

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Telšiai Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius Priest Seminary Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of an evaluation procedure organized by the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO) for the Telšiai Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius Priest Seminary, Lithuania. The external Evaluation Team was composed of:

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The four members of the Evaluation Team appointed by AVEPRO visited the Seminary on 21st January 2015.

1) GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE SER

Major remarks

Telšiai Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius Priest Seminary (hereafter - the Institute) prepared its SER according to the procedures required. The teaching staff, students and other stakeholders were informed about the preparation of the SER and involved to a satisfactory extent. The SER meets AVEPRO's fundamental requirements. Information is provided in the SER in a clear and understandable way. The analysis included in the SER is thorough, comprehensive and adequate.

The Team paid close attention to the remarks of the panel of the last external evaluation, which took place in 2010 and was organized by the Lithuanian national Centre of Quality Assessment in Higher Education. E.g. care is being taken to provide possibilities for the teaching staff to acquire higher academic degrees, the library has been modernized, and two issues of the Institute's scientific periodical journal "Opera Theologorum Samogitarum" have been published since 2013.

In 2014 the Institute and its study programme were positively assessed by the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, on behalf of the Congregation for Catholic Education (hereafter - the Congregation), and obtained a renewed five-year affiliation to that Faculty.

Minor remarks

There is a lack of precision, detail and analysis in some parts of the SER. Some tables included in the annexes lack references in the text and are not commented on in the SER. These shortcomings of the SER are of minor significance. It can be stated that, overall, the SER is well prepared.

Short comments on the SER and a list of recommendations

It is strongly recommended that the structure of the assessment form provided by AVEPRO be followed closely while preparing the SER for the next time. Also, more attention should be paid to the integrity and clarity of the SER, providing references to and comments on the annexes in the text, avoiding surplus general information, and ensuring that the facts are followed by generous analysis.

2) CURRENT SITUATION IN THE INSTITUTE

It is evident that a lot of effort is put into quality improvement at the Institute. Over the last few years the Institute has renewed its classrooms, library, study and research equipment, and invested generously in the expanding library resources and in increasing the qualifications of its teaching staff.

The importance of the Institute for the local Church and the cultural development of the region is evident, and this aspect of the Institute's mission is clearly recognized by the management and staff. The Institute provides an important regional service as a centre of theological learning and research in this part of Lithuania, also ensuring dialogue between the Church and society, theology and culture.

Most of the Institute's teaching staff are quite young and competent. The Institute provides good opportunities for its teaching staff to build on their qualifications and acquire academic degrees abroad.

The Institute enjoys good national and international co-operation with other comparable institutions. In the case of national co-operation, it has an especially good relationship with Klaipėda University, the Institute of St. Joseph in Vilnius, and Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. The Institute cooperates internationally with pontifical universities and faculties abroad.

In 2009, with the approval of the Congregation, the Institute's study programme was experimentally affiliated to the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University for five years. This relationship ensures permanent academic-institutional supervision of the implementation of the criteria defined by the Congregation and the Bologna Process, as well as supervision of the quality and content of study programmes.

Strong relationships with the Pontifical Lateran University guarantee that the Institute's activities are organized with a sense of the broader context of the European higher education space, and of the theological endeavors occurring in a global context.

The Institute has successfully implemented the main requirements of the Bologna Process (e.g. transfer to ECTS, structure of studies, and emphasis on study outcomes). Also, its academic activities are conducted in correspondence with national requirements. The Institute has good and active relationships with regional social partners.

The finances of the Institute are sufficient for it to continue in its mission.

Some challenges to the Institute's mission should also be mentioned. In the last few years the number of applicants has decreased. The optimal number of teaching staff with the academic degrees required has still not been reached. The Institute has partly solved this problem by inviting teachers from other institutions and providing local teaching staff with the possibility to study for and acquire the necessary degrees abroad (there are currently four teachers studying for doctoral degrees abroad).

3) SUMMARY OF ON-SITE MEETINGS AND COMMENTS

The Team found a good atmosphere and a culture of collaboration and interaction between the management, staff, and students. All parties engaged openly, honestly and constructively with the Team, and it was able to clarify details, acquire any information lacking, and hear the opinions of management, staff, and students. The management and staff display optimism, dedication, and determination to continuing their work to implement the mission of the Institute, according to national and international norms and the needs of Church and society.

4) MISSION, OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIC PLAN OF THE INSTITUTE

The mission and objectives of the Institute correspond to the nature of the Institute and the needs of society. The mission emphasizes the need for priests with higher education qualifications, which will enable them to conduct their priestly ministry efficiently in the local context. The mission has a regional focus (region of Klaipėda, Telšiai diocese). It emphasizes quality and the requirement for highly qualified priests.

Demand for the Institute's study programme seems evident, as the number of priests in Lithuania is rapidly decreasing and the quality requirements of society regarding new priests are high.

The Institute does not have a fully documented strategic plan; however, it does have clear strategic objectives for the next four years, which are stated in the SER and are realized by the management and staff. The Institute has a well-defined plan for the continuous improvement of its facilities and library, the improvement of the quality of its teaching staff, and the development of dialogue between the Church and society via its activities.

It is understood by the management that graduates of the Institute will play an important role in the development of the social, cultural and religious fabric of this region and country. Care should be taken that the importance of the Institute's mission for the regional and local needs of society, culture and the Church is recognized equally by management, staff, and students.

5) RESULTS OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Major remarks on teaching activities

The Religious Sciences study programme (hereafter - the programme) is the only study programme run by the Institute. The span, structure and content of the programme correspond to national, international (Bologna Agreement), and ecclesiastical requirements, and are in line with the Institute's mission. The content of the programme and methods of its realization are inspected annually and approved by the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University.

The programme has clearly-defined learning objectives and outcomes. It aims to equip students with the fundamental insights and skills, tools for critical analysis and for the application of knowledge acquired necessary to work in society and the Church.

The study facilities are very good, and some are being renovated. Students are provided with living space and meals. The dormitory, refectory and library are conveniently placed in the same complex of buildings.

The Institute has an energetic and relatively young teaching staff (average age - 45). A significant part of the teaching staff is invited from other higher education institutions, due to the specific nature of the Institute (having one programme dedicated to the training of future priests), and because of the difficulty of finding teaching staff locally who would meet national and ecclesiastical quality requirements. A number of teaching staff still have no doctoral degree. The management of the Institute realizes this problem and makes additional efforts to provide the teaching staff with opportunities to boost their qualifications abroad and acquire the necessary academic degrees. Four teachers are currently studying abroad for their doctoral degree.

The involvement of the local Catholic diocese in the process of studying contributes greatly to the quality of the extracurricular training possibilities. The involvement of social partners (e.g. the local Catholic diocese, catechetical centre, etc.) is important in providing students with opportunities for practice and extracurricular activities connected to their future professional careers. As part of their academic programme, students are required to go on practical and supervised placements in schools, youth groups, community projects and parishes, where they have the opportunity to apply their academic and social skills. Placement supervisors provide feedback to the students and teachers of the Institute.

The descriptions of the programme study units clearly define the knowledge assessment methods and ECTS distribution throughout each course unit. The knowledge assessment procedures and methods are established, published and accessible to the students. Course descriptors and the

manner of assessment are clear. Examination results can be appealed against. The appeals procedure is clearly outlined and transparent. Students are informed about the module descriptors and assessment at the beginning of each course unit. A variety of teaching methods are used by teachers. Students are encouraged to ask questions, discuss and seek deeper understanding of the subjects taught.

Students are comfortable in expressing their opinions and questions about issues concerning their studies to staff and management. Because of the size of the Institute, the teaching staff and administration are easily available and approachable for students. The ratio between teachers and students is such that the teachers are easily available to every student for consultation regarding study materials. There is a warm, positive and friendly atmosphere between staff and students.

The quality of study units is assessed through the regular renewal of the unit descriptions, analysis of the situation in meetings between teachers and management, the informal sharing of impressions between teaching staff, students and management, and the analysis of anonymous questionnaires filled in by students annually.

The international academic mobility of students and staff is limited, mainly due to the specific nature of the Institute (i.e. the students' study schedule is closely connected to their spiritual training). Nevertheless, an international dimension is present at the Institute in other ways. The most prominent dimension of international mobility is demonstrated by the fact that most of the Institute's management and teaching staff gained their scientific degrees in foreign institutions and have maintained their relationships with those institutions since then. The teaching staff takes part in international conferences, training sessions, seminars and internships. Students are provided with opportunities to undergo practical training in parishes abroad. A significant number of credits in the study curriculum are dedicated to learning modern foreign languages (Italian and/or English). It should be pointed out that about a quarter of graduates continue their studies abroad (mostly in Italian universities).

Major remarks on research activities

There are some challenges present to the development of the quality scientific research at the Institute. Many teachers are involved in pastoral activities, and invited professors are often dedicated to the research priorities of their primary institutions.

Nevertheless, the overall situation is positive and improving. There is awareness among the teaching staff of the need to be involved in scientific research. The management encourages teachers to undertake ongoing professional development. The Institute has a successful record of organizing national scientific conferences annually. Since 2013 the Institute has published the scientific journal "Opera Theologorum Samogitarum". The teaching staff participates in international scientific conferences and publishes articles in internationally recognized scientific journals. The number of scientific publications by authors involved in teaching at the Institute is relatively high.

Major remarks on study and research resources

The overall quality of the facilities (classrooms, library, computers, etc.) is very good. Modern equipment (multimedia, computers, etc.) is available to both teachers and students. There is enough space to study efficiently in.

The library has sufficient resources to ensure the quality of studies and research. The library facilities are well equipped, and the space for learning and the research materials are sufficient. The Institute has funds for the constant updating of library resources. Teachers can order books and articles needed for their courses. There is open access to good IT resources.

Recommendations

The teaching staff, management, and students of the Institute unanimously confirm that the decreased number of students has no negative impact on the quality of studies. On the contrary: it guarantees the quality of studies, as every student receives undivided attention from their teachers and the management. Nevertheless, it is widely known that such a situation can threaten the normal dynamics and (possibly) transparency of teaching and assessment procedures (e.g. the anonymity of quality assessment, and the presence of sound competition between candidates and students), and can result in a lower quality of new students, and diminish the opportunities to motivate teaching staff to carry out research and develop their teaching skills. Therefore the management of the Institute should constantly observe how the lower number of students influences study and research activities, and find ways to ensure high quality performance despite these challenges.

6) GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND AUTONOMY

The Institute is accountable to the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. It is bound by national and ecclesiastic norms for higher education. The Institute has a clearly defined management structure. The Rector, Vice-Rector, Prefect of Studies, Council of Study and Science, and Seminarians' Education Council are all involved, on different levels, in managing academic activities and quality assessment at the Institute. During the meetings with the Team there were no complaints from any parties about the Institute's management system. It seems that the opinions of staff, students and former students are all considered in decision-making.

Nevertheless, there is a need for more transparency and understanding regarding the functions and procedures of the different managing bodies, e.g. how members of managing bodies are elected and for how long, and in what ways the staff and other stakeholders participate in decision-making when new members of management are elected, etc..

The distinction between areas of spiritual formation and studies also needs to be more effectively realized and expressed in the management system: not only formally but also in practice. The boundaries between ecclesiastic and academic responsibilities, and the relative autonomy of latter, need to be maintained.

7) STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS (SWOT)

Strengths

The Institute has all formal basics needed to continue with its mission. Its affiliation to the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, ecclesiastic status and the very nature of the Institute place its studies in a well-defined niche in the national space for higher education.

The Institute has great potential. Its facilities are very good (i.e. library, classrooms, IT technologies, dormitories). It has a relatively young, professional, and energetic staff. It has the funds required to continue with its mission and continuously improve the quality of its activities.

The management and staff understand the need for constant improvement. The Institute has paid attention to the recommendations made by the panel of the last external evaluation and improved accordingly.

There is an atmosphere of openness and collaboration between the management, teaching staff, students and other parties involved. The Institute has good relationships with corresponding academic institutions and social partners.

The Institute provides an important regional service by providing a centre of theological learning and research in this part of Lithuania, also ensuring dialogue between the Church and society, theology and culture.

Weaknesses

The number of students is decreasing. Only 3 students have entered the Institute since 2012.

Opportunities

The Institute has a great opportunity to foster dialogue between the Church and society, and to contribute to the cultural development of the region.

The Institute is capable of providing its teaching staff with various opportunities to build on their qualifications abroad (e.g. by acquiring a higher academic degree).

The Institute has the opportunity to continue developing good national and international cooperation with other comparable institutions and social partners.

The Institute has the opportunity to draw more attention from potential candidates by developing its presence on the internet.

Threats

Constantly increasing national requirements for the quality/amount of research conducted by the academic staff may leave some teaching staff on the periphery of academic life in Lithuania.

The falling number of students may result in lower grades among new students, a lack of the anonymity and objectivity required in quality assessment procedures, a lack of sound competition between students, a reduced variety of teaching methods, and an incapacity to motivate teaching staff to conduct research and develop teaching skills, etc.

International exchange opportunities for students are reduced, due to the understandable limitations set by the very nature of the Institute. Therefore, continuous efforts have to be made to ensure that students are aware of and experience the global context of their studies.

8) IMPROVEMENT PLAN (IN LINE WITH AVAILABLE FUNDING)

Keep implementing a culture of quality assurance in all areas of the Institute's life, from the recruitment of new students to the preparation of students for their professional careers.

Include teaching staff and student representatives in decision-making in the Institute's academic life, on various levels.

Continue to provide teachers with opportunities to advance in their academic careers. Collaborate with corresponding institutions in Klaipėda, Kaunas, and Vilnius, by inviting teaching staff with the required qualifications and academic degrees.

Find ways to motivate teaching staff to conduct research on behalf of the Institute, thus responding to growing national and international research standards. The Institute's research strategy should be developed.

Anticipate problems that may arise because of the declining number of candidates. This situation may require stepping out of the "comfort zone" and seeking alternative solutions.

Conclusion

Considering the elements that have come to light through both the Self-Evaluation report and the site visit, the Team hopes that the competent Lithuanian authorities will grant the Telšiai Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius Priest Seminary accreditation for six years.