

Decision Regarding the Assessment of the Humanities Study Programme Group Tallinn University

15/09/2015

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 Humanities study programme group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University in seven years.

Tallinn University submitted for evaluation the following study programmes from the Humanities study programme group:

- Philosophy (BA)
- Philosophy (MA)
- Theory of Culture (BA)
- Theory of Culture (MA)
- Linguistics (MA)
- Literary Studies (MA)
- Reviewer-Editor (BA)
- Humanities (BA)
- Liberal Arts in Humanities (BA)
- History (BA)
- History (MA)
- Comparative Literature and Cultural Semiotics (MA)
- Anthropology (BA)
- Anthropology (MA)

Assessment Committee

Malcolm Cook (Chair)	Professor Emeritus, Chair of the Modern Humanities Research Association (UK)
Kristian Bankov	Secretary General of the International Association for Semiotics Studies; Professor, New Bulgarian University (Bulgaria)
Hugh Beach	Professor, Uppsala University (Sweden)

Katalin Farkas	Professor, Vice-Rector, Central European University, Budapest (Hungary)
Marjan Groot	Professor, Leiden University (Netherlands)
Tapio Heiskari	Student, University of Helsinki (Finland)
Simon Kirchin	Dean, University of Kent (UK)
Benedikt Stuchtey	Professor, Phillips-Universität Marburg (Germany)

The Committee's Comments on the Study Programme Group

Strengths

- *The English language proficiency of teaching staff and students is outstanding. Many staff members are fluent in other foreign languages as well.*
- *Many students are deeply interested in their studies, and teaching staff are committed to their disciplines.*
- *A significant number of lecturers (approximately 10%) come to the University from foreign countries.*
- *Relations between teaching staff and students are very good; it is easy for students to get in touch with their lecturers.*
- *Support structures are effective.*
- *The library is well equipped and access to research databases is excellent.*
- *The learning environment is pleasant and of high quality.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *A major problem is the significant drop in student numbers in many study programmes. It is important to acknowledge that the field of humanities must also adapt to the changing needs of society. Therefore students must also acquire the general competencies (creative and critical thinking, oral and written expression skills, teamwork skills) and digital literacy. In addition, the role and meaning of humanities should be explained in a more active way throughout the University.*
- *At present the status of many lecturers' posts is uncertain as many of them work part-time and their salaries often come from research grants of limited duration. This makes the situation of departments unstable and hard to plan as well.*
- *The University is about to launch new study programmes without any previous market studies or analyses of existing competing offers.*

- *The University must guarantee that students have the opportunity to complete their studies in their enrolled study programmes.*
- *In the interest of equal treatment of students it is recommended that anonymous marking be used to assess students' written assignments.*
- *The high dropout rate is a problem and reasons for this (outside of economic ones) should be thoroughly analysed.*
- *Student mobility rates are low although exposure to other cultures is particularly important to humanities students.*
- *Funds needed to invite internationally known lecturers from abroad for short visits are insufficient.*
- *To gain greater impact, it would be practical to launch joint research projects with teaching staffs of both Tallinn University and the University of Tartu.*
- *With regard to publications in humanities, the Committee believes that universities should concern themselves more with their impact and quality than with quantity.*
- *The University should establish clear, agreed and uniform policies and practices regarding compliance with deadlines and how to handle any cases of plagiarism.*
- *There is a lack of effective communication between senior management and teaching staff; teaching staff and students are not always aware of the rationale for changes taking place in the University .*

Study Programmes Findings

PHILOSOPHY (BA), PHILOSOPHY (MA)

Strengths

- *The University should be commended for including an introductory course in the programme regarding how to read and write philosophical texts.*
- *Both students and teaching staff highly value the interdisciplinary nature of the BA programme.*
- *Communication between lecturers and students is close and direct, and students are provided with comprehensive support.*

Areas of improvement and recommendations

- *Cooperation with alumni and their involvement could be systematic.*
- *Teaching staff and students could visit and perform at upper secondary schools more often to excite the interest of teachers and their students in the field of philosophy as well as in studying it.*
- *Teaching staff should observe and reflect upon the teaching of their colleagues in order to learn from each other. It is recommended that lecturers share assignment questions and feedback on assignments in order to improve uniformity of assessment principles, as well as ensure a comparable quantity and quality of feedback given to students.*

- *More attention should be given to developing transferable skills in the teaching and learning process enabling students to acquire more of the experiences needed in the working world.*
- *International student mobility rates are low. To improve mobility, the students with positive mobility experiences could inspire their fellow students.*

THEORY OF CULTURE (BA), THEORY OF CULTURE (MA)

Strengths

- *The interdisciplinary nature of the BA programme is considered its main strength by both students and teaching staff.*
- *Communication between lecturers and students is close and direct, and students are provided with comprehensive support.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *Cooperation with alumni and their involvement in teaching and development activities could be systematic.*
- *The University should seek ways to include more international lecturers in teaching.*
- *Teaching staff should observe and reflect upon the teaching of their colleagues in order to learn from each other. It is recommended that lecturers share assignment questions and feedback on assignments in order to improve uniformity of assessment principles, as well as ensure a comparable quantity and quality of feedback given to students.*
- *More attention should be given to developing transferable skills in the teaching and learning process enabling students to acquire more of the experiences needed in the working world.*
- *International student mobility rates are low. To improve mobility, the students with positive mobility experiences could inspire their fellow students.*

LINGUISTICS (MA)

The Linguistics MA programme was launched in 2002 but it will be restructured to include a Language Editing programme, and starting in September 2015 a new MA programme with the title 'Linguistics and Language Editing' will be launched. This is expected to increase the number of practical elements in the programme, the number of applicants and the employment opportunities.

Strengths

- *Teaching staff are highly qualified and some are internationally known. All staff members have attended courses to develop their teaching skills.*
- *Students' feedback on teaching is positive; students are motivated and pleased with the study programme.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *When designing the new study programme, the University did not research similar programmes around the world, the potential employment opportunities for graduates of the programme or applicants' potential interest in it. When further developing the programme, these aspects should be kept in mind.*
- *Teaching should include a variety of assessment methods, possibly including formative as well as summative forms of assessment, and syllabi should clearly specify how interim assessments contribute to the final grade.*
- *It should be verified that the courses within the study programme provide assessments for a variety of general competencies (analytic, presentational, cooperative, etc.).*
- *The publication strategy of TU School of Humanities should be clearly focused and aimed at perhaps fewer, but high-quality publications.*
- *The study programme has a very small number of students and the dropout rate is high (although absolute numbers are small).*
- *Students believe that participation in international mobility is difficult because they may miss some of the courses needed for graduation.*
- *Students are not sure if and how their feedback is taken into account.*
- *Students should be provided with assistance and counselling to form realistic future employment plans.*

LITERARY STUDIES (MA)

The study programme was launched in 2002 but it will be integrated with the Romance Studies and German Philology programmes starting in September 2015.

Strengths

- *The study programme is flexible, incorporating various options for specialisation.*
- *Teaching staff are highly qualified and committed to teaching and to the students. The staff includes several scholars who are leaders in their fields in Estonia.*
- *All staff members have participated in courses to develop their teaching skills. Students are motivated and pleased with the study programme.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *When designing the new study programme, the University did not research similar programmes around the world, the potential employment opportunities for graduates of the programme or applicants' potential interest in it. When further developing the programme, these aspects should be kept in mind. The Romance Studies and German Philology programmes were discontinued because of small numbers of applicants. It is not clear how the integration of these programmes with the Linguistic programme will help to increase the number of applicants.*

- *More practical subjects or electives should be included in the study programme, which would help graduates find employment outside of academia as well.*
- *Assessment criteria and methods should be reviewed, and it should be clearly described how different forms of interim assessments influence evolution of the final grade.*
- *The publication strategy of TU School of Humanities should be clearly focused and aimed at perhaps fewer, but high-quality publications.*
- *Students are not sure if and how their feedback is taken into account.*
- *Students should be provided with assistance and counselling to form realistic future employment plans.*

REVIEWER-EDITOR (BA)

Strengths

- *Students value the practical orientation of the study programme. The programme is important for Estonian society in general.*
- *Teaching staff are very committed and highly motivated.*
- *The study programme includes several practical and useful subjects that could also be included in other humanities programmes, including master degree programmes.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *Over the past five years the number of students has been declining by as much as 45%.*
- *Despite the practical orientation of the programme, the dropout rate is relatively high. Reasons for dropping out should be analysed and preventive measures taken.*

HUMANITIES (BA), LIBERAL ARTS IN HUMANITIES (BA)

Strengths

- *Due to general orientations of the study programmes, students have a considerable number of choices in planning their studies and learning outcomes. Such flexibility has also contributed to successful completion of studies.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *Since teaching staff belong to different structural units and the management of the programme and coordination of teaching are tasked to a few part-time staff members, implementation of the programme is somewhat hampered. Coordination and planning of teaching should be improved to prevent last-minute cancellations of study modules.*

- *At present teaching staff have no general overviews of the study programmes. To obtain a greater cohesion of the programmes, cooperation and communication among teaching staff should be improved.*
- *Students are unaware of their participation in study programme development.*
- *Digital technology should be used more extensively in teaching, and this in turn requires investments in staff trainings and digital resources. Teaching staff need to be motivated to further develop their teaching skills and make greater use of modern teaching methods.*
- *Both the University and the University's Student Union should offer additional counsel and assistance to students of the programmes, to successfully integrate them into the academic community and involve them in extracurricular activities – and in this way also reduce the number of students dropping out at early stages of studies.*
- *In both study programmes students can apply for scholarships but their awareness of such opportunities is inadequate.*

HISTORY (BA), HISTORY (MA)

Strengths

- *The Institute of History at Tallinn University comprises a large number of teaching and research staff and the staff-student ratio is very good by international comparison.*
- *Strengths of the Institute lie within its orientation to research.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *The number of courses taught in English should be increased and more international teaching staff should be involved.*
- *The Institute should make itself more visible to the general public using opportunities offered by various media channels as well as intensifying cooperation with employers.*
- *Research staff should be more involved in teaching and administrative activities. At present the Institute does not have enough support staff, and the number of professors and lecturers is too low compared to researchers.*
- *Historical learning facilities have their drawbacks – for example, intermittent Wi-Fi connectivity and inadequate access for the disabled.*
- *More digital platforms should be used in teaching and learning.*

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURAL SEMIOTICS (MA)

Strengths

- *This study programme was designed with idealistic considerations aiming to strengthen the position of humanities in society.*

- *The programme is the only English-taught MA programme in humanities at Tallinn University and as such an important milestone for further internationalisation.*
- *The study programme is unique in its orientation and complements well the Semiotics programme in English offered by the University of Tartu which is unique primarily thanks to biosemiotics.*
- *The teaching is excellent, attention is also given to contemporary topics such as post-colonialism and feminism.*
- *Teaching staff have completed their studies abroad and use alternative approaches in their teaching practice.*
- *Teaching is closely related to research and students are involved in this research.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *It is recommended that suitable courses from other study programmes be included in this programme, offering them in English.*
- *To further improve internationalisation of the student body, the programme should be marketed more effectively using a variety of digital media options.*
- *TU School of Humanities should find ways to reduce the dropout rate.*
- *All teaching staff should obtain PhDs as soon as possible.*

ANTHROPOLOGY (BA), ANTHROPOLOGY (MA)

Strengths

- *The small size of the department ensures close teacher-student relations.*
- *The department hosts a good English website, attracting many foreign students.*
- *The MA programme is taught fully in English and the BA programme largely in English.*
- *International student mobility through the Erasmus programme is good, and some students have also won Fulbright grants.*
- *Students are very pleased with the programme.*
- *The anthropology department must be commended for achieving a noticeable visibility in the international arena with surprisingly little resources.*

Areas for improvement and recommendations

- *Student dropout rates are high, especially at early stages of studies.*
- *The small number of teaching staff at the department is a problem. This limits the choice of electives, which are dependent on short-term visits by foreign lecturers.*
- *It would be useful to offer courses from the Anthropology programme to students of other study programmes and vice versa.*
- *Teaching staff should observe and reflect upon the teaching of their colleagues in order to learn from each other.*

- *Teaching staff should give meaningful feedback (not only grades) regarding all examinations and written assignments.*

Further information:

Assessment Report