

INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEW OF *THEOLOGY* STUDY PROGRAMMES IN LITHUANIA

Vytautas Magnus University, 7-11th February 2011

Overall Report

The Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania (SKVC) invited and commissioned an international panel of experts to undertake, in February 2011, an evaluation of three study programmes run by Vytautas Magnus University's Faculty of Catholic Theology.

STUDY PROGRAMMES:

- Catholic Theology (Bachelor's level)
- Pastoral Theology Study Programme (Master's level)
- Religious Education (Master's level)

TEAM MEMBERS

- Peter Stilwell – Team leader, Professor of Theology, Lisbon, Portugal
- Vidas Balčius – Professor of Theology, Holy See
- Gediminas Mikelaitis – Vilnius, Lithuania
- Justas Bujokas – Student, Lithuania
- Daiva Buivydienė – Coordinator SKVC, Lithuania

Written at the suggestion of SKVC, the present document is a general overview produced by the team leader as a personal synthesis of the observations made by the experts during their final meeting. A detailed evaluation of the three study programmes under consideration can be found in the respective reports written by the team as a whole.

STRENGTHS

1. We were struck by the obvious youth and energy of the Faculty of Catholic Theology. Although it had been a founding faculty of the University in 1922, it was officially closed in 1944 and only returned to Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in the last decade of the 20th century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the recovery of independence by Lithuania.
2. The facilities and resources available to the Faculty are of very good quality. The main Faculty building, shared with other VMU units and activities, was donated to the University by the archdiocese to help house Theology, and has been fitted with all the necessary equipment for contemporary academic work. Libraries and access to online academic reviews are more than adequate for the first cycle in Theology and Religious Studies, and sufficient for the second cycle study programme in Pastoral Theology
3. Aided by the university, the Faculty has adopted the criteria and procedures of the Bologna process and a student and learning centred understanding of higher education.
4. Supported by the local Catholic Church, the study programmes under consideration have identified niche areas in the Catholic community and in society which can be served by:
 - a. A basic formation in Catholic Theology, which includes a broad introduction to Humanities in general;
 - b. A specialized formation in Pastoral Theology based on questions of family life, and on management and communication skills in pastoral work;

- c. A master's degree for teachers with professional experience in primary and secondary education who want a more advanced understanding of the processes of religious education and are prepared to develop the necessary skills for valid small-scale research in this area.
5. The structure of these courses is adequate for the learning outcomes proposed and both of the Theological courses evaluated are in accordance with the requirements of the Holy See.
6. Staff and students show a high level of motivation.
 - a. The alumni with whom the evaluation team met considered their learning experience in these three study programmes to have been very positive. They underlined the broad humanist formation received, the close relationship with the teaching staff, the research methodology acquired, the confidence and information instilled to bring people together from different worldviews and religious affiliations. One of the graduates, in order to explain the professional advantage he felt the creativity acquired by himself and his colleagues in the second cycle study programme in Religious Education, coined the expression "We have become professional dreamers".
 - b. VMU's general policy has introduced strong incentives for the faculty staff to improve academic performance by linking salary to research, publication and international experience,.
7. The positive professional outcome of all three courses was confirmed by a considerable number of employers the evaluation team was able to meet.

WEAKNESSES

1. The undoubted academic value and personal prestige of staff members in the area of Moral Theology has resulted in overvaluing that area in the study programmes in Theology, to the detriment of others. The details were duly noted in the evaluation team's reports.
2. Some of the staff are at the end of their tenure, but there are a number of promising staff members who are at an early stage of their career.
3. There is a considerable discrepancy between the credits required by the Holy See (300 ECTS) for a Bachelor's degree in Theology and the credits in a normal Bachelor study programme according to Lithuanian law. This may make lead to undervaluing the degree in Theology in the job market, outside strictly ecclesiastical circles.
4. The intake of students for the Master study programmes is small.
5. Further investment needs to be made in widening the range of specialized books and reviews available to students in the Master's degree in Religious Education.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The Faculty of Catholic Theology is the only theological faculty in Lithuania, which places it in a strong position to respond to the Catholic Church's call for the greater formation of all its members by preparing those who will take on that task with the proficiency acquired through a university education.
2. The staff is being gradually moulded by experience and the career requirements of research, publishing and internationalization. If the Faculty's research centres continue to develop their cooperation with other VMU faculties and departments, it will be able to contribute to a clearer understanding of the underlying trends in Lithuanian society as its values, customs and mix of religious affiliations are subjected to change.

3. To the extent to which the Catholic Church becomes more aware of the external and internal pressures for change in culture and society, the work carried out by the FCT will be more greatly valued as a contribution to the necessary academic groundwork for any structured reflexion on the development its own identity and mission.

THREATS

4. The small number of students in the Master study programmes is linked to the yearly quota of State-financed positions attributed to them by VMU. The programmes are therefore almost entirely dependent on the fluctuations of the State's finances and political options. Complementary forms of financing scholarships and grants would seem to be a challenge worth facing.
5. A constant threat, at present in Europe, is the marginalization of Theology from mainstream academic research and development. The dominant view is that State and public services (which include education) should take a neutral stance when it comes to religion. The challenge is to prove that the necessarily confessional nature of Theology is an advantage, as it reflects the developing self-understanding and worldview of significant community in society. A faculty of Theology must, therefore, constantly remind public opinion, through its achievements and publications, that a critical perspective on contemporary issues is not only compatible with but can be enriched by academic contributions from a the background of a two to three-thousand year old religious tradition.

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One outstanding issue was left untouched by the evaluation team: the question of the title of Bachelor in Theology attributed to students who have completed a five year university course (300 ECTS). This has to do with the structure of Catholic Theological formation, as outlined in Papal documents and laid out by the Congregation for Catholic Education. The question of civil recognition of this canonical title must therefore be taken up directly in talks between the Lithuanian Government and the Holy See.

In the name of the international evaluation team, I would like to thank the Faculty of Catholic Theology – and all its staff and students – Vytautas Magnus University and His Excellency Sigitas Tamkevičius, Archbishop of Kaunas, for their willing collaboration and kind hospitality. Through them we express our gratitude to all those who participated in the sessions with us, clarifying our queries and helping us reach a more rounded understanding of the Faculty and the study programmes we had been asked to evaluate.

We thank SKVC for having invited us to carry out this assessment and express our warmest gratitude to Daiva Buivydiene for her constant help, professional expertise and personal touch.

Finally, as team leader, I would like to register my appreciation for the dedicated teamwork shown by all. An intense, weeklong schedule was turned into a very rewarding personal experience.

Lisboa, Portugal
21st November 2011

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