The decision of the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education

Estonian Academy of Security Sciences

Decision on the initial assessment of the joint Master's study programme "Countering Hybrid Threats" within the Internal Security study programme group

29 April 2025

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education decided that studies at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences in the joint Master's study programme "Countering Hybrid Threats" within the Internal Security study programme group partially conforms to the level required.

Pursuant to subsections 9(3) and 10(1) of the Higher Education Act and clause 32.5 of the document "Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Re-assessment in Higher Education", established by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA), the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (hereinafter referred to as the Council) states the following:

1. On 11.12.2024, the Ministry of Education and Research submitted the information required for the initial assessment of the joint Master's study programme "Countering Hybrid Threats" within the Internal Security study programme group of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (hereinafter: Academy) to HAKA.
2. On 02.02.2025, the Director of HAKA approved the following composition of the committee for initial assessment (hereinafter referred to as the Committee):

Sergiu Vasile	Chair; Director, Border Police Department within the Police Faculty, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Police Academy, Bucharest; Romania
Heidi Maiberg	Student member of the Committee; graduated from PhD studies of the Royal Holloway University London less than a year ago; Estonia
Kimmo Himberg	Senior advisor, Taigawise Oy Ltd; former Rector of Police University College, Finland

Marek Kohv	Head of the Security and Resilience Research Programme, International Centre for Defence and Security

3. The Assessment Committee reviewed the information submitted by the Academy and the Ministry of Education and Research. Web conversations with the representatives of the Academy were held on 18.03.2025.

4. The Committee sent the draft assessment report to the Academy for comments on 04.04.2025.

5. The Academy sent its comments on the assessment report on 16.04.2025.

6. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the HAKA Bureau on 21.04.2025. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision.

7. The Committee's assessments were as follows:

Study programme	Partially conforms to the level required
Learning and teaching	Conforms to the level required
Organisation of studies	Conforms to the level required
Academic staff	Conforms to the level required
Learning environment	Conforms to the level required
Financial resources	Conforms to the level required

8. The Council with thirteen members present discussed these received documents in its session on 29.04.2025 and, based on the assessment report and the information submitted by the higher education institution to the Estonian Education Information System, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations, and suggestions for further development regarding the higher education institution.

8.1. Study programme

Strengths:

1) The need for the study programme is demonstrated by the letters of support from the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Defence, which confirm the involvement of important national security authorities.

2) Cooperation with Lithuanian and Latvian universities ensures a diverse and international learning environment.

3) The study programme is well structured, with clear learning outcomes consistent with the European Qualifications Framework, Level 7, and EU policies. The study programme covers important areas such as hybrid threats, resilience building, strategic communication, and crisis management.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations:

1) The concept of hybrid threats is not entirely clear in the documents of the study programme. The 2016 EU definition could be used consistently in the documents of the study programme.

2) The study programme should also include military aspects, as these topics are very important with regard to hybrid threats. From an academic point of view, a study programme for hybrid threats without a military dimension would be incomplete. In addition, it is impractical as graduates may encounter difficulties in jobs that require collaboration with defence or intelligence agencies. Even in study programmes with a civilian focus, basic military literacy in concepts, structures and strategies is essential for delivering effective professionals in security policy and crisis management. This does not mean that education should be militarised. Rather, a programme must ensure holistic, realistic, and operationally relevant understanding. Such a programme would equip future policymakers, analysts, and crisis responders to engage effectively in the shared responsibility of national security.

3) Although the modules in data analysis and management concern technical skills, the study programme lacks specific IT / cyber security subjects such as cyber threat intelligence, digital forensics or infrastructure protection. The study programme should extend the IT / cyber security modules.

Suggestions for further development:

1) Although internship is not a mandatory part of the Master's study programme in Estonia, mandatory internships with various national and/or EU agencies (e.g. Frontex, national defence institutions or crisis management bodies) should be considered. This addition would not only enhance the practical applicability of the study programme but would also serve as a promotional tool, showcasing real-world relevance and increasing demand for graduates with expertise in countering hybrid threats.

2) The Academy could further expand its international cooperation by partnering with universities, research institutions and security organisations outside the European Union. This would enhance the programme's global reach and provide students with broader perspectives on hybrid threats.

3) The Academy could establish long-term strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, such as government agencies, international organisations, and private sector companies, to ensure the programme remains relevant and aligned with industry needs.

8.2.   Learning and teaching
Strengths:

1) The studies will be taking place in three higher education institutions, which, in addition to the planned content of the study programme, will help create an environment where students will learn from each other in an informal way as well. Intercultural communication is a transferable skill which supports tackling the challenges of a changing world.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations:

1) The Academy is encouraged to consider the application of software that allows providing feedback on the students' work without knowing a student's name (e.g. Turnitin). Other options for increasing the neutrality and objectivity of assessment (e.g. implementing cooperation between teaching staff) could also be considered.
2) A transparent system and guidelines should be set up for students that describe how allocation of supervisors is organised among three higher education institutions, especially if a student is struggling to find a suitable supervisor, and how cooperation between two supervisors from different organisations is organised. Considering the possible diversity of the topics of the theses, the principles of the ethics committee regarding work and the assessment of theses should be specified.

Suggestions for further development:

1) According to submitted materials and the assessment visit, teaching staff has access to trainings to improve their teaching methods as well as support from educational technologist. However, the trainings are not mandatory. The programme is encouraged to create a mandatory internal training system for the staff to stay in touch with the most up-to-date teaching methods.

8.3.   Organisation of studies
Strengths:

1) Providing scholarships to alumni who turn their thesis into a scientific publication is a good practice that contributes to research, and development of the field, as well as raises awareness of the study programme.
2) All premises within the consortium partners are built bearing physical disabilities in mind. The teaching staff and the support administrative staff are ready to offer full support for adapting and customising the training materials and documents for special needs.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations:

1) The Academy should reconsider how mentoring is provided to students. According to the current system, proactivity lies with the student. Given the target audience (working professionals), mentoring should be used as a preventative measure which is an integrated part of the studies, with focus on time management.

8.4.   Academic staff
Strengths:

1) All faculty members have extensive teaching experience, as well as experience from other international Master's programmes in Internal Security.
2) The Best Lecturer award is an example of a good practice to motivate lecturers, for example.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations:

1) Since there are no military and IT subjects in the study programme, there are no corresponding lecturers. Given the very broad scope of potential hybrid threats, research and experience in these fields would be a useful input to the study programme.

8.5.   Learning environment
Strengths:

1) The Academy has invested in modern IT infrastructure, including virtual simulation centres, hybrid lecture rooms, and access to scientific databases, ensuring a high-quality learning environment.
2) Extensive access to electronic resources, academic support services and e-learning platforms (in particular Moodle) has been provided.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations:

1) The degree of uniformity and integration of resources and platforms between partner institutions remains unclear. All aspects regarding the learning and teaching environments should be better coordinated with the consortium partners, especially for the online platforms, procedures within the activities and common approach for the online teaching/assessment modules.

8.6.   Financial resources
Strengths:

1) The Academy has secured external funding through EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, to support the study programme.
2) The Academy has conducted a detailed risk analysis and developed mitigating measures to address potential risks, such as the loss of EU funding or restrictions in international mobility.
3) The Academy has a well-structured budget that supports the implementation of the curriculum, including investments in modern learning environments and state-of-the-art teaching equipment.
4) The Academy has calculated the cost of one student place in the Master's study programme, ensuring financial sustainability.

Suggestions for further development:

1) The study programme is largely based on EU funding. The Academy should explore additional funding sources, such as private sector partnerships and alumni contributions, to reduce dependence on EU funding.

9. If the assessment in one or two fields of assessment is "partially conforms to the level required" and the remaining assessments are "conforms to the level required", the Assessment Council weighs the strengths and areas for improvement of the study programme group and adopts one of the following decisions:

a) adopts a decision that the studies conform to the level required, and makes a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research that the higher education institution be granted the right to conduct studies in the respective study programme group and studies, or

b) adopts a decision that the studies partially conform to the level required, and makes a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research that the higher education institution be granted the right to conduct studies in the respective study programme group and studies for one to three years.

10. The Council weighed the strengths and areas for improvement of the Academy in organising the joint Master's study programme "Countering Hybrid Threats" within the Internal Security study programme group and, considering the areas for improvement specified in clause 8 of the decision:
§7(3) of the Standard of Higher Education states that "Different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole. The title of the study programme is consistent with the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme, modules and subjects." The curriculum of the Academy should also include military aspects, as these topics are very important in the case of hybrid threats. From an academic point of view, a study programme for hybrid threats without

a military dimension would be incomplete. In addition, it is impractical as graduates may encounter difficulties in jobs that require collaboration with defence or intelligence agencies. Even in study programmes with a civilian focus, basic military literacy in concepts, structures and strategies is essential for delivering effective professionals in security policy and crisis management. This does not mean that education should be militarised. Rather, the study programme must ensure holistic, realistic, and operationally relevant understanding. Such a programme would equip future policymakers, analysts, and crisis responders to engage effectively in the shared responsibility of national security. Although the modules in data analysis and management concern technical skills, the study programme lacks specific IT / cyber security subjects such as cyber threat intelligence, digital forensics or infrastructure protection. The study programme should extend the IT / cyber security modules.

DECIDED THE FOLLOWING:

1) The studies partially conform to the level required;
2) To make a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences the right to conduct studies in the joint Master's study programme "Countering Hybrid Threats" of the Internal Security study programme group for three years.

The decision was adopted with 13 votes in favour. 0 were against.

11. A person who finds that his or her rights are violated or his or her freedoms are restricted by this decision may file a challenge with the HAKA Assessment Council within 30 days after he or she became or should have become aware of the decision. The Assessment Council shall send the challenge to the HAKA Appeals Committee, which shall, within five days of receipt of the challenge, provide a written unbiased opinion to the Assessment Council on the validity of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within 10 days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If further examination of the challenge is necessary, the Assessment Council may extend the deadline for examining the challenge by up to 30 days. Judicial contestation of a decision is possible within 30 days from the date of service of the decision by filing an appeal with the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Court Procedure Act.

Hillar Bauman

Secretary of the Council