

STUDIES QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY AT VILNIUS UNIVERSITY (2013-2015)

The responsibility of Vilnius University (hereinafter - VU) for the quality of studies is based on studies quality assurance policy and the implementation of quality improvement strategy, which is an integral and inseparable part of VU strategic performance.

The quality of the performance as well as its outcomes are of primary concern to the VU academic community. Vilnius University seeks to ensure that the quality of higher education meets the international standard and the needs of all stakeholders. The quality of VU studies and the related performance is a basis for the implementation of university study programmes of all cycles. It is built on the integration of research and education for the development of personalities who are open, creative, tolerant, able to act and self-fulfil, be open-minded, ready to the challenges of globalisation, responsible and constantly evolving, citizens and community leaders who are active and responsible, preparing competent and broad-minded scientists, researchers and other highly skilled professionals, as well as facilitating persons with higher education to raise their level of competence and acquire new knowledge.

The ongoing change in higher education environment that was influenced by the state, society, the changing students' needs and expectations (related to reducing inequalities in the society,, acquiring knowledge, skills and competence, etc.), the emergence of labour market developments (triggered by sustainable economics, growth of scientific knowledge-based intellectual jobs, social cohesion, mobility needs, etc.), new teaching and learning opportunities (due to the globalisation of higher education, the development of services in education, the growing competition between higher schools, the flexibility of higher education and its openness to the public needs, etc.), led to acknowledge the assurance of quality of higher education and its improvement as the issue of top priority in developing the European Higher Education Area.

Major challenges of the EU Member States for higher education up to the year 2020 posed by new European Higher Education Area priorities (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, "Bologna Process 2020 - The European Higher Education Area in the new decade", (2009)) involve the expansion of the number of people involved in higher education and inclusion of social groups that are weakly represented, reaching 20% of the number of graduates with part of their study period spent in another country, offering lifelong learning opportunities, maximising the graduates' employability, transforming study programmes in order to create a student-oriented educational environment. Among the announced priorities of the higher education modernisation reform is the improvement of quality of higher education so that study programmes comply with the needs of students, labour market and their future career, the recognition and promotion of lecturers who achieved outstanding excellence in the areas of education and research, enhancement of education, research and business ties to encourage innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship.

The European Higher Education Area acts on the basis of a national responsibility for its higher education quality thus to ensure the quality of higher education, both the national and institutional levels are extremely important. At the national level, the education quality should be maintained, improved, renewed and developed in accordance with international trends. However, the primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of higher education lies with the higher education institution.

Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania ("Valstybės žinios", No. 54-2140 of 12-05-2009) ordered the Lithuanian higher education institutions to be responsible for the quality of their performance - each university must have an internal studies quality assurance system that is developed according to the European standards and guidelines for higher education

quality assurance and the quality improvement strategy approved by the higher education institution, in order to provide the operating procedures and tools that help ensure the quality of studies.

VU is implementing internal quality assurance processes and procedures (monitoring of study programmes approval and periodic review, management of student assessment quality, teaching quality assurance, provision of learning resources and student support, etc.) and seeks for the systematic, continuous quality assurance that could influence the surveillance of decision-making and implementing processes, based on quality criteria and indicators.

The studies quality management system at the University, supported by information technology, enables to take into account the expectations of the academic community and external stakeholders, to ensure their confidence, participation in the processes of education (especially in the process of quality assurance and improvement), share the responsibility among those involved in the VU studies process for higher education quality and improvement. The internal studies quality assurance system serves as a basis of monitoring studies activities and its quality determining factors, a purposeful impact on studies quality improvement, allows the consolidation of efforts and activities of the community and external stakeholders as well as facilitates rational planning and allocation of human and material resources seeking to ensure the quality of education.

The studies quality management system at VU is being developed in accordance with the values enshrined in the Vilnius University mission, European standards and guidelines for higher education quality assurance, principles of social responsibility and cooperation and partnership, principles of the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model, by adapting them to the needs of VU (student and staff needs, study process quality management, university staff capacity building; development of partnerships and collaboration with foreign educational and research institutions and international organisations, factual resource in decision-making process for the education quality assurance and improvement; the application of the principles of social responsibility).

VU studies quality management system is based on the following principles:

Motivating learning environment based on research and studies integration

VU while seeking its establishment in the European and global higher education area is developing a flexible studies system based on scientific achievements and knowledge as well as the application of research outcomes. VU is implementing study programmes that ensure the unity of research and studies through the performance of fundamental and applied research of high international standard, and the activities of social, cultural and technological development involving students of all study cycles.

VU supports and fosters a stimulating learning environment that systematically and consistently promotes student learning and provides incentives and the necessary skills to become an active participant in the study process, responsible for his/her own learning. The study process develops reasoning and creativity, critical thinking, social responsibility, the ability to solve problems, to innovate constantly, to understand, accept and tolerate the diversity of the world and the society. Motivating learning environment determines the teachers' activity, too, and the change in prevailing traditional hierarchical teacher – student relationship: teachers not only create a learning environment that enables the change in students' thinking and activity and promotes their responsibility, but also, in collaborating with students, learn how to continuously improve this environment. One of the factors on quality assurance in the development and updating of study programmes and organisation of learning-based education is the consideration of the students' needs.

This requires to review the community attitudes to education, the change of teaching and learning methods, the concept of student workload. The enforcement of this change requires the

development of teachers' didactic competence, the establishment of appropriate support structures for students and teaching staff, accounting of the lecturers' workload, providing the necessary conditions for learning environment (classrooms, laboratories, equipment, library resources, information resources, etc.).

Openness and internationalisation

One of the most important factors of quality of university education is the competence, knowledge and skills of VU academic staff. Vilnius University is open to the best professionals: researchers, lecturers and administrators who are able to create and foster a stimulating learning environment and effective study support. To facilitate the teachers in accepting the challenges of the knowledge society and involving in active participation in lifelong learning and motivating their students, it is necessary to create a favourable, attractive and friendly working environment for academic staff, to ensure continuous improvement of the teachers' qualifications as well as the recognition of their research and pedagogical skills.

The abundance of entrants is essential for any university, thus the entrants' characteristics such as motivation, preparedness and ability to study are becoming critical success factors in the educational process aiming to the international dimension of higher education and research.

By creating and delivering continuing study programmes, VU also seeks to create conditions for persons with higher education to raise their competence.

Education quality assurance is closely linked to the internationalisation of the learning process. The University seeks to ensure a level of research and studies, which would allow equal participation in international cooperation activities by being an active and responsible member of the international academic community. Therefore, VU is developing a flexible education system, by purposefully consolidating resources to implement study programmes and individual subjects (modules) to be delivered in foreign languages in the fields of cutting-edge research conducted by university scientists and study areas reflecting regional particularities and having the greatest competitive potential. The internationalisation of education, based on the integration of education and research, not only enables to continuously develop student creativity, innovation and critical thinking, but also encourages the co-operation of students, various national and international research, teaching, business organisations, dissemination of best research and teaching practices, ensures timely application of advanced teaching and learning methods, technologies in the study process.

Responsibility and trust

In order to systematically and continuously improve the quality of university studies and the activities that have an impact on studies quality and to foster quality culture, it is necessary to build awareness of all members of university community, to call for their commitment and joint efforts. Thus, the University seeks for and maintains an effective, positive and constructive dialogue between university managers, employees, students, teachers and other stakeholders by fostering the environment of discussion, cooperation and trust.

The trust in the University community and its responsibility for higher education quality assurance, continuous education quality improvement is based not only on the articulation and publicity of its values and commitment, openness of studies quality information, transparency and publicity, but also on the ability to provide evidence supporting the implementation of their declared aims, as well as the implementation of specific quality assurance measures and procedures and the formation of VU structures responsible for the coordination of studies quality improvement.

Thus, in developing confidence in its performance and its outcomes, VU disseminates objective information to the community and other interested parties about the education quality improvement measures and procedures regarding access to education, study programmes offered,

results of the external evaluation and accreditation of the study programmes, survey results of students' and academic staff's satisfaction, etc. The education quality management information system which is being implemented at VU, contributes to the accuracy of information, its availability and timely submission, that ensures the justification of the quality management decisions.

The University community's responsibility for continuous quality assurance and improvement of education and activities that have an impact on education is revealed through a systematic monitoring of the quality of their activities, self-assessment and improvement, seeking to obtain the effectiveness of feedback, for example, the application of results obtained from surveying the students', teaching staff's opinion and satisfaction, for self-assessment of the study programmes, for the review of subject content and teaching and learning methods, supplying with resources, etc., and for the development of education quality improvement plans.

Continuous Improvement and Change

Satisfying the needs and expectations of the society and the state's changing demands and aspirations, academic progress, labour market changes, meeting the needs of students - is one of the primary reasons for VU to introduce innovation in research and education, to improve the quality of education and the activities that affect education. A continuous improvement of studies quality also offers favourable opportunities for operating in the international higher education environment, promotes diversified cooperation.

VU seeks to successfully develop and foster educational environment based on scientific research, academic performance and learning paradigm, thus, it is important to create a stimulating atmosphere that is favourable to the change of the provisions of the academic community and the subsequent change in the daily practice. The success of the educational process reflecting the students' needs and expectations is directly related to the capacity of the institution as a system to change and alter the awareness and skills of both internal and external stakeholders. A systematic approach forms the concept of quality as that of the change as well as the institutional quality assurance system that responds to this concept.

In order to implement a successful change, the following features of the internal quality assurance system are necessary: links with strategic planning, a conscious commitment and shared responsibility of the community, (self-) involvement of stakeholders, recognition and dissemination of best practices, the promotion of reflection and self-assessment of performance and their use in improving the studies quality, a well-organised system of reliable data collection, storage and analysis, factual evidence and division of responsibilities in making and implementing decisions on improving the quality of education and increasing the quality of decision-enforcement.

A continuous improvement of the quality of education is going on in structured processes aligned with VU strategy, providing evidence-based decision making and achievement of the expected results. The VU studies quality improvement is implemented by collecting and analysing related data and processes, their outcomes through self-assessment of the performance and the use of accumulated data, facts and the results of their analysis for the improvement of the performance (for the development and implementation of action plans).

The quality assurance of the University's performance is based on the performance management cycle, which explains what phases are involved in the implementation of any performance: 1) Performance planning, 2) Performance implementation, 3) Evaluation of the performance outcomes, 4) Reflection on the performance outcomes (see Figure 1)

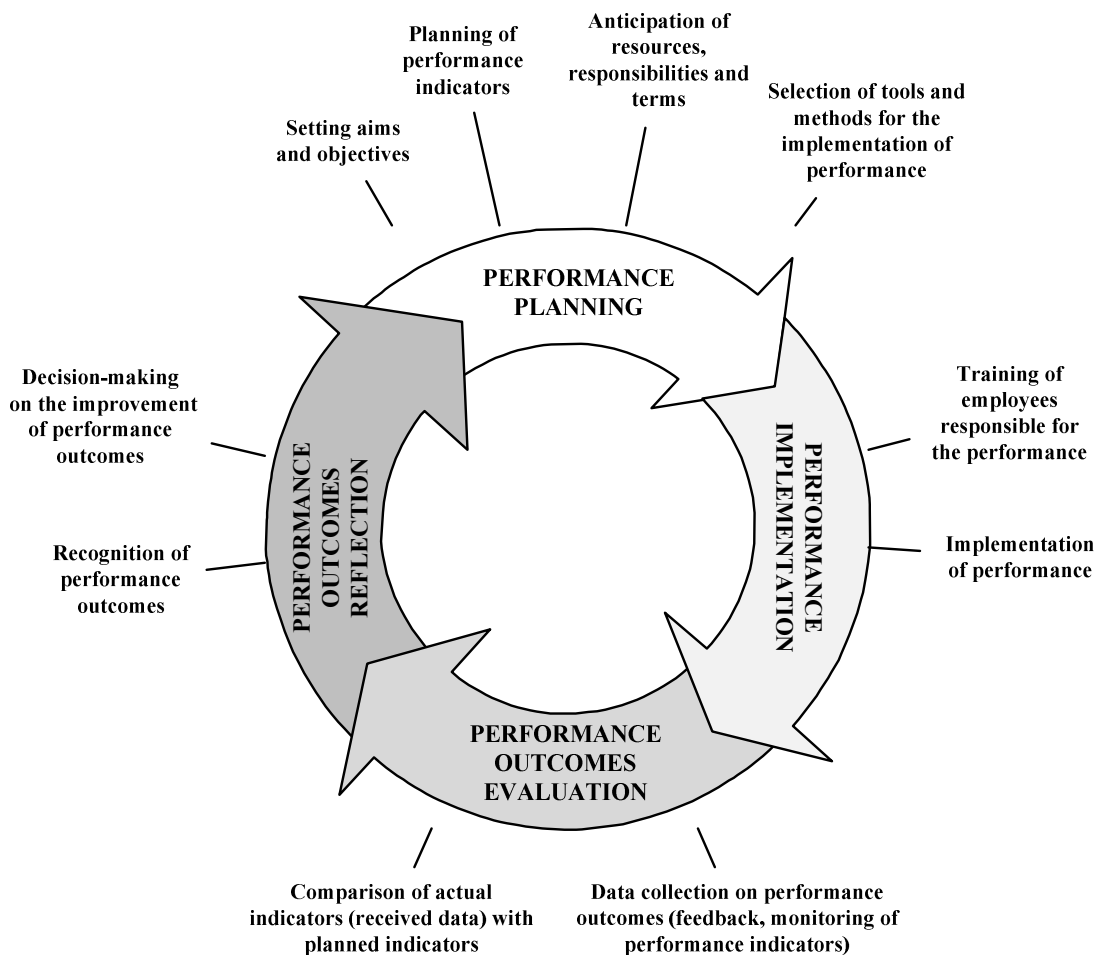


Figure 1. University's performance management cycle

Vilnius University undertakes as follows:

- ensure the implementation of strategic objectives for improving the studies quality and study related performance;
- publicise evidence supporting the compliance of the expected outcomes, available resources, ongoing processes with the actual outcomes;
- ensure the interaction between the quality evaluation process, creativity, promotion of innovation and the improvement of performance outcomes;
- foster and promote the performance reflection, learning from the experience, dissemination of good practice;
- define and promote the responsibility of VU employees for the quality of their performance in accordance with their duties, competence and obligations;
- ensure the involvement of students, alumni and other stakeholders in achieving the quality of performance outcomes;
- publicise objective information about the education quality improvement tools and procedures, results of the external assessment and accreditation of study programmes, study programme development, survey results on student satisfaction with their studies and academic staff satisfaction with their performance;
- recognise the merits and creative initiative of the academic community and encourage them to improve the quality of their performance, and to create the necessary conditions for their training;

- ensure the efficient and effective functioning of the study quality management system by supplying all the necessary resources.

Studies quality assurance policy maintenance ensures the efficiency in implementing strategic objectives of quality improvement.

The strategic aims:

1. Be open and attractive university for gifted and motivated prospective students and highly qualified academic staff and researchers.
2. Create and develop the motivating learning environment based on research and studies integration.

Methods of implementation, monitoring and adjustment of higher education quality assurance policy and quality improvement strategy

Strategic objectives are related to education quality assurance policy and implemented through quality improvement strategy. The planned and actual values of the indicators of higher education quality improvement, its deadlines, resources, responsibilities are specified in the plans on the improvement of performance outcomes.

Higher education quality assurance policy and quality improvement strategy are periodically reviewed and updated in accordance with the strategic management procedures.

Annex 1. Studies Quality Improvement Strategy (2013-2015).



ANNEX 1. STUDIES QUALITY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY (2013-2015)

AIM 2. Be open and attractive university for gifted and motivated prospective students and highly qualified academic staff and researchers.		
OBJECTIVES	MEASURES	INDICATORS
1. Take a leading position in attracting motivated and gifted Lithuanian secondary school graduates seeking university education	1) Organise “VU Days” in regions 2) Create the information dissemination system promoting VU study programmes and admission procedures in secondary schools of Lithuania 3) Organise extra-curricular programmes for secondary school students 4) To provide nominal scholarships for VU students	1) Proportion of the best secondary school leavers admitted to VU out of all best secondary school leavers of the corresponding year 2) Score indicators of the entrants
2. Increase the international attractiveness of second and third cycle study programmes	1) Needs analysis of joint second and third cycle study programmes with foreign universities 2) The development and delivery of second and third cycle study programmes in a foreign language and joint study programmes with foreign universities 3) Preparation of study subjects (modules) to be delivered in a foreign language 4) Design of internet sites for second and third cycle study programmes 5) Development of special programmes for temporary employment of second and third cycle students at VU academic departments	1) Number of international graduates 2) Proportion of international students out of all second and third cycle students 3) Proportion of international teachers 4) Number of joint study programmes delivered with advanced foreign universities 4) Proportion of study programmes in a foreign language 5) Student satisfaction index
3. Provide conditions for persons with higher education in raising their level of competence and increase their number in	1) Establish a system of lifelong learning 2) Develop and provide continuing education programmes	1) Number of continuing study programmes graduates 2) Number of continuing study programmes students 3) Proportion of income from continuing studies

higher education		
4. Create the recruitment and motivation system for the academic staff	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Academic staff needs analysis and planning 2) Open competitions for teaching staff, focusing on the expert assessment of their research and teaching quality 3) Development of the scheme for attracting international staff 4) Create a suitable motivating work environment for academic staff 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Proportion of most qualified teachers 2) Proportion of international teachers 3) Academic staff satisfaction index 4) Proportion of outgoing (mobile) teachers
AIM 2. Create and develop the motivating learning environment based on research and studies integration		
OBJECTIVES	MEASURES	INDICATORS
1. Develop and implement study programmes that respond to the needs of students, academic progress, changing needs and aspirations of the state and the society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Analysis of the compliance of newly developed and renewed study programmes with the students' needs, the progress of science, the needs and expectations of the society and the state. 2) Design of guidelines and reference material for the development of joint study programmes 3) Periodic renewal of study programmes, with a clear indication of the learning outcomes at the levels of the programme and the subject 4) Ensuring alignment among subject(modules) learning outcomes, resources, learning and assessment methods 5) The implementation of ECTS 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Proportion of graduates employability in 6 months after graduation 2) Student satisfaction index 3) Graduate satisfaction index
2. Develop academic support and services for students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Providing information to students on the available services 2) Providing training and consultation related to student internship, mobility, career opportunities 3) Continuous update of information, material and technical resources necessary for studies delivery 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Amount of investment for the upgrade of study infrastructure, Lt 2) Student satisfaction index
3. Enhance students' independent learning, flexibility of the study system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Development of methodological guidance for organising students' independent work and information technology-based learning tools, which would be combined with the increasing volume of independent work 2) Development and application of self-assessment evaluation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Number of students in major study programmes 2) Number of students in minor study programmes 4) Indicators of student academic progress 5) Student satisfaction index

	<p>system emphasizing reflective learning</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3) Development of individualised study system for the most gifted students 4) Development of minor study programmes 5) Preparation of recommendations for the application of the assessment results to foster students' further progress 6) Development of the system for the monitoring of students' work load 	
4. Encourage innovation of teaching, academic staff's creativity and continuous improvement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Recognition and dissemination of good practice (dissemination of VU academic staff who returned from internship and VU visiting foreign academic staff for VU academic staff, dissemination practice and experience of VU PhD student internship supervisors, etc.). 2) Needs analysis and planning of academic staff training 3) Planning of mandatory doctoral internship abroad in VU PhD Regulations, allocating of funds 4) Arrangement of academic staff sabbatical leave and internship system for attracting funding of faculties 5) Development of methodological support system for academic staff 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Amount of investment for teacher qualification upgrade, Lt 2) Academic staff satisfaction index 3) Student satisfaction index
5. Enhance students' research activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Promote Student Research Societies activities (develop interdisciplinary conferences, seminars, establish a range of scientific activity nominations, organise international contests in different fields of science (economics, statistics, political science, sociology, etc.). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Number of first, second and third cycle students who have made reports in scientific conferences 2) Number of first, second and third cycle students who have published scientific articles 3) Number of doctoral students of a certain research who have made reports in scientific conferences; proportion of them who have made reports in international conferences 4) Number of doctoral students of a certain research who have published scientific articles; proportion of them who have published scientific articles in international journals