



## OVERVIEW REPORT FOR *POLITICAL SCIENCE* STUDY FIELD

2016/2017

### INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation performed by four external evaluation groups of the following study programmes in the study field of *Political science* in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions: at Klaipėda University – *Political Science, European Studies*, at Mykolas Romeris University – *Health Policy and Management*, at European Humanities University – *Public Policy, World Politics and Economy Studies*, at Vytautas Magnus University - *International Politics and Development Studies, Scandinavian and Baltic Studies, Contemporary European Politics, East Asia Region Studies*, at Vilnius University - *Politics and Media, Eastern European and Russian Studies, European Studies: Ideas, Institutions and Economy, Public Policy Analysis and International Relations and Diplomacy*, at Kaunas University of Technology - *Public Policy, Public Policy and European Studies* were evaluated and at the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania - *Military Diplomacy and International Relations* were evaluated.

The external evaluation was organised by the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC).

The external evaluations were performed according to the evaluation areas and criteria: (1) Programme aims and learning outcomes, (2) Curriculum design, (3) Teaching staff, (4) Facilities and learning resources, (5) Study process and students' performance assessment, and (6) Programme management.

Comprehensive external evaluation reports including strengths and weaknesses and concluding with some recommendations were prepared for each evaluated programme and included evaluation marks. This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the *Political science* field from a general point of view.

18 programmes received positive evaluation and 1 programme received negative evaluation.

## **OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS**

### **Programme aims and learning outcomes**

The programme aims and learning outcomes are generally well defined, clear and informative, but definitions sometimes tend to be too wordy and do not relay any distinct message. Aims and learning outcomes reflect properly the type and level of Bachelor/Master studies and the qualifications (competencies) defined. The programmes have taken care of analysing the compliance of the learning outcomes with international academic and professional requirements in various ways, paying generally more attention to professional requirements and stakeholders' expectations, labour market and public needs than purely research-based needs for academic development. Given this fact, universities could give more attention and assistance to placing graduates outside the academic sphere. The names of the programme, its learning outcomes, content and the qualifications offered are generally compatible with each other, but sometimes the course level learning outcomes are not sufficiently aligned with programme-level learning outcomes. The topics of Bachelor/Master's theses indicate that the programmes are training specialists in their specific areas – consistently with the aims and general learning outcomes – but in some cases the methodology applied could be more sophisticated, both in terms of quantitative and qualitative methods, and the use of international literature could be wider. Programmes have generally recognized their strengths and weakness, but not all have developed proper action plans to improve the situation. Students should be more effectively apprised of the purpose and function of learning outcomes in relation to their progressive academic development and exit qualifications, especially since, generally, they are well defined and well structured

### **Curriculum design**

Curriculum designs meet legal requirements. Subjects are generally evenly spread and not repetitive and the contents of the subjects of the programmes are mostly consistent with the type and level of studies. Major weaknesses of the curricula in relation to attaining defined learning outcomes build around teaching research methods. There is teaching about research process, and thesis-oriented courses of MA programmes tend to commence early enough, but courses on quantitative and qualitative methods partly remain too introductory even in MA-programmes. Programmes emphasising policy issues tend to emphasise policy formulation and implementation, while teaching policy evaluation and its methodology would often contribute better to achieving intended learning outcomes. When the programme aims include knowledge and skills of economy-related expertise or even economics together with contents of political science, the curriculum may not include sufficient credits and time to guarantee the achievement of promised professional knowledge and skills in economic analysis. The regional studies programmes offer a good combination of broad background knowledge and specific understanding of the regions in focus. They have also found viable solutions to integrate language training, although the range of languages offered could be broader. In general, curricula are more or less consistent with the aims of the programme. Sometimes it is not clear why a particular course is mandatory and not elective – or other way round. In some programmes, there is a heavy emphasis on compulsory courses and only a limited offer of elective courses. And some courses are taught for mixed groups of various programmes which weakens the required consistency of studies from the point of view of intended learning outcomes of a particular study programme. The word interdisciplinarity is used very often, but it seems that in some cases there is neither consistently developed concept of that nor adequate arrangements to monitor its implementation. In some cases the literature of courses could cover better the latest international literature, although the situation has - improved over the years. The role of additional literature (on top of mandatory literature)

remains often unclear. A general recommendation concerns some reduction in the general introductory classes on the one hand and an expansion of specialized applications on the other, perhaps including electives with some, or more degree of choice as to the field of specialization.

### **Teaching staff**

The study programmes are provided by the teaching staff meeting legal requirements. In general, the number and the qualifications of the teachers are adequate to ensure learning outcomes but the research profile of the teaching staff is not always sufficiently aligned with content of the courses they teach. Teaching staff generally is very well organized and cross-use of teaching staff between different programmes is well advanced and ensures that teaching responsibilities match with research focuses. Usually, there is a good balance of senior and junior members of staff. In the regional studies programmes, teaching staff are highly motivated experts in their areas. Programmes tend to have goals to make their programme more international, but they do not seem to have sufficiently active approach or resources enough to invite visiting professors to cover themes the programmes are not so familiar with. VMU and VU, however, pay much attention to internationalization, which is also reflected in the programmes. In some institutions teaching staff has a partially impressive international reputation including degrees from universities in the US, UK and Northern Europe. The universities tend to create conditions for the professional development of the teaching staff, but the staff is not always actively utilizing the offered assistance for further professional development due various reasons such as mismatch of time schedules, low awareness and motivation, reluctance to go abroad etc. Furthermore, pedagogical training is still largely missing. Relatively low international research output in peer-reviewed journals and the weak visibility in the international academic community, for instance in attending major international conferences, seems to be a permanent problem for the staff of many programmes – with some outstanding exceptions, however. International research projects are taken part in but hardly ever as coordinators. Major problems here are heavy teaching loads and lacking personal research allowances. Pump-priming grants could serve to launch bids for national or international research grants. If well managed, such funding will repay the initial investment in terms of research overheads many times over. There are opportunities for international staff exchange, but staff is relatively passive in using them. Teaching staff turnover is sufficient but international recruitment should be more general to achieve the goals of internationalisation and inflow of new ideas and perspectives. This is a national challenge related to salaries, lack of resources, and attractiveness of research communities. While endeavouring to improve their research profiles, staff were complaining about overwork, brought about in the main by internal restructuring. The stronger integration of part-time colleagues is an matter for future attention.

### **Facilities and learning resources**

The facilities and learning resources are adequate both in their size and reasonable quality in all institutions, but there is a lack of individual working spaces for teachers and student consultations, sometimes also lack of functional space for students' group work. New buildings like at VMU, however, significantly improve the situation. Older premises are not always barrier-free, accessible for staff and students with special needs. Due to limited funding, library resources are not always properly updated and there is a shortage of textbooks, but situation varies much depending on the university and programme. Software for basic statistics and qualitative textual analysis is generally available. Universities have adequate arrangements for students' practice/internship, but sometimes placements could cover also wider range of organizations (e.g., NGOs, international organisations) and be longer. Moodle and other social media platforms are used widely for communication between students and teachers, but often only for delivering files without using more interactive options. Wifi-service is available but sometimes too

weak or too limited areas. Where there are physical space issues, institutions should be quick in addressing them for immediate and future development. Placement and internship arrangements and opportunities can generally be rich and varied.

### **Study Process and students' performance assessment**

The admission requirements are generally adequate and well-founded, but in some programmes, there is a lack of applicants or qualified students, partly due to demographic reasons. In some programmes, there have been gaps in admission in recent years, not always properly communicated in advance. This may endanger the quality of the graduates in longer run. The programmes tend to be knowledgeable about the threat. On the other hand, student-teacher ratios are excellent. There is clearly a national need to rethink the number of BA/MA study programmes available in the country. International students enrich the programmes, there is partly a high ratio in programmes taught in English at VMU. The organisation of the study process does not appear to be a problem in any programme, but students' participation in staff-led research activities is mostly weak, although there are good examples of publishing practices of these work in in-house outlets. The principles of assessing learning and practices for written assignments as well as descriptions of the courses are adequate and publicly available. Students seem to be satisfied with teachers' feedback of their learning. At VMU, there is a remarkable Code of Academic Ethics with the intention to make the study process honest and transparent in all programmes. Opportunities for student mobility is offered in all institutions (via ERASMUS+ or bilateral exchange agreements), but minor part of student chooses to use them, less so among MA students who are normally working full-time and may have family responsibilities. Partly problems with study credits transfer from exchange studies were reported. Programmes follow-up the employment of their graduates and most of them have at least some working contacts to employers and stakeholders and alumni in order to receive information about the professional performance of their graduates. There are services to support students' career planning, but very often students do not know it, nor use them. Grants are delivered to best students, but very often few and relatively small. There are some scheduling issues concerning major and minor studies and rationalisation matters in the function of military and civil academic systems.

### **Programme Management**

In general, study programmes have a clear formal organisation for study programme management: responsibilities for decisions and monitoring of the implementation of the programme are clearly allocated. Regular internal and external procedures are in place for the programme's review, monitoring, quality assurance and implementation. All programmes use a university-wide quality assurance system which include internal and external assessment of the hosted programmes. Student feedback is collected in all programmes, but students tend to be rather unaware of what the results of surveys are and how they are used for improving the programme. In some programmes the interviewed students can give examples of changes made on the basis of their feedback. Stakeholder feedback is collected in various ways, often face-to-face, as response rates in surveys tend to be low. Sometimes stakeholders are providing internship places for the students on regular basis and programmes take – wisely – advantage of opportunities for broader collaboration, also in research and development activities including joint conferences and public lectures, and contribute to national and regional development at the same time. Project management can in most cases easily refer to examples of changes based on stakeholder and student feedback. However, the management is also knowledgeable about the challenges of receiving sufficient and qualified feedback and in most cases there are plans for improvement. Ties with stakeholders could be further strengthened by launching an alumni network that actively engages alumni with the universities. One may conclude that internal quality assurance matters, but it is not without flaws, and the coverage, efficiency and

effectiveness of the quality assurance system has significant variation by university. Programme management has always reacted to recommendations of external evaluations, but sometimes there is considerable inertia which is partly related to changes and challenges of the hosting organisational unit and the qualifications of its unchanging staff, whole university or Lithuanian system of higher education – and available resources. Systematic improving of international research culture would be instrumental for solving many problems, but it takes time and requires organisational mergers, when the numbers of students are declining and the prospects of higher governmental funding for universities are vacillating to say the least. Where there have been newly-developed management initiatives, appropriate evaluation procedures should be in place. Equally, while the student voice is generally listened to, it should be acted upon speedily and efficiently. Political Science in Lithuania is competing for quality students in all programmes. The policy of allowing institutions to operate with smaller numbers in some years helps to keep communities functional in higher education contexts and continues to fulfil particular local, regional and national military needs.

## **MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDY PROGRAMMES IN *POLITICAL SCIENCE* STUDY FIELD**

### **➤ Strategic recommendations at institutional level (for Higher Education Institutions):**

Teaching staff should receive more support for research driven teaching and to produce high quality research that can be placed in internationally recognized journals, eg. by introducing research clusters and personal research allowances. The universities could consider introducing a fund for pump-priming research funding on a competitive basis. Small seed funding could be used to develop applications for larger research grants.

Decisions on the opening of programmes should be made on a predictable and timely basis. This includes predictable decisions about state-funded places to the programmes. Fund-raising for graduate scholarships from alumni, social partners, and donors should become a strategic priority.

Alumni should be more involved with the programmes and department they graduated from, including a mentorship programme. Ultimately, the alumni should also become part of the donor base of the University.

Institutions should encourage more teaching staff and student mobility. It is advised to provide better opportunities for study credits transfer for exchange studies.

It is necessary to evaluate new management systems and respond systematically to any concerns and criticisms.

For Military Academy: it is important to bring together more closely military and civil systems towards a shared culture and academic community.

### **➤ Strategic recommendations at national level (for the Ministry of Education and Science):**

Seed funding grants should be introduced to fund pilot research projects that will serve to launch larger bids for national or international research grants.

Due to declining student numbers a reduction of teaching loads should be considered to stimulate more high quality research.

Distribution of state funded student places should be made on a timely and predictable basis.

Provide scholarships to attract the strongest cadets at the Military Academy.

➤ **Recommendations for SKVC:**

Reward excellence in any of the six areas under evaluation – working with SKVC this might involve 5 points instead of 4. Reconsider the following from the points template: 4 (very good) - the field is exceptionally good. (Very good) is NOT ‘exceptionally good’. There is a problem here which needs to be addressed. The 5<sup>th</sup> point could be ‘exceptional’

Be more proactive in communicating some standards for the West to appreciate and emulate where possible. For example, SKVC’s appointment of international experts as Team Leaders is excellent practice. Another point is the Lithuanian way of laying out legal bases in the SERs on which evaluations operate. This would be new to some countries.

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