



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW REPORT
DESIGN STUDY FIELD

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the Design study field in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Vilnius Academy of Arts, European Humanities University and Vilniaus technologijų ir dizaino kolegija.

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 Design study field for each evaluated HEI. Reports contain evaluation marks (separately for the first and second cycles). This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the Design study field from a general point of view.

Based on the findings of the Design study field evaluation, the expert panel has decided to give a positive evaluation to all evaluated HEIs and first/second cycles.

On the basis of the external evaluation report of the study field, SKVC took a decision to accredit the Design study field for 7 years at all evaluated HEIs.

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

This section of the Overview contains overall observations by the expert panel regarding the most positive aspects of the study field of Design in Lithuanian HEIs, as well as areas in need of improvement.

3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

Across all programmes the curricula and modes of delivery are appropriate for the needs of students. Staff are clearly enthusiastic about their subject - which was reflected in the very positive engagements with them, their students, and social partners alike. Similarly, and although inconsistent, there is some developing support for pedagogy, which could again be recognised through structured staff pedagogic development with shared case studies and a mentoring system.

Measurement of learning outcomes. A common theme throughout was the opportunity to consider developing a common set of curriculum principles and standards, for example, based on the core themes of knowledge, understanding, intellectual, professional, and transferable skills. Similarly, within the larger institutions, consideration should be given to ways of ensuring greater parity in assessment across programmes. Similarly, course data, external examiner reports, assessment descriptors, and a common set of curriculum principles should also be reviewed. The Expert Panel was unable to establish if there were consistencies in approach regarding student assessment forms and parity across programmes, which is a potential area for further development.

New skills. The institutions visited should consider ways to build on the existing strengths to develop student entrepreneurship, design management, and marketing at the undergraduate level. This could be achieved through, for example, the establishment of a one-year paid industrial placement, placement/social partner awards, a Director of research and Enterprise role, mandatory competition submissions, or formalising links with other disciplines and other universities. In some instances, evidence of design problem-solving could be strengthened and opportunities to showcase student work enhanced. There was a variance between the acquisition of strong technical skills and high-level thinking skills: one of which creates graduates who serve current industry needs and the other produces graduates who will lead the industry in the future and it is pleasing to see that the design field provision accommodates both.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

Beyond the schools - context. The city-based academic context is an excellent environment for the study of design and its relevance to culture, industry, commerce, and the entire workings of a city and its galleries, museums, architecture, transport networks etc. Across all of the institutions visited links are, in the case of alumni, often longstanding, and with industry and professional practitioners built on trust and goodwill. Social partners were very supportive of the institutions and were familiar with both the relevant study programmes and the academic staff through their involvement in various activities across the academic calendar. It is recommended that the institutions actively engage with and embrace the advice, support, and influence of alumni and social partners to attract additional funding into the institution and foster stronger student-industry links. Further, aspects of the curricula were informed through the rich and sustained partnerships with industry - many of whom are competing and exhibiting at an international level. Whilst scholarship and research are encouraged and funded, the institutions visited might wish to holistically promote their research activity through a designated research/innovation oversight role, membership criteria, and annual review of research/innovation/scholarship.

Interdisciplinarity. Many design disciplines wrestle with developing true interdisciplinary approaches with design thinking at their core. However, an opportunity exists for the institutions visited to develop an ethos of interdisciplinarity (potentially piloting at the post-graduate level) by developing English language skills, developing **collaborative projects, internationalising research projects/competitions**, and by strengthening and making more visible research strategies across the institutions visited.

Internationalisation of research activities. More clarity on languages of instruction and a strategy for increasing the use of English could help to attract a greater international staff and student cohort. In some instances, there was a lack of a vibrant creative and artistic environment to afford students the opportunity to work informally, feel comfortable in the environment, experience ideas in action, and contribute to the wider creative and cultural offering in Lithuania. It is recommended that VTDK develop significantly the visible identity and showcase the excellent student and staff work both as outputs and as work in progress. All

of the institutions had a strong presence in their locale and with their social partners, and they are encouraged to use these strong credentials to galvanise their international reputations.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

Generally, all design field institutions have in place excellent governance and systems for attracting, recruiting, retaining, and supporting students. Further, there is clearly a very good level of pastoral care and partnership working between academic staff and students. Students stated to the Expert Panel that they felt supported in their learning and project development. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be the volume of either outward or inward student mobility one might expect and institutions are encouraged to develop strategies to strengthen and internationalise the student experience by promoting greater outward mobility and review arrangements for attracting, retaining, and supporting inward mobility students - particularly those with no grasp of Slavic languages. Constructs like an international student committee/convention which meets regularly and an active unit charged with attracting international students (via Erasmus or otherwise) would help to develop the international student culture.

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

In every institution there was clear evidence of a forward-looking and ambitious approach to teaching, learning, and scholarship. Meetings with all groups endorsed the collegiate nature of partnership learning and working across all areas - albeit in quite diverse physical environments. The quality of student work and support for learning is consistently strong across all courses and reflects an ethos which promotes the transformational impact of education on student learning. Industry partners were enthusiastic and strongly supportive of the quality of students coming to the market.

Regular updates of the study programmes. There is a clear link between the institutions and professional practitioners and importantly an understanding of the need to continually innovate and develop practices across the disciplines. Programmes are flexible and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are updated and fit for purpose. There could be more space for ideas on content and setups of the programmes stemming from students. The internationalisation strategies of the institutions, as opposed to ambitions, need to be developed to a higher level to ensure there is a richer student exchange culture.

More innovative assessment systems. Institutions should consider ways to develop student understanding of the assessment regime through the integration of some aspects of self-assessment or learning contracts. In some instances, the institutions could help with arrangements of creative space for individual use or group work of students which would improve their peer learning, self-management and learning assessment skills - although it is recognised there are excellent learning environments in some programmes. Students benefit strongly in shaping their own learning path through a studio-based learning environment.

Strengthening individual design process management and the ability to navigate across different design areas should also be encouraged. This would also positively impact the development of personal and professional paths.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

Academic staff qualifications, their research/practice, and pedagogic activities are commensurate with other institutions operating at their level. Staff are well supported and there is evidence of appraisal and staff development through support for activities (exhibitions/cultural visits etc.) in all of the institutions visited. Moreover, there is strong leadership, a clear teamworking ethos, and a visible ambition to support both the work of the institution and its students. The institutions should review, evaluate, and develop their outward and inward mobility strategy of teaching staff, visiting scholars and professors across the disciplines as a means of internationalising their reach, international recognition, and as a staff development activity. Where small student cohorts within named programmes institutions should consider a flexible matrix whereby allowing students to take 'common' modules and to share their learning experiences. In several instances, there is a lack of visible evidence of applied staff research towards higher-level thinking and creative risk-taking towards cutting-edge solutions evident in student work. It is recommended that VTDK engage in, and promote more creative risk-taking projects that develop its innovation credentials both internally and to the outside world.

Pedagogic development. A system for staff pedagogic development should be considered within each institution and ideally at a national level.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

Resources varied quite considerably between institutions, and relate directly to their operating context. At their very best resources are advanced, well supported by technicians, and ensure that students are well-equipped to develop their making skills to the highest level. In other situations, the resources require substantial ongoing investment - which is difficult when the institution does not own the building from which it operates. Overall, students are pushed to the best of their ability with the resources that are available to them, and as such all institutions visited demonstrated creative resilience in developing both practical and thinking skills in their students. The Expert Panel recommends that a clear and externally visible promotion of campus identity for each institution is important to mark their valuable contribution to the creative and design life of the cities in which they operate. In the spirit of widening participation, equality, diversity, and inclusion, all institutions should review access across their campuses in order to fulfil the Accessibility Improvement Plan in the coming years to achieve the goal in 2025 set in the Plan. Similarly, access to computing both on-campus and via software off-campus is another area for development for all institutions. The institutions which do not operate a studio-based teaching culture should consider a studio-based allocation for students to allow greater peer learning and to create a better sense of belonging to a creative environment. This may also be achieved through partnerships with external organisations. In

some cases, the study process could be more actively moved to virtual spaces allowing studying while living abroad.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

There was evidence of thorough and rigorous student-centred quality assurance and public information systems in place across all three institutions visited. Each institution had the equivalent of a quality management department which clearly co-ordinate recruitment and student support activities with policies and procedures that work well for each institution. Student feedback mechanisms work on a number of levels: directly with staff, through questionnaires, and through student participation in various committees. Across each of the institutions, there was a lack of clarity about how any centralised and systematic approach for collecting student feedback with regard to their experience at the module or programme level is used to improve the quality of the student experience. All institutions are encouraged to develop systems and approaches for developing both the quality and rigour of student feedback and each might consider introducing individual course targets (both percentages of students actively participating, and through quality indicators) in order to strengthen data for analysis and evaluation. Institutions should ensure that their quality assurance systems detect and integrate feedback from social partners on what kind of skills need to be advanced, and emerging new trends in professional and interdisciplinary best practice.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN DESIGN STUDY FIELD

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

There is clearly both energy and ambition in the design field within higher education in Lithuania and those institutions visited should be proud of their work across teaching, scholarship, and outreach activities. However, research per se was less easily defined in the design field and as such included aspects of practice, exhibition, competition, and some income generation - but the research field of design requires significantly greater attention, definition, and visible output.

Internationalisation. Whilst the teaching quality standards are high, the dilemma of internationalisation set against a backdrop of no clear policy on the language of instruction is potentially limiting in attracting international students to Lithuania given that English is a common international language.

Links to the national agenda. Clear Internationalisation strategies and the development of meaningful and impactful Lithuanian government strategies/policies for the creative

industries/design innovation are vital if universities offering design programmes are to operate to their full potential.

Design and other disciplines. Institutions should consider embedding greater flexibility within disciplines to encourage interdisciplinary thinking and projects. Similarly, new provision combinations could be encouraged through formalised links with say, engineering and product design, graphic design and computing, photography with architecture, textiles/fashion with business etc.

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

Whilst they may exist it does not seem clear how national strategic frameworks relate to university provision (teaching, research, and outreach activities). For example, there does not appear to be a national strategy for design or the creative industries. Similarly, how does the Lithuanian Ministry of the Economy and Innovation support design research through research grants, education/industry partnership projects, or via seed funding for university 'spin-out' or 'spin-in' projects. The universities and colleges that constituted this design field review are undertaking outstanding work in teaching and entrepreneurship - but there does not seem to be a natural government development/support strategy to encourage design research projects, industry-partnered projects, or internationalisation of design. If universities and colleges, as educators of tomorrow's workforces, are the economic driver and catalysts for industry, so there needs to be a clearer and more visible link between higher education and government policy in the creative and design industries.

Recommendations on the evaluation process for SKVC

Whilst the sentiment behind the quality assurance process is sound, the actual process and the bureaucratic nature of the proformas in many ways subtract from the key intention of a quality review. The requirement to tie everything back to the Self Evaluation Report (SER) in many ways detracts from the purpose and independence of an expert panel who have insufficient time to interrogate every aspect but rather should be afforded the freedom to be reassured about important oversight issues of for example, governance, planning, curriculum development, teamworking, outreach, marketing and recruitment, staffing, physical resources etc. The process and methodology as it currently exists are overly bureaucratic and lengthy and should be revised to allow for the bigger strategic issues to be discussed in more depth. Perhaps the SERs should also be published - in a condensed form.

It is my view that the entire process needs a 'root and branch' review to make it much simpler to complete, but with a greater focus on the key questions, namely:

- What measures are in place to ensure good governance?
- What delegated authority framework operates across the institution?
- What is the 5-year institutional plan?

- What is the teaching and learning ethos and practice across the institution - and how is this supported?
- What strategies are in place to attract, recruit, retain, and support students?
- What is the research culture across the institution and how is this supported?
- How are resources deployed across the institution (human and physical)?
- What staff development strategies and practices exist across the institution and what professional frameworks exist for developing pedagogic skills?
- How are students supported in their learning?
- What outreach strategies/activities are in place locally, nationally, and internationally?
- How are student skills being developed?
- What measures are in place to develop student professional/employability skills?

With regard to the development of academic staff teaching skills through a Professional Standards Framework, the UK's system may be of interest: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/uk-professional-standards-framework-ukpsf>

Finally, SKVC should consider starting each on-campus review with a campus tour rather than putting it towards the latter half of the day. Starting the visit with a tour in many ways puts reviewees at ease in their own space, allows for informal questions to be raised, and helps the expert panel to understand the operating context of the disciplines under review.

Endnote: The support afforded to the expert panel by the nominated SKVC representative has been outstanding in every respect. They have been diligent, tenacious, mindful of regulations and methodology, and approachable - with an excellent understanding of the operating context and report requirements - despite the bureaucratic nature of the task.