter the programme gives opportunity to get enrolled if a person⁴ holds a Master’s or an equivalent degree, passes English language test on C1 level and submits a research proposal⁵. If a research proposal is approved by the academic council, an applicant will be invited for an interview.

Neither strong research proposal, nor elective courses from European studies discipline guarantee that the enrolled doctoral candidates acquire enough competences to move into the Assistantship to Professor immediately. The past experience showed the essential need to engage them with the four core mandatory courses on MA level, which are Governance and Decision-making Process in European Union (European Integration Theories and EU Institutions), European Union Law, EU Integration Economics, and History of Europe. Only after they successfully pass the special assignments within the frames of the above mentioned four courses, they will be allowed to assist the academic staff in performing some of the practical components, mostly instructed by the scientific supervisor: this may include providing support in grading tests, essays, presentations, mid-terms and final exams of the undergraduate and master programs’ students, etc. Furthermore, the Doctoral candidates will be allowed to organize workshops, lead the practical seminars and deliver courses on MA and BA level only if they successfully defend two chapters of their doctoral dissertation (the chapters on a Conceptual/Theoretical framework and a Literature review) as well as participate in a specially developed trainings on innovative teaching and learning pedagogic methods (Problem Based Learning, Simulations, E-learning, Blended learning) in European Studies⁶. Assistantship might involve preparation of a new syllabus or a single lecture using innovative teaching methods (e.g. recording video-lectures, drafting simulation scenario and rules, etc.) under the monitoring of an academic supervisor. The ECTS will be granted by the Board/Academic Council of the Institute for European Studies only if a researcher submits a detailed report approved and asserted by the principal supervisor.

With its resolution no 245/2018 of 27 December of 2018, the Academic Council, a supreme ruling body of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, - adopted a new version of the “Minimum Standard”⁷ defining the implementation standards of the Doctoral programmes as well as rules for awarding a PhD degree⁸. The Minimum Standard

⁴ Georgian and foreign citizens as well as stateless persons. Foreign citizens (or stateless persons) holding an MA degree shall make applications for the Doctoral programme in accordance with the procedures set forth in the relevant Georgian legislation, provided that they meet the admission preconditions.

⁵ A research proposal should be between 2500-3000 words, written concisely with clear structure and include the title of the dissertation, research objectives, research questions, hypothesis, research methodology, literature review and a brief bibliography.

⁶ The innovative pedagogic methods had been prioritized within the frames of the EU funded Tempus project INOTLES. Information is available at <http://inotles.eu/content/summary> (last visited in March, 2019).

⁷ available at https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/axad_council_resolutions/2018acad/2452018// (last visited in March 2019).

⁸ The old versions of “Minimum Standards” were asserted on 16 March 2011, resolution no 25/2011, available at https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/axad_council_resolutions/2011/252011// (last visited in March 2019)

regulates various aspects of the relationship between a researcher and the University including the right to enrollment in third level education, the role of supervisor, terms of the entrance in the doctoral programme, termination of the status of a researcher, teaching and research components of a doctoral programme, individual learning and research plans of a PhD candidate, a dissertation and its submission, preliminary assessment of a dissertation, awarding a degree, scholarship schemes, the rules on presenting scientific articles for international peer-review and its' assessment standards, evaluation grid of the progress reports to be presented by a researcher, etc.

The Instruction on Elaboration of Doctoral Programmes⁹ was asserted earlier, -on 16 July 2009 (Resolution no 250) as revised on 16 March 2011 with the resolution no 26/2011 and defines the rules on development of the third level education programmes by various faculties of TSU, the procedures for their assertion as well as the tentative titles of the programmes and their maximum duration. Other relevant internal regulations include the Order no 05/03 adopted by the Head of TSU Quality Assurance Service on 7 March 2018 regulating a "Recommended Methodology of the Ratio of the Personnel Involved in Implementation of the Programmes"¹⁰ as well as the Order no 07/03 adopted by the Head of TSU Quality Assurance Service on 16 March 2018 asserting the compliance of the qualifications of the personnel involved in programme implementation with the learning outcomes planned under the taught and research components¹¹. Recently, Tbilisi State University established a new body titled as Interuniversity Dissertation Council, -composed of the Full and Associated Professors as well as of Chief and Leading Scientists of the research units of TSU, -in charge of crafting a final decision on granting a PhD degree after a dissertation is successfully defended before a jury composed of seven-members¹².

With the frequently changing legislative landscape in higher education field in Georgia and in TSU as well as the innovation brought by the interdisciplinary Doctoral programme in European Studies, the most challenging and disadvantageous issue became learning the "rules of the game" for both the administration and the first intake students that proceeded to the final defense in due time. Subsequent clarifications of the expectations for graduation in a centralized manner in the University attenuated these problems, still, lots of changes are coming.

Chapter 2. Mapping the assessment mechanism of the Doctoral-level learning outcomes in European Studies programme

Georgia has been a full Member of the Bologna process/ European Higher Education Area since 2005¹³. In 2010¹⁴ and through subsequent revisions in 2018¹⁵, the Georgian government, in particular the Minister of Education, Science, Sport and Culture of Georgia adopted a Qualifications Framework and a Learning Fields Classifier that spotlights the learning outcomes for eight degree-level. The Qualifications Framework -a document establishing broad enough expectation for each degree-level ensuring identification of where particular programs fit within these expectations -was adopted in compliance with the requirements of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF LLL) as well as European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA). According to the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement¹⁶ -an agency responsible to oversee and assess the implementation and quality assurance: "The document unites all the qualifications existing in Georgia, reflects the learning

and 16 July 2009, resolution no 249, available at https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/axad_council_resolutions/2009/249/ (last visited in March 2019).

⁹ Available at https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/axad_council_resolutions/2011/262011/.

¹⁰ Available at <https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/orders/g4ynRcrnhhrv3KDrF/?p=1> (last visited in April 2019).

¹¹ Available at <https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/orders/xjZLRyouzIDed3z9Q/?p=1> (last visited in April 2019).

¹² See Article 1 and Section 2 of Article 2 of the Bylaw of the Interuniversity Dissertation Council, available at https://www.tsu.ge/ge/juridical/axad_council_resolutions/2018acad/1162018kod/ (last visited in March 2019)

¹³ The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is the main voluntary processes at European level and reflects a major effort to reform and restructure significantly the expectations and degree structures in order to create a harmonized common European higher Education Area. It is nowadays implemented in 48 states and defines the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Available at <http://www.ehea.info/page-georgia> (last visited in March 2019).

¹⁴ Order no 120/n of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia on Assertion of the Qualifications Framework, adopted on 10 April, 2019.

¹⁵ Order no 69/n of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia on Assertion of the Qualifications Framework and Learning Fields Classifier, adopted on December 10, 2010.

¹⁶ The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement is Legal Entity of Public law (LEPL) within the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, which was created by the Reorganization of LEPL - National Center for Accreditation on September 14, 2010 on the basis of the order N89/N of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia for the purpose to improve educational quality throughout the country.

outcomes of different levels of general, vocational and higher education. The National Qualification Framework establishes what knowledge, skills, and responsibilities should a person have for obtaining the document verifying the completion of the relevant cycle.”¹⁷

With the changes imposed upon Qualifications Framework, the cross-cutting learning outcomes elaborated originally in 2010 had been refined and instead of six descriptors (Knowledge, Using knowledge in practice, A skill to generate the analyses-based conclusions, Communications skill, Values)¹⁸, currently it maintains only three descriptors (Knowledge, Skills, Responsibility and autonomy)¹⁹ for each level of education. According to the descriptor of the “Level Eight” education which corresponds to a Doctoral degree, the category of Knowledge is proposed as “a knowledge based on the latest achievements of learning and /or activities that enable the use of existing knowledge or innovative methods, including in multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary context. Systemic and critical understanding of learning or activities.”²⁰ Furthermore, “The Skills” are defined as “Planning and implementation of a research in accordance with the principles of academic integrity; Developing new research or analytical methods and /or approaches that are oriented on creating new knowledge (at the standard level required for international peer-reviewed publications); Critical analysis, synthesis and assessment of new, complex and contradictory ideas and approaches resulting in the correct and effective decision-making (in research and /or innovation) for solving the complex problems. Ability to present and transmit new knowledge in interrelation with existing knowledge to the colleagues as well as to the general public. The Ability to participate in thematic discussions at local and international level.”²¹ Finally, the third descriptor which stands as “Responsibility and autonomy” is defined as “Implementing research projects and /or development-oriented measures based on the latest achievements in the academic and /or professional context, while respecting the principles of leadership, academic and /or professional integrity, as well as demonstrating innovation and independence.”²² As revealed, the National Qualifications Framework defines general skills and competencies expected of all doctoral recipients in Georgia and provides some guideline about the learning outcomes assessment.

The learning outcomes of the Doctoral programme in European Studies has been aligned with the requirements of the revised qualifications framework as well as with the aims of the programme itself. The aims of the programme one by one has been compared with each learning outcome of the teaching and learning components of the programme as a result of which, the special maps had been drawn. In contrast to 2014 the attention was paid not only to curriculum mapping and teaching methods, but also to the development of rubrics.

In particular, the goal of mainstreaming a systemic and comprehensive mechanism for assessment of the learning outcomes, a special plan and methodology has been developed as a component part of the interdisciplinary Doctoral programme in European Studies. Unlike the debates that it might be a mistake to look for “learning outcomes” instead of “research outcomes” on Doctoral level (dichotomy around the selection of a correct term)²³, it has never been subject of discussion that the main indicator of assessing a PhD program learning outcomes is a PhD dissertation. However, because a doctoral dissertation is presented in the final phase of the program (minimum years for completion - three, maximum amount of years - five), and besides, all accredited Georgian doctoral programmes have to operate within the realms of the read lines of existing valid legislation, it became important to propose the effective assessment mechanism of the results/learning outcomes of the teaching components²⁴ that stand beyond the dissertation, -subject of operationalization in a dynamic manner, throughout the course of the whole program²⁵. In addition to valid, reliable and transparent assessment, participation of all stakeholders was defined as an important feature of the programme. The key objective of assessing the learning outcomes was defined the improvement and upgrade of the programme, as well as the enhancement of the process aimed at tailoring the

¹⁷ Available at <https://eqe.ge/eng/static/787> (last visited in April 2019).

¹⁸ See Article 3.8 of the Annex 3 of the Order no 69/n of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia on Assertion of the Qualifications Framework and Learning Fields Classifier, adopted on December 10, 2010.

¹⁹ See Annex 1 of the Order no 120/n of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia on Assertion of the Qualifications Framework, adopted on 10 April, 2019.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Academic Council of the Institute for European Studies of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, meeting minutes, 21.12.2018. Discussions at the Public Lecture organized at TSU by Dr. Alexander Hasgall, the Head of EUA Council for Doctoral Education, European University Association (EUA), 16 May 2019.

²⁴ Including two seminar papers as a small-scale research project not related to the dissertation.

²⁵ Decision of the Academic Council of the Institute for European Studies of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 1.03.2019.

academic and research process to the individual needs of the doctoral researchers.²⁶

That was the rationale that the twelve points learning outcomes assessment method, where an Academic Council/ Board composed of the staff involved in the Doctoral Programme plays a vital role -had been elaborated. It resembles the holistic approach demonstrating that each component offered to researcher semester-by-semester is done for a particular purpose.

To start with, immediately after completion of the first two semesters a researcher has to present before a special jury a revised, specified and upgraded research proposal, - a document described in previous chapter as an admission requirement to the doctoral programme. It is assumed that a collaboration with the assigned scientific supervisor, the offered taught courses and the interaction with other fellow researchers on various occasions (e.g. workshops, etc.) should provide necessary scaffolding to a PhD candidate enabling to demonstrate enough autonomous approach necessary for replacing the initial research plan with the upgraded content demonstrating higher standard in terms of essence and technical performance. The progress will be checked initially by an academic staff member in charge of providing the taught course during first two semesters where a Professor shall be looking at the degree of integration of learning outcomes of the offered courses in the updated research paper. At the last stage the paper will be evaluated jointly by an academic supervisor and the Board/academic council members, while the recommendations will be communicated to a PhD candidate for the review and consideration.

Learning outcomes of the courses that are offered during the first and subsequent semesters will be assessed through the direct evaluation methods, such as those prescribed under the syllabi for the midterm and final exams, as well as through specially elaborated quizzes drawn up for this particular purpose and administered occasionally by the academic personnel; This approach is assumed to be supportive to analyze the dynamics of the researchers' achievements, level of attainment of learning outcomes and the degree of overcoming the specific milestones deriving from the course goals. The share of the points given to a student in a quiz might not necessarily be allocated in the share of the final grade, as per decision of a Professor; However, it will serve as a significant indicator for the instructor to analyze the strengths and weaknesses revealed in the proposed course and to make it into compliance with the needs of a researcher. The results of the analysis as well as the dynamics of the progress of an individual researcher will be presented by the instructor of the course to the Board/Academic Council of the Doctoral programme by the end of each semester.

The learning outcomes of the mandatory courses "Academic Writing" as well as "Research Design and Methods of Social Inquiry" will be checked and assessed across a performance index available after a PhD candidate submits two small scale researches –the so-called seminar papers that are not composite parts of a dissertation. The next milestone will be considered to be accomplished if the separate chapters of a dissertation integrate the learning outcomes of those two courses revealing the quality necessary to recommend those for publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journals. The results will be analyzed and reviewed by the Board/Academic Council of the programme.

Checking the learning outcomes of the third mandatory course "Teaching Methods" will be ensured through analyzing the outputs and outcomes of various elements of Assistantship to Professor- another component of the programme. For elective courses, such as a. EU Law, b. European Economics, and c. Comparative Course on EU (Supranational) and UN (Universal) International Organization, the learning outcomes will be checked against the level of performance of one of the research components necessary to obtain the assigned ECTS. The research component (up to 2500 words) with the ratio of maximum 25 per cent of the overall grade was considered to stand as a good indicator to judge about the progress of a researcher. Here, a targeted benchmark is a grade - at least 81-90 points (B) out of maximum 100 among the 35 per cent of the researchers' cohort.

The specially elaborated student surveys focused on the interrelation of the goals of each study course with its learning outcomes, as well as on the correlation of the offered course with the learning outcomes of the programme, -is considered as an important indirect method of assessment. The questionnaire drafted to survey the employers of the graduates of the programme is allocated under the same category. The results of these surveys are subject to analyses by the Board/ Academic Council.

During the third and subsequent semesters of enrollment in the programme, the learning outcomes are checked against the quantity of peer-reviewed publications. It is being agreed that the simple accumulation of ECTS under the component of two mandatory seminar works cannot facilitate an evidence-based definition of the learning outcomes. The sole credible milestone under this component can be the acceptance of a scientific work for the international peer-reviewed journal. Participation in international/local scientific conferences or workshops and presenting the seminar papers or separate chapters of the dissertation, is assumed to be a valuable asset for the learning outcomes' assessment purposes.

²⁶ Ibid.

The mechanism of assessment of the learning outcomes for the component of Assistantship to Professor is a specially elaborated survey for the Academic Personnel regarding the degree of successful fulfillment of the pre-defined requirements by a researcher; It is being organized by the Institute's administration at an initial phase, while the results are submitted to the Board/Academic Council of the programme for further analyses and scrutiny.

And last, but the most important indicator or a key milestone to measure the Doctoral programme learning outcomes is a Dissertation. The targeted programme completion index, in other words the reasonably desired number of successful defenses from each cohort of doctoral candidates can only be a tentative figure; this is largely due to the absence of tangible control mechanisms over the external factors such as the availability of time and resources of a PhD candidate, which makes any prediction nonrealistic²⁷. Hence, the tentative index was indicated as maximum 30 per cent in each cohort. The relevant benchmark defined currently is a final assessment attained on a grading scale, which defines that at least 25 per cent of the defended PhD dissertations with a final minimum grade magna cum laude/very good (81-90 points, B out of 100 points maximum) -could be an indicator of a quality research and attainment of learning outcomes. For a technical visualization, the special map is drawn where each learning outcome of the programme is measured against the rubrics of the dissertation evaluation matrix, which contains ten criteria with maximum accumulated points one hundred possible to be allocated. In particular, this rubric sets that each Professor in a seven-member Dissertation-Defense-Council checks and evaluates: 1. The contribution of a PhD candidate in the development of the field, sub-field or/and interdisciplinary field. 2. The structure of a dissertation, the degree to which it sets an ideal condition for settling the research questions and attaining objectives. 3. Solution of the research goals and objectives. 4. Critical analyses and synthesis of the cited sources and actual data related to the research. 5. Technical organization of a dissertation including the citation technique. 6. Novelty, topicality and relevancy of a PhD dissertation. 7. The adequacy of choosing of scientific methods and its' application in the research process; Drawing conclusions and mapping research outputs via referencing the relevant sources, appropriate scientific literature and actual data. 8. The degree of targeted accentuation on the main problems outlined in a dissertation. 9. A structure of a presentation during the public defense, -the visual and conceptual aspects. 10. Adequacy of the proposed answers on the questions raised during the defense.

Conclusion

The experience revealed that the assessment is a complicated process that takes time, planning and dedication to build a correct strategy, which, as programme evolve, is to become a subject of constant revision. There is no doubt that it can be achieved only through a tailored-made approach. While a programme evaluation is a broad process, it cannot lead into a path of a strived and well-desired excellence if there is a gap in learning outcomes assessment. Meaningfully and properly done assessment of learning outcomes, i.e. well-defined purpose of the degree, correctly chosen milestones and assignments, as well as aligned degree requirements with the expected skills and competencies, can transform the imposed re/accreditation pressures into an opportunity for showcasing and experience-sharing across Higher Education Institutions. Eventually, it will make the degree programmes better and stronger, and most importantly, reinforce the PhD researchers to improve the levels of their achievements. So far, it makes predictable that during upcoming years the assessment mechanism, as elaborated for the Doctoral programme in European Studies at TSU, will foster not only a team spirit across the faculty, administration and researchers, but also will unfold the new ideas, promote greater clarity and forger sense of shared responsibility which overall means connecting assessment activity directly to the enhanced quality assurance -perhaps, the ultimate goal of this complicated exercise.

²⁷ Even though the programme is fulltime, 99 per cent of the PhD candidates of the programme are employed that forces them into using the "semester freezing" mechanism -which means temporarily halting the status of a researcher for an indefinite time.