

**Decision Regarding the Assessment of the  
Social Sciences Programme Group  
University of Tartu**

**15/09/2016**

**The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher Education and VET decided to approve the report by the Assessment Committee and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu in seven years**

On the basis of subsections 12<sup>2</sup> (1) and 10 (4) of the Universities Act, point 3.7.3 of the Statutes of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher Education and VET (hereinafter referred to as 'EKKA') and point 41.1 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education', authorised in point 3.7.1 of the above-mentioned EKKA Statutes; the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of EKKA (hereinafter referred to as 'the Council') affirms the following:

1. On 4.05.2015 the University of Tartu and EKKA agreed upon a time frame to conduct the quality assessment of the study programme group.
2. The Director of EKKA, by her order on 06.05.2016, approved the following membership of the quality assessment committee for the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu, Tallinn University of Technology and Tallinn University (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee')

<b>David Inglis, Chair</b>	Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter (United Kingdom)
<b>Heikki Hiilamo</b>	Professor of Social Policy, University of Helsinki (Finland)
<b>Jonas Hinnfors</b>	PhD, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg (Sweden)
<b>Florian Rampelt</b>	Student, University of Passau (Germany)
<b>Margus Sarapuu</b>	Head of Task Force on Zero Bureaucracy, Ministry of Economics and Communication (Estonia)

<b>Mati Vaarmann</b>	Ambassador (Estonia)
<b>Gediminas Vitkus</b>	Professor and Head of European Studies Department, Institute of International Relations and Political Science (Lithuania)
<b>Brigita Zepa</b>	Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Latvia; Director of Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (Latvia)

3. The University of Tartu submitted the following programmes for evaluation under this study programme group:
  - Government and Politics (BA)**
  - Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy (BA)**
  - Sociology (MA)**
  - European Union – Russia Studies (MA)**
  - European Studies (MA)**
  - Baltic Sea Region Studies (in English, MA)**
4. The University of Tartu submitted a self-evaluation report to the EKKA Bureau on 10.02.2016 and the assessment coordinator forwarded it to the Committee on 05.04.2016.
5. An assessment visit was made to the University of Tartu during 09–10.05.2016.
6. The Committee sent its draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 25.06.2016, EKKA forwarded it to the University of Tartu for its comments on 04.07.2016, and the University delivered its response on 03.08.2016.
7. The Committee submitted its final assessment report to the EKKA Bureau on 19.08.2016. 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 31.08.2016.
9. The Council with 8 members present discussed these received documents in its session on 15.09.2016 and, based on the assessment report, decided to point out the following strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations regarding the Social Studies study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu.

#### **Assessment at the Level of the Study Programme Group**

##### Strengths

- The infrastructure for teaching and learning is of high quality.
- Teaching is of high quality across all of these study programmes.
- Academic units associated with these programmes have close relations with employers and other cooperation partners who are also involved in teaching activities. Internship opportunities created for students are commendable.

##### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- Better integration between BA and MA programmes in the politics specialities should be ensured.

- The role of employers and the expectations of them should be more clearly systemised within all study programmes.
- The system of student feedback has various shortcomings. It is advisable to make it compulsory for all students to give feedback on all courses taken.
- Programme managers must ensure that the division of workloads for the junior teaching staff allows them to sufficiently focus on their doctoral studies.

### **Assessment at the Study Programme Level**

#### **GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS (BA)**

##### Strengths

- A structured feedback system has greatly benefitted development of the study programme. In the course of study programme development, feedback from both the teaching staff and students has been taken into account.
- General and specialisation courses are in good balance in the programme.
- A strength of the study programme is a solid foundation of research methods, supported by the research-led teaching.
- A wide spectrum of electives offered under the programme enables students to find interesting research topics.
- Teaching and learning resources are excellent.
- A direction towards more learner-centred, interactive and practical approaches has been taken in teaching and learning. The teaching staff is provided with the support needed for transitioning to new teaching methods, and most members of the staff have participated in trainings to enhance their teaching skills.
- Students are very committed and satisfied with the quality of their study programme, teaching staff and the studies in general.
- Teaching staff are highly qualified.

##### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- The assessment committee recommends consideration of lengthening the BA thesis. Since the thesis provides sufficient evidence to evaluate the intellectual qualities achieved by a student, it is advisable not to replace it with a final exam. Supervision of student theses (including guidance on choosing topics) should be better organised, for example, a special course on writing a thesis could be included in the study programme.
- Sometimes the programme's great flexibility confuses students. The supervision and counselling systems within the study programme should be made more structured so that students can plan their studies (including international mobility) more effectively and that they take courses having more advanced analytical levels towards the end of their studies. This would reduce the relatively high student dropout rates.
- Funding opportunities should be sought in order to engage external experts in the teaching.
- The Institute should negotiate workable framework agreements with potential internship facilities in order to help students find good internship placements.
- It is essential to create favourable conditions and motivators to seek research funding from different national and international sources.
- It is advisable that different units standardise their policies and procedures regarding the students.

#### **SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY (BA)**

### Strengths

- Students can choose from a wide range of courses allowing them to combine different fields of study and build their own speciality-specific programme.
- Theory and practice are well integrated in the study programme.
- Various interactive teaching methods are utilised in teaching. Attention is paid to developing students' learning and social skills (critical thinking, creativity and innovation). Teaching is research led; the results of research by teaching staff are regularly integrated into courses.
- Both students and employers highly value the course in Quantitative Methods.
- The teaching staff are committed to teaching, younger staff members in particular are highly motivated. Several lecturers have completed training in teaching methods to improve the quality of teaching. Teaching staff share their experiences of implementing new teaching methods.
- Due to good relations with employers, it is easy for students to find internship placements. Annual trips to Netherlands provide students with international experience.
- Students' skills meet the expectations of the local labour market.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- The three different specialities included in this study programme currently lack overall coherence. The studies and identities of the students enrolled in the programme are related to a speciality, rather than to the whole programme. At times, the diverse range of courses is confusing for students. One solution would be either to increase the integration between the three fields of study or to divide the programme into three separate, but interwoven, study programmes (Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy). This would provide a clearer overview of the content and expected learning outcomes of the programme(s) to both students and employers. In case the existing multidisciplinary study programme is retained, it would be advisable to give it a more generic name — Social Sciences, for example.
- Monitoring mechanisms should be established, which enable the programme managers to monitor shifts in student course choices and preferences and, based on that, to review and adjust course schedules.
- Since the thesis develops a student's autonomous thinking, learning and research skills, as well as provides sufficient evidence to evaluate the intellectual qualities attained by a student, it is only advisable to replace the thesis with a final exam in exceptional cases. The assessment committee recommends attaching more ECTS credits to the thesis.
- The large number of courses with small values in ECTS credits makes it difficult for students to choose among them. It would be advisable to offer a smaller number of courses with larger ECTS credit values.
- Teaching staff should keep themselves up to date on the developments in e-learning systems (e.g. Moodle).
- Some students are of the opinion that the assessment methods used are sometimes too simplified and do not provide qualitative feedback. The programme manager should determine whether such dissatisfaction is justified.
- Staff workloads are high and need regulation by the management.
- More mentorships and opportunities for career development should be offered to the younger staff members (e.g. funds for participating in international conferences).
- The fields of social work and social policy lack professors who should be the intellectual leaders of these disciplines.
- A mechanism for sharing good practices among teaching staff should be formalised.
- It is advisable each year to involve at least one visiting lecturer from abroad.

- Students need more training in how to present their research results to the public in an understandable way.
- International student mobility is relatively low. Existing obstacles for student mobility should be removed and students should be encouraged to take advantage of the Erasmus programme and other mobility opportunities.
- Students should be provided with more systematic counselling regarding course choices, so that they complete all compulsory and prerequisite courses at the appropriate times and are not late with choosing a specialisation.
- A minimum number of Research Methods courses to be taken by a student should be clearly determined for each discipline.

## **SOCIOLOGY (MA)**

### Strengths

- The teaching staff's internationally recognised research supports solid research-led teaching. The results of research are regularly integrated into courses. Students are encouraged to participate in various academic research projects within the framework of the programme.
- A strength of the study programme is its practical orientation.
- The organisation of studies is very flexible, therefore the programme is well-suited to working students.
- The study programme has exceptionally good relations with local employers and other cooperation partners, who are enthusiastic about and supportive of the programme.
- Digital learning resources are well used (e.g. Moodle).
- A variety of assessment and learning methods (interdisciplinary, interactive) are used.
- The teaching of quantitative methods is of very high quality. According to students, there is a good balance between quantitative and qualitative methods in the programme.
- The supervision of MA theses is well organised.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- The title of the programme — Sociology — is very generic. An MA programme with a narrower focus and more topical title (e.g. Media Sociology) might help to attract potential students and it can be built on the existing study programme.
- It is advisable to appoint a deputy programme manager who could help to implement the ambitious plans for expanding student markets.
- The teaching staff should more frequently discuss issues regarding study programme development, assessment and feedback on courses, as well as share their good teaching practices.
- The teaching staff should be offered more opportunities for training, so that they can improve their pedagogical skills and keep up to date with latest developments. Teaching staff should continuously keep themselves up to date with developments in e-learning platforms (such as Moodle).
- It is advisable to deliver more courses in English.
- Feedback collection is too mechanical and giving feedback is not compulsory for all courses. Feedback mechanisms should be systematised and the results of feedback discussed among staff members.
- Programme managers should monitor student satisfaction levels with the classical lecture format and take action as needed. In teaching theory more attention should be given to innovative teaching methods, which may engage students more effectively.

- More mentoring should be offered to the younger teaching staff (especially doctoral students) at the academic unit level.
- More international lecturers should be involved in teaching, to enhance student experience and develop their transferable skills.
- The structure of the MA programme in Sociology needs attention, as the number of non-sociology courses taken by students is too large, risking a blurring of the focus of the programme.

## **EUROPEAN UNION – RUSSIA STUDIES (MA)**

### Strengths

- This study programme, which is delivered in English, attracts international students and contributes to the internationalisation process of social sciences education in Estonia.
- A good example of the University's strategy of digitalisation is the opportunity offered to students in some courses to improve their marks by participating in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This strategy can also serve as a model for programme development, innovative learning and good teaching practice for other study programmes.
- The programme's interdisciplinary approach works well; the teaching staff have a shared vision of the programme.
- The study programme is delivered by a highly committed teaching staff.
- The internationally diverse teaching staff is in accord with the University's strategic goal to improve the quality of studies by recruiting internationally recognised lecturers from abroad.
- The feedback system works as an effective communication channel between students and the Institute.
- Teaching staff have adopted a more interdisciplinary and learner-centred approach to teaching.
- Cooperation between the teaching staff and students is very good. One result of this collaboration is the European Union – Russia Relations MOOC, completed by students under supervision of their teachers. Preparation of students for research is very good within this programme and therefore students have a good basis for future careers at universities.
- Students in the programme are provided with proper support.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- Given that the aim of the programme is to analyse the functioning of both of these political entities (the European Union and Russia), it is advisable to strengthen the Russia element in the programme.
- The description of learning outcomes could better correlate with the titles and descriptions of individual modules. For the sake of coherence of the programme, the modules of field subjects could be kept more closely related to the main subject of the programme — i.e. to the European Union – Russia relations.
- It is advisable to increase the number of ECTS credits attached to an MA thesis, so that graduates acquire the research and analytical skills needed for doctoral studies.
- It is advisable to reformulate the objectives of the programme so that they describe the existing high analytical levels of the studies in the MA programme as accurately as possible.
- The study programme development should continuously bear in mind the interests of students and the needs of the labour market. The rationale for changes in the study programme should be better explained to the students.
- More attention should be given to recognition of and motivation for teaching staff.
- A working format should be established where teachers could discuss development of the programme and share their experiences and best teaching practices.

- Sometimes students' command of English is insufficient.
- The Institute should continue to support and encourage international mobility of students to broaden their European perspective.

## **EUROPEAN STUDIES (MA)**

### Strengths

- The study programme's interdisciplinary approach works well; teaching staff have a shared vision of the programme.
- The study programme is delivered by a highly dedicated teaching staff.
- The internationally diverse teaching staff is in accord with the University's strategic goal to improve the quality of studies by recruiting internationally recognised lecturers from abroad.
- The feedback system works as an effective communication channel between students and the Institute.
- Teaching staff have adopted a more interdisciplinary and learner-centred approach to teaching.
- The student places are filled with motivated and capable students whose satisfaction with the content, form and methods of their studies is high. Students successfully find professional jobs in the public or education sectors. A still functioning alumni database of the former European College can serve as an example of good practices.

### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- Given the interdisciplinary nature of the study programme, it would be advisable to include a course on the EU economic and monetary union.
- The description of learning outcomes could better correlate with the titles and descriptions of individual modules. For the sake of coherence of the programme, the modules could be kept more closely related to the main subject of the programme — i.e. to the European Union.
- In order to support the strategic objective of internationalising social science studies in Estonia, it is advisable to increase the proportion of studies delivered in English. It could be considered to offer the whole programme in English.
- It is advisable to increase the number of ECTS credits attached to an MA thesis, so that graduates acquire the research and analytical skills needed for doctoral studies.
- It is advisable to reformulate the objectives of the programme so that they describe the existing high analytical levels of the studies within the MA programme as accurately as possible.
- The study programme development should continuously bear in mind the interests of students and the needs of the labour market. The rationale for changes in the study programme should be better explained to the students.
- More attention should be given to recognition of and motivation for teaching staff.
- A working format should be established where teachers could discuss development of the programme and share their experiences and best teaching practices.
- Development plans should pay more attention to promoting international student mobility in every possible form. It is advisable to consider including obligatory periods of mobility within the MA programmes that are taught in Estonian.

## **BALTIC SEA REGION STUDIES (IN ENGLISH, MA)**

### Strengths

- Teaching resources and methods used in the teaching are modern and effective and support the development of a digital teaching culture. Online teaching tools are well used. The process of teaching and learning is flexible and facilitates achievement of the planned learning outcomes.
- An individual approach to students enables them to choose courses that benefit them. The practice of dividing the MA thesis writing process among three semesters facilitates the students' research process.
- The programme is taught by recognised experts in the field.
- Students are very satisfied with the support offered to them throughout their studies.
- The recently introduced system of constant feedback and assessment works very well.

#### Areas for improvement and recommendations

- Teaching staff should continue to keep themselves up to date with developments in online learning systems (such as Moodle).
  - Students should be better informed about the planned learning outcomes of the programme.
  - Teaching staff should be motivated to be more committed to the study programme and its learning outcomes. At present the teaching staff does not feel very closely attached to the programme.
  - The number of Estonian students enrolled in the programme is very low. The study programme should be better marketed to this target group. Due to a lack of information in English, international students are excluded from extra-curricular activities.
  - Since many Erasmus BA students are integrated in the seminars of this study programme, the levels of prior knowledge of students are very different and this is unsatisfactory for MA students. It is advisable to agree on prerequisite courses for taking MA-level courses.
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, on the basis of point 41.1 of the document, 'Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education',

#### **DECIDED**

**to approve the assessment report and to conduct the next quality assessment of the Social Sciences study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at the University of Tartu in seven years.**

The decision was adopted by 8 votes in favour. Against 0.

12. The Bureau of EKKA will coordinate a date for the next quality assessment of the study programme group with the University of Tartu no later than 15.12.2022.
13. The Council proposes that the University of Tartu will submit an action plan to EKKA with regard to the areas for improvement and recommendations pointed out in the report no later than 15.09.2017.

14. A person who finds that his or her rights are violated or his or her freedoms are 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 the decision may be submitted within 30 days after its delivery, 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.

**Tõnu Meidla**  
Chair of the Council

**Hillar Bauman**  
Secretary of the Council