



By Eimantė Bogdan

Review of excellence at the level of individual subject disciplines

The concept of excellence in higher education

The concept of *excellence* is no longer a new phenomenon in higher education. This concept is used to define something that is exceptionally good, exceeds the defined standards, or can be achieved by few. At the same time it is an aspiration and goal leading towards continuous improvement. Most of researchers, who have studied the concept of *excellence*, acknowledge that there are many various concepts of *excellence*, since this concept is multivalued, contextual, and ever-changing, it is agreed upon and revised in the light of personal and public needs prevailing during a certain period. In higher education *excellence* means a lot of things depending on the context and time, therefore, it is complicated, or maybe even impossible, to find one universal meaning. Moreover, something that is considered to be exceptionally good or unattainable today, tomorrow can be a standard or a rule. Therefore, we should search for a broader, universal concept of *excellence*, which would lead us towards the aspiration of standard exceeding quality in everything that we do.

Excellence in the context of Lithuania

The Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) is a quality assurance agency in Lithuania with a mission to foster the quality of higher education in the country and the culture of quality, thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of higher education in Lithuania. The branches of activities of SKVC, as a quality assurance agency, include the external assessment and accreditation of institutions and study programmes, follow-up activities and consultancy. The teams of international (predominantly) or local experts are invited for the external assessment of higher education institutions and study programmes.

Though quality assurance in higher education has always been one of the priorities of SKVC since its establishment, discussions about *excellence* in Lithuania are relatively new. Currently we undergo a testing phase and search for the manifestations of *excellence* in higher education in Lithuania. One of the methods is the spread of the concept of *excellence* at the events for sharing good practice. Another method is the examples of good practice or *excellence* in higher education institution's activities or study programmes. Therefore, SKVC started collecting and analysing the examples of *excellence* in higher education. This review covers the analysis of the examples of *excellence* performed with reference to the international expert findings and recommendations given therein.

Institutional assessment: collecting the examples of good practice

During the course of external assessment of the activities of higher education institutions, which took place in 2011–2015, the international expert teams assessed all higher education institutions operating in the Republic of Lithuania and presented recommendations for the improvement of their activities. Higher education institutions were assessed by experts according to the following four areas under assessment: (1) strategic management, (2) academic studies and life-long learning, (3) research and/or art activities, (4)

impact on regional and national development. One of the characteristics of assessing the activities of higher education institutions is the examples of good practice distinguished by the experts. Following the assessment of higher education institutions in Lithuania, the experts have identified exceptionally good examples:

- When assessing the **strategic management** area, the experts commended the cooperation of many higher education institutions with social partners, their support in framing strategic plans, and involvement in the internal strategic planning processes.
- In the **academic studies and life-long learning** area the experts distinguished strong, practice-oriented study programmes adjusted according to the ever-changing market, which determine a high student employment level, as well as good relations with students and graduates that are cherished.
- When assessing the **research and/or art activities**, especially high achievements at a global level in the individual research and/or art activities were observed in the isolated cases.
- When analysing the **impact on regional and national** development, the experts observed an active, consistent, and systematic cooperation with various social partners as well as significant impact on them. Final theses of students meet regional and national needs and are based on the interests of business enterprises.

Assessment of study programmes: examples of excellence

The assessment of study programmes takes place by analysing the following six areas under assessment: (1) programme aims and expected learning outcomes, (2) curriculum design, (3) teaching staff, (4) facilities and learning resources, (5) study process and its assessment, (6) programme management.

It is established in the procedure for assessing and accrediting the study programmes that every single programme is assessed according to the aforementioned 6 areas under assessment, whereof each is assessed on a 4-point scale. In this scale 4 points is the highest possible grade. It is given to those areas under assessment, which are **exceptional**. This scale does not have a broader description; therefore, the assessment by giving this grade shall be left for the expert decision.

Since 2014 a new column – the examples of *excellence* – appeared on the Centre's own initiative in the structure of the outcomes near the areas under assessment. The experts are asked to identify the exceptionally good specifics of performance of the programme, which stand out among most of programmes, and to describe them. A qualitative content analysis of the assessment findings was performed in order to identify the most characteristic attributes of study programmes with the examples of *excellence* specified. The analysis was performed with reference to the study programme areas under assessment in relation to the study areas. When analysing the expert assessment findings, all examples of *excellence*, as indicated by the experts, were studied and accordingly attributed to the area under assessment.

Since 2014–2015ⁱ, with the help of the international expert teams, SKVC assessed 335 study programmes, where 29 percent of the expert findings included the examples of *excellence*.

According to the type and cycle, most of the examples of *excellence* (43 percent) were revealed by the experts in professional Bachelor's study programmes, slightly less (33 percent) in the Bachelor's study programmes and the rest (24 percent) in the Master's study programmes.

Most of study programmes, in which the experts distinguished the examples of *excellence*, are performed in the area of social sciences (42 percent). A similar number of such examples were distinguished in the areas of technological sciences (25 percent) and arts (20 percent). The rest of programmes containing the examples of *excellence* are performed in the areas of humanities (5 percent), physical (5 percent), and biomedical sciences (3 percent). Such distribution interrelates with the total number of programmes registered in these areas in Lithuania: most of study programmes are performed in the area of social sciences (45 percent), as a result whereof the number of study programmes in this area may be higher as compared to the programmes in other study areas. Programmes performed in other study areas are distributed as follows: technological sciences (21 percent), biomedical sciences (10 percent), humanities and arts (9 percent each), and physical sciences (6 percent).

Most of the examples of *excellence* were identified in the study programmes performed by the state higher education institutions in Lithuania – 71 percent (22 higher education institutions, 85 study programmes) and the rest – 29 percent (9 higher education institutions, 11 study programmes) – by non-state higher education institutions.ⁱⁱ

The examples of *excellence* indicated by the experts by the area under assessment have distributed as follows: 27 percent of such examples were distinguished under the study process and its assessment, 23 percent – under the material base, 20 percent – under the programme management, 16 percent – during the assessment of teachers, 8 percent of cases were distinguished in the curriculum design, and the remaining 6 percent – under the programme aims and expected learning outcomes.

During the performance of qualitative analysis of the examples of *excellence* it was observed that some of the experts leaned towards interpreting the concept of distinction of the study programme as an unquestioning compliance with legislation. Other experts, alternatively, leaned towards seeing the compliance of the examples of *excellence* with the requirements of legal acts as a rule, not something of exceptional nature. Such experts gave credit not only to something that met formal requirements for the study programmes, but also to something that exceeded them. Having identified such facts during the course of assessment, the experts leaned to treat them as the examples of *excellence*.

Where analysing the examples of *excellence* in the expert findings, it was observed that a more detailed explanation is missing here and there as to why one area or the other is indicated as exceptionally good. Moreover, certain programme areas under assessment with the examples of *excellence* distinguished also cover the shortcomings and comments as to the improvement of quality of the programme.

The generalization of the results of the analysis of the examples of *excellence* in the study programmes and the examples of good practice of the institutional assessment witnesses that they concur in most cases. This leads to the conclusion that despite the performance of individual assessments of higher education institutions and study programmes, similar tendencies are observed during the course of such assessment.

Below is given a brief analysis of the examples of *excellence* by the study programme areas under assessment.

Area under assessment	Examples of <i>excellence</i>
<i>Programme aims and expected</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims and learning outcomes meet the academic, professional, public, and labour market needs;

<i>learning outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme aims and learning outcomes are clearly defined, duly framed, interrelated with the learning outcomes, and reflect the interdisciplinary view; • The processes of framing and reviewing of programme aims and learning outcomes involve social partners as well as consideration of their opinion.
<i>Curriculum design</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present and future needs of the labour market were taken into account during the programme framing process; • The programme itself is perfectly balanced and framed: theory is combined with practice, general subjects – with the subjects of the study field, which contributes to the successful employment of students after graduation; • Some subjects are taught in English; • Various specializations are offered.
<i>Teaching staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers are highly qualified professionals in their field, who are actively engaged in their scholarly endeavour, demonstrate high scientific achievements, publish scientific reports in the international magazines, and prepare textbooks or teaching aids for students; • Conditions are provided for the professional development of teachers: improvement of professional and pedagogical competencies; • Significant attention is devoted to the introduction of new teachers to the programme; • Recognized teachers from foreign countries and local teachers at the international level enhance the internationalisation of programmes and offer the latest innovative teaching methods; • Devoted and highly motivated teachers teaching in foreign languages and having experience at the international level; • The efforts of higher education institution to pull in and preserve the top level personnel as well as recognized scientists and teachers.
<i>Facilities and learning resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent material resources, which meet high standards and are furnished with the state-of-the-art equipment required for work (buildings, classrooms, workshops, and the overall infrastructure); • High-level, well-equipped modern libraries and logins to the electronic databases; • Excellent student practical training base: all necessary equipment, all conditions for students to have substantial practical training using the equipment of employers and social partners; • State-of-the-art laboratories and equipment, which meet the international standards; • Equipment tailored to the needs of students with disabilities.
<i>Study process and its assessment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous mutual cooperation between the teachers, students, and social partners, good communication, academic and social support; • Skilled graduates, who have no difficulties to establish on a labour market soon after graduation, and knowledge as well as competencies acquired by graduates, which are very much appreciated by employers; • Well and clearly organized study process: integration of new students into studies, possibility for students to choose various learning methods (e.g. distance learning), formation of individual study plan; • Involvement of students with disabilities in the study process; • Motivation of students to participate in scientific and research activities; • Motivation of students to participate in mobility programs; • Clear and transparent system for assessing the students' achievements, possibilities for students to familiarize with the evaluation results;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic, active, curious, highly motivated, devoted, and programme-engaged students.
<i>Programme management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of the teachers, students, and social partners in the programme as well as its continuous improvement and assessment; • Cooperation between public and private sectors as well as strong relationship with social partners; • Continuous improvement of the programme by taking into account the recommendations of previous assessment; • Changes in the programme by taking into account the students and graduates feedback results.

Study programmes with the overall assessment totalling no less than 22 points (out of 24 possible) and no area under assessment given 2 points by the experts may also be deemed to be the examples of *excellence*. To generalize the data of 2010 – 2015, 69 study programmes with the overall performance score of 22 and more were assessed during this period. The number of highest rated study programmes totals 6 percent of all study programmes assessed over the last 6 years. Out of all 45 higher education institutions currently operating in the Republic of Lithuania, study programmes of 18 higher education institutions were given highest ratings. According to study areas, most of programmes, which were given 22-24 points, are among social sciences – 30 programmes (i.e. 7 percent of all study programmes registered in this study area), which forms quite a big gap with respect to other study areas. Other study areas range as follows: biomedical sciences (11 programmes, 9 percent of all programmes in this area), arts (11 programmes, 9 percent of all programmes in this area), technological sciences (9 programmes, 3 percent of all programmes in this area), physical sciences (5 programmes, 6 percent of all programmes in this area), and humanities (3 programmes, 3 percent of all programmes in this area).

Generalization

Though the quality assurance in higher education has always been one of the priorities of SKVC since the establishment of the Centre, discussions about *excellence* in Lithuania are relatively new. Currently we undergo a testing phase and search for the manifestations of *excellence* in higher education in Lithuania. In order to identify the concept of *excellence* in the context of Lithuania, SKVC started collecting and analysing the examples of *excellence* in higher education.

Following the assessments of higher education institutions and study programmes, it was observed that in most cases the examples of good practice of the institutional assessment concur with the examples of *excellence* identified at the study programme level, which leads to the conclusion that despite the performance of individual assessments of higher education institutions and study programmes, similar tendencies are observed during the course of such assessment.

Following the analysis of the examples of *excellence* in study programmes and the review of study programmes, which were given the highest rating (no less than 22 points), it was observed that most of such examples were discovered in the programmes within the area of social sciences. Such distribution interrelates with the total number of programmes registered in these areas in Lithuania: most of study programmes are performed in the area of social sciences, as a result whereof the number of study programmes in this area may be higher as compared to the programmes in other study areas.

To generalize the results of the analysis, it could be concluded that the concept of *excellence* is influenced not only by the assessment experience of the experts, but it also depends on the personal subjective experience of the experts. On the other hand, we can find the examples of *excellence*, where high rating of study programmes is based analytically and systematically by presenting a detailed description as well as analysis of quality indicators of the programmes. So far it is complicated to precisely distinguish between the examples of *excellence*, since the concept of *excellence* itself has not been crystallized and specified yet, therefore, the experts commonly refer to their personal experience and consensus by indicating what, in their opinion, is exceptional in the programmes. When there are more examples collected and more extensive experience acquired, we will be able to more specifically define the *excellence* and to select the examples of *excellence*.

13/06/2016

ⁱ This review does not cover the study programmes assessed in 2016, since their assessment procedures have not been finished yet.

ⁱⁱ There are two types of higher education institutions – state and non-state institutions – operating in Lithuania.