



STUDIJŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO CENTRAS  
CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## COMMUNICATION FIELD OF STUDY

### OVERVIEW REPORT

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Report prepared in 2024  
Report language: English

## I. INTRODUCTION

Overview report is based on the external evaluation of the Communications field of study in the following Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

- Vilnius Gediminas Technical University
- Kaunas University of Technology
- LCC International University – was evaluated but is not included in this report
- Vytautas Magnus University

The external evaluation was organised by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), Lithuania.

This Overview report focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the field of study from a general point of view. External evaluation reports containing more detailed information on the field of study in the relevant HEIs, including evaluation points, commendations, and recommendations, are available on [SKVC's website](#).

Based on the findings of the evaluation, the decision has been made to give a positive evaluation to the following HEIs and cycles:

- Vilnius Gediminas Technical University – BA Creative Industries, BA Entertainment Industries, MA Communication of Creative Society, MA Communication of Innovation and Technology.
- Kaunas University of Technology – BA Communication Studies and Information Management Technologies, MA Strategic Communications.
- Vytautas Magnus University – BA Public Communication, BA Creative Industries, MA Integrated Communication, MA Creative Industries.

Based on the findings of the evaluation, the decision has been made to give a negative evaluation to the following HEIs and cycles:

- LCC International University – BA Contemporary Communication.

Upon receiving a positive evaluation, SKVC decides to either grant full accreditation to the field of study and cycle for a period of 7 years or provide partial accreditation for a period of 3 years. If the field of study and cycle is given negative evaluation, it is not accredited.

## II. OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

This section of the Overview report highlights the overarching observations made by the expert panel regarding the positive aspects of the Communication field of study in Lithuanian HEIs, as well as areas identified for improvement.

*Due to the significant difference in the quality of the Communications field across all areas of provision at LCC and LCC's current appeal application, this overview will not include LCC.*

### 1. STUDY AIMS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

The panel found that the programme aims, learning outcomes and content at both first cycle and second cycles were appropriate for the level of study and aligned with commensurate programmes internationally. The institutions demonstrated a clear understanding of the dynamic labour markets that were aligned to respective programmes and used this insight to design and develop programmes accordingly. One overt example is the introduction of analytic skills into the KTU first cycle degree as a direct result of consultations with industry partners. For first cycle programmes, all of the institutions combined technical skills with a broad knowledge base appropriate to the programme. Second cycle programmes had a stronger theoretical base.

The programmes were also aligned to strategic goals within the institutions with a demonstrable connection to societal and cultural issues.

The constructive alignment between programme aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods was less well articulated at Vilnius Tech than at the other two with KTU being outstanding in this respect. There is perhaps an opportunity to share best practice in ensuring alignment practices at a national level.

Social partners are integral to the development of courses and provide students with ample opportunities to gain work-based learning experiences and develop transferable skills. This is both effective and fruitful. A greater balance could be encouraged to ensure that gaining specific skills for work does not marginalise the value of theory, critical thinking and conceptual understanding.

### 2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC (OR ARTISTIC) RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Faculty staff were actively engaged in a range of research and practices across all 3 institutions. KTU and VMU were particularly engaged with a range of national and international organisations in the academic field and areas of policy at a national and international level. VMU had a particularly high level of research in terms of quality, quantity and international reach which is comparable with high performing HEIs internationally. Vilnius Tech is still developing capacity in this regard. Encouraging greater engagement with the academic field at an international level needs to be fully integrated into workload models so that early career lecturers and those with caring responsibilities are not disadvantaged.

All 3 institutions also had practitioners who were actively engaged in relevant subsectors of the creative industries providing expertise, knowledge of the sector needs and opportunities to develop technical skills.

The institutions all provided innovative assessments and opportunities for both cycles to engage with a range of leading technologies, data and other relevant innovations. Students also had the opportunity to engage with more academically focused research in their dissertations although these were also sometimes more practically oriented. The concept of 'research' in this respect was not always aligned to the 'science' of communications, in that it tended to focus on research as problem solving or learning by doing, particularly when this involved an external partner. This is commendable but there was a gap in the integration of academic research and engagement with current academic debates.

The SERs did provide examples of links between research, and HE provision but when discussing the integration of academic research with students they often saw it as irrelevant (many suggested that 'theory classes' were not well attended) and boring compared to 'practical classes'. When discussing this with staff they also tended to focus the concept of 'research' either on students' opportunities for problem solving or a 'practical project', or a discussion of methodologies. As a result, it was difficult to fully evaluate the extent to which there are strong links between scientific research and provision which suggests that they are not currently foregrounded. As expected, second cycle students were more aware of and enthusiastic about integrating research and theory.

The panel found that there was an overriding desire to develop research cultures in the field of Communication but this was not embedded into (particularly first cycle) programmes in a way that was valued at the same level as labour market concerns. The two are not mutually exclusive but if the theoretical underpinning is not present and engaged the value of practical outcomes is diminished. Neither social partners nor students were particularly aware of the academic research that was being undertaken or how it might relate to practice.

### **3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT**

Overall, the panel found this area of provision to be very good with admissions processes clearly presented and a range of activities, academic and pastoral support enriching the educational experience. Admissions information on the websites was clear, informative and accessible. Attracting high numbers of students is challenging and sudden increases in the student numbers can be counterproductive to the evolution of innovative pedagogies. Staff consultations on strategic changes to admissions were not always evident. There are also questions around the sustainability of programme growth particularly as this field seems saturated in terms of the number of courses available across the country. This is exacerbated by the current geopolitical situation and student aspirations to study abroad.

The panel found that students were well supported by their faculties and institutions, this was evident in the meetings with students who were enthusiastic about the support they received.

The use of hybrid learning for second cycle students at Vilnius Tech was commended as this flexibility makes courses accessible for people who also need to work and/or have caring responsibilities. VMU has a range of opportunities to engage in international training, projects and online courses in addition to programme content which gives greater opportunity for international engagement. KTU presented some potentially

beneficial programmes for academic support, but students expressed that they were unable to access them which suggests that communication channels are not always working effectively. Nevertheless, all HEIs had ample support available and students commented positively on the availability of staff and the range of ways to access support (email, VLEs, face-to-face, courses, events etc.).

#### **4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT ASSESSMENT, AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT**

This is another area that the panel found to be very good overall. Progress is monitored, course evaluations are systematic and procedures for appeals work effectively. KTU provides targeted training to enable staff to support vulnerable students effectively with an excellent awareness of how to adapt teaching and assessment to support individual needs. All institutions provided targeted support and an ethos of inclusivity ensuring equal opportunities for students to reach their potential.

The dedication to student learning and the commitment to continual improvement were impressive across the HEIs. The challenges that they faced were associated with the students' need to work and earn, this led some programmes to lose students when they were subsequently employed by their placement provider. This demonstrates successful provision for the labour market but prevents students from completing studies or engaging with mobility opportunities.

Tracking graduate employment is always difficult but where possible having a sense of career trajectory would be helpful for course development and marketing purposes. The alumni that attended the meetings felt a sense of belonging and were clearly valued often providing suggestions for course development that were included in the provision of later years. Some were also engaged with mentoring current students. There was clear evidence of positive learning cultures at all HEIs.

#### **5. TEACHING STAFF**

For the three institutions included in this overview report, there were sufficient staff at the required level of qualification and experience to satisfy legal requirements. It was noted by HEIs that the pipeline is diminutive despite the popularity of (particularly first cycle) programmes but there was evidence of early career lecturers and PhD students who were actively teaching. Providing them with opportunities to work as research assistants in addition to teaching assistants might encourage continued engagement with the profession. The comparatively low salaries (by international standards) are a barrier to greater mobility and international connections which in turn can restrict research and teaching development in addition to confidence in engagement with the field at an international level.

All three HEIs engaged with mobility programmes although the take-up varied. There were a wide-ranging internal opportunity for training and development in a range of areas from pastoral care, to curriculum development and research skills. These were embedded in incentive schemes for existing staff and a requirement for all new appointees and those who had identified skills gaps. The extent to which these incorporated leadership training for career progression was mixed. Career progression was generally a points-based system of requirements, but two career pathways were evident providing opportunities to specialise in teaching or research whilst engaging with both.

## 6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

There are some excellent infrastructure projects that have been completed or are under completion. These include the first virtual studio in Lithuania at Vilnius Tech, updated rooms, renovated buildings with upgraded facilities for editing, filming, music and more alongside some impressive new library spaces (at KTU and VMU in particular). KTU's new building provides many inviting creative spaces and opportunities to collaborate and develop practical and academic projects in the future.

Overall, this is impressive and provides creative and inspiring environments for students. There are some older buildings that cannot be renovated but these emphasise the tradition and culture of the cities through careful renovations, they are clean, light and the rooms are perfectly adequate. This does, however, create some challenges for mobility access in some cases. There did seem to be a preference for traditional style classroom settings with seats in rows facing the front. Creating more flexibility in these would be beneficial with furniture that can be moved or reorientated to facilitate group and collaborative work around one area (rather than individual chairs with a drop-down board).

The access to journals provided by the government is an excellent initiative that is used effectively by institutions. The panel's impression was that physical books in libraries were dated generally and whilst e-books are available some books are better or only available in print. Other online resources were informative and accessible.

The institutions provided budget lines to update tech. Where institutions are located in the same city it might be possible to provide inter-institutional tech loans although the competitive nature of admissions to this saturated market might hinder such collaborative endeavours.

## 7. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

This area was very good at an international level across all 3 institutions.

All HEIs had internal quality assurance systems. KTU is highlighted for the transparency of their quality assurance and management processes available on their website.

Information and feedback were systematically gathered across a range of stakeholders with a strong student voice included across institutions. Students were provided with different opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes through engagement with a range of structures, events and surveys. These included representatives sitting on committees, round-tables, workshops and informal conversations. Social partners were integrated into quality management from course development through round-tables and workshops to dissertation topics and assessments.

Overall, websites were clear and navigable and quality assurance systems were robust with systematic monitoring. There were mechanisms to gather feedback from a range of stakeholders and institutional level checks to ensure that changes or new developments were thoroughly considered.

## III. RECOMMENDATIONS

### STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMMUNICATION FIELD OF STUDY

#### Strategic recommendations at an institutional level (for HEIs)

1. Evaluate existing practices in relation to, research time, and links between pay and grant awards so that those with caring responsibilities or early career researchers are not disadvantaged due to the need to work excessive hours in order to engage with research projects.
2. Evaluate workload models to ensure that early career researchers have sufficient time to develop their research expertise and apply for grants alongside teaching duties.
3. There is a tension between the desire and need to 'serve the labour market' which is often reduced to specific skills needs, and the need to progress and incorporate intellectual content. The latter might better help 'drive the labour market' rather than simply serve it. Across the EU HEIs are finding the balance between practice (specific skills) and research (intellectual understanding) challenging but there is currently a strong leaning towards 'serving the market' in some institutions which risks losing some of the intellectual rigour and potential for more critical and innovative thinking. This leaning also has a tendency to dichotomise provision into 'theory vs practice' in the minds of students which is similarly unhelpful. It is recommended that this is periodically 'sense checked' for balance. This might include, for example, providing opportunities for knowledge exchange between technical and/or industry facing staff and theoretically oriented staff to facilitate a more nuanced and flexible dialogue between theory and practice and to support students in understanding the relevance of theory in practice. Such a dialogue should also be opened out to social partners. This will then facilitate greater opportunities to firmly embed scientific research into HE provision.

We stress that overall, these institutions are innovative and forward thinking. They are engaging with the field at an international level and we found the provision for the field of Communication is very good with an admirable and evidenced desire to continue improving.

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

1. Consider if pay can be increased to attract scholars from an international pool and to encourage Lithuanian scholars to remain in the sector. Institutions reported some difficulty in attracting and recruiting good, research active staff and stated that the pipeline was small and somewhat stifled.
2. Examine existing policy frameworks that support consecutive and extensive periods of time of working beyond the EU working time directive. The panel found researchers regularly working 60hr weeks. This is potentially disadvantageous for those with caring responsibilities and could lead to burn-out. The current situation (working excessive hours) is used as a way to 'top-up' wages which might otherwise be insufficient, so the impact of any changes should be carefully assessed in light of the first recommendation.

The subsidy provided to institutions that enables them to access literature through academic journal subscriptions is a very valuable initiative and has supported institutions in providing high level teaching and learning for students in addition to supporting world class research in the field.

## Recommendations on the evaluation process for the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC)

1. The SERs were understandably mixed in terms of their coherence. For some, it was difficult to extract detailed information because it was presented through a range of different explanations, narratives and graphics. A more precise template that enabled basic required data to be viewed relatively easily and was similar across institutions would facilitate more in-depth discussions on visits as it would save time in the preparation phase and provide clarity. We appreciate that the narrative is important, but this could be limited to a specific word count and provide additional, focused information.
2. It would be helpful to have some examples of good practice gained from previous evaluations or tips on how to engage HEIs in more critical conversations prior to visits. It was very difficult to engage the groups in the meetings with critical, reflexive discussions. It was necessary to repeat the same question in different ways, multiple times and instead of responding to the question people would provide information on something that they were proud of. Whilst we take some responsibility as the panel, our questions should have been clearer and more probing, but this aspect of the process was frustrating at times because it limited the depth of analysis possible in the available time.
3. Ideally, it would be helpful to have a couple of days after the visits for the panel to come together, consolidate their findings and complete the majority of the report. It is harder to do this when everyone is back at work and focused time is harder to find amongst busy schedules.

These are minor points. The panel agreed that the overall experience of the evaluation process was exceptional. Well organised, always treated with respect, well informed throughout the process and an outstanding representative from SKVC who provided all the support we needed.