



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW REPORT

Public Health

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the Public Health study field in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Klaipėda University, Lithuania Sports University, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Vilnius University.

The external evaluation was organised by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), Lithuania. Comprehensive external evaluation reports that include discovered strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations, were prepared for the Public Health study field for each evaluated HEI. Reports contain evaluation marks (separately for the first and second cycle). This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the Public Health study field from a general point of view.

Based on the findings of the Public Health study field evaluation, the expert panel has decided to give a positive evaluation to all evaluated HEIs and first/second cycles.

On the basis of the external evaluation report of the study field, SKVC took a decision to accredit the study field for 7 years at Lithuanian Sports University and Lithuanian University of Health Sciences and for 3 years at Klaipėda University and Vilnius University.

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

This section of the Overview contains overall observations by the expert panels regarding the most positive aspects of the study field of Public Health in Lithuanian HEIs, as well as areas in need of improvement.

3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

It was noted by the panel that all Public Health programmes contain a significant proportion of medical and biomedical subjects, often quite specialised. This is obviously a result from the history of Public Health, often originating from medicine and especially hygiene.

The development of learning outcomes and curricula are closely linked to social partners and national bodies and are, therefore, in most cases readily updated and aligned with national regulations and international guidelines. There is a great variation in the research profile between the HEIs, with a differing strong research focus on, for example, environmental issues/climate change, physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle medicine, food science and veterinary medicine, just to mention a few.

Apart from the Register of Public Health practitioners, there appears to be no nationally defined set of competencies for Public Health practitioners, including the newly created role of Lifestyle Medicine Specialist. As a result, institutions are currently defining their own learning outcomes and competency frameworks. Without detailed guidance relating to the expectations of this

new role which is expected to be a significant destination for many graduates of these programmes, it is difficult for both institutions and external evaluators to determine whether the current programmes are fit for purpose.

While some understanding of the basics of medicine and health remains necessary for Public Health graduates, it may be that the inclusion of so much of biomedicine topics means that there is less opportunity to cover Health, or Public Health, including health promotion competencies such as communication skills, policy development, motivational interviewing, marketing. This again enforces the need to ensure that there is a shared, national understanding about what the professional competencies of Public Health professionals should be.

Future development could possibly encompass specialities in different areas at the different institutions, such as environment/climate, public health nutrition, Food safety/food security, public health physical activity, public health policy, lifestyle medicine and epidemiology, just to mention a few. An exchange between national/international institutions in this regard could make it possible to share basic course modules, as well as highly specialised modules on the Master's level, using Moodle or teacher mobility programmes.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

Many teachers are active in research and involve their own research in teaching as well as students in research projects. Scientific publications in the area of Public Health in highly cited journals were low overall, however, some universities were more active in publishing. It was noted that almost all Master's theses were published in Lithuanian, which makes them less accessible for the panel and international audiences and makes publication in international journals of the findings more difficult. However, a large proportion of published materials are published in national periodicals or as reports in Lithuanian, which means that they might have a great national impact and less international. The positions as first and last authors or corresponding authors are not so prevalent for the teachers during the last five years.

Student involvement in research varied a lot between universities and often appeared to be linked to the possibilities for teachers to spend time in research activities. In some of the universities, students were co-authors in publications and conference abstracts, based on their master theses.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

Student admission was mostly based on a high number of applicants. Due to the many specialities in Public Health, there appears to be some confusion among students about possibilities for future professions, including academic and international careers.

There is a consistent pattern across the universities of being keen to support students from challenging financial backgrounds, and those with disabilities. Some universities even had grants for socially vulnerable students and could offer affordable housing on campuses. There

is a particular emphasis on physical disabilities, which was also observed during on-site visits, with adjustments such as chair lifts and digital readers.

Support for students with mental health issues and learning disabilities was less obvious and may need specific boosting. There is increasing international interest in differential attainment, where some groups of students perform below their true abilities due to physical, social or financial disadvantages. Institutions should have processes in place to systematically monitor for differential attainment, for example, analysing assessment results by gender, ethnicity, disability, social vulnerability and language of instruction. It is important that, when having identified any differences, mechanisms of support are also identified and provided.

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

Most graduates do get employment in different roles related to Public Health, and the development of primary health centres will swallow a large number of graduates in the future. A register of Public Health professionals guides the development of the wide area of Public Health, and so do international developments such as ASPHER and international collaborations such as Erasmus+, highly ranked universities and WHO collaboration.

The lack of a national competency framework makes it difficult to comment on whether the graduates of these programmes are being adequately prepared for their future careers - this is most significant in light of the creation of this new Lifestyle Medicine Specialist role, comprising an estimated 400 practitioners across Lithuania, however, information about the competencies is needed. It is advisable that the Master in Lifestyle Medicine at LSMU is consistent with other master programmes and has a duration of two years to include practice and elective modules as well as possibilities for mobility.

Few of the students and graduates overall seem to be interested in an international or academic career, although more student interest is shown in those institutions where international work is put high on the agenda.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

Maintaining a balance between research and teaching is challenging in several institutions, but it was notable that in those institutions where time is generously allocated for participation in research, the working climate was good and the number of published papers was high. This also meant a larger part of student involvement in research, since there was time allocated among teachers for supervision and research activities.

There are universities with a great international network and lots of mobility among teachers. However, opportunities for international experience for staff are still limited in the universities and could be increased, to the benefit of both staff and institutions. It was also felt that

continued learning among staff was hampered at some universities and that knowledge of the English language was not adequate among staff as well as among students.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

Learning facilities and resources mirrored the existing needs in all the institutions, and there appear to be processes in place for getting updated with equipment and refurbishing of existing facilities. Most resources observed were of a high standard. The laboratories in place are sometimes very specialised which underscores the existence of Public Health specialties which should be highly valued nationally as well as internationally.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Quality management is handled differently by different institutions, and most of them have really good feedback on their programmes by social partners and alumni. The quality assurance processes for modules taught in more than one language (usually Lithuanian and English) were universally absent from the reports written for the panel. It seems to be a common problem that student participation in evaluation surveys is low and it is unclear how much of student feedback is looped back into the programmes' design.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN PUBLIC HEALTH STUDY FIELD

Strategic recommendations at an institutional level (for Higher Education Institutions):

The development of an international strategy would be beneficial for most institutions. Such a strategy would involve mobility programmes for teachers and students (and identifying possibilities of linking the two), applying for international funding, networking with international institutions, taking part in international conferences, building language skills and rewarding co-publication with partners in other countries and international journals. Such a strategy could include an assessment of international activity in yearly appraisal talks/salary negotiations for teachers and could deserve a particular mention in final examination documents for students.

There are a lot of discrepancies between the institutions in regard to scientific publication efficiency. Continued learning for teachers and staff on how to write, publish and communicate science, also using social media, should be promoted as well as courses on supervision of students and research ethics.

It is universally challenging to collect student input on course content and processes; increasing student involvement should form an important and integral part of the development at most institutions. Early on in the studies, it is important to emphasise possible future roles for students, including careers within academia and internationally. In the marketing of the study programmes, this is an essential part in order to further increase the attractiveness of the programmes.

Collaboration with other national HEIs should be proven beneficial, due to the different Public Health specialities demonstrated at the different HEIs. This could encompass joint course modules, national teacher exchange, double teacher affiliations, as well as joint supervision of theses in the second cycle.

It would be beneficial to identify ways of running joint PhD programmes possibly sponsored by social partners in the national or local environment as well as with other HEIs, nationally or internationally, in order to further emphasise academic career opportunities to students in the first and second cycles.

Strategic recommendations at the national level (for the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport):

Possibilities for specialising within the Public Health area should be identified, with a core set of competencies for all, and different speciality programmes fitting the roles identified, where clear competencies should be published, particularly for the new Lifestyle Medicine Specialist role. This could take place at national workshops with all involved HEIs taking part and in collaboration with SKVC.

The basis for Public Health science needs to be further discussed, as medical dominance is apparent in most institutions, which is understandable due to the development from environmental medicine and food safety. This might be helped by the competency development mentioned above.

It could be useful to identify and highlight the scientific specialities of different institutions in order to increase the feeling of a need for national collaboration as well as international. This could lead to more collaboration between the institutions.

When doing the bibliometrics to evaluate the scientific quality of the institutions, attention should be paid to internal university and national collaboration in authorship as well as identifying international collaboration and rewarding these for the purpose of possibly making sure that a sense of coherence is created within the HEI, the country and within the EU and internationally.

National support for building internationalisation strategies is surely needed. This could encompass courses as well as templates for strategies, including a national yearly internationalisation ranking of the institutions.

There seems to be a bit of a competition between medicine and Public Health in regard to which is more scientific or valued. This should be discussed on a national level as a way to promote an understanding of the need for Public Health specialities, even though some boost was provided by the pandemic experience. More funding for PhD positions in Public Health would be advised as a means to support Public Health science as a whole.

The issue of whether Public Health research actually reaches the level of having importance for policy change is certainly valued nationally as well as at some institutions, and the expert panel wishes to emphasise the importance of including that type of evaluation when assessing the quality of institutions, and not only building on scientific output in journals.

More national financial support should be provided to socially vulnerable students, in particular those in the local environment of some of the HEIs, and financial support in the form of grants should also be secured for any student reaching a high academic performance level.

In light of the current state of the world, it was suggested that a course module on food security and safe water provisions as well as other aspects currently emphasised would be implemented due to the threats the public are living under, financial and otherwise. This could be supported at the national level and performed by HEIs.

Recommendations on the evaluation process for SKVC

Most documentation provided for review was in the format of separate documents in English and Lithuanian. In circumstances where a joint document was provided, this meant that files were larger and extremely difficult to navigate. It would be helpful to require respondents to create separate documents in English in the future.

It might be useful for SKVC to develop stricter guidelines for quality assurance for study programmes to be used by all universities including methods for benchmarking, student self-assessment and suggestions for how to increase student involvement in the quality assurance of study programmes.

The process has been smooth and easy to understand, even though slightly pressed for time during the site visits. It could be of importance to add half a day at the SKVC at the beginning of the evaluation process, thus making arrival on the first day a bit more enjoyable with a hotel night in Vilnius in the beginning and leaving for the other institutions on a Monday afternoon, and going home Friday evening. But this worked and the expert panel was very well taken care of.