

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

THE OVERVIEW OF ECONOMICS STUDY PROGRAMMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LITHUANIA, 2010

INTRODUCTION

This overview is the result of the international evaluation of 15 study programmes in Economics implemented in six universities (one involving two separate campuses) and one college (involving two separate campuses) in Lithuania in October-November 2010. The evaluations were undertaken by two separate teams of international experts with a common team leader, Dr. Michael Emery.

Since the last overviews in 2005 (though not for Economics), 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 programme 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. This overview is based on 15 study programmes in Economics, comprising 13 university and two college programmes, in 2010. It is interesting to note that 'Economics' occurs in the titles of 11 of the 15 evaluated programmes; 'accounting, finance and banking' make up the four other titles.

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 more than that where there are several programmes for evaluation. 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' provided by SKVVC 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 15 programmes is **19.0**: all of the 15 programme evaluations are positive and accreditation is granted for either 3 or 6 years. The first group of six programme evaluations comprises four university and two college economics programmes; here the average total grade is 20.3 covering one master programme and five bachelor programmes. The second group of nine programme evaluations are all university programmes; here the average total grade is 18.2 and covers seven master programmes and two bachelor programmes. Overall, the strongest areas are 'Facilities and Learning Resources' and 'Study Process and Student Assessment'; the weakest area is 'Curriculum Design', though in the second group 'Programme Aims and Learning Outcomes' is also a weaker area out of the six areas.

In the cases where the higher education institutions (HEI) has more than one economics programme evaluated, on three occasions the total grades but the section grades are different, even though several of the areas evaluated have common features for each programme, for example, 'Facilities and Learning Resources, and 'Programme Management'. This indicates that the quality of such programmes are not the same in every one of the six areas and that the evaluations undertaken by the same expert team are objective, with the experts evaluating with complete integrity.

The two expert groups both contained the same expert team leader, Dr. Michael Emery, but were largely made up of four different experts, all of whom were also sub-team leaders responsible for the production of initial reports.

QUALITY AND STANDARDS OF PROGRAMMES

The expert teams find very serious attempts by all of the 8 HEIs, both colleges and universities, 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, and this must continue. One programme, a specialist master programme in Agricultural Economics with 22 points, is approaching international level and other programmes with 21 points are near that level but still require further significant developments over time. However, a number of student master theses are not of international standard and require additional work; these theses are lacking in empirical and analytical research and evaluation, often they are too descriptive. Of the seven bachelor programmes three have 21 points but the other four programmes are not at an international level and need to achieve significantly higher grades overall, made up of more grades 4 in order to bear comparison with good quality bachelor programmes in other European countries. Staff also need to actively benchmark their programmes against comparable Western European bachelor programmes in respect of internationalism, the

regular use of English in teaching and learning, library book and journal stocks, modern textbooks used, and overall standards. 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 gradings. 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 of grades are continually in the top category, then the student intake must be the finest in Lithuania and Europe or staff marking needs reviewing. It is invariably the latter reason.

INTERNATIONALISM AND MOBILITY

A clear international focus is seriously lacking in all of the 15 programmes evaluated; it needs a far more structured and positive approach for its inclusion. Programme aims should endorse an international approach. 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 student written work in order to help internationalise the programmes. The libraries need to support internationalism much more with current international books, current 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; staff and student mobility is weak overall in the evaluated programmes. 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. Guest speakers from such businesses would be invaluable as they have direct knowledge of current international issues such as the current Irish and eurozone problems and can impart this information to the students.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

The 7 evaluated undergraduate/first cycle bachelor study programmes are offered in colleges and universities and the 8 evaluated master/second cycle study programmes in universities. In some instances, there is distance learning. The programmes include the content usually associated with Economics programmes in Lithuania. But there are four institutions offering specialist themes: one university has an agricultural economics focus for both bachelor and master programmes, two HEIs focus on a mixture of accounting, banking and finance, and a further one specialises in producing secondary schoolteachers of economics. In these programmes the curricula comprise the essential economics subjects, though at a restricted amount and level with the pedagogic teaching programme, but also geared to the specialisms; for example, the pedagogic bachelor programme includes the essential student teaching practices necessary for training teachers. The state regulations are sufficiently flexible to allow for such important programmes.

The curricula have been designed in accordance with state regulations, study programme requirements, and the HEI's own regulations. 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 in both bachelor and master economics programmes occasionally and students spoke of this to the expert team. In one case, there is an overlap of subjects between the master programmes evaluated and where this combined with low student numbers in one case the experts strongly recommend merger. Current specialist subjects are lacking in several specialist programmes. For example, the experts recommend inclusion of Central Banking, Bank Management, and Crisis Management in those specialist bachelor and master banking programmes where they are not present. Similarly, the experts recommend the inclusion of modern accounting subjects in the specialist accounting bachelor and master programmes. Practice is an important feature in bachelor programmes, but students, graduates and employers suggest that it is given more importance in some cases. Similarly, Business Ethics requires more acknowledgment. It is included as part of some bachelor programmes but it is also needed in master programmes to help enforce on-going honesty in business; dishonesty is evident in the financial world and in some municipalities with details of several criminal cases being investigated currently in the Lithuanian and international news.

With 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. As already noted, the regular and structured use of more guest speakers involved in implementing the curriculum would be invaluable here. English is a feature of the bachelor programmes, but it should also be part of the master programmes. Students also thought that English conversation classes would also be useful. An economics graduate now working

in the commercial property sector at SEB told the expert team how essential English is for international communications between Vilnius and the parent company in Sweden.

Overall, the experts recommend that the curricula require a more positive international input in the range of subjects offered, their content, and in the associated intended learning outcomes, as also 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 Economics programmes evaluated include general subjects not included and not thought essential in many other countries. Here, 3 years is thought sufficient including for honours programmes too. The evaluated full-time master Economics 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 bachelor and master economics study programmes and competing more internationally.

The Economics programme implemented at the Pedagogical University has different characteristics. It combines instruction in Economics and in teaching at secondary schools. Its duration is 4 years. This form of programme is common in other European countries and is of the same length. However, the structure is often different with European programmes using 3 years for studying the main subject area followed by a further year for teaching methodology. This is a '3 plus 1' structure, with students able to leave after 3 years with a bachelor degree and obtain a job other than in teaching.

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 very vague and a firmer use of the learning outcomes is needed. However, at the same time and within the field of Economics 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 one case, the learning outcomes appear identical for both bachelor and the follow-up master Economics programmes. Here, the HEI concerned argued that they were implemented at different levels, being implemented at a deeper level for the master work. Expert advice is that the learning outcomes should not be identical for a bachelor and follow-up master Economics programmes because it gives an impression of the same quality and teaching level for first cycle and second cycle programmes.

In the most effective 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 certainly become dated over time.

STUDENT THESES AND SUMMARIES

Master students write a 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 to match international standards; 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 note a wide variation in the quality of these economics 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 and quality of the summary is

too 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 at the end of the summary.

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 Economics graduates readily obtain employment locally or regionally, in fact many are in employment whilst studying. It is currently the case that HEI student entries are falling overall and so in general, 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 particularly are high at well above 10% and these occur usually in the first year of studies. The reasons are not always known, but relevant HEIs should investigate matters. In comparison, the drop-out rate in HEIs in the UK is 8% overall and in the top universities it is 1%.

The experts suggest a wider and more effective use of distance learning systems to assist students requiring more flexible teaching schedules, even though many classes do not start until 1730 hours and for part-time students there are weekend blocks of teaching. In the UK, for example, the Open University consists of distance learning with occasional summer schools and is highly successful both in term of its student numbers and in quality.

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 at some 9,300 Euros in England soon, for example, compared to 1,100 Euros per year in Lithuanian bachelor programmes 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. Students complain of this to the expert teams. 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 more 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 in the 15 evaluated programmes, 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, as the general view held by students is that the quality of the teaching in the evaluated programmes is ‘average’ overall. Surprisingly this is also so even where experts expect to find good teaching quality where pedagogic skills are being taught everyday.

Staff development plans need more relevant detail to include the acquisition of modern dynamic teaching methods, supported by more up-to-date staff research activity and with master programme staff particularly staff research needs to be leading edge and published in refereed international journals. More English, both oral and written, 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 in Economics – this is highly valuable for programme development and student learning. A teaching-cycle might be produced for all Economics 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 Economics 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 commercial 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 Economics teaching and learning environment. It also means that few new young 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 the commercial world. In these cases, there are insufficient vibrant and capable staff to manage, energise, and innovate the Economics programmes and as a consequence programme management appeared to the expert teams 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 Economics 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. As a good example, some of these part-time staff are in very senior positions in commerce and highly respected in Lithuania. Such appointments add esteem to the programmes.

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. More such staff are needed, whether on exchange, on short-term contracts, or even full-time, to add wider experiences and improve language abilities and internationalism. Students stated to the experts that they value staff from abroad and would like to see more appointed.

Staff development is a feature in all faculties visited 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, as it is in other countries, 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 Economics programme and helps attract high quality staff to the faculty.

SUMMARY

The experts make the following key recommendations for programme improvement:

- Take action to improve overall quality and standards by raising the level of challenge in teaching and in student work in order to equate more with international bachelor and master programmes in Western Europe.
- Benchmark bachelor and master programmes against similar programmes in Western Europe; this will help inform staff who could then raise quality and standards of the Economics programmes 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. This is in addition to the electronic sources so widely available to students.
- Greater student mobility is required. Lithuania is an international trading country and EU member state thus Economics 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 international commercial issues and the latest economic theories. Econometrics, for example, may not be always popular but it is relevant in Economics programmes.
- Where student numbers are continually low and at a critical level, then, if possible, such programmes should be merged with similar programmes.
- Both master and bachelor full-time programmes are of one year longer duration in the 15 evaluated programmes than many equivalent programmes in Europe; this deserves careful consideration to improve international competitiveness of the programmes and attract exchange students and more students overall.
- 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. In the evaluated programmes, there is an awareness of learning outcomes but also a general vagueness as to their importance in designing effective programmes.

- Use the correct terminology 'aims and learning outcomes', as used in SKVC's 'Methodological Guidelines'.
- Student theses and final project work need to involve reflection, empirical research, and critical analysis much more, as well as high quality descriptive writing; 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. There are several instances where this over-grading unfortunately occurs. Where it does occur then it should be reviewed and a more objective marking policy embedded.
- Programmes require more active and positive marketing and careful monitoring of student drop-out rates to offset any falling applications and falling first year intakes. Distance learning and APEL should also be considered to improve numbers. More State-funded student places would also help offset falling numbers.
- Teaching and learning methodologies need to embrace the latest teaching techniques to motivate the students more and provide up-to-date information of an international level, thereby improving programme quality and standards.
- More dynamic staff development programmes including teaching pedagogy, more high quality staff research with outcomes published in refereed and respected journals, and more staff mobility are greatly 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 and dynamic learning experiences.
- Actively 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.
- Plagiarism is a problem in all countries with students having access to the internet and databases. In some of the evaluated programmes there is a vagueness as to how to deal with it, should it occur. Clear and rigorous policies need to be embedded in all HEIs and known to both staff who have to deal with it and to the students.

Evaluated programmes by the two teams of international experts October-November, 2010:

Economics I:

Economics (bachelor), Klaipeda University

Grades 3 3 3 3 3 3 = 18

Agricultural Economics (bachelor), Lithuanian University of Agriculture

Grades 4 3 3 3 4 4 = 21

Agricultural Economics (master), Lithuanian University of Agriculture

Grades 4 4 3 3 4 4 = 22

Economics (bachelor), Siauliai University

Grades 4 3 3 4 4 3 = 21

Economics (professional bachelor), West Lithuanian Business College, Klaipeda

Grades 3 3 3 4 4 4 = 21

Economics (professional bachelor), West Lithuanian Business College, Siauliai

Grades 3 3 3 3 3 4 = 19

Economics II:

Fundamentals of Economics and Business (bachelor), Vilnius Pedagogical University

Grades 3 3 3 3 2 3 = 17

Accounting, Finance, and Banking (bachelor), Vilnius University, Kaunas

Grades 3 3 3 2 3 3 = 17

Economics (bachelor), Vilnius University, Kaunas

Grades 3 2 2 3 3 4 = 17

Applied Macro-Economics (master), Vilnius University, Vilnius

Grades 2 3 3 3 3 3 = 17

Banking (master), Vilnius University, Vilnius

Grades 4 3 3 4 3 3 = 20

Economic Analysis and Planning (master), Vilnius University, Vilnius

Grades 3 4 3 4 4 3 = 21

Finance (master), Vilnius University, Vilnius

Grades 3 3 3 4 4 3 = 20

Finance and Banking (master), Vytautas Magnus University

Grade 2 3 3 3 3 3 = 17

Macro-Economic Analysis and Policy (master), Vytautas Magnus University

Grade 2 2 3 3 4 3 = 17

Average Total Grade Score = 19.0

Dr. Michael Emery, International Team Leader.

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