

Overview of higher education Sociology programmes in Lithuania

Introduction

There are 9 sociology programmes in Lithuania which were involved in the current round of evaluation: 4 at the undergraduate level and 5 at the postgraduate level. Two of these programmes are based at Vytautas Magnus University, two at Kaunas University of Technology, three at Vilnius University and two at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences.

These programmes were evaluated by an international teams of experts on October 9 and 10 (programmes in Kaunas), and on November 6, 7 and 8 (programmes in Vilnius). The teams were composed as follows:

October 9-10, 2012

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November 6-8, 2012

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This overview report has been prepared by the two Team Leaders based on the self-evaluation reports prepared by the institutions, wide-ranging discussions held with staff and students from the institutions during the visits, and the views of the visiting experts.

The teams suggested that of the 9 programmes evaluated, 5 were accredited for six years, 3 for three years and 1 was not accredited.

This report will present the findings of the expert teams under the headings suggested by the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education. It focuses naturally on some of the areas where improvements could be made and makes recommendations as to what these instances

might be; it should be remembered that there are also many positive points and instances of good professional practice.

Aims and learning outcomes

Both teams found the programmes reasonably well defined and information about the programmes was publicly available, though this information could sometimes be more complete to enable students to make better informed choices. The aims of the programmes were in general consistent with the level of qualification offered, but the titles of two were not quite consistent with the contents.

There are two main concerns with the programme aims and learning outcomes of many of the programmes.

Firstly, the general aims of the programmes are often quite ambitious and expressed in a very high-flown manner. It is, however, difficult to judge how these aims are thought to be realized in practice and how to measure them in terms of learning outcomes. Sometimes a bit more down-to-earth goals might be more convincing and realistic, and also more useful on the labour market.

Second, it looks like the disciplinary identity of sociology and the position of the graduates at the labour market in Lithuania is not very well crystallised. This is a problem that does not only concern Lithuanian sociology, but is experienced in Western European countries, as well, but it seems to be even more accentuated in the post-socialist countries, like Lithuania, where sociology, at least in its present shape, is a relative newcomer in the national system of higher education. In the discussions with both the teachers and the students at the visited institutions, we often heard expectations which were, if not totally contradictory, at least quite wide apart. For instance, on the one hand, students are expected to be employed by various market research organizations which emphasize practical computer skills and statistical methods. On the other hand, sociology has an aura of being one of the liberal arts which educates students with a wide profile of subjects allowing them to choose according to their own inclinations and wishes with the aim of producing mature, reflective and critical citizens ('public intellectuals') who are capable of taking care of various kinds of jobs, from social planners to social critics. We think that to an extent this is an inbuilt antinomy within the discipline in general, but as said, it might be more problematic in a country like Lithuania than in countries where sociology has a more firmly established tradition within academia. One aspect of the issue, present in many post-Soviet countries, is that sociology is considered closely related to philosophy and, although the links are obvious, it is not the best positioning of a subject, where most of the jobs are quite practical. We acknowledge that there is not any simple way to solve the problem. The best way to deal with is, first, to be aware of it and inform the students of it, and second to take it openly up in describing the aims and learning outcomes of the programmes, as well as taking it into account in planning the right balance in the concrete study units of the programmes. In countries where sociology has a firmer position, it has built up an identity as one of the social sciences, as opposed to being part of humanities.

Not independently of the identity question, the most apparent challenge sociology teaching at Lithuanian universities is facing – the diminishing amount of new students. This might be a result of demographic changes which are outside of the reach of the agents active in planning and

implementing these programmes, but one could imagine that clearer, more consistent, realistic and attractive aims could be a good asset in competing with other institutions in the field and other disciplines as would more pronounced individual programme profiles which would be distinctive enough to make a real difference.

The quality and appropriateness of learning outcomes, both at programme and course levels, displayed large variations between the institutions. The site visits clearly demonstrated the teaching staff's understanding of student-centered and active teaching and learning.

Curriculum design

The curricula appear to meet the Lithuanian legal requirements and they are also, in general, consistent with European guidelines, for example the Bologna process.

While in general the contents of the curricula are consistent with sociology programmes elsewhere, there are some idiosyncrasies. The rationale for inclusion of some of the modules is not clear or well-motivated, and seems to reflect the interests of the staff and the availability of local teaching resources rather than needs of students. In that sense, many of the programmes lacked collective ownership.

The programmes evaluated contained a mixture of optional and compulsory courses. In a number of instances it was not clear why certain courses were optional rather than compulsory, and vice versa. Nor was it clear just how some of the optional courses enhanced the curriculum students were taking. The institutions need to give a clear rationale for the courses included in the programmes and make such information available for the students.

Special attention should be paid to the contents, extension and status of the courses on sociological methods in the curricula. For instance, at some institutions the students expressed emphatically their need to learn more and get a deeper understanding of statistical methods.

Some programmes consist of a great number of rather small study units. In order to make the whole programme more transparent and comprehensible it would be advisable to combine them into bigger modules.

Despite the fact that the programmes offer often a great number of elective courses, these are not always elective in practice since the small amount of students does not make it possible to offer them often enough. This is related to the more serious problem that some programmes obviously have too few students and are faced with diminishing student numbers.

The staff

All the sociology staff teaching in the programmes have the minimum qualifications in sociology necessary to enable them to do so. Staff from other disciplines who teach in the programmes also have the minimum necessary qualifications in the subjects they teach.

We also found the staff to be very dedicated and willing to improve their programmes. However, in many cases, this meant willingness to improve their own courses, and not necessarily to consider teaching other, perhaps more useful courses.

The teams had concerns about the staffing levels and workload in a number of the programmes. Teaching loads are often high. The workload is also in some cases quite unevenly divided among the staff members. The departments have, for instance, not always employed new persons to teach courses left over when someone has left the department for a shorter time or permanently and therefore the remaining teachers have had to take over their teaching duties, too. In some instances, the rules for the number of contact hours were too complex and seemed being not well understood by the staff members.

Perhaps as a result of the high teaching loads, the research outputs are lower than they might be, especially measured in publications in internationally-recognised peer-reviewed journals and this applies even to the most highly respected professors. In the long run, this will have a harmful effect on the standards of teaching, in particular because the lack of international benchmarking may discourage the best students to choose to study sociology in Lithuania. If Lithuania is to become internationally recognized for its sociology, then developing research base at the universities is essential. Staff needs both time and resources to enable them to do this, both of which are currently in short supply at least at most institutions.

There are some opportunities for staff to attend conferences and to travel abroad to extend their experience and develop their research and other scholarly activities. However, participation in such activities is far from universal and is perhaps something which should be more actively encouraged and promoted by the university administration. The lack of appropriate international presence also makes these departments less than attractive from the perspective of incoming lecturer and researcher mobility.

Facilities and learning resources

The team members can only draw on their own experiences in their own countries and elsewhere to judge the adequacy of the resources. Relative to other countries, the teaching facilities and resources seem to be quite satisfactory: both the teachers and the students have access to modern texts and journals via internet, libraries are quite well provided, students have access to computer classes. The departments have started using internet facilities in teaching and teachers exceedingly communicate with their students on the internet. The teaching halls and seminar rooms are modern and in most cases within easy reach to the students.

In some institutions, however, teaching staff do not have appropriate office space and many have to share a single office, sometimes taking turns according to a time schedule. This is problematic in terms of interaction with students.

Study process and assessment

The quality of the students admitted to the programmes is quite variable and the admission criteria are mostly clear, however some of the institutions are not very selective in their admission process.

Some of the Master's programmes admit students who have received their Bachelor (BA) education in other disciplines than sociology. This causes some practical problems since they have to teach introductory courses in sociology, which the students with a BA in Sociology have already attended to, to these 'non-sociological' students. This practice, however, has the advantage of widening the student base.

The student experience was good in general and the staff was experienced to be engaging and helpful. Students had also in many cases opportunities to participate in their teacher's research projects.

In general, we found that the assessment guidelines and marking procedures were made clear to students. However, the standards for the grades given, for instance, for the Bachelor's and Master's theses, differed quite a lot from a higher education institute to another. This is, of course, not independent from the differing levels of students at the various departments.

The nature of the students' practice reports was not always quite clear and practice adequately implemented. It was not always clear enough how practice was related to the general aims of the study programme and the advancement of learning and whether the internship opportunities provided covered appropriately the entire spectrum of potential employers.

Students gain invaluable experiences by visiting other institutions both in Lithuania and abroad. While such opportunities are obviously available and participation encouraged, e.g. the Erasmus exchange scheme, students make use of them in quite limited numbers. The reasons for this should be thoroughly explored, and if possible, hindered abolished. If, for instance, going abroad leads students to take additional courses at home on their return, this should be taken care of by better coordination of their studies abroad and at home. If language is a hindrance, more effective language teaching should be included in the study process, etc. If this is because of the limited international visibility of the sociology departments and scholars in Lithuania, then this is a deeper problem that should be addressed at the faculty level.

Programme management

We found most of the programmes we evaluated to be well managed, with clear lines of responsibility and delegation. One general comment is that it would be the best if sociology programmes were managed from within the sociology departments, and not as now was sometimes the case, on, say, departmental level from other disciplines. In some instances, management restricted themselves to running the current course offerings, and the choice of the courses was based less on the identified needs of the programme, than on the availability and willingness of faculty members to teach them.

The role of the stakeholders and social partners in the planning and assessment of the study programs could be broadened and more systematically organized.

Feedback from the students was also valued and acted upon. Even though students evaluation of the courses was collected, e.g. using questionnaires, this feedback was to some extent collected informally and not very systematic. Students' involvement in the programme planning could be made more institutionalized, as currently their feedback is mostly used to improve the existing courses.

Often, it was not clear whether student opinions triggered any action on the programme level, as opposed to the individual course level.

Conclusion

The quality of the Lithuanian sociology programmes showed variation, but there are a number of areas in which even the best ones could be improved. This report indicates areas which might usefully be addressed.

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December 10 , 2012