



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## **HERITAGE STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW REPORT**

2023

**Prepared by the chairperson of the expert panel:**

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Report language – English

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the Heritage Studies study field in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): European Humanities University; Vilnius University; and Vytautas Magnus 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 ... study field for each evaluated. Reports contain evaluation marks (separately for the first and second cycle). This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the heritage study field from a general point of view.

Based on the findings of the Heritage Studies study field evaluation, the expert panel has decided to give a positive evaluation to European Humanities University (first- and second-study cycles); Vilnius University (second-study cycle) and Vytautas Magnus University (second-study cycle).

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

## 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 Heritage Studies in Lithuanian HEIs, as well as areas in need of improvement.

### 3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

The aims and outcomes of the Heritage Studies field curricula contain the predominant components required for the development of students' key competencies, responding well to the needs of society and the labour market. However, the balance of theory and practice is uneven and the field is not comprehensively covered in any single HEI in Lithuania. Particular issues are a lack of up-to-date engagement with global issues in heritage practice and management and, in some cases, a lack of engagement with recent and contemporary critical debates outside of the Lithuanian national and regional contexts. The different typologies and instruments for identifying, understanding and valorising heritage need to be better addressed in both practical and critical terms. That said, it is evident that individual HEIs have strong specialisations in certain areas. These, allied to the practical activity of academic staff in the heritage sector, deepen the curriculum and provide students with excellent learning opportunities.

In the case of some of the evaluated universities, the following issues require clarification: i) the identities of the programmes; ii) the relative emphasis on, and interrelationships between, theory and practice; and iii) relationships between first- and second-cycle studies (for European Humanities University, henceforth EHU).

The Study Field programmes broadly align with the missions of the relevant universities, although in some cases the overall institutional mission and vision is relatively abstract, such that the translation of these into concrete objectives for any given programme is indirect.

Students' ability to tailor their studies to personal interest is limited, particularly in second-cycle studies, in some cases because of the understandably tightly-packed nature of the curriculum.

The engagement with sectoral partners is generally very good - across all evaluated universities - and is a strength of the study field at the national level. This has a positive impact on learning and teaching, student expectations and career-building, and graduate employment.

While some theses are clearly theoretically informed, critical, and relevant to practice, some fall short in these areas, and students appear unable to frame appropriate research questions, methods, or to transcend the limits of their case studies to understand the more general relevance of their focus. This suggests the need for enhanced and more structured supervision processes.

### **3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES**

The study field programmes cover the established and conventional bases of heritage studies. However, there is a need for closer engagement with international debates and global concerns that can transcend the national context. While many graduates will remain in Lithuania, ensuring a wider general knowledge of global heritage issues and practices is important in order for graduates to understand and contextualise their work within Lithuania, to engage with international instruments (e.g. UNESCO and Council of Europe designations), and to undertake international collaborations. Universities should seek to internationalise their curricula and to increase opportunities for incoming and outgoing mobility, for staff and students. The study field programmes and the relevant departments have limited engagement with key critical and theoretical debates in the academic field. There is a need to engage with the latest trends in the overlapping fields centred on heritage studies (e.g. connected to, *inter alia*, politics and political uses of the past, geopolitics, materiality, new approaches to conservation and decay, heritage and emotion, sustainability (including the role of heritage in Sustainable Development agendas), minority heritages, colonial legacies, gender, and communities. These key areas of international scholarly debate are strongly developing research directions that question and renew previous interpretations of cultural heritage. Engaging constructively and critically with these and equipping students with up-to-date knowledge requires regular updating of the Programme curriculum, and, accordingly, providing updated resources.

### **3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT**

Admissions procedures in the Study field are broadly coherent and effective. They are clearly set out in relevant websites, although information in English needs to be provided comprehensively in order to attract non-Lithuanian students and to internationalise cohorts. Student support mechanisms, both pastoral and financial, are in place but could be augmented. The panel found that the majority of students undertake paid work outside of their studies. Programme providers should accommodate students' evident financial need to work through providing - as much as is possible - flexible study options and accessible timetables. Most students demonstrated considerable loyalty to their institutions and satisfaction with their studies. The few exceptions, mainly concentrated at EHU, concerned perceived lack of transparency in administrative structures (including student representation on key committees), late communication of timetable and timetable changes (making it difficult for students to commit to paid work), and inadequate grievance procedures.

Given the importance of professional experience within the study field, more institutional support is required to help students identify and broker their placements. Although some theses are evidently accomplished examples of critical, theoretically-informed and practically relevant research, others suggested that supervisory structures and processes for independent research could be improved to optimise student achievement. Student international mobility opportunities are limited and further provision in this area would contribute to the training of an internationalised workforce and the development of the heritage sector in Lithuania, while also opening the horizons of students who may consider post-graduation professional or academic mobility.

### **3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT**

Teaching and learning approaches are effective in the Study field providers, using a range of formats that constructively diversify the educational experience, enabling high levels of active participation on the part of students as opposed to passive learning. Effective use is made of VLEs and students' access to academic staff is good. Students benefit from close engagement with sectoral issues through the first-hand experience of teaching staff who are able to build this into pedagogy. Sector partners also engage closely with Study field provision, contributing to the relevance of the curricula and the employability of graduates. While cohort numbers are relatively small, it is evident that graduates are successful within the job market and wider sector (across heritage management, museums, cultural entrepreneurship, and tourism). Sector stakeholders champion the study programmes and were almost unanimously positive about them and their students and graduates. The few minor suggestions from partners/employers were that some sector-critical skills development could be improved, for example in relation to community engagement, interpretation, and management (e.g. project management, finance, and budgeting). Systems for ensuring academic integrity are effective. In one case, equality of educational opportunity connected to field trips was unclear and - as a

principle - providers should seek to ensure that students do not have differential access to learning experiences and opportunities to achieve. Provision for students with disabilities is generally excellent and clearly taken very seriously by study field providers, notwithstanding the impediments caused by the use of historic buildings.

### **3.5. TEACHING STAFF**

The teaching staff at Study Field providers are adequate in number and have considerable expertise, particularly in the Lithuanian context and in sectoral practice. Many teachers are accomplished heritage sector actors in their own right and bring this experience and expertise into their scholarship successfully. However, with the exception of some high-performing individuals, teaching staff do not appear to be engaged in the key international scholarly debates in the field, and are not active within the key scholarly fora internationally, including participation in major conferences and publication in English in the most influential journals/book series in the field. Knowledge of English appears to be a barrier for a minority of teaching staff, which is of concern not just because it is - for better or worse - the main language in which heritage studies debates are conducted at an international level, but also because it is the main language in which international heritage policy is framed. It is evident that teaching staff have limited opportunities for international mobility or for sustained periods free from teaching in which to undertake research and thus improve not only their own academic standing but also the quality of the study field in Lithuania. It is particularly important in this context to ensure that more junior staff have both mobility and research opportunities.

### **3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES**

The Study Field is well served by high-quality physical and digital infrastructure at all of the universities: students benefit from appropriate study spaces, teaching environments and library facilities. Library holdings in the study field area need to be expanded to reflect the diversity and richness of the study field literature, including online access to relevant journals.

### **3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION**

All of the universities evaluated have extensive mechanisms for study quality management and established procedures for quality assurance. However, in some cases, this information is not thoroughly publicly available, nor always clearly understood by students. This should be rectified. In the case of EHU, some students felt that they had limited representation in study quality management committees and procedures and that student representation in governance was not transparent. Involvement of students and - ideally - sector partners in study quality management should be routine, structured, and transparent. Survey evaluation of students is in place at all of the universities, but there is a need to increase student participation and response rates and to make available the surveys and relevant results, bearing in mind the need to protect respondents' confidentiality where appropriate.

## III. RECOMMENDATIONS

### MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN HERITAGE STUDIES STUDY FIELD

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

HEIs active in the study field should:

- encourage greater engagement with key global debates and issues in both heritage policy and practice and heritage studies as an academic discipline. This means:
  - internationalising and updating the curriculum;
  - augmenting relevant library resources;
  - providing teaching staff with the opportunity to:
    - participate in key conferences;
    - publish in the most influential outlets;
    - take sustained periods of research leave without teaching obligations;
    - benefit from international mobility if desired.
- put in place supervisory mechanisms for students' independent research such that theses are responsive to well-framed research questions, critically articulate, and practically relevant;
- ensure robustness and transparency of study management.

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

The Ministry should:

- enable HEIs to grant teaching staff with opportunities for research career development, particularly through a system of periodic research leave;
- create mechanisms for outgoing staff mobility;
- incentivise incoming mobility from non-Lithuanian scholars, e.g. through instituting competitive visiting fellowship schemes, honorary positions, etc.

#### Recommendations on the evaluation process for SKVC

- HEIs should be encouraged to respond exactly to a stricter SER template;
- SERs should be shorter;
- It should be stipulated that SERs be written in English from the outset, i.e. not translated.