



STUDIJŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO CENTRAS

Vilniaus universiteto

***BENDROSIOS GEOGRAFIJOS IR KRAŠTOTVARKOS
PROGRAMOS (621L70001)
VERTINIMO IŠVADOS***

**EVALUATION REPORT
OF *GENERAL GEOGRAPHY AND LAND MANAGEMENT*
(621L70001)
STUDY PROGRAMME
at Vilnius University**

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Išvados parengtos anglų kalba
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DUOMENYS APIE ĮVERTINTĄ PROGRAMĄ

| | |
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| Studijų programos pavadinimas | <i>Bendroji geografija ir kraštotvarka</i> |
| Valstybinis kodas | 621L70001 |
| Studijų sritis | Socialiniai mokslai |
| Studijų kryptis | Visuomeninė geografija |
| Studijų programos rūšis | Universitetinės studijos |
| Studijų pakopa | Antroji |
| Studijų forma (trukmė metais) | Nuolatinė (2) |
| Studijų programos apimtis kreditais | 80 |
| Suteikiamas laipsnis ir (ar) profesinė kvalifikacija | Geografijos magistras |
| Studijų programos įregistravimo data | 19-05-1997 Nr. 565 |

INFORMATION ON ASSESSED STUDY PROGRAMME

| | |
|---|--|
| Name of the study programme | <i>General Geography and Land Management</i> |
| State code | 621L70001 |
| Study area | Social sciences |
| Study field | Human Geography |
| Kind of the study programme | University studies |
| Level of studies | Second cycle |
| Study mode (length in years) | Full-time (2) |
| Volume of the study programme in credits | 80 |
| Degree and (or) professional qualifications awarded | Master 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 Master study programme in *General Geography and Land Management* 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. Miglė Stančikaitė (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 Master Study 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 department of Geography and Land Management and the Cartography Centre), other faculties (Mathematics and Informatics), 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 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 contribute 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 highly qualified specialists having interdisciplinary geographical and land management education. The expected learning outcomes include knowledge, cognitive, practical and transferable skills, which are well integrated in the programme's study subjects and courses. Collectively the intention is to provide the acquisition of skills required to enter doctoral studies and to work in various fields of socio-economic and landscape research; these include territorial planning and its supervision; working in institutions exploiting natural resources or engaging in environmental protection; and include both operational and administrative roles. The assessment panel considers this to be well done; it gives the programme a clear focus.

It is clear that the programme aims and learning outcomes are based on academic and professional requirements that match the perceived needs of the labour market. There is considerable demand for the programme, the subject field of geography being of marked societal importance. Land management professionals are important to Lithuania, which is reflected in the interest shown by employers and other social partners and stated to the expert group during the site visit. The expert group would encourage the Department to pay increased attention to the international dimension of this particular labour market.

The programme aims and learning outcomes are consistent with the type and level of studies and the level of qualifications offered, although the Department could make more transparent the differences between outcomes that are expressed in similar terms at both levels of the geography programmes. 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 been fully integrated into programme planning. The learning outcomes are appropriately mapped onto the study subjects and the programme name (from which the term *General* is omitted from 2011-12), its learning outcomes, interdisciplinary content and master degree qualification are fully compatible with each other. The offered courses and modules form a structure that is fully compatible with the overall goals of the Department and the Faculty. Students graduate with a good platform for their employment. This was confirmed during the site visit at meetings with students, graduates and employers, all of whom were satisfied with the skills and know-how level of the persons graduating from this programme. It appears to be characteristic of the programme that up to 60 per cent of students are already employed during their studies and 25 per cent gain permanent employment within three months of graduating.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

Students graduate from the programme with learning outcomes that constitute a sound basis for employment in the labour market targeted by the programme.

2. Curriculum design

The curriculum design meets all legal requirements. These have changed considerably over the past few years. A new interdisciplinary model was introduced in 2010 and the necessary continuous adaptation of the programme to comply with master regulations has further led to the situation where students completing their studies in 2011-12 will do so under a different credit accumulation system from the ECTS modular system that began for first-year students in 2011-12.

The repeated changes have clearly posed problems for programme planning. Probably the most significant change required by a 2010 regulation was to introduce separate final projects or papers for the two parts of the interdisciplinary programme. This would appear contrary to the concept of interdisciplinarity. Throughout and despite the changes, courses (modules) are evenly spread, logically linked and not overlapping with each other. They avoid undue repetition of theme and content. The subject contents are consistent with the type and level of studies and, with the learning methods that are adopted, the study subjects are appropriate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. These include practical skills of research work obtained through practical work, seminars, and workshops, which are included in the study subjects, as well as through processes of preparation of papers, presentations and theses.

The SAR shows awareness of the possible need for more practical content. It is notable, however, that although not obligatory under state legislation, the Department introduced compulsory learning practice from 2010. This was designed to strengthen the scientific abilities of master graduates. The expert group remarked upon the need for better spatial data analysis in the theses. Another illustration of skills that need further scrutiny arose during the site visit. GIS is one of the largest curriculum elements in the programme (10 credits, 96 contact hours) but yet an employer in the GIS field expressed the wish to see graduates bringing more application skills into the workplace rather than theoretical and technical knowledge of GIS. On the other hand, an employer in a different field praised the abilities of graduates to use their knowledge and acquired skills in the practice of land management. Messages are therefore mixed, but one certainty is that qualitative analysis, an essential methodology in human and social geography, features much less in the curriculum than the quantitative analysis that is equally essential in physical geography. The expert group suggests that this disparity is addressed in future programme developments.

That relative weakness in the approach to scientific inquiry contributes to the assessment panel's view that although the scope of the programme is sufficient to ensure the achievement of most intended learning outcomes, the content of the programme does not fully reflect the latest achievements in geographical science. Several modules use only very general books or, to a large extent, national references. The reading lists could be stronger in terms of international journal publications. This modest level of inclusion of modern scientific achievements is also evident in the thesis references, which focus mainly on Lithuanian work and neglect the great body of international work in both parts of the discipline.

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 content, as illustrated by reading lists and thesis references, does not adequately reflect the latest achievements in the geographical sciences, including developments in spatial data analysis and qualitative methods.

3. Staff

The staff who deliver the programme meet 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, 13 academic staff contribute to the programme, all with doctoral qualifications; 55 per cent are members of the Department, 15 per cent are from elsewhere in the Faculty, and 30 per cent are from other institutions (the Institute of Geology and Geography of the Nature Research Centre; the Environment Protection Agency of the Ministry of Environment). Drawing upon specialists from other departments, all well qualified and with high scientific and teaching experience, enables the delivery of a high-quality programme with a good scientific basis. The significant contributions from the research institute and the Environment Protection Agency 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 differs between those located in the Department and those principally employed elsewhere. The greatest proportion (83 per cent) of the latter group is under 50 years old, with a good number under 40. By contrast the Department's staff are fairly evenly distributed across the age ranges. Staff turnover in recent years has followed from curriculum changes that have involved the deployment of recently qualified doctoral graduates. This turnover enabled rapid improvements to the programme during the period when significant changes in regulatory legislation were taking place. Currently, it is expected that staff turnover will take place by voluntary retirement of older staff members. This will have implications for staff development as younger staff members take on new responsibilities. Staff from other faculties and institutions occasionally change in consequence of the workload policies of those bodies. In general, it would appear that the Department manages the staffing of the programme well and that staff turnover has not been problematic.

Staff are 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. One senior member of staff has over 250 publications in the area of land management to his name. Overall, staff have published as few as five and up to 20 scientific works over the last five years but the research profile is relying to a large extent on national or other non-ranked publications. The SAR discloses that there were only 15 ISI publications in that period, a poor record by international standards. It is an aspect of the provision that demands improvement.

Staff in the Department, nevertheless, continue to improve their qualifications and take opportunities to 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, with a view to introduce more qualitative research methodology into the programme. There is also a concern that at present in Lithuania, doctoral degree studies are not available in Human Geography. There is no doubt that PhD qualifications in that subject field, as opposed to Physical Geography, following on from 1st. and 2nd. cycle studies, would greatly improve the academic integrity (and national reputation) of the subject and have an impact on its future teaching.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

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

A good balance obtains between staff of different generations.

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

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 in the Faculty's auditoria, which are adequate in size and suitably equipped. The Faculty's library and reading rooms are also adequately equipped.

The Department's computing facilities need improvement. A computer room with only 11 places is inadequate for the number of students in the Department, 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. It was made aware, however, of a very good learning resource, in the nature of the latest data bases of Lithuanian territory; these include reference data bases at large and medium scales, aerial photograph bases, terrestrial laser scan data, and other materials. They are heavily used by students for practical assignments, course papers and theses. 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 expert 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 this 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 (51 in number) 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 are well founded and comply with all statutory requirements. Entry is by competition, open without additional requirements, to bachelors of geography, land management, architecture, ecology and environmental studies, geology, forestry, agriculture, history, sociology, economics, recreation and tourism, management and business administration, communication and information, environmental engineering. There are no entrance exams. The scores are made up of several parts, related mainly to performance at bachelor level. The programme attracts highly motivated students with good competitive scores. The Department regularly recruits 12-17 well-qualified students each year (figures for 2006-2010). The planned number is 12 but in some years other programmes could not fill their quotas and hence additional places were reallocated to this programme. In addition to graduates from the University's bachelor studies, the programme has attracted graduates from Vilnius Pedagogical, Klaipeda and Vilnius Gediminas Technical universities.

The organisation of the study process ensures an adequate provision of the programme and achievement of the 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 that they are kept well informed.

Students are encouraged to participate in scientific activities, including research in staff projects. The assessment panel, however, considers that increasing the international dimension of research and student involvement would greatly strengthen these activities. The panel was pleased to be informed by students that some are already involved in the ERASMUS exchange programme. Destinations for partial studies have included universities in Iceland, Sweden and Germany. Others have had practice experience in Spain, France and Greece. Students consider they have adequate information regarding these opportunities and the panel would wish the Department to encourage as strongly as possible their take up; this would be another aspect of adopting a greater international perspective in studies and research.

The excellent relations between staff and students greatly impressed the expert group. They lie at the heart of the more than adequate level of academic and social support the Department provides. Almost all students in the programme are state funded, which is a good indicator of the quality of the students entering the programme as well as a good basis of financial support. The University provides additional 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. There are few withdrawals from this programme; most are temporary for personal reasons, the students subsequently returning to complete their studies.

The assessment of knowledge and achievement, as for the Department's bachelor programme, is by a variety of continuous, intermediate and final examination methods. They take mostly traditional forms and are subject to the same University regulations. Study module 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.

About 60 per cent of graduates over the period 2006-2010 gained employment in government agencies, working in activities directly related to their study field. Environment protection and land management each took about a third of graduates over the period. Some 10 per cent of graduates entered into doctoral studies while at the same time working in state institutions. Others work in the education system and the private sector; only some 16 per cent were in employment only indirectly related to their studies. Employers who met with the assessment panel confirmed their satisfaction with the quality of the graduates and their subsequent performance in employment. It is undoubted that the professional activities of the majority of graduates meet the programme provider's expectations.

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.

Students are encouraged to pursue both scientific and professional goals and the majority progress into subject-related employment.

Weaknesses

The international perspective of the subject studies and research is poorly developed.

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 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 mainly effective. All bodies involved at the various levels have clear monitoring and reporting responsibilities. The University's 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. The assessment panel is confident, therefore, that programme management will address the weaknesses that this report has identified.

Main strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

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

The design and operation of the University's 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. Revise the curriculum's content with a view to more adequately reflecting the latest methodological developments and achievements in the geographical sciences, including developments in spatial data analysis and qualitative methods.
2. 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.
3. Make haste with the renewal and upgrading of computing, laboratory and field equipment and of learning resources, including the improvement of access to up-to-date scientific publications.
4. Develop further the international perspectives of studies and research, including the encouragement of students to increase their participation in mobility programmes, not only the ERASMUS exchange programme but also to gain experience over wider geographical areas.
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 in readiness for the changes that are thus identified.

IV. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

The study programme General Geography and Land Management (state code – 621L70001) 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) | 3 |
| 6. | Programme management (programme administration, internal quality assurance) | 4 |
| | Total: | 20 |

*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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