



ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY FOR
HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Initial Assessment Report

EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

Theology Programme Group Master's Study

2022

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1. Introduction

Initial assessment of the study programme group

The initial assessment is carried out by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) if the higher education institution has submitted an application to the Ministry of Education and Research for the right to provide instruction in a study programme group and level.

When applying for the right to provide instruction, an assessment of whether the quality of learning meets the requirements for studies at the level of higher education, and whether the resources and sustainability necessary for studies are sufficient, takes place.

The initial assessment will be carried out by the EKKA in three assessment areas: **1) quality of learning, 2) resources, and 3) sustainability**. In terms of quality of learning, a distinction is made between three sub-areas – study programme, learning and teaching, and the organisation of studies. In terms of resources, a distinction is also made in three sub-areas: academic staff, learning and teaching environment, and financial resources. Sustainability is assessed both in terms of the quality of learning and resources, and in terms of additional sustainability criteria.

On the basis of its analysis, the assessment committee assesses whether the requirements for each assessment area (including sub-areas) have been met:

- 1) conforms to the required standard;
- 2) partially conforms to the required standard;
- 3) does not conform to the required standard.

As a result of the initial assessment, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education makes a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research on whether to grant the higher education institution the right to provide instruction in the relevant study programme group and level; to grant the higher education institution the right to provide instruction in the relevant study programme group and level for a period of one to three years; or not to grant the higher education institution the right to provide instruction in the relevant study programme group and level.

The initial assessment is carried out in accordance with the document 'Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Re-assessment of Study Programme Groups' approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education on 19.05.2020.

The initial assessment of Master's studies by the EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary's Theology Study Programme Group took place between January and March 2022.

The institution of higher education submitted the following study programme '**Theology and Society**' for assessment in the Master's studies of the Theology Programme Group.

To carry out the initial assessment, the EKKA set up an assessment committee consisting of experts from higher education institutions, external experts and student representatives. The EKKA agreed upon the composition of the assessment committee with the higher education institution.

The composition of the assessment committee was approved by order of the Director of the EKKA:

Ringo Ringvee (Chairman)	Adviser, Religious Affairs Department, Ministry of the Interior
Anneli Randla	Associate Professor, Senior Research Fellow, Estonian Academy of Arts
Priit Rohtmets	Associate Professor, University of Tartu; Professor, Head of Development, Institute of Theology of the EELC
Katre Koppel	doctoral student, University of Tartu

Description of the assessment process

Liia Lauri was the assessment coordinator on behalf of the EKKA.

The members of the assessment committee completed the initial assessment training organised by the EKKA. The members of the committee reviewed the documents submitted by the higher education institution. During the preparatory meeting for the assessment visit, the Commission drew up a draft visiting plan, which was coordinated with the higher education institution and the EKKA. On the basis of the documents provided by the higher education institution, the committee members agreed on the issues to be clarified and the questions to be addressed. The committee agreed on the division of labour and the tasks for the assessment visit.

A flexible format assessment visit to the higher education institution took place on 14 February 2022. One member of the committee and some of the interviewees attended the meetings online, the rest were physically present at the Seminary. The committee familiarised itself with the learning environment and conducted the interviews agreed in the schedule.

The assessment visit took place in a positive atmosphere. The representatives of the higher education institution answered the questions openly and provided adequate explanations.

EKKA sent the assessment committee's preliminary report to the higher education institution for comments on 10.03.2022.

The higher education institution submitted its comments on the preliminary assessment report on 11.03.2022.

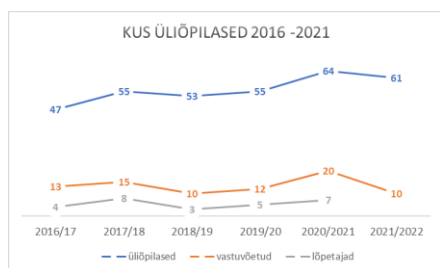
In drafting the final version of the report, the committee took into account the comments of the higher education institution.

The committee submitted its final report to the EKKA on 21.03.2022.

A brief overview of the EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

The EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary is a private higher education institution, which began its activities as a vocational training institution in 1922, continued its activities under the Soviet occupation in the form of theological courses, and was officially re-established by the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia in 1989.

The Seminary has the right to provide instruction in the study programme group for theological study. The Seminary offers a programme of professional higher education in the field of 'Free Church Theology and Leadership'. The number of students at the Seminary has increased slightly over the last five years, from 47 in 2016 to 61 in 2022; the number of admissions ranges from 10 to 20, and the number of graduates from 3 to 8 per year (see graph).



(Haridussilm, 2022)

The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary underwent institutional accreditation and a quality assessment of the study programme group in 2019. The Seminary was accredited for a period of seven (7) years, but the decision was made subject to an additional condition in terms of management and staffing, and research and development. The

fulfilment of the side-condition was assessed in 2021. The assessment committee considered the shortcomings to have been fully remedied and highlighted positive developments:

1) The Seminary is active internationally. Collaboration with Swedish and Norwegian higher education institutions continues, and consultations are ongoing with a number of other higher education institutions for future cooperation. 2) The higher education institution's governance structure is clear and responsibilities are defined. 3) Clear and measurable objectives have been set in the higher education institution's Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027. 4) A mentoring system implemented by the lead teachers supports students. The following were cited regarding research and development: 1) A long-term research and publication plan has been developed and approved. 2) an RDA coordinator with a 0.4-part time position has been recruited to coordinate and support faculty research. 3) Funding for R&D activities is based on results to date and is motivational.

With that, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education considered the secondary condition set in the decision of 26.05.2021 as fulfilled.

2. A Brief Summary of the Assessment Results and Justifications for the Assessments

The materials submitted for the assessment of the Master's Programme in Theology and Society of the EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary and the interviews conducted indicated that the decision by the Seminary to open the study programme was prudent. The opening of the study programme is seen as important by both the Seminary and the owner, and both see it as an important means of ensuring the identity and intellectual continuity of the free church.

The study programme has been developed with input from the owner of the Seminary, management, and academic staff, along with past, present, and future students. The documents governing the organisation of studies have been made public, and the organisation of studies allows for the needs of different groups of learners to be taken into consideration. The study programme meets the requirements set out in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education. The study programme prepares students for both ecclesiastical and social careers, as well as for further studies at the doctoral level. The admission requirements are clearly articulated. The Seminary's Study Regulations and the assessment system are sufficiently comprehensive to ensure transparency and objectivity in the assessment. Appeals procedures are transparent and fairly applied. The structure of the study programme is logical and coherent, and the implementation of problem-based learning underpins the achievement of the study programme's objectives. Mentoring for students is ensured in a similar way to the mentoring system already in place in the professional higher education study programme of the Seminary in order to ensure that students' academic progress is monitored and supported. Erasmus+ agreements are in place to support students' international mobility. The Seminary also has cooperation agreements with foreign institutions of higher education, along with procedures for taking into account prior learning and professional experience, as well as academic recognition. Teaching is carried out by teaching staff with a high level of teaching and supervisory experience.

The academic workforce resource is sufficient to achieve the study programme objectives and learning outcomes. The overwhelming majority of academic staff (teaching staff) hold a doctorate (14 out of 19). Based on the material provided, the requirements for academic staff are in line with the Standard of Higher Education in terms of qualifications, duties, and other responsibilities of academic staff. The selection and recruitment criteria for staff are fair and transparent. The number of teaching staff in the study programme exceeds the planned number of students.

As the Seminary has a functioning professional higher education study programme, all of the necessary infrastructure (both digital and physical) is in place and constantly being updated. Investment in research, development, and creative activities has increased significantly in recent years, with the trend set to continue (e.g. a budget of EUR 4,500 for research and publishing activities in 2021, with an actual expenditure of EUR 8,027, and a planned budget of EUR 5,000 for 2022 (Budget 2021_22)). Evidence provided by the Seminary, as well as interviews with the representatives of the owners and the Rector, indicated that the Seminary has sufficient financial resources to operate at a high level of quality. The financial resources come from own revenue, economic activities, and project-based grants. Tuition fees

are seen as the main source of funding for education. During the interviews, the owners' representatives confirmed that, if necessary, it would be possible to increase the funds from the owners' side in order to ensure the functioning of the study programme. The opening of the Master's programme will require an increase in support staff, with the recruitment of a programme manager and an assistant manager planned. The financial risks associated with the opening of a Master's programme will be mitigated by a functioning infrastructure and support structures.

Access to open, online libraries and databases is made as easy as possible for students and teachers. The ICT solutions to support teaching are up-to-date and operational.

The materials provided and the interviews carried out indicated that the sustainability of the higher education institution meets the required level. A risk analysis has been carried out for the opening of the Master's programme. The owner provides scholarships in order to motivate the clergy and youth leaders of congregations to pursue their studies.

The age structure of the academic staff involved and the proportion of young lecturers ensure the sustainability of teaching within the study programme group. The average age of the academic staff is 48.6 years (8 under 50, and 11 over 50). The study programme was developed with the aim of achieving the highest possible quality, involving new academic staff in addition to the existing teaching staff to ensure the quality and sustainability of teaching. Thus, new lecturers (including foreign lecturers) account for almost half of the academic staff (9 lecturers, Documentation for the Initial Assessment 2021, p. 5),

In the materials submitted and in interviews with the owner's representatives, the Rector, lecturers, and potential students, there was a perception that the opening of a Master's programme is an opportunity to increase the number of non-denominational academic staff (lecturers) and to ensure generational cohesion. At the same time, it should be noted that, as the study programme is still in the planning stage, many of the assessments are based on an assessment of the proposed activities, albeit taking into account the context in which the institution currently operates in the field of professional higher education, the resources available and the results achieved in delivering the professional higher education study programme.

THE COMMITTEE'S DECISION:

ASSESSMENT DOMAIN	CONFORMS TO THE REQUIRED STANDARD	PARTIALLY CONFORMS TO THE REQUIRED STANDARD	DOES NOT CONFORM TO THE REQUIRED STANDARD
QUALITY OF STUDY	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
RESOURCES	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SUSTAINABILITY	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Strengths:

- Sufficient financial resources and adequate measures to ensure sustainability and mitigate risks.
- Very good cooperation between the management and the owners of the higher education institution.

- Highly qualified academic staff with extensive teaching experience. Academic staff qualifications in line with the Standard of Higher Education. A clear vision for the growth of the academic staff through the proposed Master's programme.
- Clear admission and graduation conditions, a coherent and comprehensive study programme.
- Opportunities for international mobility.
- Supporting and monitoring students' academic progress through the mentoring system already in place.
- Taking into account the needs and interests of target groups and stakeholders in the study programme development process.
- Modern learning environment.

Areas for improvement and recommendations:

- The proposed teaching methods were not clear from the syllabuses submitted for subjects. In order to be able to assess the appropriateness of the proposed teaching methods for achieving the learning outcomes, the teaching and assessment methods should be described in more detail.
- The attestation of academic staff has not yet taken place and there is no procedure in place for doing so. Feedback from academic staff should be formalised, despite the Seminary being small and the communication informal.

3. Analysis of Master's studies in the study programme group for theological studies of the EEKBL Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary by assessment areas and criteria

3.1. QUALITY OF LEARNING

3.1.1. Study programme

3.1.1.1. Launching and developing of the study programme is based on the Development Plan of the higher education institution, national development plans and analyses (including labour market and advisability analyses) and strives for top quality.

The opening of a Master's programme has been on the agenda since 1993, including being mentioned in the strategic planning document that ended in 2018. The current strategic planning document (2021–2027) does not mention the opening of a Master's programme; however, in the context of faculty mobility, the creation of a Master's programme as a joint programme has been mentioned.

Based on the submitted materials and interviews, it became clear that the opening of the study programme was preceded by an analysis, which highlighted the following facts confirming the opening of the study programme: 1. The seminar has close spiritual ties with the congregations of the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (EEKBKL). The Seminary and its owner consider it important that people belonging to the association have the right place to study; 2. The study programme is also suitable for members of other free churches; 3. The availability of a Master's degree has become the norm in society and this standard is becoming the norm in the EEKBL; 4. The study programme provides the succession of faculty and staff needed by the Seminary and the EEKBL; 5. The opening of the study programme was preceded by a survey of EEKBL members, which revealed an interest in enrolling; 6. The Seminary's leadership analysed the availability of faculty and their willingness to teach at the Master's level. As a result, the staff for the opening of the Master's programme was found to be available, both in the form of existing teaching staff and additional teaching staff.

From the study programme development process, it can be concluded that the study programme is being developed with the aim of achieving the highest quality by involving new academic staff in addition to the existing teaching staff.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard

3.1.1.2. Employers and other stakeholders of the study programme group are involved in the study programme's development.

Both the Council of the Seminary and the EEKBL Board of Elders, as the representative of the Seminary's owner, have contributed to study programme development. Based on the interviews with the Seminary's management, the teaching staff, and the students, the following study programme development process emerged: the management first asked the owner for input and received permission to proceed with study programme development. Following discussions in the Council of the Seminary, a series of development days were organised, involving both teaching staff and current and potential students. The Board of Elders, as the owner of the Seminary, gave its approval to the study programme on 7.12.2021 and decided on the name of the study programme from among the options presented to it.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard

3.1.1.3. The study programme meets the requirements and trends in national and international legislation that regulate the professional field and if a professional standard exists, takes into consideration the acquisition and implementation of the knowledge and skills described therein.

The aim of the study programme is to prepare professionals with competences for missiological life in society and for church building. Completion of the study programme will enable graduates to work in the ecclesial and public spheres, and to continue their studies at the doctoral level.

The documentation submitted by the higher education institution includes a thorough analysis of the compliance of the study programme with the requirements outlined in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education. All requirements have been met.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard

3.1.1.4. *The learning outcomes of the study programme are equivalent and comparable to the learning outcomes of the academic cycles of higher education described in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education.*

In the documentation submitted by the higher education institution, the learning outcomes of the study programme have been thoroughly analysed in comparison with the learning outcomes of a Master's degree as set out in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education. The learning outcomes are equivalent and comparable to those of the Master's degree described in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education.

Key learning outcomes: After completing the programme, the student will be able to reflect on his/her own spirituality and that of congregations in dialogue with the development of the Christian Church and with biblical, cultural, and theological studies. The student will be able to apply various methods and analyse both social and ecclesial phenomena in the light of biblical teaching and to propose reasoned and innovative solutions to emerging problems. Both the ecclesial and the societal dimension of the learning outcomes are important, as is the ability to analyse and synthesise creatively the data collected and to apply them to the theological question posed in the field of the Master's thesis.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard

3.1.1.5. *Different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. The title of the study programme is consistent with the content; and the structure and content of the study programme supports the acquisition of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme.*

The material presented shows that the different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. The study programme consists of four (4) core modules totalling 90 ECTS credits (of which 10 ECTS credits are for practical training), an optional module of 10 ECTS credits, and a Master's thesis module of 20 ECTS credits.

Subjects in the core modules may be taken in a different order. In the optional module, students can choose 10 ECTS credits of subjects from other higher education institutions or from seminary's study programme of professional higher education. It is also possible to apply for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for studies completed elsewhere, including abroad and/or learning acquired through experience. The title and content of the study programme are broadly consistent, although in the absence of subject maps, it is difficult to adequately assess the correspondence between subject content and title for all subjects (e.g. Mission-Conscious Leadership and the Synergy of Talents, Vision-Based Church). It is advisable to formulate the titles of the subjects in such a way that their content is already clear in the title of the subject. The structure of the study programme is logical. During the interviews it became clear that the subjects are intended to be read every year and therefore the possibility to spend a semester in a foreign higher education institution is built into the structure of the study programme. Learning is innovatively problem-based, which also contributes to achieving the objectives of the study programme.

Level B2 English language proficiency is required. Some of the subjects may also be taught in English, and interviews with the Seminary's management and staff revealed that it would be possible to admit a whole English-speaking group, while maintaining the possibility of teaching in Estonian.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard

<p>3.1.1.6. <i>The joint study programme and the joint study programme cooperation agreement meet the requirements of § 11 and § 19 of the Higher Education Act.</i></p>
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Not applicable

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF THE STUDY PROGRAMME TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

The study programme conforms to the required standard.

Based on the materials provided and the interviews, it became clear that the opening of the study programme was preceded by an analysis that mapped both the needs and the opportunities for opening the study programme. The materials provided and the interviews conducted confirmed that the different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. Contributions to the development of the study programme have been made by the Council of the Seminary, the owner of the Seminary, as well as the teaching staff and the current and potential students of the seminary. In the documentation provided by the seminary, the learning outcomes of the study programme have been thoroughly analysed in relation to and are in line with the learning outcomes of the Master's degree as set out in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education. Completion of the study programme will enable graduates to work in the ecclesiastical and public spheres and to continue their studies at the doctoral level. The academic staff for the opening of the Master's programme is available in the form of both existing and additional faculty members.

The study programme title and content are broadly in line, although in the absence of subject maps, it is difficult to adequately assess the correspondence between subject content and title for all subjects. It is advisable to formulate subject titles in such a way that the content is already clear from the subject title.

Strengths

- Various stakeholders have been involved in the design and development of the study programme.
- Problem-based learning supports the achievement of the study programme objectives and learning outcomes.

3.1.2. Learning and teaching

<p>3.1.2.1. <i>Conditions for admission and graduation are clear and transparent; requirements to prospective students stem from prerequisites for the completion of the study programme.</i></p>

The study programme submitted for assessment clearly and transparently describes the general conditions for admission. Admission to the programme is based on professional higher education or bachelor's degree and an intermediate level of English (B2), as well as passing an entrance examination and test. Specific admission interview and test requirements have not yet been formulated. In an interview with the management of the higher education institution, it was confirmed that a test of mental ability is being developed with the help of professional social scientists. In addition, applicants will have to submit a motivation letter.

The study programme does not require prior theological education, nor does it require membership in a theological community (congregation). In order to even out the possible differences in the level of knowledge of beginners, the management of the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary says it intends to use a variety of active learning methods, including integrated studio learning, and to encourage advanced learners to mentor other learners.

The general conditions for graduation are clearly and transparently described in the study programme. The learning outcomes of the different modules of the study programme support the achievement of the learning outcomes of the study programme, e.g. the overall learning outcome of the study programme is reflected in the learning outcomes of all modules: *'The student who has completed the study programme will analyse social and ecclesial phenomena in the light of biblical teaching and offer reasoned and innovative solutions to emerging problems'*.

The form and content of the Master's thesis and Master's project need to be clarified. The current 'Guidelines for the preparation of written work' do not yet cover the Master's thesis.

The current higher education institution admission and graduation rules (available on the website) do not yet cover Master's studies.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.2. *The academic staff to be involved are aware objectives of the study programme and their role in achieving those objectives.*

Interviews with the management and teaching staff of the higher education institution revealed that a large proportion of the academic staff to be involved (including all the planned supervisors) were involved in the development of the study programme and were therefore aware of the study programme's objectives and their role in the opening study programme. For example, all interviewees confirmed that the aim of the study programme is to offer a theology and society-engaging Master's programme, based on a free church perspective.

As the study programme is methodologically innovative, consideration could be given to a more detailed description of the proposed studio organisation and problem-based learning in the study programme and/or in the materials introducing the study programme. This would further enhance the understanding of the objectives and functioning of the study programme by the academic staff, visiting lecturers, and students involved.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.3. *Planned study methods motivate learners to take charge of their studies and achieve learning outcomes.*

The proposed learning methods are not explicitly described in the study programme. Interviews with the management and academic staff involved in the higher education institution highlighted integrated sessional learning, some of which is delivered face-to-face on-site and some virtually. Feedback-assisted independent and group work plays an important role in the learning process. Problem-based learning, linking different subjects in modules and studios, will be implemented throughout.

On the basis of this information, it can be assumed that the proposed learning methods should motivate learners to achieve the learning outcomes.

The higher education institution partially conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.4. *Appropriate methods and means (incl. the use of digital technologies) are planned for the assessment of learning outcomes; assessment is transparent, objective and supports the development of students.*

Assessment is governed by the higher education institution's Study Regulations and assessment system (available at <https://kus.kogudused.ee/kooli-lugu/dokumendid/>), which are sufficiently comprehensive to ensure transparency and objectivity.

The proposed study programme form states that the assessment of learning outcomes of the study programme will be subject-based. As the syllabuses was not yet required to have been drawn up at the time of the initial assessment phase, it was not possible to familiarise oneself with the assessment methods for all subjects.

Interviews with faculty members revealed that similar methods are envisaged for the assessment of learning outcomes as in the case of professional higher education.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.5. *The content and volume of independent work and practical training (in the case of doctoral studies, implementation of professional activities) support the achievement of learning outcomes of the study programme.*

The proposed study programme has a total of 10 ECTS of practical training (4 ECTS in the module 'Bible and Society' Apprenticeship: From Hermeneutics to the Message, and 6 ECTS in the module 'Creativity and Execution' Master's thesis practical training (prototyping)). The amount of practical training is sufficient to achieve the learning outcomes of the study programme.

Interviews with faculty members and the Rector revealed that the internship is planned primarily in connection with the topic of a Master's thesis or a Master's project, with the aim of supporting the preparation of the thesis.

The general traineeship arrangements are described in sufficient detail by the higher education institution (available at <http://kus.kogudused.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/oppekorralduseeskiri.pdf>).

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.6. *The academic staff members to be involved have adequate teaching and digital competences in order to support the autonomy of students and ensure adequate and professional supervision.*

The teaching competences of the academic staff involved can be assessed on the basis of the list of academic staff provided by the higher education institution and the information provided in the CVs in the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS) and other public environments (external lecturers).

Based on the materials provided, most of the faculty members involved have extensive teaching and mentoring experience. For example, all of the lead teachers have more than 10 years of teaching experience, three of them with more than 20 years of experience. All instructors have at least four years of teaching experience.

The lead teachers also have a large supervising experience – e.g. under the supervision of Toivo Pilli, 10 master's theses and 6 doctoral dissertations have been successfully defended at various colleges and universities. Under the supervision of Einike Pilli, 7 master's theses and 3 doctoral dissertations have been defended, and so on.

The academic staff involved have a wealth of experience in teaching and expert supervision.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.2.7. *The level and volume of research, development and creative activities of academic staff to be involved is sufficient to provide instruction and supervise academic work by students in the appropriate cycle of higher education.*

The assessment of the research, development and creative activities (RDC) of the academic staff to be involved can be based on the list of academic staff provided by the institution and their CVs in ETIS and other public environments (external lecturers). The requirements for RDC activities of academic staff are described in the higher education institution's faculty job description, the Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027, and the Research Plan 2020–2026.

Based on the materials provided, the quality of the research of a vast majority of the faculty members involved is high and the number of research publications to support the teaching and supervision of students is sufficient. According to ETIS, the number of high-level research articles published in relation to the institution has increased over the last five years. The adopted Research Plan 2020–2026 will support the further development of research and development.

The research and development of most of the international faculty involved is also of a high standard, with the research of Tarmo Toom and Ivana Noble worth noting in particular.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

Partially conforms to the required standard of learning and teaching.

The study programme submitted for assessment clearly and transparently describe the general conditions for admission and graduation. The different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. The study programme does not presuppose any prior theological education and, in order to level out the possible differences in the level of knowledge of the beginning learners, a variety of active learning methods, including integrated studio learning, are envisaged. Based on the materials provided, the level of research of the faculty involved is high and the number of research publications is sufficient to support the teaching and supervision of students in the Master's programme.

The proposed teaching methods are not explicitly described in the study programme. At the time of the initial assessment of the study programme, the syllabuses had not yet been drawn up, which meant that it was not possible to familiarise oneself with the assessment methods for all subjects. As the study programme is methodologically innovative, the assessment committee recommends that the proposed organisation of the studios and problem-based learning should be more explicitly described in the study programme and/or in the materials introducing the study programme. As a consequence of the above, there is room for improvement in these areas.

Strengths

- Faculty members who are aware of the objectives of the study programme and have extensive teaching and mentoring experience.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- A more detailed description of studio and problem-based learning in the study programme or in the materials introducing the study programme.
- The form and content of the Master's thesis and the Master's project need to be clarified, e.g. compliance with the learning outcomes and the requirements and objectives set for the Master's project.

3.1.3. Organisation of studies

3.1.3.1. *The organisation of studies is unambiguously regulated and information thereof publicly available; it allows to cater for the needs of different learners as well as specificities of the study programme group.*

The higher education institution's Study Regulations from 2016 and other documents regulating the organisation of studies (guidelines for written assignments, rates of tuition fees, teaching staff's job descriptions, assessment system) are available on the higher education institution's website <https://kus.kogudused.ee/koolilugu/dokumendid/>.

For full-time learners, sessional learning is planned, which can be attended remotely and/or alongside work commitments (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 7). The development of digital competences of teaching staff and digital solutions for learners is recommended to enable learning to be delivered through distance learning (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 6).

Within the framework of visiting interviews it was revealed that the first year of the proposed study programme will be open to Estonian-speaking students, but that in the following years the school will be potentially ready to accept international English-speaking students. The admission of international students will be decided according to the interest of the students. The higher education institution is ecumenically open and also welcomes intellectually able non-denominational students. However, members of the free churches are seen as the main target group.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.2. Practical training (in doctoral studies applied professional activities) is regulated, requirements for the completion of practical training have been laid down and preliminary agreements concluded with organisations offering opportunities for practical training.

From the visiting interviews, it emerged that the students of the proposed Master's programme will be completing an internship on the topic of their Master's thesis. The higher education institution has a general description of the internship arrangements, which regulates and defines the requirements for the internship. However, there are currently no preliminary agreements regarding placements. Interviews with prospective students revealed that both congregations (which have been the traditional placement setting for professional higher education) and organisations outside congregations are seen as places for traineeships. In order to meet the expectations of students (as well as their previous experience), the assessment committee recommends that, in the pre-placement process, consideration should be given to entering into cooperation with different organisations contributing to the development of society.

The higher education institution partially conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.3. The higher education institution has in place rules for academic recognition as well as for recognizing prior studies and work experience.

The higher education institution takes into account students' previous studies and work experience on the basis of RPL (recognition of prior learning and experience, est .VÕTA) application. RPL is regulated by the Study Regulations (2016), with the RPL application procedure and forms available on the website of the higher education institution.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.4. Students have access to counselling (study and career counselling and preferably psychological counselling); measures for monitoring and supporting academic progress of students have been devised.

The committee based its assessment of guidance and academic progression measures on the Study Regulations at the professional higher education level, as there is no corresponding documentation at the Master's level (yet). It is clear from the Study Regulations that each student in the professional higher education programme is assigned a personal mentor from outside the school, who will advise the student throughout his/her studies and up to one year after graduation. In addition, the interviews revealed that all professional higher education students are part of a mentoring group, which is mentored by a lead teacher throughout their studies. A similar mentoring system is planned for the proposed Master's programme. In addition to the mentoring system, the progress of the students will be monitored by an instructor for each specific subject and the director of studies. At the end of each course, students will be asked for feedback on the course and the instructor (internal assessment document and visit interviews).

Students can benefit from the services of a psychologist in cooperation with the owner's foundation 'Sõbra Käsi' (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 6).

The higher education institution partially conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.5. The higher education institution has devised a plan for fostering international (including virtual) mobility among students enrolled in the study programme group.

The higher education institution has signed Erasmus+ agreements to support international student mobility, and the assessment team was reassured during the visiting interviews that new agreements are being signed all the time, both within the framework of Erasmus+ and outside of it. According to the documents provided, cooperation agreements with higher education institutions in Sweden and Lithuania are in place, and cooperation negotiations are ongoing with higher education institutions in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and Norway.

The initial assessment document shows that the third year is seen as a good opportunity to go abroad if potential students do not finish their Master's thesis within two years. At the same time, mobility is also possible during the first two years, including virtual mobility. Currently, Erasmus+ BIP (Blended Intensive Programmes) are expected to become operational, which is a good opportunity for students to participate in international mobility, especially students who need to combine family and professional life with studies.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.6. *The higher education institution implements fair and transparent rules for dealing with complaints.*

The higher education institution has a fair and transparent procedure for handling complaints. According to the Study Regulations, students have the right to submit a written protest to the Rector within two working days if they do not agree with the grade they have received for their thesis defence. Up to one month after receiving the result of the course, the student has the right to lodge a complaint with the director of studies if the student considers that his/her grade does not meet the assessment criteria. The appeal will be reviewed with the instructor and the result will be communicated in writing (Assessment System, Chapter 4). Students also have the right to appeal to the Rector, the Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, and the Board of Governors, as provided for in the Statutes of the Seminary.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.1.3.7. *Plans are in place for regular internal assessment of study programmes by the higher education institution, including the analysis and taking into account of feedback from various stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, academic staff).*

According to the Study Regulations, feedback surveys are carried out every academic year for each subject, to ensure the quality of teaching. In the case of negative feedback on a large scale, the Rector discusses with the instructor who taught the subject and with the lead teacher of the subject in question how to improve the situation. If, despite several feedbacks, the quality of teaching does not improve, the instructor shall be replaced. This was confirmed during the visiting interviews.

The higher education institution's internal assessment document states that recent graduates will be asked for feedback on the study programme and the organisation of studies, including mentoring and supervision. Every three years, alumni are asked for feedback on their learning and work experience with a view to study programme development. Every two years, students are asked for feedback on mentoring, supervision, and study programme management. What was described in the internal assessment document was confirmed during the visiting interviews.

At a meeting with the faculty of the proposed Master's programme, it became clear that informal reflection on the study programme is an ongoing process. Although this is a small higher education institution, where academic staff interact closely with management, the committee recommends that feedback from academic staff be formalised. Similarly, feedback from employers needs to be formalised.

The higher education institution partially conforms to the required standard.**CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF THE ORGANISATION OF STUDIES TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL**

The organisation of studies fully meets the required level of regulation and disclosure, academic recognition and recognition of prior learning and work experience, guidance and monitoring, and support for academic progress, international mobility, and complaints procedures. There is room for improvement (formalisation) in the areas of internal assessment (feedback from academic staff) and traineeship arrangements (pre-arrangements with traineeships), which is why the committee assessed compliance in these two areas as being partially satisfactory. The overall assessment is that the organisation of studies conforms to the required standard.

The documents regulating the organisation of studies have been made public and the organisation of studies allows for the needs of different groups of learners to be taken into consideration. The general organisation of traineeships is regulated in the higher education institution. Recognition of prior learning and work experience is also regulated. The school has a strong mentoring tradition, which is planned to be applied to the planned study programme to ensure that students' academic progress is monitored and supported. Opportunities for international mobility are

ensured, taking into account students' needs to combine work and family life with studies. The higher education institution has a fair and transparent complaints procedure.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- There are currently no pre-arrangements with traineeships. In order to meet the expectations of students (but also their previous experience), the committee recommends that, when concluding pre-placement agreements, consideration should be given to entering into cooperation with different organisations contributing to the development of society.
- Although this is a small institution of higher education where academic staff interact closely with management, the committee recommends that feedback from academic staff should be formalised. Similarly, feedback from employers should also be formalised.
- Formalising guidance and academic progression measures at the Master's level.

AN OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AS MEETING THE REQUIRED LEVEL OF EXCELLENCE

Based on the study programme development process, it can be concluded that the study programme is developed with the best quality in mind and that the launch of the study programme is preceded by a proper analysis. The study programme development process has involved input from the School Board, the EEKBL's Board of Elders as the representative of the school's owner, the teaching staff, as well as current and potential students.

The documentation submitted by the higher education institution has thoroughly analysed the compliance of the study programme and learning outcomes with the requirements set out in Annex 1 of the Standard of Higher Education and the requirements have been met. The different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. The proposed learning methods are not yet explicitly described in the study programme, but the available information suggests that they should motivate the learner to achieve the learning outcomes. The higher education institution's Study Regulations and the higher education institution's assessment system are sufficiently comprehensive and ensure transparency and objectivity in assessment. Based on the materials provided, the research quality of the involved teaching staff is high, and the number of scientific publications is sufficient to support the teaching and supervision of students in the Master's programme.

The documents regulating the organisation of studies have been made public and the organisation of studies allows for the needs of different groups of learners to be taken into consideration. The general organisation of traineeships is regulated in the higher education institution. Recognition of prior learning and work experience is also regulated. The school has a strong mentoring tradition, which is planned to be applied to the planned study programme to ensure that students' academic progress is monitored and supported. Opportunities for international mobility are ensured, taking into account students' needs to combine work and family life with studies. The higher education institution has a fair and transparent complaints procedure.

As this is a proposed study programme, many of the assessments are based on an assessment of the proposed activities. The quality of the learning achieved can only be assessed as fully adequate once the study programme has been implemented. The quality of learning partially complies with the required level.

Strengths

- The strengths of the proposed Master's programme are clear admission and graduation requirements, a faculty that is aware of the objectives of the study programme and has extensive teaching and supervising experience.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- There are currently no pre-arrangements with traineeships. In order to meet the expectations of students (but also their previous experience), the committee recommends that, when concluding pre-placement agreements, consideration should be given to entering into cooperation with different organisations contributing to the development of society.
- Although this is a small institution of higher education where the academic staff interact closely with management, the committee recommends that feedback from academic staff should be formalised. Similarly, feedback from employers should also be formalised.
- The form and content of the Master's thesis and the Master's project need to be clarified, e.g. compliance with the learning outcomes and the requirements and objectives set for the Master's project.
- A more precise description of studio and problem-based learning in the study programme or in the materials introducing the study programme.

Development opportunities

- The study programme title and content are broadly in line, although in the absence of syllabuses, it is difficult to adequately assess the correspondence between subject content and title for all subjects. It is advisable to formulate the names of the subjects in such a way that the content is already clear in the subject title (e.g. Mission-Conscious Leadership and the Synergy of Talents, Vision-Based Church).

3.2. RESOURCES

3.2.1. Academic staff

3.2.1.1. Requirements for academic staff are based on the Higher Education Standard and further rules put in place by the higher education institution, procedures for the selection and recruitment of staff are fair and transparent.

The requirements for academic staff are outlined in the statutes of the higher education institution, the job description for faculty members, the Study Regulations, and the Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027 (available at <https://kus.kogudused.ee/kooli-lugu/dokumendid/>).

Based on the materials provided, the requirements are in line with the Standard of Higher Education in terms of the qualifications, duties, and other responsibilities of academic staff. The selection and recruitment criteria are fair and transparent.

The procedures for the attestation of academic staff are not yet in place and staff have not yet been evaluated. Interviews with the Rector and staff have revealed that the plan is to start the attestation process as early as this year.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.1.2. The qualifications of prospective academic staff members meet the requirements laid down in legislation as well as those stemming from the specificities of the study programme group and academic cycle.

The qualifications of the academic staff involved is available in the list of instructors and their CVs in ETIS. Of the 19 proposed teachers, 14 have a PhD, the other five have a Master's degree. All of them have previous professional teaching experience, while the lead teachers have long-term teaching experience (more than 10 years).

The qualifications of the instructors and other academic staff involved meet the standard.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.1.3. The number of academic staff to be involved in the study programme group is adequate and enables achieving the objectives of the study programmes as well as the learning outcomes.

The number of academic staff to be involved is indicated in the list of instructors and the courses they teach.

The number of academic staff involved in the study programme is sufficient to achieve the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme. The plan is to involve 19 academic staff, five of whom will be lead teachers. As the planned intake is around 15 students, the number of academic staff would initially exceed the number of students.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.1.4. Prospective academic staff members regularly engage in continuing education at institutions of higher education or research from abroad, take part in international research projects and deliver presentations at high level conferences.

The international professional development of the academic staff involved will be identified from the list of instructors, their CVs in ETIS, and the documentation provided by the higher education institution.

A large number of the staff involved in the study programme have received further training at foreign universities and some have participated in international research projects, e.g. Meego Remmel in the projects 'Ecumenical Bioethics' and 'Protestant Bioethics'. The large number of foreign lecturers (five out of 19, plus three lead teachers teaching permanently at foreign universities) ensures the inclusion of broader international experience in teaching. The higher education institution has organised, and its faculty have participated in, high-level international conferences.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.1.5. The higher education institution has plans for creating opportunities for continuing education and personal development (including for topping up digital skills) for academic staff members involved in the study programme group, including for benefitting from international mobility opportunities.

The job description of a faculty member at the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary and the Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027 set out opportunities and obligations for academic staff to further their development. Mobility opportunities are ensured through cooperation agreements with other higher education institutions and specialised organisations, including Erasmus+.

Interviews with the Rector and academic staff showed that opportunities for self-development, especially international mobility, are greater if they can be seized.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF ACADEMIC STAFF TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

Academic staff conforms to the required standard.

Strengths

- Highly qualified, highly motivated academic staff.
- The number of academic staff involved to achieve the study programme’s objectives and learning outcomes exceeds the planned number of students.
- Sufficient opportunities for self-development, including international mobility.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- In order to provide more systematic feedback to academic staff, a procedure for the attestation of academic staff should be established.

3.2.2. Learning environment

3.2.2.1. *There are facilities (lecture rooms, labs, seminar rooms, rooms for independent work by students etc.) available for studies and study-related research, development and creative activities; these are adequately furnished and equipped with up-to-date equipment needed for achieving the objectives of the study programmes; or alternatively concrete financing decisions/projects exist in order to meet the extended needs.*

As the Seminary has a functioning professional higher education study programme, all of the necessary infrastructure (both digital and physical) is in place and constantly being updated. Investment in research, development, and creative activities has increased in recent years, and the same trend is expected to continue (Budget 2021_22, Strategic Planning Document 2021–2027, p. 2). Once the Master's programme has been successfully launched, the additional financial resources can also be channelled into the research and development activities of the teaching staff. (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 5).

The Seminary's digital capacity has improved and continues to evolve, both in terms of digital infrastructure (equipment, high-speed network connection, etc.) and digital security (segregated networks, user authentication, in-house firewalls, etc.). The teaching and digital competences of teaching staff will also be enhanced through regular training, including an emphasis on the specificities of blended learning (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 6).

In recent years, social media has become an important channel for information exchange. The Zoom environment is used for online and blended learning, and both teachers and students have received training in its use in teaching. All lectures are recorded, and the necessary equipment (both audio and video) is available to provide a high-quality e-learning experience for both teachers and learners (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 6).

A tour of the higher education institution's premises and interviews confirmed the existence of a suitable learning environment.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.2.2. *The making available of up-to-date textbooks; research publications and other study materials as well as providing access to research databases necessary for conducting studies, research, development and creative activities in the study programme group is ensured.*

The Jotform environment is used for various registrations and a digital library has been created in addition to the regular library. Access to open online libraries and databases (e.g. Open Access Digital Theological Library, Theology on the Web, Lausanne Documents, GlobeTheoLibRegnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, World Evangelical Alliance Documents, Journal of European Baptist Studies, Scandinavian Journal for Leadership & Theology, etc.) has been made as easy as possible for students and faculty (Initial Assessment Document, Chapter 6).

According to the initial assessment document, when the Master's programme starts, there are plans to provide even better access to online libraries and databases for students. In addition to specialised lectures, students will also be taught how to use libraries and databases within the different subjects. Interviews during the visit revealed that negotiations are under way, for example, to use the EBSCO database. There are also plans to cooperate with partner universities abroad in the acquisition and use of literature.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.2.3. *State of the art and fit for purpose ICT solutions, including study information system, document management system, online learning environment, have been envisioned in order to support learning and teaching. Digital learning and teaching as well as IT support is available to students and teaching staff.*

Since this academic year, the Seminary has been using Tahvel, a study information system for institutions of professional higher education, and for many years it has been using the Moodle environment, which enables interactive problem-based learning using various tasks, video materials, tests, etc. An educational designer monitors the structure of the subjects on Moodle and provides support and training where necessary. (Initial assessment document, Chapter 6).

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

The learning environment conforms to the required standard. As the seminary has a functioning professional higher education study programme, all of the necessary premises, furnishings, and equipment are available. The digital infrastructure will be further developed, and the digital competences of staff will be enhanced through training.

Strengths

- An existing and functioning learning environment, including the necessary digital infrastructure and its upgrading.
- Actions to raise the digital literacy of staff.

3.2.3. Financial resources

3.2.3.1. The educational institution has adequate funds necessary for conducting high quality studies in the study programme group as well as for the provision of adequate and up-to-date support services and supporting the development of academic staff.

Evidence provided by the higher education institution and interviews with the representatives of the seminary's owners and the Rector showed that the seminary has adequate financial resources to ensure quality operations. The financial resources come from its own revenue, from its economic activities, and from project-based grants. Tuition fees are seen as the main source of financing (Initial assessment documentation 2021). During the interviews, the owners' representatives confirmed that EEKBKL, as the owner of the Seminary, is aware of its responsibilities when opening a study programme and that, if necessary, it will be possible to increase the funds to ensure the functioning of the study programme.

The opening of the Master's programme will require an increase in support staff, with the recruitment of a Master's programme leader and an assistant. The financial resources to deliver the study programme rely heavily on tuition fees, which in turn depend on the number of students. The financial situation is therefore inevitably subject to certain risks.

The financial risks associated with the opening of a Master's programme are mitigated by the infrastructure and support structures already in place.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.3.2. The higher education institution has a strategy for raising funds needed for the advancement of the study programme group related research and development.

Based on the initial assessment documentation provided and interviews with the management and owners of the institution, the institution has a clear plan to raise funds for the promotion of its RDA activities. The main sources of income are:

- own revenue, i.e. tuition fees for degree and continuing studies, conferences, sales of materials and expert services (more than a quarter of the budget).
- economic activities (interest on money invested in funds and rental income) and grants from Estonian churches and organisations.
- project-based grants from Estonia (Ministry of the Interior, Estonian Council of Churches) and abroad (grants have been consistently sent through three sources: Converge Worldwide, Faith and Learning International, and the Toronto Estonian Baptist Church).

According to the seminary's management, investment in research, development, and creative activities has increased significantly in recent years, and the Seminary plans to continue this trend in the future. Once the Master's programme has been successfully launched, the money raised can be channelled into research and development activities for the teaching staff.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.2.3.3. *Financial reports for the higher education institution or keeper thereof are publicly available. Annual reports for the higher education institution or keeper thereof have undergone financial auditing unless stipulated otherwise in legislation.*

The financial indicators of the Seminary's owner, describing its financial situation, are publicly available. The Seminary's budgets for the last few years (Budget 2021_22), which show an upward trend, were also presented to the committee as additional material.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

Financial resources are at the required level. Financial indicators are available. A fundraising strategy is in place and functioning. The owner of the Seminary is committed to the good functioning of the study programme and, where necessary, hedges the risks related to financial resources.

Strengths

- Available financial resources, as well as effective methods to secure financial resources.
- Owners' commitment to open a study programme.

AN AGGREGATED ASSESSMENT OF THE ADEQUACY OF RESOURCES TO THE REQUIRED LEVEL

The resources of the higher education institution for the opening of the Master's programme are adequate in terms of academic staff, learning environment, and financial resources.

Strengths

- Highly qualified, highly motivated academic staff with extensive teaching and supervising experience.
- The number of academic staff in the study programme exceeds the number of planned students.
- The teaching infrastructure is up-to-date and the premises have been recently renovated and furnished.
- The digital infrastructure for teaching is in place and is being systematically developed.

- The higher education institution has a small specialised library and access to specialised digital databases.
- ICT solutions to support learning are up-to-date and operational.
- The higher education institution has sufficient financial resources to start up the course and the Seminary has a contingency plan to finance it if the tuition fees do not cover the planned costs.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- In order to provide more systematic feedback to academic staff, a procedure for the appraisal of academic staff should be established.

3.3. SUSTAINABILITY

Overall assessment of the quality of teaching at the required level: *partially conforms to the required standard.*

Overall assessment of the resources at the required level: *conforms to the required standard.*

3.3.1. Additional sustainability criteria

3.3.1.1. *The higher education institution has a development plan along with an action plan aimed at ensuring the sustainability of high-quality studies in the higher education institution as a whole as well as in the study programme group under assessment. In the case of a brand-new higher education institution, a development plan and draft action plan exist.*

The Seminary has the Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027, which sets out the key results, indicators, and enablers for the development period. In addition to the key results, the overall enablers for the achievement of the outcomes of the Seminary are formulated, which in this context refers to the action plan that sets out the activities to be undertaken to achieve the objectives (Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027: 2–3). The Seminary’s Research Plan 2020–2026 sets out clear objectives and actions to achieve the objectives, some of which have been achieved to date.

The strategic planning document presented by the Seminary gives an overview of the objectives and results planned in the previous development period, which shows that the Seminary has been able to achieve the objectives set (Strategic Planning Document for 2021–2027: 4–6).

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.3.1.2. *When planning studies in the study programme group, the higher education institution has conducted a risk analysis and devised a long-term financial projection, which among other things includes the calculation of a student place, an analysis of risks stemming from the operating environment and planned mitigating measures thereof.*

The Seminary has submitted to the assessment committee the total cost of the study programme, as well as the cost of one study place (Documentation for the Initial Assessment 2021: 7, Financial calculation_teaching placeMA). A financial projection has been made in the cost per teaching place for both 10 and 15 study places.

Risks to the operating environment are mitigated by the motivation expressed by the owner’s representatives in the interviews to launch the Master’s programme (i.e. the possibility to mitigate financial risks through the owner’s provisions, if necessary). The format of the Seminary’s Advisory Board, where the owner, the management, and academic staff of the higher education institution and the students are represented, also helps to mitigate risks. It is also important from a risk mitigation perspective that several members of the owner’s management (Board of Elders) are at the same time involved as academic staff in the activities of the institution, including in the context of the Master’s programme (Interview with owners, <https://kus.kogudused.ee/kooli-lugu/noukogu/>, <https://kogudused.ee/struktuur/>). The owner values higher education.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.3.1.3. *The age structure of academic staff to be involved as well as share of young teachers ensures sustainability of instruction provision in the study programme group.*

Evidence provided by the Seminary on the age structure of the 19 academic staff involved in postgraduate studies shows that the average age of academic staff is 48.6 years. In the age distribution, there are 8 academics under the

age of 50, and 11 over the age of 50. The oldest academic staff member's year of birth is 1960. The youngest academic staff member was born in 1990 (Documentation 2021: 4, 17–20).

The number of academic staff under 40 (5) indicates that the Seminary is an attractive employer. The need to ensure generational continuity is emphasised in the Seminary's Strategic Planning Document (Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary Strategic Planning Document 2021–2027: 6). The opening of a Master's study is seen by the Seminary as an enabler for the recruitment of young academic staff (Documentation for Initial Assessment 2021: 2). This perception was confirmed by interviews with the owners of the Seminary, the Rector, academic staff and (potential) students.

The higher education institution conforms to the required standard.

3.3.1.4. In the case of doctoral studies, sustainability is achieved when doctoral studies in the study programme group are based on well-established fields of research and development within the higher education institution that have successfully undergone evaluation. Supervisors of doctoral theses are actively engaged in research and have supervised successfully defended doctoral theses.

Not applicable

AN AGGREGATED ASSESSMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUIRED LEVEL OF SUSTAINABILITY

The materials provided and the interviews carried out showed that the sustainability of the institution conforms to the required standard. It has a strategic planning document and an action plan. A risk analysis has been carried out for the opening of the Master's programme. The study programme and the costs of the study places have been presented. There is continuous communication between the higher education institution and the owner, and some members of the higher education institution's council are also members of the owner's council (EEKBKL's Board of Elders). This ensures a common information space between the higher education institution and the owner.

Tuition fees are seen as the main source of funding for Master's studies. Higher education is valued by the owner, and if the cost of the Master's degree exceeds the income, the owner will guarantee the financial needs. The owner also offers scholarships to the clergy and youth leaders of its congregations to cover the costs of teaching (Documentation needed for initial assessment 2021). The infrastructure for teaching is in place thanks to the studies in professional higher education offered by the higher education institution. If necessary and possible, here is also the possibility of Master's study in English (targeting students from Finland and the Baltic States). Both the infrastructure and the academic staff are available to deliver teaching in English.

The age structure of the academic staff involved and the proportion of young faculty members ensure the sustainability of teaching in the study programme group. The average age of academic staff is 48.6 years. In terms of age distribution, there are 8 faculty members under the age of 50, and 11 over the age of 50.

In the materials submitted, and in interviews with the owner's representatives, the Rector, academic staff and potential students, there was a perception that the opening of a Master's programme is an opportunity to increase the number of non-denominational academic staff (teaching staff) and to ensure intergenerational cohesiveness.

Strengths

- Similar objectives of the higher education institution and the owner.
- Adequate risk analysis and financial projections.
- Valuing higher education by its owners.

- The age composition of academic staff ensures the sustainability of the study programme.
- The Master's programme is seen as an opportunity to recruit new faculty.