

The Decision of the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education

Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary Decision on the Re-Assessment of the Master's programme *Theology and Society* in the study programme group of Theology

1 July 2025

The Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education decided that the studies in the Master's programme *Theology and Society* in the study programme group of Theology at the Estonian Free Church

In accordance with § 9(3) and §10(1) of the Higher Education Act and clause 32.1 of the document 'Guidelines for Initial and Reassessment in Higher Education' established by the Higher Education Assessment Council of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA), the Higher Education Assessment Council of HAKA (hereinafter the Council) states the following:

1. The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (hereinafter KUS or the Institution) submitted the data required for the re-assessment of the Master's programme *Theology and Society* in the study programme group of Theology to HAKA on 16 January 2025.
2. By the order of 11 June 2024, the Director of HAKA confirmed the expert panel (hereinafter the panel) consisting of:

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| Maarja Beerkens (Chair) | Vice Dean for Education, Associate Professor, Leiden University, Netherlands |
| Matthew Kitching (Secretary) | PhD student, Lancaster University, United Kingdom |
| Joke Van Saane Priit Rohtmets | Rector, University of Humanistic Studies, Netherlands Associate Professor, Vice Head of the School of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Tartu; Professor, Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Estonia |
| Ringo Ringvee | Advisor, Ministry of the Interior, Estonia |



3. The expert panel examined the data submitted by the Institution. The assessment visit to KUS took place from 17–18 March 2025.
4. The panel submitted the draft assessment report to the Institution for comments on 9 May 2025.
5. KUS submitted its comments on the assessment report on 22 May 2025.
6. The panel submitted its final assessment report to the HAKA Bureau on 1 June 2025. The assessment report is an integral part of the decision.
7. The panel's assessments were as follows:

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|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Study programme | Conforms to the required standard |
| Learning and teaching | Conforms to the required standard |
| Organisation of studies | Conforms to the required standard |
| Academic employees | Conforms to the required standard |
| Study environment | Conforms to the required standard |
| Financial resources | Conforms to the required standard |

8. The Council discussed the submitted documents at its meeting on 1 July 2025 with 11 members participating. Based on the assessment report and the data submitted by the Institution, the Council decided to highlight the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations, and proposals for further development from the assessment report.

8.1. *Study programme*

Strengths:

- 1) The study programme is based on problem-based learning. This is an effective choice not only to support the students' learning process but also to ensure a balance between biblical courses and social topics.

Opportunities for further improvement:

- 1) The Master's programme is practical and problem-based. However, some students wish to pursue an academic career. To facilitate their admission to doctoral studies, methodological and research courses could be added to the study programme.
- 2) Consideration could be given to adding an elective internship course to the Master's programme to provide students with practical experience as a pastor.

8.2. *Learning and teaching*

Strengths:

- 1) The vision of the study programme's goals and objectives is appropriate, clear, and widely shared.

Opportunities for further improvement:

- 1) Internship opportunities could be considered for students who are not yet active in a congregation but wish to grow into this role through their Master's studies.
- 2) The study programme promotes skills that are important in society more broadly (for example, leadership, communication, pastoral care and mentoring, project management). These transferable skills could be explicitly highlighted in the study programme and introduced during student recruitment to demonstrate the broad scope of the programme.

8.3. *Organisation of studies***Strengths:**

- 1) The study programme takes individual needs of students into account very well by applying an effective combination of independent, online, and physical contact learning, further supported by mentoring and counselling.

Areas of concern and recommendations:

- 1) Students admitted to the study programme have diverse educational backgrounds and some lack prior contact with theology. Master's students are expected to bridge this gap on their own initiative. KUS should introduce an assessment of theological competences for these Master's students and bridging courses prior to the Master's studies.

Opportunities for further improvement:

- 1) Given the obstacles to traditional international mobility, expanding innovative forms of international mobility (for example, short-term virtual mobility, increasing the international dimension of the study programme) could be considered.
- 2) While the Institution has a policy concerning complaints and appeals, there is a lack of clarity in some procedures (appealing grades, appealing plagiarism, resit exams) as to who is responsible for decision-making. It should be clearly established which decision-making body should adopt such decisions.

8.4. *Academic employees***Strengths:**

- 1) The KUS personnel policy is proactive, enabling the recruitment of highly qualified teaching staff and supporting the development of a new generation of lecturers.

Opportunities for further improvement:

- 1) The culture of research and publishing at KUS should continue to be promoted. Junior researchers could be supported more through mentoring and co-publishing.

8.5. *Study environment*

Strengths:

- 1) Good digital solutions are in place for the effective delivery of hybrid learning. All staff members use these opportunities and are provided with appropriate support for this purpose.

Opportunities for further improvement:

- 1) Efforts should be made to ensure online access to learning resources, including databases, for both students and staff.

9. If the assessments for all assessment areas are 'Conforms to the level required', the Assessment Council adopts a decision that the studies comply with the required standard and makes a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the educational institution the right to provide instruction in the corresponding study programme group and level of study.

10. Based on the above, the Council

DECIDED THE FOLLOWING:

- (1) The studies conform to the required standard;**
- (2) To propose to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary the right to provide instruction in the Master's programme Theology and Society in the study programme group of Theology.**

The decision was adopted with 11 votes in favour. 0 were against.

11. A person who considers that their rights have been violated or their freedoms restricted by a decision may submit an appeal to the HAKA Assessment Council within 30 days after becoming aware, or when they should have become

aware, of the contested action. The Council forwards the appeal to the HAKA Appeals Committee, which, within 5 days of receiving the appeal, submits a written impartial opinion to the Council on the validity of the appeal. The Council resolves the appeal within 10 days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned position 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