

**VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY**

***EVALUATION REPORT***

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## **1. Introduction**

This report is the result of the evaluation of Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania. The evaluation took place in 2014, with site visits conducted in April and September.

### **1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme**

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement.

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:

- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a “fitness for (and of) purpose” approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

### **1.2 The profile of Vytautas Magnus University**

Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) is one of 23 universities or university-status institutions in Lithuania<sup>1</sup> and one of the 14 public universities. With 8 471 students enrolled in 2013, it is the fifth largest higher education institution in the country<sup>2</sup>. The enrolment rate has dropped from a peak of 9 153 in 2010 (Self-Evaluation Report, hereafter: SER p. 45). VMU attributes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.collegeatlas.org/lithuania-colleges-universities.html>. There are a similar number of smaller not-research-focused colleges in the country, 19 September 2014

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aikos.smm.lt/aikos/institutions.htm>, 19 September 2014

the decrease to a falling birth rate; the nation's population is estimated to have fallen by almost 100 000 since the last census in 2011 to below 3 million people in 2014<sup>3</sup>. In addition, even though Kaunas is Lithuania's second largest city, a brain-drain of young people moving abroad or to Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, some 100 km away, is of concern to VMU's management. While the other 11 higher education institutions in Kaunas are specialised in specific fields, such as technology, health science, agriculture and public security, VMU's profile is a liberal arts university. As such it is unique to the country and VMU emphasises it as a strong feature in its mission. Fostering personal development and social responsibility are part of the University's strategy. At the site-visit interviews the team was told that VMU intended to cap student numbers at 10000, albeit with a shift in the ratio to more graduate students and non-traditional forms of learning, with a view to providing high-quality education.

The present evaluation by IEP is the second such exercise following one in 2005. VMU seems to have followed the recommendations of the evaluation team to focus its vision more emphatically to establish itself as a liberal arts university and, even more importantly, to disseminate this vision among the VMU staff and students as well as the community at large. VMU is also conscious of the need, emphasised by IEP, to strengthen its research base and it continues to take steps in this direction, as it does toward increasing student and staff mobility. Since the 2005 review, a number of managerial changes have been implemented, which have been made possible by changes in the national legislation.

VMU functions under the Law of Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania. Within the national framework, higher education institutions seem to enjoy a high degree of autonomy with regard to their operations and financial management. VMU states that it has evolved its management approach to raise efficiency, including implementing a "transition from governance to management and development, optimisation of centralisation/ decentralisation level, increase in the organisational and managerial potential of University units ..." (SER p. 13). The rector is the top administrator of VMU, who ensures the implementation of the University's strategy in accordance with its Statute. The Senate decides on academic matters while the University Council oversees the governance of the University. A national accreditation system requires accreditation of all study programmes offered in the country.

In accordance with national legislation, VMU owns and administers its premises (SER p. 14). Of the budget received from the state, which in 2013 amounted to 39.2% of all income (SER p. 53), 86% is earmarked for salaries, and the remaining 13% for scholarships (calculated from SER p. 55).

VMU has ten faculties:

- Arts (with 446 BA and MA and 15 PhD students enrolled in 2013)

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<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania>, 19 September 2014

- Catholic Theology (146 BA and MA/10 PhD)
- Economics and Management (1273 BA and MA/40 PhD/and 55 integrated BA-MA)
- Humanities (1265 BA and MA/69 PhD/143 integrated BA-MA)
- Informatics (296 BA and MA /14 PhD /8 integrated BA-MA)
- Law (888 BA and MA /7 PhD /9 integrated BA-MA)
- Natural Sciences (704 BA and MA/41 PhD /19 integrated BA-MA)
- Political Science and Diplomacy (1922 BA and MA /35 PhD /75 integrated BA-MA)
- Social Sciences (1293 BA and MA /58 PhD /34 integrated BA-MA)
- Music Academy (238 BA and MA).

Additionally, the SER (p. 4) lists two institutes (for Innovative Studies Institute and for Foreign Languages), six university-level centres and units supporting educational, recreational and management functions, and the Botanical Garden. VMU has also established eight public enterprises.

Studies are organised in three cycles, Bachelor, Master and PhD, as well as some integrated programmes leading to Master level. Of 45 Bachelor programmes, five are offered in English. There are 58 Master programmes, of which 22 are in English. The doctoral programmes cover 18 fields of study.

According to figures provided by VMU, the total number of university staff reached 1 091 in 2013. Of these, 42% were teachers, 5% researchers, 2% management positions and 51% other staff, which included administrative and management staff for the faculties, institutes and centres and the additional units, such as the Orchestra of the Music Academy.

### **1.3 The evaluation process**

VMU applied to IEP for an external evaluation and submitted its official registration in May 2013. The self-evaluation process was initiated by an order of the rector and was headed by the vice-rector for studies. Representatives of various units, including a student and quality assurance staff, were included in the 11-member operations team to reflect the various university constituencies. The team laid down a process planning, implementation and monitoring scheme with a flowchart for actions, responsibilities and outcomes. On the whole, the process seemed to the IEP evaluation team to be broadly inclusive and most interview groups supported the impression that university members were aware of it and had had the opportunity to provide their views and feedback on several levels of the organisation and its stakeholders.

The evaluation team considered the SER informative and to the point but would have liked to see more emphasis on self-analysis and a discussion of certain issues. For example, the SER devotes two annexes (Annex 17 and 18) to the indicator system to evaluate various aspects of the university, but there is no conclusion drawn about how well the system works or how quality findings are followed up on. VMU informed the team that it planned to conclude the formal process of drawing conclusions about “how the system works” for December 2014. The team anticipates that VMU will use the opportunity to highlight the intensive discussions and self-reflection that seem to have taken place, as the interviews during the site-visits testified.

The SER of VMU, together with 18 appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2014. The two site-visits of the evaluation team to Kaunas took place from 7 to 9 April and from 7 to 10 September 2014, respectively. In the visits the team had discussions with the rector, the four vice-rectors, the self-evaluation working group, the head and staff of the Centre for Quality and Innovations (from September, the Quality and Strategy Office), the deans, academic staff and students of six faculties (which the team chose to obtain an all-round picture of the fields the University covers), and VMU’s external partners. The second visit addressed issues for which the team asked to interview identified focus groups, namely all ten deans, central office staff that included the directors of personnel, the finance office and the internal audit office, Senate and Council representatives, student representatives, and international researchers and graduate students.

Following the first visit, the team asked for additional information in preparation for its second site visit, which VMU readily supplied in due time. The team provided a first overview of findings during an oral presentation for the VMU community at the end of the main visit on 10 September.

The evaluation team (hereafter the team) consisted of:

- Lothar Zechlin, former rector of the Universities of Graz, Austria, Hamburg and Duisburg-Essen, Germany, team chair
- Christina Ulenius, former Rector of Karlstad University, Sweden
- Hans Beunderman, former Vice-rector of TU Delft, the Netherlands
- Annakaisa Tikkinen, student, University of Oulu, Finland
- Christina Rozsnyai, Programme Officer for international affairs, Hungarian Accreditation Committee, team coordinator.

The team thanks Rector Zigmantas L

ydeka, the head of the self-evaluation working group Vice-Rector Kestutis Sidlauskas, the chair of the self-evaluation team Vilma Zydziunaite, and the members of the team and the

other staff of VMU for the efficient organisation of the process and the site-visits. The team very much appreciated the openness of the university members in the interviews, which transmitted a proud sense of identity of the members of the VMU community and their dedication to contribute to the success of the university. The team is grateful for the kind hospitality that made the evaluation process not only enriching but also enjoyable.

The evaluation report discusses the main areas of VMU operation. As noted, the emphasis of IEP evaluations is on strategic management and not a detailed analysis of all university activities. Therefore, comments and recommendations focus on areas where the evaluation team believes that VMU has particular potential for development with the aim of moving the University forward in establishing itself as a unique higher education institution and ensuring its sustainability to achieve its long-term goals. The recommendations are shown in italics in the text and summarised at the end of the report in chapter 8 for easy reference.

## 2. Governance and institutional decision-making

Within the challenging context of declining student numbers and the competition of other universities in the area, VMU positions itself as a liberal arts university. This profile is emphasised in its mission and is perceived in its strategic documents as well as by the university community at large. The distinctive liberal education philosophy has been commended by the 2005 IEP evaluation team and in the very recent institutional review report by an international team commissioned by the national quality assessment agency. The current IEP team can only join in encouraging VMU to continue to pursue this unique position and to build its continued development on this philosophy.

The team has tried to discover what the philosophy exactly means to various members of the university community. As one student put it, it is “a freedom of choice” to study with a focus on individual development. Others stressed the goal to produce graduates with a broad knowledge of arts and sciences who are capable of critical thinking, translated into transferable skills and appreciated by the employment market. Yet another interpretation combines the philosophy with VMU’s culture of stimulating responsibility, consensus, contribution to community, open attitude toward partnerships. All of this is reflected in the VMU mission.

The mission of Vytautas Magnus University is to be a community-based research, art and study institution which pursues the earlier mission of the University of Lithuania, established in Kaunas in 1922, and creates liberal learning conditions for individuals, develops partnerships, takes an active part in the life of Kaunas city, advances the future of Lithuania and contributes to the global cultural and academic development. (SER p. 6)

The team respects the pervasive awareness of the liberal arts philosophy at VMU. It is assured that the university’s external partners are conscious of this unique feature and value it. The team wondered whether it would be beneficial to promote this feature by holding a university-wide discussion on this aspect and achieving a consensus on its implications. The team also discussed how much such a philosophy is feasible in the rapidly changing environment, e.g. when international trends are to increase specialisation in higher education, and student population and teaching-methods change. Therefore, the evaluation team *recommends that VMU adapts the philosophy of “artes liberales” with a view to the changing external environment and to the diverse concepts in its internal community*, in order to ensure that this feature, which the team considers an asset, will be retained in future.

A second feature that impressed the team was the participatory decision-making culture, while at the same time VMU counts a comparatively large amount of organisational units (from the SER and other documents the team counted ten faculties, 40 departments, 22 faculty centres, six research centres, 36 research clusters, 18 units/offices). The decision-making bodies are set up according to the law and repeated in the university Statute. The *de facto* approach

involves discussion and consensus-building at all levels and in various fora (e.g. committees, centres, clusters), which is reflected in the management processes of VMU.

The main decision-making bodies are set down in the country's Law on Higher Education and Research and reflected in the university Statute, which are approved by the Seimas. The rector is "the sole management body" (Law Article 19). The University Council is responsible for approving strategic issues and financial regulations. It also appoints the rector and, as a quality control function, approves the rector's annual report. The university Senate is "the management body of academic affairs" (Law Article 21) which includes the approval of new study programmes. The Council is an 11-member body, of whom six are from VMU elected by the university community, including administrative staff and students, and five from outside the university, appointed by the Minister of Education and Science on recommendation of the Council of Higher Education. The Senate has 55 members delegated by the academic community and at least one fifth of the members are students.

The positions of vice-rectors, not legislated by law, are included in the VMU Statute. VMU has four vice-rectors, appointed by the rector, who are responsible for studies, science, development and public relations. Faculty deans coordinate the work of the faculty and represent it in the Senate.

The University Strategy 2012-2020, similar to the previous one and the action plan supporting it, are the product of deliberation and discussion at all levels of the university community. Strategy-development, annual reports and, indeed, the SER for this evaluation, have all proceeded –following impetus from the top – in a bottom-up manner.

The Strategy sets out the University's main aims, building on the liberal arts foundation, namely to cultivate a "socially active and responsible community", to act as a "reliable international partner"; to manage "studies favourable for unfolding talents and personalities", to achieve "the highest level of science and arts"; and to foster a "harmonious and creative environment". The Strategic Action Plan for 2012-2020 breaks these down into short-term, long-term and continuous actions.

The internally-driven, bottom-up elaboration of the university strategy results in it lacking real focus which could drive coherent action with allocated resources. It follows that the Strategic Action Plan lists numerous activities but there are no assigned responsibilities, nor was the team able to establish specific leaders of actions. The evaluation team explored the decision-making processes in depth in both site visits. The fact that many staff members are active in different positions at the same time might affect transparency, yet the participatory culture pervading the university is accepted and expected by all. However, from discussions with various university groups the team came to the conclusion that while the participatory culture is satisfying in the current set-up, its effectiveness is also dependent on the leadership capabilities and influence of unit managers. As such, it impedes strategic management and risks the university's long-term sustainability.

The team would like to invite the management to consider optimising its decision-making, and to raise its efficiency and transparency, by devolving distinct strategic assignments to distinct units and entities, distributing identified responsibilities to the different decision-making layers and also reconsidering whether the current number of decision-making layers is optimal. The prevailing consensus mode on so many layers as the basis for decision-making produces many overlaps, and does not optimise use of the resources available. Moreover, it may not be efficient enough to ensure that these processes are fit for the future in a rapidly changing environment.

It is equally important to prepare the managers at all levels for any new processes by offering them dedicated training sessions. While strengthening the management abilities of deans at all faculties, VMU might consider financial incentives, beyond the current reduction of teaching load, in order to ensure having a sustainable management team at all levels of the organisation.

*The team recommends reconsidering whether the structure of decision-making with input from so many layers and organisational units is fit with respect to strategic planning, and to optimise resources and increase efficiency by avoiding overlaps.*

The team had the impression that VMU is financially self-sufficient and it has made advancements in attracting income. As noted above, the team learned that VMU receives 39% of its income from the state budget, based on the number of enrolled students and allocated in large part to teaching salaries. Some 20% of income comes from tuition for non-state-funded Bachelor students, Master students and non-traditional courses offered as well as some research work, while another roughly 35% is from so-called purposeful funds coming from projects and EU structural funds. The actions identified in the SER leave the impression of a capable and forward-looking financial management at VMU.

VMU has been able to use its surplus investments to launch the construction of several new facilities, although the economic recession has delayed their completion. The team heard that some deans appreciate not having to deal with major budget issues and point to their lack of expertise in such matters. However, the team heard also that in some departments, the current budget allocation structure prevents attracting capable teachers who are incentivised by higher salaries in business. With regard to the efficient use of resources as well as streamlined decision-making, the team emphasises its previous recommendation by *suggesting that VMU reconsider what matters could be decided at the central level (e.g. the development of interdisciplinary study programmes and especially research reflecting the University mission) and at the decentralised level (such as an incentivising, dedicated budget allocation coupled with some management decision-making at faculty level)*. While participatory decision-making assures wide acceptance, it is difficult to keep it in line with a central philosophy and to ensure sustainability in times of change.

The team also recommends that VMU continue to *look for additional income sources (e.g. expanding its offer of life-long learning courses, cooperating with other institutions to apply for*

*EU funding, or political lobbying) but without losing sight of the truly essential elements of its liberal arts identity.*

Finding additional income would allow VMU to expand its infrastructure, including services for students. The team heard repeatedly that while there are cafeterias in the outlying campuses or teaching buildings, there is a need for a cafeteria near the central buildings where students would have a place to eat, but also to meet and study in groups. *The team therefore recommends to allocate funds for such an infrastructure, but taking care to balance investments with human resources needs* (so as to contribute to reducing the teaching load of the academic staff in favour of more research time, discussed in more detail in section 4).

During the interviews the team heard about initiatives to merge with other universities in the city, based on which discussions with other institutions have taken place. In fact, VMU already has a number of co-operations, extending to projects, research and teaching. Students may, in the liberal arts spirit, take classes of interest at another university and receive credits towards their programme at VMU. The evaluation team commends such cooperation, not only because it broadens students' course choices but can save financial and human resources by avoiding overlaps in educational provision and ensure a critical mass in both teaching and research. Also given the relatively small population of Kaunas, indeed of Lithuania, the team encourages VMU to proceed further, *by continuing to explore the possibilities for actual mergers of institutions but also its own faculties or departments where feasible.* The team recommends *working out different scenarios for possible mergers on all three of these levels. These should include demographic considerations, involve risk assessments and devise a forward-looking strategy.* *The team stresses, however, that VMU should retain its unique character, which is its special asset and serves its community at large. The "artes liberales" idea can be used as a basis for marketing Kaunas as "the most student-friendly city in Lithuania" on which to build future co-operations.* In this, VMU can build on its good and ongoing contacts with community leaders, as well as in seeking to recruit new students, be it from secondary schools or internationally.

### **3. Teaching and learning**

The liberal arts philosophy set down in VMU's mission is noticeably translated into the management of teaching and learning. The four-year Bachelor programmes, which are in line with the national legislation (at 180-240 ECTS) foresee a wide selection of courses for students in the first two years, after which they concentrate on their majors and minors. Students noted that detailed information on the courses is available before enrolment and a built-in measure allows students two weeks at the beginning of a course to transfer to another one if it was not up to their expectations. Their course selections frequently involve classes at various faculties and sometimes other universities.

Employers testified that the all-round development of students results in their "ability to think critically", provides them with transferable skills and prepares most graduates for the challenges they face in their work. A relatively high employment rate among VMU graduates was consequently reported. Another university requirement that is an asset for students is the practical work they must carry out over several weeks in the course of their studies. This is arranged either by the university or the students themselves, but an agreement between the employer and university is mandatory.

The management of the study matrix is guided by programme committees. They are formed for the design of each study programme and are responsible for overseeing it throughout its lifetime. The allocation of teachers to the component courses, which often span two or more faculties, begins with discussions by the teachers who are interested, and teaching allocation is ultimately approved by the department heads and deans heading the teachers' faculties.

As noted, state financing is provided according to student enrolment, and therefore teachers are expected to carry a full teaching load as part of their base salaries. Beyond that, however, VMU has an incentive system for promotions based on a complex set of indicators that include teaching and research, as well as administrative and other activities. There is also ample opportunity for staff training, which is incentivised by being included among the evaluation indicators on individual staff members.

The evaluation team found the programme structure commendable and supportive of the liberal arts philosophy of VMU. It explored this "freedom of choice" among students and found that there were those who were quite enthusiastic about it but also heard that many students lack focus and are not able to build a meaningful curriculum, or sometimes even lack clear motivation in their choices. This seems to vary by faculty, with some being more successful than others in translating the advantages of the structure for their students.

Although teachers seem to be fully open to helping students on a one-to-one basis with regard to their concerns, including curriculum choices – and students report readily taking advantage of the opportunity – the team believes that a university-wide system of assistance for curriculum planning could provide a structured approach to alleviating this problem by catering also to less motivated students. The "freedom of choice" should, in fact, be

“informed freedom” in order to benefit everyone, and should build on designated learning outcomes for each study programme in order to steer students in a structured way. While the figures the team received showed the drop-out rate to be quite low, structured assistance in curriculum planning could also help reduce their number and increase student satisfaction overall.

The team therefore recommends that VMU *strengthen support services for students by offering guidance to help them optimise their student development and experience, while also freeing up teachers’ time and reducing their workload.* The Career and Competence Centre, which is active in organising numerous career management workshops and events seems to the team to be well-placed for such a task. Recognising that VMU is well aware of the teaching load issue, the team commends the university for setting up the new Study Organisation and Management Council in response to the outcomes of its internal monitoring system, presented to the team before the second site visit.

The team also recommends *making use of good practice in student guidance that takes place at some faculties by sharing their experiences with other faculties. The alumni could be involved by providing feedback from their employment experience so that the value of the “artes liberales” philosophy is communicated to new students, thus motivating them to take full benefit of all opportunities offered.*

#### 4. Research

Research is seen by all members of the VMU community as a cornerstone for the international reputation of the university. VMU's mission reflects this awareness and it has taken steps toward increasing its research output and quality. It monitors its standing in international rankings, listed in the QS World University Rankings among the top 800, and research output by academic staff is a key indicator in their annual evaluations. Sabbaticals are foreseen in the VMU Statute, although academic staff reported that they seldom have time due to teaching and administrative commitments to actually take advantage of them.

The evaluation team acknowledges that many academic staff consider their heavy teaching loads as an obstacle to conducting more research, as was expressed several times in the interviews. At the same time, the team observed numerous incentives by VMU to stimulate research, which the team appreciates. The reduction of teaching loads, in spite of the normative state funding system, could be achieved through rational teaching organisation, reviewing the current provision and reducing parallelism, and similar initiatives that the team would encourage the VMU faculties, to consider with the help of the new Study Organisation and Management Council.

Research is organised within the departments, centres and in clusters. There are currently 36 research clusters which involve academic staff across faculties and departments from VMU in collaboration with other institutions. The team believes such collaborative clusters are a good structure for optimising research performance and funding, and they encourage interdisciplinarity and can raise research quality by functioning as a benchmarking tool against other institutions. The aim to be competitive in research can be exploited if VMU can build on its existing strengths. Therefore, *with respect to forming research clusters involving other institutions, the team stresses that VMU should not lose sight of its core identity.*

Research projects at VMU are driven by national and international calls, for which research groups apply on a departmental or cluster basis. Over one third of the university's income is gained through research, which indicates that the system is at present financially sustainable.

From the information the team has received it is evident that the projects cover a diverse variety of subject areas, reflecting the background of the initiating academic individual or group. A dominant set of themes cannot be detected. The advantage of this individualised approach is that the personal research interests of teachers can feed back directly into their teaching. The disadvantage, however, is that there is no focus on VMU priorities or its core identity and, in fact, there is no research strategy beyond the goal of attaining excellence for the university. For this reason *the team recommends sharpening the VMU research strategy towards more focus and mass in general and prioritising the clusters in line with VMU profiles in order to bring them to the level where they are internationally competitive.*

The team appreciates that students, mostly at graduate level, are involved in the work of the research groups. An intensive research focus is not as yet reflected in the volume of PhD

students, however. Their numbers have remained steady over the past four years at around 3% of the total student enrolment number, and the rate of PhD to Master's students has actually dropped from 7.4% in 2009 to 6.43% in 2013, with fluctuations around these ratios in the years between. To support PhD studies, VMU has set up some individual scholarships as incentive, in addition to the funding received from the Lithuanian Research Council. The attainment of doctoral programmes in 18 fields, "in cooperation with 25 Lithuanian and foreign universities and research institutions" (SER p. 9), is certainly commendable.

VMU has taken numerous steps to increase its research volume and quality. The annual academic staff evaluations include a number of indicators related to research, and promotions and salary increments consider research output. In 2007 VMU set up a Project Management Office, the task of which was to coordinate a monitor project activity, specifically to assist in project writing and preparing project budgets. A research fund as seed money for new research was also established. The evaluation *team encourages VMU to consider increasing its internal budget for research seed money as a strategic tool to attract researchers and boost research.*

## 5. Service to society

It is part of the liberal arts philosophy and the mission of VMU that it “be a community-based research, art and study institution ... [that] develops partnerships, takes an active part in the life of Kaunas city ...”. Reflecting this aim is the civic engagement with which VMU staff and students conduct a variety of volunteer activities, several hundred of them listed by faculty in the SER (Annex 8). They range from charity work to cultural and sports events involving the external community.

In the framework of life-long learning, VMU has developed many programmes, some structured with credit allocations, others as volunteer events for interested community participants. It is actively establishing methods for recognising non-formal learning attainment. The 2013 Annual Report Summary (p. 60) refers to 16 part-time post-graduate study programmes that are offered. Several distance education projects are being implemented for distinct target groups, some for VMU students and others for secondary students or the community at large. In this regard the team would like to point to the importance of *considering the fitness of human resources for a particular activity, such as the experience of a teacher offering a life-long learning course or part-time programmes*. Specific training for specific activities is key to their success and sustainability, and an asset in staff development.

Serving disabled students is a VMU concern, counting 154 students with disabilities enrolled in 2013 (Annual Report 2013 p. 64). Disabled students, orphans and financially disadvantaged students are relieved of tuition fees. A number of scholarships are secured through the University budget and special funds.

With its recent establishment of the Music Academy and the Theatre in the Faculty of Arts, VMU contributes significantly to the cultural life of the city, with countless concerts and drama performances. The VMU Botanical Garden serves not only research and teaching purposes but is also open to the public and is the venue for cultural events.

The external partners of VMU interviewed by the evaluation team spoke highly of the university’s commitment to the city and region. They praised especially the liberal arts philosophy and the all-round education of graduates and mentioned numerous cultural and education events organised by the university.

The evaluation team values the commitment of VMU to contributing to society at large. It would like to point out that in addition to serving society, this pursuit is an asset that can be exploited for actively enhancing VMU’s national reputation and for branding it even internationally. The many partnerships and long-term ties such activities create are of benefit also to the University’s teaching content and practical education, to say nothing of the liberal arts message made tangible for students and society at large.

The team would like to *recommend that VMU continues to explore new markets for services to society and make use of the good will and reputation it has acquired*.

## 6. Quality culture

VMU has a well elaborated quality assurance system. In line with the inclusive culture at the university the system involves all internal stakeholders, including regular student questionnaires, and extends to soliciting feedback from external stakeholders. The primary focus of quality assurance is, in fact, the study programmes. The content and performance of each of them are reviewed each year by the responsible programme committees based on the quality feedback, and every three years programmes are updated. The SER (Annexes 13 – 17) presents the elaborate system's different scopes, from the programme design scheme to the integration of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), to the description and background of quality assurance, and finally the performance indicators and their calculation. The evaluation scheme of academic staff, which is also part of the system, has been discussed above.

Between the two site visits VMU has taken several measures to raise the quality in response to its internal monitoring. These include changing its Centre for Quality and Innovations into the Quality and Strategy Office in order "to enhance continuous improvement, to foster data collection, research, analysis and dissemination, to use the set of appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators and to promote and monitor the implementation of University Strategy" (Handout). As mentioned already, the new Study Organisation and Quality Management Council, whose responsibility is to streamline study programme management, also includes a suggestion to curb the teaching load.

The evaluation team noted with great interest the high number of instruments and indicators and the university's internal stakeholders. It was evident to the team that academic staff is fully aware of quality monitoring being part of every-day life in a higher education institution. In this sense, the team believes that the foundations of a quality culture have been established at VMU.

On the other hand, the team was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of quality measures, processes and indicators. The team points to the cost/benefit ratio of such an elaborate system and questions its focus, best described by VMU itself, "The main goal of the performance indicator system was to perform the monitoring of the University performance on the basis of self-analysis and to make strategic planning more effective" (SER Annex 16 p. 72). The team would like to emphasise the other essence of quality culture that involves "living" it, internalising ongoing improvement involving not only formal actions but informal ones, such as discussions within the community about quality issues that can bring to the fore what a formal, predetermined structure might miss. Reducing the amount of actions and focusing on identified key measures would surely contribute to this aim. It would also reduce the strain on both financial and human resources.

Students are also well aware of quality monitoring in the form of teaching evaluations that they are asked to complete online at the end of a semester. However, they reported that they often do not see any follow-up measures taken in response to their observations. Such

disillusion in the system often results in superficial, formalised evaluations that should be avoided if the system is to really lead to quality improvement.

In order to sharpen the system and create a living quality culture at VMU the team would like to recommend that it *consider the reduction to key performance indicators, and implement softer, communicative approaches to quality management that use the results of the measured data for „informed discussions“ on improving quality.* The team suggests that the university *should involve department heads and deans in discussing the results of teacher evaluations by students and ensure that questionnaires and their general outcomes are made available on a platform commonly used by students.* It would be a good idea *to have a “Quality Day” at faculty level for a discussion that also includes students, external stakeholders and alumni on the main outcomes of student questionnaires.* The team commends VMU for its initiatives to provide *feedback on the outcome of quality evaluations and the results into strategic planning* and encourages the university to continue implementing the identified measures in practice.

## 7. Internationalisation

Internationalisation pervades VMU at all levels, a selection of which deserve mention in this report. The SER (p. 6) lists it as “a member of international associations (EUA, EAIE, EDEN, AABS, GreenLight, UNAI, Global Compact and CEL/ELC) and an active participant in the EU Lifelong Learning programmes (Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig and Jean Monnet), as well as national and international research programmes (FP6, FP7 and COST).” The university is a member of the European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences ECOLAS and “currently cooperates with 105 universities from 35 countries around the world on the basis of bilateral agreements and with 241 ‘LP/Erasmus’ partners from 31 European countries.” Internationalisation is among its strategic goals, and an International Office operates under the rector. A number of performance indicators monitor international activity.

Part of the university’s strategy is to raise the number of foreign staff, students and programmes. In 2013 there were 179 foreign students in full-time and 181 in part-time studies, up from 41 and 94 respectively in 2009 (SER p. 10). The incoming/outgoing ratio of students studying abroad reached 96%, up from 65% in 2008. There are currently seven double or joint degree Master courses in collaboration with foreign partners (SER p. 45). VMU recognised the importance of advancing foreign language proficiency and began teaching seven Master programmes in English in 2007 (SER p. 11). Currently it offers five Bachelor and 22 Master programmes in English (SER p. 4). The evaluation team was able to meet with a group of teachers and graduate students working at VMU, some of whom had been there for several years, from a number of countries. In 2013 academic staff participated in 318 events abroad, and 17 administrative staff participated in the Erasmus mobility scheme (Annual Report pp. 34 and 35). Language learning is part of the liberal arts strategy of VMU, with nearly a third of graduates having studied two, and 10% three foreign languages (Annual Report 2013 p. 40).

The SER (p. 10) mentions 32 international scientific events for 2013, up from 15 in 2009. In addition, VMU regularly organises cultural events such as dance and theatre performances with international involvement.

The evaluation team commends VMU for its extensive internationalisation. Its recommendations are intended to point to the importance of channelling these activities in a well-monitored and targeted way. Increasing internationalisation and a diverse student body requires careful management. *The university should consider focusing on selected collaborations with foreign partners, such as through the network ECOLAS, to achieve the highest impact and promote VMU at the international level. It could build on the collaborations to initiate new joint programmes, recruit incoming students and send VMU students abroad, and to enable academic and administrative staff mobility.*

## 8. Conclusion

VMU has made remarkable advances in its strategic planning and quality assurance that positively affect internationalisation, research and education. On the other hand, VMU itself mentions several challenges, weaknesses and threats in the conclusions of its SER and in its SWOT analysis that need serious attention.

Therefore the evaluation team believes that now is the time to transfer the results achieved into concrete change that is staked out for the future as part of the plan-do-check-act cycle of ongoing monitoring and follow-up that a university's management pursues. It is equally important to continue developing human resources and to periodically provide leadership training to the heads of units. With its openness for ideas, its eagerness to be evaluated repeatedly by international experts, and its implementation of countless innovations and monitoring of their success, VMU does have a good capacity for change. The evaluation team suggests to the VMU leadership to draw up risk assessment scenarios and to develop sets of strategic options for each scenario as a basis for future planning.

It is hoped that the evaluation team's recommendations will assist the university in this pursuit, whether it accepts or rejects them, but in any case makes them the subject of its discussions for the way forward.

### Summary of the recommendations

1. Adapt the philosophy of *artes liberales* with a view to the changing external environment and to the diverse concepts in the internal community of VMU.
2. Reconsider whether the structure of decision-making with input from so many layers and organisational units is fit with respect to strategic planning, and in order to optimise resources and increase efficiency by avoiding overlaps.
3. Reconsider what matters could be decided on at the central level (e.g. developing interdisciplinary study programmes and especially research reflecting the university mission) and on the decentralised level (such as a specific budget allocation to, and some decision-making by faculties).
4. Continue developing human resources and periodically provide leadership training to the heads of units.
5. Continue to look for additional income sources (e.g. expanding the offer of life-long learning courses, cooperating with other institutions to apply for EU funding, or political lobbying) but without losing sight of VMU's liberal arts identity.
6. Allocate funds for infrastructure, such as a central cafeteria and more individual and group study places on campus, while taking care to balance investments with human resources needs.

7. Continue to explore the possibilities for actual mergers of institutions where feasible, and work out different scenarios for possible mergers also at the level of departments. Ensure that the unique character of VMU is retained and use the *artes liberales* idea as a basis for marketing Kaunas as “the most student-friendly city in Lithuania” on which to build future co-operations.
8. Strengthen support services for students by offering guidance to help them optimise their student development and experience, while also freeing up teachers’ time and reducing their workload.
9. Make use of good practices in student guidance in some faculties by sharing their experiences with other faculties. Involve alumni with feedback from their employment experience so that the value of the *artes liberales* philosophy is communicated to new students, thus motivating them to benefit fully from all opportunities that are offered.
10. With respect to forming research clusters involving other institutions, do not lose sight of VMU’s core identity.
11. Sharpen the VMU research strategy towards more focus and mass in general and prioritise the clusters in line with VMU profiles in order to bring them up to a level so that they are internationally competitive.
12. Consider increasing the internal VMU budget for research seed money as a strategic tool to attract researchers and boost research.
13. Consider the fitness of human resources when implementing a particular activity, such as the experience of a teacher offering a life-long learning course or part-time programmes.
14. Explore new markets for services to society and make use of the good will and reputation VMU has acquired.
15. Consider the reduction to key performance indicators monitoring quality.
16. Implement softer, communicative approaches to quality management that use the results of the measured data for “informed discussions” on improving quality.
17. Involve department heads and deans in discussing the results of teacher evaluations by students and ensure that questionnaires and their general outcomes are made available on an electronic platform commonly used by students.
18. Have a “Quality Day” at faculty level for a discussion that also includes students, external stakeholders and alumni on the main outcomes of student questionnaires.

19. Continue to provide feedback on the outcome of quality evaluations and their results into strategic planning.
20. Consider focusing on selected collaborations with foreign partners, such as through the network ECOLAS, to achieve highest impact and promote VMU at the international level.
21. Build on targeted collaborations to initiate new joint programmes, recruit incoming students and send VMU students abroad, and to enable academic and administrative staff mobility.