



Republika e Kosovës
Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim
Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju
Kosovo Accreditation Agency

UNIVERSITY OF PRISHTINA
Doctoral Programme in
ORGANISMS BIOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Programme Reaccreditation

REPORT OF THE EXPERT TEAM



Republika e Kosovës
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DATE, PLACE
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Date of site visit: July 02, 2021

Expert Team (ET) members:

- Prof. Dr. *Mladen Krajacic*
- Prof. Dr. *Melita Kovacevic*
- Mr. *Asnate Kazoka* (Doctoral Candidate Expert)

Coordinators from Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA):

- *Naim Gashi*, Executive Director of KAA
- *Flamur Abazaj*, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring
- *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

Sources of information for the Report:

- Self-evaluation Report, by the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences
- Regulation for Doctoral Studies, by the University of Prishtina (version 2021)
- CV documents of the Faculty academic staff
- Syllabi of the programme subjects

Criteria used for program evaluation:

- Standards for Evaluation of Doctoral Programmes, by Kosovo Accreditation Agency



1.2. Site visit schedule

09.00 – 09.45	Meeting with the management of the institution/faculty where the programme is integrated (<i>no slide presentation is allowed, the meeting is intended as a free discussion</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Idriz Vehapi</i> (Dean of FNMS)• <i>Avni Berisha</i> (Vice-dean for education)• <i>Kajtaž Bllaca</i> (Vice-dean for finances)• <i>Sefer Avdiaj</i> (Vice-dean for QA)• <i>Jeton Hyseni</i> (Secretary of FNMS)
09:50 – 10:50	Meeting with the head/s of a doctoral programme <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Bexhet Mustafa</i>• <i>Avdulla Alija</i>• <i>Agim Gashi</i>• <i>Kemajl Bislimi</i>• <i>Idriz Vehapi</i>
10:55 – 11:50	Meeting with representatives of relevant doctoral committees, administrative and QA staff involved in doctoral programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Bekim Gashi</i>• <i>Ferdije Zhushi</i>• <i>Ramë Vataj</i>• <i>Arsim Ejupi</i>• <i>Illir Mazreku</i> (QA)• <i>Shpresa Canolli</i> (Administrative staff)
11: 50 – 12:50	Lunch
12: 55 – 13:40	Meeting with research-teaching staff and supervisors <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Linda Grapci</i>• <i>Elez Krasniqi</i>• <i>Halil Ibrahim</i>



- *Avni Hajdari*

13:45 – 14:30 Meeting with doctoral candidates

- *Mimoza Buzhala*
- *Andonita Buqinca*
- *Donard Geci*

14:35 – 15:15 Meeting with employers of graduates

- *Rifat Morina* (University of Prizren)
- *Ibish Mazreku* (University of Peja)

15:20 – 15:35 Internal meeting between expert team and KAA

15.35 – 15:45 Closing meeting with the management of the institution/doctoral programme

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

The University of Prishtina, the largest and oldest university in Kosovo, offers a spectrum of study programmes at all the levels according to Bologna Agreement. Its academic unit, the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences, is the only institution in the country responsible for research and higher education activities in mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography and biology. Accordingly, study programmes in *Biology*, as well as *Ecology and Environmental Protection*, have been offered by the Faculty (Department of Biology, in particular) on both bachelor and master level. Following doctoral programme in *Biology of Organisms and Ecology* was established in 2013, it was re-accredited in 2016.

Both the University and the Faculty proclaimed a motivation to develop towards leading position in the Kosovo research and higher education area, to adopt respective European standards, and to undertake reform steps in the process of integration in the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.



2. PROGRAMME EVALUATION: Doctoral programme in BIOLOGY OF ORGANISMS AND ECOLOGY - REACCREDITATION

2.1. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND FUNDING

Concerning legal status, mission and institutional regulations, the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences refers to the Statute of the University of Prishtina, as well as the *Regulation for Doctoral Studies* issued by the University. The Regulation document is quite well elaborated providing information on the goals, institutional support, structure, supervision and other general issues concerning doctoral studies.

Vice versa, the Regulation document considers an academic unit to be a responsible institution in doctoral programme delivery, and refers to the level of the academic unit (faculty) for some important regulative and supportive components of the system. However, the *Doctoral Studies Council* of the Faculty remained unclear, as did its chair person. Unproperly, the meeting with a head of the doctoral programme was attended by the dean, and the experts panel have unexpectedly met no representative from the university level, in spite of emphasising the regulative role of the University. The vice-rector for research, as well as a member of the *Central Council of Doctoral Studies* (the math-natural sciences field-representative) should have attended the site-visit.

At least five academic staff, listed as eligible supervisors, could be considered active and competent scientists, who have published at least 3 papers, as first or corresponding authors, in relevant international journals. The Faculty has sufficient academic staff with a doctoral degree to deliver all the courses, as well as sufficient administrative staff to support doctoral study programme. On the list of the academic staff, full-time employed at the Department of Biology, there is at least one person (Fadil Millaku) who is regularly affiliated both to the University of Prishtina and another university (the University of Peja).

Although the spatial resources and the equipment could/should be better, the resources could generally be considered satisfactory to enable research activities of doctoral candidates. As the panel have received no official free-standing document, nor a part of more general document with a specified section, it was not clear what financial resources has the Institution allocated to specifically support the doctoral programme.

It seems that reviews and updates of the programme are conducted on both the university and the Faculty level, however, doctoral education opportunities are not shown at the official English web-page. Although, the general strategy for doctoral study delivery is presented in



the *Regulation for Doctoral Study*, it could not be found as a part of the official English web-page.

Compliance level:

Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. According to the *Regulation for Doctoral Studies*, issued by the university, it would be necessary to constitute the *Doctoral Study Council* at the level of the Faculty.
2. Doctoral study is expected to be led by the *Doctoral Study Council* (headed by a *chairperson*) in the respective academic unit. Accordingly, the study programme is expected to be represented by this management body, which would be recognised as a component of the institutional management structure.
3. A free-standing document, or a separate section of a more general one, is expected to specify financial resources allocated to support the *Doctoral Study Programme*.

2.2. SELECTION AND ADMISSION CRITERIA

The selection and admission criteria for doctoral studies are defined by the *Regulation for Doctoral Studies*. The current version of the *Regulation for Doctoral Studies* is in force from June 24, 2021.

This regulation states that the prerequisite for enrolment is a master's degree or at least 300 ECTS obtained in the previous education and also the average grade in each level of previous studies has to be no less than 8.00.

The other requirements for candidates are – motivation letter, which justifies the interest for scientific / artistic research in the relevant field, the conceptual concept of research, evidence of success at each level of preliminary studies, evidence of English language proficiency, evidence related to relevant publications and recommendations of two professors in the relevant field.

All candidates who have submitted the required documentation are subject to an entrance examination assessing the professional/scientific aspect and English language proficiency. Both regulations (the current and the former one) state that the conceptual concept/proposal of research has to be submitted but the actual criteria for selection do not reflect the quality of the proposal. The requirement of an average grade of 8,0 can serve for determining the potential



of academic excellence. However, this can also be an eliminating factor for a number of candidates, especially for those who have changed study fields during their studies, therefore it would be suggested to include the average grade among the selection criteria but not to set it as a prerequisite.

The new regulation features several changes in comparison with the previous regulation. The previous admission system did not foresee any specific entrance examinations but the current one defines two exams – in professional/scientific area and in English. During the interviews the expert team was informed that most of the students who were not accepted for studies in the past had failed the English proficiency requirement. A separate exam in English has been established as a response to this issue.

The new regulation also defines a more strict timeframe for completing the doctoral studies. While the old regulation only states that doctoral studies are organised in six semesters, the new regulation states that doctoral studies have to last not less than three years (six semesters) and there is a possibility to continue for one more year based on a reasonable proposal. The new regulation also states that if the student fails to complete studies within this extended period, the status of a doctoral student is lost. However, from the statistics provided and also during the interviews the expert team witnessed students who are in their fifth to eighth year of studies therefore it is not clear how this system works in practice.

Compliance level:

Fully compliant

ET recommendations:

1. Eliminate the mandatory prerequisite of an average grade of 8,0 in all levels of previous studies and include the average grade as one of the admission criteria.
2. Introduce admission criteria that would assess the quality of the proposed research concept rather than just demonstrate previous research activity.
3. Ensure that the defined time-frame of doctoral studies is implemented and applies to all students enrolled.



2.3. DOCTORAL PROGRAMME STRUCTURE/CONTENT

In spite of referring to UP Regulations, in comparison to the university document, the SER Document of the Faculty brings some inconsistent statements concerning core standards in this cluster.

According to SER Document, a doctoral student has to accumulate 30 ECTS from exams in the first semester. The programme offers 15 mandatory courses, distributed in the three modules that are supposed to be elective. However, it implies that all the 15 mandatory courses have to be completed, bringing 2 ECTS each. It sounds ridiculous, but unfortunately the panel members learned at the sight-visit that this is a truth. For comparison, in UP Regulations, those 30 demand ECTS in the first semester reveal from 3 to 6 exams.

In the second semester, 30 ECTS have to be accumulated from seminars, according to SER Document. This part remains completely unclear (which seminars, how many of them). What about a list of elective courses, offered in the second semester? It is not comparable at all to the complicated rules stated in UP Regulations. According to that document, 6 ECTS are received from elective courses, and 16 ECTS from in-depth studies (two areas related to the potential doctoral topic, 8 ECTS each). The rest of the credits (8 ECTS), missing to reach the total of 30 ECTS required for the second semester, could be acquired by presenting results, related to potential doctoral thesis, at a conference, and by research training in a scientific institution. The last possibilities were not mentioned in the SER Document. Both documents agreed in presenting how students earn 90 ECTS in the remaining three semesters. However, 20 ECTS for the first authorship in an international journal publication do not seem to significantly stimulate and encourage research.

The overall conclusion is that, due to significant course-work overload, the study programme failed to fulfil some crucial standards. There are some positive examples, indeed, concerning particular doctoral candidates and their research proficiency, but the system is not regulated to ensure individual research opportunities. Students are formally allowed to take courses outside the institution, but it is hard to believe it would be possible with such an overload. Similarly, students' mobility is probably encouraged declaratively, but the circumstances concerning courses and exams workload hardly enable that important activity.

There is no information on time limit of the doctoral study in the SER Document. According to UP Regulation, a doctoral study must be concluded with a thesis defence no later than six years from student's registration. It means that another core standard of the programme is not fulfilled.



The panel members were supplied with report forms for monitoring the progress of doctoral candidates. In conclusion, a monitoring process seemed established. There is a list of doctoral students specifying their passed exams and the overall progress. It is not sufficiently informative concerning students' progress dynamics; thus, it is uncertain how the system really works. Although the list of supervisors, their doctoral candidates, accepted thesis title, and commission members' names is not informative enough, missing dates to present progress dynamics, it looks like supervisors are promptly allocated to doctoral students. Furthermore, the acceptance of a doctoral research proposal is a subject to clearly defined and transparent procedure accomplished at the university level.

Compliance level:

Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. The doctoral programme should significantly reduce courses workload, fulfilling a crucial demand on research-based doctoral study programme.
2. It should be possible to document a progress monitoring process (which is probably established) by presenting an informative data collection, that brings dates of all the steps in the process, evidencing precisely a progress dynamic.
3. A doctoral study should be time-controlling process. Every step has to be completed in due time, and the final one – a public defence, has to be accomplished in a time-limited period which is regulated by an appropriate document.

2.4. RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT CAPACITY

In natural sciences, laboratory equipment and consumables are significant demand, and the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences should improve its research environment. Insufficient financial support is a threat that does not play in favour of research prosperity. However, this aspect is certainly not a bottle-neck – there are several laboratories that could be considered properly equipped, offering up-to-date infrastructure and facilities compatible with the area of research. Those positive examples resulted from individual achievements of some outstanding staff-members, unfortunately not from the overall system.

From the perspective of the European Research Area, the Faculty, including the Department of Biology, would not be considered research-intensive. Nevertheless, it is



certainly among the most internationally recognised institutions in the Country and it could make a further progress. Consequences of far too weak promotion criteria are observable, and a political willingness to change that, would be a trigger contributing further development. It would not be impossible to escape Q4 zone, approaching more respectable ranking categories. Anyhow, seems that the institution could allocate enough competent supervisors, and no one among them has more than three doctoral candidates.

The accreditation panel is supplied with a list of the Ethics Committee members, however, without a date of issue and a rector's signature, it could not be considered an official document.

According to complex and well elaborated form concerning international ethical standards, the panel members might recognise that this issue is properly regulated in performing research. Yet, we would prefer to see a concrete document issued for a particular doctoral student, and not just an empty form.

Compliance level:

Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. All the performances and facts are expected to be evidenced by an official document with a date of issue and signed by a person in charge (rector or dean), referring also to the occasion and date of decision.
2. Empty forms used in ethical or any other regulation processing are informative, but the filled forms presenting a concrete process concerning a particular doctoral candidate would be welcomed.

2.5. SUPERVISION

The Faculty (Department of Biology, in particular) has enough active researchers to ensure doctoral candidates to have at least one competent supervisor in the area of doctoral research. Supervisors are experienced in research, and their scientific activity and productivity is properly documented (WoS or SCOPUS indexed publications). Furthermore, they are experienced in research projects (as collaborators, but also principal investigators), as well as international academic conferences and workshops. As the scientific papers have often been published by a research group, and doctoral candidates share an authorship with more than one



scientist, it is presumable that more than just a supervisor is available (off the record) to the doctoral student.

In principle, the number of doctoral students per supervisor is compatible with a supervisors' overall workload. The expert team has learned through the meeting with doctoral candidates that they meet their supervisors regularly, very often on a daily basis, to discuss research issues and monitor progress.

Responsibilities of the institution, supervisor and doctoral student are clearly elaborated in the *UP Regulations for Doctoral Studies*.

Participation in international academic networks has obviously contributed to research intensity and scientific outcome of the Department, but has also brought additional value to doctoral candidates' skills.

Compliance level:

Substantially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. Although supervisors have regular contact and professional relationship with their doctoral students, to fully meet accreditation standards, we would recommend them to document those contacts (weekly, at least monthly) and make a note on doctoral research progress.
2. Performances contributing supervisors' professional development would be highly recommendable.

2.6. ASSESSMENT

The collection of ECTS throughout the study process takes place according to the accredited programme. The Regulation states that the new way of calculating ECTS applies only to programmes that will enter accreditation/re-accreditation process after this Regulation has entered into force. The expert team is not entirely convinced of the effect of this remark and the way how it would apply the the specific programme that the expert team is assessing. The new Regulation clearly defines that the student obtains ECTS for publication as the first author of at least one part of the doctoral dissertation in international indexed journals. This comprises 20 of the 90 ECTS that have to be obtained during the three last semesters. The completion and public defense is also awarded with 60 ECTS.



For the purpose of reviewing the thesis, the council of the faculty, upon a proposal from the Council of Doctoral Studies, appoints a commission consisting of 3 members, including one foreign member. All members of the commission must be from the respective field and hold at least the title of assistant professor.

If the thesis is evaluated positively, the commission for defence of doctoral thesis is formed. It can consist of the same members as the commission for reviewing the thesis. The supervisor can participate in the defense of the dissertation but is not a part of the commission and has no right to make decisions.

The commission for the defense of doctoral thesis may come to one of the five defined conclusions – defended with great success, defended very well, defended with good success, defended with sufficient success, did not defend. The Regulation states that the defense procedure itself is based on the protocol presented in the form F9, however, the form F9 does not provide any information on the defense process and decision making criteria. It has to be noted that in general, the forms listed in the Regulation do not comply with the ones provided as an annex to the expert team.

In case the student fails to defend the thesis, there are two possible scenarios – one where student is allowed to defend again and the other one where the student is denied the rights to defend.

In case of a negative assessment, the Regulation does not prescribe any possibilities for the student to appeal to any higher instance.

The regulation states that it is possible to remove the title if a case of plagiarism or copyright infringement has been identified. However, it does not refer to any plagiarism or copyright issues during the preparation or review of the thesis, except that the scientific research on humans and animals must be done according to the regulations of the Ethics Commission.

Compliance level:

Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. Ensure that the new *Regulation on Doctoral Studies* applies to all students enrolled in doctoral studies and that appropriate legal measures are taken (renewal of contracts etc.).
2. Develop clear decision making criteria for defense of a doctoral thesis as an annex to *Regulation on Doctoral Studies*.
3. Establish the possibility to appeal in case of a negative assessment.



4. Ensure that all doctoral thesis are checked for plagiarism and ethical issues as a part of review procedure.
5. Introduce references to plagiarism and ethical issues and the their legal consequences in the *Regulation on Doctoral Studies*.

2.7. DOCTORAL RESEARCH OUTCOME

On the request, the accreditation team was provided with a list of papers, published in the last three years with doctoral candidates at the Department of Biology. The list is quite impressive, bringing seven references in which doctoral students, or graduated doctors, appear as the first authors of the papers published in international relevant journals. Taken into account that a doctor (with her/his skills properly shaped through a doctoral research), and not actually a thesis would be the main outcome of a doctoral programme, a list like that should be desirable for all the stakeholders in the process. Those are certainly positive examples of theses, representing a valuable addition to the topic knowledge base. Unfortunately, some authors' names could not be recognised on the official list of doctoral students/graduated doctors. On the other hand, many doctoral candidates' names have not found related to any authorship. Thus, the question remains if successful authorship is a rule, or an exception. In the SER Document, there is a huge list that should represent papers published with doctoral students. However, the list has failed to specify which one, among the authors, is a doctoral student.

A hardcopy of a doctoral thesis, available in the institution's library, would meet accreditation core standard. We believe that all the theses have been stored in the University/Faculty archives. But in the UP Regulations, to which the Faculty refers so often, the Article 21 brings a demand for a doctoral thesis to be published on the University website at latest one month after the defence. Surprisingly, we were not provided with any link, and just one single thesis has been sent to us as an example.

In conclusion, the final outcome of some doctoral candidates could certainly satisfy all the criteria, but the question is raised again on pursuing regulations – the doctoral study service of the Faculty is obliged to take care of keeping and storing detailed records related to the research work and the performance of other study tasks of each PhD student.

Compliance level:

Substantially compliant



ET recommendations:

1. To be able to represent a doctoral research outcome, but also many other issues regarding doctoral study programme, the Faculty should establish a precise regulation system, and then ensure the follow up in organising and storing detailed records related to all the performances and task completions of each PhD student.

3. OVERALL EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE ET

The Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences (the Department of Biology, in particular) is certainly among the most research-intensive institutions in Kosovo. It has a strong potential to deliver a doctoral study programme, especially concerning the aspect which is the most important and the most difficulty reachable. However, the Faculty has failed to regulate all the necessary issues, or at least, the institution has failed to prepare *Self Evaluation Report* and present the programme properly at the site visit. Taking into account some unfavourable circumstances (new accreditation standards, epidemiologic situation, institutional leadership changes...), perhaps, it could have been expected.

The SER document is quickly and carelessly prepared, containing so many typing errors that it is tedious to read. Concerning study programme, it is quite a bad reference. There are some crucial inconsistencies. The Faculty refers to the University of Prishtina Regulations for Doctoral Studies, but does not respect some substantial items of that document – there is no Doctoral Studies Council of the academic unit, and the programme was not represented by the chair person (head of the programme) on the site visit. The number of exams and the total course workload is unproper. Some files provided to the accreditation team are not official documents, furthermore they are not precise and informative enough.

In conclusion, the Expert Team considers that the doctoral programme in *Biology of Organisms and Ecology* offered by the University of Prishtina, the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences 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. APPENDIX

Comments to the Institution's response

As mentioned in the Overall Evaluation and Recommendation of the ET, the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Science (with its Department of Biology) is among institutions in Kosovo, which are certainly characterised by respectable research capacities and research outcome – demands for doctoral study programme that are the most difficult to reach. The rest is just a matter of organisation.

However, the accreditation team reasonably expect that:

- the *Doctoral Study Council* is clearly introduced into the faculty management structure
- the Doctoral Study Programme is represented by a head (chair-person) and other members of the *Doctoral Study Council*
- the courses work-load is in agreement with the recent *UP Regulation for Doctoral Studies* and, of course, with *KAA Accreditation Standards*
- the institution should have clear and informative documentation to be able to present its performances transparently

We strongly believe that the Faculty might complete that within a short period of time. Additional time consumption and much more dedicated approach will be worth the effort, contributing significantly to the “plain sailing” in the future.



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Expert Team

Chair

Mladen Krajacic

July 22, 2021

(Signature)

(Print Name)

(Date)

Member

Melita Kovacevic

July 22, 2021

(Signature)

(Print Name)

(Date)

Member

Asnate Kazoka

July 22, 2021

(Signature)

(Print Name)

(Date)