

July 17, 2020

The Board of AQ Austria
AQ Austria
Franz-Klein-Gasse 5
1190 Vienna

Dear Madam President, dear Members of the Board,

I hereby confirm that we have received and fully accept the Expert Panel Review Report regarding the PhD in Cognitive Science. We are pleased to learn that the Report confirms the academic excellence of the program and that it fulfills all the criteria for accreditation.

We fully accept the recommendations made in the Report. The administration of CEU PU will work with the Department of Cognitive Science to address the recommendations, especially in the areas that are critical university-wide such as institutional bias, racism and harassment as well as doctoral funding. Please refer to the Department's detailed reply in the appendix of this letter.

We would like to thank the Expert Panel members for their expertise and insights, as well as for the productive and collegial discussions during the site visit. We are grateful to the Expert Panel members for their hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm with which they approached the task.

We await the decision of the Board with anticipation and looking forward to the opportunity of starting our program in Vienna in the coming academic year.

Sincerely,



Michael Ignatieff
President and Rector
Central European University Private University

Answers and comments to the expert report on the accreditation procedure for the doctoral programme in Cognitive Science of CEU PU

Members of the Department of Cognitive Science are very grateful for the report made by the expert panel. We are very happy and proud to see that our PhD program fulfils the criteria stipulated in the PU-AkkVO. We are also very grateful for the recommendations specified in the report. We shall take them very seriously so as to improve our current program. We answer point by point to these recommendations below.

Recommendation: The expert panel recommends monitoring the workload in light of future teaching assignments and comprehensive exam assignments for the students.

We are aware of the heavy workload that the PhD program requests from students. We have fine-tuned the requirements of the program at several points in its history: we are looking for the best trade-off between, on the one hand, the requirements of high quality doctoral training and research, and, on the other hand, respect for students' welfare and feasibility in a reasonable time.

It is important to note that the doctoral students are not required to teach. However, we want them to have the opportunity to acquire some teaching experience during their time as PhD students. They can therefore get credits from teaching as part of the 'academic activity' module. Currently, the requirements for the academic activity module in the fourth year are deliberately open: the goal is to decide case-by-case on projects with each student in view of their goals and opportunities. With this flexible setting, we will be in a position to monitor and quickly adapt to the needs of the students.

We are therefore in a position to follow this first recommendation and we will quickly react to the student feedback we receive.

Recommendations: The expert panel recommends to expand the scope of research and teaching for cognitive computing to include reciprocal areas of study (how models of the brain and natural systems inform computational methods [eg. Artificial Neural Networks; Swarm Intelligence; Membrane Computing; Evolutionary algorithms etc.) that find application in industry.

As a further enhancement idea, the experts find the research focus of faculty members a bit too close to each other that make it a bit constrained. Also, given the emphasis on social cognition, an additional expert in the language domain would be an asset (this recommendation can be considered for the two positions open). Adding an expert in cognitive neuroscience who can teach broader techniques might also strengthen and broaden the scope of the program.

Because we are recruiting two new faculty members, we now have the wonderful opportunity to expand the expertise of the department. Our recruitment will be opportunistic and the key factor of selection will be the research and teaching potentials of the candidate. At the same time, we will keep in mind the added value of having

- a better gender balance among the faculty members
- strategic research development at the level of the department.

With regard to that last point, we do agree with the expert panel that it would be great to recruit scientists that:

- expand our research in cognitive computing
- add further expertise in cognitive neuroscience
- expand our current expertise in language and the cognitive bases of communication

Recommendation: As another potential collaboration partner, the expert panel recommends that the Cognitive Science PhD programme at CEU PU, once settled in Vienna, considers institutionalizing also a collaboration with Uni Salzburg.

We are extremely enthusiastic about the new collaborative opportunities that coming to Vienna brings. We thank the expert panel for drawing our attention to the potential that an institutionalised cooperation with the University of Salzburg would bring.

Recommendation: CEU PU may wish to consider the implementation of processes to deal with potential institutional bias, racism, harassment, etc. Specific examples include: Mechanisms for safe/anonymous reporting of allegations of harassment and bias; staff training, and, wherever possible, recruitment panels to be appropriately ethnically and gender-balanced.

Thank you for raising this important topic. CEU PU takes these issues very seriously and is already in the process of significantly revising its harassment policy to expand mechanisms for anonymous reporting. The revised policy will be tabled for the first Academic Forum and Senate meeting in Fall 2020.

In addition, CEU's Equal Opportunity Committee together with the SUPERA project team are overseeing the implementation of CEU's first Gender Equality Plan (GEP) aiming to improve gender equality as well as more generally equal opportunities across all areas of CEU's operations. CEU has also created two new administrative positions of Equality Officers (one is Gender Equality) to further improve the university's performance in these areas. As part of the SUPERA project the topic of training for both staff and students will be reviewed in cooperation with Human Resources Office and with the Student Union. CEU is also currently updating its Code of Ethics under the leadership of the Disciplinary Committee.

At the departmental level, we are in a position to benefit from the above institutions and procedures and we shall rely on them when necessary. During our 'zero week', when incoming students are introduced to the institution, we inform them about the options they have for dealing with problems of harassment, racism, gender biases and other unfair treatments. We shall continue to track the development of the procedures for dealing with unfair treatment at CEU and we will make sure that our students and faculty are well aware of the options that are given to them. Note that one member of the department is a faculty representative to the disciplinary committee.

Recommendations: The addition of teaching assignments should not come at the expense of increasing the already heavy workload. Rather, we recommend the workload to be reduced, and teaching to replace some coursework.

This recommendation echoes the one advising to monitor the workload in view of teaching opportunities for doctoral students. We reiterate our strong awareness that the workload needs to be reasonable and our commitment to monitor the consequences of teaching on the workload. Teaching currently remains an option for which we decided to grant credits within the module 'academic activity'.

Students should be better informed from the outset about the average duration for finishing the thesis, as well as about the first year course requirements and about the workload of the obligatory comprehensive exam.

We are in the process of gathering information about past PhDs in order to make it available to future students from their start: how long previous PhD students took, how many studies (if any) they ran, how long was the PhD thesis, how many papers they published during their doctoral time, how many papers they submitted on the basis of their thesis, etc. We will make this document available to all of our students.

The first-year course requirements are, however, already well explained during the ‘zero week’ and can be found in written form on our website.

Furthermore in order to avoid PhD trajectories much in excess of 4 years (e.g., due to non-significant results of experiments), the experts recommend to adopt preregistered studies as part of thesis chapters.

We thank the panel of experts for this suggestion. We will discuss in a future meeting the value of preregistering studies so that studies with null results can be justifiably included in the PhD thesis. We note, however, that studies with null results can already constitute elements of PhD theses. We do think that studies with null results, which might not find a place in journals, can nonetheless be worthy chapters of doctoral dissertations.

Recommendation: Workload can be further reduced: the grade average 3,3 requirements as well as the demands for the comprehensive exam could be made more lenient to free time for other tasks. Alternatively, courses can be tailor-made to relate to the thesis topic.

We do not envisage reducing the average requirements (since this is a CEU-wide policy) or make the demands for the comprehensive exam more lenient. However, we agree that the courses and the coursework especially can be tailor-made to relate to the thesis topic. We will encourage students to use coursework as opportunities to prepare, further or expand their doctoral research.

Recommendation: The expert panel recommends that funding documentation be revised in line with the 4-year degree duration and that the duration of the guaranteed student stipend be clarified.

We agree that a funding extension would be beneficial for our doctoral students. The current funding model provides a monthly stipend of EUR 1,300 (increased for Vienna) for 36 months and additional support through various grant schemes. The two main types of grants: the “Write-up Grant” and the “Doctoral Research Support Grant” are pretty much guaranteed for every doctoral student although the student still needs to apply for them. There are also other grant schemes available. Nonetheless, the university is in regular discussions with the PhD students through the Student Union on this topic. As the doctoral funding structure is a matter decided on the university-wide level, we will emphasize the panel’s recommendation to the Senior Leadership of the University.