

## Decision Regarding the Assessment of the Social Sciences Programme Group

**Tallinn University**

**15/09/2016**

**The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher Education and VET decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University in seven years, with a secondary condition**

On the basis of the following references: subsections 12<sup>2</sup> (1) and 10 (4) of the Universities Act, point 3.7.3 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher Education and VET (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA'), points 41.1 and 42 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', authorised in point 3.7.1 of the above-mentioned EKKA Statutes, and clauses 53 (1) 2) and 53 (2) 2) and 3) of the Administrative Procedure Act; the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of EKKA (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 4.05.2015 Tallinn University and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct the quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 06.05.2016, approved the following membership of the quality assessment committee for the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu, Tallinn University of Technology and Tallinn University (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

<b>David Inglis, Chair</b>	Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter (United Kingdom)
<b>Heikki Hiilamo</b>	Professor of Social Policy, University of Helsinki (Finland)
<b>Jonas Hinnfors</b>	PhD, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg (Sweden)
<b>Florian Rampelt</b>	Student, University of Passau (Germany)
<b>Margus Sarapuu</b>	Head of Task Force on Zero Bureaucracy, Ministry of Economics and Communication (Estonia)

<b>Mati Vaarmann</b>	Ambassador (Estonia)
<b>Gediminas Vitkus</b>	Professor and Head of European Studies Department, Institute of International Relations and Political Science (Lithuania)
<b>Brigita Zepa</b>	Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Latvia; Director of Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (Latvia)

3. Tallinn University submitted the following programmes for evaluation under this study programme group:

**Traffic Safety (ProfHe)**

**Liberal Arts in Social Sciences (BA)**

**Social Sciences (BA)**

**Sociology (BA)**

**Sociology (MA)**

**Political Science (MA)**

**Politics and Government (BA)**

**Politics and Government (MA)**

**International Relations (MA)**

**Urban Governance (MA)**

4. Tallinn University submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 8.02.2016 and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 5.04.2016.
5. An assessment visit was made to Tallinn University during 11–13.05.2016.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 25.06.2016, EKKA forwarded it to Tallinn University for its comments on 4.07.2016, and the University delivered its response on 15.08.2016.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 19.08.2016. 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 University's self-evaluation report to the Council members on 31.08.2016.
9. The Council with 8 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 15.09.2016 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University.

### **Assessment at the Level of the Study Programme Group**

#### Strengths

- The calibre of many students is impressive. Students are satisfied with study programmes in general and the courses they take.
- The study programmes are flexible and conform to the changing needs of students; cyclical teaching is used. A wide range of teaching and assessment methods are utilised.
- The study programmes have strong relationships with employers and other cooperation partners, many of whom are alumni of Tallinn University's social sciences.
- The study programmes are delivered by exceptionally committed teaching staff.

- Teaching resources and facilities are of high quality.
- International diversification of both staff and the student body is a welcomed trend. A multicultural atmosphere and ethos are clearly evolving within study programmes.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- At present teaching staff are not sufficiently familiar with the rationale for changes in the study programme(s). Communication between different levels of the teaching staff should be improved so that the decision-making process is not of an overly one-way character.
- The quality of student counselling and support services varies quite a lot among different study programmes and is too dependent on the personal initiatives of particular individuals. A more systemised approach involving the whole study programme group should be applied to student support.
- It is recommended that the Tallinn University School of Governance, Law and Society establish uniform principles and procedures for collecting feedback that students consider to be reliable. At present the quantity and quality of feedback collected varies considerably across study programmes and courses.
- The teaching staff salaries are not sufficiently competitive in the labour market.
- A balanced workload distribution should be ensured among the teaching staff of the School. It must be avoided that the younger members of the teaching staff who are in the midst their doctoral studies are overloaded with teaching duties.
- Student access to some speciality-related journals is limited. Also, it is not always possible for off-campus students to use the software needed for statistical and quantitative research, diminishing the flexibility of learning.
- For the sake of internationalisation of the teaching staff, more opportunities for in-service trainings in English should be provided.
- Since the University is becoming increasingly international, more attention should be given to developing an English-speaking teaching environment. All relevant information (signs, documents) should be also available in English. Support staff should also be able to speak English.
- Creation of programmes in English should not affect the workload and quality of disciplines taught in Estonian.

#### **Assessment at the Study Programme Level**

#### **TRAFFIC SAFETY (PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION); HAAPSALU COLLEGE**

##### Strengths

- There are positive synergies between Haapsalu College's four study programmes — the Traffic Safety programme is collaborating with the IT sector to develop 3D models used for traffic safety purposes, and with the design speciality to design street lamp prototypes. The Traffic Safety programme is important at the College and well integrated with the rest of the study programmes.
- An extensive programme of cooperation with a Norwegian University college has been very well developed.
- A systematic and fruitful communication exists among the local community, employers and the College, which opens up collaboration opportunities for students as well (e.g. with Haapsalu city authorities to plan the city's traffic safety measures).

- Special attention has been given to serve the needs of distance learners, including seminar rooms and up-to-date computer classrooms. The on-line learning platform functions well.
- The teaching staff systematically apply progressive teaching methods emphasising student interaction and group work.
- There are good informal relations between the teaching staff and students. Small study groups enable the staff to give students individual attention.
- The target group of this study programme consists of working adults. Students consider the programme to be unique and value the distance learning opportunities offered through it.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- In view of students' future prospects (e.g. their desire to enrol in a MA programme in social sciences), strengthening the academic and/or analytical elements in the programme could be considered.
- Counselling of students at the beginning of their studies should be improved.
- It is advisable to consider involving more teaching staff with doctoral degrees in the teaching, for example, as visiting lecturers.
- Only a few members of the teaching staff are active in research. It is advisable to create favourable conditions for both teaching and the research.
- It is not quite clear whether school pedagogy, taught within the framework of basic teacher training, can also be applied in university teaching. It is advisable to include a specific course of university pedagogy in the teacher training programme.
- Student mobility is very low. All potential barriers to mobility should be removed.

### **LIBERAL ARTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES (BA)**

#### Strengths

- The programme attracts excellent, highly committed and well prepared international students.
- Facilities for teaching are spacious, recently refurbished and of excellent quality. Access to the library's digital resources is very good.
- The programme has dedicated management and support staff with an excellent command of English and good relations with students.
- The programme offers numerous choices to students.
- The teaching staff utilises lively and interesting teaching methods and are aware of the students' needs.
- Students have a very good command of English well suited for the English-taught programme.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- A clear job description for a programme manager should be put in place, specifying his or her areas of responsibility and exact duties. In this way it is possible to avoid placing excessive burdens on an individual.
- It should be considered as to how to reconcile the broadness of the programme with a student's desire to specialise in a specific speciality within it.
- Progression from this BA programme to MA level studies may be difficult, since students may not have completed all prerequisite courses required for the chosen speciality. Therefore student counselling regarding course selection should be more extensive.

- Cooperation with partner organisations should be more systematic (e.g. with regard to students' internships).
- There are several courses in the syllabus whose content requires classroom teaching but are substituted for by independent work. This has caused discontent among students. It is recommended that all courses that are required by the study programme also be carried out.
- Additional resources are needed to ensure systematic student counselling and to provide students with sufficient options for internships.
- At present neither the students nor the teaching staff have a clear overview of all assessment criteria and methods used within the study programme. Teachers of different courses apply different assessment methods which causes confusion among students. The requirements for course completion and assessment criteria should be made more transparent and understandable to students. Given the large number of teachers involved in the study programme, it should be ensured that at least those staff members who deliver the more substantial courses are aware of the general objectives and overall structure of the study programme.
- Communication between members of the teaching staff should be improved. One possibility would be to organise staff meetings of different schools at least once a year to discuss the challenges set by the study programme and to share good practices.
- Student feedback mechanisms should be more strictly regulated. It should be better thought through as to how to take feedback into account, how to respond to it and how to inform students about the actions taken as a result.
- Given the international nature of the study programme, the opportunities for student mobility are underused. Students should be encouraged to participate more in mobility programmes.

## **SOCIOLOGY (BA, MA)**

### Strengths

- Committed teaching staff prepare graduates with solid knowledge, who then have no problems finding jobs in their profession.
- The managers and teaching staff of these programmes collaborate closely with external partners of the University.
- Teaching is solidly research based, especially at the MA level. Teaching and research are efficiently integrated, leading to various positive results (e.g. excellent MA theses).
- Various modern teaching and learning methods are utilised throughout the programme, including methodologies based on active and problem-based learning, interdisciplinary teaching and online learning.
- A variety of assessment methods are used. Assessment criteria are clearly described.
- The BA programme provides solid training in quantitative methods.
- Teaching staff involve students in their research projects.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- It is advisable to eliminate potential overlaps between the BA- and MA-level courses.
- It should be determined as to how to ensure that progression from the BA programme to the MA programme is as clear and smooth as possible. The MA programme should be distinct from the BA programme by both course content and an increased intellectual challenge for students.

- The University does not have appropriate software licences for statistical and qualitative analysis programs to be used off-campus. Student access to computer classrooms is limited. Both problems should be addressed.
- Students believe the MA programme has a weaker quantitative methods component than the BA programme. Probable causes for such dissatisfaction should be identified.
- With regard to thesis supervision, it is advisable to make agreements between supervisor and supervisee compulsory, outlining the rights and obligations of both parties, in order to ensure that students are treated equally.
- It is advisable to retain the obligation to write BA theses, since students who are involved in the process acquire independent research experience crucial to their development. The expectations for BA theses (as to the amount of time involved, level of attainment expected, etc.) should be explained more clearly to students.
- It is advisable that staff members of the different study programmes meet at least once a year to discuss positive developments in the programmes and share good practices with one another.
- All MA-level assessments should include qualitative feedback to students, which is crucial to students' intellectual development. The principles of qualitative feedback provided within all BA courses should also be defined.
- MA students were unaware that they were also allowed to choose some courses outside either their programme or the School. Students should be provided with better counselling and guidance about these opportunities at the beginning of their studies.
- The majority of the teaching staff are junior members who are still pursuing their PhDs. Since younger teachers need to focus on their doctoral studies, employing more experienced staff would also be necessary for the sake of sustainability of the study programme.
- Employers and cooperation partners would welcome more opportunities to discuss their needs with programme managers and teaching staff. This would ensure that external stakeholders are more involved in the process of study programme development.
- Younger teaching staff should be provided with better counselling regarding their career development, and should be offered mentoring and funding for participation in international conferences.
- It should be explained more clearly to members of the teaching staff, especially to junior members, how their workloads are designed. A more equitable division of the workload among the teaching staff should be ensured.
- For the sake of internationalisation of the programme it is strongly advised that more international lecturers be involved in teaching.
- Better counselling should be provided for students.
- Submissions of MA theses presented in the form of scientific articles to journals should be permitted.
- It should be examined more thoroughly as to whether a potential internship facility fully meets the requirements.
- When assessing courses, feedback from the Student Council should be more fully taken into account.

### **POLITICAL SCIENCE (MA)**

#### Strengths

- A distinct strength of this study programme is its academic and analytical focus, creating favourable conditions for students to pursue their education in doctoral studies, and satisfying labour market needs. The teaching staff successfully utilises a scientific approach in teaching.

- The study programme offers clear and comprehensive insight into key topics of modern Estonian society.
- Teaching staff apply creative methods to introduce potential topics for theses to students.
- Teaching staff are active in the international arena.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- At present teaching staff appear not to be included in the extensive reforms relating to study programmes. Since the knowledge and experience of the teaching staff are of great importance, they should be more actively involved in further reforms of the study programme.
- It is advisable to develop a communication plan under which the visibility of the programme is increased and its content more effectively introduced to a broader society.
- It is advisable to increase the length of the thesis.
- Titles and themes of both courses and modules should better reflect the study programme as a whole. At present the content of modules is not always clearly understood based on their titles.
- Since the University is becoming increasingly international, more attention should be given to developing an English-speaking teaching environment. All relevant information (signs, documents) should also be available in English. Support staff should also be able to speak English.
- The overlapping elements of different courses in research methodology and Master's seminars should be reduced.
- Teaching staff should be regularly and systematically offered opportunities for pedagogical self-development. Teaching staff should be encouraged to use more diverse teaching methods.
- Teaching staff should also be allowed sufficient time for research along with their teaching functions. A more flexible attitude towards hiring new staff members should be applied when using project-based research funds for that purpose. This would ensure a more equitable division of teaching workloads among the teaching staff.

### **POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT (BA)**

#### Strengths

- The study programme provides an effective introduction to scientific research methods.
- Topics of the courses are current and well suited to imparting the knowledge and analytical skills of the contemporary social and political environment.
- Both teaching staff and students are satisfied with their access to digital documents.
- The University cooperates closely with employers as well as with other stakeholders. Local authorities offer internship opportunities for students.
- Many members of the teaching staff are active in both teaching and research.
- Teaching staff are well internationalised.
- The study programme's flexibility allows students to shape their studies according to personal needs.
- Students are very satisfied with the support offered to them throughout their studies.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- It is advisable to strengthen the elements of political theory and political philosophy in the study programme.

- The study programme includes a wide range of poorly systematised electives which need to be grouped by more distinct subthemes.
- To avoid routine in the teaching and learning process, it is advisable to increase staff's awareness of innovative teaching methods, teaching and learning environments, and learning aids that support teaching. Teaching staff should be systematically and regularly offered opportunities for pedagogical self-development.
- It is advisable to conduct instruction in smaller groups to be able to implement interactive teaching methods more effectively.
- Teaching staff should also be allowed sufficient time for research along with their teaching functions.
- Teaching staff currently appear not to be included in the extensive reforms relating to study programmes. Since the knowledge and experience of the teaching staff are of great importance, they should be more actively involved in further reforms of the study programme.
- Students currently receive too much general information and too little programme-specific information.
- A more systematic approach is needed with regard to student counselling on matters of the study programme.
- International student mobility should be encouraged even more than currently done, including providing students with clearer information about mobility opportunities and facilitating the transfer of ETCS credits. Integration of 'mobility windows' into the study programme could be considered, so that students do not lose one academic year while studying abroad.

## **POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT (MA)**

### Strengths

- Both teaching staff and students are satisfied with their access to digital documents.
- Supervision of student MA theses is effective and well organised. Preparation of the thesis starts right in the initial stages of the studies.
- The University cooperates closely with employers and other stakeholders. Local authorities offer internship opportunities to students.
- Teaching staff is well internationalised.
- Working students are very satisfied with the flexible organisation of the study programme and with the teaching staff in general. Students see a strong relevance of the study programme to their professional work experience.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- The intention to introduce a more interdisciplinary programme should be better publicised and also more effectively implemented. In the course of this process, the study programme could be critically reviewed, including eliminating possible overlaps in the courses and enhancing the synergy between different courses. It is also advisable to develop more courses within the programme granting greater numbers of ECTS credits.
- Consistent use of innovative teaching methods, learning environments and learning aids in the teaching process should be ensured. Also, theory and practice should be interconnected in teaching and learning.
- Teaching staff should be regularly and systematically offered opportunities for their pedagogical self-development.
- Teaching staff should also be allowed sufficient time for research along with their teaching functions.



- After enrolment students should be better counselled with regard to overall planning of their studies.
- MA students have very few contacts with the rest of the student body and with student representatives. From a strategic point of view, an interaction of older and more experienced students with younger students in the same field of study should be encouraged.
- Dropouts due to full-time employment are a concern. The department should set up a feedback system for employers and students who have problems with combining work and studies, to seek suitable solutions for all parties.

## **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (MA)**

### Strengths

- Strengths of the programme are the wide range of subject areas and variety of electives.
- The obligatory applied activities within the study programme are an essential instrument for practical experience. The international study trips serve as an example of good practice.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- An MA programme should not include courses typical of a BA programme, such as 'Introduction to International Relations'. Students admitted to the MA programme should already have basic knowledge in international relations, or otherwise they should be offered additional bridge courses outside the study programme.
- It is not advisable to develop a programme that is overly Estonia and Baltic region specific, because this may negatively affect the sustainability of the study programme.
- The University needs to address the low salary levels of the teaching staff which hamper the recruitment of highly skilled international staff.
- Supervision of student MA theses needs to be improved, because it is not sufficiently systematic and consistent. The Political Science programme could be taken as a model, where Master's seminars are much better organised.
- Teaching staff should improve cooperation with both the public and business sectors. Students should be offered more assistance in finding internship placements.
- The lack of academic staff is a concern. Three full-time and two part-time staff members are not adequate to cover the wide range of courses and fully meet the expectations of students for their studies. A large turnover among study coordinators in recent years has also increased the workload for the teaching staff. It is crucial to recruit new lecturers and ensure that they have normal workloads.
- Although students have expressed their dissatisfaction with some of the lecturers and with overlaps in courses, no action has followed such feedback. This raises doubts about the School's claim of a well functioning systematic feedback system. The system of communicating and feedback between the students and academic staff needs to be improved.
- The system of alumni feedback needs to be formalised; given the international student body, informal contacts within Estonia are not adequate.
- It is advisable to raise the current English language entry requirement (B2), since it does not allow some of the students to effectively participate in the learning process.

## **URBAN GOVERNANCE (MA)**

### Strengths

- This study programme is exceptionally international, multidisciplinary and challenging to students.
- Involvement of employers and other partners in the programme is excellent.
- The study programme provides great opportunities for those students who work full time at establishments related to their field of study to expand their knowledge and critically rethink the nature of their professional practice.
- Teaching staff perform their work with great dedication. They are very well qualified to teach this programme.
- Both the physical learning environment and electronic learning resources meet the needs of the programme.
- Visiting lecturers from abroad participate in the teaching.
- Students' satisfaction with the study programme is high, and the qualifications of graduates are very good.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- The viability of the programme depends on the input of research staff who already have heavy workloads and many other duties. The programme manager needs more administrative support to avoid overloads and to fully realise the programme's potentials.
  - Students are of the opinion that some online courses (those without classroom teaching) lack sufficient support. It is advisable to apply at least a minimum amount of contact hours, even through Skype, for example.
  - Student assessment should not be limited to grading only, but should also include qualitative feedback.
  - During the first semester, it is advisable to include an introductory course in the speciality, where the prior knowledge of some students may be inadequate resulting from different BA backgrounds. Students' progress should be monitored more closely, particularly during the critical first semester.
  - The teaching staff should ensure that the practical applications of theory are sufficiently represented in all courses.
  - The University should create opportunities to use a larger number of international guest lecturers, which would enhance the student experience.
  - Students find the internet timetable (ASIO) confusing. Students should be provided with sufficient guidance to be able to navigate the timetable at the start of their studies.
- 10.** Point 41 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', establishes that the Quality Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Council shall weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations pointed out in the assessment report, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven, five or three years.
- 11.** The Council weighed the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations referred to in point 9 of this document and found that the study programmes, the teaching conducted under these programmes, and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to the requirements if the University eliminates the following shortcomings:
- The designed learning outcomes of the MA programme in International Relations are currently not sufficiently distinguishable from the BA-level learning outcomes as described in Annex 1 point 1.1. of the Government of the Republic Regulation, 'Standard of Higher Education'. The

MA programme includes courses typical of a BA programme, such as 'Introduction to International Relations'. Students admitted to the MA programme should already have basic knowledge in international relations, or otherwise they should be offered additional bridge courses outside the study programme.

- The number of the teaching staff in the International Relations programme is not adequate to achieve the objectives and learning outcomes of the programme based on their duties, the teaching and research workloads and the number of students to be supervised, as defined in clause 6 (7) 1) of the 'Standard of Higher Education'. Three full-time and two part-time staff members are not adequate to cover the wide range of courses and fully meet the expectations of students for their studies. Supervision of student MA theses is not sufficiently systematic and consistent.
- The BA programme in Liberal Arts in Social Sciences contains several courses in the syllabus whose content requires classroom teaching but are substituted for by independent work. Therefore the conduct of studies does not adequately support attainment of the objectives of the study programme, as prescribed by subsection 6 (5) of the 'Standard of Higher Education', and the learning outcomes, as described in Annex 1 point 1.1 of the 'Standard of Higher Education'.
- Clause 6 (7) 2) of the 'Standard of Higher Education' prescribes that *a member of the teaching staff who teaches a given subject must have the necessary teaching competence and his or her qualification supports achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme*. According to clause 2 6) of the 'Standard of Higher Education', *teaching competence includes the planning of a process of teaching and learning, providing education, assessing and giving feedback, supervising and reviewing, and educational methodological work*. In the Liberal Arts in Social Sciences programme, teaching staff of different courses apply different assessment methods causing confusion among students. Also, not all members of the teaching staff are aware of the general objectives and overall structure of the study programme.

12. 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) 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 less than seven years, and, on the basis of points 41.1 and 42 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education',

#### **DECIDED**

**to approve the assessment report and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University in seven years with the following secondary condition:**

No later than 15.09.2017, Tallinn University shall submit an action plan and a progress report to the Council on eliminating the shortcomings referred to in point 11 of this document.

The decision was adopted by 8 votes in favour. Against 0.

13. In case Tallinn University does not comply with the secondary condition by the due date, the Council will repeal this assessment decision and set a new date for a quality assessment of the study programme group, or establish a new secondary condition.
14. The Council proposes that Tallinn University will submit an action plan to EKKA with regard to the areas for improvement and recommendations pointed out in the report no later than 15.09.2017 .
15. 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 EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding. A judicial challenge to the decision may be submitted within 30 days after its delivery, 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.

**Tõnu Meidla**  
**Chair of the Council**

**Hillar Bauman**  
**Secretary of the Council**