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## **AKADEMIA EVOLUCION**

### **BA FASHION DESIGN**

### **RE-ACCREDITATION**

## **REPORT OF THE EXTERNAL EXPERTS**

5 July 2022



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---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1	Context	3
1.2	Event schedule	4
1.3	A brief overview of the institution and program under evaluation	7

### 2 PROGRAMME EVALUATION

2.1	Mission, objectives and administration	8
2.2	Quality management	10
2.3	Academic staff	12
2.4	Education process content	13
2.5	Students	15
2.6	Research	17
2.7	Infrastructure and resources	18

### 3 FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXTERNAL EXPERT 18



Republika e Kosovës  
Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



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---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 CONTEXT

The re-accreditation of this BA Fashion Design programme was conducted via an audio and visual Microsoft Zoom link between a number of teams comprising Akademia Evolucion management, teaching staff, students and employers located in Kosovo and the External Experts (EE) in the United Kingdom and in North Macedonia.

All meetings with the Academy were conducted in the Albanian language with good simultaneous translation into English.

Another event, the re-accreditation of an MA Fashion Design programme, was conducted coincidentally and in a similar manner. There was a high degree of overlap of meetings with teaching staff, students, graduates, employers and in the content supplied to the EE for these existing BA and MA Fashion Design programmes

#### **Date of event**

Tuesday 14 June 2022.

#### **External Expert (EE)**

Professor Alan Brickwood, independent higher education adviser.

Marija Vasilevska, PhD student from Skopje., North Macedonia

The External Experts (EE) were familiar with Akademia Evolucion, having previously participated in other events at the College. Alan Brickwood in reviews of both programmes in 2013 and 2016 and Marija Vasilevska in the Institutional Review that took place earlier this year, in February 2022.

#### **Coordinators from the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA)**

Shkelzen Gerxhaliu, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring.

Flamur Abazaj, Senior Officer for Evaluation and Monitoring.



### Sources of information for the Report and criteria used

The EE was provided, in advance, with a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) including module descriptors and a large set of appendices that included curriculum vitae for the teaching team, the Quality Assurance Annual Report for 2020/21, a Research Strategic Plan 2022-2027, a Student Handbook and a short video showing the students' working environment

Other information provided in advance included a copy of the latest version of KAA's Accreditation Manual. This together with a template for the production of reports and a sample report provided the basic criteria used in the evaluation.

At the close of the event the EE requested two additional items of information:

- some precise information on student numbers, and
- a financial plan for 2022 and subsequent three years to include budgets and resources for staff research and development (not student collaborative projects), accommodation and other developments that might impact upon the two programmes.

Due to restrictions in place, to prevent the spread of the global pandemic and remote nature of the event, it was not possible to undertake any physical review of learning resources available to students, their work, nor any direct interaction with management or teaching staff for this programme.

A representative from KAA was present at meetings throughout the event to check the accuracy of information provided to the EE.

### 1.2 EVENT SCHEDULE

Tuesday 14 June 2022.

	Event	People
09.00 – 09.45	Meeting with the management of the Academy.	Mr Arber Vllahiu, Board Member. Mrs Enkelejda Shatri, Executive Director



		Prof Flora Loshi, Academic Director Mr Dritan Axhami, Administrative Director.
09.50 – 10.35	Meeting with quality assurance representatives and administrative staff.	Mrs Luljeta Vuthi, Head of QA. Mrs Donjeti Lumi, Head of HR and Students Support. Mr Dritan Shtari, Head of Finance. Mrs Naltina Fejzuullahu, Library & Archives. Mrs Ermina Jusufi, Head of Career Orientation & Alumni. Mr Arian Hazrolli, Technical Support & IT official.
10.40 – 11.40	Meeting with the heads of the study programme (BA).	Prof Lulkacela, Head of BA Fashion Design Programme
11.45 – 12.40	Meeting with the heads of the study programme (MA).	Prof Vesa Govori, Head of MA Fashion Design Programme
	Lunch break	
13.25 – 14.10	Meeting with teaching staff.	Prof Majlinda Kelmendi Prof Illir Martini Prof Naim Hoxha Prof. Dorina Gashi Prof. Vlora Mustafa Prof. Ylber Rukiqi Prof. Elmedina Rrahmani / Prof. Goezde Bursaligil
14.15 - 15.00	Meeting with students	Mr Shpëtim Ms Ermelinda Muslia Mr. Redon Baholli



		Ms. Vesa Rukiqi Ms Fjolla Qela Ms Arlinda Nushi
15.05 – 15.50	Meeting with graduates	Ms Donika Cakaj Ms Afrona Krasniqi Ms Kaltrina Gjyrevci Mr Arlind Bogiqi Ms Qame Ramadani Ms Sadete Gashi Ms Te uta Kuliqi
15.55 – 16.40	Meeting with employers of graduates and external stakeholders	<b>Representatives from:</b> MINNA FASHION VALONE S-SPRINT KAMA MAD EMPIER DRENUSHA XHARA BLINI - including a textile, design and manufacturing trade association representing 150 companies.
16.40 – 16.50	Internal meeting of KAA staff and experts.	
16.50 – 17.00	Closing meeting with the management of the faculty and programmes.	



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---

### **1.3 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE INSTITUTION AND PROGRAMME UNDER EVALUATION**

Akademia Evolucion is an accredited private higher education institution specialising in design studies. It received its most recent institutional re-accreditation in February 2022

The Academy was established in 2009 and is located on one site in Prishtina. It currently has approximately 550 students of which around two-thirds are enrolled upon its two fashion design programmes. It offers the following three, 3-year accredited bachelor programmes and one, 2-year master's programme. Specifically:

BA Fashion Design	MA Fashion Design
BA Communication Design	
BA Interior Design	

The source of students is described as being diverse, with them originating from all regions of Kosovo and from neighbouring Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and the Preshevo Valley. They also have students from Bosnia, Turkey and Germany and argue that this cultural diversity facilitates a highly positive effect on student creativity and the quality of projects in which they participate.

The mission and objectives of the Academy are those of being recognised and valued as a higher education institution with a reputation for the development and advancement of new creative, scientific ideas and the highest possible level of professional and vocational standards. These, together with an unequivocal commitment to providing the local and regional markets with the highly qualified professionals they require.

Its strategy, to achieve these objectives, include continual investment in the quality of teaching staff, excellent professional services, support to students and both a sensitivity and an adaptability to 'change' – including trends in the fashion industry.

It has a senior Board of Directors mainly responsible for strategy, development and financial policy. This Board oversees the business of the Academy including the effective use of its assets. It approves the business plan and its implementation and all other main governance and strategic matters.



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Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



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Kosovo Accreditation Agency

---

The second tier in the organisational structure comprises an Academic Council, a Quality Assurance Council and the office of the Executive Director. There are three academic departments of fashion, communications and interior design reporting to the second tier via an Academic Director.

In response to questions as to whether there were any future plans that might significantly impact upon this programme, senior management confirmed that the College had expansion plans to include additional accommodation.

## 2 PROGRAMME EVALUATION

### 2.1 MISSION, OBJECTIVES AND ADMINISTRATION

The three-year (6 semester) BA Fashion Design programme shares a common mission with other programmes at the Academy and set of strategic objectives, that are entirely consistent with those of the College and KAA more broadly.

It aims to deliver a teaching and learning experience for its students that is practice-based and with a set of core intellectual, professional and transferable skills vital to the profession, industry and communities for which the programme is designed to serve. Upon graduation, its students will be able to survive, adapt and prosper in a range of career options in the broad field of fashion design nationally.

The EE was in little doubt that this programme is intended to provide, strong support to the development of a high-quality fashion and textile industry and to the economy of Kosovo.

The Academy pointed to its long experience teaching fashion design and stressed the consistent high level of student projects carried out in collaboration with industry and the value employers placed upon its graduates. The latter resulting in a consistently very high level of successful employment of those graduates by employers. This was clearly an outcome the Academy was deservedly very proud of and maintained by an active





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Industrial Board created by the Academy as a forum to facilitate feedback and inputs from industry.

These very positive opinions and results were confirmed during meetings the EE held towards the close of the event with graduates and employers. Programme leaders also stressed the absolute necessity for the programme and its graduates to be up-to-date due, not least, to the growth of opportunities and competition in both education for, and employment in, the fashion industry in Kosovo. The College was therefore very clear that its graduates from this programme had to be good. The EE were aware from other sources that fashion design is in the top five popular areas of study in Kosovo.

These objectives were evidenced by a clearly stated emphasis upon student-centred teaching, with full learning support, intended outcomes, subject coverage in the curriculum and a balance of delivery at around two-thirds/ one-third between practice and theory, respectively. These being consistent with other programmes internationally with similar objectives and expectations of a graduate from higher education embodied in the National Qualifications Framework and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

**Compliance level**

The study programme is entirely consistent with the overall mission of the College. It has a well-defined overarching didactic and research content and its rationale is well founded on relevant external academic and professional best practice and advice. It is Fully Compliant with Standards 1.1 to 1.3.

There is a full and thorough range of formal policies, guidelines and regulations referred to in the SER and supporting documents dealing with responsibilities relating to the management and delivery of programmes, behaviour and to recurring procedural and academic issues. These cover academic integrity, responsibility, public accountability and ethics requiring conformity from every person within Akademie Evolucion, including students. These include codes of practice and disciplinary procedures.



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Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



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Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju  
Kosovo Accreditation Agency

---

These arrangements are established at institutional level with satisfactory mechanisms to ensure they are effectively cascaded down.

The EE was also assured on these matters by the Student Handbook containing summaries of most of the arrangements of importance and given to students at induction.

**Compliance level**

The EE is satisfied that these measures are fully embraced at all levels. They are Fully Compliant with Standards 1.4 to 1.6.

## 2.2 QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Akademia Evolucion is an established and mature institution specialising in creative design. It has quality assurance standards and principles established over the past 13 years according to the Bologna Process and regulations laid down by KAA. The latter drawing heavily upon participation and advice from teams of advisers and experts from across the world. This to ensure a comparability of standards internationally and the promulgation of up-to-date thinking and 'best practice' in both subject and pedagogical fields

At institutional level there is a comprehensive and thorough system of common requirements for the design of new programmes, modification of existing ones and for the processes of monitoring, review and formal evaluation.

This includes a clear articulation of what programmes are setting out to achieve; the selection and recruitment of suitable students; their attendance; the content and balance of the teaching and learning experience; effective outcomes; and fair assessment for the purposes of monitoring and feedback to students, for progression and award and for when things go wrong. These systems also include the collation of information via regular surveys, on student satisfaction, their attendance; gender balance; workload; student, staff and employer feedback and the destination of graduates.



Republika e Kosovës  
Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim  
Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju  
Kosovo Accreditation Agency

---

These were examined in detail during the process of institutional reaccreditation earlier this year and found to be satisfactory.

There is a Quality Assurance Office with dedicated staff in charge of administering the control of quality and standards and responsible for day-to-day collection, collation and feedback of findings from a wide variety of sources. One example being advice from an advisory Industry Board that meets twice a year to provide an industry perspective as to whether programmes are in line with the needs of the market.

Keen to ascertain how some of this worked in practice, the EE chose to explore student attrition rates as one indicator of the College's perception of 'success' and at what point the Quality Assurance Unit might intervene and begin to 'police' a situation. The Quality Assurance Annual Report for 2020/21 together with the SER, provided to them, contained much detailed information but was incomplete on numbers for progression between years and hence the successful completion of the programme compared to intake. There were other inconsistencies in the documentation supplied that had an above average level of errors – duplication, conflicting numbers, the provision of more than 50% of the teaching staff CVs untranslated into English and the absence of any clarity over the formal status and positioning of the Industrial Board – to name just a few. All suggesting to the EE that the documentation had not been thoroughly checked before dispatch.

The EE are very sympathetic to the very challenging task of having to present documentation in what is a foreign and unfamiliar language to most at the Academy and of the burden some of these requirements can pose for a relatively small and specialist institution. Nor do they wish to be picky but these kinds of errors can detract from otherwise good impressions and cause consequential errors in judgement by EE. They should be avoidable with little extra effort. The EE recommend the Academy seeks help with this in future.

Upon receipt of the additional information requested, the concerns of the EE were substantially allayed.



The additional papers were satisfactory providing answers to the queries raised by the EE and restoring confidence that the quality assurance system in place is fundamentally sound and effective.

**Compliance level**

With the benefit of additional material requested during the event, the EE is satisfied that the required quality assurance processes are in place and will be applied to this programme. They are Fully Compliant with Standards 2.1 to 2.9.

**2.3 ACADEMIC STAFF**

The full-time teaching staff team is strong. It comprises people that are qualified, highly experienced, competent and motivated. The overall position on staffing is relatively stable and secure. Staff confirmed their commitment to student-centred learning with strong tutorial support consistent with a commitment by the Academy to be a student-centred teaching institution.

The SER provides listings of 7 full-time and 2 part-time teaching staff dedicated to the programme by qualification, title, tenure and by of their specific areas of expertise. Most were on contracts due to expire at the end of the current academic year but the EE were reassured that these would be renewed subject only to the outcome of this reaccreditation event. This represents nearly 80% coverage of the curriculum by full-time staff.

All staff are aware of what is expected of them including participation in external student collaborative projects, internship opportunities and extra curricula opportunities.

All staff are subjected to regular evaluation of their performance and student satisfaction surveys carried out twice yearly at the end of each semester. Both are completed by students anonymously - although the EE were advised that, despite extra efforts by staff, students were not always keen to participate in these surveys.



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Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim  
Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju  
Kosovo Accreditation Agency

---

Management expressed having some difficulty at times and needing to ‘headhunt’ in the recruitment of experienced staff due to competition from the public funded higher education institutions.

**Compliance level**

The EE is satisfied that arrangements for the recruitment, deployment and general development of academic staff are appropriate and Fully Compliant with Standards 3.1 to 3.10.

**2.4 EDUCATION PROCESS CONTENT**

It is easy to identify additional topics for the curriculum of a practice-based vocational programme such as this. What is more difficult is deciding what needs to be reduced or removed to make space and avoid overloading the curriculum and student. One solution historically was to lengthen the duration of programmes. Now programme designers have to be more innovative and deploy solutions such as ‘prioritising’ subject components by ‘levels of understanding’. This can result in subject ‘x’ requiring, for example, ‘mastery’ or ‘competence’ whilst another subject ‘y’ needing only those students gain an ‘awareness’ or ‘familiarity’.

The EE was impressed by the clarity and honesty of the programme objectives. They are unequivocally designed to produce fashion designers able to survive and prosper in local and national fashion industries. Despite this practical limitation, the programme cannot operate in isolation ignoring wider issues if it is to deliver those stated objectives. Fashion is a huge dynamic and competitive international industry. This, coupled with an absolute requirement for degree programmes to address the intellectual development of students and of transferable skills, raises expectations of graduates having at least a ‘familiarity’ and ‘awareness’ of some of the big cultural, technical and economic changes taking place in the industry. These cannot be ignored.



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Republika Kosova - Republic of Kosovo



Agjencia e Kosovës për Akreditim  
Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju  
Kosovo Accreditation Agency

---

The SER cites several of these changes under clear stated intentions of *'mastery over sustainability'* and of *'change and advanced programmes and syllabi by adapting to the labour market, technological and artistic changes and advancements.'*

Those intentions are good, evidenced by components included in the curriculum, and provoked lively and constructive discussions between the EE, subject leaders and teaching staff ranging across several other topics that included:

- A demise of large 'high street' retailers in favour of internet sales with shop assistants and static displays being replaced by live streaming. A shift accelerated in recent years by the global pandemic.
- Fashion designers becoming much closer to the customer. Moving from traditional business models of designer/large manufacturer/wholesaler/retailer to much smaller models of designer/maker/consumer that are far more responsive and direct.
- Mass customisation following trends established in other manufacturing industries long ago based on Kaizen, lean manufacturing and high 'stockturns'.
- Obesity, with over 50% of countries reporting overweight populations and the effect this has had upon the block system and sample sizing.
- Impact of the LGBT gender and identity movement. A very high proportion of designs on display at the London Fashion Week earlier this year were androgynous.
- Consumer-driven pressure for a circular economy with the fashion industry under pressure to reduce waste. It allegedly being the third worst industry for waste in the world.
- Big established fashion 'label' producers unable to sell their products in an increasing number of markets due to consumer-driven concerns over ethics, slavery and the human conditions of workers where items are made.
- Plagiarism – sometimes referred to as 'Diet Prada'. A breakdown of respect for intellectual property rights arising from social media infiltration.

English language features in semesters 2, 4 and 6 otherwise the curriculum is entirely taught in the Albanian language.



The third year offers a choice of specialisation between ‘pattern’ and ‘fashion design’ streams in semesters 5 and 6 both with comparable demands from a semester 6 capstone project. This being a culminating comprehensive test of a student’s ability to draw together all that they had learnt, produce a design solution and be able to present this in a professional manner.

**Compliance level**

The EE is satisfied that the education process, curriculum content, subject balance, teaching methods and assessment arrangements are thorough and appropriate to this programme’s objectives. It is Fully Compliant with Standards 4.1 to 4.12.

**2.5 STUDENTS**

The meeting with students, from all years of both the BA and MA programmes, was lively and positive.

Students were able to confirm the thoroughness of general information given to them by the Academy about the programme. They all commented on the high reputation enjoyed by the Fashion Design Department and BA programme in Kosovo and of their unqualified praise for the highly supportive teaching and learning experience they had received to date. Many of the students spoke in detail about their reasons for choosing Akademia Evolucion in preference to other institutions.

Graduates were equally complimentary and satisfied with their experience at Akademie Evolucion which all of them described to have been highly effective in preparing them for the world of work. Employment was broad ranging from having their own designer/maker studio to technical positions within large manufacturing businesses. Several spoke of the specific value of internships that had paved a way for them into immediate employment after graduation. All had maintained a relationship with their past tutors at the Academy.

The EE were particularly impressed by comments from several students and graduates who spoke very highly of the valuable experience they had gained from collaborative



project work that had been facilitated by teaching staff, undertaken for external organisations and carried out jointly with teaching staff.

A few spoke English and attributed this mainly to their secondary schools. All displayed a good awareness of the position of the Kosovo fashion industry and of a future expansion for it globally.

Employers were similarly very positive of their experiences with the Academy in offering short-term work experiences to students and of the quality of graduates they had employed. They also all reported positively on their involvement with the Industrial Board.

Unfortunately, there were occasions when the highly advantageous relationships with employers and the lure of full-time employment was too much for students to complete their studies or continue onto postgraduate programmes.

Those employers ranged from a textile manufacturing trade association with 150 member companies to manufacturers of athletics fashion garments, bridalwear and underwear. Many were fairly large and included a specialist pattern maker that was in the process of substantially digitising its processes. The trade association cited 80% of all internships it had facilitated being taken-up by Akademia Evolucion students and all listed a high proportion of their employees having been drawn from the Academy. The range of occupations was less clear but seemingly dominated by those requiring competency in technical skills.

The SER provides comprehensive information on institution-wide arrangements for student admission, participation in decision-making, rights of representation, feedback, what students can expect, what is expected from them and support for them when difficulties arise. These arrangements are thorough and have been developed from experience, drawn widely upon best practice from elsewhere and subjected to continuous improvement – a characteristic of effective QA systems. In all circumstances they are delegated, mirrored and adapted to suit local circumstances and needs within prescribed limits.





#### **Compliance level**

The EE were impressed with the thoroughness and flexibility of arrangements and quality of support given to students. The employers' views supported these impressions and were very complimentary about the employability of graduates. Arrangements for students are therefore deemed to be Fully Compliant with Standards 5.1 to 5.11.

## **2.6 RESEARCH**

Whilst Akademia Evolucion describes itself as a teaching institution, it has nevertheless given research excellence a high priority in its Strategic Plan and on a par with excellence in teaching. This to ensure its knowledge base, its teaching staff and the material they deliver, is professionally up-to-date and vital to students and the communities it serves.

However, its '5-year road map' to achieve that 'research excellence' seemed muddled and incomplete to the EE. Stated intentions and budgetary support were reasonable and typical of the kind of commitment one would expect to be made by any well organised institution of higher education but examples given in the SER, and other planning documents seemed weak and lacking in relevance and drive. They certainly did not inspire confidence. The examples given centred mostly upon student and community-centred collaborative projects and appeared to bear little connection to the lively discussions held during meetings with programme leaders, teaching staff and students on some of the issues facing the industry and 'change'. There are, for example, no references to research into anthropometrics and implications of changing body shapes (obesity); 'gender fluidity'; no studies on waste and the environment; technology and mass customisation. No reference to what kind of research is appropriate for a relatively small specialist design academy; how scientific knowledge might be imported and how staff can be both encouraged and required to engage, somehow, in appropriate research and staff development as a condition of employment – as is common in most higher education institutions. The EE was left with an impression that whilst intentions were good, focus, leadership and drive had not been articulated and given sufficient priority to deliver the intended 'research excellence'.



The EE strongly recommends that the Academy revisits the actual arrangements for ensuring effective research and staff development as a matter of urgency.

**Compliance level**

The EE is partially satisfied with the intentions and arrangements being pursued by the Academy to enhance its knowledge base and the vitality of its teachers and teaching through applied research. These are Partially Compliant with Standards 6.1 to 6.10.

**2.7 INFRASTRUCTURE AND LEARNING RESOURCES**

The SER provided full details of the College's commitment to providing a well-resourced and quality environment. These included details of both general and dedicated accommodation, specialist equipment, IT and conventional library learning resources and non-academic student support services.

A short video, approved by KAA, was supplied to the EE, which showed what appeared to be a modern, tidy and well-arranged environment.

Unfortunately, due to restrictions, imposed as a consequence of the Covid pandemic, and the remote nature of the event, it was not possible for the EE to physically inspect the spaces and facilities available to this programme nor assess the demands made upon them.

**Compliance level**

Infrastructure and learning resources for this programme appear to be Fully Compliant with Standards 7.1 to 7.6.

**3 FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXTERNAL EXPERTS**

The External Experts are grateful to the College management, teaching team, students and employers for their open and dynamic contributions to the event, and wishes them well for the future.



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This three-year BA Fashion Design Programme is clearly important to Kosovo and is both well respected and successful in providing graduates for its fashion industry. The EE, however, believes that success will undoubtedly, in time, bring about a more sophisticated industry with much higher expectations of the people it employs. For Academia Evolucion to share in and be part of that success, it will need to ensure that its knowledge base is vital having kept pace with changes in the industry beyond Kosovo. It will need to do this by excellence in research and staff development, practice and by exposure and association with the best. The Academy needs therefore to ensure it has clear and appropriate arrangements in place for that to happen.

The EE therefore **Recommends** that Academia Evolucion strengthens the arrangements it has to ensure it can deliver its stated objective of 'research excellence'.

**In conclusion, the External Experts consider the BA Fashion Design programme to be Substantially Compliant with the Standards included in the current KAA Accreditation Manual and therefore recommends the study programme continues to be accredited for a further 3 (three) years and with a similar maximum annual enrolment of 120 (one hundred and twenty) students, as currently approved.**

Professor Alan Brickwood, External Expert  
5 July 2022

Marija Vasilevska, External student Expert  
5 July 2022