



STUDIJŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO CENTRAS

Vilniaus universiteto
GEOGRAFIJOS PROGRAMOS (612F80001)
VERTINIMO IŠVADOS

EVALUATION REPORT
OF *GEOGRAPHY* (612F80001)
STUDY PROGRAMME
at Vilnius University

Grupės vadovas:
Team Leader: Prof. Geoffrey Robinson

Grupės nariai:
Team members: Prof. Maris Klavins
Prof. Tommi Inkinen
Prof. Jürg Luterbacher
Dr. Miglė Stančikaitė

Išvados parengtos anglų kalba
Report language - English

Vilnius
2011

DUOMENYS APIE ĮVERTINTĄ PROGRAMĄ

Studijų programos pavadinimas	<i>Geografija</i>
Valstybinis kodas	612F80001
Studijų sritis	Fiziniai mokslai
Studijų kryptis	Gamtinė geografija
Studijų programos rūšis	Universitetinės studijos
Studijų pakopa	Pirmoji
Studijų forma (trukmė metais)	Nuolatinė (4)
Studijų programos apimtis kreditais	160
Suteikiamas laipsnis ir (ar) profesinė kvalifikacija	Geografijos bakalauras
Studijų programos įregistravimo data	19-05-1997 Nr. 565

INFORMATION ON ASSESSED STUDY PROGRAMME

Name of the study programme	<i>Geography</i>
State code	612F80001
Study area	Physical sciences
Study field	Physical Geography
Kind of the study programme	University studies
Level of studies	First cycle
Study mode (length in years)	Full-time (4)
Volume of the study programme in credits	160
Degree and (or) professional qualifications awarded	Bachelor of Geography
Date of registration of the study programme	19-05-1997 No. 565

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The Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

The external evaluation of the Bachelor study programme in *Geography* at Vilnius University (hereafter, 'the University') was initiated by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education of Lithuania nominating the international expert group (hereafter, the 'expert group' or 'assessment panel') formed by Professor Geoffrey Robinson (University of St. Andrews, Scotland – team leader), Professor Tommi Inkinen (University of Helsinki, Finland), Professor Maris Klavins (University of Latvia, Latvia), Professor Jürg Luterbacher (University of Giessen, Germany) and Dr. Migl4 Stančikait4 (Institute of Geology and Geography of the Nature Research Centre, Lithuania).

The evaluation of the study programme ('the programme') made use of the following documents: Law on Research and Higher Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2009); Order on External Evaluation and Accreditation Procedure of Study Programmes (2011); Methodology for Evaluation of Higher Education Study Programmes (2010); General Requirements for Undergraduate and Integrated Studies Programmes (2010); and Geography Study Field Regulation (2004).

The basis for the evaluation of the study programme is the Self-Assessment Report (SAR), written in 2011, its annexes and the site visit of the expert group to the University on 18 October 2011. The Faculty of Natural Sciences ('the Faculty') coordinates the programme, which is delivered by staff from within the Faculty (the departments of Geography and Land Management, Hydrology and Climatology, Geology and Mineralogy, and the Cartography Centre), other faculties (Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and Informatics, Economics, Philology, and Philosophy), as well as from the newly established Nature Research Centre (specifically from the former Institute of Geology and Geography). The Department of Geography and Land Management (the 'Department') is directly responsible for teaching the basic geography and land management subjects and for organizing field research practices. The site visit incorporated all required meetings with different groups: the administrative staff of the Faculty, staff responsible for preparing the self-assessment documents, academic staff, students of all years of study, graduates, and employers. The expert group inspected various support facilities and resources (classrooms, laboratories, library, computer facilities), examined students' final works, and various other materials.

After discussions and preparations of conclusions and remarks, the expert group presented introductory general conclusions of the visit to the Department's self-assessment team. The group subsequently met to discuss and agree the content of the report, which represents the members' consensual views.

It may be noted that both the Bachelor programme in *Geography* and the Master programme in *General Geography and Land Management* are located in the same department within the same faculty. They share the same facilities; many staff contributes to both programmes, albeit with different loadings; administration and management are essentially the same for both programmes; and employers who met with the evaluation group related to both programmes and interacted at department and faculty levels. The site visit covered both programmes simultaneously and, inevitably, the two evaluation reports have much in common.

II. PROGRAMME ANALYSIS

1. Programme aims and learning outcomes

The programme aims and learning outcomes are well defined, clear and publicly accessible. The primary aim is to train geographers in a broad range of subject areas that contribute to a “specialist understanding” of “general attitudes” towards sustainable development, land management, environment and landscape protection.

There is considerable demand for the programme. The aims and learning outcomes are consistent with the type and level of studies and the level of qualifications offered. They are seen as catering to societal needs and preparing students either directly for employment in those areas on graduation or to be able to progress to master studies. It is clear, however, that the labour market the programme is intended to serve is solely in Lithuania: the aims and outcomes make no mention of employment and higher-level study opportunities elsewhere. The intended learning outcomes embrace broad groups pertaining to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of cognitive, practical and transferable skills. Like the aims, the description of some specific learning outcomes is very broad. For example, “to comprehend ...” and “to understand ...” are terms that lack precision and could be more clearly defined, in context, at this level. But these are quibbles. The outcomes relating to skills are expressed in terms of what students are expected to be able to do, which impressed the expert group, indicating that the concepts of aims and outcomes have not been fully integrated into programme planning. The learning outcomes are appropriately mapped onto the study subjects. The programme name, aims, learning outcomes, content and the qualifications offered are fully compatible with each other.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

Students graduate from the programme as specialist geographers with especially broad basic scientific and applied skills.

2. Curriculum design

The curriculum meets all legal requirements. It assumed the current structure in 2005-2006 and has adapted to comply with all subsequent legislation and regulations. Although the study field is nominally physical geography, the programme has been kept to the interdisciplinary tradition of uniting physical and human components. This has had consequences for the time devoted to the preparation of theses; interdisciplinary requirements are for research to be conducted in both physical and human geography. This is achieved by scheduling a final paper in one area and a final project in the other; the students choose which area is addressed by each of the two methods.

The programme includes many study subjects, both obligatory and optional. The courses are evenly spread over the four years of study, with parallel teaching of physical and human components ensuring that both can be advanced at the same pace from year to year. The subjects are logically linked and avoid undue repetition of theme and content. As mentioned in the previous section, learning outcomes are mapped onto the study subjects and all possible inclusions of optional subjects combine with obligatory subjects to enable achievement of the

intended learning outcomes. The content of the subjects is consistent with the level of studies and generally appropriate for the achievement of the learning outcomes.

The study methods and materials seem to be appropriate for the achievement of the learning outcomes. The SAR, however, states with regard both to aims and outcomes and to the curriculum, that more attention to practical work could further enhance the programme; this could be associated with the introduction of qualitative research methodologies in social geography and strengthening the group of optional subjects. The SAR also targets developments in teaching and learning methodologies. The expert group would look to more research-based or evidence-based teaching methods that would help to ensure that the programme reflects the latest scientific achievements. They acknowledge, however, that good examples of research-supported teaching do feature in the programme as it now stands from 2011, noting with approval the introduction of a new module '*Methods of sociogeographical research and sociogeographical learning practice*'.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

The curriculum has been well adapted to accommodate the regulatory changes that have characterised the last few years.

The structure and content of the curriculum are very well matched to the programme aims and outcomes.

Weaknesses

The programme's social geography components do not yet introduce the research methodologies that play a major part in the modern discipline.

3. Staff

The staff who delivers the programme meets all legal requirements. Most have a long experience of teaching and research, all satisfy more than the minimum requirements. Collectively their numbers are more than adequate and they are well qualified to ensure the intended learning outcomes. In total, 42 academic staff contributes to the programme; 28 teach specialised geography subjects and 14 teach study area basics. Of the specialist teachers, 55 per cent are members of the Department, 35 per cent are from other departments in the Faculty, and 10 per cent are from other institutions. Staff from other faculties teaches appropriate study area basics and general education subjects. This drawing upon specialists from other areas and institutions, all with high scientific and teaching experience and qualifications, enables the delivery of a high-quality programme with a good scientific basis. The number of guest lecturers and interactions with the research institutes in the Nature Research Centre are indicative of high-quality inputs of research into teaching. Four technicians in the Department complete the staff available to the programme.

The staff's age profile is even throughout the various age ranges (from below 40 to above 60). This facilitates continuity in the programme, as staff turnover occurs mostly by voluntary retirement of the older members or by programme changes. Staff from other faculties and institutions occasionally changes in consequence of the workload policies of those bodies. In general, it would appear that programme management copes well with the inevitability of

turnover amongst such a large complement of staff, from a variety of main workplaces, which combine to deliver the programme.

Staff is active scientists who contribute to scientific conferences and participate in scientific research projects related to the programme's study field. The participation of staff in these scientific activities is uneven, however, and it is an aspect of the provision that warrants improvement. Staff in the Department, nevertheless, continues to improve their qualifications and engage in staff-development activities. Collaborative agreements with foreign universities, in particular Bamberg (Germany) and Montpellier (France), facilitate visits of teachers from abroad. These are organized so as to promote improvements not only in geographical competence but also in foreign language skills, teaching methods and study management. The expert group would encourage further developments in these arrangements.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

Teaching and research contributions from highly experienced, well-qualified staff from other faculties and institutions.

Ongoing improvement of the staff's qualifications and an overall significant participation in scientific activities.

Visits and training by staff from foreign institutions.

Weaknesses

The scientific activity of many teachers, especially those in the Department, is rather modest. The number and quality of publications are low, and mostly published in local scientific journals.

4. Facilities and learning resources

Programme lectures are delivered not only in the Faculty's auditoria but also in the faculties of Physics, Chemistry and Philology. The auditoria are adequate in size and suitably equipped. The Faculty's library and reading rooms are also adequately equipped.

Arrangements for students' practice are adequate. Students participate in three field practices, which support the theoretical subjects studied in each of the first three years. Various social partners cooperate with the Department in arranging the practices.

The Department's computing facilities need improvement. A computer room with only 11 places is inadequate for the number of students, albeit that they have access to equipment in other areas and many have their own computers. The expert group saw little in the way of fieldwork equipment. Despite the statement in the SAR that two-to-three auditoria and laboratories in the Faculty are renewed and provided with new facilities every year, the group observed that laboratories were in need of upgrading to keep pace with modern developments in the subject field. The group was pleased to note that the need for improvement has been recognized and the Department has secured some European funds for the purpose. Included will be renewal of technical facilities in auditoria, and upgrading of experimental equipment and mobile computing hardware and software used for fieldwork practicals. The Department's computers, including those in the computer classroom, are all to be replaced and a new geography laboratory provided

and equipped. The expert group would encourage the Department to ensure an adequate provision for maintenance and renewal of small items, especially fieldwork equipment, as part of the expenditure programme.

Library resources are of variable adequacy. Literature is located in the University and Faculty libraries. The Faculty library holds some 150 most recent scientific publications in geography and land management, in the English, German and Russian languages. Many subjects are covered by enough textbooks and other educational and scientific literature. Other subjects are inadequately covered. As a partial remedy, lecturers place summary materials on the Department's website home page; although this is laudable exercise, which is planned to be completed for all the programme's study subjects during the next two years, this is a poor substitute for authentic publications. The other faculty libraries support the subjects that they contribute to the programme. Students who met with the expert group were emphatic that they are not seriously hampered by the level of library resources; they make use of the wide variety of libraries elsewhere in Vilnius, in addition to having their own access to online databases made available by the University and by such institutions as the Nature Research Centre and the Lithuanian Science Academy. A student GIS is also available and students are generally satisfied with the level of holdings and accessibility of learning resources. Nevertheless, the expert group would hope that in the process of securing funds to improve equipment and other laboratory resources, the Department will also deploy funds to keep library resources up to date.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

The securing of funds to renew teaching and learning equipment in the very near future.

Weaknesses

The current lack of modern equipment, teaching and learning materials, and sufficient resources for practical work.

5. Study process and student assessment

The admission procedures comply with all statutory requirements. Entry is by competitive examination with scores augmented by high performances in national and international geography competitions. The programme attracts highly motivated students with good competitive scores. Geography is a very popular subject amongst school leavers and demand for the programme is high. The Department regularly recruits 33-37 well-qualified students each year (figures for 2006-2010). Unfortunately, and apparently the result of factors outwith the Department's control (academic leave of absence; personal and financial circumstances; taking up of paid employment which then impinges on academic work) there is a significant dropout rate. This has reached as high as 25-27 per cent from first and final-year students; only 22-27 students graduated over the period 2006-2010, although some who failed to graduate in the allotted four years have returned to studies later. The expert group encourages the Department to consider implementing a systematic method of more accurately ascertaining the reasons for non-completion, at the same time preserving individual confidentiality. The group recognises the

inherent problems of establishing such a system but without definitive information the troublesome dropout rate cannot be effectively tackled.

The programme has been described above as involving a large number of staff from several faculties and other institutions, with classes held in a variety of locations. The organising task, performed by the Department, is considerable; it is a notable feat to be able to ensure an adequate provision of the programme and the achievement of intended learning outcomes. Students are provided with all necessary information about classes, aims and outcomes, subject requirements and the scheduling of assessments, learning practices and study papers, including the final thesis. The information is provided in a variety of ways and in a timely fashion. The students who met with the expert group acknowledged they are kept well informed.

Students are encouraged to participate both in scientific and social activities. Opportunities include an annual scientific conference of geography students where presentations and papers are in competition for awards and prizes. A few students are able to work with staff members on their research projects. The Faculty organises a wide range of events for students to be able to meet and interact with teachers and social partners; some of the events also involve staff from other universities, in Lithuania and abroad, and graduates from the programme. Of particular note are the specialised learning trips in spring and autumn that take students to various parts of Lithuania and widen students' knowledge of the natural and cultural heritage. (The trips are additional to the annual summer practices, which are an important part of the study process.) All these activities heighten students' motivation and help to promote the excellent relations between staff and students that greatly impressed the expert group. They lie at the heart of the academic and social support the Department provides.

The University provides financial support in a number of ways. Scholarships reward certain academic successes or are directed to the social support of students with disabilities or other handicaps to study, such as serious illness or bereavement. Counselling and advisory services are available to help and guide students experiencing study difficulties. Despite all of these measures, economic and personal circumstances still lead to most of the student withdrawals referred to above.

Students have opportunities to participate in the ERASMUS exchange (student mobility) programme. At bachelor level this is limited to students with good results and facility in a foreign language; they can spend six months at a chosen West European university. Outgoing students in this programme have numbered from one to four in each year. Incoming students have numbered as many as nine, and they bring an additional component to the university and geography experience of the home students.

The assessment of knowledge and achievement is by a variety of continuous, intermediate and final examination methods. They take mostly traditional forms. Eligibility to take a subject examination is dependent on satisfactory attendance at the various practical and seminar sessions. Study subject documentation informs students about the assessment methods to be used and the requirements for achieving particular grades. Specific procedures govern the preparation and submission of the final thesis. The assessment system appears to be well organised and equitable; it is clear, adequate and publicly available.

The professional activities of the majority of graduates meet the programme provider's expectations, in that a remarkable proportion of the graduates (up to 45 per cent) continue in the

Department's master study program of Geography and Land Management; others (up to 15 per cent) proceed to other Faculty programmes in cartography, ecology, and geology. Many of the substantial remainder go directly into employment, mostly in geography-related positions. From discussions with graduates and employers, it would appear that students are now better prepared for employment than they were some years ago. But given the likelihood that in the longer term the job opportunities will change, it would be sensible for the Department to begin intensive labour-market analysis with the intention of modifying the programme in readiness for the changes that are thus identified

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

Especially noted was the confidence of students; the enthusiasm of a well-qualified staff; and appreciation by graduates of the skills they had acquired in the programme.

A wide range of academic activities promote the excellent staff-student relations that lie at the heart of the Department's academic and social support of students.

The progression of a majority of graduates into further studies or subject-related employment.

6. Programme management

Operating within the regulatory framework of the State, programme management is at three levels: University, Faculty and Department. Responsibilities for internal regulation, decisions and monitoring of the implementation of the programme are clearly allocated. Operational control and direct responsibility for implementing the programme are with the Department. Here the Head, the staff and the programme committee deal variously with matters that include organisation of the study process; provision of facilities and learning resources; improvement of study quality; allocation of teaching loads; changes of curriculum, subject preparations and descriptions; relations with social partners; and confirmation of supervisors for theses and research papers. Programme management is generally effective; the exception has been the inability to secure adequate funding for the regular periodic upgrading of facilities and learning resources. That is doubtless a problem that pervades the University and it is to be hoped that the recent acquisition of European funds will improve matters.

The evaluation and improvement processes involve stakeholders. Students are represented on the programme committee and on the Faculty council. Social partners are also represented on the committee; they play an important advisory role there and in their contacts with staff and students in events organised by the Department. Employers and alumni who met with the assessment panel expressed their appreciation of the good relations that prevail with social partners and their ability to be heard in discussions about programme enhancements.

Internal quality assurance procedures are efficient and generally effective. All bodies involved at the various levels have clear monitoring and reporting responsibilities. The general system is based upon European Regulations for internal study quality assurance; the so-called 'Dublin descriptors' or guidelines; UK guidelines for geographical studies; and guidance from the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education. The periodic surveys of study

disciplines and teaching quality are an important part of the process. Other information is regularly gathered from teaching staff, employers and other social partners.

Analysis of regularly gathered information underpins the improvement process. Lessons learned from internal surveys lead, after due process, to programme improvements. The outcomes of external evaluations carried out in 2001 were used to improve the programme, as was an internal assessment carried out by a former programme committee in 2005. Already, the SAR incorporates pointers to improvements that will have been prompted by the current evaluation. The use that has been made of the outcomes of internal and external evaluations is evidence to the expert group of the programme management's responsiveness to the needs for change and willingness to identify and implement improvements.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

The involvement of stakeholders in the Department's programme management.

The design and operation of the internal quality assurance system to align with international standards.

The willingness to apply the results of internal and external evaluations to improve the programme.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. With regard to both aims and outcomes and the curriculum, enhance the programme by increasing practical work, which could be associated with introducing qualitative research methodologies in social geography and strengthening the group of optional subjects.
2. Adopt more widely the research-based or evidence-based teaching methods that are found in parts of the programme and would help to ensure that the programme reflects the latest scientific achievements.
3. Take whatever steps are required to raise the level of international scientific activity, research and publication to at least the level of the most active contributors to the programme and hence raise the Department's and the programme's international visibility.
4. Make haste with the renewal and upgrading of computing, laboratory and field equipment and of learning resources.
5. Given the likelihood that in the longer term employment opportunities will change, the Department might begin intensive labour-market analysis with the intention of modifying the programme (and the master programme that many students progress to) in readiness for the changes that are thus identified.

IV. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

The study programme Geography (state code – 612F80001) is given **positive** evaluation.

Study programme assessment in points by fields of assessment.

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation Area in Points*
1.	Programme aims and learning outcomes	4
2.	Curriculum design	3
3.	Staff	3
4.	Material resources	3
5.	Study process and assessment (student admission, study process, student support, achievement assessment)	4
6.	Programme management (programme administration, internal quality assurance)	4
	Total:	21

*1 (unsatisfactory) - there are essential shortcomings that must be eliminated;

2 (satisfactory) - meets the established minimum requirements, needs improvement;

3 (good) - the field develops systematically, has distinctive features;

4 (very good) - the field is exceptionally good.

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