



CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EVALUATION REPORT

STUDY FIELD of PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

at Vytautas Magnus University

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Study Field Data

Title of the study programme	Public Administration*	Rural Development Administration
State code	6122LJ001	6211LX054
Type of studies	University studies	University studies
Cycle of studies	First cycle	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	Full-time (4 years)	Part-time (3 years)
Credit volume	240	120
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Bachelor of Business and Public Administration	Master of Business and Public Administration
Language of instruction	Lithuanian	Lithuanian/English
Minimum education required	Secondary education	Bachelor's degree
Registration date of the study programme	1999	14/06/2002

Title of the study programme	Public Governance and Administration
State code	6211LX048
Type of studies	University studies
Cycle of studies	Second cycle
Mode of study and duration (in years)	Full-time (2 years)
Credit volume	120
Qualification degree and (or) professional qualification	Master of Business and Public Administration
Language of instruction	Lithuanian/English/Russian
Minimum education required	Bachelor's degree
Registration date of the study programme	24/05/2001

* two-fields (Public Administration and Political Science) study programme

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel was assigned according to the Experts Selection Procedure as approved by the Director of Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education on 31 December 2019 [Order No. V-149](#). The site visit to the HEI was conducted by the panel online on 20 May, 2022.

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

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

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

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

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

Ms. Ugnė Bičkauskaitė (student representative), 3rd year student of Political Science at Vilnius University, Lithuania.

1.3. GENERAL INFORMATION

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

No.	Name of the document
1.	Statistics on student, social partner and alumni engagement in quality assurance: methods, frequency for each method, rates of response and survey results 2020-2021
2.	Statistics and reasons for drop-outs of studies 2018–2022
3.	Vytautas Magnus University Strategic Plan for 2021–2027
4.	Syllabi of bachelor level study subjects “Civil Society Organizations”, “Ethics of Politicians and Public Servants”, “Internship I”, “Internship II”, “Management of Public Services Delivery”, and master level study subjects “Ethics Management in the Public Sector”, “NGO and Public Interest”
5.	Methodic of the Qualification and Pre-graduation Internships for the Public Administration Students
6.	Senate of Vytautas Magnus University Resolution on the Approval of Gender Equality Plan of Vytautas Magnus University for 2021-2025, approved by the decision No. SEN-N-37 of June 23, 2021, of Vytautas Magnus University Senate
7.	Disability Policy of Vytautas Magnus University: “University of Inclusive Opportunities”, approved by decision No. SEN-N-36 of June 23, 2021, of Vytautas Magnus University Senate
8.	Communication and marketing plans 2021-2022 of the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy and the Agriculture Academy of Vytautas Magnus University
9.	Description of The Minimum Qualification Requirements for Teaching and Research Staff Working in the Field of Social Sciences at Vytautas Magnus University, approved by decision No. 2–5 of March 13, 2019, of Vytautas Magnus University Senate
10.	Description of Procedure for Calculation of Remuneration of Vytautas Magnus University Staff, approved by the decision No. TA-N-3, of 27 January 2022 of the Council of Vytautas Magnus University
11.	List of publications of the teachers of the Public Administration study field programmes at the Vytautas Magnus University, 2020
12.	List of final thesis defence committees of Public Administration, Rural Development Administration, Public Governance and Administration study programmes 2019-2021

1.4. BACKGROUND OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FIELD STUDIES AT VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY

Vytautas Magnus University (hereinafter referred to as VMU or the University) was established in 1922 and re-established in 1989. It is a public HEI based on “the common

beliefs and values of freedom, openness, and dialogue, and oriented towards humanistic culture” (cf. SER). The University provides degree studies of all three cycles – Bachelor, Master and PhD studies which cover a broad spectrum of fields ranging from humanities, social sciences and arts to the fundamental sciences, environmental sciences, and biotechnologies. VMU is managed by two collegial bodies, the Council and the Senate, and the separate managerial body of the Rector. The Council is a collegial management body which affirms the University’s vision, mission and the strategy, financial and other strategic issues; the Senate is a collegial body managing the academic affairs of the University. The University is headed by the Rector, who is advised by the Rector’s Council. VMU boasts 14 faculties (Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Faculty of Economics and Management, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Informatics, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy, Faculty of Social Sciences, Agriculture Academy, Education Academy, Music Academy, Institute of Foreign Languages, Botanical Garden, cf. SER).

The study programmes in the study field are implemented within the Department of Public Administration (established in 1999), which is part of the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy. Three more departments are a part of the Faculty: the Department of Political Science, the Department of Regional Studies, and the Department of Public Communications. The Faculty also has four scientific centres (Czesław Miłosz centre, Andrei Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development, the Centre for Social and Political Critique, UNESCO-UNITWIN Research Centre for Media and Information Literacy).

The study field of Public Administration at VMU includes the first cycle study programme *Public Administration* (hereinafter referred to as *PA*) and two second cycle study programmes *Public Governance and Administration* (hereinafter referred to as *PGA*) and *Rural Development Administration* (hereinafter referred to as *RDA*). Until 2019, there was also the second cycle study programme *Public Policy and Administration of the European Union*, but the programme was suspended due to declining state funding and student numbers.

The Department of Public Administration of the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy is responsible for the implementation of the *PA* and *PGA* study programmes. The history of the department dates back to 1998, when the first cycle studies in Public Administration were launched at the Institute of International Law and Politics. In the course of further developments and changes in the programmes they were re-organized into two VMU faculties, namely the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy (with the study programmes in the areas of political science, communication, journalism, regional studies) and the Faculty of Law (with the study programmes in international law and justice studies). After the state reform of higher education, Aleksandras Stulginskis University became a structural unit of Vytautas Magnus University, i.e. the Agriculture Academy. The Faculty of Bioeconomy Development of the Agriculture Academy concentrates on studies in the field of Social Sciences. The Department of Business and Rural Development Management of the Faculty of Bioeconomy Development is responsible for the implementation of the second cycle study programme *Rural Development Administration*, which was launched in 2002.

VMU collaborates with many universities and scientists around the globe, implementing projects, enhancing student and staff exchanges, and improving the study and research

system. VMU is an international and multilingual institution that continuously develops international networks and intercultural dialogues, participates in international scientific, academic, and social projects, encourages teacher and student mobility.

The last external evaluation of the first cycle study programme *Public Administration* took place in 2013; the programme was assessed with 21 points out of 24 and accredited for the maximum period of six years.

The last external evaluation of the second cycle study programme *Public Governance and Administration* took place in 2014, the programme was assessed with 18 points out of 24 and accredited for a period of three years. The last external evaluation of the second cycle study programme *Rural Development Administration* took place in 2016, the programme was assessed with 16 points out of 24 and accredited for a period of three years.

II. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Public Administration study field and *first cycle* at Vytautas Magnus University is given **positive** evaluation.

Study field and cycle assessment in points by evaluation areas

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation of an Area in points*
1.	Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	3
2.	Links between science (art) and studies	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	4
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Study quality management and public information	3
	Total:	23

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

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

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

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

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

Public Administration study field and *second cycle* at Vytautas Magnus University is given **positive** evaluation.

Study field and cycle assessment in points by evaluation areas

No.	Evaluation Area	Evaluation of an Area in points*
1.	Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	3
2.	Links between science (art) and studies	3
3.	Student admission and support	3
4.	Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	4
5.	Teaching staff	3
6.	Learning facilities and resources	4
7.	Study quality management and public information	3
	Total:	23

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

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

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

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

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

III. STUDY FIELD ANALYSIS

3.1. INTENDED AND ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM

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

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

The SER states on the Bachelor study programme (p. 6) that “the aim of the first cycle study programme in Public Administration is to prepare highly qualified specialists in Public Administration and Politics who can creatively apply the competences acquired during their studies, who have a detailed understanding and knowledge of politics and policy, the functions and powers of public administration, recognize and are able to take into account the specifics of administration and management of public sector organisations”.

In line with this objective, the undergraduate programme has been registered as a study programme in two study fields (Public Administration and Political Science). According to VMU, this is the only programme in the country that links the two fields so closely.

VMU indicates that the graduates of this programme, upon the completion of their studies, should be able to work in the following types of jobs:

- specialists in political organisations, state and municipal agencies engaged in policy making and policy implementation;
- staff at state and municipal agencies performing public administration functions;
- specialists at public sector and non-governmental organisations providing public services;
- specialists at non-profit state and municipal entities.

Regarding the Master programmes (p. 10), the SER indicates that the aim of the PGA second-cycle study programme is to prepare highly qualified specialists in Public Administration, working in the fields of policy implementation, public management, and the provision of public services who can creatively apply the competences acquired during their studies.

On the same page the SER details that “the aim of the RDA study programme is to prepare highly qualified specialists in Public Administration by providing knowledge and skills necessary for research and professional activities in the system of rural development administration institutions, by developing strategic and holistic thinking and special skills necessary for the integrated management of qualitative and quantitative changes in rural areas and the functioning of institutions, or by providing them with an opportunity to pursue Doctoral studies and research in related study fields.”

Notably, since 2020, the PGA programme has been open for students from Belarus and is implemented in both English and Russian.

According to the Civil Service Department of the Republic of Lithuania data, the demand for such specialists in the Lithuanian public sector is rather high. In this respect, although the overall objectives of the PA and PGA programmes are rather generic, they do respond to the labour market conditions. However, the blend of political science and public administration in the first cycle and the focus on rural development administration in the second represent a comparative advantage of VMU programmes. Furthermore, by offering an option in Russian to Belorussian students (mainly NGO managers and activists), VMU contributes not only to civil service professionalisation in Lithuania but also beyond that in the region.

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

As documented in the SER, the aims and outcomes of the first and second-cycle study programmes are aligned with VMU’s mission, objectives and activities outlined in the University Strategy 2021–2027. More specifically, VMU as a community-based research, art, and study institution focuses on creating liberal learning conditions for individuals, the development of partnerships, and contributing to the public life of Lithuania. The strategy is based on the following five priorities: (1) creating a community in harmony fostering consolidation, (2) engaging in/contributing to international research, (3) implementing a 360-degree study approach, (4) promoting the integrity of self-governance and responsibility, and (5) ensuring overall impact on societal development. The strategic objective “Studies 360” outlined in the SER is of particular relevance to the programmes in the study field, aiming to “plan, organise, execute, and evaluate performance of the state agency, political institution, or civil society organisation, with due regard to the knowledge about the dependencies of such performance on the peculiarities of the functioning political and administrative system and societal needs” or “be able to follow principles of democratic, responsible, and effective public service.”

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

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

Criteria	Legal requirements	In the Programme
Scope of the programme in ECTS	180, 210 or 240 ECTS	240
ECTS for the study field	No less than 120 ECTS	132
ECTS for studies specified by University or optional studies	No more than 120 ECTS	76
ECTS for internship	No less than 15 ECTS	15
ECTS for final thesis (project)	No less than 15 ECTS	15
Contact hours	No less than 20 % of learning	33%

Individual learning	No less than 30 % of learning	67%
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Table No. 2. Study Programmes' Public *Governance and Administration (PGA)* and *Rural Development Administration (RDA)* compliance to general requirements for *second cycle study programmes*

Criteria	Legal requirements	In the Programme
Scope of the programme in ECTS	90 or 120 ECTS	120
ECTS for the study field Information Services	No less than 60 ECTS	120 (PGA) / 114 (RDA)
ECTS for studies specified by University or optional studies	No more than 30 ECTS	18 (PGA) / 24 (RDA)
ECTS for final thesis (project)	No less than 30 ECTS	30
Contact hours	No less than 10 % of learning	25% (PGA) / 37.5% (RDA)
Individual learning	No less than 50 % of learning	75% (PGA) / 62.5% (RDA)

In most part, the study programmes in both study cycles meet the legal requirements and provisions stipulated in various legal acts of Lithuania. The volume of the three programmes is sufficient to achieve the expected learning outcomes in both study cycles. Study courses in the study programme PA (first cycle) are of 4 or 6 ECTS in volume with the latter ones having more complex learning outcomes and requiring a higher number of the students' working hours in the course. In the second cycle, the volume of all modules (except for thesis) of both study programmes is 6 ECTS, which ensures that a student's workload is evenly distributed throughout the programme and between single courses. Learning outcomes meet the requirements set out in the Descriptor of the Study Field of Public Administration for the RDA programme. This is not the case for the PA and PGA programmes (Bachelor and Master level), where the development of the competences and abilities related to cooperation with citizens, allowing them to participate in public governance, is missing on the programme level, even though these topics (not skills) are covered sporadically in various courses as subtopics, such as Civil Society Organisations, NGO and Public Interest, etc. Another shortcoming is the lack of using academic representatives from other HEIs in the thesis defence committees. Therefore, some shortcomings exist in both study cycles in meeting legal requirements, in particular, the Descriptor of the Study Field of Public Administration.

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

The aims and learning outcomes of the first-cycle study programme PA have been devised to meet the requirements of the two study fields *Public Administration* and *Political Science* alike. This is possible due to the fact that 116 ECTS (out of 132 ECTS assigned to the study field of *Public Administration* and of 133 ECTS assigned to the study field *Political Science*) are common for both fields. Annex 4 of the SER shows the proportion of learning outcomes related to the two study fields for each course of the first-cycle study programme PA. As the numbers are always either 50/50; 100; 100/100 or 50/100 and 100/50 %, they seem, however, to have been distributed rather mechanically. An overview over the coherence among programme courses and programme learning outcomes has been provided as “Additional Information”. The number of learning outcomes per course seems reasonable as only the courses “Introduction to Political Science” and “Introduction to Public Administration” have three learning outcomes assigned to them (all other courses have two or just one). However, the third key learning outcome of the study field of *Public Administration* (“Ability to cooperate with citizens, allowing them to participate in public governance”) seems not to be reflected in the programme and course learning outcomes. The overall linkage of programme and course learning outcomes with study and assessment methods is exemplified on the basis of the first-cycle study course “Organizational and Administrative Culture”. An integrated overview/relation matrix of all relevant information for the first-cycle study programme PA is, however, missing.

The same scattering of relevant information can be observed for the second-cycle study programmes RDA and PGA. Figures 2 and 3 of the corresponding SER contain information on the link between skills and acquired knowledge (learning outcomes) with the study courses. While Table 1 demonstrates the coherence of competencies according to the Descriptor of the Study Field of *Public Administration* with the courses/ subjects of the study programmes (as both programmes belong to this study field, the third key learning outcome - “Ability to cooperate with citizens, allowing them to participate in public governance” - is included here). Table 3 elaborates on the coherence of the field study programme aims and the intended learning outcomes as related to the programme courses, which are also shown in the matrices of the “Additional Information”. As is to be expected for second-cycle study programmes, the number of learning outcomes per course is in general higher than in the first-cycle study programme. The concrete linkage between individual learning outcomes and corresponding teaching and assessment methods is, again, exemplified for both second-cycle study programmes on the basis of one course respectively in Table 4 and 5 of the SER. Also for the second-cycle study programmes RDA and PGA an integrated overview of all relevant information (relation matrix) would be helpful.

During the online site-visit it was stated that the Study Programme Committee revises the compatibility of aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods annually. It was, however, noted that the formal review structures are heavily dependent on previous discussions among the teaching staff in order to better balance the concretely applied teaching and assessment methods. In this context it was also stated that teachers, considering the need for coherence between the courses as well as regarding the individual courses, make regular adaptations necessary at course level. Also, concerning this matter, an

encompassing relation matrix for each study programme which could be discussed and, if necessary, adapted at the end/before each semester (not only annually), might be useful.

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

In order to ensure that the first-cycle study programme PA meets the requirements of the two study fields *Public Administration* and *Political Science* alike, it encompasses 240 ECTS and eight semesters with a corresponding number of courses as well as an internship phase (10 weeks in total). The distribution of courses related to the respective study fields is explained in the SER with a slightly larger share of political science in the first two study years, and a stronger emphasis on public administration in the second half of the studies. The distribution and subjects of the compulsory study courses are comprehensible, but a high number of programme-unspecific „General university study courses“ (56 ECTS) in the first four semesters is contrasted by a relatively limited number of electives in semesters 5-7 (20 ECTS). The effective scope of available electives is further restricted by a mere duplication of the corresponding subjects in semesters 5 and 7. While the existing compulsory and elective courses correspond to the special design of the first-cycle study programme PA, important subjects of political as well as administrative science related to digitalisation – e.g. E-Democracy or E-Government/ E-Governance – have no special modules reserved for them.

The subjects of the second-cycle study programmes PGA and RDA are grouped into four broad categories: Public administration, Public sector and NGOs; Public management; Public policy; and Research work. For the study programme PGA, the compulsory subjects are in line with the subject dimensions of the study field, even if their actual positioning in the study plan might be discussed (e.g. „Ethics Management in the Public Sector“ in the first semester, but „Theoretical and Comparative Analysis in Public Administration“ in the second and – even more striking – „Administrative Law“ in the third). The number of electives is rather limited (six offered, from which three have to be chosen) and cover a wide range of subjects; the possibilities for real specialisation regarding the policy areas of social affairs, health, education and culture as claimed in the SER are, therefore, debatable. A larger number of electives with a clear focus on certain specialisations and corresponding consecutive courses over three semesters might be discussed. Important subjects like administrative digitalisation, digital leadership and digital competences are not (at least not recognisably) addressed. For the study programme RDA, the compulsory courses are in line with the subject dimensions of the study field, but the focus of the programme on rural development could be stronger reflected in some rather general course titles (e.g. „Management of Human Resources“; „Management of Institutional Changes“; „Theories and Methods of Consulting“). The number of core elective courses (4 offered, from which 1 has to be chosen) seems very limited, but is enlarged by the so-called optional courses for practical or scientific work. Why important subjects such as „Administrative Law“ and „Administration Information Systems“ are not compulsory, and if the offer of legal courses like, again, „Administrative Law“ and „Agriculture and Food Law“ in English is convincing, should nevertheless be up for discussion.

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

VMU's liberal study policy allows students to plan their studies by choosing general study courses and part of the study field courses. Students also have the possibility to move from one study programme to another and change the form of studies. Alongside a Bachelor degree diploma of their major speciality, VMU graduates can also get a certificate of minor studies. Overall, VMU provides students with opportunities to take individual studies when creating their own individual study plans following Artes Liberales principles. More specifically, there are various avenues for the personalisation of studies: for example, students can choose from over 30 foreign languages and electives from all VMU faculties or other universities; to meet specific learning needs students can also study according to an individual study schedule which is designed on the basis of the study programme and individual study plans and determines the distribution of the courses to be taken at a certain time, the number and time of consultations, the form and order of assessments, and the beginning and end dates of the examination session. In addition, in various modules there are possibilities for students to select topics and adjust them for assignments and for the final thesis. First, there is the possibility to choose a more scientific or practical way in thesis writing to personalise the studies, e.g. connecting professional activities with the studies and the thesis topic. At the same time, VMU provides the flexibility of studying in various languages - some lectures are held in English and some in Russian, depending on which language students are able to better understand, and materials are provided in Russian and in English.

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

The general principles of preparation and defence of final theses are regulated for all three study programmes by the "VMU Study Regulations and General Order on the Preparation and Defence of the Final Theses", complemented by specific recommendations of departments/ faculties. The process itself is structured, responsibilities are defined and programme requirements are outlined. Thus, a bachelor thesis comprises 40-60 text pages and has to be based on at least 15 recent scientific publications including foreign sources. For master theses the requirements are 50-80 text pages and at least 25 recent scientific publications, which also have to include foreign ones. Due to the programme orientations, the subjects of final theses as shown in the corresponding annexes/additional lists for the first-cycle study programme PA and the second-cycle study programme PGA cover a wide range of themes relevant for the respective study fields. Topics in practice are mostly proposed by teaching staff and the thematic focus is predominantly on Lithuania, but other options are not excluded (suggestions by social partners or by the students are supported). From their orientation and scope, the revised final theses seem to be compliant with the field and cycle requirements and the respective programme guidelines (the omission of page numbers in references, which has been observed in at least one bachelor thesis, is, however, hardly adequate at this level of studies and highly debatable). For the second-cycle study programme RDA, the subjects of the master theses seem to be in line with the field and cycle requirements as well, but a closer look at the seven examples accessible via the link provided to access documentation (note that the names are blackened) showed that

programme guidelines have not always been observed (e.g. number of text pages; quality of English summaries; number/quality of foreign sources; inconsistent citation and application of bibliographic standards). Although the programme pays “considerable attention [...] to the abilities and skills of preparing a research work” (SER, p. 24), and offers a number of specialised courses and has a multiple-stage pre-defence preparation system, these quality control mechanisms should be critically reviewed at the programme level and above to ensure that the formal standards are observed and applied consistently.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. VMU study programmes include a political science/public administration blend and a regional development administration focus which sets the University studies in the study field apart from other programmes in the country.
2. The programme management and the teaching staff are aware of the need to constantly review the compatibility of programme aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods.
3. VMU offers various ways and possibilities to personalise studies with a lot of flexibility provided to students.
4. VMU offers the PGA programme in Russian for Belarussian students (NGO activists and managers).

(2) Weaknesses:

1. The PA and PGA programme aims are rather generic and could be revised to reference VMU comparative advantages. In addition, some course subjects, course titles and the sequencing of modules/courses, as well as the ratio of compulsory and elective/optional courses should be reviewed.
2. The learning outcomes of BA and MA studies (PA and PGA) do not fully meet the legal requirements since representatives of other HEIs do not (regularly) participate in the thesis defence committees and, more importantly, they do not address explicitly the development of competences related to the ability to cooperate with citizens.
3. An integrated overview of all relevant information/a relation matrix linking aims, learning outcomes and teaching/learning and assessment methods is not available. It could be useful for discussions and possible (continuous) adaptation at the end/before each semester (not only annually).
4. With regard to the second-cycle study programme RDA discrepancies between regulations/guidelines for master theses and practical implementation have been noted.

3.2. LINKS BETWEEN SCIENCE (ART) AND STUDIES

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

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

Taking the contents of the three Public Administration field study programmes into account, research conducted by VMU research units and teachers is related to the needs of these study programmes. In addition, thanks to the dominating focus on applied research, the study programmes are continuously updated with the latest research results and reflect the demands of policy-making and decision-making practice.

VMU uses an incentive programme based on financial fees in order to support their teachers in research. Within this context it is very important, as mentioned during the site-visit, that teaching staff can obtain such benefits not only thanks to publications but also thanks to other research-related activities. While in the case of (especially) senior teachers articles published in top international journals are awarded in terms of their impact factors (Q1 and Q2), there is an internal competition among PhD students which motivates them to achieve better results in research. Another important measure is internal institutional funding, i.e. the research units can also be awarded for their performance by extra funding. However, taking the information collected during the site-visit into account, it should be emphasised that non-financial incentives are underdeveloped. In addition, during the site-visit it was confirmed that a clear majority of public funding for VMU is based on contact teaching hours.

Although the teaching staff is trying to conduct both theoretical and applied research, the latter prevails. The demand as well as incentives often come from social partners/third parties, e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture, local action groups, the Lithuanian Academy of Science, and other collaborating public authorities or NGOs. A closer look at recent funding of the teaching staff's research shows that whilst teachers have been successful in various local or national funding schemes, there is still a gap with regard to funding from international donors/resources. In this context, it is noteworthy that the overall research performance of VMU in the evaluation period was above average in Lithuania. On the other hand, however, due to the main focus on applied research it might be difficult to publish research results in top international journals. Therefore, additional incentives might encourage theoretical contributions which would undoubtedly lead to higher visibility of VMU research activities. For instance, both fields relevant for the PGA study programme, i.e. public administration and political science, are open for theoretical contributions. In this regard, VMU might want to significantly increase support for more intensive engagement of its teaching staff in international research networks.

From the perspective of the high-quality contents of the study programmes, it is important to note that recent research results have been continuously incorporated in the curricula. This is a good practice and teachers should be further encouraged to share research results with their students.

Overall, the VMU study programmes offered meet the quality requirements related to the links between education and science and can be evaluated as very good. However, as described above, the SER and the information collected during the site-visit have revealed a few weaknesses/issues that should be improved/addressed.

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

Research at VMU in the study field tends to be focused on relevant practical and theoretical issues in public policy implementation, public management and public service provision (most research topics include the implementation of public policy, civil service reforms, administration of public services, and serving citizens as customers and clients, etc.). The results of the research projects (which are adapted to social partners' needs) are used as examples in the study courses. In addition, research and studies are interlinked when the topics are proposed by the teachers for final theses according to the topics of ongoing research projects, so that students in their final theses contribute to the implementation of similar research, i.e. they conduct empirical research on smaller sub-topics or related research of narrower scope. Furthermore, there are project calls and teaching material updates and also ideas and inputs from outside VMU that keep the studies up-to-date., e.g. social partners and communities highlight research needs and consult on thesis topics. Finally, Erasmus+ projects are implemented for study programme developments.

Overall, links between the content of the studies and latest developments in the public administration discipline are established. At the same time, research is strongly biased towards project-based applied research guiding the studies, which has come at the expense of a more theoretical approach. As a result, some shortcomings have been detected in the studies from a more theoretical perspective. As highlighted by alumni representatives and social partners during the site-visit, gaps in the (outdated) theoretical knowledge of first-cycle students and their low awareness of real-life changes that have taken place, were noted.

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

VMU uses a set of measures facilitating active involvement of students in research activities (e.g., scientific events for students and young researchers, transformation of the best Master thesis into research papers/articles, awarding students who are active in research). From this point of view, teaching staff at VMU consider students as possible research collaborators.

Taking into account the information collected during the site-visit, it seems that VMU effectively facilitates active involvement of students in ongoing research activities. The employed mechanisms include regular student conferences, calls for specific topics of Master theses (they are determined by means of focus and scope of research projects managed by VMU's research units or individual teachers), co-authorship in the cases of research or policy-oriented publications, and some extra credits for active involvement in applied research. During the site-visit, teachers declared that demand often comes from students, but the students were only aware of a few of the opportunities mentioned (e.g., most of them

mentioned the student conferences). Concerning the student conferences, VMU employs a kind of non-conventional approach in this field, because active participation in student conferences is considered a precondition for successful defence of Master theses. More precisely, each second-cycle student must present a Master thesis related paper in a conference which is organised either at VMU or any other HEI.

It must be highly appreciated that some students at VMU have already obtained grants from the Lithuanian Research Council or similar donors. Besides this achievement, a competitive environment supports students in their active involvement in research, and, recently, a few of them decided to develop either their Master theses or semester papers into PhD theses.

Students are encouraged to collect relevant data and practice various research methods during their internships. According to the authors of the SER who took part in the site-visit, the internships can bring a great added value not only for students' individual development but also for VMU and its outcomes in teaching as well as research. The rationale of such an added value is based on further development of collaborative links and continuous connection of VMU with practitioners who can easily present their expectations as well as needs. The students participating in the site-visit partly confirmed this statement.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. The mutual and fruitful collaboration between the University and local as well as national stakeholders (e.g., donors, policy-makers) in applied research as well as in teaching is very important and can undoubtedly add value.
2. The interconnection between internship programmes for students and their research activities is a good practice.
3. Students are actively involved in research, some of them even have obtained grants from relevant research donors.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Embeddedness into and too much reliance on applied research projects and hence, high exposure to external influences for R&D activities (with the potential risk of R&D volatility, increased uncertainty among researchers, and unbalanced teaching in terms of the coverage of theoretical and practical side of the public administration field).
2. VMU's incentive programmes are based on financial incentives; this approach might be a bit tricky, because financial incentives can be effective only in specific circumstances and might be perceived differently. More precisely, certain financial incentives (e.g. a lump sum as a financial award) can lead to higher motivation in case of one group of teachers, whilst other groups can consider the same financial incentive limited or even insufficient.

3.3. STUDENT ADMISSION AND SUPPORT

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

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

The admission process for the first-cycle study programme is organised under the national application system LAMA BPO. Candidates can apply for state-funded study places and non-state-funded ones. The second-cycle studies are organised through the online admission form administered by the VMU Study Department. In order to get state-funded study places for the first-cycle studies, the candidates must fulfil concrete study programme requirements that are publicly available.

In 2018, the number of applicants for the first-cycle study programme (PA) was lower than in 2020 and 2021. In 2019, the situation was even worse when the study programme student group was not formed due to the low number of applicants. As mentioned in the SER, the number of applicants correlates with the changing requirements for the admission of students to first-cycle studies at the national level. For both master study programmes (PG and RDA), the number of applicants has remained stable during the past three years, with on average more than 30 applicants.

Overall, admissions to the first-cycle and second-cycle studies are carried out efficiently in accordance with the established procedures. All information about admission can be found on the VMU webpage.

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

The SER (pp. 25 and 45-46 respectively) indicates that the recognition of foreign qualifications is done centrally by the International Cooperation Department of the University. The recognition process is based on the “Rules for the admission of persons who received their education in a foreign country and foreign citizens who have received their education in Lithuania” approved by the Rector of VMU in accordance with national Lithuanian regulations. If needed, the International Cooperation Department of VMU conducts assessments of qualifications for the candidates who studied abroad. Learning outcomes that were acquired during the Erasmus+ mobility programme are recognized upon the submission of an academic certificate. ECTS is used as a reference when converting the credits.

Competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning activities are recognised through an application system based on the VMU Study Regulations, Description of the Procedure for “Assessment and Recognition of Competences acquired through Non-Formal and Informal Education” as well as the “VMU Description of Organisation of Non-formal Adult Education”.

During the period under evaluation, there were no cases of recognition of qualifications, partial studies, and previous non-formal and informal learning in the first cycle study programme.

Considering the details presented in the SER and additional information provided by the VMU team, the expert panel concludes that the procedures for the recognition of partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning are adequate. However, it was impossible to assess their application in practice, as during the evaluation period in the context of the first-cycle PA and second-cycle PGA programmes there were no such cases. While the RDA programme had such cases, they were few and occurred several years ago (four in 2018 and two in 2019). No cases were reported in 2020 and 2021.

The expert panel noticed that all the needed information is accessible on the VMU website in Lithuanian and English.

3.3.3. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring academic mobility of students

All VMU students are provided with academic mobility opportunities. VMU has established a lot of international contacts with 487 partners in the European Union (EU) and 115 institutions outside the EU. In the period 2018-2021, there were no students coming from abroad to study full-time in the first-cycle study programme PA. The reason for this is that most courses are taught only in the Lithuanian language. Yet, the number of study modules taught in English is slightly increasing each year. During the years 2018-2021, there were no students from the PA study programme who went to the academic mobility programme for one semester. Most students in the first-cycle study programme are already employed and have family responsibilities, and the provided scholarship seems not sufficient enough to live on in a foreign country.

None of the students from the second-cycle PGA study programme participated in academic mobility in the period of 2018-2021. Most master students combine their studies with work. For the RDA study programme almost every year (in the period of 2017-2020) at least one student participated in the academic mobility programme.

For the past three years, a significant number of foreign students from Belarus have enrolled in the PGA study programme. In 2020, the number reached 13 students and in 2021 – 9 students. International students see the advantage of a flexible support system from financial (reduction of tuition fee) and linguistic (modules in English and Russian) points of view.

In general, the experts noted that VMU encourages students to participate in academic mobility exchange programmes. All the needed information can be found online in both languages. Yet, there is not much interest to apply for such possibilities. The main reason that is highlighted seems to be related with financial aspects for the first- and second-cycle studies. The low number of English-speaking foreign students is related to the lack of study modules taught in English. The situation is quite different in the second-cycle PGA programme, where courses are offered in foreign languages (Russian and English) and many students from Belarus have applied for this programme.

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

At VMU the Dean, the Head of the Department, and members of the Study Programme Committee periodically meet with the students enrolled in the study programmes. The

discussions cover current issues related to teachers, study programme plans, career opportunities, etc. The academic staff in the faculty is always available for student consultations on academic and study organisation issues. Teachers during the final assessments inform students about the possibility of having a feedback session regarding results and mistakes. Based on the internal University regulations, every teacher must spend a certain number of hours per semester consulting students regarding the assignments and course-related issues. Consultations can be done in various forms from face-to-face consultations to online-meetings on Teams or Zoom platforms.

Based on the students' needs they can receive free of charge psychological consultation at the VMU Psychology Clinics in individual meetings. Students with special needs are supported and consulted by a disability coordinator in dealing with the various study and environmental issues.

At the VMU Career of Students Affairs Department, students are offered support for modelling their career paths. Regularly, the faculty organises face-to-face meetings with the study programme alumni. The graduates introduce their work experiences and the relevance of acquired knowledge and experience. The University from time to time announces open job positions, places for internships, and volunteering. The RDA Study Programme Committee organises "Round table discussions" with graduates from different years and workshops to develop students' skills in research design, research methods, etc.

VMU provides a tuition fee reduction for Belarussian students in the PGA study programme. In 2020, four students received a 50% fee reduction, three students received a 75% reduction, and seven were totally exempted from the tuition fee. In 2021, 10 Belarussian students were exempted from the tuition fee. The requirements for getting fee reduction: no academic debt and an average grade higher than 7.

The expert panel noticed that the University is trying to build a strong community sense with the students through feedback sessions, consultations with the teachers, and fee reductions for the foreign full-time students. These actions play a major role in the drop-out rate statistics, especially for those students who cannot quickly adapt to a new social environment and require more time and measures for integration.

3.3.5 Evaluation of the sufficiency of study information and student counselling

The first year first-cycle students receive the most important information regarding the study process in the University during the special annual event "Introduction to studies". All needed information is also accessible at the University webpage. Students have access to full descriptions of all courses via the Moodle platform.

At the beginning of the semester, each course module starts with the general presentation regarding the evaluation process, main course topics, main literature, deadlines, etc.

In general, the experts noted that the main integration processes organised by the University result in a better and faster adaptation of Lithuanian and foreign students.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. VMU has established a long list of international partnerships within and outside the EU.
2. Almost all foreign students in PGA receive tuition fee reductions/exemptions.
3. Alumni of the programmes are involved in the discussions with current students. This helps to understand what specific skills the programme provides and to broaden the knowledge about prospects for jobs.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Only few students are willing to go abroad benefiting from academic mobility programmes.
2. Changing national application requirements for the first-cycle studies could pose a risk and prevent the formation of even a minimum-sized group.

3.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING, STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

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

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

The study process of the evaluated study programmes is generally regulated by the “VMU Study Regulations” and made transparent for the students especially by the course descriptions available on Moodle, which contain the relevant information about the teaching and learning process and specific requirements. That said, even though arrangements for internships in the first-cycle studies are described in the guidelines, they are not well-communicated to students nor to social partners who host students for internship purposes. As it was found out at the site-visit, no exact or concrete tasks have been assigned to students by the VMU, and social partners are not aware of what is expected from them in terms of what kind of skills and knowledge they should provide. Also, there is no formalised evaluation of students’ internship by host organisations to improve on the internship arrangements. The teaching and learning methods are diverse and adapted to the different forms of study courses such as lectures (e.g. explanation, illustration, video review, summarising information), seminars (e.g. analysis of problem examples and questions, performance and summary of tasks, case analysis) or practical tasks (e.g. interpretation and solution of practical tasks, analysis of professional activity, preparation and presentation of reports). For the first-cycle PA study programme, table 4.1 of the SER shows the connection between certain study and assessment methods. For the second-cycle study programmes PGA and RDA special importance is given to interactive, inclusive and creative study methods and teamwork. The University’s “Innovative Studies Institute” (ISI) also supplies teaching staff and students with information on systems and tools for distance teaching and how to organise,

implement and evaluate distance learning results. VMU uses a cumulative grading system, so students' performance is assessed by various forms of intermediate, individual and final examinations. Not only after the termination but also during the study courses teaching staff and students therefore have a variety of indicators with regard to the achievement/non-achievement of intended learning outcomes. Despite the fact that various formats such as problem-based learning, simulation activities, team-work, discussant role-playing etc. have been used to actively involve students, these forms of interactive studies have been introduced sporadically and not systematically. During the site-visit, teaching staff as well as students/ alumni confirmed the existence of frequent contacts (by various channels), feedback, gradings and evaluations and their satisfaction with the results. All in all, pertinent systems and mechanisms are in place to ensure that the teaching and learning processes take into account the needs of the students and enable them to achieve the defined learning outcomes.

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

VMU offers a wide range of financial, social and psychological support for students with special needs. These encompass e.g. different reductions of fees as well as the provision of scholarships or a free-of-charge psychological counselling. University buildings and libraries are adjusted, parking spaces are provided for and adapted dormitory rooms are available, which even allow for the accommodation of an accompanying person. The students concerned can address their needs to a "Disability Coordinator" who also has the task to sensitise the rest of the students on "disability etiquette". Study schemes can be individualised based on the "VMU Description of the Procedure for Providing the Individual Study Schedule" and students with special needs are registered in the database systems in order to assure their systematic consideration. Furthermore, the expert panel noted that VMU has a comprehensive understanding of socially vulnerable groups, which - besides students with special needs - includes orphans, students from large and/or socially/ financially disadvantaged families. During the site-visit, it was also learned that students with children were explicitly considered by VMU and that some services rooms are provided for them (e.g. to feed babies or to change diapers). Even if the number of students with special needs was rather low during the evaluation period (two in all three programmes) and the number of students from socially vulnerable groups could not be specified, it can be concluded that all in all the necessary systemic provisions have been implemented and awareness for the issues is clearly visible at the level of management and teaching staff.

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

The "VMU Study Regulations" in general and, more specifically, the announcement of assessment criteria and their differentiation for each specific module at the beginning of the semester are available on Moodle, as well as the cumulative grading system with intermediate, individual and final examinations, provide for a high level of transparency. Consulting hours are regulated and consulting and feedback to students is provided

constantly by different means (e.g. personal contact, e-mail, forum and individual discussion of presentations, tasks, examinations) during course and tutorial hours. In fact, feedback from the students is collected for the purpose of gathering students' expectations and evaluations on courses both before and after the courses, as it was highlighted by the students during the site-visit. The students' study progress is monitored by the teaching staff and periodically discussed by the Study Programme Committee. For the second-cycle study programme RDA, the SER also mentions an administrator monitoring students' progress/possible failure and reporting to the chairperson of the Study Programme Committee. Teaching staff as well as students/alumni have confirmed their satisfaction with the existing monitoring and feedback mechanisms without mentioning any relevant deficiencies or needs for improvement.

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

The SER indicates that the University monitors the employment and career of VMU graduates through the alumni survey, statistics provided by the Employment Service and information provided by the Government Strategic Analysis Centre (STRATA). VMU especially relies on the alumni participation in career guidance as well as feedback on their career paths:

- Graduates are invited to various events to share their experiences, insights, etc. The University has a VMU Alumni Club that aims to connect VMU graduates and to maintain close relationships with the University. Every year the club participates in events such as the Career Days that aim to develop students' professional and employability skills as well as share information on career opportunities.
- In September 2019, VMU joined the career mentoring platform *idialogue50*, where VMU graduates are invited to register and become career mentors.
- Annually in May–June, VMU Career Centre conducts an online survey for alumni, one year after their graduation. Summarised survey results are published on the University website and on the Career Centre website.

The SER (pp. 78-79) indicates that the Department of Public Administration and the Department of Business and Rural Development Management collect relevant information about graduates during the Career Days at the University, during the annual traditional Faculty Days to which the Alumni of the programmes are invited, and during public political and governance debates and other academic events. Finally, the University has an agreement with the Employment Service for the provision of statistical information about VMU graduates registered for a job search at 12 months and 15 months after their graduation.

Survey results demonstrated a positive attitude of the respondents towards future career prospects and compliance with labour market needs. While initial evaluations were 100% positive, there was a slight decrease in the satisfaction in the following years. The respondents also indicated that VMU Career Centre is the most useful tool in preparing for future jobs, which links up to the above described proactiveness of the Centre. During the site-visit, the expert panel observed the same positive assessments from both the students and the alumni. At the same time, the panel was informed that student, alumni and social

partner response rates to the surveys have been limited and the University is exploring other options to receive feedback and relies on events and other face-to-face activities for the interaction with the alumni and social partners. Additionally, the SER team informed during the site-visit that VMU currently lacks resources to systematically collect data on and track alumni careers.

STRATA data on the employment of the graduates in the study field of Public Administration 12 months after their graduation shows relatively low employment rates in positions requiring high degree of competence (in 2019, only 37% of the graduates of the first-cycle study programme had such jobs). At the same time, SODRA and Student Register data show that more than 70% of the graduates of the first-cycle study programme were working in the study fields related to their study profile or similar professional activities. For the PGA programme, the employability statistics are more positive but decreasing. While in 2018, 100% of the respondents worked in highly qualified jobs, in 2019 only 60% of the respondents worked in highly qualified jobs and 40% of the respondents were unemployed. That being said, the information provided by VMU during the site-visit indicates that all or nearly all second-cycle students already hold jobs (mostly in the public sector or related organisations) while enrolled at the University, which seems to indicate that they lost their jobs after graduating. The University indicates that the advent of the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic had negative effects on the employability of all programme graduates due to the overall labour market dynamics. This information seems to contradict the highly positive alumni survey results and the feedback of social partners given during the site-visit. This discrepancy may be explained by the low response rates to the different surveys mentioned above, but it may not necessarily be the only reason.

Both employer and social partner surveys detailed in the SER and the feedback heard from the different sources during the site-visit show a positive evaluation of the VMU alumni performance. Furthermore, the expert panel observed that the need for the qualified rural development specialists graduating from VMU, as well as the relevance of the opportunity for studies for the Belarussian NGO managers, were especially emphasised by the alumni and the social partners.

Considering the above, the expert panel concluded that career guidance services are sufficient and alumni/social partner evaluations of the PA, PGA and RDA programmes are positive. However, career tracking services should be improved in order to increase statistically relevant quantitative alumni and social partner feedback and link this data with qualitative feedback and employment statistics better.

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

VMU has established policies and procedures to ensure academic integrity which have been implemented effectively. The principles of integrity are defined in the VMU Statute, the Code of Ethics of VMU, the Plagiarism Prevention Procedures of VMU, and VMU Study Regulations. Non-discrimination measures are regulated by the Code of Ethics.

Appropriate information on rules and requirements and the collaborative approach between teachers and students have contributed to a culture of mutual trust. Regarding written exams/assignments as well as bachelor and master theses, cases of plagiarism are rare and potential problems are detected and mitigated early on. All second-cycle students and teachers have access to specialised plagiarism detection software through VMU Library. Library staff consults on system functionality issues so that they can check written assignments before submitting or evaluating. Information on plagiarism prevention rules is clearly provided in the descriptions of thesis and other study courses on the *Moodle* platform. Before the public defence, all final theses of both PGA and RDA students are screened for plagiarism using the Oxsico software.

Overall, as described in the SER and confirmed at the site-visit, no violations of the principles of academic honesty, tolerance and non-discrimination were recorded among the students studying in the first and second-cycle study programmes during the period 2018–2021.

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

VMU has established effective policies and procedures for the submission and examination of appeals and complaints. The rules and procedures for appeals (theses and other exams) and complaints are stipulated in VMU's Regulations for Submission of Appeals; the Plagiarism Prevention Procedures of VMU; and VMU Study Regulations (cf. SER).

According to the SER, no appeals/complaints were received in both study cycles in the PA study field in the evaluation period. According to the respondents at the site-visit (students, graduates), students are aware of the rules and support services for complaints and appeals. Students confirmed that teachers are very approachable, flexible and responsive to students' complaints, and most issues/complaints are solved in an informal and amicable manner.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Well established internal policies and mechanisms to ensure academic integrity, appeals and complaints; potential conflicts are solved amicably and early on.
2. Pertinent systems and mechanisms are in place to ensure that the teaching and learning processes take into account the needs of the students and enable them to achieve the defined learning outcomes.
3. Systemic provisions for the inclusion of students with special needs and students belonging to other socially vulnerable groups have been taken, and awareness for these questions is clearly visible at the level of management and teaching staff.
4. Diverse monitoring and feedback mechanisms are in place, and teaching staff as well as students/ alumni are satisfied with their functioning.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. Career tracking services should be improved in order to increase statistically relevant quantitative alumni and social partner feedback and link this data with qualitative feedback and employment statistics better.
2. Contradictory employment and alumni/social partner response data (coupled with low respondent rates for the surveys).
3. Arrangements for internships on the first-cycle studies in terms of tasks and communication of expectations to students and hosting social partners are not clearly established.

3.5. TEACHING STAFF

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

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

VMU follows a strategic approach in order to ensure the high quality of the offered study programmes. This is necessarily valid for human resource management, too, and, as stressed in the SER. Teaching staff is admitted through open competitions and teacher performance is assessed regularly (through an internal attestation mechanism). As for the workload and qualification structure of the teaching staff, VMU employs a combination of national and internal intra-institutional regulation.

If one looks at the qualification structure of the teachers, especially the relative numbers look very good. For instance, all teachers involved in teaching in the PGA programme in recent years hold PhD degrees. However, according to the information mentioned in the SER, only about one quarter of all teachers in the same study programme are full-time teachers. This number can be translated as a risk in regard to the sustainability of the programme. Otherwise, the number as well as quality of teaching staff is sufficient.

The teacher/student ratio was not stable during the evaluated period but a positive trend has been noted since the changes adopted in 2020. Especially the first cycle PA programme was challenged by a small number of students enrolled before 2020. Recently, the real numbers of students attending some lectures were significantly influenced due to openness of these lectures for students of other programmes (in the field of political science). Taking these facts into account, the teacher/student ratio oscillated from two to six students per teacher at bachelor level. As for the RDA and PGA programmes, the ratio of the number of teachers to the number of students studying in recent years oscillated about three (RDA) or two (PGA).

Active involvement of representatives of various social partners, including state authorities or local governments, in teaching (e.g., guest lectures) or supervising (e.g., supervision and reviewing of students' final theses) is a long-term common practice at VMU. As for the professional competences and specific qualifications of teaching staff, it is important to point out that most of those who teach in the second-cycle study programmes are also experts and

practitioners in their field. This facilitates a smooth achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The teaching staff is adequate in terms of all relevant requirements, including their didactic competences. However, due to the limited number of students, the total number of full-time teachers remains rather low. A closer look at involvement of teachers in activities which might improve their experience, skills, and competences offers paradoxical results. On one hand, there is a high demand to take part in various courses, workshops or training focused on development of teachers' competences or skills. On the other hand, international mobility programmes seem to be much less attractive for them, because their participation in such mobilities was very limited. This looks like a clear weakness and missing opportunity because participation in international mobility programmes can also lead to improvement of teachers' competences or skills, and, in addition, participating teachers usually experience some innovative approaches thanks to their own involvement in these programmes.

3.5.2. Evaluation of conditions for ensuring teaching staffs' academic mobility

Increasing international academic mobility was one of the most influential trends which led to many synergies and boosted performance in the academic environment in the recent two decades. Although the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was immediately followed by sets of very strict policy responses including various travelling restrictions, this unexpected event has not led to any closure of HEIs and academic life has continued. VMU had struggled with a low degree of involvement in international academic mobility programmes in the study field already before the pandemic, and during the pandemic these programmes were almost completely unexploited by VMU teachers working in the Public Administration study field.

Since the PGA programme is taught in English, and a majority of teachers involved in the RDA programme have sufficient knowledge of English (including readiness to its active use), the basic precondition for ensuring teaching staffs' academic mobility seems to be fulfilled. In addition, most of the teachers can communicate, teach, and publish in Russian. If there is somebody who needs additional training or wants to learn another foreign language, s/he can use an offer from the VMU's Institute of Foreign Languages. Teachers can attend courses free of charge.

VMU has tried to offer conditions that could attract Erasmus+ teaching mobility programmes for its own teaching staff. But the information in the SER indicates that the Erasmus+ teaching mobility programme has not been sufficiently exploited yet. It is valid for both outgoing and incoming teachers and for teachers in all study programmes. This low interest and participation in Erasmus+ poses a challenge which should be understood as a window of opportunity. It is crucial that VMU is aware of all the benefits linked to the active use of the Erasmus+ teaching mobility programme (or similar programmes of international academic mobility), and could adopt their own institutional incentive programme in this field.

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

Unlike in the case of international academic mobility programmes, the participation of teachers in various courses, workshops or training activities to improve their competences

was significantly higher during the evaluation period. The conditions which facilitate such activities are user/teacher-friendly and respond to the demand as well as to current needs (e.g. VMU's offer in this field has reflected new needs evoked by the pandemic, and the necessity to implement social distance policies).

VMU has adopted a regulation in the field of teaching staff's competence building, namely the "Description of Procedure for Professional Development at the VMU". According to this regulation, teachers should develop their competences in eight sub-fields, such as didactics in higher education, digital tools, research, management, etc. This systematic approach matches with teaching staff's demand, and teachers have enjoyed relevant and adequate opportunities to improve their competences during the evaluation period. A combination of in-house courses or training (for instance, offered by the VMU Institute of Innovative Studies) with externally provided courses or training is another feature of this system. In addition, most teachers have actively collaborated with various international and national organisations or institutions. This experience has been translated into competences which cannot be achieved in any other way.

Regardless of the above-mentioned intensive involvement of teachers in various extra courses or training, the SER states that young and/or new teachers (in comparison with the older/more experienced ones) are more willing to apply innovative (unconventional) methods and tools in their teaching activities. This should be considered as an institutional challenge. A possible systematic response might include extra training for teaching staff addressing new and innovative teaching methods.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. VMU applies a systematic, strategy-based approach for competence building of its teaching staff.
2. Teachers are also actively cooperating with national and international organisations and institutions.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. The total numbers of outgoing and incoming teachers within the Erasmus+ teaching mobility programme is very low; it is necessary to develop more effective incentive mechanisms or supporting programmes to exploit these opportunities in a much more effective way.
2. Taking the information from the SER into account, it seems that VMU needs to cope with the challenge of teachers' readiness to use some innovative or non-conventional teaching methods. VMU might consider offering more support/training for those teachers who do not like to leave their comfort zone and prefer conventional teaching methods or methods which they are more familiar with.

3.6. LEARNING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

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

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

There is a sufficient number of class-rooms equipped with up-to-date technologies for both face-to-face and online studies. Teachers can use two laboratories to involve students in remote work: the Digital Humanities Laboratory and the Virtual Didactic Laboratory. Furthermore, VMU uses two electronic platforms, i.e. Moodle for studies and the Student/Teacher Portal as administrator's page or information management system. Various software licences have been obtained for studies and research. Likewise, systems of plagiarism check have been adopted. The existing equipment and IT tools are fully sufficient for the Public Administration programme's needs. For the teachers, there are also developed and constantly updated support systems and methodological recommendations on how to adapt the course to distance studies, prepare it for online learning, etc. The teachers are also consulted by email by filling in the request form. Facilities and study processes have been adapted to the special needs of students. Thus, disabled people are not disadvantaged in accessing study buildings or partaking in the study process, i.e. there are special applications and devices for students with reduced mobility, hearing disability, visual impairment, or mental issues. Library services are of good quality and accessible to students physically or electronically. Visitors to the Library also have an opportunity to access individual and group work rooms, workplaces for visitors with disabilities, discussion spaces and recreation areas. Study materials – literature, databases etc. – are updated every year at the beginning of the academic year in cooperation between lecturers and the library. Thus, all the materials are accessible, and if students cannot access something, teachers provide them with the texts.

The main finance sources of study programmes are state appropriations for studies and student tuition fees. Overall, physical, informational and financial resources are sufficient for carrying out studies effectively.

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

Infrastructure resources are updated as needed and are planned for the new academic year at the faculties. Every year, VMU upgrades computers and purchases technical equipment according to the resource development plans submitted by the faculties, which they prepare according to the study needs. When planning the renewal of information resources relevant to studies, the need for studies is coordinated with the library by the teachers responsible for study programmes and courses. For that, an interactive document ordering service is installed on the library website and requests are based on the reasons of the need for the quantity, form and storage space of resources required for studies or research. Hence, the learning facilities and resources available at VMU are planned, updated and enable the current number of students to achieve their learning outcomes both by face-to-face studies and by distance studies.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. Very good quality library services, modern facilities and adjustment of premises and facilities to people with special needs.
2. Establishment and access to remote study-related labs - Digital Humanities Laboratory and Virtual Didactic Laboratory - that add value to the study processes.

(2) Weaknesses:

Not identified.

3.7. STUDY QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

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

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

The internal quality assurance system in VMU follows the Lithuanian national legislation and is operationalised via internal VMU regulations, acts and decisions listed in the Bachelor and Master programmes SER (pp. 53 and 76 respectively). All documents that regulate VMU internal quality assurance procedures are published in both English and Lithuanian on the VMU website.

The ultimate responsibility for all the quality assurance decisions belong to the Senate and the Rector. Studies-related decisions are delegated to the Faculty Council, the Study Programme Committee, the Dean of the Faculty and the Head of the Department. In the case of the merged Stulginskis Academy, the Chancellor of the Academy and the Academy Council (similar to Faculty Council) also participate in the decision making chain. The Faculty/Academy Council responsible for the quality assurance of the whole study field considers the issues of the study field and makes decisions each year in spring. The Councils discuss major renewals of study programmes in the field, results of study programmes' internal assessment and study programme quality improvement plans.

The Study Programme Committees coordinate the programme, its curriculum and programme quality assurance implementation. The Committee is also responsible for implementing quality improvement plans formulated on the basis of the evaluations and other received feedback. Finally, the Committee is also responsible for analysing labour market tendencies as well as stakeholder feedback. The first cycle Committee is composed of 8 members: 6 teachers, 1 social partner and 1 student, while the 2nd cycle committees include 1 additional social partner representative.

The annual analysis carried out by the Committee includes the following aspects of the programmes: programme alignment with the most recent research trends, compliance between the programme and the labour market needs, demand of the programme, suitability and sufficiency of the programme resources, teachers' competence, students' progress, students' and teachers' mobility, etc. The results of the analysis are discussed with the Head of

the Department, the Dean of the Faculty, the Chancellor of the Academy, the Faculty/Academy Council, and they are also presented during the meetings with students, alumni, and employers. Individual courses are evaluated upon their conclusion and pass through a recertification process every three years. On top of the Study Programme Committees, input for the quality assurance of studies is provided by the Quality Assurance Department as well as the internal self-assessment procedure at the faculty level, where teaching staff reviews each other's study modules, as was highlighted by the teaching staff during the site-visit.

The results ultimately are used to formulate programme improvement plans. The plans are approved by the Faculty/Academy Council. The decisions on the renewal of the programmes are made in cooperation with the Study Department, International Cooperation Department, Library, and other University divisions responsible for organisation and administration of studies. Student, alumni and social partner surveys are factored in when assessing the quality of the programmes as well as their renewal and/or improvement.

The expert panel found that the overall structure of the quality assessment procedures and processes is adequate and functions relatively well, in particular considering the continued changes occurring both as a result of the previous evaluations as well as the annual evaluations mentioned above (e.g. the inclusion of three Belarussian professors, changes to programme structure, new contents on public procurement or EU project management, etc.). That being said, considering the shortcomings mentioned in sections 3.1.7 (RDA master theses), 3.2.2 (outdated theoretical knowledge), and 3.4.4 (lack of statistically relevant quantitative data of alumni and social partner feedback) above, especially the low response rates to all the different surveys used to garner feedback on the programmes as well as the adherence to quality standards in student performance assessments (e.g. theses), the panel has identified room for improvement across the board in this criteria.

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

The main stakeholder engagement in quality assurance tools detailed in the SERs as well as during the site-visit include:

- Study Programme Committee;
- On-line surveys for students, alumni and social partners/employers coordinated by the VMU Study Quality Unit;
- Face-to-face activities such as Alumni Club, Career Days, other events organised by the University;
- Biannual round tables with the social partners to complement the on-line surveys.

As already mentioned, the first-cycle Study Programme Committee is composed of 8 members: 6 teachers, 1 social partner and 1 student while the 2nd cycle committees include 1 additional social partner representative. The committee discusses key issues related to the study programme quality, its relevance and improvement plans. The committee therefore represents the main institutionalised channel for student and social partner input.

In addition to the committee and as already mentioned above, students can share their opinion on studies through student surveys (periodic and end of semester), discussions, conversations and in direct discussions with teachers. Alumni are also included both in the surveys and in face-to-face activities organised by the University (see section 3.4.4. and 3.7.1).

Notably, VMU indicates that in addition to the existing partnerships it strives to include new partners in joint activities, share the results and discuss the quality of joint activities.

The expert panel considered as highly positive the efforts of the VMU to engage both alumni and social partners in face-to-face activities through the alumni clubs and joint periodic activities, including the round tables. However, additional efforts need to be made in order to ensure more reliable quantitative input and link it in a more meaningful way with other information such as employment data, thus better integrating the different quality assurance, student performance assessment and alumni career tracking tools.

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

The results of assessments (results of surveys and social stakeholder discussions, statistical data, external evaluation reports, etc.) are utilised as inputs for the improvement of the studies through the formal quality assurance mechanisms detailed in the section 3.7.1 above (Study Programme Committee and others).

Once concluded, survey results are shared with the social partners as well as other members of the University and external stakeholders within three months. The SER indicates that the results are shared on the VMU website, emailed to the students and the teachers, stored in Outlook folders, delivered in social media, and shared by other channels. While that may be true, the expert panel was unable to access the information on the study quality assurance surveys, feedback or other related reports on the VMU website without VMU email and password. Furthermore, quality assurance/opinion survey results are included in a sub-folder under the general university description folder, and cross-referencing to the study programme descriptions directed to the potential and current students were not located. Some positive data is mentioned in the texts throughout the website, but not the criticism or areas for improvement. In that sense the expert panel concludes that the publication of the information collected through the quality assurance mechanisms needs to be made more accessible for the stakeholders.

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

VMU conducts annual student surveys and analyses student's opinions. At the end of the semester, the students evaluate teaching methods for each module by eight statements on a 10-point rating scale. In 2020-2021, the best-evaluated part was "The teacher complied with ethical requirements in the course", which received a score of 9.75, and the "The teacher provided the main course information in VMU Moodle or another distance environment" with 9.71 points. The worst evaluated statement was "The study methods applied by the teacher

encouraged my active participation in the course” which was marked with 8.57 points, which concurs the critique and shortcomings in using interactive teaching methods, as presented in sub-chapter 3.4.1.

VMU also uses surveys for graduates. The results show that the best-evaluated part was the help from the administrative personnel (3.88 points out of 4). The lowest score was given to the statement “Classes (lectures, seminars) matched my study expectations” with 3.17 points in the study year 2020-2021.

Current students in most cases are grateful for the teachers’ liberal approach, they appreciate their attitudes and flexibility. However, there is some room for improvement, in particular, students would like more opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to practice. Students at the site-visit also mentioned that they could be better informed about future professions and job/career opportunities.

In the academic year 2020-2021, students of the PGA programme marked that the best statement describing their study programme was “The teacher adhered to professional ethics” with 9.54 out of 10. The same statement was evaluated as the best in the RDA study programme with 9.56 out of 10. Students in the surveys of graduating students of the PGA and the RDA study programmes indicate that during their studies they have acquired the ability to think analytically, to work in teams, adapt to changes, acquire public speaking and problem-solving skills, and have improved their ability to analyse legislation, and English language skills. They mostly emphasised the human resources at the University: teachers’ professionalism, involvement of social partners, and a liberal environment.

Overall, the expert panel obtained a good impression about the study programmes in the PA study field. The students at the site-visit highlighted their teachers’ professionalism and liberal approaches. Graduates were thankful to the University for the skills and competences they had acquired during their studies, i.e. to think analytically, to work in teams, and to adapt to rapid changes.

Strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation area:

(1) Strengths:

1. VMU has implemented well designed quality assurance procedures and mechanisms that lead to meaningful changes.
2. Quantitative feedback methods are complemented by intense stakeholder engagement in periodic activities.

(2) Weaknesses:

1. The stakeholder response to quantitative feedback surveys is low.
2. Additional efforts need to be made in order to ensure more reliable quantitative inputs and link the data obtained in a more meaningful way with other information such as employment data, thus better integrating the different quality assurance, student performance assessment and alumni career tracking tools.

3. While the overall information on the quality assurance procedures is made available on the VMU website, the information is not cross-referenced in other sections of the site aimed at students and the general public and is not accessible without password.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation Area	Recommendations for the Evaluation Area (study cycle)
Intended and achieved learning outcomes and curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be more systematic addressing of competences related to the ability to cooperate with citizens on the BA and MA (PGA) programme and module level. • It should be made sure that each year, there are representatives of other HEIs in the thesis defence committees. • It should be discussed to review the compatibility of aims, learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment methods not annually but each semester and by means of an encompassing relation matrix for each study programme. • For the second-cycle study programme RDA, quality control mechanisms should be critically reviewed at the programme level and above to ensure that the formal standards for master theses are observed consistently.
Links between science (art) and studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to project-based applied research output that is used for teaching purposes, studies should also keep up with the real-life changes, in particular, in the Lithuanian context, and with up-to-date theoretical knowledge in the public administration domain.
Student admission and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While VMU has many international partners and contacts, students hardly participate in academic mobility mostly due to personal reasons. The reasons why students are not willing to go abroad should be analysed in-depth and appropriate actions to increase mobility should be explored (e.g. increased financial support, development of distance/online exchanges, etc.).
Teaching and learning, student performance and graduate employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer communication of internship expectations and tasks to students and hosting social partners as well as more formalised evaluation and feedback provision with the inclusion of all parties involved in the internship process. • Career tracking methods should be improved in order to increase statistically relevant quantitative alumni and social partner feedback and link this data with qualitative feedback and employment statistics better.

<p>Teaching staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VMU should step up their internationalisation strategy and, in particular, increase the participation in the Erasmus+ teaching mobility programme. The main focus should not be limited to finding attractive partner universities, but teachers should be encouraged to take part in mobility programmes. In addition, mobility programmes can be used for research collaboration (which is an important motivation for both sides in any mobility programme). • Fast developments especially in the field of ICT and further internationalisation of higher education in recent years have led to many challenges linked, inter alia, to the introduction of innovative teaching methods. Some teachers might feel under pressure due to these challenges. VMU should pay more attention to this issue, and offer proper support (e.g., specialised courses for teachers focused on innovative teaching methods, regular training on efficient on-line communication as well as teaching, etc.).
<p>Learning facilities and resources</p>	
<p>Study quality management and public information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional efforts need to be made in order to ensure more reliable quantitative input and link it in a more meaningful way with other information such as employment data, thus better integrating the different quality assurance, student performance assessment and alumni career tracking tools. • While the overall information on the quality assurance procedures is made available on the VMU site, the information is not cross referenced in other sections aimed at students and the general public nor is it accessible without the password.

V. SUMMARY

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

One of the key strengths of the study programmes in the study field Public Administration is the interdisciplinary approach, encompassing a political science and public administration blend and a regional development focus, which sets VMU studies apart from other PA programmes in the country. Teaching staff are involved in international research projects and networks and research results are integrated in the study programmes on a regular basis. Students are actively encouraged to take part in research activities through various incentives. In addition, VMU has developed and implemented a solid quality assurance mechanism, as well as sound policies and procedures for academic integrity and appeals which are adequately communicated and function well in practice. Students and social partners are actively involved in programme development and improvements. Teaching staff are very responsive and flexible (e.g. in the use of foreign languages) and actively support the personalisation of studies. The expert panel also noted that alumni and social partners confirmed the relevance of the studies for PA practice and emphasised the added value of the participation of students from Belarus in the PGA programme.

That said, there is still room for improvement in the majority of the seven evaluation areas, notably related to the systematic coverage of specific competences in the curricula, the balance between core vs. optional courses, the sequencing of modules, the consistent application of standards for theses, the focus of research activities, the participation in teacher and student mobility, the framework conditions for internships, the sustainability of programmes (in particular related to student enrolment numbers, drop-out rates) and the applicability of knowledge and skills acquired to PA practice. At a more general level, despite the flexibility that was noted with respect to various aspects of the studies at VMU in the field of PA, the three study programmes under evaluation follow to a great extent different organisational approaches and practices, implying inconsistencies in running the programmes and hence, diverging results, including on the satisfaction of different stakeholders with various aspects of studies. Further integration and cooperation efforts could be beneficial in this regard.

In conclusion, the expert panel would like to express their thanks to the team at VMU for compiling the self-evaluation report, for organising the site-visit and for providing additional

information in response to our requests for clarification. The panel also wishes to thank all site-visit participants for sharing their valuable insights.

Expert panel chairperson signature:

Dr. Christine Leitner