

# Estonian University of Life Sciences

## Institutional accreditation decision

27.06.2022

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education<sup>1</sup> decided to accredit the Estonian University of Life Sciences for seven years.

On the basis of Section 38(3) of the Higher Education Act and clause 43.2 of the Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation established on the basis of the authorisation contained in Section 24(5) of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, the Higher Education Assessment Council (hereinafter the Council) of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) states the following:

1. The Estonian University of Life Sciences (EULS) and EKKA agreed on the timeframe for institutional accreditation on 07.04.2021.
2. On the basis of point 8 of the 'Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation', the following study programmes were also assessed in the context of institutional accreditation:
  - Environmental Protection (Bachelor's studies)*
  - Animal Science (Master's studies)*
  - Rural Building (Integrated Bachelor's and Master's studies)*
  - Veterinary Medicine and Food Science (Doctoral studies)*
3. On 04.01.2022, the Director of EKKA approved the composition of the institutional accreditation committee (hereinafter the committee) as follows:

<b>Mark Richardson</b> (Chairman)	professor Emeritus, University College Dublin (Ireland)
<b>Marge Vaikjärv</b>	Doctoral student, University of Tartu (Estonia)
<b>Alvija Slaseviciene</b>	Director, Food Institute of Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania)

<sup>1</sup> Until 11.06.2022 the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)



<b>Carmen Fenoll</b>	Professor, University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain)
<b>Ivar Kruusenberg</b>	Member of the Committee from outside academia; Senior Researcher, National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics; CEO, PowerUp Energy Technologies Inc.; Member of the R & D Council (Taip) of the EVV (Estonia)
<b>James Longhurst</b>	Professor, University of the West of England (United Kingdom)
<b>Johanna Björkroth</b>	Professor, University of Helsinki (Finland)
<b>Marialena Nikopoulou</b>	Professor, University of Kent (United Kingdom)

4. The EULS submitted the self-analysis report to EKKA on 20.01.2022, the EKKA assessment coordinator sent the self-analysis report to the Committee on 22.01.2022.
5. On 18 March 2022, two members of the Committee inspected the EULS infrastructure. A virtual assessment visit to the EULS took place on 22-24 March 2022.
6. The Committee sent the draft assessment report to EKKA on 15 May 2022, the EKKA forwarded the draft assessment report to the higher education institution for comments on 16 May 2022 and the EULS submitted its comments on 30 May 2022.
7. The Committee submitted the final assessment report to EKKA on 06.06.2022. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the HAKA website.
8. The final assessment report and the self-analysis report were forwarded to the members of the Council by the Secretary of the Council on 20 June 2022.
9. The assessment committee's assessments were as follows:

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Assessment</b>
<b>Strategic management</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Resources</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Quality culture</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Academic ethics</b>	Partially conforms to requirements
<b>Internationalisation</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Teaching staff</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Study programme</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Learning and teaching</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Student assessment</b>	Conforms to requirements

<b>Learning systems</b>	<b>support</b>	Conforms to requirements
<b>Research, development and/or other creative activities</b>		Conforms to requirements
<b>Service to society</b>		Conforms to requirements

**★ Worthy of recognition:**

Strategic management has focused on change management between the two accreditations, with the reorganisation of the university’s structural units and reform of the academic career model being carried out without losing employee loyalty and support. As a result, the structure of the university is even more consistent with the mission, which in turn is the basis for introducing a stronger quality culture.

10. At its meeting on 27 June 2022, the Council discussed the documents received with 11 members present and decided to highlight the following EULS strengths<sup>2</sup>, areas for improvement and recommendations and suggestions<sup>3</sup> for future developments from the assessment report<sup>4</sup>.

## **10.1. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### ***Strengths***

1. A flexible and systematic approach to the recommendations of the previous institutional accreditation, as a result of which the university’s structure is better aligned with objectives, mission, vision and core values, and which in turn forms the basis for the introduction of a stronger quality culture.
2. Heads of academic units have been given greater powers and responsibilities in achieving the University’s strategic goals. The university’s cooperative structure creates ever better opportunities for interdisciplinarity.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Achievements beyond the standard (not compliance with the standard) have been identified as strengths.

<sup>3</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>4</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. In the context of the ongoing restructuring, new technological solutions could make administrative procedures more flexible for staff members.

## **10.2. RESOURCES**

### ***Strengths***

1. Recent reorganisations have had a positive impact on the satisfaction of the members with employment relations, increased cooperation in teaching and research and contributed to revenue growth.
2. The recently established Statute for the Awards of the Estonian University of Life Sciences, which aims to highlight excellence in different fields of activity, can be considered an important motivator, increasing the visibility of staff and units at the university level.
3. There is considerable revenue growth from various sources, which reduces dependence on the state budget. Research, services to the society and other external stakeholders, the introduction of new courses and continuing education provision increase the revenue and impact of the EULS.
4. Cooperation agreements with external partners on the shared use of the infrastructure work well.
5. The Rural Building study programme offers cutting-edge learning opportunities thanks to the investment in the laboratories of wood technology and construction physics.
6. Students on the Veterinary Medicine and Food Science study programme are very satisfied with the learning and teaching environment.

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

1. Following the relaxation of the Covid-19 travel restrictions, funding for field trips supporting learning and related outdoor activities should be increased or at least not cut.
2. The possibility of making outdoor stations and similar research and learning infrastructure self-sufficient could be considered.
3. The main and unique strengths of the units could be clearly identified on the websites of institutes and chairs. This would help, among other things, develop new cooperation projects with companies.
4. Rules on the use of e-mail and social media channels should be clarified so that employees and external stakeholders receive more targeted messages and less indiscriminate noise in the virtual world of communication.
5. Recruitment channels could be expanded, including through international portals specialised in academic positions and, where appropriate, other international resources.

## **10.3. QUALITY CULTURE**

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

1. Compulsory student-centred learning and teaching training for teaching staff needs further development in order to strengthen the common understanding of the EULS quality culture in the field of teaching.

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

1. While the university meets the requirements for quality culture, the involvement of staff in the field of quality management could be enhanced by providing specialised quality management training programmes (if necessary, using external expertise).

## **10.4. ACADEMIC ETHICS**

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

1. The Academic Ethics Committee does not yet collect data systematically enough to analyse trends and develop concrete change triggering activities. The Ethics Committee should be more proactive in analysing the concerns and issues related to ethics in the EULS and provide input to the development of the various policies and procedures of the University.
2. Although trainings are carried out on a regular basis, research group members may have certain gaps in the field of research ethics. To avoid this, it is recommended to step up the assessment of the level of achievement of learning outcomes at the end of trainings.
3. It is desirable to create a single and easy-to-use section of the website where all policies, procedures and guidelines relating to ethical issues in the EULS can be consulted. More effective dissemination of information to students regarding the mechanisms and procedures for appealing learning outcomes could be considered.
4. Awareness of ethics among university members is generally limited to issues of gender and cultural equality. Consistent policies and information campaigns on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are recommended.

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

1. The University could explore the potential impact of subconscious biases on the implementation of best practices on equality, diversity, and inclusion.
2. In cooperation with universities around the world, new tools should be sought to prevent and detect fraud, in particular in relation to the increase in the share of digital education and the spread of online assessment.

## **10.5. INTERNATIONALISATION**

### ***Strengths***

1. There has been an increase in the provision of international Master's programmes around the EULS' areas of excellence, which ensures a steady flow of foreign students.
2. A wide range of extra-curricular events are organised to support the integration of foreign students.

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

1. Better alignment with the curricula of partner universities must be ensured by mapping credits so that EULS students participating in mobility do not have to extend the duration of their studies when studying abroad.
2. The modules for foreign students are not the same in volume and content as those offered to Estonian students, which is contrary to the concept of internationalisation of the EULS learning experience. It is desirable to phase out the different approach to modules and harmonise the learning experience for all students.
3. Improving the English language skills of Estonian students would help to promote internationalisation at home through the joint learning of local and foreign students.

## **10.6. TEACHING STAFF**

### ***Strengths***

1. The age profile of academic staff is good, and the career model supports the advancement of younger lecturers.
2. Foreign guest lecturers contribute to teaching and research.
3. Student feedback on the quality of teaching is on a rising trend.
4. A large proportion of the teaching staff of the Environmental Protection study programme participate in in-service training. The lecturers are internationally active and have good cooperation in international networks and projects.

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

1. In accordance with the structure of the new positions, the university has set the goal that all teaching staff members at the position of lecturer or above have a doctorate. Achieving this goal will require considerable attention in the coming years. The university must continue to support its lecturers so that they complete their doctoral studies on time.

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

1. The free semester opportunity is used by an average of 1 of 25 faculty members. A new approach to the use of the free semester and the University's expectations in this regard should be developed. It should be ensured that the use of the free semester is in line with the university's requirements in terms of research and knowledge development.
2. As the Environmental Protection study programme is developing in a direction that focuses on today's global environmental challenges and new technologies, the university needs to ensure that these topics are covered by faculty members with relevant competencies.
3. The Animal Science study programme should further develop the international mobility of lecturers, participation in international research projects and cooperation networks.

## **10.7. STUDY PROGRAMME**

### ***Strengths***

1. Compulsory internships in all study programmes are well organised and supervised.
2. Laboratory work is carried out in the form of projects that allow students to develop their learning skills, research planning and implementation, and creativity.
3. The modular structure of curricula allows students flexibility in planning their studies and optimal use of teaching resources.
4. The research of academic staff and the teaching carried out by them are closely linked.
5. There has been an increase in the number of courses and modules in English, which will create better opportunities for the inclusion of foreign students.
6. An example of the good performance of the Animal Science study programme feedback system is the openness to stakeholder proposals. The study programme is highly valued by corporate stakeholders.
7. In the development of the Rural Building curriculum, other Estonian higher education institutions are consulted, which allows the EULS to emphasise the university's bioeconomy focus in the context of engineering.
8. The Veterinary Medicine and Food Science study programme is socially influential, and the theses deal with topics of societal importance.

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

1. A learning outcomes-based approach is not yet commonplace in curriculum development. Some academic staff have difficulties in understanding this approach and therefore the spread of best practices within the university is somewhat patchy. It is advisable to carry out a university-wide audit by comparing the learning outcomes of curricula and modules and highlighting the best practices to be shared later in training.

2. The Environmental Protection study programme must follow through the already planned activities to reduce the fragmentation of the curriculum, involving lecturers, students, and external stakeholders.
3. The specialist modules and courses of the Animal Science curriculum should incorporate more sustainable development challenges and promote cooperation competences.

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

1. The sustainability of the provision of study programmes with a small number of students and abundant elective courses should be analysed. This may mean reducing the number of Master's programmes and increasing the number of joint modules in several curricula in order to reduce the teaching burden for lecturers. In order to increase students' autonomy and self-learning competencies and to ensure the sustainability of the study programmes, the number of contact hours could also be reduced.
2. Consider extending the concept of project-based laboratory courses in Food Technology to other programmes.
3. Stakeholder engagement practices in curriculum development vary from chair to chair and are sometimes based on personal relationships rather than formal input. The involvement of stakeholders in the curriculum development could be standardised.
4. The Environmental Protection study programme should include more practical work and practices.
5. In the development of the Environmental Protection study programme, more attention should be paid to global challenges in addition to Estonia's environmental problems.
6. The overall objective of the Animal Science study programme should be better linked to the content of the courses and to what are mandatory and which electives. The compulsory 79 ECTS specialty module could be divided into smaller general and specialty sections, which would provide more flexibility for the students in building their portfolio of competences.
7. The unique strengths and specificities of the Rural Building study programme should be better communicated in order to be more competitive in recruiting students.

## **10.8. LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### ***Strengths***

1. Teaching in small groups (particularly in Master's studies).
2. Alumni of the Environmental Protection study programme are very pleased with their learning experience and the extent to which it has benefited their careers. The competitiveness of EULS graduates in the labour market is high.



3. Practitioners are involved in the delivery of the Animal Science study programme. Students are very happy with the competence, guidance, open attitude and willingness to assist of the lecturers.
4. The Rural Building study programme fosters close cooperation with companies that supports teaching and graduation theses.

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

1. In order to optimise students' individual study plans and promote a student-centred approach, a variety of measures should be implemented in admission to assess students' academic capacity.
2. The current study programmes are mainly knowledge oriented. Curricula should be geared more towards systematism, proactive, strategic and critical thinking, cooperation and self-awareness, and integrated problem-solving competences.
3. Curriculum modules and courses should address the issues and challenges of sustainable development more broadly and ensure that lecturers have the necessary skills to address these topics.
4. Given the fact that external research funding subsidises teaching in the Environmental Protection study programme, a plan must be developed to ensure that a reduction in research funding does not negatively affect teaching.
5. In the Environmental Protection study programme, internship opportunities should be extended both in Estonia and abroad.
6. In the Animal Science study programme, it is desirable to increase the number of possible internship places so that working students can gain experience from elsewhere than their place of work.
7. For the doctoral programme in Veterinary Medicine and Food Science, an entrance interview should be conducted with all candidates, regardless of the origin of their Master's degree.

## **10.9. STUDENT ASSESSMENT**

### ***Strengths***

1. The teaching staff actively cooperates in defining and developing assessment methods.
2. In the Animal Science study programme, assessments are carried out in a team of lecturers.

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

1. Criteria should be set to assess each student's contribution to group work in more detail.
2. Peer evaluation of students should be applied to include all students in group work.

3. The quality of supervision should also be assessed during the attestation of doctoral students. The University could consider ways for doctoral students to give feedback on supervision and how to use this feedback.
4. It is advisable to create an online tool to monitor the progress of doctoral students throughout their doctoral studies.

## **10.10. LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

### ***Strengths***

1. Well-functioning cooperation between students and support professionals has led to significant progress in raising and promoting mental health awareness. Together with improved access to psychological counselling, the EULS has created a supportive environment for the entire university membership.

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

1. In order to enhance student learning opportunities, the EULS must continue to raise awareness among staff of the continuous improvement process described in the quality management system and to follow the procedures designed to support students' learning — what are the minimum levels to be achieved and what activities are to be undertaken if the minimum is not achieved.
2. In order to further reduce drop-out rates, the university could in addition to a system to assist students with weak progression, consider identifying indicators in the profile of drop-offs and proactively monitoring these indicators to identify students at risk at an early stage.
3. The rate of drop-out and interruption in the Environmental Protection study programme is relatively high in international comparison. In order to reduce the drop-out rate, action is needed on top of university efforts, at national level, including in cooperation with other universities.

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

1. The university could further explore why students go on academic leave and communicate more closely with them at the end of the leave period if they do not return and provide additional support on returning to study to increase their chances of completing their studies within a reasonable time.
2. Students should be made more aware of the possibility of participating in studies during academic leave.
3. In order to further develop advisory services, the respective action plans should set targets with metrics (e.g., awareness, waiting time for psychological counselling, workshop performance, etc.).

## **10.11. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND/OR OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES**

### ***Strengths***

1. The clear focus of the EULS creates a good environment for national and international cooperation.
2. The research priority axes meet Estonia's needs.
3. Performance indicators are appropriate and are constantly being developed.
4. The university is supported by numerous European projects and contracts with companies.
5. Internal cooperation and strategic objectives are supported by *ad hoc* centres and a baseline fund.
6. In the Animal Science study programme, several students have published scientific articles based on their Master's thesis and participated in professional conferences.

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

1. Much of the research conducted is dedicated to applied research and the provision of services, which complicates the writing of high-level articles and may jeopardise the role of the university of being the creator of knowledge-based solutions in solving various societal challenges. It is recommended to draw up a plan, matched with resources, to promote high-level research.

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

1. Consideration should be given to how to support and upgrade units that do not have a good level of R & D. Cooperation between research groups should be strengthened.
2. A balance should be struck between teaching and research for all academic staff, in particular lecturers, and their participation in research should be promoted.
3. Existing efforts to monitor the academic progress of doctoral students should be continued and expanded, for example by forming a small group of tutors independent of supervisors.
4. It must be ensured that doctoral students are able to provide feedback on the quality of supervision without the supervisor being present. A common supervision feedback system should be developed (as also mentioned in the University's self-analysis report).
5. Young academic staff members should be supported in setting up research groups and becoming active supervisors.
6. The Veterinary Medicine and Food Science study programme should extend multidisciplinary collaboration both inside and outside the university, as many areas are quite small.

7. The Rural Building study programme should increase research activity in the field of environmental engineering in interdisciplinary cooperation with natural scientist colleagues.

## **10.12. SERVICE TO SOCIETY**

### ***Strengths***

1. The success of the various EULS measures has made it possible to involve different groups of society from children to entrepreneurs in educational activities.
2. Thanks to the pro-activeness of the university, more and more people are using services aimed at society.
3. The veterinary capacity of the EULS is a unique service to the Estonian society.

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

1. Consideration should be given to developing the activities of the Open University so that those who drop out of the university could gradually complete their studies there.
2. Links should be sought with a wider range of companies and institutions in order to jointly invest in research infrastructure, either in EULS laboratories or in enterprises.
3. The Alumni Association should be transformed into a formal advisory group so as not to rely solely on *ad hoc* contacts between lecturers and companies.

11. If one to four 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 for improvement of the institution and assess that the management, organisation, teaching and research activities and the teaching and research environment of the higher education institution meet the requirements and decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of seven years; or that there are shortcomings in the management, organisation, teaching and research or in the teaching and research environment of the higher education institution, provide guidance on their elimination and decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of three years.

12. The Council analysed the strengths and areas of improvement of the EULS and considered it necessary to highlight the following:

- 1) The strategic management of the university is worthy of recognition, it has focused on managing change between the two accreditations, with the reorganisation of the university's structural units and reform of the

academic career model being carried out without losing employee loyalty and support.

- 2) The University has flexibly and systematically approached the recommendations of the previous institutional accreditation, as a result of which the structure of the university is better aligned with the objectives, mission, vision and core values, and which in turn forms the basis for the introduction of a stronger quality culture.
- 3) Recent reorganisations have positively affected the satisfaction with the employment relations at the university, increased cooperation in teaching and research, and contributed to revenue growth.
- 4) Well-functioning cooperation between students and support professionals has led to significant progress in raising and promoting mental health awareness. Together with improved access to psychological counselling, the EULS has created a supportive environment for the entire university membership.

13. Based on the above, the Council

**DECIDED TO**

**Accredit the Estonian University of Life Sciences for seven years.**

The decision was adopted with 11 votes in favour. Against 0.

14. The accreditation is valid until 27.06.2029 or the revocation of the decision. The time frame for the next institutional accreditation will be agreed between HAKA and the Estonian University of Life Sciences by 27.06.2028.
15. The Estonian University of Life Sciences shall submit to the Council no later than 27 June 2023 an overview on the progress regarding the areas of improvement and recommendations set out in clause 10 of this Decision.
16. A person who considers that his or her rights or freedoms have been infringed by the decision, can lodge a challenge with the HAKA's 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 HAKA 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**