



Assessment Report on Fulfilling the Requirements of the Secondary Condition of Institutional Accreditation

Tallinn University

2023



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Introduction

Background and aim of the assessment

‘Institutional accreditation’ is the process of external evaluation which assesses the conformity of a university or 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 expert panel analyses the strengths and weaknesses 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.

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.

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 (hereinafter HAKA Council) http://ekka.archimedes.ee/wp-content/uploads/Guide_to_IA_18_en.pdf as of 14.06.2022.

The institutional accreditation of Tallinn University took place in March 2021. HAKA Council decided at its meeting on 7.06.2021, that the next accreditation is to take place in seven years if the HEI meets certain requirements set by the HAKA Council.

The task of the current expert panel was to evaluate whether the requirements (secondary condition) set by the HAKA Council have been met by Tallinn University.

The expert panel consisted of the following members:

Anja Oskamp	Emeritus Rector, Open University of the Netherland, The Netherlands
Liz Bacon	Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Abertay University, Scotland

Assessment process

The higher education institution sent its progress report on the fulfilment of the requirements of the secondary condition to HAKA on 17.01.2023.

The members of the expert panel wrote the report based on the written materials presented by the HEI and the information obtained in the interviews held (electronically) on 21st February 2023.

In the following sections, the expert panel summarises their findings regarding the fulfilment of the secondary condition and provides feedback on the progress the HEI has made in connection with experts' recommendations made in the institutional accreditation report in 2021.

In finalising the assessment report, the expert panel took into consideration comments made by the institution. The panel submitted the final report to HAKA on 21.03.2023.

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

General progress report

General assessment of the actions taken by the Tallinn University with regard to improvement areas presented in the HAKA Council decision on 7.06.2021.

Comments

This section of the report provides a short reflection on the progress made on each of the standards since the original visit in 2021.

In terms of strategic management and planning, the University has made good progress. It has developed a new strategic plan which runs from 2023-2027 and includes specific KPIs for all goals alongside plans for an information system, open to all staff, to ensure actions plans and goals are tracked (to be delivered in Jan 2023). At the same time the development plans for academic units were drawn up to ensure they were aligned with the overall strategic plan. A named member of the Rectorate is responsible for the delivery of each goal.

With regard to resources, progress has been made on staff salaries. Managers are provided with guidance and rules for salary decisions. TLU recognises the need for equal treatment, gender equality and a workload model for academic staff has been developed. A unified information system to deliver and implement this is being planned. In terms of revenue distribution, long term planning is difficult due to the nature of the funding however the main tool for aligning distribution will be the strategic plan going forward. New staff are supported in their understanding of this through an induction e-course and this includes staff teaching for only a short period of time. In terms of research funding, it was good to see this has increased and is supported by a new Knowledge Transfer and Project Support Office. By appointing named responsible persons TLU is enhancing following up on the plans and objectives. They show that when procedures don't work (for example paying for the project writing services by the academic units) as well as they should, that is noted, and they are revised.

Quality Culture is addressed in more detail below; however, the University has made good progress in establishing a Quality Framework document although this is at quite a high level so the interpretation and implementation of the framework will be important to ensure it is consistently implemented across the University. As it is relatively new, it is too early to understand how it is working in practice and how the specific issues raised in 2021 are being addressed. It is explicitly stated that external input is sufficiently provided in the current, and future, quality procedures and that the university doesn't plan additional external procedures, amongst other things because they are costly. This is a reasonable argument, provided that the current quality procedures are followed adequately. It was clear from the interviews that quality culture is taken seriously and that TLU is

taking steps to ensure this. Further work is needed to identify how the framework is interpreted consistently across the University, compliance and standards are ensured and monitored, and how there is a feedback loop to ensure continuous enhancement of quality and standards.

With regard to Academic Ethics, solutions to the effective recording and analysis of misconduct cases have been discussed and plans are in place to progress this, including ensuring consistent treatment across the University. Staff have been trained each semester on reducing plagiarism and topic-based seminars for students continue. Although there still is work to be done, it is an ongoing process of improvement, for example academic ethics committees in the academic units will be established, and university wide guidelines will be formulated. There will also be a focus on the challenges of interdisciplinary projects.

Substantial developments have been made in articulating TLU's international ambitions and this includes a more proactive approach to student mobility, ensuring that credits earned abroad can be used for the study programmes at TLU, and plans to develop a framework for "internationalisation at home". Partner universities have been sought and found that have a language level requirement that is more suitable for TLU students. For some programmes, such as English language and Culture, a joint course is planned. In 2023 the introduction of foreign universities and the skills of writing a motivation letter will be integrated into professional language courses to ensure students are better prepared.

In terms of academic staff, work has begun on an approach to ensure a fair and consistent workload between academic staff. In terms of continuing professional development (CPD), there is a university-wide registration system to log activities however it remains unclear whether CPD is entirely staff driven or whether managers take a strategic approach to ensuring their staff are upskilled. The first steps, such as the e-course in teaching at Tallinn university have been launched however it will be important to review and audit the implementation of these initiatives to ensure consistent support for CPD across all the staff, in order to meet the strategic direction of the University.

TLU piloted an internal study programme review process in 2021-22 which is reported to have been very effective, for example resulting in some considerable changes, such as the closure of 6 programmes and surfacing quality issues on 13. The new Quality framework developed makes the process of the development of new study programmes and the closure of programmes much clearer and is welcomed. It also ensures stakeholder engagement in these processes. The approach taken towards study programs shows that TLU took the comments and recommendations of the panel seriously.

In terms of learning and teaching, considerable progress has been made with regard to the use of data analytics due to the introduction of a data warehouse which utilises Tableau in order to visualise and learn from the data. TLU has made a good start in developing plans to support collaborative learning and the development of teaching plans, as well as ensuring that the internal evaluation of study programmes will include a review of the approaches to learning and assessment methods.

First steps to increase the variety of assessment methods have been taken with the development of the quality framework and the development of the incubator however it is not clear whether this also includes guidelines for assessment, distribution of responsibilities, approaches to moderation

etc. The response to section 1.9.3, regarding student peer-feedback/assessment etc. is welcome and appropriate, the issue raised related to students teaching/assessing their peers due to a lack of staff expertise to deliver the DLG programme. As discussed below, this has now been resolved.

Good progress has been made in the area of learning support systems, for example in updating RPL forms and in supporting international students who were dissatisfied with the counselling services. A new Studies Advisor post was created to provide additional support. To help address dropout rates the University has increased the provision of alternative learning opportunities for full-time students. TLU has also created the opportunity for part time learning and the award of Microcredentials however, the effectiveness of this initiative still has to be evaluated. Limited progress has been made regarding the use of three different VLEs. Whilst it is recognised that there are diverse views among staff, TLU is encouraged to work towards just one VLE in order to reduce resources required to support three VLEs e.g. licenses, technical support, which could be better deployed elsewhere, and to provide a more consistent experience for students.

Research priorities have been identified and progress has been made on greater oversight of the process and quality, for example an overhead fee is now being retained centrally to support and sustain the research strategy which is welcomed. The development plan foresees KPIs for research which have been articulated in Annex 3 however, their impact is not yet clear. Although the balance between more academic oriented research and research which contributes to society is not clear yet, it is recognised that these are both important and often intertwined.

Additional funding for Haapsalu College has been secured and new posts have been created to support develop business relationships, with a focus on knowledge transfer and external relations. The new university development plan includes research contributing to society and TLU plans to develop and implement a comprehensive R&D and knowledge transfer operational framework and transport system.

Commendations

- TLU has worked hard to ensure that the development of the Strategic Plan was an open process with many opportunities for staff to engage. The KPIs, actions and goals are tracked for all to see, and a named member of the Rectorate has been identified as having responsibility for the delivery of each goal.

Further considerations

- TLU has developed a policy regarding students teaching other students, such as that which occurred on the Digital Games Masters programme and this now needs to be documented in writing.
- TLU has taken the recommendations and considerations seriously and substantial progress has been made. The strategic plan and supporting development plans will make it possible to improve all aspects of the University in a coordinated way going forward. Understandably, a lot remains in the planning or development phase so it is too early to assess the impact of these changes however, the panel has confidence in the University to deliver this, given the tremendous progress made since the review visit in 2021 and the University is encouraged to continue its direction of travel.

Report on fulfilling the requirements of the secondary condition

At its meeting on 7.06.2021 HAKA Council decided that the next institutional accreditation of Tallinn University will take place in seven years but set a secondary condition that the university must meet in one year.

The following are the requirements set by the HAKA Council to be met by Tallinn University, and the expert panel's assessment on the developments the Tallinn University has made in this regard.

Shortcomings in the implementation of the distributed management model: TLU's management system is characterised by highly dispersed management. Although this ensures the involvement of staff at all levels, in practice it has led to inconsistency/excessive variability/lack of coherence in its implementation. It is recommended that TLU develops reporting and monitoring of academic units in a way that ensures continuity of practice and compliance with documented rules throughout the university and thus the harmonisation of the organisational culture. Although the development plans of the different units are based on the university's strategic plans, they are still not fully aligned. In order to ensure an appropriate and coherent approach to the priorities of the TLU throughout the university, the development plans of both academic and support units need to be aligned with them.

Assessment of the expert panel: the secondary condition is fully met

Evidence and analysis

The explanatory letter provides a good and sound overview of the process of how the development plan was written. It also provides a clear overview of the Estonian goals for higher education and research and how TLU's development plan and strategy aligns with that. It shows that the management is very much aware of the context and how to take decisions that support these goals. It is also clear that a thorough assessment of the external context has been made. In addition, a lot of effort was put into engaging with the TLU community during its development. The final version of the strategic plan has been accepted by the Senate and an initial IT system with plans and actions for monitoring is already in place.

Attention has been paid to the alignment of the development plans of the academic units and they have been developed in a consistent format, divided into three sections: firstly, an introduction and a discussion of their relationship to the university's goals. Secondly, an articulation of the activities that the unit contributes to which deliver the University's goals. Thirdly, the unit's additional own goals, if applicable. When setting the unit's own goals the possible activities and metrics that are used to implement and evaluate the goals must be articulated.

The units are obliged to structure their development plans in a consistent way which helps the university to monitor progress, and also to work together and to iterate back and forth between the units. In the interviews the panel learned that to manage and steer the implementation and monitor the ongoing process, the people responsible meet every three months and topics are discussed in-depth. In this way they cannot only share their plans and ideas but also update them as appropriate. In an ever-changing world it is not only important to set long term goals, but also to be able to adapt these when the situation and environment changes. Another important topic of lengthy discussions in these regular 3 monthly meetings, as well as other network meetings, is the staff workload. As was reported in the discussion with the panel, TLU has big ambitions but limited resources so

systems need to be flexible and staff workload needs to be monitored. They are in an iterative process, to ensure consistency of workload which was not the case before when there was more flexibility in the system. An initial system to allocate consistent workload to staff has been developed however TLU recognises the challenges of treating staff consistently. For example, awarding a certain number of points for publishing a research article as the effort required to deliver it can vary considerably, however they aim to set an optimum load. The result of all this is that people already see that some processes have already improved and feel that the university is tackling these issues, and working groups are coming together to solve issues.

For management and monitoring the plan, a sound structure has been developed. One member of the Rectorate is responsible for each goal specified in the Strategic Plan and one of the Vice-Rectors is responsible for the preparation of the annual action plan for the corresponding strategic goals. For the implementation, the activities of the Vice-Rectors, and each of the actors are clearly documented. Monitoring also includes a reality check: for example if it appears that the goals identified in the Strategic Plan cannot be achieved with the existing workforce and resources, the Vice-Rector proposes to the Senate and the Council that either the sub-goals of the development plan should be modified or that additional resources should be found.

For monitoring the delivery, key performance indicators (KPIs) have been set and defined, however these KPIs have yet to be fully documented. From the interviews, the panel learned that KPIs for strategic goals have been defined, and that every unit contributes to them through their activities. However KPIs at the unit level are mostly defined but not quite final as some new ones are being developed, for example around data optimisation. All KPIs will public and on the website shortly.

The panel also asked about the digital strategy of the university and learned that it is part of strategic plan development goal 2. The focus is on teaching and learning and what is needed for that in a constantly changing world. The strategy plan gives structure to discuss this.

Conclusion

The panel sees that TLU has taken the recommendation seriously and finds that it has addressed the shortcomings. A Strategic Plan now is in place and there are processes to make sure there is alignment between this with the unit development plans. A key component of monitoring and implementation has been to make individual Vice-Rectors responsible for each KPI and making this clear in the plan. To drive implementation of these plans, and engagement with the community, TLU organises regular meetings with people involved to ensure plans are not only kept up-to-date and delivered but to discuss other relevant topics that concern the whole university, such as academic staff workload.

The structure for the development plans of the academic units, as well as the IT system that is developed and (partly) in place supports the monitoring of all plans, their alignment, and the deliverables (through KPIs). This also makes the university future proof since there is a mechanism in place to address problems, discuss them and solve them jointly.

The panel finds that the university has fully met this secondary condition.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The panel recommends that the structure for discussion and iteration of the plans is kept under review, to assess the impact on different units and ensure continuous enhancement.

Gaps in quality culture: Quality issues may not always reach decisionmakers, and pragmatic solutions to problems at unit level are not necessarily in line with university policy. In order to close the gaps in the quality management of TLU and to harmonise quality management processes across different units, it is recommended to develop a clear framework that explains and links processes at different levels of quality management and specifies who is responsible for what. Currently, the exchange of best practices is taking place through different networks and informal channels and lacks a systematic approach. It is desirable for the TLU to develop a system for the sharing of best practices and to develop a structure for analysing and exchanging quality-relevant information outside existing networks.

Assessment of the expert panel: the secondary condition is substantially met

Evidence and analysis

The panel found that TLU has taken the recommendations made by the panel seriously and worked hard to comply. A Quality Framework has been developed covering a range of topics. It articulates some procedures and explicitly identifies the responsibilities and the responsible person(s) for each topic. The concepts are well described, albeit at a high level. The panel learned from the interview that the framework was based on the standards and guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance provided by ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

The Quality Framework includes guidance on how to launch and close a study programme, admission of students, teaching and learning support services, alongside key aspects of strategic management such as planning and reporting and some aspects of research such as good academic practice. It is well thought through, weighing the pros and cons of the various activities. For example, with regard to external evaluations the current process of very extensive national external evaluation, including a large scale process for self-evaluation is considered against an additional external evaluation, as suggested by the original panel leading to a cost benefit analysis. This resulted in not opting for an additional external evaluation.

Whilst the panel felt this was an excellent start, from the documentation it was not clear how the framework was interpreted and implemented in practice or what staff awareness is of them. From the interviews the panel learned that the framework and the regulations were debated at Senate however they are considered a starting point. The panel also understood that the framework is a living document that it is discussed on a regular basis, and that there is an ambition to include more sections covering other topics.

The framework is also discussed in professional networks within university who meet regularly. This is the main place where the quality framework is interpreted and implemented. This approach should ensure that the framework reaches most members of university involved in teaching and curriculum development. An example of concern is taken from the digital learning program, where before students were leading the teaching of the module and assessing the work of other students.

From a School's perspective the framework reflects the values of the universities and gives a good overview of the regulations. The plan is that all the quality rules for the University will be included in the framework. Within the Schools it helps to explain to colleagues what the aims of the University are and how they want to achieve them. There is also training for new staff. In general, the leadership of the Schools find it a useful framework and helps to provide a good overview of the different regulations to ensure quality inside each School.

The panel asked about how the regulations work in practice. An example was given related to the learning and teaching process. Estonia has a good system of legal acts and statutes however the framework fills the gap and ensures all the detail is in one place, for example regulations related to feedback and quality of assessment. In terms of ensuring consistency of implementation through the university, the strategy manager, with the strategy office, is responsible for this. Annual reports are the basis for assessing how well people are doing. Topics are also discussed in the networks, alongside feedback from the staff. All important matters and proposed changes are reported to, and discussed, at Senate. An example includes feedback from staff in the university staff satisfaction survey. Several areas for improvement emerged and changes are now being made. In relation to involving staff in the quality process, every year goals for the next year are agreed and the following year there is a discussion regarding the delivery of those goals – whether they have been achieved, what has stopped staff from achieving them, and how university can help etc.

The panel asked about a quality culture at TLU. Quality is one of the values at TLU and so everyone feels this as part of their job. At TLU a key approach to engendering a quality culture is through communications, embedding it in everything they do and talking about quality all the time, and spreading the TLU values so that staff understand its importance. The actions of leaders are also very important however quality is discussed at all levels regularly and in all areas. There is a lot of effort put in involving the whole TLU community. Procedures and responsibilities for assessment did not seem to be clear. It is resolved now but the procedures still need to be written and in the panel's opinion should be implemented university wide.

TLU has made a good start in enhancing its approach to quality however as acknowledged in the discussion with the panel, there is a lot more work to do. For example, the Framework is not complete, other topics need to be included, and the quality systems need a feedback loop to ensure continuous improvement.

Conclusion

The panel is impressed with the work that has been carried out over the last two years and noted that this condition has been taken extremely seriously by TLU, with considerable progress being made. The Quality Framework developed provides a good starting point to discuss quality in the University, as well as helping staff to understand the values and goals of the University. The assurance from the interviewees that it is a living document that is discussed regularly by the Senate and that is constantly updated and refined shows that TLU understands that a framework alone doesn't do the job and that constant awareness of quality is necessary. That said, the framework is very high level and it will take some time finalise as there is more to do such as inclusion of additional quality topics, ensuring consistent interpretation and implementation of the framework across the University, implementation and documentation of a quality feedback loop to ensure continuous improvement. The panel is confident that given time TLU will reach its quality goals.

At this moment it is still too early to affirm that the condition is fully met, but the panel feels confident that it will be met in the coming years. The panel at this moment qualifies this condition as substantially met.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Quality Framework document needs to include additional topics as discussed, have a mechanism to ensure it is implemented consistently across the University and document a feedback loop(s) to ensure continuous enhancement.

Shortcomings in the delivery of the digital learning game study programme: In the curriculum of digital learning games, a significant part of the studies (including basic courses) is carried out by master students on the second year of the same study programme. A sufficient number of qualified teaching staff must be ensured for the high-quality delivery of the study programme.

Assessment of the expert panel: the secondary condition is fully met

Evidence and analysis

Since the visit, good progress has been made on the main area of concern which was the knowledge and skills of the core staff teaching on the programme, and the use of students in the second year of the programme to teach students in the first year, due to a lack of expertise in the core staff base. This approach is fraught with challenges and risks. Since the visit, these issues have been resolved and there are no students teaching on the programme. Overall, the current staff on the programme appear well qualified with 10 having PhDs, and most having a good level of university teaching experience and pedagogic training. Staff on temporary contracts such as those from industry are a sector norm and provide valuable input to programmes. This approach is supported and valued.

From the interviews, the panel learned that there is a university wide policy, which everyone has been informed of, that students are not permitted to teach other students, however this has not yet been documented in writing as the policy is one component of a set of larger set of changes being implemented but it has been made clear to all staff verbally. There are plans to document this in writing by the end of 2023.

In terms of other updates to the programme, there has been considerable effort to increase recruitment which did increase, but then dropped again slightly last year. It will be important to continue these efforts to ensure the viability of the programme going forward. Considerable thought has gone into ensuring the financial sustainability of the programme, for example increased fees for non-EU students, closing modules which do not attract large numbers of students and enhancing the marketing of the programme.

During the initial visit, a concern was raised by the panel related to the ad hoc approach to gathering input from alumni and employers regarding the needs of the labour market. An updated study programme council has been formed to foster industry connections and this is very welcome. Students have also showcased their work at two industry events which is excellent. It is good to see that the Games Society has been relaunched and this should continue to be supported.

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made in addressing the recommendations made by the panel as outlined above. Overall, the programme is of good quality and the conditions are considered to be fully met, however it is important that TLU ensures it has appropriate procedures, processes and audits / monitoring in place to ensure that these continue to be met.

Strengths

- Engagement with the Study Council and employers
- Games society

Opportunities for further improvement

- TLU should clarify its policy in writing as planned by the end of 2023, regarding the staff qualifications, knowledge and skills required to deliver a quality programme, and that students are not permitted to teach on programmes. This should include how compliance with the policy will be monitored.