VYTAUTO DIDŽIOJO UNIVERSITETO

VEIKLOS VERTINIMO IŠVADOS

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW REPORT OF

VYTAUTAS DIDYSIS UNIVERSITETAS

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Vertinimo sekretorė:
Review secretary:

Grupės nariai (kategorija):
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2023

Report language – English

CONTENT

I hereby certify that this is the final text of the institutional review report Vytautas Magnus University.

Prof. Philippe Dinkel

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The purpose of the external review is to determine the quality of the performance of a higher education institution based on the findings of the external review, to create prerequisites for improvement of the performance of a higher education institution, to promote a culture of quality, and to inform founders, academic community and the society about the quality of higher education institutions.

2. This review report is based on the evidence given in the self-evaluation report, additional evidence requested by the Panel, information provided by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (hereinafter – Centre, SKVC) and a site visit, where meetings with a wide range of audiences were held.

3. The Panel was composed of the reviewers, following the Experts Selection Procedure approved by the Director of Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education on 31 December 2019 Order No. V-149 and included the following members:

Prof Philippe Dinkel (Chair), Brenda Eade (Panel Secretary), Prof. Dr Daire Keogh, Dr Peter Wells, Renata Guobuzaite, Gaga Gvenetadze.

4. As a result of external review **Vytautas Magnus University (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas)** is given a **positive evaluation**.

5. Evaluation areas:

Area	Assessment with points*
MANAGEMENT	4
QUALITY ASSURANCE	3
STUDIES AND RESEARCH (ART)	4
IMPACT ON REGIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	4

*5 points - **excellent**– the area is rated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally;
4 points – **very good** – the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks;
3 points – **good** – the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks;
2 points – **satisfactory** – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed;
1 point - **unsatisfactory** – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks.

6. **Nine** examples of good practices were found; **nineteen** recommendations are made.

II. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Background of the review process

7. The external review of Vytautas Magnus University (hereafter referred to as VMU or the University) was organised by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education and carried out in May 2023 by an Expert Panel of international experts (hereinafter – the Review Team). It was conducted in accordance with the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of

Higher Education Institutions and Branches of Foreign Higher Education Institutions, Evaluation Areas and Indicators approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania (hereinafter – the Procedure) on 19 of December 2019 Order No. V-1529 and the Methodology for Conducting an Institutional Review in Higher Education approved by the Director of SKVC on 9 of March 2020 Order No V-32 (hereinafter – the Methodology).

8. According to the Procedure the external review consists of the following stages: submission of a self-evaluation report prepared by the higher education institution to the Centre; formation of a Review Team and analysis of the self-evaluation report; the Review Team visit to the higher education institution; the preparation of the external review report, decision-making on the external review as well as accreditation and publication thereof; follow-up activities aimed at improving the performance of the higher education institution, taking into account the external review report.

9. At the preparatory stage of the external review, the Review Team received a Self-Evaluation Report (hereinafter – SER) with annexes 1-4 each containing multiple documents. SKVC provided to the Review Team additional information about the University, as set in the Methodology (Chapter 26), including statistical data on students and staff; financial data; findings from the ex-post study field reviews, institutional reviews and evaluations of research and development activities; State-budget allocations for research activities; information on violations of academic ethics from the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania. The Review Team requested additional information, such as the Annual Report for 2022, statistical information on recruitment, progression and completion, minutes of meetings of Council and Senate, examples of internal evaluation of new study programmes, examples of study programme improvement plans and the monitoring of their implementation, examples of final thesis for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (covering a range of topics and marks), University communication strategy, examples of artistic research projects in the field of arts and music, examples of changes that have been made as a result of student evaluations and feedback, list of international and national projects for the public implemented in the last 3 years, a complete list of applied research centres at VMU and the funds (received for scientific research works or external services) for each unit for the last 3 years.

10. The site visit was undertaken after a training session organized by SKVC staff and preparatory Review Team meetings. The Review Team visited the University on three days from 3-5 May where it held twelve meetings with internal and external stakeholders. Subsequently, the Review Team met both in-person and virtually to review and agree conclusions and recommendations. The review report was finalised by correspondence and submitted to the SKVC.

11. In line with the Procedure the external review focused on four areas covered by the evaluation indicators and related criteria: **Management**, **Quality Assurance, Studies and Research (Art)** and **Impact on Regional and National Development**. In analysing the evidence collected, the Review Team also gave due consideration to the recommendations of the previous review in May 2014.

12. The review of a higher education institution assesses each of the evaluation areas with one of five ratings: **excellent** – 5 points – the area is rated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally; **very good** – 4 points – the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks; **good** – 3 points – the area is being developed

systematically, without any major drawbacks; **satisfactory** – 2 points – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed; **unsatisfactory** – 1 point – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks.

13. The decision on **positive** evaluation is made when none of the evaluation areas is evaluated unsatisfactorily (1 point). The decision on **negative** evaluation is made when at least one of the evaluation areas is evaluated unsatisfactory (1 point).

14. In line with the Methodology the review report, prepared by the Review Team is reviewed by SKVC and sent to the higher education institution to submit comments on factual errors and the evaluations based thereon. The Review Team revises the report in response to the comments from the higher education institution (if applicable) and submits it to SKVC.

15. The Review Team received comments from VMU and considered them. As a result, twelve changes were made to the report.

16. After the Review Team considers comments from the higher education institution (if applicable) and finalizes it, the report is considered by the external Commission of the Higher Education Institutions' Review (hereinafter – the Commission), set up by SKVC. On the basis of the proposal, made by the Commission, provisioned in the Commission's regulations, approved by the order of the Director of SKVC on 8 of January, 2020 order <u>No. V-5</u>, SKVC takes one of the decisions:

   - to evaluate the performance of the higher education institution positively;
   - to evaluate the performance of the higher education institution negatively.

The higher education institution shall be entitled to lodge a reasoned complaint to the Commission for Appeals formed by the Centre.

The decisions of the Centre and the Commission for Appeals may be appealed against in accordance with the procedure established by the Law on Administrative Proceedings of the Republic of Lithuania.

17. On the basis of the external review decision SKVC takes one of the following decisions on the **accreditation** of the higher education institution:

- to **accredit for a period of seven years** if performance of the higher education institution is evaluated positively;

- to **accredit for a period of three years** if performance of the higher education institution is evaluated negatively;

- to **provide no accreditation** if the repeated external review results of the higher education institution are negative.

18. SKVC announces the decision on the external review together with the conclusions of the external review and the decision on the accreditation of the higher education institution on its website. The higher education institution respectively announces the decision on the review of the higher education institution together with the external review report on its website and maintains it until the next external review.

2.2. Background information about the institution

19. Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) is one of the largest state-run higher education institutions in Lithuania with campuses in both Kaunas and Vilnius. It has its origins in the Higher Courses started in Kaunas in 1920, which led to the establishment of the University of Lithuania in 1922, renamed Vytautas Magnus University in 1930 before becoming the University of Kaunas in 1940. In 1946 the University was closed by the Soviet Government but restored in 1989 with the vision of being a liberal arts university. In 2019 the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania decided to reorganise Aleksandras Stulginskis University and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences by merging them with VMU. The combined university group became Vytautas Magnus University.

20. The mission of the University is: "to be the community institution of science, arts, and study which continues the mission of the University of Lithuania, established in Kaunas in 1922, creating liberal learning conditions for an individual, developing partnerships and taking an active part in the life of Lithuania to advance its future and contribute to the global cultural and academic development". Its vision is to be "one of the strongest, wide-ranging universities in the Baltic region, fostering the principles of Artes Liberales, bringing together a community to build the future of Lithuania and Europe".

21. Since the last institutional review in 2014, the University has faced a major challenge in terms of the merger of the three universities in 2019. In addition, as with all universities in Lithuania, it has felt the impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic in 2020 and more recently, in February 2022, the Russian War against Ukraine. These events have provided challenges in terms of resources, delivery of the curriculum and student well-being, but have also brought opportunities for new developments and partnerships which VMU has effectively addressed. The Review Team confirms that VMU has responded to recommendations made in the 2014 Review Report and implemented a number of changes which it has evaluated. These are discussed further in the Section 3.2 (Quality Assurance).

22. VMU is an active member of Transform4Europe (T4EU), the Alliance of European Universities which aims to create a common European higher education area and vision. This aligns with the University's ambitions to increase its international presence and to take an "active part in the life of Lithuania to advance its future and contribute to its global, cultural and academic development". VMU is currently cooperating with 214 universities in 81 countries around the world and has 487 "Erasmus+" partners from 32 European countries and 104 partners from 40 other countries. The University is also a member of a number of international associations and organisations (EUA, IUFRO, ILter, EFI, NJF, BOVA, ICA, etc.), and participates in national and international research programmes (Horizon2020; Horizon Europe; LIFE; Interreg Baltic Sea Region) and in the COST cooperation network of researchers.

23. The University has 9 main faculties, 2 institutes, 3 academies and a botanical garden. Within the Agriculture Academy there are four further faculties – Engineering, Agronomy, Bioeconomy Development and Forest Sciences and Ecology. The faculties, institutes and academies are located in Kaunas, except for the Academy of Education which is located in Vilnius [Academic departments of the University | VMU (vdu.lt)]. The Centre of Ukraine has recently been established in the Academy and provides a community service space with various cultural and educational activities for Ukrainian people based in Lithuania.

24. Across the two campuses in Vilnius and Kaunas there are 311 lecture rooms, ranging in size from 2 to 242 seats. The Great Hall, which seats 725 students, caters for larger groups. Research is carried out in 35 research and 32 study laboratories; academic staff are allocated their own work space.

25. VMU offers 123 study programmes - 54 first cycle programmes (15 of which are provided in English) and 71 second cycle programmes (15 of which are provided in English) The University also runs 24 third cycle programmes. Areas of study include Mathematics, Informatics, Physical Sciences, Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, Engineering, Technology, Agriculture, Law, Business and Public Management, Education, and Sports Sciences, as well as the Arts linked to Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Technological Sciences and Agricultural Sciences. Integrated (first cycle and second cycle) programmes, leading to qualifying degrees, in Law and in professional studies in Pedagogy are also provided by VMU.

26. In addition to the academic units, VMU has an administrative structure which includes finance, human resources, international relations and student support.

27. There are currently 8218 students studying at VMU and in 2022, 49,056 students have graduated from the University. There are 1,507 (full time equivalent) staff, 758 of whom are academic (601 are teachers and 157 are researchers) and 749 are non-academic members of staff.

III. ANALYSIS BY EVALUATION AREAS

3.1. Management

Management area is analysed in accordance with the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

1.1. Compliance of the higher education institution's strategic action plan with the mission, assurance of its implementation:

1.1.1. The strategic action plan is consistent with the mission of the higher education institution, legal acts regulating research and study activities and it takes into account the provisions of the national research and study policy, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area;
1.1.2. The parts of the strategic action plan (analysis of the current situation, priorities and aims, objectives of the activities, implementation means, resources, planned performance indicators) are appropriate and justified;
1.1.3. Regular monitoring of the implementation of the strategic action plan is carried out and the results are used to improve performance management.

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28. The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2021-2027 has been devised with strong internal and external participation and is consistent with the mission of VMU - to be the "community institution of science, arts, and study which continues the mission of the University of Lithuania, established in Kaunas in 1922, creating liberal learning conditions for an individual, developing partnerships and taking an active part in the life of Lithuania to advance its future and contribute to the global cultural and academic development". The SAP reflects the University's vision to be "one of the strongest, wide-ranging universities in the Baltic region, fostering the principles of Artes Liberales, bringing together a community to build the future of Lithuania and Europe". It is compliant with

the national research and study policy, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area and takes account of the Bologna Process and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) documents.

29. The SAP supports the Lithuania 2030 State Progress Strategy, promoting a learning society from primary school to doctoral studies (teachers with at least a master's degree), self-sufficiency, green agricultural policies and increased internationality. VMU's Education and Agriculture Academies are key actors for the implementation of these goals and are nationally recognized for their excellence.

30. The SAP reflects the expertise and needs of the three merged universities - Aleksandras Stulginskis University, the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences and Vytautas Magnus University, which resulted in a reorganisation of the structure and governance of the University as well as the introduction of new areas of study and faculties such as teacher training and bioeconomy. As part of the planning process, VMU undertook a detailed SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis involving the academic units within the University, social partners and other stakeholders. This identified areas for development and possible risks for the future of the University.

31. Five priority areas were identified in the SAP:

- to ensure full support and help to the student in achieving the highest study outcomes;
- to increase the innovativeness, flexibility, and accessibility of studies addressing the needs of today's society and building the society of the future;
- to develop teachers' competences and cooperation;
- to create a learning ecosystem conducive to the development of personalities and talents;
- to strengthen leadership in teacher training.

32. The Review Team considers that the SWOT was an effective tool for the University to use to establish the priorities for VMU over the next five years. The priorities identified are relevant to the mission and vision of the university and align with the Lithuania 2030 State Progress Strategy.

33. VMU will use three main sources of funding to implement the SAP: the state budget (which amounted to EUR 26,858.06 thousand, in 2018-2019) accounts for 50% of funding; targeted funds (from the EU and other programmes (which amounted to 1535.64 thousand in 2018–2019), accounts for 30% of funding; tuition fee for full-time and part-time studies; income from other studies and training, income from outsourcing, economic activities, rental income (which amounted to EUR 12,031.76 thousand in 2018–2019) provides the remaining 20%). The Review Team was assured by members of the Senior Management Team, and from the data provided, that the University's management of the budget will enable it to achieve its priorities and objectives. This is also confirmed by the University's financial stability to date.

34. Following the recommendations of the 2014 external review the SAP includes measurable quantitative targets and indicators, which are monitored on a regular basis through the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data by the Strategy Implementation Monitoring and Analysis Unit. The outcomes of the monitoring process and the achievement of the targets and indicators are reported in the University's Annual Report.

35.   The Review Team confirms that the SAP complies with the mission and vision of the University and with national and international expectations. However, the management and monitoring of such a wide range of indicators (154) is problematic in terms of strategic focus and it may be difficult for the University to effectively use these indicators to achieve its strategic goals. Such a wide range of indicators may also inhibit the University drilling down to explore and develop specific priorities in more depth over the five-year period. The Review Team also suggests that it may be prudent to review and update the SAP before 2027 to ensure it continues to reflect the dynamic nature of the University's activities.

1.2. Effectiveness of process management of the higher education institution:
1.2.1. A clear structure for governance, decision making and distribution of responsibilities is defined;   *1.2.2. Regular process management analysis is performed, preconditions for process improvement and risk management are planned;*   *1.2.3. Stakeholders are involved in the management process at an adequate level.*

36.   The University Statute sets out the governance and decision-making structure. This identifies the key decision-making areas as the Council, the Senate, the Rector's Council, and the Rector. The Council has 11 members which includes representation from the student council. Five members of the Council are appointed from within the University, the remaining members are external. The Chairperson is an external member of the University Council, and is neither a student nor member of the staff of the University.

37.   The Council is responsible for "ensuring the University's public accountability, social responsibility, and rapid and effective response to environmental change". It publishes the Strategic Plan, approves and publishes the annual activity report and communicates directly with the Seimas on all matters relating to the organisation and financial accounting of the University. The Council appoints the Rector and the Chancellors of the Education and Agricultural Academies.

38.   The Senate is "the collegial body of the University's academic self-governance". It reports directly to the Council and its responsibilities include approving programmes and study procedures, awarding honorary titles, evaluating the outcomes of research, approving the quality assurance procedures, and study regulations of the academic units, determining and approving the management structure within academic units, including the appointment of deans and heads of units. Its membership is drawn from all the academic units of the University and includes students, researchers, professors and administrators. The Rector, Vice-Rectors, and Chancellors of Education Academy and Agriculture Academy are ex-officio members of the Senate. The Chairperson (a scientist or artist) is nominated and then elected by secret ballot by members of the Senate.

39.   The Rector's Council is responsible for initiating development plans, and for controlling and co-ordinating the general management and organisation of the University. Its membership comprises the Rector and vice Rectors.

40.   The Rector is responsible for legal compliance, the issue of orders, financial management of the University, the use of facilities and for the quality of the education provided.

41.   All of the above roles and responsibilities, and those of the Vice-Rectors, the Director of Administration, the Chancellor of the Agriculture Academy and the Chancellor of the Education Academy are defined in the Statute which has been approved by the Lithuanian Parliament. The heads of academic units, are responsible for taking routine decisions relating to the programmes and research activities within their units. The Review Team confirms that the structures for governance, decision making and the distribution of responsibilities are clearly defined and effectively support the management of the University.

42.   The 2019 merger of VMU with the Lithuanian University of Education Sciences (now Education Academy) and the Aleksandras Stulginskis University (now Agriculture Academy), shortly before the Covid crisis and the war in Ukraine, has been a huge challenge for VMU, presenting both a risk and an opportunity in terms of forging a new identity. The Review Team considers that the merger process is well under way and praises VMU's efforts to forge a new participative culture with its emphasis on the community's well-being in turbulent times.

43.   VMU states that the management of academic and non-academic staff is based on the principles of inclusion, tolerance, and cooperation, and that harmony and consolidation in community are achieved by respecting the diversity of the community and ensuring human rights, dignity, non-discrimination, equal opportunities and diversity on the basis of gender, age, race, religion, language, culture, disability, socio-economic and other grounds. The Review noted that the support of students in various forms (scholarships, mentors, buddies, physical and psychological support, cultural, sportive and social activities) is recognized and appreciated by the beneficiaries, as well as the proactivity, creativity, flexibility and openness of the management, resulting in a sense of collegiality, proudness and happiness.

44.   The University has addressed areas of duplication in the curriculum and resources, and is taking appropriate measures to tackle the structural complexity of faculties, institutes, and academies, as well as dealing with human resources and financial sustainability and the reorganization of the infrastructure.

45.   However, the Review Team believes that the internal institutional balance between vocational units (such as education and agriculture) and less applied sciences (such as arts and philosophy) requires further development to enable VMU to engage fully with its unique Artes Liberales culture.

46.   Process improvement and risk management are effectively achieved through the monitoring of the Strategic Plan as discussed in paragraphs 32 and 33 above. A fast and efficient decision-making process is supported by effective data analyses, and decisions in the case of emergency situations (such as Covid or the war in Ukraine) can be reviewed if needed or requested. Finances are externally audited, and the Internal Audit Unit regularly puts under scrutiny selected units and management processes, in accordance with VMU Quality Assurance procedures (see area 3.2 for more detail).

47.   The Review Team recognizes the level of autonomy of each faculty/academy/institute inside VMU, which helps to consolidate their identity, fosters internal communication, individual responsibility and interdisciplinary activities in line with the Artes Liberales spirit. This is especially important for the smaller, less applied science-oriented disciplines and should help to develop their specific research and teaching culture and indicators (as for example research in arts

and performance). The same flexibility is also noted in the distribution of face to face and online teaching.

48.   Stakeholders including, students, alumni, social partners and other representatives from industry are actively involved in the management process. This includes operational and strategic issues (such as the writing and implementation of the SAP) and membership of Council and other University committees - thus fostering a sense of participation and confidence.

49.   The Review Team noted the development of external stakeholders' participation in VMU management since the 2014 evaluation. VMU is monitoring the professional successes of its graduates, who act as VMU ambassadors, potential employers, internship providers, research partners, juries for the examination of the thesis, helping to create a smooth transition between studies and professional life and broadening the University community.

50.   The Review Team commends the commitment of VMU stakeholders, especially social partners, in the realization of the SAP. Their commitment to VMU enables conformance to go alongside creativity and connectiveness, realism and critical thinking. This is reflected in the development of lifelong learning (since the 2014 review) and non-formal education to meet societal needs in various fields (such as computer science or inclusive education), as requested by external state and private demands. These developments are implemented through the Lifelong Learning Academy inside the Professional Development Competence Center. The Review Team encourages VMU to continue to strengthen its links with its alumni and social partners to further develop its provision of lifelong learning and achieve its strategic goals.

1.3. Publicity of information on the performance of the higher education institution and its management effectiveness:

1.3.1. Systematic collection and analysis of the performance data, results (including student employment and graduate career monitoring) is in place, data is used for the improvement of performance of the higher education institution;
1.3.2. Information on the performance of the higher education institution is clear, accurate and accessible to the academic community and the public, and is provided regularly to the founders and members of the legal entity.

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51.   VMU has comprehensive and up-to-date data collection systems to support the various management bodies in making operational and strategic decisions. This includes research output through the Current Research Information System (CRIS) as well as staff and student surveys relating to the admission's process, the quality of teaching and learning, programmes of study, employment and graduate career monitoring. VMU also gathers data from various national indicators, surveys and reports. The summarized data is used for improvement purposes through the preparation of annual performance reports, for monitoring strategic indicators, implementing internal quality assurance processes, the preparation of self-evaluation reports and for marketing purposes.

52.   However, the Review Team concluded from meetings with students and other stakeholders that the number of surveys and evaluations are too numerous for an efficient synthesis to be made. Students indicated that they did not always complete every survey as they found the process onerous and time consuming, and were not always made aware of action taken in response to their feedback. Reduced participation may influence the outcomes of surveys, which will then not

reflect an accurate view of the quality of the learning experience. The Review Team recommends reviewing the number and frequency of surveys and analysing more effectively key indicators, such as student drop-out rates and staff turnover. These areas are discussed further in the Section 3.2. Internal and external communication is well developed at VMU and information is presented to stakeholders, including founders and members of the legal entity in a variety of different formats which include formal, informal, digital and presential. The development of digital management is being undertaken through the DMS system, with special attention being paid to cyber-criminality issues. VMU provides extensive information to the community, including international partners and potential students, through its website which is in English and Lithuanian. Each Faculty has its own page, providing details of the programmes available, research activities, latest news and partnerships. The University also communicates with the civil and local society through dedicated channels such as social media, press releases, and by VMU experts commenting on current topics. In this respect VMU played an important role in 2022 during the festivities of the 100 years of the Lithuanian University and in the role of Kaunas as European Capital of Culture. Thirty-three programmes are delivered in English, and it is the view of the Review Team that VMU's membership of Transform4 Europe will further strengthen its communication with international partners.

1.4. Effectiveness of human resource management:
1.4.1. Clear and transparent principles and procedures for the formation, management, evaluation of academic and non-academic staff are established and applied;   *1.4.2. The higher education institution has sufficient academic (in-house academic staff) and non-academic staff to meet its operational objectives;*   *1.4.3. The qualifications of the academic and non-academic staff are appropriate for the purposes of the higher education institution;*   *1.4.4. Conditions are created for the academic staff to improve the knowledge and skills required for teaching and research activities;*   *1.4.5. Conditions are created for non-academic staff to develop competencies.*

53.   VMU has effective and clear policies for the management and implementation of human resources. These include procedures for the Selection and Employment of Staff, for Qualification Requirements, the Calculation of Remuneration and for calculating the Working Time of Teachers. The workload for each staff category is clear (research, contact with students, administration, personal development) and well documented in the bonus system. However, the areas for improvement set out in the "Teacher Surveys" of 2020-21 and 2021-2022 indicate that full time staff consider the teaching load to be high, and VMU may wish to review this to make working conditions at VMU more attractive to prospective academics. The University confirmed that a teacher's total working time does not exceed 36 hours per week, and that teaching accounts for between 28-44% of the total working time which is equivalent to 18-23 hours per week. This complies with the requirements of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

54.   The Review Team examined the bonus system applied to VMU staff and although complex, found it was generally well understood, appreciated and seen as transparent and motivating by staff. Although the balance between each bonus area – research, pedagogy, organization – may vary, research output is clearly the main incentive, which supports the University's ambition to be an international research university. The bonus system may lead to a 30% salary variation each

year, and every five years to a downgrading to a lower academic position if the requirements for the current position are not met.

55. The Review Team acknowledges the positive results of the HR policy in the research achievements at VMU. However, the absence of an initial long-term contract may be perceived as less attractive for international professors and junior researchers who wish to build up a lifelong academic career. The Review Team noted that, in accordance with Lithuanian Law, contracts are reviewed after the first 5 years, with the possibility of a permanent contract being issued if the academic meets certain requirements. VMU has recently signed up to the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) which has led to a revision of research assessment in terms of qualitative evaluation, Journal Impact Factor and ranking. However, VMU may wish to consider reviewing the balance of the bonus system in terms of teaching and research, as less emphasis is placed on developing teaching and didactic indicators. The weighting of these elements in the workload could be increased in the bonus system to raise the profile of teaching and assessment and this could be documented in the next SAP. It may also be helpful for VMU to track the staff turnover rate through a specific indicator.

56. The University has sufficient academic and non-academic staff to meet its operational objectives. There are 142 professors, 240 Associate Professors, 181 lecturers and 38 assistants, giving a total of 601 academic staff, providing a student/staff ratio of 14:1. In addition there are 157 researchers, 26 Heads of Department and 723 administrators to support the management of the University and its stakeholders.

57. The qualifications of academic and non-academic staff are appropriate for the purposes of the higher education institution. VMU requirements for the positions of teachers and researchers are established on the basis of the Law on Higher Education and Research, the recommendations of the European Commission on the European Charter for Researchers and on the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. Between 75 and 80% of academic staff hold PhDs.

58. Non-academic staff make up approximately 45% of all the University staff. This includes staff who provide direct services to research and studies (62%) such as laboratory assistants, study administrators, research managers, library staff, and staff who perform general functions (38%), such as IT specialists, finance and HR staff. Job descriptions set out the qualification requirements for their employment.

59. During the period 2018–2022, the gender balance has been maintained. Women make up 50-58% of the workforce and men between 42 and 52%. The proportion of women in academic positions is relatively even across all age groups, while the majority of male teachers and research workers are over 40 years of age.

60. VMU has been recognised for its strong focus on staff development by the Transform4Europe Network and it is now the leading university for providing professional development support for academic staff across the Network. The University has a budget of Euro 250300 for staff development during 2022/3. The criteria for professional development are set out in the Procedure for Professional Development of Academic and Non-academic Staff at VMU. The procedure recommends that academic staff spend at least 20 academic hours per year on professional development, and non-academic staff, at least 10 hours per year. Opportunities for staff to improve their knowledge and the skills required for teaching and research activities are provided by the Professional Development Competence Centre at the University. Staff are also supported to attend

conferences and some external training courses. Since 2018 there has been a significant increase in participation in professional development courses by VMU staff and this is demonstrated by the number of certificates issued in 2022 - 2,322, compared with 236 in 2018. The University has also significantly increased the budget for staff development during the period from 13,798.7 in 2018 to 32,615.0 in 2022.

61.   Staff also participate in Erasmus learning visits and the number of visits has increased from 90 to 250 per year since the previous review.

62.   From the evidence provided in the Self Evaluation Report and its annexes and discussions with administrative staff, the Review Team concluded that their participation in professional development activities is less well developed. VMU recognises this and stated in the Self Evaluation documentation that this as an area for improvement.

63.   The University has a system of non-formal staff assessment through interviews with heads of department and the outcome of student surveys, but the Review Team did not see evidence of any compulsory administrative measures (e.g., special training or mentoring) in the case of poor evaluation, except through the re-evaluation of academic positions every 5 years. The Review Team suggests that staff assessment is formalized through a full appraisal process which involves both academic and non-academic staff, and that the University encourages further participation in the courses offered by the Professional Development Centre to enable all staff to benefit from VMU's national and international expertise in education. In particular this could support the development of innovative teaching and learning strategies.

64.   The 2019 merger is generally regarded as successful in terms of human resource management, reducing redundances, fostering synergies and bringing general salary increases. The number, gender balance and qualifications of both academic and non-academic staff selected through a fair and transparent procedure are appropriate to the VMU higher education mission and are aligned with national expectations.

1.5. Efficiency of financial and learning resource management:
1.5.1. Financial resources are planned, allocated and used rationally; *1.5.2. Various financial resources for the implementation of higher education activities are attracted;* *1.5.3. Learning resources for provision of studies and research (art) activities are planned and used rationally;* *1.5.4. Learning resources for conducting studies and research (art) activities are appropriate, sufficient and available.*

65.   VMU's most recent financial figures show a strong increase of state funding between 2019 and 2022 (approximately 36%). This has been used to build a new infrastructure following the merger of the three universities, to develop scholarships and investments, and to support a significant increase in staff salaries.

66.   At the same time, targeted funds have also significantly increased (+ 51% overall, with a peak of + 87% in 2021), reflecting, in an impressive way, the strategic ambitions of an international research university. However, VMU's own funds decreased by approximately 18%, with a percentage in total budget of 16% (this was 24% in 2019), mainly through tuition fees and various services (notably in R&D and leasing of unused VMU premises).

67. Overall, these figures show the success of the 2019 merger, and also the many challenges VMU will need to meet in terms of financial sustainability in the next ten years. One of the main concerns is student numbers as there is currently a demographic decrease in Lithuania. The recruitment of potential students is likely to fall, and although VMU recruitment figures show an increase for 2022 (8218 students) compared with 2021 (8210 students) there is a significant decrease in overall student numbers compared with the pre-pandemic period in 2019 (9715 students). In addition, there is a significant student drop-out rate on several programmes (up to 36%). To meet the University's internationalization agenda, international students enjoy the same tuition fees as national ones, rather than bringing in additional income to the University. In accordance with the Artes Liberales philosophy, small programmes with low recruitment (as few as 4 students) are maintained alongside bigger and more profitable ones.

68. The complexity of the administration is costly although it does provide an effective system of managing the wide range of programmes, faculties and academies across two campuses. The non-formal lifelong learning offer remains expensive for ordinary citizens. Staff salaries and workloads need further review to meet the level of international higher education competition. The new CoARA principles of research evaluation may also lead to changes in research incentives.

69. The Review Team acknowledges that VMU is fully aware of and ready for these challenges but recommends the University further explores various scenarios in terms of overall student numbers and the minimum number of students on programmes to keep them financially viable. The Team believes that VMU should continue being proactive in the development of its foundation programmes for prospective students and should systematically survey the reasons for students dropping out. This would accord with the strategy of Lithuania 2030 for developing education. After turbulent years (merger, Covid, Ukraine war), the Review Team hopes that the ongoing transformation process will reach a smoother, if not always predictable pace.

70. The learning resources at VMU are appropriate for the study programmes delivered by the University. They are used effectively, and there is a clear system of planned renewal and refurbishment of all the facilities to meet the needs of the diverse student population. VMU has significantly rationalized its assets over the last three years following the acquisition of real estate through the merger of the three universities. Considerable investment has been made to update dormitories, make buildings accessible and install equipment to meet the needs of the digital age, and to address climatic conditions. The most notable assets are the Nemunas Valley installations, the Modern Didactics Centre, The Teacher Training Centre, the Sports Centre and the Library. The Review Team confirms that the structural facilities of VMU are of a very high standard and the Team is fully convinced, following its tour of the VMU Kaunas campus, of the appropriateness, sufficiency and availability of VMU's infrastructure to meet its future strategic challenges.

71. **In summary**, following the 2019 merger of VMU with the Lithuanian University of Education Sciences and the Aleksandras Stulginskis University, VMU has established effective management processes. The Strategic Plan reflects the mission of VMU and is based on an effective analysis of SWOT. The Strategic Plan is monitored through the governance structure of the University and the evidence provided indicates that the key indicators are being met, and in some cases have been exceeded. However, the Review Team believes that the wide range of indicators inhibits a focused approach to achieving the key strategic goals of the University and suggests a review of the Strategic Plan to update it in line with ongoing changes and developments in the University. VMU is an active member of the Transform4Europe Network which will support

its aims to be recognized as a University of International Research. VMU has a clear governance structure which supports effective decision making, enabling the University to respond effectively to unexpected events such as the Covid Pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Process management analysis and risk management are embedded in the remit of the various University committees. Stakeholders are involved in the management process through their membership of University Committees, as well as in an advisory capacity within faculties. Clear and effective information is provided to the public on the performance of the University through the Annual Activity Report which is published on the website. Data is systematically collected and analysed and this includes student employment and career monitoring. However, the Review Team suggests that the University would benefit from the analysis of other key indicators of quality such as student drop-out rates and staff turnover. VMU has an effective human resource management policy which supports a participative culture with an emphasis on the community's well-being. There are opportunities for professional development for all staff. However, the Review Team found that such opportunities for non-academic staff were less well defined, and the take-up of such courses was lower than that for academic staff. A recommendation has therefore been made in this respect. The current system of staff appraisal is informal and the Review Team recommends that this if formalized to support career development. There are sufficient academic and non-academic staff to support the delivery of the curriculum and to provide an effective student learning experience. Staff are well qualified - between 75 and 80% of academic staff hold PhDs. Financial resources are planned and effectively allocated, and the University has responded to the financial implications of the merger in 2019 and is continuing to update and refurbish its physical infrastructure. The current resources include a state-of-the-art sports centre and opportunities for students to carry out in-depth research in their chosen fields of study. The Review Team identified four areas of good practice and makes six recommendations in this area.

72. **Judgement:** the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks and is given 4 points.

73. **Recommendations for the area:**

- Update the SAP to take account of the indicators which have already been met and consider a more focussed approach with fewer indicators to support the achievement of the strategic goals of the University.
- Analyze more effectively key indicators, such as student dropout rates and staff turnover.
- Review the balance of the bonus system, to increase the emphasis on high quality teaching learning and assessment.
- Implement a system for the professional development of non-academic staff which is comparable with that for academic staff.
- Encourage further participation in the courses offered by the Professional Development Centre which will support the development of innovative teaching and learning strategies and enable all staff to benefit from VMU's national and international expertise in education.
- Formalize the assessment of staff through an appraisal system and provide support through training and mentoring for areas which are identified as requiring improvement.

74. **Good practice examples:**

- VMU's efforts to forge a new participative culture and its emphasis on the community's well-being in turbulent times.
- VMU's leadership role in the Transform4Europe Network which will support the University's international strategy.
- The dedicated commitment of VMU stakeholders in the realization of the SAP, and in enabling creativity and connectiveness, realism and critical thinking to go alongside conformance.
- The University's commitment to continually investing in, and updating, its infrastructure which is demonstrated by the development of state-of-the art facilities such as the sports centre encouraging student participation and commitment.

3.2. Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance area is analysed in accordance with the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

2.1. Implementation and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system:
2.1.1. The higher education institution has approved and made publicly available internal quality assurance documents that are consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area; *2.1.2. Internal quality assurance measures of planning, implementation and improvement are appropriate, applied periodically and ensure the involvement of the whole institution and stakeholders;* *2.1.3. Processes for planning, implementation, monitoring, periodic evaluation and development of activities are specified;* *2.1.4. Students and academic and non-academic staff of the institution receive effective support;* *2.1.5. Provisions and procedures for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, appeal and ethics are specified and applied;* *2.1.6. The results of the external review are used to improve the performance of the higher education institution.*

75. Following the merger of VMU, Aleksandras Stulginskis University and Lithuanian University of Education Sciences and the approval of the University's 2021–2027 Strategy, the quality system has been substantially renewed, is clearly regulated and is aligned with the approved strategic objectives and the European Statutory Guidelines (ESG). A comprehensive review of the VMU quality system took place in 2020-2021, leveraging international peer expertise and benchmarking across a range of institutions in EU member states. The VMU Quality Manual was published and is available to all stakeholders on the University's website.

76. The quality assurance system is linked to national and international higher education policy priorities. Quality assurance processes are divided into 3 groups (strategic, core and supporting processes), and form a set of 20 interlinked processes, comprising the strategic quality management process, 8 processes for the management of studies and learning activities, 6 processes for the management of research and artistic activities and doctoral studies, and 5 supporting processes. Quality assurance is based on the principles of openness to development, collegiality, academic ethics, responsibility and publicity. A 4-step process (Plan-Implement-Evaluate-Improve) model has been adopted for continuous and systematic quality development.

77.   The Review Team considers the Quality Assurance system to be detailed, incorporating strong quality assurance principles, (openness to development, collegiality, academic ethos, responsibility). However, the Review Team found, from studying the various procedures for quality and through meetings with management and staff, that the approach to quality management tends to be driven by performative indicators of quality rather than an appreciation of quality improvement by all the University's stakeholders. The emphasis has been on research outcomes with less attention being given to teaching, learning and professional services.

The current model is comprehensive and holistic in its approach; there are clear areas of responsibility throughout the organisation for quality management. These are owned by the senior leadership team, and then cascaded in a federated approach to key functional areas of the University. The Quality Manual identifies responsibilities for all areas of the quality assurance system. However, the Review Team found that the current quality assurance approach leans towards being task-oriented – e.g. meeting detailed performance indicators - rather than fostering a strong quality culture with which all stakeholders can engage. While departments fulfill their quality assurance responsibilities, these often revolve around meeting compliance requirements rather than actively cultivating a culture of quality. To enhance the institution's QA framework, it is recommended that the University considers adopting a more nurturing quality culture and moves away from conformance towards performance. VMU may wish to consider a balancing of the current metrics-based performance management framework with approaches to encourage developmentally-focused quality enhancement and culture, e.g. the development of communities of practice around best-practice, small-grant funding for local quality initiatives, encouragement of reflective-practice within QA processes.

78.   The quality assurance processes do involve a broad range of stakeholders – both internal and external who inform all stages of the process. For example, social partners participate in the meetings of the University's committees, act as external reference points for the development of programmes and for the examination of the thesis and provide feedback to the University on a regular basis through discussions, interviews and conversations. Students are involved in the quality process through their membership of the University committees. They are elected to these committees and trained by the Student Council.

79.   The Quality System specifies processes for planning, implementation, monitoring, periodic evaluation and development activities. Planning is linked directly to the strategic plan and the University produces an annual report of all its activities during the year. A procedure is in place for the development of new programmes, which are subject to continuous quality review. Where the Faculty Council identifies a need for improvement in relation to a programme a quality improvement action plan is put in place. Examples of these were provided to the Review Team indicating that action is taken where necessary and the outcomes are monitored.

80.   Faculty Councils monitor quality while the Quality Department carries out checks at the University level. Periodic evaluation is carried out both externally through SKVC, European Universities Association (EURA), the Research Council of Lithuania, and internally through the ongoing review of programmes. VMU undertakes numerous surveys to obtain feedback on the quality of its provision. These include the quality of the student experience overall, course evaluation, internships, exit surveys, graduate and alumni surveys, doctoral studies, a survey of teachers, and an employee well-being survey. The response rates for these surveys are variable and students with whom the Review Team met indicated that they did not always complete the

surveys as they are too numerous and time consuming. The outcomes of the various surveys are discussed through the committee structure and there is evidence of action taken. However, students indicated that they were not always aware of the changes made as a result of their feedback, and consequently they did not feel motivated to complete further surveys.

81.   VMU provides an extensive range of support services for academic and non-academic staff and for students, and both students and staff spoke positively about the support they received. Staff are provided with opportunities for continuing professional development (see paragraphs 52-53) and can use the University's sports and arts centres. Provision is made for the psychological and spiritual well-being of staff and students. Students can access careers advice, academic guidance relating to their programme of study, skills development, mentoring, and pastoral support which includes free counselling sessions. They are also eligible for financial support in the form of scholarships. The International Cooperation Department provides activities and specialist support to assist international students to integrate into the University. Students with whom the Review Team met confirmed that they are effectively supported in terms of both their academic and pastoral needs. The Review Team noted VMU's inclusive policy in the setting up of the Ukraine Centre to support students from Ukraine, and that this has accepted 310 Ukrainians to study at VMU. The Review Team found that support services are wide-ranging and holistic, and international students are well integrated into the VMU learning community. However, the Team did not find evidence of feedback which directly related to the quality of these services, although the outcomes of surveys about staff well-being and the student satisfactions are positive. The Review Team believes that seeking direct feedback about the effectiveness of the University's support services would provide opportunities for further enhancement.

82.   The Code of Academic Ethics, which is currently being updated, includes procedures, and makes provision, for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, appeals, complaints and ethical behaviour. The Gender Equality Plan sets out measures to promote cultural change within the University to maintain gender balance and ensure equal opportunities at all levels. The Disability Policy aims to ensure a culture of equality and non-discrimination and includes provision for reasonable adjustments to working and study conditions. VMU has recently introduced the procedure for the prevention of sexual harassment and gender-based violence so that such cases can be dealt with through the University's policy procedures. The reporting procedure enables the complainant to remain anonymous, thus supporting vulnerable members of the community. To address the fundamental principles of research professionalism and Ethics, research committees have been set up in each department. The University has recently signed a CoARA agreement which may require VMU to update its documentation relating to the assessment of scientific and artistic activities.

83.   Academic Integrity is reinforced at all stages of the student journey by tutors, information on the correct process for citations and by activities (including the Enlightenment Project) organised by the Student Council. Strict penalties apply for cheating and plagiarism and very few cases of academic dishonesty have been recorded. Appeals against a decision about academic dishonesty, or relating to grading are considered by the Dispute Resolution Commission. Complaints about the quality of teaching or other issues relating to the student learning experience are also referred to the Commission. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures receives complaints from both staff and students relating to academic ethics. These cases are also referred to the Dispute Resolution Commission and the outcomes reported back to the Ombudsman.

84. Although VMU has clearly defined policies for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, the Review Team found that both staff and students have yet to take full ownership of these policies, and have limited awareness of how to further develop and embed a culture of inclusion, tolerance and equality within the University. It is also suggested that a more reflective approach to academic integrity could be adopted which would address the issue of artificial intelligence.

85. The Review Team found evidence that VMU has used the outcomes of the previous SKVC Institutional Review in 2014 and other external reviews to improve performance. The University has been reviewed by the European Association of Universities. Several study fields have been reviewed by SKVC and the Research Council of Lithuania undertook an assessment of VMU's research activities. VMU has responded to the recommendations made by these external reviews and implemented changes where necessary. This has included changes to the University's strategic management. The reports from the reviews are published on the University's website. Following the previous SKVC institutional review, the VMU Performance Improvement Plan was presented to the Senate and approved by the Council, and then published.

86. The Review Team noted that all actions on the improvement plan have been completed. However, to ensure continuous enhancement of the learning experience, the Review Team suggests that VMU should consider implementing a "continuous quality improvement plan" for the University as a whole, which captures the outcomes of both internal and external reviews and provides the basis for continuous enhancement.

87. **In summary,** VMU has effective policies and procedures in place for quality assurance and these are clearly set out within the Quality Manual and associated documents which are made available to all stakeholders. The quality system is guided by national and international indicators and priorities and draws on external expertise. Processes for planning, implementation and monitoring including periodic evaluation are in place and evidenced through departmental improvement plans. The support systems for both staff and students are extensive and are appreciated by those who use them. Policies and procedures relating to academic integrity, inclusion, equality and diversity are contained in the Code of Academic Ethics. The outcomes of external reviews have been used to form action plans and implement change. Although the system of quality assurance is clearly articulated and the necessary policies and procedures are in place, staff and students have yet to fully embrace the notion of operating within a culture of quality. As set out in the European Standard and Guidelines, quality assurance should be the basis for continuous enhancement of the student learning experience and for this to evolve, action plans will need to be updated on an ongoing basis. In addition, VMU may wish to encourage developmentally-focused quality enhancement through communities of best-practice, small-grant funding for local quality initiatives and the encouragement of reflective-practice within QA processes. The University will also need to consider how it is going to address AI in terms of academic integrity, and ensure that its research and ethics policies meet the needs of CoARA. The Review Team identified two areas of good practice and makes six recommendations in this area.

88. **Judgement:** the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks and is given 3 points.

89. **Recommendations for the area:**

- Review the focus of quality assurance to move away from compliance and towards nurturing a quality culture which is owned by both staff and students, and is equally appropriate for both teaching and research.
- Clearly articulate changes made as a result of student feedback and review the number, timing and format of surveys with a view to increasing the response rate.
- Implement a system of obtaining feedback which relates directly to the quality of the support services available to staff and students.
- Adopt a more reflective approach to academic integrity which addresses the issue of artificial intelligence.
- Implement a continuous quality improvement plan which captures the outcomes of both internal and external reviews and provides the basis for continuous enhancement.
- Continue reviewing and updating the documentation associated with research and ethics procedures to ensure they are fully aligned with the requirements of CoARA.

90. **Good practice examples:**

- The extensive range of support services provided for academic, non-academic staff and for students.
- The establishment of the Ukraine Centre which has accepted 310 Ukrainian students to study at VMU.

3.3. Studies and Research (Art)

Studies and Research (Art) area is analysed in accordance with the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

3.1. The level of research (art), compatibility of studies and research (art) and its compliance with the strategic aims of activities:
3.1.1. The study and research (art) activities carried out and their results are consistent with the mission and strategic aims of the higher education institution; *3.1.2. The level of research (art) activities is sufficient for the ongoing studies of the higher education institution;* *3.1.3. Studies are based on research (art);* *3.1.4. Consistent recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning is performed.*

91. VMU has a very wide range of study programmes with a uniquely inter- and intra-disciplinary nature, facilitated by its liberal arts ethos, particularly at the undergraduate level. It has the largest number of study field groups in Lithuania (14 out of 16). The University conducts studies in all study groups except Health Sciences, Veterinary Sciences and Public Safety. This aligns with its strategic aim "to create liberal learning conditions for an individual". Satisfaction with the diversity and flexible individualization of course/programme design was high among students and lauded by social partners - employers and alumni - and recognized as a key strength in forming well-rounded graduates able to adapt quickly and effectively to labour market needs and employer expectations.

92. Despite the high degree of satisfaction among current students, some programmes/disciplines have experienced higher than would be expected drop-out rates (36% and 26%). This may have been exacerbated by the Covid Pandemic and/or the inability of learners on fee-paying places to meet the costs associated with completing their study programmes. It does, however, raise concerns about the learning experience and the viability of running such programmes.

93. Graduate tracking systems are in place in most departments/programmes to monitor the success of graduates. However, there was not enough evidence to confirm that graduate tracking is systematic across all programmes, and that this data is being used to inform decision-making, particularly in respect of admissions policy, new programmes and delivery methods.

94. The institution's research output has increased significantly during the decade since the last VMU review and this has been bolstered more recently by the addition of the 2 Institutes of Agriculture and Education to the VMU teaching, learning and research eco-system.

95. Research areas and fields are approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport while the formal (annual) and comparative (every 5 years) expert evaluation of R&D activities is organised by the Research Council of Lithuania. The quality of research is largely evaluated using the points-based system (higher points being awarded for papers/research in prestigious journals groups (Q1 and Q2)). Points can however be accumulated by a greater quantity of papers/research in lesser-ranked publications, based on a national formula which considers different criteria such as the contribution of the institution's authors, the journal's IF/AIF, and the co-authorship of foreign and business institutions. The Review Team found that the number of researchers publishing in Q1 and Q2 journals has increased.

96. Academic staff and teachers were very satisfied with the opportunities to conduct more research and to have this recognized and valued by the institution's points-based meritocracy system for professional development and advancement. The Review Team, however, does have some concerns about the strong emphasis on research which can have a detrimental effect on class-time with teachers being over-stretched.

97. The Review team found clear evidence that studies are based on research (art). The results of the study field evaluations during 2020–2022 confirmed the strong links between studies and research (art). VMU provided examples of where the outcomes of research had informed and changed courses within specialist programmes, particularly in the area of forestry.

98. Teachers belong to research clusters, whose topics are closely related to the study fields in which they teach. Masters and doctoral students are included in the activities of the clusters, and the topics offered for the Master's thesis are related to ongoing research and applied research. The latest knowledge, methods and results obtained during their research projects are directly integrated by the teaching staff, into the content of study programmes.

99. VMU has an effective system for the recognition of foreign qualifications which is consistent with its internationalization strategy. This is set out in the Description of Policy on Academic Recognition of Competences and Qualifications at VMU. The University has been granted the right, by SKVC, to perform academic recognition of education and qualifications acquired in foreign states in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. VMU is constantly updating its recognition policy for foreign qualifications to take account of changes in the international education environment, and most notably the need to have a policy for the recognition of the qualifications of

war refugees. To fully assess the qualification of an applicant's suitability to study, qualitative methods of checking knowledge and abilities are applied.

100. Prior and non-formal learning is recognized for admission purposes, in accordance with the Description of Procedure for the Assessment and Recognition of Competences Acquired Through Non-formal and Informal Education. Information for those who intend to have their competences recognised is published on the University website. VMU plans to enhance and update the recognition process with the aim of making it digital, using the resources of its membership of Transform4Europe.

101. During the period of this review – 2017-2022 - only a small number of students (127) chose to have their competences assessed, and only 115 completed the process. The recognition of prior and non-formal learning is applied to attract non-traditional learners (especially later in life learners) is minimal and does not support the institutional approach to lifelong learning The Review Team believes this is an area for development. However, hybrid on-campus/on-line learning is taking place in a number of disciplines/programmes which does support less traditional learners.

> *3.2. Internationality of studies, research (art):*
>
> *3.2.1. The higher education institution has a strategy for internationalisation of research (art) and study activities (including indicators of internationalisation), means for its implementation, and measurements of the effectiveness of these activities are performed (not applicable to colleges unless provided for in its strategic documents);*
> *3.2.2. The higher education institution integrates aspects of internationalisation into the content of studies and research (art) activities.*

102. Internationalisation is a priority for VMU and the internationalisation strategy forms a major part of the Strategic Plan for 2021-2027. The main indicators of internationalisation are provided in the Strategic Plan and these include measuring the percentage of new double diploma and joint degree programmes, the proportion of foreign students enrolled, the proportion of VMU students and teachers participating in exchanges, the number of foreign doctoral students, international cooperation management, the number of students receiving international scholarships, the percentage of information on the University's website which is presented in English.

103. VMU is highly successful in its international outreach, both in terms of the internationalisation of the student body and the programmes it offers. The University's membership of Transform4 Europe is a prime example of the recognition VMU receives internationally. This provides opportunities for joint research projects with other overseas institutions, as well as the forging of further institutional partnerships. The introduction of joint/double degree programmes has helped to raise the profile of the University and the diversity of its programmes to attract not only international but also Lithuanian students.

104. Opportunities for study abroad periods either as an integral /mandatory requirement of a study programme or stand-alone international experiences such as conferences/summer schools are wide-spread and successfully implemented. International students who attend VMU for a full or partial programme of study are well supported through mentoring and buddy systems organised by the International Studies Department.

105. The University delivers 3 joint second cycle programmes with foreign partners, and has 34 double diploma study contracts with universities in Belgium, India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

Ukraine. The number of contracts increased from 14 to 34 during the evaluation period. Under double diploma contracts 107 students came to study during 2018–2022. Currently new dual diploma contracts are being negotiated with seven partner universities from the UK and the USA.

106. The University has "Erasmus+" cooperation agreements with 417 institutions in 32 countries and has received EUR 1.5 million in funding from the EU for the implementation of the programmes in 2022.

107. The overall average of outgoing students on international exchanges during the period of the review is 3.93%, compared to a national average of 2.3% The take-up of international exchanges is unevenly dispersed across academic units and programmes depending on the specific requirements of the programme, and in some cases early employment of students prior to graduation. Incoming foreign students attending for partial studies account for 21.59% of the student population.

108. To strengthen mobility, VMU is currently preparing the concept of an international semester and for at least 12 credits of study courses to be taught in English. This would increase the opportunities for foreign students to enter those units where the availability of courses for exchange students is small, and also provide opportunities for Lithuanian students to attend the study courses taught in English, while still in Lithuania, and prepare for shorter study periods abroad, or to take virtual study courses.

109. Teachers actively participate in international exchanges and over the past 5 years VMU teachers and administrative staff have taken part in 643 "Erasmus+" learning visits to 49 countries around the world. Teachers are members of international associations, sharing experience with researchers, teachers, and experts from other countries, which they use to enrich their teaching. Annually about 20–30 practitioners from foreign companies/organisations visit VMU and teach students.

110. Recognition of VMU's internationalisation is reflected in its ranking in 2022, when the University was ranked 389 among all world universities and the first place among the ranked Lithuanian universities in the category of internationalisation in the "QS World University Rankings". The "Times Higher Education" (THE) ranking placed VMU 311th place in the international category. VMU was awarded the leading position in Lithuania for student mobility by the "U-Multirank" rating. The category of foreign teachers was ranked the highest in the QS Emerging Europe & Central Asia (EECA) ranking. However, with the University may wish to focus more on "branding" rather than ranking to further strengthen its international profile.

111. **In summary,** the institution is fulfilling its mission to offer flexible and dynamic programmes of study in the liberal arts tradition, allowing students to develop their individual profiles and to ultimately become well-rounded and adaptable graduates in the workplace. However, the development of a more flexible approach to the delivery of programmes, and the admission of students, could support and increase the number of late in life learners. Research has taken on a new priority for the institution since the last review in 2014 with most, if not all associate and full professors engaged in some form of research together with students and in cooperation with other internationally recognized institutions and researchers. There is clear evidence of research activities informing teaching and learning. VMU has effective policies for the recognition of foreign qualifications and prior non-formal and formal learning. However, these processes are not widely used for the admission of students. The University has a strong international presence

through its membership of Transform4Europe which provides opportunities for the development of further international partnerships, joint degrees, student and teacher exchanges as well as involvement in research projects with other international institutions. VMU is particularly interested in developing international joint doctoral programmes. The Review Team identified two areas of good practice and makes two recommendations in this area.

112. **Judgement:** the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks and is given 4 points.

113. **Recommendations for the area:**

- Widen access for life-long learners and address drop-out numbers on financial/family situation grounds.
- Ensure the University's USP of being a learner-centred and teaching University, which is a strong pull-factor for students continues, and that research output is not allowed to dominate the institution's eco-system.

114. **Good practice examples:**

- The individualized modular style programme design and the flexibility of the final degree which is extremely successful and sets the institution apart from others in the country and indeed in Europe.
- The internationalization opportunities afforded to students, teachers, researchers and professional staff.

3.4. Impact on Regional and National Development

Impact on Regional and National Development area is analysed in accordance with the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

4.1. Effectiveness of the impact on regional and national development:
4.1.1. The higher education institution carries out an analysis of national and (or) regional demands, identifies the needs to be met and foresees the potential impact on national and (or) regional development; *4.1.2. The monitoring, analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures on national and (or) regional development are performed.*

115. VMU analyses the national and regional demands, and identifies the potential impact it can have on national and regional development through a SWOT analysis. The outcome of this analysis has been included in the Strategic Plan for 2021-2027, and various activities are being implemented and new initiatives developed to support the regional and national needs identified by the SWOT.

116. The merger of VMU with Aleksandras Stulginskis University and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences has created the most wide-ranging university in Lithuania that coverers two major areas (education and agriculture), recognized as critical ones in the development of Lithuania. Currently, there is a high demand for trained professionals in both areas. The University is in a unique position to meet these demands by sharing its scientific potential and preparing

young professionals for agrobusinesses, as well as educational/cultural institutions. In particular, VMU could extend its impact in the field of education by identifying demand for preparing secondary school education courses to support "professional orientation", "Inclusive education (for children with disabilities)".

117.   The Kaunas region is characterized by a strong potential for scientific innovation and VMU activities provide a significant part of this potential. Following the national level strategy, VMU research has focused on developing the high value-added, knowledge-intensive, highly-skilled labour-based products and activities that would lead to structural changes in the economy. Especially notable are VMU interdisciplinary institutes in the fields of humanities, technology, agriculture, IT (digitalization, artificial intelligence, etc.) that brings together best practices and competences across these areas. For example, the "Forest 4.0" project introduces a scientific approach to managing forests sustainably, based on innovative data collection and processing applications.

118.   VMU is a shareholder in 5 companies, based in the commercialization of the technologies developed, and has a business incubator, which hosts between 10 and 15 innovative companies working in the fields of biotechnology, agriculture, food industry, etc. The development of start-ups and the promotion of entrepreneurial activities will make VMU the home of more innovation breakthroughs.

119.   The University also actively participates in the region's cultural and artistic life, including musical events. Participation in the strategic project "Kaunas European Capital of Culture 2022" contributed to the development of the region's identity that combines its heritage, multicultural history and contemporary culture.

120.   VMU's Botanical Gardens not only preserve plant biodiversity and carry scientific research but are also open for the general public as a venue for recreation and cultural events. The botanical festival "Night of Scents" runs in the gardens every year, offering various lectures, presentations and other educational activities. VMU's Botanical Garden's space is open for local communities for Mardi Gras and other celebrations. The annual Biblical Plants Exhibition held in the greenhouse helps to foster links with the religious community.

121.   The University contributes to the development of democratic society by disseminating knowledge on political and social developments, gathering historical archives, providing support for dissidents. VMU Andrew Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development organizes annual international scientific conferences in memory of Leonid Donskis and Andrei Sakharov, public lectures, commemorative concerts, exhibitions and social campaigns.

122.   VMU also contributes to the increased inclusion and equal opportunities for all members of the community to participate in the University academic and community life. VMU's disability policy addresses the needs of persons with disabilities and special individual needs, such as psychological health difficulties, dyslexia, autism, etc.

123.   In 2021, the VMU Sports Centre was awarded "Gilė" label, which indicates that the facility is accessible to persons with disabilities. The Sports Centre offers modern and well-developed facilities that allows students to participate in various sports at both national and international level. VMU sports teams successfully participate in various competitions, the most notable of which are the National Basketball League (NBL), the Regional Basketball League, the Baltic

Student games, the European Universities' Championships and the FISU World University Championships.

124. The University has developed strong links with its social partners, which include local and national businesses, production companies, public institutions, municipalities, educational institutions and centres, cultural and artistic organizations (e.g., Ernst &Young, Thermofisher, Agrokoncernas, Kaunas municipality). The partners are actively involved in the University's activities by participating in study committees, theses defences, providing scholarships, employing VMU students.

125. In line with the principles of Artes Liberales, graduating VMU students are defined as flexible, possessing a wide range of skills and languages that allows them to adapt well to changing economic situations, making them a great asset to the future economic development of the region.

126. The presence of VMU and its impact on regional and national priorities are evident through the activities identified above. The SAP includes several KPIs relating to the impact of VMU on National and Regional Development, all of which are marked as achieved during the last three years. Feedback from stakeholders is positive, but it does not specifically address the regional and national impact of the University. The Review Team, therefore, concludes that the University has yet to fully implement a means of evaluating the effectiveness of these measures in meeting national and regional demands.

4.2. Assurance of conditions for lifelong learning:

4.2.1. The higher education institution monitors and analyses the need for lifelong learning;
4.2.2. The higher education institution anticipates the diversity of forms and conditions of lifelong learning and ensures their implementation;
4.2.3. The higher education institution performs the evaluation of assurance of conditions for lifelong learning.

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127. VMU offers a range of lifelong learning opportunities for individuals seeking to further their education and develop new skills., as well as formal learning through three cycles of studies (bachelor, masters, doctoral). However, the Review Team believes that an increase in the number of part-time programmes and a more flexible approach to the mode of delivery would better accommodate the needs of working students. In addition, the University could consider the development of training courses (short courses) for business professionals.

128. In recognition of the need for developing training in education, VMU has established the "Gifted" centre with Israel's "Ron Vardi" centre, which runs a curriculum for international gifted children, to complement the children's general education. Children from all regions are encouraged to participate in this program (350 children took part in 2022). The University also applies its innovative educational methods for children's learning activities in "Mažųjų akademija" (kindergarten).

129. "VMU Schools and Classrooms Network" consists of 5 secondary schools and 7 classes named after VMU in other schools, where a comprehensive learning experience is supported by modern facilities and resources.

130. After the merger with Aleksandras Stulginskis University and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, VMU become a major centre in the development of teachers' qualification

at the national level and the only institution in Lithuania with qualification development activities for the agrosector.

131. To provide diversity in the forms and conditions of lifelong learning, VMU offers a self-study distance learning service "Open Studies", where all members of public, including students and University employees, can study their selected courses online. In addition, the institute of Foreign Languages offers 30 foreign language courses to the general public.

132. "VMU World Lithuanian University" conducts Lithuanian language courses, internships, lectures and supports visits and lectures of renowned Lithuanian professors at the University.

133. In addition, each year, Lithuanian studies are organised for teachers of Lithuanian schools, situated abroad.

134. To cater for the older generation, "The University of the Third Age" offers learning activities for seniors.

135. VMU has established itself as a leading partner in the European University Alliance "Transform4Europe" and the Review Team believes that there is an opportunity for the University to extend the best practices which foster mobility and closer co-operations with universities within this network, to the Academic Kaunas Consortium, to create more visits, shared courses, joint degrees/programmes.

136. **In summary,** the University analyses the national and regional demands, and identifies the potential impact it can have on national and regional development through a SWOT analysis which is linked to the Strategic Plan. Various activities are being implemented and new initiatives developed to support the regional and national needs identified by the SWOT. Two major areas of the economy agriculture and education are supported by a wide range of VMU initiatives and research activities. The University has strong links with businesses and social partners who actively participate in the management of quality and the development of programmes. As yet the University has not formed strong links with local universities to further enhance the range of courses available to students. However, it derives great benefit from its membership of Transform4Europe and the best practice from this alliance could be transferred to local networks. VMU offers a diverse range of lifelong learning opportunities that are designed to meet the needs of learners from all backgrounds and interests. The VMU Professional Competence Development Centre coordinates and monitors the quality of the lifelong learning activities at the University. However, the outcomes of quality monitoring, and feedback from stakeholders about its provision could be used more effectively to ensure that VMU is fully supporting national and regional needs. The Review Team identified one area of good practice and makes four recommendations in this area.

137. **Judgement:** the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks and is given 4 points.

138. **Recommendations for the area:**

- Implement a more systematic and coordinated method of assessing the effectiveness and quality of the various initiatives, and their national and regional impact to provide a basis for continuous enhancement of the provision;

- Extend the best practices which foster mobility and closer cooperations with universities within the European University Alliance "Transform4Europe" to the Academic Kaunas Consortium, to create more visits, shared courses, joint degrees/programmes;
- Diversify the types of courses/programmes and their mode of delivery to increase the University's commitment as a lifelong learning space for all. This should include the development of more training courses (e. g. short courses) for business professionals;
- Identify demand for preparing secondary school education courses to support "professional orientation", "Inclusive education (for children with disabilities)".

139. **Good practice examples:**

- The close involvement of a diverse range of social partners in the study process, providing recommendations on new areas of activity and curriculum development. This is reflected in the establishment of the Centre for Ukraine and VMU's involvement in the National Human Rights Forum.

IV. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

The Review Team identifies the following examples of good practice in:

Management:

- VMU's efforts to forge a new participative culture and its emphasis on the community's well-being in turbulent times
- VMU's leadership role in the Transform4Europe Network which will support the University's international strategy.
- The commitment of VMU stakeholders in the realization of the SAP, and in enabling creativity and connectiveness, realism and critical thinking to go alongside conformance.
- The spacious and state of the art structural facilities of VMU – e.g. the sports centre - which encourages student participation and commitment.

Quality Assurance:

- The extensive range of support services provided for academic, non-academic staff and for students.
- The establishment of the Ukraine Centre which has accepted 310 Ukrainian students to study at VMU.

Studies and Research (art):

- The individualized modular style programme design and the flexibility of the final degree which is extremely successful and sets the institution apart from others in the country and indeed in Europe.
- The internationalization opportunities afforded to students, teachers, researchers and professional staff.

Impact on Regional and National Development:

- The close involvement of a diverse range of social partners in the study process, providing recommendations on new areas of activity and curriculum development. This is reflected in the establishment of the Centre for Ukraine and VMU's involvement in the National Human Rights Forum.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCEMENT

The Review Team's recommendations for further enhancement are:

Management:

- Update the SAP to take account of the indicators which have already been met and consider a more focussed approach with fewer indicators to support the achievement of the strategic goals of the University.
- Analyze more effectively key indicators, such as student dropout rates and staff turnover.
- Review the balance of the bonus system, to increase the emphasis on high quality teaching learning and assessment.
- Implement a system for the professional development of non-academic staff which is comparable with that for academic staff.
- Encourage further participation in the courses offered by the Professional Development Centre which will support the development of innovative teaching and learning strategies and enable all staff to benefit from VMU's national and international expertise in education.
- Formalize the assessment of staff through an appraisal system and provide support through training and mentoring for areas which are identified as requiring improvement.

Quality Assurance:

- Review the focus of quality assurance to move away from compliance and towards nurturing a quality culture which is owned by both staff and students, and is equally appropriate for both teaching and research.
- Clearly articulate changes made as a result of student feedback and review the number, timing and format of surveys with a view to increasing the response rate.
- Implement a system of obtaining feedback which relates directly to the quality of the support services available to staff and students.
- Adopt a more reflective approach to academic integrity which addresses the issue of artificial intelligence.
- Implement a continuous quality improvement plan which captures the outcomes of both internal and external reviews and provides the basis for continuous enhancement.
- Continue reviewing and updating the documentation associated with research and ethics procedures to ensure they are fully aligned with the requirements of CoARA.

Studies and Research (art):

- Widen access for life-long learners and address drop-out numbers on financial/family situation grounds.

- Ensure the University's USP of being a learner-centred and teaching University, which is a strong pull-factor for students continues, and that research output is not allowed to dominate the institution's eco-system.

Impact on Regional and National Development:

- Implement a more systematic and coordinated method of assessing the effectiveness and quality of the various initiatives to provide a basis for continuous enhancement of the provision.
- Extend the best practices which foster mobility and closer cooperation with universities within the European University Alliance "Transform4Europe" to the Academic Kaunas Consortium, to create more visits, shared courses, joint degrees/programs.
- Diversify the types of courses/programmes and their mode of delivery to increase the University's commitment as a lifelong learning space for all. This should include the development of more training courses (e. g. short courses) for business professionals.
- Identify demand for preparing secondary school education courses to support "professional orientation", "Inclusive education (for children with disabilities)".