



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OVERVIEW REPORT FOR LITERARY STUDY FIELD

2020 year of the evaluation

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I. INTRODUCTION

The overview is based on the external quality evaluation of the Literary study field in the following Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions: at *Vilnius University*; at *Vytautas Magnus University*.

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

Comprehensive external evaluation reports including strengths and weaknesses and concluding with recommendations were prepared for second cycle field studies and included evaluation marks. This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the Literary study field from a general point of view.

All studies at all HEIs were given positive evaluation.

On the basis of external evaluation report of the study field SKVC takes a decision to accredit study field and cycle either for 7 years or for 3 years. If the field evaluation is negative such study field is not accredited.

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

Overall observations by the expert panel regarding the most positive aspects of the study field in Lithuanian HEIs as well as areas in need of improvement. The analysis covers all 7 evaluation areas.

3.1. Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum

The programs evaluated had relevant learning outcomes and curricula congruent with achieving those aims. The evaluation team were particularly pleased to note that this was so, as comparatively recent enrolment numbers in both programs had necessitated restructuring of the programs. If one were to distil a single pedagogical emphasis from both—in some cases, significantly different—programs, it would be the attempt to balance local and regional cultural relevance with the enormous heritages of broader European and world literatures.

As noted above, the approaches taken differ significantly: Vilnius University runs a tripartite study program, whilst Vytautas Magnus offers a more traditionally-structured program. Both programs aim to produce competent and enthusiastic practitioners of literary (writing, reviewing, theory, criticism) and literature-adjacent fields (publishing, editing, proofreading). Staff of both programs also openly acknowledged that the potential market for literary studies in Lithuania remains small. The team found strengths and vulnerabilities in each institution's approach, but as a general assessment both seem to meet the needs of their students, and of the labor market; both institutions were able to provide encouraging employability data for students emerging from these programs.

The team felt that, if there were common weaknesses of these programs, they lay in 1) the occasionally imprecise descriptions of what skills and abilities exactly were to be built by these programs, and 2) the occasionally oblique connection of some courses (particularly

highly theoretical courses) to the practical, labor-market skills being targeted for development.

3.2. Links between science (art) and studies

The team was highly impressed by the connections both programs had developed with practitioners of literary and literature-adjacent professions. Although such connections with alumni, social partners, and external experts may always be expanded, it was notable that both programs had built relatively stable relations with field practitioners.

The engaged staff have appropriate educational and employment backgrounds to teach their subjects effectively, and to keep abreast of modern trends and developments in their fields. In both institutions, the 'core' staff are supplemented by external lecturers from related programs or associated faculties, which also encourages cross-fertilization of knowledge and professional contacts.

It was a concern of the team that mobility—for both staff and students—seems difficult to encourage and to increase. Representatives of both institutions had similar explanations for this situation: students find it expensive to leave Lithuania for mobility (and many have jobs from which they cannot easily obtain leave), and staff face similar financial, familial, and employment constraints, despite the general institutional willingness to support, in the abstract, professional mobility.

On the whole, however, both institutions had clearly professional and international-quality staff, who have established and maintained close contacts with field practitioners of the major elements of these programs.

3.3. Student admission and support

Both institutions had clear formal policies regarding admission to these programs. Each institution had its own characteristics of admission that the team felt compelled to remark: Vytautas Magnus allowed admission from applicants with undergraduate specializations from outside philology, provided that certain additional requirements (bridging courses) were met; Vilnius University permitted admission from applicants 'with a Bachelor's degree in any field.' Staff of both programs openly acknowledged that these were not ideal admissions criteria, but were practically necessary given the relatively small sizes of these programs.

Additionally, the team noted that both institutions were clearly attempting to re-establish these programs on more stable ground (each had recently had student recruitment difficulties resulting in the non-running for a year of each program). The team commended each program for, in its own way, addressing these challenges, and steadying the programs by attracting new students.

Once enrolled, the students seem well supported, particularly by academic staff. The atmosphere in each program was affirmed—by students and staff—to be friendly, small, cooperative, and informal. Students averred that they felt comfortable approaching teachers and administrators with difficulties or questions. The team commended both institutions on this collegial, collaborative approach to student-teacher interactions. The team cautioned both

institutions, however, that greater steps should be taken to identify students who may be having difficulties that lead to withdrawal from enrolled status, as this is problematic for both programs.

As mentioned earlier, mobility was also a concern. The team accepted that students found mobility challenging, given their familial, employment, and financial circumstances. But the team urged both institutions to attempt to identify ways to increase mobility participation, even if for periods of a week or a fortnight.

3.4. Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment

The team felt that teaching and learning, and student performance, were of high quality at both institutions, particularly in light of the recent struggles each program had experienced in attracting the minimum number of students. With minor exceptions—such as unclear assessment emphases in courses taught by more than one person—the students seemed satisfied with the quality, objectivity, and relevance of their assessments.

The students and social partners/field practitioners from each program also emphasized that program graduates emerge from both institutions with useable skills. This had been a concern of the team, which was concerned in both institutions by the occasionally highly-theoretical nature of the subject offered. (Literary Studies can be, by the nature of writing and criticism, highly abstract and theoretical).

Graduate employment data seemed appropriate for the programs, given the relatively small size of both programs, and the admittedly small market in Lithuania for literature-related employments.

3.5. Teaching staff

Both institutions have recruited and employed staff of high commitment and appropriate academic backgrounds for these programs. Many of the program-specific instructors have been academics in the specific field of Literary Studies for ten or more years. In each institution, these program-specific teachers are assisted/supplemented by lecturers from other associated disciplines, or external lecturers brought in for discussions of real-world praxis.

As noted above, staff mobility is troublesome. The staff are engaged, professional, and maintain strong teaching and research portfolios; in most Higher Educational institutions in the E.U. or the U.S.A., therefore, they would expect to engage in frequent mobility opportunities, conference attendance, and guest lecturing. It appears that, in both Vilnius University and Vytautas Magnus University, though, the financial difficulty of supporting regular mobility remains challenging. Although the team fully accepted the practicality and honesty of this acknowledgment, it remained a recommendation for both institutions and programs to support staff mobility and conference participation whenever reasonably possible.

3.6. Learning facilities and resources

It should be noted at the outset that the external evaluation of both institutions was conducted remotely, given the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Despite being unable to visit the institutions in-person, the team felt confident in affirming that the learning facilities and resources were adequate and, indeed, appropriate for the effective running of the Literary Studies program. The classrooms have relevant technology (projectors for laptops, etc.). Both institutions seem to have made laudable efforts to be physically-inclusive for students with special needs, such as reduced mobility, or visual impairments (this was particularly commended for Vilnius University).

The resources available (program-relevant books, journals, academic databases) are adequate for the running of the program, and for the scholarship of the instructors in the programs. No library or institution can possess all relevant resources, yet both Vytautas Magnus and Vilnius University have clearly made a commitment to supporting the research needs of these comparatively small programs.

It was, however, a recommendation for both institutions to build closer ties between library staff and academic staff. In both universities these connections existed; the team merely wished to affirm that with tight budgets and multiple acquisitions priorities, it is imperative for close coordination to exist between library staff and academic staff.

3.7. Study quality management and public information

Both institutions have clear and compelling internal management structures governing the universities, their programs, and internal relations, including statutes, policies, procedures, regulations, and university management representation (Senate, etc.). These documents are, in almost all cases, easily available online. Both institutions also confirmed that they know, and follow, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Both programs feature active local (faculty-level) management and oversight for quality assurance and complaint resolution, so that relatively small concerns may be dealt with internally, without needing to involve executive management.

Both programs also heavily emphasize external contact with business practitioners, social partners, and program-related field workers. This priority helps students to obtain real-world field insight, build (potential) professional and employment networks, and engage in workplace observations or internships. The team felt, however, that both institutions could improve their practical engagement with social partner and alumni and, where possible, that additional formal internship opportunities would be beneficial.

III. EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE

Please give examples of excellence (if any) discovered while conducting the Literary study field evaluation.

Each institution was commended for certain institution-specific examples of excellence. These points here represent a brief summation of individual examples of excellence, or excellences that pertain to both institutions/programs.

Both programs dealt with recent enrolment difficulties with academically responsible reformations and reimaginings of their programs, and this has resulted in increased student enrolment.

Both programs demonstrate relatively solid employment data for graduates in fields that can sometimes be difficult to monetize.

Both programs feature committed staff members who maintain appropriate research profiles in sometimes difficult circumstances (funding difficulty for mobility or conference attendance, COVID-19 interruptions, etc.).

Vytautas Magnus was particularly commended for the program's commitment to student individualization of the study program.

Vilnius University was particularly commended for the rigor and transparency of their M.A. thesis composition/defence procedure, and for the effective resource management (relative to Literary Studies) of their library and resource staffs.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN LITERARY STUDY FIELD

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

- Close attention must be paid to program viability relative to enrolment numbers, and this vigilance must also later apply to preventing student withdrawals.
- Literary Studies can produce graduates who work in many fields; yet it is desirable to clarify what precise skills and professional abilities are expected of successful graduates.
- The lack of educational mobility is profoundly disadvantaging to the students, who miss out on one of the strong benefits of European Higher Education. Mobility support for students—and, it must be noted—teachers—should be a high priority for Lithuanian Higher Education.

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

- Literary Studies tend to require access to scholarly materials generated around the world; and access to research databases, bibliographical resources, journal subscriptions, etc., can be prohibitively expensive for individual institutions. Any additional governmental support that can be provided towards obtaining this access for Lithuanian teachers and students would be extremely valuable.
- As noted above, the lack of educational mobility is profoundly disadvantaging to the students, who miss out on one of the strong benefits of European Higher Education. Mobility support for students—and, it must be noted—teachers—should be a high priority for Lithuanian Higher Education.