

# Institutional Accreditation Decision

## Estonian University of Life Sciences

29.08.2019

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to accredit the Estonian University of Life Sciences for three years.

Acting in accordance with section 10 (4) of the Universities Act and point 3.7.3. of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) and based on section 43.2 of the 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation' compiled on the basis of the authorisation given in section 3.7.1 of the Statutes of EKKA, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter, 'the Council') shall state the following:

1. The Estonian University of Life Sciences and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct institutional accreditation on 23.04.2018.
2. The following study programmes were assessed during the institutional accreditation according to point 8 of the 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation':
  - Forestry (bachelor's studies)*
  - Landscape Architecture (master's studies)*
  - Production and Marketing of Agricultural Products (master's studies)*
3. On 5.04.2019, the Director of EKKA approved by her order No 1-19/32/2019 the composition of the institutional accreditation committee (hereinafter 'the Committee'):

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**Tove Blytt Holmen** (Chair)

Senior Advisor, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance (NOKUT), Norway

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**Francisco Aguilar**

Professor, Deputy Research Director, Centre for Environmental and Research Economics, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden

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**Rik Leemans**

Professor, Head of Environmental Systems Analyses Group, Wageningen University, Holland

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<b>Laima Taparauskiene</b>	Vice-Rector, Aleksandras Stulkinis University, Lithuania
<b>Alvija Šalaševičienė</b>	Director, Food Institute, Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
<b>Kathryn Moore</b>	Professor, Birmingham City University; Immediate Past President of the International Federation of Landscape Architects; UK
<b>Liv Teresa Muth</b>	Student, Member of the ESU Quality Assurance Student Experts' Pool; Germany

4. The University submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 14.02.2019, and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 01.03.2019.
5. An assessment visit to the Estonian University of Life Sciences took place on 15 to 17.04.2019.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 17.06.2019, and EKKA forwarded it to the Academy for its comments on 25.06.2019 and the University delivered its response on 08.07.2019.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 04.08.2019. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision. The report is available on the EKKA website.
8. The Secretary of the Council forwarded the Committee's final assessment report along with the self-evaluation report to the Council members on 21.08.2019.
9. The component assessments by the Committee were as follows:

<b>Standard:</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Worthy of recognition</b>
Strategic management	Conforms to requirements	
Resources	Conforms to requirements	
Quality Culture	Partially conforms to requirements	
Academic ethics	Partially conforms to requirements	
Internationalisation	Conforms to requirements	
The teaching staff	Conforms to requirements	
Study programme	Conforms to requirements	
Studying and teaching	Conforms to requirements	

Student assessment	Conforms to requirements
Learning support systems	Partially conforms to requirements
Research, development, and/or other creative activity	Conforms to requirements
Service to society	Conforms to requirements

10. The Council with 10 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 29.08.2019 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths<sup>1</sup>, areas for improvement and recommendations<sup>2</sup> and proposals for further improvements<sup>3</sup>.

## **10.1. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### ***Strengths***

1. The University has an ambitious mission, a clearly defined vision and a comprehensive development plan with objectives and key performance indicators in place. Sub-objectives and activities set out in the action plan are reviewed and updated regularly.
2. Managerial and planning activities of the Estonian University of Life Sciences rely on approved strategy and are described through processes and steps of decision-making. The progress of implementing the development plan is systematically analysed and results discussed.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. While bioeconomy is a persistent theme at all levels of the University, there seems to be no broader understanding of it nor the individual roles, especially at the level of study programmes. To become a leader in the field of bioeconomy, the entire community of the University shall be continuously involved and consulted (i.e. students, scientists, teaching and support staff, alumni, stakeholders, and others).
2. The development plan should incorporate clearly defined and measurable target values to allow for measuring its implementation and impact for various units. It would contribute to a better response, where needed, and planning of improvement activities.
3. The SWOT analysis included in the annexe only points out one strength and one weakness, while the University's self-evaluation report describes several shortcomings and threats, and these should also be highlighted in the development plan. This is particularly relevant for the issues related to

<sup>1</sup> Strengths refer to accomplishments that exceed the standard level (not mere compliance).

<sup>2</sup> Areas for development and recommendations refer to shortcomings in meeting the institutional accreditation standard and influence the formation of the final decision of the Council.

<sup>3</sup> Proposals for further improvements are suggestions that do not refer to non-compliance to standard and taking them into consideration is at the discretion of the University. Proposals for further improvement do not influence the formation of the final decision of the Council.

teaching and learning. The development plan shall be updated to reflect current challenges in higher education and changing legislation, with a focus on teaching and learning (admissions, dropping out, quality assurance).

4. During the assessment visit students, external partners, heads of some study programmes and support staff mentioned not being involved in preparing the development plan. Using different approaches (top-down, bottom-up) for different stakeholder groups would be beneficial.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The development plan draws on several underlying strategies (R&D strategy 2025, knowledge-based bioeconomy, territorial-spatial development plan, quality of studies strategy, the Estonian University of Life Sciences 'The Green University' Strategy 2025, marketing strategy). It is advisable to prepare a single comprehensive strategy for three to five years and have the entire University to contribute to its review and renewal.

## **10.2. RESOURCES**

### ***Strengths***

1. The staff of administrative, finance and legal departments are incredibly competent and readily available.
2. Procedures are well defined in the strategy, followed, and upgraded.
3. The staff are dedicated, skilled and enthusiastic.

### ***Proposals for further developments***

- While the central depreciation reserve fund can cover equipment maintenance costs, the lack of special maintenance contracts for project-funded equipment might jeopardise the continuity of world-class research.

## **10.3. QUALITY CULTURE**

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Quality assurance principles of the University are described in a document adopted in 2005, 'Quality of studies strategy for the Estonian University of Life Sciences'. Very few indicators for expectations towards the general quality culture of the University can be found there, especially for bachelor's and master's studies. The University should broaden the shared basis for quality assurance: consider what processes shall function throughout the University, who shall report to whom and what are the expected results.
2. Since the higher education and approach to quality of studies is changing, the University has to update its quality of studies strategy rather urgently and to make sure it meets the expectations for the quality of modern higher education.

3. There is a need to prepare procedures for integrating the results of quality-related activities into further development activities (the so-called routine follow-up activities) and relevant documentation.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- It is advisable to reflect on the questions asked in the EKKA guide to institutional accreditation: What do you want to achieve, and why? How do you want to do it? How would you know that the activities would be effective and have the desired impact? Results of such discussions should be consolidated, systematised, and enforced by both the teaching staff and the of the Council of the University.

### **10.4. ACADEMIC ETHICS**

#### ***Strengths***

1. Each institute has designated members of staff responsible for questions related to research ethics.
2. Appropriate means are used and available for both staff of the University and the students to detect academic fraud.
3. In case of complaints, both the staff and the students can refer to several contact persons.

#### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Not all essential ethical dimensions are covered in the regulations on teaching and learning (e.g. honesty, fairness, compassion, confidentiality, conflict of interests, accountability). It is essential to incorporate them consistently in all areas of teaching and learning.
2. The principle of equal treatment shall be defined in greater detail in various standards and guidelines to ensure transparency and equal treatment of all stakeholders.
3. There seems to be a lack of clear ethical principles in terms of academic freedom and obligations and interrelations within the University community. Everyone in the University should be better informed about academic ethics as an entirety, emphasising that all categories of academic ethics are of equal weight.
4. Guidelines for handling the cases of academic misconduct shall be distributed among the community more widely, and it should not be limited to cases of plagiarism.
5. Teaching staff shall have a better knowledge of academic ethics. It could be done through the use of flow diagrams, assigning people responsible and giving feedback at all levels. This would add to the transparency of decision-making processes and equal treatment of all stakeholders.
6. Students shall be better informed about academic fraud and its consequences.

### **10.5. INTERNATIONALISATION**

### ***Strengths***

1. The University actively supports internationalisation and allocates both financial and human resources to that end. Units supporting internationalisation have been established (language centre, financial support for mobility).
2. The University values internationalisation highly and takes steps to reduce the existing barriers to better mobility of both students and staff.

### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The University should make efforts to integrate international and Estonian students better and thus advance cultural openness. For example, a different feedback system is used for international students, which somewhat reduces the opportunities for integration.
- The University should prepare a concrete plan for increasing the volume of teaching in English and continue with various courses and programmes to improve the English skills of its academic and support staff.
- Internationalisation, in its many forms, should reach all students and teaching staff.

## **10.6. TEACHING STAFF**

### ***Strengths***

1. The teaching staff is motivated, and their ability to link theory and practice is recognised.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Over the past five years, the overall number of teaching staff has remained around 450, while the number of academic staff holding a PhD has fallen from 246 to 223. Keeping in mind the University's objective that all teaching staff on the level of lecturer or above should by 2020 hold a PhD, it is a vital area for improvement for the University.

### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The University has created and implemented opportunities for self-development of teaching staff, but the teaching staff should grasp these opportunities more effectively and systematically. It is advisable to implement good teaching stimuli and to recognise teaching as being separate from research work.

## **10.7. STUDY PROGRAMME**

### ***Strengths***

1. Study programmes of the University comply with both national and international standards and are recognised in Estonia and beyond.
2. Forestry study programme underwent significant changes to increase the coherence of and logical links between subject courses.

3. Landscape Architecture proves to be a highly successful international study programme which has links with European as well as other international landscape architecture organisations and stays in touch with the developments in this field. The research capacity of the teaching staff of the study programme is excellent and research is well integrated with teaching.

#### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. To be an internationally recognised University in the field of bioeconomy, there is a need for i) integrating globally important agricultural and marketing issues into the study programmes; ii) ensuring a better balance between the directions of production and marketing of agricultural products within the study programmes; and iii) offering more subjects in English.
2. Study programmes of production and marketing of agricultural products should offer more knowledge about both business and marketing. Some of the content and literature of the subject courses under the study programme should be updated to be more international and reflect the rapid changes in the EU research and innovation policy.
3. Reduction in the number of students is a major problem. Several study programmes struggle to fill the state-funded student places. Agricultural sciences (except veterinary science) tend not to be the first choice for student applicants, and thus the University is struggling to fill student places and the number of enrolled students is lower than desired. Internal and external stakeholders should make joint efforts to market the study programmes in order to attract more students to enrol.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The monitoring system for alumni employability and development could be used more actively for following the labour market trends to identify whether the study programmes should be adjusted accordingly.

### **10.8. LEARNING AND TEACHING**

#### ***Strengths***

1. The infrastructure creates excellent opportunities for learning and teaching.
2. The focus is on practical teaching and teaching is tightly linked to research.
3. Study programmes are flexible and attempt to cater for various kinds of students, including those who have a full-time job.

#### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Learning outcomes of the master's level study programmes need changing, because currently they are more teaching than student-centred ('knows', 'is familiar with', 'understands'). The learning outcomes shall reflect a level suitable for master's studies. Learning outcomes and their content should be described through learning taxonomies, taking the student-centred approach.
2. In general, there are enormous shortcomings in terms of a student-centred approach and understanding and implementing student-centred teaching. It

was only apparent in the Landscape Architecture study programme, evidenced by appropriate learning outcomes. For implementing a student-centred approach, relevant training should be provided, and teaching staff should be motivated to take part.

3. Student applicants of all study programmes do not always understand the admission criteria and requirements. In the case of Forestry study programme, these might be clear for student applicants who have a family tradition in forestry, but not for those without any relevant background. Admission criteria should be clearly available and comprehensible for all potential future students.
4. Interviews with the students revealed that they are not necessarily aware of how the teaching staff uses their feedback. The students have to be informed about how their feedback helps to improve teaching and learning.
5. The number of students who drop out in the Forestry study programme is extremely high, exceeding the number of graduates. Internal and external stakeholders should analyse the reasons for dropping out and introduce preventive measures to reverse this trend.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- Students should be better informed about the accreditation of prior and experiential learning, e.g. when going to study abroad or if they want to prepare an individual plan.

## **10.9. STUDENT ASSESSMENT**

### ***Strengths***

1. The University supports the development of assessment competencies of the teaching staff. The teaching staff can access training funded through various projects (e.g. ASTRA) and conducted by trainers from the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, which fosters the sharing of best practices. In 2016–2017 seminars on developing teaching skills were organised with the help of the University's educational technologist.

### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Assessment methods at most of the sample study programmes are not linked to the learning outcomes and do not support achieving them; also, the descriptions of assessment methods are too general. The Committee finds that the current evaluation system demonstrates that students are probably learning, but it remains unclear, what they are learning exactly. Evaluation methods should be updated to make student assessment more transparent and link them with learning outcomes, including achieving and supporting general competencies. Also, the assessment criteria should be described in greater detail.
2. For making learning and teaching more effective, a system should be established for giving feedback to students about their progress in achieving the learning outcomes.



3. Criteria for the evaluation of teamwork should be clearly defined in a way that allows for evaluating the individual contribution of each student.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- Restoring the good practice of attending colleagues' lectures could be considered for sharing experiences and acquiring additional knowledge.

### **10.10. LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

#### ***Strengths***

1. An excellent support structure is in place to support and develop University's students and staff.
2. Social programmes, activities, and specialised support services, as well as Estonian language courses, are available for international students.
3. University supports out-of-school activities and civil society initiatives.

#### ***Areas for improvement and recommendations***

1. Staff working with student counselling should improve their English skills, or someone able to advise international students in English should be hired.
2. Interviews with students revealed that one of the reasons behind early dropping out is that they have misunderstood the content and learning outcomes of the study programmes. University should communicate the expected learning outcomes to future students clearly, so that fewer students would drop out as a result of misleading information.
3. It is necessary to identify the root causes of early school leaving and dropping out and implement preventive measures in the existing learning management and support systems. The economic situation of students should be scrutinised, with a focus on how this could obstruct their academic progress.

### **10.11. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT, AND/OR OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITY**

#### ***Strengths***

1. The Estonian University of Life Sciences places much value on its role and responsibilities in the society, in R&D activities, and appreciates the results of its work, international visibility and impact to society. Top position for agriculture and forestry in the QS World University rankings perfectly shows their international academic quality and visibility.

#### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The definition of bioeconomy is too broad, and the teaching staff, researchers and heads of structural units do not have a shared understanding of it; this restricts the integrating potential of bioeconomy. The current understanding and application of bioeconomy could entail more elements of a circular economy or green economy

which are linked with the sustainable development goals, to attract more cooperation within the University and beyond.

## **10.12. SERVICE TO SOCIETY**

### ***Strengths***

1. The University takes various measures for being of service to society and knowledge-sharing and is determined in developing these measures further.

### ***Proposals for further developments***

- The University should explore opportunities for engaging the alumni more actively in informing current and future students about working opportunities.
  - Continuing professional training offered by the University should be thoroughly analysed to reflect the needs of society better.
11. If one to four component assessments are provided as 'partially conforms' and all the remaining component assessments are provided as 'conforms', the Council shall analyse the strengths and areas for improvement of the HEI and conclude that the management, administration, teaching and research activities, as well as the environments of learning and research at the HEI, meet the requirements, and decide to accredit the HEI for seven years; or shall conclude that there are shortcomings in the management, administration, teaching and research activities or the environments of learning and research at the HEI, provide guidance for their elimination, and decide to accredit the HEI for three years.
12. The Council analysed the strengths and areas for improvement of the Estonian University of Life Sciences and concluded that several shortcomings had been mentioned in the report of the assessment committee not only for the three standards that were assessed 'partially conforms to the requirements' but also other standards (in particular 'Learning and teaching' and 'Student assessment'). The assessment council points out the following critical shortcomings:
- 1) Section 6 (2) of the Government of the Republic Regulation 'Higher Education Standard' establishes a requirement that *study programmes and conducting studies shall be consistent with the internal quality standards of the educational institution as well as with national and international quality requirements and agreements.* According to Standard 3 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *the higher education institution has defined the quality of its core and support processes, and the principles of quality assurance. In the higher education institution, internal evaluation supports strategic management and is conducted regularly at different levels (institution, unit, study programme), the findings of internal and external evaluations are analysed and quality improvement activities implemented.* Quality assurance principles of the University are described in a document adopted in 2005, 'Quality

of studies strategy for the Estonian University of Life Sciences'. It contains only a few indicators about expectations towards the general quality culture of the University and fails to meet today's expectations for the quality of higher education. There are no procedures in place for using the results of various internal and external evaluations for development activities.

- 2) According to Standard 1 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *development planning at the higher education institution is purposeful and systematic, involving various stakeholders. The higher education institution regularly evaluates the achievement of its stated objectives and the impact of its activities.* The SWOT analysis in the University development plan only points out one strength and one weakness, while several shortcomings and threats related to teaching and learning have been ignored. During the assessment visit, it became clear that not all stakeholders were involved in preparing the development plan and this is why the stakeholders (teaching staff, researchers, support staff, students, alumni, employers) have a mixed understanding of the Estonian University of Life Sciences as a leader in the field of bioeconomy.
- 3) According to Standard 4 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *the higher education institution has defined its principles for academic ethics, has a system for disseminating them among its members, and has a code of conduct including guidelines for any cases of non-compliance with these principles.* There seems to be a lack of clear ethical principles in terms of academic freedom and obligations, interrelations within the University community. The awareness about academic ethics as an entirety is low. Guidelines for handling academic misconduct mainly focus on plagiarism. Not all essential ethical dimensions are covered in the regulations on teaching and learning (e.g. honesty, fairness, compassion, confidentiality, conflict of interests, accountability). The principles of equal treatment are not defined clearly enough.
- 4) According to section 6 (3) of the Higher Education Standard, *the objectives and learning outcomes of a study programme shall be equal and comparable with the learning outcomes of the cycles of higher education level described in Annex 1 to this Regulation, meet the requirements and trends of international legal instruments that regulate the professional field and, if a professional standard exists, take into consideration the acquisition and implementation of the knowledge and skills described therein.* According to Standard 7 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *study programmes are designed and developed while taking into account the expectations of stakeholders, higher education and professional standards, and trends in the relevant fields. The objectives of the study programme, modules (including courses and their learning outcomes are concrete and coherent.* Learning outcomes of the master's study programmes are limited to knowledge and understanding, while analysis and synthesis are missing, and thus do

not describe a level suitable for master's studies. The learning outcomes tend to focus on teaching rather than the learner.

- 5) According to Standard 8 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *the higher education institution systemically implements a student-centred approach that guides students to take responsibility for their studies and career planning and supports creativity and innovation.* There are enormous shortcomings in terms of a student-centred approach and understanding and implementing student-centred teaching.
- 6) According to section 6 (4) of the Higher Education Standard, *the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme are formulated in such a way that they provide a basis for evaluating the knowledge and skills of graduates of that study programme.* According to Standard 9 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation', *assessments of students, including recognition of their prior learning and work experiences, support the process of learning and are consistent with expected learning outcomes. Objective and reliable assessment is ensured.* Assessment methods at most of the sample study programmes are not linked to the learning outcomes and do not support achieving them; also, the descriptions of assessment methods are too general. There is no systematic approach for giving feedback to students about their progress in achieving the learning outcomes.
- 7) According to Standard 10 of the regulation 'Guide to Institutional Accreditation' *the higher education institution ensures that all students have access to academic, career and psychological counselling. Individual development and progress of students are monitored and supported.* Reduction in the number of students is a significant problem. Several study programmes struggle to fill the state-funded student places. There is a high number of students who drop out, sometimes exceeding the number of graduates. Information about the content of study programmes and learning outcomes is sometimes misleading; the expected learning outcomes and the content of study programmes are sometimes ambiguous and seems to be one of the reasons for dropping out. Staff working with international students has insufficient knowledge of English.

13. Based on the previous, the Council

### **DECIDED**

#### **To accredit the Estonian University of Life Sciences for three years.**

The decision was adopted by ten votes in favour and 0 against.

14. The accreditation is valid until 29.08.2022. The EKKA Bureau shall agree the time of the next institutional accreditation with the Estonian University of Life Sciences by 29.08.2021, at the latest.
15. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms 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. The Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days. A legal challenge to this decision is possible within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court under the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

**Eve Eisenschmidt**  
**Chair of the Council**

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