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THE FACTORS TO BE IMPROVED IN STUDY PROGRAMMES: ANALYSIS OF A UNIVERSITY CASE

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Abstract

The current research presents a qualitative analysis of the results of self-evaluation reports of University study programmes over the period of 2010–2015. The research aimed at revealing major facts concerning the problems and factors prevailing in the institution and, thus, restricting quality in studies; these features may be characteristic not only to a single but also to several study programmes. Analysis of the research data employed 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. The research results reveal key aspects of the curriculum design, learning outcomes and their assessment as well as highlight the goals to be achieved while focusing on improvement of the content of programme's subjects/ descriptions, learning outcomes, student activities and assignment plan, clarification of originality of representation of a programme. The aspects of the study process and its evaluation are oriented to financial support, enhancement of internationalisation, improvement of assessment of students' attainments. It is emphasised that the feedback process and its results should be improved in the management of a study programme. Also, striving for an effective system of management of a study programme, it is necessary to make the system of motivation of teaching and other staff more effective
Key words: *external evaluation, study programmes, quality assurance, university education.*

Introduction

The challenges set by globalisation prompt continuous changes and increase competitiveness in higher education, which requires assurance of a higher quality. This becomes the object of discussions for present-day scientists focusing research on quality of teaching (Henard, Leprince-Ringuet, 2008, Almuntashiri et al., 2016), systems for quality assurance (Basari et al., 2016, Lekena, Bayaga, 2012, Campatelli et al., 2011), increase of quality assurance (Harvey, 2007, Petrovskiy, Agapova, 2016), quality assessment (Elassy, 2013, Stukalina, 2014, Pruskus et al., 2015, Savickienė, Pukelis, 2004, Sirtautienė, 2006, Bounds et al., 1994). Even though it is emphasised that quality is a subjective concept and there is no single definition of quality in higher education, also, that only general models for measuring quality are used, still, quality of study programmes faces quite clear indices. In this context, drawing generalisations on insights by some researchers (Schindler et al., 2015, Keçetep, Özkan, 2014, Lim, 2008, Cullen et al., 2003, Pruskus et al., 2015, Savickienė, Pukelis, 2004), quality in higher education is defined in the following way: competences of students and academic staff, high quality study programmes, efficient teaching methods, internal (institutional) system for quality assurance, governance and management of a higher education institution, high quality basis for studies and research.

Increasing requirements for education, aiming to ensure equal opportunities in education for all, determined implementation of quality standards in education worldwide (Saria et al., 2016). Lithuania actively contributed to activities of the Bologna Process, the design of the system of assurance of general quality in studies, which resulted in the designed

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national system for quality assurance. As D. Chalmers (2008) has it, "in the last two decades, higher education systems and institutions worldwide have undergone extensive changes and reforms related to improving quality". Several stages of the higher education reform in Lithuania are singled out in terms of making impact on the changes in assurance of quality in studies, too: 1) in 1990 the former system of the soviet period was changed; 2) in 1993 the system of three cycles of studies and corresponding degrees was introduced; operating higher education institutions were restructured and new ones were founded, also, some former higher education institutions were restored; 3) in 2009 the focus was laid on enhancement of efficacy, improvement of quality and accessibility, when quality of higher education was determined by four factors: professional teaching staff, adequate learning facilities, guaranteed financial support to students and proper dormitories for students. The "voucher" funding of studies was introduced, the funding of scientific research was based on competing programmes and the basic state funding decreased aiming at emphasised importance of research results; 4) in 2017 the reorganisation of the network of higher education institutions started; it aims at improvement of quality in higher education. The latter is prompted by demographic indicators as well, showing that over the latter seven years the number of entrants to higher education institutions in Lithuania decreased from 27 thousand to 17 thousand, and in 2021 only some 10 thousand will remain. All these stimulate the changes in the funding system and reviewing of the offer of study programmes, which makes improvement of quality in studies, improvement of study programmes relevant. In 1995, the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education was founded; it coordinates external evaluation of study programmes and higher education institutions. On the ground of conclusions and recommendations of external evaluation, a higher education institution improves its study programmes, thus meeting the strategic aim of the University – improvement of the study process. In this context, it is highly important to ensure improvement of study programmes and the implementation of its results. Even though quality is being investigated by numerous researchers, still there is lack of more comprehensive research works on what are the essential generalised areas to be improved in study programmes.

Problem of Research

The problem questions: What areas to be corrected/ improved are emphasised by external experts in the case of a particular university institution in terms of curriculum design, learning outcomes and their assessment, procedure of implementation, academic staff, required learning facilities? Do the repeating remarks prevail for majority of study programmes? How could they be corrected and improved at an institutional level?

Research Focus

The areas to be corrected/ improved in university study programmes are the research object. The research aim is to reveal the areas to be improved/ corrected in university study programmes on the ground of the results of external evaluation of study programmes (content of conclusions provided by experts) concerning quality of studies.

Methodology of Research

General Background

The research was conducted in 2010–2014 while analysing the results of self-evaluation reports of twenty-one study programmes of the University. Content analysis is the research method (Singer, 2009, McCulloch, 2004); it was chosen because of objectivity in revealing facts

on the surveyed reality through the text being analysed. The most important data were selected in the course of the research; the data reveal, characterises and represents the object under investigation. The data were grouped according to the similarity features, thus forming sub-groups (sub-categories). The latter also were grouped into larger groups, categories, grounding on the principles of analogy and similarity. Their semantic similarity allows generalisation and presentment of the facts reflecting the surveyed reality. In the research, the results of content analysis are generalised by the *method of incomplete generalising induction* (Tidikis, 2003, p. 387), 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.

Content Analysis

An example of content analysis is provided in Table 1, singling out essential units (statements) of the text analysis, encoding them according to similarity and grouping into sub-categories which are attributed to common categories according to a linking sense.

Table 1. Example of categorisation of research results (curriculum design).

Category	Sub-category	Statements
Integration of practice into study subjects to be corrected	*Necessity to develop students' international competences*	"Competences of graduates that are related to the ability to communicate in the professional international environment are not properly substantiated on participation of students in international academic exchange programmes."
	Necessity of a longer practice period	"While studying particular subjects, it would be useful to have more practice."
	Necessity to reflect practical activities in study subjects	"The programme should stronger develop practical skills, especially in relation to graduation theses. This tendency should be continued in other practical training and practical placement activities."
	Necessity to increase practice	"The study programme should include more practical placements and collaboration with social stakeholders should be more active in the framework of the study programme."

Results of Research

Curriculum Design

Usually, practice is integrated in the overall structure of university studies. The purpose of practical activities is "to provide conditions for a student to apply gained theoretical knowledge and skills in particular work situations and obtain abilities or experience required for future professional performance" (Stasiūnaitienė, Norkutė, 2011). Experts who evaluate study programmes emphasise (Figure 1) *importance of integration of practice in study subjects*, underlining the necessity to develop international competences. In the period under analysis, experts emphasise that competences related to the ability to communicate in the professional international environment are insufficiently grounded on students' participation

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QUALITY ISSUES
AND INSIGHTS
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 5, No. 1, 2016

in international programmes of academic mobility. Also, the necessity of long-term practical placement and reflection of such activities in a study subject is underlined. This tendency should be continued in other activities of practical training and practice. Moreover, the need to increase practical placement is expressed in cases when a study programme could include more practical placements, and implementation of study programmes in collaboration with social stakeholders could be more active.

The second block of experts' remarks is dedicated to the curriculum design through *positioning of a study programme* (Figure 1), pointing out the necessity to attribute study subjects to a particular study field, strongly substantiating inclusion of study subjects into a particular study programme. In some cases titles of programmes do not meet the study field (e.g. "<...> the study programme is registered in the field of Pedagogy; however, its title <...> does not reveal the major purpose of the programme which is to educate a teacher"), the essence of studies is not revealed (e.g. a title of a particular study programme is attractive in the marketing sense, but it is not clear about the future job and key competences of a graduate).

Experts emphasise that *substantiation, uniqueness* (Figure 1) of study subjects is to be corrected. There is lack of integration of innovative measures in study subjects because usually designers of a particular study programme apply the classical model for education of students and even do not include recent achievements in science and technologies. The necessity to update programmes (descriptions) of study subjects is highlighted. Nevertheless, it is not enough anymore to simply substantiate the necessity to include a certain study subject; the experts notice that uniqueness of a specific study subject, and its necessity in relation to it, is seldom proven. A subject's title must be related to a study programme's title, not always directly, though the relation must be maintained. However, experts point out that there should be not a merely mechanical adjustment of the titles but rather the grounded logical relation through the content of the study programme and study subjects which must be essentially linked with the programme. Since in Lithuania majority of universities have approved the lists of compulsory study subjects for students, experts recommend to maintain a more flexible approach: "some elective subjects could be recognised as compulsory subjects; <...> this would help to expand the competences obtained during the study programme with additional skills and knowledge". *Coherence and synthesis of study subjects* is pointed out as to be corrected when underlining the necessity for consistency of study subjects: "the first year of studies should include not only fundamentals or general study subjects but also those which motivate <...>, correspond to the aims and objectives of the entire study programme".

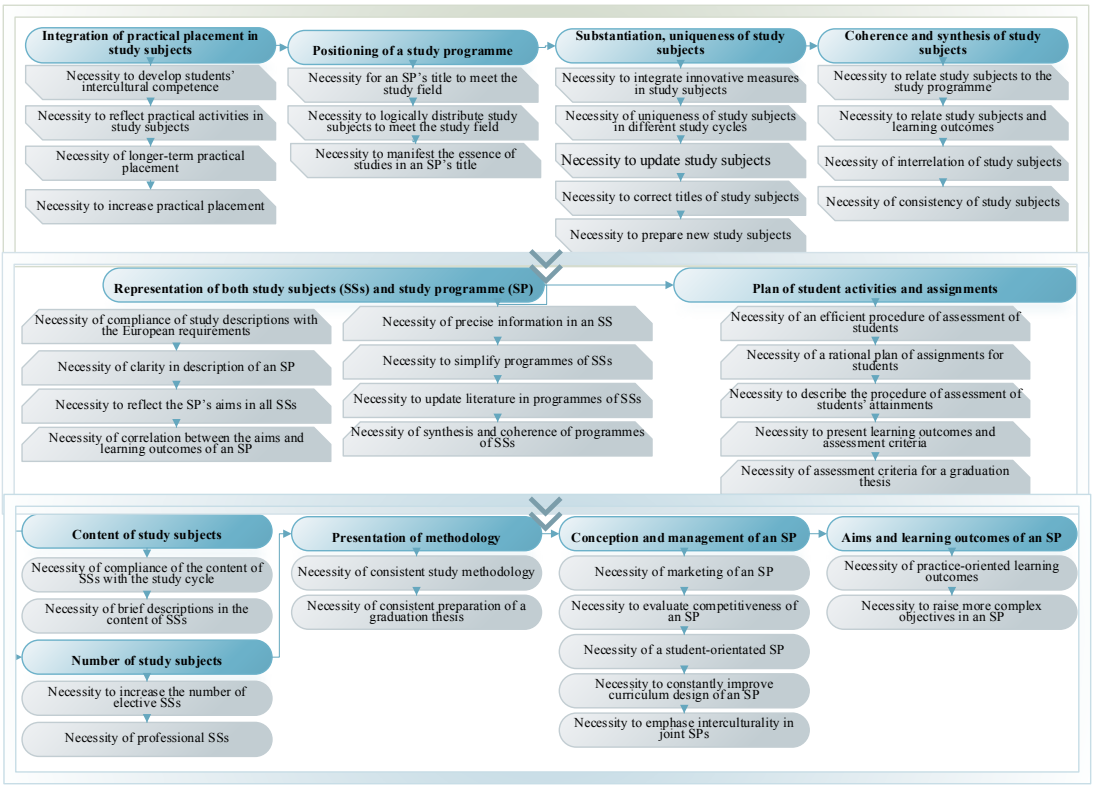

Figure 1: Curriculum design.

Experts underline that it is *important to relate learning outcomes of both study subjects and study programme*: "<...> Anticipated learning outcomes of study subjects are not related to the learning outcomes of the study programme, i.e. attribution of study subjects to this programme is not substantiated in relation to anticipated learning outcomes". Also, presentation of single study subjects and their correlation are important (e.g. "Even though study subjects do not duplicate, it is aimed to maintain <...> logic of study subjects; however, there is no integration of the aims of study subjects being developed at levels of skills: every subject focuses on different aims"). Sometimes content of study subjects is too broad, there are too many of subjects and they are little related to practice – mostly based on a classical theoretical approach. The necessity of synthesis and coherence of descriptions of study subjects as well as simplification are emphasised because the form itself is complex, hardly understandable to a student. Experts found out that not always the aims and learning outcomes of a study programme correlated, all study subjects lacked reflection of the aims. The aims of both study programme and subjects are formulated as too challenging and insufficiently clearly – this also determines complicated descriptions of study subjects and miscommunication with students concerning what should be achieved by them. Curriculum design also lacks substantiation concerning calculation of students' independent work and assessment criteria (e.g. the ECTS system is not completely acknowledged). Since scientists' classical approach to study subjects dominates, "<...> almost all lists of literature in study subjects lack recent publications, especially in foreign languages, Internet sources, data bases are not indicated".

Assignment for student activities is also to be improved. Descriptions of study subjects unclearly render information to students on what they must know, be able to do, how this will be assessed. A description of the procedure of assessment of students' attainments is required, "<...> to ensure students' comparable experience, independently from a chosen subject". There is a suggestion to present assignments in study subjects in a more rational manner. The *necessity of constant studying of methodology* is underlined ("<...> in the first year, a course specifically

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QUALITY ISSUES
AND INSIGHTS
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 5, No. 1, 2016

designed for research could be useful). Most often preparation of the Master Thesis in study programmes starts in the third semester; however, experts hold it that it is too late. During other semesters skills of scientific research could be used not relating to the Master Thesis, for instance, seminar work, writing of an article etc.

On the ground of commentaries of experts, it can be stated that the *conception and management of a programme is to be corrected*, emphasising the necessity of marketing of a study programme (e.g. "<...> substantiation of a study programme lacks the analysis of demand, the aims and anticipated competences are not clearly highlighted"), estimation of competitiveness ("Competitors of a programme are insufficiently estimated"), orientation to a student. Moreover, it is emphasised that constant improvement of curriculum design not only by listing the data of quality surveys but also proving what was amended after receiving feedback must be implemented. Learning outcomes of a study programme must also be oriented towards practice, while formulating more complex objectives of a study programme.

Study Process and Its Evaluation

Experts provided the commentaries concerning the study process and its evaluation (Figure 2). Projection of graduates' career is highlighted, it is pointed out that it is necessary to monitor students'/ graduates' career ("Career of graduates is not being systematically monitored; nevertheless, the Self-evaluation Report states that majority of former Master students are working according to their speciality"). Increase of employment and self-realisation opportunities is underlined ("Indices of employment according to the speciality should be increased <...>"; "<...> to more comprehensively acquaint student with the opportunities to get a better paid job if a student would go abroad for partial studies").

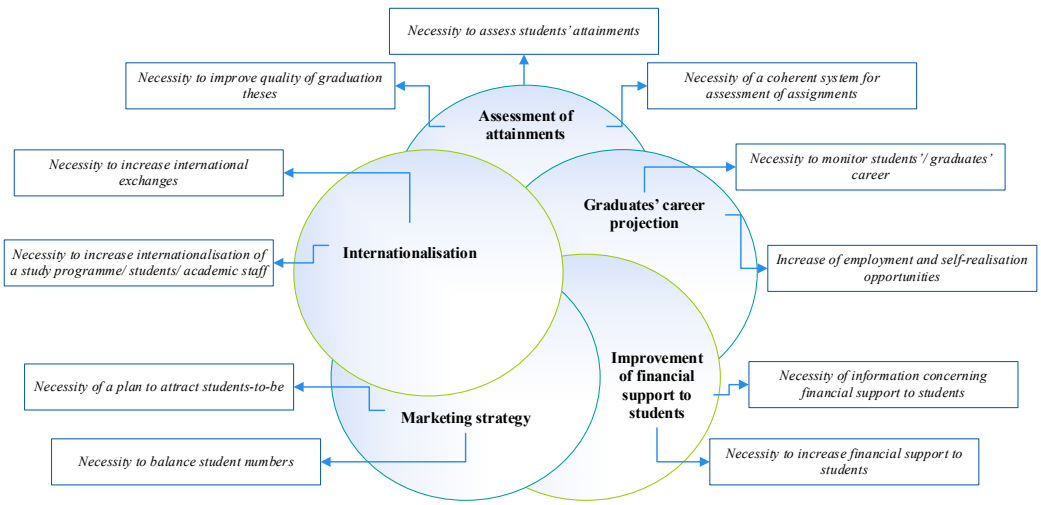

Figure 2: Study process and its evaluation.

Improvement of financial support to students is emphasised pointing out that "more endeavours should be put in finding additional opportunities to get financial support to gifted students" and to inform students about financial support. The marketing strategy should be perfected, too, because the number of students constantly decreases and the available measures do not attract them. The lack of internationalisation, importance of increase of internationalisation of a study programme/ students/ teaching staff are mentioned as well ("The University does not properly support international components, in terms of both students and teaching staff, including exchange programmes, collaboration, joint research activities"; "Foreign students must be attracted by increasing internationalisation of the study programme"). This can be improved via international exchanges ("<...> not many students participate in international

mobility programmes which successfully contribute to the gaining of many general abilities"; "Possibilities for students to go abroad even for a shorter than one semester period should be searched for"). Assessment of attainments should be improved, emphasising that there is lack of a unified consistent system for assessment of assignments, integration of students' attainments in the study process and improvement of quality of graduation theses.

Management of a Study Programme

Assurance of quality in studies is underlined (Figure 3) while emphasising the necessity of the procedures intended for perfection of a study programme ("It is not defined how the programme is designed, perfected, the system of quality assurance does not reflect collaboration of teaching staff in design and perfection of the programme"; "Management of the study programme is the weakest area of the programme"). It is stated that the quality management structure should be more detailed ("Description of the programme should be more detailed in order no questions would arise concerning the composition of the Management Committee and the Quality Assurance Commission"). The necessity to evaluate the performance is highlighted by stating that "systematic assessment of quality of the study programme does not proceed". Experts state that it is important to distribute responsibilities "for implementation and supervision of the programme, the decision-making". Implementation of the feedback process ("<...> possibilities for closed submission of feedback and (or) the system for quality assurance are required <...>"; "Students do not receive continuous feedback concerning their attainments, teaching staff do not receive feedback concerning their work with students") as well as recording of feedback ("There are no clear evidences that the measures were applied systematically in order to involve employers in the process of improvement of the study programme") are required.

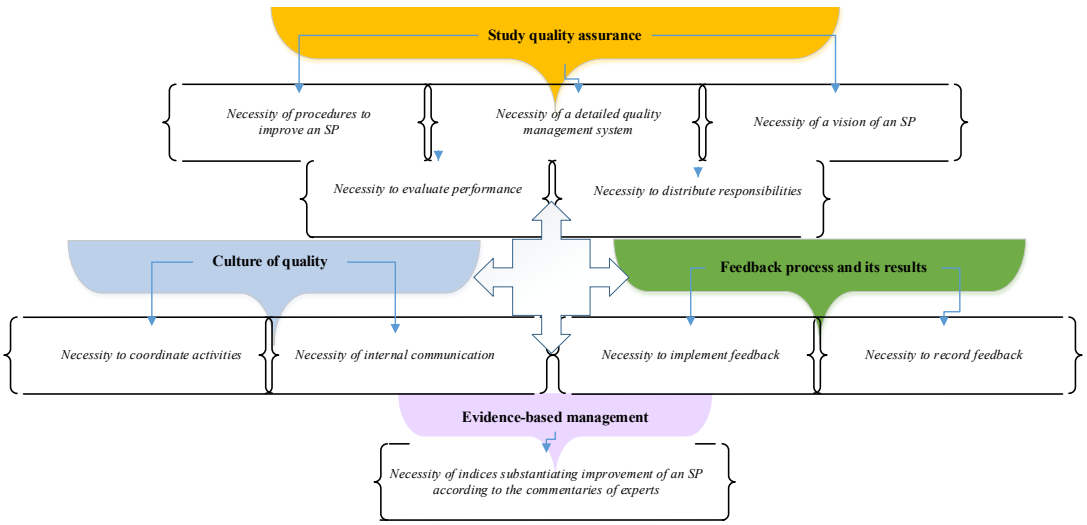

Figure 3: Management of a study programme.

Evidence-based management which should be improved is underlined emphasising the necessity of indices substantiating improvement of study programmes according to the commentaries of experts. The need for the culture of quality is relevant, too, emphasising importance of coordination of activities and internal communication (e.g. "<...> managers of the faculty and department as well as teaching staff very little exchange information on the study programme").

ISSN 2029-9575 (PRINT)
ISSN 2538-7200 (ONLINE)
QUALITY ISSUES
AND INSIGHTS
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 5, No. 1, 2016

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

It is emphasised that analysis of learning outcomes and assessment (Figure 4) reveals the need for improvement of representation of a programme, pointing out the necessity of highlighting purposefulness and originality in the specific field of a programme ("<...> aim to present the programme as universal, reflecting the demands of a rapidly changing society and labour market. However, such formulation of the programme's orientation builds a distance between this programme and more fundamental <...> goals in studies and research"). Moreover, the necessity to highlight specificity of a programme is pointed out ("<...> specificity of this programme should be underlined more strongly <...>"; "An interdisciplinary character of the programme is not clearly substantiated").

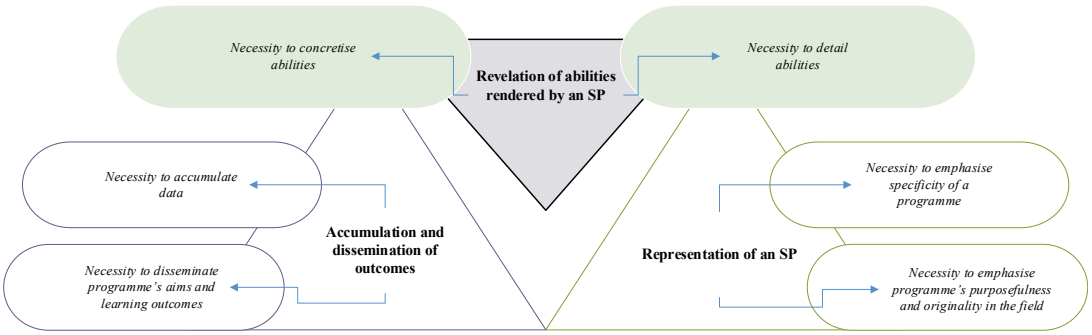

Figure 4: Learning outcomes and assessment.

The area of revelation of rendered abilities should be improved emphasising the necessity to concretise ("<...> some abilities are formulated in a too generalised manner (e.g. "Will be able to critically and creatively think")"; "<...> the learning outcomes should more emphasise obtained knowledge and skills while studying in the international environment <...>") and detail ("the list of transferable skills in the study programme does not indicate the ability of graduates to communicate in the professional environment, even though a possible employment in EU states is mentioned") the abilities.

Accumulation and dissemination of outcomes is underlined pointing out that "systematic collection of feedback information from industry enterprises on the aims and anticipated learning outcomes of the study programme is not carried out", and "programme's aims and anticipated learning outcomes are little accessible to society".

Academic Staff

Management of human resources plays "a very important role in trying to ensure quality of performance of a higher education institution" (Kohont, Nadoh Bergoc, 2010). Analysis of the remarks provided by experts concerning academic staff (Figure 5) highlights that the system of motivation of teaching staff should be perfected focusing on the necessity to motivate to strive for high qualification. An institution should ensure activeness of academic staff in professional and social, institutional management performance. Also, it is underlined that the load for academic staff should be reduced because too many hours of contact work, administrative burden and non-formal activities are allocated, which distract teaching staff from their key task, i.e. high quality delivery of lectures and development of research. Experts emphasise the need to develop competences of academic staff underlining professional and intercultural competences. Staff management is pointed out as a field to be corrected concerning assurance of rotation of teaching staff, attraction of teachers from other areas and visiting foreign teachers. Academic staff members not always collaborate with social stakeholders, graduates, not always involve them in a study programme.

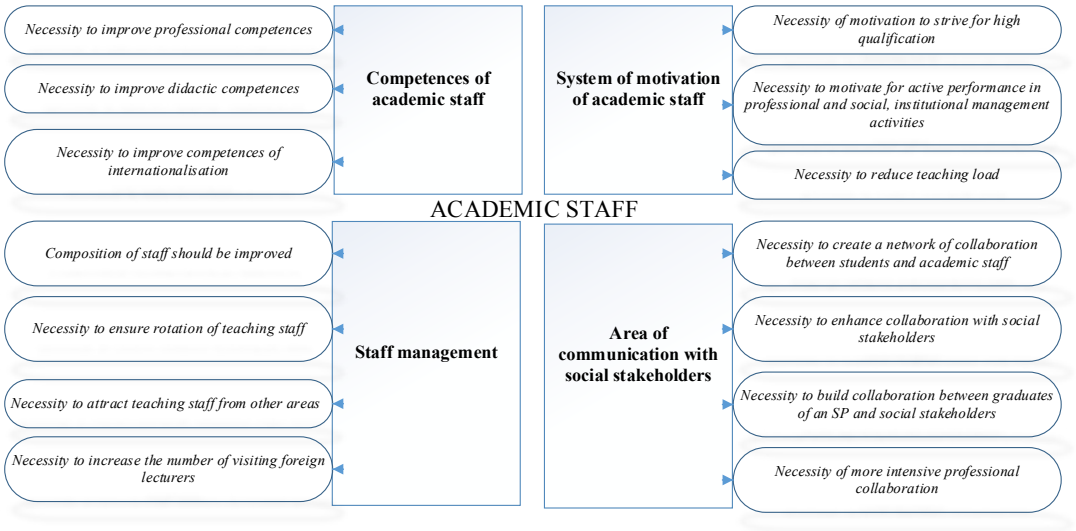

Figure 5: Academic staff.

A. Kohont and J. B. Nadoh (2010) underline that "when evaluating the current preparation of teaching staff and their needs for professional development, it is clear that additional training and support are required. This not only contributes to better understanding of the changing environment and goals set by society, but also to performance of important roles attributed by supporters and implementers of these processes of change". A. Kohont and J. Nadoh Bergoc (2010) have it that a system of feedback information should be created, which foresees how to use this information for improvement of management of a higher education institution, teaching, research, design of study programmes and other activities. Aiming to meet student's "emotional, academic and social needs and to provide preconditions for successful studying" (Sajienė, Tamulienė, 2012), support to students is required.

Conclusions

Essential factors for improvement of study programmes are focused on the curriculum design. Study subjects must be systematically substantiated and correlate with the anticipated learning outcomes and the main aim of the programme, relate with each other and necessarily be oriented not only to theory but also to practice. Coherence of study subjects must be reflected in the interaction of learning outcomes and methods, which would facilitate stronger holistic education of a future specialist. More attention should be paid not to the preparation of study subjects and their descriptions, but rather to actual delivery of them, interaction with students, social stakeholders, colleagues, when aiming to avoid duplication and redundancy, too high theorisation. All study programmes should enhance managerial international and practical competences of academic staff. To ensure quality of a study programme, not only documents and follow-up activity plans are required but also their improvement with regard to commentaries of experts, results of feedback and insights of academic staff is needed.

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ISSN 2029-9575 (PRINT)
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AND INSIGHTS
IN THE 21st CENTURY
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