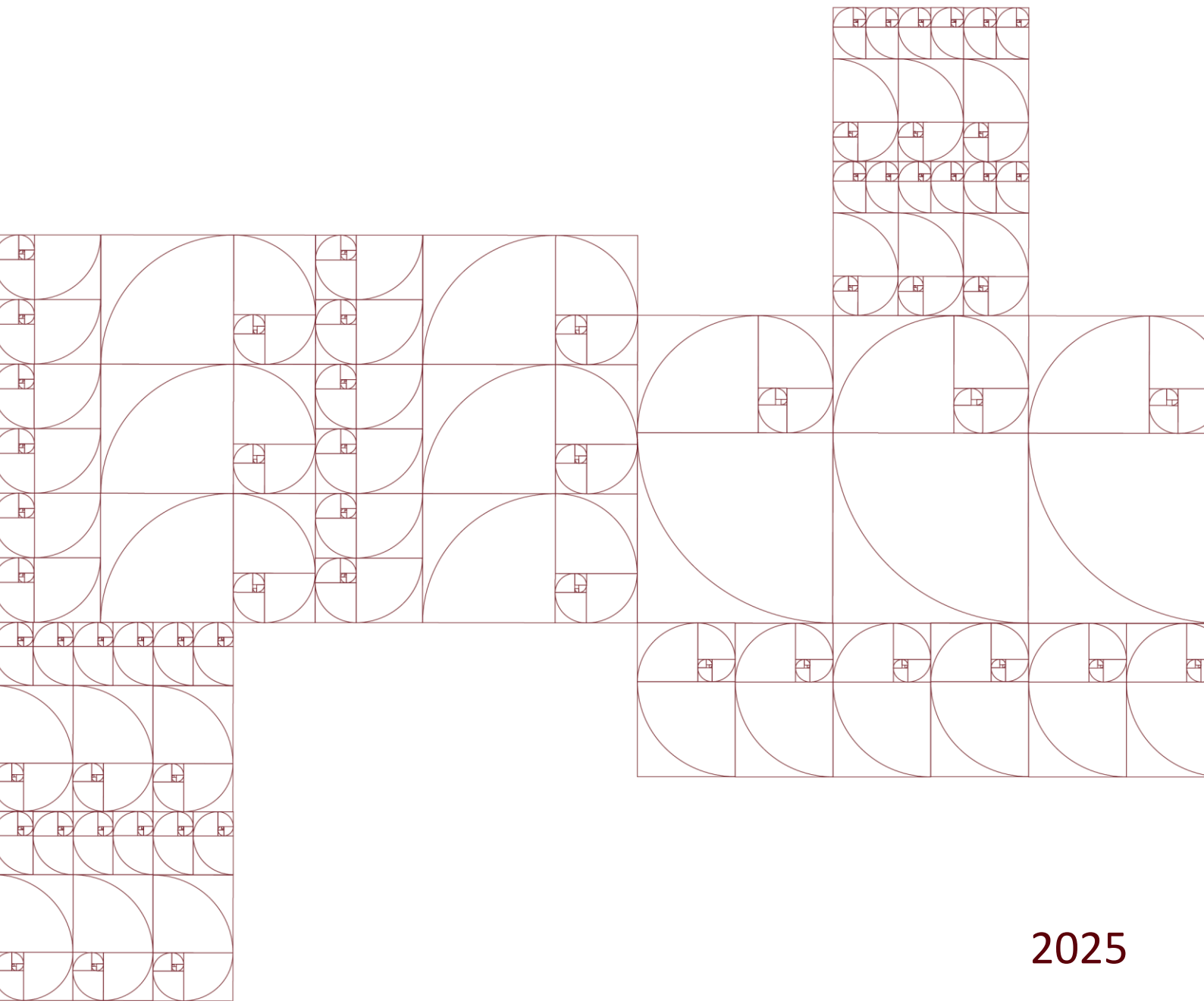




FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS AFTER INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW



The present report is one of the steps in the follow up, which is an integral part of an external review of higher education institutions (HEI) in Lithuania. The follow up starts after the institutional accreditation decision comes into force and is aimed at implementing recommendations received during the external review. It consists of several steps: an action plan, a follow up report, and external feedback on progress.

*Within six months (in case of a positive external evaluation decision) or three months (in case of a negative external evaluation decision), a higher education institution prepares **an action plan** aimed at enhancement of its activities based on the findings and recommendations of the review.*

***The action plan** represents the strategic actions and decisions taken by the institution to address the recommendations and suggestions for improvement provided in the review report. **A follow up report** is prepared to reflect the progress achieved by the higher education institution in implementing the action plan.*

*This **feedback on progress report** is an outcome of a peer discussion process between the higher education institution and external peers to reflect on the enhancement efforts and achievements of the higher education institution and adjust its actions, if necessary. The process has been coordinated by SKVC (the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, Lithuania).*

*The **feedback on the progress report** aims to answer the following questions:*

- *Are outcomes of the review appropriately addressed by the provisioned actions?*
- *Do the actions have clear links with specific outputs aimed at enhancement?*
- *Is there measurable and sufficient progress already achieved?*
- *Are there any suggestions and/or commendations in terms of actions taken and/or provisioned?*
- *Are there any potential challenges in implementing the recommendations?*

Timeline of the Institutional Review

The institutional review visit took place in November 2022

The decision on accreditation granting 7-year accreditation came into force on: 10 May, 2023

Timeline of the Follow Up

The action plan has been approved on November 6, 2023

The progress report has been approved on October 11, 2025

The external progress visit took place on 11 December, 2025

The feedback on the progress report has been prepared in December 2025 by:

- **Prof. Dr. Eneken Titov**, Professor of Management in Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (*Eesti Ettevõtluskõrgkool Mainor*) (Estonia);
- **Dr. Vitor Braga**, an Associate Professor at the School of Technology and Management (Porto Polytechnic) (Portugal).

Introduction

The progress review of SMK university of Applied Sciences (further -SMK) clearly demonstrates that the institution has taken the previous assessment and expert recommendations seriously, implementing substantial and meaningful improvements within just over two years. Both the action plan in general and the progress report prepared by SMK reflect a systematic and well-thought-out approach to quality enhancement. The progress report was detailed, comprehensive, and provided a clear picture of the actions taken.

This report constitutes a comprehensive response by the SMK College of Applied Sciences to the recommendations provided during the previous external evaluation. It is structured to provide clear, evidence-based accounts of the structural and operational transformations implemented across three core pillars: Management, Quality Assurance, and Studies and Research.

One of the most encouraging aspects was that SMK's actions were not limited to short-term measures aimed solely at meeting the requirements of this progress review. Instead, the institution presented initiatives that extend beyond the review period, forming a coherent and sustainable framework for continuous improvement. This demonstrates a strong commitment to long-term development and the embedding of quality culture across all levels of the organization. Since the last evaluation, SMK has undergone a profound structural change. Moving away from a compliance-oriented "checklist" culture, the institution has embraced a result-oriented strategic model. This evolution is underpinned by the formalization of the Deming Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act), ensuring that monitoring is not merely a recording of past data, but a proactive tool for institutional growth. Key to this transition is the implementation of a 10-year Strategic Action Plan, supported by granular Quarterly Reports and a dual-structure annual reporting system that prioritizes variance analysis and "Insights for the Future."

The online meeting with SMK representatives further confirmed this commitment. The experts were impressed by the quality and professionalism of the presentations delivered by those responsible for each assessment area. The presentations were well-structured, consistent, and easy to follow, providing a systematic overview of implemented improvements and achieved results. Importantly, SMK did not only describe actions but also assessed and presented their impact, which is a clear indicator that quality culture is not merely documented but actively functioning within the institution.

Significant efforts have also been made to professionalize governance and human resource management. Decision-making authority has been centralized within qualified academic bodies (Academic Council and Study Programme Committees), and student representation has been institutionalized through a democratic and transparent Election Cycle. In the area of Human Resources, SMK has opted for a decentralized, high-quality management system supported by legal and organizational experts, ensuring that academic leadership is empowered to focus on pedagogical excellence.

Overall, the documentation and the online meeting provided strong evidence that SMK has made considerable progress in addressing previous recommendations and is moving toward a more integrated, strategic, and sustainable education provided by SMK.

To ensure maximum clarity for the evaluating experts, this document is organized by Evaluation Area. Each specific recommendation (Comments 1 through 27) is listed individually, followed by the institution's specific measures taken to address the concern and expert's opinion.

1. Evaluation Area: Management

1. SMK should reflect on its strategic and action plans and ensure that the main priorities are more obvious and reflected in 'key' indicators rather than in detailed checklists.

To address this, the institution has undergone a structural shift from a compliance-oriented "checklist" culture to a result-oriented strategic model. SMK has put in place a more formal and complete strategic planning tool based on a clear hierarchy: i) a Strategic Action Plan (aligned with a 10-year long-term vision) which defines the macro-objectives; ii) Annual Action Plans, which translate these objectives into operational reality.

2. The SMK should focus on the 'check' and 'act' elements of the Deming cycle leading to the addition of more formal monitoring and review mechanisms, and better improvement actions.

Concerns were raised regarding the strategic action plans and the use of effective KPIs, as well as the full use of the Deming cycle (regarding 'check' and 'act'), requiring more formal monitoring mechanisms in a systematic way, distinguishing the past and present focus. Furthermore, in addition to i) a Strategic Action Plan and ii) Annual Action Plans, iii) Quarterly Reports produced by the Heads of Departments now serve as the primary pulse-check of the institution. These reports provide a granular view of progress, allowing for corrections before the end of the year, and are integrated with a new Risk Management Tool that identifies operational bottlenecks in real-time. This systematic approach effectively distinguishes past performance from current strategic focus, providing a clear trajectory for institutional growth.

3. SMK should have a greater systematic approach in reporting and with a focus on the difference between past and present and focus on improvements, specifically establishing a formal structure around annual performance reviews in particular for mid-management and leadership.

A critical refinement in these annual plans is the introduction of a dual-structure report: the Data Summary, which now includes a forward-looking "Insights for the Future" section, and the Analytical Summary, where KPIs are not merely listed but subjected to a variance analysis. This ensures that the institution does not just record data but evaluates the gap between "planned" and "achieved."

4. SMK should take care to ensure that persons making academic decisions are competent to do so and are appropriately designated as 'academic' or teaching staff

SMK has ensured that academic decisions are made by competent individuals with practical teaching experience. Decision-making authority is now centralized within the Academic Council and Study Programme Committees, both operating under updated regulations and clear membership criteria based on qualifications and experience. All members are formally appointed by Director's Orders, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Job descriptions for key roles, such as Heads of Study Programmes and the Head of Academic Activities, have been updated to clearly define academic responsibilities. Additionally, new members receive systematic orientation and refresher training on their roles. These measures guarantee that academic decisions are made by appropriately designated academic staff who understand teaching realities, creating a transparent and competence-based system.

5. SMK should carefully follow the terms of reference or constitutions of the respective decision-making bodies to ensure that the relevant groups are appropriately represented.

The previous evaluation identified specific weaknesses in the decision-making process, particularly concerning the formal competence of the individuals involved and the transparency of their appointment.

The appointment process has been professionalized: both the Academic Council and the Study Programme Committees are now appointed by the Director following clearly defined qualification and ethical criteria, ensuring an adequate profile for all members. To support this new governance structure, the Rules of Procedure of the SMK Council were updated in 2024, clarifying the separation of powers and the legal framework for oversight. This ensures that governance is not only inclusive but also technically robust.

6. SMK should provide students with better information on and communication of the variety of Boards and Committees on which students can serve, and how the appointments are made. SMK should ensure that students are elected to governance and student representation positions by their peers.

To overcome the concerns about both the inclusion of students in governing bodies and the dissemination of information regarding the variety of boards and committees, SMK has institutionalized a transparent "Election Cycle." This process, taking place every September, is initiated through an official letter to the Student Council that lists all available positions to be filled. This guarantees that student representation is not merely symbolic, but rather it is a democratic process that ensures that students are part of the strategic decisions made, fostering a culture of co-governance and transparency.

7. SMK should establish a separate risk register which is regularly monitored by the Director and her senior team and reported to the Shareholders periodically.

Risk management at SMK has evolved from an informal practice to a multi-layered analytical framework. It is now based on analysis at different levels: through the Quarterly Reports and Meetings, which analyse operational risks; and through Annual Summary Plans, which are aligned with the long-term strategy progress reports to address strategic risks. A significant addition to the institutional framework is the inclusion of a fully detailed Risk Management Process in the updated SMK Quality Guide, providing a standardized methodology for the entire organization.

8. SMK should develop a system so that there is a single integrated model of data based on clear definitions and dates, shared across the whole organisation and it is used in the annual review processes.

Recognizing that effective management requires "one version of the truth," a dedicated Working Group for an Integrated Data Model was created. This group is tasked with consolidating fragmented data sources into a single data base. This project is currently in progress, with preliminary results expected by mid-January 2026 and final implementation scheduled for March 2026. This initiative is expected to provide the "Check" element of the Deming cycle with unprecedented precision.

9. SMK should provide the Heads of Study Programmes with specific receive support in undertaking recruitment.

SMK has taken steps to professionalize human resource management by clearly distributing responsibilities and ensuring legal compliance. Heads of study programmes deal with the selection, evaluation and development processes of lecturers and they are equipped with targeted methodological, administrative, and organisational support. The recruitment process has been entirely revised to accommodate a systematic and structured flow for academic staff, which was officially integrated into the Quality Guide in 2024. This lifecycle approach ensures consistency across five key stages: planning and hiring; adaptation and competence development; evaluation, motivation, and feedback; work administration; and the exit process. Heads of Study Programmes now receive comprehensive administrative and legal support, allowing them to focus on assessing academic competence and ensuring quality. Dedicated staff members handle candidate searches, job announcements, and document reviews, while contract preparation is coordinated by the Documents and Process Manager.

10. The management of human resource planning should be further professionalised and a HR specialist should be retained to support staff.

SMK decided not to hire the HR specialist but explained the system they created to ensure the high-quality personnel management. SMK has clearly structured and professionalized its human resource management processes by distributing responsibilities across different roles and ensuring compliance with legal and organizational standards. Heads of study programmes and heads of departments are responsible for planning human resource needs, conducting annual interviews, and supporting the adaptation of new employees. At the institutional level, the principle of coaching leadership is applied, with department heads empowered through targeted capacity-building initiatives focused on people management, annual interviews, and competence development planning.

Specialized support is provided through a lawyer for labour law issues and a designated accountant for recruitment and payroll administration, both of whom regularly upgrade their qualifications through targeted training. The selection process is coordinated by a separate administrative employee, ensuring consistency, transparency, and compliance with legal requirements. In complex situations—such as organizational changes, conflict resolution, or the recruitment of highly qualified staff—SMK engages external experts, including legal advisors, organizational psychologists, and HR agencies. This approach guarantees sustainable and professional support for managers and teams without expanding the staffing structure unnecessarily.

11. SMK should establish a formal approach to individual professional development plans and goals setting.

SMK has introduced a structured professional growth planning procedure integrated into annual interviews and performance appraisals. Since 2025, the Procedure for the Development of Staff Competences has regulated the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of individual development plans. SMK has made efforts to implement a formal approach to professional development of staff, which is based on the

information exchanged in the individual interview, through the definition of a number of development goals made by the staff members.

In terms of staff growth, SMK has made considerable efforts to implement a formal approach to professional development. This is currently based in Individual Development Interviews, where staff members define a specific number of development goals (typically 2-3 per year). However, as a point of further development, the institution could benefit from a more formal and systematised institutional programme. Currently, while individual goals are met, the initiatives can appear as unrelated or fragmented efforts. It is recommended that SMK transitions towards a programme of joint/transversal initiatives offered to all staff members (both academic and non-academic). Such a change would not only allow for significant synergies and cost savings but would also increase the opportunities for interdepartmental collaboration, creating a more unified and stronger institutional culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SMK has demonstrated evident progresses by transforming external expert recommendations into significant structural changes. The transition from a management style based on exhaustive 'checklists' to a model based on high-impact strategic KPIs, associated with the formalization of the Deming Cycle—particularly through the reinforcement of the 'Check' and 'Act' phases—provides the institution with a higher degree of administrative maturity. Governance is now better protected by clear competence criteria, and student inclusion has evolved into a regularized, democratic process.

It is recommended that the institution moves towards the consolidation of the integrated data model and of individual staff development initiatives into a cohesive, transversal institutional programme. Therefore, the institution should maintain its efforts into the implementation of the improvement measures and to continue with the processes of reflection, independently, for resolving potentially newly identified weaknesses.

2. Evaluation Area: Quality Assurance

12. SMK should review its monitoring and communication models to ensure that the academic community is fully aware about its obligations and of any weaknesses that require a response.

In response to recommendation, the institution has significantly enhanced its internal communication architecture. The establishment of a robust response mechanism is no longer an informal process but a codified requirement within the updated SMK Quality Guide (2024). To ensure that both staff and students are aware of their roles and the outcomes of evaluations, the institution has implemented publicly accessible quality dashboards and organized meetings where evaluation results are discussed. This proactive dissemination ensures that shortcomings are not just identified by management but are understood by the entire academic community, fostering a shared responsibility for quality enhancement.

13. SMK should continue on its path of evolving its quality system by putting a particular focus on their more systematic assessment to critically understand their effectiveness and impact; a shift to a clearer and more systematic process of monitoring or checking, may assist the College in better identifying areas for improvement

Following the recommendation and moving beyond a compliance-based approach, SMK has transitioned to a clearer and more structured review process. This is evidenced by the introduction of Thematic Quality Audits, which look beyond quantitative data metrics to assess the actual impact of quality policies on student success and teaching. Shifting the focus from "what" is being done to "how well" it is working; the College has gained more critical self-awareness. This structured review process, now, is aligned with the institution to identify specific areas for improvement with higher precision, ensuring that QA activities lead to tangible pedagogical and administrative improvements.

14. SMK should reflect as a whole institution on how data can be better used to drive improvement

A key area of development was the more effective use of data to promote continuous improvement. SMK has recognized that raw data is only valuable if it is transformed into actionable intelligence and allows effective decision-making. To address this, the institution has invested in advanced data analytics tools that integrate various institutional databases. This change facilitates a shift from descriptive analytics (what happened) to diagnostic and prescriptive analytics (why it happened and what should be done). This data-driven approach is now central to the annual study programme reviews, where longitudinal data on student progression, employability, and satisfaction are used to justify curriculum updates. The provisioned Integrated Data Model (set for full implementation in 2026) will further consolidate this, providing a critical tool that allows for a more sophisticated analysis of institutional trends and the impact of quality interventions.

15. SMK should take "drop out" as a particular focus in the monitoring

Regarding the expert recommendation that SMK should place particular emphasis on monitoring student dropout rates, the institution has evolved from a mere statistical recording of withdrawals to a proactive, multi-layered retention strategy. SMK has recognized that addressing dropout rates requires not only data collection but also a deep exploration of the underlying causes (whether academic, financial, or personal). The institution has implemented a systematic tracking mechanism that monitors student engagement and attendance in real-time. By leveraging its digital management systems, SMK can now identify students at-risk at an early stage— before the dropout occurs. This transition to predictive monitoring is a significant advancement. Data on student performance and participation are reviewed during the newly established quarterly progress meetings, allowing departments to intervene with personalized support measures to students, such as academic tutoring or financial counseling.

Furthermore, SMK has enhanced its exit interview process and withdrawal surveys. Instead of simply processing a student's departure, the institution now conducts a qualitative analysis of the reasons provided for leaving. This feedback is integrated into the Annual Analytical Summaries, ensuring that high dropout rates in specific programmes or years of study lead to a formal "Act" phase in the quality cycle. For instance, if data identifies a trend of dropouts in the first semester, the institution has provisioned for strengthened induction programmes and peer-mentoring initiatives to improve student integration.

By formalizing the monitoring process of dropout rates as a KPI at both the departmental and institutional levels, SMK has ensured that student retention is no longer seen as a purely administrative issue, but as a core indicator of educational quality. This evidence-based approach allows the College to measure the effectiveness of its support services and to implement targeted improvement actions, thereby fostering a more supportive learning environment.

Conclusion

Overall, the progress in the Quality Assurance area is substantial. SMK has effectively addressed the expert recommendations by formalizing its communication channels, deepening its systematic evaluations, and embracing a data-driven management philosophy. The proactive focus on student retention demonstrate that the quality system is no longer just a procedural requirement but a functional tool for institutional excellence. The improvements and measures proposed by the institution are expected to further consolidate these gains.

3. Evaluation Area: Studies and Research (Artistic Activity)

16. SMK should systematically ensure that, in the future, teaching is grounded in scientific research.

SMK has introduced several strategic changes to ensure that teaching is firmly grounded in scientific research. The institution's strategy and annual action plans now clearly emphasize the importance of science-based innovation and the active involvement of students in research activities. This strategic focus reflects SMK's commitment to creating a strong link between science and education.

To reinforce this connection, study programme committees have been given a new responsibility: strengthening the integration of research into study programmes. At the same time, SMK has developed a more transparent and motivating incentive system to encourage lecturers to engage in research and publish their findings. Qualification requirements have also been revised to place greater emphasis on research skills, particularly for new academic staff, ensuring that teaching is supported by strong research competence.

In addition to these structural changes, SMK continues to implement practical measures that bring research closer to students. These include solving real-world problems during courses, involving students in applied research projects, and organizing seminars where academic staff share research results. Such initiatives aim to create a learning environment where scientific thinking and evidence-based approaches are integral to the educational process.

The expected outcome of these efforts is a culture where lecturers consistently integrate their own research and global scientific trends into teaching and learning outcomes. SMK seeks to motivate teachers to participate in international projects and research groups, such as the European University Alliance, and to bring this experience into classroom practice. Evidence of progress can already be seen in the growing number of teachers involved in scientific work and the increasing participation in international projects, many of which directly or indirectly support teaching.

Experts have recommended that SMK further strengthen this approach by defining clear criteria and measurable indicators to assess the extent to which studies are based on research. Establishing such KPIs will enable systematic monitoring and continuous improvement, ensuring that the unity of science and education becomes a defining feature of SMK's academic culture.

17. SMK should organize additional training sessions for staff on constructive alignment of assessment with learning outcomes, ensuring that these are appropriately aligned with the National Qualifications Framework.

SMK places strong emphasis on ensuring constructive alignment between learning outcomes, assessment methods, and the National Qualifications Framework. To achieve this, the institution have already organized,

and continues, more than twenty thematic training courses annually, covering essential topics such as the formulation of learning outcomes in accordance with the national framework, preparation of assessment criteria, provision of feedback, advanced assessment methods, analysis of student achievements, and integration of reflection into the study process. These regular training sessions help lecturers continuously update and deepen their knowledge, ensuring that study program objectives, teaching methods, and evaluation practices remain aligned and of high quality.

To support a systematic approach to staff development, SMK has established a Staff Competence Development Procedure, which defines the principles of planning, implementing, and monitoring training activities. This procedure assigns responsibility to the academic director for coordinating competence development initiatives and ensures that teacher training is organized in a structured and consistent manner. In addition, SMK encourages the dissemination of good practices among lecturers, fostering a collaborative environment where innovative assessment and feedback strategies can be shared and adopted.

Participation in national and international higher education projects further strengthens academic staff competence, particularly in areas such as student assessment practices and understanding of the European Qualifications Framework, (NQF is aligned with EQF). These partnerships provide valuable opportunities for lecturers to engage with the latest trends and standards in higher education, enhancing the overall quality of teaching and assessment at SMK.

Experts still recommend that SMK develop a clearer understanding and systematic overview of how study programmes comply with the National Qualifications Framework. This may include defining specific criteria and expected results to measure alignment effectively. Establishing such indicators will enable SMK to monitor progress and ensure that constructive alignment remains a cornerstone of its academic quality assurance processes.

18. SMK should carefully review the workload associated with study programs to ensure the accurate allocation of credits and to develop a systematic method for credit assignment.

SMK ensures that the allocation of credits and the workload associated with study programmes are regulated in accordance with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (or ECTS users guide) and the relevant local recommendations. At the institutional level, the system for assessing student workload is clearly described in the Quality Guide and integrated into the study programme portfolio management process, which demonstrates a well-established and systematic approach closely linked to programme development.

The distribution of credits is reviewed during the preparation or updating of each study programme, taking into account feedback from both students and teachers. This practice confirms SMK's commitment to stakeholder involvement and recognition of their input as an essential part of quality assurance. Furthermore, the upcoming "Study Programme Portfolio Management" procedure, planned for implementation in March 2026, will hopefully cover the entire study programme cycle—from the development of new programmes and the improvement of existing ones to the analysis of closed programmes and the review of portfolio balance. This initiative reflects SMK's forward-looking approach and its focus on continuous improvement.

During the previous accreditation, experts expressed concern that students might have been able to obtain positive grades too easily, suggesting that the level of effort required did not always correspond to the credits

assigned. In response, SMK has implemented measures to ensure that this imbalance is addressed. The recent improvements reinforce the link between workload, learning outcomes, and credit allocation, guaranteeing that students' achievements genuinely reflect the work required for the assigned credits. These changes provide confidence that grades are now earned fairly and that the study process maintains academic rigor.

In addition, SMK is encouraged to continue to adhere to national and international legal acts and documents regulating the study process, ensuring that programme structures align with the European Qualifications Framework, the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework, the General Requirements for the Implementation of Studies, and study field descriptors, while also responding to evolving labor market needs.

19. SMK should analyze the effectiveness of its incentive system for lecturers to determine whether it is sufficient and appropriate for supporting the achievement of their research objectives.

SMK has recently introduced a clearer and more motivating incentive system designed to encourage lecturers to engage in research and publish their work. The initial results indicate that this system is effective, as research objectives are being achieved, and performance indicators show significant improvement. For example, the number of publications indexed in WoS and Scopus has increased considerably, and research and development funding has reached impressive levels, with projections of approximately one million expected in 2025. These outcomes suggest that the incentive system is contributing positively to the institution's research ambitions.

20. SMK should define specific research objectives and systematize the research expectations for its academic staff.

SMK has made significant progress in defining research objectives and systematizing research expectations for its academic staff. Study programme managers now prepare and monitor annual plans that include clear targets for publishing within the respective study fields, ensuring that research activities are integrated into program development and delivery. To formalize and regulate these processes, SMK developed and implemented the document Descriptors of Scientific (Artistic) Activity Management System and its Application at SMK College of Applied Sciences, which provides a structured framework for managing research activities across the institution.

In addition, SMK has revised its research groups to better align with the institution's strategic priorities and goals. While previous research directions focused on areas such as health, sustainable development, technology, business, and IT, the updated structure now emphasizes themes such as management transformation and educational technologies, improving quality of life, digital technologies, the interaction of design and media arts, and the creation of a legal society. This shift demonstrates a clear effort to ensure that research directions are closely connected to SMK's study fields and institutional strategy.

The institution has also strengthened its research capacity by hiring additional researchers, increasing the number from 16 in 2023 to 31 in 2025, with further recruitment planned for 2026. This expansion supports the achievement of SMK's research objectives and enhances the overall research culture within the college. Furthermore, measurable KPIs have been introduced into research goals, providing a clear basis for monitoring progress and evaluating success.

The impact of these initiatives is already visible: the number of published articles continues to grow, and there is a notable increase in high-impact publications indexed in WoS and Scopus. These results confirm that

SMK's efforts to formalize research objectives, align them with institutional priorities, and link them to lecturers' workloads have been effective in fostering a strong and systematic research environment.

21. SMK should support researchers in presenting their work more frequently at specialized thematic conferences and forums, rather than only at internal events, and encourage the preparation of a greater number of peer-reviewed publications. It is recommended to establish a more formal structure or process to ensure a consistent and strategic development of the institution's research profile.

SMK has made notable progress in supporting researchers to present their work more widely and to increase the number of peer-reviewed publications. An official process has been established, supported by several regulatory documents, including Descriptors of The Procedure for Remuneration for Scientific (Artistic) Work on Behalf of SMK College of Applied Sciences, Descriptors of Qualification Requirements for Lecturers and Researchers, Descriptors of Scientific (Artistic) Activity Management System and its Application, and the SMK Research Mentorship Guidelines. These documents provide a formal structure for incentivizing and guiding research activities, ensuring consistency and strategic development of SMK's research profile.

To strengthen research capacity, SMK has significantly expanded its team, increasing the number of researchers. Research groups have been revised to align more closely with SMK's strategic goals, focusing on areas such as management transformation, educational technologies, improving quality of life, digital technologies, and the interaction of design and media arts. This alignment ensures that research directions are relevant to study fields and institutional priorities.

Several initiatives have been introduced to foster active participation in research and improve publication quality. ScienceHub meetings are organized for new researchers to discuss opportunities for contributing to research, coordinating topics, and understanding the process of preparing scientific publications. In 2025, SMK launched the WriteForward mentoring program for those with little or no experience in writing scientific articles, pairing them with experienced members of SMK's science group. For advanced researchers, specialized seminars are offered on research methods, justification techniques, and the use of citation tools, supporting continuous professional development.

These efforts have already yielded positive results, including an increasing number of publications and greater involvement in international consortia and networks. By formalizing processes, expanding research staff, and introducing targeted mentoring and training programs, SMK has taken significant steps toward building a strong and sustainable research culture.

22. SMK should develop a more detailed research strategy that closely aligns with the college's strategic goals, ensuring that its approach to lifelong learning is also integrated with the development of research activities.

SMK has successfully developed a new institutional strategy for 2026–2030, where research is positioned as one of the core processes of the college and is supported by clearly defined KPIs. This strategic approach ensures that research activities are not only aligned with SMK's overall goals but also integrated with its commitment to lifelong learning. The applied research section of the strategic plan has been updated to reflect emerging changes in the higher education context, emphasizing the unity between research and studies.

To strengthen the link between research and lifelong learning, SMK launched the Competence Academy, which provides services to the market through lifelong learning courses and other solutions for companies.

Promoting and implementing lifelong learning activities is now an essential part of SMK's research and study strategy, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities and labor market needs. This integration has led to tangible results, including the development of more than 50 courses tailored to reskilling and upskilling needs. These initiatives have generated significant impact, with €131,000 achieved through reskilling programs in the region.

Further demonstrating the synergy between research, innovation, and lifelong learning, SMK has launched three spin-off companies offering products and services born from the Competence Academy's collaboration with businesses. These ventures reflect SMK's ability to translate research and academic expertise into practical solutions for the market.

Overall, SMK has made substantial progress in creating a detailed research strategy that aligns with its strategic goals and integrates lifelong learning as a key component. By updating its applied research priorities and embedding them into institutional planning, SMK ensures that LLL activities remain relevant, impactful, and closely connected to both academic development and societal needs.

23. SMK should place a stronger focus on developing international partnerships and targeted collaboration initiatives.

SMK has significantly strengthened its focus on developing international partnerships and targeted collaboration initiatives. Between 2023 and 2025, the institution hired three research project managers whose responsibilities include building scientific networks both in Lithuania and abroad, forming and expanding thematic research groups, and preparing and implementing research projects based on international cooperation. This strategic move ensures that research networking and project development are managed in a systematic and professional manner.

SMK has actively joined several major international networks and alliances, including the DIVERSE European University Alliance, the FEDE association (Federation for European Education), and the EIT Culture & Creativity association. These memberships have opened opportunities for deeper collaboration with international partners, the initiation and writing of new projects, and the promotion of mobility for both teachers and students. SMK's engagement in these alliances reflects its commitment to long-term, structural, and sustainable cross-border cooperation in education, research, and innovation.

The improvements in internationalization are already visible. SMK has submitted numerous project applications under programs such as COST and Horizon, with a total of 51 projects initiated in 2024–2025, 16 of which involve international consortia. Furthermore, between 2022 and 2025, SMK attracted more than €4 million in funding for research and development activities. These achievements demonstrate the effectiveness of SMK's strategy to expand its international research profile and strengthen collaboration in a targeted and impactful way.

By formalizing processes, employing dedicated research managers, and actively participating in European alliances, SMK has laid a strong foundation for sustainable international cooperation. These initiatives not only enhance the institution's research capacity but also contribute to its strategic goal of integrating education, research, and innovation on a global scale.

Conclusion

SMK has made strong and systematic progress in implementing the recommendations. Research has become a core strategic priority, supported by clear KPIs and integrated with lifelong learning through initiatives like the Competence Academy and spin-off companies. Teaching quality has improved through regular training on constructive alignment, updated qualification requirements, and a structured competence development procedure. Credit allocation and student workload management are now embedded in systematic processes, ensuring transparency and fairness.

Research development is evident in the formalization of objectives, revised research groups aligned with strategy, and significant capacity growth—doubling the number of researchers and introducing mentoring programs. These efforts have led to a notable increase in WoS/Scopus publications and participation in international projects, attracting remarkable funding. Internationalization has advanced through dedicated research managers, membership in European alliances, and active engagement in Horizon and COST projects.

Overall, SMK has successfully embedded these improvements into its strategic framework, creating a strong link between research, teaching, lifelong learning, and international collaboration. Continued refinement of KPIs and monitoring will further consolidate these achievements and ensure sustainable growth.

4. Evaluation Area: Impact on Regional and National Development

24. SMK should continue to expand and strengthen its partnerships in Kaunas and Vilnius, establishing collaborations in areas that align with the competencies of its study programs. and 26. SMK should analyze its social partnerships by establishing clear criteria that demonstrate their tangible impact on regional and national development.

SMK has made significant progress in fulfilling the recommendation to expand and strengthen partnerships in Kaunas and Vilnius. The institution has reinforced its ties with businesses, local authorities, and innovation centers, ensuring that these partnerships directly contribute to the development and enhancement of study programmes. This collaboration is not superficial; it involves regular engagement in updating study content and refining internship experiences, which guarantees that students acquire competencies aligned with the evolving needs of the regional economy.

Beyond curriculum development, SMK has responded to local talent development initiatives by offering commissioned training tailored to the requirements of organizations in the region. This approach demonstrates a proactivity in addressing workforce needs and positions SMK as a responsive partner in regional economic growth. To ensure these partnerships are impactful and sustainable, SMK has introduced the “Recommendations for the Development of Strategic Partnership,” a framework that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative criteria to measure institutional, regional, and social impact. The implementation of this framework follows the PDCA cycle, reflecting a commitment to continuous improvement and accountability.

The tangible outcomes of these efforts are evident in the academic area: 87% of final theses now take the form of applied projects that tackle concrete regional challenges, illustrating how collaboration translates into real-world problem-solving. Furthermore, SMK has formalized its network through more than 180 tripartite agreements with businesses and public sector organizations. These agreements are designed to ensure that graduates possess competencies that match the demands of the local economic sector, thereby reinforcing the alignment between education and labor market needs. Collectively, these initiatives

demonstrate SMK's strategic and systematic approach to partnership development, fulfilling the recommendation with a measurable impact on both academic quality and regional development.

25. SMK should ensure that its partners are well informed about the academic aspects of its study programs, providing them with a clear understanding of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels and the corresponding academic standards.

SMK has taken concrete steps to ensure that its partners are well informed about the academic aspects of its study programmes and the requirements of higher education. Employer representatives are actively involved in Study Programme Committees, which creates a two-way exchange: they provide feedback on labor market needs while gaining insight into the academic standards and constraints that shape student preparation. This involvement helps bridge the gap between industry expectations and educational frameworks.

To deepen this understanding, SMK organizes training sessions for committee members, focusing on the principles and requirements of higher education, including the frameworks that govern study programmes. These trainings aim to clarify academic standards and the logic behind curriculum design, ensuring that partners appreciate the rigor and value of higher education. While these efforts have strengthened collaboration, experts have suggested that SMK should further expand employers' representatives' participation in seminars, workshops, and roundtable discussions—both within SMK and across other higher education institutions. Such broader engagement would enhance knowledge sharing and foster a more meaningful partnership between academia and the labor market, ultimately benefiting students and employers alike.

27. SMK should conduct a more in-depth analysis of the lifelong learning sector and identify specific areas or sectors where the institution could provide targeted support.

SMK has approached the recommendation on lifelong learning with a clear focus on priority sectors and targeted initiatives. The institution identified education, health, and adult non-formal learning in high added value areas as strategic directions, responding to both market needs and its own expertise. In education, SMK addresses teacher shortages and competence development through its EduAction initiative, which has become a structured system for professional growth, delivering over a hundred activities and engaging thousands of educators. In health, SMK offers nationally approved programmes that enhance practical and psychological skills, tackling the shortage of qualified specialists and improving service quality.

To support digital transformation and labor market adaptability, SMK collaborates with the Employment Service and municipalities to implement upskilling and reskilling programmes, including courses in e-commerce, database creation, and AI tools. These efforts have already reached hundreds of participants and contribute to reducing skills mismatches. SMK also plays an active role in national platforms such as Kursuok, ensuring accessibility of accredited training across Lithuania and strengthening regional competitiveness. Additionally, cultural education initiatives under the Culture Passport programme foster creativity and technological literacy among students, aligning with national priorities.

Finally, SMK is expanding its lifelong learning model internationally through micro-credential development with DIVERSE alliance partners, aiming to introduce innovative modules in areas such as AI ethics and intercultural competence. These actions collectively demonstrate SMK's commitment to building a

sustainable lifelong learning ecosystem that supports economic resilience, digital growth, and social development.

Conclusion

SMK has demonstrated substantial progress in addressing the recommendations, showing a clear commitment to strengthening partnerships, improving stakeholder understanding, and expanding lifelong learning opportunities. The institution has built a robust collaboration framework with businesses and public organizations, ensuring study programs remain aligned with labour market needs and regional priorities. Its efforts to involve employers in Study Programme Committees and provide targeted training have improved mutual understanding of academic standards, laying the foundation for more meaningful cooperation.

In lifelong learning, SMK has moved beyond isolated initiatives to create a structured ecosystem that responds to national and regional challenges. By prioritizing collaboration with the stakeholders and especially fast-growing sector companies, SMK has positioned itself as a key contributor to workforce development and social resilience. The scale and diversity of these activities, combined with international engagement through micro-credentials, reflect a forward-looking strategy that integrates local impact with global trends.

Overall, SMK's actions are systematic, measurable, and aligned with its mission, indicating strong progress toward fulfilling the previous recommendations.

General Commentary and Reflections

The progress demonstrated by SMK College of Applied Sciences, since the previous external evaluation, reflects a thoughtful and systematic commitment to institutional development across all four mandatory evaluation areas. By transitioning from a fragmented administrative approach to a hierarchical and result-oriented management model, the institution has successfully aligned its operational activities with its 10-year (long-term) strategic vision. The considered reorganisation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the integration of the "Check" and "Act" phases of the Deming Cycle have promoted a more transparent, evidence-based culture of accountability, addressing the previous concerns regarding dispersed institutional priorities.

In what regards the Quality Assurance, SMK evolution is equally significant. The college has moved beyond mere compliance, introducing changes that will lead to a robust Internal Quality Assurance System that prioritizes impact and effectiveness. The strategic focus on student retention—supported by predictive monitoring, real-time engagement tracking, and qualitative exit analysis—demonstrates a well-intentioned shift toward a student-centred quality paradigm. Furthermore, the commitment to data-driven improvement, evidenced by the Integrated Data Model set for 2026, ensures that institutional decisions are increasingly built on actionable intelligence rather than circumstantial evidence.

In the area of studies and research, the SMK has made noticeable progress in implementing the recommendations, introducing several structural and procedural improvements. SMK has taken steps to strengthen the integration of research into teaching, improve lecturer development, and expand international collaboration. Processes for aligning studies with research have been introduced, and training for academic staff has become more systematic. Incentive systems and research objectives have been clarified, and efforts to build international partnerships and participate in projects have increased. While these actions show

progress toward a more structured and strategic approach, further work is needed to ensure long-term sustainability across all areas.

SMK has taken steps to strengthen partnerships, improve communication with stakeholders, and expand lifelong learning activities. The institution has worked to align collaborations with study program competencies and introduced measures to monitor their impact. Efforts have also been made to ensure partners understand academic standards and to develop targeted lifelong learning initiatives in key sectors.

In conclusion, SMK has not only addressed the specific deficiencies identified by the experts but has also used the evaluation process as means for structural transformation. The institution, now, has governance mechanisms, analytical tools, and participatory culture required to support high standards of educational quality. While the full implementation of integrated data systems remains a work in progress, the current trajectory suggests that SMK is well-positioned to maintain its regional leadership and meet the evolving demands of higher education.

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A. Goštauto g. 12, 01108 Vilnius, Lithuania

tel.: +370 5 205 3323

ivs@skvc.lt

skvc.lrv.lt