

**Decision Regarding Assessment of the Life Sciences
Study Programme Group
EuroAcademy**

21/08/2018

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education at the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Life Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at EuroAcademy in three years

On the basis of subsection 21¹ (2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, subsection 14 (7) of the Private Schools Act, subsection 10 (4) of the Universities Act and point 41.3 of the document, ‘Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education’, authorised in points 3.7.3 and 3.7.1 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as ‘EKKA’), the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Council’) affirms the following:

1. On 18.06.2015 the Council decided to conduct the next quality assessment of the Environmental Protection study programme group (which is now incorporated into the Life Sciences study programme group) at Euroacademy in three years.
2. On 28.09.2017 EuroAcademy and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a quality assessment of the study programme group.
3. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 05.03.2018, approved the following membership of the committee for the institutional accreditation as well as for the quality assessment of the Business and Administration, Languages and Cultures, and Life Sciences study programme groups at EuroAcademy (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Committee’):

Helen Thomas	Freelance Education Consultant – Chair of the Committee (United Kingdom)
Anca Greere	Assistant Director, QAA, UK; Professor in Linguistics and Translation Studies, Babes-Bolyai University (Romania)
Tanja Dmitrovič	Vice-Rector, Professor, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)
Olav Aarna	Advisor to the management board of the Estonian Qualifications Authority (Kutsekoda) (Estonia)
Anne Perkiö	Head of International Business Programme, Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Finland)

Roger Levy	Professor, The London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom)
Tuula Tuhkanen	Professor, University of Jyväskylä (Finland)
Jekaterina Masenko	Student, Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia)
Johanna Mattila	Professor, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Sweden)

4. EuroAcademy submitted the following programmes for evaluation under the Life Sciences study programme group:
 - Environmental Specialist (Prof HE; in Estonian)**
 - Environmental Specialist (Prof HE; in Russian)**
 - Environmental Specialist (Prof HE; in English)**
 - Environmental Protection (MSc; in Estonian)**
 - Environmental Protection (MSc; in Russian)**
 - Environmental Protection (MSc; in English)**
5. EuroAcademy submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 16.03.2018 and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 16.03.2018.
6. An assessment visit was made to EuroAcademy during 8–10.05.2018.
7. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 18.06.2018, EKKA forwarded it to EuroAcademy for its comments on 18.06.2018 and the higher education institution delivered its response on 5.07.2018.
8. The Committee submitted its assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 13.07.2018. That assessment report is an integral part of the decision, and is available on the EKKA website.
9. EuroAcademy submitted its additional comments to the Council on 14.08.2018 and, on 17.08.2018, its comments in letters. The Secretary of the Council informed the Committee of the additional information contained in the letters from EuroAcademy, and on 20.08.2018 the Committee decided to clarify its assessment in the report regarding graduation theses in the Life Sciences study programme group, leaving out the reference to graduation theses prepared at the level of professional higher education.
10. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee’s assessment report, along with EuroAcademy’s self-evaluation report and its response to the draft assessment report, to the Council members on 2.08.2018. The letters from EuroAcademy to the Council were forwarded by the Secretary of the Council to the Council members on 17.08.2018. The Council discussed the comments and views contained in those letters and took note of them.
11. The Council with 12 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 21.08.2018 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Life Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at EuroAcademy.

Strengths

- 1) Study programmes are taught in three languages (Estonian, Russian and English) making them attractive for international students.
- 2) There are good and close relations among the administration, students and lecturers at EuroAcademy; small study groups enable individual instruction. Students are satisfied with the counselling and guidance provided by the teaching and administrative staffs.

- 3) Students appreciate the flexible and student-friendly study plan and study information system, as well as the pleasant learning environment. Individual study plans are developed for students as needed.
- 4) The computer classroom and the GIS program used (ArcGIS) are up to date and the number of licenses for GIS programs is sufficient.
- 5) Involvement by lecturers and specialists from other higher education institutions and organisations in the teaching process contributes to the appropriateness of programme contents. The fact that representatives of companies are involved in the teaching process helps increase the visibility of the study programmes in the labour market.
- 6) Psychological counselling is offered to international students to assist them with adapting to the Estonian community and academic life. Students also have an opportunity to get legal advice from an employee of the Academic Affairs office.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Based on the submitted documentation and discussions with teaching staff, the Committee did not find sufficient evidence that the study programmes are coherent or that individual lecturers have the necessary knowledge of the content of the programme as a whole.
- 2) In the professional higher education programme, more attention should be paid to the issues of the European Union's environmental legislation, the use of mathematical methods and statistical analysis. It is also necessary to improve students' skills in English through language training to achieve a more consistent level of knowledge among students, and to direct students to read research articles on a regular basis.
- 3) In the process of study programme development, feedback from students and other stakeholders should be taken into account to a greater extent, and more systematically. The high average age of teaching staff is also a challenge when modernising study programmes.
- 4) It is advisable to develop a clear benchmarking system for comparing EA's study programmes with international programmes within the same field of study.
- 5) Maintenance of three parallel study groups with small student numbers is economically risky and may lead to instability in the long run. The faculty should investigate as to whether some courses could be jointly conducted only in English for all study groups, for example. This would also help to improve the active English language skills of students across all study programmes.
- 6) EuroAcademy describes its study programmes as interdisciplinary, but according to the Committee, there is no real interdisciplinarity in teaching or in the learning outcomes. In order to achieve interdisciplinarity of the study programmes, the syllabi need to be thoroughly reviewed, including the introduction of genuinely interdisciplinary courses, preferably in the form of problem-based learning. Students should also be given the opportunity to acquire an adequate basic theoretical knowledge of different disciplines before a transition to interdisciplinary learning. In order to achieve interdisciplinary focus, it is necessary to find a teaching staff with appropriate competencies and knowledge (including conceptualisation skills), which necessitates refreshing the base of the teaching staff as well as developing and training the existing teaching staff.
- 7) The quality of MSc theses examined by the Committee falls below the expected standards in the context of European higher education. To improve the quality of graduation papers, students should acquire better theoretical skills for defining research questions, as well as better problem-solving and writing skills. To this end, it is necessary to make changes to the study programmes and to ensure that the lecturers understand and apply the established requirements in a consistent way. For some teaching staff, this may entail additional training.
- 8) The titles of the study programmes do not clearly reflect their contents. In the Committee's view, a title 'Environmental Management' would be more suitable for the programmes submitted for evaluation.

- 9) Laboratory equipment does not meet modern standards and needs to be replaced in order to meet the requirements for a professional higher education programme.
- 10) E-learning is not used sufficiently, many lecturers use electronic resources only as a repository for learning materials. Wider access to national and international e-learning networks would support development and implementation of study programmes, so that they meet the standards and requirements in the area of environmental protection.
- 11) Statistical programs, which are actually readily available in the public domain (e.g. the R program), are not used in the process of teaching and learning.
- 12) The library does not have recent essential books in the field of environmental protection (environmental management). Access to full-text scientific articles is very limited in the existing databases. Since databases are very expensive, a way to improve their accessibility would be joint agreements with the public universities in Estonia. Another option would be to actively guide students regarding how to access electronic journals at the public libraries of universities in Tallinn.
- 13) Minimal IT-support is a significant concern throughout EuroAcademy, only being offered two hours per week, and which only resolves minor problems, but does not include, for example, support for the use of electronic resources or the remote use of EA's resources. IT-support should be improved, for example, to provide a helpdesk service that addresses the use of resources both locally and remotely.
- 14) EA should provide teaching staff with laptops to enable them to work in a more mobile manner (including facilitating their participation in international networks and exchange programmes) and to support the use of electronic systems in teaching.
- 15) There is no development plan for learning resources, and funds for the corresponding activities are not budgeted.
- 16) The learning outcomes for many courses are not clearly defined. Assessment criteria are not fully consistent with the planned learning outcomes and are not clearly defined, which contradicts the principles of consistent and objective assessment. The assessment criteria for the Environmental Protection study programme should be reviewed in order to be more clearly defined and aligned with the planned learning outcomes.
- 17) Interviews with the teaching staff revealed that the teaching methods used are outdated and are mainly limited to classroom lectures. There is no evidence of group work or interdisciplinary activities in the process of teaching and learning. There is no system for the assessment or development of pedagogical skills of the teaching staff which would encourage innovation and modernisation of teaching methods.
- 18) Graduation theses are often supervised by visiting and/or part-time staff members, posing a threat to the quality and consistency of supervision.
- 19) There are inevitable limits to the competence of the EA teaching staff to supervise graduation theses related to other continents, in particular the practical work. It is recommended that EA seek supervisors with the necessary professional competence from the country where students are carrying out the work.
- 20) Staff participation rates in mobility programmes are low.
- 21) Only a few staff members participate in research or in active collaboration with stakeholders.
- 22) The English language skills of some teaching staff members do not meet an acceptable standard, negatively affecting development of the international learning environment at EuroAcademy.
- 23) It was not clear to the Committee who is responsible for finding internship placements or for internship supervision. Therefore, the quality and relevance of practical training, and the related workloads are inconsistent. EA should appoint full-time employees who would seek placements and monitor internships to ensure that all students have the same practical training opportunities.
- 24) The Committee was concerned by the expectations expressed by some international students that, upon completion of the MSc programme, they would be able to obtain a licence which

enabled them to work as environmental inspectors in Estonia. This is an unrealistic expectation within the context of the current requirements in Estonia. International students should be provided with relevant information about the Estonian labour market to give them a clear picture of their future career prospects (e.g. on the EA homepage).

- 25) Dropout rates are high, especially in the programmes taught in English, which are also reflected in the small number of graduates. Student counselling should be made more effective, particularly in programmes delivered in English, in order to reduce the dropout rates.
- 26) Student participation rates in mobility programmes are low.
- 27) The student recruitment process is not adequately rigorous or consistent to bring in students with the necessary qualifications and motivation to be successful in their studies. Conducting of video interviews is not based on uniform requirements and, although the interviews are recorded, the recordings are not analysed or used to improve the process. It is recommended that EA use a standardised interview protocol and documentation in the case of video interviews to ensure greater objectivity, strictness and comparability when selecting the candidates. Interviews could be conducted by at least two faculty members.
- 28) There is no system to track the employment of graduates. From discussions with alumni and based on information in the self-evaluation report, only about half of the graduates are employed in areas related to their profession.

12. Point 41 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', establishes that the Quality Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Council shall weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations pointed out in the assessment report, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven, five or three years.

13. The Council weighed the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations referred to in point 11 of this document and found that the study programmes have the following critical shortcomings:

- Subsection 6 (5) of the Government of the Republic Regulation, 'Standard of Higher Education', prescribes that *the title and the content of a study programme must be aligned*. The titles of the study programmes do not clearly reflect their contents. In the Committee's view, a title 'Environmental Management' would be more suitable for the programmes submitted for evaluation.
- According to subsections 6 (1) and (2) of the 'Standard of Higher Education', a *study programme must be in line with the areas of activity and internal quality standards of the educational institution*. EuroAcademy describes its study programmes as interdisciplinary, but according to the Committee, there is no real interdisciplinarity in the teaching or learning outcomes.
- According to point 5.1.3 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', authorised in clause 10 (1) 2), subsection 10 (4) and § 12² of the Universities Act, subsections 21¹ (1) to (2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education and subsections 14 (6) to (8) of the Private Schools Act, *different parts of a study programme must form a coherent whole*. The study programmes in the Life Sciences study programme group are not sufficiently coherent and the teaching staff do not have the necessary knowledge of the content of the programme as a whole.
- Point 3.1 of Annex 1 to the 'Standard of Higher Education' prescribes that in order to be awarded a master's degree, the student *must, inter alia, know the theoretical development trends, current problems and potential applications in the field of study, and, in addition, be able to independently and creatively identify and formulate problems and/or research questions related to the field of study and be able to solve them with appropriate measures within given*

timeframes and with limited information. The quality of MSc theses examined by the Committee falls below the expected standards in the context of European higher education. To improve the quality of graduation papers, students should acquire better theoretical skills for defining research questions, as well as better problem-solving and writing skills.

- Clause 6 (7) 2) of the 'Standard of Higher Education' prescribes that *a member of the teaching or research staff who conducts studies in a given subject (including visiting members of the teaching staff) must have the necessary teaching competence*, which also involves supervisory competence according to clause 2 6) of the 'Standard of Higher Education'. There are inevitable limits to the competence of the EA teaching staff in supervising the graduation theses related to other continents, in particular the practical work. Also, the English language skills of some teaching staff members do not meet an acceptable standard.
- Clause 6 (7) 4) of the 'Standard of Higher Education' prescribes that *necessary premises for studies as well as for research and development activities related to Doctoral study must be available (auditoriums, laboratories, seminar rooms and a library), the furnishings and equipment of which are ample and up-to-date for achieving the objectives of study programmes and the condition of which meet the health and safety requirements established in legal instruments.* Laboratory equipment does not meet modern standards and needs to be replaced in order to meet the requirements for a professional higher education programme.
- Clause 6 (7) 5) of the 'Standard of Higher Education' stipulates that *necessary information technology tools for studies and connections to domestic and international information networks must be accessible, and necessary data media for acquiring subjects in the study programme must be available.* The library does not have recent essential books in the field of environmental protection (environmental management). Access to full-text scientific articles is very limited in the existing databases. The minimal IT-support is also a significant concern throughout EuroAcademy, only being offered two hours per week, and which only resolves minor problems, and does not include, for example, support for the use of electronic resources or the remote use of EA's resources.
- Subsection 6 (4) of the 'Standard of Higher Education' stipulates that *the objectives and learning outcomes of a study programme must be formulated in a way that they provide a basis for evaluation of the knowledge and skills of graduates of that study programme.* The learning outcomes for many courses are not clearly defined. Assessment criteria are not fully consistent with the learning outcomes and are not clearly defined, which contradicts the principles of consistent and objective assessment.
- Point 5.3.3 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education' prescribes that *teaching methods and tools used in teaching must be modern, effective and support the development of digital culture.* Point 5.4.5 of the same document prescribes that *the teaching staff must be routinely engaged in professional and teaching skills development.* Interviews with the teaching staff revealed that the teaching methods used are outdated and are mainly limited to classroom lectures. There is no evidence of group work or interdisciplinary activities in the process of teaching and learning. There is no system for the assessment or development of pedagogical skills of the teaching staff which would encourage innovation and modernisation of teaching methods.
- According to point 5.4.3 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', *the teaching staff must collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the higher education institution and with partners outside of the higher education institution (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other Estonian or foreign higher education institutions).* Only a few staff members participate in research or in active collaboration with stakeholders.

- Point 5.5.1 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education' prescribes that *student places are filled with motivated and capable students*. The student recruitment process is not adequately rigorous or consistent to bring in students with the necessary qualifications and motivation to be successful in their studies.

14. On the basis of the foregoing, the Council

DECIDED

to approve the assessment report and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Life Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at EuroAcademy in three years.

The decision was adopted by 12 votes in favour and 0 against.

15. The Bureau of EKKA will coordinate a date for the next quality assessment of the study programme group with EuroAcademy no later than 21.11.2020.
16. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

The Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.

A judicial challenge to this decision is possible within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

Eve Eisenschmidt
Chair of the Council

Hillar Bauman
Secretary of the Council