



ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY
FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Report on Fulfilling the Requirements of the Secondary Condition

Study Programme Group of Personal Services

Tallinn University

2021

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Introduction

Background and aim of the assessment

Quality assessment of a study programme group involves the assessment of the conformity of study programmes and the studies and development activities that take place on their basis to legislation, national and international standards and developmental directions with the purpose of providing recommendations to improve the quality of studies.

The goal of quality assessment of a study programme group is supporting the internal evaluation and self-development of the institution of higher education. Quality assessment of study programme groups is not followed by sanctions: expert assessments should be considered recommendations.

Quality assessment of a study programme group takes place at least once every 7 years based on the regulation approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*.

In 2018, an international expert panel assessed the quality of the study programme group of Personal Services at Tallinn University. As a result, EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education decided at its meeting on 26 February, 2019 that the next assessment is to take place in seven years if Tallinn University meets certain requirements set by the Council.

The aim of the expert panel was to assess whether the requirements (secondary condition) set by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education have been met by Tallinn University.

Study programmes under review

Study programme	Level	Unit responsible for the programme
Recreation Administration	BA	School of Natural Sciences and Health
Recreation Management	MA	School of Natural Sciences and Health

Expert panel

The expert panel consisted of the following members:

Christopher Cooper	Professor, Oxford Brookes University, the United Kingdom
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Berit Skirstad	Associate Professor, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway
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Assessment process

The panel members based their assessment on two key sets of evidence. Firstly, the original assessment report from the visits in 2018 and also the response to the secondary conditions report from the University in 2021. Secondly, two individual, on-line interviews were held with the two panel members and the Program Manager and the Institute Director.

In the following sections, the expert panel summarises their findings regarding the fulfilment of the secondary conditions, and also provides feedback on the progress the institution has made in connection with experts' recommendations made in their previous report in 2019.

The current report is a public document and made available on EKKA website after EKKA Quality Assessment Council has made its decision.

Tallinn University provided some explanations and comments on the preliminary report of the panel. When finalising the assessment report, the panel took into consideration comments made by the university and made some adjustments in the final report. The university did not submit any comments on the initial report. The panel submitted the final report to EKKA 18 June.

General progress report on the study programme group of Personal Services since its previous assessment

The assessment report from 2019 regarding quality assessment of study programme group of Personal Services is available on EKKA website. https://ekka.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/Personal_services_report_FINAL.pdf

Comments

Panel members appreciated the work that had been done by both the School and the University in terms of meeting the conditions and recommendations of the Panel's 2019 report.

In the period between our first visit and 2021, the strong identification of the staff, students, alumni and employers with the two programs has been maintained. Since that initial visit in 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed the operating environment for the programs. Whilst this could be seen as a handicap to developing initiatives, it can also be seen as an opportunity for say, developing on-line programs and international collaboration.

When we visited in 2018, we felt that the School and the University were keen to internationalise. However, in 2018 the assessment team could not find any overt plans to do this, aside from the ERASMUS scheme and ad hoc, occasional sessions by guest lecturers from other universities. This situation has not changed and in 2021 there remains no international strategy. This complete lack of

regard for the panel's recommendations by the School is surprising, particularly given that the University has developed a plan to internationalise.

It was clear from the panel's visit in 2018 that staff were very busy and the team was unable to discern a clear workload planning framework for the programs. This has been partially addressed with a University plan for career development and this is to be applauded, particularly the systematic activities to evaluate and monitor staff workload. We remain concerned however, that staff are still struggling to find time for research and other scholarly activity. In 2018, the panel therefore recommended that the School develop a clear research strategy which includes transparent support for staff in terms of conference, teaching relief for research and travel funding. In 2021, it is clear that this has not been done and the panel's recommendation has been ignored.

Area of concern to table 2 in the progress report

The name of the study

On page 3 and page 10 in the Progress report it is claimed that the studies now have the same name Recreation Management, and we understand that this has been done post the University's report responding to the visit.

However, when we asked the Director why the students who had taken the bachelor in Recreation Management did not take the master's degree in the same topic, she explained that the content of the Master study was too similar to the bachelor study in Recreation. This is a cause for concern as in 2021 the MA programme was updated but this was not addressed as a concern there.

Programme Fragmentation

The 2018 visit recommended reducing the number of electives on the programs as it was felt it led to fragmentation and lack of focus. The panel learned in 2021 from the interviews and the University's report that not only has this not been done, but that there is still scope to increase the number of electives. This would be unwise. The Program Manager and the Institute Director justified the number of electives by referring to the Tallinn University Statute of Study Programs where they require that "the total volume of courses belonging to elective courses is two times greater than the volume of credit points prescribed for options" (page 11 in the Progress Report). None of them thought of suggesting some changes, rather they said this is the way it has always been done. From the interview with the Program Manager, we learned that many of the courses were graded "pass /fail" and one third had written exams. This raises the question as to how they can be sure that the students going through this Program actually meet the learning objectives as so many courses are electives.

The 2018 visit also recommended a stronger suite of general management courses as part of the program. As far as we can tell this has not been done. This remains a concern in terms of future proofing the programs. There is increasing evidence that employers are seeking generic management skills as well as the more subject specific modules. Getting this balance right is difficult but essential. We therefore recommend that the School considers increasing and intertwining the scope of general management modules on the programme. The programme team should decide whether these modules should replace elective modules.

Other Concerns

The 2018 visit was impressed with the commitment of employers to the programs and their willingness to be involved more formally through say, guest lectures. This has been done.

It was clear in 2018 that there was a need for more feedback from the graduates on the programs. The Institute has decided not to implement a dedicated system for this, instead, using the university's generic system. This runs the risk that graduates will be less likely to identify with the program's request for feedback as they will not be contacted by the school; that the response rate will thus be lower, and that the opportunity to ask program specific questions is lost. However, we did note that the program manager told us that she evaluated the courses that she taught.

Commendations

- We were impressed by the process and the rigour used to review the program learning outcomes and map them onto the European Higher Education Area Dublin Descriptors.
- The University level initiatives in terms of internationalisation and the development of a career planning framework are to be applauded and we urge to School to implement them as soon as possible.

Further considerations

- As will be noted from above failures to adopt earlier recommendations, we remain seriously concerned at the lack of a strategic framework for the School's approach to these programs. In particular this includes research and internationalisation. This appears to stem from a lack of leadership, grip of detail and future-focussed thinking at the School level. It has led to an inward-looking approach, a lack of new initiatives and resistance to change, rooted in a focus on how things have been done in the past. This complacency and lack of ambition is dangerous in a competitive international environment for these programs. It appears that this School culture has led to some of the conditions imposed by EKKA not being met. We recommend that the senior management in the School are enrolled on leadership programmes.

Report on fulfilling the requirements of the secondary condition

At its meeting on 26 February, EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education decided that the next assessment of the study programme group of Personal Services at Tallinn University will take place in 7 years (maximum term) but set a secondary condition that Tallinn University should meet by 26 February 2021 .

Based on the [Assessment Report](#) of the expert panel and the Decision of EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education https://ekka.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/TLU_isikuteenindus_OKH_otsus.pdf , Tallinn University submitted the following documents to EKKA in February 2021 :

- 1) Personal Services Study Programmes Report

The following are the four requirements set by the Quality Assessment Council to be met by Tallinn University, and the panel's assessment on the developments the institution has made in this regard.

Secondary condition #1:

Government Regulation on "Standard of Higher Education" (SHE) § 6 (3) provides that the requirement that the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme are equivalent or comparable to the higher education level learning outcomes described in Annex 1 of the Regulation, meet the requirements and trends of international law governing the profession and, if a professional standard exists, take into account the acquisition and application of the knowledge and skills described therein. § 6 (4) of the SHE prescribes the requirement that the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme are formulated in such a way that on the basis thereof, it is possible to assess the knowledge and skills of the graduate of the study programme. In the Bachelor's and especially the Master's programmes, the learning outcomes are not formulated to reflect learning at different cognitive levels (from knowledge to analysis, assessment, and creation), as is the case in the European Higher Education Area (Dublin descriptors). Learning outcomes need to be redesigned to more clearly reflect all levels of cognitive learning, state-of-the-art key competences, and skills.

**Assessment of the expert panel:
the secondary condition is fully met**

Evidence and analysis

We were concerned that the University's written response to the conditions was vague and at times evasive. However, our interviews with the Program Director and Institute Director reassured us that this condition was fully met. The School has clearly gone through a rigorous process of reviewing the learning outcomes and mapping them onto the European Higher Education Area Dublin Descriptors. The process involved a bottom-up approach and iterations between the School and University's quality assurance department.

Strengths

- The School and the University are to be applauded for the rigour with which this process was implemented.

Secondary condition #2

Pursuant to § 6 (7) 1) of the Government of the Republic Regulation “Standard of Higher Education” (SHE), the conduct of studies conforms to the requirements if ordinary teaching staff and research staff are available for the studies, who meet the qualification requirements established in legal instruments and whose number is, based on their responsibilities, the volume of conducted studies and research and the number of supervised students, adequate for achieving the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme. For both study programmes, it is necessary to develop a clear framework for the workload of teachers and to implement it transparently. Currently, the problem is the lack of supervisors, and it is difficult for lecturers to find time for research.

**Assessment of the expert panel:
the secondary condition is partially met**

Evidence and analysis

The Assessment Report from 2019 asked the School to implement a transparent workload system for academic staff. According to the written Progress Report (page 4) and a more recent communication with the University this should now be in place. This is contradictory to the answers we received from the interviews with both the Program Manager and the Institute Director. The Program Manager reported that the HR department had developed an electronic system in an excel format, but it is not open for everybody, and salaries can be discussed. The Institute Director stated that for academic staff the teaching load ranged from 40 to 80% of their time. In principle, lecturers teach as many hours as professors, but junior lecturers teach less.

Recruitment

The Progress Report stated at the top of page 4 that “currently, the problem is the lack of supervisors”. To our question if they had a recruitment plan for new staff, the answer was that they hired what they needed each year. Since few of their teachers had a PhD degree, we recommend they plan for how they could offer help for the teachers to be able to qualify and reduce the number of hours they have to teach for a period. We recommend that arrangements for teaching hour relief for early career researchers is rigorously adhered to.

To our question, if those who were working on a PhD had to teach less, the Institute Director answered that they taught half time. The Progress Report specified that they had 500 Euros added to their doctoral allowance, but nothing about their teaching workload. The Progress Report mentions that a tenure system has been established, but there are no details except that two of the teachers (K. Kulbin and K. Pedak) are currently on doctoral studies.

Instead of having a list of the different teachers who are involved in the Recreation Programs which is in Annex 3, there should be a list of how many lectures these teachers from other study programs teach in the Recreation Program in order to show how fragmented the studies are (see the point in the beginning of this report about a fragmented study).

Strengths

- The Master Study Program will become biennial. To have some lecturers included from other specialties can be an advantage if it fits in the total Program. When the master’s study becomes biennial the teachers have less lectures and more time to use on research we presume. The School should make a recruitment plan for the staff they need in the future.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- We recommend that the institute should ensure the implementation of a transparent approach to allocating teaching hours in the study programme group of personal services. For example (i) staff could have a workload balance of 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service and administration, which can then be flexed according to individual circumstances such as winning a grant. This is common practice elsewhere; and (ii) teaching allocations should be based on transparent formulae – such as one teaching hour (lecture) equals 3 working hours. If the lecture is repeated in the same year, then that gives you 1,5 - 2 working hours for a lecture and practical lessons 2-3 working hours. Currently the school does not have a universally accepted and transparent workload planning system. This can lead to unfairness in teaching allocation and research support. The current system is open to special pleading and favouritism. We strongly recommend that the workload planning system incorporates research and teaching relief for research. We also recommend that the School’s senior management are responsible for the allocation of workload of School faculty members and to do this in an efficient manner.
- In part, the workload planning issue is exacerbated by a lack of clarity regarding the School’s view of research. We strongly recommend that the School develops a clear research strategy incorporating publications, grants, impact and research students.
- The School should make a recruitment plan for the staff they need in the future.

Secondary condition #3

Clauses 5.3.6, 5.4.4, and 5.5.4 of the Regulation “Quality Assessment of the Study Programme Group at the First and Second Levels of Higher Education” prescribe the requirements that the Study process supports academic mobility. Qualified foreign and visiting lecturers and practitioners participate in the teaching. During their studies, students study as foreign or visiting students in other Estonian and/or foreign higher education institutions. Internationalization is a separate goal for both study programmes. However, there is no clear plan for its implementation. It is, therefore, advisable to develop a comprehensive plan for internationalization. The plan should include key indicators and ensure their monitoring. Study programmes should have more international partners and foreign lecturers, a larger number of courses taught in English, and it should also be possible to write the graduation thesis in English

**Assessment of the expert panel:
the secondary condition is not met**

Evidence and analysis

The panel was concerned that there is no attempt to internationalise the programs, despite national and University plans to do so. We were pleased to hear in a more recent communication with the University that international lecturers have been invited to teach on the programmes. However, we remain concerned that there is no strategic plan at all for these international activities for the years to come. Elsewhere, many Higher Education establishments have used the Covid-10 pandemic as a means of developing ‘virtual’ international activities as minimal costs are involved and this is a model that could be adopted. Three English courses are announced, but they all are from the Wellness study.

The Program Manager told us that several of the staff were willing to teach in English, but usually only very few foreign students had registered for the courses, so they often ended up teaching the English and the Estonian students separately so doubling the work.

In order for Erasmus agreements to work, the School must be connected to specific persons who are interested in exchange with a specific university. If the persons from both sides can see the benefit in doing cooperation, then there is a possibility of success. A further advantage is the opportunity for developing joint research together. We were pleased to hear in a more recent communication with the University that links have been made with Ukraine and Belarus. Sadly, the Institute Director did not seem to have other ambitions for internationalization than the ERASMUS student exchange.

One other element that was mentioned by the Institute Director concerning exchange was the obstacle of curricula transferability. In order to overcome that difficulty, it is important to recognize that if you want to cover exactly the same subjects as you have at home, then you should stay at home. The University must admit that the subjects abroad are a little different than those at home, but the students learn other important things in addition to the courses. Elsewhere, other Higher Education establishments have found practical ways to solve this issue rather than using it as a reason *not* to internationalise. These practical solutions include a close mapping of curricula for equivalence, the use of 'shell' modules which can be taken by Erasmus students and count for the same credits as a module in their own institution, and the use of case study and industry projects which can have equivalent credits to the student's home institution.

On page 7 in the Progress Report a mobility Program across TLU was approved that allows the application of virtual mobility in part or in full. This was not focused upon by either the Program Manager or the Director. Indeed, the University's published document 'Principles of International Level Studies' was not mentioned by either of the interviewees, despite that document offering a roadmap for internationalization for the School's programs.

We were not told of any recognized agreements with visiting teachers from other universities in either Estonia or abroad. Members of the teaching staff only had contacts with practitioners, or other schools at TLU, and they were giving lectures in the Program.

Benchmarking

The Assessment Report (page 12) suggested that the Institute compared their studies in recreation with competitors, but then only showed the number of applicants to study places, which shows it is a popular study. That is not the same as investigating if the Recreation study in Tallinn has the same subjects and curriculum as a similar study in another country. The Program Manager mentioned that they had mapped their study onto an Adventure Recreation study in Slovakia and the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Strengths

- The master thesis can be written in English (p. 7 in Progress report) and in the Bachelor Program you can apply for an exception from the requirement to write in Estonian.

Areas of concern and recommendations

1. We were pleased to hear in a more recent communication with the University that the Recreation study has compared with a similar study abroad to see if the tasks and the curriculum are of the same standard. However, we are not told which programmes were used in this benchmarking exercise. Unless this is done against significant international competitors student exchange will be disadvantaged as the program managers are not aware of international equivalent modules. This leads to the area of concern number 2 below because students feel they will be disadvantaged by departing from the Estonian system. This is not a healthy situation and fosters inward-looking programs.

The main area of concern here is the lack of an international strategy for the School. This would provide a framework for internationalising the programs. Such a strategy should address student and staff mobility, principles of international partner choice, appointing a champion in the School for internationalisation, introducing flexibility in the curricula to accommodate internationalisation, a benchmarking exercise for the programs against leading international competitors, a plan to introduce more courses in English, and a plan to leverage from the increased fashion for virtual meetings.

2. One particular area of concern relating to internationalisation was the reluctance of students to engage in international exchange. The Institute Director mentioned the Erasmus Programs, and she told us that they had several agreements for exchange, but only a few were active. We got the impression from our interviews that the students were not very interested in going abroad. It is necessary that the teachers recommend the student exchange and the positive experience from such opportunities. If this is not done, then the Erasmus exchange can be unbalanced with more Erasmus students coming to Estonia than are leaving. This is a net cost for the University.

Recommendation

- The School should develop an international strategy to act as an overarching framework and roadmap for internationalising the programs and developing student and staff mobility. This should include: a statement of their School's view on internationalisation; aims and objectives; detailed implementation plans; KPIs; a monitoring system; and a mapping exercise of the programs against international competitors to allow for the development of modules with international equivalence.

Secondary condition #4

SHE § 6 Section 2 provides that the study programmes and conducting studies are in accordance with internal quality standards and national and international quality standards and agreements. Clause 7.2.1.5 of the regulation "Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation", which is a national quality requirement, stipulates that opportunities have been created for students to study at a higher education institution regardless of their special needs. The Committee considers that the physical aptitude test for admission to the Bachelor's programme is discriminatory, does not take into account students with special needs and is somewhat anachronistic. Nor does it fit in with today's understanding of inclusive education.

**Assessment of the expert panel:
the secondary condition is substantially met**

Evidence and analysis

The Assessment Report mentioned that the physical aptitude test was felt to be both “discriminatory and somewhat anachronistic” (p 25). Additional conditions are included on page 9 in the Progress Report which makes the admission more flexible. According to the Program Manager the teachers still were in favour of the test. The argument is that the students also get educated as a coach or activity instructor. For a recreation manager the assessment team sees the necessity to have life-saving skills (for example swimming) if you have a group with you, for example outdoors. But for these reasons it should be enough to have self-reporting as they have done this year and for 2021 admission because of the Covid-19 situation. To have a physical aptitude test does not fit the modern-day view of inclusive education. People with special needs must also be allowed to be educated in recreation management, and they can organize trips and other activities for special groups if they have someone to look after the safety.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- We recommend that the school continues with the self-reporting of swimming ability in order to be enrolled in the study.