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***UNIVERSITY "HAXHI ZEKA" IN PEJA
FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND
ENVIRONMENT
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT
MSc***

ACCREDITATION

REPORT OF THE EXPERT TEAM

23 Jun 2021, Zagreb, Croatia



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Date of site visit: 25 May 2021

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- *Dr Josip Mikulić*

Coordinators from Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA):

- *Naim Gashi, KAA Director*
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- *Leona Kovaci, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring*

Sources of information for the Report:

- [1] *Self-Evaluation Report, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, MSc in Sustainable Tourism Management, Peja, December 2020.*
- [2] *CVs of the study programme academic staff.*
- [3] *Syllabi of the study programme.*
- [4] *Video material illustrating University of Peja teaching, research and other relevant infrastructure, date of publishing unknown.*
- [5] *Regulation for Postgraduate Studies (Master), University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [6] *Regulation for Bachelor Studies, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*



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- [7] *Regulation on Selection Procedures Relating to the Appointment, Removal and Advancement of Regular Academic Staff, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2019.*
- [8] *Document entitled “List of cooperation agreements”, date/place of publishing unknown.*
- [9] *Example of a Quality Assurance improvement plan.*
- [10] *Code of Ethics for Academic Staff and Students, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [11] *Document entitled “List of professional development programs offered to staff for enhancing teaching”, date/place of publishing unknown.*
- [12] *Academic Development Plan brochure, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [13] *Personal development plan template.*
- [14] *Example of a vacancy notice (in Bosnian), University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [15] *Student quality assessment questionnaire template.*
- [16] *Academic staff self-assessment questionnaire template.*
- [17] *Dean-Teacher quality assessment questionnaire template.*
- [18] *Administrative staff quality assessment questionnaire template*
- [19] *Quality Assurance Guide, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, date of publishing unknown.*
- [20] *Example of the Annual Quality Assurance Report, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [21] *Faculty of Management of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment strategic development plan 2021, date of publishing unknown.*
- [22] *Strategic Plan of University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja 2020-2024, Peja, 2020.*
- [23] *Research Strategy 2020-2024 brochure, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2020.*
- [24] *Regulation for Publications, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2016.*
- [25] *Action Plan for Implementation of University “Haxhi Zeka” Development Strategy for Scientific Research, Peja, 2020.*
- [26] *Research Strategy 2019-2024, University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja, Peja, 2019.*
- [27] *Meeting minutes from consultative meetings with the study programme stakeholders held on 21 Oct 2019, 7 Sep 2020 and 11 Nov 2020.*
- [28] *List of journal articles published in 2018-2020 including information on citation databases.*



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- [29] *List of conferences in the last 3 years organised by the Faculty of Management of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment of the University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja.*
- [30] *List of University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja academic staff attending scientific conferences in the last 3 years.*
- [31] *List of research grants in the last 3 years.*
- [32] *List of ongoing joint research projects.*
- [33] *Document entitled “Financial Plan for MSc Sustainable Tourism Management”, date/place of publishing unknown.*
- [34] *Document called “Example of a marked exam”.*
- [35] *Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment [online], available at <http://unhz.eu/course/fakulteti-i-menaxhimit-ne-turizem-hotelier-i-dhe-mjedis/>, [Accessed 9 Jun 2021].*
- [36] *Kosovo Agency of Statistics [online], available at <https://ask.rks-gov.net/>, [Accessed 9 Jun 2021].*
- [37] *National Development Strategy 2016-2021, Government of the Republic of Kosovo, Prishtina, 2016, [online], available at: <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/>, [Accessed 21 Apr 2021]*
- [38] *Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021, Government of the Republic of Kosovo, Prishtina, 2016, [online], available at: <https://masht.rks-gov.net/>, [Accessed 21 Apr 2021]*
- [39] *USAID/Kosovo Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-2025, USAID, 2020*
- [40] *Strategy for Kosovo, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), 2016.*
- [41] *University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja partnership agreements, available at <https://unhz.eu/zyra-per-bashkepunim-nderkombetar/>, [Accessed 11 Jun 2021].*
- [42] *University “Haxhi Zeka” Peja Office for Quality Assurance and Evaluation, available at <https://unhz.eu/zyres-per-sigurim-te-cilesise-dhe-vleresim/>, [Accessed 10 Jun 2021].*

Sources referenced from [1] to [4] inclusive were provided by the University of Peja prior to the online evaluation interviews, whereas the sources from [5] to [34] were requested and received upon the interviewing.

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In addition to the above documents, the evaluation process has included various other documents and materials made available through different publicly accessible sources. In the above list, these were listed from [35] onwards.

Criteria used for program evaluation:

- *Standards and performance indicators outlined in the Kosovo Accreditation Agency's Accreditation Manual, 2018.*
- *The European Qualifications Framework*
- *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*
- *National Qualifications Framework, Kosovo National Qualification Authority, Prishtina, 2020.*

1.2. Site visit schedule

- 09.00-09.40 Meeting with the management of the faculty where the programme is integrated*
- 09.45-10.15 Meeting with quality assurance representatives and administrative staff*
- 10.20-11.20 Meeting with the heads of the study programme*
- 11.20-12.00 Lunch break*
- 12.00-12.40 Meeting with the teaching staff*
- 12.45-13.30 Meeting with employers of graduates and external stakeholders*
- 13.35-13.45 Internal meeting of KAA staff and experts*
- 13.50-14.00 Closing meeting with the management of the faculty and program*



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1.3. A brief overview of the institution and program under evaluation

The University “Haxhi Zeka” in Peja (hereafter referred to as: the UHZ) was established in 2011 as a follow up to the High School of Economics founded in 1960. The UHZ runs its operations through five (5) faculties, namely the Faculty of Business, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Agribusiness, and the Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment. The latter is hereafter referred to as: the FMTHE. According to [1] and [22], at the time of this writing, the UHZ offers 13 bachelor and master studies and has got roughly 11.000 students enrolled in the study.

The FMTHE was first operated as a department within the aforementioned High School of Economics to gradually change its status into a separate academic unit of the UHZ [35]. At the time of this writing, the FMTHE has got 2437 students enrolled in its two BSc level study programmes, namely the Management in Tourism programme and Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment [1][35].

The Sustainable Tourism Management program which has been the subject of the undertaken evaluation (hereafter referred to as: Study Programme) is a new study programme targeting primarily graduated UHZ students with the first degree in BSc in Tourism Management or other such degree, hence providing them with a natural follow-up in their personal knowledge and overall professional development. The Study Programme is a two-year programme carrying 120 ECTS credits and expected to correspond with Level 7 of the Kosovo National Qualifications Framework.

Work done in the course of the undertaken evaluation has been based on the self-evaluation report [1] prepared by the FMTHE (hereafter referred to as: SER), as well as on supplementary information and documentation listed in Section 1.1. All the documentation was provided either by the Institution/KAA or has been publicly available via different channels.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the assessment process did not include site visits to UHZ/FMTHE locations. The evaluation has therefore been done entirely via online interviews and by means of document consultation. Although this has not had any influence on the objectiveness of the assessments made, nevertheless the process has still been somewhat



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hindered by the inability to undertake physical inspection of the FMTHE facilities and operational procedures.

As given in Section 1.2, online meetings were held with the following stakeholder groups and attendees:

- *FMTHE Management, attended by Prof.Assoc.Dr.Adem Dreshaj, Prof.Assoc.Dr. Mimoza Hyseni Spahiu and Prof.Assoc.Dr.Bedri Millaku;*
- *Quality assurance and representatives of the administrative staff, attended by Prof.Ass.Dr. Albona Shala, Dr.sc.Thelleza Latifi, Msc, Besa Baloku and Msc.Perparim Blakaj;*
- *Academic staff members acting as the heads of the study programme, attended by Prof. Ass.Dr.Behrije Ramaj and Prof.Ass. Dr. Bekë Kuqi;*
- *Teachers, attended by Prof.Dr.Afrim Selimaj, Prof. Dr. Fatos Ukaj, Prof. Ass. Dr.Petrit Hasanaj and Dr.sc. Merita Dauti;*
- *Representatives from the industry, attended by Mr Armend Delijaj, Hotel Freskia, Ms Ilirjana Kastrati, Era Group Peja, Mr Baki Hoti, SHTAk Tourist Association, Mr Mentor Bojku, Outdoor Kosovo Tourist Association, and Mr Vyrtyt Morina, Municipality of Peja.*



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2. PROGRAM EVALUATION

2.1. Mission, objectives and administration

The UHZ mission may be found in [22] and online at [35]. The mission of the Study Programme is given in the SER and formulated as to “...train students for the labour market in various sectors of the tourism industry in both the public and private sectors so that the development of this industry affects the country’s economic development”. In doing so, the Study Programme may be summarised to focus on the three key areas: management, sustainability, and rural tourism.

Both UHZ and Study Programme mission statements are rather generic and as such fit for a variety of possible academic and/or business outcomes. In this regard, it may be said that the mission of the Study Programme has been aligned with the overall mission of the institution. Nevertheless, instead of making an omni-applicable formulation, it would rather be expected that a study programme mission would identify key immediate and future challenges of the given economy sector and translate them into a coherent strategic orientation. However, this has not been the case and the mission does not imply programme’s comparative advantages and unique discriminators on the market, neither it suggests programme’s strategic orientation with respect to the geographic area of interest, research focus or target academic relevance (eg. focus on rural tourism). FMTHE prides itself to have been educating young professionals to “...promote regional development and support sustainable development of Kosovar society in general...” [35], however, if relevant national strategic documents such as [37] or [38] are searched for occurrences of the word “tourism”, not a single hit can be found. Almost the same hit record stands for other documents focusing on Kosovo strategic development and generated by alternative eligible sources such as [39] and [40]. It may therefore be argued that although the mission of the institution and that of the study programme correspond to each other, the former may hardly be seen as providing a balanced reflection of the current and future specific strategic needs of both the institution and the local community, neither it recognises in a meaningful way any of the critical trends of the 21st century’s industry/economy.



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Having a clear vision on what are the main long-term development and business objectives of both the study programme and the institution, the expert team deems immensely important, especially for a business/management focused institution. Given that, in the undertaken evaluation procedure, setting up of the Study Programme has been highly advocated by FMTHE representatives and such attitude was claimed to have been substantiated by concrete analysis of the labour market needs, it is somewhat odd to find considerable discrepancies in the underpinning figures provided in the SER and the undertaken interviews, in addition to the discrepancies explained earlier. Thus, for instance, according to [1], several factors have been identified as highly likely to impede the successfulness of the proposed Study Programme. These are primarily the lack of a comprehensive national tourism development strategy and relatively low volume of visits to Kosovo. Nevertheless, both have been somewhat dismissed by the FMTHE Management and the interviewed employer representatives, which suggested the figures to be as much as 10 times more favourable than the statistical figures provided by [36] (eg. the real number of tourism-related visits to Kosovo claimed to exceed 2 mio visitors annually). Even though reliance on various intangible factors and unofficial data, as well as the corresponding risk taking, are a fundamental part of any entrepreneurial undertaking, the expert team maintains setting up a new study programme must be based on universally accepted facts, criteria and business pragmatics, such that sound decisions and development missions may be coined.

If the key objectives of the Study Programme and skills expected to be acquired by the graduated students are analysed, it may be summarised that 4 of 5 skills have a reference of sustainability. At the same time, only two programme modules deal with sustainability (namely the "Sustainable tourism assessment and planning" module and "Environmental Tourism and Sustainability" module), and both of them include sustainability basics only. Furthermore, if the "Environmental tourism and sustainability" module taught at the MSc level is compared to the module "Sustainable tourism" taught at the BSc level, almost the entire course's aims and descriptions are the same. Also, some of the Study Programme target skills of the graduated students are rather vague and hence difficult to be assessed. Thus, for instance, the "...ability to manage the concepts and principles of sustainable tourism" is found unclear as to what the "managing a concept" syntagm would actually mean in practice and how this and similar other skills correspond with the descriptions and expectations given in the Kosovo National Qualification Framework. In this regard, the expert team feels the Study Programme does not

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have a well-defined didactic concept and better transition and progression from the corresponding BSc level should be achieved.

In addition to the questionable rationale driving the formation of the Study Programme, dubious evidence has also been presented to prove that relevant academic and/or professional advice had been sought for when designing the Study Programme. The supplementary documentation provided by the FMTHE indeed proves that some level of coordination with the external stakeholders has been achieved [27]. However, no evidence has been provided which would prove the analysed sample is representative enough and that advice seeking went beyond typical meetings with local stakeholder representatives. The interviewed employer representatives clearly stated that none of them had seen the final content on the Study Programme even though it has repeatedly been claimed by the FMTHE that the programme has been generated in accordance with recommendations from the business sector. Indeed, it may be argued that such recommendations and final feedback have been collected elsewhere, nevertheless, it would somewhat be expected that advice on the final content of the Study Programme would be sought for.

The rather ambitious plans and reasons driving the idea of the Study Programme which have been communicated in the undertaken interviews are somewhat in contradiction with the cooperation agreements the FMTHE has got signed [8]. Thus, for instance, going beyond local tourism needs has repeatedly been used as an argument to substantiate the relatively unfavourable local tourism volumes. However, this cannot be seen to have been reflected in the cooperation agreements signed by both the UHZ [41] and FMTHE [8].

Furthermore, the FMTHE has identified three European higher education institutions – namely the Politecnico de Leiria, Portugal, the Linnaeus University, Sweden and the Southeast European University, North Macedonia – as benchmarking universities running comparable study programs to design the Study Programme against. However, it remains unclear why universities with rather poor ranking were chosen as role models, as well as how come that outputs of such benchmarking were not found eligible to be presented in the given evaluation process.



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Evidence has been provided demonstrating formal policies, guidelines and regulations addressing various academic and/or procedural issues have been generated and put into power. However, only a limited number of these is publicly available in English language. In addition, the organisation of the important documentation downloadable for general public is rather poor and navigating through the sources such as the UHZ/FMTHE websites is rather difficult and nonintuitive.

The UHZ has got introduced a regulation addressing ethical (mis)conduct and other inappropriate behaviour relevant to the study process [10]. Although the document may be deemed to cover the most important issues and misconduct situations, it is not entirely clear why in Article 2 of the regulation, separate regulation covering ethical misconduct issues done by non-academic staff is invoked.

Finally, the institution has failed to demonstrate a clear vision on its strategic orientation and goals related to the Study Programme, and both the documentation supplied, and the feedback gained leave room for arbitrary interpretations. Through the undertaken evaluation a number of contradictory information and feedbacks have been received such as, for instance, a feedback from the management that the formation of the Study Programme has been an official objective of the current strategic development plan, even though not a single reference to such an objective can be found in the corresponding document [22].

Compliance level: Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

- 1. Run thorough analysis on trends in Kosovar tourism sector and the corresponding expected labour market needs. Generate a sound plan based on the findings from such analyses taking into account all relevant influencing factors some of which have been commented above. Identify specifics of the target geographic area and identify which hospitality industry niche is reasonable to be treated as key/strategic. Revise thoroughly the Study Programme such that to reflect the findings.*



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2.2. Quality management

Evaluation actions and improvement planning have been integrated into the regular planning processes, and FMTHE staff take part in these activities. However, it remains unclear to what extent is the thus collected feedback translated into concrete improvements as there was evidence that either feedbacks collected, or the corresponding improvement plans get eventually neglected. Thus, for instance, even though the FMTHE documents an example of a quality assurance (QA) improvement plan [9], it may hardly be found as genuine and/or appropriate as it only lists activities which are rather widely applicable and may hence be hardly seen as a consequence of a regular QA assessment that had been taken prior to generating the plan. Indeed, there are straightforward references of the findings from annual QA reports to have been included in the corresponding improvement plans such as the case with [9] and [20], however, sensitivity analyses of the assessment and improvement processes are unlikely to have been undertaken. Thus, for instance, in [20], even though the overall score of the student-teacher relationship may be argued to have been too high to be called representative enough, it was not questioned for the purposefulness of the questions made. Similar conclusions may be drawn with results from other categories assessed such as the skills gained while studying at the UHZ and others. Moreover, in evaluating academic staff satisfaction, absolutely the lowest score (average 2,97) has been given the level of academic's participation in decision making processes. This, however, did not cause any concrete improvement actions to be defined in the corresponding QA improvement plan.

Feedback collected have been made publicly available but in Albanian only [42]. If translated quickly by an online translating facility, it may be seen that only the latest reports have been made available and it is hence difficult to see the progression of QA processes. Also, not all QA feedbacks have been included in the public display. Thus, for instance, apart from the summarised feedback provided in [20] and [42], no detailed info is available on analyses done to assess labour market needs, especially those having to do with the FMTHE portfolio of services.

The quality improvement process is regulated primarily by the Quality Assurance Guide [19]. From the copy of the document downloadable from the UHZ website it may be concluded that the regulation was accepted formally in 2020 and hence been relatively new. The regulation seems sound and addresses all relevant QA issues, however it misses more concrete elements

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having to do with QA processes dealing with program planning and delivery. The UHZ does collect feedback from employers but from [20] it may be concluded that such a feedback may hardly be seen as representative enough (eg. only 13 feedbacks have been collected).

Finally, even though QA arrangements and measures are relatively well organised, to improve the quality further, it is recommended the UHZ/FMTHE seeks examples and advice from other comparable higher education institutions outside Kosovo such that to develop a fully functional system able to meet the strategic objectives and minimise the immanent administrative burden.

Compliance level: Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

- 1. If it hasn't already done so, introduce a system which would collect and keep record of the undertaken peer reviews in a digital format thus allowing for easier manipulation and analysis. Generate an QA planning, monitoring and implementation system which would allow for a seamless tracking of a concrete QA plan/measure in a digital format, rather than going through a collection of reports, plans and other such hardcopy documents.*
- 2. Introduce measurable KPIs (Key performance indicators) which would be included in and analysed during the semestral or annual reporting process.*
- 3. Revise the student-teacher survey questions such that to provide more refined feedback on the quality of student-teacher relationship and hence provide room for further improvement.*
- 4. Revise the external stakeholder survey process such that to include broader spectrum of feedbacks and reflect employer's satisfaction on concrete job-related set of skills and knowledges other than generic ones such as "communication skills", "creative and innovative skills" and others. Introduce a QA improvement process which would first collect feedback on employer's short/long term expectations which would then be cross-referenced with the feedback on graduated students acquired skills and competences.*



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2.3. Academic staff

Based on the formal staff profiles submitted prior to the review and conducted online discussions, it is evident that the academic staff at the FMTHE, who are intended to carry out the Study Programme, are able to deliver an adequate level of student learning experience. The FMTHE staff consists of one full professor, three associate professors, two assistant professors and five assistants. Staff from other faculties from the UHZ, who are involved in the proposed program, encompass one full professor, two associate professors and one assistant professor. Since there is only one external staff member, while there is a significant share of younger staff involved (assistants and assistant professors), the staff structure for carrying out the proposed program can be deemed sustainable in the medium term.

Staff appointment and ranking of academic staff is based on an assessment of educational criteria, research and scientific criteria, and service criteria. In order to enhance the academic competences of the FMTHE, which is highlighted as a key objective in the University's five-year strategic development plan (from 2017 onwards; [1] p. 33), the FMTHE staff have been provided a few basic training opportunities. The expert team was provided with the list of training opportunities that were offered to staff (three training opportunities in 2020 and 2021). According to the Quality improvement strategy ([1], p. 36), emphasis is put on improving both teaching strategies and quality of learning materials, but no proof was provided regarding formal training aimed at achieving these goals. Literature used in the teaching process should not be older than ten years ([1], p. 36), but this requirement has not been met for all courses in the proposed program (e.g. Tourism Product Management, Projects Management in Tourism, and others).

The responsibilities of the faculty staff cover teaching, material design, student consultations and research work. In accordance with academic freedom, faculty members have autonomy in designing course contents and teaching materials, as well as choosing appropriate teaching methods. Besides conducting regular student surveys, self-assessments and supervisor assessments, aimed at improving academic performances, it is further recommended to conduct regular peer-observations and unannounced observations at least once a year, in order to improve academic practices and performances. Moreover, it is recommended to make evaluation results available to all interested parties, including students.

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Compliance level: Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

- 1. Develop a set of KPIs at individual staff level for measuring and monitoring the standards of quality related to teaching, learning and research related to the areas of teaching.*
- 2. Devote more attention to the development of high-quality teaching materials and, in particular, reading materials in Albanian language as elementary learning resources, which reflect current state-of-the art knowledge in specialty fields covered by the proposed program.*
- 3. Consider observational methods (peer observation and/or unannounced expert observations), to be carried out at least once a year, for best practice transfer and general stimulation for enhancing teaching performance.*

2.4. Educational process content

The curriculum of the proposed Study Programme is designed in a way that it covers a broad range of subjects related to the management of tourism, dominantly related to the management of tourism destinations, rather than tourism businesses (e.g. hospitality businesses). Accordingly, this program provides qualifications desirable and/or eventually required to work in institutions like e.g. public destination marketing organizations (DMOs, national tourist boards), or destination management companies (DMCs). As highlighted in interviews with the faculty management, program heads, teaching staff and industry representatives, it is expected that the program will prepare experts who will lead future tourism development in Kosovo by activating unused development potentials, especially in the areas of cultural tourism and nature-based tourism.

The curriculum contains several weaknesses regarding the structure of subjects and topics covered:

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- First, as argued earlier in Section 2.1, although the aspect of sustainability is highlighted in the program title, only two courses nominally refer to it (Sustainable Tourism Assessment and Planning; and Environmental Tourism and Sustainability). It is likely that sustainability aspects are inherent to many of the program subjects, which would justify use of the word sustainable in the program title, but the title may also be misleading since important technical sustainability aspects are not sufficiently covered by the proposed subjects, such as e.g. innovations related to environmental management. Although the program has an expectedly strong social-sciences focus, a more interdisciplinary approach might be considered (or required) given the complexity of sustainability management.
- Second, there is an overlap in the course contents of some subjects that may result in redundant repetition of teaching content. For example, it seems difficult to draw a clear line between, for example, Sustainable Tourism Assessment and Planning, on the one hand, and Tourism Strategies and Policies, on the other hand. A higher level of coordination between course holders is required to avoid repetition in achieving learning outcomes at the program level. This is also partly reflected in the basic literature which is also repetitive for some courses (e.g. Nigel Evans, Strategic Management for Tourism, Hospitality and Events – courses: Tourism strategies and policies; Marketing Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Development).
- Third, many of the proposed courses seem very basic and generic from a (sustainable) tourism management perspective, especially those which are related to the field of marketing (e.g. Services marketing, Consumer behaviour, Professional communication), which contradicts the highly specialized nature of a scientific master degree.

There are also significant weaknesses regarding the learning outcomes of the program ([1], p. 38-39). According to the European Union's European Qualifications Framework, at Level 7, which corresponds to the scientific master level of the proposed program, relevant learning outcomes involve: (i) highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research, (ii) critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields, (iii) specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation, in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields, (iv)

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manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches, and (v) take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams. Although stated in the SER (p. 38), that the Study Programme is fully compliant with the European Qualifications Framework, the learning outcomes almost entirely fail to meet level 7 requirements, both at the program and individual subject levels. Most of the learning outcomes at the program level are at very basic (e.g. general knowledge of sustainable tourism assessment and planning), in addition to be unclear (e.g. ability to manage the concepts and principles of sustainable tourism). Regarding the subject-level learning outcomes, contained in the provided analytical course syllabi, several of them are developed in a very traditional way emphasizing mainly the provision of knowledge.

Another weakness relates to the mandatory course literature. For some subjects the literature is dated, which might be problematical for propulsive areas like e.g. Project Management in Tourism (basic literature is older than 10 years). Moreover, it is not clear why literature from a non-social sciences background is used for the course Methodology of Scientific Research, but rather from the area of medical and biological sciences. Scientific methodology is based on same general principles across disciplines, but for conducting research in a particular area of study, as required for writing the scientific master thesis, discipline-specific methodology might be required to conduct relevant research (e.g. qualitative research techniques are not likely to be covered sufficiently, or at all, in natural or medical sciences methodology textbooks, while they are very important in social sciences research).

Finally, from the Study Programme syllabi [3] it is evident that no formal internships are planned to be taken by students. At the same time, a number of study courses include some form of practical assignments and works to be undertaken. As such, and given that no evidence has been provided on what sort of own infrastructure the FMTHE has got available to support the practical part of the educational process, it is highly recommended that the expectations from taking internships – if any – are more clearly defined both with respect to the target outcomes, as well as regarding who are the partners the FMTHE would undertake such a cooperation with.

Compliance level: Partially compliant

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ET recommendations:

1. *Analyse comparable study programs offered by leading higher-education institutions in the field of tourism and hospitality management (e.g. Hongkong Polytechnics, University of Surrey, Bournemouth University, to name a few), according to prominent rankings like e.g. Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU; a.k.a. Shanghai ranking list) which cover subject-related rankings.*
2. *Review reference programs for overall curricular structure, with a particular view to key learning outcomes. Assure a consistent, state of the art use of learning taxonomies and active verbs when defining learning outcomes, in accordance with Level 7 requirements of the European Qualifications Framework.*
3. *Avoid overlapping of course contents through better coordination between course holders (e.g. in group meetings).*

2.5. Students

Since the evaluated Study Programme has not been carried out yet, there was no possibility to talk to enrolled or graduated students in the online discussions. Based on the SER, published documents available online on the university website (<https://unhz.eu/regulations/>) and those provided upon request of the expert team, it can be concluded that the UHZ is fully compliant with regard to Standard 5.

The university has defined appropriate admission criteria for applicants and published them. The university uses an Electronic Management System for Students (SEMS) to record individual student achievements and providing additional functionalities. Rights and duties of students are publicly available via the University website.

As set out in [5], the mentor is obliged to remind the student to control the work for plagiarism through the UHZ Anti-plagiarism platform (Article 41). The expert team however recommends that mentors double-check all theses for similarity with other works, and that this is made a mandatory step before a thesis can be defended.



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Based on available documents and after the discussions with management representatives and teaching staff, the expert team can also state that the faculty staff are accessible to students and can be approached for problems.

Compliance level: Fully compliant

ET recommendations:

1. *Mentors should double-check all theses for plagiarism as a mandatory requirement before a thesis can be defended.*

2.6. Research

According to the SER, the proposed program foresees general measures which are aligned with the overarching institutional Research strategy (2020-2024) [23], involving: (i) Establishment of a scientific journal at the academic unit level, (ii) Establishment of a research institute in the field of environment, (iii) Organizing an international multidisciplinary conference, (iv) Supporting academic staff for joint research, publications, and artistic projects at international level, and (v) Involving and enhancing student participation in research projects. Moreover, as part of this program, faculty staff will be encouraged to publish textbooks in Albanian language, in accordance with the Regulation for publications, and conduct joint research activities with students as part of their study obligations ([1], p. 78).

Based on the SER and discussions with faculty staff, one can conclude that research is considered not only declaratively an important component of overall faculty activities, but effort is made to proactively stimulate and support research activities of faculty staff. During the interviews, members of the management and faculty staff have mentioned that a financial stimulation is paid to faculty staff for journal publications indexed in Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS; 1.000€ per published article).

Based on the self-assessment report and provided list of journal publications, it is apparent that a few journals dominate among the publications in recent years. Some of them are not directly related to the field of tourism or even completely unrelated (e.g. pharmacology). Moreover,

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there are generally only few studies published in the Web of Sciences, none of them in a journal with a Clarivate impact-factor (SSCI/SCI). Since the proposed program is nested within the field of tourism, it is somewhat surprising that not a single international tourism journal is covered, although there are even several journals in the region. Only few publications have a clear relationship to the respective courses.

According to the discussions with the faculty staff, University of Peja compares considerably well in relation to other Kosovo HEIs in terms of publications in indexed journals, which is to be commended. In the future, research efforts should however be directed towards research outlets (journals and conferences) which are more closely related to the field of tourism, hospitality and environmental management (for example, there are over 100 tourism journals covered by Scopus). Moreover, the evaluators consider it to be important to provide seminars/education to faculty staff on predatory journals which may significantly decrease institutional and/or individual staff's research reputation.

The SER highlights that the UHZ has organised three international conferences in 2019, whereas the FMTHE intends to organise a conference as part of the proposed program. International conferences provide an opportunity to connect with international peers and to present working papers, so this is a positive aspect.

Regarding clear policies that define what is recognized as research, consistent with international standards and established norms in the field of study (standard 6.3), the SER and the Research Strategy [23] do not provide explicit information. The discussions with the faculty staff revealed that there is consciousness about the importance of publications in indexed field journals, however, we could not find explicit mention in relevant documents. The track-record of published works of faculty staff shows that almost each researcher has produced at least an average of one research publication per year for the past three years. Based on the provided list of attended scientific conferences, the FMTHE staff do have a proven track record of research results on the same topics as their teaching activity when considering conference publications, but not when considering journal publications.

As part of the Study Programme, students will be engaged in research activities in addition to writing their research thesis.

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Compliance level: Substantially compliant

ET recommendations:

1. *Develop clearer guidelines where to publish in order to achieve a better match between teaching and research activities (publishing policies or as part of the Research strategy).*
2. *Organize seminars to familiarize faculty staff with field journals (tourism, hospitality, environmental management) indexed by major databases.*
3. *Organize research seminars to further enhance writing and publishing capabilities of faculty staff and raising awareness about predatory journals.*
4. *Consider both financial and non-financial compensation to foster research activity of faculty staff with above-average or outstanding research results (e.g. flexible teaching loads depending on research productivity).*

2.7. Infrastructure and resources

The UHZ is a publicly funded institution and as such enjoys the comfort of – to a certain extent – secured long-term financial stability through public funds. Although the institution has submitted a document providing basic information on the Study Programme cost & revenue breakdown structure [33], this can hardly be treated as serious financial planning, especially from a business administration/management-focused institution. From both the SER and the feedback collected, it is obvious that the majority of the income comes from the tuition fees and hence much of the attention in securing long-term stability of the given Study Programme will rely on the interest of the prospective students. In this regard, and as it has already been discussed earlier, it is not clear how come that the draft financial plan presented in [33] does not foresee any growth in the generated revenue which would either come from the higher number of students enrolling the Study Programme or, indeed, higher tuition fees as a result of the claimed strategic importance of the program for the local/Kosovar tourism sector and/or the assumed high labour market demand. This may only imply that either the Study Programme is not a sound business undertaking, or the given financial planning is rather faulty. Given that the latter would be hard to expect from a management-focused higher education institution, it

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may be deemed that the Study Programme can hardly be seen as financially promising. In addition, the feedback collected also suggests that, for the given Study Programme, there is no phase-out plan. Given the uncertainties related to the expected number of prospective students, generating a contingency phase-out plan seems reasonable.

Although the UHZ locations and premises could not be evaluated physically, there are no reasons to believe that both UHZ and FMTHE are undercapacitated with respect to available infrastructural resources needed to underpin general academic processes. However, no video material illustrating facilities needed for undertaking practical study modules of the Study Programme have been made available, neither it can be found on the UHZ website. Indeed, it may be argued that the planned practical classes are intended to be held outside the UHZ premises, nevertheless it is not entirely clear how come that dedicated “laboratory” facilities to complement the theoretical classes with do not already exist at the corresponding BSc study level. Moreover, it is hard to understand how come that a Level 7 study programme claimed to have been focused on scientific research does not include facilities and equipment which students and staff would utilise to research issues such as sustainable tourism capacity planning, green resort logistics and similar.

In the SER, capacities aimed to prove adequate library facilities are quantified, however, the video material accompanying the evaluation process [4] do not provide enough evidence to confirm the figures given. Moreover, in the annual QA report [20] provided by the FMTHE to further substantiate the evaluation process, it may be seen that some concerns on the available infrastructure have been raised by the academics with average scoring being less than 4. This, coupled with the fact that many facilities filmed in the enclosed video do not feel spacious enough to accommodate properly the expected number of students/staff, suggests that more work needs to be done to secure adequate capacities for both the Study Programme and the educational process in general. The expert team recognises the fact that, in the actual strategic plan [22], objectives have been set (Activity 7.1.3) to build new FMTHE facilities roughly 5000 m² in size, with the construction works due to begin in 2024. However, it remains unclear how come that such a massive construction undertaking does not include any preceding activities and the corresponding costs given that in the corresponding budget, no funds have been allocated for that purpose in the 2020-2023 period.



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Apart from access ramps at the entrance to – what feels as – the main university building, no evidence has been observed on what other dedicated infrastructure has been made available to students and staff with special needs such as text-to-speech aids, floor guidance for visually impaired people, in-door access ramps, dedicated lavatories and others.

Finally, although it may not serve as a straightforward measure, it is interesting to realise that in the entire SER the word “software” has not been mentioned even once. Indeed, it may be argued that for a management-focused institution, state-of-the-art software support to underpin educational processes would not be seen as critical. Nevertheless, as the 21st century economy is unimaginable without various vertical software solutions, and given the nature of any Level 7 study programme, it would be somewhat expected that as much focus as possible is given to substantiating the educational process with modern, highly capacitated and niche-specific software tools and solutions.

Compliance level: Partially compliant

ET recommendations:

- 1. Generate sound financial plan to prove long-term financial stability, which would include revenue sources other than those secured by the Government, and detailed forecast on the corresponding costs. Depending on the character of the thus generated financial plan, if necessary, define a phase-out plan for the given Study Programme.*
- 2. Generate quality improvement plans which would address concerns raised by the academic staff regarding the available infrastructure and put these plans in the context of the planned construction of the new FMTHE facilities.*



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3. OVERALL EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE EXPERT TEAM

The Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment of the University “Haxhi Zeka” in Peja is a relatively new higher education institution but even so has managed to achieve considerable success in different educational fields and disciplines. The evaluated study programme is an advanced level programme targeting primarily BSc graduates interested to continue their education or professional careers in the hospitality and tourism sector and develop further their research and scientific skills and competences.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the assessment process did not include any site visits to any of the UHZ locations, nor it included physical face-to-face interaction with the interviewed stakeholders. Although it may be argued that such circumstances may have influenced the objectivity of the conclusions made, every effort has been made by the expert team to make the conclusions sound, substantiated by concrete evidence and not a result of speculation or misjudgement.

In this regard, in every section a set of recommendations has been given to address the issues raised through the evaluation process. It needs to be emphasised though that all the recommendations made should be seen only as guidelines aimed at improving the overall quality of both the study programme evaluated as well as the institution as a whole. In this regard, it remains to the FMTHE management and staff whether these recommendations would be found affirmative and hence put into practice or disregarded. Nevertheless, in addition to the recommendations made, few general comments on matters to be complimented for, as well on those which leave room for improvements seem appropriate to be made. These are as follows:

1. The institution has demonstrated an unprecedented degree of openness and integrity in communication with the expert team participating in the evaluation. It is beyond any doubt that the entire FMTHE team has made considerable efforts to reach the current level of operation in a relatively short time, which proves the institution has been run and operated by a team of highly motivated people.

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2. The institution enjoys a reputation of a respected higher education institution in the local community, and it was a pleasure to hear many of the interviewed external stakeholders vouching this much for both the Study Programme and the institution in general.
3. Finally, the institution is to be complimented for promoting high standards in research as well as in ethical behaviour.

However,

1. Although the UHZ and FMTHE have introduced a number of regulations and processes aimed at reaching the highest standards of academic and research practice, there are many misalignments and discrepancies between them thus leaving considerable room for arbitrary interpretations. The QA process is rather complex and over-administered, and it is hence difficult to keep track on the entire lifecycle of an improvement made.
2. Also, majority of the regulations are still to be fully accepted by the academics and other staff members given that only marginal efforts have been made to promote positive academic undertaking in ways other than through the corresponding rules of conduct. Scores suggesting that academics feel marginalised in the decision-making processes, such as the ones demonstrated in [20], should be found alarming especially at an institution claiming to have been promoting academic freedom and intellectual diversity.
3. Finally, the UHZ's ties with local community are to be complimented for. Nevertheless, going beyond local ties and partnerships, and focusing on, at least, regional recognition and undertaking in order to generate tangible long-terms outputs the academic process may benefit from, is highly recommended.

In conclusion, the Expert Team considers that the study program MSc in Sustainable Tourism Management offered by the Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment of the University "Haxhi Zeka" in Peja is ***partially compliant*** with the standards included in the *KAA Accreditation manual* and, therefore, recommends ***not to accredit*** the study program.



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Expert Team

Chair

(Signature)

Dražen Vrhovski

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June 23, 2021

(Date)