



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OVERVIEW REPORT FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES STUDY FIELD

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the **Religious Studies** study field in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions: *at Klaipeda University* and *at Vilnius 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 some recommendations were prepared for Religious Studies study field in each evaluated Higher education institution and included evaluation marks. This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the Religious Studies study field from a general point of view.

Based on the findings of Religious Studies study field evaluation, expert panel have come to a decision to give **positive** evaluation to HEIs: *at Klaipeda University and second cycle; at Vilnius University and second cycle*.

On the basis of external evaluation report of the study field SKVC takes a decision to accredit Religious Studies study field and second cycle *at Klaipeda University* and *at Vilnius University* for 3 years.

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

Both second cycle study programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) have an interdisciplinary curriculum and learning outcomes. This is to be commended since it offers the students a broad perspective on the place and function of religion in contemporary society. The curricula and learning outcomes of the two programmes differ substantially from those of a regular BA- or MA-programme in theology, so that there is no overlap between these two fields of studies; furthermore, both programmes also differ from each other, so that there is no overlap within the field of religious studies either. Yet, 'religious studies' is a generic term, which includes a variety of academic approaches and disciplines. Therefore, the Expert Team recommends the management of both programmes to give them a specific subtitle, so that (prospective) students have a better idea of what they can expect. The religious studies programme of Klaipeda University already has such a subtitle (*Spiritual Counselling and Assistance*) and the Expert Team strongly recommends that the religious studies programme of Vilnius University also gives itself a subtitle (the Expert Team suggests: *Philosophy, Religion and Culture*). This is all the more needed since the curriculum and learning outcomes of both programmes differ greatly from those of regular programmes in religious studies at most other European Universities (typically, a programme in religious studies focuses on the empirical study of (non-)Christian religions). Finally, unambiguous subtitles for both programmes would not only contribute to avoid confusion and disappointment among the students, but would also enable the management to give a more focus and a better balance to the respective programmes.

In general, both programmes achieve their intended learning outcomes, but this is seriously compromised by insufficient formal admission criteria (see below). Furthermore, both programmes aim to combine theoretical knowledge and practical expertise; this certainly makes sense because it enhances the job-opportunities for the alumni. However, in the case of the programme of Klaipeda University, practical training and internships need to be professionalized and in the case of the programme of Vilnius University practical training still needs to be developed in full.

2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

The teachers of both programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) base their teaching on their research activities, and the students get the opportunity to contribute to the research of the teaching staff. This aspect is more developed in the case of the programme of Vilnius University, since it presents itself as a research master. The programme of Klaipeda University also has fine examples of these links, especially in the field of applied research, which correspond with the practical focus of this programme. As both programmes are interdisciplinary, they could benefit from more interdisciplinary research and structural cooperation between the researchers who teach in these programmes. Another important area for improvement concerns the Erasmus exchange and related programmes. Hardly any of the students of both programmes participate in these programmes, although it goes without saying that this would widen their scope and enhance their academic knowledge and skills.

3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

Both programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) do their best to take good care of their students in various ways, and they are supported in their efforts by the two universities. However, reaching the intended learning outcomes is seriously compromised by the admission policy of both programmes. The only admission requirement is a university BA-degree in any field of studies, which inevitably has a negative effect on the academic level of these programmes (especially in the case of the programme of Vilnius University, which aims to be a research master) and is causing problems for those students who don't have an academic background in the relevant study fields.

4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

The graduates of both programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) are very satisfied with the education they received, and benefit from it in their work. Since the programme of Klaipeda University has a more practical focus, most of its graduates are employed in jobs that correspond with their degree; this is much less the case for the programme of Vilnius University, because it lacks a sharp focus and prepares less for the job market, but rather prepares students for entering a doctoral programme.

5. TEACHING STAFF

Both programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) have a competent teaching staff, well suited for the programmes they teach. The ratio of teaching staff per student offers possibilities for an individualised approach in teaching. However, the small number of students enrolled in these programmes affects their long-term viability and has a negative effect upon the study-experience of the students (especially in the case of Vilnius University). There is a considerable difference in the use of academic mobility by the teaching staff between the programmes; the teachers of Vilnius University make far more use of this opportunity than those of Klaipeda University.

6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

The learning facilities, in particular library resources, IT-facilities and equipment, facilities for students with special needs etc. are very good. The challenge for both universities will be to keep these facilities and resources on their current high level and to regularly update their library resources.

7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Both programmes (study programme *Spiritual Counselling and Assistance* at Klaipeda University and study programme *Religious Studies* at Vilnius University) have a robust Internal Quality Assurance system, including formal and informal evaluation of the individual courses. The information about the programmes is clear, accessible and appropriate for purpose.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES STUDY FIELD

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

Klaipeda University

- The institution should take a critical look at the admission criteria of the programme.
- The institution is recommended to stimulate and facilitate interdisciplinary research.
- The institution is strongly recommended to (still more) stimulate and facilitate students' participation in Erasmus exchange programmes.

Vilnius University

- The institution should take a critical look at the admission criteria of the programme.
- The institution is recommended to stimulate and facilitate interdisciplinary research.
- The institution is strongly recommended to (still more) stimulate and facilitate students' participation in Erasmus exchange programmes.
- The Expert Panel recommends the institution to address the disconnection between the university wide QA regulations and requirements and how these are implemented and monitored on this study programme and overseen by Faculty management.
- The institution is recommended to actively explore the possibilities of stronger cooperation with other similar programmes in the Baltic region, e.g. through a dual degree programme.
- The institution is strongly recommended to strengthen the role of the programme management to implement the necessary restructuring of the programme.

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

- The Expert Team recommends to stimulate and facilitate more academic cooperation between various universities in the Baltic region, especially in so-called research masters with a low student intake. These programmes can be taught in English, which makes joint programmes feasible.