



CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Overview report of
Human Geography study field**

2023 evaluation year

Prepared by expert panel members:

1. Prof. Dr. Sarah Nettleton;
2. Prof. Dr. Tommi Inkinen

Vilnius

2023

I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the Human Geography study field in Klaipeda university and Vilnius university.

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

Based on the findings of the Human Geography study field evaluation, expert panels have come to a decision to give a positive evaluation to both evaluated higher education institutions.

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 the Human Geography in Lithuanian HEIs, as well as areas in need of improvement.

3.1. Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum

Human Geography study programs demonstrated strengths in the well-structured and diverse content of both universities and their three programs: Vilnius University has a strong focus on planning practice, environmental and spatial management, and project experiments. The study learning outcomes are clearly defined, and the program places a significant emphasis on teaching management, structuring, and volume, which is supported by evidence of quality control. Graduates of Vilnius University are broadly educated, capable of integrating information and technological tools effectively, and readily available for professional work. Klaipeda University exhibits strengths in its alignment with market needs, as evidenced by a comprehensive evaluation of program relevance to society and the labour market. The program places importance on equipping students with modern tools and GIS technology, recognizing their significance in today's digitalized world. Additionally, Klaipeda University shows a strong commitment to adhering to legal requirements and regulations, with close cooperation between university staff and lecturers, social partners, and potential employers to analyse labour market needs.

While there were no specific weaknesses identified, Vilnius University faces challenges related to the low number of students and the number of vacancies identified by social partners, indicating the need for a more systematic analysis of market demand and measures to increase student enrolment. Recommendations for improvement include collecting measurable data on market needs and developing a recruitment strategy to attract more students, potentially by increasing the quota of funded student places. In Klaipeda University, information on Second Cycle Personalisation, with detailed information available for the first cycle but not the second. Furthermore, limitations in student choice regarding the pedagogy or teacher training module may overrule some students' preferences. Additionally, there is a relatively limited regional and local geographic focus, which may restrict the variety of topics explored e.g. in students' final theses. The expert panel recommends that Klaipeda University reviews its Bachelor's program to allow all students to either opt in or opt out of the pedagogical elective and route, enhancing

personalisation. They also suggest encouraging a broader geographic range of topics for final theses to enrich students' learning experiences.

3.2. Links between science (art) and studies

Human Geography programs in general demonstrate strengths in well-documented and logical links between research and teaching. In Vilnius University, there has been a positive development in research output and collaboration since the last evaluation. However, there is potential for further enhancement in research output and international project participation. To address this, recommendations include supporting staff in managing their workloads to allow for research and publication in international journals and encouraging participation in national and international conferences for networking and research profile development.

At Klaipeda University, strengths include close cooperation with the regional community, intensive interaction with local authorities, investment in improved technical infrastructure and up-dated software for students, and active student involvement in research and conferences. Nevertheless, there is a need for improvement in international publication activity and limited time for staff to secure external funding and publish in international journals. Opportunities for international projects and travel are also limited, partly due to the pandemic. Recommendations for improvement involve senior management supporting teaching staff to balance workloads for research activities and encouraging more national and international projects involving students. These recommendations aim to strengthen the research and teaching linkages at both universities, ultimately enhancing research output and impact.

3.3. Student admission and support

Vilnius University has strengths in its informative, user-friendly website accessible to both current and potential students, along with transparent and easy-to-understand admission procedures. Students benefit from strong support from both faculty members and the administration. Additionally, the university employs a majority of practitioners as teachers, allowing students to learn from real-world situations. However, there are challenges, particularly related to the complexity of some specialised modules, which can be challenging for students. This includes knowledge gaps in using technological applications and data collection and analysis tools, demanding additional time and resources from both students and staff. To address this, the expert panel recommends a review of admission criteria to include prerequisites that ensure students have the foundational knowledge and skills to study modules without relying on additional support. Moreover, the panel suggests integrating internationalisation aspects into the program to diversify student experiences.

Klaipeda University exhibits strengths in its informative web pages for students, clear and transparent admission procedures for first and second cycles, and the active involvement of students in field trips, international and local projects, and conferences. Additionally, the respectful relationship between students and teachers and the support offered by teaching staff are noteworthy. However, a need to increase the number of students recruited for both first and second cycle programs is identified as an area for improvement. The expert panel recommends finding ways to increase the student quota for these programs to meet demand. These recommendations aim to enhance the educational experience at both universities by addressing admission criteria, student support, internationalisation, and opportunities for increased student enrollment.

3.4. Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment

The site-visits to both universities demonstrated clear and comprehensive policy and procedure practices related to academic integrity, tolerance, non-discrimination, and appeals. This clarity ensures that all stakeholders understand their rights and responsibilities. In Vilnius University, there is transparency in providing details about the number of complaints and appeals, promoting accountability in addressing issues related to the study process. The proactive approach to addressing issues, such as replacing a subject when a complaint is filed, shows a commitment to continuously improving the quality of education and addressing concerns promptly. The presence of an anonymous hotline, involvement of psychologists and lawyers, and access to academic advisors demonstrate the University's commitment to supporting students and staff who report violations or have concerns, all supported by multi-level monitoring. On the development side, the panel notices the existence of policies and procedures but also lack of specific data or examples of cases related to academic integrity, discrimination, or appeals. This absence of specific data raises questions about the rigour of the procedures. It would be beneficial to include information on outcomes and improvements resulting from these policies, particularly in areas where specific data was not available during the review period. The recommendation is to pay attention in collecting this specific data.

In Klaipeda University, the evaluation identified clear and comprehensive policies and procedures for ensuring that students' needs are taken into account, and intended learning outcomes are achieved. This includes well-defined learning outcomes and a variety of teaching methods. Procedures for monitoring student study progress and providing feedback to students are designed to be timely, ensuring that students can make necessary adjustments in their learning journey promptly. In addition, the University utilises technology, such as the Academic Information System (AIS) and virtual classes, to enhance the teaching and learning process, providing students with additional resources and opportunities for learning. This is supported by engagement with social partners to enhance the employability of graduates, offering internships and preparing students for real-world applications of their knowledge and skills.

3.5. Teaching staff

Vilnius University's staff demonstrated strengths in actively producing publications in well-regarded international outlets and displayed the potential for further development. The staff members are well-qualified and exhibit strong motivation to improve both the national importance of the study field and increase the international impact of their research results. However, certain weaknesses were identified. Staff workloads should be adjusted to accommodate time for writing research outputs and participating in international conferences. Additionally, there is a need to increase the number of international visiting scholars contributing to teaching. The recommendations from the expert panel include modifying staff workloads to allocate time for research outputs and participation in international conferences. They also suggest increasing the number of international visiting scholars to contribute to teaching.

Klaipeda University's staff possesses strengths in the form of a good student-to-teacher ratio, enabling personalised teaching. They are highly motivated, and the interactions between staff and students foster a strong sense of community within the programs. The staff members are highly motivated and have demonstrated efforts, particularly in teaching and national publishing. Nonetheless, weaknesses were identified as well. While there has been improvement in international publishing in response to a previous evaluation, the total number of international publications remains low, with a primary focus on books. These international publication activities are limited to only a few staff members. Additionally, the relatively high number of teaching hours

raises concerns about the allocation of time for research activities. There are limited opportunities for international mobility for staff members, inhibiting the expansion of international networks.

3.6. Learning facilities and resources

Vilnius University has well-equipped and sufficient learning facilities, such as auditoriums, laboratories, and the library. These facilities are integral to effective teaching and learning. The University utilises modern audio visual equipment, computers, and specialised software packages, providing students with access to up-to-date technology and resources for their studies. The learning environments, including auditoriums and laboratories, are adapted to specific activities, enhancing their functionality and supporting multipurpose workspaces. This reflects a commendable commitment to inclusivity. However, weaknesses were identified. Students may not fully utilise opportunities to study abroad, and the availability of funds for updating learning materials may vary annually due to budget constraints. Reliance on external funding sources for certain library subscriptions and resources could lead to uncertainties in resource availability if external funding decreases. The recommendations from the expert panel include reviewing the layout and design of buildings to ensure they can accommodate staff and students with mobility, visual, auditory disabilities.

Klaipeda University demonstrates strengths in well-equipped classrooms with modern facilities and a significant number of workstations. Lecture halls and classrooms with internet access and multimedia equipment, along with computer labs and professional software, contribute to the positive learning environment. Moreover, the resources for the library and equipment are gradually improving over time. However, there are weaknesses to address. There is limited space for staff, particularly teachers who share small and limited office spaces. The library, while improved, still has limitations in student library spaces. Financial resources are perceived as limited compared to other European higher education institutions, and there is a lack of recreational spaces for students. Office space for staff is inadequate, and facilities for students to meet, relax, and engage in social and academic debates outside formal teaching hours are virtually nonexistent. The recommendations suggest that the University continues to improve accessibility for students with disabilities and special needs. Additionally, addressing issues related to space adequacy for both teachers and students, particularly for studying outside class hours, is recommended to enhance the overall learning environment.

3.7. Study quality management and public information

All Human Geography programs demonstrate a strong commitment to ensuring program quality and continuous improvement. As such, Vilnius University's internal quality assurance system aligns with European Higher Education Area standards, fostering a culture of quality. Regular discussions and meetings, both in-person and remotely, emphasise transparency and collaboration. The inclusion of younger teachers and social partners enriches perspectives, and the active engagement of stakeholders in Study Program Committees (SPC) and other aspects of the program is a clear strength. However, there are limitations due to low student survey participation rates. While the surveys cover various aspects of the learning experience, low response rates may not accurately represent the entire student body's views, potentially overlooking critical insights. The expert panel recommends exploring ways to encourage students to participate in evaluation and feedback processes, both quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative (e.g., focus groups led by independent facilitators).

Both programs at Klaipeda University are consistent with University policies and have a strong foundation for quality management. It demonstrates clear policies, processes, and a commitment to improvement. However, there are challenges related to transparency. While the University

collects annual indicators and data related to quality management, not all additional survey results are made publicly available. This lack of transparency could limit stakeholders' access to valuable feedback. The SER mentions various surveys and evaluations but does not specify the criteria or benchmarks used to assess quality, making it difficult to gauge the effectiveness of quality management efforts. Additionally, the report mentions feedback from social partners but does not provide details about the nature and extent of this feedback, making it challenging to assess its impact on quality management. There is also a lack of transparency about the processes of involvement of social partners, especially those in commercial sectors. The expert panel recommends ensuring that data collected on student evaluations, social partners' market employment needs, and the monitoring of graduate employment are transparent. This potentially enhances the overall quality management system.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic recommendations for the Higher Education Institutions (at institutional level)

Increase research productivity and outputs.

The expert panel recommended that both HEIs enhance research productivity. This entails investing in and providing support for teaching staff to increase research publications, involvement in international projects, and securing additional research funding.

Develop student recruitment and retention.

The expert panel recommended both HEIs must develop strategies to increase student recruitment and retention. This crucial recommendation requires the development of ways to attract and retain students, taking into consideration their diverse needs, including those who work full-time. Strategies should focus on making programs more attractive, improving the work-study balance, and offering flexible scheduling options.

Ensure curriculum alignment fits with the labour market.

The expert panel recommended that HEIs must ensure that their programs remain relevant to the job market, particularly in areas related to sustainability, planning, and environmental management. Involving stakeholders such as social partners, alumni, and employers in program development through Study Program Committees can help maintain this relevance. Both HEIs should build on their existing strengths, including interdisciplinary approaches and robust support systems for students. These strengths contribute to a personalised and effective learning environment that should be maintained and expanded upon. Fostering research-teaching integration is essential, and so HEIs should continue emphasising the integration of research into teaching, by ensuring clear connections between courses and ongoing research efforts to keep students updated with the latest developments in their field. It is also essential to acknowledge and appreciate HEIs' commitment to improvement and self-evaluation throughout the evaluation process.

In conclusion, both institutions demonstrate notable strengths in their respective programs. These recommendations aim to help them further enhance the quality and relevance of their higher education offerings. By addressing these strategic areas, HEIs can better serve the changing needs of students, the job market, and society as a whole. The expert panels appreciate the dedication

shown by the universities and look forward to witnessing further developments in these highlighted areas.

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

On a national level, the recommendation is to increase resourcing to both universities and via them to Human Geography study programs. Current financial resources in both universities are limited, if compared to other universities in Northern or Western Europe. Additionally, national level consideration of university profiles and targeted resourcing is recommended, if they are not already present and deployed. The attractiveness of Lithuanian universities for international scholars is dependent on research facilities and their quality, decent salary levels, and research group qualities. All these issues are fundamentally connected to university funding and attractiveness of academic work in Lithuania. A final recommendation is to create and maintain suitable structures for competed funding (e.g. applied through calls and funding distributed by suitable organisations) that can be developed according to the needs of current/sustainable science policy.

Report language – English

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