

Decision Regarding Assessment of the Journalism and Information Study Programme Group Tallinn University

29/09/2017

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Journalism and Information study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University in seven years

On the basis of subsection 10 (4) of the Universities Act and point 41.1 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', authorised in points 3.7.3 and 3.7.1 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA'), the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 1.03.2016 Tallinn University and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct a quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 15.02.2017, approved the following membership of the quality assessment committee for the Journalism and Information study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'):

Ágústa Pálsdóttir	Chair of the Committee, Professor, University of Iceland, Iceland
Leen d'Haenens	Professor, KU Leuven, Belgium
Väino Koorberg	Member of Estonian Academic Journalism Society, Estonia
Annisa Suliman	Principal Lecturer, Leeds Beckett University, UK
Meelis Süld	Chairman of the Board, Estonian Association of Journalists, Estonia
Marija Vasilevska	Student, University of 'Ss. Cyril and Methodius', Macedonia
Margus Viher	Director General, The Estonian Patent Office, Estonia

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

Information Science (BA)**Information Science (MA)****Digital Library Learning (MA, a joint study programme with Parma University, taught in English)****Journalism (BA)****Communication (MA)**

4. Tallinn University submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 23.01.2017 and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 14.02.2017.
5. An assessment visit was made to Tallinn University during 18–19.04.2017.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 5.06.2017, EKKA forwarded it to Tallinn University for its comments on 7.06.2017 and the University delivered its response on 21.06.2017.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 21.06.2017. 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 25.08.2017.
9. The Council with 8 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 29.09.2017 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Journalism and Information study programme group at Tallinn University.

Assessment at the Level of the Study Programme GroupStrengths

- 1) Academic staff is very dedicated to their work.
- 2) As a result of successful international interactions, a number of international lecturers teach at the University. This gives the study programmes significant added value.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Heavy workloads of the teaching staff may become a serious problem, which should definitely be addressed in the near future. It is recommended that more young qualified full-time lecturers be recruited.
- 2) The international student mobility rate is too low and should be increased.
- 3) Only few students complete their studies in a timely manner. The situation should be carefully monitored and a flexible solution should be found.
- 4) The University should develop procedures to increase the volume of student feedback on the study programme as a whole.

Assessment at the Study Programme Level**INFORMATION SCIENCE (BA and MA)**Strengths

- 1) There is a good balance between theoretical and practical studies in the study programme, and good connections with employers also exist. Collaboration with practitioners in the field is excellent.
- 2) The study programmes are based on research and reflect the latest trends in research.

- 3) Strengths of the study programmes include an interdisciplinarity and collaborations with other higher education institutions.
- 4) Practical trainings are well organised.
- 5) Before the start of the studies, individual profiles are prepared for each student, indicating their prior studies and knowledge.
- 6) Competition for student places in the Information Science programmes is fierce.
- 7) Alumni are competitive in the labour market.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Additional funding should be found for teaching, research and staff development, thereby also contributing to development of the study programme.
- 2) Graduates of the BA programme should be motivated to continue their studies in the Information Science MA programme.
- 3) Given the nature of the study programmes, it is important to ensure that sufficient financial resources be allocated for keeping the digital learning aids consistently up to date.

DIGITAL LIBRARY LEARNING (MA, A JOINT STUDY PROGRAMME WITH PARMA UNIVERSITY, TAUGHT IN ENGLISH)

Strengths

- 1) The study programme has a strong international orientation. The programme prepares graduates well for further studies at foreign universities.
- 2) Customised learning opportunities are offered in a digital learning environment.
- 3) Members of the teaching staff are experienced and dedicated, and are regarded as opinion leaders in Estonia.
- 4) Experienced international lecturers teach in the programme.
- 5) Extensive participation in international professional networks supports programme development, teaching activities and applications for research funds.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) The number of student applicants is in a downward trend. In the context of the cessation of funding from the European Union, it is necessary to seek new sources of financing and to apply for new funding through them – for example, to find ways to get international students from Third World countries to study in the programme. The profile of the programme may also need to be redefined.
- 2) New international partners should be found for the joint programme.
- 3) Due to the international nature of the study programme, sufficient financial resources should be ensured to purchase and update the digital devices used.
- 4) Increased flexibility should be applied to the teaching and learning process to encourage students to complete their studies in a timely manner.
- 5) Workloads of the teaching staff should be reduced to leave them more time for research and self-development.

JOURNALISM (BA)

Strengths

- 1) The interdisciplinary nature of the teaching staff ensures that the study programme is appropriate and up to date, and its focus on the social sciences and cross-media differentiates it from other similar programmes.
- 2) Changes in the study programme are made quickly and flexibly based on the results of feedback received, and according to the needs of the labour market.

- 3) The prospect of linking journalism studies with studies of the arts and audiovisual culture at the Baltic Film and Media School (BFM) will make the programme more attractive to both students and employers in the creative industries. Collaboration between the Journalism programme and the BFM will provide opportunities to acquire competencies in the areas such as audiovisual journalism and cross-media story-telling.
- 4) In the study programme, particular attention is paid to the development of teamwork skills, which are regarded as useful by alumni.
- 5) The study programme is relevant and globally oriented due to the inclusion of foreign journalism and new media.
- 6) Due to the existence of international partners, the number of international lecturers has increased.
- 7) Members of the teaching staff have close connections in the professional field, providing them with good overviews of new developments in media, along with the needed skills and competencies. A large number of practical courses make the programme interesting, and it is taught by numerous practitioners who work in the field of media and share their new and interesting viewpoints with students.
- 8) Good support systems have been created for the students.
- 9) Students having completed a course are interviewed, and data collected from them is used as input for future activities.
- 10) In order to obtain a more balanced and detailed overview of the needs of the media industry and make changes to the study programme on this basis, the programme coordinator has conducted in-depth interviews with its representatives (IT visionaries, practitioners, university lecturers).
- 11) Students have an improved access to excellent studio and audiovisual equipment that meet the standards of a modern media industry.
- 12) Students with disabilities have excellent access to the programme.
- 13) Diverse learning strategies are used – a flipped classroom, e-learning, etc.
- 14) Student feedback on the study programme is positive. They find the learning process flexible and the size of the study groups appropriate. Student feedback on the learning process and the programme is taken into account and the needed changes are made quickly based on this. Feedback is digitised.
- 15) The teaching and learning process is supported by excellent teaching facilities (a new academic building, well-equipped studio, computer classrooms).
- 16) Students are able to combine working and studying.
- 17) Theoretical learning materials are well linked with the practical assignments.
- 18) Due to having practitioners in the programme as lecturers, students easily find practical training places and jobs in the media industry during their studies.
- 19) Good relationships exist between students and lecturers. Staff members are available to students.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Successful integration of elements of the arts and audiovisual technology of the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication Institute into the Journalism programme requires a clear strategy to ensure that there will be no overlapping between courses and that the corresponding modules will be clearly linked to the programme's journalistic focus and competencies.
- 2) According to practitioners, there are gaps relating to both the theoretical parts of the study programme (e.g. media psychology) and the skills acquired in media entrepreneurship, project management and brand management. The courses should also support development of the students' professional identity as journalists.

- 3) The study programme does not sufficiently incorporate subjects supporting a student's personal development – for example, stress management, avoiding burnout, journalists' safety, time management, ethics, psychology, etc. Employers also believe that more emphasis should be placed on developing students' transferrable competencies in the programme.
- 4) Alumni should be involved in development and delivery of courses to a greater extent, to allow them to share their experiences and best practices.
- 5) Larger than average workloads and low salary levels of the teaching staff are concerns which have an impact on the health and morale of staff members as well as on the management of research projects and teaching. There is a shortage of qualified supervisors. The study programme is largely delivered by part-time lecturers and practitioners, which can, in the long run, endanger the sustainability of the programme as well as academic continuity. Full-time lecturers must be recruited for the programme. It is important to ensure new generations of younger lecturers, by providing them with adequate support and development opportunities.
- 6) Specific courses on university teaching skills should be developed for practitioners.
- 7) E-learning opportunities are not adequately developed, and therefore students do not have access to the needed learning materials outside of lecture hours.
- 8) Students should be supported in a more targeted manner when preparing for thesis writing.
- 9) There is a shortage of journalism textbooks in Estonian.
- 10) Student progression and completion rates are low.
- 11) Feedback mechanisms used between teaching staff and the working world should be formalised.
- 12) The study programme should offer international mobility opportunities to students in a more proactive manner. Currently the number of incoming international students studying in the programme exceeds the number of students who participate in outward learning mobility.
- 13) Low applicant and graduate numbers have a critical impact on the programme's funding.
- 14) According to all lecturers, students and programme coordinators, the feedback system should be more individualised in order to obtain more personal and detailed information about the teaching and learning process, and could also include students' self-evaluations. Currently it is not clear to students as to what concrete changes have been made based on their feedback.
- 15) A transparent system should be set up to deal with students' concerns so that they would have a clear direction as to whom to turn to with their problems at the University.

COMMUNICATION (MA)

Strengths

- 1) The study programme contains well-proportioned courses on communication theories and research methods, as well as courses on subject fields such as social communication, language-based communication and health communication.
- 2) The study programme is versatile and takes into account the needs of the labour market, making use of client projects to bring elements of real-world practices into the study.
- 3) Students appreciate the content of the study programme and believe that employers value their Master's degrees and professionalism.
- 4) The availability of practical training places is excellent due to the proximity of media companies and the ministries.
- 5) Some courses are taught in English and international lecturers are involved in the programme, fostering international mobility as well as 'internationalisation at home'. In cooperation with employers, the study programme provides practical training places for Erasmus students.
- 6) Members of the teaching staff are very committed to supervising MA theses. Seminars on MA thesis writing and academic writing courses are offered on a weekly basis, enhancing students' motivation and the quality of their MA theses. This is also evidenced by low student dropout rates.

- 7) A proactive use of digital technology and social media allows for a more efficient use of the learning resources (e.g. the introduction of distance learning modules, Moodle).
- 8) An excellent environment has been created for media work. There are several open study areas in the building that are regularly used by students for discussions, learning, relaxing and independent work. Both the teaching staff and the students appreciate the improvements in learning and working conditions – in particular this boosts their morale following the years of structural changes.
- 9) Students highly value the practical orientation and interdisciplinarity of the study programme, as well as the flexibility in teaching and learning, working in smaller study groups and the use of innovative teaching methods. Good relationships exist between the lecturers and the students. Staff members are supportive of the students and easily available to them.
- 10) Students are encouraged to apply their acquired knowledge of theory to practical works.
- 11) Students with disabilities have very good access to the academic building.
- 12) The ratio of experienced staff members to members with less experience is good.
- 13) The study programme and courses are taught by enthusiastic and charismatic lecturers, who are qualified, motivated and recognised both in academic and professional spheres. Practitioners are used in the teaching process as guest lecturers. Members of the teaching staff are actively engaged in research and keep abreast of the latest trends in their professional field.
- 14) More experienced staff members help their younger colleagues to build their own professional networks, and to enter the international professional community. Members of the teaching staff have set high standards for the teaching process and encourage less experienced lecturers to participate in pedagogical training courses offered by the University. As a result, the levels of student satisfaction have improved.
- 15) In addition to formal feedback, lecturers also collect more personalised feedback throughout the teaching process, which provides them with better opportunities to analyse the course, the teaching process and student development. In addition to individual and group discussions, lecturers also use social media to provide feedback to students.
- 16) Students are professionally motivated and capable.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- 1) Opportunities related to high-quality study programmes abroad should be better communicated to the students. Joint international master degree programmes could also be launched in collaboration with existing partners.
- 2) According to the students and alumni, the study programme should also incorporate courses on budgeting, project management and the impacts of media.
- 3) Marketing of the Communication programme should be more active, since it is particularly relevant to the contemporary media environment, combining elements of public relations, marketing and journalism. It is recommended that the skills and competencies acquired in the programme be promoted more effectively to employers and at the national level. Currently, employers do not attach much value to the existence of a master's degree as such.
- 4) Strictly speaking, only three courses are offered in English, which makes the study programme considerably less attractive for foreign students. Given the Institute's international profile, the number of modules taught in English should be increased.
- 5) Based on student feedback, their workloads are too large in relation to the credits they earn.
- 6) Shortages of lecturers and low salary levels are concerns. Currently all lecturers need to also work outside the University to support themselves. Also, the study programme overly relies on practitioners for both programme development and teaching. It is recommended that a course be developed at the University to improve the pedagogical skills of practitioners, and that part-time employment contracts be offered to them.

- 7) Due to the lack of resources, heavy workloads and responsibilities of their jobs outside of the University, lecturers find it difficult to focus on their professional development. Access to conferences and other development opportunities is limited.
 - 8) The number of teaching materials in the Estonian language should be increased.
 - 9) E-learning is not applied consistently, for example, video and audio lectures are not available. Given that the majority of students are also working, distance learning options would be beneficial to them.
 - 10) At the very beginning of their studies, students should be introduced to international mobility opportunities, which they should be able to use easily and flexibly. It is strategically important to increase students' motivation to participate in learning mobility.
 - 11) Discussions with professional associations and employers regarding the competencies they expect from students should be continued.
 - 12) Access to the study programme could be improved – for example, with regard to the Television course, an alternative should be offered to visually impaired students.
 - 13) Management of the study programme should monitor the career progress of alumni. Alumni should be more involved in the development and delivery of programmes at both BA and MA levels.
 - 14) Students should be informed about how their feedback has been taken into account and what changes have been made based on that feedback.
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, and

DECIDED

to approve the assessment report and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Journalism and Information study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University in seven years.

The decision was adopted by 8 votes in favour and 0 against.

12. The Bureau of EKKA will coordinate a date for the next quality assessment of the study programme group with Tallinn University no later than 29.09.2023.
13. 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 29.09.2018.
14. 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. A judicial 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 pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

Maaja-Katrin Kerem
Vice-Chair of the Council

Hillar Bauman
Secretary of the Council

