

## **Review Report on Political Science in Lithuanian Higher Education**

The Lithuanian academic community has a major achievement in the reconstitution of the Political Science discipline in the years following 1990. In this work they were able to draw on various resources – the commitment of a number of scholars from other fields who were prepared to change disciplines in order to incorporate this crucial strand of the social sciences into Lithuanian higher education; the contribution of émigré academic specialists; and the dynamism and enthusiasm of a new generation of young academics specialising in the political science field. They have without doubt accomplished a great deal, creating new specialist institutions and study programmes, which reflect the curriculum and standards of the discipline at an international level. The development of a number of political science journals and the formation of the Lithuanian Political Science Association have produced a valuable framework for cooperation between academics at the national level and for integrating the Lithuanian political scientists into European and international disciplinary networks.

During our visit we were impressed by the enthusiasm of the political science teachers we met, and their commitment to developing the discipline and establishing strong European and international links. We were equally impressed by the competence of the students we met, by the written work we had an opportunity to observe, and by the linguistic skills of many students and their commitment to acquiring a rounded understanding of the political science discipline.

As in all positive stories, however, there were some weak points and areas of concern. Some of these were peculiar to individual institutions and programmes, and we have dealt with those in our individual Reports and recommendations. Others were of a more general nature, common across several institutions; and we would summarise these in the following points.

1. There is some unevenness in the quality of teaching. Many teachers clearly have an excellent grasp of the discipline and are very effective in both communicating core knowledge and transmitting enthusiasm for the subject to their students. In some cases however teaching appears to be weaker, as younger academics are pressurised by high teaching loads and older academics find difficulty in adjusting to new systems and contexts.
2. This problem is compounded by the relative lack of a framework within universities to assist and reward positive achievement in the area of pedagogy. Pedagogical skills are as important in higher education as they are at lower levels of the education system, and require pro-active policies for their development. Strengthening of staff development in the area of pedagogy is a task that needs to be assigned high priority in Higher Education policy.

3. There also needs to be a positive framework for encouraging and facilitating research by academic staff, especially younger staff who have recently completed their Ph.Ds and who need the opportunity to proceed in research in order to function fully as advanced teachers. In this respect it is also important to provide opportunities for participation in conferences, guest lectureships, post doctoral visits and the like in order to improve international contacts. Workload and resource allocation mechanisms needs to take into account the full range of obligations that modern higher education teachers have – for high quality teaching, active research, and effective administration. The balancing of these different areas – sometimes apparently conflicting but in the final analysis really *complementary* – is always difficult, but needs to be consistently pursued. This is a key institutional responsibility, but needs support at the state level by appropriate resource provision.
4. There is a tendency to emphasise connections between the *practice* of politics and its academic study - both through institutional linkages and by treating experience in the field of practical politics as a qualification for entry into the academic discipline. While significant mutual benefits can flow from linkages between academics and practitioners in the field of politics, it is important to avoid confusing their respective roles and perspectives. In a democratic political culture, academic disciplines, especially Political Science, need to have a clear and inviolable autonomy from the centres of political power; and while it is valuable for both students and academics to develop an active dialogue with politicians, their respective missions are very different.
5. There appears to be a widespread availability of higher education study programmes in part-time modes. These can be a very useful complement to full-time degree programmes, providing a range of options for educational development over the individual life-cycle and providing flexible patterns of integration between academic study and labour market experience. However the Lithuanian tradition seems to place a very heavy responsibility on the student to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills to qualify for a part-time degree, with limited support from their academic institutions. (In this respect it appears to be more like the “external degree” system developed by the University of London in the British higher education system, rather than modern part-time study provision). It should be appreciated that the part-time learner needs a similar level of instruction and support to full-time students, and part-time study programmes should be restructured to provide this.
6. We understand that some 70% of Lithuanian secondary school leavers now go on to higher education. This inevitably means the emergence of a “mass” higher education system in which the character of students is very different from that of an earlier era when higher education was far more of an elite experience. The contemporary university student population is highly diverse, containing large numbers of students with limited academic preparation, motivation for study, and career orientations. It is, of course, possible to ignore these changes and to continue to direct university

teaching towards the more highly motivated entrants. But the result of such an approach is a high degree of social waste - in terms of both student time and public resources – as significant numbers of students drop-out of programmes before completion, or under-perform. There is no simple solution to this problem, but the allocation of resources to strengthening pedagogy and providing systems of individual and social support for students, especially in the early years of their studies, can have a very positive impact. As far as we could see, these issues need to be addressed much more systematically in Lithuanian higher education, including in Political Science departments.

7. We observed a high degree of regional identity in the Universities we visited. This has many positive benefits – including a strong commitment by institutions to regional needs and development, and a strong loyalty by students and employers from the region to the institutions. On the other hand, it can lead to a degree of parochialism, in which institutions focus on local needs at the expense of a wider view of the national higher education system and society, and can become a barrier to cooperation between institutions from different regions. We believe that there needs to be more inter-regional networking and cooperation between institutions, especially in the provision of higher degrees and the sharing of resources.
8. We perceived a widespread weakness in the programmes we evaluated with respect to training in research methods. There is a tendency to regard methods as something that should be taught alongside substantial subject material as and when needed. The integration of methodology teaching with its practical application is a legitimate approach: but first students need a solid grounding in methodological principles and techniques, which can only be provided by dedicated methods courses. As a general norm, the equivalent of at least half a semester should be devoted to methods training, besides training within substantial courses, in order to meet international standards. In order to ensure high quality teaching, especially in quantitative techniques, some teachers from each institution should be given the opportunity to attend international training, such as that offered by the summer schools in Essex (ECPR) and/or Ann Arbor (ICPSR).
9. There needs to be a systematic effort to improve the physical facilities for teaching staff – especially junior staff. Teachers need private offices, or at most offices shared between no more than two people, in order to have adequate facilities for individual guidance of students, and the conduct of personal research.

We recognise that none of these problems are unique to Lithuanian higher education - almost all of them are currently confronting higher education systems around the world – and that the capacity to address them is constrained by the availability of resources. But we think that it is important to call them to the attention of policy makers and to urge that they are taken into account in the future planning of higher education development.

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