



CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EVALUATION REPORT
STUDY FIELD of PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
at Vilnius University

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Study Field Data

Title of the study programme	<i>Public Administration</i>	<i>Public Governance</i>
State code	6121LX057	6211LX078
Type of studies	University studies	University studies
Cycle of studies	First cycle	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	Full time (3.5 years), part-time (5 years)	Full-time (1.5 years), part-time (2 years)
Credit volume	210	90
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Bachelor's degree in public administration	Master's degree in public administration
Language of instruction	Lithuanian	Lithuanian
Minimum education required	Secondary education	
Registration date of the study programme	16/06/2000	02/03/2012

Title of the study programme	<i>Regional Development and Governance*</i>
State code	6281LX004
Type of studies	University studies
Cycle of studies	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	Full-time (2 years)
Credit volume	120
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Master's degree in public administration
Language of instruction	English
Minimum education required	
Registration date of the study programme	04/06/2014

* **joint** study programme, implemented together with Pardubice University (Czech Republic)

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel was assigned according to the Experts Selection Procedure as approved by the Director of Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education on 31 December 2019 [Order No. V-149](#). The site visit to the HEI was conducted by the panel on 26 May, 2022.

Dr. Christine Leitner (panel chairperson), Senior Advisor, Centre for Economics and Public Administration (London, UK), and Senior Policy Advisor, Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs, Austria;

Dr. Egert Juuse, Research Fellow, Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance, School of Business and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia;

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Daniel Klimovský, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia;

Prof. Dr. Benedikt Speer, Berlin School of Economics and Law, Germany;

Dr. Ieva Lazarevičiūtė (social partner), independent expert, Lithuania;

Mr. Rimvydas Burba (student representative), graduate of Master's programme "Diplomacy and International Relations" at Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania.

1.3. GENERAL INFORMATION

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

No.	Name of the document
1.	Statistics on quality assurance system (methods; frequency; response rates; change in evaluation results)
2.	Statistics on the dissemination of the quality assurance measures implementation (statistics on the access and use of social networks and other channels)
3.	Public Administration field teachers' publications 2020 (and 2021) lists
4.	Communication and marketing plan following the revision of the first and second cycle study programmes
5.	Data on appeals/complaints (exams, thesis, etc.)
6.	Data on cases related to discriminatory practices
7.	Documentation regarding specialisation
8.	Documentation on the internship guidelines for bachelor level
9.	A list of elective courses offered and a list of elective courses actually taught
10.	A list of grant schemes where the teaching staff submitted their applications in the observed period (2018-2021)
11.	Statistics about the child care room
12.	Results of defended thesis of "Regional Development and Governance" in 2018-2021
13.	Structure of the updated bachelor degree study programme "Public Administration and Law" (that will start at September, 2022)

1.4. BACKGROUND OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FIELD STUDIES AT VILNIUS

UNIVERSITY ŠIAULIAI ACADEMY

Vilnius University (hereinafter - VU), established in 1579, is the oldest and largest public higher education institution in Lithuania. According to the Statutes, the main governing bodies are the Senate, the Council, and the Rector. Based on the data of 1 October 2021, there were 5317 employees (2424 teaching staff, 804 research staff, 2089 non-academic staff) and 23,374 students. Since 1 January 2021, the University has had 15 core academic units (hereinafter, CAUs - 11 faculties, 1 institute, 1 centre, 1 business school, and 1 academy) and 12 core non-academic units. VU boasts 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 and integrated study programmes as well as 110 master and professional study programmes are offered in 12 study field groups and 60 study fields.

The studies in the field of Public Administration are carried out at Šiauliai Academy (hereinafter - CAU, ŠA), which started its activities on 1 January, 2021, after the merger of Šiauliai University (hereinafter - ŠU) with Vilnius University. ŠU was a classical university, which acquired the status of a university in 1997, with all three levels of university study

programmes, formal and non-formal in-service training and retraining programmes, and research in the humanities, social sciences, physics, technology, biomedical sciences, and the arts. At VU, CAU ŠA operates in accordance with the Statute of Vilnius University and the regulations of Šiauliai Academy. The main governing bodies of the CAU are the Council and the Director, as well as the College of Studies, which plays an advisory role. Currently, the CAU has 2 institutes (Institute of Regional Development, Institute of Education) and 2 centres (Lifelong Learning Centre, Šiauliai Open Access Centre) carrying out research and studies in the respective field. The main research fields are ecology, informatics, engineering, mathematics, social sciences, health sciences, humanities, business and public management. The CAU has 224 employees: 120 teachers (22 professors, 39 associate professors, 9 assistants, 50 lecturers), 15 researchers (4 chief researchers, 5 senior researchers, 3 researchers, 3 junior researchers), 89 non-academic employees, 12 of whom are heads of departments and administrative staff. Currently, 1061 students and 213 unclassified students study at CAU ŠA.

CAU ŠA implements three programmes in the study field under evaluation: 1 first cycle study programme “Public Administration” and two second cycle study programmes - “Public Governance” and “Regional Development and Governance”, which is a joint study programme with Pardubice University in the Czech Republic. It also offers bridging courses of 30 and 60 credits of Public Administration studies for those who want to study in master’s degree studies after non-university studies and studies in other fields. Doctoral studies in the field of Management are also being carried out (until 2021 - a consortium of Vytautas Magnus University with Klaipėda University, Aleksandras Stulginskis University, Mykolas Romeris University and Šiauliai University, since 2021 the rights of ŠU are taken over by Vilnius University, and since September 2021, it has become possible for CAU ŠA teachers to supervise doctoral students who have entered the Faculty of Economics and Management of Vilnius University).

The first cycle study programme “Public Administration” was externally evaluated in 2013, and the second cycle study programmes “Public Governance” and “Regional Development and Governance” were externally evaluated in 2016. They all received a positive evaluation that resulted in accreditation of a maximum term of six years (note: joint study programme “Regional Development and Governance” in the Czech Republic was accredited in 2019 for 7 years (until 2025)).

II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Public Administration study field and *first cycle* at Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy is given **positive** evaluation.

Study field and cycle assessment in points by evaluation areas

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation of an Area in points*
1.	Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	3
2.	Links between science (art) and studies	4
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	4
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Study quality management and public information	3
	Total:	24

*1 (unsatisfactory) - the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental shortcomings that prevent the implementation of the field studies.

2 (satisfactory) - the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated.

3 (good) - the area is being developed systematically, without any fundamental shortcomings.

4 (very good) - the area is evaluated very well in the national context and internationally, without any shortcomings;

5 (excellent) - the area is evaluated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally.

Public Administration study field and *second cycle* at Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy is given **positive** evaluation.

Study field and cycle assessment in points by evaluation areas

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation of an Area in points*
1.	Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	3
2.	Links between science (art) and studies	4
3.	Student admission and support	4
4.	Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	4
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Study quality management and public information	3
	Total:	25

*1 (unsatisfactory) - the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental shortcomings that prevent the implementation of the field studies.

2 (satisfactory) - the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated.

3 (good) - the area is being developed systematically, without any fundamental shortcomings.

4 (very good) - the area is evaluated very well in the national context and internationally, without any shortcomings;

5 (excellent) - the area is evaluated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally.

III. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

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

3.1.1. Evaluation of the conformity of the aims and outcomes of the field and cycle study programmes to the needs of the society and/or the labour market

VU indicates (SER, p. 8) that both undergraduate and graduate public administration programmes aim to train competent specialists of the public administration system, analysts with democratic values and moral values of public administration, able to create effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels as well as learn continuously. The key differences, as VU indicates, are in the scope and complexity of the programmes with the Master programme *Public Governance* offering higher level and more complex contents as compared to the Bachelor programme *Public Administration*.

The University also reports that in addition to the above mentioned aims the undergraduate programme includes innovative digital information and communication technologies, the formulation and implementation of investment projects, components that, if strongly embedded in the study process, could be considered as a competitive advantage compared to other public administration study programmes in the country..

The Master programme *Regional Development and Governance* also stands out due to its focus on training specialists in regional development and the formulation and implementation of regional development programmes. Finally, the programme offers a unique opportunity to study public governance and regional economics at two universities (in Lithuania and the Czech Republic).

Considering these objectives, the specialised focus of the Master programme *Regional Development and Governance* as well as the information provided by the Ministry of the Interior on the demand for analytical skills in Lithuanian Civil Service and the demand for trained civil servants in regional government institutions emphasised by the social partners, the expert panel considers that the aims and objectives of the study programmes are aligned with the needs of the society and labour market demands.

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

As outlined in the SER, the first cycle study programme *Public Administration* and the two second cycle study programmes *Public Governance* and *Regional Development and Governance* (joint study programme with Pardubice University) are aligned with the University's mission, objectives and strategy. Until January 1, 2021, before merging with VU, the aims and learning outcomes of the public administration field study programmes were coordinated with the ŠU strategic documents: Šiauliai University Strategy 2015–2020 (2015), which set out the University's mission to “promote innovation in the region and the country at an international level” and the main objectives “to improve the quality of study programmes and their relevance

to the needs of the labour market; to increase the possibilities of study availability, choice and individualization; to systematically increase the internationality of studies; to train competent specialists who can compete in the labour and research market, full-fledged humane personalities, to develop an innovative, civic, competitive community capable of integration into the regional, Lithuanian, European and world market". ŠU positioned itself as the leader of progress in the Northern Lithuania region and saw its contribution to the implementation of the objective to strengthen the capacity and competence of the civil service of Priority 3 *Effective Public Administration* of the Šiauliai Region Development Plan for 2014–2020. Following the merger with VU, all study programmes were reviewed. The programmes of the Public Administration study field were considered beneficial for the progress of the region and are in line with VU's long-term goals set out in the Vilnius University Strategic Plan 2021–2025 (2021), which aims to create value for society and the education of graduates capable of solving societal problems. In view of the strategic objectives, however, the relatively low student numbers (which is also referred to in other sections of the report) remains a matter of concern, in particular, considering the growing demand for public sector employees in Lithuania.

Taking the above into account, and having reviewed the content of the study programmes and related research activities in the field of Public Administration, the expert panel concludes that the study field and the aims and outcomes of the three study programmes are aligned with the mission, strategic objectives and activities of the University.

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

Table No. 1. Study Programme's *Public Administration* compliance to general requirements for first cycle study programmes

Criteria	Legal requirements	In the Programme
Scope of the programme in ECTS	180, 210 or 240 ECTS	210
ECTS for the study field	No less than 120 ECTS	170
ECTS for studies specified by University or optional studies	No more than 120 ECTS	15 (General University Studies) and 25 (optional courses)
ECTS for internship	No less than 15 ECTS	15
ECTS for final thesis (project)	No less than 15 ECTS	15
Contact hours	No less than 20% of learning	32%
Individual learning	No less than 30% of learning	68%

Table No. 2. Study Programmes' *Public Governance (PG)* and *Regional Development and Governance (RDG)* compliance to general requirements for second cycle study programmes

Criteria	Legal requirements	In the Programme
Scope of the programme in ECTS	90 or 120 ECTS	90 (PG) / 120 (RDG)
ECTS for the study field Information Services	No less than 60 ECTS	60 / 90
ECTS for studies specified by University or optional studies	No more than 30 ECTS	15 / 18
ECTS for final thesis (project)	No less than 30 ECTS	30
Contact hours	No less than 10% of learning	20% / 28%
Individual learning	No less than 50% of learning	80% / 72%

Study programmes on both study cycles meet the legal requirements and provisions stipulated in various legal acts of Lithuania. Learning outcomes meet the requirements set out in the Descriptor of the Study Field of Public Administration for BA and MA level programmes. The study modules consist of 5 or 10 study credits (in the first cycle programme *Public Administration* and the second cycle programme *Public Governance*) and 6 study credits (joint study programme *Regional Development and Governance*), which ensures that a student's workload is evenly distributed throughout the programme between single courses (1 ECTS equals to ca 26 hours of work) and proportionally equal between semesters. All three study programmes are sufficient in scope to achieve the expected degree outcomes. That said, the only shortcoming is the lack of using academic representatives from other HEIs in the thesis defence committees, when it comes to compliance to legal requirements.

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

The aims and learning outcomes of the first cycle study programme *Public Administration* as well as of the second cycle study programmes *Public Governance* and *Regional Development and Governance* (joint study programme) are exhaustively explained in the SER and the appendices 1 and 2. The division into general and subject related competences to be acquired by the students and their linkage to the respective learning outcomes is clear and stringent for all three study programmes. Appendix 2 illustrates the concrete study plans of the programmes and shows the distribution of learning outcomes for each study course. Their numbers vary considerably according to the scope and content of the subjects. For some courses with a comparatively high number of learning outcomes this might, however, raise the question how their concrete achievement is assessed in detail (e.g. programme *Public Administration*: „Strategic Governance in Public Sector“ = 9 learning outcomes; programme *Public Governance*: „Change Management and Leadership“ = 10 learning outcomes; programme *Regional Development and Governance*: „E-Governance and Democracy“ = 13 learning outcomes).

For all three study programmes, a semester-oriented nexus between learning outcomes and certain study/ assessment methods is presented in Appendix 3, which is nevertheless broad enough to allow for a considerable amount of discretion. The teaching staff, therefore, disposes of the necessary information and tools to revise regularly the study and assessment methods used to achieve the learning outcomes for the respective study courses. In this they are guided by Bloom's taxonomy and the principle to gradually implement more sophisticated problem-based methods over the course of the studies. The overall coordination is the responsibility of the Study Programme Committees, which ensure the equilibration between the modules of the study programmes. The expert panel concludes on this basis that the necessary mechanisms to ensure, revise and adapt the compatibility of aims, learning outcomes and methods are in place and well designed.

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

The first-cycle study programme *Public Administration* is structured by a complex modular framework, which combines subjects of General University Studies with core subjects of the study field, interdisciplinary subjects and specialisations. These are complemented by a practice phase. The thematic scope of the modules is broad and was apparently designed to offer first-cycle students a comprehensive overview of their study field. In this context, General University Studies as well as compulsory interdisciplinary subjects (e.g. psychology, sociology, micro- and macroeconomics) can be justified. Given the outstanding importance of the rule of law for public administration, it could however also be discussed to replace some of them with more law-oriented subjects (the modules „Law“ and „Public Administration Law“ – with the latter only being an elective! – could thus be revalued and complemented). Also up for discussion could be the value of the isolated foreign language module at the beginning of the studies, as specialised „Administrative English“ courses are to be found in many comparable programmes. Finally, the very limited number of electives - „Public Administration Law“ and „Strategic Governance in Public Sector“ – at the end of the studies doesn't allow for a well-grounded specialisation as they can't be deepened any further. Here an integration into the compulsory subjects (especially for „Public Administration Law“) or a higher number of electives at the expense of General University Studies or interdisciplinary subjects might be considered.

The subjects of the second-cycle study programme *Public Governance* are divided into three „blocks“ (public governance processes; public governance methods; deepening electives) and form the foundation of the fourth „block“, the Master's thesis. Given the scope of the programme (90 ECTS) and its multidimensional/ multidisciplinary character, the subjects seem to be suitably balanced to cover the broad thematic field of public governance. The number and thematic alignment of the electives is adequate for such a programme. The same applies basically for the joint second-cycle study programme *Regional Development and Governance* with the difference that less ECTS are allocated for the electives. While the number and thematic alignment of the electives seems also to be adequate, it is therefore of utmost importance for a consistent specialisation of the students that all of them are regularly available in practice, as each student can only choose one elective per semester. This can become especially problematic when low student numbers result in the *de facto* non-eligibility of certain electives.

While the above mentioned points/ comments might be discussed in the course of the further programme development, the expert panel concludes on this basis that the subjects/ modules of all three study programmes essentially ensure the consistent development of students' competences.

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

There are various avenues for the personalisation of studies (e.g. the possibility to study according to individual study plans, to take foreign languages, to participate in academic mobility, to choose minor studies and electives, to postpone the defence of thesis, to opt for three internship tracks, to use non-formal and informal education in crediting of study subjects, including the internship, etc.). As became evident, the possibilities to personalise studies, i.e. the scope of courses to choose from, were broadened after the merger with VU. In addition, there are possibilities for students to select topics and adjust them for assignments in various modules and for the final thesis.

That said, the problem is that not all optional courses can be selected by master students, as a selection of optional courses is group-determined and hence, only some of them are actually offered. The problems in selecting electives at the partner university in the Czech Republic were also noted in the case of the joint study programme.

The issue on the bachelor level is related to a low volume of electives in the programme, which is going to decrease even further from 2022 onwards, as the two specialisations students can opt between will be removed. Hence, only 7% of the electives dedicated to the whole programme is too low. Also, the current and the future electives from the list of General University Studies do not always relate to a study field.

In principle, VU ŠA offers opportunities for students to personalise the structure of public administration programmes according to their personal learning objectives and intended learning outcomes, but in reality there appear to be limitations, in particular, in the first-cycle studies.

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

The principles of preparation, evaluation and defence of final theses for the evaluated period are clearly determined for all three study programmes by the pertinent regulations of VU and VU ŠA, which are publicly available and regularly reviewed and updated. They are complemented by methodological recommendations etc. and have also been adapted to the necessities of the pandemic situation. The successive stages and terms of the thesis elaboration are approved by the Study Programme Committees and made accessible for the individual students. Due to the broad orientation of both study programmes, the subjects of Bachelor theses in the first-cycle study programme *Public Administration* and of Master theses in the second-cycle study programme *Public Governance* cover a wide thematic range relevant for the study of public administration (as shown in Appendix 5). As is to be expected, the focus of theses is predominantly on the Lithuanian context but also on comparative aspects of PA and seems – as far as this can be deduced from their titles – to be compliant with the orientation of the study field. The comparatively few Master theses of the second-cycle study programme *Regional Development and Governance*, however, do not always – at least according to the titles – reflect the special regional focus of the programme

(e.g. „Change Management and its Tools used in Public Sector Corporations“; „Civil Service in European Union Institutions“; „Performance Driven Culture in the Public Sector“). While this might be a point for further discussion in the respective Study Programme Committee, the necessary regulations, structures and mechanisms are clearly at hand to ensure the general compliance of final theses with the field and cycle requirements.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The necessary regulations, structures and mechanisms to ensure, revise and adapt the different fields of activity of this evaluation area are in place and well designed.
2. Various ways and possibilities to personalise studies with a lot of flexibility provided to students, except for choosing between elective courses (see Weaknesses below).
3. Regionalism and legal aspects as focus areas enable VU to distinguish its programmes from other similar ones in Lithuania (this is especially the case of the second-cycle programme *Regional Development and Governance*).

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Too low volume and share of elective courses in the first-cycle studies and group-level (group-determined) selection of electives in the second-cycle studies.
2. The relatively high number of learning outcomes for a number of courses of all three study programmes raises doubts regarding their concrete operationalisation/assessment.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

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

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

Despite the fact that publication records of teachers of VU ŠA do not contain a desired number of articles in top international research journals, the teachers published several other important publications (e.g., chapters in collective volumes published by publishing houses like Springer or Palgrave Macmillan) during the evaluated period. The University regularly organises its own research- or practice-oriented events, e.g. conferences entitled “Good Governance at Local Self-government” or “Rethinking Regional Competitiveness”. The scope and focus of these events reflect the contents of the field of public administration. It is very important that the specialised courses/subjects taught in all study programmes correspond to the areas of teachers' research interests, and therefore teachers can constantly integrate the results of their research into the content of the offered courses/subjects (SER, p. 37). In addition, these events facilitate exchange of both knowledge and experience of the VU ŠA teachers with their colleagues from other HEIs or from various public authorities.

According to the information published in the SER, teachers can publish results of their research in an in-house journal, namely in the journal entitled “Socialiniai tyrimai” (engl. transl.: “Social Research”) which is published by the VU Publishing House. From the perspective of international academic standards, such an option must be used carefully. First of all, research performance of VU ŠA should be improved, inter alia, by means of contributions in top international research journals. However, this in-house journal has been included neither in the WoS database nor in the Scopus database yet, and therefore it cannot be considered any top-level international research journal. Second, too intensive engagement of the VU ŠA teaching staff in its own in-house journal could be counterproductive if the editorial board of the journal aspires to get the journal in any of the above-mentioned internationally recognised databases. Third, teachers should be both encouraged and motivated to publish outside of the in-house journal because such an approach might support a more effective spread of teaching staffs’ research findings or results within relevant international academic communities. Last but not least, even students should see that a desired standard is to publish research results in international journals rather than in the in-house journal.

The list of collaborating institutions, i.e. other HEIs as well as various public authorities or NGOs, confirms the strong regional orientation of (not only applied) research conducted by VU ŠA teachers. In particular, as became evident during the site-visit, teaching staff at VU ŠA have built close relations with municipalities for the purpose of conducting fundamental and applied research. At the same time, the University tries to develop intensive international collaboration, too. Within this context, the Researchers’ Excellence Network (RENET) must be highlighted as an interesting and fruitful initiative in the field of international collaboration. This network was established by Šiauliai University in 2015, and it has been active since then. A VU ŠA teacher who chaired and coordinated activities from 2015-2020 has been responsible for the overall management of the network since 2021. Activities performed by the network members fully reflect the needs of the offered study programmes. Another important and meaningful activity in the field of international collaboration is the close collaboration with the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. This collaboration brings additional value in research as well as teaching.

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

From the evidence presented and discussions at the site-visit, a lot of tasks in courses are related to new literature and debates regarding different issues. Teachers strive to balance theory and practice. Academic staff implementing studies in the field of public administration integrate their research into the study subjects they teach. The results of the research are shared with students to update their knowledge based on the latest findings and using appropriate methods. Topics that have been researched include some of the pressing long-term and short-term issues in public administration, relevant for the studies, such as sustainable development, green transition, regional resilience, participatory budgeting, smart cities, smart and digital governance, etc. with some specific niche foci (e.g. e-leadership). For example, IT and governance interlinkages are presented to showcase the technological tools and relevant cases in relation to public administration.

Also, the link of studies with real-life developments is assured by tasking students to find real problems from their regions (reasons for problems and possible solutions) and to read the most relevant research on the topic for providing a scientific background. Methodologically, this is done by self-reflections and concept mappings to apply concepts for real-life cases. Likewise, VU ŠA makes sure that the contents of BA and MA theses focus on new trends and realities. And, as many lecturers are practitioners as well, they know problems in local municipalities and hence, combine practical problems with conceptual frames. The study resources used by lecturers are up-to-date and this has been facilitated by the access to additional literature, databases, various software and programmes after the merger with VU. Overall, the content of studies is closely linked with the latest developments in public administration discipline and practice.

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

VU ŠA facilitates relevant and appropriate conditions for its students (at all levels) to get involved in research activities which are directly or indirectly linked to the contents of their study programmes. On this matter, one can highlight a few channels or measures adopted by the University at least.

A research journal entitled “Young Researchers’ Works” is a nice example of how VU ŠA can both encourage and facilitate a broader spread of findings and/or results achieved by students within their own research activities. Students are motivated to publish in the journal because such a publication gives them an additional advantage for defence of their final theses (SER, p. 43-44).

VU ŠA regularly (usually on an annual basis) organises its own research- or practice-oriented conferences, and participation in these events is open for students, too. It is very important to stress that the mentioned openness is not only formal, but students are actively encouraged to take part in them, and some of them use this opportunity to present their own findings and discuss them with other participants. As it is mentioned in the case of articles in the journal entitled “Young Researchers’ Works”, active participation in these events is also considered an additional research activity of students, and active students can enjoy extra advantages for the defence of their final theses.

Speaking about the final theses, students of VU ŠA have an opportunity to be involved in ongoing research conducted by their teachers also by means of preparation of their theses. More precisely, students are invited to deal with particular research issues/questions in their final theses. According to the information in the SER and feedback provided during the site visit, this option is used by students at all levels, and it seems like a common practice that faculty writes and publishes research papers, and even articles, together with their students.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Studies are linked with global and national developments as well as recent trends in the field of Public Administration and hence, there is a reliance on up-to-date literature and practical use cases in the study process.

2. Recent results of teachers' research are systematically used in teaching, and students are familiar with relevant findings.
3. Students are encouraged to be actively involved in research, and their achievements in this field bring them additional advantages.
4. Generally, the University is active in international collaboration, but it also exploits an international network (RENET) established by the University several years ago. Within this context, an intensive institutional collaboration with the Czech partner University brings important additional value for both research and teaching.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Insufficient/low number of articles published in top-level international journals during the evaluation period.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

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

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

The student selection and admission criteria for the study programmes are publicly available at the University's webpage (<https://www.vu.lt/en/studies> (ENG)). The application procedure for the first cycle programme *Public Administration* is made through Lithuania's national joint admission carried out by LAMA BPO. The applicants can be accepted to non state-funded and state-funded study places. In order to enter government financed studies, requirements that have to be fulfilled are higher. The competitive score is made based on the established formula and consists of results of state maturity exams and annual grades of school subjects. According to the SER (p. 46), "the competitive score additionally includes results of winning international and national Olympiads and competitions". Meanwhile, the application procedure for the second-cycle programmes is organised by the University via its own application system, based on the rules of admission. Firstly, the study programmes are open to those entrants who have obtained Bachelor degrees in a list of certain fields (cf. SER, p. 45). Applicants with a BA degree that is not in that list have to complete additional studies before entering second-cycle programmes. The calculation of the competitive score is made according to the formula, where the average marks of the diploma supplement as well as average marks of the Bachelor thesis / final examinations are summed up. In order to enter the *Regional Development and Governance* programme, applicants must also be proficient in English (at least B2 level) and participate in motivational interviews. Additionally, when applying for the *Public Governance* programme, additional scores can be awarded for research (e.g. 1 point for scientific publications, cf. SER p.46).

The number of applicants to the first cycle programme *Public Administration* seems to have fluctuated significantly throughout the years. According to the SER (p. 47), the programme was popular among applicants until 2016. However, later (2017-2019) first year student groups were not formed due to the low number of applications. In 2020, there were 43 first priority and 62 other priority applicants, 36 of them signed study contracts (nine in state-funded places). In 2021,

admission was closed as there were too few entrants. Meanwhile, in both second-cycle study programmes trends are different. The number of applicants to the *Public Governance* programme is noticeably increasing (from 18 in 2018 to 29 in 2021), while the *Regional Development and Governance* programme appears to become less popular (e.g. from 28 applicants in 2018 to 20 in 2021). However, the numbers of recently signed contracts are similar: 16 in the *Public Governance* (9 state-funded and 7 non-state-funded) and 14 in the *Regional Development and Governance* (all non-state-funded).

The admission scores for the first- and second-cycle programmes differ rather significantly. For instance, in 2020 the average score for state-funded places in the *Public Administration* programme was 7.4 (8.5 highest, 6.3 lowest), while the *Public Governance* programme had an average admission score (for state-funded places) of 8.9 (9.1 highest, 8.4 lowest).

Overall, admission to first- and second- cycle study programmes is carried out sufficiently adequate and in accordance with the established procedures. Information on admission criteria and processes is publicly available on the University's website in English and Lithuanian. Nevertheless, a lack of strategy and/or tools to ensure sustainability in terms of attracting a sufficient number of students of the programmes (especially *Public Administration* and *Regional Development and Governance*) is observable. The number of applicants and students (e.g. the case of admission closure due to the low number of applicants) as well as the long-term orientation of the programmes should be discussed. Additionally, the marketing of the programmes could be enhanced to potentially attract more students to apply and/or learn about the programmes.

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

The SER (p. 49) describes the procedures for the academic recognition of education and qualifications related to higher education acquired in accordance with international educational programmes and the national legislation and regulations established by the Ministry of Education. The process is based on the applicable EU procedures and methodologies. The University operationalizes these legal acts and international guidance through VU university wide Senate decisions:

- Vilnius University Senate Resolution No. SK-2013-8-11 "Description of the procedure for admission of a person who has studied at another domestic or foreign higher education institution and wishes to continue his / her studies at Vilnius University" (20/06/2013) (Vilnius University Senate Resolution No. S-2017-11-10 of 21 November 2017).
- Vilnius University Senate Resolution No. 9 "Procedure for crediting study results at Vilnius University"(June 3, 2004) (Wording of Resolution No. SK-2007-11 of the Senate of Vilnius University of 30 May 2007).
- Vilnius University Senate Resolution No. SPN-63 "Description of the Procedure for Recognition of Competences Acquired by Non-formal and Informal Learning of Vilnius University Students and Crediting of Study Subjects (Modules)" (19-11-2019).

A foreign qualification is recognised as equivalent when no significant differences between the general requirements of the country where the foreign qualification was obtained and the general requirements of the Republic of Lithuania are confirmed. Such evaluations and decisions are made individually on a case-by-case basis after the student (or a candidate in case of new entrants) submits his or her application to the university. The same applies to the informal learning experiences. In the case of foreign qualifications, no more than 75% of the desired volume of the first, second cycle or integrated study programme may be credited, while in the case of competences acquired through work, voluntary work or internships, short-term or long-term internships, courses, seminars, projects, etc., independent learning and other informal learning means, the limit stands at 50% of the study programme volume.

The data for the assessment of how the above detailed procedures function in practice is limited as only 15 students applied to have their informal learning record to be recognised by VU in the second semester of 2020, and only two did so in the first semester of 2021. Considering the above information the expert panel considers that the existing procedures are adequate but their application in practice needs to be monitored in order to assess why the interest to use this opportunity from applicants is so limited.

3.3.3. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring academic mobility of students

VU students of all cycles, after completing at least one semester at VU, have the possibility to take part in mobility during different periods of their studies (or after studies) under ISEP, Nordplus, Erasmus+ programmes and bilateral cooperation agreements. VU ŠA currently has 45 agreements with foreign universities. Additionally, VU belongs to the ARQUS (since 2021) and COIMBRA University networks, and has established cooperation with universities in the United States (University of Nebraska, Kent State University), which indicates that students have wide mobility opportunities. Information on mobility possibilities for students is publicly available on the University website (<https://www.vu.lt/en/studies/exchange-students> (EN)). Such information is also shared via newsletters and in meetings with students.

Unfortunately, over the last three years, there were no students from VU who went for practice or part-time (at least 15 study credits) field studies. In addition, there were no incoming students in this period, except for 6 students who arrived from University of Pardubice in 2019 (they were in the joint study programme *Regional Development and Governance*). Even though academic mobility of students is made fully available and encouraged, students did not use the opportunities to participate in exchange programs due to the following facts: some of them are employed and have families; no new groups were admitted between 2017 and 2019 during an extended period of time (referring to first-cycle study programme), the pandemic situation created obstacles. Even with such adverse circumstances in mind, the students should be encouraged to take part in exchange programs (including organised remotely) and online international seminars.

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

The University has resources to provide students with academic, financial, social, psychological and personal support. Information related to each type of support is accessible on the University webpage (<https://www.vu.lt/en/studies/student-services>).

Academic advice is given within each academic unit separately as well as centrally by the Department of Student Services and Careers. It must be highlighted that three academic and remote learning consultants are designated specifically for VU ŠA students. Excellent library facilities are available for all students. A specialist for databases provides training and consults on the use of library and information retrieval (at VU Library ŠA Information Centre). Additionally, VU offers a mentorship programme that contributes to the general competences and professional development of students.

The University provides a possibility for students to receive financial support: scholarships for very good learning results (in 2018–2021, for 139 students in the field of public administration), social scholarships (11 PA students in 2018-2021), nominal scholarships (7 PA students in 2018-2021). At VU, students, especially disabled and/or from socially vulnerable backgrounds, can get reduced study fees (9 students in 2018-2021) and dormitory rents, special scholarships (e.g. for talented graduates from vulnerable groups). Between 2018 and 2021, 9 students with disabilities (in PA field) received financial support.

VU Health and Sports Centre promotes a healthy lifestyle, while the Counselling and Training Centre provides psychological counselling. Also, the chaplain provides spiritual counselling and support.

The VU ŠA students have the opportunity to receive academic, financial, social and psychological support. Even if they do not actively use all the services, the expert panel observed that the University has a good dialogue with students and developed a strong personalised and informal communication/approach with them (especially related to academic support, problem solving).

3.3.5 Evaluation of the sufficiency of study information and student counselling

Students are introduced to their study programmes during the VU Integration Week when they receive information about the objectives, intended outcomes, methods, and personalisation opportunities of respective study programmes, study processes and possibilities for support. Additionally, when new courses are started in the beginning of the semester, the essential information (e.g. related to content, requirements) is introduced to the students. All information about the study process, mobility abroad, study financing and payment for studies is also provided to students in the study departments and during meetings with University staff (e.g. Study Programme Committees, Vice Deans, consultants). The information is also available on the University website. Materials related to the study process are also provided to the students via the VU Information System (VUSIS). After students enter this platform, they can see personal information, the study plan, the schedule of lectures, study results, etc. According to the SER (p. 53), the Study Programmes Committee and the teachers have pre-assigned time dedicated to student consultations. They can as well consult lecturers between or after lectures and/or by email.

The University has done a lot at all levels to make information and counselling available to students. However, the expert panel noticed a discrepancy between information availability and

students' experiences. During the meeting with the students, they demonstrated a lack of awareness about internships (alternative possibilities, requirements) as well as opportunities to be involved in the research activities developed by their teachers. The reasons for this informational deficiencies related to the perception of students should be analysed.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Good inter- and intra-relations between University staff (administration, teachers) and students.
2. The University has a personalised approach to students in terms of communication, support, study experience (e.g. individual studies).

(2) Weaknesses:

1. The number of students (e.g. fluctuating number of entrants/ drop-outs) as well as – in this light – the long-term orientation and sustainability of the programmes should be discussed.
2. Low student mobility: students are not willing to physically leave for an exchange abroad.

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

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

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

Both at the institutional (Public Administration Study Programmes Committee) and systemic (VUSIS) as well as the individual course level the relevant information about the teaching and learning process and related requirements is provided for the students. VU emphasises its student-centred study model with cumulative assessments and constant feedback to the students and also offers special support in this area for the teaching staff (e.g. training and counselling). During the site visit, practice-orientation in terms of deepening practical knowledge and skills of students at VU ŠA was highlighted by social partners and the SER team. This can be explained with many lecturers being also practitioners, but also by deep connections with public administration practice, e.g. through shadowing practitioners, site visits etc. during the studies. The teaching and assessment methods are diverse, adapted to contact and remote forms of studies and differentiated according to the necessities of first- and second-cycle study programmes. In the evaluated programmes formative, intermediate and final written and/ or oral assessments are performed, sometimes complemented by self- and collegial assessments of the students. Teachers can be reached in different ways (in/ after class, contact hours, telephone, e-mail) and provide feedback on completed tasks and the general progress of the students orally and in written form. However, this is not a one-way-process as teachers also use course evaluations and other forms of student feedback to improve their courses and teaching/ assessment methods. VU ŠA moreover stresses the fact that small student groups allow for a more individualised approach as teachers

know the respective strengths and needs of their students and can thus better counsel them. Based on the existing structures to ensure the compatibility and adaptation of aims, learning outcomes and methods, the necessary elements are therefore in place for teaching and learning processes to take into account the needs of the students and to enable them to achieve the defined learning outcomes. This was also confirmed during the online-site visit by the relevant groups (teachers, students and alumni).

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

VU ŠA states its commitment „to create equal opportunities to study and work for all members of the community“ (SER, p. 52) and offers a wide range of financial, social and psychological support for students with special needs. Institutionally, the University's Counselling and Training Centre provides professional psychological help and a Disability Coordinator is available for students with special needs to help them with the adaptation of study plans etc. Apart from the flexibilisation of studies and assessments, VU strives to invest in suitable adaptations of the University environment and to provide students and teachers with special consultations if needed. Students from socially vulnerable groups can receive financial help (e.g. a reduction of fees or granting of scholarships), which constitutes the main focus of social support by the University. Table 3.6 of the SER illustrates the different measures as well as the corresponding numbers of receivers at least for the first-cycle study programme *Public Administration* and for the second-cycle study programme *Public Governance*. This is evidence for the practical relevance of such measures at VU. Furthermore, there is a free childcare service with a special Child Care Room at the VU Library Information Centre for students and teachers with small children, which allows them for a maximum of three hours to pursue their University related activities. Therefore, an awareness for the special needs of students with disabilities/ students from socially vulnerable groups can be clearly observed and corresponding support mechanisms are available and in practical use.

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

The study progress of the students is monitored systematically at the level of the individual courses through the various forms of assessments and counselling by the respective teachers as well as by the Study Programme Committees, which evaluate annually all relevant student-related information (e.g. grades, feedback from internships, preparation/ defence/ results of theses). As there is a general „goal [...] set for students to reach at least a typical level during their studies“ (SER, p. 59), pertinent performance data is collected, compared and operationalised on a programme and on an individualised base. Furthermore, the Department of Study Administration is monitoring overall trends of students' achievements and the Student Service and Career Department keeps track of drop-out and failure rates and is also responsible for the elaboration of preventive action plans. For students who need support because of their study situation, there are thus different contact persons available like e.g. teachers, academic counsellors, career counsellors and psychologists. The monitoring of student progress is complemented by methodic counselling especially in the preparation phase of final theses. Apart from the supervisor and an

expert in social research methodology who can be consulted, general consultations with students, supervisors, reviewers and members of the final thesis defence committees are organised as an integral part of the studies. Feedback to students is provided via Moodle, but also confidentially by email. This was praised by student representatives at the site visit, while alumni appreciated the mentoring by teachers as a preparation for their career. In summary, systematic monitoring combined with feedback and counselling enable perceptive students to assess their performance and to subsequently plan their study progress.

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

VU uses the Career Management Information System (CMIS) career.lt and relies on governmental data (interfacing the student register with the population register and Sodra (State Social Insurance Fund) databases) to monitor its alumni employment until five years after graduation. VU also interviews its graduates at 1 (to assess the employability of graduates), 3 (to assess the ability of graduates to successfully establish themselves in employment) and 5 years (to assess the satisfaction of graduates and job evaluation) after graduation. Notably, according to the SER team, at ŠA such surveys began only after the merger with Vilnius University.

According to STRATA, on average, a year after graduation, 89% of graduates of the first-cycle studies in public administration and over 90% of the graduates of the second-cycle studies worked in Lithuania under employment contracts. VU also reports that the number of working graduates of the first cycle study programme has increased over the three-year period, while that of the second cycle programmes has not changed substantially. Finally, the University reports that surveys of graduates at the programme level show that over 95% of graduates agree and over 70% fully agree that the studies and preparation of the thesis have been beneficial for their professional and personal development (SER, p. 61). Such assessments were backed up by the reports received during the site-visit from both the alumni and the social partners. Interestingly, part-time students who combine studies with employment have more positive perceptions of the programme benefits for their preparedness for PA careers than full-time students.

Notably, the Social Partners Council, an internal quality assurance body created in 2014 which includes 15 social partner representatives (discussed in greater detail in section 3.7.2) also takes part in the alumni career tracking by reflecting on the needs of the professional field/labour market and the possibilities to respond to them in the second-cycle study programme *Public Governance* and in the first-cycle study programme *Public Administration* as a way to increase the employability of the VU ŠA graduates.

However, in another part of the report VU indicates that almost all part-time students in the first-cycle programme *Public Administration* and second-cycle programme *Public Governance* are already employed (SER, p. 76). Therefore, the question arises how much of the employability record is due to the VU efforts, and how much it depends on the applicant/student employment record. As a result, the expert panel recommends investing additional efforts to link student employment analysis to the quality of the evaluated study programmes and to future career prospects of its alumni.

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

VU has established policies and procedures to ensure academic integrity which have been implemented effectively. The principles of integrity are defined in the Vilnius University Code of Academic Ethics. VU teachers and students must follow these rules which define the general ethical norms of academic, teaching, study and research work. The code defines “cases of fraud, plagiarism, counterfeiting, bribery, and assistance to others in performing dishonest academic activities” (cf. SER p. 62). Regarding non-discrimination policies and measures, policy guidelines are stipulated in the Vilnius University Diversity and the Equal Opportunities Strategy and other related documents (cf. SER pp. 62).

According to the study regulations, students who violate academic ethics may be expelled from the University. In practice, teachers use a variety of measures to ensure that students adhere to the principles of honest study during exams and for written assignments. As reported in the SER, during the examination session, the delegated representatives of the Student Representation Office monitor the progress of the examination and help the teachers to ensure the honest passing of the examination. In addition, VU applies an electronic system (ESAS) for final and written works to monitor plagiarism. Teachers continuously monitor cases of plagiarism of works, strengthening students’ skills of quoting and referencing research papers. Academic ethics are also discussed in the broader context of civil service ethics and anti-corruption among others. Cases of violation of the principles of academic honesty, tolerance and non-discrimination are dealt with on the basis of regulations of the Central Academic Ethics Commission of Vilnius University and the Regulations of the Academic Ethics Commission of the CAU of Vilnius University, as well as the regulations of the Central Dispute Resolution Commission of Vilnius University and the Regulations of the Dispute Resolution Commission of the CAU of Vilnius University. The VU ŠA Academic Ethics Commission examines complaints of members of the academic community working or studying at the Šiauliai Academy that may violate academic ethics (no complaints have been filed in the evaluation period, cf. SER, p. 62). VU has also established a special hotline to which any member of the community can address for violating the principles of academic ethics, tolerance and non-discrimination. Complaints are confidential and assistance is provided by a special team of psychologists and lawyers.

Overall, as described in the SER and confirmed at the site-visit, no violations of the principles of academic honesty, tolerance and non-discrimination were recorded among the students studying in the first and second-cycle study programmes during the period. Appropriate information on rules and requirements and the collaborative approach between teachers and students have contributed to a culture of mutual trust. Regarding written exams/assignments as well as bachelor and master theses, cases of plagiarism are rare and potential problems are detected and mitigated early on.

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

VU has established effective policies and procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints. The rules and procedures for appeals (theses and other exams) and

complaints are stipulated in the regulations of the CAU Dispute Resolution Commission. Complaints regarding examination procedure or assessment may be filed in writing to the CAU Board of Appeal within five working days of the communication of the assessment results. The decision of the Board of Appeal is final, the decision on the examination procedure can be appealed to the VU Dispute Resolution Commission. During the analysed period, no appeals were received from first- and second- cycle study programmes regarding examination and thesis defence procedures and assessment (cf. SER, p. 63).

According to the respondents at the site-visit (students, graduates), students are aware of the rules and support services for complaints and appeals. Students confirmed that teachers are very approachable, flexible and responsive to students' complaints, and most issues/complaints are solved in an informal and amicable manner.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The necessary regulations, structures and mechanisms to ensure, revise and adapt the different fields of activity of this evaluation area are in place and well designed.
2. The collaborative approach between teachers and students has contributed to a culture of mutual trust.
3. Data on support measures/ numbers of receivers for disabled students/ students from socially vulnerable groups is available and presented.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. The limitations of the current approach applied to the tracking of employability and career progress at VU ŠA makes it difficult to determine the value added of the education / teaching for employment and/or career progression.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

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

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

As for the human resource management approach for teaching staff, VU employs an open-competition model. Teachers are motivated by means of employment contracts for an indefinite period in case they are successful in the competition. In addition, teachers are systematically evaluated on a regular basis (five-year assessment period) and a set of performance indicators are taken into account. It should be highlighted that students' feedback related to teaching is taken into account (SER, p. 65), too.

In the evaluation period, the teaching staff has been stable, and both its quantitative and qualitative characteristics (including qualification structure, and didactic as well as research

competences) comply with internal University regulations and legal requirements. The workload of teaching staff is adequate but one can see that teachers at VU ŠA usually do not work as full-time teachers. This might be viewed as a certain risk because part-time teachers are usually resistant to academic mobility programmes or similar activities due to their other commitments.

Lectures in both cycles are delivered by adequately qualified and experienced teachers. In this context, the close collaboration with the Czech partner University has had a positive impact on the pedagogical potential of VU ŠA, i.e., as mentioned during the site visit, close collaboration between the two partners has positively influenced pedagogical skills as well as capacities of the teaching staff of VU ŠA. However, the University also collaborates and invites practitioners who can share their specific knowledge or experience with both students and teachers and whose contributions increase the overall attractiveness of the offered study programmes.

3.5.2. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring teaching staff's academic mobility

The teachers who participated in the online-site visit stressed that the University administration is proactive and ready to assist them in all relevant activities linked to participation in academic mobility programmes. This is a very important institutional prerequisite to ensure intensive and fruitful teaching staff's academic mobility.

Teaching staff actively participated in academic mobility programmes during the evaluated period. Some of them were co-financed through the Erasmus+ programme but the University also exploited its own initiatives for this purpose. Especially the RENET as an in-house initiative should be positively evaluated from this perspective. It helped to enrich both outgoing and incoming teaching mobility opportunities. Although the participation of teaching staff in academic mobility programmes was less intensive since the strict COVID-related measures had been introduced, some mobilities were organised remotely during that time (some of them were organised thanks to the RENET collaboration). Last but not least, repeated visits of a certain group of incoming teachers can be highlighted as an interesting achievement in terms of development of a stable international collaboration through academic mobility programmes.

Taking the above mentioned evidence into account, teachers of the VU ŠA can enjoy appropriate conditions for active participation in international academic mobility programmes.

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

The University offers a set of courses and training focused on teaching methods, communication skills, supervising, etc. for its own teachers. According to the information in the SER, these courses last from three to 40 hours (SER, p. 70). The integration of Šiauliai University in Vilnius University as a significant institutional change was accompanied by specific training for the teachers from Šiauliai University. This was necessary for the use of the information and communication systems and databases of Vilnius University. More precisely, the teachers' active participation in the training helped them to be integrated successfully in research and educational activities at Vilnius University. According to the discussions at the site visit, adapting to the new University environment does not seem to have been a challenge for them.

On the other hand, further internationalisation of education as well as research at VU ŠA can be considered an important challenge. In spite of declarations of intent mentioned in the SER, certain

competences of the teaching staff could be improved. For instance, if one looks at the usage of English as an academic lingua franca, the University declares B2 level for all its teachers in the field of reading, but only two thirds of them have the same level in the field of speaking. In this context, it should be emphasised that an intensive international collaboration and active involvement in various research networks aiming for publications in top international research journals might require a higher level of language skills (C1). Therefore, the declared state can be positively assessed, but it should be stressed that there is still room for significant improvement, and the University should invest in this field.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The University as an employer uses an open-competition model.
2. The University offers appropriate conditions for active teachers' participation in academic mobility.
3. VU offers a broad range of additional courses and training for their teaching staff.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. In terms of further international academic collaboration, there is room for improvement in the field of English language skills of the teaching staff.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

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

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

There is a sufficient number of classrooms equipped with up-to-date technologies for both face-to-face and online studies. VU SA uses Moodle as an electronic study platform for studies. Various software licences have been obtained for studies and research. Likewise, systems of plagiarism check have been adopted. Existing equipment, IT tools are fully sufficient for the Public Administration programme's needs. Facilities and study processes have been adapted to the special needs of students. Thus, disabled people are not disadvantaged in accessing study buildings or partaking in the study process, i.e. there are special applications and devices for students with reduced mobility, hearing disability, visual impairments, or mental issues. Library services are of good quality and accessible to students physically or electronically. Visitors of the Library also have an opportunity to access individual and group work rooms, workplaces for visitors with disabilities and discussion spaces. Study materials – literature, databases etc. – are updated in cooperation between lecturers and the library.

Arrangements for internship are clear on paper (three-stage approach: preparation, on-spot supervision and reflection, and post-internship evaluation) and there seem to be no significant problems in the communication of expectations and tasks to students nor social partners who

host students for internship purposes. The University provides a list for students to select practice placement, and the main criterion for selection is the link with the final thesis. Another criterion is the orientation to a future work position. There is a formalised evaluation of students' internships by host organisations to improve on the internship arrangements within the council of social stakeholders.

The main finance sources of study programmes are state appropriations for studies and student tuition fees. The evident challenges are related to upgrading equipment for hybrid studies and making the tools used for online studies more compatible with each other between VU ŠA and Pardubice University for a joint master study programme. Nonetheless, the situation with regard to study facilities and available resources has improved during the evaluation period due to the merger with VU that has broadened the access to additional literature, databases, upgraded Moodle and MS Teams, as well as various software and programmes. Hence, the overall physical, informational and financial resources are sufficient and adequate for carrying out studies effectively, as stipulated per the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports.

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

Infrastructure resources are updated as needed and are planned. There are ongoing efforts to modernise the learning facilities. During the evaluation period, two major investment projects were initiated to renovate the study buildings (make them more energy-efficient) and to install additional computer classes. When planning the renewal of information resources relevant to studies, the need for studies is coordinated with the library by the teachers responsible for study courses. Study materials in Lithuanian are upgraded three to four times a year. Hence, learning facilities and resources available at VU ŠA are planned, updated and enable the current number of students to achieve their learning outcomes by face-to-face studies, but less by distance studies.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Very good quality library services, modern facilities and adjustment of premises and facilities to people with special needs.
2. Clearly established arrangements for internships on the first-cycle studies in terms of tasks and expectations communication to students and hosting social partners with formal evaluation procedures.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Shortcomings in technical equipment for hybrid studies and the tools used for online studies differ between VU ŠA and Pardubice University that might hinder the smooth running of joint master study programme.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

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

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

The study quality assurance system of VU has been implemented in accordance with the European Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulations (SER, p. 76). Šiauliai Academy also reports having implemented a quality assurance system during the decade prior to the merger with VU, although the system focused more on studies rather than on research. Both systems were very similar, and therefore their integration according to the reporting team was smooth.

VU ŠA applies various internal quality assurance processes and procedures that include the approval, monitoring and evaluation of study programmes and the monitoring and analysis of the study programmes by means of periodic questionnaires (at the end of each course and at the end of each semester). Notably, the internal quality assurance system, in addition to the above processes, integrates monitoring of study results through student assessments and teacher pedagogical competence assessment and development processes as well (SER, p. 76).

Following the national model, study programme committees (SPC) are tasked with ensuring the quality and continuous improvement of study programmes as well as making sure that all applicable regulations are being followed in line with the national legislation and the European Standards and Guidelines methodologies and principles. The SPC is subordinate to the CAU Council and reports to it on the implementation of the programmes at least once a year. In line with the integrated nature of the quality assurance methods, SPC reports include an analysis of the admissions statistics (numbers of applicants, scores, etc.), the internationalisation of study programmes; students' satisfaction survey results; demands for upgrades in material and other resources; the costs of study programme implementation; the subject and pedagogical competencies of the academic staff implementing the study programme; student workload; other data of the study process such as information on academic debts, academic leaves, the suspension of studies, graduation, the continuation of studies at a higher level, employability, and other relevant qualitative and quantitative data related to the quality of studies.

Changes to the study programmes resulting from such considerations are considered by the SPC, and if the amendments are significant, they are considered and approved by the CAU Council or the Senate of the University. If the SPC is responsible for more than one study programme, such changes are also reviewed by the College of Studies before they are appreciated by the Council.

The SER provides multiple examples of the changes implemented over the course of the last three years as a result of the functioning quality assurance system in areas such as:

- Meeting students' professional development needs (e.g. the adjustments in the E-Governance course);
- Student workload optimisation (e.g. integrating some of the assignments that could be accounted for different courses in order to facilitate work-life balance for part time students);
- Decisions on ensuring academic ethics (response to reported discrimination cases);
- Study quality commitments (improving student performance through adjustments in individual

consultation schedules and arrangements);

- Improving the quality of final theses (introduction of additional group consultations in addition to the changes in the individual consultation arrangements).

Considering the details provided in the SER, evidence heard during the site visit and the concrete examples of changes implemented as a result of the functioning of the quality assurance system, the expert panel considers that the quality assurance system is fully adequate and does not require any adjustments at this time.

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

The SER (p. 79) summarises the mechanisms and examples of stakeholder participation in internal quality assurance processes. The University reports that stakeholders can be grouped into the categories:

1. Persons, groups of persons and organisations directly involved in the study process (teachers, students, administration, etc.) - engaged in all stages of study programme management and assessment (SP development, marketing, implementation, evaluation);
2. Public administration institutions and bodies involved in the process of programme development, implementation and evaluation - engaged in all stages of study programme management and assessment (SP development, marketing, implementation, evaluation);
3. Non-governmental organisations and society at large.

As mentioned in section 3.4.4, in May 2014, VU created a Social Partner Council that includes 15 members representing public administration institutions. The Council meets at least once per academic year. It provides suggestions for the improvement of the programmes, advises the teachers of the programmes on the relationship between practice and theory, and offers relevant topics for the final theses. According to the SER (p. 79), during the reporting period, three meetings of the Council took place and no meetings were held during the pandemic. Furthermore, social partners were included in the final thesis defence commissions and have suggested topics for the theses. Finally, social partners were engaged in both elaborating the SER and the site visit.

Both social partners as external stakeholders and students as internal stakeholders are included in the Study Programme Committee activities and their inputs are considered in the study programme evaluation processes. In addition, workshops and roundtables are held with various stakeholders to provide feedback, and also the Alumni Club has been active in offering reflections. As acknowledged by social partners during the site visit, there are both formal and informal channels and contacts between VU ŠA and external partner organisations.

On the whole, the expert panel considers that stakeholder engagement in the quality assurance is adequate. In particular, the panel recognises the relevance of the Social Partner Council as an interesting and well structured example of stakeholder engagement mechanism. At the same time, supplemented information shared by the VU ŠA on request of the experts at the site-visit shows that student response rates to the quality feedback surveys is much lower than the overall VU response rates, thus indicating an area where improvement is necessary and viable if the University as a whole is used as a comparison.

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

As mentioned above, the University has established a clear and well functioning mechanism for quality assurance/assessment that includes diverse methods and periodic surveys to collect information on study programmes, their performance and stakeholder feedback. The University reports that quality assessment reports, information on study programmes, their results, events and activities as well as new opportunities are published on the University website and on social networks maintained by the University, as well as events such as the Quality Days and others (cf. SER, pp. 79-80).

VU uses its on-line presence well, and key stakeholders appear to use on-line channels for contacts with the University. For example, the SER (p. 52) indicates that 51% of all consultations on the study process provided centrally in the Student Services and Careers Department are conducted by email, 14% in the direct inquiry system on the website, 5% in social networks. Social partners and alumni also shared positive comments on the use of the on-line channels, even though it was acknowledged by them that marketing for the purpose of visibility and higher awareness of VU ŠA programmes could be improved. This is particularly pertinent in relation to attracting students, whether foreign or local.

That being said, the link provided in the SER on where quality assurance information for VU ŠA should be located for easy access (<http://su.lt/studijos/studiju-kokybe>) leads to the University's main page rather than the information on quality assessment results. In fact, the expert panel was unable to reach the reports or other study quality related information on the website in an easy manner. As such, the recommendation is to simplify access in order to increase the transparency of the quality assurance system in VU Šiauliai Academy following the example of the main Vilnius University webpage where such information is easily accessible on the main menu under the 'Studies' dropdown list.

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

During the meeting with the students, they shared opinions about the quality of the study programmes under evaluation. For instance, they expressed their satisfaction about the teachers' considerate and informative introduction to study subjects, and the good quality of consulting - also during the pandemic. Teachers provided students with sufficient study materials, including offering extra resources that are not part of the course programmes. Additionally, Public Administration programmes can be organised according to individual study plans, and students appreciate the flexibility and personalisation opportunities offered by VU ŠA.

The students, some of whom are already employed, mentioned at the site visit that the experience and qualifications received helped them in various ways for their career development. They also believe that the studies will help them to climb up to the career ladder.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Well integrated quality assurance system that brings together different aspects of the study programme management.
2. Well structured Social Partner Council and use of other formats such as workshops, the Alumni Club, etc. which enable VU ŠA to collect feedback from various stakeholders through complementary channels.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. While the expert panel considers that stakeholder engagement in the quality assurance is adequate, additional information requested during the site-visit shows that students' response rates to the quality feedback surveys are much lower than the overall VU response rates, thus indicating an area where improvement appears to be necessary and viable.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation Area	Recommendations for the Evaluation Area (study cycle)
Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	• There should be a higher share of electives in the programmes and a broader basket of elective courses to choose from. In this respect, courses dedicated to enhancing general and specific competences could be designed for a wider range of electives more related to the study field. • For all three programmes the number of learning outcomes attributed to the individual courses should be revised and possibly reduced in order to effectively guarantee their operationalisation/assessment. • It should be made sure that there are representatives of other HEIs in the thesis defence committees each year.
Links between science (art) and studies	• The low number of articles published in top-level international journals should be addressed by various incentive programmes. However, incentive programmes can improve an undesired state in this field only if they are combined with the readiness of teaching staff to publish in such journals. The University could offer institutional assistance for those who conduct relevant and interesting research and who, at the same time, struggle with selling their findings/results in high-quality international journals.
Student admission and support	• In order to further expand the internationalisation of the University, students should be further encouraged to participate in exchange programmes. As students are often unable to physically leave for personal reasons, alternative and more flexible exchange formats (e.g. remote/ hybrid internships or studies) should be introduced and encouraged. • The fluctuating number of entrants poses a potential threat to the sustainability of the study programmes. For example, in 2021 the admission (to the first-cycle programme) was closed as there were not enough entrants. Therefore, a way to mitigate this risk must be sought. For example, the marketing of the study programmes could be improved by emphasising benefits and future (job) perspectives.

Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	While the expert panel considers the stakeholder engagement in the quality assurance adequate, additional evidence requested during the site-visit shows that students' response rates to the quality feedback surveys are much lower than the overall VU response rates, thus indicating an area where improvement appears to be necessary and viable.
Teaching staff	The internationalisation of the study programmes as well as a higher degree of inclusiveness for students or teachers from other countries requires, inter alia, the readiness of teaching staff to teach and publish in English. VU should focus on the overall improvement of these competences. It is important to offer courses for those whose English language skills are below level C1 and advanced training (focused, for instance, on academic writing) for those with/above level C1.
Learning facilities and resources	The equipment for hybrid studies should be upgraded and the tools used for online studies made more compatible with each other between VU ŠA and Pardubice University for their joint master study programme.
Study quality management and public information	- The University website should make quality assurance reports and other information more accessible. - More emphasis should be placed on marketing activities to increase the visibility and awareness of the VU ŠA programmes, both in Lithuania and abroad.

V. SUMMARY

Overall, the expert panel found that in the evaluation period VU ŠA has systematically developed all seven evaluation areas of the first and second-cycle programmes in the Public Administration study field in line with the legal requirements, the needs of the labour market and the specific needs of the public sector. No fundamental shortcomings have been identified by the expert panel in the evaluation period. The panel noted that all recommendations of the previous evaluation have been taken into account and VU ŠA has taken appropriate action to mitigate shortcomings identified at the time.

One of the key strengths of the study programmes in the field of Public Administration is their practice orientation (e.g., practitioners as lecturers, site visits to PA, job shadowing, research/thesis topics suggested by social partners, etc.). The panel also noted the clear and distinctive focus on regionalism and legal aspects of the PA study field. In addition, VU ŠA has also implemented sound policies and effective internal processes (e.g., quality assurance, academic integrity, student support). The informal approach to problem-solving supported by various channels for support and communication is much appreciated by students. On a more general level, synergies have been achieved due to the merger with VU, which has allowed enhanced access to resources (databases, literature, etc.) as well as a widened scope of courses for students to choose from.

That said, there is still room for improvement in most of the seven evaluation areas, notably related to the sustainability of the study programmes which could be jeopardised due to problems encountered in attracting a sufficient number of local and foreign students. In this regard, efforts should be stepped up to improve the relatively low visibility of VU ŠA programmes. Furthermore, full integration with VU to tackle potential problems from the merger (e.g., related to quality assurance) should be pursued without delay. In addition, obstacles to the smooth running of the joint study programme “Regional Development and Governance” should be addressed. Other areas for improvement include measures to increase student mobility and financial support (applying for Erasmus schemes), the updating of teaching facilities and equipment (investments for hybrid teaching) and further harmonisation of the study process / approach (addressing tuition fee, visa issues, etc.).

In conclusion, the expert panel would like to express their thanks to the team at VU ŠA for compiling the self-evaluation report, for organising the site-visit and for providing additional information in response to our requests for clarification. The panel also wishes to thank all site-visit participants for sharing their valuable insights.

Expert panel chairperson signature:

Dr. Christine Leitner