



ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY
FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Assessment Report on Meeting the Requirements of
the Secondary Condition of Institutional Accreditation

Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

2021

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Introduction

Background and aim of the assessment

'Institutional accreditation' is the process of external evaluation which assesses the conformity of a University or higher education institution's management, work procedures, study and research activities and environment to both legislation and the goals and development plan of the higher education institution itself. This is feedback-based evaluation in which an international expert panel analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the institution of higher education based on the self-assessment report of the institution and on information obtained during the assessment visit, providing recommendations for improvement and ways of implementing them.

The goal of institutional accreditation is to support the development of strategic management and quality culture that values learning-centeredness, creativity and innovation in the higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as to increase the societal impact of education, research and development delivered by the HEIs.

Educational institution must undergo institutional accreditation at least once every seven years based on the regulation approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter EKKA Council) [Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation](#).

The institutional accreditation of *Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary* took place in 2019. EKKA Council decided at its meeting on 26 February 2019, that the next accreditation is to take place in seven years if the HEI meets certain requirements set by the EKKA Council.

The task of the current expert panel was to evaluate whether the requirements (secondary condition) set by the EKKA Council have been met by the *Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary*.

The composition of the expert panel was as follows:

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| Prof. dr. F.G. Immink | Emeritus professor of Practical Theology and former Rector of the Protestant Theological University, The Netherlands. |
| Dr. Ringo Ringvee | Ministry of the Interior (Religious Affairs Department), Estonia. |

Assessment process

The higher education institution sent its progress report on the fulfillment of the requirements of the secondary condition to EKKA on 26 February 2021.

The members of the expert panel wrote the report based on the written materials presented by the HEI and the information obtained in the interviews held electronically on April 19, 2021.

In the following sections, the expert panel summarises their findings regarding the fulfillment of the secondary condition and provides feedback on the progress the HEI has made in connection with experts' recommendations made in the institutional accreditation report.

In finalizing the assessment report, the expert panel took into consideration comment made by the institution. The panel submitted the final report to EKKA on 06.05.2021.

The current report is a public document and made available on EKKA website after EKKA Council has made its decision.

General progress report

General assessment of the actions taken by the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary with regard to improvement areas presented in the EKKA Council decision on 26 February 2019.

Comments

The Institution moved from Tartu to Tallinn and is geographically now in a better position for student enrolment and public services to the society. The Seminary took the recommendations on the General Management and the Research development quite serious and documented the efforts and results in a clear report. The online site-visit was informative and in line with the report on the additional requirements.

The Assessment Committee holds that the Seminary is a healthy and transparent institution of Higher Professional Education.

Commendations

- The leadership responsibilities are better distributed and the rector oversees her activities and is in control.
- The international exchange is at the moment partly hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the institutional relationships are utilized well for online meetings and conferences.
- The Seminary launched a clear longtime research plan.
- The Seminary hired new young staff and appointed a Research Development Manager.

Further considerations

The Seminary should maintain a strong focus on international exchange.

During the implementation of the Research Plan the Seminary should focus on:

- Three or four research topics which structure the research of students and staff.
- Further development and implementation of a model of applied science for students.

Report on meeting the requirements of the secondary condition

General background

At its meeting on February 26, 2019, EKKA Council decided that the next institutional accreditation of *Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary* will take place in seven years but set a secondary condition that the university must meet in two years.

Meeting of the requirements of the secondary condition

The following are the requirements set by the EKKA Council to be met by *Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary*, and the expert panel's assessment on the developments the HEI has made in this regard.

1) Regarding management and staff of a higher education institution:

- According to section 7.1.1.5 of the 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation' based on clause 10 (1) 1) and 4) of the Universities Act, subsections 21 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsections 21 (1) to (3) and (5) of the Private Schools Act, **liability at all management levels shall be defined and described, and it shall support the achievement of institutional purposes and the coherent performance of core processes.** Delegate and distribute managerial tasks as much as possible, considering the high workload of the rector and in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Seminary. Managerial responsibilities of the staff shall be defined more clearly, in particular the role of the Lead Teachers.
- According to the section 7.1.2.5 of the regulation 'Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation', **employees shall participate in international mobility programmes, cooperation projects, networks, etc.** The mobility and international exchange of staff must be supported and intensified.

Assessment of the expert panel: the secondary condition is fully met.

Evidence and analysis

Defining and describing liability at all management levels.

The documents presented by the Seminary and the interviews indicate that the recommendations made by EKKA Council in regard of defining and describing liability at all management levels have been implemented (Document on the additional requirements, p.1; Plan of Management 2021; Development plan (2020-2027)). The Plan of Management (2021) defines the duties and areas of responsibilities for the staff. Rector is sharing several duties like communication with partners, project decision-making, fundraising with other members of the staff. For this, two new staff members are hired: project development manager and research development manager. Besides of assisting rector in several areas their specific duties are management of research (including dissemination of results, organizing outreach activities, technical editing etc.) and management of Seminary's and its owner's projects, cooperation projects (Erasmus+), communication with partners and administration of the students' mentoring system (Plan of Management 2021).

The development plan for 2021-2027 sets measures for long term sustainability that include mentoring. In academic mentoring the lead-teachers are mentors for the new faculty members and include joint-teaching. There is also mentoring for students by lead teachers that takes place in groups. The students may have mentor also from outside of the Seminary and then the mentoring is

one-to-one while the Seminary provides training for the mentors. The mentoring system is seen also as a possible tool for future recruitment. (*KUS arengukava 2021-2027*, <https://kus.kogudused.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Arengukava2021-2027.pdf>)

Participation in international mobility programmes, cooperation projects, networks, etc.

The Seminary has a clear vision regarding international cooperation and mobility. Development plan for 2021-2027 sets goals for international students' and teachers' exchange and mobility and indicates Erasmus+ cooperation partners (*KUS arengukava 2021-2027*, <https://kus.kogudused.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Arengukava2021-2027.pdf>). However, the ongoing pandemic has had negative impact on developing international exchange programs.

The Seminary has been actively networking internationally. The contacts with current partner in Erasmus+ framework Örebro School of Theology are maintained although the Covid-19 pandemic has set limitations for cooperation. There have been negotiations with the The International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Elstal Theological Seminary, and Lithuanian Christian College International University for future cooperation. In 2021 the Seminary and the Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology signed a cooperation agreement, which includes a student and faculty exchange, common conferences and research. (Document on the additional requirements, p. 2.)

Regarding participation of teaching staff in conferences there is a positive trend among the younger generation staff who are active in their participation (Document *Õppejõu aruanne*).

Conclusion

The Assessment panel concludes that the management and staff of a higher education institution requirements regarding research and development are fully met: liability at all management levels are defined and described in the Plan of Management. The development plan for 2021-2027 sets measures for long term sustainability that include mentoring which supports sustainability of the institution. The Seminary has a clear vision regarding international cooperation. A manager post responsible for cooperation with partners is established. However, the Covid-19 crisis has left its mark on international cooperation and participation in mobility programmes.

Strengths

- The Seminary is strong in cooperative teamwork.
- The management of the Seminary has clear structure and the areas of responsibilities are defined.
- Development plan 2021-2027 set clear and achievable goals in development plan.
- Mentoring system supports students. Academic mentoring is carried out in groups by lead teachers. For individual mentoring the Seminary provides additional training.

Areas of concern and recommendations

None

Opportunities for further improvement

- As the pandemic and travel restrictions continue the Seminary (with its partners) should look for online opportunities for international cooperation.

2) Regarding research and development:

- *According to the section 7.3.1.1 of the regulation ‘Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation’, **a higher education institution shall define its RDC objectives and measure their implementation.** The Seminary should develop a longer-term research plan for the next 5-7 years. The Seminary should analyse and define its applied research plans, activities and profile. Research outcomes should be published in national and international publications.*
- *According to the section 7.3.2.2 of the regulation ‘Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation’, **a higher education institution shall have financial resources needed for RDC development and a strategy that supports their acquisition.** More resources need to be allocated for research purposes, and priority should be given to supporting younger faculty members’ participation in research seminars and conferences abroad.*

Assessment of the expert panel: the secondary condition is fully met.

Evidence and analysis

I. Research program

The Seminary developed a long-term research program: Free Church Identity and the relationship between church and society. The research plan is accepted by the Advisory Board in June 2020 (Strategic Planning Document, p. 7).

In the Estonian society Free Churches have the role of a religious minority. According to the research plan Free Churches have (1) a tradition of a democratic structured leadership, and (2) a strong tradition of volunteers carrying out congregational activities. Further, Free Churches have a strong tradition is social and diaconal work.

The research plan focusses on these topics and aims at well-founded knowledge of these themes. The research will be carried out by the methods of Applied Science, and has the strategic intention to improve the practices in church and society.

II. Applied science

The Applied Science of the Seminary focusses on practical issues, and uses the skills of analysis, theoretical reflection and practical application. Both students and staff do their research under the requirements of the research plan. Recent student topics were for example: the functioning of local church boards, Communion and Baptist practices. Staff topics: youth work in churches, practices of nature care. The Seminary is aware of the fact that Applied Science in religious matters also includes hermeneutical reflection.

III. Financial resources

The Seminary appointed a Research Development Manager (0.4). He has a managerial role in coordinating research and publications, coordination of lectures and conferences, et cetera. Part of the job is also producing podcasts and managing the online debating room (Elephant Room).

The Strategic Planning Document shows that the financing of research is motivational and based on results (p. 3). In fact, most research is done in spare time. It is the intention of the Seminary that the formal workload grows from 0.1 to 0.3, for the benefit of research.

The budget for the Research/Development activities has been growing during 2020 and 2021 (Document on the additional requirements, p. 3).

IV. Publications

In 2021 the faculty staff will be publishing 8 articles in a 1.1. category journal. Younger faculty members worked together with more experienced researchers. (Document on the additional requirements, p. 3).

Conclusion

The Assessment panel concludes that the requirements regarding research and development are fully met.

- The Seminary has developed a long-term research plan
- The staff will use the skills of analytical, empirical and hermeneutical techniques (Applied Science) and instruct students accordingly.
- The budget for research activities has been growing.

Strengths

- The development of a strategic long-term research plan in Applied Science. This plan will bring structure and coherence in the research of staff and students. And it will stimulate young staff and students to use the methods of Applied Science.
- The appointment of a young Research and Development Coordinator (0.4). This will benefit the teaching staff in the planning and valorisation of their research activities.

Areas of concern and recommendations

None

Opportunities for further improvement

The Assessment Panel would like to suggest:

- Plan also another research topic that is characteristic of Free Church identity: The priesthood of all believers. This topic is also mentioned by the Board of Elders and the Board of Trustees. (Strategic Planning Document, p. 7). This topic is very much in line with the mission of the Seminary: comprehensive and lifelong development of individual Christians. This theme includes issues in the area of spirituality, and pastoral and spiritual care practices.