

Recommendations to the Higher Education Institutions, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Ministry of Education and Science

The expert group suggest that the HE institutions and the Ministry consider the following proposals: -

(Numbers in brackets refer to the 2003 report).

1. That the previous suggestions of the group from the visit in 2003, regarding the types of qualifications offered be considered again. The experts are not happy about the policy to remove all pre-school and primary teacher education courses from universities. We previously suggested that the best elements of the two types of programmes be combined, namely, the theoretical approach from universities and the practical preparation from colleges, and that all students be awarded a degree which is of the same standing. To remove the theoretical underpinning of pre-secondary education would, in our opinion, be detrimental to the preparation of teachers for this sector. It is unwise to consider that those involved in the education of younger children require a less theoretical preparation than that received by student teachers preparing for secondary schools. The plan to 'demote' pre-primary and primary education courses to colleges gives the impression to the public that teachers of younger children need to be less highly qualified than those who teach at secondary level. This is a false premise. It is also completely against the trend now observed in Europe which is to have a teaching profession where all members have a Bachelors degree, or above, level education. The OECD report of 2003 supports this and the expert group strongly advise the government of Lithuania to follow this trend. The demographic trend in Lithuania causing the demand for teachers to fall gives the perfect opportunity to implement these changes in order to raise teacher quality by having higher expectations of entry requirements for teacher education courses.
2. We advise that the two types of qualification are combined by co-operation between the colleges and the universities. This could in the first instance lead to colleges, under the guidance of the university sector, being able to teach to degree level and their students receive university degrees. This move would mean considerable changes to both qualifications but would, in our opinion, be highly productive. The concentration on university courses of some subjects which are not directly related to primary education could be reconsidered and a more practical based approach be introduced into the pedagogy area, whilst colleges could increase the theoretical component of the courses. This we recommended on our previous visit.
3. We are also concerned about the discrepancy in the length of the training courses for pre-school and primary teachers. The length of study time and credits required should be the same. It is also a concern for us that, in order to gain a degree, students from colleges are having to undertake further study at universities in order to achieve the desired bachelors qualification. Most students we met in the colleges wished to gain this award for the sake of their careers. This penalises students financially as there is lessening government support for study in HE institutions. There is also a regrettable discrepancy in the length of the top-up to degree courses

that need to be followed. For example, students following a pre-school educators course may do a three year college course followed by one year at university to gain a degree, whilst those prepared for primary teaching by the colleges may have a four year course plus a one and a half year top up for the degree.

4. After our previous visit we recommended that all study programmes should include the intention to encourage students as autonomous learners (8.1). We have been pleased to note that teaching contact time has been reduced and staff and students reported that self-study has been introduced into programmes, this having a positive effect on aiding students to become more responsible for their own learning and adopt a positive approach to lifelong learning. This too has been strongly evident amongst college staff, many of whom, despite long teaching hours, are following courses for their own continuing professional development (CPD) and engaging in research. Students now show more independence as learners and demonstrate more expertise and independence in finding and selecting information to use for their assignments, relying less on staff input.
5. Students demonstrate more critical thinking skills than we previously observed, but this area still needs to be strengthened, particularly in the area of the dissertation/final course paper. Staff also need help to aid their students to become more critical in their approaches to theory and pedagogic practice.
6. Reflective practice has visibly improved in the courses and this needs to be encouraged and built upon at all levels.
7. Research methods have been introduced into courses but we feel that all staff, especially in the colleges, need continuing professional development in this area so as to be able to successfully advise students on the application of research methodology.
8. Some improvement has been observed in students' understanding of learning styles in relation to the needs of learners but we would like to see this area become more routinely introduced into students' early courses so as to help them to understand themselves and others as learners and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. These introductory courses need, in some cases to be further strengthened to include study skills, time management and self-awareness as a learner.
9. The teaching practice element has been strengthened in university courses, gaining more credits than previously allocated, as we advised. In many of the courses reviewed we observed the teaching practice element has become far more progressive in nature, students beginning with observation and moving towards increasing autonomy in later years.
10. Programmes now have a more holistic approach as opposed to the former separation of course elements (8.2). This however, still needs work and staff are advised to review again all the elements of programmes to see if further combination of course elements can be considered so as to bring disparate elements together. It is important that students of the pre-secondary phase experience

programmes, model in their learning the integrated active learning approaches now being used in schools across Europe. Teaching appears to be more varied in style using less direct transmission of information and more active methods such as group work, projects and some integrated learning.

11. There is now better coherence between programme stated aims and the courses provided, but this could be taken further and consideration given to how the programme aims are reflected in course elements, learning outcomes and the assignments set. However, there was clear evidence of progression and the increasing rigour of the programmes from the first to subsequent years (8.2). There appears to be a higher incidence of failure than previously, possibly denoting a higher expected standard (8.3). However, much of the failure to complete appears to be financially related or put down to 'lack of motivation' of the student concerned. This could possibly be linked to the open-door policy to recruitment in colleges where there is no interview before starting the programme, so staff cannot assess the suitability of applicants for working with children or their understanding of the nature and demands of the programme. Suitability for the role of a teacher is not confined to the obtaining of the correct school grades.
12. Assessment tasks have been widened but are still somewhat reliant on the written examination. Feedback is on the whole good, with clear set criteria made available to students, but in some institutions levels of feedback can be inconsistent (student meetings) as some tutors do not provide clear written guidance of a good standard. We would advise a whole programme approach to the giving of written and oral feedback to students. A mark is not sufficient to help students improve. The team has expressed considerable concern over the very high marks given to some work, especially dissertations, which do not merit these grades. It is suggested as in 2003 (8.3) that the Ministry consider the introduction of an external examiner system that is underpinned by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education's criteria and guidance for action. This would ensure parity between institutions by the overseeing of a selection of all work, at least from year 2 of programmes and beyond.
13. More international co-operation by staff is evident, leading to innovation and the introduction of new ideas into teaching and research. It is to be regretted that so few students take up the opportunity to study abroad, mainly it appears due to a lack of language skills. We strongly advise that this area of the curriculum be strengthened to allow students to experience education in another European country.
14. Access to ICT is improving (8.8) but in some Colleges is still not sufficient for staff and students alike. Students are more willing now to use the net to access foreign materials, though language can still be a problem. This change is evident in some of the bibliographies supplied with dissertations. However, there is still, in some institutions a reluctance to embed ICT within the course, still treating it as a separate element. We would like to see ICT as part of the normal pedagogy employed in all subject areas and the use of ICT in school teaching addressed in all courses to prepare students for the future. There is some evidence of the presentation of theories from Western educationalists in programmes but this could

be strengthened, particularly in the colleges, and students encouraged to be critical of the presented ideas.

15. There is evidence of extremely good relationships with schools for teaching practice provision and employment. We suggest again as in 2003 (8.7) that mentor training needs to be urgently established so as to ensure that schools and institutions are following coherent practice and that schools/teachers understand and support input from and the requirements of the programmes. This would naturally lead into the planned induction year which will be very valuable for beginning teachers. There is evidence that this advice is being implemented and we support this trend.
16. We strongly recommend that all courses within programmes state their ECTS credit equivalence as it is not stated in all programmes (8.9).
17. There are still instances where generalist staff are delivering subjects to students which have no pedagogical base and those staff have no school experience or particular adherence to the course aims and philosophy. This is difficult for students. Some institutions have managed to overcome this by regular meetings but we are concerned that such staff in universities did not attend the meetings with the expert group as they were engaged in teaching on other courses. This gives the impression that these subject areas and staff do not belong to the programme being assessed and destroys any attempt by a course team to provide a holistic approach.
18. The overlap previously observed between BA and MA courses has been removed but we are concerned that students progressing from colleges onto university courses have a higher failure rate than those who attend university for all their higher education. The professed reason for this is that students from colleges have weaker academic profiles and are not used to the theoretical nature of university study. This is unacceptable and efforts must be made to provide support for this group in making the transition to university work. It is not acceptable to blame the student. A similar case occurs for students whose first language is not Lithuanian as their failure rate in colleges is higher than for Lithuanian speakers. Colleges need to urgently consider the provision of extra language support for these individuals from the beginning of the course to help overcome any deficiency in their ability to communicate, in writing, at an acceptable level in the Lithuanian language. All universities and colleges should provide this type of support for students outside of the normal course teaching, undertaken by a separate body responsible for the development of student learning.
19. Dissertations have improved (8.3) but the team are concerned still about the balance of the submissions and the lack of critical discussion. College staff especially need guidance in this area, but in both universities and colleges more care must be taken over the breadth of the research undertaken and the stated aims. Students are undertaking impossible research tasks and presenting unfounded results that cannot be justified from the work undertaken. More triangulation of methods employed is required and more limited research aims would improve results immeasurably. There needs to be a better balance between researched literature, methodology, data collection and analysis and the final discussion of findings against the theory. This

latter is lacking and seriously limited. This is the most important area of the research where students are required to refute or support previous research findings and provide a critical discussion. In colleges where dissertations are a fairly new phenomenon some students are not given the option of this form of assessment.

20. The team believes that all students should prepare a final thesis so as to stretch all students' critical thinking and to provide equability within the courses.
21. The professional development of staff in the colleges is better than on our previous visit but there is concern expressed by some tutors that certain university departments do not welcome college staff onto doctoral courses. These staff feel undervalued as a result. The team considers that the divide between colleges and universities which appears to have widened as a result of proposals for the future of teacher education since our last visit, is to be regretted. Closer co-operation would be beneficial to all concerned and to the education of prospective teachers. Cost is also a problem as many staff members do not have the funds to finance their own studies. Financial concerns over the amount of Lithuania's GDP used for HE and the low expenditure per student, due to the high numbers studying at this level is understandable, but possibly the use of some monies set aside for the purpose of staff development is to be recommended.
22. Course content has broadened but we suggest that due to the ever changing requirements in education all students should study education law in relation to Lithuania and the EU as this has a close relationship to their professional competence. There is some evidence of students being prepared for differentiated learning and for working with children with special needs (including gifted and talented) and immigrants (8.10). However, employers and the team believe that this is an area that could be expanded in the curriculum in all institutions.
23. Self assessment documents varied in levels of real evaluation. We suggest that the term self-assessment be changed to self-evaluation (as per QAA regulations in England). Some writing teams were still reluctant to fully express on paper what they deemed to be the problems associated with the courses they offered, though happily discussed these aspects face to face. It is important to realize that pointing out short comings and suggesting possible solutions or areas for action is a positive step aiding innovation and change. Allied with this was a difficulty in expressing what the new philosophy for teacher education is for their organisation. Some groups still found it difficult to articulate the kind of graduate or post graduate they wished to produce (8.2).
24. Resourcing is generally better than in 2003 (8.8). There are more foreign journals, though this could improve still further and is also affected by use of foreign languages (8.5) and more access to the net. Refurbishment of plant has occurred and the teaching areas are better maintained.
25. The team is concerned that due to the demographic changes within the country the number of teachers required has dropped and the financial viability of some programme provision may be in question. This could have serious implications for

the institutions involved in teacher education and also for their surrounding communities as many of these institutions are the focus for cultural support and innovation within their area of the country. We recommend therefore that consideration should be given as to how these resources, including staff, can be used in the future. There is obviously a need for the continuing professional development of the current teaching staff in Lithuania and the HE institutions could be the centres for this, performing valuable service for their districts and bringing innovative ideas and personal development to teachers at all levels of education.

26. It is to be regretted that the team was hampered in its work by the late arrival of documents from Vilnius Pedagogical University. The Centre for Assessment in Higher Education gives clear dates for submission but has no power to sanction institutions who do not comply. We strongly recommend that this is examined as this lack of control by the Centre affects the ability of the assessment team to successfully complete the task set. This visit was also complicated by the difficulties the team experienced with one assessor who did not use the language of English fluently. We had been previously assured that this would be the language of the assessment visits. Communication between team members and co-operation were adversely affected by this problem and caused concerns that full understanding of findings and agreement over decisions could have been compromised which could not be the fault of any particular team member. This added to the workload of team members, particularly in the initial writing of the reports stage and a heightening of stress.
27. On a return visit it is highly recommended that the same members of the expert team are used. This enables the experts to have a realistic conception of what changes have been made, what progress has occurred and where innovation is still to be undertaken. Starting afresh with a new team defeats the object of the exercise which is to look for change.

Vilnius, 10th November 2005