

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Higher Education Institution	Parnu College, Tartu University
Study programme group	<i>Personal Services</i>

Programme (s)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the assessment panel was the evaluation of the following professional higher education study programmes of the Personal Services study programme group:

Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management	Hotel Management
Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management	Tour Operation
Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management	Catering Management
Tallinn University of Technology, Kuressaare College	Tourism and Catering Management
University of Tartu, Pärnu College	Tourism and Hotel Management

The evaluation looked at each of the study programmes separately, but also at their similarities and differences.

The following persons formed the assessment panel:

Prof Peter Mason, Department of Marketing, Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Business, Bedfordshire University, UK - chairman

Dr Rong Huang, Plymouth School of Tourism and Hospitality, UK

Associate Prof Remigijus Kinderis, Klaipeda State College, Lithuania

Feliks Mägi, Nordic Hotels OÜ, Chairman of the Management Board, General Manager of Nordic Hotel Forum, Estonia

Rasmus Kuusemets, Lääne-Viru Rakenduskõrgkool, student, Estonia

After the preparation phase, the work of the assessment panel in Estonia started on Monday 24th November 2014 with an introduction to the Higher Education System as well as the assessment procedure by EKKA, the Estonian Quality assurance organisation for higher education. The members

of the panel agreed the overall questions and areas to discuss with each group at the three institutions, which were part of the assessment process. The distribution of tasks between the members of the assessment panel was then organised and the concrete schedule of the site visits agreed.

During the following days meetings were held at the Kuressaare College of the Tallinn University of Technology (Tuesday), Pärnu College of the University of Tartu (Wednesday) followed by the site visit to the Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management and Friday. In all cases, the schedule for discussion on site for each of the various study programmes only allowed for short time slots to be available for panel members to exchange information, discuss conclusions and implications for further questions.

In all three institutions the discussions with the persons responsible for the study programmes, the staff, the students and the representatives from the employment market (employees, employers and alumni) were very open and interesting and allowed for an exchange of ideas.

On Saturday 29th November, the panel held an all-day meeting, during which both the structure of the final report was agreed and findings of panel meetings were compiled in a first draft of the assessment reports. This work was executed in a cooperative way and the members of the panel intensively discussed their individual views on the relevant topics.

Parnu College is part of Tartu University (TU), which is one of the oldest universities in the Baltic region, having been founded in 1632. TU's role in its involvement with Parnu College is important in connection with regional development. The Tourism curriculum of Parnu College, according to the Self-evaluation Report, is one of 'enterprise' which specialises in spa operations and destination management. The focus on these two related themes means it is the only institution in Estonia to concentrate on these areas of the tourism curriculum.

The premises of the College are modern, a variety of teaching material is available and used, e-learning is provided, the library is extensive and provides an attractive learning environment - so the teaching/learning resources appear to be very good. The Self-evaluation Report indicates that modern and active teaching/learning methods are used, e.g. team work, project work, idea maps and case-studies.

There is a mix of full-time and part-time staff used in delivery of the course. The teaching team is well qualified, as many of them have relevant Master's degrees and some have doctoral degrees. Staff generally recognise and value the role of research in their teaching and also actively encourage students to be involved in their research projects. The College and TU provide a range of training opportunities for the teaching staff.

The College appears to have a high reputation amongst students and there is strong competition for the state funded places. The College is also allowed to recruit 'paying' students, in addition to the state-funded numbers. Students are actively engaged in research project work. Some final theses have been used, with the assistance of supervisors, as the basis for articles in professional journals.

During the visit on November 26th 2014, the evaluation team (henceforth 'the team') had open and detailed discussions with the Director, those responsible for the study programme management, the teaching staff, the students and industry representatives (employees, employers and alumni).

A. General findings (concise analyses of the study programme group):

Strengths

There is close cooperation, and a good working relationship, with TU in terms of the study programme.

The programme has been periodically updated based on information from academics, students, alumni and employers. Students rate the course highly.

There is a generally high quality study environment, (the study rooms, equipment and the library are of high quality and there is good student access to IT). There is a specific e-learning strategy for supporting students in their individual work.

The teaching team is well qualified - many of them have relevant Master's degrees and some of them have doctoral degrees. There is a range of training opportunities available to the teaching staff. Staff clearly recognise the role of research in their teaching and also actively engage students in their research projects.

Many students are of high quality as a result of the strong competition for places, and because of the reputation of the College. Students are involved in different types of research work, projects, and summers schools.

Areas of Improvement

The team found that the sequencing of modules does not always seem to follow a logical pattern or have a convincing rationale. Overlapping occurs where subject courses are closely related (e.g. 'Tourism Marketing', 'Design and Development of Tourism Products', and 'Price Formation and Income')

Not all industry-related software packages (e.g. Fidelio) are up to date.

The teaching staff seem to have a flexible attitude towards assignment deadlines and in the view of the team they are too flexible for students and indeed some students agree with this.

There appears to be too many assignments per course, hence students are over-assessed.

Although most courses are in Moodle, and it is the intention of the College for them all to be in Moodle, not all of them were at the time of the visit, meaning students on courses not using Moodle may feel they are being treated inconsistently and unfairly.

Some teaching staff feel pressure to gain a PhD in order to secure their current positions.

Recommendations

The curriculum needs to be revisited regularly in relation to sequencing, rationale and possible overlapping. Modules should also be regularly reviewed with regard to their associated practical elements.

According to responses given during the visit, the quality of students varies, with significant differences between the 'competitive' students and the 'external' students. The number of international students is also likely to grow in future. With this variety of students by origin, it will be important to regularly monitor the quality of course entrants.

A clearer policy on deadlines for assignments should be in place, including a formalised procedure for late submission of assignments. Flexibility should only be allowed for extenuating circumstances and these should be clarified and must be approved.

Latest versions of industry related software should be obtained.

The team suggests that Moodle should become the main e-learning platform as soon as possible to ensure consistency and fairness for all students.

B: Strengths and Areas for Improvement of the programme in Tourism and Hotel Management by assessment areas

(1) Study programme and study programme development

Strengths

The programme has a clear niche as there are no other courses like it in Estonia. It is consistent with its objectives and learning outcomes.

The programme curriculum has been periodically updated, based on information from academics, students and employers.

The programme curriculum conforms to changes taking place in the labour market, follows current professional standards, and conforms to changes coming from the Programme Council.

A number of “internationalisation at home” activities are carried out, including the employment of two foreign teachers who teach in English, and there are also several short contracts of foreign teachers to deliver the related Master’s programme.

The overall study methods of subjects are consistent with the expected learning outcomes of the study programme.

The course has both theoretical and ‘applied/practical’ aspects.

The study programme development takes into account feedback from teachers, students, alumni and employers.

Competition for places on the course is high and the number of state supported places is limited.

Areas for improvement

The curriculum structure means that students may have reduced interest in general subjects as they may fail to see the connection between ‘background knowledge’ subjects and their professional career.

The sequencing of modules does not always seem to follow a logical pattern or have a convincing rationale. Overlapping occurs where subject courses are closely related (e.g. ‘Tourism Marketing’, ‘Design and Development of Tourism Products’, and ‘Price Formation and Income’).

Limitations on student numbers by Tartu University, means that extra ‘external students’ are recruited who have to pay fees to study at the College.

Maintaining the quality of students, during a period of declining numbers of secondary school leavers in Estonia, may present a challenge.

Recommendations

The curriculum needs to be revisited regularly in relation to sequencing, rationale and possible overlapping of modules.

Internationalisation of the study programme should continue with both an increasing number of international students and an expansion of modules delivered in English, or other relevant foreign languages.

The quality of students, particularly in relation to their different origins, needs to be regularly monitored.

(2) Resources

Strengths

The programme is well integrated into the TU infrastructure and there is good funding from TU.

There are modern, attractive, well equipped and spacious facilities, and a good location provides a high quality teaching and learning environment.

There is a large library with separate places for individual learning and a good variety of textbooks and academic journals.

There is access to the TU databases, library and other teaching resources.

There is good cooperation with Pärnu Vocational School to use their practical classes.

There is a wide range of placement opportunities for all students.

There are good opportunities for distance (open) learning students to combine studying with working.

Areas for improvement

According to the Self-evaluation Report, there are heating problems during winter and ventilation issues during the summer.

All versions of industry-related software (e.g. Fidelio) are not up to date.

Recommendations

The heating/ ventilation system should be adjusted to ensure it does not adversely affect the teaching/learning environment.

Latest versions of the industry-related software should be obtained.

(3) Teaching and learning

Strengths

Courses in English, (lasting for one semester) are available for students.

There is a specific e-learning strategy for supporting students in their individual work.

Students are involved in different types of research work, projects, and summer schools.

Areas for improvement

Deadlines are too flexible for students.

There are too many assignments per course, hence students are over-assessed.

During the visit, alumni and employers indicated that some placements are too short.

Discussions with alumni and employers during the visit indicated that employers do not receive specific training to lead the practice.

There is a reasonably good balance of theoretical and practical work, but there could be more practical elements of the course.

Recommendations

A clearer policy on deadlines for assignments should be in place.

There should be training for employers to lead the practice internship.

The effectiveness of short practices should be monitored and modified if necessary.

Courses should be regularly reviewed with regard to their associated practical elements.

Although English is used, other foreign languages, particularly Finnish and Russian should be made more available

(4) Teaching staff

Strengths

The combination of quality and quantity of staff means that teaching is adequate to ensure the learning outcomes.

Academic staff can attend different training courses on teaching and supervision of their choice. The College organises training in accordance with the objectives of TU (or the College).

The teaching staff actively involve students in different research projects. Staff clearly understand the role of research in curriculum development.

Students have provided a fairly high evaluation of teachers.

Qualified foreign and visiting teaching staff and practitioners participate in teaching within the study programme.

Areas for improvement

Teaching methods and content for generic modules are not as well integrated with subject specialisms as they should be.

The external teaching staff/industry practitioners may not give sufficient attention to the whole curriculum.

The teaching staff seem to have a flexible attitude towards assessment deadlines.

Some current teaching staff feel the pressure to gain a PhD qualification, as a result of TU policy, in order to secure their current positions and salary.

Recommendations

Best practice guidance/seminars for integration of subject specialisms with generic courses should be developed.

A clear policy to involve and train external teaching staff/industry practitioners should be put in place.

A formalised procedure should be put in place for late submission of assignments. Flexibility should only be allowed by the teaching staff for extenuating circumstances and such circumstances must be approved.

The purposes of different types of research should be discussed and encouraged.

(5) Students

Strengths

Students rate the course highly. There is high competition for the state funded places, because of the good reputation of the College.

The Student Council is active and runs several events through the study year.

Students are involved in the research of staff and in certain circumstances they are paid to do research.

Student's feedback is well used to change the curriculum.

There are possibilities for student credit transfer.

Students have the opportunity to (anonymously) critically evaluate the course and teaching staff.

Areas of Improvement

Student's expectations appear too high in relation to their job when graduating.

There is too much flexibility in students' assignment deadlines.

Not all the study courses are, as yet, in Moodle.

Recommendations

Student's career expectations should be more closely matched, via the course, to reality.

Deadlines should be more strictly adhered to – this is something with which students themselves agree.

To ensure consistency and fairness for all students, Moodle should become the main e-learning platform and electronic channel of communication between staff and students and all study courses should be in Moodle.