



HAKA

Estonian Quality
Agency for Education

Institutional Accreditation

Assessment report on the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

2023



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Introduction

Institutional accreditation

'**Institutional accreditation**' is the process of external evaluation which assesses the conformity of a university or higher education institution's management, work procedures, study and research activities and environment to both legislation and the goals and development plan of the higher education institution itself. This is feedback-based evaluation in which an international assessment panel analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the institution of higher education based on the self-assessment report of the institution and on information obtained during the assessment visit, providing recommendations for improvement and ways of implementing them.

The goal of institutional accreditation is to support the development of strategic management and quality culture that values learning-centeredness, creativity and innovation in the higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as to increase the societal impact of education, research and development delivered by the HEIs.

HEIs are assessed according to twelve standards of institutional accreditation. Assessment focuses on the core processes of the HEI – learning and teaching, research, development and creative activities, and service to society – as well as on strategic management of the organisation and resource management. The learning and teaching process is examined in more detail under five standards (study programme, teaching staff, learning and teaching, student assessment, and learning support processes). Throughout the assessment process, there is a focus on academic ethics, quality culture and internationalisation.

The Institutional Accreditation Report consists of the evaluation of twelve institutional accreditation standards. **Achievements that exceed the level of the standard (not compliance with the standard) are presented as strengths. Areas of concern and recommendations point to shortcomings in meeting the requirements of the institutional accreditation standard** and affect the formation of the final decision of the Council. **Opportunities for further improvement are proposals for improvement that do not contain a reference to noncompliance with the standard** and the inclusion or exclusion of which is at the discretion of the institution of higher education. Proposals for further developments will not affect the final decision of the Council.

Educational institutions must undergo institutional accreditation at least once every seven years based on the regulation *Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation* approved by HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education as of 7.01.2022.

The institutional accreditation of The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church took place in March 2023. The Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) composed an international expert panel, which was approved by the higher education institution. The composition of the panel was thereafter approved by the order of HAKA director.

The composition of the expert panel was as follows:

Joke van Saane	Chair, Rector; University of Humanistic Studies (The Netherlands)
Helen Thomas	Secretary; Freelance Education Consultant (United Kingdom)
Heidi Maiberg	PhD student, Royal Holloway University of London (Estonia)
Antti Räsänen	Professor and Dean Faculty of Theology; University of Helsinki (Finland)
David J. Shepherd	Professor of Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, and Dean of Undergraduate Studies; Trinity College (Ireland)
Einike Pilli	Rector; The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (Estonia)

Assessment process

The assessment process was coordinated by HAKA staff – Liia Lauri and Tiia Bach.

After an initial preparation phase where the distribution of tasks between the members of the assessment panel was determined, the work of the assessment panel in Estonia started on Monday, 27 March 2023, with an introduction to the Higher Education System as well as the assessment procedures by HAKA. Members of the team agreed the overall questions and areas to discuss with each group during the site visit and to a detailed schedule for the site visit.

From Monday 27th to Wednesday 29th of March 2023, meetings were held with representatives of the Institute of Theology as well as with external stakeholders.

On Thursday, 30 March 2023, the panel held a meeting, during which the findings of the panel were discussed in detail and the structure of the final report was agreed. Findings of the team were compiled in a first draft of the assessment report and evaluation of the 12 accreditation standards.

The institution did not have any clarifications or comments on the report. The panel submitted the final report to HAKA on 06.06.2023.

The current report is a public document and made available on HAKA website after HAKA Council has made an accreditation decision.

Information about the Institute of Theology

The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (the Institute) is a private institute of professional higher education which dates back to 1946 when it was established as an institution for the training of church pastors for the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Since its foundation the Institute has developed and broadened its focus. In 2013 the Tartu Academy of Theology and the Institute of Theology merged which added the speciality of pastoral care and counselling to the Institute. In cooperation with the Orthodox Church of Estonia, the chair of Orthodox Theology was started in 2014 with the aim of training priests for the Orthodox Church. The cooperation between the Lutheran and Orthodox Church is unique.

The mission of the Institute of Theology is to promote theological competence in Estonia and internationally and to prepare clergy, church musicians and other church workers for the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Orthodox Church and other Churches. The Institute of Theology is structured round four academic units: the Faculty of Theology, the Pastoral Seminary, the Department of Life-Long-Learning and the Department of Church Music. The Faculty of Theology, the largest unit, includes the Tartu Academy of Theology and the Chair of Orthodoxy.

In 2022 the legal structure of the Institute of Theology changed when it became the Foundation of the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church rather than being directly owned by the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The head of the foundation is the Rector who reports to the Council of the Foundation.

The Institute of Theology offers a PHE programme in Theology with specialisms in Lutheran Theology, Pastoral Care and Counselling, and Orthodox Theology. It delivers two master's programmes: a master's in Theology and a master's in Christian Culture. There are also courses in Church Music and life-long learning. At the time of the assessment visit, the most recent data showed that there was a total of 131 students studying for the PHE and master's programmes with an average age of 49. The courses are supported by 35 academic staff members, of which 27 are visiting lecturers, and 16 non-academic staff, equating to 11.1 FTE.

Main impressions of the self-evaluation report and the visit

The self-evaluation report (SER) was a comprehensive document which provided a good basis for the Panel's work. The SER included a wide range of appendices which provided data and information to support the narrative of the SER. The Panel requested a small number of additional documents before the visit which were readily provided.

The Institute of Theology had undertaken appropriate preparation for the visit and were welcoming and professional in their approach. The Panel found all those they interviewed to be open and honest in their responses.

Main changes on the basis of recommendations of the previous institutional accreditation

The SER included a comprehensive report on all twenty-five recommendations from the Institutional accreditation of 2016 and the Study Programme accreditation in 2018. This

report showed that the Institute had considered all the recommendations and provided some information on actions taken. There were three recommendations where no action was taken in light of the considerations. The first was to ensure greater objectivity in the assessment of students' work by involving more than one person in the assessment process. Whilst the Institute of Theology has not introduced a further person in assessing student work because of the number of staff, the Panel was confident that the process of marking assessments was thorough and objective and this was confirmed by the students. The second recommendation where no action was taken was to increase the level of student mobility. The Panel learned that students are aware of opportunities for international mobility and are encouraged to consider them. However, they confirmed that personal circumstances constrain their ability to do so. The third recommendation where there was no change was to develop a Master's course in English. The Institute of Theology gave serious consideration to this and concluded that there was insufficient market demand and potential for such a course to be viable. Actions focussing on curriculum changes are part of a major curriculum review which was delayed due to the Covid pandemic and which is now planned for 2023-2024.

Summary of the institutional accreditation findings

General Findings

The Institute of Theology has a clearly identified mission and vision with the primary focus of training pastors for the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC). The integration of training for the Orthodox Church (OC) and training in pastoral care and counselling (PCC) is unique and provides a sound basis for the training of pastors for the church and for meeting the future needs of society for spiritual education. The Institute faces the challenges presented by declining church membership and this in a small country. The Institute has a strong ethos which is reflected in the dedication of staff to both teaching and research and in the motivation of students.

Whilst the mission and vision are very clear, the Development Plan (DP), the Action Plan (AP) and associated plans for different units lack specificity which makes it hard for the Institute to monitor and demonstrate progress.

The small size of the Institute offers the advantages of facilitating good relationships among staff, and between staff and students and enables effective, but informal, communication. Whilst acknowledging the effectiveness of the informal channels, the Panel found that the Institute would benefit from strengthening the formal channels of communication and ensuring that questionnaires are systematically administered, the results of surveys formally considered and the decisions made reported back to the respondents whether these are students, alumni or staff.

The main sources of income for the Institute come from the Church and student fees.

The Institute is active internationally and staff are members of both national and international networks and committees. The level of activity is high in proportion to the staff base. The international activity of staff and of visiting international staff enhances the learning experience of the students. The Institute staff are highly research active and the level of publication is very good.

Commendations

- The outstanding commitment and motivation of staff in relation to teaching and learning.
- The diverse range of support for students which clearly contributes to the low drop-out rate.
- The extensive engagement in international activity from the staff group.
- The high level of research activity and publications.
- A significant awareness of the balance between responsibility to church and service to society and the international academic community
- Lifelong learning courses reach a large audience.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Institute lacks specific targets and objectives in the Development Plan and in the associated Action Plan and in specific areas of activity including external communications, internationalisation and research. This means it is difficult for developments to be monitored and achievements demonstrated. The Panel recommends that the Institute reviews its Development Plan, Action Plan and related plans for discrete areas including research, and revises them to include specific and measurable targets and objectives.
- The Institute has many effective informal channels of communication and processes that work. However, without documenting processes and establishing clear and formal communication channels, it is difficult for the Institute to ensure that all staff and students are aware of and understand processes and how they work. The Panel recommends that the Institute pays more attention to formalising processes and channels of internal communication to ensure awareness of these processes and consistency in their implementation.
- Sources of reliable income for the Institute are limited which constrains the Institute's activity and its ability to raise salary levels and provide adequate opportunities for the professional development of staff. The Institute is recommended to be much more proactive in exploring options to increase the income levels.
- There is a clear commitment to a quality culture. However, there is no clarity as to who owns which process and no document which explains how different quality processes feed into each other, and how the feedback loop is closed. It is recommended that the Institute produces a diagram to show how the different quality processes relate to each other and who is responsible for the quality related processes and policies.
- Whilst there is clear commitment to and understanding of the values underpinning the Institute, these are not further elaborated in an institutional statement on academic ethics or to those aspects of academic misconduct that are increasingly challenged by the developments in artificial intelligence.

	conforms to requirements	partially conforms to requirements	does not conform to requirements	worthy of recognition
Strategic management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quality culture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internationalisation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teaching staff	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study programme	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning and teaching	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student assessment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning support systems	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research, development and/or other creative activity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service to society	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Strategic management

Standard

Development planning at the higher education institution is purposeful and systematic, involving various stakeholders.

The higher education institution regularly evaluates the achievement of its stated objectives and the impact of its activities.

Guidelines

The HEI has formulated the objectives and key results for its core activities – learning and teaching; research, development and creative activities, and service to society – taking into account national priorities and the needs of society, focusing on its strengths and reducing unnecessary duplication both within the HEI and throughout higher education in Estonia.

The HEI is managed in accordance with its mission, vision and core values, as well as objectives set out on the basis of those principles. Responsibility for implementation of the goals and action plans of the development plan are clearly specified. Achievement of the objectives and effects of the activities are evaluated regularly.

Sustainable development, creativity and innovation are supported and given value in both core and support activities.

The HEI is mindful of the opportunities provided by digital technologies in planning for development activities.

Membership of the HEI (including students), as well as external stakeholders, is involved in developing and implementing the HEI's development plan and action plans. The HEI members share the core values that serve as a basis for the institution's development plan.

Evidence and analysis

The governance structure of the Institute has recently changed. A foundation has been established which is now the owner of the Institute. The Council of the Foundation is charged with the appointment of the rector. Since this governance structure was relatively new at the time of the visit, the staff had not yet had time to fully adjust to it and for the impact to be apparent. In the interview with the Rector and the owner it became clear that decisions are made based upon mutual respect and shared visions about the Institute.

The new governance structure has three levels of council: foundation, institute and faculty. The three councils are linked logically, and each council has its own sphere of influence, which is clearly documented in regulations. The three councils have regular meetings.

The strategy of the Institute is formulated in a Development Plan 2022-2026 (DP), covering the main areas of the Institute: education, research and service to church and society. The DP contains the mission, vision and values of the Institute. According to the Self Evaluation Report (SER), all administrative and academic staff, as well as students through their representative body, are involved in the process of constructing a new DP. The students confirmed that their views were taken seriously in this process. Based on both the SER and confirmed in interviews with different stakeholders, it was clear that student and other stakeholder views are similarly considered in the case of policy changes and institutional decisions.

The DP is accompanied by an Action Plan 2022-2026 (AP) containing objectives, actions, results, budgets and timelines for the different components of the DP. The objectives as formulated in both the DP and the AP are rather general. For example, the DP includes as key results that "in society the Institute is a visible education and research centre;" "the structure of the Institute has been put in order," and "The financial resources of the Institute will be increased." The way the key results are expressed, in combination with the fact that there is not always a clear distinction between key results and activities to achieve them, makes it difficult to see how progress towards them is monitored.

There is a significant number of key results for which the time frame is 'continuous'. The first point for monitoring the DP was the end of 2022 which was the first year of the five-year plan. However, the lack of clarity in the indicators leads to a lack of clarity and specificity in the monitoring process. Overall, the DP and the associated AP would benefit from being more specific. Neither the Rector nor members of the teaching staff were able to specify the overall aims in the DP in more concrete terms. However, it was clear that these were shared, and the goals became more concrete as work progressed.

Monitoring progress on aims and targets is a shared responsibility of both the Rector and the Academic Dean and is controlled by the Council of the Institute and the Council of the Faculty. The role of the Academic Dean is crucial in the process of the monitoring and evaluation of the overall academic endeavour of the Institute. The Panel learned that the full-time term of the new Academic Dean only started in January 2023, and it was clear to the Panel from discussions with management and teaching staff that the revised structure of the leadership needed to be clarified to members of the Institute so that everyone is clear as to who is in charge at the different levels, and who is accountable.

The SER includes a report on the actions taken in the light of the recommendations of the last accreditation. It is clear from this report that all the recommendations were considered. What was not clear to the Panel is how the decisions on the recommendations were reached, who was involved and in what forum.

The sustainability of the Institute is a matter of concern, for the Board of the Institute and for the Panel. In times of declining numbers of religious attachments and church membership, it is hard for a theological institute mainly focused on one denomination to survive. In this light, the Panel values the ecumenical perspective of the Institute, as is visible in their cooperation with the Orthodox Church and the broad audience of the pastoral care and counselling programmes (PCC). In the interviews with the Rector, the Head of the Tartu Academy of Theology (TAT IT) and the new dean the Panel heard several good ideas and directions to strengthen the Institute's sustainability. The most important of these included: renewal of the curriculum to make it relevant to a wider audience; innovation and digitalization of courses to attract new cohorts of students; finding the next generation of faculty members; active use of social media to enhance exposure, and participation in (inter)national church and higher education networks to increase efficiency. The Panel considered that the Institute needs to have stronger engagement with crucial higher education networks both nationally and internationally and recommends that opportunities for such cooperation should be explored to improve sustainability.

The Institute has carried out risk assessment and management of the physical environment. In the interview with the Rector and the Head of the TAT IT, it became clear that other areas of risk, such as budgets and student numbers, are also analysed. It would be helpful for the Institute to develop an overarching format for holistic risk analysis, and to formalize the monitoring of the risks in annual reports.

Conclusion

Development planning in the Institute is purposeful and involves all relevant stakeholders. However, the process is not sufficiently systematic. Whilst the Institute does review the development plan and the action plan, it cannot demonstrate progress towards and achievement of its stated objectives and the impact of the objectives since these are not specific enough and cannot be monitored or controlled.

The revised management structure has yet to become fully embedded and it is not yet clear who is responsible for what activity and where accountability lies. This leads to lack of clarity and confusion which poses a risk. Risk analysis is carried out, although it was not always clear where and how this was done.

The management articulated several ideas to address the challenge of sustainability in the context of declining church membership.

Overall, the Institute partially conforms to requirements.

Strengths

- The Institute is characterized by the strongly shared mission and vision, which is manifest across the Institute and at all levels.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The development plan and the action plan contain many aims and targets which are not specific. This means it is not possible to monitor the goals systematically and report on the results. The Institute is recommended to formulate sharp and concrete aims so that they can be clearly and systematically monitored, and progress evaluated.
- There is a lack of clarity as to who is responsible and accountable for the aims and activities in the action plan. It is recommended that the responsibilities and accountabilities for the aims are clarified and that these are defined by role rather than by individual persons.
- The Institute should explore and embed itself in crucial higher education networks both nationally and internationally.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Panel suggests that it would be helpful for the Institute to develop an overarching framework for risk analysis so that there is a clear overview of risk for all areas of the Institute's activity.

Resources

Standard

The higher education institution develops its staff and manages its physical and financial resources in a purposeful, systematic and sustainable manner.

Internal and external communications of the higher education institution (including marketing and image-building) are targeted and managed.

Guidelines

The HEI has an efficient staff development system in terms of both academic and support staff. The principles and procedures for employee recruitment and development are based on the objectives of the HEI's development plan and are fair and transparent. The principles for employees' remuneration and motivation are defined, available to all employees, and followed.

Allocation of the HEI's financial resources is based on the objectives of its development plan. The management and development of its infrastructure (buildings, laboratories, classrooms, digital infrastructure, etc.) are fit-for-purpose and economically sound. The infrastructure is regularly analysed (including the network, digital equipment, software and services, IT systems, user support, digital security, etc.), taking into consideration among others the needs of students, teaching staff and other members of the HEI personnel.

Sufficient resources are available for updating the infrastructure for education and research, and/or a strategy exists enabling the HEI to acquire them.

The HEI has defined information protection rules (including on data protection and the protection of user privacy) and these are implemented. The development and security of the online learning and teaching environment are ensured. The online learning and teaching environment allows to identify the authorship of student work.

The HEI has a functioning system for internal and external communications, relevant to the target audiences. The information made public about HEI's activities (including study programmes) and the findings of external evaluations is correct, up to date, easily accessible and understandable. The HEI has a system to popularise its core activities and academic career opportunities. The HEI members are informed of the decisions relevant to them in a timely manner.

Employee satisfaction with management, working conditions, information flow, etc., at the HEI is surveyed regularly and the survey results are used in quality improvement activities.

Evidence and analysis

The Panel learned that there are four pillars of the Institute's finances: funding from the church, tuition fees, rental income from letting out premises, and support to the activities of TAT IT. Funding from the church was raised by 10% in 2022 which reflects the importance of the Institute to the church for the training of pastors and other church workers. The Institute was awarded Euros 80,000 by the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2021-2022 to provide training for pastoral care and counselling. The Panel learned from the Rector that the Institute was in discussions with the Ministry in the hope of being awarded further funding for training in this area. It was, however, uncertain whether the Institute would be successful. The Institute attracts other project money as, for example, through Uniproject and the Nordic Church of Germany. The Head of TAT IT has developed links with organisations in the USA which have also yielded funding. Overall, reliable sources of income are few which impacts on the financial sustainability of the Institute. This makes the environment in which the Institute operates challenging.

The budget figures show a significant drop in income from Euros 456,996 in 2017 to 368,644 in 2021 and, although the 2021 budget figures balance, much of the reduction in expenditure is shown to be in staff salaries, reflecting a decrease in the staff numbers. One of the recommendations in the last accreditation report was for the Institute to find ways of increasing staff salaries. The Institute has managed to give staff an increase as reported in the SER. However, the salary level of staff in the Institute is still low in comparison to the Estonian average. Senior staff recognise that the salaries are still low, and this is an area of some concern among staff as shown in the responses to the staff survey carried out in 2022. Despite this, the Panel saw no evidence that salary levels have led to staff losses.

The budget for professional staff development is very low. The budget information provided in the SER showed that in 2020 a total of Euros 450 was allocated to staff development to cover all staff, in 2021 it was Euros 0 and in 2022 Euros 200. Whilst the Panel recognise that there may be some staff development covered in the research and development budget, the resources for staff development are very low. Over the same period there have been no joint courses for faculty members together with members of the other two church institutions in Estonia (Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary and the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary) which coincided with the Covid pandemic. Although the SER includes support provided to staff to gain higher qualifications through scholarships, this is very limited. The Institute needs to increase support for staff professional development including gaining higher degrees.

The Institute set up an economic sustainability working group the aim of which was to explore options for generating funds from the real estate. Whilst the working group concluded that options were not realizable, the initiative to explore options was well planned and executed and is good practice. The Institute received a significant sum from the church from a sale of some property which enabled it to undertake much needed renovation work of the main building.

IT systems, user support and digital security are well established and take the needs of students, academic and administrative staff into consideration. Digital resources were particularly important during the Covid pandemic. Senior staff reported that this had positive long-term benefits such as enabling students to attend lectures remotely.

The Institute has developed external and internal communication and the budget includes funding for this, although the Panel was unable to disaggregate the sums for communication as these are presented with IT and registry services.

The SER states that the Institute lacks the financial means for broader advertisement campaigns. The Panel learned from the Head of TAT IT that the Institute plans to increase its social media presence which can be cost effective and relatively easy to achieve. The Panel did not find evidence that the Institute had articulated its objectives for external communication beyond the general statement of greater use of social media.

The Panel heard that the size of the Institute supports informal communication. However, there were few regular channels of formal internal communication which means that staff and students may not always be as fully aware as they might of policy, aims and objectives. The Panel suggests that the Institute should develop regular communication

forms and minutes from board to staff and students, which will help to strengthen awareness of mission and vision by focusing on concrete actions.

Conclusions

The Institute operates in a challenging economic environment. Funding from the Church is secure. However, funding from other sources, in particular from the Ministry of Social Affairs, is vulnerable and impacts the longer-term future of pastoral care and counselling. Although staff salaries remain low, there is no evidence that this leads to staff losses. Financial support for the professional development of staff, including support for gaining PhDs, is very limited.

The Institute has managed to renovate and update its estate through one-off funds from the Church. However, there is no long-term plan to support any future needs. The Institute does not have a plan or clear objectives for external communication or for raising the profile of the Institute more broadly.

Strengths

- The process of setting up an economic sustainability working group, with internal and external stakeholders to explore options is an example of good practice.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- Overall, the Institute's income from sources other than EELC is vulnerable and impacts on the longer-term sustainability of the Institute. The Panel recommends that the Institute increases its activity for generating other reliable sources of income.
- Staff salaries remain low and do not compare well with the average salary in Estonia. The Panel recommends that the Institute continues to find ways of increasing staff salaries and benefits, including training and development.
- There is no clear plan with objectives to develop external communications. The Institute is recommended to develop a plan with clear targets and to monitor the effectiveness of progress in achieving these targets.

Quality Culture

Standard

The higher education institution has defined the quality of its core and support processes, and the principles of quality assurance.
In the higher education institution, internal evaluation supports strategic management and is conducted regularly at different levels (institution, units, study programmes).
The findings of internal and external evaluations are analysed and quality improvement activities implemented.

Guidelines

Members of the HEI have agreed upon definitions for the quality of their core and support processes and are guided by them in their daily work. The HEI has established its policies and procedures for internal quality assurance (internal evaluation). The regular internal quality assurance both at the institutional and study programme level takes into account, inter alia, the standards set out in these Guidelines. All members of the HEI, including students and external stakeholders, participate in internal evaluations.

Internal evaluation of study programmes results in feedback from experts within the HEI and/or from outside it. Regular reviews and enhancements of study programmes ensure their relevance, including their compliance with international trends. In the course of internal evaluations, peer learning, comparisons with other HEIs regarding their results and means for achievement, as well as a sharing of best practices take place, among other things.

Internal evaluation is based on the following key questions in quality management: What do you want to achieve, and why? How do you want to do it? How do you know that the activities are effective and will have the desired impact? Is there an equilibrium between the desired outcomes and the resources used for their achievement (including technological solutions)? How do you manage the quality improvement activities?

Evidence and analysis

The Institute has defined its quality culture as “a unified perception of core value, mission and vision, as well as the practices to ensure the quality of the Institute.” The definition goes on to state that “quality culture is a shared responsibility of the entire Institute.” Further elaboration of the definition of quality culture notes that the principles of quality management focus on processes and their implementation. The aim of these processes is to support the achievement of the aims and to ensure smooth implementation. The definition and purpose are clear.

The Institute has several key documents which outline quality processes. These include the Statute of the Curriculum, Admission Rules of the Faculty of Theology, Rules of Procedures for the Professional Development of Academic Staff, Procedure and Requirements of Evaluation of the Qualification of the Academic Staff and Research Fellows. Overall, these quality documents are comprehensive and address the main elements of quality management and assurance. The Panel learned that there is no single point of access for these documents or a role within the Institute which is responsible for maintaining the documents. The Panel noted, however, that individual procedural documents may be the responsibility of a particular member of staff. The Panel learned,

for example, from meeting with staff and this was confirmed in the job description, that the responsibility for 'holding' the Statute of the Curriculum rests with the Academic Dean.

The Institute administers a range of questionnaires seeking feedback from stakeholders. Students complete end of course evaluations. This is an on-line questionnaire and has recently been made compulsory to increase the percentage of returns. Whilst this is the formal route for feedback from students, the close relationship between staff and students and the accessibility of staff to students facilitates immediate, albeit informal, feedback from students. Academic staff outlined the relevance and importance of informal feedback within the context of the Institute, enabling immediate feedback which might otherwise be lost in an end of course questionnaire. Student feedback is formally discussed in the Heads of Chairs meetings and students reported that they do receive response to their feedback. However, the Panel did not see or hear of a formal process for ensuring that the feedback loop was closed.

The Institute also gathers feedback from employers and from staff. It was not clear to the Panel how often questionnaires are issued to these two groups. The Panel learned from senior staff that feedback from employers is gathered through a range of interchanges including individual meetings with employers, attendance at external committees and meetings with practice supervisors. Although this is not systematic, the Panel learned that this feedback is shared and discussed in internal meetings, particularly in the Heads of Chairs Meeting. The SER included an analysis of a questionnaire to staff. It was not clear whether this was a regular questionnaire or not.

Monitoring the outcomes of feedback and of student performance starts with discussions at the individual chair level. This then feeds into discussions between the Heads of Chairs, which in turn feeds into the meetings of the Council of the Faculty of Theology and from there to the Council of the Institute. The Rector compiles an annual report which reflects on the outcomes of the quality processes including the responses to surveys and questionnaires, module evaluations and student performance and discussions on these in the Heads of Chairs meetings. It was clear to the Panel that the processes are there and are embedded, although the Panel could find no document which outlined the process either as a narrative or a diagram. This would be a useful addition.

Senior staff described the process for monitoring progress on the DP and the associated AP. This starts in the individual units and is reported up through the Heads of Chairs, the Faculty of Theology and to the Council of the Institute. As with feedback from students, feedback from the monitoring process feeds into the Annual Report. Despite the clear process, it was difficult to see how the Institute would demonstrate achievement of the objectives in the AP or in the DP given the broad nature of the objectives, as noted under *Strategic Management*.

The SER included an account of how the Institute had addressed the recommendations from two previous external evaluations. It was clear from this that all the outcomes had been considered, though had not always led to action. Those that had been addressed included the upskilling of staff's digital competencies. There were others that had not been addressed. This included introducing some element of externality to the grading of assessments i.e. that more than a single staff member who may teach and assess a course should review or moderate assignments. Where the recommendation had not been taken

forward an explanation was provided although it was not clear where and how the decisions on this had been taken. This demonstrates that, overall, the Institute takes seriously the outcomes of external evaluations.

The definition of quality does not address quality enhancement. The Panel learned from meetings with staff and senior managers that effective practice is shared between colleagues on an informal basis which is practicable in a small institution. The Academic Dean noted that if she observes effective practice, she will encourage the member of staff to share it with other staff. Staff also reported that effective practice is shared in meetings of the units and in Heads of Chairs meetings. Whilst it was clear to the Panel that effective practice is shared, it could find no documented encouragement for this or a systematic way of ensuring the sharing of such practice.

Conclusions

The Institute has defined the quality of its core and support processes, and this is clearly understood by staff. Feedback is sought from a range of stakeholders and the feedback is fed into relevant groups and committees. Students usually receive a response to their feedback which is good but there is no formal closing of the feedback loop. Whilst these processes are documented there is no central point where such documents are held. This presents a potential risk that some procedures or processes may not be kept fully up-to-date and documents may not always be readily accessible.

There is a quality cycle which includes gathering of feedback from students, end of course reviews and monitoring of student progress which is discussed at chairs level and feeds up into the Annual Report which is prepared by the Rector. It was clear to the Panel that this cycle is clear to staff at all levels. It would be helpful for this cycle to be represented somewhere in diagrammatic form to ensure awareness and understanding at all levels of the Institute and also for external stakeholders.

The Institute is very open to feedback received through informal channels. Whilst these channels clearly enrich the levels of feedback, the Institute needs to be mindful that some feedback may be lost in this way. Staff communicate well with each other and thus share their practice. The Institute needs to recognise that informal ways of sharing good practice may mean that opportunities for greater sharing and implementation of such practice may be lost.

Overall, the Institute has a clear commitment to quality and to monitoring it and the processes are effective and thus the requirements of the standard are met. There is, however, much reliance on informal channels of communication which currently work, and there is a lack of clarity as to where responsibility for processes and monitoring lies.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- Not all questionnaires are regular. The Panel recommends that the Institute implements the more regular administration of all questionnaires including to external stakeholders and staff and ensures that the feedback loop is systematically closed.

- There is no single point where quality procedures and processes are held within the Institute. The Panel recommends that the Institute develop a diagrammatic representation of the quality cycle which could helpfully include role responsibilities for key quality documents and procedures.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Whilst the Institute clearly shares effective practice, especially informally, the Panel suggests that the Institute might find it helpful to be more systematic in the sharing of such practice to ensure that the opportunities for enhancement that the sharing affords are not lost.

Academic ethics

Standard

The higher education institution has defined its principles for academic ethics, has a system for disseminating them among its members, and has a code of conduct including guidelines for any cases of non-compliance with these principles.

The higher education institution has a functioning system for handling complaints.

Guidelines

The HEI values its members and ensures that all its employees and students are treated according to the principle of equal treatment.

Employees and students of the HEI are guided by the agreed principles of academic ethics in all their activities.

The HEI respects fundamental values and policies of research set out in the document, 'Research Integrity', issued jointly by Estonian research institutions, the Estonian Academy of Sciences, the Estonian Research Council and the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

The HEI supports its students and teaching staff in their understanding and responding to ethical issues. Teaching staff and students do not tolerate academic fraud, including cheating and plagiarism, and they will act immediately upon any such occurrence. Attention is paid to the application of principles of academic ethics in the digital environment: avoidance of creative theft, the protection of intellectual property rights etc.

Management of complaints from HEI members (including discrimination cases) is transparent and objective, ensuring fair treatment of all parties.

Evidence and analysis

The principles of academic ethics are based on the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ECCRI). The Panel found some ambiguity within the SER as to whether the Institute was a signatory to the ECCRI and established that the Institute became a signatory in November 2022; this was confirmed by staff during the visit. It was unclear to the Panel to what extent the Code had been brought to the attention of staff and relevant students. Neither the Code nor a link to it can be found by searching the Institute's website.

The Panel established that the Institute currently lacks its own institutional statement on academic ethics/integrity. The Panel considered that it was both useful and important to develop one given that the ECCRI only addresses research integrity and not academic integrity more broadly. An institutional statement would be helpfully grounded in the religious values of the Institute and thus further reflect and support the atmosphere of openness and mutual confidence within the Institute. Together with individual responsibility, these values can and should underpin the implementation of ethical principles, policies, and practices.

Whilst the Panel were not made aware of any instances where the ECCRI was not being adhered to, staff during the visit acknowledged that plans to establish a Research Ethics Committee for approving research proposals had not yet been realised. Whether it is constituted as a separate committee or whether this function is fulfilled by a sub-group of an existing committee, the Panel found that establishing a committee or sub-committee was an important step forward and should be acted on as a priority.

It was clear from the SER and from conversations with staff during the visit that the Institute does have policies and practices intended to safeguard the academic integrity of assessment.

The SER highlighted elements of specific modules (e.g. *Introduction to Academic Writing* (3 ECTS) and *Planning a Research Paper and its Methods* (2 ECTS) which aim to develop awareness of issues of academic misconduct. Documents included as appendices 13 and 37 of the SER explain the Institute's understanding of types of academic misconduct and how these are dealt with. However, in conversation with staff, it was acknowledged that it had been some time since the components of the modules and the related policies and practices had been reviewed. Staff recognised that it would be useful and important to review and revise the policies and associated practices, especially in light of the emergence of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools (like GPT-4, Bard, BingAI etc). Although it was suggested by some staff that the ethos of the Institute and the maturity of the student body made them less likely to use such tools, the Panel noted that it was important for the future, which may well include younger students, that there was more awareness of the developments of AI tools.

The SER stated that, at present, only final essays and theses are electronically checked for misuse of academic sources through submission to Ouriginal. In discussions, some staff suggested that smaller assignments need not be submitted because faculty members would easily detect plagiarism in these. However, there was limited awareness that smaller assignments are more vulnerable to being completed using AI-text generators. The Panel noted that that putting shorter assignments through Ouriginal would increase its Estonian language text database and thus its effectiveness.

Based on the visit, the Panel was satisfied that the Institute had an informal procedure for complaints to be raised, first with the relevant staff member and then, if the complaint could not be resolved, it would be escalated to a higher level. Should the complaint relate to a member of staff, it could be raised in the first instance at a higher level. The Panel could not find any evidence that there was a mechanism for concerns to be raised anonymously. Whilst use of an anonymous mechanism, might not be frequent, it would, nevertheless be appropriate to have such a mechanism in place.

Conclusions

The Institute has defined principles for academic ethics through being a signatory of the ECCRI. Staff are aware of the Code, although there was no link to it on the Institute's website. Whilst from a research perspective, the Institute meets the requirements, it is important for there to be an institutional statement which could embrace principles of academic misconduct as well as research ethics. This would provide the opportunity to foreground the Institute's values in relation to academic ethics. Students are taught about academic ethics in particular modules and this ensures that they are aware of academic misconduct and its consequences. Ouriginal is in place for the detection of plagiarism. However, the need to address the increasing challenge of academic misconduct with the developments in AI has not been fully recognised.

The Institute has a system for hearing complaints which works well, and which staff and students are aware of. The complaints system would be enhanced by developing a mechanism for raising complaints anonymously.

Although the Panel found no evidence of violations of the mores of academic ethics, the absence of an institutional code of conduct and lack of visibility of the only recently signed Estonian Code leads to a partial meeting of the requirements of Academic Ethics.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The Institute does not have its own statement on ethics, nor does it have a specific forum in which the Institute's adherence to the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity is monitored. The Panel recommends that the Institute establishes a committee or sub-committee for academic ethics that could be responsible for developing a statement of academic integrity which is rooted in the Institute's values and which monitors the Institute's adherence to the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.
- The Panel found that there was limited awareness of the challenges to academic integrity raised by the rapid developments in artificial intelligence. The Institute should review modules, policies and practices pertaining to academic integrity/misconduct to ensure that they are fit for purpose and fully informed by the latest developments and challenges in this area.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Institute has recently become a signatory to the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. However, there is no reference to this on the Institute's website. It would be helpful to ensuring a broad awareness and understanding of the Code by making it more visible on the Institute's website.
- The Panel advises the Institute to submit all un-invigilated written assessments to Ouriginal which will also help to develop the platform's Estonian language database.
- The Panel considers it might be useful to create a mechanism for concerns to be raised anonymously, in case this is necessary, and to make such a mechanism known.

Internationalisation

Standard

The higher education institution has set objectives for internationalisation and assesses the attainment of these objectives regularly.

The higher education institution has created an environment that encourages international mobility of students and teaching staff, supporting the development of learning, teaching and RDC activities, as well as the cultural openness of its members and Estonian society in general.

Guidelines

The HEI creates opportunities for international student exchanges by offering study programmes and/or modules taught in English. The learning environment at the HEI supports internationalisation and cultural openness.

Recognition of qualifications and recognition of prior learning and work experiences for student admission and programme completion are in accordance with the quality requirements set by the HEI, are systemic and consistent with the expected learning outcomes and support international student mobility. The organisation of studies at the HEI facilitates student participation in international (including virtual) mobility (e.g., study programmes enable mobility windows). The HEI has agreements with foreign higher education institutions and, through international exchange, sends its students abroad to study and undertake internship, providing comprehensive support for this. Members of the teaching staff encourage students to participate in international mobility. International lecturers participate in the process of teaching, including supervision of doctoral theses.

The HEI supports and recognises the participation of its teaching staff in international teaching, research or creative projects, as well as their teaching, research or creative work and personal development which are performed at HEIs abroad.

Evidence and analysis

The SER states that part of the mission of the Institute is “*to promote theological competence in Estonia and internationally.*” One of the values included in the DP is to develop theological thinking and the written word in Estonian and participate actively in international cooperation networks. The DP includes the key result for the Institute to be a recognised research centre with international contacts. The AP includes four action points related to this key result including more active staff participation in international cooperation; running an annual conference with international partners; increasing the numbers of partners where there is effective cooperation for study and research mobility, and achieving a 3% engagement of students in international mobility. Whilst the actions are clearly stated, it was difficult for the Panel to see how the Institute could use these either to demonstrate achievement of the Key Result or to monitor progress towards it. Senior staff acknowledged that there are no specific/measurable targets for the internationalisation objectives which, they explained is, in part, due to the uncertainty of resources to support internationalization activity. The Panel learned that this is an area that the new Academic Dean will be reviewing. The Panel further learned from senior staff that the inclusion of the actions in the AP serves as a reminder for departments to discuss internationalization activity regularly in their meetings and to come up with new or different options for international cooperation.

The Institute has a suitable number of international agreements and co-operations. There are four co-operation agreements within framework of ERASMUS+ either signed or shortly to be signed. The Institute recognises that the DORA+ programme, which supports shorter visits, may better suited to the Institute, especially the students. The Institute is active in international networks including the European Network of Health Care Chaplaincy and the Volos Academy of Theological Studies in Greece. The Panel did not gain a clear picture of the criteria used to identify what international cooperation agreements the Institute would like nor how many. The Panel did learn, however, that if a member of staff or a student was interested in visiting a particular institution the Institute would be pro-active in establishing some form of agreement. The Panel also learned that currently the Institute does not have staff with the capacity to develop ERASMUS agreements which are resource intensive to develop.

The Panel learned from senior staff that many of the co-operation links stem from the personal contacts of staff. This is an effective way of developing links. However, the Panel also learned that most of these links are formed by the senior professors where the level of international engagement is already good. This may not encourage the engagement of younger staff.

The establishment of agreements and the links made by staff provide a basis for international activity for both students and staff. However, the take up of international mobility by students is very low. During the period from 2016 to 2022 eight students undertook a period of international mobility. Six of these were under DORA+; four were to Finland and two each to Belgium and Germany. This reflects the age profile of the student body and the fact that the majority have family and work commitments which limits their capacity to take up mobility opportunities. Both PHE and master's students told the Panel that they were aware of the opportunity to participate in student mobility; some had considered it but were not able to realize it on account of personal circumstances. In discussions the Panel could not establish that the Institute was aware of shorter scholarships of one or two weeks that are offered through Harno. Shorter opportunities of this kind could enable more students to take up mobility opportunities. There are no incoming international students which reflects the fact that the curriculum is delivered in Estonian. As noted in the response to recommendations from the previous accreditation, the Institute gave serious consideration to developing a master's course in English and concluded that the potential demand and the resources required did not make this a viable development. The resource implications do not enable the Institute to develop and deliver courses in English.

In contrast to student mobility, staff mobility reflects the staff base well. Eleven staff participated in a range of outgoing international activity between 2018 and 2022. This included conferences, research visits and engaging in networks. Most of these staff participated in multiple international activity. This reflects the value in the DP of participating actively in international cooperation networks.

There is some incoming international mobility by staff with an average of four visits a year which are mostly for short visits. Students reported that their learning experience benefitted from the staff's international mobility and they also felt that this enhanced the status of the Institute. They also reported that staff's international activity positively

impacts on their studies. Given the personal constraints of students to undertake international activity, they said that they would welcome more incoming international staff. Students cited the value of a visiting lecturer contributing to the Old Testament course.

Conclusions

The Institute has set objectives for internationalisation. Whilst these lack specificity in terms of targets, thus making it difficult to monitor progress and achievement, the Institute is active internationally and the level of international contacts is very good in proportion to the size and capacity of the institution. Whilst there are opportunities for student international mobility, take up remains very low, which is a clear reflection of the age profile of the students and their personal constraints on travel. Overall, the Institute demonstrates that it is encouraging and supportive of international cooperation and mobility for both staff and students. However, given the constraints on students, it would be valuable for the Institute to consider more actively options for enhancing internationalisation for students without travel.

Strengths

- The Institute has a good range of staff engagement in international forums which benefits both staff research and students' learning.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- As noted under *Strategic Management* the objectives, key results and actions associated with Internationalisation lack specific and measurable goals, making it difficult for the Institute to demonstrate progress towards the objectives. It is recommended that the Institute ensures that the revisions to the Development Plan and Action Plan, recommended above, include measurable objectives for Internationalisation which will enable senior management to track progress in this area.
- The take-up of international mobility by students is very low. It is recommended that the Institute develops a strategy for 'internationalization at home' and also explores options for students to participate in shorter mobility options, such as visiting Libraries and participating at conferences abroad which can be supported by scholarships for short-term mobility provided by Harno.

Opportunities for further improvement

- Active international links have mostly been developed by individuals who are predominantly senior professors. Whilst this is an effective way of developing links which match the individual member of staff's professional interests, it does not engage younger staff members. The Institute is encouraged to identify links which reflect the professional needs of the Institute and thus engage younger staff members.
- The Institute lacks staff capacity to pursue new agreements under the ERASMUS framework. The Panel suggests that the Institute could explore whether there are

any opportunities to co-operate with another theological institute in Estonia where there is staff capacity for this work.

Teaching staff

Standard

Teaching is conducted by a sufficient number of professionally competent members of the teaching staff who support the development of learners and value their own continuous self-development.

Guidelines

Distribution of teaching staff by age and the percentage of young members of the teaching staff ensure the sustainability of studies. The career model of academic staff motivates capable young people to start an academic career and creates opportunities for their advancement.

The HEI supports systematically the development of its teaching staff. Members of the teaching staff engage in development of their professional, teaching and digital competences, improve their supervision competence, and share best practices with one another. IT and educational technological support (including trainings) are available to teaching staff.

Teaching staff's participation in research, development and/or creative activities supports the teaching process and ensures competence for the supervision of students' theses (including doctoral theses).

Members of the teaching staff collaborate in fields of teaching, research and/or creative work within the HEI and with partners outside the HEI, e.g. with field practitioners, public sector organisations, companies, other research and development institutions, and lecturers from other Estonian or foreign higher education institutions. Qualified visiting lecturers and practitioners participate in the teaching process.

When assessing the work of teaching staff (including their periodical evaluations), the effectiveness of their teaching as well as their research, development and creative work is taken into account, including student feedback, the effectiveness of their student supervision, development of their teaching; supervisory and digital competences, their international mobility, and their entrepreneurial experience or other work experience in their fields of speciality outside the HEI.

Evidence and analysis

The total number of academic staff has varied between 26 (2019) and 50 (2021). At the time of the visit there were 35 academic staff which equated to 7.7 full time equivalent (FTE) staff, a decrease from 8.5 in 2018. Of the overall staff numbers 27 were visiting lecturers. Over the period 2018 to 2022 the student to staff ratio has increased from 13.8 to 17. This ratio is adequate.

Good practice is shared between colleagues, mostly in the context of meetings of the chair group. During the visit the Academic Dean explained that she collects examples of both good and bad practice to share and discuss at the faculty level. Student feedback, which is mandatory, feeds into staff performance interviews where teachers are invited to reflect and, if applicable, to adjust their teaching in light of the feedback. Students confirmed, during the site visit, that their feedback is taken seriously, and cited some instances where courses have been improved as a result, including a different form of assessment or a change in the literature.

The number of staff members holding a PhD is 65%, which is good in the Estonian context and fully appropriate for an institution of PHE. The SER provides several examples of the Institute providing both funding and time for staff members to study for a PhD. Given the

interrelation between teaching and research and the high standards in the international field of higher education it is important to continue to provide support for staff to gain PhDs. There is well described process of attestation. The most recent attestation process was undertaken in 2022. It was clear to the Panel from discussions with staff and students that teaching staff are very dedicated to the students and their learning processes. Although there are no formal procedures for modifying teaching practices in the case of special learning needs among students, teaching staff are ready to help students and to accommodate them whenever possible.

Despite the low salaries of the staff, the Panel noted and was impressed by the intrinsic motivation of teaching staff both to teach and to contribute to future researchers and workers in the church and the sphere of pastoral care.

The high number of visiting staff is vital for enriching the students' learning experience and their international skills. The inclusion of visiting teachers leads to a balance of researchers and practitioners in church and pastoral care. This aligns with the vision of the Institute to train students not only on an academic level, but also to prepare them for work in the church and society. Some visiting faculty members bring relevant teaching experience, hybrid teaching, for example, which enriches the repertoire of the full-time staff.

The Institute does not have a general HR development plan which, the Panel learned, reflects the small number of staff and the low percentage of full-time staff. This is also impacted on by the limited resources available for supporting staff development. The staff development system is adequately clear, fair and transparent. The Academic Dean holds one-to-one meetings with faculty members and includes discussion of the future leadership in these meetings. There are some recently appointed and younger members of academic staff which has a positive impact on the age profile of the overall staff complement. Many staff members teach in other institutions in Estonia which is enriching for students and offers them some professional development through interchange with colleagues in other institutions.

Conclusions

Overall, there is a sufficient number of professionally competent teaching staff members to support the development of learners. The processes for the attestation of academic staff are clear and transparent.

Staff value and pursue their own continuous self-development. The evidence the Panel reviewed demonstrates that the Institute meets the requirements of the standard Teaching Staff.

Strengths

- Teaching staff are very dedicated to individual students and their learning processes.
- The personal satisfaction of the teachers is exceptionally high, especially given the low salaries and restricted resources.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- There is a very limited budget for staff development and no overall HR development plan to support the systematic development of staff in both research and teaching skills. The Panel strongly recommends that a regular training plan is developed with specific aims and strategies for staff development in teaching skills to enhance the skills of staff.

Study programme

Standard

Study programmes are designed and developed while taking into account the expectations of stakeholders, higher education and professional standards, and trends in the relevant fields.

The objectives of study programmes, modules and courses and their planned learning outcomes are specific and coherent.

The study programmes support creativity, entrepreneurship and development of other general competencies.

Guidelines

In planning and developing study programmes (incl. programmes conducted in a foreign language), the HEI is guided by its objectives, its competence areas and the needs of the labour market, and takes into account national strategies and the expectations of society.

The study programmes are based on up-to-date sectoral know-how and research.

The planned learning outcomes are in accord with the requirements for the corresponding level of the Estonian Qualifications Framework, and in planning them the HEI has taken into account the future needs, among other things. In developing study programmes, the HEI has conducted a comparative analysis of similar programmes in leading foreign higher education institutions.

The objectives of the study programme and its modules, the planned learning outcomes, theoretical and practical learning, the proportion of independent work and internship, and the assessment of the achieved learning outcomes form a coherent whole.

The development of general competences (incl. creativity and entrepreneurship) and speciality-related digital competences as well as support for the development of a self-directed learner is a natural part of the study programme, and these are integrated with speciality studies.

Expected student workloads defined in the study programmes are realistic and consistent with the calculation that, on average, 1 ECTS credit equals 26 student learning hours. The study programme offers sufficient challenge for learners with different levels of knowledge and skills.

Evidence and analysis

There are three coherent curricula with specialisations: PHE in Theology (with specialisations in Lutheran Theology, Pastoral Care and Counselling, and Orthodox Theology), MA in Theology (with specialisations in Theology and Diakonia and Pastoral Care and Counselling) and MA in Studies in Christian Culture. The learning outcomes are well articulated and clearly differentiated. For example, the master's programme demands more analysis and evaluation than in the PHE programme. Evidence from the curriculum documents presented with the SER and the discussions with students confirmed that the curricula integrate both content-based and generic competencies effectively. As stated in the SER all curricula meet the Occupational Qualification Standard of Pastoral Counsellor levels 6 and 7 and reflect the expectations and requirements of EELC and OC. The Archbishop confirmed during discussions that the Church continues to require master's level theological education for their pastors. The Archbishop also expressed his satisfaction with the standards and quality of the education offered by the Institute which meets the Church's needs. The representative of the Ministry of Social Affairs confirmed to the Panel that she has been able to contribute to the development of the PCC

specialisation at both PHE and master's level and thus ensure it meets the needs for pastoral care and counselling within the Ministry.

The PHE Theology programme includes the opportunity to study Orthodox Theology as one of three specialisations following completion of 120 ECTS shared across all specialisations. The Panel learned that the joint curriculum was planned collaboratively between the two chairs: the Orthodox Chair sees itself as a micro-faculty within the Lutheran Faculty and welcomes the collaboration which provides sufficient Orthodox theology to meet their educational and training needs. Collaboration is also evident in the master's in theology where the curriculum enables students to take courses from Orthodox theology as electives. This collaboration is a positive feature of the Institutes study programmes.

The Panel spent some time seeking to understand the rationale for the master's in theology and the Pastoral Seminary being independent of each other. The Panel learned that the Institute had reviewed this in the past and established that there were practical reasons for the arrangements. The Panel noted the data in the SER which showed that there had been no enrolments for the theology specialisation on the master's Theology for the last two years. The Panel also noted that there are potential benefits to students in combining or merging the master's in theology and the Pastoral Seminary in terms of reducing the overall study time. The SER showed that the average time for a student to graduate from the master's in theology is three years. Those that continue to the Pastoral Seminary then have an additional year of study. The total study time could thus be six or seven years, including the PHE programme. The Panel considered that a better model would be to enable students to undertake a bachelor and then a master's degree which included the professional training for PCC.

The Institute plans a major review of the curriculum, a review which was postponed because of the Covid pandemic. The current versions of the curricula are dated 2014, although there have been minor changes to individual courses during that time. For example, 4 ECTS were added to the e-course Biblical Studies and New Testament ERA which staff felt was a positive development, and enabled students to cover more material and increase their knowledge level. The planned major curriculum review presents a good opportunity for the Institute to review the overall curriculum structure as well as the foci and content development of the individual courses and programmes. The review also presents the opportunity for developing more shared curricula which, in turn, could create stronger student groups, generate greater cross fertilization of ideas and generate economies of scale.

The senior staff explained that the focus of the curriculum for training pastors has been on theology. However, the Institute is now aware of the need for more pastoral care and social entrepreneurship to meet societal demands. The Panel heard from the Head Chaplain of the Department of Mental Health of the Ministry of Social Affairs and from the Academic Dean who expressed the value of including more practical studies in both the PHE and the master's curricula. The Panel also heard from the Academic Dean that it would be valuable to increase the social science element of the curriculum. The curriculum review will provide the opportunity to develop a curriculum which balances theological studies with a more practical and social science approach.

The planned curriculum review is a significant opportunity for the Institute. The Panel did not find or hear evidence of a planned process to undertake the review beyond the collecting of feedback and information from stakeholders. The Panel stress the importance of ensuring a systematic process which includes collecting feedback from a comprehensive range of stakeholders to ensure that future programmes meet the needs of stakeholders and the further development of the Institute.

Students expressed their satisfaction with the overall curriculum. Students from PHE Theology indicated that they would welcome a slightly lighter load in the third year to enable them to focus on the final thesis.

Conclusions

The Panel found that all the current curricula meet the relevant Occupational Qualification Standard of Pastoral Counsellor levels 6 and 7. Stakeholders have been included in the process of curriculum development and report that the programmes meet their needs. The Institute is planning a major curriculum review which was delayed due to Covid. This is a timely review which will enable the Institute to make changes that meet the developing needs of both the Church and society. Overall, the Institute meets the requirements of Study Programme.

Strengths

- The opportunity for master's students to take an elective from the Orthodox curriculum which enriches their study.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Panel advises the Institute to develop a clear plan for the process of reviewing and renewing the curriculum, including stages for the collection of feedback from a wide range of stakeholders.
- The Panel encourages the Institute to include more practical subjects and generic skills in the revised curricula to meet the changing need of society.
- The Panel strongly encourages the Institute to review the structure of the programmes, especially in relation to the master's in theology and Pastoral Care and Counselling to create stronger student groups, greater cross fertilization of ideas and economies of scale.

Learning and teaching

Standard

Admission requirements and procedure ensure fair access to higher education and the formation of a motivated student body.

The higher education institution systemically implements a student-centred approach that guides students to take responsibility for their studies and career planning and supports creativity and innovation.

Graduates of the higher education institution, with their professional knowledge and social skills, are competitive both nationally and internationally.

Guidelines

Admission requirements and procedure are fair and impartial. In the admission process, student's ability for academic progress on the chosen programme is assessed.

The academic recognition of foreign qualifications is based on international conventions, agreements between countries, and the Estonian legislation.

Learning and teaching process takes into account students' individual abilities and needs and supports their development. Learning offers sufficient challenge for students at different levels. Students participate in planning and implementation of the learning process.

Organisation of independent work and face-to-face teaching motivates students to take responsibility for their studies.

Teaching methods and learning aids used in the learning and teaching process are modern, appropriate and effective and support the development of digital culture, contributing – among other things – towards the development of a self-directed learner, creativity, innovation and the development of digital and other general competencies. The HEI has a Code of Good Learning and Teaching (including online) and it is applied in practice.

The internship is integrated with speciality studies, the requirements for the internship are defined and the student's supervision ensured.

Students are motivated to learn and contribute to improving the quality of their studies by providing meaningful feedback on both the learning and teaching process and the organisation of studies.

Doctoral students plan their studies, as well as their research and development activities, in collaboration with their supervisor(s), setting specific objectives for each year and assuming responsibility for achieving those objectives.

Evidence and analysis

From the SER and discussion with students and staff during the visit it was clear that the admissions process is extensive. It consists of an evaluation of previous learning, both formal and informal, by means of documents submitted, an examination of biblical knowledge and an interview and an essay. The questions for the essay and the biblical knowledge exam are the same for all students, ensuring consistency and fairness. The interview asks some standard questions but may also probe particular areas to determine suitability for the course. It was noted by staff during the visit that this admissions process is primarily used to assess general suitability for the course and that it is rare that someone would not be admitted. The Panel found that there is some scope for rejecting applicants, but there have not been any cases in recent memory. The Panel established that it was possible for applicants to appeal an admissions decision but could not find the process documented and it was not clear how the process was made known to students.

In discussion during the visit staff explained how the Institute seeks to facilitate a learner-centred approach. It was clear from student feedback that the mentoring programme currently in place has helped to ensure that individual learning needs are met.

The SER notes that recommended reading is provided in addition to required reading, which enables more advanced students to go deeper if they wish and are able to. During the visit, staff clarified that the interactive approach in the classroom helps to ensure that students of different levels can ask any questions they may have. In the case of one staff member, both student assessments and feedback on those assessments are made known to the entire cohort (with their permission) allowing weaker students to benefit from the feedback of others prior to submitting subsequent assessments.

It became clear from the visit that the Institute seeks to identify and respond to the special physical needs of students to enable their access to learning. It was less clear, however, whether special learning needs, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and those relating to mental health issues were being identified and accommodated either at admission or during the students' studies. The Panel found that the Institute's programme of research seminars assists students and offers opportunities to receive feedback. The Panel noted that it is encouraging to see master's students involved in assisting other students at an earlier stage in their development.

The Panel noted that there is a good range of teaching and learning methods including interactive lectures and seminars enabling students to raise questions and discuss during the session, and group discussion of homework both on Moodle and face-to-face. Students were positive about the learning and teaching. The Panel could not find any place or document which provided a teaching and learning guide or strategy and staff did not identify such a document. A clearly articulated learning and teaching strategy could support further enhancement of teaching and learning.

The SER noted a series of technical developments which have facilitated online and hybrid learning and engagement between staff and students. It was clarified during the visit that hybrid sessions continue to be offered when students are ill or abroad, even though there is a strong preference to encourage either fully online or fully in-person learning experiences. Students expressed satisfaction that they have the necessary skills to engage with their learning digitally. The Dean supports and encourages Moodle use by students and staff and the SER noted that Moodle use by staff is variable. During the visit it became clear that some staff have fewer skills in this area than others which may impact on the student learning experience.

It was clear from the SER and the visit that the Institute has a highly developed system for ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to successfully complete an internship and a practical placement where relevant/necessary. Staff also confirmed during the visit, that confidentiality in relation to these placements and internships was rigorously maintained.

The Institute has many mechanisms for gathering feedback from students as detailed in the SER. This includes requiring that students complete an online module evaluation prior to receiving their results. While there is no established practice or mechanism for closing the feedback loop to ensure that students know what actions have (or haven't) been taken

in light of their feedback, there is strong evidence, offered by both staff and students, that student feedback was taken seriously and that changes were made in response to student feedback. Alumni reported in discussion with the Panel that they were satisfied that their views were continuing to be heard by the Institute although there is no formal alumni survey.

In general, alumni, stakeholders and employers were satisfied with the level of professional knowledge and social skills of the graduates. As the Institute trains workers for the Estonian churches, the majority of the alumni work in Estonia. Because of that, it is unclear how well they would perform in an international setting.

Conclusions

Admissions requirements and procedures are fair. The high retention rates are good evidence for the appropriateness of the admissions process. The high retention rates also reflect the quality of the support for students within the learning and teaching process which is clearly student focussed and takes note of feedback from students. Within the spheres of the Estonian Church and pastoral care employers are satisfied with the level and relevance of graduates' skills and knowledge.

Strengths

- The Institute has thought carefully about how to facilitate academic support for students from both staff and fellow students. An individual approach is provided, if needed.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Institute might find it helpful to document the process for applicants to appeal admissions decisions and ensure this process is made known.
- Currently there is no systematic way of encouraging or ensuring that students make known any physical or special learning needs. The Panel suggests that it would be worth making it clearer in the admissions process that students should make known any physical or special learning needs and how they should do so.
- The level of digital skills across the staff group is variable. To remedy this the Institute should offer further encouragement and support to upskill staff who need it, in relation to Moodle.
- There is clearly good practice in teaching and learning which could helpfully be reflected and codified in a code of Good Learning and Teaching to promote further enhancement.

Student assessment

Standard

Assessments of students, including recognition of their prior learning and work experiences, support the process of learning and are consistent with expected learning outcomes. The objectivity and reliability of student assessments are ensured.

Guidelines

The assessment criteria are understandable to students and students are informed about them in a timely manner. Members of the teaching staff cooperate in defining assessment criteria and apply similar approaches.

Assessment methods are versatile and relevant, assess the degree of achievement of learning outcomes (including general competencies), and support the development of a self-directed learner.

If possible, more than one staff member is involved in the development of assessment tasks and student assessments. Along with assessments, students receive feedback that supports their individual development.

The HEI develops the teachers' assessment competence and supports the solid application of digital technologies in assessment.

Evaluation of doctoral students is transparent and impartial. Its purpose is to support the development of doctoral students, to assess the effectiveness of their current work and to evaluate their ability to complete the doctoral studies on time and successfully defend their doctoral theses.

When recognising prior learning and work experience towards the completion of the study programme, results obtained through the studies and work experiences (the achieved learning outcomes) are assessed. Students are aware of their rights and obligations, including the procedures for challenges regarding assessments.

Evidence and analysis

The SER states that the assessment criteria, assessment methods and conditions for eligibility to take the exam and resits are included in the syllabus. The assessment criteria are formulated, and the assessment methods are chosen according to the learning outcomes. Apart from the final thesis, where only differentiated assessment is used, both differentiated and non-differentiated assessment is practised. The SER states, and this was confirmed in the site visit, that there is a variety of assessment methods. Student feedback on assessment methods is formally sought in the end of the course questionnaire. Additionally, students also give feedback verbally during the course and through informal channels. The Panel was given an example of when the student group was given the opportunity to select, as a group, their preferred assessment method at the beginning of the course delivery. This is an example of innovative practice.

There are clearly stated and documented rules and regulations, dated 2014, for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), whether gained by formal study or through work experience. Students reported that they were aware of the opportunity for RPL and used it, albeit to a limited extent.

The previous assessment report recommended that the alignment of the general learning outcomes of the curriculum and the assessment should be improved. The SER describes what action was taken to address this recommendation. The teaching staff from the same and similar areas, as for example dogmatics, ethics, history of dogma, examined and

revised the contents of the subject courses. The Panel learned that as a result of this work the particular emphasis of each subject is better specified, overlaps are eliminated, and the workload of students reduced. During the site visit, it emerged that there is no formal process for monitoring the alignment of the assessment criteria, assessment methods, and learning outcomes through, for example, supervision or co-vision. However, in the case of new subjects, the contents and principles of assessment are discussed in meetings of the chairs on an ad hoc basis. As confirmed by the interviews with students, alumni and teaching staff during the site visit, such discussion may also arise from negative feedback from the students.

In general, the objectivity and reliability of student assessment are assured. The Panel learned that within the context of a small institution, informal communication between the students and teaching staff might be the fastest way of communicating including, for instance, discussions in the hallway. Such ad hoc communication may have positive benefits; however more formal and systematic feedback contributes to greater transparency, objectivity and consistency of assessment.

The Institute does not follow the practice of having more than one marker involved in the marking process which, the Institute claims, is because of the lack of staff resources to do so. Students are aware that they can appeal a mark if they are not satisfied with the grade awarded. The Panel learned that this rarely happens because students seldom appeal the grade. The SER describes an instance where one student did appeal a grade and an external expert from another educational institution was engaged to re-mark the work on the basis of the same learning outcomes and assessment criteria. As stated in the SER, in such cases the student is awarded the grade based on the evaluation of the external expert. The Panel noted that this presents a risk of unfair and inconsistent practice which could either benefit or be of detriment to a single student. This risk can be reasonably but not entirely mitigated by ensuring that there is very clear and unambiguous guidance on the learning outcomes and marking criteria. The SER states that, given the size of the student body, the Institute has the flexibility and motivation to provide additional exam times for the students in, for example, the case of illness. This practice could lead to inequality of treatment. However, in discussion with senior staff, it was clear that the Institute is aware of the risk and ensures that the same assessment methods and criteria are used in the case of alternative exam dates.

The Panel found that the Institute had a cautious perspective on rapid technological advances that can be used in higher education such as ChatGPT and other AI solutions which can present risks for academic misconduct. The Institute is encouraged to analyse how to respond and adapt to these developments in the higher education arena.

Conclusions

Overall assessment supports student learning and meets the requirements of the standard. Assessment practices allow for the recognition of prior learning and work experience. The Institute has focused energy on ensuring the alignment of the assessment criteria with the learning outcomes and, overall, this is good. Whilst there is no formal or systematic review process to monitor the alignment of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, there were no adverse comments relating to this from either staff or students. There are some practices which present a risk including the process to appeal a mark and

the practice of offering alternative exam dates to students. However, the Panel found that the risk is low.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- Whilst it is clear that assessment methods are discussed in meetings of the chairs this is undertaken on an ad hoc basis. The Panel recommends that the Institute should create a clearer and more formal process for reviewing and developing the assessment system which would support better the analysis and discussion of the alignment of the assessment criteria, assessment methods and learning outcomes for all courses.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Institute is encouraged to consider introducing regular co-vision or supervision to help to ensure consistency which will be increasingly important in the context of technological advances in higher education, in particular the development of Chat GPT and other A.I solutions.

Learning support systems

Standard

The higher education institution ensures that all students have access to academic, career and psychological counselling.

Students' individual development and academic progress are monitored and supported.

Guidelines

The HEI assists the student in developing an individual study programme based on the student's special needs as well as educational abilities and preferences.

The HEI advises its students (including students with special needs and international students) on finding internship places as well as jobs. Students are aware of where to get support in the case of psychological problems.

The HEI has a functioning system to support and advise international students (including psychological and career counselling) which, inter alia, helps them integrate smoothly into the membership of the HEI and Estonian society. The HEI analyses the reasons students withdraw from studies or drop out, and takes steps to increase the effectiveness of the studies.

In order to carry out studies and research, development and creative activities, the availability of up-to-date study and research literature, other study materials and tools (including those for independent work) and access to research databases is ensured. Study literature, materials and other teaching aids are of equally high quality.

To support study activities, timely and relevant information and communication technology solutions have been planned, including the study information system, document management, online learning environments, analytical tools for teaching and learning. Support for online learning and IT is available to students.

The HEI supports student participation in extra-curricular activities and civil society initiatives.

The HEI monitors student satisfaction with the counselling services, the online learning and IT support provided and makes changes as needed.

Evidence and analysis

The student profile, as presented in the SER, shows that the average age of students is 49 with a ratio of women to men of approximately 4:3. The majority of students have both work and family commitments. The SER states that given this profile and regardless of the flexibility of the study process, students are likely to take longer over their studies than the nominal study period. Data provided for 2021 and 2022 showed that approximately half of the students graduated within the nominal study period.

One of the recommendations from the last assessment report, was that the Institute should work on trying to reduce the student drop-out rate. The drop-out rate provided in the data showed that the rate of 8.7% in the Institute is lower than the average in Estonia which is 11.7%. The overall dropout rate is thus low and reflects both the motivation of students to complete their studies and on the support provided to students to enable them to do so.

Academic and career counselling advice and support is distributed across several individuals and services. Sources of support include a learning management specialist who provides guidance on learning, RPL, and study opportunities abroad; Head of the Dean's office who provides advice on learning management, e learning platforms, options for lifelong learning and on internships; Head of TAT IT who also provides advice on

internships, distance learning and labour market perspectives and the Head of the Library who supports students with identifying study and research literature.

Some of these functions or tasks are for students from all courses, others are specific to the PHE PCC speciality and to the Orthodox Theology speciality. The Institute offers counselling and support for students experiencing financial difficulties including offering bursaries and support to students to establish a balance between work, family commitments and academic life. Students reported that they were aware of the support offered and of who to go to for different support options. They were very appreciative of the support offered. In particular, students were very appreciative of the support from the Head of the Library.

In 2017, the Institute launched a mentor programme for PHE students. The development of this was a response to the feedback received in the last assessment. Students are allocated to a mentoring group which has a designated and trained tutor. From discussions with students and staff, the Panel learned that students bring a wide range of issues to the group including study motivation, time management, spiritual questions, and academic progress. Students reported positively on the mentor programme and suggested that meetings with the mentor could benefit from being more frequent. Students also reported that they considered that the mentoring programme should be extended to the master's programme. The Institute intends to do this but has not yet done so due to a lack of resources, particularly of staff who could act as a mentor.

The Panel learned that the support services do not include a counselling psychologist. In discussion with teaching and management staff, the view was expressed that the ethos of the Institute, the nature of the subjects offered, and the pastoral element provided sufficient sources of support for the students. Additionally, the Panel learned that many students have support for psychological and spiritual issues from their church communities. The Panel explored whether some independent source of counselling support should be offered and concluded that, at the present time and with the range of support available to students both in the Institute and within their church and pastoral communities, this was not justified.

The Institute uses a student information system (SIS) to record and monitor student progress. The Dean's Office and academic staff can monitor student progress and students are able to access the SIS themselves to review their own progress. When monitoring by the Dean's office identifies issues with a particular student, the student is contacted, and discussions are held to find appropriate ways forward. The Panel note and encourage the initiative from the new academic dean to enhance the use of the SIS to monitor and analyse the progress of students. This would enable the tracking of indicators that support or hinder students results. The Panel explored whether it was possible for a student in difficulties to be overlooked and learned that problems are often identified through personal contact enabled by the size of the Institute where all students are known to staff. Management and teaching staff were confident that no student would fall through the net.

The Institute has had relatively few students with physical impairments. When such students enrol the Institute has been pro-active in making appropriate arrangements. The Panel learned of one case when a portable stairlift was rented to accommodate a

wheelchair user. Students who present with physical, mental or specific learning needs tend to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis and solutions are tailor made for the student. The Panel found that the Institute is both willing and flexible in its approach. The Panel acknowledged that in Estonian Higher Education questions of dyslexia, dyscalculia, mental health problems and learning difficulties stemming, for example, from those on the autistic spectrum, are not widely discussed or recognised. The Panel was of the view, however, that it would be beneficial for the Institute to have a systematic way of asking students whether they have any special needs which may require specific help to enable them to study effectively.

Conclusions

The Panel found that there is a good and effective range of learning support services which are readily accessible to students. The Panel also noted the positive and supportive learning environment which contributes well to the low drop-out rate and thus to the good completion rates. Students are monitored and supported through their studies both academically and personally. The requirements of the standard are met.

Strengths

- The fact that the dropout rate is lower than the average in Estonia reflects well on the support provided to students throughout their studies.
- The overall support offered and, in particular, the support offered by the Head of the Library.
- The Institute has sufficient flexibility to enable appropriate and timely access for students with special physical needs.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- The mentor programme, which offers good support, is limited to PHE students. The Institute is recommended to progress plans to extend a mentor programme to master's students as a matter of priority to ensure all students have access to such support.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Institute is advised to develop a system which will encourage students to share any disabilities or learning needs so that appropriate and effective support can be provided.
- The Institute is encouraged to appoint a named individual as the contact point for students with a disability or special learning needs. This will help spread awareness about the support the Institute can provide.

Research, development and/or other creative activity

Standard

The higher education institution has defined its objectives and focus in the fields of RDC based on its mission, as well as on the expectations and future needs of society, and assesses their implementation and the societal impact of its RDC activities. RDC supports the process of teaching and learning at the higher education institution. Support services for RDC are purposeful and support implementation of the objectives of the core process.

Guidelines

The HEI places a high value on the role and responsibilities of the field of RDC in society and evaluates the results of its RDC activities, their international visibility and societal impact.

The HEI responds flexibly to the current needs of society and the labour market in terms of its research and plans its research in collaboration with enterprises, public sector institutions and organisations of the third sector.

Members of teaching staff introduce students to their research results as well as the latest scientific achievements in their areas of specialisation, and involve students in their R&D projects where possible.

The organisation and management of RDC take into account the profile and the mission of the HEI.

The HEI applies digital tools for the administration and re-use of research data.

Evidence and analysis

The Institute aims to be a Christian educational and research centre that is fully recognised by EELC and the State of Estonia, as well as internationally as stated in the DP. It is clear from the SER that the Institute's objectives for RDC activities are mainly driven by the needs and expectations of the EELC. Thus, the RDC objectives primarily serve the needs of EELC, but also of Estonian society and of the labour market. From the perspective of EELC, the Institute has clearly defined its objectives and its focus for RDC based on its mission and has identified its key result in RDC to be a recognised research centre with international contacts.

The SER states that the Institute has prioritised three research areas: Biblical studies, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology. The success of Biblical Studies as a discipline is good; the Biblical Scholars have produced publications and textbooks in their field. In Biblical Studies special efforts have been made to develop supervision. Research in Systematic Theology is broad-based and international. Of all the RDC activities within the Institute, Systematic Theology is the most successful research area.

From the perspective of the expectations and future needs of society and the stakeholders, the goal setting for RDC is not clear. The Panel found it difficult to find the focus for societal research, which is primarily the responsibility of Practical Theology, where research interests have expanded with the new Academic Dean. Pastoral care and counselling and Diakonia are highly valued in Estonian society, and Practical Theology aims to respond to that need as stated in the SER.

According to the interviews and the RDC Strategy document, the planning of RDC activities begins with the professors and develops in consultation with colleagues and the Academic Dean. The needs of teaching, the Church and stakeholders are also taken into

consideration. This planning process is described in the RDC Strategy document as planning research and publication activities in line with needs and opportunities. The Panel understood through discussions with senior staff that the process is both bottom-up and top-down. It is, however, an informal process. The Panel found no evidence of a research committee, or sub-committee or a strategic research plan. The responsibility for assessing the implementation of societal impact of RDC activities lies mainly with the Academic Dean who holds interviews with the academic staff to formulate an understanding of the RDC strategy of the Institute. At the same time and in the same interviews the personal academic interests of the staff members are also mapped.

The SER identified that there are many challenges for the development of research in Practical Theology. However, there are many current opportunities and much potential which, the Panel found, the Institute is not currently exploiting. These include sub-areas of PCC and practical church life, which are both important areas for the Institute. The new Academic Dean has many ideas for developing Practical Theology and raising its research profile. The recently appointed professor is also well placed to strengthen research in Practical Theology, especially with his large international networks.

In the period 2018–2022, the Institute's academic staff produced a total of 540 publications. In the context of the Institute's size and resource base the publication of 17 peer-reviewed journal articles is an outstanding achievement. There were also ten monographs and ninety-six popular articles aimed at societal impact which is a significant number. The Institute places high value on both academic publishing and popular writing.

The Panel found that RDC activities support the teaching and learning. Teaching staff are active in producing research reports, textbooks and learning materials in the Estonian language to support the students. The large number of popular articles published by the teaching staff supports both student learning and has positive, societal impact. The Institute tries to involve master's students as co-authors in the Institute's own publications. This is very good practice.

The support services for RDC are based on the activity of a group of professors and the Academic Dean. Recent appointments will strengthen this group.

The AP indicates that the financial support allocated to RDC activities is mainly based on the Institute's current budget and (international) projects. The Panel learned that the volatility of research funding reflects the number and size of research projects that the Institute attracts. The SER notes two sources of funding for research programmes and research work. There is also some fixed research funding, i.e. the so called Uniproject from the Nordic Church in Germany. The Panel recognises the restrictions for the Institute in bidding for Estonian funds for research. The Panel further notes the benefits and importance of joint projects in gaining more external research funding. Increasing the number of joint publications can also advance research whilst improving the use of limited human resources. The Institute has a well-kept library that supports both staff members' and students' RDC activities. There is some capacity within the Institute to provide financial support to enable staff's research work and participation in networks.

Overall, the Panel could not find very specific information on the monitoring of research activities. For example, the Panel found no evidence of how the distribution of scholarships has benefited research.

Conclusions

RDC activity is an important part of the Institute's identity. The objectives are based on the mission and RDC activity focuses on the three areas of Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology, of which two are well established, the third is growing stronger. The publication record for the size of the Institute is very good, as is the extent of research activity.

There is informal planning of research activity which is both top-down and bottom-up which works well. However, there is no research strategy paper and RDC lacks processes for mapping research themes, funding intentions, and monitoring. The assessment of implementation and impact still needs to be developed so that responsibilities are less reliant on individual staff members. Transparency and systematic financial planning would better support academic staff in planning their work as would a more goal-oriented and focused plan.

Teaching staff are active in publishing textbooks and the participation of students in the writing of research articles provides excellent support for teaching and learning.

Strengths

- The Institute values academic publishing and has a very good publication record.
- The research activity in Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Church History is commendable.
- The new academic Dean has a responsible and active approach to RDC development.

Areas of concern and recommendations

- Whilst the overall objectives and key results are stated in the Mission and Development Plan, there is no separate strategic plan for RDC activities. It is recommended that the Institute develops a Strategic Research plan with a clear focus and targets which enables the monitoring of progress and the maximising of research opportunities and funding.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Panel suggests that more emphasis is placed on RDC activities in PCC and practical church life, which are important areas both for the Institute and more widely in society.
- It would be helpful for the Institute to explore options for cooperation and co-working in publishing which can provide avenues for further funding.
- The Institute could helpfully explore options for applying for external research funding in cooperation with other institutions both nationally and internationally.

Service to society

Standard

The higher education institution initiates and implements development activities, which enhance prosperity in the community and disseminate recent know-how in the areas of the institution's competence.

The higher education institution, as a learning-oriented organisation, promotes lifelong learning in society and creates high-quality opportunities for that.

Guidelines

The HEI contributes to the development of the community's well-being by sharing its resources (library, museums, sports facilities, etc.), by providing consulting and advisory services, participating in the development of non-profit sector and charitable activities, and by organising concerts, exhibitions, shows, conferences, fairs and other events.

The HEI involves alumni in activities aimed at the development of the HEI and the knowledge society.

Employees of the HEI participate in the work of professional associations and in other community councils and decision-making bodies as experts, directing society's development processes as opinion leaders. The impact academic employees have on society is taken into account when evaluating their work.

The HEI has clearly defined the objectives for in-service training, measures their implementation and plans improvement activities. The HEI plans in-service training based on the present and future needs of the labour market target groups. Evidence-based learning supports the learning and self-development of adult learners.

The HEI takes advantage of digital means in order to provide trainings and services to the public at large.

Evidence and analysis

The primary aim of the Institute is to influence and serve the EELC. At the same time, it aims to be open to the broader society through different activities and services. In Estonian society the Institute aims to raise awareness of religious issues and spirituality. The Church Music Department keeps the church music tradition, which is an inseparable part of Estonian church culture, alive. Many activities of the Institute are conducted in collaboration with EELC. However, there are also other partners, such as Tartu University, the Orthodox Church of Estonia, Tartu City Government, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and a range of media platforms including radio channels and Facebook.

The Panel established in meetings with the senior management that the Institute is planning new areas of activity such as participation in teachers' continuing education by offering lifelong learning (LLL) courses for teachers' organizations. The Institute has been proactive in undertaking meaningful work with Ukrainian refugees, who were accommodated at the Institute's Tartu office at very short notice. This demonstrates a proactive and prompt response to helping people in emergency.

Life-long learning activities are quite broad in scope. Between 2018-2022 the number of participants to the LLL courses varied between 159-468, with an average of 356 participants per year. In relation to the resources of the Institute and the potential number of participants, the courses have reached a very good audience. The Panel learned that there are no LLL courses taught by staff from the Orthodox chair staff, and there is little LLL activity directed to Orthodox Church members. The Panel recognise that the Orthodox

Church has a different structure; however, there are opportunities for developing cooperation. The Panel heard from the Head of the Dean's office that there is real potential for increasing systematic cooperation between all those parts of the Institute which engage in training and also that there could be better cooperation between the LLL department and other educational departments of the Institute.

The data showed that participation by staff members in professional associations is very good. The activities of PCC are especially systematic and more broadly attended. Bible School, as TAT IT activity, is new and very promising. The Panel consider that the Pastoral Seminary is an important and strategic part of education for the Institute. The Church Music Department is unique in the context of Estonia, offering vocational C and D category preparation to church musicians.

The Institute has successfully developed e-courses during the last two years. A series of e-courses in the Public University was launched in 2021. This offers a forum where the public audience and theologians can mutually improve their knowledge and exchange ideas. The Panel did not find any evidence that the Institute offers courses specifically targeted at young people either face-to-face or e-courses. E-courses would be an effective means of reaching people which is also relatively easy to implement.

Conclusions

Overall, the Institute is active and effective in its service to society offering many courses and training opportunities that are well organised. Many of the teaching staff are engaged in a good range of societal and spiritual activities.

The Institute initiates and implements relevant development activities. Its personnel disseminate their know-how based on their own strengths and skills. There are new openings that the Institute could pursue, the most important of which are in Pastoral Care and Counselling. There are two areas for the Institute to develop: filling the gap in the courses including those directed to young, especially non-Christian young people, and those focusing on the Orthodox Church; and addressing the imbalance of the course offering so that there is a better balance between those in the field of PCC and other areas. The Institute recognise these development areas and has insight into how they might be progressed.

Strengths

- PCC offers a wide range of life-long learning courses in their area which reaches a wide audience.
- The cooperation with the Ministry of Social affairs is effective in offering courses and building the reputation of the Institute in Estonian Society.
- The Institute's staff are proactive and energetic in their religious and societal activity.

Opportunities for further improvement

- The Institute is encouraged to build systematic cooperation in life-long learning with other academic departments to better maximise the impact and contribution.

- The Panel noted that the majority of the Institute's life-long learning courses are designed for the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church staff and church members. The Institute might like to explore opportunities to offer courses and training for non-Christians, especially for the younger generation which it does not yet do.
- In line with the Institute's approach to offering life-long learning, which is based on its own strengths and skills, the Panel encourages it to develop life-long learning which is taught by Staff from the Orthodox theologians and is directed both to Orthodox Church members and more broadly to the Estonian public.

Annex 1. Schedule of the assessment visit

MONDAY, MARCH 27		
Institute of Theology, Pühavaimu 6, Tallinn		
Time	Activity	Representatives of the Institute <i>Names of the interviewees and their positions</i>
9.30 – 11.30	<i>Panel meeting. Light lunch. Walk to the Institute</i>	
11.45 – 12.30	Introductory meeting with the self-evaluation team	Ove Sander (Rector), Siimon Haamer (Head of the Tartu Academy of Theology of the Institute of Theology of the EELC), Randar Tasmuth (Head of the Chair of Biblical Studies), Mariann Münter (Head of the Rector's Office)
12.40 – 13.40	Meeting with students of professional higher education programme of „Theology“	Tiina Kütt (2nd yr. Lutheran Theology), Sander-Ingemar Kasak (1st yr. Lutheran Theology), Kairi Luige (3rd yr. Pastoral Care and Counselling), Tiiu Roosma (1st yr. Pastoral Care and Counselling), Siim Kallas (3rd yr. Lutheran Theology)
13.45 – 14.45	Meeting with students of Master's programme of „Theology“	Raili Hollo (2nd yr. Diakonia and Pastoral Care and Counselling), Indrek Salumets (2nd yr. Theology), Andrus Lukas (2nd yr. Diakonia and Pastoral Care and Counselling), Tuuli Võsa (2nd yr. Diakonia and

		Pastoral Care and Counselling), Mai-Liis Mäeväli (2nd yr. Studies in Christian Culture)
14.45 – 15.00	<i>Break</i>	
15.00 – 16.00	Meeting with cooperation partners and employers of professional higher education and master's programmes of „Theology“	Katri Aaslav-Tepandi (Head Chaplain of the Department of Mental Health of the Ministry of Social Affairs), Marko Tiitus (Assessor of the EELC), Mattias Palli (Vicar General of the Orthodox Church of Estonia), Jelena Leibur (Head of the Nursing Care Centre of the North Estonia Medical Centre, former Head of the Diaconia Hospital)
16.10 – 17.00	Meeting with alumni of professional higher education and master's programmes of „Theology“	Sirje Prits (professional higher education Pastoral Care and Counselling 2019; MA DPCC 2022), Marek Alveus (professional higher education Lutheran Theology 2019; MA Theology 2021), Ann Tamme (professional higher education Lutheran Theology 2021), Jane Vain (MA Theology 2020), Monika Marfeldt (Studies in Christian Culture 2022)
17.00 – 18.00	<i>Panel meeting: summing up the Monday meetings</i>	

TUESDAY, MARCH 28

Institute of Theology, Pühavaimu 6, Tallinn

Time	Activity	Representatives of the Institute <i>Names of the interviewees and their positions</i>
9.00 – 10.00	Meeting with the Rector and the owner of the Institute	Ove Sander (Rector), Urmas Viilma (Archbishop of the EELC), Andrus Mõttus (Chancellor of the EELC), Siimon Haamer (Head of the TAT IT), Mariann Münter (Head of the Rector's Office)
10.00 – 10.15	<i>Break</i>	
10.15 – 11.10	Meeting with the members of the academic staff	Randar Tasmuth (Head of the Chair of Biblical Studies), Thomas-Andreas Pöder (Head of the Chair of Systematic Theology), Priit Rohtmets (Head of the Chair of Church History), Naatan Haamer (Lecturer of Practical Theol.), Anneli Randla (Visiting Lecturer), Karin Kallas-Pöder (Visiting Lecturer)
11.15 – 12.15	Meeting with the Dean of the Faculty, Head of the Departments (Tartu Academy of Theology, Chair of Orthodoxy) and the Study Programmes	Randar Tasmuth (Dean of the Faculty until August 31, 2022), Liina Kilemit (Dean of the Faculty since September 1, 2022), Siimon Haamer (Head of the TAT IT), Tauri Tõlpt (Coordinator of the Chair of Orthodoxy)
12.15 – 13.15	<i>Lunch break</i>	
13.30 – 14.30	Meeting with the representative of the Support Services (for both students and academic staff)	Margit Ubaleht (Learning Management Specialist), Renate Lekko (Managing Director), Liina Sander (Assistant to the Head of the

		Pastoral Seminary), Kerstin Kask (Head of the Dean's Office), Mariann Münter (Head of the Rector's Office)
14.30 – 14.45	<i>Break</i>	
14.45 – 15.45	Service to Society: Department of LLL, Department of Church Music, Pastoral Seminary	Kerstin Kask (Head of the Department of Lifelong Learning), Kersti Petermann (Head of the Church Music Department), Marko Tiitus (Head of the Pastoral Seminary)
15.50 – 16.30	Tour in the facilities of the Institute incl library. Video tour at Tartu Academy of Theology.	
16.30 – 17.30	<i>Panel meeting: summing up the Tuesday meetings.</i>	

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29

Institute of Theology, Pühavaimu 6, Tallinn

Time	Activity
9.00 – 10.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inquiry of documents (in case we have discovered during the visit that we need some more evidence)• “Open doors” – opportunity for those from the Institute who want to come to discuss various topics related to institutional accreditation with the experts (please register by sending e-mail: liia.lauri@harno.ee by March 28; time limit is 5 minutes per person)• ad hoc interviews (in case we have discovered during the visit that we need to talk (again) with someone)
10.30 – 12.00	Panel meeting: conclusion of the visit, preliminary messages for the Institute, next steps.
12.00 – 12.30	Closing of the visit. Presentation of the preliminary findings of the panel to the Institute: main strengths and areas of improvement.