



Institutional Accreditation and Re-assessment of Master's Programme in Theology and Society

Assessment report on the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

2025



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Introduction

Institutional accreditation

‘Institutional accreditation’ is the external evaluation which assesses the conformity of a higher education institution’s management, work procedures, study and research activities and environment to both legislation and the goals and development plan of the higher education institution itself. This is feedback-based evaluation in which an international assessment panel analyses the strengths and areas for improvement of the institution of higher education based on the self-assessment report of the institution and on information obtained during the assessment visit, providing recommendations for improvement and ways of implementing them. Educational institution must undergo institutional accreditation at least once every seven years based on the regulation [*Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation*](#) approved by HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education as of 2.07.2024.

The goal of institutional accreditation is to support the development of strategic management and quality culture that values learning-centeredness, creativity and innovation in the higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as to increase the societal impact of education, research and development delivered by the HEIs.

HEIs are assessed according to twelve standards of institutional accreditation. Assessment focuses on the core processes of the HEI – learning and teaching, research, development and creative activities, and service to society – as well as on strategic management of the organisation and resource management. The learning and teaching process is examined in more detail under five standards (study programme, teaching staff, learning and teaching, student assessment, and learning support processes). Throughout the assessment process, there is a focus on academic ethics, quality culture and internationalisation.

Achievements that exceed the level of the standard (not compliance with the standard) are presented as strengths. Areas of concern and recommendations point to shortcomings in meeting the requirements of the institutional accreditation standard and affect the formation of the final decision of the Council. Opportunities for further improvement are proposals for improvement that do not contain a reference to noncompliance with the standard and the inclusion or exclusion of which is at the discretion of the institution of higher education. Proposals for further developments will not affect the final decision of the Council.

Re-assessment of the study programme

In the case the right to provide instruction for the HEI in the specific study programme group or study programme has been granted for a specified term, HAKA shall, within a specified period, conduct a re-assessment of the study programme group and cycle of higher education.

When an institution applies for the right to provide instruction, it is ascertained whether the quality of instruction meets the requirements laid down for the relevant cycle of higher education; and whether resources and sustainability are adequate for the provision of instruction.

Re-assessment is carried out based on the documents submitted by the institution as well as the assessment visit in accordance with the document [*Guidelines for initial assessment and re-assessment in higher education*](#) approved by HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education on 2.07.2024.

HAKA conducts initial assessment and re-assessment in six assessment areas: (1) Study programme, (2) Learning and teaching, (3) Organisation of studies, (4) Academic staff, (5) Learning and teaching environment, (6) Financial resources.

Based on the analyses, the expert panel will determine for each assessment area, whether it conforms to the required standard, partially conforms to the required standard, or does not conform to the required standard.

Based on the assessment report, HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education makes a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research, whether to grant the higher education institution the right to organise studies in the relevant study programme group and level of higher education for unspecified term, for one to three years, or not to grant the right.

Institutional accreditation and re-assessment of Master's Programme in Theology and Society

The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (Theological Seminary) underwent the process of institutional accreditation together with the re-assessment of the Master's Programme in Theology and Society. Thus, the Assessment Report consists of two parts: (1) evaluation of twelve institutional accreditation standards, and (2) a report on re-assessment of the Master's programme.

The institutional accreditation and re-assessment of the Master's programme in the Theological Seminary took place in March, 2025. The Estonian Quality Agency for Education (**HAKA**) composed an international expert panel, which was approved by the higher education institution. The composition of the panel was thereafter approved by the order of HAKA director.

The composition of the expert panel was as follows:

Maarja Beerkens (Chair)	Vice-Dean, Associate Professor, Leiden University (The Netherlands)
Matthew Kitching (Secretary)	PhD Student, Lancaster University (UK)
Joke van Saane	Rector, Professor, University of Humanistic Studies (The Netherlands)
Priit Rohtmets	Associate Professor, University of Tartu; Professor, Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (Estonia)
Ringo Ringvee	Advisor, Ministry of Interior (Estonia)

Assessment process

The assessment process was coordinated by HAKA staff – Dr Liia Lauri and Ms Aleksandra Dolgoplova.

After an initial preparation phase where the experts were introduced with the Estonian Higher Education system as well as the assessment procedure by HAKA, distribution of tasks between the members of the assessment panel was determined. Members of the team agreed the overall questions and areas to discuss with each group during the site visit and to a detailed schedule for the site visit.

The work of the assessment panel in Estonia started on 16 March 2025.

During the following days, from Monday 17th to Tuesday 18th of March 2025, meetings were held with representatives of the Seminary as well as external stakeholders.

On March 19th, the panel held an all-day meeting, during which the findings of the panel were discussed in detail and the structure of the final report was agreed. Findings of the team were compiled in a first draft of the assessment report and evaluation of the 12 accreditation standards and re-assessment areas.

In finalizing the assessment report, the panel took into consideration comments made by the institution. The panel submitted the final report to HAKA on 1 June 2025.

The current report is a public document and made available on HAKA website after HAKA Council has made an accreditation decision.

Information about The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (EFCTS, also referred as the Seminary or school) is a private professional higher education institution, owned by The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBC). It serves the needs of evangelical Protestant churches and Christians, with a special focus on Free Church Theology. The Seminary's mission is to support the comprehensive and lifelong development of individual Christians and congregations.

The Seminary is a small institution. It has two study programmes: a bachelor's programme in *Free Church Theology and Leadership* and a master's programme in *Theology and Society*. The yearly intake over the last 5 years has been between 13 and 20 students at the bachelor's level and between 13 and 17 students at the master's level. In total, the Seminary currently has about 80 students enrolled and employs about 50 (mostly part-time) staff.

The school was established and developed to prepare leaders for Estonian Free Churches. Its predecessor, The Estonian Seminary for Baptist Preachers, was opened in the Spring of 1922. The school was the first free-church educational institution in Estonia. However, the school was closed between 1940–1989, during Communist times. Since reopening, the school has gained the status of a government-acknowledged professional higher education institution and more than 140 students have graduated. In 2019, the school moved from Tartu to Tallinn and the Seminary changed its English name from the Tartu Theological Seminary to the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary.

In Fall 2022, the Seminary opened an MA level programme, and this degree is targeted to evangelical protestants, including members of UFEBC, thereby providing a greater focus than merely serving local churches. In Fall 2024 the school (Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary) opened the Centre of Leadership and Mentoring to serve the development activities of the UFEBC in a more focused way.

Over the last 35 years the school has grown from a professional higher education institution (HEI) to an educational centre, offering a wide range of activities and materials for churches and the broader society. The main areas of activity are:

- formal education on the BA and MA level
- conferences, both on the research level and for the wider public
- yearlong adult training courses and micro credentials
- short courses (including e-courses) and networking events (called "comb") for church ministries, both for youth and adults
- open lectures and concerts
- publishing books, video lectures, regular podcasts, study materials, animations etc.
- activities in leadership and mentoring

- coaching programme for local churches to support their development

Main impressions of the self-evaluation report and the visit

The panel found that the Seminary's preparations for the accreditation process were considered and well organised. The panel observed that the Seminary adopted a collaborative approach to the production of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) for HAKA accreditation. The SER was clear, detailed and insightful in allowing the panel to organise its work and develop associated lines of enquiry. Hospitality during the visit itself was generous, with meals prepared by members of the school community, showcasing the Seminary's cultural ethos in sharing downtime between professional activity. Requests, whether for further information or in relation to practicalities, were responded to fully and expediently throughout. For all of this, the panel would like to extend its thanks to the institution.

Main changes on the basis of recommendations of the previous institutional accreditation

The SER includes a report on the actions taken in the light of the recommendations of the last accreditation and its secondary conditions. The previous accreditation identified three main issues that must be solved: delegation and distribution of managerial tasks (beyond the Rector), international mobility of staff, and a research plan and resources for its implementation. It is clear from this report that all the recommendations have been addressed, although not all have been fully resolved. The Seminary has a long-term research plan and implementation strategy in place, which now needs further embedding within the organization for its full effect. International mobility has received much attention in recent years with a noticeable positive effect. While the Seminary has improved engagement of senior staff in leadership, this report gives advice how to speed and strengthen the process further. Another ongoing concern is the need to further formalize and standardize processes, while doing justice to the informal culture highly valued by staff members, students and alumni.

I Institutional Accreditation Report

Summary of the institutional accreditation findings

General Findings

The Seminary is a small but energetic and highly committed higher education institution. It is devoted to its mission to serve the needs of its Church community, to empower local churches, and to contribute to comprehensive and lifelong development of its students as well as individual Christians broadly. The mission is recognized and shared by its staff, students and shareholders. Its activities are highly appreciated by its community and stakeholders. Its staff is motivated and eager to contribute to the mission.

The Seminary has taken major steps towards professionalization of academic and support processes. The institutions has clear study regulation and other policies in place. The quality culture in the institution is well established, with special strengths in collecting regular feedback from students and other stakeholders, both formal and informal ways. It has a well-functioning digital environment to support academic and administrative processes.

The Seminary offers good and relevant Bachelor's and Master's programmes characterized by a student-centred approach. The curriculum employs a well-balanced mix of on-campus instruction, online and recorded content, and independent study. The institution also provides exceptional academic and personal support through both individual and group mentoring, which students greatly appreciate. Nevertheless, high dropout in the Bachelor programme remains an area of concern, largely attributed to the characteristics of the student population.

Looking to the future, the Seminary has a strategic plan and a stable financial outlook. It maintains a strong and supportive relationship with its owner, the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBS). It is also proactive in attracting and cultivating qualified faculty to ensure its sustainability. The management is mindful of ensuring long-term institutional sustainability, including awareness about leadership succession. However, sufficient student enrolment – crucial for both financial and academic sustainability – remains a risk factor. The Seminary is actively working to enhance its visibility and recognition among its target group.

Despite these positive developments, the review panel identified several areas requiring further improvement, notably in governance and assessment policy.

As noted in previous accreditation reports, the governance model and daily practice remains heavily centered on the role of the Rector. This practice poses challenges to ensuring academic autonomy from the institution's owner, creates ambiguity regarding a mandate for important academic decisions, and risks placing an excessive workload on the Rector. The panel has provided specific recommendations to streamline and strengthen the governance structure.

Assessment policy is another key area in need of enhancement. While many academic processes have been formalized, the approach to assessment has not kept pace. Assessment practices largely remain at the discretion of individual instructors, with limited coordination or oversight at the programme level. Furthermore, the absence of clear policies on resits, academic support for underperforming students, and grading practices (including the use of differentiated versus undifferentiated grades, routine plagiarism checks) threaten the fairness, transparency, and robustness of grading. On a

positive note, collaborative thesis assessment and efforts to develop AI-resilient testing formats reflect forward-thinking approaches. Considering that assessment has a critical role not only for supporting learning but also verifying achievement of learning outcomes, the panel recommends that the Seminary reviews critically its assessment strategy.

In summary, the Seminary is performing commendably given its size and the broader challenges faced by small, private institutions. The panel is sympathetic to the Seminary's aspirations to engage more fully with the network of applied universities in Estonia—a goal currently hindered by prohibitively high membership fees. Furthermore, the institution's commitment to delivering high-quality research and education without public funding is both ambitious and admirable.

Commendations

- The Seminary's clear mission to serve the needs of its Church community, to empower local churches, and to contribute to comprehensive and lifelong development of its students as well as individual Christians broadly and the effective manner in which the institution operationalizes this mission.
- The well-established quality culture, with special strengths in collecting regular feedback from students and other stakeholders, both formal and informal ways.
- The well-balanced curriculum containing a mix of on-campus instruction, online and recorded content, and independent study.
- The institution's highly student-centered approach, both in relation to teaching and learning and student support, including the combination of (community) individual mentors and (academic) group mentors, which effectively supports the holistic development of students (spiritual, professional and personal).
- The high-quality premises that provide a conducive learning environment for students

★ Worthy of Recognition

- The institution's highly student-centered approach, including the combination of (community) individual mentors and (academic) group mentors, which effectively supports the holistic development of students (spiritual, professional and personal).

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Rector plays a central role in the Seminary and holds a lot of responsibilities, both on strategic as on operational level. The panel therefore recommends to continue developing the Seminary's leadership group, including the role of the Lead Teachers and Academic Dean, to mitigate the risks associated with an over-reliance on the position of the Rector. Specifically, we **recommend** considering a clearly identified Academic Board with clear membership (e.g. Rector, selected lead teachers, Academic Dean), a clear mandate for certain academic and student-related decisions, and a clear meeting and decision-making structure.
- The academic autonomy of the institution is not formally guaranteed given the Constitution of the Advisory Board and the role of the Elders' Board. The panel therefore **recommends** that the Seminary ensures suitable balance between the role of the Advisory Board and internal academic scrutiny, following from codified arrangements within the Seminary's governance framework to ensure appropriate academic autonomy between the Advisory Board and Board of Elders and the Seminary as a whole.
- At present only the thesis is routinely checked for plagiarism. In order to ensure the integrity of all assessment and to maintain academic standards the panel therefore **recommends** the Seminary establish arrangements to check all student papers for plagiarism.

- The institution has a small pool from which to recruit suitable and qualified academic staff. It therefore needs to give due consideration to staff development and succession planning. The panel therefore **recommends** that the institution establish a robust and impactful career model and organize the documentation of attestation in accordance with the Seminary's academic positions.
- A matter of concern in both programmes is the high proportion of very small courses of 3 ECTS or less; the panel is concerned about the extent to which these enable the requisite depth, cumulative learning and increasing levels of difficulty during the programme. The panel **recommends** the school to review the programme and consider merging some small subjects into larger units to strengthen coherence, synthesis and facilitate student learning.
- The Seminary's permissive admission policy seems to contribute to high drop-out rate, long study duration, and high support needs from the teachers and the organization. The panel therefore **recommends** the Seminary remains disciplined in admitting only students who meet published entry criteria and who show sufficiently their potential for succeeding in the programme.
- The assessment in the programmes is almost entirely dependent on individual teachers and lacks sufficient coordination and monitoring at the programme and institutional level. The panel therefore **recommends** that the Seminary adopts:
 - a reasoned programme-level plan as to what courses should have a differentiated or undifferentiated grades (as an important determinant of cum laude distinction);
 - a practice to monitor and coordinate the assessment in the programme to ensure comparability and fairness in assessment, for example via grade and success rate analyses, peer reviewing of assessments, or calibration meetings.
 - transparent principles and conditions for students to resit an assessment, ensuring the same standards and comparable level of independence expected from the student. Also ensuring that students are graded based on their achieved learning outcomes.

	conforms to requirements	partially conforms to requirements	does not conform to requirements	worthy of recognition
Strategic management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resources	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quality culture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic ethics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internationalisation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teaching staff	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study programme	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning and teaching	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student assessment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning support systems	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research, development and/or other creative activity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service to society	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Key to evidence

D: document provided as part of the evidence base

E: interviews with employers and other external stakeholders

M: interviews with management staff

S: interviews with students

A: interviews with alumni

T: interviews with teaching staff

R: inspection of resources (e.g. library, laboratories)

SER: Self-Evaluation Report

1. Strategic management

Standard

Development planning at the higher education institution is purposeful and systematic, involving various stakeholders.

The higher education institution regularly evaluates the achievement of its stated objectives and the impact of its activities.

Guidelines

The HEI has formulated the objectives and key results for its core activities – learning and teaching; research, development and creative activities, and service to society – taking into account national priorities and the needs of society, focusing on its strengths and reducing unnecessary duplication both within the HEI and throughout higher education in Estonia.

The HEI is managed in accordance with its mission, vision and core values, as well as objectives set out on the basis of those principles. Responsibility for implementation of the goals and action plans of the development plan are clearly specified. Achievement of the objectives and effects of the activities are evaluated regularly.

Sustainable development, creativity and innovation are supported and given value in both core and support activities.

The HEI is mindful of the opportunities provided by digital technologies in planning for development activities.

Membership of the HEI (including students), as well as external stakeholders, is involved in developing and implementing the HEI's development plan and action plans. The HEI members share the core values that serve as a basis for the institution's development plan.

Indicators

- The rate of achieving the objectives set in the development/action plan (key results)
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The institution's strategy is articulated in the Strategic Planning Document 2021-2027, which is itself based upon the mission and vision of the Seminary. The school serves the needs of Free and Baptist churches in Estonia, united in the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBEC), herein referred to as 'the Union'. The Strategic Planning Document mainly focuses on teaching and impact for local churches. According to the SER, various stakeholders, including the owner, members of the staff, students and external stakeholders, were involved in the process of developing this document. This was confirmed in the interviews (E/M/S/T), as was the continuous process of feedback on the strategy. The seminary has ensured that its development planning is purposeful and systematic, involving various internal and external stakeholders and regularly evaluates the achievement of the stated objectives and the impact of its activities.

The objectives and key results in the Strategic Planning Document are in line with the core values of the Seminary. The key results are quite clear, however not always specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART). The processes of shared leadership and feedback are adequately designed and implemented. However, the management structure of the school is very complex. The structure presented in the Management Plan is not quite consistent with the findings during the interviews (M/T). The *Advisory Board* and the *Lead Teachers* turned out to be the most important groups for strategic issues, while the *Leadership team* seems to be a grouping of people with various coordination and management responsibilities without a formal mandate for decisions (M).

Furthermore, individual lead teachers seem to have quite diverse roles within the organization, and their responsibilities and mandate – either individually or as a group - remain in practice ambiguous **(T, M)**. The Advisory Board is chaired by the Rector and also consists of representatives of the owner (both the Union and the Elders' Board). While the owner is at the same time the formal employer of the Rector, the formal autonomy of the school within the governance structure is not specified. During the interviews however **(E/M/T)** the panel got the impression of sufficient critical and autonomous debates in practice. To avoid the threat of limited autonomy, the Seminary should consider establishing a clear Academic Board to ensure autonomy in academic affairs and clarify the decision-making structure with a formal role of lead teachers to participate in decision-making. This would further help with the recommendation from previous accreditation to delegate and distribute managerial tasks and not concentrate all decisions and activities in the role of the Rector.

The SER includes a report on the actions taken in the light of the recommendations of the last accreditation and its secondary conditions. It is clear from this report that all the recommendations were considered, although not all have been resolved. International mobility of staff and students is considerably improved in past years but remains a challenging issue. Another ongoing concern is the need to further formalize and standardize processes, while doing justice to the informal culture highly valued by staff members, students and alumni. In the interviews **(S/T)**, both staff members and students showed a high level of personal commitment to the Seminary.

As with most small independent theological institutions in the world, sustainability is a matter of concern. The seminary is visible within the other institutions of Higher Education in Estonia and maintains good and open relations with the other theological institutes. Development of future leadership is a priority to the management and owners.

The seminary is aware of the imbalance in age of staff and is purposeful in strengthening a new generation of teachers and researchers. Long term financial support is guaranteed by the owner.

Conclusion

The seminary has a solid strategy in line with the needs of the owner. The key results are systematically evaluated. Overall, the panel determined that the institution conforms to the requirements of Standard 1: Strategic Management.

Strengths

- Both student and staff members are highly committed and dedicated to the Seminary and value the informal and Christian culture of the school.
- Over the last years the Seminary has taken a major step towards professionalization and formalization of processes and policies in relevant documents.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Rector plays a central role in the Seminary and holds a lot of responsibilities, both on strategic as on operational level. The panel therefore **recommends** to continue developing the Seminary's leadership group, including the role of the Lead Teachers and Academic Dean, to mitigate the risks associated with an over-reliance on the position of the Rector. Specifically, we recommend considering a clearly identified Academic Board with clear membership (e.g. Rector, selected lead teachers, Academic Dean), a clear mandate for certain academic and student-related decisions, and a clear meeting and decision-making structure.

- The academic autonomy of the institution is not formally guaranteed given the constitution of the Advisory Board and the role of the Elders' Board. The panel therefore **recommends** that the Seminary ensures suitable balance between the role of the Advisory Board and internal academic scrutiny, following from codified arrangements within the Seminary's governance framework to ensure appropriate academic autonomy between the Advisory Board and Board of Elders and the Seminary as a whole.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Seminary currently maintains contact with alumni in a simple way by keeping email addresses. The panel therefore suggests that the institution establishes more structural mechanisms to help activate the Seminary's alumni network.
- Strive to ensure that all objectives are written so that they are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, which allows to monitor and evaluate success better.

2. Resources

Standard

The higher education institution develops its staff and manages its physical and financial resources in a purposeful, systematic and sustainable manner.

Internal and external communications of the higher education institution (including marketing and image-building) are targeted and managed.

Guidelines

The HEI has an efficient staff development system in terms of both academic and support staff. The principles and procedures for employee recruitment and development are based on the objectives of the HEI's development plan and are fair and transparent. The principles for employees' remuneration and motivation are defined, available to all employees, and followed.

Allocation of the HEI's financial resources is based on the objectives of its development plan. The management and development of its infrastructure (buildings, laboratories, classrooms, digital infrastructure, etc.) are fit-for-purpose and economically sound. The infrastructure is regularly analysed (including the network, digital equipment, software and services, IT systems, user support, digital security, etc.), taking into consideration among others the needs of students, teaching staff and other members of the HEI personnel.

Sufficient resources are available for updating the infrastructure for education and research, and/or a strategy exists enabling the HEI to acquire them.

The HEI has defined information protection rules (including on data protection and the protection of user privacy) and these are implemented. The development and security of the online learning and teaching environment are ensured. The online learning and teaching environment allows to identify the authorship of student work.

The HEI has a functioning system for internal and external communications, relevant to the target audiences. The information made public about HEI's activities (including study programmes) and the findings of external evaluations is correct, up to date, easily accessible and understandable. The HEI has a system to popularise its core activities and academic career opportunities. The HEI members are informed of the decisions relevant to them in a timely manner.

Employee satisfaction with management, working conditions, information flow, etc., at the HEI is surveyed regularly and the survey results are used in quality improvement activities.

Indicators

- Distribution of revenues and costs
- The results of the staff satisfaction survey
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The financial situation of the Seminary has been stable over a period of several years and is also in a better position than it was 2 years ago (**M**). The financial resources are based on the objectives of the Seminary's development plan. The self-earned money has, over the last five years, increased from 17% of the total income in 2020 to 40% of the total income in 2024 (**SER, D**).

The sources of funding are diverse. The main sources are (**SER**):

- own income, i.e. tuition fees from undergraduate and postgraduate studies, conferences, sales of materials and expert services (more than a quarter of the budget);
- donations and economic activities (interest and rental income on money invested in funds); and grants from Estonian churches and organizations;
- project grants from both Estonia and abroad.

In recent years the Seminary has been in a growth phase, and it has therefore been necessary to build better administrative systems **(M)**, which requires resources. Although the Rector is responsible for the purposeful, systematic and sustainable development of the staff and financial resources, a new system of shared responsibility has been implemented. Along with the Rector the General Secretary of the UFEBC and the leader of the financial unit of the UFEBC (EEKBL-Valduste OÜ), as a financial team, are responsible for the sustainability of the finances **(SER)**. Additionally, the Rector attends the Board of the UFEBC to discuss and to provide full details of the finances of the Seminary. This way the Board of the UFEBC and the Board of Elders are informed and, as representatives of the owners, guarantee the financial sustainability of the Seminary **(SER, E)**.

With additional funding from the UFEBC the salaries have grown in recent years, and the seminary has guaranteed that staff will have a flexible way of working at the Seminary, because most of the staff are working part-time **(M)**.

The seminary building is modern, fit-for-purpose and supports the functioning of the school. There is auditorial space for teaching and shared/private space for learning. The school has its own library and access to the University of Tartu Library and the Estonian National Library. The seminary has a grant from a UK publisher, which allows it to supplement its library annually, but it lacks databases to use the material necessary for teaching and research.

Students use digital resources in their studies. All courses are in Moodle, with the Academic Dean and the Educational Designer being responsible for providing the necessary administrative and technical assistance for academic staff. The academic staff has autonomy in designing the courses themselves and the panel found that the content of Moodle courses is regularly updated.

The required information about study programmes, internal documents, and staff etc. is available on the webpage of the Seminary <https://kus.kogudused.ee/>. It is up to date, and it is easily accessible and understandable. The Seminary has an active and well-targeted approach to student recruitment, including by visiting suitable churches and other relevant communities and also through the use of relevant social media groups to promote the programmes **(S)**.

The Seminary makes use of various channels to promote its activities, increase its visibility and contribute to external stakeholders. The Seminary has an active Facebook page, a Youtube channel and individual social media pages **(R)**. The Seminary has recently hired new enthusiastic staff member to focus on communication. Furthermore, the Seminary is an active contributor to the religiously oriented television channel TV7 **(A)**. The Seminary also engages in communication with stakeholders through various email lists. The channels and activities are summarized in the document Media Plan **(D)**. Communication with students is mostly via email and social media.

Regular feedback about studies and administrative staff is sought and collated by the institution. This feedback has been analyzed and changes have been made based on the views of stakeholders, in particular students.

Recent changes of the staff were made in 2024, when in the management staff two leading members (Academic Dean and Educational Designer) were replaced with new ones. Distribution of the tasks among new administrative team members is currently under review to as part of an effort to strengthen the effectiveness of the support team. **(SER)**.

Conclusions

The Seminary manages its physical and financial resources in a purposeful, systematic and sustainable manner. The Seminary conforms to the requirements of Standard 2: Resources.

Strengths

- A system of shared responsibility of the finances has been implemented.
- The high-quality premises that provide a conducive learning environment for students

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- Try to secure online access to learning resources, including databases for students and staff

3. Quality Culture

Standard

The higher education institution has defined the quality of its core and support processes, and the principles of quality assurance.

In the higher education institution, internal evaluation supports strategic management and is conducted regularly at different levels (institution, units, study programmes).

The findings of internal and external evaluations are analysed and quality improvement activities implemented.

Guidelines

Members of the HEI have agreed upon definitions for the quality of their core and support processes and are guided by them in their daily work. The HEI has established its policies and procedures for internal quality assurance (internal evaluation). The regular internal quality assurance both at the institutional and study programme level takes into account, inter alia, the standards set out in these Guidelines. All members of the HEI, including students and external stakeholders, participate in internal evaluations.

Internal evaluation of study programmes results in feedback from experts within the HEI and/or from outside it. Regular reviews and enhancements of study programmes ensure their relevance, including their compliance with international trends. In the course of internal evaluations, peer learning, comparisons with other HEIs regarding their results and means for achievement, as well as a sharing of best practices take place, among other things.

Internal evaluation is based on the following key questions in quality management: What do you want to achieve, and why? How do you want to do it? How do you know that the activities are effective and will have the desired impact? Is there an equilibrium between the desired outcomes and the resources used for their achievement (including technological solutions)? How do you manage the quality improvement activities?

Indicators

- Improvement activities implemented based on the analyses of internal evaluations in the HEI's core and support processes (examples from different areas)
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has adopted a formal quality assurance policy. The newly established (2024) document Quality Assurance defines the general principles for assuring quality, including quantifiable and qualitative indicators to monitor success (e.g. in the areas of student success, programme quality, teacher quality, research and service activities) **(D)**.

The quality assurance system incorporates intensively the feedback from internal and external stakeholders in the process. Regular surveys are conducted with the alumni (every 3 years), community (every 3 years), and students (in the end of every course) **(SER)**. There are both formalized mechanisms for gathering information (i.e. surveys) as well as informal mechanisms for feedback (e.g. via mentor groups) **(SER)**. The institution was able to provide concrete examples as to how the feedback has been translated into changes, such as extending the programme from two to three years, inserting more courses in Biblical Studies into the programme, and removing certain courses from the programme **(SER, S, M)**. Furthermore, all students who drop out of the programme are interviewed for feedback.

The institution has also established internal practices to assure quality. There is a process in development for reviewing syllabi before the course starts, which is currently not yet fully implemented. At present, the Academic Dean is expected to review syllabi in terms of learning objectives and assessments and overall clarity of the syllabus **(M)**. The practice of collegial review of

the syllabi is not yet fully developed. Nevertheless, there are good examples where a Lead Teacher coordinates courses (content and objectives) within a team group **(T)**. This practice could be further developed to ensure the coherence and cumulative nature of the curriculum throughout different learning paths.

The seminary has made a good progress in formalizing its quality assurance systems while also keeping its informal processes, suitable to a small institution **(SER)**. However, the decision-making structure surrounding quality remains somewhat too informal. The principle of “whenever there is enough reason to make changes, we will make these” **(SER, M)** is sympathetic, but it leaves the responsibilities and involvement of teachers in this process unclear. In practice, lead teachers seem to be consulted about programme changes but their responsibilities and rights to be involved in the process are not formalized **(M, T)**. Considering that the seminary has strong culture of stakeholder feedback and responsiveness, the panel considers the institution must also provide clarity as to who makes decisions – after considering feedback – based on academic standards and on a regular comprehensive review of the programme (not simply ad-hoc) (see also the chapter on the strategic management and recommendations concerning the organizational structure).

Conclusions

The panel found the institution has a formal quality assurance policy in place that it is implementing effectively, albeit with some elements in a preliminary phase of implementation. The seminary is actively seeking feedback from various stakeholders, both formally and informally, and there is clear evidence that the school is monitoring its quality regularly and is responsive to feedback in their activities. The seminary therefore conforms to the requirements of the Standard 3: Quality Culture.

Strengths

- The seminary has an effective system of collecting regular feedback from a broad variety of stakeholders (students, alumni, community).
- The seminary has a strong culture of collecting personalized, soft feedback (in addition to surveys), such as by exit talks with students and via a mentoring system.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- The strong culture of responsiveness to internal and external stakeholders (students, community) could be better balanced with a formal academic decision-making body that conducts regular (e.g. yearly) and comprehensive programme review, proposes and decides upon changes in curriculum and policies, and guards the overall academic standards of the programme. While the activities happen, they tend to be informal and concentrated in the role of the Rector. The group of lead teachers, which currently function as a sounding board for the Rector on academic matters, seems a good basis to build upon further. (See the recommendation about an Academic Board under *Strategic Management*).
- The Seminary should continue implementing its policy of regular review of syllabi by colleagues to ensure a cumulative and coordinated curriculum, possibly with the active participation of lead teachers.

4. Academic ethics

Standard

The higher education institution has defined its principles for academic ethics, has a system for disseminating them among its members, and has a code of conduct including guidelines for any cases of non-compliance with these principles.

The higher education institution has a functioning system for handling complaints.

Guidelines

The HEI values its members and ensures that all its employees and students are treated according to the principle of equal treatment.

Employees and students of the HEI are guided by the agreed principles of academic ethics in all their activities.

The HEI respects fundamental values and policies of research set out in the document, 'Research Integrity', issued jointly by Estonian research institutions, the Estonian Academy of Sciences, the Estonian Research Council and the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

The HEI supports its students and teaching staff in their understanding and responding to ethical issues. Teaching staff and students do not tolerate academic fraud, including cheating and plagiarism, and they will act immediately upon any such occurrence. Attention is paid to the application of principles of academic ethics in the digital environment: avoidance of creative theft, the protection of intellectual property rights etc.

Management of complaints from HEI members (including discrimination cases) is transparent and objective, ensuring fair treatment of all parties.

Indicators

- The percentage of student papers checked by plagiarism detection systems and the percentage of detected plagiarisms
- Other indicators depending on the HEI, for example statistics about complaints (total number, the proportion of decisions taken in favour of the applicant)

Evidence and analysis

The seminary has defined the principles for academic ethics in a separate policy document, Policy of Academic Ethics (in Estonian), in line with the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. This national code is signed by the school. The guidelines are actively promoted and available to all staff members and students. When asked in the interviews, both faculty and students showed active awareness of the rules and the importance of integrity. In several interviews the Christian nature of the seminary was presented as a natural ally of adherence to ethical standards.

The institution established an Academic Ethics Committee. One of the committee's tasks is to approve research papers (including student papers) that deal with human beings or are otherwise sensitive in nature. In the interviews **(S/T)**, both students as researchers confirmed this practice.

All final student papers are checked for plagiarism using the programme Plagium. According to SER, during the last few years not a single case of plagiarism was detected. This position was underscored by both faculty and students **(S/T/M)**, who pointed to the institution's size and the explicitly Christian character of the school. The school also stressed that it understood the need to consider and act on the implications posed by artificial intelligence. Recently **(T/S)**, some students were discovered having used AI in their papers, which was corrected after a discussion between the teacher and the students. The institution informed the panel that faculty are in the midst of developing standards around AI and, while AI forms not only a risk, it also poses a great opportunity in higher education. In the interviews,

(S) students reported that teachers have provided them with some good examples as to how to handle AI, until regulations are established.

Study regulations describe the operative procedures for complaints, for both students and staff members. Procedures for complaints about staff members, including the Rector, are transparent and accessible. Both staff and students **(S/T)** were able to demonstrate their awareness and understanding of the appeal process in case of academic decisions (e.g. grade appeals or plagiarism). However, it remains unclear which body has the mandate to decide on the appeals after they have been submitted by the Academic Dean. Students can also provide anonymous feedback at the end of every course, if they have concerns over academic misconduct. They can also contact the teacher, the lead teacher, the mentor or the Rector. Staff were similarly able to demonstrate **(T)** that they are clear what to do if there are issues associated with academic misconduct. The size of the seminary lends itself, inevitably, to informal communication, including on academic misconduct.

Conclusions

The institution has defined its principles of academic ethics, which reflect both the Christian values of the school and the national Code of Ethics for applied HEI's. The principles are well disseminated to students and staff who are clear about the implications. The seminary has established guidance on academic misconduct, which is transparent for stakeholders. Based on evidence from SER, additional documents and the site visit, the panel determined that the seminary conforms to requirements of Standard 4: Academic Ethics.

Strengths

- N/A

Areas of concern and recommendations

- At present only the Master's thesis is routinely checked for plagiarism. In order to ensure the integrity of all assessment and to maintain academic standards the panel therefore **recommends** the Seminary establish arrangements to check all student papers for plagiarism.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The use of AI by students and staff is common, however the institution is yet to develop clear, formal guidelines. The panel suggests that the seminary expedite the development and approval of regulations for the use of artificial intelligence in learning and teaching as well as assessment.
- The informal culture, linked to the small size of the seminary, presents some risk with respect to reporting academic misconduct. The panel therefore suggests that the institution develop a general anonymous channel for reporting suspected misconduct.
- Codify the institution's procedures for addressing appeals (such as grade or plagiarism appeals). While it is clear that the Academic Dean is the contact point for students in such cases, it remains unclear which body has the authority to make the final decision. Consider the Academic Board for such decisions (see recommendation under Standard 1).

5. Internationalisation

Standard

The higher education institution has set objectives for internationalisation and assesses the attainment of these objectives regularly.

The higher education institution has created an environment that encourages international mobility of students and teaching staff, supporting the development of learning, teaching and RDC activities, as well as the cultural openness of its members and Estonian society in general.

Guidelines

The HEI creates opportunities for international student exchanges by offering study programmes and/or modules taught in English. The learning environment at the HEI supports internationalisation and cultural openness.

Recognition of qualifications and recognition of prior learning and work experiences for student admission and programme completion are in accordance with the quality requirements set by the HEI, are systemic and consistent with the expected learning outcomes and support international student mobility. The organisation of studies at the HEI facilitates student participation in international (including virtual) mobility (e.g., study programmes enable mobility windows). The HEI has agreements with foreign higher education institutions and, through international exchange, sends its students abroad to study and undertake internship, providing comprehensive support for this. Members of the teaching staff encourage students to participate in international mobility.

International lecturers participate in the process of teaching, including supervision of doctoral theses.

The HEI supports and recognises the participation of its teaching staff in international teaching, research or creative projects, as well as their teaching, research or creative work and personal development which are performed at HEIs abroad.

Indicators

- Teaching staff mobility (in-out)
- Student mobility (in-out)
- Other indicators depending on the HEI, for example:
 - Number of English-taught study programmes by main units and levels of study
 - Percentage of foreign students (by study programmes, levels of study, in total in the HEI)
 - Percentage of study programmes that include English-taught subjects (of at least 15 ECTS)
 - Number of ECTS acquired through external mobility

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has set objectives for internationalisation and adopted *The Principles of Internationalisation* by the Advisory Board of the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary on 13 June 2023. The document sets an overall framework for Internationalisation by positioning the aims, ways and responsibilities in this process.

According to the SER (**p. 24**), there has been an increase over recent years in the mobility of students and faculty members (staff out in 2022/2023 - 4, in 2024/2025 - 10; students out in 2023/2024 - 8, in 2024/2025 - 12). After the pandemic the number of participants in adult training courses has remained stable (406 in 2022, 528 in 2023, 419 in 2024. (**SER p. 48**). Documents provided indicate the internationalisation of the academic faculty occurs through teaching (TCM International Institute, IBTSC) and through networking and participation in different cooperation formats. (**SER p. 56**)

The institution has an Erasmus Coordinator who is responsible for promoting the possibilities for Erasmus mobility programmes. The Seminary has also organised BIP-courses (blended intensive programme), and has built two-directional mobility with the School of Theology and Leadership from Norway and Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. According to the documents provided

and interviews during the site visit the institution promotes the possibilities of mobility in suitable ways and the students as well as staff are well informed.

The Seminary recognises that they do not have long-term international students and that their students prefer short term exchanges. According to the interviews with the students, the main obstacles were the accompanying costs abroad but mostly work and family responsibilities. Internationalization in the institution also takes place through international conference activity organized in 2024, and which included pre-conference for students. **(SER p. 26)** However, the panel considered that the Seminary could further expand its conception of internationalisation more effectively to include internationalisation at home and within the curriculum. For example, the use of short-term online mobility opportunities, the use of international guest lectures (in-person and online).

Though a number of individual courses are taught in the English language, there are no programmes taught fully in the English. The institution is aware of the existence of areas for improvement with regard to student mobility and has plans in place to address these issues. **(SER p. 57)** The panel concurs that it would be beneficial to increase the proportion of courses delivered in English in order to grow the number of incoming mobility students.

Conclusions

The institution has established objectives for internationalisation, demonstrable international collaborations, part-time faculty who have international teaching experience and students and staff who have undergone periods of mobility, which the Seminary itself promotes and encourages. Therefore, while there is the capacity to expand efforts surrounding internationalisation, the panel determined that the seminary conforms to requirements of Standard 5: Internationalisation.

Strengths

- N/A

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- Considering the increased number of courses delivered in English, try to attract more incoming mobility students, also for the benefit of the local students.
- Expand the institution's conception of internationalisation to include internationalisation at home and within the curriculum. Make use of (in some cases extensive) international experience of local staff, expose students more to international discussions and topics in the current courses or new modules, and familiarize students with the international interconnectedness of the field (e.g. international networks).

6. Teaching staff

Standard

Teaching is conducted by a sufficient number of professionally competent members of the teaching staff who support the development of learners and value their own continuous self-development.

Guidelines

Distribution of teaching staff by age and the percentage of young members of the teaching staff ensure the sustainability of studies. The career model of academic staff motivates capable young people to start an academic career and creates opportunities for their advancement.

The HEI supports systematically the development of its teaching staff. Members of the teaching staff engage in development of their professional, teaching and digital competences, improve their supervision competence, and share best practices with one another. IT and educational technological support (including trainings) are available to teaching staff.

Teaching staff's participation in research, development and/or creative activities supports the teaching process and ensures competence for the supervision of students' theses (including doctoral theses).

Members of the teaching staff collaborate in fields of teaching, research and/or creative work within the HEI and with partners outside the HEI, e.g. with field practitioners, public sector organisations, companies, other research and development institutions, and lecturers from other Estonian or foreign higher education institutions. Qualified visiting lecturers and practitioners participate in the teaching process.

When assessing the work of teaching staff (including their periodical evaluations), the effectiveness of their teaching as well as their research, development and creative work is taken into account, including student feedback, the effectiveness of their student supervision, development of their teaching; supervisory and digital competences, their international mobility, and their entrepreneurial experience or other work experience in their fields of speciality outside the HEI.

Indicators

- Competition for elected academic positions
- Number of students per teaching staff member in full-time equivalent (FTE)
- Percentage of teaching staff holding a PhD degree
- The results of the students' feedback about the teaching staff
- Teaching staff participating in continuing training or other forms of teaching and digital competences and professional development
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has 43 teachers and almost half of the academic staff (20) hold doctoral degrees **(SER)**. Since the Seminary emphasizes the academic, but also practical skills, taught by lecturers with experience in church work, who necessarily don't have a doctoral degree, the number of competent members of the teaching staff is sufficient. Additional training for academic staff is encouraged by the academic and administrative leaders of the Seminary. The academic staff are working either as a lead teacher or teachers **(T)**. A comparatively large number of academic staff work part-time, which makes it a challenge to ensure the quality of teaching and information sharing across the institution. **(T, M)** According to feedback, academic staff consider that the current level of information sharing is insufficient. The Seminary informed the panel that it intends to increase meetings with academic staff and engage them more in sharing the school news and discussions regarding good practices in teaching, learning and assessment and experiences in handling complicated cases etc. **(SER, M)**

Responsibility for staff development resides with the Rector, Academic Dean, Director of Development and the lead teachers. **(M)** The panel determined that the five lead teachers play an integral part in administering the studies and RDC, as they form a small contingent of staff who have a full-time position at the seminary. **(M, T)** For teachers, the seminary has a Guide for Faculty Members, which regulates all processes connected to teaching and supervision. **(D)**

Visiting teachers are recruited according to need and are asked to teach a course where and when there is an opening. **(T)** The fact that young people and alumni are encouraged to become visiting teachers, is very positive and this was recognised by the panel. **(A)** However, it is suggested to establish a robust and impactful career model in order to encourage people to plan their academic career and as a means of succession planning for the institution. It is also suggested for the staff who are new to teaching, including master's and PhD students to be supervised by experienced staff and undergo preparation for teaching and/or teaching qualifications.

Academic staff are obliged to pass attestation and the process for professors and lectures is formulated in the Policy of Attestation. As the positions of lead teachers and teachers do not match with professors and lecturers it may be difficult for the academic staff to understand the requirements, which they have to fulfil in order to pass the attestation. **(M, T, D)** The panel consider this would benefit from further consideration and clarification.

Conclusions

The teaching staff of the seminary are appropriately qualified, with an increased number of young teachers being recruited and encouraged to take up academic responsibilities. There are formal requirements in place for teaching staff. Therefore, notwithstanding the need to improve communication, especially with part-time staff, the panel determined that the Seminary conforms to the requirements of Standard 6: Teaching Staff.

Strengths

- Young people are encouraged to take up academic work.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The institution has a small pool from which to recruit suitable and qualified academic staff. It therefore needs to give due consideration to staff development and succession planning. The panel therefore **recommends** that the institution establish a robust and impactful career model and organize the documentation of attestation in accordance with the Seminar's academic positions.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Ensure that staff who are new to teaching, including Master's and PhD students are consistently supervised by experienced staff and undergo preparation for teaching qualifications.
- Continue to improve communication between visiting lecturers and the seminary to aid administration and the effective contribution of the staff to the programmes.

7. Study programme

Standard

Study programmes are designed and developed while taking into account the expectations of stakeholders, higher education and professional standards, and trends in the relevant fields.

The objectives of study programmes, modules and courses and their planned learning outcomes are specific and coherent.

The study programmes support creativity, entrepreneurship and development of other general competencies.

Guidelines

In planning and developing study programmes (incl. programmes conducted in a foreign language), the HEI is guided by its objectives, its competence areas and the needs of the labour market, and takes into account national strategies and the expectations of society. The study programmes are based on up-to-date sectoral know-how and research.

The planned learning outcomes are in accord with the requirements for the corresponding level of the Estonian Qualifications Framework, and in planning them the HEI has taken into account the future needs, among other things. In developing study programmes, the HEI has conducted a comparative analysis of similar programmes in leading foreign higher education institutions.

The objectives of the study programme and its modules, the planned learning outcomes, theoretical and practical learning, the proportion of independent work and internship, and the assessment of the achieved learning outcomes form a coherent whole.

The development of general competences (incl. creativity and entrepreneurship) and speciality-related digital competences as well as support for the development of a self-directed learner is a natural part of the study programme, and these are integrated with speciality studies.

Expected student workloads defined in the study programmes are realistic and consistent with the calculation that, on average, 1 ECTS credit equals 26 student learning hours. The study programme offers sufficient challenge for learners with different levels of knowledge and skills.

Indicators

- Number of students per study programme
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The panel identified that both study programmes (bachelor's and master's) are developed based upon objectives, translated to learning outcomes which are in line with the needs of the church as owner of the school. Both programmes reflect the mission and vision of the school and meet the Estonian and Higher Education standards.

The average age of students is relatively high. Interviews with both students and teaching staff **(S/T)** indicated that teaching arrangements accommodate students' life circumstances. The complex family context of most of the students **(S)** limits international engagement, such as participation in student exchange programmes abroad.

The scope of the bachelor's programme is rather narrowly focussed on work within churches or closely related sectors, and the panel considered that the potential relevance of the programme for wider society is not fully developed. The theological level of the bachelor's programme is up-to-date, following international developments in the field of theology (for instance, increasing attention to interreligious dialogue). The programme seeks to strike a balance between responding to the practical needs of the church and meeting the academic research standards within theology. As a result of this balance, for example biblical languages are only covered by 3 ECTS courses, which is sufficient for

pastoral work in the church, but falls short for research purposes. Many electives are available for the students, who are also encouraged to take elective courses at other institutes **(S/T/M)**.

The scope of the master's programme is, by conscious choice of the seminary, wider than only church ministry. The curriculum is structured around thematic topics (so called studios), the teaching itself is problem based, involving a transdisciplinary approach. This meets the needs of the students who often already have a professional job in the field, as explained by the students **(S)**. Based upon this student population's characteristics, the internships in the master's programme are designed around professional fields outside the church, encouraging the students to widen their focus. However, the panel considered that an internship for students who want to start a career in the church through the master's is missing, given the broad nature of students undertaking the programme.

The master's programme builds upon the bachelor's programme, with the more diverse student population in the postgraduate programme resulting in divergent needs of students to achieve the learning outcomes. The school facilitates these needs throughout the admission process, for example by providing literature lists for students who lack a bachelor's degree in theology. During the interviews **(S/T)** the panel was provided with some appropriate examples by students who indicated they were provided with work by theological authors that helped them to bridge the gap between their baseline understanding and academic theology.

The standard requires development of general competences during the study programme. In both programmes these transferrable skills are part of the curriculum. In the interviews **(S/A)**, the panel was provided by examples from students and alumni who were able to demonstrate these skills in their jobs (alumni) or study activities (students).

Conclusions

Based on this analysis of documents, SER and interviews, the panel was able to conclude that while there are areas for further work within this standard, the programme learning outcomes are broadly fit-for-purpose, programmes are contextualised and consider student needs. The panel therefore concludes that both study programmes (bachelor's and master's) conform to the requirements of Standard 7: Study Programme.

Strengths

- The institution's approach to the design of study programmes, which focusses on student centred learning and the needs of different stakeholders.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- A matter of concern in both programmes is the high proportion of very small courses of 3ECTS or less; the panel is concerned about the extent to which these enable the requisite depth, cumulative learning and increasing levels of difficulty during the programme. The panel **recommends** the school considers merging small subjects into larger units to strengthen coherence and facilitate student learning.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The MA curriculum is practical and problem based. However, a small percentage of the student body is focused on pursuing an academic career. To enable them to apply for a PhD track within a Graduate School elsewhere the panel suggests adding a number of Methodological and Research Courses in the MA curriculum.

- Consider introducing an elective course on the MA programme to enable students to gain practical experience as a Pastor

8. Learning and teaching

Standard

Admission requirements and procedure ensure fair access to higher education and the formation of a motivated student body.

The higher education institution systemically implements a student-centred approach that guides students to take responsibility for their studies and career planning and supports creativity and innovation.

Graduates of the higher education institution, with their professional knowledge and social skills, are competitive both nationally and internationally.

Guidelines

Admission requirements and procedure are fair and impartial. In the admission process, student's ability for academic progress on the chosen programme is assessed.

The academic recognition of foreign qualifications is based on international conventions, agreements between countries, and the Estonian legislation.

Learning and teaching process takes into account students' individual abilities and needs and supports their development. Learning offers sufficient challenge for students at different levels. Students participate in planning and implementation of the learning process. Organisation of independent work and face-to-face teaching motivates students to take responsibility for their studies.

Teaching methods and learning aids used in the learning and teaching process are modern, appropriate and effective and support the development of digital culture, contributing – among other things – towards the development of a self-directed learner, creativity, innovation and the development of digital and other general competencies. The HEI has a Code of Good Learning and Teaching (including online) and it is applied in practice.

The internship is integrated with speciality studies, the requirements for the internship are defined and the student's supervision ensured.

Students are motivated to learn and contribute to improving the quality of their studies by providing meaningful feedback on both the learning and teaching process and the organisation of studies.

Doctoral students plan their studies, as well as their research and development activities, in collaboration with their supervisor(s), setting specific objectives for each year and assuming responsibility for achieving those objectives.

Indicators

- Student satisfaction with the content and organisation of studies
- Alumni satisfaction with the quality of studies
- Employer satisfaction with the preparation of the graduates
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The admission process is clear and formalized (**D**). Next to the formal entry qualifications, the programme uses an interview and an entry test. Furthermore, prospective students must have prior practical experience. The seminary has explicitly adopted a liberal admission policy, believing in giving a chance to all students who have met formal entry qualifications. This also means entry for students who do not have sufficient Estonian language skills for studying at an academic level and/or students whose academic capability is not entirely convincing (**T, M**). The Seminary is also aware that some students may enter the programme with misplaced expectations in terms of the investment in time that is required or regarding the academic level of the programme (**SER**). Highly personalised learning approaches and an intensive mentoring system provide additional support for students who are admitted under these circumstances (**S, M**). Nevertheless, the BA programme has a high drop-out rate and long study-duration, which is probably partly related to the entry criteria. While the panel does not want to discourage the optimistic admission philosophy and consequently the diversity of the student body, it is essential that students can make an informed choice about starting the programme

in full knowledge of their chances of success, and that the decisions are made in the best interests of the students, and not in the interests of the school.

The Seminary seems to handle the diversity of the student body (theological vs no theological background, in-service pastors vs students with some junior level practical experience, fluent vs limited Estonian language skills) with surprising ease, **(S, T, M)** which seems to be thanks to the very small class size and personalized approach to teaching. As a downside of such an extensive support system, in some cases it raises a question if every student achieves the expected course level sufficiently independently, as expected in higher education; enforcing clear boundaries are important. The panel encourages the Seminary to stay alert about a healthy balance between a supportive study environment and developing students into increasingly independent and professional learners. As an example from the recent discussions, the panel welcomes the Seminary's stand on not being too permissive about deadline extensions.

The Seminary takes a student-centered approach to learning with a strong focus on personalised development. Its teaching, assessment and supervision integrates spiritual, professional and personal development effectively. In the panel's view the Seminary does an excellent job in accommodating students' individual needs, which is also greatly appreciated by students. This concerns students with limited language skills, physical disabilities, and other personal and work-related impediments **(S)**. All classes are being recorded and made available after a certain period, and the opportunity to review the material is much appreciated by students for more complicated classes or for students with a language disadvantage **(S)**. The master's programme offers opportunities for online participation via Zoom in exceptional cases (e.g. disabilities or when commuting is a problem). At the same time, physical presence on campus is a norm and students are intrinsically motivated to be present **(S)**. Both programmes use a creative mix of independent study, on-campus activities, and in the case of the master's programme, hybrid formats **(SER, S)**.

The Seminary has put effort into structuring the theses writing process coherently **(SER)** and students are well informed about the support structure (e.g. finding a topic and supervisor, requirements etc.) **(S)**. There are opportunities for extra challenge for students outside of the programme, such as taking courses in other universities, or study abroad and students are well aware about the opportunities and encouraged, despite the obvious barriers mentioned under Standard 5, to advantage of them.

When looking at the indicators, evaluations from the alumni, students and the community show positive results **(SER)**. Interviews with the students and the alumni confirm that students appreciate the personalised approach, mentorship, and opportunities for their personal development. They are also positive about the skills they obtain and feel that the programme prepares them well for their work for the community. The interview with the external stakeholders confirms that they are satisfied with the professional development of the graduates **(E)**.

Conclusions

The panel concluded that the teaching philosophy at the Seminary is clearly student-centred, accommodating individual student needs. The programmes make efficient use of on-campus activities, independent study, and occasional online (hybrid) modes of studying. The programmes develop students' general and professional skills for their future jobs, particularly in service to the community. The panel also consider that admission criteria are fair and transparent, albeit the panel expresses concerns about the extremely permissive selection criteria that might lead to accepting students with very low chance of succeeding. The panel therefore conclude that the institution conforms to the requirements of Standard 8: Learning and Teaching.

Strengths

- The well-developed and routine practice of recording of lectures, which clearly assists students to understand complex subject matter and helps those students who cannot attend classes for personal reasons, or for whom Estonian is a second language.
- The programme is well-structured and makes effective use of a combination of on-campus activities, independent study and (occasional) online live/hybrid meetings, accommodating well the student body that is spread around the whole country.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Seminary's permissive admission policy seems to contribute to high drop-out rate, long study duration, and high support needs from the teachers and the organization. The panel therefore **recommends** the Seminary remains disciplined in admitting only students who meet published entry criteria and who show sufficiently their potential for succeeding in the programme.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The panel encourages the Seminary to stay alert about a healthy balance between a supportive study environment and developing students into increasingly independent and professional learners, and to create and enforce boundaries about exceptions, leniency and additional support. As an example from the recent discussions, the panel welcomes the Seminary's stand on not being too permissive about deadline extensions.
- The Seminary could also think about formalizing a pre-entry step for students who may have some deficiencies in their background (e.g. via the Bible School, or targeted Estonian (Ba) or English (MA) language support, to ensure that the student is able to fully participate in the programme at an expected level.

9. Student assessment

Standard

Assessments of students, including recognition of their prior learning and work experiences, support the process of learning and are consistent with expected learning outcomes.
The objectivity and reliability of student assessments are ensured.

Guidelines

The assessment criteria are understandable to students and students are informed about them in a timely manner. Members of the teaching staff cooperate in defining assessment criteria and apply similar approaches.

Assessment methods are versatile and relevant, assess the degree of achievement of learning outcomes (including general competencies), and support the development of a self-directed learner.

If possible, more than one staff member is involved in the development of assessment tasks and student assessments. Along with assessments, students receive feedback that supports their individual development.

The HEI develops the teachers' assessment competence and supports the solid application of digital technologies in assessment.

Evaluation of doctoral students is transparent and impartial. Its purpose is to support the development of doctoral students, to assess the effectiveness of their current work and to evaluate their ability to complete the doctoral studies on time and successfully defend their doctoral theses.

When recognising prior learning and work experience towards the completion of the study programme, results obtained through the studies and work experiences (the achieved learning outcomes) are assessed. Students are aware of their rights and obligations, including the procedures for challenges regarding assessments.

Indicators:

- The number of credit points applied for and awarded under the accreditation of prior and experiential learning scheme (APEL)
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The panel found that the institution uses a varied range of assessment including debate, dispute and papers, as well as personalised diaries of spirituality, internships and a focus on students' individual vocational contexts and experience. The Seminary has established Assessment Regulations that are part of the institution's broader Study Regulations. These regulations state that the methods of assessment, the assessment criteria and the principles of final grading shall be described in the course syllabus, which the student can examine before the beginning of the course at the latest. The Seminary also provided information about the grading system, which is based on a scale A-F. **(SER)** The panel found that course syllabi do make reference to assessment methods and assessment criteria, but they vary in terms of how detailed they are in specific expectations for a certain grade or a pass mark. **[D]** However, students informed the panel that they were clear about this and received information in different ways, for example from staff during initial classes. **(S)**

The Seminary also provides information about assessment in the *Description of the Assessment* document, published on the Seminary's website. This information confirms that the assessment system at the institution was approved established in 2016 and edited in 2024. The Seminary has adopted an outcomes-based approach to assessment and delineates between differentiated and non-differentiated forms of assessment **(D)**.

About a half to one third of all courses have differentiated grades **(S, T)**. The high proportion of pass/fail grading is explained by the Seminary as being due to the nature of the courses that do not easily lead to differentiation (practice-based, self-reflection-based). The decision about differentiated vs non-differentiated grading is left almost entirely to the teacher **(M)**. Considering that grades form

a basis for a cum-laude decision, the lack of an overview or strategy about what courses are graded and not, is surprising.

The standard requires that the institution ensure the objectivity and reliability of student assessment. Here the panel found some problems. There are rubrics in place as required by the assessment regulations. **(T)** However, beyond use of the rubrics by individual staff the Seminary were unable to articulate how they assure themselves of the objectivity and reliability of assessment. **(T, M)** Management stated that they did not know if they could ever totally erase variability in marking between staff because staff are different. **(M)** There was also an acknowledgement that some staff may mark more harshly than colleagues and, in these instances, the protective mechanism was students' right to appeal their grade. **(M)** The panel views this as problematic, in part because it relies on the student recognising this fact. Also, because the institution should proactively address its responsibility for ensuring the objectivity and reliability of student assessment. While the use of rubrics is part of this, their use alone cannot provide this assurance. The Seminary has not currently considered, for example, sampling assessment, second or blind marking, grade comparison between courses, or a calibration session, etc. However, the institution informed the panel that the Rector is key in guiding staff on what is expected and the institution's approach. **(T)** The panel considers that the institution needs to establish a robust practice to ensure comparability and fairness in assessment.

The highly student-centred and supportive learning environment is an additional threat to fair and reliable grading. While the assessment document clearly states that the grading is based on achieving learning outcomes, the Seminary shows also quite some leniency and extra support. In the interviews it seems that not only the demonstrated competencies, but the effort of students is considered in case of students with some prior deficiencies or (language) limitations **(M)**. Also, the policy of resits in case of failed testing remains informal, based primarily on an agreement with the teacher about what needs to be revised or redone to achieve a positive grade.

The Assessment Regulations state that after the study period of the course has expired, members of the teaching staff shall not be obliged to accept papers from the students. The students who, by the end of the course, have not demonstrated achievement of the learning outcomes that correspond to the assessment criteria described in the assessment methods and do not have a valid reason for that or an agreement with the member of the teaching staff have to take the course again. **(D)** However, the regulations do not explicitly specify how many times a student may re-sit a piece of assessment, and the panel heard that students can re-take it in agreement with the teacher until they achieve a passing grade. **(S, T, M)** The panel considers that, again, in the interests of fairness the regulations should specify a transparent resit policy with the maximum number of resits that a student may take.

Students are permitted to request extensions to assessment deadlines. The Assessment Regulations state that the teaching staff may, exceptionally, extend the deadline for assignments in compelling circumstances. Such a request, together with the reasons for the request, must be submitted to the teaching staff before the deadline for the assignment. **(D)** However, the panel were informed that 'exceptional' circumstances are not defined and there can be variability in terms of how this is interpreted and/or applied. **(S, T, M)** In the interest of fairness and transparency the panel considers that the legitimate grounds and standards for an extension should be established and consistently applied.

The institution operates an appeal system for assessment. The regulations specify that students must appeal their grades within one month of receiving their result and appeals should be submitted to the Director of Studies. **(D)** The institution informed the panel that students can then apply to the

Research Commission if they remain dissatisfied with the grade. **(M)** The panel concluded that the regulations pertaining to grade appeals should be revised to ensure any steps beyond consideration by the Director of Studies are clearly articulated and accessible to stakeholders, specifying clearly who decides in such cases.

Students were broadly satisfied with the range of assessment, the contribution this makes to their learning and the quality of feedback. **(S, A)** However, students did inform the panel that feedback can sometimes be too slow and prevent them from applying the learning prior to the next piece of assessment. The panel therefore considers the institution should ensure the timely provision of feedback on assessed work.

The Seminary has a transparent and adequate Recognition of Prior Learning policy in place. The Seminary accepts RPL applications for non-differentiated assessment. **(SER)** Applications are accepted between 2 and 4 times a year and assessed by the RPL Committee. Applications may be for accredited or experiential learning. **(D, Study Regulations p.6-7)** The regulations state that the smallest unit that can be recognised by RPL is a course or a practical training, however, larger wholes can also be applied for to be recognised as a set. The graduation thesis cannot be recognised by RPL. A compulsory course or practical training that has been performed shall be recognised in the volume of credit points set forth in the curriculum.

Conclusions

Overall, the panel found that the institution has established regulations governing assessment, a suitable range of assessment methods and clear connection between assessment and learning outcomes guided by rubrics. However, while regulations address appeals and extensions these require further consideration and adaptation. More significantly however, the Seminary lacks a robust mechanism for ensuring the objectivity and reliability of student assessments and is over reliant on the accurate application of rubrics by individual members of staff. Consequently, the panel concluded that the Seminary partially conforms to the requirements of Standard 9: Assessment.

Strengths

- N/A

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The assessment in the programmes is almost entirely dependent on individual teachers and lacks sufficient coordination and monitoring at the programme and institutional level. The panel therefore **recommends** that the Seminary adopts:
 - a reasoned programme-level plan as to what courses should have a differentiated or undifferentiated grades (as an important determinant of cum laude distinction);
 - a practice to monitor and coordinate the assessment in the programme to ensure comparability and fairness in assessment, for example via grade and success rate analyses, peer reviewing of assessments, or calibration meetings.
 - transparent principles and conditions for students to resit an assessment, ensuring the same standards and comparable level of independence expected from the student. Also ensuring that students are graded based on their achieved learning outcomes.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Ensure students receive feedback on assessed work in a timely manner, establishing a clear deadline for grades might help both students and teachers for communicating expectations.
- Ensure the written procedure for grade appeals details the process for considering appeals beyond the involvement of the Academic Dean.
- Ensure that extensions to assessment are approved in accordance with specified criteria to ensure consistency and fairness

10. Learning support systems

Standard

The higher education institution ensures that all students have access to academic, career and psychological counselling.

Students' individual development and academic progress are monitored and supported.

Guidelines

The HEI assists the student in developing an individual study programme based on the student's special needs as well as educational abilities and preferences.

The HEI advises its students (including students with special needs and international students) on finding internship places as well as jobs. Students are aware of where to get support in the case of psychological problems.

The HEI has a functioning system to support and advise international students (including psychological and career counselling) which, inter alia, helps them integrate smoothly into the membership of the HEI and Estonian society. The HEI analyses the reasons students withdraw from studies or drop out, and takes steps to increase the effectiveness of the studies.

In order to carry out studies and research, development and creative activities, the availability of up-to-date study and research literature, other study materials and tools (including those for independent work) and access to research databases is ensured. Study literature, materials and other teaching aids are of equally high quality.

To support study activities, timely and relevant information and communication technology solutions have been planned, including the study information system, document management, online learning environments, analytical tools for teaching and learning. Support for online learning and IT is available to students.

The HEI supports student participation in extra-curricular activities and civil society initiatives.

The HEI monitors student satisfaction with the counselling services, the online learning and IT support provided and makes changes as needed.

Indicators

- The average duration of the study by levels of study
- Dropout/withdrawal rate (during the first year and the whole study period)
- Students' satisfaction with the support services
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary combines formal and informal approaches to monitoring and supporting students' individual development and progress. **(SER, M)** The Seminary has a strong mentoring programme that is oriented towards both the academic success and personal growth and is a central part of its strategic approach to providing learning support **(SER)**. Group mentoring focuses primarily on academic work, and it also focusses on motivational aspects of completing the programme. In group mentoring, BA and MA students are placed into groups with between 5 and 8 members. Groups are gender balanced and led by a Seminary lead teacher or an administrative team member. Groups meet between 3 and 4 times a year and conduct a study session. **(SER)**

In addition, the Seminary provides individual mentoring. Students are asked to identify a suitable mentor, preferably one with the same theological background and ideally from the same gender. Students can also find mentors from the Network of Estonian Christian Mentors. Individual mentors (usually with the strong link with the practice outside of the school) advise students on professional skills (like time management) but also in case of personal challenges and professional development **(S, M)**. Individual mentoring meetings take place 3–4 times a year and are designed to support students holistically, including emotional, professional, social and spiritual development. Mentors receive guidance and support in order to discharge their responsibilities effectively. **(M, D)**

The institution operates career counselling, organised by the project leader of the Centre of Leadership and Mentoring (JuMe). The Seminary clearly has strong and impactful links with the wider church network that help to ensure students pursuing church careers receive helpful and instructive advice and guidance. **(M, S, E)** This was recognised by students as supportive and developmental. **(S)** However, the institution has students who are, or intend to, pursue secular careers and the Seminary would therefore benefit from considering how it can strengthen career advice for this portion of its student body.

The Seminary has a Student Dean in place who is responsible for all formal issues related to studies. The Rector assumes responsibility for more serious personal issues. **(M)** The panel recognise the highly effective and supportive approach to providing pastoral support for students facing difficulties. The Union also avails itself of the services of Christian psychologists from the Union-owned 'Foundation From Friend to Friend' who have assisted a number of students at the Seminary. **(SER)**

Technological support is provided by the Educational Designer who, although they combine this responsibility with others in the institution, maintains an effective digital architecture for the smooth running of the Seminary. **(M, T, S)** The Study Information System at the University is called Tahvel and is shared with other applied higher education institutions in Estonia. Tahvel is used to store assessment grades and students have access to them through Moodle. **(SER)** Students confirmed that they receive timely responses and assistance relating to technical queries from the Educational Designer and other staff. **(S, A)**

The panel were provided with examples of support and reasonable adjustments provided to students with physical disabilities. This included enabling students with mobility impairment to attend classes remotely. **(S, M)** However, the panel determined that the Seminary could strengthen its approach by codifying its procedures for providing support to students with disabilities, including both physical and learning disabilities. It would help make the commitment explicit to both students and teachers, and make the procedures for addressing the special needs clear.

Beyond formal support organised and/or delivered by the Seminary, students interact together socially to help support belonging and cohesion. This includes shared meals, camping trips and swim and sauna sessions. **(SER)** The institutional community also engages in prayer together and the panel recognise the broader contribution this makes to the effectiveness of the student support system.

The panel found that the institution gathers formal feedback on support services periodically **(M)**. In order to ensure that the Seminary has a systematic approach for enhancing student support, the panel considers that a more regular review of the results and progress could be beneficial, involving its young, enthusiastic support team.

Conclusions

Considering the size of the institution the panel considers that the range of student support initiatives are appropriate and fit-for-purpose. Pastoral support is highly effective and group and individual mentoring makes a particular contribution in this respect. Although there is some scope to strengthen career support and codify arrangements for disability support the panel considers that the Seminary conforms to the requirements of Standard 10: Learning Support Systems.

Strengths

- The institution's highly student-centered approach, including the combination of (community) individual mentors and (academic) group mentors, which effectively supports the holistic development of students (spiritual, professional and personal).

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- Strengthen careers support for students who intend to pursue careers outside church settings
- Codify the institution's procedures for providing support for students with disabilities, including learning disabilities
- Establish regular and effective systems for gathering timely feedback on student support systems

11. Research, development and/or other creative activity

Standard

The higher education institution has defined its objectives and focus in the fields of RDC based on its mission, as well as on the expectations and future needs of society, and assesses their implementation and the societal impact of its RDC activities. RDC supports the process of teaching and learning at the higher education institution. Support services for RDC are purposeful and support implementation of the objectives of the core process.

Guidelines

The HEI places a high value on the role and responsibilities of the field of RDC in society and evaluates the results of its RDC activities, their international visibility and societal impact.

The HEI responds flexibly to the current needs of society and the labour market in terms of its research and plans its research in collaboration with enterprises, public sector institutions and organisations of the third sector.

Members of teaching staff introduce students to their research results as well as the latest scientific achievements in their areas of specialisation, and involve students in their R&D projects where possible.

The organisation and management of RDC take into account the profile and the mission of the HEI.

The HEI applies digital tools for the administration and re-use of research data.

Indicators depend on the specificities of the HEI

- Numerical data:
 - (1) scientific publications by classifiers;
 - (2) public presentations of creative work; recognition from international competitions; reviews in professional publications, etc.;
 - (3) patent applications, patents;
 - (4) textbooks, study aids of various formats, etc.;
 - (5) system development solutions; product development solutions; environmental applications solutions;
 - (6) contracts concluded with enterprises;
 - (7) spin-off companies, etc., in line with the profile and priorities of the HEI; etc.
- Number of scientific publications / creative works per member of academic staff and per employee with the requirement to do research (FTE, by areas)
- Number and volume of externally funded projects of RDC activities
- Proportion of projects with a positive financing decision out of the submitted project applications.
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has a Research Plan for 2020–2026, which has been updated twice (2021, 2024). Depending on the students and teaching staff it has a specific focus, highlighting Free Church Identity, as well as the Church's relationship with the society (**SER**). The panel found that some of the opportunities offered for the staff emanate from this plan. When conferences are connected to the plan, this may direct the Seminary's cooperation or attendance at these conferences (**T**). Over the last several years the Seminary has either organised or been involved in organising several local and international conferences. The Seminary's RDC activities are defined by supporting the Church and society through academic inquiry. As well as by responding to societal and specific community needs within the context of Free Church identity in Estonia.

In connection with the Research Plan little research is conducted on an international level. International cooperation in research has instead been relatively modest but has been set as a priority by the senior management team. The panel found that, in part, owing to the recruitment of new faculty members research is of high level, but often it is not connected with the Research Plan and is mostly undertaken independently. The panel considered it would therefore be preferable if the plan

was more directly influencing the work of staff. However, in a positive sense, teaching staff are encouraged to publish more actively by the institution's management, and this is financially rewarded.

Most of the student research has a practical emphasis, e.g. youth work, factors surrounding growth and decline in church membership etc. Student research is often reflected in the church magazine **(M)**. The owners support this research by affording the students a chance to carry out interviews or organise focus groups in church setting. The Union could be more pro-active in terms of initiating research on topics relevant for the UFEBC **(E)**. The panel considered that increased involvement of the owners and the community in this aspect of the institution's activities would contribute to developing relevant research in the Seminary

Between 2020-2024, the faculty published a total of 118 scholarly articles in peer-reviewed international journals across the classifications 1.1, 1.2, and 3.1 (with additional outputs in lower classifications). The panel found there to be a general growth in the volume and quality of publications, peaking in 2021 and showing a slight decrease in subsequent years.

Staff are encouraged to participate in Erasmus mobility and the institution informed the panel that greater assistance for international travel and publication opportunities is envisaged in the next research plan **(T)**. The panel reflected that as part of this future plan the institution should consider submitting more applications for research funding as part of a consortium and make use of the Seminary's international links in order to expand this area of its activities.

Conclusions

The Seminary has a Research Plan, which has been regularly updated. Research is of a sufficient level but is not always related to the plan. International research cooperation has been set as a priority for the Seminary and students are encouraged to engage in research. The Seminary has also engaged in producing educational materials such as textbooks. The panel therefore determined that the Seminary conforms to the requirements of Standard 11: RDC.

Strengths

- Management is committed to strengthening the research culture in the Seminary. Publishing in international journals is encouraged by the management and is financially rewarded

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- Ensure that the Research Plan more directly informs the research practice of academic staff
- Actively seek the input of stakeholders to inform the Seminary's research priorities and inspire relevant research ideas
- As part of the institution's research plan consider submitting more applications for research funding as part of consortia, including international consortia, and make use of the Seminary's international links

12. Service to society

Standard

The higher education institution initiates and implements development activities, which enhance prosperity in the community and disseminate recent know-how in the areas of the institution's competence.

The higher education institution, as a learning-oriented organisation, promotes lifelong learning in society and creates high-quality opportunities for that.

Guidelines

The HEI contributes to the development of the community's well-being by sharing its resources (library, museums, sports facilities, etc.), by providing consulting and advisory services, participating in the development of non-profit sector and charitable activities, and by organising concerts, exhibitions, shows, conferences, fairs and other events.

The HEI involves alumni in activities aimed at the development of the HEI and the knowledge society.

Employees of the HEI participate in the work of professional associations and in other community councils and decision-making bodies as experts, directing society's development processes as opinion leaders. The impact academic employees have on society is taken into account when evaluating their work.

The HEI has clearly defined the objectives for in-service training, measures their implementation and plans improvement activities. The HEI plans in-service training based on the present and future needs of the labour market target groups. Evidence-based learning supports the learning and self-development of adult learners.

The HEI takes advantage of digital means in order to provide trainings and services to the public at large.

Indicators

- Number of people in continuing training and other privately financed open forms of study (by responsibility areas or structural units)
- Other indicators depending on the HEI

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has a long history regarding service to society. According to the SER (p. 47) the institution considers their RDC as part of the service to the wider society and the publications produced by Seminary staff are seen as part of this. Besides the sharing of theological knowledge and fostering interdenominational cooperation, the Seminary addresses societal and environmental issues (SER p. 47). The Research Plan has been adapted to include the direction of service to society and the institution has subsequently organised conferences on suicide and family issues which are open for all of society to attend (T, M). The Seminary has also organised cultural events for wider public (SER p. 49).

The majority of the institution's activities are related to serving the religious community of the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia. This includes the provision of micro-credentials and optional courses (<https://kus.kogudused.ee/taienduskoollitus/vabaained-seminarist/>). For adult professionals training in church ministry there are short courses available called "kärg" (comb). The institution informed the panel that it sees itself, in addition to being a university-level school, as a centre for lifelong learning (SER p.47). Academic staff are also involved in professional associations and expert groups (SER p. 49-50).

The institution's approach to service to society involves integrative measures to support individuals from non-native language backgrounds. According to interviews staff provide assistance outside of class to help individuals improve their language skills and integrate with their local communities. (S, T, M)

The Seminary serves the society in multiple meaningful ways. It provides input to interfaith discussions and to ecumenical dialogue, promotes thoughtful civic engagement and provides training both to the community as well as a wider audience. Thus, the Seminary plays a role in supporting social cohesion. The Seminary itself considers service to the society as one of their greatest strengths (**SER, p. 50**).

Conclusions

The Seminary combines a sharp focus on service to its immediate religious community with a view to supporting society more widely and seeks to achieve this through RDC, public and community events and other means. Consequently, the panel determined that the Seminary conforms to the requirements of Standard 12: RDC.

Strengths

- The Seminary is capable of carrying out different services to society. One side of this is serving the religious community through theological higher education that is considered necessary by the denomination. The other side is services that the seminary with its alumni provide to the wider society. In this the ethos of the Seminary is crucial.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- N/A

II Re-assessment Report

Short overview of Theology and Society master's study programme

The MA Theology and Society was launched in 2022 and, since its inception, has admitted 27 students (of which 25 have continued their studies). Student enrolment has been diverse with students enrolled from UFEBC and the Estonian Pentecostal Church, as well as from the Estonian Methodist Church and the Association of Free Churches of Estonia (Eesti Vabakoguduste Liit). The programme has also recruited 3 students whose first language is not Estonian. The first graduates will defend their thesis in June 2025.

The MA is strategically important because there are no other evangelical free churches offering MA level higher education in Estonia, Finland or Latvia. The programme is therefore critical in serving the church's personnel needs. Furthermore, it has a unique profile also compared to other similar Master programmes in Estonia, focussing on an interaction between theology and contemporary needs of a pluralistic society. Overall, the programme provides unique study opportunities for individuals who will serve as church workers, leaders, chaplains, counsellors, religious education teachers, and those occupying positions connected to religion or theology within society. Additionally, it welcomes students with a prior higher education diploma in other fields who wish to gain further theological expertise, such as journalists or other professionals seeking specialised theological training.

The initial assessment exercise identified one standard as 'partially complying', namely the standard 'quality of learning'. The committee provided four recommendations:

- Formalization of the Master's thesis requirements
- Pre-arrangements for traineeships
- Formalization of the feedback from academic staff, and employers
- Implementing the attestation policy

The Seminary has done good progress with three of the recommendations. Information about the Master's thesis is specified in two documents. The syllabus of the thesis seminar lists the objectives and the requirements of the Master's thesis **(D)**. The *Guidelines for thesis writing*, for both bachelor and master students, provides students with information about the thesis process, intended timeline and responsibilities of the student and the supervisor, respectively **(D)**. The interview with the students confirmed that they are familiar with the requirements and the process of the thesis writing **(S)**.

Since the previous assessment, five attestation procedures for academic staff have been carried out. Four of the candidates passed the attestation and one was rejected. The next attestation round will take place in 2027 (after 5 years after the initial attestation). Attestation is limited to lead teachers.

Feedback from academic staff is collected via a staff survey, intended to take place every three years (SER). Last survey was conducted in 2024, which for example identified a need for better communication and more transparency in task division.

In the initial assessment, "the Committee recommends that, in the context of pre-placement agreements, consideration should be given to entering into cooperation with different organisations contributing to the development of society". The Seminary has chosen not to arrange any pre-agreements with relevant organisations, considering that most master students are already practicing in their field and traineeship is therefore not a mandatory part of the programme. Furthermore,

considering a close community, the links with the organisations are good in case an arrangement is needed for a particular student. The argumentation for this choice is convincing. This panel recommends the Seminary to consider a traineeship option for students who are not yet in service by a church and may wish to grow into the role after all, even if formalized pre-arrangements are not needed considering the small number of students and good links with the organizations (see below in the report).

Assessment results and justifications of assessments

Expert panel's decision

ASSESSMENT AREA	Conforms to the required standard	Conforms partially to the required standard	Does not conform to the required standard
STUDY PROGRAMME	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LEARNING AND TEACHING	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ORGANISATION OF STUDIES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ACADEMIC STAFF	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LEARNING AND TEACHING ENVIRONMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FINANCIAL RESOURCES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Justifications of the panel's assessments to the assessment areas

The master programme is well designed, with a clear educational vision that fits into the strategic view of the Seminary. The balance between traditional confessional theology and an open mind to contemporary society is delicate but preserved by the institution. The programme is coherent, built around three content modules, elective courses and a thesis. During the visit the panel was persuaded by the formal and informal feedback procedures focused on continuous improvement. The panel therefore concludes that the programme is designed and conducted in such a way that it conforms to the standard *Study Programme*.

The programme has clear and reasonable entry and graduation requirements, and a clearly defined and broadly shared vision. The programme develops professional skills needed for the specific career path as well as broader transferable skills that are also applicable for a different path. A mandatory internship is linked to the field of the Master's theses, as *Master's Apprenticeship* course in the curriculum. While this orientation of the internship is understandable considering the student population, an alternative (additional) internship option might help those students who enter the programme with a different background and might want to grow into a specific career. Assessment formats are sufficiently varied; assessment is to a large extent transparent and supports the learning process. The panel therefore determined that the programme conforms to the standard *Learning and Teaching*.

The organisation of studies is clearly regulated and a comprehensive *Study Regulations* document is publicly available. Policies on complaints and RPL are clearly formulated. Mentoring and counselling supports students effectively and the programme caters to students' individual needs. Some aspects are informally addressed, such as facilities for students with special needs. Considering the specificity of the target group, traineeship is not currently a formal part of the program and therefore also no formal traineeship agreements exist. Based on this evidence, the Seminary conforms to the standard *Organisation of Studies*.

The Seminary employs sufficient number of academic staff for the Master's programme, with almost all of teachers holding a PhD degree. Academic staff members are involved to a varying degree in research activities, international mobility and teacher training activities, and the staff is well aware about the different opportunities. A significant share of staff works part-time for the institution, which allows to cover a broad area of expertise in a small institution but also creates its challenges. Considering a large share of part-time staff, the Seminary faces a challenge of communication and collaborative practices, for which it has taken necessary steps. The Seminary is pro-active in finding qualified teachers and it is also investing into the future by seeking out young people with a potential to grow into a teaching role after their PhD. Based on this evidence, the programme conforms to the standard *Academic Staff*.

The programme has modern, functional and welcoming physical facilities. The digital systems effectively support the learning environment and administrative systems. Technical equipment (connections, screens etc.) suitably support hybrid learning and online interaction. Students and staff have sufficient support from the Academic Dean and Educational Designer. The physical library is sufficient and functional for the needs; access to online databases is available via other libraries on

location, but not online. The panel determined that the Seminary conforms to requirements of the standard *Learning and Teaching Environment*.

The programme meets necessary reporting requirements. The financial report has been submitted. The institution has developed a risk and financial analysis. Considering that the Seminary is a very small institution without governmental funding, some financial uncertainty is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the institution has increased its funds, diversified its funding sources and has an assurance from the UFBEC, which creates a picture of a solid financial sustainability. The programme conforms to the standard *Financial Resources*.

Drawn from the analysis below, the panel presents here the main strengths and areas of concern with recommendations.

Strengths:

- The programme is based on problem-based learning philosophy. This is an effective choice, not only to enhance the learning processes of students, but also to ensure the balance between biblical courses and societal themes.
- The programme has an appropriate, clear and broadly shared vision about its purpose and objectives.
- The programme considers very well the individual needs of students by applying an effective mix of independent study, online meetings and physical meetings, supported by mentoring and counselling.
- The Seminary demonstrates a pro-active staffing policy of identifying highly qualified candidates for teaching tasks and encouraging growth of a new generation of teachers.
- The programme has good digital solutions for facilitating hybrid education effectively, and all staff make use of these facilities and are provided with appropriate support in order to do so.

Areas of concern and recommendations:

- The Master students enter the programme from diverse educational background, some without any exposure to theology, and they are expected to bridge the gap on their own initiative. The panel therefore **recommends** that the seminary establish the assessment of pre-requisites or pre-master's courses for students admitted to the MA programme without prior training or qualifications in theology

Analysis of the Master's programme in Theology and Society by assessment areas and criteria

1. Study programme

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).

Evidence and analysis

The panel established that the study programme is developed based upon clearly defined objectives, which are effectively translated to learning outcomes. The objectives are in line with the needs of the church as owner of the Seminary (**SER, E**). The programme reflects well the mission and vision of the school and contributes to its ambition to be a true educational centre for Free Church theology (**SER**). The program corresponds to the Estonian standard for Higher Education, as proven by the document *Comparison of the Higher Education Standard and Seminary's Curricula* (**D**).

The programme has a scope of 120ECs, divided over three years (previously two years) (**SER, D**). The content of the study programme is tightly related to the main themes of the Research Plan 2020-2026 "Free Church Identify and the Relationship between Church and Society". The programme is built around four substantive themes

1.2. Employers and other stakeholders (incl. students) of the study programme group are involved in the study programme's development.

Evidence and analysis

Employers and stakeholders, including the owner, were actively involved in the initial development of the programme. The Seminary is planning to improve the programme (for instance by adding more biblical topics and moving some general topics to electives) in the same way by active consultation of all relevant - internal and external - stakeholders (**SER, M**).

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

Evidence and analysis

The MA curriculum corresponds to the vocational standard of the chaplain (**SER**). Even though a pastor in a Free Church is not obliged to hold a master's degree, the degree is increasingly seen as a professional expectation and the programme has been designed accordingly. As appropriate to a Master degree, the programme is not oriented only to practical service but also to deep intellectual engagement with theological concepts (**SER, T**).

The teaching philosophy of the programme is defined as problem-based learning, emphasizing the importance of contemporary real-life challenges in the learning process (**SER, M**). In the interviews,

students confirmed this approach, with appreciation of the opportunity within this educational philosophy to connect their theoretical learning to practical or societal problems **(S)**.

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.

Evidence and analysis

Learning outcomes of the programme correspond well to the learning outcomes specified in the Standard of Higher Education. The problem-based content modules, for example, advance not only students' knowledge but also their skills to apply the knowledge, address complex problems and be aware of relevant societal issues in their field **(S, M)**. Practice oriented courses such as *Self and Project Management* develop students as reflective and independent learners. A comprehensive overview how the Standards are reflected in specific courses is provided in the document *Comparison of Higher Education Standard and Seminary's Curricula* **(D)**.

1.5. The study programme is coherent and has a comprehensive structure. The title of the study programme is in line with the learning outcomes of the modules and courses within the study programme.

Evidence and analysis

The title of the programme reflects the content and ambition of the programme. The modules within the programme are all related to suitable areas: Bible and Society, Theology and Identity, Leadership and Communication. These titles summarize adequately the three foci of the programme, and they are in line with the research plan of the Seminary. The three content-based learning lines are augmented with an elective module and a creative module. The programme is completed with a 20EC thesis project. **(D)** The programme is coherent and comprehensive, providing a common core as well as some flexibility for students to follow their own interests.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: STUDY PROGRAMME

The master programme is well designed, with a clear educational vision that fits into the strategic view of the Seminary. The balance between traditional confessional theology and an open mind to contemporary society is delicate but preserved by the institution. The programme is coherent, built around three content modules, elective courses and a thesis. During the visit the panel was persuaded by the formal and informal feedback procedures focused on continuous improvement. The panel therefore concludes that the programme is designed and conducted in such a way that it conforms to the standard *Study Programme*.

Strengths

- The programme is based on problem-based learning philosophy. This is an effective choice, not only to enhance the learning processes of students, but also to ensure the balance between biblical courses and societal themes.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- The MA curriculum has a practical, problem-based focus. However, a Master's degree must prepare students sufficiently also for pursuing a research career (including PhD), if they have the ambition. To enable them to apply for a PhD track within a Graduate School elsewhere the panel suggests extending Methodological and Research Courses in the MA curriculum.
- The programme includes an apprenticeship related to the Master's thesis. . The programme could consider an alternative internship opportunity as an elective course on the MA programme to enable students to gain practical experience as a Pastor.

2. Learning and Teaching

2.1. Conditions for admission and graduation have been formalised, are clear and transparent; requirements to prospective students stem from prerequisites for the completion of the study programme.

Evidence and analysis

The admission criteria are formalized, including a prior formal qualification, an interview and an entry test. The admission requires prior practical experience, but exceptions are allowed on this criterium **(D)**. Currently, the institution is considering the role of testing candidates' English skills at the point of entry, to ensure that successful applicants can effectively interact with literature in English and take courses in English **(SER, M)**. The programme is thus conscious about setting requirements that allow students succeed without creating unnecessary hurdles for accessibility. Requirements for graduation are clear: completion of 120 ECs coursework consisting of a set of mandatory and elective courses, and the successful defence of a master thesis.

2.2. Academic staff members are aware of the objectives of the study programme and their role in achieving these objectives.

Evidence and analysis

The academic staff expresses a shared vision about the programme, emphasizing the bridge between theological themes and societal issues, serving the needs of the specific religious community, and developing opportunities for higher-level reflection for professionals in the field **(T)**. They take active part in curriculum as well in mentoring activities for students.

2.3. Learning and teaching including independent work and traineeships form a whole. Study methods motivate learners to take charge of their studies and achieve learning outcomes.

Evidence and analysis

The programme is well-structured around self-study, on-site sessions and online/hybrid sessions. The programme management is planning to re-evaluate the balance between these different elements **(SER)**, but interviews with teachers and students did not indicate any serious problems in the format. The students appreciate the programme's flexibility in joining the sessions occasionally online, if work-related or other obligations make the commuting impossible, although physical presence is a respected norm both for teachers and students **(S)**.

The programme is making use of a problem-based learning approach **(SER)**. The extent to which different courses really make use of this approach varies, depending on the nature of the course and teachers' preferences **(T)**. Students are enthusiastic about the relevance of the courses and the focus on societal themes **(S)**.

A traineeship/internship in the master programme is optional and focussing currently primarily to secular organizations and activities. Considering that many master students are in-service pastors, it is an understandable choice. This may, however, disadvantage the students who want to grow into

that role and an internship would be an effective way of helping them in this growth. The panel recommends the programme to offer a traineeship opportunity for such students, for example via an elective space in the programme.

2.4. Learning and teaching supports, besides the acquisition of speciality skills, the development of transferable skills, which contribute to tackling the challenges of the changing world.

Evidence and analysis

The programme pays attention to the professional and generic skills via specific practically oriented courses (e.g. Self-leadership and project management, Presenting and preaching, and Communication and psychology), and via mentorship. Furthermore, the students gain a lot from interacting with each other, considering that many students are in-service pastors. Both the students and the teachers appreciate a lot the learning experience that makes use of this interaction **(S, M)**. The topics related to current challenges of the changing world enter the classroom regularly as cases and examples, especially considering the problem-based format of learning in this programme. The programme offers skills that are relevant in society more broadly (e.g. leadership, care and coaching), and the programme might want to make these more explicit and promote those also in its recruitment.

2.5. Appropriate methods are used for the assessment of learning outcomes; assessment is transparent, objective and supports the development of students. Where necessary, digital technologies among other means are used for assessment.

Evidence and analysis

The panel found that the institution uses a varied range of assessments. Next to traditional papers and exams, the programme makes use of debate, dispute and problem-based portfolios, as well as personalised diaries of spirituality, internships and a focus on students' individual vocational contexts and experience. **(SER, D)** These are clearly communicated to students who informed the panel that they understand what is expected of them in order to complete different assessment tasks. **(S)** Students also recognise and value the contribution that varied assessment methods make to their acquisition of different skills. **(S, A)** As noted in the institutional accreditation report, the panel considers that the institutional arrangements to ensure the objectivity and transparency of assessment need further development (e.g. resit policy, monitor comparability of standards). The panel confirmed that there was suitable alignment between assessment methods and learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: LEARNING AND TEACHING

The programme has clear and reasonable entry and graduation requirements, and a clearly defined and broadly shared vision. The programme develops professional skills needed for the specific career path as well as broader transferable skills that are also applicable for a different path. An internship is optional which, considering the target group, is understandable but might be a disadvantage for students with a different background. Assessment formats are sufficiently varied; assessment is to a large extent transparent and supports the learning process. The panel therefore determined that the programme conforms to the standard *Learning and Teaching*.

Strengths

- The programme has an appropriate, clear and broadly shared vision about its purpose and objectives.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- Consider internship opportunities for students who are not currently practicing in church but might wish to grow into the role with the help of the Master programme.
- The programme offers skills that are relevant in society more broadly (e.g. leadership, communication, care and coaching, project management). The programme could define these transferable skills explicitly and promote these also in its recruitment to show the broad relevance of the programme.

3. Organisation of studies

3.1. The organisation of studies is unambiguously regulated and information thereof publicly available; it allows to cater for the needs of different learners (including learners with special educational needs) as well as specificities of the study programme group.

Evidence and analysis

The programme is governed by the Seminary's Study Regulations, a comprehensive document that lists rules on most academic and administrative processes. The document governs also Mentorship, which is central to student support at the institution and design to address the needs of the whole student body, including students with special education needs. **(D)** However, as noted under Standard 10 in the institution report, the arrangements for supporting students with special educational needs, while effective in practice **(S, A, M)** would benefit from being codified to aid transparency and assist the consistent and effective application of student support systems within the Seminary. **(D)** The programme is also sensitive to the students' needs in a broad sense, accommodating students via recordings, and via a good combination of online and physical meetings **(SER, S)**. The programme is well aware that its students are spread all over the country and is sensitive to these needs without sacrificing educational quality.

3.2. Traineeships are regulated, requirements for the completion of traineeships have been laid down and written preliminary agreements have been concluded with organisations offering traineeship opportunities.

Evidence and analysis

The programme does not have a mandatory traineeship requirement. Practical elements are built into two courses (including preparation for the Master's theses, identified as 'apprenticeship'). Considering that the majority of the master students are in-service pastors, or otherwise active in their churches, a mandatory traineeship requirement would indeed add little to the development of a large proportion of the student cohort. This choice, however, may disadvantage the students who want to grow through their studies into a pastor's role. An internship would be an effective way of helping them in this growth. The programme offers internship opportunities but focusses on secular organisations and activities. The programme could offer structural opportunities for advanced internships in a church setting for the group of students interested in a church career. Considering that the institution has very good links with the churches, finding the partners should not be an issue.

3.3. The higher education institution has in place rules for academic recognition as well as for recognizing prior studies and work experience; these are implemented in the study programme group under assessment.

Evidence and analysis

The programme has a formal document in place specifying the procedure and criteria for recognizing prior studies and work experience **(D)**. A stable number of requests are being submitted every year within the Seminary (data is aggregated for Bachelor and Master programmes though) and in recent

years the programme has been able to accommodate all of the requests, as a result of good counselling prior to their submission **(SER, M)**.

The Master students enter the programme from diverse educational background, some without any exposure to theology, and they are expected to bridge the gap on their own initiative, sometimes with the help of the Bible School **(SER)**. The panel therefore recommends that the Seminary formalizes pre-master opportunities for students admitted to the MA programme without prior training or qualifications in theology

3.4. Students enrolled in the study programme group participate in international (including virtual) mobility programmes.

Evidence and analysis

The programme caters primarily for those students who want to maintain a connection to their practical work and aspire to integrate theological education into their professional and personal lives **(SER)**. This creates a challenge for international mobility. Family and work obligations are a major obstacle for mobility considering the characteristics of the student population **(S)**. The panel received evidence of modest student involvement in international mobility that was reasonable considering these barriers. Nevertheless, the panel considered that the institution could expand innovative forms of international mobility on the programme that takes account of these barriers, for example short virtual mobility modules with international partners. As almost one third of the courses are in English **(SER)**, it creates the conditions for participation in international mobility programmes. Furthermore, international topics may be more actively incorporated in the curriculum to encourage "internationalisation at home" and expose students to international themes and diversity.

3.5. Fair and transparent rules for dealing with complaints are applied in the study programme group.

Evidence and analysis

The rules for dealing with complaints and appeals (e.g. grades) are transparent to students and specified in the Study regulation **(D, S)**. In principle, complaints are handled by the Advisory board. However, as indicated in the institutional accreditation report, the process of addressing an appeal or complaint on academic matters remains somewhat unclear. While the student can submit an appeal by the Academic Dean, the role of the Academic Dean, the rector and the lead teachers in the decision making remains informal **(M)**.

3.6. Regular internal review is conducted in the study programme group, including the analysis and taking into account of feedback from various stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, academic staff).

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary collects regularly student feedback via course surveys. Since it is a new programme, there are no alumni or employers' surveys available yet, but the institution has the policy in place for gathering the input. External stakeholders (the community) was actively involved in developing the

master programme. A targeted student survey for the general learning experience (a focus on the balance between independent study, on-site and online learning) is planned for spring 2025 **(SER)**. There are also concrete examples of changing the program based on student feedback (e.g. length of the programme, core and mandatory courses) **(SER, M)**.

3.7. Counselling is ensured for students (study and career counselling as well as psychological counselling); effective measures for supporting academic progress of students and preventing dropouts are being implemented.

Evidence and analysis

Students can access a wide range of counselling in different forms. The Union avails itself of the services of Christian psychologists from the Union-owned 'Foundation From Friend to Friend' who have assisted a number of students at the Seminary. **(SER)** Internally, the Seminary has a Student Dean in place who is responsible for all formal issues related to studies and also provides support for students experiencing personal issues. **(M)** The Rector assumes responsibility for more serious personal issues. **(M)** Students are also assigned mentors and part of this role is designed to provide pastoral assistance, which is valued by students. **(S, A, M)** The institution operates career counselling, organised by the project leader of the Centre of Leadership and Mentoring (JuMe). **(SER)** Based on the data from the first three years, the programme has a low drop-out rate. These measures have probably contributed to student motivation and progress.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: ORGANISATION OF STUDIES

The organisation of studies is clearly regulated and a comprehensive *Study Regulations* document is publicly available. Policies on complaints and RPL are clearly formulated. Mentoring and counselling supports students effectively and the programme caters to students' individual needs. Some aspects are informally addressed, such as facilities for students with special needs. Considering the specificity of the target group, traineeship is not currently a formal part of the program and therefore also no formal traineeship agreements exist. Based on this evidence, the Seminary conforms to the standard *Organisation of Studies*.

Strengths

- The programme considers very well the individual needs of students by applying an effective mix of independent study, online meetings and physical meetings, supported by mentoring and counselling.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Master students enter the programme from diverse educational background, some without any exposure to theology, and they are expected to bridge the gap on their own initiative. In the admission process the gap between requirements and competencies is bridged voluntarily by the students. The panel therefore **recommends** that the seminary establish the assessment of pre-requisites or pre-master's courses for students admitted to the MA programme without prior training or qualifications in theology

Opportunities for further improvement

- Consider expanding innovative forms of international mobility on the programme that takes account of barriers to standard mobility, for example short virtual mobility with international partners and enhancing internationalisation within curriculum.
- As identified in the institutional accreditation report, the Seminary has formulated its complaint and appeals policy but responsibility for certain academic decisions remains unclear (e.g. grade appeals, plagiarism appeals, resits). The Seminary is recommended to identify clearly a body who has a mandate to decide on such cases.

4. Academic staff

4.1. Procedures for the selection and recruitment of academic staff are fair and transparent.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has been very proactive in finding qualified staff **(M)**. Considering a small pool of suitable candidates, the personal headhunting approach is a legitimate hiring policy. The Seminary is also investing into the future by seeking out young people with a potential to grow into a teaching role after their PhD **(SER)**. There is an effective mix of teachers devoted primarily to the Seminary, guest teachers, and part-time teachers.

4.2. The qualifications of 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.

Evidence and analysis

With the exception of two teachers, all teachers in the Master programme have a PhD level qualification **(SER)**. All regular teachers (lead teachers) go through an attestation in every five years **(SER, T)**. The programme also employs teachers with practical experience in the field, which is valuable considering the profile of the programme and the nature of the student population.

4.3. The number of regular academic staff in the study programme group is adequate and enables achieving the objectives of the study programmes as well as the learning outcomes.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary employs 43 teaching staff members, with a notable proportion—nearly half—holding doctoral degrees. Almost all teachers in the Master programme hold a doctoral degree and some have excellent international level research background. This contributes to the academic quality. The Seminary also hires targeted part-time staff to fill specific expertise areas (e.g. research methodology) **(T)**. As pointed out in the institutional assessment, the large number of part-time positions poses challenges especially in the area of effective information sharing among the staff. To address this, the Seminary plans to increase academic meetings to enhance communication and collaborative practices. **(M, SER)**

4.4. 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.

Evidence and analysis

Several of the academic staff members are regularly engaged in international theological exchange and participate in international and local conferences. Some have participated in international mobility programmes. Academic staff also have international teaching experience (TCMI, IBTSC). **(SER)** As pointed out in the institutional assessment, regarding staff with multiple affiliations the question arises as to which institution they represented at these events **(Appendix 9)**. Nevertheless, the

Seminary is active in encouraging international mobility and conference participation and the teachers are well aware of the opportunities **(T)**.

4.5. The academic staff have adequate teaching and digital skills for supporting the development of self-directed learners. Regular academic staff members have undergone required appraisal and/or received regular feedback on their performance; and have been topping up their professional, digital and pedagogical skills.

Evidence and analysis

The academic staff is comfortable with the digital environment of the school, and they are supported by the Educational Designer if there is a need for support with digital systems **(interview with supporting staff)**. Staff participates regularly in training events and conferences **(SER)** and staff is aware of opportunities for further development in didactical skills in other institutions **(T)**.

4.6. The level and volume of research, development and creative activities undertaken by academic staff is sufficient for conducting studies and supervising student work in the relevant cycle of higher education. Where doctoral studies are under assessment: supervisors of doctoral theses actively engage in research and doctoral theses have successfully been defended under their supervision.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary's Research Plan for 2020–2026, which has been regularly updated, aligns with the re-assessment criteria by providing a structured approach to research priorities, particularly emphasizing Free Church Identity and the Church's societal role **(SER)**. Though, as noted elsewhere in the report this does not consistently and sufficiently direct staff research across the institution. High-quality research is conducted in the Seminary, for junior staff there is an opportunity for these activities to be more closely linked to the Research Plan.

Teachers are active researchers in the field and thereby qualified for supervising students' research work. The total count of yearly publications of all teachers linked to the Seminary over the last period has been between 36 and 14 publications **(SER)**. While several of the publishing staff members have main affiliation elsewhere and contribute to the Seminary on a part-time basis, they offer valuable research strength to the institution and they were attracted particularly for supporting the Seminary's Master programme with their different expertise.

4.7. The age structure of academic staff ensures sustainability in the study programme group.

Evidence and analysis

The average age of teachers in the Seminary is 49 years **(SER)**. The Seminary is well aware of the generation change coming up over 8-10 years **(SER)** and it prepares for it by actively searching for new talent and encouraging them to develop into PhD level teachers. The teacher interview showed a mix of senior-level teachers and more junior teachers still on their PhD trajectory **(T)**.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: ACADEMIC STAFF

The Seminary employs sufficient number of academic staff for the Master's programme, with almost all of teachers holding a PhD degree. Academic staff members are involved to a varying degree in research activities, international mobility and teacher training activities, and the staff is well aware about the different opportunities. A significant share of staff works part-time for the institution, which allows to cover a broad area of expertise in a small institution but also creates its challenges. Considering a large share of part-time staff, the Seminary faces a challenge of communication and collaborative practices, for which it has taken necessary steps. The Seminary is pro-active in finding qualified teachers and it is also investing into the future by seeking out young people with a potential to grow into a teaching role after their PhD. Based on this evidence, the programme conforms to the standard *Academic Staff*.

Strengths

- The Seminary has a pro-active staffing policy of identifying highly qualified candidates for teaching tasks and encouraging growth of a new generation of teachers.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- As identified in the institutional accreditation report, encourage further the research and publication culture in the Seminary. Consider mentoring and collaboration opportunities for young researchers to develop into active researchers (e.g. co-publishing).

5. Learning and teaching environment

5.1. An environment has been created for teaching and learning as well as related research, development and creative activities (lecture rooms, labs, seminar rooms, spaces for independent work by students, digital learning environment etc.), which is sufficient and meets modern requirements for achieving the objectives of study programmes.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary building is modern, accessible and serves the purpose of the programme well. There is auditorial space for teaching and shared/private space for learning and for interacting **(R)**. As the programme make active use of hybrid learning, the classrooms are well equipped with technology (large screens, computers, connection) that facilitate high-quality online interaction **(R)**.

5.2. The digital infrastructure at the higher education institution (including network, digital equipment, software and services, study information system, helpdesk, digital security etc) is up-to-date. Digital infrastructure meets the needs of students in the study programme group, teaching and other staff at the higher education institution.

Evidence and analysis

Seminary uses the study information system Tahvel and Moodle environment for study support **(SER)**. The system works well for students **(S)**. Students get digital support from the Academic Dean, Educational Designer and sometimes from teachers, if needed **(SER)**. Also, teachers get digital support from the Academic Dean and Educational Designer, if for example needed for posting material, course guides and recordings into a digital system **(S)**.

5.3. Support for digital learning and teaching is available for students and teaching staff.

Evidence and analysis

Support for digital learning and teaching is available for staff and students (see 5.2.). Furthermore, students are introduced to the digital systems by the Academic Dean **(SER)** and are also supported via the mentor groups if necessary **(S)**.

5.4. Access to up-to-date textbooks; research publications and other study materials as well as access to research databases necessary for conducting studies, research, development and creative activities in the study programme group are ensured to students and teachers of the respective study programme group.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has a functional physical library that supports students sufficiently in their course work and research projects. Also, the digital library is growing. Digital science databases are not available on campus or online from the distance, but they are available in larger libraries, including the University of Tartu and University of Tallinn libraries, and the National Library.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: LEARNING AND TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

The programme has modern, functional and welcoming physical facilities. The digital systems effectively support the learning environment and administrative systems. Technical equipment (connections, screens etc.) suitably support hybrid learning and online interaction. Students and staff have sufficient support from the Academic Dean and Educational Designer. The physical library is sufficient and functional for the needs; access to online databases is available via other libraries on location, but not online. The panel determined that the Seminary conforms to requirements of the standard *Learning and Teaching Environment*.

Strengths

- The programme has good digital solutions for facilitating hybrid education effectively, and all staff make use of these facilities and are provided with appropriate support in order to do so.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- The panel encourages the Seminary to search for opportunities for ensuring online access to digital databases, especially considering that many students live outside of Tartu and Tallinn.

6. Financial resources

6.1. The educational institution has adequate funds necessary for conducting high quality studies as well as for the provision of adequate and up-to-date support services, for implementing learning and teaching related developments and for supporting the development of academic staff. The higher education institution has sufficient funds for study programme group related research, development and/or creative activities.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has achieved a stable financial situation that has improved significantly over the past two years, with self-generated income rising from 17% of total income in 2020 to 40% in 2024. Diverse funding sources include tuition fees, donations, economic activities, and project grants, which collectively support the Seminary's growth and development.

A system of shared financial responsibility has been established, involving the Rector, General Secretary, and financial unit leader to ensure sustainable management.

6.2. 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.

Evidence and analysis

The financial report, on behalf of the UFBEC as the owner, is publicly available at the Estonian Business Register (**SER, R**). The reports are also posted on the UFBEC website. The panel does not have information about financial auditing.

6.3. The higher education institution has a long-term (five years) strategy for ensuring financial resources along with a risk analysis and financial projection. The strategy shall include an analysis of risks stemming from the operating environment along with envisioned measures for the mitigation thereof. Regular development planning and risk management with a view to ensuring sustainability of high quality studies in the higher education institution as a whole and in the relevant study programme group is undertaken at the higher education institution.

Evidence and analysis

The Seminary has provided a programme-level financial analysis (**D**). The main identified risks include lower student numbers, loss of external income sources, and shortage of qualified teaching staff. These risks are coupled with a reasonable mitigation plan.

The Seminary has also provided a narrative 5-year risk analysis (**SER, D**). The analysis does not identify any concrete risks or their mitigation plans, but it provides assurance about an improved financial situation, more diversified income sources and lowered real estate risks that are expected to ensure financial sustainability in the coming years.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT: FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The programme meets necessary reporting requirements. The financial report has been submitted. The institution has developed a risk and financial analysis. Considering that the Seminary is a very small institution without governmental funding, some financial uncertainty is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the institution has increased its funds, diversified its funding sources and has an assurance from the UFBEC, which creates a picture of a solid financial sustainability. The programme conforms to the standard *Financial Resources*.

Strengths

- N/A

Areas of concern and recommendations

- N/A

Opportunities for further improvement

- N/A