

EXTRACT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES STUDY FIELD EVALUATION REPORT

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STUDIJŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO CENTRAS
CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Vilnius University

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OUTLINE OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The field of study evaluations in Lithuanian higher education institutions (HEIs) are based on the following:

- Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Studies, Evaluation Areas and Indicators, approved by the Minister of Education, Science, and Sport;
- Methodology of External Evaluation of Study Fields approved by the Director of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC);
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The evaluation is intended to support HEIs in continuous enhancement of their study process and to inform the public about the quality of programmes within the field of study.

The object of the evaluation is all programmes within a specific field of study. A separate assessment is given for each study cycle.

The evaluation process consists of the following main steps: 1) Self-evaluation and production of a self-evaluation report (SER) prepared by an HEI; 2) A site visit by the review panel to the HEI; 3) The external evaluation report (EER) production by the review panel; 4) EER review by the HEI; 5) EER review by the Study Evaluation Committee; 6) Accreditation decision taken by SKVC; 7) Appeal procedure (if initiated by the HEI); 8) Follow-up activities, which include the production of a Progress Report on Recommendations Implementation by the HEI.

The main outcome of the evaluation process is the EER prepared by the review panel. The HEI is forwarded the draft EER for feedback on any factual mistakes. The draft report is then subject to approval by the external Study Evaluation Committee, operating under SKVC. Once approved, the EER serves as the basis for an accreditation decision. If an HEI disagrees with the outcome of the evaluation, it can file an appeal. On the basis of the approved EER, SKVC takes one of the following accreditation decisions:

- **Accreditation granted for 7 years** if all evaluation areas are evaluated as exceptional (5 points), very good (4 points), or good (3 points).
- **Accreditation granted for 3 years** if at least one evaluation area is evaluated as satisfactory (2 points).
- **Not accredited** if at least one evaluation area is evaluated as unsatisfactory (1 point).

If the field of study and cycle were **previously accredited for 3 years**, the re-evaluation of the field of study and cycle is initiated no earlier than after 2 years. After the re-evaluation of the field of study and cycle, SKVC takes one of the following decisions regarding the accreditation of the field of study and cycle:

- To be accredited for the remaining term until the next evaluation of the field of study and cycle, but no longer than 4 years, if all evaluation areas are evaluated as exceptional (5 points), very good (4 points) or good (3 points).
- To not be accredited, if at least one evaluation area is evaluated as satisfactory (2 points) or unsatisfactory (1 point).

1.2. REVIEW PANEL

The review panel was appointed in accordance with the Reviewer Selection Procedure as approved by the Director of SKVC.

The composition of the review panel was as follows:

1. Panel chair: Prof. Peter Jonkers
2. Academic member: Prof. Šimo Šokčević
3. Student representative: Gustė Stakeliūnaitė

1.3. SITE VISIT

The site visit was organised on 14 October 2024 hybrid.

Meetings with the following members of the staff and stakeholders took place during the site visit:

- Senior management and administrative staff of the faculty(ies)
- Team responsible for preparation of the SER
- Teaching staff
- Students
- Alumni and social stakeholders including employers.

There was no need for translation and the meetings were conducted in English.

1.4. BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

Overview of the HEI

Vilnius University (hereinafter: VU, the University) was established in 1579 and is the oldest and largest higher education institution in Lithuania. The University has 15 core academic units (11 faculties, 1 institute, 1 centre, 1 academy, and 1 business school) and 12 core non-academic units. According to the data of October 1, 2023, VU has 5523 employees (of which 2632 are teaching staff), and about 23.600 students.

The University offers undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies in the fields of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medical and healthcare sciences, and technological sciences. More than 90 bachelor's and integrated study programmes as well as 110 master's and professional studies (pedagogical) programmes are operated.

Overview of the field of study

Studies in the field of religion are operated by the Faculty of Philosophy (hereinafter also FPHS, the Faculty), comprising five institutes (Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Institute of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology, Institute of Sociology and Social Work, Institute of Educational Sciences), and eight departments. One of these is the Department of Continental Philosophy and Religious Studies (hereinafter: the Department), which operates the MA Study Programme in Religious Studies (hereafter the Programme).

Members of the teaching staff of the Programme contribute to the production of the journal *Religija ir kultūra* (Religion and Culture) by serving as editors or members of the editorial boards. To ensure the dissemination of research results and the promotion of cooperation, local and international research conferences, international seminars, practical seminars, forums as well as public lectures are organized. There are no doctoral studies in the field of Religious studies in Lithuania, so students who have completed the Programme can enter doctoral studies in philosophy, cultural studies, educational studies, sociology, or history and theory of arts.

The Programme has been operative since 1994, when the Master's degree programme in Religious studies (registered in 1997) appeared. Starting with 2000, the Programme has several times been improved and updated.

Previous external evaluations

External evaluations of the Programme were conducted in 2011 and 2020. After the last evaluation, the Programme was accredited for 3 years. The recommendations of the previous evaluation(s) and their implementation are discussed in the Self-Evaluation Report.

Documents and information used in the review

The following documents and/or information have been requested/provided by the HEI before or during the site visit:

- *Self-evaluation report and its annexes*
- *Final theses*

Additional sources of information used by the review panel:

The following additional sources of information have been used by the review panel:

- Updated version of the Appendices 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9.

II. STUDY PROGRAMMES IN THE FIELD

Second cycle/LTQF 7

Title of the study programme	Religious Studies
State code	6211NX030
Type of study (college/university)	University studies
Mode of study (full time/part time) and nominal duration (in years)	Full-time, 2 years of study
Workload in ECTS	120
Award (degree and/or professional qualification)	Master of Humanities
Language of instruction	Lithuanian
Admission requirements	Bachelor's Degree
First registration date	1997.05.19 No. 565
Comments (including remarks on joint or interdisciplinary nature of the programme, mode of provision)	-

III. ASSESSMENT IN POINTS BY CYCLE AND EVALUATION AREAS

The second cycle of the Religious studies field of study is given a negative evaluation.

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation points
1.	Study aims, learning outcomes and curriculum	2
2.	Links between scientific (or artistic) research and higher education	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student assessment, and graduate employment	3
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Quality assurance and public information	2
Total:		20

IV. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

AREA 1: STUDY AIMS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

- 1.1. Programmes are aligned with the country's economic and societal needs and the strategy of the HEI

FACTUAL SITUATION

- 1.1.1. Programme aims and learning outcomes are aligned with the needs of the society and/or the labour market

The Religious Studies Study Programme of VU (henceforth: the Programme) is dedicated to the analysis of religion as regards its multidimensionality, historical development, and diverse manifestations in the modern era. The Programme focuses on the tension between secularization and the continuing existence of religion in today's society. From a methodological perspective, the Programme uses the latest theoretical insights of the disciplines involved in this Programme. Characteristic of this program is its interdisciplinary and non-confessional, specifically philosophical approach to the phenomenon of religion (SER, p. 8f.).

The opportunities for further developing the Programme are associated with the continual attention to the reassessment of the theoretical conception of religion, the integration of new optional courses, responsiveness to the challenges of the contemporary world concerning religion, and the communication of research in religion to society. The latter aspect determines the practical side of this Programme, that is, the very need for specialists in religious studies in society, as well as their influence on public opinion and culture as such (SER, p. 9).

In the light of recent changes in Lithuanian society, it has become necessary to reconsider the relations of Catholicism, predominant in Lithuania, with other Christian denominations and non-Christian confessions anew from an interdisciplinary and non-confessional perspective. This Programme is the only one of its kind that offers such a perspective on the current societal situation and is, therefore, unique in Lithuania. To enhance its quality, the Programme draws from the experiences of similar programmes in other European countries (SER, p. 10f.).

The learning outcomes of the Programme form one consistent entirety – the development of the skills to independently formulate problems arising in the junction of different disciplines of religious studies, to creatively apply, and to continuously improve and update the interdisciplinary knowledge in the field of religion. The interdisciplinary nature of Religious Studies requires that the key abilities are developed within a comprehensive and systemic framework by studying the entirety of disciplines (SER, p. 11f. and Appendices 1, 2 rev., and 4 rev.).

One of the most essential demands raised by potential employers and different social partners is for the graduates of this Programme to have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the aspects of religious life and the place of religion in culture and society, to be able to analyse different cultural processes bearing a religious dimension, to understand cultural, political and social processes and their interaction with the field of religion, and also to have inter-religious communication skills (SER, p. 12). The employers have the following key interests in the Programme: (1) ability to provide consultations on the issues of religion; (2) understanding of the history of Christianity and other religions; (3) ability to conduct and maintain the interreligious dialogue and relations between individuals and institutions; (4) ability to observe and analyse the situation of religion in the multi-cultural world affected by secularization and globalization processes; (5) to represent and defend representatives of conventional and other religious communities in Lithuania (SER, 13).

The need for specialists with a profound knowledge of the field of religion is more than obvious to researchers specifically interested in the subject; in society, however, the need is often perceived formally only, without always appreciating the need to seek the acquisition of professional competence in the area of religion. Therefore, the Programme not only responds to the formal need of specialists in the area of religion in modern Lithuanian society but also has defined a goal to establish the standards for the professional competence of specialists in the area of religion for public institutions and authorities, and thus influence the view of the public domain upon religion in general.

According to the data of the Education Management Information System, 55% of the graduates of the Programme find employment immediately after graduation, while the remaining part continues with doctoral studies in various fields. The Programme is often chosen by graduates of religious studies or theology from other institutions of higher education, but also by Bachelor degree students of other programmes in humanities – primarily, philosophy, history, journalism, and philology, but also lawyers, economists, and occasionally bachelors of natural or technical sciences (SER, p. 13).

1.1.2. Programme aims and learning outcomes are aligned with the HEI's mission, goals, and strategy

The aims and expected learning outcomes of the Programme are designed to implement the mission of the University “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” and are in line with the strategic priorities set in the 2021–2025 plan. The learning outcomes of the Programme pursue the long-term objective of VU, namely that graduates are capable of solving societal problems. The course units (modules) taught in the Programme are designed to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge and/or to study international content and to pursue the long-term objective of “Interdisciplinary and international research and studies” (SER, p. 13f., Appendix 10).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 1.1.)

The interdisciplinary and non-confessional character of the Programme corresponds certainly with the needs of Lithuanian society, which has become more secular and religiously diverse over the years. Because it is the only Programme of its kind in Lithuania, it is also unique. Furthermore, the Programme aligns to some extent with the mission of VU, in particular, to strengthen the cognitive and creative potential of Lithuania.

The links of the Programme with the labour market outside the academia are weak: the three graduates whom the Panel interviewed are doctoral students, and the general overview of the employment of the graduates shows that, over the period 2020-2023, the overall majority of them are studying for a doctoral degree too (SER, p. 50). Moreover, there is no formal input from the employers and social partners in the Programme. The teaching staff and the employers confirmed the weak link

of the Programme with the job market, although the latter did not find this problematic since, in their opinion, students were drawn to this Programme for existential reasons rather than to enhance their opportunities as professionals outside the academia.

Furthermore, although the Programme is interdisciplinary, comprising modules in the fields of philosophy, religious anthropology, history of (non-Christian) religions, Christian religion, and art, it lacks an empirical and practical side. According to SER, p. 20, the Programme is oriented to high-level theoretical studies, and no practical encounter of the students with religious life in contemporary Lithuanian society is foreseen. The only empirical modules of the Programme are the *optional* courses “Baltic Worldview: Research Perspectives”, and “Sociology of Religion” (SER, p. 11f., Appendix 1, 2 rev., 4 rev., and 10 rev.; the description of the latter course is missing in the overview). Hence, the overall set-up of the Programme shows that it is largely left to the students to connect the theoretical insights they learn in the courses with the empirical reality of the religious/secular landscape in Lithuania.

These findings explain why the teaching staff, the employers, and the social partners are of the opinion that this Programme has a weak link with the job market outside of academia and why most graduates embark on a PhD project after graduation. In particular, the panel deems it doubtful whether the Programme can realize most of the key interests of the employers (especially no’s 1, 3, 4, and 5), if the graduates don’t have any practical training.

Finally, because of its theoretical nature and its lack of practical training, it is doubtful whether the Programme can contribute adequately to realizing one of the long-term objectives of VU, namely that its graduates are capable of solving societal problems.

All these deficiencies have already been noted in the previous evaluation and included in the list of weaknesses (see EER 2021, p. 9, 14, the present SER, p. 24), but they have not been addressed sufficiently so far (the revisions of the Programme, whose implementation was scheduled for 2024-2025, have been postponed to 2025-2026). In sum, although the Programme is beyond doubt unique, its relevance to Lithuanian society and its needs, and its coherence with some of the long-term objectives of VU are limited.

1.2. Programmes comply with legal requirements, while curriculum design, curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment methods enable students to achieve study aims and learning outcomes

FACTUAL SITUATION

1.2.1. Programmes comply with legal requirements

According to SER, p. 15f, the Programme is designed and currently run in accordance with (1) the Description of the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework, (2) the Description of General Requirements for the Provision of Studies, (3) the Description of Study Cycles, (4) the Description of “Studies in the field of Religious Studies,” and the University’s Regulation of Study. All studies in the field comply with legal requirements (for a detailed overview, see SER, p. 15f, Table 1). Detailed plans for the Programme as a whole and for the individual courses are provided in Appendices 2rev. and 10 rev.

1.2.2. Programme aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods are aligned

According to SER, p. 16f., the Programme corresponds to the type of university studies in that they provide systematic knowledge and skills based on theoretical training and research. Furthermore, the Programme meets the academic requirements in terms of aims, intended learning outcomes, design, and content. The compliance of the Programme with cycle, academic and/or professional requirements is ensured by the operating system of the University and the fact that the teaching staff of the SPs are active researchers at a national and international level.

The logic of the structure of the Programme’s subjects corresponds to the Programme’s goals, objectives, and developed abilities. It consists of three groups of compulsory courses: disciplines of

religious studies, disciplines of philosophy of religion, and disciplines covering the history and systematics of dogma:

- (1) The modules of religious studies comprise the *History of Religions I and II*.
- (2) The modules of philosophy of religion comprise *Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Dialogue, Postmetaphysical Thought and the Problem of Religion, Problems of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion: Nihilism and Secularization, Christian Ethics*.
- (3) The modules covering the *History and Systematics of Dogma I, II, III*

In addition to these compulsory modules, there is a group of optional modules comprised of modules covering religious studies, philosophy of religion, and disciplines investigating the relationship between religion and culture. The division between compulsory and optional modules has been opted for to enable students to focus on the subjects they are most interested in or the aspects of religious studies most needed for their professional activities (SER 17f).

The SER 18 notes that the Programme was essentially renewed in the years after 2021, and these changes are to be implemented in 2024-2025 (see Appendix 3 rev. for an overview of these changes). The factors that prompted these changes were the recommendations by the EER, 2021, and the decreasing popularity of the Programme among the students, caused by a too strong focus on theological courses (SER 18f.). This means that the SER (16f. and throughout the document) is no longer up to date as regards the contents of the Programme.

1.2.3. Curriculum ensures consistent development of student competences

Table 2 (SER, p. 19f.) gives an overview of the distribution of the students' workload. The research projects and final thesis units are included in the workload of the compulsory course units. The volume of the contact study hours of the Programme is about 27,3% of the total students' workload. As students develop, deepen their theoretical knowledge of the field of study, and improve their research skills, more time begins to be devoted to their independent work. The tasks assigned to independent work and the discussion of the outcomes carried out during the contact work become one of the methods of ensuring and monitoring the progress of the students. In the last semesters, students are given more freedom to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in practice by conducting larger-scale research independently.

According to SER, p. 20f. and Appendices 2 rev., 4 rev., and 10 rev., the modules' content and distribution over the semesters ensure a consistent development of general and subject-specific competences. The modules are linked into a coherent whole by their learning outcomes, and together, they gradually lead to the MA in Religious Studies. The Programme is composed of contemporary and relevant disciplines covering different aspects of religious studies. Concerning the modern methodologies prevailing in contemporary religious studies, the Programme introduces the students to the specifics of interdisciplinary religious studies. In practical as well as theoretical terms, the Programme introduces the students to the methodologies prevailing in contemporary religious studies and teaches them to use these methodologies in an integrated manner. Such an interdisciplinary composition of the Programme defines its professionalism, uniqueness, and relevance to contemporary Lithuanian society. At the same time, this composition creates a substantial basis for attaining the principal abilities that are sought to be developed.

Following its interdisciplinary and non-confessional approach, the Programme aims to train highly qualified specialists in religious studies. Students acquire the ability to independently formulate and propose solutions to religion-related problems arising at the intersection of theology, philosophy of religion, and religious studies, the ability to construct arguments and discuss them, the capacity to creatively apply theoretical knowledge in the field of religion and practical skills in professional activities, the competence for self-study, necessary for further studies (SER, p. 21).

The outcomes of the Programme are achieved by the entirety of the subjects studied. All modules contribute to the general and subject-specific competences and ensure their coherence. The teaching methods correspond to the aims of the Programme and allow to achieve the expected general and specific outcomes. The main teaching methods are lectures (problem-based teaching), seminars (discussions, presentations, raising questions, critical analysis of the problems under consideration), and individual work, during which the students collect and examine material for presentations, survey

and analyse primary sources and literature related to specific problem-related questions, and prepare course papers. Moreover, students cultivate their abilities individually by consulting with course lecturers or, when preparing the Master's thesis, with their Master's thesis supervisor (SER, p. 22).

Students are assessed during the final or mid-term examinations; they are also evaluated for their presentations and course papers, as well as for their constructive participation during discussions. The methods for assessment and their criteria are related to the development of general and subject-specific competences. The methods for assessment are specified in the course descriptions, presented in Appendix 10 rev. The intended general and subject-specific outcomes of the Programme and their coherence with the intended outcomes of course units, teaching methods, and assessment methods are presented in Appendix 2 rev.

1.2.4. Opportunities for students to personalise curriculum according to their personal learning goals and intended learning outcomes are ensured

The Programme offers the following opportunities for students to personalize their studies:

- Follow an individual study plan, which needs approval by the SPC chair.
- Participate in academic exchange.
- Study various foreign languages as non-credit course units.
- Choose a one-year pedagogical study programme (in addition to the Programme Religious Studies).
- The Programme has 30 credits of optional modules.

1.2.5. Final theses (applied projects) comply with the requirements for the field and cycle

The master's thesis aims to develop the ability to identify scientific problems, the competence to independently and properly carry out scientific research in the field of religious studies, and to present it in the preparation and defence of the master thesis. The theses are supervised by the lecturers of the Programme, and their topics require approval by the SPC of the Programme. A special course (Scientific Research Work) prepares the students for writing the thesis. In this way, the coherence of the topic and the projected presentation of its content concerning the study field is ensured (SER, p. 23; for a list of the titles of the theses, see Appendix 5).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 1.2.)

The old Programme, which is still operative in 2024-2025, and the revised Programme, whose implementation was originally scheduled for 2024 but has been postponed until 2025, comply with the legal requirements (for the revised Programme, see Appendix 2 rev.). As to the old Programme, this was confirmed by the student representative of the SER team, the teachers, and the students. The reason for this postponement is that, in 2024, no students were enrolled in the first year of the Programme.

At the level of the individual modules, the teaching/learning and assessment methods are aligned to the learning outcomes (Appendices 2 rev., 4 rev. 10 rev.).

The panel found it difficult to evaluate the design of the Programme as a whole due to serious deficiencies of the SER. In its explanation of the rationale behind the Programme, the SER regularly refers to the old Programme (see SER, pp. 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 43, 49, and passim, see also above 1.2.2) and mentions only in passing (SER, p. 18f.) that the old Programme has been revised substantially: the compulsory modules *History and Systematics of Dogma I, II, III* have been replaced by three new modules (*The Bible as an Anthro-po-theological Narrative*, *History of Christianity*, *The concept of Divinity in Classical Antiquity*), and two new optional courses (*Sociology of Religion*, *Religion and Crime*) are also planned. These changes were prompted by the recommendations of the external evaluation of 2021 and by the decreasing popularity of the Programme among prospective students, which is partly caused by "a certain internal incompatibility of the Programme itself, where a large part of the compulsory part of the Programme is focused on theological courses, for which a large portion of the applicants are not even prepared" (SER, 19). Beyond doubt, these changes have made the Programme

less theological, and they were explicitly welcomed by the students and the graduates, but because the SER still concentrates on the old Programme, it does not substantiate if and how these changes have made the Programme more focused and balanced, as was recommended by the EER 2021 (see EER 2021, p. 14f).

The panel's impression that the Programme has an insufficient focus and balance was strengthened by the fact that during the interviews with the SER-team, the teaching staff, the students, and the graduates, everyone seemed to have a different conception of the aims and strengths of the Programme. The management of the Faculty of Philosophy also told the panel that the integration of the Department of Continental Philosophy and Religious Studies, which is responsible for running the Programme, is not (yet) well integrated into the broader Institute of Philosophy, thus compromising the coherence of the Programme. Moreover, the very low student numbers (0 in the first year, 2 in the second year of the Programme) and their very diverse study backgrounds, expectations, and requests make it almost impossible for the teaching staff to keep the focus of their courses. A clear sign of the lack of focus is the topics of the final theses, which in several cases are at odds with the interdisciplinary and non-confessional character of the Programme: out of a total of seven theses over the period 2021-2023, three are purely philosophical, and one is theological (Appendix 5). When the panel confronted the teaching staff with this inconsistency, they answered that they simply responded to the proposals from the students. A final example of the Programme's insufficient focus is the opportunities for the students to personalize their curriculum (see above 1.2.4). Most of them are very sensible, but the first one (follow an individual study plan, which needs approval by the SPC chair) is formulated in such an open way that it seems to allow students to compose their Programme as they see fit. The interviews with the students and the graduates confirmed the panel in this impression.

All in all, the panel deems this Programme not sustainable because of its insufficient focus and balance between theoretical and empirical/practical modules, its weak links with the labour market, and its consistent very low student numbers.

AREA 1: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle		X			

COMMENDATIONS

- Interdisciplinary and non-confessional character of the Programme*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

- The focus of the Programme is insufficient and not clear to the teaching staff, the students, and the graduates. There is little interaction between the teachers as all of them seem to be primarily concerned with their own courses and fields of expertise.*

For further improvement

1. *The Programme lacks a clear link with the labour market outside of academia. This can be improved by introducing practical, applied modules. To realize this, the Programme needs to foster stronger structural ties with social partners and employers.*

AREA 2: LINKS BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC (OR ARTISTIC) RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION

- 2.1. Higher education integrates the latest developments in scientific (or artistic) research and technology and enables students to develop skills for scientific (or artistic) research

FACTUAL SITUATION

2.1.1. Research within the field of study is at a sufficient level

VU's research activities in the scientific fields of philosophy and theology have been evaluated by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMT) annually. Over the past three years, the R&D evaluation in the field of philosophy showed a consistent increase in scores: 589.70 in 2020, 958.62 in 2021, and 1012.39 in 2022. However, research in the field of theology has only been evaluated in 2020 (39.51 points) because of the very small size of the research in this discipline (SER, p. 26f. and Appendix 6). The 2023 comparative expert assessment of R&D activities covering 2018–2022 rated the quality of R&D activities in philosophy as 5, and their economic and social impact as 4.5 (SER, p. 26). The research activities carried out by the teaching staff are closely tied to the Programme (see SER, p. 30 and Appendix 7 with the three most important research publications per teacher in the Programme). For example, the project “Contemporary Research in the Continental Philosophical Tradition and Religion” (2019–2024), funded by VU, is of direct relevance to the curriculum, influencing course content and student research opportunities. National and international projects, including those funded by the Research Council of Lithuania and the European Social Fund, also play a significant role in the integration of research outcomes into the Programme (SER, p. 27-29). The Programme demonstrates cooperation with external partners in scientific activities, including international collaborations, such as the conference on “Religions and Technology” and the “Ontology of Law” project, which involve partners from several European countries and the USA (SER, p. 28). These collaborations contribute to the academic environment and support the integration of research in the Programme (SER, p. 30).

2.1.2. Curriculum is linked to the latest developments in science, art, and technology

The Programme is closely aligned with current research conducted by the teaching staff, who are actively involved in national and international research projects. For example, projects like “Contemporary Research in the Continental Philosophical Tradition and Religion” and “Ontology of Law” directly inform the content of various courses and modules. The outcomes of these research activities are integrated into both compulsory and elective modules, ensuring that students are engaged with contemporary methodologies and issues (SER, p. 26-27; Appendix 10 rev.). The content of study modules is updated regularly to reflect the latest scientific and technological advancements. Teachers incorporate new research publications and case studies into their teaching materials, with the Study Programme Committee (SPC) responsible for approving these updates. Examples of integration include the use of newly published research articles in student presentations, term papers, and final theses. Modules such as “Contemporary Problems of Anthropology of Religion” and “Myths and Rituals” are specifically designed to incorporate the latest research findings and discussions from the field (SER, p. 27-28). Additionally, the teaching staff regularly revise their course materials based on recent literature and academic research, ensuring that students are always working with the latest resources available (SER, p. 28; Meeting with Teaching Staff).

2.1.3. Opportunities for students to engage in research are consistent with the cycle

The Programme offers avenues for student involvement in scientific activities, particularly during the final stages of their studies, when students prepare their master's theses. Students are encouraged to engage in research activities, including presenting their work at conferences and participating in scientific events organized by Vilnius University. Additionally, students contribute to science

communication by writing articles for platforms like *bernardinai.lt*, allowing them to engage with broader, non-academic audiences (SER, p. 31). In terms of quantitative student involvement in scientific activities, the Programme has shown improvement over recent years. Initially, about 10% of the students were engaged in research activities during the 2020-2021 academic year. This percentage increased to 22% by the 2022-2023 academic year, reflecting a positive trend toward greater participation, although students' participation in absolute terms is still very low (SER, p. 31).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 2.1.)

While the individual teachers make a strong effort to integrate their latest research into their courses, the Programme as a whole faces challenge due to its reliance on a few key projects, such as "Contemporary Research in the Continental Philosophical Tradition and Religion" (SER, p. 27). This focus on specific areas of teaching staff expertise may limit the diversity of research opportunities available to students, particularly those with interests outside of philosophy, such as the sociology or anthropology of religion. Students whose research interests lie beyond the areas covered by these projects may find fewer opportunities to engage in relevant research. This reliance on specific fields limits the Programme's interdisciplinary potential, which is a crucial aspect of religious studies. Expanding the research scope to include a wider range of disciplines would offer a more inclusive academic experience and ensure that all students can find relevant research opportunities that align with their interests (SER, p. 28). The Programme's research activities are funded through a combination of internal funding, national projects, and international partnerships. Although these funding avenues have proven viable, the lack of dedicated long-term financial planning specifically for the Programme poses challenges in expanding research scope and maintaining continuity. Research activities are largely dependent on securing external funding through grants, which may limit the Programme's ability to ensure sustainable growth in research and interdisciplinary integration (Meeting with teaching staff). Although the percentage of students participating in scientific research has shown a positive trend—rising from 10% in 2020-2021 to 22% in 2022-2023 (SER, p. 31)—these figures may be less relevant given the small number of students enrolled in the Programme. With such a limited cohort, small changes in absolute numbers can result in significant percentage shifts, making the trends less meaningful as indicators of overall research involvement. The small student body should provide an opportunity for a more diversified approach, allowing more students to find research topics that align with their interests across this broad interdisciplinary field. A more structured Programme or incentives for wider participation in research would be beneficial. To better prepare students for a range of professional roles, beyond academic careers, it is important to broaden research opportunities to include interdisciplinary and applied research projects. By incorporating research that addresses real-world challenges and is aligned with career-relevant skills, the Programme can help students develop research abilities that are transferable to both academic and non-academic fields. The support for student research skill development through seminars, public lectures, and workshops is a positive feature of the Programme. However, the SER does not detail whether these activities are systematically integrated into the curriculum or if they are optional and attended by only the most motivated students. A more structured approach to embedding these opportunities within the study cycle, making them a mandatory part of the learning process, could help ensure that all students develop robust research skills (SER, p. 31). Additionally, there is no mention of specific research methodology training being a compulsory part of the curriculum, which could be a missed opportunity for strengthening student preparedness for independent research. This issue is particularly significant given that the Programme enrolls students from a variety of academic backgrounds, including those who have not previously studied humanities. Many students entering the Programme lack exposure to the specific methodologies used in fields such as philosophy, history, and religious studies, making it more difficult for them to adapt to the research demands of the Programme. A formal research methodology course earlier in the curriculum would provide a shared foundation, ensuring that all students, regardless of their undergraduate studies, have the necessary skills to engage with complex research tasks and successfully complete their theses (Meeting with students and the graduates). In addition, the Programme's journal *Religija ir Kultura*, while playing a crucial role in disseminating scholarly work and contributing to the Programme's academic visibility, has faced significant delays in

publication due to financial constraints. Articles submitted in 2023 and 2024 are being published in the 2020 issue, which not only undermines the timeliness of the journal but could also negatively impact the Programme's ability to maintain a strong research presence and reach a broader academic audience. Addressing these delays would be important for enhancing the journal's role as a platform for both teachers and student research (Meeting with Senior Management and Administrative Staff; Meeting with SER Team; <https://www.journals.vu.lt/religija-ir-kultura>). While the Programme benefits from the research quality of the teachers and their international collaborations and external partnerships, it appears that the involvement of external partners in directly enhancing student research opportunities could be expanded. The current collaboration seems to benefit primarily the teaching staff rather than offering students more tangible opportunities, such as joint research projects or internships with partner institutions (SER, p. 28). Expanding these collaborations to directly involve students in international research networks could significantly enhance the research experience for students and broaden their exposure to cutting-edge developments in the field.

Although the Programme integrates the latest developments in research and offers opportunities for student involvement, the overall structure could be more robust and inclusive. While some efforts have been made to encourage student participation in research, the current level of involvement remains limited, and further progress is needed. There are still notable limitations in terms of the scope of research integration, the breadth of interdisciplinary perspectives, and the accessibility of research opportunities for all students. The aim of integrating scientific research and developing research skills is only partially met. The Programme has distinctive features, such as its ongoing research initiatives by teachers, but further development is required to ensure that all students benefit equally from the research environment and that the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies is fully embraced.

AREA 2: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle			X		

COMMENDATIONS

1. *The research qualities and performance of the teachers ensure the courses' high academic quality.*
2. *The Programme integrates recent research developments into its curriculum, offering students access to up-to-date scholarly advancements.*
3. *The Programme offers a variety of seminars, lectures, and workshops that support student development in research skills.*
4. *International collaborations provide valuable opportunities for the teaching staff to engage with global academic networks and enrich the Programme's academic environment.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. *Increase efforts to ensure that research opportunities are more structured and accessible to all students, as current student involvement in research remains limited.*

2. *Broaden the Programme's interdisciplinary approach to incorporate a wider range of fields beyond philosophy, such as sociology and anthropology of religion (not as optional but as compulsory courses), in order to provide students with a more diverse academic experience.*
3. *Introduce formal research methodology training earlier in the curriculum to provide students with the necessary skills for independent research, especially given the diverse academic backgrounds of students entering the Programme.*
4. *Improve the processes and financial support for the journal *Religija ir Kultura* to ensure timely publication and maintain its role in disseminating scholarly work.*

For further improvement

1. *Strengthen the Programme's participation in large-scale international research projects to enhance its visibility and distinctiveness.*
2. *Encourage and formalize channels for student publications to increase the visibility and academic impact of their research outputs.*

AREA 3: STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

3.1. Student selection and admission is in line with the learning outcomes

FACTUAL SITUATION

3.1.1. Student selection and admission criteria and procedures are adequate and transparent

The admission criteria for the Programme are established by VU and publicly accessible on the university's website. As outlined in SER, p. 33, applicants are required to have completed a Bachelor's degree in any field, with no specific prerequisites in philosophy or theology. Previously, applicants were expected to have 20 credits in philosophy or courses related to the intersection of religion and culture; for those without these credits, supplementary coursework was available. Admission scoring up to 2020 was based on a formula that included the weighted average of diploma grades along with the mark from the applicant's final thesis or graduation exam.

In 2021, these requirements were simplified to make the program more accessible and align with the criteria of other master's programs at the university. Currently, the entrance score is calculated using 50% of the final thesis or exam grade combined with 50% of the weighted average of other grades from the diploma supplement. Since these changes, the program has seen minor fluctuations in applicant numbers, with 6 applicants listing it as their first priority in 2022, up from 4 in 2021 and 2 in 2020. However, despite slight increases in overall applications, student enrollment has recently declined; only 2 students signed study agreements in 2023, and the program did not attract any students for the academic year 2024-2025 (interviews with Faculty Management and students).

3.1.2. Recognition of foreign qualifications, periods of study, and prior learning (established provisions and procedures)

The procedure for recognizing foreign qualifications, partial studies, and prior non-formal and informal learning at VU follows established guidelines in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (SER, p. 34f.). The university has a structured process, overseen by the Student Admission Sub-Division, for evaluating foreign qualifications to ensure they align with Lithuanian academic standards. While there were no students in the Programme requesting foreign qualification recognition during the evaluation period, past applications were approved, indicating the Programme's readiness and consistency in handling these requests.

VU also offers recognition of prior formal, non-formal, and informal learning (SER, p. 35). Students may apply for credit recognition based on previous studies, professional experience, or self-directed

learning. Up to 75% of a program's credits can be recognized for formal studies, while non-formal and informal learning can account for up to 50%, excluding final projects or other mandatory course units. Information on these procedures is accessible on the university's website, and applicants are guided through the process by the university staff.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 3.1.)

While the revised admission criteria aim to simplify the enrollment process and attract a broader range of applicants, the lack of specific prerequisites in philosophy or religious studies presents challenges in achieving consistent academic preparedness for the advanced academic expectations of the Master's level among all students. Given the Programme's research-oriented design, intended as a pathway to doctoral research, there appears to be insufficient attention to assessing the suitability of students during the admission process. Students entering from various backgrounds may have vastly different levels of knowledge in religion and philosophy, creating disparities in foundational understanding. While this variability is manageable with a small number of students and actually has been managed well on an individual basis for the current students (see interviews with the teaching staff and the students), it could present significant difficulties if enrollment increases. Without a common baseline, lecturers may struggle to effectively teach advanced material, as they would need to balance the needs of students with little prior exposure to these fields against those with more substantial backgrounds.

To mitigate these challenges, the Programme could consider reintroducing optional prerequisites or offering structured preparatory courses in philosophy and theology. This would help to establish a more uniform academic foundation for incoming students, supporting both their individual success and the program's educational goals.

The university's recognition process for foreign qualifications, partial studies, and prior learning is clear, accessible, and aligned with international standards, supporting students from diverse backgrounds. However, as no Religious Studies students applied for recognition during the evaluation period, it's difficult to assess its specific impact on this Programme.

3.2. There is an effective student support system enabling students to maximise their learning progress

FACTUAL SITUATION

3.2.1. Opportunities for student academic mobility are ensured

According to SER, p. 35f. VU offers students in the Programme various academic mobility opportunities through Erasmus+, Nordplus, ISEP, and bilateral agreements with partner universities (for an overview, see SER, p. 36f., Table 10). Religious Studies students can participate in exchange programs for up to half of their study period, with popular destinations including universities in Estonia and Poland. Additionally, students have access to the ARQUS and COIMBRA networks, providing further international study options.

Despite these offerings, academic mobility within the Programme has been very limited, with only one student participating in an Erasmus+ exchange during the evaluated period. Factors such as programme length, personal obligations (e.g., work and family), and financial constraints have impacted students' ability to participate in exchanges.

3.2.2. Academic, financial, social, psychological, and personal support provided to students is relevant, adequate, and effective

According to SER, p. 37f. VU provides comprehensive support services to students in the Programme, covering academic, financial, social, psychological, and personal areas. Academic support includes access to consultations with faculty, guidance from academic advisors, and participation in a mentorship program, where both faculty and alumni share their experiences to assist students' academic and career development. Financial support is available in the form of scholarships, state

loans, and social support grants, though students report that scholarship amounts are often insufficient to cover living expenses fully.

Social and psychological support is offered through the university's Community Development Division, which provides counseling services, workshops on mental health topics, and support for students with disabilities. First-year students are further supported by introductory activities, like orientation weeks and mentoring programs, which help them integrate into university life.

3.2.3. Higher education information and student counselling are sufficient

VU ensures that students in the Programme have access to comprehensive information about their studies and related support services (SER, p. 40f.). Study-related information is disseminated through multiple channels, including the university's website, faculty newsletters, and the VUSIS student information system, where students can access personal data, academic records, and schedules. Additionally, at the beginning of their studies, students participate in orientation sessions and integration weeks, during which they receive detailed guidance on their study program, university procedures, and available support resources. For ongoing support, students have access to academic advisors, course-specific consultations, and a mentoring program.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 3.2.)

VU provides sufficient resources and partnerships to support academic mobility, and students can benefit from a wide range of exchange options. However, practical barriers like programme duration, work commitments, and financial limitations reduce participation. To enhance mobility, the Programme could explore additional support measures, such as targeted scholarships or flexible study plans, to encourage more students to take advantage of these opportunities.

The interview with the students confirmed that the university's support services for Religious Studies students are broad and well-structured, addressing diverse student needs effectively. Academic mentoring and accessible counselling services create a supportive environment conducive to both personal and academic success. However, while financial support is available, the limited amount of scholarships may lead some students to seek additional sources of income, potentially impacting their studies. Enhancing financial aid options or increasing scholarship amounts could alleviate this burden, allowing students to focus more fully on their academic goals and participate in the aforementioned mobility programmes. Overall, the range of support services is a strong asset, contributing positively to the student experience in the Programme.

The information and counselling provided to students in the Programme are sufficient and effectively support their academic journey (for confirmation, see the interview with the students). The multi-channel approach ensures that students have ready access to necessary information, while structured counselling and academic advising provide personal guidance. These services are particularly beneficial in a small programme setting, where students benefit from personalized support.

AREA 3: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle			X		

COMMENDATIONS

1. *Comprehensive support services cover academic, financial, social, psychological, and personal students' needs.*
2. *The Programme offers diverse international mobility opportunities, enhancing students' academic experience.*
3. *Students with knowledge deficiencies are assisted on an individual basis by their teachers.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. *Insufficient admission criteria. As the Programme is predominantly research-orientated and appears to be designed as a pathway into doctoral research, there appears to be a lack of attention to the suitability of students applying in the recruitment and admission process.*

AREA 4: TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT ASSESSMENT, AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

4.1. Students are prepared for independent professional activity

FACTUAL SITUATION

4.1.1. Teaching and learning address the needs of students and enable them to achieve intended learning outcomes

The teaching and learning process within the Programme uses various methods to meet student needs and help them achieve the intended learning outcomes. Study forms include contact classes such as lectures, seminars, practical sessions, and consultations, which constitute 27.3% of the students' workload. The remainder is allocated to non-contact work, including independent study (SER, p. 43). Teaching methods aim to develop students' critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. These methods include group discussions, presentations, and problem-based learning. Some courses also use approaches such as the flipped classroom and peer-review to increase student participation (SER, p. 43). The cumulative assessment system supports continuous learning, and students receive regular feedback on their progress (SER, p. 44; Appendices 4 & 12). Students complete individual assignments such as written work and research papers. Teachers provide feedback and monitor progress through in-person and online consultations (SER, p. 45). The Programme offers flexibility through individual learning plans, which can be tailored to align with students' academic interests (SER, p. 46). Graduate opportunities are available, with students encouraged to pursue doctoral studies in fields like philosophy, ethnology, and sociology. The Programme prepares students with general and subject-specific competences relevant to further studies (SER, p. 47; Meeting with SER team; Meeting with teaching staff).

4.1.2. Access to higher education for socially vulnerable groups and students with individual needs is ensured.

VU has implemented measures to ensure that socially vulnerable groups and students with special needs have access to the study process. In 2020, the university adopted a five-year Diversity and Equal Opportunities Strategy (2020-2025), which outlines the objectives related to disability, gender equality, cultural diversity, social exclusion, and balancing study and personal commitments. The strategy also includes anti-discrimination policies aimed at supporting socially vulnerable groups. The study process is adapted for students with special needs through various mechanisms. These include the provision of individual study plans, compensatory equipment, and consultations for both students and teaching staff on accessibility issues. The Disability Affairs Coordinator plays a key role in this process by analysing the needs of students with disabilities and coordinating appropriate study conditions. Students can submit specialist recommendations, and based on those, the university develops individualised study plans, which can include adaptations such as extended time for assessments, accessible study materials, or timetable adjustments (Meeting with students). While these support mechanisms are in place, there were no students with disabilities enrolled in the Programme during the evaluation period (SER, p. 46-47).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 4.1.)

The teaching and learning process within the Programme is well-structured, utilizing a combination of contact classes, independent work, and innovative methods such as flipped classrooms and peer reviews. These methods foster critical thinking, analytical skills, and independent problem-solving. The continuous assessment system provides regular feedback, helping students refine their skills throughout their studies. While the Programme offers strong theoretical foundations and key

competences, feedback from alumni and employers has highlighted the need to better align academic skills with practical professional abilities (Meeting with alumni, employers, and social partners). To better prepare students for non-academic roles, there is a need to introduce more opportunities for practical application, such as internships or applied projects, as well as expand the use of digital learning resources. Additionally, the Programme currently lacks sufficient career guidance for students pursuing non-academic careers, as well as a strong alumni network to support professional development. Expanding career guidance and strengthening alumni connections would significantly enhance students' transition to the job market and better equip them for diverse career paths.

The Programme demonstrates a commitment to inclusion through individualized study plans and compensatory measures for students facing challenges. While the Programme effectively builds key academic competences, greater emphasis on practical skills and career support is necessary to fully meet the goal of preparing students for professional life. Enhanced engagement with social partners and alumni could also help bridge the gap between academic training and non-academic career preparedness, as noted by alumni and employers.

4.2. There is an effective and transparent system for student assessment, progress monitoring, and assuring academic integrity

FACTUAL SITUATION

4.2.1. Monitoring of learning progress and feedback to students to promote self-assessment and learning progress planning is systematic

Student progress in the Programme is monitored at various levels, including individual course units, year-level performance, and overall Programme outcomes. At the course level, a cumulative assessment system is in place, providing feedback throughout the semester. The university's virtual learning environment (VLE) is used for students to track their progress and receive feedback from teachers (SER, p. 48). At the year level, the Study Programme Committee (SPC) and the Study Department oversee student progress by monitoring average grades and identifying performance patterns. Any trends, such as consistent grade variations, are reviewed to assess whether adjustments to the curriculum or teaching methods are needed (SER, p. 48). Support is available for students facing academic challenges. The Student Affairs Office (SACO) manages a drop-out prevention plan, offering academic support and counselling services to students identified as being at risk. Students are informed of available resources, such as academic advisors and career counsellors (SER, p. 49). This system provides a structured approach to monitoring student progress and incorporating feedback to maintain the quality of the study process (Meeting with SER team; Meeting with students).

4.2.2. Graduate employability and career are monitored

In the Programme, students receive consistent feedback throughout their studies to support self-assessment and guide their planning of further study progress. The feedback system is integrated into both individual assignments and overall course evaluations. Teachers provide feedback during and after assignments, highlighting strengths, areas for improvement, and offering recommendations for supplementary study materials. Students are encouraged to reflect on their performance and use this feedback to plan their next steps (SER, p. 48). Feedback is delivered through multiple channels, including written comments on assignments, individual and group consultations, and communication via the university's virtual learning environment (VLE). Students can also seek additional clarification or follow-up feedback if needed. Feedback is given not only on final assessments but also on interim tasks, promoting continuous engagement and self-reflection (SER, p. 49). The use of cumulative assessments ensures that students receive feedback at different stages of their learning process, enabling them to adjust their efforts and improve progressively. This system supports students in planning their study progress based on the feedback they receive (SER, p. 48).

4.2.3. Policies to ensure academic integrity, tolerance, and non-discrimination are implemented

Graduate employability and career tracking in the Programme is conducted through two main sources: the Career Tracking Information System (karjera.lt) and data from the Government's Strategic Analysis Centre (STRATA). The system tracks objective indicators related to graduates' employment from state registers, as well as subjective data collected from graduate surveys, which are conducted one, three, and five years after graduation (SER, p. 50). According to STRATA data, more than 50% of second-cycle Religious Studies graduates were employed on a contractual basis one year after VU's internal data for the last three years shows that in 2020, 66% of graduates pursued doctoral studies, while 33% found employment. By 2021, all graduates were employed, with one continuing their doctoral studies. In 2022, 100% of graduates were employed (SER, p. 50). Graduate career opinions are also collected, although participation in surveys has been low, limiting the representativeness of the data. VU continues to explore ways to increase participation in these surveys to gain more accurate feedback on employability and satisfaction with the training provided by the Programme (SER, p. 50).

4.2.4. Procedures for submitting and processing appeals and complaints are effective

VU has implemented policies to ensure academic integrity, tolerance, and non-discrimination. These principles are based on the university's foundational documents, including the Code of Academic Ethics and the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Strategy 2020-2025. The principles aim to foster mutual respect, openness, and trust within the academic community. They cover issues such as academic honesty, the prevention of cheating, plagiarism, and ensuring an inclusive academic environment (SER, p. 51). Cases of academic integrity violations, including breaches related to tolerance or discrimination, are handled by the Academic Ethics Commissions. These commissions operate at both central and faculty levels, and their procedures are regulated by VU's internal rules. Any student who violates academic ethics may face consequences, including reprimands or expulsion. During the assessment period, there were no reported cases of academic dishonesty or violations of tolerance and non-discrimination principles in the Programme (SER, p. 52). The university also offers a confidential helpline where students and staff can report violations of these principles and receive support from psychologists and legal professionals. This measure is intended to further strengthen the culture of integrity and tolerance within the academic environment (SER, p. 51).

4.2.5. 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.

VU provides clear procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints regarding the study process. Students who wish to appeal their final grades must submit a written request to the Dispute Resolution Commission within seven calendar days of the final assessment. Appeals related to the interim assessment or final thesis defence can also be lodged within three working days after the assessment or defence. The Dispute Resolution Commission is responsible for addressing these complaints and its decisions are final. In the case of more complex complaints related to research or study activities, students may submit applications to the Central Dispute Resolution Commission. Applications must be submitted within one month of the alleged violation or the time it became known. The Commission may extend this time frame in exceptional circumstances if it determines that serious reasons prevented the timely submission of the complaint (SER, p. 52). During the last three years, there have been no recorded cases of appeals or complaints within the Programme, indicating that the established procedures are functioning effectively without generating significant disputes (SER, p. 52).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 4.2.)

The system for monitoring student progress in the Programme is well-structured, providing consistent feedback through cumulative assessments and the virtual learning environment (VLE), enabling students to self-assess and plan their academic progress. The Study Programme Committee (SPC) and the Study Department track performance trends, allowing for timely adjustments to the curriculum as needed. Graduate employability is monitored through both external (STRATA) and internal systems, with many graduates continuing their studies in doctoral programmes. The Programme demonstrates strong policies on academic integrity, tolerance, and non-discrimination, with no reported violations during the evaluation period. Continuing to raise awareness of these policies would help ensure that all students remain fully informed. The appeals and complaints procedures are clearly documented, and the absence of recorded cases over the last three years suggests a stable study environment.

Overall, the system is effective, but improvements in student engagement with feedback, participation in graduate and employer surveys, and promoting academic integrity policies could further enhance outcomes. While student progress is effectively monitored in terms of academic performance, the Programme should also place greater emphasis on encouraging and supporting student participation in research activities, as highlighted in Area 2. The relatively low student involvement in research indicates that more structured opportunities and support systems may be needed to foster greater student engagement, particularly in research fields aligned with their career aspirations.

AREA 4: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle			X		

COMMENDATIONS

- The Programme effectively combines contact classes, independent work, and innovative teaching methods to foster critical thinking and analytical skills.*
- A well-structured system for monitoring student progress, including cumulative assessments and VLE, ensures consistent feedback throughout the study cycle.*
- The Programme demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusion and academic integrity, with policies in place to support all students and no reported violations during the evaluation period.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

- Introduce more practical learning opportunities, such as internships and applied projects, along with expanded digital resources, to better align academic competences with professional skills.*
- Enhance career guidance by providing tailored workshops, engaging with social partners, and building a stronger alumni network to support student transitions to the job market.*
- Increase structured research opportunities to encourage greater student participation in research, particularly in fields aligned with their career interests.*

For further improvement

1. *Improve student engagement with feedback by offering more structured follow-up to help students apply it for academic and professional development.*
2. *Boost participation in graduate and employer surveys to gather more comprehensive data on employability and satisfaction for future Programme enhancements.*

AREA 5: TEACHING STAFF

5.1. Teaching staff is adequate to achieve learning outcomes

FACTUAL SITUATION

5.1.1. The number, qualification, and competence (scientific, didactic, professional) of teaching staff is sufficient to achieve learning outcomes

Certification of the research and the teaching staff is carried out every five years by a (international) commission. Teachers are certified by assessing the number of research articles they published, their participation in conferences, leading research, lecturing, preparation of methodological material, participation in the process of doctoral studies, supervision of students' research, serving as experts, and organizational and other scholarly work. Student feedback on the work of the teaching staff is also considered (SER, p. 54).

As of 2020, CAUs organize annual individual interviews of the teaching staff with the head of the institute to discuss their performance (achievements, problems, goals, etc.). In addition, the Vice-Dean for Studies conducts annual interviews with the chairpersons of the Programme (SER, p. 54).

The Programme is run by the teaching staff, whose academic interests and qualifications ensure high-quality delivery of the Programme. At the time of SER preparation, the Programme is taught by seven teaching staff (two men and five women). 100 % of the teaching staff have a PhD, and their research interests and activities are related to the topics of the modules they teach (for an overview of the teaching staff compliance with the general requirements for second cycle Programmes, see Tables 16 and 17 (SER, p. 55f.)). Appendix 7 offers a list of the permanent teaching staff of the Programme, indicating their pedagogical and/or scientific degree, their pedagogical work experience, research interests (listing 3 major works over the last 5 years), practical work experience in the subject field, the modules taught, and the current workload. According to Table 14 (SER, p. 54f.) the average staff-student ratio over the period under review is 1,85.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 5.1.)

The students and graduates commended the expertise of the teaching staff. All of them have a PhD and are experts in their teaching field. The Appendices 7 and 10 rev. show that the teachers have published regularly and recently in their field of expertise, and the required reading for each course is relevant, up-to-date, and of good (international) quality. This demonstrates that the qualification and competence of the teaching staff is more than sufficient to teach the courses of the Programme.

Yet, every teacher is focused on his or her own (specialized) course, so there is little interdisciplinary teaching on the Programme level, even though this is one of its most important aims. This means it is up to the students to make the links between the contents and methodologies of the modules. The students did not complain about this, probably because they are involved in their monodisciplinary field of research, as the titles of their theses show (see Appendix 5).

The students also commended the teachers' commitment to the learning success of the students. Because the study backgrounds of the students are very diverse and because most of them do not have a BA in philosophy, theology, or religious studies, they regularly need individualized support to catch up with deficiencies in these disciplines. The teachers are most willing to provide the students with this information. The students also appreciated teachers' mentoring in preparing their final theses. Because of the very low staff-student ratio this labour-intensive approach is feasible, but the flipside is that the coherence and academic level of the Programme are jeopardized as the interests and needs of individual students risk becoming the (only) driving force of the Programme. This is evidenced by the interviews with the Teaching Staff and the students, and the topics of several theses (see Appendix 5).

As Appendix 10 rev. shows, the teachers use a variety of teaching and assessment methods. To develop and further improve these methods, they are assisted by the Centre of Educational Competence of VU, which offers several programmes in this domain (SER, 58f.).

5.2. Teaching staff is ensured opportunities to develop competences, and they are periodically evaluated

FACTUAL SITUATION

5.2.1. Opportunities for academic mobility of teaching staff are ensured

According to SER, p. 56, the teaching staff of the Programme usually make use of the opportunities provided by the Erasmus + exchange programme Learning Mobility of Individuals. Visits within the frameworks of the programmes are funded through the EU funds allocated specifically for these programmes. The international relations coordinators are constantly informing the teaching staff about the exchange opportunities, consulting them, and providing organisational support.

The funds to support these educational initiatives are earmarked each year in the VU budget for the current year. Project-based activities financed from the EU funds distributed by the Research Council of Lithuania or other external institutions financing research and other activities also provide opportunities for exchange visits, which are willingly used by the teaching staff. Their objectives and duration are determined by the nature of the project. The CAUs that run the SPs of the field create favourable conditions for project-based activities and visits needed for their implementation. The teaching staff are informed about the possibilities of such activities and internships by the project coordinator, who also advises on project preparation and the organisation of the visits, and provides organisational and administrative assistance.

Project-based activities, especially in cooperation with other Lithuanian universities, create wider opportunities to invite researchers working in third countries to give lectures and seminars in the Programmes of the field. Table 18 (SER, p. 57) offers a summary of the teaching staff mobility over the period 2020-2023, and Table 19 (SER, p. 58) gives an overview of the foreign lecturers who delivered lectures in the Programme.

5.2.2. Opportunities for the development of the teaching staff are ensured

In 2018, VU started developing a system for the improvement of the pedagogical competences of the teaching staff. Therefore, the pedagogical competences that every VU teaching staff member must possess

have been described and approved in the Vilnius University Regulations. Aligned with these Regulations, the assessment of pedagogical competences of the teaching staff has been introduced in competitions for positions and during certifications.

The Regulations of VU stipulate the pursuit of academic excellence as one of the most important professional values of the teaching and research staff. The competence development system of the teaching staff operates at several levels. The Centre of Educational Competence of VU has been established to organise the development of pedagogical competences of the teaching staff. It periodically organises a programme for the development of basic pedagogical competences, as well as an introduction programme for new VU teaching staff, and a programme for the development of pedagogical competences.

The training programmes focus on the competences formed by the modules, coherence of studies and assessment methods, development of diversity and equal opportunities at the University, different teaching-and-learning methods and styles, strategies of assessing student achievement. The Centre responds proactively to new developments in the area of studies, and updates the programmes delivered.

Unfortunately, the teaching staff do not systematically record their participation in professional development events and training, but the analysis of the data provided in their CVs suggests their tendency to partake in new opportunities.

Surveys of the teaching staff who participated in educational competence development training show that they frequently emphasise the benefits and importance of communicating and cooperating with other lecturers as well as the opportunity to reflect on their learning experience.

It should be noted that from 2021 the teaching staff can get specific funding for updating and preparing modules to increase student engagement.

The teaching staff of the Programme improve their research competences mainly by participating in national and international conferences. They make presentations and expand their experience by listening to other presentations and participating in discussions. Participation in various projects in which team research is carried out, writing articles, participating in the work of editorial boards of scientific journals, and reviewing articles also help to improve this competence.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 5.2.)

VU has a well-functioning system of hiring, evaluating, and promoting academic staff, thereby considering their research as well as teaching performance. Furthermore, VU values and fosters academic mobility and the improvement of the teaching and research competences of the academic staff. The teachers confirmed that they receive earmarked funding, which enables them to participate in conferences abroad and ERASMUS+ exchanges, and to make research visits (for examples, see SER, p. 57, 60). The Programme also welcomes teachers from abroad to give guest lectures (SER, p. 58).

AREA 5: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle			X		

COMMENDATIONS

1. *Expertise and commitment of the teaching staff. The students commended the teaching staff for helping them out in case of knowledge deficiencies and mentoring them in preparing their final theses.*
2. *VU has a well-functioning system of hiring, evaluating, and promoting academic staff, and fosters their academic mobility and professional development.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. *The aims of the Programme require (more) interdisciplinary teaching. This can be realized through team teaching and/or revising the content of some courses.*

For further improvement

1. *The panel recommends expanding academic mobility to all teachers of the Programme.*

AREA 6: LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

6.1. Facilities, informational and financial resources are sufficient and enable achieving learning outcomes

FACTUAL SITUATION

6.1.1. Facilities, informational and financial resources are adequate and sufficient for an effective learning process

The Programme is located in the Faculty of Philosophy, in a historic building that was fully renovated in 2005. This building includes 12 lecture halls, 11 seminar rooms, and 2 computer labs, providing a total of 1,041 seats. Each room is equipped with basic technology, including computers, multimedia projectors, and WiFi (through Eduroam). Because of the Programme's small student body, students mostly use the seminar rooms, which create a more interactive and personalized environment. Several rooms also support hybrid learning, enabling both in-person and online participation, which adds flexibility to the learning process (SER, 61 p.).

Students and staff have access to an extensive range of informational resources. The Faculty's library has a specialized collection of over 7,000 titles focused on religion, philosophy, and related areas. Additionally, students can use the Central Library and the Scientific Communication and Information Center (SCIC), which is open 24/7. Together, these libraries offer more than 30,000 books and access to 92 digital databases, including JSTOR, Oxford Journals Online, Springer Link, and Academic Search Complete. These databases cover a broad range of academic journals and publications, giving students a strong foundation for research in religious studies.

Students and faculty also have access to specialized software that supports data analysis and academic projects. The software available includes SPSS Modeler and Statistics, MAXQDA (for qualitative data analysis), and Microsoft Dynamics, among others. These tools are available in the computer labs and can also be accessed remotely, allowing students to continue their work from home.

Financial resources are used to keep these facilities and resources up to date. The Faculty administration, together with Programme committees, reviews and updates resources regularly based on academic needs. Faculty members are consulted twice a year about the books and materials required for their courses. The "Suggest a Book" system further allows students and faculty to recommend new resources for purchase, ensuring that the library collection remains relevant and up-to-date with current academic trends.

6.1.2. There is continuous planning for and upgrading of resources.

The Faculty of Philosophy at Vilnius University follows a structured process for planning and upgrading resources for the Programme. This process involves regular coordination between the Faculty administration and the Programme committees to identify and address resource needs. Twice a year, faculty members review the materials required for their courses and submit requests for updates or additional resources as necessary. The Faculty also uses a "Suggest a Book" system, allowing both faculty and students to recommend new resources, ensuring the library remains up-to-date with current academic needs.

Financial resources for updating learning materials are allocated annually through the Faculty's budget, drawing from university funding, project activities, and other sources. Recent upgrades have included classroom renovations to support hybrid learning and updated technology for lectures and seminars. Additionally, specialized software licenses and database subscriptions are regularly renewed to support the program's evolving needs. This systematic approach helps maintain a high standard of learning resources and ensures that materials and equipment align with the latest academic requirements.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 6.1.)

The Programme demonstrates a well-organized approach to providing learning resources and facilities that effectively meet students' academic needs. The thoughtfully renovated spaces and the range of technological and informational resources available create a supportive and flexible learning environment. The Programme's resources are responsive to changing academic needs, with regular updates based on faculty and student input, ensuring that both physical and digital materials remain relevant and accessible. Additionally, the Programme's commitment to accessibility, as seen in the support for hybrid learning and adaptive technology, underscores its dedication to inclusivity.

The Faculty of Philosophy has a well-organized approach to resource planning and upgrading that supports the academic goals of the Programme. Regular collaboration between the administration and faculty ensures that resource needs are promptly identified and addressed, while the twice-yearly reviews allow for timely updates to course materials. The "Suggest a Book" system further adds flexibility, enabling the library to respond quickly to new resource requests from both students and faculty. Financial planning appears robust, with annual allocations for library resources, classroom technology, and software licenses, which help sustain the program's quality.

AREA 6: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle				X	

COMMENDATIONS

1. *The Religious Studies Programme provides access to modernized facilities and 24/7 study spaces, supporting both traditional and hybrid learning.*
2. *Regular resource reviews and the "Suggest a Book" system ensure that library and academic materials stay relevant and aligned with current academic needs.*

AREA 7: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

- 7.1. The development of the field of study is based on an internal quality assurance system involving all stakeholders and continuous monitoring, transparency and public information

FACTUAL SITUATION

7.1.1. Internal quality assurance system for the programmes is effective

According to SER, p. 66f, the study quality assurance system at VU is implemented in accordance with the relevant standards and guidelines for quality assurance. The main responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with the Study Programme Committee (SPC, for its composition, see Appendix 8). The activities of this Committee are supervised by the VU Department for the Quality and Development of Studies.

Meetings of the SPC are held when necessary and at least once per semester. One of the SPC's main tasks is to improve the Programme to achieve coherence between the aims, competences, content, methods, and student performance assessment of the Programme, and its relevance and competitiveness. The SPC also analyses student, graduate, teaching staff, and social partner feedback about the Programme and discusses how to improve it. Finally, the SPC participates in the preparation and approval of relevant documents (e.g., course descriptions), and evaluates competences acquired by students through other programmes.

In 2021, the SPC prepared a programme improvement plan and a progress report, which were discussed and approved in March 2022. In December 2023, substantial changes to the Programme were approved, consisting of the adjustment of the Programme's outcomes/results, the transition from 6 to 5 credits, moving more modules from compulsory to optional, changing the Programme grid to include more religious studies modules (The Bible as an Anthro-po-theological Narrative, History of Christianity, The Concept of Divinity in Classical Antiquity, Sociology of Religion, Religion and Crime) for the 2024-2025 admission (SER, p. 68).

7.1.2. Involvement of stakeholders (students and others) in internal quality assurance is effective

According to SER, p. 68, social partners are involved in ensuring the quality and integrity of the Programme: 1) by helping to identify market needs in terms of competences and learning outcomes, providing suggestions on the modules to be taught; 2) by participating in the thesis defence commissions, social partners ensure that students are asked questions related to the competences required in the labour market, suggest topics for future theses, and in particular 3) by taking part in the organisation and implementation of student placements. During the practical training, the representatives of social partners consult students and assess their performance; 4) by giving lectures or conducting seminars to students. The work of social partners in the SPC enables students to see and get to know them, and for the social partners to contribute to the learning outcomes. The SPC informs the social partners about all changes in the SP design.

Social partners and alumni of the Programme contribute to publicizing it on social media and in their circle of friends. The alumni are also included in the quality assurance of the Programme.

7.1.3. Information on the programmes, their external evaluation, improvement processes, and outcomes is collected, used and made publicly available

The VU Study Information System (VUSIS) comprises a.o. the student administration application, enabling authorized staff to review and edit the students' personal data, their assessments in the modules, registration for optional courses, the topics of final theses. VUSIS also informs students about the results of their applications, final evaluations, etc. All student-related decrees are generated by the VUSIS, and this system also contains information about admission and statistics about students and

their studies. Teaching staff can enter exam results, upload course descriptions, and consult lists of students studying a particular module.

The results of study assessment are published on the vu.lt page, on the internal page of the University, and in VUSIS. Plans for the improvement of the Programme and progress reports are planned to be published on the intranet, thus providing students with this information.

7.1.4. Student feedback is collected and analysed

Information on the quality of studies and feedback from stakeholders is systematically collected to improve the quality of the Programme. Student surveys comprise: 1. a survey of the quality of each studied module (at the end of each semester); 2. a survey of the quality of semester studies (at the end of each semester); 3. a survey of first-year students on the admission process, the reasons for choosing studies and expectations (during the first semester); 4. a survey of final year students about the Programme, the quality of its implementation and studying conditions (at the end of the last semester of the final year). Detailed results of the surveys are published and available to all VU staff; 5. a survey of students in internship placements; 6. a survey of incoming and outgoing exchange students and their exchange programmes (SER, p. 69f.).

The survey of graduates on the competences acquired during their studies and their establishment in the labour market is conducted 12, 36 and 60 months after graduation. Unfortunately, the low participation of graduates does not allow the SCP to get representative data and make statistical generalisations.

SER, p. 70f. gives an overview of the student surveys in this Programme in the years 2020-2023. 21 out of 38 students (55.62%) answered the surveys. 18 students answered questions about:

- quality of the content of the studied modules (all 100% stated that they were satisfied with it);
- satisfaction with the teaching quality of the modules (94.44% answered strongly Yes, rather yes - 5.56%);
- whether they were generally satisfied with their studies at VU (88.89% answered strongly Yes, rather yes - 11.11%);
- whether they were encouraged to express their opinions (94.44% answered strongly Yes, 5.56% - rather yes);
- whether they were encouraged to independently research and analyze various problems (100% answered strongly Yes)
- whether they were assigned tasks that developed critical thinking (88.89% answered strongly Yes, 11.11% rather yes).

5 students answered the question about whether they were satisfied with the English language skills of the teachers during the semester (40% of those who answered chose strongly Yes, 60% stated that they did not have an English module that semester). Finally, 21 students answered the question of whether they would recommend their studies to relatives, friends, and acquaintances (95.24% would recommend, 4.76% would not recommend). When asked to comment on why they would recommend the Programme, the students emphasized the high quality of studies and teaching, the professionalism of the teachers, respect for students' opinions and the subject itself, the promotion of independent research, and also singled out the Programme as having no analogue in Lithuania.

Twice per study year, VU conducts a centralised survey of first- and second-cycle students

1) About specific modules. This survey uses a university-scale recommended questionnaire on a particular module. In it, students can express their opinions on studies anonymously, including their opinions on specific modules. The teaching staff are directly provided with the feedback on the course units they teach; the chair of the SPC is directly provided with the feedback on all course units; the CAUs administration receives feedback on all modules taught at a particular CAU.

2) About overall satisfaction with the studies of a particular semester. Detailed survey results about the Programme are published on the intranet of VU. These data are used: by the operators of the Programme for the improvement of the Programme, and by the SPC for continuous quality assurance.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 7.1.)

VU has a professional and performant system of quality assurance, which involves all relevant partners (teaching staff, students, graduates, and social partners/employers) in this process. The quality management of this Programme is well-meaning, as the interview with the SER-team showed, but lacks effectiveness. In 2021, the previous evaluation panel strongly recommended the Management to restructure the Programme (EER 2021, p. 14, 36, SER, p. 24). The panel welcomes the intended changes, which are also supported by the teaching staff and the students. Yet, the panel finds it incomprehensible and actually unacceptable that it took three years to implement the most important changes (the fact that no students were enrolled in 2024-2025 implies that the implementation of these changes will be delayed by another year). Inevitably, the slowness of this process has a negative impact on student enrolment and jeopardizes the viability and sustainability of the Programme, as was noted during the panel's interviews with the Faculty management, the teaching staff, and the students.

SER, p. 68 gives an overview of the involvement of the stakeholders (students and social partners) in the internal quality assurance of the Programme. As far as the students are concerned, this involvement is certainly effective. The students are very positive about the content of the Programme and the quality of the teachers. They also deem that their critical remarks about the Programme, in particular their plea for less theology and more religious studies, have been taken into account and resulted in changing the balance between these two disciplines. This shows that the Programme management effectively collects and analyses student feedback. SER, p. 70f. summarizes the student surveys during the period 2020-2023. These data show that the students were very content with the quality and contents of the Programme, the quality of their teachers, and the ways in which they were encouraged to actively participate in the courses. These overall positive evaluations from the recent past were confirmed by the interviews with the currently enrolled students.

However, the social partners and the employers are hardly involved in the Programme since they don't have a formal input in it. This is no surprise because the core of this Programme is theoretical (the Programme has no practical component, let alone an internship), and the overall majority of the graduates embark on a PhD project; these two factors inevitably imply that the connections of the Programme with the world outside the academia are weak. The description of the involvement of the stakeholders in the quality assurance of the Programme (SER, p. 68) is certainly correct on the level of VU but it does not reflect the reality of the Religious Studies Programme.

AREA 7: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 1	Negative - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
Second cycle		X			

COMMENDATIONS

- The students evaluate the content of the Programme, the expertise and commitment of the teaching staff, and the encouragement they get to participate actively in the Programme very positively.*
- VU has a professional and performant system of internal quality assurance.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. *The programme management lacks effectiveness*
2. *The Programme should increase alumni feedback to improve representation in follow-up surveys.*

For further improvement

1. *The Programme urgently needs a stronger connection with the social partners and employers*
2. *The Programme should establish defined roles for social partners in the feedback process.*

V. SUMMARY

The interdisciplinary and non-confessional character of the Programme corresponds with the needs of Lithuanian society. However, the Programme lacks an empirical and practical side, which explains why its links with the labour market outside the academia are weak. Moreover, the Programme has an insufficient focus and balance: everyone (teachers, students, and graduates) seems to have a different conception of the aims and strengths of the Programme. Another evidence of the lack of focus is the topics of the final theses, which in several cases do not align with the interdisciplinary and non-confessional character of the Programme. At the level of the individual modules, the teaching/learning and assessment methods are aligned to the learning outcomes of the Programme, but the panel found it difficult to evaluate the design of the Programme as a whole due to serious deficiencies of the SER. All in all, the panel deems this Programme not sustainable because of its insufficient focus and balance between theoretical and empirical/practical modules, its weak links with the labour market, and its consistently very low student numbers.

The individual teachers make a strong effort to integrate their latest research into their courses. Furthermore, the support for student research skill development through seminars, public lectures, and workshops is a positive feature of the Programme. However, the focus on specific areas of teaching staff expertise may limit the diversity of research opportunities available to students, particularly those with interests in the sociology and anthropology of religion. Many students entering the Programme lack exposure to the specific methodologies used in fields such as philosophy, history, and religious studies, making it more difficult for them to adapt to the research demands of the Programme. A formal research methodology course earlier in the curriculum would provide a shared foundation, ensuring that all students, regardless of their undergraduate studies, have the necessary skills to engage with complex research tasks and successfully complete their theses. The Programme benefits from the research quality of the teachers and their international collaborations and external partnerships but this seems to benefit primarily the teaching staff. Expanding these collaborations to directly involve students in international research networks could significantly enhance the research experience for students.

The revised admission criteria aim to simplify the enrollment process and attract a broader range of applicants. Yet, the lack of specific prerequisites in philosophy or religious studies presents challenges in achieving consistent academic preparedness for the advanced academic expectations of the students. Given the Programme's research-oriented design, intended as a pathway to doctoral research, there appears to be insufficient attention to assessing the suitability of students during the admission process. The consequence is that, without a common baseline, the teaching staff may struggle to effectively teach advanced material.

VU's recognition process for foreign qualifications, partial studies, and prior learning is clear, accessible, and aligned with international standards, supporting students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, VU provides sufficient resources and partnerships to support academic mobility. The interview with the students confirmed that the university's support services are broad and well-structured, addressing diverse student needs effectively. Academic mentoring and accessible counselling services create a supportive environment conducive to both personal and academic success. Overall, the range of support services and the information and counselling provided by VU are strong assets, contributing positively to the student experience in the Programme.

The teaching and learning process within the Programme is well-structured, utilizing a combination of contact classes, independent work, and innovative methods such as flipped classrooms and peer reviews. These methods foster critical thinking, analytical skills, and independent problem-solving. The continuous assessment system provides regular feedback, helping students refine their skills throughout their studies. The Programme demonstrates a commitment to inclusion through individualized study plans and compensatory measures for students facing challenges. The system for monitoring student progress in the Programme is well-structured, providing consistent feedback enabling students to self-assess and plan their academic progress. Graduate employability is monitored through both external and internal systems. The Programme demonstrates strong policies

on academic integrity, tolerance, and non-discrimination, with no reported violations during the evaluation period.

All members of the teaching staff have a PhD and are experts in their teaching field. They have published regularly and recently in their field of expertise, and the required reading for each course is relevant, up-to-date, and of good (international) quality. Because most students do not have a BA in philosophy, theology, or religious studies, they regularly need individualized support to catch up with deficiencies in these disciplines, and the teachers are most willing to provide the students with this information. The flipside is that the coherence and academic level of the Programme are jeopardized as the interests and needs of individual students risk becoming the (only) driving force of the Programme.

VU has a well-functioning system of hiring, evaluating, and promoting academic staff, thereby considering their research as well as teaching performance. Furthermore, VU values and fosters academic mobility and the improvement of the teaching and research competences of the academic staff.

The Programme demonstrates a well-organized approach to providing learning resources and facilities that effectively meet students' academic needs. The thoughtfully renovated spaces and the range of technological and informational resources available create a supportive and flexible learning environment. The Programme's resources are responsive to changing academic needs. Additionally, the Programme's commitment to accessibility, as seen in the support for hybrid learning and adaptive technology, underscores its dedication to inclusivity.

VU has a professional and performant system of quality assurance, which involves all relevant partners in this process. However, the quality management of the Programme lacks effectiveness. In 2021, the previous evaluation panel strongly recommended the Management restructure the Programme. The panel welcomes the intended changes, but the panel finds it incomprehensible and actually unacceptable that it took three years to implement the most important changes.

Student feedback demonstrates that the students were very content with the quality and contents of the Programme, the quality of their teachers, and the ways in which they were encouraged to actively participate in the courses.

VI. EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE

Examples of excellence should include examples exhibiting exceptional characteristics that are, implicitly, not achievable by all.

1. *The research qualities and performance of the teachers ensure the courses' high academic quality.*
2. *International collaborations provide valuable opportunities for the teaching staff to engage with global academic networks and enrich the Programme's academic environment.*
3. *VU has a well-functioning system of hiring, evaluating, and promoting academic staff, and fosters their academic mobility and professional development.*