



STUDIJŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO CENTRAS
CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY FIELD OF STUDY

Vilnius University

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

Expert panel:

1. Panel chair: Prof. dr. Alvar Soesoo (signature)
2. Academic member: Prof. dr. Juerg Luterbacher
3. Academic member: Assoc. prof. dr. Susan Hegarty
4. Social partner representative: Izolda Marcinonienė
5. Student representative: Gustė Stakeliūnaitė

SKVC coordinator: Ieva Žemaitaitytė

Report prepared in 2026
Report language: English

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1. OUTLINE OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS	3
1.2. REVIEW PANEL	4
1.3. SITE VISIT	4
1.4. BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW	5
II. STUDY PROGRAMMES IN THE FIELD	7
III. ASSESSMENT IN POINTS BY CYCLE AND EVALUATION AREAS.....	9
IV. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS	10
AREA 1: STUDY AIMS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM.....	10
AREA 1: CONCLUSIONS.....	13
AREA 2: LINKS BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC (OR ARTISTIC) RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION	14
AREA 2: CONCLUSIONS.....	16
AREA 3: STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT	17
AREA 3: CONCLUSIONS.....	20
AREA 4: TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT ASSESSMENT, AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT	22
AREA 4: CONCLUSIONS.....	24
AREA 5: TEACHING STAFF.....	26
AREA 5: CONCLUSIONS.....	29
AREA 6: LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES	30
AREA 6: CONCLUSIONS.....	31
AREA 7: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PUBLIC INFORMATION	33
AREA 7: CONCLUSIONS.....	34
V. SUMMARY	36

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OUTLINE OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. REVIEW PANEL

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

The composition of the review panel was as follows:

1. Panel chair: **Prof. dr. Alvar Soesoo**
2. Academic member: **Prof. dr. Juerg Luterbacher**
3. Academic member: **Assoc. prof. dr. Susan Hegarty**
4. Social partner representative: **Izolda Marcinonienė**
5. Student representative: **Gustė Stakeliūnaitė**

1.3. SITE VISIT

The site visit was organised on 10 November 2025 onsite.

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

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

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

1.4. BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

Overview of the HEI

Vilnius University (VU / University), established in 1579, is the oldest and largest higher education institution in Lithuania. The University comprises 15 core academic units—11 faculties, one institute, one centre, one academy and one business school—along with 12 core non-academic units. As of 1 October 2023, the University employed 6272 staff members, including 3407 teaching staff, 805 research staff and 2060 non-academic personnel. The student body numbered 24 134, of whom 2581 were international full-time students.

VU provides undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medical and health sciences, and technological sciences. It offers over 90 bachelor's and integrated programmes and 110 master's and professional (pedagogical) programmes, covering 12 study field groups and 60 study fields.

Geography is one of the oldest disciplines taught at VU, with instruction dating back to the 18th century. Independent geography study programmes emerged in the early 20th century, and studies specifically in Physical Geography began in 1925, following the establishment of the Department of Physical Geography. Studies in Physical Geography are conducted at the Faculty of Chemistry and Geosciences (established in 2016), which includes the Institute of Chemistry and the Institute of Geosciences. As of December 2023, 281 students enrolled in Physical Geography study programmes.

Overview of the study field

The Physical Geography study field of VU is located within the multidisciplinary Faculty of Chemistry and Geosciences (Faculty). The Faculty has two institutes—the Institute of Chemistry and the Institute of Geosciences. For its governance, the Faculty has one dean, and a Head of each Institute. It has a Vice-Dean for academic affairs (from Institute of Chemistry), a Vice-Dean for studies (from the Institute of Geosciences) and two Dean Advisors (for Strategic Affairs and for Development). The discipline of geography is one of the oldest within the University. The Institute of Geosciences has five departments, three of which are related to, and responsible for, the physical geography field of study. These are: Department of Geography and Land Management; Department of Hydrology and Climatology; and Department of Cartography and Geoinformatics. Each of these departments has a specific first cycle programme related to it.

Previous external evaluations

The self-evaluation report (SER) indicates that the Physical Geography field of study at VU was previously reviewed by the SKVC in 2017. The evaluation covered the bachelor's and master's programmes in Geography, Cartography, Climatology and Hydrology, and Climate Systems. The external experts noted the strong scientific qualifications of the teaching staff, the clear connection between research and studies, and the well-developed infrastructure available. At the same time, the evaluation encouraged the University to continue strengthening internationalisation, to increase student participation in research projects, and to regularly update study content so that it reflects new scientific and technological developments.

Documents and information used in the review

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

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

Additional sources of information used by the review panel:

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

- 1) Link to VU Puvočių base and photos;
- 2) Number of students (enrolled and graduated in 2024 and 2025) for specific programs;
- 3) Scientific publications by the staff. The list includes all scientific publications from the last three years, as well as lists of conference presentations and completed and ongoing project activities;
- 4) The field of study modules (courses) for each of the programmes, with the credits and breakdown of assessment type;
- 5) Paper list of student observations submitted during the visit on November 10 regarding one of the First-Cycle study programs.

II. STUDY PROGRAMMES IN THE FIELD

First cycle/LTQF 6

Title of the study programme	Geography	Cartography and Geographical Information Systems
State code	6121CX009	6121CX015
Type of study (college/university)	University studies	University studies
Study cycle	First cycle	First cycle
Mode of study (full time/part time) and nominal duration (in years)	Full time, 4-year studies	Full time, 4-year studies
Workload in ECTS	240	240
Award (degree and/or professional qualification)	Bachelor's degree in Physical Sciences	Bachelor's degree in Physical Sciences
Language of instruction	Lithuanian	Lithuanian
Admission requirements	Secondary education	Secondary education
First registration date	1997-05-19	2017-05-02
Comments (including remarks on joint or interdisciplinary nature of the programme, mode of provision)		

First cycle/LTQF 6

Title of the study programme	Climatology and Hydrology
State code	6121CX010
Type of study (college/university)	University studies
Study cycle	First cycle
Mode of study (full time/part time) and nominal duration (in years)	Full time, 4-year studies
Workload in ECTS	240
Award (degree and/or professional qualification)	Bachelor's degree in Physical Sciences
Language of instruction	Lithuanian
Admission requirements	Secondary education
First registration date	1999-04-23
Comments (including remarks on joint or interdisciplinary nature of the programme, mode of provision)	

Second cycle/LTQF 7

Title of the study programme	Cartography	Climate Systems
State code	6211CX013	6211CX012
Type of study (college/university)	University studies	University studies
Study cycle	Second cycle	Second cycle
Mode of study (full time/part time) and nominal duration (in years)	Full time, 2-year studies	Full time, 1.5-year studies
Workload in ECTS	120	90
Award (degree and/or professional qualification)	Master's degree in Physical Science	Master's degree in Physical Science
Language of instruction	Lithuanian	Lithuanian
Admission requirements	Higher education	Higher education
First registration date	2001-05-24	1997-05-19
Comments (including remarks on joint or interdisciplinary nature of the programme, mode of provision)		

III. ASSESSMENT IN POINTS BY CYCLE AND EVALUATION AREAS

The **first cycle** of the Physical Geography field of study is given a **positive** evaluation.

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation points*
1.	Study aims, learning outcomes and curriculum	3
2.	Links between scientific (or artistic) research and higher education	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student assessment, and graduate employment	3
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	3
7.	Quality assurance and public information	3
Total:		21

The **second cycle** of the Physical Geography field of study is given a **positive** evaluation.

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation points*
1.	Study aims, learning outcomes and curriculum	4
2.	Links between scientific (or artistic) research and higher education	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student assessment, and graduate employment	4
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Quality assurance and public information	4
Total:		25

*

1 (unsatisfactory) - the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are substantial shortcomings that hinder the implementation of the programmes in the field.

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

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

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

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

IV. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

AREA 1: STUDY AIMS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

The study programmes (SPs) in the Physical Geography field of study have been developed to be well aligned with what is needed for Lithuanian society today.

The SP Geography is broad, as befits the discipline. It emphasises the holistic understanding of the environment, and graduates are adaptable. It is acknowledged in the documentation that the breadth of the discipline can be a challenge to the students, as they may not see themselves in any particular role. Nonetheless, the key employers acknowledge the depth of knowledge among alumni, with, for example, 45% of employees of Lithuanian Protected Areas being graduates of the programme.

The objective and study outcomes of the SP Climatology and Hydrology are in line with the World Meteorological Organisation and the Lithuanian Hydrometeorological Service. However, it was noted that there may be a lack of practical, simulated experience of weather forecasting within the programme. The SP Cartography and Geographical Information System is highly esteemed by industry, with alumni finding it easy to secure employment. It graduates people who have a very good grasp of both traditional cartography and map making, and more modern GIS systems. It was noted that there is an increased need in the labour market for GIS and Cartography graduates, and so the number on this SP could potentially be increased.

Student numbers had declined in the recent past—this may be partially due to the decline in the numbers taking Geography at second level. However, the number of students within the SP has increased slightly over the past three years. The careers that dominate among graduates are environmental specialists, geography teachers, meteorologists and hydrologists. This would suggest that the degrees are producing graduates which are required within the labour market.

The Second-Cycle SPs are even more targeted to the labour market. 76% of graduates of the Second-Cycle are in highly skilled posts, according to the SER.

Social partners are positive about the quality of the alumni knowledge. However, they expressed concern about the decreasing number of graduates, and also, they mentioned the need for the study field to improve communication, both internally with students and externally, about the benefits of the study field.

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

The aims of the field SPs correspond to the mission of VU, within the 'Creating the Society and the State', in particular, "to create graduates capable of solving societal problems". The SPs of the study field are inherently interdisciplinary, and therefore also fulfil the second of VU's strategic goals—that of Collaboration and 'interdisciplinary and international research and study'. Within this, the international dimension could be strengthened more, in particular with increased research collaboration with international partners. While the programme aims of the Geography curriculum, for example, are to: 'provide students with integrated geographical competence, the knowledge, and skills necessary to form ecological and environmental thinking paradigms and develop a critical attitude and a sense of civic responsibility for the Earth and their country', and thus it is somewhat focused on the national context, it would be good to expand the international aspect somewhat.

Increasing student exposure to international colleagues, and perhaps to international students, would be beneficial. It would also be beneficial to increase the number of optional modules available in English. This would facilitate that these modules could be taken by international students, thus adding to the international aspect of the teaching.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 1.1.)

The SPs have been developed in accordance with what is needed within Lithuanian society today. This was discussed at length during the site visit. In particular, it was obvious from the site visit that the Study Programme is valued by the social partners for its breath of content, in the case of the Geography curriculum, and for the ability of students to engage with spatial data and integrate diverse kinds of knowledge, from social sciences as well as the physical sciences. The SPs are characterised by the interdisciplinarity and broad understanding that are typical of the discipline of geography. The adaptability that this gives is highly prized by the social partners.

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

1.2.1. Programmes comply with legal requirements

The 5 SPs of this study field comply with the legal requirements of the Republic of Lithuania. The I and II-cycle study programmes are developed in compliance with Lithuanian legislation, including the Law on Higher Education and Research, the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework, the Descriptor of Study Cycles, the General Requirements for Studies, and the Descriptor of the Study Field of Physical and Social Geography. The allocation of study credits is designed to ensure students achieve the expected outcomes effectively. The structure and volume of I-cycle (240 credits) and II-cycle (90–120 credits) SPs comply with Lithuanian regulations, including the General Requirements for Studies and the Descriptor of the Study Field of Physical and Social Geography. I-cycle SPs span four years (6400 hours), with a semester workload of 240 credits, while II-cycle SPs are 1.5–2 years (2400–3200 hours), also with 90-120 credits per semester. Both cycles ensure alignment with field-specific requirements, covering study outcomes, teaching, evaluation, and implementation standards.

All field SP comply with the description of the study field of Physical and Social Geography, approved by the order of May 10th, 2022, of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No. V-747, requirements for coverage, general and special study outcomes, teaching, studying, evaluation, and implementation of study programmes.

Study credits represent the volume of knowledge and skills gained during studies, measured by learning outcomes and assessed by a mark. A credit serves both, as a unit of study time and a tool for recording, storing, and transferring learning outcomes. Typically, 1 ECTS credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of on-campus and individual work (an average of 27 hours), though this may vary based on the nature of the outcomes. VU has regulated the courses in terms of 5-credit limits. The alignment of learning outcomes, content, credits, and workload is reviewed annually or at least every three years by the Study Programme Committee.

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

There is an alignment between the learning outcomes with the programme aims in each of the SPs. There is a diversity of teaching and assessment methods within the different programmes. It would be beneficial to review the curriculum, to ensure that the materials, and the methodologies used, are up to date.

It is noted that there are significant differences between assessment weightings within each of the SPs, particularly in the First-Cycle SPs, and it would be beneficial to students to have alignment of the weightings of the assessments. For example (5 ECTS), in *Natural Foundation of Lithuania*, students take an examination worth 50%, with written assignments worth 20% and thematic presentations worth 30%. In *Ethnology* (5 ECTS), students take an examination worth 70%, written assignments worth 20% and participation in class worth 10%. In addition, the number of assessments in some of the modules, particularly within the Geography SP, could be examined. In other jurisdictions, two assignments would be sufficient for a 5 ECT module. While this can be seen from the additional documentation that was provided by VU this was something which was raised by the students also during the site visit.

1.2.3. Curriculum ensures consistent development of student competences

The various curricula allow a certain development of student competences and knowledge. The First-Cycle study programmes allow for progressive development of the skills appropriate to each of the specialist subjects. However, students did not demonstrate the understanding that they can apply the skills they learned in one course to other courses. While the SP in Cartography and GIS shows good development of the competences, the SP in Climatology and Hydrology and in Geography could integrate more modelling and data analytics within the courses as the years progress, to ensure that these students are industry-ready. It is acknowledged that the removal of 15 credits from the curriculum in each of the years has impacted on the curriculum, and that the department has created packages, as mentioned below. Nonetheless, the students would benefit from clarity about the advantages of availing of these packages.

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

Since 2023, students in the First-Cycle in VU choose 60 credits outside of their field of study. This put pressure on the original curriculum, with some courses which had previously been core being removed. Faculty have turned this to the students' advantage, by creating 'packages' of courses which align with particular students' interests. This will be of great benefit to students, as students who are currently in final year commented on their desire to take additional modules in physics and chemistry to equip them better for their main studies, and to facilitate admittance into postgraduate routes.

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

The final theses and their defence are conducted as per the regulations for the field of study and the cycle. The University has very good guidelines and protocols in place for thesis preparation, including committee formation and defence. The department has also created methodological tools which the students can use. The students in the First-Cycle are prepared for their thesis through a course in research methods, with research being integrated into various courses throughout the degree. Within the First-Cycle SPs, the students need to balance their final thesis with 15 credits of other courses within the second semester. The programme teams might consider how the students could be scaffolded to be able to achieve the best results possible in their thesis.

During the site visit, the social partners spoke about instances when they can provide topics for the final dissertation. This is to be commended, and encouraged.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 1.2.)

The programmes produce graduates who are well regarded and sought after in a wide variety of enterprise. It is noteworthy that student numbers in the First-Cycle have risen over the past number of years—this will be very beneficial for the team and should reinvigorate the discipline.

Some elements of the programmes, particularly in the First-Cycle, need attention. It would be useful to review the curriculum, and particularly the assessment within the courses, to ensure parity of

assessment and to prevent over assessment. This will help not only students but also may reduce staff workload. The affordances of technology could also be examined to potentially reduce the time the team are in front of the students, while making sure that the learning is not negatively impacted, but rather enhanced. There may also be opportunities to share courses across the SPs, which would benefit students and Faculty. There may be benefits to co-teaching content, which would also free up some colleagues to allow a little more time for research. Nonetheless, there are some subjects, such as GIS, which do require differentiation as each of the SPs has different needs—in particular the students on the Cartography and GIS programme will be more advanced in GIS, for example, than those on the general Geography programme, and so it would benefit them to be taught separately in that subject.

Staff were very enthusiastic about teaching, while acknowledging that their teaching load is quite high. In particular it was great to hear from the early career researchers about their passion for educating the next generation. Nonetheless, the contact hours that the Faculty have are high compared to other European contexts.

AREA 1: CONCLUSIONS

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

COMMENDATIONS

1. The programmes prepare graduates well and who are well regarded by the social partners. The alumni are very enthusiastic about the programmes.
2. The Second-Cycle SPs are well designed and are aligned to the needs of industry, in particular in relation to Climate Systems. This course is very well designed for the needs of the social partners such as the Lithuanian Hydrometeorological Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. Review curricula in the First-Cycle to:
 - a. Ensure that assessment balance is fair across courses.
 - b. There is clear development of skills in each of the SPs, including ensuring that the foundations are in place for elements such as modelling and data analysis.
 - c. The curriculum of each of the SPs is up to date, incorporating active pedagogies as appropriate in the courses.
2. Regarding the First-Cycle, clearly articulate to the students the learning journey, including the recommended 'packages' of individual learning, and how these may be beneficial.

For further improvement

1. The number of enrolled students, although it has grown somewhat over the past three years, could grow further.
2. It would be useful to explore increasing the offering of optional courses in English. This would benefit international students, who currently are limited with the courses that they can take.

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

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

The Physical Geography study field at VU combines teaching and research in a coherent and systematic way. It includes five programmes: Geography, Cartography and Geographic Information Systems, and Climatology and Hydrology at the bachelor's level, and Cartography and Climate Systems at the master's level. All programmes are implemented by the Departments of Geography and Land Management, Hydrology and Climatology, and Cartography and Geoinformatics within the Institute of Geosciences.

The study field operates in a strong scientific environment. The academic staff are active researchers and project participants in national and international initiatives funded by the Research Council of Lithuania, the European Union, and other agencies. The topics of these projects, such as climate change, hydroclimatic analysis, cartography, and environmental monitoring, correspond directly to the study subjects. Students therefore learn from current scientific findings and methodologies. The study plans show a logical progression of courses that help students to develop research-related competences. Students learn research methods, statistical analysis, remote sensing, and geoinformation technologies. They gain practical experience through field and laboratory practices where they collect, analyse, and interpret data. The coherence matrix demonstrates that courses such as *Introduction to Geographical Studies*, *Earth Geosystems*, *Geographical Information Systems*, and *Climatology and Hydrology* directly support the development of scientific thinking and analytical ability.

At the master's level, the programmes focus on independent research work using institutional data and software. Students acquire skills in modelling, data visualisation, and the use of modern geospatial tools, which prepares them for research or professional careers in environmental analysis, hydrology, and cartography.

Scientific activities are also supported by regular University and Faculty events, including conferences where students and staff present their work and exchange experience with peers.

The research profile of the Physical Geography field is comprehensive and diverse. It includes studies of climate, hydrology, geomorphology, cartography, soil science, and environmental change. The Institute of Geosciences carries out long-term research on topics that are directly relevant to the study programmes. Ongoing research projects utilize satellite information to assess hydroclimatic resources, climate change impacts in the Baltic Sea region, and environmental effects on inland waters. This work involves cooperation with both external and social partners, which includes providing research-based advice, such as the Department of Hydrology and Climatology advising the Lithuanian Hydrometeorological Service in 2024. Collaboration also takes the form of jointly organized scientific events, like the Cartocon conference with the Lithuanian Cartographic Society and the "Klimatosaugos briaunos" conference with the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Lithuania. Other studies focus on the modelling of coastal morphology, soil property dynamics, and the visualisation of natural and social phenomena. These research activities are led by professors and associate professors who also teach in the study field. Their participation ensures that students are exposed to up-to-date scientific concepts and tools. The teaching staff list confirms that lecturers publish their results in international journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. The main research themes, such as spatial analysis, remote sensing, hydrological monitoring, and cartographic design, are reflected in the content of the study subjects. This close link between research and teaching guarantees that students work within a scientifically active environment and that they are guided by experts contributing to international research networks.

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

The study plans indicate that the programmes are structured to include modern scientific methods and technological applications. From the first year, students are introduced to spatial data systems, remote sensing, and statistical analysis. Courses such as *GIS Basics*, *Remote Sensing of the Environment*, *Cartographic Design*, *Climatology*, and *Hydrology* integrate current technologies used in environmental and geographical research.

The curriculum of the master's programmes deepens these skills. The Cartography programme focuses on data modelling, spatial analysis, and digital map creation, while the Climate Systems programme emphasises modelling of climate variability and the analysis of environmental datasets. Both programmes use real data from the Institute of Geosciences and other sources, allowing students to apply scientific and technological innovations in practice.

The study programme committees review the course content regularly to ensure that new scientific developments are reflected in the study process. This process supports the continuous renewal of teaching materials and guarantees that students are trained in line with current research standards.

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

Students in the Physical Geography field have many opportunities to participate in research. The list of thesis topics from recent years shows that students investigate current themes such as land cover change, hydrological processes, microclimate variation, remote sensing of environmental parameters, and the social effects of landscape change. Many topics are directly linked to staff research projects or are prepared at the request of social partners.

The report provides evidence of student involvement in scientific activities. In Section 2.1 and Table 2.6, it shows that in 2021–2023 between about 4% and 7% of Bachelor's students and up to one third of Master's students participated in research through papers, conference presentations, projects, internships and science-promotion activities, with some engagement at Second-Cycle level.

Practical and fieldwork components play a central role in developing research competences. Students take part in field studies in geomorphology, soil science, and hydrology, where they collect and analyse their own data. Courses such as *Training Practice in Topo-Cartography and Geomorphology* and *Landscape Study Practice* provide opportunities for real-world investigation and teamwork.

Students present the results of their work at specific conferences, which are dedicated to student research, and at national academic conferences organised by the Faculty. Cooperation with public institutions and private partners also allows students to take part in applied research projects related to environmental assessment, spatial planning, and climate adaptation

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 2.1.)

The Physical Geography field demonstrates a rather well-integrated relationship between science and studies, though improvements are evident. The research conducted is partially connected with the teaching content of the study programmes. The lecturers are experienced and internationally active researchers who bring some of their new scientific findings and methods into their teaching.

The curriculum is structured to enable the continuous development of research competences, progressing from basic to advanced levels. Throughout their studies, students are encouraged to engage with scientific literature, data analysis, and modelling tools. Research-based learning is further supported through field practice, laboratory work, and thesis projects that address real environmental and geographical problems.

To further strengthen the integration of research and teaching, the study field could document the extent of student involvement in research projects and present concrete examples of how research results are used to update course content. Expanding interdisciplinary themes that link physical geography with the social and economic dimensions of sustainability would also be beneficial.

Additionally, the cooperation with Klaipėda can further demonstrate the link between scientific research and higher education. This partnership is exemplified through interdisciplinary projects that connect inland and marine environmental studies across the two institutions. By leveraging the distinct geographical and research strengths of both locations, these collaborations create integrated educational pathways in environmental and spatial sciences.

Overall, the connection between science and studies in this field is well established and consistent with the mission of University and the Faculty.

AREA 2: CONCLUSIONS

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

COMMENDATIONS

1. Academic staff are active researchers with recent international publications and projects, ensuring that students are exposed to up-to-date scientific knowledge and technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. Improve the systematic documentation of student involvement in research, including clearer evidence of participation in projects, publications, and the use of research outcomes in course updates across both study cycles.
2. Strengthen interdisciplinary research–teaching links, particularly by more consistently integrating social and economic dimensions into physical geography research.

For further improvement

1. Strengthen scientific collaboration and interactions and provide opportunities for student exchange with Physical Geography at Klaipėda University.
2. Increase interdisciplinary integration within the curriculum by linking physical geography with broader environmental and social aspects of sustainability.

AREA 3: STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

Student selection and admission to First-Cycle and Second-Cycle study programmes in the Physical Geography field at VU are organised centrally through the national joint admission system (LAMA BPO) and according to procedures approved by the VU Senate. Admission rules, including the calculation formulas for competitive scores and the list of admissible subjects, are publicly available on the University and national admission websites.

For First-Cycle programmes, applicants with secondary education are admitted on the basis of a competitive score which combines the final exam in Geography, a second relevant subject (mathematics, biology, physics, history or information technology), a third subject and Lithuanian language and literature. Additional points are awarded for achievements in Olympiads and competitions, high grades in final school papers, vocational qualifications, military service, volunteering and specific links with Lithuanian schools abroad. For non-state-funded places, additional points may also be given for completion of *the Young Geographers' School*. The minimum competitive score required for admission to a state-funded place during the period under review was 5.4.

According to the SER, in 2021–2023 there were 1,036 applicants (first and other priorities) to First-Cycle programmes in the field, of whom 216 enrolled (around 20.8%). The number of applicants increased over the period (281 in 2021; 360 in 2022; 395 in 2023), and the Geography programme in particular attracted high demand, significantly exceeding its planned intake in 2022. Entrance scores for students admitted to Geography, Cartography and GIS, and Climatology/Hydrology show broadly stable or slightly increasing mean values for state-funded places (approximately in the range of 7–8), with lowest scores clustered just above the minimum threshold, indicating a relatively consistent baseline level of preparedness.

Admission to Second-Cycle Cartography and Climate System Studies is based on a separate competitive score formula, which uses the weighted average of previous studies, the grade of the final thesis or final examination, and additional points for research activity, completion of complementary geography studies and closely related Bachelor's degrees. Access is open to graduates from a defined list of relevant study fields, including both physical geography-related and other cognate disciplines. In 2021–2023 there were 103 applicants (first and other priorities) to Second-Cycle programmes, of whom 42 enrolled, mainly in state-funded places.

The SER states that admission criteria and formulas remained unchanged in the evaluated period and that the admitted students are generally sufficiently prepared for studies, so no major adjustments to the study process were required on this ground. During the site visit, the administration indicated that cohort sizes fluctuate but are being monitored and managed, and that current admission volumes are considered sufficient to ensure the continuity and sustainability of the programmes.

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

Recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study at VU is regulated by institutional procedures aligned with national legislation and the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The University has been authorised by the Ministry to carry out academic recognition of education and qualifications obtained abroad, and decisions are taken by the Student Admission Sub-division on a case-by-case basis. Each foreign qualification is assessed individually, comparing the qualification with Lithuanian requirements and established practice for similar cases. During the evaluation period, five applicants

to Physical Geography field studies requested recognition of foreign qualifications; three were recognised, while two were not, as the requested courses did not meet the study field requirements.

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is governed by separate University-wide regulations on admission of students continuing studies and on crediting learning outcomes. Learning outcomes achieved in other HEI, including during exchange periods, may be recognised if they correspond to the aims, content and scope of the programme; up to 75% of a First- or Second-Cycle programme may be recognised in this way. Competences acquired through employment, volunteering, training or self-study may also be recognised, up to a maximum of 50% of the programme, while final examinations and final theses cannot be recognised. Decisions on recognition of prior learning are taken by study programme committees, with assessors involved where needed. In the Physical Geography field, four students applied for recognition of competences acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning, submitting 11 applications in total, all of which were granted.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 3.1.)

Student selection and admission in the Physical Geography field at VU are clearly regulated, transparent and coherent with the intended learning outcomes and profile of the programmes. The competitive score formulas at First- and Second-Cycle appropriately prioritise geography and related subjects, previous academic performance and research activity, while the system of additional points supports motivated and high-achieving applicants. Admission data for 2021–2023 show stable or increasing demand, particularly for Geography, and entrance scores at a level indicating a satisfactory baseline of student preparedness; cohort sizes are monitored and managed so that current admission volumes are considered sufficient for programme sustainability. Procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications, periods of study and prior formal, non-formal and informal learning are well established, aligned with national and international frameworks and applied consistently in the field, providing flexible entry for students.

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

3.2.1. Opportunities for student academic mobility are ensured

Student academic mobility in the Physical Geography field is organised within VU's general framework for studies abroad, mainly through Erasmus+, Nordplus, ISEP and bilateral agreements, coordinated by the International Relations Office and the faculty-level Erasmus coordinator. Field students may go for partial studies or internships abroad and, in total, can spend up to half of their studies in mobility schemes. The Faculty has 43 Erasmus and other agreements with foreign universities in various European countries, and field-related courses in English are offered to incoming students, particularly on climate and environmental topics. According to the self-evaluation report, 11 students from the field went on Erasmus+ partial studies (at least 15 ECTS) during the period under review, mostly at First-Cycle level, while Second-Cycle mobility was limited. In the same period, the Faculty received 13 incoming exchange students at bachelor and master levels from several European countries.

During the site visit, students confirmed that mobility options are regularly publicised and formally available but indicated that in practice there have been cases where support for choosing host institutions and courses, preparing learning agreements and resolving academic mismatches was not fully sufficient. Some students reported difficulties identifying a suitable set of field-related courses at partner universities and perceived that not all partnerships were equally well aligned with their study profile. This suggests that, while the overall framework and number of agreements provide a solid basis for student mobility, the practical implementation and individual guidance could be further strengthened to make these opportunities more easily usable for all students in the field.

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

According to the SER, students in the Physical Geography field have access to a comprehensive system of support at University, Faculty and programme levels. Academic support and career-related assistance are provided through consultations on admission, study planning, academic leave, changes of programme, internships and employment, supplemented by training on study skills, stress management and job search, and the use of a career management system. Financial and social support measures include incentive and social scholarships, special and nominal scholarships, state loans, dormitory accommodation (with reduced fees for disadvantaged students), as well as opportunities for participation in sports and cultural activities. The SER notes that scholarships are an important, but limited, form of support, reaching less than one third of students and usually not sufficient to cover living expenses; in practice, students often rely on family support or paid work alongside their studies, which was also reflected in student comments. During the site visit, students stated that financial incentives such as scholarships are a strong motivator, but that some grants and support options are not widely known to them.

Regarding internships, the SER states that professional practice is a mandatory and integral part of the First-Cycle programmes. During the site visit, however, students indicated that institutional support for finding and arranging placements is often limited: in their experience, University staff and study programmes do not always actively suggest suitable hosts or respond promptly to requests for assistance. Although requirements and procedures are formally described in official documents, several students reported that this information is not always sufficiently clear or visible in practice and that they therefore rely largely on classmates who already work in the field to identify potential placements and navigate the process.

Psychological and personal support is provided by community psychologists (including short-term crisis counselling), regular seminars and workshops on mental health, stress management, procrastination and personal effectiveness, chaplaincy grounded in the University's Ignatian tradition, and dedicated services for students with disabilities and equal opportunities coordination. These services are designed to be accessible and confidential, with reduced fees for many activities. In addition, student representation structures, including the student union and its curators, as well as organisations such as ESN, play an active role in helping first-year and international students integrate into the community, sharing information about available support and contributing to a supportive social environment through events, peer support and informal guidance. Overall, the range of academic, financial, social, psychological and personal support services is broad and relevant, but student comments indicate that their effectiveness could be strengthened through better visibility of specific measures (such as scholarships and internship assistance) and a more proactive institutional role in supporting practice placements.

3.2.3. Higher education information and student counselling are sufficient

Based on the SER, students in the Physical Geography field are introduced to their studies and the available support system through several structured steps. Before the start of the academic year, newly admitted students may take part in activities organised by student representatives, and during the University-wide *Integration Week* they meet with representatives of the study programme committees, are informed about programme aims, intended learning outcomes, study requirements and assessment, and receive information on support and leisure opportunities. General information on the study process, regulations and administrative procedures is made available through University and Faculty websites, the virtual study information system (VUSIS), e-mail, social media and the Student Life Guide prepared by the Students' Union. This enables students to access timetables, examination schedules, elective course options and key rules.

Continuous counselling is provided via central and faculty-level channels. The central student affairs and career services offer ongoing academic and career counselling, training and online resources, while at Faculty level students can approach Vice-Deans, SPC Chairs and course lecturers for individual academic advice. Mentoring schemes and career-related events, such as meetings with

alumni and employers, further complement this system. During the site visit, students confirmed that information on general study procedures and career opportunities is regularly communicated and that formal opportunities for consultation exist throughout their studies. At the same time, several students reported that they sometimes find it difficult to approach lecturers with questions and perceive a certain distance between staff and students. They also noted that, although they frequently complete surveys and provide suggestions for the courses, they do not always receive clear feedback on how this input is used or which changes follow from it, which undermines the perceived effectiveness of feedback mechanisms. In addition, several students indicated that information and counselling regarding specific processes, particularly the organisation of internships and planning of mobility, can be experienced as fragmented or not sufficiently clear in practice, as mentioned in the previous section.

Overall, the formal system for providing information and counselling appears comprehensive and continuous, but students' comments point to a need for more approachable communication, clearer follow-up on how their feedback is used and which changes result from it, and more targeted guidance in practical matters such as organising internships and planning mobility.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 3.2.)

Opportunities for mobility, student support and counselling in the Physical Geography field are based on a broad and well-developed formal framework: there is an extensive network of mobility agreements, a comprehensive system of academic, financial, social, psychological and personal support, and structured arrangements for induction and continuous counselling. However, actual outgoing mobility remains modest, students report difficulties finding suitable field-related courses at partner institutions and insufficient guidance with learning agreements, and institutional support for arranging mandatory internships is perceived as limited, with heavy reliance on peers already working in the field. In addition, some students experience a distance in communication with staff, lack clear feedback on how their survey input is used and find information on specific processes, particularly internships and mobility, fragmented or unclear. Therefore, the aims of ensuring opportunities for academic mobility and providing relevant, adequate and effective support, information and counselling are partially met—the necessary structures and procedures exist, but their implementation and accessibility need to be strengthened.

AREA 3: CONCLUSIONS

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

COMMENDATIONS

1. Strong network of international mobility agreements. The Faculty has established an extensive network of Erasmus+ and other mobility agreements with a wide range of European universities, providing a solid structural basis for both incoming and outgoing student mobility.
2. Structured introduction and continuous counselling system. The institution offers a structured induction process (including Integration Week) and continuous access to central and faculty-level counselling, ensuring that students are systematically informed about their study programmes, requirements and available support services throughout their studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. Improve the practical implementation of student mobility by providing more targeted guidance when choosing host institutions and courses and by ensuring that learning agreements include enough field-related subjects.
2. Strengthen institutional support for internships by clarifying and actively communicating requirements and procedures and by taking a more proactive role in helping students identify and secure suitable practice placements.

For further improvement

1. Enhance communication and feedback mechanisms by making support measures (such as scholarships, mentoring and internship assistance) more visible and by systematically informing students how their feedback is considered and which changes follow from it.
2. Foster more approachable staff–student interaction by encouraging practices that make it easier for students to ask questions and seek advice (e.g. clearly advertised consultation hours, informal Q&A sessions), thereby increasing the perceived accessibility and effectiveness of existing support and counselling.

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

4.1.	Students are prepared for independent professional activity
------	---

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

The teaching and learning approaches in the First-Cycle programmes are carried out using the typical and traditional teaching methods of lectures, seminars and practical sessions, along with field work. There is evidence of different teaching methods being used, with the underlying aim of encouraging critical thinking and promoting analytical skills in students. There was evidence of active pedagogies, such as flipped classrooms, debates and the team engage students through in-class polls and other mechanisms. These types of pedagogies could be included in more modules, as appropriate. Simulations are also employed, although some of these could be updated to include, for example, more a modern simulation for weather forecasting.

The students can avail of a well-stocked library, and a geoscience museum, to aid their study. It is noted that it would be important that students have access to the latest literature on these subjects, which often is not in textbooks but rather can be achieved through engaging students in reading research literature, albeit with some scaffolding. Students also should be pointed to up-to-date data, for use within their studies. While this seems to be the case within the Cartography and GIS SP, it was less evident in Climatology and Hydrology and in Geography.

Students engage in a placement during their studies. However, the onus is on the students and the social partners to be pro-active in these. There was evidence that some students had great difficulty in sourcing an internship place. It would be beneficial to re-establish links with social partners and potentially widen the net of placement partners to enable all students to be placed appropriately and to create additional opportunities.

Similarly, while the study field has 43 partners abroad, student feedback was that it was difficult to find a good fit for students within the curriculum of the partner institutions. As mentioned in Area 3 above, students reported facing problems when they went to study abroad. Some students spoke about a lack of alignment with the learning agreements in partner institutions. This would benefit from some additional focus from the team. It may be useful to review the agreements with a view of focusing on fewer, but that are more aligned with the needs of the various SPs.

With the advent of Gen-AI, students will benefit from clear guidance about the benefits and drawbacks of using Gen-AI in all types of work. While some of the teaching Faculty do this, a coordinated effort is merited across the study field.

The Second-Cycle programmes are more focused, with good alignment between teaching methods, assessment and graduate outcomes.

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

VU has had a Diversity and Equal Opportunities Strategy since 2020. This has enabled socially vulnerable groups to access study through investment in the University's infrastructure. The coordination of study plans for members of the student population who have diverse needs is mainly carried out by the VU Disability Affairs Coordinator, who is within the VU Community Development Department. Students can individualise their studies in accordance with the procedures outlined in the 'Description of Procedure for Individualisation of Study at VU'.

All the relevant policies are in place to allow socially vulnerable groups to access their studies, and the staff reach out to aid those with disabilities. Nonetheless, the physical infrastructure lags behind at times. It is noted, for example, that there is no lift available within the Department to bring students who have mobility issues to other floors. It would be good, also, to explicitly state the provisions for things like fieldwork for those with mobility issues.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 4.1.)

The Faculty are generally enthusiastic about teaching. There seem to be differences in the student experience depending on the SP, with students on the Cartography and GIS SP having a somewhat more relevant and engaged experience than those on the other two First-Cycle SPs. As mentioned in Section 2, the First-Cycle SPs would benefit from a curriculum review, looking at what is being taught, how it is being taught, and ensuring that the skills are being built coherently from year to year. Given the intense rotation of Faculty in recent years, there is now a good opportunity to carry out an in-depth review of the curriculum, and of the teaching and learning, to ensure that it meets the needs of the learners.

The Second-Cycle SPs are well addressing the needs of the students and society. The students are well placed to achieve the objectives of the study plans.

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

VU aims to provide all students with regular and effective feedback, and feedback is given in a variety of methods. In each SP, the student progress is monitored at three levels: course (module); all students of the year; and within the study programme. At modular level, the lecturer provides feedback to students when the assessment is cumulative, thus enabling the student to improve their learning. The VLE (Moodle) is used extensively, with some courses assessed through quizzes in this medium. This allows for rapid, automated feedback to students. Formative assessments are used in addition to the summative assessments, and these allow the lecturers to tailor and adapt the content of the courses as the course is progressing.

Feedback is also sought from the internship partners on the students' work while on placement. Each student has a supervisor within the internship partner, as well as a supervisor in VU. This helps to ensure that the feedback is gathered in an efficient manner.

A student representative is invited to attend the study programme committee of each of the SPs. A student representative is also involved in the review of pedagogies.

Opportunities are provided for students to feed back to the programme teams. However, students would benefit from the team closing the feedback loop—that the team lets them know about what has happened in relation to the feedback. This has the capacity to increase engagement of the students with the programme.

4.2.2. Graduate employability and career are monitored

Graduate rates and employability are tracked centrally by the University's Career Tracking Information System (karjera.lt). This houses both indicators of graduate outcomes (where the graduates have ended up) and surveys on graduate perceptions of career-related matters (including career satisfaction). According to this data, one year after graduation 42% of First-Cycle graduates and 82% of Second-Cycle graduates are in employment. When surveyed, graduates of the Physical Geography SPs most valued their general education, followed by the skills they acquired. It is

interesting to note that the internship experience was rated third, at only 27%. This further strengthens the need for more of a focus on the internship aspect of the SP.

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

VU has a Code of Academic Ethics that sets out clear expectations for both students and Faculty. All staff and students must adhere to the Code of Academic Ethics of University, which governs the general norms of teaching, learning and research of the University community. Breaches of this are handed at University level, according to the 'Central Academic Ethics Commission of VU'.

Various means are used to ensure that students uphold the levels of academic integrity required, including open book type examinations, e-examinations, independent invigilators being present at examinations, and a text-matching software integrated into the VLE to detect plagiarism.

References to Gen-AI and the challenges that poses are missing. It would be beneficial to include clear guidance for students (and staff) about the permitted use of Gen-AI in work.

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

VU has implemented transparent processes for submitting and processing appeals, which is clearly outlined in the SER. The Dispute Resolution Commission is composed of both academics and students (3 of each), which ensures that the student voice is also heard.

In addition, the Academic Ethics Commission has a membership of 4 academics and 2 students. Complaints may be submitted to this by students no later than one month after the alleged incident. It is noteworthy that students of the Geography SP have availed of this Commission, making applications concerning unethical behaviour of a lecturer, and that the complaint was upheld. A staff member also made a complaint about a student, which was also upheld. This points to the accessibility of the system, which is to be commended.

VU has a unique helpline for anonymous reporting of violations of the principles of academic ethics, tolerance and non-discrimination. This helpline provides support by a special team of psychologists and lawyers. As the helpline is anonymous, it is not known whether it has been availed of by those within this field of study.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 4.2.)

VU has good policies in place to ensure that students are getting the most from their studies. There are also very good policies around academic integrity. However, there is a need to address Gen-AI, to provide guidelines for staff and students about what is acceptable and ethical use, and what platforms can be used.

There is one student representative on each of the programme committees. It would be beneficial to increase this number, to ensure that students have a strong voice in curriculum design. It is also important to close the feedback loop with the students, letting them know what has happened because of their input.

There is also a need to focus on the internship process, perhaps reaching out to alumni and encouraging them to take on interns within their organisations. This will ensure that graduates are career ready.

AREA 4: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 4	Unsatisfactory - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and

		substantial shortcomings to be eliminated		without any shortcomings	internationally without any shortcomings
First cycle			X		
Second cycle				X	

COMMENDATIONS

1. There is a very good, central monitoring of alumni, include a graduate survey at regular intervals.
2. Good alignment of Faculty expertise, societal need and curriculum at Second-Cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. In the First-Cycle, increase the opportunities for students to input into curriculum design and development, particularly in the First-Cycle.
2. Address the issue of Gen-AI, providing guidelines for its use. This could include agreeing what platforms can be used, and what platforms cannot be used. It should also include a consideration of whether students must declare every use of Gen-AI within a submission.

For further improvement

1. Have an increased focus on internships and practical training. This could include forming a 'Social Partners Forum' which could act as a 'critical friend'. It is also important to be proactive in searching out opportunities to engage with external partners, for them to know what you do, and so that they may be able to offer internships to your students.
2. It would be useful to have additional alumni network events, both formal and informal. These could be in different centres within Lithuania, and do not have to be in Vilnius. These can also be occasions to reach out to alumni who are in a position to partner with you on different aspects of curriculum or of research.
3. Ensure that the teaching material is up to date, and at the cutting edge of research. This is also the case for the practical sessions and simulations.

AREA 5: TEACHING STAFF

5.1.	Teaching staff is adequate to achieve learning outcomes
------	---

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

The teaching staff of the Physical Geography field at VU is recruited following the University's formal *Procedure for the Selection and Evaluation of Teaching and Research Staff*, ensuring transparency and competitiveness. Positions are filled through public competitions, including international calls for higher-level appointments. Contracts are typically for five years, with the possibility of open-ended contracts after two consecutive successful competitions. Staff qualification and performance are reviewed through a five-year certification cycle involving student feedback and at least one external expert.

According to the SER, the majority of teaching staff delivering Physical Geography field subjects are employed at VU on a long-term basis, typically under at least part-time contracts that are renewed through competitive procedures and periodic certification. This provides continuity in programme delivery and institutional memory. At the same time, the SER indicates slow staff renewal and a limited influx of early-career academics, which may pose challenges for the long-term sustainability and dynamism of the teaching workforce.

The Physical Geography field at VU is taught by 47 teaching staff members, of whom 79% hold a doctoral degree and 40% of the Second-Cycle teaching load is delivered by professors. The team covers the main branches of physical geography—climatology, geomorphology, hydrology, soil science, environmental modelling, GIS, and remote sensing.

The staff includes professors, associate professors, lecturers, and assistants. Both First- and Second-Cycle programmes comply with national qualification requirements:

- In First-Cycle programmes, 80% of lecturers are active researchers.
- In Second-Cycle programmes, 94% of lecturers hold a PhD, and 40% of teaching volume is delivered by professors.
- Practitioners (12%) contribute with relevant professional experience, strengthening the applied component.

The SER also indicates that teaching staff involved in the Physical Geography field meet University's institutional requirements for foreign language competence. A substantial proportion of staff demonstrate at least B2-level English proficiency, as evidenced by their participation in international research projects, academic mobility programmes, and publication in international peer-reviewed journals. At the same time, English-language competence currently supports primarily research and international cooperation, as the programme is not delivered as a full English-taught or joint study programme.

Appendix 5 confirms that while some staff have Q1–Q2 publications, the overall publication portfolio is dominated by Q2–Q3 outlets, with only isolated examples of high-impact publications across the team.

The SER reports that research FTE is extremely low, with only 7.14 FTE researchers in 2022 dedicated to physical geography – far lower than comparable fields at VU (e.g., physics 97.87 FTE; biology 70.08 FTE). This structural limitation restricts both publication productivity and international competitiveness.

Regarding externally funded projects, Table 2.5 shows participation in a single high-level Horizon Europe project (The HuT), and several smaller ERASMUS+, COST and national projects. VU does

not coordinate any major EU research consortia in this field, and the breadth of international competitive grant acquisition remains limited.

As mentioned earlier, experts would like to point out that students reported inconsistency in teaching quality across subjects, with concerns about:

- Outdated lecture materials in several First-Cycle courses;
- limited methodological competence in some specialized subjects;
- uneven communication or insufficient feedback from certain staff members.

These comments suggest that scientific qualifications do not consistently translate into high-quality didactic performance, particularly in the early years of study.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 5.1.)

The number and formal qualifications of the teaching staff are sufficient to meet legal requirements, and the group includes several well-established researchers in climatology, geomorphology, hydrology and GIS. Staff demonstrate motivation and good engagement with national scientific networks.

However, several systemic weaknesses reduce the overall academic strength of the field:

- Research productivity is relatively low. Publication numbers fluctuate substantially, and the majority of articles appear in lower-tier journals, with limited presence in top quartile (Q1–Q2) publications, which are essential for international competitiveness.
- Research capacity is insufficiently funded. With only 7.14 FTE researchers, staff face difficulty achieving sustained research output or securing competitive EU funding.
- Limited participation in high-level international projects. Only one Horizon Europe project involves the field, and VU is not a coordinator. Most externally funded projects are national in scope, which limits international research exposure and student involvement in frontier science.
- Didactic quality is uneven. Student feedback points to variability in teaching quality, outdated materials in some courses, and insufficiently modernised methods, indicating a need for more systematic pedagogical development.
- Age structure suggests future sustainability challenges since it shows a predominance of senior academics, with limited renewal of younger staff, which could affect long-term sustainability. Although the staff body is experienced, generational renewal is slow, with only modest numbers of junior researchers joining the team. Nonetheless, staff renewal has picked up pace over the recent past.

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

5.2.1. Opportunities for academic mobility of teaching staff are ensured

VU systematically provides opportunities for professional development and evaluation. Annual performance discussions are held between teaching staff and institute heads, complemented by five-year certification procedures that assess achievements, pedagogical quality, and competence development.

Academic mobility and competence development are supported through Erasmus+, Nordplus, ISEP, and bilateral agreements. Staff can receive funding for study visits (1 week to 2 months) and participate in teaching or training activities and conferences abroad. The SER does not provide precise numerical data on the number of outgoing and incoming teaching staff in the Physical Geography field over the last three years. However, both the available documentation and discussions during the site visit indicate that academic mobility involves only a limited proportion of the total teaching staff (47 persons) and clearly less than half of the staff participate in such activities. Mobility is concentrated mainly among senior academics who are already engaged in international research projects, while younger staff members and early-career lecturers participate significantly less frequently.

During the site visit, it also became evident that some younger staff perceive the institutional support mechanisms for mobility as administratively complex, or they do not meet eligibility requirements for certain mobility schemes due to their employment status or heavy teaching workloads. As a result, while mobility opportunities formally exist, their practical accessibility and uptake remain uneven across staff groups. Incoming mobility is even more limited and is largely restricted to short-term visits by foreign academics (e.g. guest lectures or research meetings), rather than systematic involvement in teaching.

Despite the modest scale, mobility activities have produced tangible benefits, including strengthened international research cooperation and joint publications. Nevertheless, the limited number of participants and the short duration of most exchanges constrain the broader impact of academic mobility on curriculum renewal and the internationalisation of teaching across the study field.

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

VU provides extensive opportunities for the professional development of teaching staff. These include training in pedagogy, digital tools, language skills, research methods, academic ethics, and assessment practices. Teaching and research performance is reviewed through annual appraisals and a five-year recertification procedure, which evaluates staff achievements in teaching, research, and professional activities.

The SER describes a formally established framework for teaching staff development at VU. Professional development is supported through institutional arrangements coordinated by central University units and the Faculty, including access to pedagogical training programmes, digital teaching support, language courses, and research competence development. Funding for staff development is provided through institutional resources, Erasmus+ staff mobility schemes, and internal calls supporting participation in conferences, training courses, and pedagogical innovation. Development activities cover scientific research, didactic competences, digital tools, assessment methods, and professional ethics, and are implemented through workshops, seminars, training courses, mobility visits, and participation in research projects.

According to the SER and Appendix 5, the scientific activity of the staff is continuous but relatively modest. The number of peer-reviewed articles fluctuated significantly over 2021–2023 (16 → 22 → 11), and the majority of these publications appear in lower- to mid-tier journals, especially Q3–Q4 sources. Q1 outputs are sporadic, with only 1–4 Q1 papers per year (over the staff of 47), and Q2 papers remain limited despite some improvement in 2022–2023.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 5.2.)

The mobility framework is robust, but limited practical uptake reduces its impact on teaching renewal and internationalisation. A more active institutional strategy including workload adjustment, financial incentives, recognition in evaluations would be needed to stimulate broader participation.

Opportunities for training and mobility exist but could be used more intensively, particularly for long-term exchanges and for inviting more foreign lecturers to the programmes. The current approach is

somewhat fragmented, relying heavily on individual initiative rather than a strategic, faculty-wide staff development plan.

PhD students and young researchers are underrepresented in teaching activities, and mentoring systems for early-career academics could be formalized. Stronger institutional incentives for pedagogical innovation, digital competences, and English-medium instruction would help align staff profiles with international standards.

While a broad development infrastructure exists, its utilisation is uneven. Considering student concerns about didactic quality, systematic pedagogical training should be prioritised. Staff need clearer expectations regarding continuous improvement, especially in digital pedagogy, modern climatology methods and GIS innovations.

AREA 5: CONCLUSIONS

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

COMMENDATIONS

1. Examples of motivated researchers integrating research into teaching, especially in Second-Cycle programmes.
2. Presence of international research collaboration, including participation in at least one Horizon Europe project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. Increase research productivity and international visibility, prioritising high-impact (Q1–Q2) publications and competitive international grants.
2. Enhance research capacity by increasing research FTEs, allocating protected research time and supporting early-career researchers.
3. Accelerate generational renewal, establishing clear pathways for young academics and reducing reliance on a small core of senior staff.

For further improvement

1. Strengthen didactic quality systematically, addressing variability in student experience, updating outdated materials and expanding modern teaching methods.
2. Promote structured pedagogical training so that all staff—particularly senior lecturers—engage in continuous didactic development.
3. Expand participation in major EU programmes (Horizon Europe, Interreg, ERC collaboration), including coordination roles where possible.

AREA 6: LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

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

During the site visit the expert team could visit several laboratories, Library of the Faculty and Museum of Minerals. There are satisfactory conditions for the study process at both cycles, with equipped laboratories, computer classrooms, mobile and stationary equipment (e.g. meteorological station with integrated accessories in inner yard of the HEI) and it helps to achieve the learning outcomes. According to the SER, during the 2022–2023 academic year, 60% of auditoriums were fully occupied. Some rooms are shared to meet various student needs and organizational activities. Mobile meteorological stations are used during summer practice at two training sites outside Vilnius – Puvočiai in Varėna district (all year round) and Pervalka in Neringa municipality (only in warm season). According to First-Cycle students' remarks, only outside residence in Puvočiai fully satisfies the study and living requirements. To add, soil research laboratory in the Faculty also waits for new equipment installation. The meeting with the administration indicated that, due to public procurement procedures, purchasing new equipment or renovating the living space in outdoor sites takes a considerable amount of time.

Facilities for students with disabilities are available at VU (with reference to strategy “Open University for the Disabled”, 2017), and all necessary information can be found at www.vu.lt/negalia. During the visit Expert panel has not noticed any lift or facility for people with special needs. It was mentioned, currently, no such students are enrolled at the institute but if needed people could use the lift in the Faculty of Medicine which is in the same building.

Teachers and students could use ArcGIS software (DesktopGIS, ServerGIS, DeveloperGIS, MobileGIS, BussineGIS software packages) free of charge. Some courses are conducted online. All information regarding students, teachers, courses and updates is automatically submitted on the VLE Moodle platform.

Students can use all libraries in Vilnius, with the main one being the VU Library (central, MKIC and HEI reading rooms available 24 hours a day). There are stored almost 5 million physical documents in the library (VUL) and academic community could reach even more than 260 thousand e-books. VUL subscribes 58 e-books with the content of scientific information databases. Meanwhile, during the site visit experts got the comments from students that the outdated scientific literature is sometimes used by lecturers. VUL organizes special information literacy training sessions for students: in 2022, even 2 thousand students took part in VUL trainings. It is worth to mention, students' positive feedback shows the necessity of such events. There are special workplaces adapted to persons with special needs in VUL.

VU Information Technology Service Centre (ITSC) is the main supplier of e-mail, e-mail conferences; websites; large file transfer system, VPN; 10 GB space on servers for storing files; etc. VU also provides access to the international University Wi-Fi network Eduroam.

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

Planning is based on the annual budget estimate, which considers government appropriations, University funds, and state assignments. The University allocates funds to purchase new scientific books and publications; however, the budget has decreased — from about €6,000 a few years ago to less than €4,000 in 2022/23. Support (generally in the form of methodological publications and books) is received through the cooperation with foreign universities. Meanwhile, laboratories, equipment, urban stationary meteorological station need investments. Expert panel highlights the

long-term public procurement procedures. Therefore, purchasing new equipment or replacement parts takes time when defects are detected (e. g. situation with stationary meteorological station).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 6.1.)

The factual situation shows sufficient but not fast enough implementation of new learning facilities and resources. The HEI is recommended to renovate laboratories and to assimilate already purchased equipment (e.g., the soil research laboratory) as soon as possible and to use it actively in the study process. Although the majority of learning facilities is well used, there are some gaps in study quality, such as the lack of practice on newest satellite and radar data and implementation of a weather simulator, which could be developed and tested in collaboration with teachers, students and employees. According to students' comments, there is not sufficient usage of the newest scientific resources available in the well-equipped Faculty library. Living conditions and the equipment used during outside practice do not fully meet study aims or students' expectations and therefore require continuous updating.

AREA 6: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 6	Unsatisfactory - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
First cycle			X		
Second cycle				X	

COMMENDATIONS

1. The HEI provides a good example of practical studies through active summer practice outside University premises.
2. Through Research Council of Lithuania (LMT) financial projects, the HEI receives support to expand scientific research infrastructure, enabling students to engage with the scientific community and apply their knowledge in practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. For the First-Cycle studies: limited practical work and collaboration with social partners and employees (e.g., LHMT) in specialized areas (satellite and radar meteorology, climate change etc.)
2. Some outdated equipment is used during summer practice outdoors, the only stationary meteorological station works also with interruptions.

For further improvement

1. Increase possibilities to create and participate in simulation activities (such as usage of real and model data for weather forecasting and facilities corresponding forecaster's workplace) for the First-Cycle studies.
2. Improve the learning process by incorporating up-to-date materials from LHMT and international meteorological, climatological and hydrological courses, and by aligning course themes with the needs of social partners.
3. Participate in joint projects with employees (including teachers, students, and PhD candidates) and make the learning process more relevant to real workplace conditions for Second-Cycle studies.

4. It is suggested to strengthen programming (R, Python) teaching.
5. Improve English skills by using more study materials in English and participating more actively in international training programmes.

AREA 7: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

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

FACTUAL SITUATION

7.1.1. Internal quality assurance system for the programmes is effective

VU operates a multilayered internal quality assurance (QA) system aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Responsibility for QA spans the Senate, the Department for the Quality and Development of Studies, Core Academic Units (CAUs), and the Study Programme Committees (SPCs). SPCs consist of academic staff, a student representative, and an external social partner and meet at least once per semester.

Centralised quality data are collected through module surveys, semester-wide satisfaction surveys, first- and final-year student surveys, internship evaluations, and exchange student feedback. These data are stored in the VUSIS system and used in annual programme reviews, lecturer certification, and discussions at SPC and CAU levels. Programme modifications described in the SER—including workload redistribution and the introduction of courses such as Geopolitics of Climate Change and Cartography with GIS—demonstrate evidence-based improvements.

However, the SER and site-visit discussions reveal that QA effectiveness is variable. While processes exist and documentation is comprehensive, the practical resolution of recurring student concerns (e.g. teaching quality, communication issues) is inconsistent, the latter was clearly exemplified during the site-visit by a group of students.

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

Stakeholder involvement is embedded in several mechanisms:

- **Students** participate in the SPC, Faculty councils, and working groups, and they provide feedback through University-wide surveys each semester.
- **Employers and social partners** contribute through participation in the SPC, thesis defence committees, internships, and guest lectures.
- **Alumni involvement** exists but is ad hoc—primarily through occasional meetings, individual consultations, or participation in course delivery.

During the site visit, students stated that they felt welcome to express their opinions; however, they also noted that feedback often resulted in unclear or delayed follow-up actions. Discussions with employers and social partners indicated uneven satisfaction across subject areas. Employer involvement was assessed positively in applied and technically oriented domains, particularly GIS, hydrology, and environmental modelling, where graduate competences and course content were considered relevant to labour market needs. In contrast, employers expressed more critical views regarding hydrometeorology-related subjects, noting gaps in practical skills, data-handling competencies, and alignment with current professional practices.

As a result, while stakeholder involvement is formally ensured and functional, its scope, balance across subject areas, and long-term continuity remain limited and would benefit from a more systematic and diversified engagement of external partners.

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

Programme descriptions, learning outcomes, admission requirements, and general information are publicly available on the VU website. External evaluation reports are published as legally required.

Detailed QA information, including survey reports, programme reviews, SPC decisions, and improvement plans, is accessible internally through VUSIS and the Faculty intranet. Teachers and administrators use this information to monitor progress and plan updates.

However, key programme-level indicators—such as satisfaction trends, dropout statistics, improvement summaries, and graduate employment data—are not consolidated or clearly presented to external audiences. Public-facing QA information remains dispersed, outdated in places, and insufficiently accessible, as it was expressed during the site-visit by several employers.

7.1.3. Student feedback is collected and analysed

VU applies an extensive survey system, including:

- Module surveys at the end of each course,
- Semester-wide satisfaction surveys,
- First- and final-year student surveys,
- Surveys of internships and exchange students,
- Lecturer-initiated surveys in some courses.

Survey results feed into annual programme evaluations and lecturer performance reviews. SPCs discuss student feedback and propose changes where necessary.

Despite this, students reported that although surveys are frequent, they seldom receive clear information on actions taken. They also indicated that recurring teaching problems (outdated materials, limited feedback, weak communication) persist in some courses despite low ratings in previous semesters. This suggests that feedback analysis does not always translate into effective corrective actions.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION (regarding 7.1.)

VU maintains a well-formalised and institutionally, and ESG aligned quality assurance system. Responsibilities are clearly defined, evaluation tools are in place, and continuous data collection is embedded in daily practice. Programme committees operate regularly and contribute to incremental improvements.

However, the practical effectiveness of the system in the Physical Geography field is uneven:

Overall, the QA framework is structurally robust but needs stronger implementation, clearer communication, and more outcome-oriented monitoring to ensure systematic improvements in teaching quality and stakeholder engagement.

AREA 7: CONCLUSIONS

AREA 7	Unsatisfactory - 1 Does not meet the requirements	Satisfactory - 2 Meets the requirements, but there are substantial shortcomings to be eliminated	Good - 3 Meets the requirements, but there are shortcomings to be eliminated	Very good - 4 Very well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings	Exceptional - 5 Exceptionally well nationally and internationally without any shortcomings
First cycle			X		
Second cycle				X	

COMMENDATIONS

1. A comprehensive QA framework aligned with ESG principles, with clearly defined responsibilities and regular reviews.
2. Extensive and systematic student feedback collection, supported by modern digital tools.
3. Functional programme committees that discuss curricula, assessment, and study results on a regular basis.
4. Active involvement of selected employers in thesis defences, internships, and programme-level discussions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address shortcomings

1. Ensure clearer communication to students regarding how their survey results and comments lead to specific programme improvements (“close the feedback loop”).
2. Ensure consistent monitoring of teaching quality, including follow-up actions for repeatedly low-rated courses or pedagogical issues.
3. Shift QA focus from procedural compliance to measurable outcomes, ensuring that QA processes demonstrably improve learning outcomes, teaching quality, and student experience.

For further improvement

1. Strengthen the practical use of QA data by linking survey outcomes to concrete corrective measures—especially where teaching quality concerns persist.
2. Improve public transparency by publishing consolidated programme-level indicators, improvement summaries, and external evaluation results in a visible and user-friendly format.
3. Broaden and systematise employer and alumni engagement, e.g., through advisory boards, annual consultations, or structured surveys.

V. SUMMARY

VU offers Study Programmes which comply with the descriptors for the study field of Physical Geography. The programmes are well aligned with the mission and strategy of the University. The curriculum, particularly in the Second-Cycle, is well structured. The learning outcomes within modules align with the programme learning outcomes, which in turn align with the competences required for the field of study. The programmes complement each other well and produce graduates who are well regarded and sought after in a wide variety of enterprise. It is noteworthy that student numbers in the First-Cycle have risen over the past number of years—this will be very beneficial for the team and should reinvigorate the discipline. Some attention needs to be paid to the alignment of assessments, and assessment weightings within and across modules.

The Physical Geography study field at VU demonstrates a strong and coherent integration of research and teaching, with significant strengths across the evaluated areas. The field benefits from excellent instruction by active researchers, ensuring the curriculum is informed by current scientific work in climate, hydrology, and cartography. Programmes are structured to progressively build student competencies in modern methods and technologies, supported by authentic research experience through theses and practical activities connected to ongoing projects. At the same time, publication output is uneven, with limited high-impact (Q1–Q2) papers, and the small number of full-time research positions constrains research capacity and international competitiveness; participation in major international projects is low, with only one Horizon Europe project, and these constraints particularly affect the First-Cycle, where students reported weaker research integration and uneven didactic quality. Areas identified for further development include strengthening the documentation and visibility of student involvement in research outputs, ensuring a more systematic review process for integrating research results into course updates, and increasing interdisciplinary integration within the curriculum. Additionally, fostering scientific collaboration and student exchange opportunities with related programmes at other national universities is recommended for future enhancement.

University ensures clear and transparent admission procedures in the Physical Geography field, with competitive scores and recognition of foreign qualifications and prior learning aligned to the intended learning outcomes and sufficient demand and entrance scores to sustain both First- and Second-Cycle programmes. Students have access to a broad system of academic, financial, social, psychological and personal support, an extensive network of international mobility agreements and structured induction and counselling throughout their studies. However, student feedback indicates that mobility opportunities are not always easy to use in practice, institutional support for finding and arranging mandatory internships is limited, and communication about specific procedures, available support measures and the use of student feedback is not always sufficiently clear or visible, with some students perceiving a distance in communication with staff. Overall, Area 3 can be evaluated as good for both cycles, but with notable shortcomings in the implementation and accessibility of mobility, support and counselling that should be addressed.

The Faculty on the Physical Geography area of study are generally enthusiastic about the commitment to teaching the next generation of geographers. Its social partners are also very supportive of the Study Field. There are very good policies in place for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination. However, there appear to be differences in the experience of students within the First-Cycle, depending on which of the Study Programmes they are undertaking. It would be helpful to ensure that there is a wider group of students involved in curriculum design and review, and that the students know what has happened because of their feedback. It will be important to review the teaching materials and assessment across the three SPs in the First-Cycle to ensure relevance. It is also important to provide clear and relevant guidance on the permitted use of Gen-AI.

The teaching staff of the Physical Geography field at VU is sufficient in number and formally well qualified to deliver both First- and Second-Cycle programmes. The majority hold doctoral degrees, and the Second-Cycle programme benefits from a strong proportion of professors and active researchers. The staff covers all key subfields of physical geography, ensuring subject-matter competence across the curriculum. However, the overall research performance of the field remains

modest. Peer-reviewed publication output fluctuates, high-impact (Q1–Q2) publications are limited, and the small number of full-time research positions restricts research capacity and international competitiveness. Participation in major international research projects is low, with only one Horizon Europe project involving the field. These limitations particularly affect the First-Cycle, where weaker integration of research and uneven didactic quality were reported by students.

Opportunities for mobility and professional development exist through Erasmus+, Nordplus, and internal training, but participation is inconsistent and largely dependent on individual initiative. Long-term mobility and pedagogical development require stronger institutional support. Students noted variability in teaching quality and outdated materials in some courses, indicating the need for more systematic pedagogical modernisation. Furthermore, the age structure shows limited renewal of younger academics, posing risks to long-term sustainability.

Overall, the teaching staff meets the requirements for programme delivery, but shortcomings in research capacity, pedagogical consistency, internationalisation, and generational renewal remain. These issues are more pronounced in the First-Cycle, while the Second-Cycle benefits from stronger research integration, more experienced lecturers, and greater alignment between staff competence and study outcomes.

One can see renovated laboratories and auditoriums; moreover, there are positive signs regarding the acquisition of modern equipment, which is ready for installation. Nevertheless, the factual situation reveals weaknesses in the continuous updating of learning facilities and resources. One of the reasons may be the long-term public procurement process. The HEI library meets all the necessary requirements for high-quality studies and full fills students' needs, it operates round the clock, every day of the week.

VU has a comprehensive and ESG-aligned internal QA system that covers all key stages of programme monitoring, data collection, and review. The SPC operates regularly and includes students and an external social partner, ensuring formally compliant stakeholder participation. The University collects extensive quantitative and qualitative data through module surveys, semester evaluations, and targeted surveys of different student groups, and uses these data in annual programme reviews and staff evaluations. Despite this well-established structure, the practical effectiveness of QA in the Physical Geography field is uneven. Students report recurring issues related to outdated materials, inconsistent communication, and limited follow-up on feedback. Although employers contribute to internships and thesis defences, their involvement in programme development remains narrow and dependent on individual contacts. Alumni engagement lacks structured mechanisms. Public-facing information on programme quality, improvement actions, and outcome indicators is fragmented and insufficiently accessible, limiting transparency for external stakeholders. Overall, QA processes are clearly defined and functional, but their impact on teaching quality and programme improvement is inconsistent. Strengthening communication of results, broadening stakeholder engagement, and shifting towards outcome-oriented monitoring are essential to increase the effectiveness of the QA system.

The committee wishes to thank the HEI for the very good quality self-evaluation report, the well-organised site-visit, and the constructive discussions with the review panel. Particular thanks are extended to the SKVC coordinator, Ieva Žemaitaitytė, for her great efforts in coordinating the evaluation process in a very efficient and professional manner. She was always approachable and organised the pre work, the stay as well as the writing process in a very professional way.