



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OVERVIEW REPORT FOR SOCIOLOGY STUDY FIELD

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I. INTRODUCTION

The overview is based on the external quality evaluation of the *Sociology* study field in the following Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): at *Vilnius university (VU)*, at *Vytautas Magnus university (VMU)* and at *Kaunas university of technology (KTU)*.

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

Comprehensive external evaluation reports including strengths and weaknesses and concluding with recommendations were prepared separately for first and second cycle field studies and included evaluation marks. This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the *Sociology* field from a general point of view.

Based on the findings of *Sociology* study field evaluation, expert panel have come to a decision to give positive evaluation to **first and second cycle studies at Vilnius University, to first and second cycle studies at Vytautas Magnus University and to second cycle studies at Kaunas university of technology.**

On the basis of external evaluation reports of the study field SKVC takes a decision to accredit study field and cycle either for 7 years or for 3 years. If the field evaluation is negative such study field is not accredited.

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

The expert panel comprised 5 senior academics from the Austria, Lithuanian, Slovenia, and the UK, and 1 student representative from Lithuania.

Based on the criteria of the evaluation the expert panel rated the study field of sociology across the 3 institutions - Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University and Kaunas University of Technology very highly. On the basis of the documentary and verbal evidence the expert panel agreed that sociology in Lithuania is strong. Highlights being sound training in core and conventional qualitative and quantitative methods, engagements with partners outwith the University sector, good levels of employability and dedicated staff who in general deliver programmes creatively and pragmatically.

3.1. Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum

The evaluation panel for the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) found that the aims, learning outcomes and contents of the study programmes in sociology at first cycle and second cycle both at *Vilnius University* and *Vytautas Magnus University* and for the second cycle at *Kaunas University of Technology* are generally well founded and at the appropriate

level in the sense that they address scientific and practical as well as professional sociological knowledge, skills and methods as known on international level at other European universities. The evaluators appreciated the quality of the self-evaluation reports (SERs) provided by the three institutions.

The aims and outcomes of both first and second cycle programmes offered in Sociology are to ensure that students graduate with a sound understanding of social and economic transformations, the workings of social and political institutions, methodologies appropriate to the study and analysis of social, economic, political and cultural life, and the ability to think critically and analytically. All programmes have learning outcomes which relate to these substantive areas. Second cycle programmes explore these issues in greater depth and enable specialisation and cultivate higher levels of independent scholarship than the first cycle degrees. In addition to these foundational areas the subject specific programmes have distinct aims which in turn are orientated towards labour market needs. Sociology degree programmes focus on socio-demographic, cultural and technological change in the context of globalisation. Graduates gain employment in marketing, public opinion agencies, advertising and public relations. Social Policy programmes focus on welfare and social justice at national and international levels. Those graduates gain employment in social services and public administration but also in private businesses. Criminology programmes ensure graduates are able to analyse emergent forms of crime in a global environment through applying critical theoretical approaches. They graduate with skills valuable for prison services, the police, the Ministry of the Interior, and Centres for Crime Prevention and Control. The expert panel heard by employers that they appreciate among other skills, a serious education in data analysis and those experts expressed that graduates of all three universities are well trained working with data and statistics.

All different institutions vary in the ways in which they link sociology to specific applied fields, but all of these different ways to show and to apply sociological competencies are reasonable and definitively competent. Trying to empower sociological graduates in a way that they can compete successfully on the labour market with graduates of law, economics or management is seemingly a good teaching

3.2. Links between science (art) and studies

Professors and other lecturers are involved not only in teaching but also in doing research and publishing. The expert panel found different degrees of intensity in publishing between the individual universities, this in respect to quality and quantity of publications. While the group of evaluators found evidence for good teaching achievements, the impression was sometimes that the research output could be strengthened. Taken the number of publications against the number of academic staff, the publication ratios could be better, especially when considering English language journals and here especially SSCI-journals. Some units have a tendency to publish in national scientific journals rather than in international scientific journals with (high) impact factors. Teachers should be encouraged and supported to publish in international journals with impact factors in order to increase the

profile of teachers and their universities. For example, one academic unit indicated that between 2017 and 2019 only 16 out of 86 staff members had attended an international conference. This small share of academics being involved in international conferences signals negatively a low interest in international research affairs and it does not contribute to further education. Also the fact became evident that research activities are not always included in the workload module in some organizations and that they vary depending on the contract.

There is also positive evidence that new research projects are initiated and that research funds at different research foundations are submitted successfully on a competitive basis. The expert panel found an explicit approach to integrate teaching into research procedures, especially for the second cycle. Approved acquisition of research projects will certainly produce further research findings and insights which will contribute positively to get integrated into teaching practice.

The panel has also found significant ambitions to integrate into EU programmes. These ambitions can be intensified by further incentives by the universities. The panel identified a number of visiting professors and optional modules programmed with open topics, thus giving a genuine opportunity for visiting professors to teach to their research strength. Internationalisation and international exchange by students and staff go almost along with ambitions to increase quality marks in teaching and research. Against this background, teachers (and students) should be encouraged and supported to apply for more research projects (and fellowships) funded by national and international bodies of research and their associations.

3.3. Student admission and support

The admission procedures are transparent and well-grounded. The websites of all three universities are very informative and accessible for both current and prospective students. The admission procedures are transparent and well communicated. Attracting a higher number of students is a challenge that the departments and the universities need to address. However, it is important that the state commits to find a greater number of places so that more students can benefit from studying in the sociology field programmes. Academic mobility of both outgoing and incoming students is low; more support could be given from the University and Faculty administration and opportunities to study in English need to be increased. Second cycle students are often combining their studies with paid employment and do not have the time to travel abroad. The needs of second cycle students who are often combining paid employment in professional roles need to be closely monitored to ensure there is sufficiently flexibility to ensure they are able to maximise their study potential. The implementation of the VU Five-year Strategy for Diversity and Equal Opportunities (February 2025) to meet needs arising from disabilities (e.g. visual, audio, mobility) could be developed within Sociology and No explicit policies or transparent procedures for dealing with instances of sexual harassment or for the needs of LGBT students.

3.4. Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment

Sociology study programmes in all the institutions have adopted teaching, learning and assessment methods which are able to deliver the learning outcomes e.g., individual and group project work, study visits, laboratory work, discussions, problem-solving sessions, case studies etc.. They are all actively encouraging their staff to improve their didactic, digital and language competences by participating in professional development courses.

The fact that many students must maintain their jobs outside of the university in parallel to the university studies is a reason that students are also not showing to be very active to go abroad for one or two semesters. It must be said that students are generally informed about academic mobility opportunities through many different channels, such as emails, social media, as well as the departmental websites.. In most cases the departments for international liaison and the faculties coordinate international mobility processes and provide personal advice to students. During the visit the panel heard also that the actual availability of eligible programmes does not always match students' interest or language skills, as the number of universities where sociology field programmes are taught in English at the required level may not be high. The scholarships provided were deemed insufficient to cover the living expenses abroad and that private funds need to be secured.

Institutions are adapting their buildings and other facilities for accessibility to students with special needs and all new buildings are designed to enable easy access for people with mobility issues. Library departments also provide readers with individual needs with access to special software, equipment, keyboards etc to enable visually impaired people to access the information they need. The evaluation panel gained the strong impression that libraries of the evaluated universities are quite well equipped with access to electronic books, articles and software and that also the stock of hard copy infrastructure is in a state which is internationally competitive. The same finding applies for the equipment with electronic devices in libraries, offices and distant learning.

There are established and transparent procedures for ensuring academic integrity and codes of ethics. Students also have the right to appeal against assessment results or raise complaints regarding the study process using established procedures which are defined in the study regulations. Vilnius University has a centralised Student Centre to support students on different levels of study. At the departmental level, students can receive support from dedicated departmental administrators during the working hours. An effort is made to make all key information available online in Moodle and dedicated webpages. Students can also book consulting sessions (face-to-face and online) with teachers. In all, in the individual evaluation reports the panel concluded with quite positive impressions.

3.5. Teaching staff

All the institutions under evaluation prove to have sufficient numbers of well qualified and experienced teachers to satisfy the legal requirements. The age distribution is quite good with

the majority of the teachers in the middle age group. There are also some young lecturers who have recently started their careers, as well as doctoral students who will be able to replace those teachers who are close to retirement. Critically it should be mentioned that a majority of teachers is always Lithuanian, the inflow- and outflow mobility which crosses national borders is seemingly quite low. This affects research and teaching negatively. At the same time it must be mentioned that salaries for the teaching staff are low which is an obstacle for universities to attract new staff, especially from abroad.

All institutions provide good conditions for teachers to participate in academic mobility programmes but in most institutions an insufficient number of teachers make use of this opportunity. However, there is very good participation in professional development courses to develop didactic, digital and language competences. Interview findings have shown a bundle of different reasons why teachers continue to fail to take advantage of the opportunities for academic mobility. Those reasons include a lack of engagement in international research projects, high teaching work loads, and limited mobility funds. It may be necessary to make it compulsory for every teacher to participate in such programmes at least once every five years.

During the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented physical access to the learning spaces, the different sociology departments provided the students and staff with software enabling remote access of study materials and necessary software. The taught content is delivered through a number of software packages, including Moodle. During the meeting the students commented positively on the available physical and informational infrastructure enabling their study and learning; they are able to book individual and group work rooms. There is good availability of electronic library resources ensuring remote access outside the opening hours.

3.6. Learning facilities and resources

The expert panel could gain a very positive idea regarding learning facilities and resources. The physical infrastructure available for teaching, learning and training is sufficient both in terms of size and quality as well as accessibility. The sociology students in all universities have access to auditoriums, computer rooms and specialised libraries which are in good quality. The library spaces have many workstations for both students and staff. Specially designed spaces for individual and group work are provided. The recommendation regarding all university libraries is to explore the demand for extended library opening hours to enable the students to access resources and learning spaces, as well as to interact with their peers to facilitate group learning.

The panel found that all three universities have a system in place to inform and advise the students regarding their study. The online resources are very informative and easily

accessible. Also, provisions have been made for students to reach their teachers and administrators easily.

Although the evaluation panel agreed that the physical, informational and financial resources are usually satisfying and sufficient to ensure effective learning process, also cases were found where some staff still share offices and not enough spaces for meetings exist (e.g. sociology department of Vilnius University). Efforts are being made to provide less restricted office environments to the teaching staff.

3.7. Study quality management and public information

The evaluation panel found in all three universities (VU, VMU, KTU) very informative and helpful self-evaluation reports to gain a first impression regarding state of the art at the different locations. All information which was provided for the expert panel could contribute to the quality control and measurement. The effect of doing self-evaluation reports is not only to deliver documents to the evaluation panel but also to strengthen the need of reflection and self-control at the side of the departments which is in itself a very necessary working tool.

Feedback from diverse stakeholders is systematically collected and analysed through several channels including surveys, round table discussions and regular meetings. However, the expert panel did not come across evidence on how regular and representative these events are, or how substantial their contribution to changes in study programme is.

VU provided insufficient opportunities and examples of involvement with stakeholders in the design and delivery study programmes and insufficient analysis of data collected through student surveys. The pool of external stakeholders and employers presented in the Self-evaluation report of KTU is small.

III. EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE

At Vilnius University employability rates for Sociology first and second graduates is high and are the types of jobs they secure them to use their knowledge and skills acquired during their studies. The Library and related IT learning resources are excellent

The Vytautas Magnus University standing as a higher education institution is strong and internationally excellent. The profile of the university as a liberal arts university and the critical orientation of sociology study field are clearly communicated, well known to society and celebrated among the students, the staff, and the alumni. The study experience is enhanced by a well-functioning administrative support which truly supports internationalisation. The departmental management structure is effective, supportive of research and able to establish and maintain a responsive system for research and learning. There is a strong collegial spirit that results in a vibrant academic community, organised around the values of openness, freedom and democratic culture. The expert panel found a strong and sustained commitment to the development of research on the international

standing, expressed in a solid number of research projects funded externally by prestigious research councils and impressive and consistent research performance over the years.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN *SOCIOLOGY* STUDY FIELD

- **Strategic recommendations for the Higher Education Institutions (at institutional level):**
 1. First and second cycle programmes must invest in recruitment to increase student members.
 2. To build connections with international partners and to exchange teachers and students. Also, double degree programmes may help to increase the visibility and attraction of sociology departments. Networks and cooperation programmes can be organized along different levels, (1.) connecting with other universities at the level of Baltic states around the Baltic sea, (2.) connecting at European level, and (3.) to try to connect to universities overseas (in the US, but also in Asian countries). E.g. Expert panel found out about a new centre for Asian studies at Vilnius University. Try to merge energies in order to recruit more students along those channels.
 3. To try to do active marketing at international sociology conferences (exhibition desks at ESA, ISA conferences or elsewhere) or to attend other strategic relevant places to attract high school graduates just by information and by communicating the strengths and competitive advantages. The admission procedures are transparent and well communicated. However, the high quality of the study programmes alone does not appear to attract students. Also, alumni could be better interpreted as a social capital through which the universities and departments may advertise. E.g. the presentation of graduates' success stories may enhance the web-presentation of the programmes
- **Strategic recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Science and Sport (at national level):**