



NATIONAL AUDIT
OFFICE OF LITHUANIA
• BRINGING BENEFITS •

IS THE QUALITY OF STUDIES ENSURED IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

8 July 2021

No. VAE-6

SUMMARY

Relevance of the Audit

Higher education is critical in fostering economic growth, reducing poverty and boosting the country's overall prosperity. It is beneficial not only for the individual but also for society as a whole. Higher education attainment leads to higher employment rates, higher wages, greater social stability and civic participation, better health outcomes, etc.¹ World Bank² notes the economic return on higher education, with an annual increase of 17 % in the salary of graduates in higher education. Highly skilled staff are a prerequisite for a country's ability to innovate and its long-term growth in a changing environment.

Quality of Lithuanian higher education and studies receives criticism of international organisations³: graduates tend to work in less qualified jobs at the beginning of their careers as they lack adequate job skills; 40% of employers looking for specialists in the field of information and communication technologies experienced difficulties; 21.2% employees aged 15–64 were more qualified than required at work.

The Programme of the Eighteenth Government⁴ approved by Seimas, provides that the quality of studies is a priority at all levels of higher education – universities and colleges. Studies and science should reach a global level but only one university ranks among the

¹ Internet access: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation?CID=EDU_TT_Education_EN_EXT, (accessed on 29 April 2021).

² World Bank Education Overview: Higher Education. Internet access: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/610121541079963484/world-bank-education-overview-higher-education>, (accessed on 29 April 2021).

³ European Commission. Education and Training Monitor 2019 Lithuania. Internet access: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-lithuania_en.pdf (accessed on 29 April 2021); OECD. Review of National Policies for Education. Education in Lithuania, 2017.

⁴ Approved by Resolution No XIV-72 of the Seimas of 11 December 2020.

top 500 in the world (423rd in 2021⁵, 400th in 2022⁶). In order to improve the quality of higher education and achieve greater international recognition, the necessary conditions should be created that are compatible with the mission of the higher education institution, traditional and modern values, help the institution become more competitive and ensure that the needs of society and the State are met.

In order to assess whether the quality of studies in higher education institutions is ensured, we carried out a public performance audit.

Objective and Scope of the Audit

The objective of the audit is to assess whether the quality of studies in higher education institutions is ensured.

Key audit questions:

- whether higher education institutions have adequate internal quality assurance systems in place;
- whether sufficient conditions are in place to ensure the quality of study programmes;
- whether sufficient attention is paid to students' views on the quality of studies;
- whether the continuous development of teachers' didactic competences is ensured;
- whether the development of internationalisation is ensured.

Audited entities:

- Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, as it is involved in science and study policy-making;
- 23 state higher education institutions, as they implement the State's science and higher education policy.

During the audit we collected information and cooperated with the Study Quality Evaluation Center, the National Agency for Education, the Lithuanian Higher Institutions Association for Organizing Joint Admission (LAMA BPO), the Research Council of Lithuania, the Government Strategic Analysis Center.

Audited period 2017–2019. Data of 2020, 2021 and previous years may be used to assess trends and developments.

Audit limitations: non-state higher education institutions were not subject to audit procedures, nonetheless, information on them from publicly available sources was used for comparisons with state higher education institutions; we did not assess doctoral studies at research institutes.

⁵QS World University Rankings. Internet access: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2021> (accessed on 29/04/2021).

⁶QS World University Rankings. Internet access: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2022> (accessed on 01/07/2021).

The audit has been performed in accordance with the Public Auditing Requirements and International Standards of Supreme Audit Institutions. The scope and methods of the audit are described in greater detail in Annex 2, Audit Scope and Methods (p. 57).

Key Audit Results

Quality of studies in higher education institutions is not sufficiently guaranteed because the quality assurance measures and their application have shortcomings, the development and delivery of study programmes needs to be improved, and the internationalisation of studies is not sufficiently developed.

1. Quality assurance measures for studies need to be improved

Quality assurance systems have shortcomings and fail to assess the performance of higher education institutions in a timely manner:

- between 2011 and 2016, external evaluators/experts assessed the internal quality assurance systems of 7 (out of 11) state universities and 11 (out of 12) colleges as deficient: they are not in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, too complex, lacking specific objectives, indicators to measure the effectiveness of quality assurance, etc. Five of the 23 institutions have not updated them since 2015: two are updating their quality assurance policies in 2021 and three have not provided data. The expert evaluation of the updated internal quality assurance systems will be carried out between 2021 and 2023. Quality assurance systems not updated or defective do not contribute to the quality development of activities and studies (Subsection 1.1, p. 15).
- External evaluation of higher education institutions is not being carried out in a timely manner, as only one out of 23 state higher education institutions and one out of 11 non-state-owned higher education institutions will be evaluated once every 7 years, as provided for in the Law on Higher Education and Research.⁷ The remaining 22 state and 10 non-state higher education institutions are planned to be evaluated once every 8–10 years, which is almost twice as often as in other European countries. Following the evaluation, no one entity was entrusted with monitoring the implementation of the recommendations made by the experts. Since 2020, the Study Quality Evaluation Center is obliged to monitor the implementation plans for recommendations, however, there is no provision for higher education institutions to provide information on progress, no deadline for reporting. Without a timely assessment of the performance of higher education institutions and implementation of the recommendations, the improvement of the quality of performance is not ensured (Subsection 1.1, p. 15).

Different minimum requirements for admission to higher education institutions have been established and applied, even though the enrolled persons in the same classrooms receive the same degree, and the proper application of these requirements is not ensured by allocating additional funds:

⁷Article 49(3)

- To qualify for state funding, applicants must have passed three national matura examinations and the passing entrance competition score must not be less than that laid down⁸ separately for colleges and universities. For those who wish to study at their own expense, only one national matura examination is needed and there is no requirement for the lowest passing entrance score, although it is encouraged to apply it. According to the passing entrance scores recalculated by LAMA BPO, 8 state colleges accepted persons with less than 4.3 competition score to study places not funded by the State. With a lower score, the share of students admitted to state higher education institutions increased from 0.3 % in 2017 up to 4.2 % (857 students) in 2020. For foreign citizens, it is sufficient to have a document confirming the right to higher education, while the transfer of grades of subjects for persons applying to places not funded by the State is carried out by the higher education institutions themselves. Study Quality Evaluation Center indicates⁹ that higher education institutions do not follow the recommendations on recalculation of scores and admit foreign citizens with extremely low grades and/or the ones who have not studied the required subjects. This leads to the admission of the unprepared students and affects the quality of the studies for all students (Subsection 1.2, p. 18 and Section 3, p. 39).
- When allocating additional funding to higher education institutions (EUR 4.8 million in 2020) for the application of the lowest passing entrance score to all applicants, the Ministry neither assess the scores of foreign residents, nor takes into account the additional scores awarded by higher education institutions to study places not funded by the State. Funding is granted on the basis of the Education Management Information System, although it does not contain all the necessary data: up to 1% of scores of the enrolled persons were not reported in the Student Register (Lith. Studentų registras) by state higher education institutions, 11.3% by non-state ones. In the absence of reliable and comprehensive data for decision-making, the additional funds do not meet the objective of encouraging higher education institutions to enrol the students who are well-prepared for studies (Subsection 1.2, p. 18).

There are no performance quality indicators that allow comparisons of performance of higher education institutions. According to the data of 8 assessed higher education institutions, universities monitor from 16 to 66, colleges from 56 to 92 performance indicators, however, they are not comparable due to different measurement units, calculation methodology. In the absence of comparable quality measurement indicators, it is not possible to reliably assess the quality of performance and the results to which funding would be linked, as pursued by the Programme of the Eighteenth Government. This practice of funding for better results is already in place in Estonia, Finland, and Norway (Subsection 1.1, p. 15).

2. The processes of development and delivery of study programmes needs to be strengthened

⁸ Law on Higher Education and Research, Article 59(1) and (6); Order No V-661 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of 30 August 2017 approving the minimum indicators of the educational outcomes of persons applying for the first cycle and integrated study places in higher education institutions from 2020.

⁹ SKVC prepared an analysis of the academic recognition decisions taken by Lithuanian higher education institutions in 2019.

- Experts state that the social partners are involved in the programme development process 'formally', 7 out of 19 student representations have stated that the participation of students in developing study programmes is also inactive and 'formal'. 2 universities and 4 colleges were found not including students in study programmes development, one university did not include the social partners in the working group, although they provided opinions and recommendations on the programme development. Insufficient involvement of the social partners and students will lead to a lack of understanding of the labour market and learning needs relevant to the quality of study programmes (Subsection 2.1, p. 21).
- Experts negatively assessed planned (new) programmes (out of 142 provided) for 2017–2020 of 14% of state universities and 17% colleges. 32% of the programmes were assessed as having significant shortcomings and meeting only minimum requirements in terms of the links between science/art and study activities (15% in universities and 67% in colleges). The experts commented on the objectives and outcomes of the studies, the content of the programmes and the organisation of the practice: offers for practice placements, content, facilities. In state higher education institutions, 43.3% of all assessed programmes implemented in 2010–2017 were accredited only for 3 years (with shortcomings to be corrected), 2.4% — not accredited. Programmes for 2018–2019 have not been assessed and their accreditation has been formally extended, resulting in at least 56.5% of on-going programmes not evaluated on time at the beginning of 2021, although 53,000 (60.1%) students were enrolled in them. Without a strong focus on developing the highest quality programmes, the preparation of students will not meet the needs of the labour market (Subsection 2.2, page 26).
- Residency studies have not been assessed; the first external evaluation is scheduled for 2023 (for veterinary medicine). 54 % of the residents surveyed rate the acquisition of practical skills 1–5 out of 10, while 61 % think that the theoretical part is too short. The lack of evaluation of residency studies has a negative impact on the quality of studies and students' satisfaction with studies (Subsection 2.2, p. 26).
- The right of doctoral studies has not been granted to any of the 3 new Doctoral study programmes. 48% of ongoing research and 75% of art doctoral studies have been assessed by experts as deficient in at least 1 field, and 4 out of 25 doctoral studies have been recommended for correction in line with the experts' comments. The reasons for the expert's final decisions are unclear: the values of the parameters describing the quality and effectiveness of doctoral studies are not defined, nor is it specified in what cases it is proposed to continue, correct, or suspend it. The findings of the evaluation of sciences doctoral studies are not made public, while the evaluation findings of arts are published. Doctoral studies need improvement, publicising the results of their evaluation would allow the applicants to choose the most appropriate doctoral course or higher education institution (Subsection 2.2, p. 26).
- 8 out of 19 student representations surveyed identified the quality of teaching as a major problem. 2 colleges and 5 universities did not prepare teacher qualification development plans as there was no requirement for their

preparation. 9 colleges and 8 universities have not classified the training of teachers' didactic competences according to the teacher's professional expertise. In 2016, experts recommended to Lithuania¹⁰ to strengthen the didactic competences of teachers. As a result, the development needs and expectations of teachers with different professional expertise are not met (Subsection 2.3, p. 37).

- All state higher education institutions conduct student surveys, however, students are not actively participating in them, the activity of surveys on the quality of studies is 15–40%, and for reasons of studies termination, which are carried out by only 3 higher education institutions – 12–35%. In the opinion of 12 of 19 student representations, the most frequent termination of studies is due to the inappropriate choice of study fields, while 7 believe that the quality of the studies is poor. On average, between 2017 and 2020, 15.8% of college and 13.4% of university students left their studies, while higher education institutions do not sufficiently analyse why students leave their studies “on a voluntary/personal request”, despite the high 37.5% rate between 2017 and 2020. Institutions indicate that they are improving surveys, however, 14 of 19 student representations believe that fundamental problems are revealed only partially or not revealed at all by higher education institutions. The Lithuanian Student Union, 9 student representations and experts comment on the feedback from the surveys: there is a lack of summary of results, discussion, publicity of decisions taken and ongoing. Not listening to the views of the students, the opportunity to improve their study programmes and their performance is lost (Subsection 2.1, p. 21).
- 9 student representations evaluate the organisation of practices as satisfactory or negative (college students compared to university students provide more favourable evaluations). Students surveyed negatively evaluate the usefulness of practice assignments (34%), the attention of the practice supervisor at the higher education institution (34%), and the information provided by the higher education institution on practice placements (40%). 14 student representations indicate that students feel only partially prepared for their practical work. The average employment rate for graduates of state universities in 2017-2019 was 81%, and for colleges – 78%, however, the data may be unreliable and not comparable, as registers do not collect information on those who have gone abroad to work, those who are employed according to the field of study, the acquired qualification (specialisation), the individual contract, the data are not updated with changes in career paths etc. Failure to provide adequate conditions for placements deprives students of the opportunity to develop their practical skills, even though practical training is seen as a key element of graduates' employability (Subsection 2.1, p. 21).

¹⁰ Internet access: https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kita_infromacija/Leidiniai/Recommendation_AM_politika_HE2STU_2016_ilg.pdf, recommendation 7 (accessed on 12 January 2021).

3. Internationalisation of studies is insufficient

- Internationalisation in the country has been addressed in different legal acts¹¹, where the planned period ended in 2020 and the new strategic document for internationalisation development has not been approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. In the absence of international development objectives, measures, uniform indicators, there are no clear objectives or directions for internationalisation of studies (Subsection 3, p. 39).
- In Lithuania, the aim¹² was that by 2020 20% of students would have completed part of their studies abroad, however, the proportion was less than 4%. Teachers' mobility according to institution data is around 13.6% in colleges and around 11.2% in universities, 9.1 % in colleges and around 0.3 % in universities according to the Education Management Information System, as 12 (out of 23) state and 15 (out of 17) non-state higher education institutions do not provide data on teachers' mobility in the Register for Educators (Lith. Pedagogų registras). On average, the mobility of graduates in pedagogical studies was around 5%, as 5 (out of 15) higher education institutions are not given a specific time to practice or study abroad. Lack of mobility leads to a loss of experience, new skills that could help to compete more successfully on the labour market in the future (Section 3, p. 39).
- Lithuania is twice below the EU average (22%) in terms of the share of foreign doctoral students in the country (10.1 %) in 2019. The survey¹³ conducted by the Lithuanian Society of Young Researchers reveals the unattractiveness of doctoral studies, 80% of doctoral students consider that the studies need improvement. In order to ensure the quality of studies, it is important that the scientific research carried out is of a high level and that attracting foreign doctoral candidates can positively contribute to the necessary competences of researchers (Subsection 3, p. 39).
- Joint degree programmes (without doctoral studies) account for 2.5% of all programmes in higher education institutions, with 0.8% of all students enrolled (848 in 2020) and a 16.2% decrease between 2017 and 2020. 5 of the 37 registered joint programmes do not exist and there is a lack of state incentives to develop joint programmes. As a result, the potential of promoting internationalisation of joint programmes that provide international education and career opportunities is not realised (Subsection 3, p. 39).
- On average, state universities run 23 programmes (32%) in a foreign language, while colleges – 3 (14%). The recommended level of foreign language proficiency (C1) was not reached, as in 6 universities 43% of teachers had C1 levels, in 6 colleges – 31 %, 7 higher education institutions do not have information on the language proficiency of teachers, and 3 do not deliver

¹¹ National Programme for the Development of Studies, Research and Experimental (Social, Cultural) Development for 2013-2020 approved by Government Resolution No 1494 of 5 December 2012; Order No V-364 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport "On the approval of priorities of promoting internationalisation in higher education for 2019-2020" of 5 April 2019

¹² Order No V-110 of 8 February 2019 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport approved the Action Plan for the National Programme for the Development of Studies, Research and Experimental (Social, Cultural) Development for 2013-2020.

¹³ Lithuanian Society of Young Researchers. Study of the satisfaction of students in the third (doctoral) cycle, 2019

programmes in a foreign language. The limited choice of programmes taught in a foreign language and the lack of adequate language proficiency for teachers prevent the attraction of more foreign students and internationalisation (Subsection 3, p. 39).

Changes during the audit

Following the Ministry's update of the procedure for the external evaluation of higher education institutions¹⁴ and the adoption of the external evaluation plan¹⁵, an external evaluation of higher education institutions started in March 2021.

The Ministry's update of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Study Programmes,¹⁶ introduces an annual analysis of the graduate employability rate monitoring from August 2020. Data on the self-employed will be monitored and the methodology for calculating the indicator will be established.

Following the approval of the update of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Study Programmes, evaluation areas and indicators¹⁷ and the Plan for the External Evaluation of Fields of Study 2020-2025¹⁸, instead of evaluating study programmes from 2020 to 2nd half of 2020.

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport

1. In order to encourage state higher education institutions to improve the quality of their studies and to provide policy makers with comparable data between colleges and universities, establish performance indicators to which the performance-based funding of higher education institutions would be linked (1 key audit result).
2. In order to enrol persons who are properly prepared for higher education studies, regardless of the type of funding (1 key audit result):
 - 2.1. to establish uniform minimum requirements for those enrolled in the first cycle and full-time study places not funded by the State at least as low as for those enrolled in state-funded places in colleges and universities; and to ensure compliance with them;
 - 2.2. to establish the procedures for determining the equivalence of subjects of secondary education abroad for subjects of general education in Lithuania to places not funded by the State.

¹⁴ Approved by Order No V-1529 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of 19 December 2019.

¹⁵ Order No V-329 of the Minister for Education, Science and Sport of 5 March 2020

¹⁶ Order No V-1126 of the Minister for Education, Science and Sport of 3 August 2020.

¹⁷ Order No V-835 of 17 July 2019 of the Minister for Education, Science and Sport.

¹⁸ Order No V-149 of the Director of the Study Quality Evaluation Center of 31 December 2019.

3. In order to ensure that higher education institutions address the shortcomings identified in the external evaluation and improve their performance, provide for reporting deadlines and reporting on the progress made in implementing the recommendations made by external experts (1 key audit result).
4. In order to improve the evaluation of doctoral studies in sciences and arts, to ensure that (2 key audit result):
 - 4.1. the criteria for the final decision on the evaluation of doctoral studies in sciences and arts are set;
 - 4.2. the conclusions of the evaluation of doctoral studies would be made public.
5. In order to increase the internationalisation of studies, to adopt an internationalisation strategy document covering internationalisation objectives, measures, indicators, funding, and deadlines (3 key audit result).
6. In order to have reliable data for informed management decisions, to improve the Education Management Information System so that it contains correct and relevant data related to the activities of higher education institutions (1 and 3 key audit results).

The measures and deadlines for the implementation of recommendations are set out in the “Recommendations Implementation Plan” section of the Report, (p. 49).

All state higher education institutions have been provided with letters highlighting the need for improvement and encouraging the institutions to make strong actions by assessing comparative information on the performance of higher education institutions among universities and among colleges.