

The evaluation of the study programmes of Bachelor of Social Policy (Vytautas Magnus University), Master of Social policy (Vilnius University) and Master of Comparative Politics (Vilnius University) – An overview

Turo Virtanen
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Introduction

The overview is directly based on the three reports submitted by the review team. The chair of the team was Prof. dr. Turo Virtanen (University of Helsinki, Department of Political and Economic Studies, Finland), and other members were: Prof. dr. Pamela Abbott (Senior Researcher and Honorary Professor at the University of Aberdeen, Professor Emeritus at Glasgow, Caledonian University, United Kingdom), Dr. Hanna Mamzer (Assistant Professor at the Sociology Department, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland), Mr. Rimantas Dumčius (Director, Research & Policy Advice, at the Public Policy and Management Institute, Lithuania), and Mr. Eimantas Kisielius (student of International Business second cycle study programme at the Kaunas University of Technology).

The Bachelor of Social Policy is implemented at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas. The programme does not have any graduates yet and this is its first external evaluation. The programme was offered for the first time to students in 2011 and was a result of wider research on labour market. The programme team consulted with German and British universities to ensure the quality in teaching.

The Master of Social Policy is implemented at the Faculty of Philosophy of Vilnius University (VU). This is the first external evaluation of the programme.

The Master of Comparative Politics is implemented by the Institute of International Relations and Science at Vilnius University (VU). Since its last external evaluation in 2007, the programme has improved some of its aspects and continues to carry on its path that retains the earlier strengths.

Programme aims and learning outcomes

The Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU) follows the university's general educational strategy of Liberal Arts which is definitely a strength of the programme. An attempt of connecting this broad approach with learning outcomes of a specific field – Social Policy – is also evident, which also should be considered positive. Further consideration should be given for a more consistent specification of the aims the programme, as there are now several competing formulations. Clarification in this area is instrumental to more transparent justification of which courses are compulsory and which are optional.

The Master programme of Social Policy (VU) has been designed to meet an identified labour market need and the programme design, aims and learning outcomes prepares students for this niche. However, the process, aims and objectives of the placement are inadequately spelt out.

The aims and learning outcomes of *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* are well thought out and specified at the level of a Masters programme. Teachers and students have a shared understanding of the aim and learning outcomes.

Curriculum design

The curriculum of *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)* is properly designed and adequate to expectations towards BA programmes. There is clearly demonstrated interest in innovative teaching methods, interactive, creative, inspiring, technology based techniques, which can be used as an important element to attract prospective students. Among aspects worth further consideration there is maintaining balance between general education and classes focused specifically on Social Policy. The challenge of maintaining this balance is visible for example in the fact that it may seem unclear how division between compulsory and optional courses was made. It is particularly important to offer optional courses which are designed to increase the competencies of the students.

The Master programme of Social Policy (VU) enables students to engage with some contemporary debates in social policy from an interdisciplinary perspective. The programme enables students to gain an understanding of comparative social policy in Europe and globally. However, the programme is narrow in its focus and does not adequately cover core areas of social policy enabling students to gain a critical understanding social policy issues in contemporary society. The programme does not enable the student to gain the level of practical skills in qualitative and quantitative social science research methods that might be expected at this level. The programme is too heavily informed by social work and students have inadequate opportunity to deepen their understanding of core topics/issues in social policy, with option courses being drawn from other disciplines.

Course descriptions of *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* have all necessary information and are exemplary documents for conveying information about the course and its links to broader learning outcomes. The course Problems of Political Science is an innovation that many other programmes may emulate in their benchmarking of good practices.

Teaching staff

An asset of *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)* is properly selected staff, qualified in an adequate way in terms of experience necessary in order to provide proper quality teaching. Staff has experience in research related to teaching subjects, international cooperation and is willing to develop their teaching skills. It is worth to consider, however, even stronger cooperation with international institutions. This cooperation exists, however, in the context of self-definition of the university (which classifies itself as an international one). It is worth to strengthen this field of activity. Particularly it is worth to look at options of inviting more international staff to visit VMU (this is stressed also in the self-evaluation report).

The academic staff of *the Master programme of Social Policy (VU)* are committed, enthusiastic, and supportive of students, research active and professionally engaged. Academic staff are able to attend national and international conferences and are active in professional associations. The performance of staff is regularly reviewed and staff can be rewarded for good performance. However, the academic staff are not taking up opportunities for development especially in teaching and learning, or staff exchange, and most are not publishing in international peer-reviewed outlets. The delivery of the programme relies on a small number of staff and there is too great a reliance on one member of staff to deliver a significant proportion of the core. Too few of the staff identify with social policy as their core discipline.

Most of the teaching staff of *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* are research-active, revise and update their teaching regularly, and take part in international and other conferences on a regular basis. The programme recognises the need to improve its internationalisation in many respects, but it does not have an internationalisation strategy that covers all major aspects of the programme including staff, research, publication as well as teacher and student exchange, etc.

Facilities and learning resources

The facilities of the VMU hosting *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy* are good, adequate and sufficient in terms of size and quality and they allow to provide quality studying in the programme. Particularly positive is an attitude demonstrated by library staff, who is interested in feedback from academics and students and who is willing to accommodate to their needs as much as possible.

The learning resources of *the Master programme of Social Policy (VU)* are adequate to meet the needs of the programme, with students able to access the learning materials they require, and they are provided with good support, including feedback on their work, by the teaching staff. The University has a policy for supporting students living with physical disabilities and the accommodation is mostly wheelchair-accessible. However, the office accommodation provided for academic staff is inadequate. Inadequate systematic provision is made for supporting students with learning disabilities including formalised systems for making appropriate adjustments to learning and teaching methods and assessments for them as well as for students living with physical/sensory disabilities.

Facilities and learning resources of *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* are modern and mostly functional for teaching and studying. Not all the facilities are well adapted for the disabled students or staff, part of which is due to the nature of historical building. Teaching premises are better suited for lectures than seminars (where participants could be facing each other). Library facilities and computer resources may be underutilised part of the semesters as students use also other libraries and, increasingly, their own laptops. At the same time, teaching staff have only one shared space in the premises of the Institute.

Study process and students' performance assessment

The strengths of *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)* include the facts that admission to the programme is clear and students have clear view of how their work is assessed. Moreover, they are provided feedback on their performance – both students and staff claimed that it is very easy for students to contact teachers, and they are accessible all the time, willing to comment on students' work. On the other hand, the process of teaching is assessed by students especially in forms of focus group interviews and regular annual evaluations.

The Master programme of Social Policy (VU) has a strong focus on practice and students undertake a practical placement. The delivery of the programme is scheduled to meet the needs of students that are combining study with employment. Graduates from the programme are able to find appropriate employment and social partners confirm that they have the required skills and competencies. However, twenty-eight per cent of students admitted in the first four cohorts have failed to complete the programme. Students generally do not take up the opportunity of student mobility because they are in paid employment or have family responsibilities.

In *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* the assessment of learning is mostly transparent to students and individual feedback is given as well as generic feedback. Students are well qualified and

motivated for their studies. However, in admitting students, the entrance examination is weighted very strongly compared to the weight given to the quality of and success in previous studies, which may need reconsideration to strengthen admission based on knowledge, skills and motivation enhancing optimally the achievement of intended learning outcomes. The programme has learned that admitting students with an insufficient background in political science can create challenges, but, to date, there has not been a well thought out strategy for providing the necessary support for students who lack sufficient relevant knowledge and skills. There is no clear strategy to use ICT in teaching and to make it support, for example in the form of video conferencing, teaching the comparative aspects of relevant courses together with international partners.

Programme management

A strong positive element of *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)* is proper management of the programme, which includes transparency and organization. Important asset of the programme is its practical strength: the cooperation with social partners is proactive, strong and close and it is certainly worth to continue to work this way, especially since there is a lot of interest of social partners in collaboration. This cooperation with external partners is an outstanding example of management excellence worth to be shared with other institutions. There is clear allocation, division and responsibility for decisions and monitoring of the implementation of the programme. Necessary information and data on the implementation of the programme are regularly collected and analysed (e.g. focus groups evaluations and regular annual evaluations based on questionnaires available on the internet). The internal quality assurance measures are clear. The outcomes of evaluations conducted in different forms are taken into consideration. On the basic level the evaluation and improvement processes involve stakeholders.

The Programme Committee of *the Master of Social Policy (VU)* includes in its membership a student and a social partner and feedback from students is collected via the University computer-based system. This is positive. However, feedback on the programme is not collected systematically from graduates or social partners and qualitative feedback is not collected from students.

The programme management of *the Master Programme of Comparative Politics (VU)* has developed the programme in many important ways on the basis of feedback from students, teachers and social partners, which indicates a commitment to continuous improvement of the programme. The model of collecting, processing and utilising course feedback is an efficient and effective instrument for improving the programme.

Examples of good practice

The curriculum of *the Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)* – and the study programme on the whole – was developed together with relevant international partners, University of Sheffield and Universität Bremen, and social partners from Lithuania. Those practices are worth to be shared with other institutions as they significantly enrich the programme. This is related to both academic, more theoretical approach as well as practical aspects of studying. The cooperation with social partners must be outstanding: judging by their presence at the meeting and willingness to share their comments and feedback.

The Master programme of Comparative Politics has introduced the course Problems of Political Science. The teacher is changed every semester. The teacher is international, possibly a Lithuanian scholar who has stayed long in foreign universities. The purpose of the course is to ensure that the newest developments in the field are offered to students. At same time, students have an opportunity to get familiar with

international research culture and get new academic contacts external to the Institute hosting the programme.

Recommendations

As for the *Bachelor programme of Social Policy (VMU)*, the area that is worth to be intensified is international cooperation to be connected also with professional English language courses (related to Social Policy). It also would be beneficial to students if they were offered C type (study field and related) courses in the English language. English should be taught also in relation to the aim of the programme and the university defining itself as an international university.

The programme team of the *Master of Social Policy (VU)* should consider establishing productive links with experienced teams teaching social policy masters programmes in other Europe universities, to enable them to ensure that their programme is internationally credible. The programme team should review the programme to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between core social policy teaching, practice-orientated teaching and options from other cognate disciplines. The curriculum and teaching for the thesis should be reviewed as a matter of urgency to ensure that all students receive adequate specialist supervision and that their learning effort adds up to 30 ECTS. This should be done without making modifications to Research Practice (placement) which the review team see as one of the strengths of the programme. The programme team should review the curriculum to ensure that it is focused on social policy and not social work. Consideration should be given to reviewing the curriculum to ensure that students reach a sound understanding of the subject matter of social policy and gain advanced skills in carrying out both qualitative and quantitative research. All courses should be reviewed to ensure that they require students to engage with the most recent advances as well as classical debates in the subject area of the course, with students encouraged to engage with the international literature in social policy. Either a compulsory preparatory course in social policy for students from other backgrounds should be offered or a course in the first semester should provide such an introduction. The Faculty should consider providing more adequate office space for academic staff. Consideration should be given to more academic staff teaching on the programme so that the staff can take research sabbaticals and to reduce the over-reliance on one member of staff. Staff should consider how they can make use of European data sets for carrying out research, thus reducing the need for research funding and enabling them to carry out comparative research. A research strategy should be developed and academic staff provided with support to enable them to publish in a range of outlets including international peer review journals. Consideration should be given to offering a part-time pathway on the programme to ensure that students in paid employment are able to engage with the programme sufficiently. Feedback on the programme should be regularly and systematically collected from graduates and social partners. Students should be given an opportunity to provide qualitative feedback on the programme. Such feedback should give students an opportunity to comment on the programme as a whole as well as on individual courses. Consideration should be given to more engagement with Alumni.

The programme of the *Master of Comparative Politics (VU)* may reconsider the nature and role of entrance examination in admitting students, especially the strong weight given to examination success compared to the success in previous studies and – on the whole – to ensure that admission is based on relevant measurement of the knowledge, skills and motivation needed for successful study on the MA programme of Comparative Politics. The programme may consider the introduction of a form-based review of thesis to ensure systematic use of all established assessment criteria and proper space for relevant verbal justification of the given grade, criterion by criterion – and to include also the assessment of public defence of thesis. The programme should make an internationalisation strategy which would include all major elements of research activities, publishing, teaching, studying – including ICT-based solutions – as well as

researcher, teacher, and student exchange to ensure synergic effectiveness of different elements of internationalisation.