



CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EVALUATION REPORT
STUDY FIELD of SOCIOLOGY
at Vytautas Magnus University

Expert panel:

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2. Prof. Borut Roncevič, member of academic community;
3. Prof. Sarah Joan Nettleton, member of academic community;
4. Associate Professor Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, member of academic community;
5. Dr. Vita Kontvainė, representative of social partners;
6. Ms Jurgita Novosiolova, students' representative.

Evaluation coordinator – Dr. Ona Šakalienė

Report language – English

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Study Field Data*

| | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Title of the study programme | Sociology and anthropology | Society, culture, communication |
| State code | 6121JX042 | 6121JX028 |
| Type of studies | University studies | University studies |
| Cycle of studies | First cycle (undergraduate) | First cycle (undergraduate) |
| Mode of study and duration (in years) | Full time (4 years) | Full time (4 years) |
| Credit volume | 240 | 240 |
| Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification | Bachelor's degree in Social Science | Bachelor's degree in Social Science |
| Language of instruction | Lithuanian | English |
| Minimum education required | Secondary education | Secondary education |
| Registration date of the study programme | 1989 | 2017-04-24 |

| | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Title of the study programme | Social demography | Applied sociology |
| State code | 6211JX058 | 6211JX062 |
| Type of studies | University studies | University studies |
| Cycle of studies | Second cycle (postgraduate) | Second cycle (postgraduate) |
| Mode of study and duration (in years) | Full time (2 years) | Full time(2 years) |
| Credit volume | 120 | 120 |
| Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification | Master's degree in Social Science | Master's degree in Social Science |
| Language of instruction | Lithuanian | Lithuanian |
| Minimum education required | Undergraduate education | Undergraduate education |
| Registration date of the study programme | 2016-06-02 | 1993 |

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

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| I. INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| 1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS | 4 |
| 1.2. EXPERT PANEL | 4 |
| 1.3. GENERAL INFORMATION | 5 |
| 1.4. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY FIELD/STUDY FIELD POSITION/STATUS AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE HEI | 5 |
| II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT | 6 |
| III. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS | 8 |
| 3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM | 8 |
| 3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES | 14 |
| 3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT | 17 |
| 3.5. TEACHING STAFF | 26 |
| 3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES | 29 |
| 3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION | 30 |
| IV. EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE | 33 |
| V. RECOMMENDATIONS* | 35 |
| VI. SUMMARY | 37 |

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 (hereafter – 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 (hereafter – 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 3 May, 2021.

Prof. Dr. Dieter Bögenhold, *Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Klagenfurt (Austria)*;

Prof. Dr. Borut Rončević, *Professor at the School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica, (Slovenia)*;

Prof. Dr. Sarah Joan Nettleton, *Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of York, (United Kingdom)*;

Dr. Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, *Associate Professor at the School of Law, Social and Behavioural Sciences Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, Kingston University (United Kingdom)*;

Dr. Vita Kontvainė, *Research Fellow at Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences*;

6. Ms. Jurgita Novosiolova, *student of Mykolas Romeris University, Second Cycle Study Programme*.

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/or after the site visit:

| No. | Name of the document |
|-----|----------------------|
| 1. | N/A |
| 2. | N/A |

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

Vytautas Magnus University (hereafter VMU) was originally established in 1922 and re-established in 1989, shaped around the model of a classical university of liberal arts. The VMU's ethos is based on common beliefs and values of freedom, openness and dialogue. VMU is internationally orientated, as it offers a wide range of programmes in humanities and social sciences to international students and embraces internationally and globally relevant issues in its curriculum and research. This is supported by its mission and vision statement which expresses the commitment to be an international and multilingual institution, promoting creativity in science and the arts. The University consists of 15 academic divisions and awards degrees in Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's programmes.

The first cycle programmes "Sociology and Anthropology" (state code: 6121JX042) and "Society, Culture and Communication" (state code: 6121JX028) and the second cycle programmes "Social Demography" (state code: 6211JX058) and "Applied Sociology" (state code: 6211JX062), all in the study field of Sociology, are carried out by the Department of Sociology, in close collaboration with the other relevant departments at the Faculty of Social Sciences. The study programmes and study environment are updated continuously in response to the ongoing developments in the research area, needs in the labour market and student feedback.

The present evaluation is for the programmes in the field of Sociology. The most recent external evaluation was carried out for "Sociology and Anthropology" in 2012, "Social Policy" in 2013, and for "Applied Sociology" in 2012. New programmes have been introduced: "Society, Culture and Communication" in 2017 and "Social Demography" in 2016. After this cycle of external evaluation significant improvements have been carried out in the programme and the good practice has been continued to develop the existing programmes of study. The self-evaluation report (hereafter SER) for the present evaluation was carried out by a self-evaluation team appointed by the order of the VMU Vice Rector for Studies. The self-evaluation teams for first and second cycle programmes consisted of 12 members for the MA level and 10 members for the BA level.

II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Sociology study field and first cycle at VYTAUTAS MAGNUS 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 | 4 |
| 2. | Links between science (art) and studies | 4 |
| 3. | Student admission and support | 4 |
| 4. | Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment | 3 |
| 5. | Teaching staff | 4 |
| 6. | Learning facilities and resources | 4 |
| 7. | Study quality management and public information | 4 |
| | Total: | 27 |

*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.

Sociology study field and second cycle at VYTAUTAS MAGNUS 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 | 4 |
| 2. | Links between science (art) and studies | 4 |
| 3. | Student admission and support | 4 |
| 4. | Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment | 3 |
| 5. | Teaching staff | 4 |
| 6. | Learning facilities and resources | 4 |
| 7. | Study quality management and public information | 4 |
| | Total: | 27 |

*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 evaluation panel found that the aims and learning outcomes of the first and second cycle study programmes in Sociology are set in an ambitious and appropriate manner as they address a wide range of knowledge and methods which are in line with the ongoing societal changes and the demands of labour markets in Lithuania and the European Union (EU). The Department works closely with several significant social partners, such as market research enterprise Civitta and the governmental Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. The visit has demonstrated that these partners value highly their collaboration with the university and benefit from the skills of the graduates. Graduates were praised for their skills of working with data, particularly when they are highly specialised, e.g. applied to complex social problems, like multiple deprivation. Employers emphasised that they would like to see graduates with more advanced problem-solving skills in the future.

In the national context, employment opportunities for sociology graduates are diverse. The Department has been focusing heavily on developing partnerships with the public sector organisations. The panel considered a possibility to explore partnerships with private sector would strengthen the alignment between the high-quality skills that the graduates receive in their study and the labour market, particularly as this form of engagement is already being explored in the modules focusing on social enterprise and social business studies which are provided by the Department. Finally, the first and second cycle study programmes have a strong component of research training, which was valued very highly by the students planning to embark on research careers.

The panel found that the following aspects of the social change, forming an important context for the sociology study field, have been extensively addressed in the first and second cycle programmes, which aim to train students as both research specialists and engaged citizens:

- Lithuania's integration into social, economic and political structures of the European Union contributes to the emergence of new types of social problems such as a sudden demographic decline through emigration, fragmented families and growing social inequality.
- Lithuania's democratic system has been consolidated; however, the ongoing political crises in the region as well as climate crisis requires new complex approaches to societal development and governance.

- Internationally, public policymaking is constrained by fiscal and political pressures and there is a growing expectation for public-private partnership, creating a space for sociology researchers and practitioners.
- Complex social challenges require an interdisciplinary approach and combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The new generation of sociologists with multidisciplinary knowledge and skills specializing in communication will contribute to a better understanding of social phenomena and processes.

The panel found that the Department has a clear and visionary understanding of these and other aspects of social change. The team works consistently to develop and deliver their study programmes. This orientation aligns well with the internal debates in the discipline: for instance, the SER (2020) emphasised training students to master both “core skills” and critical understanding of societal challenges, both of which, as the meeting with stakeholders revealed, are highly aligned with the labour market needs.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the content and level of aims and learning outcomes of the first and second cycle study programmes are relevant for the labour market of sociology graduates in Lithuanian as well as in international contexts. The expected learning after the first cycle is relevant as it prepares the students to analyse quantitative and qualitative data, to apply the analysis in organisations and to develop a research design enabling them to approach complex social problems in an innovative manner. The learning after the second cycle is highly relevant for a direct transfer to doctoral studies and there is a strong evidence that students are benefitting from this advanced training and consider their future careers as researchers. Extensive engagement with social partners further testifies to the appropriate alignment of the aims and learning outcomes of the Sociology programmes with the needs of diverse public organisations. To conclude, the Sociology study programmes at VMU prepare their graduates very well to meet the demand of competent social researchers able to work in public and private sectors in Lithuania and internationally.

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

The panel found excellent alignment between the programme aims and outcomes with the VMU’s strategy. The general aim of the Sociology field study programme is “to prepare qualified sociologists” who are able to “identify socially oriented problems,” analyse them, introduce tools to solve them and use ethical approaches in their knowledge-based practice. This is in line with the VMU mission to be a “critical and engaged” institution while promoting “creativity in sciences and the arts.” Although VMU’s international orientation is expressed directly only in the study goals of “Social Demography,” which focuses particularly on East Central Europe, there is a solid and significant component of international orientation in the

curriculum content of all first and second cycle programmes. The presence of international students who have boasted positive experience of their study constituted additional evidence of the actual alignment between the field, the cycle study programmes and the VMU.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The aims and learning outcomes comply with the mission of VMU. This compliance could be further strengthened by explicitly addressing internationalisation in the aims of the first and second cycle study programmes.

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

(1) Factual situation

The first cycle study programme is a four-year programme of 240 credits (ECTS). The second cycle study programme is a two-year programme allocated 120 credits (ECTS). The lay-out is consistent with legal requirements. Learning outcomes are the basis for the courses' scope and the allocation of the ECTS can vary; 1 ECTS corresponds to 26.67 hours of student work time. The calculation of workload and allocation are constantly revised in line with the changing content of modules and character of assignments. The lay-out is consistent with legal requirements. Both first and second cycle programmes comply with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework (LTQF). The qualification of lecturers and instructors meet the legal requirements of Lithuania. Please see 3.1.5 for a detailed presentation of the credit allocation for minor and major subjects, which are in line with the VMU regulations.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The study programmes meet the general legal requirements of first and second cycle programmes in Lithuania and internationally under EQF.

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 panel found that assessment methods are aligned well with study methods for both first and second cycle programmes. The SER contains an extensive and well organised section that details the aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods. It clearly describes the aims of the study programmes, their outcomes and study methods allowing to achieve them. In the SER, assessment methods are detailed and illustrated with concrete examples drawn from all evaluated study programmes. The overall aims emphasise a holistic, publicly oriented ethos of education where students are expected to be prepared not only to analyse particular social problems, but also to engage critically with societal processes and shape them through innovative research and practice.

For both study cycles, the learning outcomes are divided into 1) knowledge and its application, 2) research skills, 3) special abilities, 4) social abilities, and 5) personal abilities. The programme level learning outcomes are well formulated in that they are specific enough.

The visit revealed the dedication of the teachers to facilitate those outcomes through development of analytical thinking, critical assessment of the empirical data, problem-solving and development of creative skills. There is a clear progression between the first and second cycle of study, where the second cycle studies require more advanced independent thinking, critical analysis and advanced application of research methods. Students are trained in teamwork and group research.

The programme learning outcomes are used effectively to integrate the actual curriculum and subjects, which is clearly presented in the SER. Table 1.8 demonstrates that learning outcomes are aligned with both evaluation methods and clear assessment strategy. Study methods are detailed to a great extent and are linked with assessment methods. A variety of methods is used to achieve the learning outcomes: contact hours in lectures and workshops, teamwork and independent work. In the framework of contact work with students, a wide variety of traditional and innovative study methods are used, such as “facilitation of the discussions during lectures, seminars, and consultations, the analysis of cases studies together with teacher and students, in-class debate and brainstorming, submitting the papers of individual and teamwork assignments, learning-by-doing laboratory work, attendance of simulations” (SER). There is a commitment to improve the links between learning outcomes and study programmes by incorporating a focus on international processes and widening the forms of cooperation with social partners as well as widening the range of social partners (SER). The panel commended on the diversity of study and assessment methods.

An additional strength is the opportunity for students to personalise their field of study by opting for elective courses across the faculty and by choosing Minor and Major in their study. Students are provided support in making their decisions.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel observed that the first and second cycle study programmes’ aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods are constructively aligned. As the programmes continue to evolve, it would be good to see a formal process that secures continued compatibility within and across the study programmes (particularly with regards to the progression from first to second cycle).

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

In line with the VMU’s liberal arts model, study programmes on the first cycle have subject divided into three groups. Groups A and B include introductory subjects and C includes speciality or other specific subjects. Group A offers introductory subjects to a variety of sciences and are divided into four subgroups: biomedical; physical and technological

sciences; the humanities, creative arts and design; and social Sciences. To ensure broad foundation, first cycle students must complete at least one subject from each of the four subgroups during the first two years. Significant attention is given to language competencies as well, since a significant level of English language competence must be reached and other languages are offered as well. Group B offers introductory specialty or study specific subjects from other study programmes. Group C offers compulsory and optional specialty subjects of the specific study programme, but also the term paper, practice modules and the final degree thesis. To ensure totality of the field, the university senate has the responsibility to decide on the subjects included in groups A and B. Study programme committee decides on the subjects included in group C for each programme separately.

In their first two years of study, students mainly select subjects from groups A and B, as well as certain introductory subjects from Group C. In the later years of bachelor studies, students primarily choose subjects from group C. This enables students to receive a comprehensive set of competencies in the first years of studies, and to specialise according to their needs and interests in the later years of studies.

Students need to achieve 240 ECTS in all programmes. The structure per programme and per different subject groups is as follows:

- Sociology and Anthropology; Social Policy: 60 ECTS from groups A and B and 180 ECTS from group C.
- Society, Culture and Communication: 40 ECTS from groups A and B and 200 ECTS from group C.

Final thesis, an independent research project, is valued at 15 ECTS.

Second cycle studies consist of two stages. In the first stage students must complete a range of compulsory and elective study-specific courses and prepare two research papers. They do this in the first three semesters. The second stage, the final semester, is dedicated to preparing the final thesis. Students of both evaluated programmes also participate in an in-service training module in the third semester (“Applied Sociology”) or in the final semester (“Social Demography”).

Both study programmes require students to complete 120 ECTS for all subjects. 54 ECTS are dedicated to compulsory subjects, 18 ECTS to elective courses, two research papers total 12 ECTS, in-service training 6 ECTS, and final degree thesis brings 30 ECTS.

In terms of module content, the curriculum for both cycles is well distributed where the students begin with introductory modules to social theories, policy and research methods, which form a basis for a further study of particular social issues, such as body, media, gender, e-citizenship, and anthropology of socialism and post-socialism. The programmes also facilitate increasing specialisation as the study progresses in methods and research communication.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The differences between the programmes on both levels follow a clear rationale and are *progressively aligned*. The expert panel found that all study programmes on both levels provide consistent development of competences of students. On the first level students receive broad foundational education combined with specific skills related to specific study

programmes. On the second level they are able to upgrade them and develop more specialised higher-level competencies.

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

Thanks to the VMU's liberal arts model, the *Sociology* study field programmes in question provide very substantial possibilities for personalisation of the study experience. As mentioned earlier, the structure of programmes is based around the three groups of courses A, B and C, thus enabling multidisciplinary learning. Students are provided with an opportunity to follow personalised study plans by deciding on the subjects that they take. Additionally, in the case of changes of personal circumstances, students can adjust their studies by moving between study programmes and from full-time to part-time studies. Furthermore, in addition to bachelor degree students also have the possibility to get a certificate of minor studies from another field.

On the other hand, master level programmes do not allow for major and minor tracks. There exists some degree of flexibility through elective modules though (8 electives for "Social Demography" and 14 electives for "Applied Sociology").

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the personalisation level is very high in the first cycle programmes, where the Liberal Arts principle is implemented in the architecture of the options. On the masters level personalisation exists through selective courses and is greater in "Applied Sociology". The programme "Social Demography" is highly specialised. On both levels, the Sociology field programmes provide the students with ample opportunities to deepen their knowledge in selected societal issues, as well as to develop qualitative or quantitative method skills.

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

(1) Factual situation

The university has regulations in place to ensure that the general requirements of the final thesis preparation are met in both first and second cycles of studies. The responsibility for the specific requirements is with the faculties. The topics for final theses can be suggested by social partners; this helps students see the connection between their research and practice and bodes well with their employability skills.

The expert panel has reviewed the list of 44 theses titles for the first cycle programme Sociology and Anthropology, 26 theses titles for the programme Social Policy, 19 theses titles for the second cycle programme Applied Sociology and 8 theses titles for the second cycle programme Social Demography. All titles were for the period 2018-2020. The topics were varied, interesting and consistent with the contents of study programmes. There is evidence

of distinction and progression between the two cycles and the quality is consistent in both cycles.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel is of the opinion that final theses are in compliance with the field and cycle requirements. The range of topics is wide and in strong alignment with the international research agenda: for instance, the final theses analyse domestic violence, gender and punishment in the criminal justice system, cultural identities in urban neighbourhoods, body modification and care and early age education. If feasible, a stronger presence of online research methods and research on the digital aspects of the social would be desirable. The commitment to internationalisation could be more explicitly reflected in the selection of topics that are taught in the programmes, the choice of case studies for final thesis research and, where feasible, teaching methods by using, for instance, the affordances of digital technology to study everyday practices in different countries. Accordingly, expanding the research and teaching agenda to engage substantively with societal problems beyond the national and Europe-centred areas would further enhance the critical strength of the programme.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The Liberal Arts framework enables the delivery of wide range of competencies and must be regarded as an asset for the Sociology field programmes at VMU.
2. The university-wide commitment to internationalisation, in terms of the staff, the students and research, forms an important strategic environment for the development of study programmes that could be internationally competitive.
3. The range of Sociology field degree programs and the diversity and richness of the content of courses, which address internationally and globally relevant issues is commendable.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

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 VMU's mission emphasises critical engagement, international and multilingual orientation and fostering creativity in science (SER). These values inform aspects of the first and second cycle study programmes offered by the Department of Sociology. The Department has an established core of senior scholars who develop their research substantively in well-

defined areas, such as gender and sexuality, social inequalities, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

The Department is nationally recognised as a leading sociology research unit in the MOSTA evaluation exercise in 2018. It is well anchored in international networks through research collaborations in externally funded projects, financed by prestigious European and national funders (SER). The Department is research intensive (15 externally funded projects in the evaluated period, some funded by major grants and are international). The research is very substantive, generating new qualitative and quantitative data in novel fields which are also policy relevant (gender and criminal justice, poverty, homelessness, ethnic minorities and religion), and directly feeds in a range of modules across all programmes. Visiting scholars from major universities abroad give invited lectures; there are visiting professorships and optional modules are programmed with open topics, thus giving a genuine opportunity for visiting professors to teach to their research strength.

During the visit it was clarified that research activities are included in the staff workload module and vary depending on the contract; staff have an option to work overtime to meet their research obligations, particularly where external funding has been secured (up to 1.5 FTE). Sabbatical leaves for research are available.

In the main the leadership team are very clear, practical and enthusiastic about the prospects of research and teaching. This enthusiasm is shared by the teaching team, who nonetheless face a challenge of combining what is a considerable load of contact hour teaching and research requirements. This is moderated by a fairly small number of students. In the visit, the students expressed positive experience of the possibility to establish and maintain link with their lecturers' research; some are planning to embark on a research career and to enrol in doctoral studies. Not all students are in paid employment; some of them benefit from scholarships that partially cover their costs. In the visit we were told that second cycle students are able to combine their work and study quite well. The first cycle students might find it difficult at times, because some of them work in the evenings. All students have an opportunity to engage with the research in conferences and publish their research in an in-house journal. Participation of students in actual research projects is limited, which is not surprising, because the projects are of high level. The student body is highly international and the visit revealed a strong sense of enthusiasm toward their study experience and the taught content. Perhaps the diversity of the student body could be used as an asset to adjust taught content in particular modules depending on their background to encourage the students to learn from their peers.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

There is evidence of a significant level of internationally relevant research conducted by some members of the staff; the topics are relevant to sociology and social policy. There is a solid record of development of research methods, particularly participatory research of vulnerable social groups. Research results are substantive, major social issues such as sexuality, gender, race, family, migration and religion are addressed in comprehensive research programmes. Students can benefit from the wider context of the graduate school that is coordinated from the department.

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 overall structure of the curriculum's content, as presented in the module descriptors, is well developed, diverse and in line with the sociology curricula that addresses key social issues. There is a clear orientation to train students to analyse social change and problems from the lenses of sexuality, gender, race, family, migration and religion, all of which are addressed in comprehensive research programmes. There is however a bit of a gap between those members of staff who are research active and engage with contemporary research using the most recent frameworks and less research active staff.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the content of studies is diverse and rich, it is in line with the latest developments in the scientific field. In all cycles there is an excellent combination of training in qualitative and quantitative methods, the contemporary social issues are addressed across a wide range of modules, which further benefit from the primary research that is done by the lecturers as part of international, externally funded projects.

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

Students get engaged in the ongoing research through their modules (evidence from the study visit) and some are given the opportunity to develop and present their research in conferences. Internships in applied research organisations are available. The study visit revealed that students valued highly the methods skills that they obtained, particularly the methods training, but also critical discussion. Students' English language skills are excellent which bodes well with possibilities to engage in international research projects.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel found that the students benefit from consistent and solid training in critical theory and research methods, particularly as they learn in very small groups. They have possibilities to engage in research activities. The expert panel observed that more could be done to enhance the international visibility of this research-led teaching, promoting the department so that both international and home students could see the value of choosing the VMU. This would hopefully help increase the small numbers of students enrolling in the first and second cycle programmes, as small student numbers can place the department at risk and may impact on the study experience by limiting the range of critical insights and experiences. The expert panel was impressed with the online learning that was extended during the Covid-19 pandemic. Parts of this experience could be maintained and used to stimulate interaction

between the first and second cycle students, doctoral students and those alumni who are research active, for instance, through workshops and seminars.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Solid critical and applied research feeds into a wide range of modules.
2. Strong emphasis on quantitative and qualitative methods research skills; strong training in research ethics studying vulnerable social groups.
3. Student engagement with research through internships and projects.
4. Programming enables guest professors from research intensive universities to contribute to the teaching.
5. Well-developed internal policy to support staff to implement research projects, publish and network internationally expressed in good publications and grant capture.
6. The lecturers' feeling of the ownership of the programme as a whole as a critical enterprise.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

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 admission procedure, which is presented in both Lithuanian and English in VMU website, is clear and easy to find (see the following link: <https://www.vdu.lt/en/studies/degree-studies/>). The admission procedure for Lithuanian citizens for the first-cycle study programmes is centrally determined and occurs during the General Admission Period, a process which is regulated by the Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (LAMA BPO). According to this procedure, the Lithuanian applicants apply for competitive places for which they need to meet threshold requirements, such as a completion of at least twelve years of school education. Applicants are ranked and admitted according to the availability of places, some of which are state funded: "admission scores to "Sociology and Anthropology" and "Social Policy" study programmes are counted from Lithuanian maturity exams or annual grade in high school diploma, and scores to "Society, Culture and Communication" are counted from applicant's country of origin maturity exam or high school diploma" (SER, p. 58).

The application system for international students is straightforward as they apply through an online system DreamApply on the VMU website. International applicants must submit their maturity exam results or high school diploma; examples of CVs and personal statements are provided.

The admission to second-cycle studies is conducted in accordance with VMU Admissions procedure for second-cycle study programmes. The ranking of the applicants for the admission of the second-cycle studies is based on: the average of the grades of the first-cycle subjects, a score of the applicant's undergraduate thesis and motivation letter.

During the last three years, the number of the students enrolled to the "Sociology and Anthropology" programme was small (13 student in 2018, none in 2019, 14 in 2020). The

“Social Policy” programme did not attract any students. However, the “Society, Culture and Communication” programme enrolled a stable but low number of students (4 in 2018, 7 in 2019, 5 in 2020). In the second-cycle, the number of enrolments has also been low (single figures) in the last three years.

The panel considers that the number of state funded places for the sociology field at the VMU should be increased to enable more students to benefit from the excellent first and second cycle programmes on offer. The panel also wondered if more could be done advertise the programmes internationally and to use other channels for student recruitment, for instance, mobilising the alumni network. The university website pages are clear and the programmes are very well presented in both Lithuanian and English. Including graduates’ success stories could further enhance the web-presentation of the programmes.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found the website to be very informative and easily accessible for both Lithuanian speakers and English speakers. The admission procedures are transparent and well communicated. However, the high quality of the sociology study programmes alone does not appear to attract students. Attracting a higher number of students is a challenge that the department and the university needs to address. Extensive marketing is a new form of activity for the university sector and the VMU could possibly gain a lot by testing different approaches to student recruitment. However, it is important that the state commits to fund a greater number of places so that more students can benefit from studying in the sociology field programmes.

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

Since 2017, the VMU have been granted the right to recognise foreign education and qualifications which is done centrally by the International Cooperation Department. A formal framework for the recognition of partial learning outcomes is in place (“VMU Description of the Procedure for Recognition of Learning Outcome”) and is implemented at the faculty level during initial assessment of applicants. The candidates’ learning achievements are converted into ECTS, the study abroad plans are agreed with heads of study programmes, as described in the SER. Stringent procedures are in place to scrutinise academic certificates and evaluate informal qualifications, all of them are regulated by the appropriate framework. The recognition process appears to be handled smoothly, as evidenced in SER.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The procedure for recognition is fair, well organised and appears to work well in practice. The panel was impressed by the student feedback during the visit which praised the administrative efficiency of the university.

3.3.3. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring academic mobility of students.

(1) Factual situation

The VMU boasts an impressive number of partner universities in the EU and EEA countries (516 institutions), as well as 99 partners outside Europe. Students can participate in the Erasmus+ exchange programme from 2 to 12 months. Graduate students can participate in the internship programmes up to 12 months. The VMU students can benefit from Mockunas scholarship scheme to fund part of their cost for part-time studies or internship. In the sociology field programmes international students can constitute about 50% of all students in some courses, which impressed the panel (As BA and MA programmes can be taught in English, foreign students have the possibility to enrol for part-time or full-time studies). In the last 3 years, 12 international students came for the full-time BA studies and 2 international students came for the MA programme.

Students are informed about academic mobility opportunities through many different channels, such as emails, social media, as well as the VMU website. The International Cooperation Department and the Faculty coordinate international mobility process and provide personal advise to students.

However, the number of home students from all sociology study field programmes who participated in academic mobility is not very high. The reasons for that might be well beyond the Department's and university's reach and have to do with a more general economic situation in Lithuania, where many students work full time to fund their study, also scholarships to support academic mobility do not always cover all expenses. During the visit the panel heard that the actual availability of eligible programmes does not always match students' interest or language skills, as the number of universities where sociology field programmes are taught in English at the required level may not be high, or the locations might be deemed as less affordable as, for instance, in Nordic countries.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel has concurred that the university creates very favourable conditions for academic mobility: there is evidence of enthusiasm to embrace internationalisation among the students and the staff. The presence of international students enriches the learning experience for the entire cohort. However, few of home students use these possibilities for academic mobility. The panel recognised that some reasons are beyond the university's control: many students work part time or full time and they may not be able to leave their jobs for the longer period. The meeting with the students revealed that the anticipated quality of the studies in the partner universities does not match their expectations in terms of language, study subject, location and the prestige of the institution.

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 SER details the comprehensive range of university's support to students regarding their academic performance and wellbeing. Dedicated departments provide information and guide access to support systems regarding accommodation, financing and counselling, among other things. There is a dedicated career centre that offers personalised advice. The support recipients are monitored; the data presented in SER shows that not very many students approach the university for support.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel deems that the VMU has appropriate system of student support in place, the use of the system is monitored. The overall absence of red tape which was praised by the students in the meeting and small number of students in the sociology field bodes makes it likely that support systems are accessible and work well.

3.3.5 Evaluation of the sufficiency of study information and student counselling

(1) Factual situation

The SER presents a detailed report of the study information system and counselling. In their first year students receive the required information during the introductory week. Students are sent personalised letters and they can find all the information in the online portal studentas.vdu.lt. The university has a centralised Student Centre to support students on different levels of study. At the departmental level, students can receive support from dedicated departmental administrators during the working hours. An effort is made to make all key information available online in Moodle and dedicated webpages. Students can book consulting sessions (face-to-face and online) with teachers, who are expected to dedicate no less than 1-2 hours weekly for private tutorials (on full time employment basis).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel found that the university has a system in place to inform and advise the students regarding their study. The online resources are very informative and easily accessible. On the departmental level, provisions have been made for students to reach their teachers and administrators easily. Some areas for improvement concern the provision of targeted information about lengthier and more complex assignments, such as the final thesis: the panel learnt during the study visit that some students wished for a more detailed introduction to the final thesis. This could be of particular importance for those students who combine different subjects in their study and/or have different disciplinary backgrounds. The expert panel considered that the references to student experience, e.g. interviews, videos, etc., could be used to enrich and diversify the marketing of the first and second cycle sociology field programmes, particularly with the aim of appealing to international students.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Excellent opportunities for international students to come and study full-time programme, which is facilitated by a very informative online system and websites in both English and Lithuanian and transparent and clear admission procedures to both cycles.
2. Robust support system ensures that the students can have their needs assessed and seek support at different levels of the university.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

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

The SER identifies the learning outcomes for sociology students as follows: to achieve a sound grasp of theoretical approaches, to be able to reason analytically and critically, to be skilled in social science research methods and to gain substantive knowledge of social institutions, social issues and problems. For the first study cycle (BA programmes) the outcomes involve gaining an overview knowledge and understanding of their field, with some subject specialisation, being able to collect and interpret data, identifying problems and communicating ideas in written and oral forms. Second cycle students must achieve a greater depth of theoretical knowledge, be able to work independently to design and carry out original research projects, in this process achieving advanced research skills in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods.

The evaluation panel found good evidence of the teaching and learning processes in place to ensure these expected learning outcomes are achieved. This is done through the thorough review of curriculum content and forms of its delivery. In regards to the BA “Sociology and Anthropology,” BA “Social Policy” and BA “Society, Culture and Communication” programmes, foundational knowledge is delivered through core, compulsory modules such as classical social theory, introductory social policy, political sociology etc and via optional modules e.g. sociology of the body, ethnicity and nationalism etc. Research skills are achieved through compulsory qualitative and quantitative modules.

In regards to the MA “Applied Sociology” and MA “Social Demography” programmes, the teaching seeks to achieve the learning outcomes through taught modules but also by supporting students to undertake independent research projects that align with the research activities of the teaching staff. A highlight is the teaching staff’s involvement with international research and data collection, e.g. VMU is a partner in the ‘European Social Survey’ and students enjoy a unique opportunity to benefit from participation in this key initiative of pan-European social data collection.

A variety of teaching methods are used to achieve the learning outcomes: lectures, seminars, individual supervision, and laboratory sessions. In seminars discussions and debates are facilitated to encourage and enable students to practice critical thinking and

verbal communication. The final thesis is also a key means to coalesce and operationalise the outcomes from group learning. In the first cycle, students develop their thesis demonstrating ability to apply their foundational conceptual knowledge and deploy research skills to analyse their chosen topic. In the second cycle, students undertake independent, analytical, applied, and original social scientific study seeking to develop a novel approach to social problems. They may use qualitative methods, quantitative methods or a mixed methods approach. Students work with individual supervisors and have one-to-one tutorials.

The teaching methods are described in detail in the SER and interviews with staff and students provided further evidence to the evaluation panel that the full range of methods are deployed and that the teaching sessions are engaging and challenging. Similarly, there are a range of assessment methods designed to evaluate the knowledge, skills and competences. Small numbers of students on all programmes entails that students benefit highly from individualised and focused teaching. A downside is that small teaching groups may limit the scope for debate and articulation of diverse views. However, the modular structure of the university entails that modules could be taken by students from other programmes, which bodes well with the opportunity for sociology students to engage with students from a variety of backgrounds.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The evaluation panel found that content, level and structure of the learning outcomes for first and second cycles are comprehensive and detailed, they are well presented in SER and students praised their programmes during the visit as they found them inspirational and academically stimulating. The programmes are designed to facilitate progression from foundational knowledge to more sophisticated levels of understanding and skills. The use of optional modules within Department of Sociology and the wider university for both undergraduate and postgraduate students provides a unique 'value added' in that students are able to follow their own intellectual curiosities which in turn will enable them to achieve interdisciplinary and innovative thinking.

The evaluation panel were especially impressed at the scope for the students to follow and develop their own intellectual curiosity and thinking through the ability to take modules offered by the wider University. The liberal arts structure and curriculum design which allows for optional modules makes it possible for students to pick from courses outside those offered within the sociology department. As a result, learning outcomes are not only met but exceeded.

The learning process could be enhanced by the recruitment of more students. The small numbers can mean that the students have limited scope to debate, challenge and learn from their peers.

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

(1) Factual situation

The SER provides an overview how the support is provided to students with special needs and students from socially vulnerable groups. The students with special needs can organise their study according to an individual study schedule. In 2020, a new institutional coordinator for working with students with disabilities was established in the University. There are disability education campaigns organized at the University. Students from socially vulnerable groups (orphans, low-income families, etc.) can receive financial support in

reduced tuition or dormitory fees and social scholarships. It is noted that the administration of the Department of Sociology took an effort to provide computer equipment to the students in need during the pandemic. During the visit, it was mentioned that the Department has a research project on inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in universities (both staff and students).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the conditions ensuring access to study for students with special needs and for students from socially vulnerable groups are in good standing. There are measures for financial support, opportunities to individualize the study process, and equipment for all students to undertake their studies is provided in the libraries, classrooms and dormitory rooms. It is commendable that the University takes efforts to increase the visibility of students with special needs and educate the community about various disabilities. The Department of Sociology has independent initiatives to welcome diverse students and staff in the community. Here the project on inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in universities led by one of the staff members is praiseworthy.

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 progress of students on several levels: individual, faculty and university level. On individual level, students and lecturers (self)-monitor the student enrolment in different courses and the progress of each individual student (interim and final assessments, activity). On faculty level, attention is given to analysis of the reasons for the students' non-participation in intermediate and final examinations, dropout prevention (provision of consultations by lecturers and peer-to peer support by other students), and students' achievement and improvement of study quality. At the university level, measures are implemented to reduce dropout rates, to assess students' achievements at the university level and to improve study quality.

Motivational scholarships can be awarded on the strength of students' academic achievements. Academically motivated students can also enhance their studies by following the programme "Academia cum lauda" – an individual study system that allows students to design their individual study plans from courses offered at university.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the lecturers are well positioned to feedback to students on their performance in an effective way, as the number of students is not high in the study programmes. This was supported by the students, who praised their close relationships with teachers during the study visit. There are appropriate institutional mechanisms set in place for monitoring the students' progress in their learning, in particular in regards to the dropout prevention. Additional opportunities are offered for academically motivated students, willing to expand or deepen their knowledge in specific areas.

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

(1) Factual situation

Data for monitoring the career of graduates are collected mainly through a regular online survey for alumni, conducted by the VMU Career Centre. In 2019, the University signed an agreement with a public Employment Service, which will allow collecting statistical information on VMU graduates registered for a job search (to be provided 12 months and 15 months after graduation). Some data is also collected in meetings with alumni in formal and informal occasions.

The information provided in SER regarding the employability of graduates is not straightforward. The graduates' surveys data, collected by the VMU Career Centre, provides information on graduates' satisfaction with their employment situation. Based on this survey, in 2018–2020, 42–66% of graduates from various sociology field programs stated that they are satisfied with their professional engagement in the labour market and their professional skills.

The data on actual employment of the graduates is provided by the Government's Strategic Analysis Centre, but in the SER it covers only BA level programs in the year of 2018. Based on this information, absolute majority of BA level graduates are employed 12 months after graduated (either self-employed or employed in professional positions that require high level of competences).

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The tracking of graduate careers and employability appears to be in good standing, but the data and analysis provided in SER could be better developed. It could be made more clear how different sources of information supplement each other and how the collected information feeds into the study quality improvement.

In the study visit the evaluation panel learnt that alumni and social partners were impressed with the competencies of the Department's graduates and student interns. The students commended on their positive study experience, possibilities to study abroad, high quality instruction in qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as the culture of sensibility to social issues; all these aspects were listed as strengths of the programs in sociology study field.

The area of improvement concerns the communication with social partners: the students would like to see a greater variety in internship placements. In addition to this, some students would like to receive a more personalised support from the VMU Career Centre.

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

(1) Factual situation

The University has clear and comprehensive policies to ensure academic integrity (VMU Statue, the Code of Ethics, the plagiarism prevention procedures of VMU, and VMU Study Regulations). The cases of plagiarism or unfair behaviour of a student are investigated by the Dean of the Faculty, who can appoint a Plagiarism Prevention Committee. The decision can be appealed to the University's Academic Ethics Commission. It is unclear if the

University's Academic Ethics Commission include any student representatives, as its composition is not specified.

The Code of Ethics of VMU regulates the non-discrimination measures. The cases of infringement of the Code by VMU community members are investigated by the Commission of Ethics, whose composition shall be approved by the Rector. The Commission does not take into account anonymous notifications.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

Policies to ensure academic integrity are in place, but rarely used as there were no reported cases of violations in 2017–2019. The VMU Provisions on Prevention of Plagiarism in Student Written Works provides a clear definition and examples of plagiarism, as well as lists recommendations for students and lecturers in order to prevent cases of such violations of academic integrity.

In policy documents, there seems to be more attention given to the sphere of academic integrity rather than recognition and prevention of various forms of discrimination and intolerance. There is only a brief statement in the Code of Ethics regarding the non-discrimination measures. Special attention could be given for raising the awareness of staff and students regarding various forms of discrimination, intolerance or harassment, and for empowering of students to recognize and to stop the breaches of non-discrimination policies. A possibility to submit anonymous complaints should be considered.

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

There is a process for students to submit complaints regarding the examination procedure. The complaint can be filed to the Dean of the Faculty, which appoints the Appeal Committee consisting of three people (composition not specified). The decision is made within five days of the appeal receipt. In the period of 2017–2019, no complaints from students of the sociology study field were received.

The panel found that there is a clear procedure for receiving feedback from students – every semester a focus group with students is organised to discuss the study quality and issues that might have come up (SER, p.86). In the meeting with the expert panel, students confirmed this practice and maintained that their feedback is being heard.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints regarding the study processes are in place, but rarely used. This might be due to the close teachers-students relationship in place at the department that allows discussing and improving learning outcomes throughout the semester. The panel commends the clear and effective procedure for continuous feedback and encouragement of students to voice their

concerns regarding the study process (a focus group with students is organised every semester).

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Learning outcomes for social sciences and the liberal arts align well with the University wide modular structure; this flexible system encourages students to broaden their education and develop their critical thinking in both first and second cycles.
2. Good framework to recognise the needs of students from socially vulnerable groups. In this context, the initiative from the Sociology Department to improve the study environment for LGBTQ+ students in the University is particularly commendable.
3. Close student-teacher relationships allows students to receive continuous feedback and support in their study process and is a valuable addition to the regular procedure for student feedback, which is being heard and acknowledged.
4. Policies to ensure academic integrity and the procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints are clear and comprehensive.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Relations with social partners and potential employers of the graduates could be better developed. The VMU Career Centre could be more active in providing personalised consultations for the student's careers.
2. Analysis of graduate careers and employability could be improved and the collected data more thoroughly analysed to feed into the study quality improvement.
3. Policies for recognition and prevention of various forms of discrimination and intolerance are brief and need be elaborated to address different vulnerabilities by seeking to reduce discrimination and unconscious bias.

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

The number of teaching staff meets the legal requirements and their qualifications match those required by the VMU Senate. A strength is that the majority of teachers are employed full time (74%) in the Department of Sociology. Those who teach part time are all highly qualified and/or active researchers and as a minimum hold Masters degrees and work within the social science fields. Visiting scholars, both national and international, also contribute to the teaching programmes, bringing fresh perspectives and teaching rooted in professional practice. Discussions during site visit meetings provided further confirmation that the teaching group is coherent and vibrant.

All BA and MA modules are taught, and final masters theses are supervised by, teachers holding doctoral degrees who are also active in national and/or international research projects. BA students' theses may be supervised by social science doctoral students, whereas MA theses must only be supervised by colleagues holding PhDs. The staff student ratio (SSR) currently 1-3 is extremely favourable and discussions with students confirmed that they receive personalised support and training.

Established collaborations with practitioners working in governmental and non-governmental institutions ensure that the teaching group are up to date and able to ensure their teaching is highly relevant to the social and economic needs of Lithuania and in some instances international welfare agencies.

The teaching group benefit from the wider University which is a relatively small institution forged out of a commitment to the liberal arts and interdisciplinary. This provides scope for staff and students alike to work and study in subjects beyond the social sciences. This is relatively unique in Lithuania and facilitates critical and analytical thinking.

English – written and verbal – is strong amongst the teachers. A significant proportion of teaching is in English – with the BA “Society, Culture and Communication” – being taught entirely in English.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The number of staff and SSRs, levels of qualification and participation of teachers in scientific research are all strong indicators of a highly accomplished teaching community. On this basis the panel judged the teaching collective to be very strong. The panel all agreed that there was a robust collegiality and a shared commitment to the liberal arts approach fostered by their institution. Abilities to think and teach creatively was also a strength, enabled by the democratic values that permeate VMU. Teaching on gender, race, LGBTQ+ was evidenced and found across modules rather than being ghettoised.

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

The SER provided evidence that teachers on both the BA and MA programmes have international teaching experience and virtually all have participated in Erasmus or some other exchange programmes. Countries where VMU sociology staff have worked as visiting scholars include: USA, Switzerland, India, UK, and Portugal. The SER and the expert panel's discussion with staff provided ample evidence of staff contributing to professional associations, membership of social scientific committees, attendance at international conferences, and some are members of editorial boards of academic journals. This was enabled due to the quality of their English language skills which are at a minimum of C1.

Particular attention is given to inviting teachers from foreign universities. The Social Science Faculty has worked to enhance internationalisation and mobility to good effect. For instance, the number of visiting teachers and scholars in both BA and MA programmes has increased since 2017 (currently 8) but the aspiration is to increase this. The VMU Senate has a

policy that scholars may take a sabbatical once every 5 years to enhance their research or pedagogy competencies.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The evaluation panel were impressed by the level of communication and exchange with other countries – mobility as indicated by the numbers of teachers participating in exchanges both those coming to Lithuania and VMU students visiting a diversity of countries – is impressive. The expert panel also were persuaded by the evidence in the SER and during site visit meetings that this is a strategic priority. Many staff have previously worked in other countries and this has ensured international networks are strong ensuring exchange programmes are translated from paper agreements to actual visits.

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

(1) Factual situation

Sociology teaching staff are encouraged to participate in professional development courses provided by VMU. The courses are comprehensive and span 8 areas: higher education didactics competences, digital competences, research competences, management competences, foreign language competences, intercultural competences, subject related competences, and personal competences. In addition, staff are able to, and do access training beyond the University. The SER did not include data on the number of staff who took advantage of the VMU training courses, although in meetings with the panel some indicated they had done so. This makes judgement difficult due to limited empirical data.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel judged that the opportunities for improving competencies of teaching staff is excellent however, SER did not include data on the number of staff who took advantage of the VMU training courses, although in meetings with the panel some indicated they had done so. This makes judgement difficult due to limited empirical data. The panel suggests that measures are taken to ensure staff are actually able to have time to take advantage of training offered by the University to enhances competences. In a similar vein, the panel suggests that the genuine possibility to benefit from sabbaticals for research and teaching is secured by appropriate workload model and that sabbaticals are available to all staff, particularly those with caring responsibilities.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Strong ethos and commitment to interdisciplinarity and a liberal arts approach.
2. Skills and competences in spoken and written English
3. Mobility with staff visiting other universities for sabbaticals or for conferences or as members of committees' editorial boards etc.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

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 physical infrastructure available for teaching, learning and training is mainly sufficient both in terms of size and quality as well as accessibility. The students of all study programmes have access to well equipped auditoriums, computer rooms and eight specialised libraries. The library space has many workstations for both students and staff. Specially designed spaces for individual and group work are provided. Most of the facilities have been recently renewed and upgraded, new office space was added and is available for the staff and postgraduates, where the department moved to a new building. During the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented physical access to the learning spaces, the VMU provided the students and staff with software enabling remote access of study materials and necessary software. The taught content is delivered through a number of software packages, including Moodle. During the meeting the students commented positively on the available physical and informational infrastructure enabling their study and learning; they are able to book individual and group work rooms. There is good availability of electronic library resources ensuring remote access outside the opening hours.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The infrastructure for teaching and learning, including auditorium, office and study spaces, library, computer rooms, software, electronic and digital resources, are excellent, adequate in all aspects and up to date. There is a choice of online platforms to use to deliver teaching and interact with students. The evaluation panel agreed that the physical, informational and financial resources are more than sufficient to ensure effective learning process. The recommendation is to explore the demand for extended library opening hours to enable the students to access resources and learning spaces, as well as to interact with their peers to facilitate group learning.

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

(1) Factual situation

There is a continued assessment and update of physical and digital infrastructure; new software packages are made available upon the need and, as mentioned earlier, the staff and students have a choice of suitable software. In the main, both the staff and students expressed satisfaction with learning infrastructure and access to online research publications, many of which are online. However, the students expressed a wish to be able to read core academic texts in Lithuanian translation.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

There is an ongoing evaluation of suitability and demand for physical and informational infrastructure, which are updated when required. There is good access to international research and scholarship through e-library. Much of literature is in English, which bodes well with the international orientation of the university. Although the students are trained in academic English, the area of improvement would consist of making key sociology field sources available in Lithuanian, particularly for first-year, first-cycle students.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. In the main, comprehensive infrastructure is available for students and staff; a particular strength is the availability of a wide range of online tools for teaching as well as e-library.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

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

The management of the study quality is described very well in SER. Various parties participate in this process: Faculty of Social Science, the Study Programme Committees, the Dean of the faculty and the Head of the Department of Sociology. A number of regular activities of the Study Programme Committee. The main feedback data collection is student surveys and focus groups, which take are carried out regularly (focus groups take place every semester). The Department also benefits from VMU alumni survey, statistics provided by the Employment Service and statistics provided by the Government Strategic Analysis Centre.

The responsibility for the whole study field of sociology lies with the Faculty Council. Discussions on the topic are during spring semesters, with decisions being made about the improvement of study programmes. The Study Programme Committee has responsibility for the individual programme, including internal programme quality assessment.

The process is well specified, with very clear responsibilities and steps, ensuring also the quality loop in the quality assurance system. The SER detailed sufficient resources, both human and material, that are allocated to the management and development of the field studies.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The expert panel found the internal quality assurance system to be very well specified, with a division of responsibilities and strong commitment to evaluation. The faculty is assessing quality on the level of individual programs, showing dedication to improvement on all levels. Information on programme quality is being collected from a wide variety of stakeholders, providing nuanced perspectives. The quality loop is developed and operational.

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

(1) Factual situation

The SER contains a description of the involvement of stakeholders in the internal quality assurance process which is rather detailed, indicating that this process is well defined and that significant attention is dedicated to this segment.

There is a commitment to evidence-based policy: a number of surveys is used to collect the data. These include the surveys of teaching and learning evaluation at the end of each semester, survey of first year bachelor students, survey of graduating students, survey of teachers at the study programmes, survey of alumni (some of whom become social partners and graduate employers) and specific additional surveys.

The panel learnt about an important mechanism for involving social stakeholders by inviting them to engage in all first cycle Study Programme Committees. The Department organises the thesis defence committees so that they include stakeholder representatives.

Social partners were also included in working groups in preparation of SER and played key role in communication. The draft version of SER was discussed with various stakeholders. Discussion in the working group was described as “very good” by the faculty, however, as the study meeting with the stakeholders panel revealed, not all social partners were equally satisfied. However, stakeholders generally perceived the communication with the department as positive.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the process of including stakeholders is very well developed.

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

(1) Factual situation

The SER details the process for the collection of data which the panel found to be very well developed. The data is collected from a variety of sources by using qualitative and quantitative methods. This information is used to assure regular improvement of the study programmes. This information includes admission, learning outcomes, results of the evaluation of study programmes and of the opinion of stakeholders. This process is conducted annually. This allows both the institution and the individual teachers to respond to identified shortcomings in a timely and regular manner. The SER contains two excellent examples on how these results were used recently to improve the quality, one that deals with organisational issues another that deals with the contents of the study programmes.

The panel noted the high visibility of information relevant for the evaluation process. The survey results are announced to the internal and external stakeholders through a variety of channels: survey results are presented within three months after the data has been collected, the channels employed are the university's website, emails (for students and teachers), online storage systems, and social media.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The panel found that the system for collection and dissemination of information is very well developed and it meets all the relevant criteria and can be considered a good practice. Further improvement could include periodic surveys among the graduates' employers. This could be fed back into the programme planning.

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

The SER details the student survey on the study programme. The panel found that the results of the first cycle survey are very good and show satisfaction with the subject content and content novelty and relevance. Subject relevance with professional skills, analytical and critical thinking, creative thinking, ability to work with social research methods and ability to use social data software have also been evaluated positively. About a third of first cycle students who completed a survey wanted to have stronger practical problem solving skills; however, the percentages have to be considered carefully as the overall number of respondents is very small. Students reported being generally satisfied with professional competencies of staff, student encouragement to participate in research, effectiveness and relevance of lectures and consistency of study subjects.

The second cycle survey's results emphasised the quality of subjects, the content of subjects as useful for education, and overall studies as useful for future professional activities. The majority of students stated that they had acquired analytical and critical thinking, creative thinking, and ability to work in groups and teams. Students reported that they have gained sufficient skills in data collection and analysis and use of computer data processing programs.

As SER indicated, some second cycle students (38.5%) did not feel that acquired the capacity to advise public, non-governmental and other organisations on problematic issues.

They also wished to see “practical courses” on the curriculum. The panel considered that such courses could indeed help the students to link research and practice. In this survey, students also reported wishing to receive a wider introduction to sociological research methods and more extensive training in IT statistical programs. The Department responded to this survey by putting plans in place to reorganise the study plans. The panel is convinced that the proposed changes will facilitate the transition to the discipline for those students who graduated from other related social sciences and humanities study fields.

The report on the focus groups results revealed additional issues of the actual delivery of the study programme, most importantly noting some inconsistencies in the studies program, limited opportunities to implement theoretical knowledge at a practical level and limited opportunities to participate in exchange programmes.

In addition to formal surveys, student feedback is also gathered through informal means. In the visit, the panel learned that the students appreciate the feeling of a small, closely knit community and feed back on their study experience to their lecturers directly. The panel’s impression was of a highly sociable and collegial culture that underpins formal means of gathering student feedback and linking it with evaluation and development. The department makes an effort to incorporate students’ voice in designing the timetable of taught sessions.

(2) Expert judgement/indicator analysis

The SER outlines results by the study cycle and programme, allowing assessment and improvement on the level of specific programmes. A number of issues has been recognised in the SER. The expert panel considered this is the evidence of an institutional strength and the openness to change and improvement, which is a result of a genuine culture of continuous critical evaluation and development. To enhance the quality evaluation cycle, the expert panel recommends the University to support conducting regular surveys among the employers and social partners.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The system for collection of data and of communication of the focus groups is very well developed.
2. Regular focus groups with students are implemented, allowing the university to identify new emerging issues, or those that cannot be recognised through surveys.

(2) Weaknesses:

N/A

IV. EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE

Core definition: Excellence means exhibiting exceptional characteristics that are, implicitly, not achievable by all.

If, according to the expert panel, there are no such exceptional characteristics demonstrated by the HEI in this particular study field, this section should be skipped / left empty.

The VMU standing as a higher education institution is strong and internationally excellent. The profile of the university as a liberal arts university and the critical orientation of sociology study field are clearly communicated, well known to society and celebrated among the students, the staff, and the alumni. The study experience is enhanced by a well-functioning administrative support which truly supports internationalisation.

The departmental management structure is effective, supportive of research and able to establish and maintain a responsive system for research and learning. There is a strong collegial spirit that results in a vibrant academic community, organised around the values of openness, freedom and democratic culture.

The expert panel found a strong and sustained commitment to the development of research on the international standing, expressed in a solid number of research projects funded externally by prestigious research councils and impressive and consistent research performance over the years.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS*

| Evaluation Area | Recommendations for the Evaluation Area (study cycle) |
|--|---|
| Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum | <p>Recognising the high quality of the evaluated programme field, the expert panel recommends that the Department</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Further builds on the VMU's mission to enhance internationalisation by including references to internationalisation in the description of the aims of the first and second cycle study programmes. |
| Links between science (art) and studies | <p>Acknowledging impressive achievements of linking research and teaching, the expert panel recommends that the Department and Faculty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure that all teaching staff have opportunities to develop their research; - Take steps to enhance the international visibility of the significant research carried out at the Department; - Work toward increasing the size of student groups in order to facilitate their direct engagement with a diverse critical approaches and experiences. |
| Student admission and support | <p>Recognising the presence of a highly effective structures in place, the expert panel recommends considering university-wide strategic efforts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To attract a greater number of home and international students to the high quality first and second cycle sociology programmes that are offered; - To seek that the number of state funded places for the sociology field at the VMU is increased to enable more students to benefit from the excellent first and second cycle programmes on offer. |
| Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment | <p>The expert panel recommends that the Department and Faculty seek the University-wide support to explore the pathways for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expanding existing relations with social partners and potential employers of the graduates; - Analysing the data describing graduate careers and employability and feeding the findings into the study quality improvement; - Putting in place comprehensive policies for recognition and prevention of various forms of discrimination and intolerance and handling of complaints. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <p>The expert panel also recommends that VMU Career Centre takes steps to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide more targeted and individualised consultations for the students preparing for employment in the sociology study field. |
| Teaching staff | <p>Recognising the commitment of the teaching staff to strive for excellence in their research and teaching, the expert panel recommends that the University puts in place practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To ensure that the staff are able to have time to take advantage of training offered by the University to enhance their competences; - To ensure that sabbaticals for research and teaching are available to all staff without penalising those members of staff who may see their teaching load increased or who have caring duties. |
| Learning facilities and resources | <p>Recognising that comprehensive facilities and resources are available, the expert panel recommends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investing in a university-wide publishing programme to translate key academic literature into Lithuanian in order to enhance the learning experience for undergraduates. |
| Study quality management and public information | <p>The expert panel recommends that the University explores further pathways to enhance the study quality cycle by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conducting regular surveys among the employers and social partners. |

*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.

VI. SUMMARY

Main positive and negative quality aspects of each evaluation area of the study field *Sociology at Vytautas Magnus University*

Having reviewed the SER, conducted site visits (virtual) and carried out interviews with VMU management, faculty administration, student and stakeholder representatives (alumni, social partners, employers) the evaluation team were highly impressed by the quality of teaching and student experience on the Sociology programmes offered at VMU. The first cycle programmes and second cycle programmes are well organised and comprehensive, and all dimensions of the evaluation criteria were judged to be either good or very good.

The first and second cycle study programmes in Sociology are rigorous, highly relevant to the societal needs and labour market requirements. Furthermore, they address some of most critical social problems and encourage the students to become active and responsible citizens. The expert panel is convinced that the Department succeeds in fostering this ethos. The expert panel also noted that the rates of employability are high indicating the practical importance and quality of this study field. The links between study programmes and social partners are strong. Students graduate with methodological skills which are highly transferable both within and beyond Lithuania. The Department is particularly strong in providing internationally oriented teaching in English. Home students benefit from being part of a rich and vibrant international student community. The expert panel was particularly impressed with the students' language skills and enthusiastic attitude to their learning community and commitment to the academic study. It is a pity, however, that as home students often work to fund their living costs, they are hindered in their opportunities to take up study and/or internships abroad. The expert panel recognises that this issue must be addressed at the national higher education policy level and cannot be resolved by the University alone.

The lecturers are prominent critical thinkers, experienced, dedicated and skilled. They are valued by students and alumni. There are good relations between teachers and students. At second cycle level the relations are especially mutually respectful and facilitated by the fact the many of the second cycle students are combining their studies with their careers and working in settings that are relevant to social policy, welfare, and other public departments or commercial organisations who conduct social related research.

The expert panel found the content of modules particularly rich and strong and the panel hopes that the prospective students will see this too and choose VMU as their destination university.

The management structure and organisation of study programmes is clear. The involvement of social partners in the management and quality audits of programmes is appropriate, but some improvements would strengthen this area. Student experience is monitored through formal processes such as the student survey and focus groups and this is complemented by

informal feedback processes at programme level. The panel saw instances of students raising concerns and these been addressed by changes made to teaching methods or content.

The expert panel were very impressed by the library and IT resources and the dedication and commitment of staff who provide these services. Office space is provided by the University.

Expert panel signatures:

1. Prof. dr. Dieter Bögenhold (panel chairperson), member of academic community;
2. Prof. Borut Roncevič , member of academic community;
3. Prof. Sarah Joan Nettleton, member of academic community;
4. Associate Professor Eglė Rindzevičiūtė , member of academic community;
5. Dr. Vita Kontvainė, representative of social partners;
6. Ms Jurgita Novosiolova, students' representative.