IN PURSUIT OF EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY OF STUDIES: THE ASPECT OF PERFECTION OF MASTER’S STUDY PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

The changing demographic indicators, changing unfavourable regional education policy condition the decrease in student numbers (6.4 per cent per year). Aiming to improve the quality of studies, the reform of higher education has been implemented since 2017; higher requirements for entrants, assessment of study fields to reduce the number of poorly executed study programmes seeking to ensure the correspondence of higher education to the demands is one of its priorities. Seeking to ensure formation of study programmes representing different areas of studies meeting the demand for educating specialists required for particular regions, it is necessary to improve the quality of studies. The article presents the results of the analysis of expert evaluation of Master’s study programmes substantiating the conclusions of a recommendatory character targeted at improving study programmes to reach exceptional quality.

Keywords: pursuit of exceptional quality, study programmes, content analysis, external evaluation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance of higher education [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], quality improvement in study programmes [6],[7] is an important subject in today's social sciences. Aiming to ensure exceptional quality of studies, Lithuanian institutions of higher education focus on delivery of high quality study programmes in compliance with the Procedure of Assessment of Study Fields and Temporal Accreditation Issued by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (2018), since it provides the basis for the said institutions to terminate admission to study programmes which have been accredited for 3 years two consequent times. Every fifth study programme delivered in Lithuanian universities, i.e. ca. 200 of them, did not meet the new requirements set for study programmes in 2018; as a result, students were not enrolled to these study programmes. However, the new system is being questioned by the academic community after it was found out that the provisions of the Law on Higher Education and Research related to assessment of study fields and temporal accreditation contradicted the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania. Another important criterion of existence of study programmes is the recruitment of students. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the latter year admission to 64 study programmes was terminated due to the lack of entrants.

Such situation supposes the relevance and problem of the research, while there are insufficient research studies dedicated to the area of perfection of study programmes, the aim is to reveal the aspects of perfection of Master’s study programmes grounding on the assessment results of external evaluation (content of conclusions provided by the external experts).

2 METHODOLOGY

The article presents qualitative analysis of the results of self-evaluation reports of University study programmes over the period of 2014—2016, employing the method of content analysis which enabled objective and systematic investigation of the features of the text, generalisation of information and formation of appropriate conclusions. In the research, the results of content analysis are generalised by the method of incomplete generalising induction [8], i.e. when there is a shift from the fact concerning specific programmes (in particular, from facts concerning weaknesses of study programmes, areas to be corrected and improved in terms of quality) to recommendations to all study programmes, which is also useful to newly designed study programmes and improvement of their management process in the future [6].
3 RESULTS

3.1 Results of the External Expert Evaluation of Master’s Study Programmes

Table 1 presents evaluation data for Master’s study programmes in respect of the sections according to the external evaluation methodology. Each of them was assessed by foreign experts during the accreditation process from a minimum grade 1 to maximum 4. The final grade is the total, and it determines the duration of valid accreditation of a particular study programme: long-term accreditation is valid for six years, and short-term is valid for three years. The further procedure of re-accreditation should be repeated when the term determined for delivery of a particular study programme expires; therefore, it is of great importance to have successful external evaluation of a study programme and ensured maximum term of accreditation.

Table 1. Evaluation of Master’s study programmes in grades in various areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment section</th>
<th>Programme aims and anticipated learning outcomes</th>
<th>Curriculum design</th>
<th>Academic staff</th>
<th>Learning resources</th>
<th>Study process and its evaluation</th>
<th>Programme management</th>
<th>In total</th>
<th>Accreditation of the programme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informatics</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Literature Studies</strong></td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td><strong>History and Politics</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Lithuanian Linguistics</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Physical and Sports Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Applied Physical Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Bio-Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Social Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Career Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Intercultural Education and Mediation</strong></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td><strong>Mechanical Engineering</strong></td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td><strong>Signal Technology</strong></td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td><strong>Average grade in assessment areas:</strong></td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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</table>

The aims of a programme (Table 1) and anticipated learning outcomes of it are assessed in highest grades only for study programmes of Education and Career Education; twelve programmes were assessed by lower grades. The part dedicated to curriculum design also includes only two programmes which received excellent grades (in the Education field). Not a single study programme was given highest grades for the part analysing academic staff delivering study programmes. In the section of learning resources, almost half of evaluated programmes collected maximum 4 grades. The part dealing with the study process and its evaluation includes none of the programmes that received highest grades. In the section on programme management, one fourth of programmes under
evaluation received the maximum, i.e. 4 grades. Grounding on the data, six study programmes were accredited for a term of 6 years, seven for 3 years, 1 was not accredited.

3.2 Analysis of Expert Recommendations for Perfection of Master’s Study Programmes

3.2.1 Programme Aims and Anticipated Learning Outcomes

The recommendations drawn for study programmes in the Humanities area include emphases of experts stating that the aims, objectives and learning outcomes of study programmes are insufficiently clearly formulated, insufficient attention is paid to development of subject-related and professional skills, students’ abilities must meet the anticipated learning outcomes. In the area of Social Sciences, the experts emphasise the need to improve the procedure of presentation of anticipated learning outcomes, to more precisely and comprehensively formulate the aims and anticipated learning outcomes of a study programme to reflect the needs of all social stakeholders, interdisciplinarity. Moreover, it is important to ensure compliance of awarded qualification with the demands of the labour market, and to eliminate specialisations in some programmes which narrow the purpose of a particular study programme. Applicability of learning outcomes and curriculum should be perfected, as pointed out by experts for the case of the Physical Sciences area.

3.2.2 Curriculum Design

In their recommendations dedicated to the curriculum design of study programmes (Fig. 1), in the Humanities in particular, the experts underline a fact that the content of modules is insufficiently reflected in its title; moreover, it is advised to review application of the modular system and purify the guidelines for the modules. It is worth perfecting the content of study programmes, to update study subjects, methods and bibliography. It is important to emphasise differences between adjacent subjects in descriptions of study subjects. Moreover, necessity to increase internationalisation of study programmes, design a strategy of internationalisation, engage new study subjects in English is pointed out.

Dealing with the Social Sciences area, the experts recommend to perfect lists of literature required for studies, increase internationalisation of study programmes, improve application of teaching methods,
distribution of study subjects across semesters, contents of subjects in order to reflect the problems which are specific to a particular area as well as to provide opportunities to select study subjects. Perfection of the curriculum of study programmes is underlined by suggesting to supplement it with practical subjects and specialised knowledge. Experts recommend to concretise the assessment criteria; study subjects should echo international trends in certain fields; they recommend to include study subjects delivered by visiting foreign teaching staff. In the area of Physical Sciences, the recommendations focus on correction of the standards set for Master’s Theses; in the case of Physical Sciences, the emphasis is laid on increase of accessibility of literature sources and recommendations for improvement of application of learning methods.

3.2.3 Academic Staff

In terms of academic staff, the Humanities area is attributed with the lack of motivation of teaching staff and insufficiency of visiting teaching. In Social Sciences, experts underline importance of development of competences in the personnel, recommend expanding the possibilities for professional development of them; they emphasise teachers’ insufficient skills of foreign languages and internationalisation, lack of visiting foreign teachers. Discussing the Technological Sciences area, the experts recommend increasing professional and scientific competence of teaching staff, perfecting English skills in teachers, promoting mobility, internationalisation of research and more efficiently solving issues of aging personnel.

3.2.4 Learning Resources

The Humanities area is addressed with recommendations to more extensively use the virtual learning environment, interactive teaching tools, assignments and to increase the use of University data bases. In Social Sciences, experts emphasise the necessity to more efficiently use the opportunities of information and communications technologies. They encourage contributing to perfection of the quality in studies by encouraging University community to engage in the decision-making concerning updating of the learning facilities, optimisation of existing laboratories and provision of equipment for the laboratories lacking it. The experts underline that possibilities and resources available at the library are insufficiently used; moreover, they think that there should be required funding for separate University subdivisions ensured at the institutional level. Experts in the Physical Sciences area emphasise the necessity to update the equipment used for studies; in terms of Technological Sciences, the experts highlight more extensive usage of the virtual learning environment, and the need for updating laboratories employing all possible means of funding is strongly advised.

3.2.5 Study Process and Its Evaluation

The recommendations covering the study process and its evaluation in the Humanities underline the necessity of perfection of assessment assignments and assurance of transparency of the feedback, clearer regulation of students’ independent studying. In experts’ mind, it is important to increase internationalisation of the teaching process, to improve the process of writing Master’s Theses, which would contribute to improving quality of the Theses. Moreover, the necessity to perfect the system of financial support to students and opportunities for practical placement is emphasised.

In the Social Sciences area, the experts point out the necessity to more clearly regulate internationalisation, to more extensively use the opportunities provided by mobility, to improve diversity of mobility, to increase accessibility of studies by employing distance teaching and learning, to improve students’ competences, to stimulate application of implemented projects in practice, to increase their impact on society (“<...> to apply projects for the Museum of Nature and Botanical Garden by engaging various society groups <...>”). The recommendations point out required improvement in selection of sites for practical placement, more attention to perfection of students’ scientific activities, which contribute to preparing Master’s Theses of higher quality. In the Physical Sciences area, insufficiently used opportunities for mobility of academic staff and students are underlined.

In the cases of the Technological Sciences area, it is recommended to increase internationalisation of study subjects, engage students in the process of increase of internationalisation and stimulate mobility of students and teaching staff. Moreover, experts emphasise the necessity to improve the system of student support and increase participation of social stakeholders in the study process.
3.2.6 Programme Management

Analysis of the conclusions provided to the programme management section reveals that the Humanities area receives recommendations focusing on improvement of quality in studies: to more purposively coordinate functions of committees and, when needed, to establish separate committees. Moreover, importance of relations with social stakeholders is emphasised. The experts note that it is a must to improve programme marketing both in Lithuania and abroad in order to recruit more students. Development of connections with other higher education institutions is another important aspect pointed out by the experts. In the area of Social Sciences, the experts emphasise importance of perfection of quality in the scientific research field, to use the products created in the frame of projects aiming to improve quality of studies. Importance of collaboration of University subdivisions as well as between University and other higher education institutions is highlighted. The experts recommend enhancing collaboration of all parties related to delivery of a particular study programme and perfecting programme management. In terms of Physical Sciences, it is recommended to stimulate sharing good practice, perfect standards of teaching. The experts recommend groups of scientists to cooperate and emphasise the necessity of perfection of marketing to increase numbers of enrolled students. Dealing with the Technological Sciences, the experts recommend developing programme marketing at the national and international levels and formalising the process of quality assurance.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of assessment of the study programmes that underwent expertise reveals that the curriculum design, management, human resource management are the areas to be improved at the institutional level. Learning resources are assessed as the most favourable among examined areas, which proves that the university successfully manages this process. At the institutional level, quite much attention is paid to the sections dealing with the study process and assessment as well as set aims and anticipated outcomes. A complex situation demonstrating that programmes of the areas of Physical and Technology sciences were assessed negatively or did not receive the highest score was pointed out.

The data of the content analysis of the recommendations to Master’s study programmes reveals that the section dedicated to the programme’s set aims and anticipated outcomes lacks clarity, comprehensiveness, correspondence to the demands of social stakeholders, development of interdisciplinarity, compliance of the awarded qualification with the demands of the labour market. In the area of curriculum design, the guidelines for the modules, content, also application of methods of teaching, opportunities to select study subjects, standards of graduation theses should be improved. The area dealing with the academic staff mostly highlights the lack of motivation, mobility of teaching staff; importance of competence development is pointed out. The section dedicated to learning resources emphasises recommendations to use the opportunities provided by information and communication technologies at a broader scale. The section on the study process and its assessment highlights importance of feedback, increase of internationalisation of study subjects and mobility of students. The section on programme management underlines importance of marketing, relationships with social stakeholders and development of inter-institutional collaboration.

REFERENCES

