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University of Prishtina

*Doctoral Programme
Experimental Biomedicine PhD*

RE-ACCREDITATION

FINAL REPORT OF THE EXPERT TEAM

August 2021 Cardiff, UK: Zagreb, Croatia: Paris, France

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Date of site visit: Virtual visit on 30th June 2021

Expert Team (ET) members:

- Professor Kenneth Wann
- Professor Melita Kovacevic
- Domagoj Vugic

Coordinators from Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA):

- Naim Gashi, Executive Director of KAA
- Shkelzen Gerxhaliu, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring
- Arianit Krasniqi, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Accreditation
- Leona Kovaci, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring
- Ilirjane Ademaj, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring
- Flamur Abazaj, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring

Sources of information for the Report:

- University of Prishtina Self Evaluation Report
- KAA Standards for Evaluation of Doctoral Programmes, June 2020
- University Prishtina Regulation for Doctoral Studies 2014, 2021
- Staff CVs
- Syllabus
- Information obtained from online meetings on 30th June with four members of the Management of the Institution, five Heads of a Doctoral Programme, representatives of Doctoral Committees, Administrative and Quality Assurance staff, four research-teaching staff and supervisors, and four doctoral candidates in Experimental Biomedicine.



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Criteria used for program evaluation:

- KAA Standards for Evaluation of Doctoral Programmes, June 2020
- Regulation for Doctoral Studies, University Prishtina, 2014, 2021
- Answers to questions posed by the ET following the virtual meeting which were received from the Experimental Biomedicine PhD course coordinators, Faculty of Medicine accreditation team.

1.2. Site visit schedule

09.00 – 09.45 Meeting with the management of the institution/faculty where the programme is integrated (*no slide presentation is allowed, the meeting is intended as a free discussion*)

09:50 – 10:50 Meeting with the head/s of a doctoral programme

1. Shaip Krasniqi
2. Suzana Manxhuka-Kerliu
3. Shemsedin Dreshaj
4. Afrim Blyta
5. Meleq Bahtiari

10:55 – 11:50 Meeting with representatives of relevant doctoral committees, administrative and QA staff involved in doctoral programmes

11: 50 – 12:50 Lunch

12: 55 – 13:40 Meeting with research-teaching staff and supervisors

13:45 – 14:30 Meeting with doctoral candidates

14:35 – 14:45 Internal meeting between expert team and KAA

14.50 – 15:00 Closing meeting with the management of the institution/doctoral programme

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1.3. A brief overview of the institution and programme under evaluation

The University of Prishtina established in 1969 (1999) is a public University based in the Pristina campus in Kosovo and is the highest ranking Albanian-language University in Europe. Many scientific disciplines (with the exception of the political sciences) are delivered at the University in ten Faculties, at three levels of study (BA, MA and PhD). There are currently around 10,000 students and 900 Academic and Administrative staff. The expert team (ET) found that there is currently no Website in English available for consultation although this is claimed to be the case on p 9 of the self evaluation report (SER). The Parliament of Kosovo passed the law for the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine in 1969. and Postgraduate studies in this Faculty commenced in 2003 with a Masters Program in Health Management. PhD Programs first started in 2007, and currently the Faculty has PhD programs in Preclinical Medicine, Clinical Medicine, Dentistry, Experimental Biomedicine and Public Health. The program under evaluation is the PhD in Experimental Biomedicine which is a continuation of a 2013-2016 PhD program financed through a TEMPUS Programme (Nb. 159034-TEMPUS-2009-XK-JPHES). The program was previously reaccredited by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency for 2016-2019 with a one year extension for 2019-2020. The prototype for the PhD in Experimental Biomedicine is a Doctoral Program of Applied Medical Science at the Medical University of Vienna (<https://www.meduniwien.ac.at/web/en/studies-further-education/phd-doctoral-programmes>) and it is stated that the programme “intends to continue academic cooperation with international partners (University of Ghent, University of Edinburgh, University of Vienna and University of Gratz etc)’

The self evaluation report (SER) makes no mention of the Regulation for Doctoral Studies Nr 1/96 dated 24th June 2021, but states that the program is defined according to the Ph.D. regulation Nr. 1/755 date 09.09.2014 which has been amended by a Statement of the Senate of the University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina” Nr. 2/111 date 02.09.2016.

The self evaluation report (SER) states that:

The Objectives of the Ph.D. program in “Experimental Biomedicine” are:

- *Strengthening research capacities, as well as improving internationalization and mobility aspects within the Ph.D. cycle;*
- *Addresses an urgent need to build expertise in the field of Experimental Biomedicine in Kosovo;*

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- *Develop, accredit and continue the program “Ph.D. Experimental Biomedicine and implement interdisciplinary team working at the UP” in line with Bologna requirements and recent trends;*
- *Reach a common knowledge base on Ph.D. program development and implementation through capacity and institution building measures.*

2. PROGRAMME EVALUATION: Doctoral programme in Experimental Biomedicine

2.1 INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND FUNDING

The Senate of the University of Prishtina approved Regulations for Doctoral Studies in 2014 and these were updated in 2021. Both versions of these were available to the expert team(ET). KAA sent the 2014 version prior to the virtual meeting and the 2021 version was sent along with answers to questions after the virtual meeting. These 2021 regulations consist of 24 articles and are a free standing, reasonably comprehensive description of the many aspects or issues relating to Doctoral education. The SER refers frequently to the articles in these regulations to support its submission. The SER presents staff (presumed Faculty of Medicine) data on pp 10-11. There are 33 named regular academic staff for the program in Experimental Biomedicine, although one name is repeated. All of these full time staff appointments are at Professorial level, and all have the title Dr, although, for 19 of these, contracts extend only to 2020,2021 or 2022, and only 7 have contracts beyond 2024 which needs to be explained. For all of these posts the allocated hours per week for teaching is 6 hours, and for research is 12 or 20 hours. The CVs for 28 staff were provided, 25 of these being regular academic staff and 3 non-regular academic staff part time who are currently visiting from Lebanon. There were no CVs for 8 regular academic staff from the Faculty and one CV for a Professor not mentioned in the academic staff list in the SER. These lists should correspond better. From inspection of the CVs the ET estimates that perhaps only 6 Professors from the regular academic staff list have published, as first or corresponding author, at least 3 relevant articles in the last 5 years. The SER states this to be more than 14 Professors. In an isolated case the staff member in question could not be found in the publications cited. In future publication data should be presented in full and in an orthodox format that makes it easy to interrogate. Although the SER states that a list of published articles is available “*at web pages of Faculty*”, as indicated above the ET could find no English version.



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The following are considered strengths in the SWOT analysis provided. 1) The Vice-Dean for Financial Issues and Assets has overall responsibility for all issues relating to infrastructure and resources. 2) The Faculty of Medicine initiates planning for the provision and the improving of resources, and any implementation and progress is monitored annually.

The SER claims that (and this is repeated twice on p 6):

“The Faculty of Medicine has allocated sufficient academic and administrative staff, spatial, physical and financial resources in order to support the doctoral program – Experimental Biomedicine.”

However, in the SWOT analysis provided in the SER the following are considered weaknesses, and this is at odds with the above statement.

- *Lack of sufficient finances to support all ongoing doctorate projects, specific kits, on public health research*
- *Limited Department finances to provide optimal administrative assistance to our programs*
- *Insufficiently equipped classrooms with needed technological appliances, such as ceiling-mounted LCD projectors.*

Also, in the final SWOT analysis in section 2.7, where Doctoral Research Outcome is being considered, it is stated:

- a) under weaknesses: *“The insufficient lab infrastructure and finance can orientate the educational process towards more classic research topics than the actual one and students cannot meet the actual research competences”*

and b) under threats: *“The financial constraints to support the educational process in the Ph.D. Program “Experimental Biomedicine”.*



These admissions in themselves are suffice to make the ET uncomfortable about the sustainability of the program. This is particularly the case if numbers are to be increased as the program team has intimated at the virtual meeting. The program needs to indicate the extent of the perceived shortfalls and the steps that will be taken to remedy this.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|----------|--|-----|----|
| 1.1 | The institution* has established institutional regulations for doctoral programmes that are either a) part of the existing regulations, but as a separate named section, or b) a free-standing document | X | |
| 1.2 | The institution has allocated sufficient human (academic and administrative), spatial, physical and financial resources, specifically to support its doctoral programmes. | | X |
| 1.3 | The institution has sufficient academic staff with a doctoral degree so that at least 50% of courses at doctoral level are delivered by academic staff from that institution. Further, at least 5 academic staff must have a PhD in the research field of the doctoral programme and have at least 3 papers, as first or corresponding author, published in international relevant publications in the last 5 years. Relevance of publications is defined according to international criteria for the particular field of science- indexed in WoS ¹ and/or SCOPUS ²). | X | |
| Subtotal | | 2 | 1 |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 1.4 | The institution conducts regular reviews and updating of the programme. | X | |
| 1.5 | Doctoral education opportunities are shown on the institutional website, in an official language of Kosovo, and in English, and include all relevant information. | | X |



| | | | |
|----------|--|---|---|
| 1.6 | The Institution has a clear strategy for the delivery of its doctoral education. If this is embedded in a general institutional strategy, it is explicitly recognised in a separate section. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 2 | 1 |

ET recommendations:

1. An explanation of the situation vis a vis staff contracts which end soon i.e. before 2024;
2. Provide the CVs for all the staff listed and ensure the staff list and the CV list match;
3. Clarify the perceived discrepancy between the conclusion of the ET and what is presented in the SER around how many Professors from the regular academic staff list have published, as first or corresponding author, at least 3 relevant articles in the last 5 years;
4. Present publications in full, in a conventional format to facilitate inspection;
5. Display the publication list on the Faculty Web Pages as indicated in the SER, preferably in English;
6. Rationalise conflicting statements in the narrative of the SER and the SWOT analyses in respect of resources, infrastructure, administrative assistance, equipment, financial constraints or otherwise to provide genuine assurances to the ET that the research program is sustainable.

2.2 SELECTION AND ADMISSION CRITERIA

As most of the procedures and requirements are defined at a central level, the admission and selection criteria are provided in the Regulations, article 7 (RDS,2021). There is a public call, potential doctoral candidates must apply and they are selected by public competition. The requirement is to have a master's degree or equivalent education in the relevant area of study, such as Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy. The SER (p14) claims that admission requirements "are transparent, consistently and fairly applied for all students". However, the SER also states that "When two candidates are of the same level, and when accepting students in number is limited, then priority would be the female candidate". Is this an example of "fairly applied"?



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It is also a requirement to have a good command of English, both in speaking and writing. However, although the SER reports on giving a priority to those candidates that ‘*earn high-grade point average*’, starting with 8.0, this is actually not the case. Selected doctoral candidates should be among the top 5, maximum 10 percent of the best students, and the average of 8.0 is too low (on the scale 5 to 10). There are also additional criteria taken into account as, for example, gender (see above), but the ET was not assured that potential capacity for research is one of them.

The view of the ET is that the study program does not recognise part-time doctoral candidates, and although all or almost all of the candidates are in full time employment, they are paradoxically also registered as full-time doctoral candidates. This situation contributes to prolonged time to completion and blurred regulations on time required to graduate.

The program study initiative was to enrol doctoral candidates every second year, bi-annually, partially due to the number of potential candidates, but also to decrease costs and to be more efficient. This is a good initiative, and positive practice at other European universities. Unfortunately, it has not been supported by the authorities.

It has to be recorded that the SER is not consistent and reliable in providing information. Within the same chapter, it provides different, contradictory or conflicting information (‘copy & paste’ process may contribute to this significantly). For example, the SER first provides a list of diplomas that are accepted in the admission process (as itemized above), and then, later, this list is extended to diploma in Natural Sciences as well; or in the SWOT analysis (p16 of the SER) among weaknesses, one of two is “*Low number of positions for PhD in Public Health*” and further one of two threats is “*Lack of interest for candidates to enroll at the Public Health PhD studies*”. For the ET this is an important and alarming sign of a quality issue.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 2.1 | Doctoral candidates must be selected on the basis of a competitive and transparent process. | X | |



| | | | |
|----------|--|---|---|
| 2.2 | Applicants for a doctoral programme must have an educational level equivalent to a masters degree. | X | |
| 2.3 | In the selection process doctoral candidates' potential for research should be assessed | | X |
| 2.4 | Applicants must be able to demonstrate a satisfactory working knowledge of English | X | |
| Subtotal | | 3 | 1 |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|----------|---|-----|----|
| 2.5 | Both, full-time and part-time doctoral candidates must have a clearly defined time for completion of their studies. | | X |
| Subtotal | | | 1 |

ET recommendations:

1. Defend the decision to give priority to candidates with a high-grade point average of only 8.0 or consider raising this to a higher grade average;
2. Provide clear examples of how, and when, the prospective candidate's potential for research is determined;
3. Assign the doctoral candidate the title of full-time or part-time depending on whether they have significant work obligations outside of their PhD studies;
4. Remove inconsistencies in the narrative as alluded to above;
5. Address the issues under Weaknesses or Threats in the SWOT analysis which give the ET cause for concern over quality.



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2.3 DOCTORAL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE/CONTENT

The work of the study program and the ECTS allocated to each component is summarised on p 21 of the SER. Clearly in terms of the hours spent and the allocation of ECTS the major part of the study program is research-based. Inspection of the content on pp 17-19 indicates that there are 90 lectures in semester I and 60 in semester II. The summary table claims only 75 hours for semester I. However, it remains to be seen how relevant attendance at a total of 135 (or 150) lectures is to the individual candidate's future research activity. Article 5 in the RDS, 2021 stipulates that lectures should be less than 20% of the total workload and that is certainly the case. However, the number of lectures seems very excessive, could surely be reduced and that would be a recommendation from the ET. Further, standard 3.3 demands that courses not exceed 20% of the total workload or 36 ECTS, and surely the current program has 50 ECTS allocated to course work in semesters I and II. In respect of duration of study for the program, article 8 in the RDS, 2021 states that "*Doctoral studies last not less than three years*" and "*Doctoral studies must be concluded with the public defense of the doctoral thesis no later than six (6) years from the day of their registration*" That does not seem to meet the requirements of standard 3.2. And it perhaps conflicts with article 16 of the same regulations which demands submission for evaluation within three years. What can possibly take place in the three extra years between submission and public defense? Also, again addressing standard 3.2 no specified information on duration of study for part-time students could be found in the SER or the RDS.

The proposed study program does embrace the idea of increased mobility for researchers and it is clear that there is a desire to promote this in a number of ways. The SER (pp 5 and 6) states that:

"mobility, promotion of scientific research, development and building a knowledge society are the focus of this particular program"

And that one of the objectives of the PhD program in Experimental Biomedicine is:

"Strengthening research capacities, as well as improving internationalization and mobility aspects within the Ph.D. cycle"

This philosophy is also encapsulated in Article 5 of the RDS, 2021 where it states that in order to achieve interdisciplinarity PhD candidates may "*carry out certain parts of research and artistic creativity in other academic units of the university or in other relevant institutions inside and outside the country*".

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Robust monitoring of a PhD candidate’s progress is a must in any study program. The obligations of the supervisor(s) are laid out in article 10 of the regulations (RDS) which include the need for guidance, assessing of quality, supporting and being fully engaged in the research activity of the student. The supervisor must also submit an annual report on the work of the doctoral student to the Council for Doctoral Studies of the academic unit. In the SWOT analysis for supervision (p66 of the SER) the belief that the supervisor keeps track of the progress of the research project of the PhD student, so enabling completion within the expected timeframe, is considered a strength. Real data for completion rates to substantiate this would be reassuring to the ET. Procedures around the appointing of a supervisor and the submission and acceptance of the doctoral research proposal are adequately covered in article 12 of the RDS,2021. If followed, then these satisfy the requirements of core standards 3.6 and 3.7.

There are two Institutional bodies responsible for Doctoral education in UP. At the Faculty level there is The Doctoral Studies Council (DSC) of the academic unit, and at the University level there is the Central Council of Doctoral Studies (CCDS). Article 2 of the RDS,2021 provides the composition of these Councils. The DSC consists of 5 or 7 senior individuals (Associate Professor or higher rank), representing the relevant departments. There is a full-time Professor or Associate Professor in the field of Medicine in the CCDS. There is therefore likely to be some representation from individuals (supervisors) close to the candidates. The program team could offer clear examples to aid assessment of this point.

Article 5 of the RDS,2021 addresses the possibility of taking courses outside of UP and the SER (p 4) states that the program intends to continue academic cooperation with international partners affording the opportunity for doctoral candidates to gain more experience outside of UP. Article 10 of the RDS,2021 speaks to the responsibility of the supervisor in respect of supporting publication of the candidate’s work which must surely include attending and presenting at meetings outside UP. As indicated above the course work is very intensive. Lectures (summarised on p 21 of the SER) however only occupy a maximum of 10% of the total work in semesters I and II, seminars, exercise and self-learning being the major course activities. The ET could find no discussion around cohorts of doctoral candidates, nor are there any concrete data presented on any alliances formed or joint programs in the event of insufficient research capacity at UP. Perhaps the program team can comment on this.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|-----|---------------|-----|----|
|-----|---------------|-----|----|



| | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|
| 3.1 | Doctoral programmes must be research-based although they may include course work and other activities that contribute to critical thinking and the development of research skills. | X | |
| 3.2 | Doctoral programmes must have a time limit of 3 or 4 years for full-time doctoral students and of 7 years for part-time students. | | X |
| 3.3 | The programme should enable individual research opportunities; courses should not exceed 1/5 of ECTS (36 credits) of total credit hours or 20% of the total workload; programme must develop transferable skills, and provide sufficient training in the methodology, ethics and integrity of research. | | X |
| 3.4 | The programme should encourage mobility and participation in learning opportunities in other institutions. | X | |
| 3.5 | The programme must have an established process for monitoring the progress of doctoral candidates. | X | |
| 3.6 | A doctoral candidate must have a supervisor/s allocated within the first 12 months. | X | |
| 3.7 | Acceptance of a doctoral research proposal must be subject to clearly defined and transparent procedures. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 5 | 2 |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|-----|--|-----|----|
| 3.8 | Doctoral candidates' mentors and members of the doctoral committee should be involved in institutional bodies relevant for doctoral education. | X | |



| | | | |
|----------|--|----------|----------|
| 3.9 | Doctoral candidates should be allowed to take courses outside the institution, as well as afforded opportunities to gain other relevant experience, such as presentations at academic conferences, workshops and other relevant activities | X | |
| 3.10 | The majority of course work should be based on tutorials, seminars, discussion groups, workshops and individual work rather than predominantly didactic methods of instruction. | X | |
| 3.11 | There should be evidenced data collection on cohorts of doctoral candidates. | | X |
| 3.12 | If there is insufficient research capacity the institution is considering different approaches, such as joint programmes, collaborative programmes); a serious endeavour needs to be documented (please, see S 4.5). | | X |
| Subtotal | | 3 | 2 |

ET recommendations:

1. *Reduce the ECTS allocated to the course work to satisfy core standard 3.3*
2. *Provide clearer statements on the duration of the full time PhD in the regulations, and specify the duration for a part-time candidate;*
3. *Provide UP data to support the statement that in the SWOT analysis for supervision under strengths (p66 of the SER) there is the “belief that the supervisor keeps track of the progress of the research project of the PhD student, so enabling completion within the expected timeframe”. To substantiate this would be reassuring to the ET;*
4. *List names of supervisors etc who sit on the Institutional bodies responsible for doctoral education at UP.*
5. *Indicate reasons that the SER does not refer to supplementary standards 3.11 & 3.12.*

2.4 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT / CAPACITY

As indicated above, under core standard 1.2, the ET noted that in the SWOT analysis presented in the SER on p 13 attention was drawn to the lack of sufficient finances to support doctoral

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projects, provide specific kits and to provide administrative assistance for the program. Yet the SER also claims on p 8 that:

“the premises, human resources, and equipment in the Faculty of Medicine comprises the adequate number within the necessary standards to ensure long-term implementation of the study program”.

and on p12 under strengths in the SWOT analysis:

“Premises and infrastructure of the Medical Faculty are available for the program development”

and again on p 54 the SER states that:

“sufficient financial, logistic and human resources are allocated for achieving the proposed research objectives”

Doctoral candidates in Experimental Biomedicine carry out their research in a Central Biomedical Laboratory and there is some listing of routine equipment, or bigger items of equipment housed in the various so-called research units. However, there remains little detail on specifications of equipment available and demands on usage, making it hard to judge just what precise facilities are available for any sophisticated program of work.

Also on p 62 of the SER in the SWOT analysis, under weaknesses, it is stated that there is:

“Lack of a part of the staff with innovative knowledge and ideas and training in known techniques to provide an adequate scientific product”

So despite the claim on p8 of the SER that *“The financial plan of the Medical Faculty is annually revised and projected in long-term aspects to ensure the sustainability of the study program”* the ET does not have confidence that this process is sufficiently robust.

Aspects of budgeting are tabled in Annex 1 of Appendices on pp 73-74 of the SER. The Laboratory reagents, expendables, and animal feed are estimated at £15 k, £3 k and £2 k respectively. If these annual costs are to service one PhD student in Experimental Biomedicine, these would seem reasonable enough.

The importance of ethical standards and integrity is recognised in the SER for the program. Hence on p 59 of the SER is stated that:

“The Faculty has an Ethics Committee consisting of 15 members of the Faculty with various expertise that evaluates and reports on the fulfillment of ethical principles based on the Helsinki Declaration but also for experimental studies in experimental animals. For clinical studies, the permission of the ethics committee from the University Clinical Center of Kosovo is required, as well as for experimental studies, applicants must have adequate training, respectively adequate certification as a starting point for further application and evaluation of

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their project proposals regarding compliance. of international ethical standards. So the preservation of ethical principles in the Faculty has a long-term tradition'

Further, on p 60 of the SER, under the SWOT analysis for Research, a strength is:

"Functioning of the Ethics Committee for issuing permits and standardization of research according to the Helsinki Declaration".

This gives the ET some confidence that the appropriate behaviour is being introduced to Doctoral candidates and that relevant safeguards are in place and working. That appropriate ethical standards are being adhered to is also addressed under item 10 in Article 12 of the Regulations for Doctoral Studies, 2021 which states that:

"All scientific research on humans or animals must be done in accordance with the provisions of the regulations of the Ethics Commission. They must also have the permission of the Ethics Commission of the faculty or university, as well as the institution in which the research is conducted; the consent of all the respondents separately (patients, respectively volunteers), if they are able to do so, and/or the consent of their guardians or their legal representatives"

Core standard 4.4 demands that no supervisor should have more than three Doctoral; candidates. This would seem to be adequately addressed now in the Regulations for Doctoral Studies, 2021 under Article 9 where it states that:

"A mentor may be hired for a maximum of two doctoral students enrolled within one academic year, but not more than three (3) doctoral students at a time"

Article 6 of the PhD regulations describes the forms of Doctoral study which certainly embrace the idea of a joint doctoral program with another University although nothing of that nature has thus far been undertaken. On p 55 of the SER the notion of *"cooperation in areas where the interdisciplinary scientific study is required, providing access to local and regional laboratories"* (Project -Mapping Mapping research infrastructures in the Republic of Kosovo-MEST)" is articulated and on p 56 of the SER there is described the opportunity *"to create bridges of cooperation, increase the quality of scientific studies, creation of relevant expertise, specific training"*. On the SER (p 57) it is stated that the Medical Faculty aims to expand cooperation with industry to facilitate technology transfer. The idea of achieving an upgrade of research capacity, if needed, seems therefore very much in the current thinking.

Supplementary standard 4.6 does not seem to have been addressed.



With respect to research publications it falls in case of the University Prishtina (UP) to the Science Coordinator Office (SCO) to document these systematically, and the SER indicates that 1161 scientific publications have been recorded. The SCO is also responsible for the archiving of scientific projects that staff are engaged in (89 scientific projects, 1999-2020). Evidence of an emerging culture with support for research quality from the UP is evidenced in the SER (p 58), for example, by the provision of funds *“for maintenance, supply, and internationalization of the scientific studies in the fields where the staff of the Institution possesses more advanced expertise”* and the *“assistance and support (that) are provided to staff in developing research cooperation agreements”*.

Evaluation and promotion of academic staff is based mainly on the quality of scientific publications. In this way UP incentivises or encourages quality research activity.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|----------|--|-----|----|
| 4.1 | Infrastructure and facilities must be up-to-date and compatible with the area of research of a whole doctoral programme and doctoral research projects. | | X |
| 4.2 | It must be evident, and clearly documented, that research is performed according to international ethical standards. | X | |
| 4.3 | An Ethics Committee should be responsible for approving research involving humans and animals. Members must be active researchers, with publications in relevant international journals with no record of any kind of misconduct of research, plagiarism or any other ethical issue, no identified conflict of interest, and committed to data protection. | X | |
| 4.4 | No supervisor should have more than three doctoral candidates. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 3 | 1 |



| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|----------|--|-----|----|
| 4.5 | In case of a need to up-grade research capacity, a joint doctoral programme with another university, preferably from abroad could be accepted (the whole programme with all the components needs to be documented, following all the applicable standards); other forms of collaboration with other institutions from abroad may also be acceptable. | X | |
| 4.6 | Taking into account the field of research, employment opportunities, and its research capacity, the institution should consider the scheduling of enrolment of new cohorts of students. | | X |
| 4.7 | The institution should support research quality by requesting and reporting on research-paper quality and publication, external research funding, the establishment of research groups, etc. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 2 | 1 |

ET recommendations:

1. Rationalise the conflicting statements that deal with infrastructure and facilities and that the ET has drawn attention to;
2. Itemise any key large pieces of equipment, owned or shared and usage;
3. Expand on budgetary considerations for the future. The current budget is only suffice for one candidate which makes a study program for a cohort of students non sustainable
4. Address supplementary code 4.6.

2.5 SUPERVISION

During the online visit and according to SER provided, the expert team (ET) found that each doctoral candidate is provided with at least one supervisor. However, it appears that not all candidates have a supervisor that is an expert in a research topic of her/his doctoral project as demanded by article 9 of the RDS,2021. Selection of both research topic and supervisor is not really clear. At least 1 supervisor, without any exception, should be an expert in the research



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field of a PhD project and should navigate the student during the time of her/his study in a collaborative manner.

Regarding the competencies of supervisors, we were not provided with the list of the academic staff acting as supervisors, but could conclude, at least from the list of the academic staff, that all of them hold a PhD title and are active researchers. Supervisors (academic staff in general) are participating in the international academic networks. Unfortunately, the list of publications provided is not fully updated so we could not conclude whether all supervisors published at least 3 papers in relevant journals.

We found that the number of doctoral candidates per supervisor is balanced correctly with a maximum of 3 PhD students/supervisor. Talking to PhD students, we concluded that doctoral students are meeting their supervisors regularly (at least once a week) and these meetings are either informal or documented. Regarding the responsibilities of the Institution, supervisor and a doctoral student, these are covered adequately by the University Regulation for Doctoral Study (2021) of the University of Prishtina.

Opportunities for professional development of supervisors and PhD students seem limited. The SER (p11) states that *“The Institution has a different mechanism to support the additional professional development of teaching staff, with special assistance given to any who are facing difficulties”*. Precisely what this is should be clarified to provide confidence in the process.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 5.1 | A doctoral candidate must have at least one supervisor (two is advisable), covering the research area/topic that is the focus of his/her doctoral research. | | X |



| | | | |
|----------|--|---|---|
| 5.2 | Supervisors must be a member of academic staff of the institution, hold a PhD and an approved academic title, be an active researcher, with a minimum of three years' research experience following the award of his/her PhD; he or she must have at least 3 papers published in international relevant publications in the last 5 years (relevance of publications is defined according to international criteria for the particular field of science- indexed in WoS and/or SCOPUS). | X | |
| 5.3 | Supervisors must have experience in research projects and participation in international academic conferences and workshops relevant to the field. | X | |
| 5.4 | The number of doctoral candidates per supervisor should be compatible with the overall workload of a supervisor. | X | |
| 5.5 | Supervisors and doctoral candidates must meet regularly (at the very least monthly) to discuss the candidates' research and monitor progress. These meetings must be documented. | X | |
| 5.6 | Responsibilities of the institution, supervisor and doctoral student must be set out clearly in a policy document. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 5 | 1 |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|----------|---|-----|----|
| 5.7 | The Institution provides professional development opportunities for supervisors. | X | |
| 5.8 | Participation in international academic networks and similar activities should be documented. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 2 | |



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ET recommendations:

1. *Ensure that at least 1 supervisor, without any exception, needs to be an expert in the field of student's research topic;*
2. *Guarantee that only supervisors with enough time and knowledge should be supervising PhD students;*
3. *All possible supervisors should communicate their research field and projects online;*
4. *Supervisors should ensure that students are integrated in her/his team.*

2.6 ASSESSMENT

In this group of standards, this program did not satisfy all nine core standards. The SER leans heavily on the Regulations for Doctoral study referring the reader to the relevant articles in the RDS, 2021. However, the ET could not rely only on these articles for information since one not quoted deals with the important issue of originality. Hence the only point in article 13 states that *“The doctoral thesis is an original scientific / artistic work, which is subject to public scientific / artistic evaluation.”*. This criterion should have been referred to in the SER. Also when asked to clarify the criteria for assessment of a doctoral thesis, subsequent to the online meeting, the team returned the narrative of article 8 of the RDS, 2021. The ET was not referred to this particular article in the SER. There seems to be some confusion over which articles pertain to assessment, which is of concern to the ET.

An important and demanding standard, given the structure of the study program, that seems to have been met, is that doctoral candidates are required to publish at least one paper as a first, or corresponding author, in an international journal.

The SER provides no assurance to the ET that doctoral candidates must confirm originality of their research work and thesis as stipulated by article 13 of the regulations (see above). When the Thesis is submitted it should be accompanied by a declaration to this effect.

In addition, there seems to be no documentation to show that there are regular checks for plagiarism. Checking originality of students' written texts is not regulated and it has not been documented in the assessment process. This issue should be covered in article 17 of the Regulations. The online meetings provided some reassurance, but there does need to be

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documentation to this effect. There is mention on p 60 of the SER (as discussed above when discussing standards 4.2 and 4.3), under the SWOT analysis for Research, that a strength is: *“Functioning of the Ethics Committee for issuing permits and standardization of research according to the Helsinki Declaration”*. This gives the ET some extra reassurance that issues around research conduct are being monitored.

The SER did not provide sufficient relevant descriptive information that could facilitate the evaluation process. On the contrary, within this section, it was more than modest in explaining any components of the assessment. Instead, it provided a list or forms, with no description, and not to be included in the report.

Once a doctoral candidate submits his or her thesis to the doctoral committee to start the assessment procedure, there will be a Committee for the evaluation and for the public defence. While the Committee for evaluation has three members, one must be external, and a supervisor cannot be the member of the evaluation Committee The Committee for defence has no such quality requirements set. The respective roles of Committees are described in the university Regulation for Doctoral studies (RDS,2021).

In the thesis defence process, the Committee can award different ‘grades’, from excellent to sufficient and fail. Firstly, there are no criteria for these grades. Secondly, it does not seem appropriate and in accord with this level of education, to award a PhD degree to someone whose Thesis is described at the level of ‘sufficient’. In the case of any negative assessments, the procedure is only partially articulated.

In the SWOT analysis under weaknesses it is stated that there is;

“Lack of narrow scientific expertise of the members of the evaluation committee in the scientific project of the doctoral student”

This is also a worrying aspect for assessment of the quality of the PhD Thesis.

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|-----|---------------|-----|----|
|-----|---------------|-----|----|

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| | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|
| 6.1 | Doctoral candidates are supported and required to publish at least 1 paper as a first or corresponding author in a peer-reviewed journal relevant to the field (indexed in WoS and/or SCOPUS). | X | |
| 6.2 | Doctoral candidates must confirm that the doctoral thesis is their original work. | | X |
| 6.3 | Doctoral candidates must submit their thesis to the doctoral committee within the stipulated time frame and participate in an oral public defence. | X | |
| 6.4 | The institution must have a clearly documented protocol for the assessment process including the composition of the evaluation committee, which should comprise at least three members | X | |
| 6.5 | The institution must have clear criteria for the assessment of doctoral theses | X | |
| 6.6 | The institution must have clear regulations governing the instance of a negative assessment. | | X |
| 6.7 | Institutions must have clear policies and procedures to address any kind of misconduct such as unethical practice, plagiarism, fabrication of data, etc. | X | |
| 6.8 | All the members of the committee for the evaluation of the public defence must be established authorities in the research field. The committee must have at least one external member from a domestic or international institution. | X | |
| 6.9 | A supervisor may not serve as a member of the evaluation committee. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 7 | 2 |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|-----|---------------|-----|----|
|-----|---------------|-----|----|



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| | | | |
|--|------|--|--|
| | None | | |
|--|------|--|--|

ET recommendations:

1. Amend the narrative in the SER to invoke all the correct articles that deal with assessment;
2. Make it mandatory for doctoral candidates to sign a declaration indicating the the work carried out is original and their own work;
3. Provide documentation that confirms that the Thesis work has been checked for plagiarism;
4. Consider the terminology used in grading the Thesis work particularly in respect of the use of the term “sufficient”;
5. Expand on the procedures that accompany and follow (e.g. appeals) a negative final assessment;
6. Indicate how the study program will deal with the weakness “narrow scientific expertise of the members of the evaluation committee” which has real implications for perceived quality of the Thesis work.

2.7 DOCTORAL RESEARCH OUTCOME

According to the SER, the expected outcomes of the program in Experimental Biomedicine are the submission of a PhD dissertation followed by a public defence of this piece of work in a *viva voce*. It is stated in the SER that the Thesis “*should reflect the reasonableness of the topic and expectations of original scientific contribution....*”. The competencies achieved are also listed. but for most of the information around the outcome the ET is referred to the relevant articles in the Regulation for Doctoral Studies, 2021 (RDS,2021). The stipulated versions for the Doctoral Thesis are described in article 14 and for the sciences this would be either a monograph, or at least three scientific papers from the Thesis work where the candidate is first author. There would seem to be no stipulated minimum length recommended for the monograph. This is perhaps introduced in Form F8 which is mentioned under Core Standard 6, on Assessment, in the SER, however if there is such a recommendation it should be in the RDS, 2021. Article 15 of the RDS, 2021 indicates that the Thesis should be written in or

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translated into Albanian, although Title, summary and keywords should be written in both Albanian and English. It is claimed in article 21 that the entire PhD Thesis shall be available on the university websites at the latest one month after a successful defence, although it was not possible for the ET to check this. Also, hard copies (3 in each case) of the Doctoral Thesis are held in the archive of the academic unit, the archive of the University and the Central University Library.

That the Doctoral Thesis presents original work that represents a contribution to knowledge is implied in p 69 of the SER. The Council of the Academic Unit, in conjunction with the Council of Doctoral Studies appoints a commission (three members) to evaluate the Doctoral Thesis. In the RDS,2021 Article 17 dealing with the evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis states that the report of the Commission “*should contain the explicit evaluation regarding the original scientific / artistic contribution of the PhD student*”.

In respect of Standard 7.3 the set of competencies that the successful student can achieve are listed on p 69-70 of the SER. Skills such as creative thinking, troubleshooting, the ability to analyse and report on data and values such as rigor, honesty and integrity are assets in any future career. An understanding of intellectual property, patents, copyright, clinical trials and misconduct equip any candidate for alternative non-laboratory career paths also. There is one caveat however. In the SWOT analysis it is stated under weaknesses:

“The insufficient lab infrastructure and finance can orientate the educational process towards more classic research topics than the actual one and students cannot meet the actual research competences”

This is a worrying perceived deficiency, and should be addressed.

The ET did not find any reference to Supplementary standard 7.4 which deals with the situation where a candidate does not complete the program. If unaddressed this is unfortunate in that it provides no fall back position for the student who may have withdrawn for legitimate reasons. An exit route, if needed, for all candidates is always desirable.

The SER refers the ET to the RDS,2021 in respect of issues around data protection and confidentiality. However, following the virtual meeting in reply to the specific question from the ET around this, the written reply from the program team claims it is dealt with in article 17, which is not true. In fact article 20 in the RDS addresses and defines the procedures in cases

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where there is a need to protect intellectual property. In brief, The Doctoral candidate and the supervisor inform the Central Commission of Doctoral Studies (CCDS) and “*may request that the submitted doctoral dissertation be treated discreetly, until the time of public defense*”. The latter may then be postponed, for a maximum of one year, from the ratification of the work in the Senate. The latter decision to postpone the public defense is taken by the Senate, on the recommendation of the CCDS following the request of the Doctoral student. It is the responsibility of the CCDS to implement procedures for legal and commercial protection of research results,

| No. | Core standard | Yes | No |
|----------|---|-----|----|
| 7.1 | The final outcome of the doctoral programme is a thesis. There is no singular, stipulated, format for the thesis. However, the copy must be publicly available. This may be on-line, but a hardcopy must be held in the institution’s library and elsewhere, as deemed appropriate. | X | |
| 7.2 | The thesis should reflect original thinking and represent a valuable addition to the knowledge base of the topic | X | |
| 7.3 | Doctoral programmes should provide a successful candidate with a set of competences that will provide him, or her, with a choice of career paths. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 3 | |

| No. | Supplementary | Yes | No |
|-----|--|-----|----|
| 7.4 | Where a doctoral candidate does not complete his/her PhD studies successfully the institution may wish to consider issuing a certificate recording the courses he/she attended during the course of study. | | X |



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| 7.5 | There is a defined procedure for the assessment and public defence in cases where the result may lead to the application and award of a patent. | X | |
| Subtotal | | 1 | 1 |

ET recommendations:

1. Where a monograph is the product of the Thesis work, the SER should stipulate its minimum length;
2. Ensure that the entire PhD Thesis is available on the university websites at the latest one month after a successful defence as indicated in the RDS,2021;
3. Make it mandatory for doctoral candidates to sign a declaration indicating the the work carried out is original and their own work (as above under standard 6);
4. Address the conceded weakness in the SER that “students cannot meet the actual research competences”.

3. OVERALL EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE ET

Overall compliance:

| Standard | Core | Supplementary |
|--|------|---------------|
| 1. Institutional structure, administrative support and funding | 2 | 2 |
| 2. Selection and admission criteria | 3 | |
| 3. Doctoral programme structure/content | 5 | 2 |

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|----------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| 4. Research environment/capacity | 3 | 2 |
| 5. Supervision | 5 | 2 |
| 6. Assessment | 7 | |
| 7. Doctoral research outcome | 3 | 1 |
| Total | 28 | 9 |

In conclusion, the Expert Team considers that the doctoral programme the PhD in Experimental Biomedicine offered by the University of Prishtina is ***Partially compliant*** with the standards included in the *KAA Accreditation manual for doctoral programmes* and, therefore, recommends *not to accredit* the study program.

4. APPENDICES

1. Annex 1: Budget and financial planning

This was referred to when discussing Research Environment / Capacity.

2. Recent evolution and developments recorded since the previous evaluation.

These were noted.



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August 4, 2021

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