

# Decision Regarding the Assessment of the Humanities Study Programme Group

## University of Tartu

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 the University of Tartu in seven years.

The University of Tartu submitted for evaluation the following study programmes from the Humanities study programme group:

- Philosophy (BA, MA)
- Semiotics and Culture Studies (BA, MA)
- Semiotics (MA)
- History (BA, MA)
- Ethnology and Folkloristics (MA)

### Assessment Committee

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|-------------------------|--|
| Malcolm Cook<br>(Chair) | Professor Emeritus, Chair of the Modern Humanities<br>Research Association (UK)  |
| Kristian Bankov         | Secretary General of the International Association for<br>Semiotics Studies; Professor, New Bulgarian University<br>(Bulgaria) |
| Hugh Beach              | Professor, Uppsala University (Sweden)   |
| Katalin Farkas          | Professor, Vice-Rector, Central European University,<br>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**

- *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 students and teaching staff are very good; it is easy for students to get in touch with their lecturers.*
- *Support structures are effective.*
- *Both teaching staff and students are pleased with the quality of resources needed for teaching, learning and research. The library is well equipped, and access to research databases is excellent.*
- *The learning environment is pleasant and of high quality.*
- *Research by teaching staff is fruitful.*

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- *A major problem is the significant drop in student numbers in many study programmes. The role and meaning of humanities should be explained more actively throughout the University, while being fully aware of the need for the general competencies, such as creative and critical thinking, oral and written expression skills and teamwork skills, which students acquire in addition to professional skills.*
- *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.*
- *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.*
- *In the interest of equal treatment of students it is recommended that anonymous marking is 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.*
- *With regard to publications in humanities, the Committee believes that universities should concern themselves more with their impact and quality than with quantity.*

## **Study Programmes Findings**

### **PHILOSOPHY (BA), PHILOSOPHY (MA)**

#### **Strengths**

- *The department makes every effort to avoid declines in student numbers and prevent student dropouts – for example, visiting upper secondary schools to explain the nature and value of the field of philosophy.*
- *The number of teaching staff is fully sufficient to cover all areas of the study programme. A large proportion of teaching staff have degrees from abroad, which supports internationalisation at the University. Research by several staff members is of internationally high value.*
- *Students believe that their feedback on courses has been taken into account.*

#### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- *The department should critically review the number of small courses offered, and ensure that the number of ECTS credits given for each course requires the same level of student workload.*
- *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.*
- *Innovative use of the Moodle platform is not widely applied.*
- *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.*
- *Senior management of the University should do more to support the department's efforts to enhance its international visibility.*
- *Specific actions should be planned to recruit more students. For example, alumni success stories and their employment statistics could be shared via the website.*

### **SEMIOTICS AND CULTURE STUDIES (BA), SEMIOTICS AND CULTURE STUDIES (MA), SEMIOTICS (MA)**

#### **Strengths**

- *The University of Tartu is the only university known where semiotics is taught at all three levels of higher education, and therefore, considering the historic heritage of Yuri Lotman, the semiotics department is one of the world leaders in the field.*
- *The concentration of qualified teaching staff makes it possible to offer a wide variety of courses in all three study programmes.*
- *Thanks to the heritage of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School the study programmes have unique profiles. The department is the world leader in the field of Biosemiotics and acknowledges its leading role and responsibility for rehabilitating the role of humanities in Estonian society.*
- *The University hosts one of the richest libraries of semiotic literature in the world.*
- *The department regularly organises international seminars, schools and conferences as well as presents the results of its research to important international forums. The department is also running one of the most prestigious semiotic journals, Sign Systems Studies, founded by Yuri Lotman.*
- *The majority of teaching staff has attended qualification courses offered by the University.*

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- *The BA and MA programmes and their learning outcomes are similar.*
- *It is recommended that the department enhance practical aspects of semiotics in the study programmes, while keeping alive traditions of the Tartu Semiotic School. To this end, for example, the department could invite guest lecturers from the field of applied semiotics and involve them in academic tutorship; offer applied research topics for doctoral studies; and involve such PhD students in academic tutorship of BA and MA students.*
- *Contacts with employer representatives are not systematic.*
- *When organising studies, it should be kept in mind that 80% of the students work while studying. Online interactive methods should be used more widely, such as the Moodle platform, and access to learning materials in the digital environment should be facilitated.*
- *Teaching staff should visit upper secondary schools more often to introduce the study programme and popularise the field of semiotics among both teachers and students.*

### **HISTORY (BA), HISTORY (MA)**

#### **Strengths**

- *The Institute of History and Archaeology at the University of Tartu possesses a good library with substantial collections. Students have favourable opportunities to work with rich archival materials.*
- *Teaching, research and administrative work at the Institute are closely interwoven. Some MA students have already published research articles, they are also involved as assistants in teaching.*

- *The fields of Art History and Archaeology are closely related to practical field work, starting at the early stages of studies.*
- *Within the framework of the Erasmus programme, successful foreign cooperation and student exchanges take place, for example, with Freiburg and Greifswald universities.*

### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- *The Institute could profit more from the status of UT being the oldest university in Estonia. Prizes could be awarded, such as for the best essay on Estonian history by a BA student, the best international student writing on Estonian history, and the best idea for historical exhibitions.*
- *Both teaching staff and students believe that too many lectures and too few seminars are used in teaching.*
- *More attention should be paid to what is happening in other institutions of higher education (e.g. Tallinn University), and collaborate on specialisations rather than competing in the same fields.*
- *The Institute should invest more to invite foreign lecturers to Tartu, and this in turn would create opportunities for return visits for teaching staff and students.*
- *More money should be allocated to finance field trips and excursions that motivate students and provide them with good opportunities for learning.*
- *Since a number of lecturers live in Tallinn, the Institute should ensure that students have adequate opportunity for consultations and communications with them.*
- *The Institute should find an appropriate balance between teaching and researching national history and global history.*

### **ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORISTICS (MA)**

#### **Strengths**

- *The ethnology department is known and visible both in Estonia and abroad. Cooperation and student exchanges with universities in India and Poland are excellent. Expeditions to the Arctic peoples in the Russian Federation have a long tradition.*
- *The study programme being part of Estonian heritage may qualify for additional government funding. Close collaboration with a Centre of Excellence enables the Institute to gain additional funding for field work.*
- *The UT Library and the National Archives provide great opportunities for research.*
- *Students can publish their essays in the Yearbook of the Estonian National Museum.*
- *Moodle is used regularly and widely.*
- *Teaching staff is collaborating closely. The study programme is broadened by a variety of electives reflecting staff's fields of interests. Students are pleased with supervision as well as with opportunities to participate in research in concert with teaching staff.*

- *The department has made great efforts to recruit students. A video introducing the discipline has been prepared. The department hosts two Facebook pages to promote communications. Admission interviews are conducted to let students know what to expect from the study programme.*

#### **Areas for improvement and recommendations**

- *The Assessment Committee recommends that the University consider changing the name of the study programme to better reflect its content (which is faultless). This may reduce dropping out due to a wrong choice of speciality and pave the way for more efficient partnerships with foreign universities.*
- *Teaching staff should regularly give meaningful feedback on students' written assignments. All teaching staff should have weekly consultation hours available to students.*
- *It is recommended that teaching staff be clearly informed on academic career opportunities.*

Further information:

Assessment Report