

# Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary

## Institutional accreditation decision

31.03.2022

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to accredit the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary for three years.

On the basis of clause 48.2 of the 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation' established on the basis of the authorisation contained in Section 38(3) of the Higher Education Act and Section 24(5) of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, EKKA states the following:

1. The Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary (BMTS) and EKKA agreed on the timeframe for institutional accreditation on 10.03.2021.
2. By her decision of 12 October 2021, the Director of EKKA approved the composition of the assessment committee for institutional accreditation and for assessing the fulfilment of the secondary condition imposed with the decision on the quality assessment of the theology study programme group (hereinafter the committee):

<b>Gerrit Immink (Chairman)</b>	<b>Professor Emeritus, Protestant Theological University, the Netherlands</b>
<b>Jonathan Loose (Secretary)</b>	Director of Learning and Teaching, University of London, United Kingdom
<b>Heidi Maiberg</b>	PhD student, Royal Holloway University of London, Estonia
<b>Antti Räsänen</b>	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
<b>Aivar Sarapik</b>	Head of Development and Administration of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church; High Priest in the Church of the Transformation of the Lord of Tallinn, Estonia

3. The BMTS submitted the self-analysis report to EKKA on 4 October 2021; the EKKA assessment coordinator sent the self-analysis report to the Committee on 4.10.2021.

4. A virtual assessment visit to the BMTS took place from 23 to 25 November 2021.
5. The Committee sent the draft assessment report to EKKA on 9 January 2022, EKKA forwarded the draft assessment report to the higher education institution for comments on 10.01.2022 and the BMTS submitted its comments to the assessment report 24.01.2022.
6. The Committee submitted the final assessment report to EKKA on 4.02.2022. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
7. The final assessment report and the self-analysis report were forwarded to the members of the Council by the Secretary of the Council on 24.03.2022.
8. The assessment committee's assessments were as follows:

<b>Assessment area</b>	<b>The assessment</b>
<b>Organisational management and performance</b>	Conforms to the requirements
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	Conforms to the requirements
<b>Research, development and/or other creative activities</b>	Partially conforms to the requirements
<b>Service to society</b>	Partially conforms to the requirements

9. At its meeting on 31 March 2012, the Council discussed the documents received, with the participation of 10 members, and decided to highlight the following strengths<sup>1</sup>, areas for improvement and recommendations for future developments<sup>2</sup> of the BMTS in the assessment report<sup>3</sup>.

## **9.1. ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

### ***Strengths***

<sup>1</sup> Achievements beyond the standard (not compliance with the standard) have been identified as strengths.

<sup>2</sup> The areas for improvement and recommendations point to shortcomings in meeting the requirements of the institutional accreditation standard and affect the final decision of the Council.

<sup>3</sup> Suggestions for further development are suggestions for improvements which do not contain a reference to non-compliance with the standard and the taking into consideration of which is at the discretion of the higher education institution. Suggestions for further developments do not have an impact on the final decision of the Council.

1. The employees of the BMTS are committed to their work. During the Covid pandemic, faculty and support staff found effective ways to communicate with students.
2. Teaching is conducted in three languages at the same time, for which a high-level system of simultaneous interpretation creates the prerequisites.
3. A director of R & D has been recruited with 0.3 full time equivalent workload.
4. The higher education institution has prioritised the acquisition of external funding. They have managed to raise a considerable amount of money from the Methodist Church funds.

### ***Suggestions for further development***

1. The Seminary uses a number of opportunities to address the social needs and problems of the Estonian society. For example, student internships are also related to social needs. It is necessary to make these activities more visible in the work of the Seminary and in external communication.
2. The Seminary management should continue to strengthen academic staff's research skills in applied theology. It would also enhance the teaching and supervision of students' thesis and allow them to publish more articles of increasing importance, that have an impact on the society, the academic world and the church. It is also an important prerequisite for the launch of the proposed Master's degree.
3. It is desirable to extend the academic and teaching opportunities of the Seminary through networks in the Baltic and Scandinavian countries.
4. Work on the pedagogical development of staff needs to be strengthened and a workable action plan for sharing good practices and training staff should be put in place.
5. Cooperation with the Asbury Theological Seminary should be continued to create a theological e-library.

## **9.2. TEACHING AND LEARNING**

### ***Strengths***

1. Students are enthusiastic and value by the learning environment highly.
2. The higher education institution has close cooperation with churches and the Board of the Methodist Mission.
3. Graduates are valued by churches in the region.

4. The HEI has developed and applies objective assessment criteria.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. The higher education institution needs to increase financial support and the student population in a targeted way in order to ensure the development of the Seminary as an inter-confessional higher education institution.
2. As an institution of higher education, the Seminary must continue to focus on developing the analytical and critical thinking skills of teaching staff and students.
3. Often, students have not been provided with detailed information about the syllabus prior to the start of the course. Students' studies cannot be effective if there is no syllabus nor information on assessment. The availability of syllabi and assessment-related information to students prior to the start of the course must be ensured.
4. The Seminary should also find ways to get feedback from other Christian organisations and charities that are (or may become) employers of Seminary graduates and take this into account in future developments.
5. Feedback must also be collected from students who have discontinued their studies and, on this basis, improvement activities should be planned.
6. There is a lack of teaching literature in Estonian. If there are significant differences in learning resources between the study programmes conducted in different languages, this must also be reflected in the content of the curricula and in the course of learning and teaching.
7. Lecturers have personal discretion in some matters that may unintentionally disadvantage students. The Seminary should monitor its rules, ensuring that students are not unfairly disadvantaged, e.g. in the assessment of students.
8. The Seminary should raise awareness of potential conflicts of interest between lecturers and students. Several lecturers work in congregations in addition to the Seminary. Although this situation has its advantages, it can also lead to a conflicts of interest due to the small size of the community. Moving from one role to another can be difficult for students and lecturers. It is necessary to analyse the potential conflicts of interest and their possible impact on staff and students.
9. Student dropouts are a problem. The organisation of teaching needs to be reviewed to ensure that students are best placed and supported to complete their studies within the nominal study time. The development and implementation of a strategy to reduce drop-out rates must continue.

10. International mobility of students is low. The higher education institution must continue to seek and create opportunities for international mobility.
11. The involvement of students in the activities of the Seminary should also be reflected in their representation in the various committees. It is desirable to involve student representatives in all academic committees, unless there is a clear reason not to do so.
12. While informal administration may sometimes be appropriate, the extent of reliance on non-formal culture at the higher education institution is a source of concern. It is also necessary to ensure that effective formal systems are in place to allow students to easily raise their concerns and complaints.
13. Instead of translating teaching materials and preparing pedagogical materials, priority must be given to writing scientific publications.

### ***Suggestions for further development***

1. It is advisable to monitor the work of the newly formed study committee and student mentoring to ensure their functioning.
2. In order to increase the number of graduates, the number of scholarships for students should be increased.
3. Continue the development work with the aim of opening the joint Master's programme with the Asbury Seminary.
4. In order to comply with international good practice, it is desirable to apply blind assessment and assessment by two lecturers.
5. It is also desirable to provide counselling and support to those students who do not plan a future career in church-based service.
6. Student feedback surveys should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they measure what is most important for the Seminary and that the measures used are valid and reliable.

## **9.3. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND/OR OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES (RDC)**

### ***Strengths***

1. The prerequisites for carrying out academic research at the higher education institution have been established, library resources and IT support are sufficient.
2. The small size of the Seminary allows for close communication between teaching staff and students. The teaching staff are clearly motivated to invest time in personal instruction, which improves the results and is reflected in the good results of the diploma theses.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. A long-term research plan needs to be developed, aligned with the identity of the Seminary and meeting the requirements for higher education institutions. A detailed research plan would also allow structuring research conducted by academic staff and students. This plan should also define what is applied research in theology and how to address hermeneutic issues.
2. However, a number of developments planned for the period between evaluations have not been implemented. For example, there is still no list of publications on the Seminary website.
3. The institution has no articles in international or national peer-reviewed journals. There are also no monographs. In this context, cooperation with other higher education institutions is important in order to publish at least joint publications. This would be helpful for those academic staff for whom it is difficult to write articles alone.
4. There is a need to expand and activate participation in research networks to increase academic excellence of the Seminary and to encourage publication.
5. In some theses there is no proper research assignment, method or data analysis. The Seminary must ensure that students are supervised at a level that avoids such a situation.
6. Diploma thesis supervisors should also discuss research ethics with students and insist on following it in the graduation thesis. The credibility of the thesis would be improved if students clearly set out their position and approach to the subject matter in the work.

### ***Suggestions for further development***

1. It is important to ensure the development of RDC infrastructure in the future. Individual RDC support services for academic staff must also be provided.
2. Teaching staff's pedagogical development must be continuous in order to ensure the development of their know-how and the improvement of their results.
3. There is a shortage of Russian-speaking supervisors, which is why it would be advisable to recruit Russian-speaking qualified supervisors on the basis of an hourly rate.

## **9.4. SERVICE TO SOCIETY**

### ***Strengths***

1. The newly started public relations specialist is an alumnus of the Seminary and is therefore well informed about the context.
2. Close cooperation between the Seminary and the Baltic Methodist Church.
3. The institution of higher education has a strategically good location that is easily accessible to foreign students and visiting lecturers.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Today, the view of the Seminary on service to society is based on the viewpoint of the Methodist Church. However, a higher education institution should see its role in serving the society in its broadest sense. Therefore, a higher education institution should define the term "society" and explain how the Church sees it. Perhaps the church's understanding is narrower than what is construed by the Seminary. How other higher education institutions see the "society" and how they serve it (e.g. creating MOOCs, writing opinion articles in public newspapers, etc.) should also be explored. It would be necessary to map the needs of all Estonian Christian churches, Christians and secular people in general and taking into account the developments of the state. Combining the needs of the wider society with the strengths and opportunities of the Seminary can also increase opportunities to become more visible and necessary in the society as a whole.
2. It is necessary to develop a communication and marketing strategy in order to make the higher education institution more visible in mainstream Estonian media and the society.
3. It is recommended to publish students' graduation theses on the website of the Seminary. This would increase the likelihood of students and other interested parties reading them, which in turn would contribute to the development of society as a whole through published analyses and new ideas.
4. The continuing education courses offered should be more broad-based and include, in addition to the Methodist Church, other Christian churches and secular members of society.
5. Already in the previous evaluation, it was recommended that the Seminary should make feedback on continuing education courses public on its website. It hasn't been done. It is recommended that the Seminary publish the feedback on its website and accompany it with the rest of the information on the training activities. Fair and accessible feedback will give potential participants better information on training, trainers and the higher education institution. In-service training is also one of the possible recruitment channels for students.
6. The Seminary must clearly inform the public that the university library is open to all interested parties. The same recommendation was included in the previous accreditation report.

### ***Suggestions for further development***

1. It is desirable to participate more actively in the academic world of Estonia by fostering cooperation with other universities and higher education institutions, in particular with similar private higher education institutions.
  
10. If one or two sub-assessments are “partially conforms to requirements” and the remaining sub-assessments are “conforms to requirements”, the Assessment Council shall analyse the strengths and areas of improvement of the higher education institution and shall assess that the management, organisation, teaching and research activities of the higher education institution and the teaching and research environment comply with the requirements and decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of seven years, or assess that there are shortcomings in the management, organisation, teaching and research or in the teaching and research environment of the higher education institution, give instructions for their elimination and decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of three years.
  
11. The Council analysed the strengths and areas of improvement of the BMTS and found that the higher education institution has made **progress on a number of issues** since its previous institutional accreditation:
  - the management of the higher education institution is well aware of the challenges facing the BMTS and, in close cooperation with stakeholders, seeks to position the Seminary in the context of the Baltic Methodist Church and the Estonian society.
  - in order to conduct academic research at the higher education institution, prerequisites have been created: a director for research and development has been recruited and the library’s resources and IT support are sufficient.
  - objective assessment criteria have been developed and applied;
  - students are satisfied with the interactivity of teaching and group work and discussions, including in digital education.
  - the necessary measures have been taken to improve the quality of the theses.

At the same time, the assessment committee’s report identifies a number of shortcomings in both the two areas assessed as partially conforming, as well as in the field of learning and teaching. The Assessment Council considers it necessary to highlight the following **significant shortcomings**:

- 1) Pursuant to subsection 3 (2) of the Higher Education Standard, *the study programmes and organisation of studies must comply with the internal quality standards of the educational institution and with the national and international quality requirements and agreements.* Section 7.2.3.2 of the “Conditions and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation” provides that the *assessment of students is supportive*



*of learning and in line with the learning outcomes.* The implementation of outcome-based learning is not ensured throughout the institution: a detailed syllabus is not always introduced to the students prior to the start of the course. The teaching of students cannot be effective if the student does not have information about the assessment. The availability of syllabuses and assessment-related information to students prior to the start of the course must be ensured.

- 2) According to clause 3 (7) 5) of the Higher Education Standard, teaching and research *literature and other teaching materials must be available for learning and teaching.* Clause 7.1.3.3 of the document 'Conditions and procedure for institutional accreditation' provides that '*Staff working conditions as well as the studying and RDC conditions for students (libraries, studios, workshops, laboratories, etc.) meet the needs arising from the specificity of the higher education institution and the expectations of its membership.*' There is a shortage of literature in Estonian. If there are significant differences in learning resources of study programmes conducted in different languages, this must also be reflected in the content of the curricula and in the course of learning and teaching.
- 3) Point 7.2.4.1 of the document 'Conditions and procedures for institutional accreditation' provides that '*The organisation of studies creates an opportunity for students to complete their studies within the nominal study time.*' In higher education, student dropouts are a problem. The organisation of teaching needs to be reviewed to ensure that students are best placed and supported to complete their studies within the nominal period of time. The development and implementation of a strategy to reduce drop-out rates must continue.
- 4) Point 7.2.4.3 of the document 'Conditions and procedures for institutional accreditation' provides that '*The higher education institution shall support the international mobility of students.*' The international mobility of students is low. The higher education institution must continue to seek and create opportunities for international mobility.
- 5) Point 7.3.1.1 of the 'Conditions and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation' states that '*The higher education institution has defined the objectives in the field of RDC and measures their achievement.*' The university has made progress in creating prerequisites for R & D, but there is no long-term research plan that would fit the identity of the Seminary and meet the requirements to higher education institutions. A detailed research plan would also allow structuring research undertaken by academic staff and students.
- 6) Point 7.3.1.1 of the document 'Conditions and procedures for institutional accreditation' provides that '*The higher education institution has defined objectives in the field of RDC and measures their achievement.*' Paragraph 7.3.2.3 of that document provides that '*The higher education institution participates in the various RDC networks.*' The university does not have articles published in international or national peer-reviewed journals. There are also no

monographs. There is a need to expand and activate participation in research networks to increase academic excellence of the Seminary and to encourage publication.

- 7) Clause 7.1.1.6 of the document 'Conditions and procedures for institutional accreditation' states that '*Intra-institutional and external communication (including marketing and image-building) is targeted and managed*'. Point 7.4.3.1 of the same document states that '*The activities aimed at the public are targeted, their results are periodically evaluated, and improvements are made on this basis.*' The university does not have a communication and marketing strategy that would help to make the higher education institution more visible in the mainstream Estonian media and society. Currently, the Seminary's perspective on service to society (including in-service training) is based on the Methodist Church. A higher education institution should see its role in serving society in its broadest sense. The Seminary must clearly inform the public that the university library is open to all interested parties. The same recommendation was included in the previous accreditation report.

12. On the basis of the shortcomings identified in point 11, the Council

**DECIDED to**

**Accredit the Theological Seminary of the Baltic Methodist Church for three years.**

The decision was adopted with 10 votes in favour. Against 0.

13. Accreditation is valid until 31.03.2025. The next period of institutional accreditation will be coordinated with the Theological Seminary of the Baltic Methodist Church no later than 31.03.2024.

14. A person who considers that his or her rights or freedoms have been infringed by the decision, can lodge a challenge with the EKKA Assessment Council within 30 days of the date on which the objector became aware or should have become aware of the contested act. The Assessment Council shall send the challenge to the EKKA Appeals committee, which shall, within five days of receipt of the challenge, submit a written impartial opinion to the Assessment Council on the merits of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the appeal within 10 days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If further examination of the challenge is necessary, the Assessment Council may extend the deadline for examining the challenge by up to 30 days. Judicial contestation of a decision is possible within 30 days from the date of service of the judgment by filing an appeal with the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Court Procedure Act.

**Hillar Bauman**

**Secretary of the Council**