REGISTRUOTA
2023-10-27 Nr. SV4-78

CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EVALUATION REPORT
STUDY FIELD of HUMAN GEOGRAPHY
at Vilnius University

Expert panel:

1. Prof. Dr. Sarah Nettleton (panel chairperson), academic;
2. Prof. Dr. Tommi Inkinen, academic;
3. Algimantas Ramonas, representative of social partners;
4. Jurgita Novosiolova, students' representative.

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Report language – English

Vilnius

2023

Study Field Data*

Title of the study programme	**Geography & Spatial Planning**
State code	6211JX028
Type of studies	University Studies
Cycle of studies	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	2 years
Credit volume	120
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Masters of Social Sciences: study field Human Geography
Language of instruction	Lithuanian
Minimum education required	Bachelors
Registration date of the study programme	199-05-19 Nr.565

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluations of study fields in Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are based on the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Studies, Evaluation Areas and Indicators, approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport on 17 July 2019, Order No. V-835, and are carried out according to the procedure outlined in the Methodology of External Evaluation of Study Fields approved by the Director of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (hereafter – SKVC) on 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 (SER) prepared by HEI; 2) site visit of the expert panel to the HEI; 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 is evaluated as satisfactory (2 points).

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

1.2. EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel was assigned according to the Experts Selection Procedure as approved by the Director of SKVC on 31 December 2019, Order No. V-149. The site visit to the HEI was conducted by the expert panel on September 26, 2023.

Prof. dr. Sarah Nettleton (panel chairperson) University of York, UK.
Prof. dr. Tommi Inkinen, University of Turku, Finland.
Algimantas Ramonas, representative of social partners;
Ms. Jurgita Novosiolova, students' representative.

1.3. GENERAL INFORMATION

The documentation submitted by the HEI follows the outline recommended by SKVC. Along with the SER 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.	VU Self-evaluation Report for the Study Field of Human Geography
2.	VU Human Geography SER Annexes 1-5

1.4. BACKGROUND OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY FIELD STUDIES AT VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1579 Vilnius University (VU) is the oldest and largest HEI in Lithuania. The University has 15 core academic units which deliver teaching and research contributing to the implementation of VU's Strategic Plan. Offering undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral research teaching and training across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medical and health care and technological sciences. The organisational structure is set out in the SER. It comprises 11 faculties, and the study field of Human Geography is located in the Faculty of Chemistry and Geosciences (CHGF). The CHGF was established in 2016 following the merger of geosciences of the former Faculty of Natural Sciences and Institute of Geosciences. This Core Academic Unit (CAU) is governed by the Board and Dean and comprises two institutes: Institute of Chemistry (6 Departments) and Institute of Geosciences (5 departments). The main study fields are: Chemistry, Biochemistry, Geology; Palaeontology, Physical Geography and Sociology. The MSc Geographical and Spatial Planning is located in the merged Faculties of Chemistry and Geography.

There is only one programme to be assessed in the study field, namely the second cycle Geography and Spatial Planning (G&SP). In 2019 this replaced the SP Geography and Land Management (see below 1.3). The wider context of studies of the second cycle SP G&SP is significant because the field is interdisciplinary drawing on a range of disciplines including: physical geography, human geography, social planning, sociology, land management, and spans varied methodological and analytic approaches e.g. qualitative and quantitative methods, information technologies, GIS mapping technologies etc. This expertise is distributed throughout the Faculty and also in other Faculties in VU (e.g. Sociology located in Faculty of Philosophy).

The G&SP contributes to and is consistent with VU mission which aims to improve the quality of studies, relevant here is the focus on interdisciplinarity, strengthen research skills, and train students to meet the needs of employers. Principally at a national level in the Ministry of Environment, as well as NGOs and in highly pressing areas of sustainability, planning and environmental management. The skills and training in the topics spatial planning, land and project management, and social research also are core to tourism and related areas.

The previous evaluation was conducted in 2012 based on documentation produced in 2011 (evaluated period 2006-2010). The main strengths highlighted were: interdisciplinarity, applied work especially in spatial planning and the analytic rigour of training. The weaknesses highlighted were: too little choice of optional modules due to small numbers of students, the need to update methods training, and a more rigorous analysis of the labour market.

As noted above the SP Geography and Spatial Planning (G&SP) replaced the SP Geography and Land Management in 2019. This reflects a shift in emphasis in the field where GIS technologies and methodologies have changed considerably, and also in response to the feedback of the external evaluation carried on in 2012. It also responds to weaknesses identified in the External Evaluation of 2012. Recommendations to update the curriculum to reflect methodological developments in qual methods and spatial data analysis was acted upon by introducing training in the use of geographical information technologies and qual methods.

A recommendation by the previous evaluation team that an analysis of the labour market be carried out, has been met by working closely with employers although as discussed below the current expert panel were of the view that these could be developed to include more discrete and measurable indicators.

II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

The **second cycle** of **Human Geography** study field at **Vilnius University** is given a **positive** evaluation.

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	4
5.	Teaching staff	4
6.	Learning facilities and resources	3
7.	Study quality management and public information	4
	Total:	27

*1 (unsatisfactory) - the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental shortcomings that prevent the implementation of the field studies.
2 (satisfactory) - the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated.
3 (good) - the area is being developed systematically, without any fundamental shortcomings.
4 (very good) - the area is evaluated very well in the national context and internationally, without any shortcomings;
5 (excellent) - the area is evaluated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally.

III. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

3.1. AIMS, LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND CURRICULUM

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)

In Lithuania, there is a growing need for a different territorial organisation of the state and spaces for everyday life in a freeing society. The Lithuanian population wants a more comfortable environment, and in the interests of sustainable development is committed to leaving future generations with living conditions that are as good or better than they are now. The EU Green Deal challenges the nation to make additional efforts to establish the most natural and regenerative environment possible. In such a context, there is a need for professionals with a broad approach, who are able to integrate information from different disciplines, and who are skilled in spatial planning. During the visit the expert panel when meeting with the social partners were told that there is a great need for specialists. Many employers are looking for specialists with a broad educational background, the ability to integrate information from different sources and a spatial mindset, and there are plenty of vacancies.

Today, it is more important than ever to grasp objective reality – to measure the parameters of the physical and social environment and the phenomena that take place within it. Therefore, the modern professional must be able to use today's tools for collecting and managing spatial and descriptive information, to operate the tools and to draw insights from data. These insights formulate tasks for universities.

The learning aims and study outcomes of the Second cycle G&SP programme (set on the Annex 1 of the VU SER submission) demonstrates that the development of the Geography and Spatial Planning programme has taken into account the needs of society and institutions. These encompass General Competences (personal abilities and social skills) and Subject Specific Competencies (knowledge and its application; research skills; and special abilities). The former includes outcomes such as: analytic, problem solving, organisational skills and ability to work independently, communication effectively and so on. The latter specialises in geographical – both social and physical – knowledge, understanding of law, land management, use of GIS systems, use and application of mapping technologies, using devices and so on.

Problem based learning (SER p. 34) focussing on ‘live’ local studies is used to ensure students are able to apply their knowledge and skills. The programme is also characterised by frequent visits to sites and the field during lectures, where students get a hands-on experience of the site they are studying, collecting data and thus acquiring practical skills.

The SER notes that the aims and outcomes are reviewed and revised in collaboration with social partners and employers from the state and business sectors (see SER p. 8). The mechanisms for consultation are through involvement of employers in teaching and assessment. For example, participation in SPC meetings, defence of theses. The SER state that graduates are actively recruited and employed by the Lithuanian Ministry of Environment and their subsidiaries (e.g. State Service for Protected areas, Environmental Protection Agency) and also by NGO and private sector organisations in sustainable development.

Following the previous evaluation on the recommendation of the Expert Panel's report the programme leaders "constantly conducts graduate employment research" (SER p. 15, Table 3), and revises the programme to ensure content matches labour market needs

Meetings with social partners, employers, alumni and students have shown that this study programme is mainly chosen by students who are already working. Most of them are working in the professional field - there is a very high placement rate. Employers and social partners have rated the students in this programme as broad-minded, knowledge-integrating and well-qualified professionals who are immediately employable and able to apply their knowledge. This reflects the exceptionally high quality of students in subject terms.

However, the evaluation team raised the issue of uncertainty: there is a strong market demand for such professionals, and even a large number of suitable jobs available, but the number of students choosing these courses (SER p. 26-27, Table 10) is lower than the potential number of state funded places (fact expressed during the visit). There were not enough opportunities to ascertain the needs of private companies and their requirements for specialist qualifications. The evaluation team believes that communication with social partners representing the public sector is very important, but not sufficient in order to fully understand market needs and additionally attract students to choose this program.

It is recommended that the University analyse the market needs in more nuance and detail, as to the specific skill sets and involve more interested parties and conduct a measurable analysis of the market needs. It is also recommended that a recruitment strategy to attract more students be developed in order to meet the demand for a higher number of spatial planning specialists.

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

The SER sets out VU's mission (SER p.9) and cites the VU mission statement which reads: "to strengthen the cognitive and creative potential of Lithuania and the world, foster academic and other spiritual and social values, educate active and responsible citizens of Lithuania and social leaders". Therefore the SER states its objectives to be fourfold: to improve quality of studies, strengthen research, invest in employees, and increase public activities.

The G&SP contributes to and is consistent with VU mission which aims to improve the quality of studies, relevant here is the focus on interdisciplinarity, strengthen research skills, and train students to meet the needs of employers. The expert panel was persuaded that the aims and study outcomes of the G&SP programme are consistent with the mission, objectives and strategy of VU. Evidence found in Annex 1 which lists: General Competences (personal abilities and social skills) and Subject Specific Competencies (knowledge and its application; research skills; and special abilities) confirms this. The former includes outcomes such as: analytic, problem solving, organisational skills and ability to work independently, communication effectively and so on. More specific detail is set out in the Table in Annex 2 Table Competences and Learning Outcomes.

During the interviews it was evident to the expert panel that the senior management, teaching staff, student, social partners and alumni were all familiar with the University's mission and objectives and were unanimous in the view that the SP aims and outcomes contribute to it.

The study outcomes are therefore consistent with the objectives and mission of VU mission, strategy and objectives. Through the education and training in specialist knowledge and skills in

human geography with particular focus on understanding of law, land management, use of GIS systems, use and the application of mapping technologies the programme produces graduates are able to contribute to the creative and cognitive potential of Lithuanian society. During the interviews the panel questioned the senior management and the authors of the SER who clearly articulated the ways the programme mapped on to the Faculty and University aims to contribute to an ecologically responsible citizenship.

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

The SER states that the SP of Human Geography at VU is designed in accordance with the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework and the Descriptors set out in the Ministry of Education's Descriptor of Study Fields of Physical and Human Geography (SER pp.9-10). The compliance to legal requirements is clearly explained in SER and the structure of the programme follows a logical path of study progression. Table 1 indicates official hours in relation to legal requirements.

Table No. 1. Study programmes‘ compliance to general requirements for second cycle study programmes (master)

Criteria	General legal requirements	In the Programmes
Scope of the programme in ECTS	90 or 120 ECTS	120
ECTS for the study field Information Services	No less than 60 ECTS	115
ECTS for studies specified by University or optional studies	No more than 30 ECTS	30
ECTS for final thesis (project)	No less than 30 ECTS	30
Contact hours	No less than 10 % of learning	30%
Individual learning	No less than 50 % of learning	70%

The documentation provided ample evidence to assure the expert panel that the programme meets the legal requirements.

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

The aims and learning outcomes are noted in the sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 of this evaluation report above. Assessment methods are briefly described on page 34 of the SER but not in great detail. However, these are set out in much more detail in Annex 3 of the SER where the table: ‘SP Outcomes by course unit and evaluation methods’ documents modes of assessment for each module. Most modules are assessed by Examination and Seminar Presentation. There are exceptions e.g. “Anthroposphere and Sustainable Development" has practical assignments and report preparation and “Application of GIS in Spatial Surveys” has a GIS task.

Examinations are done with grading. SER explains this as follows: “Typically, the assessment for seminar participation and the completion of practical tasks during classes is combined with the assessment during the examination. The final grade is determined by calculating the average of these assessments or applying various coefficients. When evaluating second cycle students, more attention is given to inclusive, problem-based learning and independent research. The

assessment strategies and methods envisaged in the curriculum subjects." During the interviews there was no criticism or development issues raised concerning the current system.

On the basis of the evidence the expert panel considers that the evaluation criteria are adequate to support study and learning results of the programme.

The studies are compatible to ensure aims and learning outcomes. The curriculum has also been extended since the last external evaluation and now includes four additional courses. In addition, the whole curriculum content list has changed considerably as it provides extension of 40 credits (before 80 ECTS; now 120 ECTS, Table 3, SER p. 15).

The evaluation expert panel discussed this in the interviews with the responsible teachers and they reported that it was a good improvement in comparison to earlier curriculum content. As a whole, curriculum structure, content, and evaluation criteria are transparent and provide assurance of study compatibility in terms of set learning outcomes defined in Appendix 1.

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

As noted above, Annex 3 of the SER tabulates the SP outcomes by course unit and evaluation methods are documented for each module. There are a total of 16 modules and the final thesis. The modules cover methodological material, content driven topics (mainly management and green development), and practical models.

The expert panel found that the coverage and extent of the courses in their totality is sufficient to ensure consistent development of student competences. The modules are also scheduled in logical order according to semesters. Practical work and workplace oriented modules are during the second year and more theory and content oriented courses are mainly in the first year. Practical work is integrated (SER Annex 3) into many of the modules and is carried out through group discussions, site visits, project work, presentations, hypothetical modelling, data collection, mapping, etc., ensuring that theoretical knowledge is consistently put into practice throughout the course. The programme concludes with the Masters thesis which is 30 credits and this is typical in numerous European universities.

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

Opportunities for personalising their structure of study is achieved by the diversity of modules offered on the programme and the dissertation. Students are able to "choose both the type of practice, which can be scientific or applied, as well as the topic and specifics of final thesis" (SER p. 11).

The expert panel found that the programme provided a good balance of compulsory study and scope to personalise learning. Most students were already in employment and are attracted to the programme because it provides training in knowledge of spatial planning and especially the application of GIS and other tools and techniques central to researching, analysing, interpreting and acting on geographical data. On p.11 SER it is noted that as the programme progresses students are required to undertake more independent study. Students also have the opportunity to study abroad for a semester via the Erasmus exchange programme. The expert panel also heard examples from students and staff during the visit of students studying in other EU countries.

They also personalise their research through their final thesis or final project. They can opt to undertake a dissertation or final project.

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

The SER provides details on the procedures for the final thesis (pp13-14) and these comply with the regulations of VU and CHGF. No fewer than 30 ECTS are allocated to the final thesis. This has been increased from the previous evaluation period when it was 20 ECT. The fourth semester is devoted to independent studies and the preparation of the master's thesis. Compliance of master's final theses with the field of human geography is ensured by the proposal and approval of topics by the study committee, and the content of theses is evaluated by the reviewers and the commission for the defence of master's theses – who include both academics and social partners.

The expert panel were persuaded that the content and skills involved in final theses are consistent with and therefore comply with the requirements of the study field. The panel were of the view that the increased credits allocated for the final thesis contributes to the scope for personalised learning and training in the application of research and analytic skills. Appendix 4 submitted with the SER lists the titles of theses submitted over the evaluation period providing the panel with further evidence that the content is complained with in the study field.

During the interviews the expert panel also heard from staff and students that students also have the opportunity to undertake research for their thesis on projects related to their current employment or as part of research projects being undertaken by staff. Many projects are applied and use contemporary databases, special planning technologies and field work when undertaking their projects.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The programme is well structured and diverse in its content and there is a strong focus on planning practice, environmental and spatial management, and project experiments. Study learning outcomes are clearly defined and their justifications are identifiable in Annexes 2 and 3. All in all, teaching management, structuring, and volume have clearly been extensively considered in the SER and the evidence of quality control is clear. Additionally, graduates are broadly educated, able to integrate information and the necessary technological tools in a high quality manner, and are immediately available for professional work.

Weaknesses:

There are no special or clear weaknesses. However, the low number of students and the number of vacancies identified by the social partners point to the need for a more methodical and measurable analysis of market demand and additional measures to increase the number of students.

Recommendations:

The expert panel recommends that it builds on its stakeholder involvement by collecting measurable data on the market needs in order to ensure the students have relevant skills sets for employment.

The expert panel recommends that a recruitment strategy be developed to attract more students and to explore whether the quota of funded student places can be increased in order to meet the demand for a higher number of spatial planning specialists.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

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

The SP G&SP engages with the study fields of Sociology, Management and Physical Geography. During the national STRATA review of R&D for the University, Sociology was rated 3, Management 4, and Physical Geography 2 (see SER p. 16). These data indicate that the quality of research in the disciplines that are covered in the programme are generally solid. Research projects at VU are predominantly supported with Lithuanian funding, with a small number of collaborative EU projects (Table 6)

The SER (p. 17-18, Tables 5 and 6) indicate the numbers of publications and projects related to human geography. The total number of listed publications varies between 23 and 11 (2019-2022) equaling an average of around 1 per teacher (2022 listed staff in the field N=15). The list of research publications includes good international journals and books. However, the overall output is still rather limited in relation to staff size.

Table 6 in SER presents the project portfolio. It includes three European Union funded projects and six national projects. The portfolio is of good quality but considering that the time span is from 7 to 5 years (earliest start 2014 till endings at the 2022), the number of attracted projects could be even higher. This is probably due that again the international work concentrates on a few key persons in the programme.

During interviews with teaching staff it was evident that there was a generational shift amongst staff where colleagues appointed during the evaluation period are proactively seeking research funding and collaborating with colleagues nationally and internationally.

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

The link between the development of research and studies is visible in the SER as Table 8 (p. 22 - 23) lists the connections between provided courses and conducted research. This is well done and clearly provides evidence that the current research is applied in teaching. It should also be noted that the research addresses topics of relevance to society and science (e.g. ecosystem studies, urban planning and the conversion of post-Soviet community spaces, research on the visual pollution of landscapes, research on water resources, etc.), and uses modern technological modes of analysis and solutions.

The expert panel was of the view that there is a sound link between the latest developments in human geography research, technological methods and innovations. Students are mainly employed in relevant sectors and the panel spoke to some teaching staff who are both employed in commercial sectors as well as teaching at VU. Over the past year, the programme has been strengthened by the application of modern Earth observation techniques, GIS analysis methods and data collection tools, which we were able to see during our visit. The content of the studies

and the final theses are based on topics provided by the social partners. For example, relevant topics on protected areas provided by the State Service for Protected Areas.

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

Thanks to the close collaboration of the professional geography community, students are exposed to the most relevant information throughout the country, to the latest issues, and to the most up-to-date tools and challenges of the time. The SER indicates that the programme admits only a small number of students. Therefore it is not surprising that the total numbers in the student involvement (Table 9) in joint research publications is limited. The same Table and the SER also indicates that students have been involved in conference organising and other research activities. Students and lecturers have published five joint papers in their research area in 2018-2019 (SER p. 24), as a result of their involvement in research, The articles are publicly available and their topics are in line with the teachers' field of research and the subjects they teach.

Conditions for student involvement are basically in order. This is related to the close community "feel" of the program that was evident in the staff, student, and stakeholder/alumni interviews. During interviews the students expressed their appreciation of staff who were tremendously supportive of their studies. They stated that this was due to the close cooperation between staff and students. They reported that as students they receive prompt advice on academic and or any other issues of concern. Moreover, with the intensive contact between students and lecturers, the strengths and specialisations of the students are clear to the lecturers, which makes it possible to involve them in the lecturers' research areas and projects.

The main hindrances to student involvement in research relate to their overall time use, as in practice, all 2nd cycle students are working either full-time or large part-time jobs. Some students expressed the view during interviews that the demands of paid employment could impact on their studies. The expert panel considered that this has the potential to cause problems in recruiting students and for educating potential PhD students.

To increase students' exposure to scientific trends and debate, student participation in human geography seminars and conferences should be encouraged, as well as in institutional meetings at home and abroad. The social partners (representative of the Ministry of the Environment) expressed that students have sufficient subject knowledge, but that practical knowledge of how institutional processes work would make them more competitive and adaptable in the labour market.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The links between research and teaching are well documented and presented. Identified links follow clear logic and are verifiable. Project work includes good partners in Europe and these links have developed well since the last programme evaluation. Teaching staff were informed about opportunities for applying for research funding and proactive in developing networks with academic and non academic stakeholders.

Weaknesses:

The total output of research publications and participation in international projects could be even more active than it is now. This is a long process and takes time. The development since the last evaluation, pointing out the same thing, has been positive and the direction is good. However, considering the number of the staff and the output, this path of aiming to increase outputs should be continued.

Recommendations:

The expert panel recommends that staff be supported to ensure their workload allows for time to apply for research funding and to publish outputs in international journals.

The expert panel recommends that staff and students be encouraged and supported to participate and attend national and international conferences to facilitate networking and to raise the profile of their research.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

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

Admission to VU's second-cycle studies adheres to established VU Admissions procedures, published in English and Lithuanian on the VU website and updated annually, ensuring accessibility.

To gain admission to the second-cycle program, applicants must have completed first-cycle programs listed in SER p. 25-26. Other first-cycle studies may also be considered by the VU admissions commission. In the period between 2018 and 2022, the number of admitted students fluctuated between 7 and 11. Discussions with the University's management revealed that this variation can be attributed to limited state-funded positions, the program's specificity, and its complexity, as detailed in section 2.

The document underscores the transparent and accessible admission requirements and procedures, thanks to their publication on the University's website. The institution demonstrates flexibility by evaluating the eligibility of applicants from unlisted fields, promoting inclusivity and expanding the applicant pool.

Merit-based admission is ensured through the competitive score formula, which factors in grades, thesis/exam performance, publications, and conference participation. This formula's consistency over the analyzed period provides stability and clarity for applicants.

Identifying admission trends is a challenge due to fluctuating data and short data queues, warranting in-depth analysis. The SER, while outlining eligible fields, requires additional measures to promote diversity and inclusivity, considering gender, nationality, and background.

During the meeting, the University's management staff noted that there has been an increase in the number of students applying for the first cycle of Geography studies. They anticipate a larger

enrolment in this program. However, the expert panel believes that additional measures should be considered to attract more suitable students to the program.

During the meetings with staff and students it was evidence that some students struggle with the content of modules which can be specialised and complex – for example the knowledge of how to use technological applications, tools for data collection and analysis. This placed heavy demands on students and staff who have to put in additional time to ensure those who lack the skills are able to complete the course work. The expert panel advises that the admission criteria be reviewed to include prerequisites that ensure students all have the same foundational skills.

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

In matters concerning academic recognition, the University diligently adheres to the principles and guidelines established in the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Furthermore, it relies on the Description of the Procedure for Recognition of Education and Qualifications in Higher Education and Acquired Under Educational Programs of Foreign States and International Organizations. Complementing these are the Methodology for Evaluating Education and Qualifications in Higher Education and Acquired Under Educational Programs of Foreign States and International Organizations, along with other pertinent documents.

Vilnius University (VU) demonstrates a formal recognition process for foreign education and qualifications, firmly aligned with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and relevant guidelines. The assessment of foreign qualifications is conducted on an individual basis, considering both accessible information and prior recognition practices to ensure uniformity and consistency in the process.

In an effort to accommodate individuals entering their study programs, VU allows them to request the recognition of their formal or informal learning outcomes. Recognition can be based either on specified study content or, in cases where study content was not pre-defined, an assessment of whether the learning outcomes align with the formal requisites and desired general and subject-specific competences of the program.

For students transitioning from other domestic or foreign higher education institutions to VU, their prior learning outcomes are evaluated against the formal requisites of the respective study field, program type, and course units. It's important to note that there is a limit to recognizing no more than 75% of the extent of certain study programs.

Furthermore, VU acknowledges the significance of recognizing informal and self-education learning competences acquired through diverse means, including employment, volunteering, internships, training, seminars, and independent learning. Up to 50% of the extent of a study program can be recognized for these competences, though some components, such as final exams and theses, may be subject to certain restrictions.

Decisions related to the recognition of learning outcomes fall under the purview of Subject Program Committees (SPCs), with the potential involvement of designated assessors or assessment panels. It is pertinent to mention that during the evaluation period, students in the field did not seek recognition of qualifications obtained abroad or competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning.

The expert panel deems these processes to be transparent and compliant with good quality management.

3.3.3. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring academic mobility of students

The program provides students with opportunities to access international studies through collaborations facilitated by the University's International Relations Department. These collaborations are established with various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and they include well-known networks such as Erasmus, ARQUS, and COIMBRA. These established networks open doors for students who wish to explore international study options. The SER highlights the presence of designated coordinators for Erasmus and ARQUS within the Institute of Geosciences. These coordinators work alongside the Vice-Dean of the Institute to manage the selection of students and agreements, enabling students to opt for a semester or year of studying abroad. It is worth noting that second-cycle studies in human geography are exclusive to domestic students, as mentioned in SER p. 30.

Vilnius University offers an array of mobility programs to enhance international exposure, including Erasmus+, ISEP, Nordplus, and bilateral agreements with foreign universities. This diverse selection allows students to align their choices with their academic goals and preferences. Importantly, students have the flexibility to allocate up to half of their study time to these mobility programs, with some, like Erasmus and Erasmus+, permitting a total of 12 months of international study. This adaptability ensures students can gain substantial international experience without extending their academic programs excessively.

The University's active participation in alliances, such as ARQUS and COIMBRA, broadens students' options for international experiences, encompassing partial studies, short-term exchanges, and participation in international conferences. The International Relations Department, in collaboration with designated personnel within the Institute of Geosciences, efficiently manages the administration of study abroad programs and international cooperation. This dedicated approach ensures students receive the guidance and support they need throughout the application and mobility process.

In summary, Vilnius University prioritizes internationalisation, providing a multitude of opportunities for students to engage in global experiences, enhancing their academic and personal growth.

There are 27 mobility agreements with 11 European countries (SER Table 12) . The agreement network is good and extensive. The SER specifies minimum requirements for students interested in partial studies abroad. For example, students must have completed at least one year of their first-cycle studies or at least one semester of their second-cycle studies at VU before they can embark on planned studies abroad. These requirements help ensure that students have a strong academic foundation before pursuing international experiences. The involvement of student initiatives like the Young Geographers Club in organising exchange events, training, and scientific events enhances the overall experience for students. These initiatives contribute to a vibrant academic community and encourage participation in international activities.

The expert panel were persuaded that there are ample opportunities for student mobility. However, because many students are in paid employment while studying this could limit their options to take up the opportunities presented. Nevertheless, during the interviews some students talked about their arrangements for forthcoming studies abroad.

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

The University extends a comprehensive array of support services to all students within the field. These services encompass various facets, including academic information and counselling, career and mentoring assistance, information technology resources, library access, financial aid, housing provisions, cultural and recreational opportunities, student engagement activities, psychological support, spiritual and religious guidance, as well as specialised assistance for students with specific needs. The University places a premium on safeguarding the confidentiality of these services to foster a supportive environment in which students can confidently seek assistance without reservation.

Of particular significance among these support services is academic support. Vilnius University offers academic assistance to students through a dual framework—within each distinct academic unit and centrally through the Student Services and Career Department. This academic support spans a wide spectrum of academic concerns, encompassing matters related to admission, program selection, financial support options, academic leave requests, study program termination procedures, individualised study plan development, transitions between study programs, engagement in internships, and participation in extracurricular activities. It is noteworthy that these academic support services are accessible not only to Lithuanian students but also to international full-time students, participants in the Erasmus+ program, and individuals involved in bilateral exchange programs. In the year 2022, the University administered over 27,000 consultations to students through an efficient one-stop-shop mechanism.

During the visit all the current students are employed but they are still able to apply for financial support for field trips, the SER reported that during 2017–2021 human geography field students received 10 such scholarships.

During the meeting with the students it was mentioned that the teaching staff and management provides significant support during the consultation hours and after the work. The teachers are always available for them. Also the students mentioned the dormitories are of good quality, but they are located some distance from the University buildings.

The expert panel were impressed by the level of academic, social, and personal support for the students. During the interviews this was highlighted by the students themselves who told us how staff respond to their queries promptly and when they asked for help tutors would offer this both face to face or remotely at times to accommodate student needs. Both teachers and students described the human geography team (staff and students) as a close and supportive community.

3.3.5 Evaluation of the sufficiency of study information and student counselling

The University provides clear information for the students on all aspects of extra curricula activities and on counselling services. The expert panel was able to locate this Information on the VU website. All students are introduced to these services in their first integration week. Information is provided centrally by the Student Services and Careers Centre, and the Studies Department at the Faculty of Chemistry and Geosciences. Students also receive individual consultations and staff provide these both in person and virtually to accommodate the needs of the students. Details on the study process is provided on the online system VUSIS, there they can find all the related information as (study plan, results, performs review and etc.).

The expert panel were impressed by the provision of information and support from both the University, the student association and the Faculty of Chemistry and Geosciences. The VU website is very informative and easily accessible. The teachers and administration can be reached easily.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The University website that is informative, user-friendly, and accessible to both current and potential students.

Admission procedures that are transparent and easy to understand.

Students receive support from both faculty members and the administration.

The majority of teachers are practitioners, allowing students to learn from real-world situations.

Weaknesses:

During the meetings with staff and students it was evidence that some students struggle with the content of modules which can be specialised and complex – for example the knowledge of how to use technological applications, tools for data collection and analysis. This placed heavy demands on students and staff who have to put in additional time to ensure those who lack the skills are able to complete the course work. The expert panel advises that the admission criteria be reviewed to include prerequisites that ensure students all have the same foundational skills.

A significant proportion of the projects in which students are involved are locally focused. Therefore, it is worth reconsidering how to better integrate internationalisation aspects into the program

Recommendations:

The expert panel recommends that the admission criteria be reviewed to include prerequisites in order to ensure students have the foundational knowledge and skills to enable them to study the modules without having to rely on additional one to one or additional small group classes. This is especially burdensome on students as the majority are also in paid employment.

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

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

The SER notes that the approach to teaching is one which encourages “argumentation, creativity and critical thinking as well as the competence to solve problems, constantly change, and understand, accept, and tolerate the diversity of the world and society.” (SER page 34). The SER sets out, in a very systematic way, the general competences to be developed and the learning outcomes to be achieved for their development (SER Annex 1).

Studies in the field are carried out on a full-time basis. The main forms and methods used are (SER Annex 3) lectures, seminars, tutorials, independent study of literature, written work and specific assignments given by teachers. Practical work is used in most subjects, and the expert visit confirmed that site visits are carried out to describe the sites, collect data and hold discussions. There is a strong focus on spatial research and the presentation of results, as well as the application of GIS, making maps and presentation skills. Students carry out independent research projects and make presentations of their results. There are group discussions, brainstorming sessions, simulation games, field trips and independent study of literature. The study programme emphasises problem-based learning.

Students have access to advice from lecturers and receive it very quickly. This was confirmed by students and lecturers during the expert visit.

The university offers interactive learning opportunities (incl. virtual classes). GIS software licences are available to students.

The expert panel found that content, level and structure of the learning outcomes are comprehensive and detailed, they are well presented in SER. The University strives to responsibly and systematically ensure its declared learning outcomes, as evidenced by the summary "Competences and learning outcomes across course units (modules)" in SER Annex 2. The assessment methods (SER Annex 3) are designed to achieve the learning outcomes of the programme and are intended to motivate students to engage in continuous self-directed learning and to foster critical self-evaluation of their knowledge and skills.

The geography community at the university is relatively small, such that individuals know each other and are in contact with each other. This network of human geographers provides a supportive environment which in turn fosters opportunities for high quality learning outcomes.

The studies are intensive and highly complex, which can make it difficult for working students to combine study.

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

The SER pages 35-36 provides an overview of the support provided to students with special needs and students from vulnerable groups. The University approved a strategy for promoting diversity and equality, which defines major guidelines 2020-2025. The objectives set out in the strategy cover disability, gender equality, cultural diversity, social inclusion, reconciling study/work with commitments in private life, and anti-discrimination. Also the University has a Procedure for Adapting Studies to Individual Needs Arising from Disability. The SER declares that the University has also introduced a system of personalised studies, based on individual needs arising from disability, which allows the study process to be adapted to students and participants with special needs. Vilnius University has a Disability Coordinator who centrally oversees disability-related issues in the community and has a process for discussing related issues and conditions. Lecturers and faculty management are informed about adaptations in specific subjects or modules, depending on needs. Regular training seminars on various disabilities and adaptations to them are held for the university community (confirmed by the visiting lecturer during the tour of the premises). Students with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds are eligible for direct financial support and a 90% fee reduction for one semester. In the case of severe illness, students can take academic leave up to 2 years, and in

cases of childbirth and child care up to 3 years, and for personal reasons – once during the course can take academic leave.

According to the SER (page 36) and during the visit, the lecturers (during the visit to the premises) confirmed that there were no specific needs to adapt the study process of the HG programme to the needs of students from socially disadvantaged groups during the period analysed. However, the administration and lecturers of the Institute of Geosciences are trained and prepared to adapt the study programme to students with special needs.

The expert panel observed during the inspection of the premises that students with reduced mobility would face significant difficulties in accessing classes in the Institute of Geosciences in most of the regular rooms, as the old building does not have the facilities provided (not seen by the expert panel). However, the lecturers confirmed during the tour of the premises that they are willing to accommodate students with mobility impairments by moving their lectures to a more accessible room on the ground floor.

The Expert Panel found that the conditions for access to study for students with special needs and students from disadvantaged groups are clearly defined and established and are described in detail in the SER (page 35-36). This is due to the systematic work of the University in this area and the system in place. The teachers of the Institute of Geosciences are trained to deal with different disability situations, although they have not experienced them during the period under review. Scenarios have been foreseen to enable students with mobility impairments to be trained. The University has strategic documents for promoting diversity and equality and guidelines for their implementation. There are measures for financial support, opportunities to individualise the study process.

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

The University employs a multi-level approach to monitor student progress (SER, p. 36-37). It assesses progress at the level of individual course units (modules), all students in a specific year, and the study program as a whole. This multi-level approach ensures that both individual and collective progress are considered. Overall, the University appears to have a well-structured and systematic approach to monitoring student progress and providing feedback. These practices are likely to promote self-assessment among students and help them plan their study progress effectively. Continuous improvement based on feedback and a focus on student support contribute to a positive learning environment.

Module's are assessed by lecturers based on student feedback and monitoring progress. The Study Administration Department monitors grades overall. The SPC assesses the students progress once a year. VU also has internal quality assurance systems (see SER p.51) for Internal Study Quality Management System" – Study Programme Committees are required to keep data on admissions and recruitment data, student satisfaction and survey results. The SPC for Geosciences has over the last year included younger members of staff and has 2 social partners.

The SER mentions the use of cumulative assessment in courses, where lecturers provide feedback on completed tasks, evaluate student progress, and highlight areas for improvement. This ongoing assessment helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses, facilitating self-assessment. Additionally, feedback from students about evaluation methods and results is used to make improvements to assessment methods and criteria. This demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement based on student input.

VU monitors student drop-out levels and implements an action plan for drop-out prevention. This includes monitoring student performance and providing support to those at risk of failing. It emphasises proactive support for struggling students. Ensuring that students can access their corrected and assessed work and consult their teachers provides transparency and an opportunity for students to seek clarification and learn from their mistakes.

There is a requirement for students to meet with academic advisors before discontinuing studies is a positive step. It encourages students to discuss their issues and explore alternatives, promoting self-assessment and planning. The SER highlights the evaluation of student internships and final theses. This feedback loop involves both supervisors and allows students to receive a broader perspective on their competencies. It encourages students to reflect on their performance. Finally, involving student representatives in program evaluation and improvement discussions ensures that students' perspectives are considered in decision-making processes.

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

The University monitors graduates' careers using the Career Tracking Information System (CTIS) karjera.lt tools. It receives information from public information systems and registers. It also uses data from sociological surveys on graduates' views on various career-related issues (one, three and five years after graduation). The data shows that practically all graduates have found employment in their field of study (SER Table 14). Most graduates are employed during their studies, which allows them to build on their existing competences and acquire new knowledge and skills. SER Table 15 shows that 1 year after graduation, a significant proportion of graduates are working in fields related to their field of study.

Graduates have good employability thanks to their broad educational background and the skills they have acquired in integrating information and managing the tools they need. During the expert visit, the social partners and alumni expressed the view that there are many job opportunities and even vacancies for graduates in human geography. Nationally, the small and tangible community of geographers who are in close contact with each other facilitates the positive career paths of graduates. As noted above, the university should make efforts to attract students to this HG study programme and to meet the needs of the labour market, while at the same time communicating career and employment opportunities.

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

VU appears to have a robust framework in place to ensure academic integrity, tolerance, and non-discrimination. It has established a clear and comprehensive Academic Ethics Code, which outlines ethical norms for students and staff. It covers various aspects of academic misconduct, including cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, bribery, and assisting in dishonest academic activities. The code also specifies potential consequences for violations, such as censure or expulsion. Additionally, the use of an electronic overlapping identification system (ESAS) for final theses and research papers demonstrates a commitment to detecting plagiarism and ensuring academic integrity. VU also has well-defined procedures for handling cases of academic integrity violations, as well as breaches of tolerance and non-discrimination. It has established academic ethics committees and dispute resolution committees to address such cases. This structured approach ensures that violations are investigated and addressed in a fair and consistent manner.

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

Information about appeals procedures is available to staff and students. The existence of an anonymous hotline for reporting violations is a positive feature of the University's approach. It allows members of the academic community to report misconduct without fear of retaliation. The involvement of psychologists and lawyers to provide assistance to callers demonstrates a commitment to supporting those who report violations. There is a way for students to appeal examination results or evaluation procedures. This appeals process adds an extra layer of accountability and fairness to the evaluation process. The SER also provides a transparent description about the number of complaints and appeals during a specific period, indicating that there was only one complaint in a particular semester. This transparency helps to assess the frequency and severity of reported issues.

The University's actions, such as replacing the subject taught by the lecturer involved in the complaint, demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing issues related to academic integrity and the quality of education. This responsiveness to student concerns is commendable. The SER provided details on the existence of clear policies, mechanisms for reporting, and procedures for addressing violations. The proactive measures taken in response to specific incidents and the commitment to transparency contribute to a positive environment for both learning and upholding ethical standards.

The expert panel considered the procedures to be adequate, however, continuous monitoring and improvement of these policies and procedures are essential to ensure their effectiveness over time.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The SER and site-visits outline clear and comprehensive policy and procedure practice related to academic integrity, tolerance, non-discrimination, and appeals. This clarity ensures that all stakeholders understand their rights and responsibilities.

Demonstrated transparency by providing details about the number of complaints and appeals, which promotes accountability in addressing issues related to the study process. The proactive approach to addressing issues, such as replacing a subject when a complaint is filed, shows a commitment to continuously improving the quality of education and addressing concerns promptly.

The presence of an anonymous hotline, the involvement of psychologists and lawyers, and access to academic advisors demonstrate the University's commitment to supporting students and staff who report violations or have concerns. This is supported by multi-level monitoring.

Weaknesses:

While the report mentions the existence of policies and procedures, it lacks specific data or examples of cases related to academic integrity, discrimination, or appeals. If there are none - then it raises questions as to the rigour of procedures.

It would be beneficial to include information on outcomes and improvements resulting from these policies. In some sections, such as the evaluation of employability, the report mentions that specific data was not available during the period under review.

Recommendations:

To provide specific data on numbers of cases related to academic integrity, discrimination, and student appeals.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

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

The number of teaching staff had varied from 12 (2018-2019) to 17 (2019-2020). The staff has three full professors, eight assistant professors, three assistant doctors, and two lecturers. Their qualifications and competencies are in accordance with legal requirements. The teacher student ratio is close to 1 and which the expert panel judged to be considered exceedingly good in order to provide student driven teaching and learning. As the majority of the staff are assistant professors the potential for active future research and research-based teaching seems good. All staff members have completed PhD studies that helps to underpin the quality assurance within the program.

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)

The program has described mobility conditions as follows in the SER (p. 45) "Academic exchanges through the ERASMUS+, NORDPLUS, ISEP (in-service training courses, monitoring visits, international cooperation visits, teaching visits and staff study visits to foreign universities and non-university institutions) and on bilateral agreements are among the most popular ways of professional improvement among the teaching staff. The teaching staff in the field SPs usually make use of the opportunities provided by the Erasmus+ exchange programme Learning Mobility of Individuals . Their study visits abroad usually last for 7 days. Visits within the frameworks of the programmes are funded through the EU funds allocated specifically for these programmes. The international relations coordinators working in the CAUs implementing the SPs of the field are constantly informing the teaching staff about the exchange opportunities, consulting them and providing organisational support." In addition to the exchange networks the staff is actively collecting project resources that both require and ensure national and international mobility. Overall, the program provides conditions for academic staff mobility.

The evaluation team considered that staff mobility of incoming visiting teachers and researchers could be increased.

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

The teaching staff has compulsory performance evaluations every 5 years. However, the program has pursued improving e.g. promotions with more frequent phases. VU provides several options for teaching staff to improve their pedagogical skills as well as other competencies that are identified in the SER (pgs. 46-47). Staff mobility is also one of the competence development areas discussed in section 3.5.2.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The staff has actively produced publications in good international outlets (e.g. European Urban and Regional Studies; Remote Sensing; Springer) and has a potential to develop this further. The staff is qualified showing a good drive and motivation in order to improve both national importance of the study field as well as increasing international impact of the research results.

Weaknesses:

Staff workloads should factor in time for writing research outputs and participation in international conferences.

The number of international visiting scholars to contribute to teaching should be increased.

Recommendations:

Staff workloads should factor in time for writing research outputs and participation in international conferences.

The number of international visiting scholars to contribute to teaching should be increased.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

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

The expert panel found the auditoriums and laboratories at the CHGF Institute of Geosciences well-equipped, with modern audiovisual equipment, computers, and hygienic facilities during their site visit. The number of seats in these rooms aligns with the student and teacher needs, ensuring an efficient learning environment. Renovations and upgrades, including the introduction of wide-screen TVs and the adaptation of Auditorium 313 for remote and hybrid lectures, demonstrate a commitment to providing up-to-date resources.

Students have access to a variety of informational resources, including GIS software licences, a virtual learning environment (Moodle), and a well-stocked VU library. The library offers both physical and electronic document collections, as well as access to numerous scientific databases, making research materials readily available. Information literacy training and the assistance of subject librarians contribute to effective resource utilisation.

Financial Resources are allocated for updating learning materials, including textbooks, books, and database subscriptions. The allocation of funds takes into account the needs expressed by teachers, ensuring that relevant and current resources are available. The adaptation to the purchase of e-books in response to the pandemic conditions in 2020-2021 demonstrates flexibility in resource allocation. The total amount of funds is, however, limited. While funds are allocated for learning materials, some reliance on external sources, such as departmental funds and VU libraries, may introduce uncertainties regarding resource availability in the long term.

Overall, as far as the evaluation panel can see, the resources appear to be currently adequate for the effective learning process in the Geography and Spatial Planning programme.

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

The SER provided a short and a rather limited description of the planning and upgrading of resources, but the following points can be noted: Resources are evidently assessed and enhanced to meet the evolving needs of both students and teachers. This reflects a commitment to maintaining the quality of education by keeping resources up-to-date. In addition, both internal and external funding sources are tapped into to secure the necessary resources. This ensures that financial constraints do not hinder the program's resource development.

The library and database of publications are regularly updated based on input from teachers. This is important for the curriculum teaching. VU lecturers also (SER, p. 50) monitor developments in professional literature related to their subjects. This proactive approach ensures that scientific publications and textbooks remain current and relevant to the field of study.

Finally, the procurement of literature is guided by specific criteria, including mandatory and recommended readings, teacher and researcher recommendations, and the latest publications in both Lithuanian and foreign languages. SER also indicates efforts to secure access to essential databases, book collections, and journal subscriptions needed for field studies. Collaboration with the Lithuanian Research Libraries Association (LARL) and the use of project funds contribute to this commitment.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

The learning facilities, including auditoriums, laboratories, and the library, appear to be well-equipped and sufficient in number. These facilities are crucial for effective teaching and learning. The use of modern audiovisual equipment, computers, and specialised software packages is acknowledged enabling students with access to up-to-date technology and resources for their studies. SER also indicates that the learning environments, such as auditoriums and laboratories, are adapted to specific activities, which enhances their functionality and allows multipurpose workspaces. This commitment to inclusivity is commendable.

Weaknesses:

There might be issues with limited utilisation of opportunities to study abroad, as the SER (p. 49-50) mentions that students did not apply for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad or competences acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning during the evaluated period. Some students may not be fully aware of the available resources.

Although there is funding allocated for updating learning materials, the availability of funds may vary annually. Budget constraints may impact the ability to consistently provide the latest resources and technologies. Finally, the reliance on external funding sources for certain library subscriptions and resources might lead to uncertainties in resource availability if external funding decreases

Recommendations:

To review the layout and design of buildings to ensure they can accommodate staff and students with any mobility, visual, auditory, disabilities.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

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

VU Regulation for the Preparation, Conduct, and Improvement of Study Programs places responsibility on study program committees to ensure program quality and continuous improvement. The effectiveness of internal quality assurance at Vilnius University is based on a comprehensive approach to ensuring the quality of its study programs. This system is developed in line with European Higher Education Area standards and aims to foster a culture of quality within the institution.

There is an emphasis on the importance of regular discussions on the implementation and evaluation of studies, with meetings held both in-person and remotely. The composition of study program committees evolves to include younger teachers and social partners to provide diverse perspectives. The main issues addressed by the SER include attracting and retaining students and maintaining the quality of studies. Efforts to enhance program attractiveness include optimising opportunities for work-study balance, integrating study modules, introducing professional practice, and updating course content based on student feedback. Additionally, flexibility in scheduling is provided to accommodate working students.

Additionally, the committees evaluate student competences acquired through other programs and make decisions through majority votes. Any significant changes in the study program is considered and approved by relevant councils, ensuring rationality and compatibility. The information about the study program is available on websites and social media platforms to ensure transparency and accessibility for prospective students and stakeholders. Overall, Vilnius University's internal quality assurance system emphasises data-driven improvement, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to maintaining and enhancing the quality of its study programs.

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

SER (p. 53) indicates that social partners play an important role in ensuring the quality and integrity of the program. Their involvement takes various forms. For example, social partners and stakeholders actively participate in Study Program Committees (SPC), contributing to the overall structure of the study programme. In addition, they assist in identifying market demands related to competences and learning outcomes that need development. It is considered that important suggestions are gained from the stakeholders regarding the content of modules. For example, special attention is given to topics like planning for protected areas and working with

legal regulations based on social partner input. Stakeholders also offer potential thesis topics, with several already resulting in completed theses (refer to * marked theses in Appendix 4).

Partners are actively involved in thesis defence commissions. In this role, they gain understanding of student competencies that are required in the labour market. This also supports suggestions for future thesis topics to be made, aligning them with industry needs. Stakeholders may also give lectures and conduct seminars for students in the field. The active engagement of social partners within the programme aids students to gain exposure to social partners, fostering understanding and networking opportunities.

Furthermore, it's worth noting that some social partners are actively involved in teaching, ensuring they stay updated with the latest information regarding SP implementation. Additionally, informal communication channels are established with social partners, including graduates, alumni, and potential employers, through professional events and meetings.

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

The programme applies the VU Study Information System (VUSIS) to manage and administer study programs efficiently. This system is used for tasks such as program planning, student data management, assessment recording, and generating official documents like diploma supplements.

The head of the study program committee continually analyses information pertaining to the study program, including conducting anonymous surveys of students to assess the quality of the program's content and the relevance of its subjects. Survey results are discussed within the committee and with subject teachers. The results of study assessments are made publicly available on various platforms, including the university's website, faculty websites, and the internal VUSIS system. Improvement plans and progress reports are planned for publication on the university's intranet. Students are also kept informed of changes in study programs through the activities of the Study Program Committees (SPC).

Survey results are used to enhance teaching content, teaching quality, and assessment procedures by instructors. Study program committees use the feedback to improve programs, prepare for external evaluations, and analyse program implementations. Heads of research and study units also use survey data to advise colleagues and promote professional development. Faculty administrations employ the feedback to enhance their unit's operations, and the Admission-Attestation Commission considers survey data during lecturers' attestation. The surveys cover various aspects of the learning experience, including subject/module quality, semester studies, admission processes, internships, exchange programs, and reasons for study termination. Additionally, graduate surveys assess competencies acquired during studies and their integration into the job market.

Overall, monitoring the quality of studies at the programme, Faculty and Vilnius University, is a comprehensive and ongoing process that employs various methods. Data collection occurs both at the university-wide level and within individual departments and programs, with the collected data complementing one another for a comprehensive quality monitoring system.

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

Student feedback on the program is collected twice per study year through centralised surveys. The first survey focuses on specific course units/modules studied during the semester, while the second assesses overall satisfaction with the semester's studies. These surveys are conducted anonymously using the VU online survey system integrated into VUSIS. The survey results serve multiple purposes as indicated in SER (p. 54–56):

- They inform program improvement efforts at the course and program level.
- They aid study program committees and CAU administrations in continuous quality assurance and improvement.
- Survey data contributes to self-evaluation reports for external evaluations.
- Results help analyse and plan future study programs.
- They assist in academic staff certification.
- Feedback contributes to enhancing various CAU and university activities.

However, it's important to note that the survey participation rate is quite low, with only a small number of students typically responding. The survey results are not statistically reliable. Additionally, responses often vary, and many are contradictory, requiring individualised analysis with specific teachers when issues arise.

In SER, Table 25 shows limited student participation in surveys on specific subjects/modules, and positive feedback tends to predominate. Any deviations from positive evaluations are discussed directly with the teacher. Similarly, Table 26 illustrates the low participation rates in surveys about the study program itself, making it difficult to draw generalised conclusions due to limited student activity. Feedback from the 2018-2019 academic year suggests more positive responses, with few negative comments. However, some students expressed concerns about study quality and workload. In the 2019-2020 academic year, feedback was more evenly distributed, with some first-year students expressing concerns about study load and work-life balance, attributed to the updated program. Finally, 2020-2021 academic year indicates that students did not perceive fundamental issues with the study program.

In 2021, there was a shift towards more positive responses, particularly in spring and autumn, with 60% of respondents stating they would recommend the program. Nevertheless, some students still cited challenges in balancing work and studies, and a few noted unmet lecture material needs. Thus, there have been fluctuations in student feedback, the low participation rates in surveys limit their usability in assessing the programme.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

Strengths:

There is a commitment to ensuring program quality and continuous improvement. The university's internal quality assurance system aligns with European Higher Education Area standards and encourages a culture of quality. Regular discussions and meetings, both in-person and remotely, emphasise transparency and collaboration. The inclusion of younger teachers and social partners enriches perspectives. The active engagement of stakeholders in Study Program Committees (SPC) and other aspects of the program is a clear strength.

Weaknesses:

While there's a robust system for collecting, using, and publishing information about studies, there are limitations due to low student survey participation rates. The low number of responses diminishes the statistical reliability of the data, making it challenging to draw comprehensive conclusions about program quality and effectiveness. Additionally, while the surveys cover various aspects of the learning experience, low response rates may not accurately represent the entire student body's views, potentially overlooking critical insights.

Recommendations:

Explore ways to encourage students to participate in evaluation and feedback processes both quantitative (e.g. surveys) and qualitative (e.g. focus groups led by independent facilitators).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation Area	Recommendations for the Evaluation Area (study cycle)
Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	The expert panel recommends that the Faculty builds on its stakeholder involvement by collecting measurable data on the market needs so that learning outcomes and curriculum can be updated in order to ensure the students have relevant skills sets for employment. The expert panel recommends that a recruitment strategy be developed to attract more students and to explore whether the quota of funded student places can be increased in order to meet the demand for a higher number of spatial planning specialists.
Links between science (art) and studies	The expert panel recommends that staff be supported to ensure their workload allows for time to apply for research funding and to publish outputs in international journals. The expert panel recommends that staff and students be encouraged and supported to participate and attend national and international conferences to facilitate networking and to raise the profile of their research.
Student admission and support	The expert panel recommends that the admission criteria be reviewed to include prerequisites in order to ensure students have the foundational knowledge and skills to enable them to study the modules without having to rely on additional one to one or additional small group classes. This is especially burdensome on students as the majority are also in paid employment.
Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	To provide specific data on numbers of cases related to academic integrity, discrimination, and student appeals.
Teaching staff	Staff workloads should factor in time for writing research outputs and participation in international conferences. The number of international visiting scholars to contribute to teaching should be increased.
Learning facilities and resources	To review the layout and design of buildings to ensure they can accommodate staff and students with any mobility, visual, auditory, disabilities.
Study quality management and public information	Explore ways to encourage students to participate in evaluation and feedback processes both quantitative (e.g. surveys) and qualitative (e.g. focus groups led by independent facilitators).

VI. SUMMARY

The expert panel conducted an evaluation of Vilnius University (VU) second cycle Geography and Spatial Planning (G&SP) program. VU is the oldest and largest higher education institution in Lithuania, with a complex organisational structure comprising 11 faculties. The G&SP program is interdisciplinary, drawing on various disciplines like physical geography, human geography, social planning, sociology, and more. It aligns with VU's mission of improving the quality of studies, emphasising interdisciplinarity, strengthening research skills, and preparing students for the needs of employers, particularly in areas related to sustainability, planning, and environmental management.

The Geography and Spatial Planning program at VU demonstrates several strengths, including its interdisciplinary approach, integration of research, and strong support system for students. The expert panel considers the following positives and strengths in the programme: Teacher-Student Ratio: The program boasts an excellent teacher-student ratio, enabling a more personalised and effective learning experience. A notable strength lies in the program's interdisciplinary approach, which encompasses various fields, including physical geography, human geography, social planning, sociology, land management, and more. This approach enriches the curriculum and ensures that students are well-prepared for real-world challenges. The program successfully integrates research into teaching, demonstrated by clear connections between courses and ongoing research efforts. This ensures that students benefit from the latest developments in science and technology.

There is evidence of clear academic, social, and personal support to students. The program fosters a close-knit community that contributes to a supportive learning environment. In addition, opportunities for academic mobility are offered through various exchange programs and collaborations, such as Erasmus, ARQUS, and COIMBRA. Students have the chance to study abroad, enhancing their international experience. Also stakeholder Involvement (social partners, alumni, employers) actively contribute to the program's quality and relevance. Their involvement in Study Program Committees (SPC) helps shape the program's structure, content, and thesis topics, ensuring alignment with market demands.

There are some areas where the panel considers further development needs. For example, while the program's research quality is commendable, there is room for improvement in terms of research output. The expert panel noted that there has been recruitment of a new generation of teaching staff who bring energy and a strong work ethic. Efforts should be made to support these staff to increase the number of research publications and participation in international projects, given the program's staffing levels. The second main issue that the panel wants to stress, are the possible challenges related to student recruitment, retention, and study priorities (almost all students work fulltime and thus, studies are not their main focus). Strategies to address these issues, such as enhancing program attractiveness and improving work-study balance, should be developed and implemented. Finally, teacher mobility could be further supported, particularly in the case of incoming visiting teachers and researchers that could further enrich the program.

In conclusion, VU's Geography and Spatial Planning program demonstrates significant strengths, including its interdisciplinary approach, research integration, and robust support system for students. However, there is room for improvement in areas such as research output, student recruitment and retention, curriculum alignment with the labour market, and the promotion of teacher mobility. The program should continue to evolve to effectively meet the changing needs

of students and society. The expert panel acknowledges Vilnius University's commitment to improvement and the dedication shown throughout the evaluation process.

The expert panel would like to express its appreciation to the programme and SER preparation group for their commitment to self-evaluation and for facilitating the site visit and discussions.

Expert panel chairperson signature: