

Overview of the international peer review of 11 programmes in the study fields of 'Geography' (Human and Physical) at three universities in Lithuania.

Introduction

The assessed programmes comprise five at Bachelor level - two at Klaipeda University (KU), one at Vilnius Pedagogical University (VPU) and two at Vilnius University (VU) – and six at Master level – distributed as for Bachelor level programmes, with an additional one at VU.

To assess the KU programmes, Professor Geoffrey Robinson (University of St. Andrews, Scotland – team leader), Professor Tommi Inkinen (University of Helsinki, Finland), Professor Māris Kļaviņš (University of Latvia, Latvia), and Dr. Miglė Stančikaitė (Institute of Geology and Geography of Nature Research Centre, Lithuania) constituted the international expert group. Professor Jürg Luterbacher (University of Giessen, Germany) joined the group in assessing the VPU and VU programmes, and Dr. Tomas Butvilas (Department of Education at Vilnius University) also contributed to the assessment of the VPU programmes. The reviews took place in October 2011.

Summary Evaluation

The evaluation methodology included the allocation of scores on a four-point scale over six fields of assessment. All programmes received positive evaluations, with points totals ranging from 16 to 21. These led to the accreditation of six programmes for a period of six years and five programmes for three years. The five programmes that received accreditation for only three years comprise the two Human Geography programmes at both KU and VPU, together with the Master programme in Cartography at VU. The two Physical Geography programmes at KU and the other four programmes at VU were accredited for six years.

The broad conclusion of the quality of provision of Geography programmes at these Lithuanian universities is that, although not disastrously weak, it is not particularly strong. Of the six assessment fields, only three received the maximum score of four points – *very good* – from the evaluating team. *Programme management* is the assessment field that scored four points most frequently; this was the assessment in both Physical programmes at KU and the four Human and Physical programmes at VU. It should be remarked, of course, that where the experts identified significant weaknesses in other assessment fields, *programme management* could hardly be adjudged *very good*. The other assessment fields scoring four points were *programme aims and learning outcomes* in the four Human and Physical programmes at VU, and *study process and assessment* in the Bachelor Physical programme at KU and the Bachelor Human programme at VU.

No fields were assessed as *unsatisfactory*, but the five programmes accredited for three years all scored only two points – *satisfactory (meets the established minimum requirements, needs improvement)* – in at least one field. *Material resources* and *staff* were the two assessment fields adjudged only *satisfactory*, the first in every one of those five programmes and the second in three of them. It is instructive to consider the basis for the expert group's assessments of these two fields.

Material Resources

Considerable advances have been made in improving the quality of material resources since the evaluation in 2007 of the provision of Ecology and Environmental Studies (which share many of the same resources in KU and VU as the Geography programmes). The way these improvements have been achieved most successfully provides pointers for those programmes that are lagging behind. For example, at KU improvements in the physical resources for the Physical programmes have accompanied the University's participation in the Maritime Valley development. Continuing involvement has led to investment plans and procurement procedures to strengthen further the research and learning infrastructure. Unfortunately, such improvements have not followed in the Human programmes, which have had little involvement in research activities that are potentially a major source of funding. Adequate funding secured from such activities will doubtless be the key to the upgrading of material resources in all the KU programmes.

At VU, current upgrading of facilities using European and Lithuanian national funding is addressing some equipment weaknesses. The expert group saw the first tranche of technical hardware for the Physical programmes that had arrived as part of the current procurement exercise. Here there are prospective improvements, especially for meteorological studies. This is a first step for a better and more appropriate education of students in the subject field. There has also been some progress in securing funding for new equipment for the Cartography programme. But the programme managers need to push hard for additional funds to provide adequately for maintenance, periodic replacement and consumable items. This need is echoed in the Human programmes, which should also press for a fair share of the funding secured by the University to be directed towards rectifying their own resource inadequacies.

The most urgent problem throughout the national provision of Geography is a lack of adequate resources for contemporary research and the relatively poor availability of literature. Current database resources and computer facilities are too limited to support a much-needed increase in the international impact of the Geography programmes. That is not to say there are no internationally recognised scholars, but more are needed. The report addresses this point further in the section on Staff below, but essential to the support of high-level research is the ensuring of adequate material resources.

Staff

The programmes are generally in the hands of a well-qualified and enthusiastic staff, their enthusiasm for their subject almost always being shared by their students. This supports the quality of the studies and goes a long way to ensuring the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The staff are largely competent in the subjects they teach. Most are actively participating in projects directly related to the study programme content. Unfortunately, with notable and highly regarded individual exceptions, the projects and the research publications are mainly local and national. In itself, such activity is valuable and can greatly help in the nation's development. Attention, however, should be paid to making the results of such studies

available to an international audience and to attracting foreign participants to collaborate in the projects. There are, indeed, some good examples of projects where this is already happening, as in the Maritime Valley development.

More opportunities should also be sought for Lithuanian geographers to extend their knowledge and expertise by collaborating in research projects elsewhere. With the exception of the staff of one programme, all were aware of the desirability of conducting scientific research, participating in international as well as national projects, and publishing in a language of the international scholastic community. Unfortunately, however, actual performance has not matched that awareness.

If Lithuanian Geography is to improve its international standing, it is imperative that a considerable proportion of staff should develop strong international research profiles. This entails publishing in impact-rated journals. There are acknowledged doubts about impact indices as the main metric of research quality. Increasingly, scientists and their funding bodies are seeking to develop rigorous quality controls on publication in open-access journals rather than the expensive subscription journals that have long dominated academia. For the present, however, high-impact publications are where research performance is most critically measured. And any changes to that situation will come from within the established international scholastic community, not from scholars who are outside that community.

Admittedly, there are difficulties in pursuing the development of an international research profile. Not least is one of language. Lithuanian, a beautiful language of which the nation is rightfully proud, is not a language of the international scholastic community. This is not an insuperable obstacle, however. There are many examples of individual staff publishing in Russian or working up their fluency in English or another major European language. This is the kind of publishing for staff to aspire to and for universities more actively to encourage and support. The examples are there: the need is for more of them.

A further obstacle may lie in the nature of some teaching staff contracts and how they are interpreted. At some universities there is apparently a requirement for 70 per cent of working time to be allocated to pedagogical activity and only 30 per cent for scientific activity. In one instance this was used to explain that preparation of textbooks and methodological work are very important activities for teaching staff. The results are mainly used for the assessment of teaching skills and pedagogical work in Lithuania. That is a valuable contribution to the development of Lithuanian universities. If, however, the 30% allocation for research were a strict limitation, it would reflect badly on those universities where it is applied. If they want their staff to be ranked alongside their other European contemporaries, it would be counterproductive to restrict their research activity in that way.

That is not the complete story, however. Most academic staff do have teaching contracts but in the mandatory five-yearly review of their position, one of the requirements is that they should have spent a *minimum* of 30% on scientific activities. This proportion varies with the appointment level, professors teaching less and having more time available for research

activities than lecturers. That all teaching staff are expected to be involved in research coheres with the evaluation team's experience and understanding of university education. Teaching staff are required to conduct and publish research work; these activities are expected to inform teaching, one of the reasons why the engagement of staff in research related to the courses they teach is such an important feature of the evaluation process.

In Lithuanian Geography, what have been referred to as the arrowhead areas of research, those that lead the way, are found in the fields of Physical Geography, where the expert group observed a generally stronger position and quality level than in Human Geography. This is a disturbing outcome, in that it appears to show Human Geography as an inferior sector of the very broad discipline of Geography. The concluding section of this report further addresses that observation. At this juncture it is worthy of consideration that the divergence of the two study fields might reflect their allocation since 2010 to two different study areas. Physical Geography, as with the whole subject of Geography prior to 2010, is a Natural Sciences study field, within the study area of Physical Sciences. Human Geography is now a Social Studies field, within the study area of Social Sciences.

In the context of the relative strengths of the two major divisions of Geography, it is significant that social scientists are not legally obliged to publish internationally. They are expected to address local and national issues and make significant contributions to Lithuania's development. This is a laudable aspiration but it need not and should not militate against publishing internationally. To be recognised internationally, whatever their study field and even for excellent work on national and local issues, academics need to publish in peer-reviewed international journals with defined impacts rated in scientific indexes. Such recognition is a major factor in the ability to attract international funding and scientific participation in national projects.

The criticisms relating to the poor international publication profiles of staff are most severe but not limited to the three programmes where the *staff* assessment field scored only two points. Most staff members' involvement in the international science community in terms of conference visits and teacher exchanges is also limited, which can reflect upon the curriculum. Professional development and the adoption of new technologies in teaching and learning are generally far from meeting EU standards.

Other assessment fields

Programme aims and learning outcomes was generally one of the strongest assessment fields. Where the experts made recommendations, they were mainly to make more transparent the differences between the aims and outcomes of related Bachelor and Master programmes.

In *Curriculum design*, the evaluation team observed a strong influence of the labour market on the content of many programmes. The input of external stakeholders to programme design attracted praise where it occurs. Elsewhere, however, it is often the case that programme content needs to be more sensitive to changes and trends in the labour market. Consistent with that, it was also frequently recommended that programmes should include more opportunities to master the transferable skills welcomed by employers.

Study process and assessment (student admission, study process, student support, achievement assessment) is generally a mixture of good practice and aspects that warrant serious examination. One of these is the need for better encouragement and support of student mobility, which, as with international activities of staff, would help to enhance the quality of Lithuania's university Geography programmes.

Even more important in this assessment field is the need for a thorough review of the supervision and grading of student theses. This applies both to Bachelor and Master levels. Evaluation criteria are suspect; almost every thesis is awarded the highest grades (9 or 10 on a 10-point scale) although they are far behind general European standards. Too commonly, the Master thesis is not of the analytical quality required at this degree level and at both levels there are many examples of poor methodology, especially in statistical and other data-analysis techniques and interpretation.

Concerns over the effects of national legislation

This overview report refers above to the splitting of Geography since 2010 between the two study areas Physical and Social Sciences, pointing to the two different levels of legal obligations with respect to scientific publications. The inference drawn is that the less onerous publishing obligation for social scientists strongly influences the perception that Human Geography is a weaker sector of the subject than Physical Geography. Prior to 2010, Human Geography was a subject field in the area of Physical Sciences. Staff in Human Geography have gained their doctoral degrees either in the Physical Sciences or in such subjects as sociology, anthropology or other sciences with close links to Human Geography.

Now, since June 2011, there are no new doctoral programmes in Geography, neither Human nor Physical. Current doctoral students in previously authorised programmes are allowed to finish their studies but new entrants are not allowed. The only field with a doctoral programme that can be considered to be related to Geography, Physical at that, is Geology; the only Higher Education Institute allowed to introduce it is VU with the Nature Research Centre. It is difficult to imagine Human Geographers finding suitable geology projects and although Physical Geographers might be able to propose relevant topics from areas such as geomorphology, there are many subjects within the field that would not be catered for in a Geology-based doctoral programme.

The legislation that was the cause of concern to the evaluating team is "Science Doctoral Studies Regulation (posted on 2001 07 11, No. 897, updated on 2010 05 12, No. 561 by Government of Lithuanian Republic)". The criteria for a proposed programme to satisfy the evaluating body (an international experts group or Research Council of Lithuania) are rightly stringent. They include national relevance and the internationality of doctoral studies; the level of scientific research implemented by Doctoral Studies Committee members of the scientific field in which the programme is proposed; the number of high-level research scientists taking part in the doctoral studies programme; and the material basis of support in the institution proposing the programme (or institutions in the case of a joint submission). The subject of Geography, in both Human and Physical sectors,

could be expected to satisfy criteria related to national relevance. It is a truly international subject but satisfying the criteria relating to the levels of internationality, scientific research workers and material support for a proposed programme could prove more problematical. In view of the experts' evaluation of *material resources* and *staff* reported above, it would appear that even joint submissions for a Physical Geography programme will find it difficult to gain acceptance. For example, if the plans that KU and VPU briefly outlined to propose a joint doctoral programme in Human/Social Geography were to come to fruition, which would greatly enhance the subject field, then the weaknesses that the experts noted in material resources would require still further attention at both universities.

To conclude: the international expert group observed something akin to a Catch-22 situation. The lack of doctoral graduates coming through from both fields is a real threat to the credibility and viability of university-level Geography in Lithuania. But without enhancements of material resources and the internationality and quality of staff research, the subject is unlikely to have the credibility and viability to satisfy criteria to introduce new doctoral programmes. Concerted action is needed both within the universities and at national/government level to address this situation before a downward spiral of provision and performance is set in motion. Geography matters. The Geography providers, their students and the nation as a whole should not have to experience such a scenario.

Legislation should not be a barrier to progress. The strengthening of the areas of material resources and scientific research reported above needs strategic injections of funding. The evaluation team would like nothing better than to see their recommendations acted upon and for future reviews to be witness to considerable improvements building on those already observed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geoff Robinson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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