

Overview of the 2013 international peer review of two programmes in the study field of 'Human Geography' and a programme in the field of 'Teachers Training' in Lithuania.

Introduction

The two Human Geography programmes are at Klaipėda University (KU), one at Bachelor level and one at Master level. The other programme is at Bachelor level at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (LEU), where students graduate with a qualification of Teacher and Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy of Geography and Natural and Human Geography. All three programmes are in the study area of Social Sciences

The evaluation team (reviewers) that conducted the peer review for the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) consisted of Professor Geoffrey Robinson (lately of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland – team leader), Professor Bjørn Asheim (University of Lund, Sweden), Professor Tommi Inkinen (University of Helsinki, Finland), Rytas Šalna (President of the Lithuanian Association of Geography Teachers) and Inga Bačelytė (final-year Bachelor student, Vilnius University), aided by Barbora Drašutytė (SKVC). The peer review took place in December 2013.

Summary Evaluation

The evaluation methodology included the allocation of scores on a four-point scale over six assessment fields. All programmes received positive evaluations, with points totals of 19 at KU and 18 at LEU. These led to the accreditation of all three programmes for a period of six years. In all six fields the three programmes showed sufficient positive qualities to be graded at least three, i.e. "good". But only at KU did the reviewers consider that a grade of four, i.e. "very good", was warranted for one of the assessment fields. That was for *programme management* of both programmes, essentially by the same management team, as discussed later in the report.

The broad conclusion of the quality of provision of the Geography programmes at these Lithuanian universities is that, although generally *good* and worthy of the six-year accreditations that the evaluations led to, Human Geography in particular is not especially strong. This conclusion broadly concurs with the views expressed after the 2011 review, when the reviewers observed a generally stronger position and quality level in the field of Physical Geography than in Human Geography. The team at that time opined that the divergence of the two study fields might reflect their allocation since 2010 to two different study areas, as is the current situation. 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.

When the 2013 evaluation took place, only two years had elapsed since the previous review and even less time for the programme managers to respond to the reports' recommendations. It is understandable, therefore, that many of the weaknesses observed in 2011 have yet to be overcome. Nevertheless, that both universities have made radical changes to their programmes and achieved significant associated improvements in that short period of time is laudable. It is cause for optimism that the proposed six-year accreditation period will see still more improvements and developing strengths.

In 2011, the three programmes had at least one assessment field judged only *satisfactory (meets the established minimum requirements, needs improvement)*, leading to the programmes' three-year accreditations. *Staff and material resources* were the two assessment fields deemed *satisfactory*, both of them in the two KU

programmes and just the latter at LEU. It is instructive to consider the basis for the reviewers' new assessments of these two fields.

Staff

The marked improvements that led to the higher grading at KU in this review are in both teaching and research. The evaluation team was pleased to see that staff at both universities have adapted their teaching to incorporate a variety of innovative methods that are highly valued by the students, spark interest in the topics being taught and help them achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Enhancement of the programmes' internationalism through the staffs' activities has also improved since 2011, especially at KU. For example, an international seminar is held annually on the themes of social geography, research methodology, and regional studies; these lead to published articles, some of them, as with other staff publications, appearing in foreign periodicals. In the improved research profiles at both universities, most staff are active participants in projects directly related to the study programme content. There has been growth in the extent of external collaborative work, some stemming from a modest increase in international teacher exchanges. Unfortunately, although there has been growth in research activities and publications that helped to raise the grade of this assessment field, it remains true that the research projects and research publications are mainly local and national. Where there has been growth in international collaborations, it is evident that the international outlook, with some exceptions, focuses largely on neighbouring countries such as Poland and other Baltic countries. Looking further afield in Europe and even in the USA and Asia should be among the subject's development aims.

A principal observation of the 2011 evaluation remains valid for both universities, that is the relatively small number of publications in international peer-reviewed journals. 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 is especially true of Human Geography, which as noted above, appears to be weaker than Physical Geography. It may not be a national legal requirement for Human Geography staff, working in the study area of Social Sciences, to publish internationally. Indeed, it is praiseworthy to address local and national issues and aspire to make significant contributions to Lithuania's development. But it need not and should not militate against publishing the research outcomes internationally. The international reputation of the subject requires the further development of a staff ethos that would look towards publishing in high-quality international journals as expectable activities. In this way, Lithuanian research is brought to the attention of the international scholastic community. And international recognition gained in this way is a major factor in the ability to attract international funding and collaboration in national projects. Additionally, the number of state-funded places allocated to second-cycle study programmes partly depends on the level of research conducted by the staff, which may well be an important consideration in maintaining the Master programme at KU.

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 rightly proud, is not a language of the international scholastic community. Improving the foreign language skills of both students and staff, especially in English, is a challenge at both universities.

In summary, whilst research activity has shown some encouraging improvement, more international participation in interdisciplinary programmes and more scientific peer-reviewed publications should be envisaged for the future. This in turn would impact on teaching activities, especially the internationalism of the curricula, and would give students new opportunities to contribute to current research themes.

Such a development will not take place overnight and will need continuing institutional support.

Material Resources

The 2011 evaluation team severely criticised the material resources available to the programmes at both universities. At KU it was noted that the Human Geography programmes had had little involvement in the research activities in the Maritime Valley development that had been an important source of funding for improvements in the physical resources of the Physical Geography programmes. It is to the Department's credit and indeed that of the University and the Faculty that considerable steps have been taken and funding secured, in such a short time, including devolved funding from EU projects, to achieve substantial improvements in the facilities and equipment available to the programmes. Classrooms have been adjusted to specialised use. Computing hardware and software resources have been considerably enhanced. Other material improvements include an upgrading of the stock of maps and atlases. The continuing enrichment of learning resources related to studies of general cartography and GIS had already begun before the 2011 evaluation, and the latest teaching literature for theory studies and practical assignments has been acquired.

It was equally gratifying to observe the improvements that had been made at LEU. The Faculty-based computing resources and classroom facilities have been enhanced and adequately provide for programme staff and students. Equipment for use in physical geography practical studies included in the teacher-training component of the programme has also been greatly improved by the purchase of up-to-date scientific instruments. Cartographic and other material collections, such as rocks and minerals, continue to be added to on a systematic basis.

Field practices are conducted in suitable locations and the evaluation team was reassured to note that good use is still being made of the training base in Tamošava that in 2011 had been under threat of closure. Small practical classrooms, small sets of equipment and a large, albeit improved, student:staff ratio lead to multiple classes and increased teaching loads, which remains a concern in the context of staff time available for research activities. Geographical practicals are as much a key part of the programme as is teaching practice. It is incumbent on the University to ensure that the Faculty is adequately funded to enhance still more the laboratory and equipment provision and ensure the development of those practical skills that are essential learning outcomes.

Aspects of the review of literature resources bear upon the recommendation to increase the internationalism of staff activities. The libraries of both universities have significantly improved their provision of books, databases and periodicals, as more funds have been made available. The librarians acknowledge that the overall stocks of traditional book resources are rather low and in particular there is still a serious lack of international scientific literature including English language publications. An increased acquisition of e-books and improved access to electronic databases are being used to address that situation. As yet, however, there are few references to the various electronic media in students' theses, despite efforts to develop students' competence in making best use of the available resources. References to international literature are also very limited, despite the international content of many bibliographies at KU. At LEU there is even less use of electronic resources, especially of international scholarly publications, by staff in course reference lists and by students in their theses. Here it was clear that a lack of fluency in English was limiting students' understanding of the databases. Undoubtedly, there is still more work to be done in encouraging both staff and students to avail themselves of the full range of literature resources relevant to their courses.

Additional issues at LEU relate to the programme's role in preparing future geography teachers. It was surprising there was no methodological material prepared for geography lessons using a White Board. There was also a relative lack of didactic literature and specifically school geography textbook resources for students to use in their teacher training, for example in writing lesson plans and adapting material for lessons.

Other assessment fields

Three of the remaining assessment fields were graded *good (the field develops systematically, has distinctive features)*. As mentioned above, *programme management* was also graded *good* at LEU but *very good (the field is exceptionally good)* at KU.

Programme aims and learning outcomes remain generally good. Well-defined aims are consistent with mainly achievable intended learning outcomes that are appropriate to the level and to the target graduate labour markets. At KU, the naming of both BA and MA programmes is problematic and the individualities of the two programmes remain less clear than they should be. At LEU, the revision of study outcomes could be more frequent and draw more upon the experiences of similar programmes.

In *Curriculum design*, the radical changes made to the curricula at both universities, both in length and revised courses have led to greater student satisfaction while preserving an acceptable coverage of the diversity and breadth of Human Geography. This is supplemented at LEU by pedagogical training and practice over a wider range of Geography, suitably directed to enabling students to qualify as well-prepared geography teachers. There are overlaps in some of the many courses there. Communication and, especially, language skills warrant attention, as alluded to above in the section on *material resources*, where the relative paucity of international references in most courses also reflects the need to grow the international dimensions of the programmes.

Study process and assessment (student admission, study process, student support, achievement assessment) Of particular note is the organisation of the programme schedules at KU to accommodate, as far as possible, the needs of a student body that is largely self funding and often in employment. Both universities provide opportunities for distant practice in neighbouring countries and opportunities for research work, particularly rich in the CROSSROADS project at KU. With regard to international student exchanges, although there has been a little improvement, there is a clear need for better encouragement and support of student mobility, which, as with international activities of staff, would help to enhance the quality of the programmes. Already mentioned is the generally poor use by both staff and students of the available international literature resources. This includes the final-year theses, the overall standard of which, although much improved since the 2011 evaluation, remains well below that expected in other European countries. They still feature a relatively low amount and quality of analytical content and still closely follow the quantitative traditions within the subject, failing to embrace the more qualitative approaches that characterise much of modern Human Geography.

Programme management showed considerable improvement at both universities. At KU the grade *very good* reflects the strengths that the reviewers acknowledged: the good use made of the outcomes of external and internal evaluations to improve the programmes; the achievement of so many positive changes to the programmes since the previous external evaluation; the heed paid to students' opinions at all levels of the planning and quality-assurance systems; and good contact maintained with alumni and employers, with employer representation on the programme committees. LEU's commitment to improve the programme's quality is borne out by the

comprehensive review of the programme and the successful introduction of a considerable number of improvements in response to the 2011 evaluation and also prompted by another self-evaluation exercise. Quality-assurance procedures are well developed and make use of contributions by all stakeholder groups. The Department has put considerable effort into improving student recruitment but the inability to reverse or even stem the sharp decline in student numbers continues to be of serious concern. Perhaps more could be done to use the alumni as ambassadors for this unique programme that offers a geography teaching qualification. In schools, teachers are the main motivators of students' selection of study programmes and more collaborative promotional events with the teaching alumni could be productive. The evaluation team, however, acknowledged that there are factors beyond the Department's control, including recent limitations placed on entry to university education in general and a revised formulation of the competition mark for entry to geography studies, which impact upon the ability to fill student places.

External factors, including the limitations of the number of state-funded places, also bear upon the low numbers of entrants and graduates that characterise the KU Master programme. Despite the well-documented demand for the programme, the low numbers of actual recruits may represent a threat to the programme's sustainability and hence a major challenge to the Department. More than that, it is perceived as a very serious problem for the whole discipline, as the programme is unique in Lithuania by offering second-level studies in Human Geography. Graduates from this programme are the only ones who currently could proceed directly to doctoral studies in the subject, although currently these would have to be pursued outside Lithuania. Therefore the Department, Faculty and University, encouraged by all those interested in Human Geography's continuation as an academic discipline, should carefully consider how to expand the intake of students to the programme.

Continuing concern over the effects of national legislation

It remains a concern that at present doctoral degree studies are unavailable in Human Geography in Lithuania. The subject is not listed among the research fields in which universities can be granted the right to implement doctoral studies. There is no doubt that PhD qualifications, following on from first- and second-level studies, would greatly improve the academic integrity (and national reputation) of the subject and have a positive impact on its future teaching.

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 legislation that initially led to this situation is "Science Doctoral Studies Regulation (posted on 2001 07 11, No. 897, updated on 2010 05 12, No. 561 by the Government of the 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 and international relevance, but satisfying the criteria relating to the levels of the internationality of scientific research work and material support for a proposed programme could prove more problematical. The programmes evaluated in 2013 have certainly improved their weakest assessment fields in the 2011 evaluation, *staff* and *material resources*. But significant weaknesses remain, as discussed above, and the Catch-22 situation described in the 2011 overview report continues: the lack

of doctoral programmes and hence of new doctoral graduates joining the staff in first- and second-level programmes such as those reviewed here is a real threat to the credibility and viability of university-level Geography in Lithuania. But without further 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 if ever they should come to be considered. The further 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. 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 university providers, their students and the nation as a whole should not have to experience such a scenario.

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

Geoffrey Robinson
Lately of the School of Geography and Geosciences
The University of St Andrews