

Decision Regarding Institutional Accreditation Lääne-Viru College

21/08/2018

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education at the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to accredit Lääne-Viru College for seven years, with a secondary condition

On the basis of subsection 21 (2) and clause 21 (3) 1) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, subsection 10 (4) of the Universities Act, point 3.7.3 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA') and points 48.2 and 48.7 of the document, 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', authorised in point 3.7.1 of the above-mentioned EKKA Statutes; the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 28.01.2015 the Council decided to accredit Lääne-Viru College for three years, until 28.01.2018.
2. On 14.12.2017 Lääne-Viru College and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a new institutional accreditation.
3. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 07.05.2018, approved the following membership of the committee for the institutional accreditation as well as for the quality assessment of the Business and Administration and the Social Services study programme groups at Lääne-Viru College (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

Paul Mitchell	Chair of the Committee – Non-university member of the Committee, higher education expert, Director, Mega Mitchell Consulting Ltd. (United Kingdom)
Ben Bierings	Previously lecturer in Social Work at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Sittard/Maastricht (Holland)
Ari Björkqvist	Project Director, Haaga-Helia Baltic Hotel Management School, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Finland)
Johanna-Kaisa Heikkilä	Senior Advisor, JAMK University of Applied Sciences (Finland)
Britt Järvet	Student, Tallinn University; Chairperson of the Estonian Federation of Student Unions (Estonia)
Enn Listra	Professor, Dean of the School of Business and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia)
Danute Remeikiene	Director, Alytus College (Lithuania)

4. Lääne-Viru College submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 27.02.2018 and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 5.04.2018.
5. An assessment visit was made to Lääne-Viru College during 15–17.05.2018.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 4.07.2018, EKKA forwarded it to Lääne-Viru College for its comments on 5.07.2018 and the College delivered its response on 11.07.2018.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 18.07.2018. That assessment report is an integral part of the decision, and is available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee’s final assessment report along with the College’s self-evaluation report to the Council members on 2.08.2018.
9. The Committee presented the following component assessments:

Organisational management and performance	Conforms to requirements
Teaching and learning	Conforms to requirements
Research, development and/or other creative activity (RDC)	Partially conforms to requirements
Service to society	Conforms to requirements

10. The Council with 11 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 21.08.2018 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding Lääne-Viru College.

10.1. Organisational management and performance

Strengths

- 1) Students, alumni, employers and other main stakeholders highly value Lääne-Viru College (LVC). Employers benefit from in-service trainings which the College offers to their employees and the students are convinced that the qualifications they receive will give them an advantage in the labour market.
- 2) The management style at LVC is effective and inclusive, and all processes regarding the aspects of College life are functioning well. Surveys conducted among employees and students confirm a consistently high level of satisfaction with the management of the College.
- 3) The College is clearly committed to diversifying its sources of income, in particular by expanding the volume of applied research and increasing revenues from in-service trainings, retraining and counselling services.
- 4) The university has wisely continued to invest in the development of its IT tools that are used effectively in both teaching and administrative activities. The quality management system is implemented effectively.
- 5) The College is committed to continuously modernising the teaching and learning environment to better support study programme development and to respond to its students’ needs. An example of this is its environmentally friendly campus where geothermal heating and solar energy are used.
- 6) The College is implementing very effective measures to support the development of its staff by providing them with opportunities for practice at other higher education institutions and for international mobility, as well as by encouraging their participation in conferences, seminars and R&D programmes. The College also offers the same opportunities to guest staff members for their self-development.
- 7) The College has systematically conducted feedback surveys among employers, students and other stakeholders, and analysed the results in order to take them into account in its improvement activities.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) It is recommended that the College reach an agreement with interested parties on a possible merger with a similar higher education institution as soon as possible. The continuing uncertainty does not support the College's development planning.
- 2) For its size the College has a rather 'heavy' organisational structure. Currently, the roles of the Vice Rector and other staff members are being reviewed, moving towards a matrix organisation, an objective of which could be, inter alia, an increase in commercial activities.
- 3) The Centre for In-Service Training and Retraining should be expanded (as an important regional centre and source of additional income) to provide lifelong learning and counselling services to various stakeholders. This would also require some changes in the structure of the management of the College.
- 4) The number of teaching staff members with doctoral degrees should be increased at the College.

10.2. Teaching and learning

Strengths

- 1) The areas for improvement and recommendations suggested during the 2015 institutional accreditation have been taken seriously and effective changes have been implemented: as LVC has decided now to focus on higher education, the learning outcomes and assessment tasks are clearly linked to the Descriptor for Level 6 of the Estonian Qualifications Framework and to the requirements of the Government of the Republic Regulation, 'Standard of Higher Education'. Additionally, the procedures for recognition of prior learning and work experience (VÕTA) have been changed upon admission of students.
- 2) The use of interviews during the admission process allows the College to identify the applicant's motivation and language skills. It also helps to understand the level at which students begin their studies in order to better focus on their individual development later on.
- 3) There is an introduction course for all students which helps them to settle into their studies.
- 4) A needs-based legal counselling centre for students is operating at the College, which is unusual for higher education institutions in Estonia. A counselling system for students with special needs has also been created.
- 5) The College has continued successfully to develop 'blended learning' – distance learning combined with intensive face-to-face instruction – and the 'connective internship' model.
- 6) All students may participate in a well-organised internship programme.
- 7) The dropout rate is lower than the average dropout rates at higher education institutions in Estonia, which indicates that students are well-supported during their studies. The College implements various measures to further reduce the dropout rate.
- 8) Flexible study opportunities have been created for adult learners. LVC is mainly focused on distance education, which makes the College's profile unique in Estonia.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) In order to develop a better understanding of international standards of competence in specialties offered at the College, it is recommended that the College conduct benchmarking against comparable European higher education institutions.
- 2) As the Universities Act provides that higher education in Estonia is free of charge when certain requirements have been met, the administration fees levied on applications for recognition of prior learning should be waived.
- 3) Satisfaction surveys and their results should be completely transparent, by redefining the questionnaire format, and removing the predefined response options. Also, the default setting should be changed in the feedback system, which currently automatically gives '4' on the response rate scale.

- 4) The College should review its internationalisation policy in order to achieve further growth in this area. This should include:
 - taking further steps to encourage international staff mobility, including recruiting international teaching staff;
 - providing staff with more opportunities to improve their English proficiency;
 - increasing the number of study programmes and modules taught in English to attract international students (currently only one programme is taught in English);
 - exploring ways to create joint programmes with international partners;
 - developing international student mobility further by introducing them to (more flexible) learning mobility opportunities.

10.3. Research, development and/or other creative activity (RDC)

Strengths

- 1) Compared to the 2015 evaluation, there have been clear changes in research activities at the College, and also, the planning of R&D activities has become much more detailed. The College has clearly defined its core activities in its Strategy for Research, Development and Creative Activities for 2016–2018. The Development Plan and the Strategy are structured very well.
- 2) The College has done a very good job of supervising its students. Students are successfully involved in research and creative activities and the level of their satisfaction with supervision is systematically measured. The professionalism, efficiency and workloads of supervisors are in good balance, ensuring the quality of research as well as the quality of students' graduation theses, and positively affecting students' completion of their studies.
- 3) Graduates of Lääne-Viru College have often been among the winners of the scholarship competition conducted by the Estonian Rectors' Conference of the Universities of Applied Sciences, which results in awarding an annual scholarship to the students who have defended the best graduation or master's theses in applied sciences.
- 4) Every year students take part in a competition for accounting-related research papers to develop new, interesting and innovative approaches.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The number of high-level publications is low – according to ETIS, only three high-level scientific articles have been published by the LVC lecturers since 2003. In order to make research more active, the College's priority must be to increase the number of staff members with doctoral degrees and to encourage existing lecturers to publish more scientific articles. Students should also be more involved in writing scientific articles (either as independent authors or as co-authors with their supervisors).
- 2) The R&D Strategy should be reviewed, so that it focuses on specific fields of applied research. The College should also be more ambitious and active in addressing the existing development goals. All goals set in the Strategy should be clearly measurable. More attention should be paid to the development of research competencies.
- 3) The College should create better contractual relationships for applied research with local authorities and companies in order to obtain additional financial resources for the College. For example, the College could offer comprehensive R&D packages to companies.

10.4. Service to society

Strengths

- 1) LVC regularly contributes to activities of the local community and to entrepreneurship by providing customer-centred training services. In the light of the available resources, the impact of the College's activities on the local community is clearly above average in Estonia.

- 2) It is worthy of recognition that 2/3 of the College's lecturers are involved in the provision of in-service trainings for companies and organisations.
- 3) It is commendable that the College plans to implement an 'open-door' policy.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The College should consider how to better focus its popularisation activities in order to achieve optimal results with scarce resources.
 - 2) Satisfaction questionnaires for the participants in trainings should be made more transparent by removing ready-given options from the alternatives.
- 11.** If one or two component assessments are provided as 'partially conforms with requirements' and all other component assessments are provided as 'conforms with requirements', the Quality Assessment Council shall analyse the strengths and areas for improvement of the higher education institution and conclude that the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment, meet the requirements; and decide to accredit the higher education institution for seven years; or shall conclude that there are deficiencies in the management, administration, academic and research activity, or academic and research environment of the higher education institution; give instructions to remove them; and decide to accredit the higher education institution for three years.
- 12.** The Council analysed the strengths and areas for improvement of Lääne-Viru College and concluded that the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment meet the requirements if the College eliminates the following shortcomings in the area of research and development:
- According to point 7.3.1.1 of the regulation, 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', authorised in clause 10 (1) 1), subsection 10 (4) and §12 of the Universities Act, subsections 21 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, and subsections 14 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Private Schools Act; *a higher education institution must define its RDC objectives and measure their implementation*. There are no clear benchmarks for the goals set by the Research and Development Strategy of Lääne-Viru College.
 - According to point 7.3.2.1 of the regulation, 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', *a higher education institution must have a functioning RDC support system*. The number of publications and applied research by the teaching staff at Lääne-Viru College is low. In order to make research more active, the College's priority must be to increase the number of staff members with doctoral degrees and to support the development of research competencies of the teaching staff. The College must create better contractual relationships for applied research with local authorities and companies in order to obtain additional financial resources for the support of staff's research capabilities.
- 13.** According to clause 53 (1) 2) of the Administrative Procedure Act, a secondary condition of an administrative act is an additional duty related to the principal regulation of the administrative act and, according to clause 53 (1) 3), it is also a supplementary condition for the creation of a right arising from the principal regulation of the administrative act. Clauses 53 (2) 2) and 3) of the Administrative Procedure Act establish that a secondary condition may be imposed on an administrative act if the administrative act cannot be issued without the secondary condition, or if issue of the administrative act must be resolved on the basis of an administrative right of discretion. The Council found that, without a secondary condition, the next quality assessment of the study programme group should be conducted in three years, and therefore, on the basis of points 48.2 and 48.7 of the document, 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', the Council

DECIDED

to accredit Lääne-Viru College for seven years with the following secondary condition:

No later than 21.08.2020, Lääne-Viru College shall submit a progress report in English to the Council on eliminating the shortcoming referred to in point 13 of this document. Members of the assessment committee shall be involved in the assessment of compliance with the secondary condition.

The decision was adopted by 11 votes in favour and 0 against.

14. If Lääne-Viru College does not comply with the secondary condition by the due date, the Council will revoke this accreditation decision or establish a new secondary condition.
15. This accreditation will be valid until 21.08.2025 or until the revocation of the decision. The EKKA Bureau will coordinate a week for the next visit of institutional accreditation with the College no later than 21.11.2024.
16. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

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

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

Eve Eisenschmidt
Chair of the Council

Hillar Bauman
Secretary of the Council