

A Report Based on Programme Evaluations by Teams of International Evaluation Experts in Higher Education for SKVC

THE OVERVIEW OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LITHUANIA, 2010

INTRODUCTION

This overview is the result of the international evaluation of 11 study programmes in Management and Business Administration implemented in two universities and six colleges in Lithuania in September-October 2010. The evaluations were undertaken by two separate teams of international experts with a common team leader, Dr. Michael Emery. The expert team recommends a sharper profile for the bachelor programmes so that stakeholders can readily identify them; some titles are bland, for example, 'Finance', and need delineating for a better understanding. The master programmes are sufficiently recognisable and delineated.

Since the last overview in 2005, programme structures have improved with first, second and third cycle programmes identified and so has the quality of the self-evaluations with SWOT analysis in the best cases and updating of the reports. The evaluation system has changed in that there are gradings 1-4 across six sections, more detailed guidance from SKVC, and individual programme evaluations rather than a single evaluation for several programmes in the same department. The 2005 overview report was based on the evaluations of 94 programmes in 26 higher education institutes (HEIs). This overview is based on a smaller selection of programmes in 2010, but is none the less important.

METHODOLOGY

The basis of the overview is the self-evaluation documents and annexes provided before each individual programme evaluation and a site visit of normally one day, but this site visit can be two days where there are several programme evaluations. General strengths and recommendations only are fed back by the team leader at the end of the site visit, since more detailed suggestions and recommendations for the programme are given in the individual programme evaluation reports. These reports include the key General Assessment grades, 1-4, for the six evaluation areas. The expert evaluators follow the 'Methodological Guidelines' for evaluating the six areas and this gives the system a consistent approach, though additionally, the international experts also draw on their wide professional experiences gained in their own countries.

EVALUATION GRADINGS

The maximum points for evaluations is 24 (6 areas x 4). The total overall average points scored for the 11 programmes is 17.3: all of the 11 programme evaluations are positive and accreditation is granted for either 3 or 6 years. In fact, only the 2 universities are awarded 6 years accreditation; their points scores are 20 and 22 with the average being 21. All 9 colleges are awarded 3 years accreditation; they have lower grades overall receiving 16 or 17 points and an average of 16.4. All colleges are awarded at least one grade 2. In comparison, therefore, the university programmes proved to be a higher quality than the colleges with an average of 21 points compared to 16.4 points. It may be of relevance here that the programmes evaluated in the two universities are both master programmes whereas in the colleges they are all bachelor programmes. In cases where a college has more than one programme evaluated, then the total grades awarded in this group of evaluations are the same. This no doubt is because many of the areas evaluated are common to each programme such as 'Facilities and Learning Resources' or 'Programme Management'

QUALITY AND STANDARDS OF PROGRAMMES

The expert teams find very serious attempts by all of the 8 higher education institutions (HEIs) to offer quality programmes with good standards. There are continuing efforts to develop them to international standards comparable to similar programmes in other European countries. One programme, a master programme with 22 points is generally at international level and the other master programme with 20 points comes close. However, a number of student theses are not of international standard because these are lacking in empirical and analytical research and evaluation. The bachelor programmes are not at an international level yet as all received at least one grade 2 award ie. 'meets the established minimum requirements, needs improvement'. They need to achieve significantly higher grades overall, made up of only grades 4 and 3, in order to bear comparison with good quality programmes in other European countries. Staff also need to actively benchmark their programmes against comparable Western European bachelor programmes, similarly so for the master programmes, though one has an on-going liaison with a Norwegian business school. The QAA for Higher Education benchmark statements are also a good source of current information.

As an indication of performance and standard, student final work is marked 1-10. In some cases, the marking has very clearly tended to the top-end and the experts recommend a review of marking systems in these instances. One method to check on student levels of work is to differentiate achievement into threshold, modal, and top. These can then be

compared to other programmes or national data. It is expected that the proportion of students within the three categories will vary over time. If the vast majority are continually in the top category, then the intake must be the finest in Lithuania or staff marking needs reviewing. It is invariably the latter reason.

INTERNATIONALISM AND MOBILITY

A clear international focus is seriously lacking in college and in university programmes; it needs a more structured and positive approach for its inclusion. English is often spoken better and is sometimes better understood by students and graduates rather than by staff and particularly older staff who may still use Russian as their second language. Good ability in oral and written English overall is lacking and needs serious inclusion in the programmes and its regular use by both staff and students. This should be in the curriculum, in teaching, and in written work in order to help internationalise the programmes. The libraries need to support internationalism much more with current international books, textbooks and journals including copies in English and other relevant languages. There should be more planned international exchanges for staff and students under Erasmus and other schemes. Possibly, the introduction of joint degrees or double degrees with foreign institutions may be the way forward. Mobility is now the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). More international guest lecturers should be invited from the growing number of international companies now operating in Vilnius, Klaipeda, Kaunas, and other places. The number of foreign banks, for example, are ever increasing with several from Sweden (eg. Nordea, Swedbank, SEB) and now the from UK with Barclays coming to Vilnius.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Nine of the evaluated undergraduate/first cycle study programmes are offered in colleges and the two of the evaluated master/second cycle study programmes in universities. In some instances, there is distance learning. The programmes include the content usually associated with Management and Business Administration programmes in Lithuania. But there are two institutions offering a unique specialist theme; for example, one college has a maritime and marine focus and one university has a military-based focus. The state regulations are sufficiently flexible to allow for such important programmes. In regard to a greater international approach, there needs to be more in the curriculum and in theses and project work. There is a lack of reference in the teaching and learning to the current business issues that include Quantitative Easing 2, the Basle III meeting, issues about the euro and Ireland, and de-risking bank balance sheets. Some of these current areas could be included by staff using modern case-studies in their teaching.

The curricula have been designed in accordance with state regulations and study requirements. There are reasonable structures and academic progression through the programmes and, in general, there are logical sequences for the subjects, but the experts are concerned that there is overlap and duplication occasionally and students are aware of this. In some cases, there are too many 'small' subjects of only 2 credits that fragment the programmes and the experts strongly recommend merger. Management and business subjects are lacking in several programmes and therefore the experts recommend an increase of management and economics subjects such as Project Management and Change Management to balance such programmes with the title. Some subject descriptors are vague and require accurate definition, they do not reflect the content accurately; this is also true in master programmes to ensure that the intended deepening or broadening of the programmes are clearly stated. Also in one master programme, the loosening of curricular rigidity with the introduction of optional subjects would help students learn more in their chosen fields of interest in management and marketing. Overall, the experts recommend that the curricula require a more positive international input in the range of subjects offered, their content, and in the intended learning outcomes, as indicated in the Bologna Accord of 1999 and the Leuven Meeting of Ministers in 2009.

LENGTH AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMMES

The evaluated full-time bachelor and master programmes tend to be longer than equivalent ones in Western Europe. The bachelor programmes evaluated are 4 years in full-time mode, but these are normally 3 years in Western Europe. The Lithuanian programmes include general subjects not included and not thought essential in other countries. Here, 3 years is thought sufficient including for honours programmes too. The evaluated full-time master programmes are 2 years duration, both for the deepening type and the broadening type, and includes writing the thesis in the final fourth semester. In Western Europe, the equivalent master programme is usually an intensive 1 year, September to September, particularly so for the broadening type, with the thesis written in the final summer, June to September. Part-time master programmes are usually studied over at least 2 years in Western Europe and students also combine study with work. Here, there are two types, a taught master with examinations and thesis and a thesis-only master programme. Typically, with the taught mode the student attends for seminars once each week or, if the master programme is by thesis only, then the student usually arranges to meet the supervisor once each term or semester to discuss progress. Consideration should be given to introducing these structures in the evaluated study programmes and competing more internationally.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Most HEI self-evaluations and any updates provide an awareness of intended learning outcomes. The staff and students are able to discern their meaning. Occasionally, incorrect terminology is used and the programme relates to 'goals' or 'objectives'. The terminology should be 'aims and learning outcomes' as correctly indicated in the SKVC 'Methodological Guidelines'. The learning outcomes need to be more explicitly linked to the subject content, the teaching and learning strategy, and to the assessment process, both formative and summative. Too often, these links are vague and a firmer and wider use of the learning outcomes is needed. However, within the field of Management and Business Administration it is neither feasible nor desirable to be too narrow and specific because there is variability in subject aims, teaching strategies, and assessment processes. It is important that the learning outcomes are achievable and relate to an identified number of credits, and so in some cases the allocations of the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) awards has to be reconsidered, as several HEIs visited by the experts intend to do. In the best faculties, the learning outcomes are regularly checked for suitability and updated in response to market conditions and advice from stakeholders, particularly the employers and practitioners. The faculties should not allow the learning outcomes to become embedded for years on end because they will become dated over time.

STUDENT THESES AND SUMMARIES

Master students write their final thesis and, in many cases, bachelor students write a final project, and all will in future due to the 2010 national regulations. In general, more empirical content is required. Additionally, too many works are entirely descriptive and lack critical analysis. The overall level needs to improve; this could be achieved by increasing the cognitive and intellectual skills like critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, identifying assumptions, evaluating statements, and detecting false statements. The student academic writings are written in Lithuanian.

A summary or abstract is usually produced and, to assist a wider readership and to foster internationalism and possible publication, this is in English. However, the experts noted a wide variation in the quality of the summaries. Some are totally unstructured without including any findings, conclusions, or recommendations and do not give a clear picture of the student's research. It is obvious from such cases that the production of a summary is often neglected by supervisors. The summary should be structured with title, purpose, method, results, conclusion, and to an advised length; it should be clear, concise and coherent. The background and rationale for the research thesis or project should be included. For the master thesis at least, the research methodology must be explicit. The key results and conclusions must be present including normally at least one or two key recommendations.

STUDENT INTAKE AND DROP-OUT RATES

Student entries and drop-out rates (attrition rates) are problematical in most cases. This is an anomaly as these Management and Business Administration graduates readily obtain employment locally or regionally, in fact many are in employment whilst studying. It is often the case that HEI entries are falling and so are those of the evaluated programme. This may be due to demographic trends or to the current economic difficulties with the banks and financial world. It is clear, however, that a more active and structured marketing plan is required to offset any falling student numbers. Most HEIs do undertake some form of marketing with open days, fairs, school visiting, and individual discussions, but a more positive approach is often needed to increase student intake. Generally the students are supported on their programmes, both academically and socially, and whether full-time or part-time students. Despite this, some drop-out rates on bachelor programmes are high at well above 10% and these occur usually in the first year of studies. The reasons are not always known. In comparison, the drop-out rate in HEIs in the UK is 8% overall.

The master programmes have their own characteristics. One is implemented at a private university where students pay significant fees and thus are unlikely to drop-out and the other is at a military academy where students are posted abroad for periods at a time and it is difficult to persuade them to complete their studies, though distance learning is a future option. The experts recommend more active marketing of all programmes and a watchful eye maintained on drop-out rates, with more student support provided. Fees are much higher in many Western European countries and rigorous marketing could well take advantage of this differentiation to recruit students from abroad, though the classes would have to be taught in English, as a few already are in the best instances. Additionally, the formal recognition and accreditation of prior learning and experience (APEL) would help increase student intake, particularly so for more mature applicants.

TEACHING AND LEARNING AND THE STUDY PROCESS

Teaching and learning standards should be improved overall. Too often, the teaching and learning strategies are very traditional and lack innovation. More is needed to raise standards to higher education levels and to motivate the students more in some instances with staff needing to use modern teaching methods supported by staff research. There is an art to teaching, it rarely happens naturally. Thus, more needs to be made of improving staff pedagogic skills. One example is for staff to use modern case-studies from the current management and business world. Too often, staff are using case-studies that are very dated, some being 20 years old. It means hard work for the staff to get up-to-date, but regular contact with employers/social partners might help to glean the latest information and

produce much more relevant case-studies. Other valuable student-centred pedagogic skills include small group teaching for high level interaction, the use of team work – both by staff teaching and students, more use of the virtual learning environment (VLE), and the wider development of distance learning, particularly for part-time students. The experts are aware that these pedagogic skills do exist and are used by some HEI staff, but there needs to be much more use of them by many more staff, both young and old. Reflecting upon this, staff development plans need more relevant detail to include the acquisition of modern teaching methods, supported by more up-to-date staff research activity and with master programme staff research needs to be leading edge and published in refereed international journals. More English is also needed in the classroom and levels of competence could be geared to the levels outlined by the accepted European Language Competence Framework. Permanent staff need to be recruited from abroad bringing their language abilities and wider teaching techniques with them – this is highly valuable for programme development and student learning. A teaching-cycle might be produced for all teaching staff to outline their perceived future development with the aim of HEIs retaining their best and most motivating teachers.

STAFF AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

The proportion of permanent to part-time teaching staff varies across programmes from a ratio of 80% : 20% (permanent : part-time) to 60% : 40%. With master programmes, there tends to be a higher proportion of part-time teaching staff. The advantage of using part-time staff is that they are often practitioners with current knowledge of the workplace and they bring this to the classroom. The disadvantage is that if there is a high proportion of part-time teaching staff then there is not sufficient full-time staff to be a critical mass who can operate and manage the programme effectively. There is evidence that the full-time staff are aware of their management roles and overall they play a reasonable part in programme management and the associated embedding of quality controls. In addition, a high proportion of part-time staff are employed by more than one HEI and so are not committed to any one HEI. There does not appear a lack of loyalty, but it is a possibility with such staff moving each week from one HEI to another. Thus, HEIs must be fully aware of the issues when employing many part-time teachers.

The staff turnover is generally low. This allows for a stable teaching and learning environment. It also means that few new staff are appointed who might introduce new teaching and learning methods and bring in more up-to-date subject knowledge. In instances where new staff have been appointed, this has resulted in more vibrant teaching environment, more up-to-date knowledge, and the opportunity to introduce more relevant subjects to the programmes. Generally, the staff age profile spreads from about 30 years to over 65 years, but there is often a gap in the 40-50 age group where good staff have left for other employment, sometimes in commerce. In these cases, there are insufficient vibrant

and capable staff to manage and innovate the programmes and as a consequence programme management appeared to expert team somewhat 'dull' and lacking in dynamism. Here, new, younger, more up-to-date staff are urgently needed to vitalise the programme.

Staff qualifications reflect the demands of the regulations. There are more professorial staff teaching on the master programmes than bachelor programmes. Occasionally with the bachelor programmes, the staff have minimum qualifications needed. The faculties concerned are advised that when appointing new staff they should be at doctoral level at least. If this is not possible in the immediate future, then the experts recommend that faculties ensure that current staff are encouraged to undertake research leading to doctoral status. As to using part-time practitioners, then only those that can teach effectively and who motivate the students with the latest knowledge and experience should be appointed. Visiting teachers from abroad are highly valued by the students, whether from Western or Eastern Europe, bringing with them new teaching methods and experiences. These are either exchange staff through the Erasmus programme or staff appointed short-term. In one instance a full-time staff member was appointed from South America, again bringing wide experience to the classroom. More such staff are needed, whether on exchange, on short-term contracts, or full-time, to add wider experiences and improve language abilities and internationalism.

Staff development features but it needs to be much more dynamic overall with all staff from all age groups taking advantage either to improve their research activities, their qualifications, their teaching abilities, or their English. It should be available to both full-time and part-time staff and each member of staff should have a structured development plan for several years ahead. In other European countries, sabbatical years are possible for full-time staff to undertake research for publication in respected international refereed journals. This is available every 5-7 years. This should be considered in Lithuania for master programme teachers particularly; it adds to the status of the programme and helps attract more applicants and higher quality international students.

SUMMARY

The experts make the following key recommendation for programme improvement:

- Take action to improve overall quality and standards in colleges particularly by raising the level of challenge in teaching and in student work in order to equate more with international bachelor programmes in Western Europe.
- Benchmark bachelor and master programmes against similar programmes in Western Europe; this will help raise quality and standards to international levels.

- Develop an international focus for all programmes including a wider and more regular use of oral and written English and other relevant languages. Libraries must contain hard copies of the latest international publications including textbooks to fully support student learning, in addition to electronic information. More student mobility is required. Lithuania is an international trading country and EU member state thus programmes should reflect this much more positively.
- Review the programme curricula to ensure that the content reflects the title and that subject descriptors are accurate. Subjects should be up-to-date and relevant in respect of current management and business issues.' Small' subjects worth only 2 credits should be merged to give a more rounded and less fragmented programme.
- Both master and bachelor full-time programmes are of one year longer duration than many equivalent programmes in Western Europe; this deserves careful consideration to improve international competitiveness of Lithuanian programmes.
- Programme learning outcomes are the linkage for programmes; they must correlate to and be explicitly linked with subject outcomes, subject content, teaching and learning strategies and assessment processes as also recommended in the Bologna Accord of 1999 and the Leuven Meeting of 2009.
- Use the correct terminology 'aims and learning outcomes', as used in SKVC's 'Methodological Guidelines'.
- Student theses and final project work need to reflect critical analysis more as well as description; summaries need to be more structured and include conclusions and key recommendations.
- In some HEIs, there is a tendency to grade student theses and project work towards the top-end of the 1-10 grading scale. This should be reviewed and a more objective marking policy embedded.
- Programmes require more positive marketing and careful monitoring of student drop-out rates to offset any falling applications and falling first year intakes.
- Teaching and learning methodologies need to embrace the latest teaching techniques to motivate the students more and provide up-to-date information thereby improving programme quality and standards.
- More dynamic staff development programmes including teaching pedagogy, more staff research and more staff mobility are needed overall; each staff member should have a personal development plan over several years. Dynamic and experienced staff in the 40-50 age group should be retained to undertake key programme management roles, bringing in more innovative aspects.
- Extend staff recruitment abroad both for short-term contracts through Erasmus exchanges and private arrangements and also for permanent staff. This will bring in wider experiences and different teaching methods that will enhance the student learning environment.

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