

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

## Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

### The decision on institutional accreditation

29.06.2023

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education decided to accredit the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church for seven years with a secondary condition.

Pursuant to clause 43.2 of the document “Guide to Institutional Accreditation” established on the basis of the authorisation contained in subsection 38(3) of the Higher Education Act and subsection 24(5) of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (hereinafter referred to as the Council) states the following:

1. The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (hereinafter referred to as the Institute of Theology) and the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (hereinafter referred to as HAKA) agreed on the period for institutional accreditation on 13 April 2022.
2. On 21 December 2022, the Director of HAKA approved the following composition of the committee for institutional accreditation (hereinafter referred to as the Committee):

<b>Joke van Saane</b> (Chair)	Rector, University of Humanistic Studies, Netherlands
<b>Helen Thomas</b> (Secretary)	Freelance Educational Consultant, United Kingdom
<b>Heidi Maiberg</b>	PhD candidate, Royal Holloway University of London, Estonia
<b>Antti Räsänen</b>	Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
<b>David J. Shepherd</b>	Assistant Professor, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Trinity College, Ireland
<b>Einike Pilli</b>	Rector, Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary, Estonia

3. The Institute of Theology submitted a self-evaluation report to the HAKA Bureau on 30 January 2023 and the HAKA assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 31 January 2023.



4. An assessment visit was made to the Institute of Theology on 27–29 March 2023.
5. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the HAKA Bureau on 23 May 2023. HAKA forwarded it to the higher education institution for its comments on 24 May 2023 and the Institute of Theology reported having no comments on 5 June 2023.
6. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the HAKA Bureau on 6 June 2023. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on HAKA’s website.
7. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the final assessment report along with the self-evaluation report to the Council members on 22 June 2023.

8. The Committee’s assessments were as follows:

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Assessment</b>
Strategic management	Partially conforms to requirements
Resources	Partially conforms to requirements
Quality culture	Conforms to requirements
Academic ethics	Partially conforms to requirements
Internationalisation	Conforms to requirements
Teaching staff	Conforms to requirements
Study programme	Conforms to requirements
Learning and teaching	Conforms to requirements
Student assessment	Conforms to requirements
Learning support systems	Conforms to requirements
Research, development and/or other creative activities	Conforms to requirements
Service to society	Conforms to requirements

9. The Council with 12 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 29 June 2023 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths<sup>1</sup>, areas for improvement<sup>2</sup> and recommendations, and suggestions for further development regarding the Institute of Theology<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The strengths pointed out include achievements beyond the standard (not compliance with the standard).

<sup>2</sup> The areas for improvement and the recommendations point to shortcomings in meeting the requirements for the institutional accreditation standard and affect the final decision of the Council.

<sup>3</sup> The suggestions for further development are suggestions for improvement which do not contain a reference to non-compliance with the standard and which are at the discretion of the higher education institution to either take into consideration or disregard. The suggestions for further development do not affect the final decision of the Council.

## 9.1 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

### Strengths

1. The higher education institution is characterised by a mission and vision shared strongly on all levels.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. Many of the goals and objectives included in the development plan and action plan of the Institute of Theology are not sufficiently detailed. Therefore, it is not possible to systematically assess the achievement of the goals. Detailed goals that allow for the assessment of their achievement must be phrased.
2. There is no clarity as to who is responsible for the goals and actions included in the action plan. A person in charge must be appointed for each goal and action. The person in charge should be appointed based on the position and not the individual person.
3. The Institute of Theology should participate more actively in national and international higher education networks.

### Suggestions for further development

1. The development and implementation of a general risk analysis framework to allow for a clear overview of risks in all fields of activity of the Institute of Theology would help.

## 9.2. RESOURCES

### Strengths

1. An example of good practice is the establishment of an economic sustainability working group that includes both internal and external stakeholders.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. The finances of the Institute of Theology mainly originate from the Lutheran church, and the higher education institution is rather vulnerable regarding other sources of income. This affects the long-term sustainability of the Institute of Theology as well. The activities for obtaining other reliable sources of income must be undertaken more actively.
2. Staff salaries are low and not comparable to the average salary levels in Estonia. The financial resources for the professional development of academic staff are scarce (totalling 450 euros for all employees in 2020, and 0 in 2021 and 200 in 2022). The higher education institution must find ways to increase employee salaries and training expenses.

3. There is no external communication plan, or its goals. These must be developed and the efficiency of the achievement of the goals must be monitored thereafter.

### 9.3. QUALITY CULTURE

#### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. The feedback surveys of the higher education institution are not carried out regularly. All surveys must be carried out and analysed regularly. The systematic involvement of external stakeholders and the staff of the Institute of Theology must be ensured, as well as the analysis and dissemination of the results of the feedback.
2. The quality procedures of the higher education institution are not subject to central management. A quality cycle system should be developed, along with the roles and responsibilities of its participants, and their activities, which must be laid down in quality-related documents.

#### Suggestions for further development

1. Even though there is informal sharing of good practices in the higher education institution, more systematicity in these activities would help ensure that some valuable good practices are not lost.

### 9.4. ACADEMIC ETHICS

#### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. The higher education institution has no regulations on academic ethics. These must be developed. Also, there is no body to monitor compliance with the recently signed Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. A relevant committee must be established to develop regulations on academic ethics and to monitor compliance with the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.
2. In the higher education institution, there is limited understanding of the ethical challenges associated with rapid developments in artificial intelligence. In order to align with the changed circumstances, the relevant practices and policies of the Institute of Theology must be reviewed.

#### Suggestions for further development

1. Even though the Institute of Theology signed the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity in November last year, there is no corresponding information on its website. To provide for more awareness and better understanding of the nature of the code, it should be published on the website.
2. It is recommended that all written works be input in the plagiarism detection software "Ouriginal". This would help, among other things, to develop its Estonian-language database as well.

3. It is recommended that an opportunity for anonymous contact be provided for issues involving ethics, and that all members of the higher education institution be notified.

## 9.5. INTERNATIONALISATION

### Strengths

1. The staff of the higher education institution is participating in several international networks that benefit both research and studies.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. There are no specific measurable goals with regard to internationalisation, so it is difficult to measure the achievement of the goals. Upon reviewing development and action plans, the existence of measurable internationalisation goals in them must be ensured.
2. Student participation in international mobility is low. A strategy must be developed for internationalisation at home, and students must be introduced short-term mobility (e.g. visiting libraries, conferences) options provided by HARNO (Education and Youth Board), for example.

### Suggestions for further development

1. International cooperation relations have been developed primarily by older lecturers individually. Younger lecturers are less involved in international contacts. It is recommended that international cooperation directions important for the Institute of Theology as a whole be defined and younger lecturers be involved as well.
2. The higher education institution lacks staff to enter into new ERASMUS agreements. Cooperation with other theological higher education institutions in Estonia is recommended in this regard.

## 9.6. TEACHING STAFF

### Strengths

1. The teaching staff is highly dedicated to the students and their studies.
2. Regardless of the low salaries and limited resources, teaching staff satisfaction is high.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. The resources for staff development are very scarce. There is no strategic plan for the systematic development of the teaching staff regarding research and teaching skills. A plan for regular training of teaching staff must be developed.

## 9.7. STUDY PROGRAMME

### Strengths

1. Master's students can choose elective subjects from the Orthodox theology specialisation. This has an enriching effect on their studies.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. A specific plan must be developed for reviewing and updating the study programmes. The plan must also set out the frequency of collecting feedback from various stakeholders.

### Suggestions for further development

1. When updating study programmes, more subjects relating to practical and general skills should be incorporated to better meet the changing needs of the society.
2. No students have been admitted to the Master of Arts Program in Theology in the past two years. At the same time, students could benefit from the inclusion of studies in the Pastoral Seminary in specialised theological studies. This would allow shortening the entire study period and form larger student groups. It is recommended that the study programme be updated accordingly.

## 9.8. LEARNING AND TEACHING

### Strengths

1. The provision of learning-related support for students by the staff of the Institute of Theology and by other students has been planned thoroughly. Individualised approach is also implemented where necessary.

### Suggestions for further development

1. Documenting and publishing the procedure for contesting the decisions on the admission of students would be helpful.
2. The digital skills levels of teaching staff vary. The higher education institution should provide more support for teaching staff in that regard.

3. The existing good practices in teaching and learning should be collected into one document on good learning and teaching practice.

## **9.9. STUDENT ASSESSMENT**

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. Even though assessment methods are discussed at chair meetings, such discussions are held on an ad hoc basis. A clearer formal procedure must be developed for reviewing and developing the assessment system. This would help better support discussions to align assessment criteria, assessment methods and learning outputs.

## **9.10. LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

### Strengths

1. The student dropout rate that is lower than the Estonian average is a good reflection of the support provided by the Institute of Theology to its students throughout their studies. What is particularly noteworthy is the support provided by the librarian.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. The mentorship programme of the higher education institution is limited to professional higher education students. This programme should also be made available to Master's students.

### Suggestions for further development

1. It is recommended that a system be developed that would allow students to share information about their special needs so that they could be provided thorough and efficient support. The higher education institution should also appoint a specific person for students to contact in case of special needs.

## **9.11. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND/OR OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES**

### Strengths

1. The Institute of Theology values publishing, and the corresponding figures of its academic staff are excellent. Academic results are particularly good in Bible study, systematic theology and church history.
2. The new Dean of the Faculty of Theology has taken an active and responsible approach toward research and development.

### Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. Even though the general goals and key results of the higher education institution have been determined in the mission and development plan of the Institute of Theology, there is no separate strategy for research, development and creative activities. The higher education institution should develop a research strategy along together with specific focuses and targets. This would allow monitoring the advances and expanding the options and funding for research.

### Suggestions for further development

1. In research, development and creative activities, more attention should be paid on the practical aspects concerning pastoral care and church life, as these are important both for the institution itself as well as for the society as a whole.
2. The higher education institution should seek opportunities for cooperation and co-publishing together with other higher education institutions. This could also bring along new sources of funding.

## **9.12. SERVICE TO SOCIETY**

### Strengths

1. In the field of pastoral care, a wide variety of in-service training courses appealing to a wide audience is provided.
2. The cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs in the provision of various training courses is efficient and helps improve the reputation of the Institute of Theology in the society.
3. The staff of the higher education institution is proactive and energetic in its social activities.

### Suggestions for further development

1. It is recommended that in-service training courses be organised in cooperation with other higher education institutions to improve the impact of the Institute of Theology.
  2. Currently, most of the in-service training courses are aimed at the staff and congregation members of the Lutheran church. Trainings for members of the Orthodox church, but also for non-religious people, primarily the youth, could also be contemplated.
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10. If one to four sub-assessments are 'partially conforms to requirements' and the remaining sub-assessments are 'conforms to requirements', the Assessment Council shall analyse the strengths and areas for improvement of the higher education institution and assess that the management, work organisation,

teaching and research activities and the teaching and research environment of the higher education institution meet the requirements, and shall decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of seven years; or shall assess that there are shortcomings in the management, work organisation, teaching and research activities or in the teaching and research environment of the higher education institution, shall provide guidance on their elimination and shall decide to accredit the higher education institution for a period of three years.

11. The Council analysed the strengths and areas for improvement of the Institute of Theology and deemed it necessary to point out the following:

- 11.1 **The higher education institution is characterised by several important strengths:** the teaching staff is highly dedicated to the students and their studies. The provision of learning-related support for students by the staff of the Institute of Theology and by other students has been planned thoroughly. The Institute of Theology values the publishing of results, and the corresponding figures of academic staff are excellent. Academic results are particularly good in Bible study, systematic theology and church history. In the field of pastoral care, a wide variety of in-service training courses appealing to a wide audience is provided. The cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs in the provision of various training courses is efficient and helps improve the reputation of the Institute of Theology in the society.

- 11.2. The **shortcomings** in meeting institutional accreditation standards mainly concern strategic management and academic ethics related topics under standards that were assessed as 'partially conforms to requirements' by the Assessment Committee.

**Shortcomings in strategic management:** the goals and objectives included in the development plan and action plan of the Institute of Theology are not sufficiently detailed. Therefore, it is not possible to systematically assess the achievement of the goals. Detailed goals that allow for the assessment of their achievement must be phrased. A person in charge must be appointed for each goal and action.

**Shortcomings in academic ethics:** the higher education institution has no regulations on academic ethics. These must be developed. Also, there is no body to monitor compliance with the recently signed Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

12. According to subsection 53(1)2) of the Administrative Procedure Act, the secondary condition of an administrative act is an additional duty related to the principal regulation of the administrative act, and according to subsection 3), it is also a supplementary condition for the creation of a right arising from the principal

regulation of the administrative act. Subsections 53(2)2) and 3) prescribe 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 the administrative right of discretion.

13. Weighing the strengths and shortcomings given in clause 11 and relying on clause 43.7 of the document "Guide to Institutional Accreditation", the Council found that if the higher education institution meets certain requirements, it will be possible to adopt a more positive decision if a secondary condition is imposed on the decision.

Based on the above, the Council

#### **DECIDED TO**

**Accredit the Institute of Theology for seven years with the following secondary condition:** the Institute of Theology shall submit no later than on 29 June 2025 in English a report on the elimination of the shortcomings specified in clause 11.2. Members of the Committee shall be included in assessing the meeting of the secondary conditions.

The decision was adopted with 12 votes in favour. 0 were against.

14. If the Institute of Theology fails to meet the secondary condition on time, the Council shall cancel the accreditation decision or shall establish a new secondary condition.
15. This accreditation will be valid until 29 June 2030 or until the decision is declared invalid. The HAKA Bureau shall coordinate a date for the next institutional accreditation with the Institute of Theology no later than on 29 June 2029.
16. The Council suggests that the Institute of Theology submit no later than on 29 June 2025, along with the report on meeting the secondary condition, an overview in English of the activities of the higher education institution relating to the consideration of other areas of improvement and recommendations as pointed out in the Council's decision.
17. 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