



CENTER FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OVERVIEW REPORT
OF THE STUDY FIELD OF BUSINESS
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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the external quality evaluation of the *Business* study field in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions: *ISM University of Management and Economics, Kaunas University of Technology, Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius University, LCC International University, Vytautas Magnus University, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University VILNIUSTECH, Mykolas Romeris University.*

The external evaluation was organised by the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC).

Comprehensive external evaluation reports including strengths and weaknesses and concluding with some recommendations were prepared for the *Business* study field in each evaluated Higher Education Institution (separately for first and second cycle) and included evaluation marks. This overview focuses on the main findings of the external evaluation of the *Business* study field from a general point of view.

Expert panels proposed to give a **positive** evaluation to: *ISM University of Management and Economics, Kaunas University of Technology, Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius University, LCC International University, Vytautas Magnus University, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University VILNIUSTECH, Mykolas Romeris University.*

II. STUDY FIELD OVERVIEW BY EVALUATION AREAS

An overall observation regarding the most positive aspects of the study field as well as areas in need of improvement.

The study field has some very positive aspects that are well evidenced in a number of the HEI's that recognise the need to innovate and develop their programmes of study in line with the rapidly changing dynamics of the business world. These institutions have an organisational culture that is more aligned to the real world of business rather than that of an academic institution. They are very in tune with the external business environment, have a proactive approach and promote active discussion and dialogue as to the future business needs. There is good evidence of the strong relationship between proactive innovative institutions, reputation across all stakeholders, dynamic and attractive programmes of study, student recruitment and retention, and graduate outcomes. Additionally these institutions recognise the importance of international collaboration in enhancing the broader reputation of Lithuania as, a quality study destination, for business innovation, and relevant research.

The adoption of a hybrid approach in learning and teaching and using the technological innovations to bring the real world into the classroom as well as taking the classroom to the real world demonstrate a willingness to innovate and in the creative use of technology to improve the student engagement and learning experience. This will be particularly important as the current pressures on the students to be able to maintain an appropriate work and study load balance are likely to increase. Flexibility in developing programmes of study to allow for

flexible attendance using, such as, short intensive blocks of study, online options, movement between full time and part time registration, should all be considered along with a wider adoption of interactive learning and teaching tools utilising the existing technology platforms.

Overall the HEI's recognise the importance of international links in both the national and the institutional context. Those with a wide range of international links have taken a more strategic view in the development of those linkages to ensure that they can foster a greater level of collaboration and cooperation rather than using the links more for students and staff mobility. International collaborative projects especially leading to research outcomes provides opportunity for engagement of both staff and students, raises the profile of the institution and demonstrates the positive contribution that Lithuanian institutions can make. Such collaborative links can also lead to joint programme developments, with mutual study abroad opportunities leading to joint awards.

The involvement in high quality research leading to publications in high impact journals is still variable. There is a danger that institutions are looking for research productivity rather than strategically targeting research activities that have the potential of making the greatest impact. Using international collaborative networks to develop joint funding proposals could provide research opportunities that otherwise may not be accessible.

The relationships with social partners is a strong feature of the study field and those partners direct engagement in areas such as, thesis defence committees, and programme committees is commendable and examples of good international practice.

The physical and staff resources that are available to the study field are very much in line with expectations and demonstrate both an investment by the institutions as well as the commitment for continuous development and improvement. The staff are academically well qualified for their roles with some institutions seeking to recruit both international faculty as well as those with strong business experience.

One area of concern is the low level of student recruitment in the study field at some HEI's and the high level of student withdrawals (dropouts). There is a clear correlation between the institutional reputation within the study field in terms of the relevance and attractiveness of the programme and student recruitment and retention. For those institutions where recruitment and retention are issues, there was a lack of analysis, critical reflection nor an understanding that the solution was not just to increase marketing. A more fundamental review of those programmes including the aims and objectives and any constraints in the learning and teaching delivery that may be impacting on recruitment and in particular on withdrawals, should identify potential areas for development and improvement.

3.1. STUDY AIMS, OUTCOMES AND CONTENT

Within the study field the institutions indicated that their focus for programme development is on meeting the needs of the labour markets, citing the views of social partners, employers and Lithuanian economic and social strategy papers as the key drivers in those developments. In that regard there is clear evidence that the programmes are responding to the skills needs of

the labour markets and do make a contribution to the economic priorities. The Review Teams found the interaction between the social partners and the institutions in respect of programme development commendable. However these developments whilst conforming and responding to the identified needs often take place within the fairly narrow constraints of the existing curriculum structures and pedagogy. This can have the effect of constraining future potential developments and focusing on identified current needs whilst utilising the existing subject frameworks to achieve efficiencies in delivery.

In conforming to the current needs there is a danger that the long-term strategic requirements for more fundamental changes within the labour markets and the economy are not adequately being addressed. There was some positive evidence that at least two institutions had recognised the future needs of industry and are addressing this through developing a better understanding of the future skills and competencies required of business graduates and are creating an educational environment and student experience that encourages direct business partnerships, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation.

Those institutions that are addressing programme developments in this strategic context presented as more purposeful having a clear vision and aims for the study field which was then further evidenced through the development of the aims, outcomes and content of their programmes. For those with a more operational or specialist focus they appeared to rely on the currently perceived aims and outcomes and a less engaged student experience.

This often resulted in a very large number of complex learning outcomes, that whilst stated as defined outcomes were not related to enabling content nor necessarily linked to assessment. In part this was the poor or misunderstood use of Bloom's Taxonomy in developing those learning outcomes which led to often passive, generic and immeasurable outcomes. This demonstrated the inconsistency in how the curriculum content, in the form of the courses or modules, directly linked to the overall programme learning outcomes, and hence to the assessments, to measure the achievement against those outcomes. For example, one institution had two programmes with very similar learning outcomes and similar content where different curriculum modules were used to demonstrate achievement of the same learning outcomes. This suggests these programmes were developed rather in isolation without a consistent nor coherent view of how the programme aims, learning outcomes, content and assessment should be aligned.

Further evidence of this inconsistency was the sometimes apparently random and incoherent collection of modules that contributed to very specific aims as described in specialist programme titles. There was no obvious way of a student 'joining the dots' and it would be difficult to understand how these often very specialist courses and modules were set in the appropriate business context that would further and contribute to the programme aims.

It was the view of the panels that there was a general lack of oversight within programmes of the assessment strategies. The relationship between the nature of the assessment, what it was designed to assess, how it was to be graded, and how that assessment would contribute to the intended learning outcomes was often unclear. Students, therefore, could be over assessed resulting in a very significant increase in their study load that in turn could be a contributing factor to high withdrawal rates. As is common within many higher education institutions, modules/courses are developed and taught by individuals without looking at the options for

integration within cognate subject areas. This can result in missed opportunities for setting assessments based on an appropriate case study that would be equally applicable across more than one module. Integrated assessments have a number of advantages including: covering the learning outcomes of more than one module, collaborative learning and teaching, and the opportunity to set often complex specialist subjects within the framework and context of real world businesses.

The panels noted some inconsistencies where institutions claim to deliver their programmes in English, and expected a high standard of English language from the students, but allowed many theses to be written in Lithuanian. Whilst this might be convenient for the student, the staff and the institution, it is somewhat counter too many institutional claims to be seeking a greater degree of internationalisation within their programmes. Such approaches could inhibit further international collaboration especially for joint international projects or joint awards, especially where English is the international language of business. It could equally be argued that this is not serving the student well in terms of future professional development nor employment opportunities.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDY ACTIVITIES

All of the institutions claimed to have a research culture that was evidenced through staff engagement in research and the resulting output, either as consultancy studies or published works. For those with a focus more related to applied research there was good evidence of close collaboration with social partners resulting in effective projects and outcomes. This approach often effectively engaged students within the research projects.

For institutions with aims to be researched focused, the outcomes were often variable. There was some evidence of research publications in high impact journals, and those with a strategic view of elevating the research profile were identifying scientific journals that are included in the lists of Association of Business Schools (ABS), and with high global citation ranking, e.g. Technology forecasting and social change, Sloan Management Review, and Journal of International Business. However, the majority of research outputs were cited as published on open access platforms, academic, and business conferences. This approach helps to support young researchers in developing confidence but in itself provides variable outputs from different members of staff.

The panels also found that for some institutions there was no real evidence of a strategic view nor plans for future research. Within some of the SER's, there was a lack of documentation that demonstrated the strategic nature of the research outputs and the metrics for measuring those outputs were not clearly defined. For some institutions the focus seemed to be on productivity rather than the quality of the research. For several HEIs, there was a lack of documentary evidence that research outputs were being embedded into the curriculum to support content and curriculum development. However, faculty indicated that their individual research did make a contribution to their teaching, despite this not being well evidenced. Where the research was collaboratively based with social partners and students were actively involved in that research, the link to teaching and the curriculum was more clearly evidenced.

Although the majority of institutions were able to demonstrate internationalisation through collaborative links there was limited evidence that these collaborative links were being used to further develop research opportunities for collaboration in major funded research projects.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

The more general business programmes appeared to be recruiting well, however several of the more specialist programmes reviewed by the Panels had low student numbers, and some had not recruited for several years. Although the HEIs all had admissions departments which took responsibility for admission and recruitment several lacked a clear recruitment strategy and did not recognise the need, or have plans for increasing recruitment. Low student numbers on some programmes may make them financially unviable, and the student learning experience may be compromised by small numbers of students on specialist modules and a lack of choice of the option modules available.

Several HEIs did not monitor the drop rates which were as high as 39% in some cases, consequently they were unable to address the reasons for students terminating their studies. As the majority of students appeared to be working whilst studying, this may be a contributing factor to the drop-out rates, and HEIs could more effectively consider the implications of maintaining a work-life balance and the impact this may have on a student's studies. As a hybrid mode of delivery had successfully been implemented during the pandemic, this may be a way forward to support both full and part-time students to complete their programmes of study.

In general the academic and pastoral support available to students was professionally delivered and effectively supported the learning process. However, the panels found that the support for students with disabilities and those from socially vulnerable groups was variable across the different HEIs.

3.4. STUDYING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

The panels were impressed by the level of engagement with social partners in terms of course development and delivery of the curriculum. For some programmes social partners were members of the Study Programme Committee which enabled them to have a direct role in ensuring the quality of the student experience. There was also evidence of partnerships for research activities which involved academic staff, students and social partners.

The majority of HEIs effectively tracked graduate career paths through contact with their alumni and surveys. Feedback from graduates and employers was used to inform curriculum development, but as discussed in 3.1, this has led to the development of some very specialist programmes with low enrolments. The speciality of the aims and programme outputs could also restrict employment choices for graduates

Employers indicated that graduates of the more general programmes, eg International Business Administration, had the necessary skills which could be further developed to meet the specific requirements of their organisation.

The panels noted the low take-up of mobility opportunities by students, which could be attributed to the fact that the majority of students are working whilst studying, and many are mature with other commitments. Most Institutions had a high number of inbound students which has financial implications and may impact on the learning experience of the national students.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

The teaching staff overall were appropriately qualified to be faculty members teaching in the business studies field. Many hold PhD's and they were largely enthusiastic about their institutions, teaching and research activities. It was noted by the panels that in some institutions there was a propensity for faculty to be drawn from individuals who had progressed from undergraduate to faculty members through, masters programmes, and thence as researchers leading to Doctoral candidates. Whilst this could be considered to be evidence of investment and support in their own undergraduates, it could equally be considered to be a rather narrow perspective if not appropriately complemented by staff with a much wider frame of higher educational and business experience. This would also hold true in the context of relevant and meaningful experience of the real world of business rather than through a rather narrow academic prism.

To ensure a significant international dimension within the faculty some institutions were heavily reliant on visiting faculty. This can provide a valuable addition to the wider international context for programmes and also encourage a wider international discourse on issues relating to pedagogy, programme content and research. However by their very nature, visiting faculty do not significantly contribute to programme development, programme management nor longer term research projects. Attracting international full-time faculty is recognised as being difficult but achievable as demonstrated by some of the institutions.

The evidence of international staff mobility was scant with a low take up of international mobility opportunities. It was recognised that this was not possible during the period of the pandemic and that institutional, economic and domestic pressures may be further factors inhibiting staff mobility. However, there were a number of examples of innovative approaches to creating international experiences through joint online projects and teaching opportunities utilising technological advances and developments that occurred during the pandemic.

There was evidence of effective transition to online delivery during the pandemic and good institutional support for both staff and students. This move to a more hybrid approach in the learning and teaching does provide for a much greater opportunity for all involved especially mature students and those trying to manage a better balance in study load, work, and domestic responsibilities. There were excellent examples where the use of technology was able to facilitate both international cooperation as well as direct input into the student learning and teaching experience from social partners and external businesses whilst they remained in their

own workplaces. These types of learning and teaching innovations fostered by individual members of staff are good examples where the overall student experience can be significantly enhanced through the adoption and adaption of these types of technology.

There was good evidence of the staff development opportunities within the study field presented by the different institutions, and a level of staff discretion and autonomy in the development of their own expertise. This can lead to interesting creative developments and demonstrates how those innovations can better inform the subject and the learning and teaching delivery. However this should also be seen in the context of the research output focus for publishing in high impact journals and the productivity requirements of institutions for research.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

Across all the HEIs, the panels found that there was generally a high standard of facilities and infrastructure. Several institutions had very prestigious plans for future development and refurbishing of their facilities. Libraries appeared to be well stocked and staff and students are able to request any additional texts they require. A wide range of databases is made available to students either directly through the institution or through partnerships arrangements. Remote access is provided to all library databases.

As indicated in 3.5, many institutions had moved to a more hybrid/online form of delivery during the pandemic and many students indicated they would like this to continue. To effectively implement this form of teaching and learning effectively, the institutions may have to make further investments in their on-line platforms.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLICITY

The majority of quality systems were well documented and staff were familiar with quality management processes. The Study Programme Committee (SPC) comprising academic staff, administrators/managers, students and social partners is effectively used by most institutions to manage and enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

Institutions are generally responsive to student feedback obtained through informal methods, and the smaller institutions rely heavily on this form of quality assurance for enhancing the student experience. However there is generally an over-reliance on surveys which in many cases have a low response rate. The panels found little evidence of effective systems/processes for feeding back action taken to stakeholders, and not all action plans were tracked and monitored. Nevertheless, the students and other stakeholders with whom the panels met indicated that they considered the programmes were effectively managed.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN THE STUDY FIELD OF BUSINESS

➤ Strategic recommendations at institutional level (for Higher Education Institutions):

The Panels make the following recommendations to the HEIs

- Adopt a more reflective approach to the writing of the SER document and take advantage of the opportunity to consider enhancements to the delivery of programmes and the student learning experience.
- Review the learning outcomes for each programme with a view to making them simpler and fewer in number, and ensure that the outcomes are measurable and linked to competencies.
- Take a more strategic overview of assessment to ensure that students are not over assessed.
- Ensure that each learning outcome is linked to a piece of assessment.
- Consider the use of integrated assessment, covering the learning outcomes of more than one module and make more effective use of case studies in the assessment process.
- Consider a more extensive use of English as the language of the thesis.
- Review mobility opportunities for both staff and students with a view to making these more flexible so an increased number of staff and students can take advantage of these opportunities.
- Review the financial implications of having large numbers of inbound students on the mobility programmes.
- Implement clear strategic plans in relation to research and involve all staff in opportunities for research.
- Provide clear links between the research undertaken by staff and how it enhances curriculum development and impacts on teaching, learning and assessment.
- Increase the involvement of students in research opportunities with their teachers.
- Implement a strategic plan for recruitment which addresses the reasons for low enrolments on some programmes and provides a plan for future recruitment.
- Analyse the reasons for students terminating their studies with a view to making changes to the curriculum/delivery methods to improve student retention.

- Review the financial and academic viability of specialist programmes with small numbers of students.
- Consider adopting a more hybrid method of delivery to encourage the recruitment of students who are working and support their work-life balance.
- Ensure that policies and procedures for the inclusion of students from socially vulnerable groups and those with disabilities are well publicised and understood by current and potential students.
- Continue to make effective use of social partners for mentoring, course development, internships, resources and quality management.
- Review the number of, and response rates for, surveys and, if necessary, implement alternative methods to obtain feedback from stakeholders.
- Ensure that quality systems are formalised and provide a clear audit trail for action taken in response to feedback from stakeholders,
- Introduce systems for feeding back action taken in response to feedback from stakeholders.

➤ **Strategic recommendations at national level (for the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport):**

The current structure of the SER's tends to inhibit the institutional willingness to produce documents that allow them to critically reflect and consider how they can improve their overall quality and seek continuous improvement. In particular the institutions do not reflect on how they can further enhance and develop the student experience and create further student opportunities for learning. The documents tend to be long on factual content and short on self-reflection. As learning institutions they tend to be strong on the processes in structuring the learning experience, yet limited in reflecting on its fitness for purpose and the outcomes. A restructuring of the documents would assist future panels in conducting reviews if that restructuring focused on:

- The presentation of the relevant data in graphical or data tables relating to student admissions, progression, withdrawals, outcomes and graduate employment.
- Curriculum maps showing the relationships between the aims and learning outcomes, curriculum content, assessments and the intended graduate skills and competencies.
- Outline programme content diagrams in terms of aims, LO's, structure, and progression, showing integration opportunities and shared resources and assessments across modules, with a short commentary on how the structure provides a coherent learning experience. To include: student contact hours, self-directed learning, online resources and facilities, flexibility in delivery.

- The pedagogical context for the learning and teaching delivery and how this develops and enhances the student learning experience. Opportunities for students to manage the programmes to achieve an appropriate study load/ work balance.
- Staffing tables indicating status, full-time/part time, staff qualifications, modules taught, programme or management responsibilities, research activities. Staff/student ratios for programmes. Staffing recruitment strategies, professional development and reward/incentive structures.
- Research strategy, including proportion of staff engaged in research activities. Indicative listings of research outputs including collaborative research projects and major grant funded projects.
- Student recruitment strategies, support resources and protocols for admission.
- International strategies for collaboration, recruitment, research projects, staff and student exchanges, collaborative curriculum development, joint awards.
- Details and commentary on the learning facilities and resources could be provided as video links rather than text.
- Access to English versions of the universities policy and procedures for quality assurance with supporting explanatory diagrams – for example for student feedback loops. The presentation of more detailed data on the results of the surveys and focus groups of both students and social partners would provide a more comprehensive overview of the reliability and validity of these tools in informing quality improvements.

There are a number of specific recommendations for improving the details and processes in conducting reviews, these include;

- Providing the appropriate training for all HEI's on the correct use of Bloom's taxonomy in the development and writing of learning outcomes to ensure that they are measurable, achievable and consistent.
- Review the processes and protocols for the institutional visits to make the meetings more manageable and valuable to the panels by:
- Identifying personnel/staff/students by role, to attend each of the meetings up to a maximum of 10.
- Avoid duplication of staff attendance at the different meetings and restrict the senior staff to attend not more than one meeting.
- Ensure that those attending have a direct connection with the study field or the programme management and the topic for the meeting.

- Ensure that the roles and list of those attending each meeting are presented to the panels at least 10 days in advance of the institutional visit.
- Ensure that the students attending the relevant meetings are adequately briefed and are well prepared (not rehearsed) for the nature and the type of meeting and that they are aware of their role within the review processes. Such students should be enrolled on one of the programmes under review.
- Consider redefining the business study field to include management as the content is similar and there is a clear progression between first cycle business study field programmes and international management second cycle programmes. It seems inconsistent not to include all business studies and related management programmes within the same study field.
- It is recognised that expert panel selection can be difficult, but it is essential to ensure that all reviewers are fully committed to the process and understand the extent of their professional contributions, and are able to ensure they can meet the deadlines required.

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