SKVC

CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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EVALUATION REPORT

STUDY FIELD OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

at Vilnius University

Expert panel:

1. **Prof. dr. Peter Jonkers (panel chairperson),** *academic;*
2. **Assoc. prof. Olga Schihalejev,** *academic;*
3. **Prof. dr. Pauline Claire Hannah Kollontai,** *academic;*
4. **Dr. Gediminas Jankūnas,** *representative of social partners / academic;*
5. **Mr. Rimvydas Burba,** *students' representative.*

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Study Field Data*

Title of the study programme	*Religious studies*
State code	6211NX030
Type of studies	University cycle studies
Cycle of studies	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	Full-time studies, 2 years
Credit volume	120
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Master of Humanities
Language of instruction	Lithuanian
Minimum education required	Higher university education (Bachelor's Degree)
Registration date of the study programme	19 May, 1997

** if there are **joint / two-fields / interdisciplinary** study programmes in the study field, please designate it in the foot-note*

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CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation of study fields is based on the Methodology of External Evaluation of Study Fields approved by the Director of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (hereinafter – SKVC) 31 December 2019 Order No. V-149.

The evaluation is intended to help higher education institutions to constantly improve their study process and to inform the public about the quality of studies.

The evaluation process consists of the main following stages: *1) self-evaluation and self-evaluation report prepared by Higher Education Institution (hereinafter – HEI); 2) site visit of the Expert Panel to the higher education institution; 3) production of the external evaluation report (EER) by the Expert Panel and its publication; 4) follow-up activities.*

On the basis of this external evaluation report of the study field SKVC takes a decision to accredit study field either for 7 years or for 3 years. If the field evaluation is negative then the study field is not accredited.

The study field and cycle are **accredited for 7 years** if all evaluation areas are evaluated as exceptional (5 points), very good (4 points) or good (3 points).

The study field and cycle are **accredited for 3 years** if one of the evaluation areas was evaluated as satisfactory (2 points).

The study field and cycle are **not accredited** if at least one of evaluation areas was evaluated as unsatisfactory (1 point).

1.2. EXPERT PANEL

The Expert Panel was assigned according to the Experts Selection Procedure (hereinafter referred to as the Procedure) as approved by the Director of Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education on 31 December 2019 Order No. V-149. The site visit to the HEI was conducted by the panel on *6 May, 2021.* Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Review Visit was organised online using video-conferencing tool (Zoom).

1. **Prof. dr. Peter Jonkers (panel chairperson)**, *emeritus, former full professor of philosophy at the Tilburg University (School of Catholic Theology), member of the advisory board of the German accreditation agency for theology (AKAST) and member of the scientific committee of the Vatican agency for quality evaluation and promotion of study programs in theology (AVEPRO) (Netherlands);*
2. **Doc. dr. Olga Schihalejev,** *associate professor of Religious Education and Deputy Head of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Tartu (Estonia);*
3. **Prof. dr. Pauline Claire Hannah Kollontai,** *Awarded Emeritus Professorship of Higher Education in Theology and Religious Studies at York St. Johns University (UK);*
4. **Dr. Gediminas Jankūnas,** *Rector/pastor at Basilica of the Assumption of Our Lady in Krekenava and Upytės parish; Chaplain at Panevėžio County Police Department; lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania);*
5. **Mr. Rimvydas Burba,** *Vytautas Magnus University, the Second Sycle Study Programme Diplomacy and International Relations (Lithuania).*

1.3. GENERAL INFORMATION

The documentation submitted by the HEI follows the outline recommended by SKVC. Along with the self-evaluation report and annexes, the following additional documents have been provided by the HEI before, during and after the site visit:

No.	Name of the document
1.	Document with the answers of Vilnius University to expert panel's requests for additional material.
2.	Rules for sending Vilnius university students for a partial study period at foreign science and study institutions, approved by Order No. R-277 of the Pro-Rector for Studies of Vilnius University of 8 May 2018 (in English and in Lithuanian).
4.	MOSTA (current name STRATA) Final report for the Unit of Assessment of the Comparative Expert Assessment of Research and Development Activities (in the area of Humanities) of 2018 Lithuanian Universities and Research Institutes.

1.4. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY FIELD/STUDY FIELD POSITION/STATUS AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE HEI

Vilnius University (hereinafter: VU, the University) was established in 1579 and is the oldest and largest higher education institution in Lithuania. The University has 14 core academic units (hereinafter: CAUs) (11 faculties, 1 centre, and 1 business school) and 12 core non-academic units. Currently, about 20.000 students are enrolled at VU.

The University offers undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies in the fields of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medical and healthcare sciences, and technological sciences. More than 80 bachelor's and integrated study programmes as well as 100 master's and professional studies (pedagogical) programmes are operated.

Studies in the field of religion are operated by the Faculty of Philosophy (hereinafter also FPHS, the Faculty). Presently, the Faculty comprises 5 institutes (Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Institute of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology, Institute of Sociology and Social Work, Institute of Educational Sciences), and 8 departments, one of which is the Department of Continental Philosophy and Religious Studies (hereinafter: the Department).

The Department of Continental Philosophy and Religious Studies, which currently operates the master's study programme in religious studies, was established in 2018, thereby incorporating the Centre for Religious Studies and Research (hereinafter: CRSR), formerly a separate academic unit. The motive to establish this Department was twofold: on the one hand, the tendencies of hybridity in the contemporary post-metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy that blur the boundaries between different philosophical disciplines and cultural fields, and on the other hand the common research in philosophy and religion of the researchers from the former CRSR and some researchers from the former Department of Continental Philosophy.

Members of the teaching staff of the study programme *Religious Studies* (state code 6211NX030) (hereinafter: study programme, programme, master's degree programme, second cycle study programme) contribute to the production of the journal *Religija ir kultūra* (*Religion and Culture*), by serving as their editors or members of the editorial board. To ensure the dissemination of research results and the promotion of cooperation, local and international research conferences, international seminars, practical seminars, forums as well as public lectures are organized.

There are no doctoral studies in the field of Religious studies in Lithuania, so students who have completed a Master's degree in this study programme can enter doctoral studies in philosophy, cultural studies, educational studies, sociology or history and theory of arts.

The last external evaluation of the study programme was conducted in 2011. The study programme was assessed positively and was accredited for 6 years. The recommendations of previous evaluations and their implementation are discussed in the analysis section of the evaluated areas.

II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Religious studies study field and second cycle at Vilnius University *is given **positive** evaluation.*

Study field and cycle assessment in points by evaluation areas

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation of an Area in points*
1.	Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	2
2.	Links between science (art) and studies	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	3
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Study quality management and public information	2
	Total:	20

*1 (unsatisfactory) - there are essential shortcomings that must be eliminated;
2 (satisfactory) - meets the established minimum requirements, needs improvement;
3 (good) - the field is being developed systematically, has distinctive features;
4 (very good) - the field is evaluated very well in the national and international context, without any deficiencies;
5 (excellent) - the field is exceptionally good in the national and international context/environment.

III. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

Study aims, outcomes and content shall be assessed in accordance with the following indicators:

3.1.1. Evaluation of the conformity of the aims and outcomes of the field and cycle study programmes to the needs of the society and/or the labour market (not applicable to HEIs operating in exile conditions)

(1) Factual situation

The Religious studies study programme of VU is dedicated to the analysis of religion, as regards its multidimensionality, historical development and diverse manifestations. The programme takes into account the contemporary tension between secularization and the continuing existence of religion in today's society. In addition, the programme takes into account the latest theoretical research and methods of the disciplines involved in this programme.

This programme is currently the only one of its kind in Lithuania that is conducted from an interdisciplinary and non-confessional, philosophical approach. It is worth noting that the different aspects of this programme are organically interwoven. The choice of the philosophical perspective correlates with its non-confessional basis, while the deliberate absence of a link with a confession allows for the integration of various perspectives on religion (SER, p. 7).

The principal outcomes of this programme are:

1. the ability to independently identify religion-related problems arising at the joint of theology, philosophy of religion and religious studies;

2. the skills to creatively apply theoretical knowledge in the field of religion and practical abilities in professional activities;

3. the ability to independently improve and update one's knowledge in the area of religion;

4. the preparation for the higher level (doctoral) studies in the fields of religious studies, philosophy of religion and other humanities.

(SER, p. 10-11; for a complete overview of the general and specific aims and intended learning outcomes of this programme, see SER, Appendix 1).

In this context, it has to be noted that all the intended abilities are a common result of the various courses.

The programme responds to the need in Lithuanian society for specialists in religion, in particular the influence of religion on public opinion and culture as such. Its aim is to train, following an interdisciplinary and non-confessional approach, highly qualified specialists in religious studies fully corresponding to the current European and global standards. The shortage of specialists able to perceive the specificity of the field of religious studies and the place of religion in the multi-cultural world, marked by secularization and globalization, has been perceived in the Lithuanian labour market ever since the restoration of Lithuania's independence. Among the most essential demands raised by potential private and public employers and social partners is to ensure that graduates of the religious studies programme have sufficient knowledge and understanding the place of religion in society, and are able to

understand and analyse different cultural processes bearing a religious dimension, and master inter-religious communication skills. Finally, although the religious studies programme does not train teachers in this field, graduates of the programme are also able to work in educational institutions (SER, p. 11).

Graduates of this programme can work in news media, begin a scientific or pedagogical career in universities or colleges, work in cultural and scientific governmental institutions, and in public and social organizations (SER, p. 12).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

This study programme is beyond doubt unique in the Lithuanian academic landscape, but its link with specific needs in Lithuanian society and the labour market is weak. During the interview the senior management of the faculty said to be rather sceptical about the need of the programme to respond to societal needs because of its focus on academic research. The list of specific learning outcomes, the interviews with the teaching staff, the students and the graduates also confirmed the impression of the Expert Panel that the programme is primarily set up as a research-master, preparing students for a phd in philosophy or other disciplines in the humanities, but hardly for the kind of work mentioned on SER, p. 11. The fact that the programme does not include internships (in contrast to what is claimed on SER, p. 18, but in line with what was said during the interview with the faculty management) further strengthens the impression that this programme is primarily focused on theoretical research, and does hardly prepare the students to put their theoretical insights in religious studies into practice. Hence, the claims of the programme regarding practical learning outcomes are inconsistent with what is actually realized. This inconsistency urgently needs to be corrected.

Given the focus of this programme on academic research, it comes as no surprise that the research quality of the teaching staff is the main reason for students to enter this programme, as the interviews with the students and the alumni made clear. Furthermore, they explicitly valued the open ant tolerant approach of the teachers regarding the variety of (religious and secular) backgrounds of the students. Finally, the alumni confirmed that they had benefited greatly from this programme, but mainly because it gave them a broader horizon, rather than as a result of its specific intended learning outcomes.

From an academic perspective, the programme does not qualify as a programme in religious studies in the proper sense of the term (this in contrast to what is argued on SER, p. 8-9 and p. 16), because of its inadequate balance between courses in philosophy (of religion), religious studies and theology. In particular, the programme lacks courses in non-Christian religions (except Judaism) and courses in empirical approaches of religious studies (e.g. sociology of religion and courses in recent developments in the religious landscape), and predominantly focuses on historical and philosophical approaches (see SER, p. 16-17 and Appendix 2, Study plan). Moreover, the Expert Panel has the impression that the theology courses of this programme are rather introductory and therefore more suited for a first cycle than for a second cycle study programme, while the courses in philosophy are very specialized and definitely qualify as courses for a research-master (see Appendix 8, course units' descriptions). These inconsistencies urgently need to be addressed, among others in relation with the admission criteria (see below, section 3.3.).

As a consequence of its lack of a clear focus and balance, the programme is confronted with very diverging, and sometimes even contradictory expectations. As was pointed out in the interviews with the teaching staff, the students and the alumni, some want to have more training in practical skills, whereas others want to keep its theoretical (or philosophical) focus, some want more courses in philosophy, while others want more attention to religion, students without a bachelor degree in philosophy find the level of the courses of the

programme in philosophy too high, while the philosophy graduates have no problems with it. This problem is somehow confirmed by the SER, p. 37, in which the following explanation for the decreasing attractiveness of the programme was given: "those who choose to study philosophy prefer the Master's programme in *Philosophy,* and students interested in religious studies find the number of philosophical disciplines too large."

3.1.2. Evaluation of the conformity of the field and cycle study programme aims and outcomes with the mission, objectives of activities and strategy of the HEI

(1) Factual situation

According to SER, p. 12, the predominantly research orientated aims and outcomes of this study programme correspond to the objectives prescribed by VU: "to enhance cognitive and creative powers of both Lithuania and the world; to nurture academic and other spiritual and social values; and to educate active, responsible citizens and society leaders of the State of Lithuania." The professors in the field carry out scientific work and facilitate the abilities of students needed for individual research; both the general and specific competences are developed, thus ensuring the preparation of active and responsible graduates for independent professional activities. Furthermore, the realization of the study programme contributes to the strategic priorities of the mission put forward in the Strategic Plan of 2018-20 of VU (e.g. VU aims to be a university enhancing Lithuania: enhancing the state's economic, social, and cultural capital, as well as preparing students for the global working environment). The study programme contributes to this by cultivating personal responsibility, skills for cooperation, creative capabilities and critical thinking, the ability to apply subject knowledge in practical activities.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Against the background of the strong research reputation of VU, the academic level of many courses of this programme and the quality of its teaching staff certainly contribute to this aspect of the mission of VU. Yet, exactly because of its strong theoretical orientation, it is doubtful whether the programme indeed realizes the more practical learning outcome to apply subject knowledge in practical activities. Finally, in order to substantially contribute to preparing students for the global working environment, would make sense that this programme, with its strong research orientation, be taught in English and that the students make use far more often and systematically of the existing Erasmus exchange programme.

3.1.3. Evaluation of the compliance of the field and cycle study programme with legal requirements

(1) Factual situation

The study programme Religious studies was created and is operated in accordance with the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework, the Description of General Requirements for the Provision of Studies, the Descriptor of Study Cycles, and Vilnius University Study Programme Regulations. Studies in the field comply with legal requirements.

The planned study programme outcomes correspond to qualification level 7:
- The scope of a study programme that awards a master's degree upon completion is 120 study credits, of which:
  - no fewer than 60 study credits shall be composed of field course units (modules) that contribute to the achievement of learning outcomes of the Religious Studies study field. The study programme consists of four groups of courses, namely religious studies, philosophy of religion, Christian theology and the correlation between religion and

culture; each group contributes to the achievement of the learning outcomes (for a complete overview how each course is linked to the general and specific learning outcomes, see SER, app. No. 2).

- no fewer than 30 study credits shall be dedicated for the final thesis (project) for the final thesis (project).
- no more than 30 study credits shall be composed of university-determined or elective subjects (deeper studies in the field and/or a research project (work of art), additional internship, modules (subjects) in another field, minor studies, the development of digital competence and other transferable skills, etc.). The elective courses include courses on *New Religious Movements, History of Jewish Thought, Philosophical Theology, Violence and Religion, Contemporary Italian Philosophy, Media and Post-Secularization, Religion and Art.*

- The scope of module is in multiples of 6 credits.
  - One study credit corresponds to 25–30 hours of a student's work hours, which include contact and self-study hours.
  - The proportion of contact hours (including online contact) for second-cycle study programmes and the second-cycle part of joint study programmes shall be no less than 10 %; direct contact hours between teaching staff and students (not online contact time) shall be no less than 5 %, and self-study hours shall be no less than 50 %.
- The scope of the programme is sufficient to achieve learning outcomes. The principal components of the Master's degree programme *Religious studies* – philosophy of religion, religious studies, Christian theology and subjects studying the relations between religion and culture, and the individual courses comprising the group of subjects – constitute the basis for the achievement of the programme's objectives and targets, and ensure the attainment of the abilities being developed. It is specifically this composition of the content of the programme, under which the phenomenon of religion is being studied from the perspectives of diverse disciplines, at the same time extending and deepening the knowledge in the areas of the history of religion, the history and systematics of dogma, and studying principal historical models of religion and the contemporary range of problems of religion, as well as the individual aspects of the correlation of religion with culture, that determines its professionalism, uniqueness and relevance. At the same time such arrangement of the study programme provides a substantial basis for the attainment of the principal abilities sought to be developed.

(See SER, p. 13 and p. 15-6; for a detailed overview see Appendix 2).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The above overview is correct, so the programme indeed complies with the legal requirements of the second cycle study programme.

3.1.4. Evaluation of compatibility of aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods of the field and cycle study programmes

(1) Factual situation

The Master's degree study programme incorporates elements of studies in philosophy, theology and religious studies. The studies are designed to provide its students with an understanding of religious phenomena and the ability to analyse and understand them from non-confessional positions. The logic underlying the structure of the programme corresponds to its objectives and targets and the abilities sought to be developed. The structure comprises four groups of subjects: history of religion, systematic theology and history of dogma,

philosophy of religion, and a range of philosophical problems related to contemporary manifestations of religion and its correlation with culture (SER, p. 13-4, p. 17).

The programme is comprised of the mandatory and optional courses with a workload of 6 ECTS per course, thus enabling the students to focus on the subjects they are most interested in, or that they need most for their professional activities (SER, p. 14-15).

A 2-semester course *Scientific Research Work* has been introduced with the purpose of developing the skills for research, and the ultimate results of the course are presented in the *Master's Final Thesis.* The course mainly facilitates the independent research activities of a Master's degree student while exploring the subject selected aided by the consultations with the appointed thesis supervisor (SER, p. 15).

The teaching methods employed in the programme correspond to its aims and allow to achieve the expected general and specific outcomes. The main teaching methods are lectures (problem-based teaching), seminars (discussions, presentations, raising questions, critical analysis of the problems under consideration) and individual work, during which the students collect and examine material for presentations, survey and analyse primary sources and literature related to specific problem-related questions, prepare course papers. The methods for assessment (examination, presentation, mid-term assessment, active participation in seminars, course papers) and their criteria are related to the development of general and subject-specific competences (taking into account the understanding of problems, concepts and methods, as well as argumentation, the analytical level of considerations, the usage of sources and literature, and creativity in interpreting and solving problems) (SER, p. 17-18).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Because of the absence of certain key contents and methodologies (see section 3.1.1 of this Evaluation Report) the contents, aims and learning outcomes of the programme do not adequately reflect what is commonly understood by religious studies, but rather apply to a programme in Philosophy, Religion and Culture. The intended outcome to provide students with an understanding of religious phenomena is limited to Christianity and Judaism, and the non-confessional perspective is only ensured by the courses in philosophy and not by, e.g. social sciences (in contrast to the claim of SER, p. 16). During the interview, the students expressed their disappointment about the limited religious scope of the programme, although they admitted that the programme already suffered from "an overload of information". The Expert Panel welcomes the division of the programme in mandatory and optional courses, since this facilitates the students to adapt the programme to their interests and professional needs; it also welcomes the introduction of a 2-semester course *Scientific Research work* to help the students writing their MA-thesis. However, during the interview with the students, one of them complained that this course had not been scheduled. The Expert Panel didn't get a clear answer whether this is a coincidental or a structural problem. In sum, from the student's perspective as well as from that of what is commonly understood as constituting core elements of a programme in religious studies, the intended aims and learning outcomes of this programme are only realized to a limited extent. Finally, the teaching and assessment methods of the individual courses of the programme (see SER, p. 17-18 and Appendix 8) are compatible with the outcomes of the programme insofar as it aims to be a research master (writing papers, oral presentations, classroom discussions, active listening etc.), preparing students for a phd in philosophy, but do not assess their familiarity with religious life in a more empirical sense and, hence, do not prepare them for empirical research in religious studies. Because of this, the students complained that this programme is "disconnected from real life". On the other hand, the alumni were much more positive about the content of the programme. The apparent divergence of the answers of these two groups may be due to the

very small size of both groups (three to four participants). Anyhow, the mismatch between the students' expectations of the programme and its actual content should urgently be addressed by the management of the programme and the faculty.

3.1.5. Evaluation of the totality of the field and cycle study programme subjects/modules, which ensures consistent development of competences of students

(1) Factual situation

The objective of the Master's degree *Religious studies* programme is to train, following the interdisciplinary and non-confessional approach of the programme, highly qualified specialists in religious studies. Students acquire the ability to independently formulate and propose solutions to religion-related problems arising at the intersection of theology, philosophy of religion and religious studies, the ability to clearly construct arguments and discuss, the capacity to creatively apply theoretical knowledge in the field of religion and practical skills in professional activities, the competence to independently improve and update their knowledge in the area of religion; students also prepare for the higher level of (doctoral) studies in the field of religious studies, philosophy of religion or other humanities.

The outcomes of the *Religious studies* programme are achieved not by the study of one or another subject, but in their entirety. All subjects in the programme contribute to the general and subject-specific competences and ensure their coherence. Students cultivate their abilities individually by consulting with course lecturers or, when preparing the Master's thesis, with their Master's thesis supervisor. The lecture method fosters the ability to identify and to systematize the information relevant to the problems analysed, the ability to understand research methodologies, to select and apply appropriate research methods. The seminar method facilitates the ability to prepare oral presentations and written texts for public communication, the ability to carry out a proper analysis of texts in humanities and social sciences, and to provide a creative and constructive interpretation of those texts, the ability to take part in a discussion (moderate a discussion and participate in it according to other participants' competence and needs), to provide arguments, match opinions, look for consensus, derive summarizing conclusions. The method of individual work fosters the ability to learn and work independently, understanding the importance of lifelong learning and creative education.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The structure and content of the programme do certainly ensure the consistent development of the competences of the students, insofar as the programme is intended to be a research-master, preparing students for a phd in philosophy, theology or another discipline in the humanities, but not for empirical research of religious studies. However, the intended aims and outcomes are seriously compromised by the fact that there are no formal admission criteria for this programme, except an academic BA-degree (see section 3.1.1 for a more detailed analysis of this problem).

3.1.6. Evaluation of opportunities for students to personalise the structure of field study programmes according to their personal learning objectives and intended learning outcomes

(1) Factual situation

The mandatory courses (60 credits) facilitate the fundamental scientific competences, the optional courses (30 credits) are oriented towards individual specialization, and conjointly all this contributes to the basis for the preparation of the Master's thesis (30 credits) (SER, p. 15-16). Other measures for the students to personalize their studies are: an individual study plan,

participating in academic exchange, studying various foreign languages outside the scope of the study programme (SER, p. 18).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The programme gives the students ample opportunities to personalize their studies. Due to the very low student numbers, however, the programme runs the risk that the students don't feel to be part of a group. This concern was explicitly put forward during the interview with the students.

3.1.7. Evaluation of compliance of final theses with the field and cycle requirements

(1) Factual situation

The evaluation criteria for the final thesis are presented in the description of the *Master's Final Thesis* course unit (see SER, Appendix 8). The aim of the master's thesis is to develop the ability to identify scientific problems, the competence to independently and properly carry out scientific research in the field of religious studies, and to present it in the preparation and the defence of the master thesis. During this process, students develop the following skills: 1) the ability to identify and formulate complex problems in the field of religious studies with reference to scientific literature, and choose a proper methodology; 2) the capacity to perform independent research on a relevant problem in the field of religious studies; the competence to comprehend, compare and evaluate the role of religion from the historical perspective and the context of contemporary culture; 3) the ability to use primary and secondary sources (in the written and digital form) for research, to correctly present bibliography and notes, the comprehension of academic standards; 4) the ability to properly plan one's work; 5) the competence to participate in theoretical discussions, to properly use academic terminology, to know how to comprehensively present the results of their research, the ability to oppose other participants of the discussion, to orally present one's arguments SER, p. 18-19).

The final theses are supervised by the lecturers from the Department for Continental Philosophy and Religious Studies, who teach in this study programme. In some cases, after a thesis topic has been approved by the Study Programme Committee (hereinafter: SPC), outside consultants are employed. Students choose the topic of the final thesis in the beginning of the third semester (October 1st), after having discussed it with potential supervisors. The final thesis topics are considered and approved by SPC of *Religious studies*. In the third semester, a special course dedicated to the preparation of the final thesis is implemented: *Scientific Research Work*. In fourth semester, students are writing their theses and prepare for its public defence. In this way, the coherence of the topic and the projected presentation of its content in respect to the study field is ensured (SER, p. 19).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The quality of the MA-theses is quite high and in accordance with the three core-disciplines of this programme, namely philosophy, religious studies and theology.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *The interdisciplinary character of the study programme, consisting of four groups of disciplines, offer the students a broad view of the study field.*

(2) Weaknesses:
1. *The study programme lacks focus and balance, and does therefore not qualify as a programme in religious studies in the proper sense of this term. Moreover, it is predominantly theoretical, so that the intended practical outcomes are hardly realized.*

14

2. *The study programme is confronted with many diverging, and sometimes even contradictory expectations.*

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

Links between science (art) and study activities shall be assessed in accordance with the following indicators:

3.2.1. Evaluation of the sufficiency of the science (applied science, art) activities implemented by the HEI for the field of research (art) related to the field of study

(1) Factual situation

The results of the Research Council of Lithuania formal evaluation of scientific research in the field of philosophy and theology (for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019), as well as the results of the comparative expert evaluation of university Research and Experimental Development (R&D), conducted by MOSTA (current name STRATA) (in 2018), are presented in the SER, p. 20, Table 3. The results show that the weighted sum of points of the formal evaluation of scientific research in the field of philosophy is increasing. The research of the VU scientists in the field of theology was evaluated as modest, due to the fact that only a few scientists work in this field.

In the MOSTA comparative expert evaluation of university R&D activities, only the field of philosophy was evaluated (The field of theology, due to its small number of scientists, was not included in the evaluation). The research in the field of philosophy was rated with 4 points; this means that the evaluated unit contained many scientific articles in foreign languages; some published in the best journals of the appropriate field or in collaboration with international publishing houses that generally ensure a high quality of the scientific peer-review process.

It is worth noting that the teaching staff of this programme is active in its field of research: they supervise and carry out scientific projects, publish monographs and scientific papers, participate in international scientific conferences. In the period 2017-2019, the 6 academic staff members have published 23 scientific publications in the fields of philosophy and theology, 2 of which are scientific monographs. Furthermore, two projects funded from the VU budget were carried out in the field of religious studies: "Religion and Culture" (2017-2018), dedicated to the interdisciplinary research of religion, and "Contemporary research on tradition of continental philosophy and religious studies" (2019–2024). The scope of the scientific activities of these projects included the organization of scientific conferences, preparation of presentations, publishing of articles and monographs, as well as the preparation of new *Religija ir kultūra (Religion and Culture*) journal issues*.

In the period of 2017-2019, one international and four national externally financed projects were conducted. International cooperation is not exclusive to international projects, but is also present in national projects, to which scientists from abroad are invited to participate. E.g., the professor of Turin University (Italy), worked in the project „Transformations of Nature in Late Modernity: Ontological and Anthropological Dimensions," while the project „Responsibility of Religious Person: Lithuanian Rabbinic Thought Between Rationalism and Hasidic Mysticism" included an associate professor from Russia from the St. Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies (SER, pp. 21-23).

It is also worth mentioning that during the evaluated period, several members of the teaching staff were awarded for their scientific accomplishments (SER, p. 20-22).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The Faculty of Philosophy as a whole deserves to be commended for the very high quality of its academic and applied research, as has been recognized by the Research Council of Lithuania and by (the international Expert Panel of) MOSTA (current name STRATA) (see SER, p. 20-22 and the report VU_FET by MOSTA). To get a fair picture of the specific research achievements of the teaching staff of the study programme religious studies the Expert Panel took tables 5 and 6 (SER p. 21-3) and Appendix 7 (overview of the scientific and academic achievements of the academic staff) as its lead. The total number of publications is good and, moreover, a great number of them are peer-reviewed. However, there is only one publication in an international academic language, which is very low. Furthermore, the distribution of the publications among the three constitutive disciplines of the programme, namely philosophy (of religion), religious studies and theology, is very uneven: the overall majority of them belongs to philosophy, and a much smaller number to religious studies and theology combined. Therefore, if the programme intends to maintain its focus on religious studies in the strict sense, a substantial additional investment in the teaching and research staff of religious studies and theology is needed. This impression has been confirmed by the fact that, during the interview with the teaching staff, the lecturer responsible for religious studies said that he/she felt academically isolated in this programme.

3.2.2. Evaluation of the link between the content of studies and the latest developments in science, art and technology

(1) Factual situation

The academic staff in the field carry out both group and individual projects, and integrate their research into the taught course units (modules). The research in the processes of secularization, carried out in the project "Religion and Culture: The Challenges of the Contemporary World to the Identity" is incorporated in the course units *Problems of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion: Nihilism and Secularization*, *Postmetaphysical Thought and the Problem of Religion*, *Christian Ethics*, *Religion and Art: the Perspective of Secularization* and others. The results of the project "Transformations of Ontology: Nihilism, Ethics, Media," were implemented into the course unit *Media and Post-Secularization*. The results of the "*Inheritance of Lithuanian Jewish Philosophical and Religious Thought*," is included in the course unit *Lithuanian Jewish Religious Thought Heritage* (SER, p. 23).

The results of research are also shared among the staff to ensure that the knowledge and competence development of students is based on latest research developments and methods. Students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the latest/most relevant research of the University's staff in their implementation of study tasks and preparation of research papers (for examples, see SER, p. 23).

The programme benefits from long term cooperation with the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow and University of Turin and the Luigi Pareyson Center for Philosophical and Religious Studies. The lectures of these two institutions correspondingly enrich the programme with new knowledge and insights (SER, p. 39).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

In line with 3.2.1 of this Evaluation Report, there is a clear link between the contents of the study programme and the research results in philosophy and religious studies. As to the courses in theology, the SER does not give any information about this criterion, but from the relatively recent dates of the publications listed as required literature of these courses,

including publications by the lecturer of these courses (see SER, Appendix 8) it can be concluded that they are linked to recent research developments in theology.

3.2.3. Evaluation of conditions for students to get involved in scientific (applied science, art) activities consistent with their study cycle

(1) Factual situation

The students of this programme come from diverse fields of studies, and usually acquire the competences for individual research activities in the fields of philosophy and theology only in writing their final master's thesis. For this reason, students are generally encouraged to prepare scientific publications based on their master's thesis, which helps those who seek to continue their studies in the doctoral programme. In the analysed period, four students prepared articles based on their master's theses, which were published in the journal *Religija ir kultūra*, as well as in the introduction to the Simone Weil book *Dievo laukimas* (*Waiting for God*). Some students are actively involved in science popularization activities on radio and television. During the evaluation period, it is worth mentioning the science popularization activities of a student of the Master's programme in Religious studies on the online platform apologetika.lt (https://apologetika.lt/apie/). Students in the field are invited to participate in research seminars and lectures organized by VU CAUs. Students of the programme are informed about the seminars and lectures of the Faculty of Philosophy researchers and visiting lecturers relevant to them, and are encouraged to participate. As the programme develops an understanding of the importance of lifelong learning, students can also choose to participate in various seminars and conferences outside the University (SER, p. 24).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator

Thanks to the research reputation of the lecturers of this programme, the conditions for the involvement of students in scientific research activities are very good. This is an important asset for this programme, because it focuses predominantly on preparing students for a phd (SER, p. 24). Yet, the Expert Panel deplores that so few students make use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus exchange programmes, since this would substantially enhance their research skills and scope (SER, p. 28).

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *The research of the Faculty of Philosophy as a whole is deemed to be very good. This creates a good research environment for the department of continental philosophy and religious studies.*
2. *Many examples of good links between research and teaching.*
3. *Good conditions for the involvement of students in the research activities of the teaching staff.*

(2) Weaknesses:
1. *Uneven balance between quantitative and qualitative research input of the philosophy segment and the theology and religious studies sections.*
2. *No use of the opportunities offered by the Erasmus exchange programmes.*

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

Student admission and support shall be evaluated according to the following indicators:

3.3.1. Evaluation of the suitability and publicity of student selection and admission criteria and process

(1) Factual situation

The student selection and admission criteria are publicly available at the universities' webpage (https://www.vu.lt/studijos/stojantiesiems/magistranturos-studijos (LT), https://www.vu.lt/en/studies/master-studies (ENG)). Applicants must have a bachelor's degree in any study field. Competitive score consists of the average grade of the course units of the first cycle diploma supplement; the grade of the final bachelor's thesis or graduation examination and the average grade of study field disciplines (philosophy, religion, culture) (SER, p.25). There is some uncertainty about 20 credits in study courses in the field of philosophy or the relation of religion and culture. According to the SER p. 25 it is required but in other places (SER p. 26 and meeting with teaching staff) it is only advisory. Even the advice to students who don't have a bachelor's degree in either philosophy or theology to complement their deficiencies in these fields through preparatory courses (20 ECTS) is apparently (planned to be) suspended to attract more students (see SER, p. 26), even though the previous evaluation of this programme recommended this (SER, p. 30).

The number of applicants is decreasing: in 2019 there were 13 applicants (3 of them as the first priority), and 4 agreements for state-funded places were signed; in 2018 11 applicants (2 of them as the first priority), and 5 agreements for state funded places; in 2017 21 applicants (5 as the first priority), and 6 agreements for the state-funded places. In addition, agreements for 1 non-state funded place were signed in 2017. The mean value of the entrance score is 16,61-17,12 from 20, the lowest 14,39 and the highest 19,37) (SER, pp. 25-26).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator

Student selection and admission criteria and process are publicly available. The requirement in the admission to have any courses on philosophy or theology at the first cycle is planned to be suspended in order to improve student's intake. However, the intended aims and outcomes of the programme are seriously compromised by the fact that there are no formal admission criteria for this programme, except an academic BA-degree. Given the fact that the programme is research orientated, the criteria do not correspond to the high standards of the programme and the expectations of the students. According to the alumni and the students, those who enter the programme with good prior knowledge in philosophy or theology, have high academic performance and a clear vision about their expectations appreciate the programme very much. The others "feel somehow lost in this programme" and experience a gap between their previous academic education and this programme, they are struggling to analyse the required reading material on their own, and they find writing essays difficult and sometimes look for help outside the university. According to the teachers teaching at the second cycle may sometimes be challenging due to big variety of academic backgrounds, but they usually reach a high level of expertise and combine their first cycle background with new knowledge and competencies from the second cycle. According to the staff meeting even if they need to accommodate the programme to the background of the students and do an introductory level during the first semester, they can move soon to more challenging issues. But the meeting with students revealed that the students with little knowledge of philosophy at the first cycle may have severe problems in meeting the high expectations required to complete the programme successfully.

Moreover, some courses (e.g. Post-metaphysical Thought and the Problem of Religion, Problems of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, Media and Post-secularization, Contemporary Italian Philosophy,) mention courses in "Introduction to Philosophy", "History of Philosophy" as prerequisites (see SER, Appendix 8), although they are not part of this programme. The Expert Panel finds the absence of formal admission criteria unacceptable.

3.3.2. Evaluation of the procedure of recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning and its application

(1) Factual situation

VU conducts academic recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning. The procedure is approved by the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania and it adheres to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Description of the Procedure for Recognition of Education and Qualifications Concerning Higher Education and Acquired Under Educational Programmes of Foreign States and International Organisations (SER p. 26). Each foreign qualification is evaluated and a decision about its academic recognition is taken individually, based on available information.

Persons admitted to studies in the field can submit requests to have their formally or informally achieved learning outcomes recognized. Formally achieved learning outcomes can be recognized on the basis of a study content specified in the study agreement. In addition, informal learning outcomes can be recognized based on the evaluation of learning outcomes' compliance with competences fostered by the study programme (SER, p. 27). No more than 75% of the scope of the study programme may be recognized from other universities and no more than 50% from informal learning. Final examinations, final theses and other research papers cannot be recognised.

There have been no cases of unrecognized foreign qualifications and one case of recognition of foreign qualifications in the field of theology and religious studies at the University of Glasgow.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis
The procedure of recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning is available and clear. It is used in some cases, especially for prior learning.

3.3.3. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring academic mobility of students

(1) Factual situation

According to SER p. 27 the International Programmes and Relations Office of VU administers studies abroad with the coordinators of Erasmus+, as well as other international mobility and practical training programmes at the faculty. The information is available on the VU's website (https://www.vu.lt/tarptautiniai-rysiai/mainu-galimybes; https://www.vu.lt/tarptautiniai-rysiai/kitos-studiju-uzsienyje-galimybes (LT), https://www.vu.lt/en/international-cooperation/other-opportunities (ENG) and presented to students during the meetings. Students have the opportunity to spend a semester or a year studying abroad, under Erasmus+, ISEP, Nordplus or under bilateral cooperation agreements. The Faculty of Philosophy has 23 Erasmus agreements with foreign universities. Also, VU students may take part at ARQUS activities (partial studies, short-term exchange, participation in international conferences, etc.) and COIMBRA network.

Students in religious studies must have completed at least one semester at VU before they can go abroad. During the analysed period, students of the Religious studies programme did not go abroad for partial studies.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Although academic mobility of students is encouraged and made fully available, students do not use the possibility to take part in exchange programmes for longer periods. There are several factors that contribute to the low interest in mobility programmes: most students work or/and have families while studying.

3.3.4. Assessment of the suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the academic, financial, social, psychological and personal support provided to the students of the field

(1) Factual situation

The Student Services and Career Department provides centrally organized support to students of all fields. There are excellent library facilities available for all students, technological libraries are open 24/7 and provide working facilities for studies. Also, academic support to students is provided at the Faculty of Philosophy, where the Head of the Studies Division is available for counselling. (SER, p. 29). Since September 2019, VU has a mentorship programme that contributes to the personal and professional development of the students, strengthens the University community and helps to reflect on career perspectives in the chosen area. Students can receive scholarships: for very good learning results (from 2017/2018 to 2019/2020, the study programme students received 8 scholarships), social scholarships (from 2017/2018 to 2019/2020 – 1 scholarship), one-off social grants and one-off earmarked. In addition, 1 student received a state-supported loan and 2 students received a reduced fee for preparatory courses.

VU Health and Sports Centre promotes healthy lifestyle and Counselling and Training Centre provides psychological counselling, also the chaplain and assistants provide spiritual counselling and support. There are several opportunities to take part in such activities as choirs, orchestra, theatres, and musical and arts groups.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The students have the opportunity to receive academic, financial, social and psychological support. In addition, social and emotional well-being of students is catered by multiple extracurricular activities. Although all these possibilities are available, the students of the field did not use them and felt disconnected from the university. It may be due to the pandemic situation with massive distance learning and almost non-existent social connections.

3.3.5 Evaluation of the sufficiency of study information and student counselling

(1) Factual situation

Students are introduced to their study programmes during VU integration week when they are introduced to the aims, intended outcomes, methods, and individualization opportunities of respective study programmes, study process and support possibilities. All information about the study process, partial studies abroad, payment for studies, scholarships, and study financing is also provided to students in study departments and during meetings with vice deans of studies, heads of Study Programme Committees and academic consultants and constantly available on the website. Information about the study process is also provided to students through the VU Information System (VUSIS): a student can see his/her personal data, relevant orders, the study plan, session schedule, results, etc. According to SER p. 30 each

lecturer has appointed office hours when they consult students; consultations are also done after lectures and via e-mail or virtual learning environment.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Although the university has done a lot centrally and the centre locally to make information and consultancy available the Expert Panel noticed a mismatch between available procedures and students' experience. During the meeting with students many concerns were expressed about little feedback on students' improvement, also the diffidence in asking for help was conveyed. Students reported feeling lost and having little feedback on their academic improvement. The centre should analyse the reasons for little use of counselling opportunities.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *Multiple possibilities for student support and social activities are available for students with different needs and interests.*
2. *Integration week helps students to understand studies at the university.*

(2) Weaknesses:
1. *Insufficient admission criteria. As the programme is predominantly research orientated and appears to be designed as a pathway into doctoral research, there appears to be a lack of attention to the suitability of students applying in the recruitment and admissions process.*
2. *Little use of counselling opportunities by students.*
3. *The students' low commitment to the study programme.*

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

Studying, student performance and graduate employment shall be evaluated according to the following indicators:

3.4.1. Evaluation of the teaching and learning process that enables to take into account the needs of the students and enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes

(1) Factual situation

As described in SER the Religious studies programme and its course units (modules) aim to ensure the cohesion between learning outcomes, teaching, learning, and assessment methods. During the orientation week, in the meeting with the SPC of Religious studies, first semester students are introduced to the programme, its aims, content and the intended learning outcomes. During the first classes of every course unit, the SP lecturers introduce students to the description of their course, emphasizing the aim of the course, its learning outcomes, content, the method of studies and assessment, as well as the assessment scheme, schedule and criteria. The assessment scheme for each course unit is specified in the corresponding course description. The studies of the programme are conducted by combining contact and individual student work. During the contact work (lectures, seminars, consultations), the aim is to disclose the field of problems (problem-based teaching), to stimulate and moderate discussions (group discussions, brainstorming), so that later, during individual work, students can deepen their comprehension by finding information, analysing the provided literature and films, attending art exhibitions, independently preparing presentations and presenting them orally during seminars or preparing written papers, thus cultivating their research skills. A

part of the individual work assignments is carried out throughout the semester (cumulative grade), so that students, having received feedback, could reflect on their progress, while another part is reflected in the individually written exam paper. In the 2020 Spring semester, due to the COVID-19 conditions, a portion of contact work was moved to virtual space: virtual lectures and webinars took place. In respect to these conditions, the use of the Microsoft Teams platform seemed more appropriate than the one used by the institution before, since MS Teams allows not only to organize the individual work of students by providing them with assignments, sharing necessary readings etc., but also to carry out contact work – virtual lectures and webinars. In principle, this did not fundamentally obstruct the achievement of the intended teaching outcomes, however for a part of students this method proved to be psychologically difficult, as working from home did not always ensure proper work conditions.

Since students of this programme have first-cycle degrees in diverse fields (e.g., literature, history, law, psychology, theology, philosophy, etc.), the individual work assignments are aimed at the utilization and expansion of the knowledge and skills they already possess. In this manner, the interdisciplinary principle of the programme is realized not only in respect to the programme as a whole, but also at the level of its course units (modules) which take into account the premises of different approaches to religion.

Throughout the learning process, students are provided with feedback about their achievements in order to ensure consistent and in-depth learning that would enable them to achieve maximum progress when studying a course unit (module) while also enabling the student to express their personality and talent. Religious studies foster a culture of argumentation, creativity, and critical thinking as well as the competence to solve problems, constantly change, and understand, accept, and tolerate the diversity of the world and society.

Initiatives that promote the internationalization of studies are also encouraged, although not being used, mostly due to the students having families or jobs in Lithuania. A final assessment of performance is obligatory. The cumulative grade system, described separately in the description of each course unit, is most common (it includes the assessment of the final examination, presentation, mid-term assessment and active participation in the seminars). The initial parts of continuous course units (modules) can be evaluated by a pass/fail evaluation (in the Religious studies programme this principle is only applied to Scientific Research Work). Assessment taken on a computer is equivalent to written assessment. The same performance evaluation criteria are applied to all students. The final Master's thesis is assessed by the Defence Committee of Graduation Theses (hereinafter: Committee) in reference to the assessment criteria of graduation theses. The members of the Committee take into consideration the graduation thesis, its presentation during the defence, responses of the author of the thesis to the questions of the reviewer and the members of the Committee, reviews and opinions of the reviewer and the supervisor of the thesis. If there is no unanimous agreement about the final mark, the final decision is taken by the chairperson of the Committee. All general principles of the assessment and of ensuring feedback at Vilnius University are regulated by these documents: Study Regulations, Procedure of Assessing Academic Progress, Regulations of the Academic Ethics Commission of Core Academic Units of VU. All information on the assessment of academic progress, schedule of examinations, failed examinations and retaking them is available on the VU website and Faculty website. The studies are largely based on independent student activities, as contact work covers only about 27.3% of the overall student workload. The usual forms of independent work in the programme and in most of its course units are: writing papers, preparing presentations on chosen or given topics, choosing real cases for illustration of theories, browsing various websites, finding and analysing information from databases, reading scientific literature and

preparing for group discussions and participation in seminars, etc. Assignments performed by students during independent work are discussed during contact sessions. The lecturers aim to implement more creative individual work assignments. In assessing student presentations, the comprehension of the problem, the weight of argumentation and creativity are taken into account. Having completed the Master's programme in religious studies, graduates can further pursue doctoral studies in fields of philosophy, cultural studies, art criticism, education studies and sociology. During the period analysed, 7 graduates of the programme enrolled in the doctoral studies in philosophy at Vilnius University (4), Vytautas Magnus University (2), and The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow (1); one graduate enrolled in the doctoral studies in history and theory of arts at Vilnius Art Academy.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

According to the Expert Panel, although the information given in SER provides for the most part the data for the proper teaching and learning process, takes into account the needs of the students and enables them to achieve the intended learning outcomes, in reality it does not match the information which was gathered during the site visit and does not seem to be working in practice. From the site visit it was clear that current students are not participating well in the programme and are struggling with their studies, which indicates that the teaching and learning as described in the SER is not being effectively implemented and managed. From the meetings with the students the panel got the impression that group work is not as frequent as it would be wished by the students, most likely because of the small number in the group (2 to 4 students).

Although the SER states, that "the intended competences and learning outcomes are oriented not only towards acquiring knowledge and skills about a specific subject, but also towards the development of general competences determined by the needs of the labour market," the Expert Panel found that it is not entirely true. During the sight visit there were no true representatives from the labour market, and the one person who participated at the meeting currently teaches at the programme.

Moreover, the information given by the alumni greatly differs from the one given by the students, the former having a very positive experience and much more related to SER data, whereas the latter, are giving in some instances more critical even negative responses. The current students said that their previous background did not help much in trying to manage the basic information they are getting on in philosophy and religion. Especially, it is difficult for those who are not used to research paper writing.

In sum, the Expert Panel thinks that the processes are adequate, but they need to be realized in practice, having more programme aims and a student-oriented approach. The panel has concerns over the quality and availability of feedback to students (some students complained that they are not getting adequate feedback on their progress, and feel uncomfortable to ask for it), that classes are cancelled and not rescheduled, and that the assessment workload is not appropriate and scheduled for submission across each semester.

3.4.2. Evaluation of conditions ensuring access to study for socially vulnerable groups and students with special needs

(1) Factual situation

The University has a Procedure for Adapting Studies to Individual Needs Arising from Disability that enables the tailoring of the study process to the needs of students and unclassified students with special needs. The students can contact the VU accessibility coordinator who will communicate their special needs to the Faculty of Philosophy employee

responsible for students with disabilities and provide recommendations about adapting the study process. The Faculty of Philosophy coordinator of the affairs of students with disabilities will prepare a study individualization plan based on the recommendation and will ensure the implementation of the plan. If necessary, they also inform teaching staff about how to adapt the teaching/learning and assessment methods of a specific course unit (module). When evaluating the study performance of students with special needs (visual, auditory, mobility, etc. impairments), flexible forms of performance assessment are utilized, and the needs of these persons are taken into account (e.g., increasing the size of the font of exam tasks, extend the time allocated for assessment, and adapting the physical environment of the assessment: ensuring good lighting of the examination facility, accessibility of the examination facility, etc.). In the period analysed, there were no students with special needs.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The Expert Panel thinks that the conditions ensuring access to study for socially vulnerable groups and students with special needs theoretically are in place. However, although they are broadly explained it is difficult for the Expert Panel to judge whether they work in practice, because the SER did not provide with this evidence and a site visit was impossible due to the COVID-19 conditions.

3.4.3. Evaluation of the systematic nature of the monitoring of student study progress and feedback to students to promote self-assessment and subsequent planning of study progress

(1) Factual situation

The University monitors the study progress of the students on several levels: the course unit (module), all students of a given year, and the study programme. On the level of the course unit (module) the progress of students is evaluated by the lecturer of the course unit (module). When applying cumulative assessment in a course (module), the lecturer will provide feedback about completed assignments, evaluate the progress that the student is making, and point out areas for improvement. By taking student feedback about the evaluation methods of the course unit (module) and the results achieved by students by the end of the semester into account, the lecturer makes improvements to the assessment methods and criteria of the taught course unit (module). Progress on the level of all students of a specific year is monitored by the Study Administration Department. When the ranking of the best students is determined and the rotation of students is implemented, it is monitored whether the grade averages of the students of a given year in a programme are not exceptionally excellent or just above the failure threshold. If there are repeating tendencies in the evaluation of students, the results of student performance evaluation are discussed with the administrative staff of CAUs operating such studies and with the study programme committees. The Student Services and Career Department monitors student drop-out levels and implements an action plan for drop-out prevention. During the period analysed, the loss of students only occurred in the first semester of 2017/2018: 2 students left the studies by their own request, 1 – due to poor attendance. Furthermore, one student went on academic leave in 2018/19, two – in 2019/2020. Students most often go on academic leave during the fourth semester, as a result of the difficulties in preparing their final thesis. Students are encouraged to return and complete their theses, lecturers, per the request of students, conduct additional consultations and the correction of topics or the change of supervisors is suggested.

Students who fail one or more exams during the exam session and have to retake an exam receive informational letters about various options of exam retaking and various forms of training and counselling how to prepare for a retake. The SPC also evaluates the results of

final thesis defences and the proportion of students who timely defended their final theses (with regard to this data, the SPC improves the thesis preparation and defence process), evaluates the distribution of final results of learning outcomes intended in the study plan, determines the student failure level in course units (modules), and evaluates the number of students who went on an academic leave or terminated their studies and the reasons behind the aforementioned.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator

Although the SER does talk about student internships, such a teaching module is not in the programme. And the site visit confirmed that there is no such internship in this programme, since it is research oriented. Furthermore, according to the SER, almost everything to ensure the systematic nature of the monitoring of student study progress and feedback to students to promote self-assessment and subsequent planning of study progress is in place. However, after the meeting with the students, it does not seem to be exercised or working in practice. This might be more the case with the present situation, since during the meeting with the alumni they confirmed that most of the students do go to doctoral studies afterwards. During the site visit the Expert Panel also learned, especially from meeting with the students, that there exists a gap between their previous education and this programme; sometimes students do not know for whom they are writing their papers, some teachers give hardly any specific feedback. Some students lack the encouragement during the course.

3.4.4. Evaluation of employability of graduates and graduate career tracking in the study field.

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER, graduate career tracking by the VU is implemented through the Career Tracking Information System (CTIS) karjera.lt tools. Two types of indicators are used for career tracking: 1. Objective indicators from state information systems, government and departmental registers: currently the system is linked with the student register, citizen register and SoDra (State Social Insurance Fund). Objective indicators about graduate careers are received from state information systems and government and departmental registers for five years after graduation and are renewed twice annually; 2. Subjective data of sociological surveys show the subjective opinion of graduates on various career-related matters. Subjective data are gathered three times: graduates are surveyed one year, three years, and five years after graduation. The aim of the first survey (for graduates who graduated 12 months ago) is to evaluate student employability; the second survey (3 years after graduation) assesses the ability of graduates to successfully establish themselves in professional activity; the third survey (five years after graduation) is conducted to determine graduate career and work satisfaction. According to STRATA data, one year after graduation more than 40% of the second-cycle graduates of Religious studies programme are employed on a contractual basis. Furthermore, the average insured monthly income 12 months after graduation was 961 Eur in 2016 (19 graduates of the field were observed), 1234 Eur in 2017 (11 graduates observed), and 1026 Eur in 2018 (11 graduates observed) (the data for 2019 are not yet available). The most common professions: journalism and teaching in primary and secondary education. Based on VU data, 60% of second-cycle graduates in the field of religious studies were employed on a contractual basis and/or were pursuing further studies a year after graduation. STRATA and VU data may differ due to different data calculation methodologies. Moreover, according to VU data, 20% are pursuing further studies while being unemployed, and about 20% of students did not submit data.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The Expert Panel thinks that the employability of graduates and graduate career tracking in the study field is in place. However, the true possibilities to pursue a job career in religious studies in Lithuania, besides moving to doctoral studies in the humanities, is not researched enough by the University and at Faculty level. After meeting with the senior management, faculty and administration, scepticism was expressed towards the societal needs for the programme, since it is not profession oriented. However, providing information to students on career prospects could be enhanced by the Faculty by engaging with a variety of employers to identify whether the specific knowledge content of this programme is appropriate to them as employers, and whether the skills and other professional attributes which a course of this kind develops for students is relevant to working in various employment contexts. It is mostly about gaining a broader expertise which can be of use in Lithuanian society, ability to understand people with diverse backgrounds, including ecumenical dialogue, also deeper understanding of culture and contextuality of values which may be applied in different fields (complies with the general mission of the VU). There is a possibility for the graduates to work in the education institutions, although for that they need to take additional courses of 60 ECTS for a qualification as teacher. This is mostly done after the finishing the religious studies programme, since there is more time needed for pedagogical practice internship.

3.4.5. Evaluation of the implementation of policies to ensure academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER, to ensure academic honesty during the studies, VU has taken various measures. The academic staff and the students must adhere to the principles of ethics laid down in the Code of Academic Ethics of VU, which defines general norms of academic, teaching, studies and research ethics. The Code also defines the notion of violation, involving cheating, plagiarism, bribery, unsolicited dishonest assistance to the peers, etc. VU utilizes the Electronic Plagiarism Control System (EPCS), which helps teachers to identify whether final thesis and other written assignments students upload to the electronic data system have been accomplished conscientiously, without copying the work of other authors, without breaking the rules of citation, etc. The fairness of the study process is also ensured by constant communication between supervisors and students, frequent consultations, vigilant supervision of the process of production of written research assignments. Students' Representation of the Faculty of Philosophy also implements a programme called "Fairly". The essence of this programme is to provide assistance for teachers in the examination process by appointing examination observers. VU Study Regulations stipulate that students who have violated academic ethics may be censured or expelled from the University. During the exam period, invigilators delegated by the Students Representation monitor the exam and help lecturers to ensure that exams are taken in good faith. The University also has a dedicated anonymous hotline that any member of the academic community can use to report violations of academic ethics or the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination. These reports are anonymous and the caller receives prompt assistance from a dedicated team of psychologists and lawyers. No violations of the principles of academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination have been investigated in the last 3 years.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The implementation of policies to ensure academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination is in place. No such cases arisen during the evaluation period.

3.4.6. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the application of procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints regarding the study process within the field studies

(1) Factual situation

As it is written in the SER, the appeal lodging procedure is determined by the Regulations of the Dispute Resolution Commission of Core Academic Units. Persons who disagree with the examination procedure or evaluation can file a complaint with the Appeals Commission of a CAU within 5 days after the publication of examination results. A decision of an Appeals Commission regarding evaluation is final, while a decision regarding the examination procedure can be contested to the Vilnius University Dispute Resolution Committee. There have been no appeals from students in the field of religious studies in the last 3 years.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The Expert Panel has no opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the application of procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints regarding the study process withing the field of religious studies, since there were no such appeals in the last 3 years.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *Student-oriented study approach on the part of the teaching faculty.*
2. *The alumni do think that they have got a broader understanding of religion and developed certain skills and competencies that they can use in their personal and professional work.*

(2) Weaknesses:
1. *Lack of adequate, timely and formal feedback to the students during the course and the whole programme.*
2. *Lack of group work, and group-feeling, since there are so few students in the programme.*
3. *Not enough support in how to do academic research and other writing skills.*
4. *Teaching and Learning processes are not effectively and consistently implemented.*

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

Study field teaching staff shall be evaluated in accordance with the following indicators:

3.5.1. Evaluation of the adequacy of the number, qualification and competence (scientific, didactic, professional) of teaching staff within a field study programme(s) at the HEI in order to achieve the learning outcomes

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER p. 37-38 and Appendix 5 there are 6 employees involved in the programme – two professors and two associate professors, one assistant professor and one junior research fellow. All teachers have a research degree, and their qualifications and competencies correspond to the implementation of the study programme and several of them have international experience in studies and research. Every teaching staff member speaks Russian and English, some German, French, Italian, Polish and other languages. This enables them to cooperate internationally and discuss their scientific work internationally. 26% course units are taught by teaching staff with the rank of professor. In addition, students can study other courses both at the faculty and also at other study programmes offered by the university in accordance with the interdisciplinary nature of the programme.

The scientific activities of the teachers correspond at least to some extent, but in most cases directly to the taught course units and to the profile of the programme. One associate professor teaches course units "Christian Ethics", "Philosophy of Dialogue", "Violence and Religion", and her recent research focuses on such topics as environmental ethics, ethics of death penalty, ethical questions by Levinas and Derrida. Another associate professor teaches the courses "History of Jewish Thought", "Heritage of Lithuanian Jewish Thought", "History of Religions" and "New Religious movements", and her research focuses on Jewish heritage but she has also researched Sarmatian movement. An assistant professor teaches "Philosophy of Religion", "Religion and Art:" and "Contemporary Philosophical Problems of Religion and Art", and her research corresponds to the field of philosophy of religion and interplay between art and religion. A professor teaches "Philosophical Theology" and "Philosophy of Religion" and his research papers are analysing different aspects of philosophy of religion, including works written by Heidegger, Husserl, Levinas, Scheling and others. Another professor teaches "Media and Post-Secularization", "Contemporary Problems of Philosophy of Religion: Nihilism and Secularization" and "Contemporary Italian Philosophy", her research deals with questions related to nihilism, secularisation and metaphysics by contemporary and historical philosophers. A junior research fellow teaches the course "History and Systematics of Dogma" and his research is related to the field of theology and its relations to the cultural context of Lithuania.

Teaching and research staff are appointed to their positions after winning a public competition for a position at the University. Staff undergoes evaluation every five years and annual year-end conversation is introduced since 2020. Evaluation of the teaching staff assesses both scientific and teaching activities, including the published teaching materials, research activity and the student feedback.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The composition of the academic staff in the Religious Studies field study programme not only meets all the formal criteria but even exceeds them. The ratio of teachers per student enables them to individualise teaching so that students' specific needs can be met. Though, as both professors are over the retirement age and one associate professor works full time in another university as a dean (see also section 3.2.1), the need for younger professors is urgent to ensure the sustainability of the programme. The scientific level of the teaching staff is good, as highlighted already in section 3.2 and also emphasized by the faculty management, teaching staff, alumni and students.

The meeting with students indicated that some students feel unsupported. Especially students with another bachelor degree than philosophy struggle to read and analyse texts with no or little supervision and support and are unable to relate their studies to religious trends in contemporary society. They highlighted the need to get more specific feedback (see also section 3.1.5). All this indicates that the improvement of the teaching staff's teaching competencies should be given more attention.

3.5.2. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring teaching staffs' academic mobility (not applicable to studies carried out by HEIs operating under the conditions of exile)

(1) Factual situation

Erasmus+ programs are available for the teaching staff. The staff of the programme has long term relations with a number of universities. One professor regularly visits the University of Turin, another one goes annually to The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, associate professor – to the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Sciences affiliated to the Pontifical Lateran University. In addition, the academic staff improved their scientific

competences by visiting research institutes (Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna (Austria), Hans Jonas Archive in Konstanz (Germany), Edmund Husserl Archive in Leuven (Belgium), Luigi Pareyson Center for Philosophical and Religious Studies in Turin (Italy) and others) and getting internships in foreign academic institutions (the universities of Tübingen (Germany), Jena (Germany), Turin (Italy), as well as by participating in international conferences. During the analysed period, all teaching staff working in the programme participated in international conferences or internships abroad. Also, during the evaluation period 1-3 foreign professors gave each year lectures in religious studies programme.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The conditions for ensuring teaching the staffs' academic mobility are very good and used well by the teaching staff. The senior teaching staff has vivid and long-lasting relations with a variety of universities; they are invited regularly to give lectures or to have internships. Students and alumni value their international expertise highly. The more experienced faculty, however, should take care to ensure that such links do not disappear when they retire and the younger faculty members should look for new relations that support (changing) aims of the programme.

3.5.3. Evaluation of the conditions to improve the competences of the teaching staff

(1) Factual situation

For Vilnius University lecturers, teaching competence development training has been organised by the central administration. Workshops, longer and shorter training courses to improve the teaching skills are organised.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Although these in-service courses are popular at VU, according to the meeting with academic staff no courses were attended by the faculty members. The teaching skills are improved according to the teaching staff predominantly by informal exchange between colleagues and feedback from the students. In addition, teaching visits under the Erasmus+ programme were mentioned in the context of the conditions to improve the competences of the teaching staff.

According to the meeting with the senior management of the faculty the main opportunities for the improvement of teaching staff are related to research – they can use sabbatical leaves and research support funds. There are several possibilities for the improvement of teaching skills offered at the central level of the university, but they are not used by the teaching staff of this programme. Nevertheless, it is not only crucial that the teaching staff reflects on its teaching strategies, as is already done informally, but also gets new ideas from the in-service training courses in order to implement new possibilities to engage students and make the learning process more meaningful to them. Taking into account the students' feedback on this matter (see section 3.5.1) this is urgent.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *Strong research-profile and consistency between research and teaching of teaching staff.*
2. *Regular use of exchange programmes and mobility opportunities.*

(2) Weaknesses:
Lack of formalised and systematic improvement of teaching skills.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

Study field learning facilities and resources should be evaluated according to the following criteria:

3.6.1. Evaluation of the suitability and adequacy of the physical, informational and financial resources of the field studies to ensure an effective learning process

(1) Factual situation

The Religious Studies programme is organized in the Faculty of Philosophy, which was established in the XVI century. The building has 1041 working seats. Also, it is equipped with computers, wi-fi access points, air conditioning and other modern equipment (including software like: WintalkerVoice v. 1.6, SuperNova Magnifier 13.03, etc). The infrastructure of the faculty is adapted to people that have mobility disabilities. Additionally, the faculty offers adaptive equipment for people with disabilities and special needs (SER, p. 42). The regulations of VU provide a basis to accommodate people in regard to their personal needs arising from a particular condition, once sufficient proof is submitted. The library that operates in the faculty is open I-IV 14.00-16.00, or according to prior arrangement. According to the SER (p. 43), the Philosophy Institute Library has collected a rich and unique assortment of publications on religious studies, philosophy of religion, biblical studies, and theology. All 7000 units of materials from this library are accessible to students. The Scholarly Communication and Information Centre contains over 58,000 publications. The University has subscriptions to over 92 databases. For the Religious Studies programme, around 15 databases are most relevant. There are no workspaces for students in the Faculty's library, but they can study at the Scholarly Communication and Information Centre (SCIC) in Saulėtekio avenue. 5, which is open 24/7 (https://biblioteka.vu.lt/en/places/scic (ENG)). Information related to the whole VU library (e.g. books, services, virtual library, etc.) is easily accessible via the University's website (https://biblioteka.vu.lt/ (LT), https://biblioteka.vu.lt/en/ (ENG)). It is worth mentioning that after meeting with the staff responsible for the Learning facilities and resources, it was clarified that the University has implemented the so-called "Suggest a Book" system, which allows the University community to order any book they need. If the library approves the need, the publication can be purchased via the library's loan programme. Different types of assistance and services are accessible in order to maintain an effective learning process: psychological help; information for the 1st year students specifically; information about the sport activities, etc. All this information is available via the university website in Lithuanian only (https://www.vu.lt/gyvenimas-universitete/studentams). The SER writers state that because of the framework of the programme in question, there is no practice that would require the base outside the University (SER, p.43).

During the site visit, it was clarified that the University has purchased 70 laptops, 40 web cameras and 30 headphones for teachers and students due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Overall, the learning facilities and resources are indeed sufficient. Even if the Faculty of Philosophy is small and doesn't have enough workspaces for students, this deficiency is compensated via the 24/7 access to the Scientific Communication and Information Center. The University addresses the presence of modern studies and advanced research. Therefore, such measures as the maintenance of the premises and information resources, including for those with special needs and disabilities, help to maintain a high quality of the learning process.

3.6.2. Evaluation of the planning and upgrading of resources needed to carry out the field studies

(1) Factual situation

The University premises were entirely renovated in 2005 in order to correspond to the needs of advanced research and modern studies (SER, p. 41). The facilities (eg. classrooms) are continuously (2017-ongoing) refurbished in order to improve the study process. The renewal also includes the updating of computers and software, renewal of licences, the further development of the collection of printed publications, utilization of the funds of the Faculty, the library, projects and VU e. resources. For example, the planning and renewing of study resources are conducted by the Faculty's administration, in coordination with study programme committees and based on the needs of lecturers and students. The teaching staff is responsible for the updating of the literature needed in the studies. They are asked twice a year about the needed literature. In case materials are not available, a public procurement process is initiated.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The infrastructure of the VU is continuously upgraded. Planning and upgrading of the sources needed to carry the study programme in question is sufficient. The university has a rich and unique collection of study material (books, databases, etc.) that allow teachers and students to maintain a good quality teaching and learning process. There is a well-organized and simple system that allows the programme members and the University community to acquire study material they need. However, to ensure that library resources are current and updated, the faculty and the University could implement a formal policy to review and renew the library resources annually on the advice of academic staff.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
1. *The learning facilities and resources are being continuously modernized as a response to: the need of the University community; modernization of studies; advancement of research.*
2. *There is a clear and well-organized system for acquiring new study material.*
3. *The University has the Scholarly Communication and Information Centre that is open 24/7.*

(2) Weaknesses: *none*

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Study quality management and publicity shall be evaluated according to the following indicators:

3.7.1. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system of the studies

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER, Vilnius University has developed an Internal Quality Assurance (hereinafter: IQA) system for its programmes as part of the project "The Development and Implementation of an Internal Study Quality Assurance System at Vilnius University". It has been developed in accordance with the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The IQA system consists of a variety of procedures and processes which are identified in the SER as follows: study programme approval, monitoring, and evaluation; the monitoring and analysis of the study process; implementation and improvement of student performance evaluation, blended learning, computer testing and plagiarism screening systems. Also, the IQA system is said in the SER to include competence

improvement and development for teaching staff designed to encourage them in the use of innovative teaching and performance evaluation methods in their delivery of courses, to ensure that there is a student-centred learning environment. For new staff VU provides an introductory programme that is said to be part of the IQA system. There is a student-drop-out prevention programme. Both programmes are intended to contribute to VU's monitoring of the suitability and quality of the learning environment overall as regards academic, social, welfare, cultural, career and other support and the appropriateness, level and availability of resources. The SER states that processes are in place for students, staff, employers, and social partners to provide feedback on the quality of all the student experience. This data is used for assuring, maintaining and continual improvement of programmes which is the responsibility of Study Programme Committees (hereinafter: SPC) who implement VU's Study Programme Regulations. The remit of each SPC is substantial covering a range of issues that includes student admissions; monitoring the quality, appropriateness of programmes and identifying necessary improvement of study programmes and resources; the financial cost of programmes; student performance; student workload and course/programme evaluation; the subject and teaching competences of the staff and their workload; as well as other related qualitative and quantitative data concerning quality assurance such as evaluation feedback of studies from academic units, students, graduates, teaching staff and social partners. One of the main aims of SPCs is to ensure that programmes are coherent in their structure and delivery regarding aims, developed competences, content, methods, and assessments. Membership of SPC is made up of teaching staff, one social partner representative and one student representative. SPC's discuss issues on an ongoing basis with Faculty management and teaching staff, and where necessary with the Core Academic Unit (hereinafter: CAU). At least once a year SPCs are required to produce a written report to the Faculty Council. University quality assurance information is disseminated and available to students, teaching staff, employers, and social partners. Work of the SPC's is overseen by the Core Academic Unit Council and Senate. VU Study Information System (VUSIS), can be used by CAU staff and teaching staff to access information about the quality management of the field study programmes.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

An adequate IAQ system is theoretically in place as indicated in the SER, but in practice it is not being implemented consistently and effectively. This was evidenced from the site visit: it was made clear to the Expert Panel from the meetings with current and former students, and from the admission in the SER of student concerns and dissatisfaction in the periods 2017-2020 with the overall quality of their studies, and there is no evidence provided in the SER as to what measures have been taken to rectify this situation. Also from the site visit the Expert Panel were told that some students struggle considerably to read and analyse texts; that their studies were too individualised; that students without a background in philosophy are struggling to follow the programme; feedback on assignments was not always timely or none was given; some students were reluctant to contact staff for academic advice; instances where information on courses were missing or lacking clarity; and cases where it was either unclear which staff member was supervising a MA master thesis or one had not been appointed. The daily internal quality assurance of the *Religious Studies* programme is carried out within the Faculty of Philosophy. But there are significant issues with the consistency of approach in the management and delivery of quality assurance of and improvements to the programme which is evident in student evaluations in the SER and during the site visit. The Panel did not find evidence either in the SER or the site visit about how quality assurance took place in marking of assignments through samples of assignments being moderated within a course and between courses within a subject area. The conclusion of the Expert Panel is that the IQA system is not being effectively implemented on the Religious Studies programme and that

Faculty management is not sufficiently addressing why this is taking place or how to implement it effectively.

3.7.2. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the involvement of stakeholders (students and other stakeholders) in internal quality assurance

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER student and social partner representatives are members of the SPC and the CAU Council which provide them with awareness and understanding of issues, changes, and developments with IQA regarding fields of study, and through their representation on the bodies then both groups have the opportunity to contribute to discussions on IQA. Student evaluation of the quality of programmes and their study experience are gathered on an anonymous basis at the end of each semester through VU's on-line surveys application. Semester surveys enable student feedback on specific courses. The annual survey deals with overall satisfaction of studies. The SER indicates that between 2017-19 student feedback in the annual survey a number of students gave negative feedback stating concerns about lack of independence in their studies, insufficient opportunities for discussions, a lack of community, practical activities (e.g., practical encounters with members of different religions) and overall said there had to be a more flexible study schedule. Further dissatisfaction with the overall study experience was given by students in the 2019-20 which was during the COVID situation, when half the studies were delivered on-line. The SER notes that this negative feedback was unexpected, and it has caused concern within VU as more students may suspend or postpone their studies. Information about how formal feedback from social partners is gathered is not mentioned in the SER and was not evidenced from the site visit.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

From evidence in the SER, the formal VU surveys and from the site visit it can be concluded that there has been considerable student criticism and overall dissatisfaction with their studies between 2017-2020. Students and social partners are also representatives on two IQA University bodies. However, the Expert Panel considers that these mechanisms are not proving effective for the involvement of students and social partners in IQA, as despite the evaluation they provide and the input into both committees, their voices are not being sufficiently heard.

3.7.3. Evaluation of the collection, use and publication of information on studies, their evaluation and improvement processes and outcomes

(1) Factual situation

As evidenced in the SER under section 3.3.2 on 'Student Admissions and Support' and from the site visit there are various tools and mechanisms used providing information to staff, students, and the public. The VU website provides information on programme content and aims of the programme, where it takes place, admission requirements and procedure, the qualification awarded, scientific and artistic activities, and general regulations for study at MA level the second cycle. New students receive more detailed information during integration week in which they are introduced to study programmes. Integration week includes a special schedule of lectures and meetings intended to introduce them to teaching staff and members of SPC who provide information about aims and outcomes of programmes, methods of teaching and learning and individualisation study opportunities on programmes and advise students about the intended outcomes of the programme and the content of courses. Integration week also involves talks by Student Services and the Career Centre. Information

on programmes in the Faculty of Philosophy is provided in the Studies Division of the Faculty, and in individual meetings with academic consultants and lecturers. Ongoing information and updates about the programme, study process and plan, session schedule, assignment details and various other things are provided on the Faculty of Philosophy website, under the heading "Studentams," and students can also access their own personal data and information via the VUSIS. Updates to students and social partners on improvement processes and outcomes of studies are available through informal feedback provided by the student and social partner representatives of the SPC and CAU Council. As evidenced in the SER the collection and analysis of student evaluations of courses at the end of each semester and an overall satisfaction of studies survey takes place at the end of each academic year. Feedback from student evaluations is collected, analysed centrally, and distributed to Faculties, relevant programme teams and teaching staff.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

In theory the public information on the VU website about the programme is satisfactory in providing general information about the programme. The delivery of the Integration week for new students consists of useful ways to provide students with more detailed information. The updating of courses and the programme are provided through the Faculty's website. However, during the site visit in discussion with students the Expert Panel found that despite the various forms of initial and ongoing information provided, students were negative about information provision and in some cases, they remained unclear about when some sessions were scheduled, found difficulty in finding out who to contact regarding supervision of their thesis, and who was available to contact for other academic help. Neither from the SER or the site visit was there evidence widely available to students or social partners on the results of evaluations and how these had factored into improvement processes and outcomes.

3.7.4. Evaluation of the opinion of the field students (collected in the ways and by the means chosen by the SKVC or the HEI) about the quality of the studies at the HEI

(1) Factual situation

According to the SER there is a formal process and system available for students to evaluate courses and overall satisfaction of their studies. This is collected through VUSIS. Student feedback can be seen by teaching staff on their courses, teaching staff can see direct data about student feedback on their subjects; Chair of the study programme and faculty administration can also see student feedback on individual courses. Student feedback on overall satisfaction with studies is collated and analysed by the CAU and are published in the "Feedback" section of VU internal website (intranet). Data from both types of survey are used by programme teams to make improvements to individuals' courses or the overall programme, by the SPC and or the CAU administration for monitoring and evaluating continuous quality assurance improvement, for self-evaluation reports for external evaluations, during the evaluation of teaching staff performance, and where relevant for the improvement of other faculty and University activities.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

In theory there is an adequate system in place for the collection and analysis of student evaluation, that this is easily accessible through the VUSIS and the result of the analysis of student overall satisfaction is published on the "Feedback" section of VU internal website (intranet). The data is available to relevant staff and administration at programme, faculty and university levels. However, from the site visit it was clear that the data is collected and analysed but given the levels of student dissatisfaction the use of this data is not being sufficiently considered and addressed in quality and improvement discussion and processes.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:
IQA systems and processes are theoretically good.

(2) Weaknesses:
1. IQA and ongoing QA monitoring of the programme in practice is lacking and is having a negative impact on the experience of some students. There is a disconnection between the university wide QA regulations and requirements and how these are implemented and monitored on this programme and overseen by Faculty management.
2. Information about the programme available to students is accessible but not always sufficient or clear.
3. Student evaluation through surveys is not significantly addressed in IQA of the programme and overall satisfaction of study.
4. There is no moderation of assessment marks within courses, or between courses delivered in the same semester within the programme.
5. Assignment feedback is often not timely or not given.
6. There is no evidence either from the SER or site visit to show what plans and measures are being put in place to address the consistent level of student criticism and dissatisfaction with the overall study experience.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS*

Evaluation Area	Recommendations for the Evaluation Area (study cycle)
Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	1. The Expert Panel deems that the study programme needs to be restructured; the result could be an interdisciplinary research master programme in "Philosophy, religion and culture", taught in English. 2. The study programme needs to find its focus and balance. 3. The diverging and sometimes even contradictory expectations regarding this study programme need to be addressed.
Links between science (art) and studies	1. If the study programme wants to maintain its focus on religious studies in the strict sense, a substantial additional investment in teaching staff in the fields of religious studies and theology is needed. 2. If the study programme defines itself primarily as a research Master's Degree, the students should make use far more the opportunities offered by the Erasmus exchange programmes.
Student admission and support	1. The admission criteria need to be formalized and upgraded, since they do not match with the high academic expectations of the study programme in comparison to the level of prior knowledge of a number of students. 2. The Expert Panel recommends more use of counselling opportunities by students. 3. The Expert Panel recommends the study programme to explore means to enhance the students' commitment to the study programme.
Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	1. The Expert Panel recommends taking a closer look at the students' complaint about the lack of adequate, timely and formal feedback to the students during the course and the whole study programme. 2. The Expert Panel recommends enhancing the group-feeling of the students. 3. The Expert Panel strongly recommends addressing the complaint of the students that they do not get enough support in how to do academic research and other writing skills. 4. The Expert Panel strongly recommends that teaching and learning processes are to be implemented effectively and consistently. 5. As the study programme is predominantly research orientated and appears to be designed as a pathway into doctoral research, there appears to be a lack of attention to the suitability of students applying in the recruitment and admissions process. The Expert Panel strongly recommends addressing this issue.

Teaching staff	The Expert Panel urgently recommends the teaching staff to pay more attention to the systematic improvement of their teaching skills.
Learning facilities and resources	The Expert Panel recommends the Faculty to devise an active policy to review and renew library resources annually.
Study quality management and public information	1. The disconnection between the university wide QA regulations and requirements and how these are implemented and monitored on this study programme and overseen by Faculty management urgently needs to be addressed. 2. The Expert Panel strongly recommends that information about the study programme available to students is sufficient and clear. 3. The Expert Panel deems it necessary that student evaluation through surveys is better addressed in IQA of the study programme and overall satisfaction of study. 4. The Expert Panel recommends introducing moderation of assessment marks within courses, and between courses delivered in the same semester within the programme. 5. The Expert Panel urgently recommends addressing the students' complaint that assignment feedback is often not timely or not given. 6. There is no evidence either from the SER or site visit to show what plans and measures are being put in place to address the consistent level of student criticism and dissatisfaction with the overall study experience. This clear deficiency of the study programme management urgently needs to be improved.

*If the study field is going to be given negative evaluation (non-accreditation) instead of RECOMMENDATIONS main **arguments for negative evaluation** (non-accreditation) must be provided together with a **list of "must do" actions** in order to assure that students admitted before study field's non-accreditation will gain knowledge and skills at least on minimum level.

V. SUMMARY

The following is a summary of the findings of the expert panel based on the Self-Evaluation Reports (SER) and the interviews with the Vilnius University administration (senior management and faculty administration staff), staff responsible for the preparation of the SER, teaching staff and stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, social partners). The expert panel gives a positive evaluation to the implementation of the study field Religious Studies (Second Cycle) at Vilnius University, with all areas of evaluation assessed as satisfactory, good or very good.

The expert panel found that the most important strengths of the study programme *Religious studies* (state code - 6211NX030) (hereinafter – study programme) are its interdisciplinary character, consisting of four groups of disciplines (philosophy of religion, religious studies, theology and the study of the relations between religion and culture) and its focus on research. This latter strength is realized thanks to the strong research profile of the teaching staff and the guest lectureships by specialists from abroad, which deepen and widen the research perspective of the students. In sum, the study programme offers many examples of good links between research and teaching. There are also good conditions for the involvement of students in the research activities of the teaching staff, which is very beneficial for students who want to enter a doctoral programme after completing their master's degree. Therefore, it is no surprise that the alumni value the quality of this study programme, because it gave them a broader understanding of religion and enabled them to develop certain skills and competencies that they can use in their personal and professional work.

Furthermore, the teaching staff aims at implementing a student-oriented approach; one example of this is the integration week, which enables students to familiarize themselves with the study programme and the university as a whole, shows. Besides that, students with different needs and interests can benefit from multiple opportunities to support them. Other strengths of the study programme, which result from that it can benefit from the expertise and facilities of Vilnius University, are that the learning facilities and resources are being continuously modernized, that there is a clear and well-organized system for acquiring new study material, and that the University has a Scholarly Communication and Information Centre that is open 24/7.

However, despite these indisputable strengths the expert panel deems that this study programme urgently needs to be restructured, because its weaknesses outweigh its strengths. The most important one that needs to be addressed by the programme management or perhaps even by the management of the faculty is that the study programme lacks focus and balance, and does therefore not qualify as a programme in religious studies in the proper sense of this term. In comparison with the regular set-up and contents of a study programme in religious studies at most other European universities, this programme comprises too many courses in philosophy (of religion and culture), while there are hardly any in non-Christian religions (except Judaism); moreover, the complete absence of courses that teach an empirical approach to the phenomenon of religion is inconsistent with the title of the study programme. Because of this lack of focus and balance, it comes as no surprise that this study programme is confronted with many diverging and sometimes even contradictory expectations from the students. In the view of the expert panel, the study programme could either continue as a programme in religious studies proper, which requires a substantial (additional) investment in an expertise in (the empirical study) of non-Christian religions, or as a broader and less formally defined programme in philosophy, religion and culture, which would give it more flexibility while nevertheless enable it to continue under the general heading of religious studies. Furthermore, if the study programme wants to continue as a research master's

programme, the expert panel strongly recommends that it would be taught in English, because this may attract students from abroad. In the same vein, if students are serious about entering a doctoral programme after completing this study programme, they should make use much more of the opportunities of the existing Erasmus exchange programmes, which are offered by Vilnius University.

Another weakness that urgently needs to be addressed are the insufficient admission criteria. Since the study programme defines itself as predominantly research orientated and appears to be designed as a pathway into doctoral research, the expert panel deems that there is a lack of attention to the suitability of students applying in the recruitment and admissions process. Because no bachelor's degree in philosophy or theology is required, students without a previous education in these fields of studies complain that they have serious problems when writing assignments and their master's thesis. Moreover, they feel not enough supported in this by the teaching staff, so that they feel somehow lost in this study programme, and showed a low commitment to it. What makes addressing this weakness even more pressing is that a number of courses of the study programme require the completion of introductory courses in philosophy, which are not part of this study programme. The expert panel deems this inconsistency between the lack of specific admission criteria in philosophy (and theology) and the fact that the study programme is difficult to complete successfully without a bachelor's degree in one of these two fields unacceptable.

A final weakness that needs to be addressed is the role of the programme management. Although all kinds of instruments are in place to monitor and improve the quality of the study programme, the student performance and the communication with the students, they seem to be insufficiently effective, at least according to the feedback the expert team received from the students. They complained about a lack of adequate, timely and formal feedback during the course and the whole programme, a lack of group work, and group-feeling, and a lack of support in how to do academic research and other writing skills. Furthermore, students have the impression that their (critical) feedback is not taken into account adequately by the management of the study programme.

Finally, the expert panel recommends the study programme to pay attention to the following elements: a more formalized and systematic improvement of teaching skills, a more active policy to review and renew library resources, moderation of assessment marks within courses, or between courses delivered in the same semester within the programme.

Expert Panel signature:

Prof. dr. Peter Jonkers (panel chairperson)