BROADER PERSPECTIVES

35 Years of Liberal Arts in Lithuania
Leonidas Donskis (1962–2016), Professor of Political Science at Vytautas Magnus University, philosopher, political theorist, historian of ideas, social analyst, and political commentator.

Mykolas Drunga (1948–2023), Associate Professor in the Department of Public Communications at Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuanian-American journalist, philosopher, and translator.

Romas Sakadolskis (1947–2016), Lithuanian-American journalist and lecturer in the Department of Public Communications at Vytautas Magnus University.

After the University was re-established, with the introduction of the Harvard University concept and VMU becoming the first university in the country to promote the American type of liberal arts education, it already seemed to challenge Soviet technocratism and the entire technocratic Soviet culture that categorised science and the world into physicists and lyricists. To me, the role of VMU seemed truly epoch-making and colossal, as it confronted the cult of specialists and the specialised academic culture that confines a person very early on, leaving them with no space to manoeuvre in life or to pursue a broader education. The shift of VMU to the concept of liberal studies represents nothing short of an academic revolution.

At Chicago, Harvard, and many other universities in the US, once you enrol, you must pass ten exams in study courses ranging from mathematics, physics, and chemistry to literature, musicology, fine arts, and all the social sciences and humanities in between. If you fail, you are required to study these courses during your first two years. If you’re a humanities student but don’t pass the maths, physics, or chemistry exam, then you need to study physics and chemistry. Even as a humanities student, you must be knowledgeable in physics, and if you opt for the natural sciences, you still need to know the difference between Dante and Torquato Tasso.

How do we envision a free person in today’s society? In antiquity, this was someone who could participate in civic life. He/She was capable of speaking, thinking, calculating, and had some knowledge of the arts. He/she was well-educated. The whole concept of Artes Librales is founded on what is needed for a person in modern times to fully participate in life. It’s not about what is needed to be a specialist in a field, shutting away in his/her office to calculate and measure. No. It’s about what is needed to be an active member of society.
“When I look at what Vytautas Magnus University has become, it’s truly heartwarming to see that our vision for its re-establishment has been realised. While there is a great need for specialists, it’s even more crucial that these individuals can adapt to rapid changes and understand the vital role universities play in the life of the state and the nation. That’s why, when I returned to Lithuania, I believed it was essential to have a university that stood apart – one that hadn’t been conditioned to conform to the Soviet system for 50 years,” says Prof. Algirdas Avižienis, the first elected Rector of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), which was re-established in 1989. Through his efforts, VMU became the first university in Lithuania to incorporate the principles of the liberal arts (artes liberales) into its studies, offering the opportunity for a comprehensive education.

In the United States, Prof. Avižienis worked for thirty years at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), one of the top twenty universities in the US, which receives as many as 100,000 applications each year. During his tenure at the UCLA, he developed a fault-tolerant computer architecture that is now widely used around the world.

Drawing on the study system of another prestigious US higher education institution, Harvard University, the internationally acclaimed scientist Prof. Avižienis decided to implement it at VMU, giving students the freedom to choose their study courses, arrange their own timetables, not be confined to their speciality alone, learn foreign languages, and opt to study a wide scope of study courses, ranging from philosophy and biology to psychology and media arts.

Specialities Will Change, but It Is More Important to Educate Thinking Individuals

“Let’s try to establish a university in Lithuania whose primary mission is to educate thinking, independent individuals who understand the world, with specific specialities being less important. After all, these specialities will change, especially now that people
are living longer. That’s why I decided to introduce such a programme. Another decision was to seek out young, talented scientists in Lithuania who had not yet been indoctrinated into the Soviet system,” says Prof. Algirdas Avižienis, recalling his efforts to re-establish VMU.

The UCLA and VMU Professor Emeritus notes that over two millennia, the understanding of the liberal arts has evolved, yet its essence remains unchanged: such an education enables individuals to grasp what is most crucial for humanity at any given time, irrespective of their speciality, and prepares them for future challenges and professions that may not yet exist.

According to VMU Honorary Professor, the most rewarding memories of his time as Rector were not only working with highly enthusiastic colleagues but also the students’ fervent desire to learn and their curiosity about everything.

“It’s heartening to recall the enthusiasm with which we worked. Together with the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. Vytautas Kaminskas we occasionally stayed up until midnight planning the further development of the programmes and thinking about what to do next. We started the University with 177 first-year students, selected from 805 applicants. I came to know nearly all of them personally. The students’ keen interest in everything truly uplifted me. *Artes liberales* made their studies more interesting,” says Prof. Avižienis, explaining that the variety offered by liberal arts studies keeps young people interested and helps them discover what they find most interesting, rather than limiting them to the narrow confines of their speciality study courses.

**VMU Serves as an Example for Other Universities in Lithuania**

The Professor asserts that the study model employed at VMU today serves as an excellent example for other higher education institutions in Lithuania. “Universities can observe how VMU model functions; I believe they will recognise the necessity of such a foundation for students. Technological and Health Sciences are very specific fields; however, providing...
students with the opportunity to study courses such as Philosophy or Music will undoubtedly make them even better doctors and researchers,” says Prof. Avižienis.

“I hope that VMU will serve as an example for other universities, encouraging them to adopt what suits them. It is of paramount importance that all universities in Lithuania aim to cultivate as many talented, intelligent individuals as possible who feel called to enter politics and are not afraid to do so, considering that, as in the rest of the world, higher education is highly dependent on the government in power,” he points out, citing the University of California, Los Angeles, as an example of an autonomous university; the UCLA is overseen not by the Ministry but by the Board of Regents, composed of 26 dedicated Californians from various spheres, including the Governor of California and the Secretary of Education. Conversely, in certain areas, VMU even outperforms the UCLA; for example, it offers the opportunity to study up to 30 foreign languages.

Prof. Avižienis lavishes praise not only on VMU but also on Lithuania and its scientists, whom he frequently meets at various conferences around the world; he even keeps a special list with their names. Among these promising scientists we find Avižienis’ own son Audrius, with a PhD in Physical Chemistry from the UCLA, who also keeps in touch with Lithuanian scholars in their fields residing in Germany, Canada, and Japan.

“I’m astonished by how impressively young Lithuanians perform globally, as it speaks volumes about the progress of the country. Our students are truly mature and do well in the scientific community. I just wish they would return to Lithuania sooner. We should encourage them to visit us, more often or to lead groups of young people, especially doctoral students,” says the computer scientist.

Universities Need to Be More Open

Giving advice to young people who are still deciding where to study, Prof. Avižienis emphasises the importance of choosing the field that interests them, rather than what their parents might suggest. He
appreciates the fact that VMU offers its prospective students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the University beforehand, so that they can visit and see for themselves how studies are conducted and what conditions are offered. The Professor encourages the University staff to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the EU to collaborate with teachers and staff from universities abroad. Yet, it is equally important to maintain contacts within Lithuania and to be more open.

“In the US, we have a practice of sending our best doctoral students to other universities, and they send us theirs in return. If we could exchange our top doctoral students with Vilnius University, it would benefit both institutions. However, this requires adjustment. I was particularly unhappy about the issue of state-funded places, when universities were nearly forced to be as insular as possible and hide their secrets. We should seek to strengthen each other by sharing our most accomplished researchers,” claims the first elected Rector of the re-established VMU.

Lithuania – Akin to Paradise

The UCLA Professor Emeritus reveals that he now spends more time in Lithuania than before, as he enjoys being here. “I thought, ‘America is too big,’ so I decided to return to Lithuania. Previously, I spent half of my time here; now, I plan to spend two-thirds. Tell me how can I not want to be here? Whenever I return to my hometown of Kaunas or to Anykščiai, I feel as though I’ve come back to a kind of paradise,” says Prof. Avižienis, who resides near VMU Botanical Garden and enjoys the beauty of the nature of Lithuania.

While in Lithuania, the Professor frequently meets with old friends and acquaintances, including his university friend, former President Valdas Adamkus, with whom Prof. Avižienis studied in the US. “The most amusing part is what we discuss – our student years and how much fun we had back then: we felt stronger than the American students. Having endured the war and survived the displacement camps, we believed we had a deeper understanding of the world than our fellow American colleagues,” recalls the Professor.
We Strive for Individuals to Approach Any Profession with an Artist’s Mindset

“In today’s world, it’s insufficient to solely master one’s field. It’s imperative to cultivate a broader perspective. This underpins VMU’s commitment to values such as democracy, collegiality, inclusiveness, openness, diversity, and humility. In the scientific community, humility means a willingness to question and reconsider one’s own views, which is the cornerstone of the artes liberales culture that permeates our science, studies, and communication,” explains Prof. Julija Kiršienė, Vice-Rector for Research at Vytautas Magnus University.
Prof. Kiršienė emphasises that *artes liberales* extend beyond the curriculum and research to embody the unique internal culture of an academic institution. She illustrates this concept to her students with a video of professional cellists moving seamlessly from playing a classical piece to rock music. Their ability to excel across diverse genres not only challenges the established norms, but also underscores their professionalism.

“This example embodies the ethos of our University: to encourage individuals to question, to challenge existing frameworks, and to explore new perspectives with conviction,” states Prof. Kiršienė, a law Professor at the University.

She argues that in today’s world of readily accessible information, universities need to evolve. The *artes liberales* model, with its emphasis on a broad-based education, is perfectly aligned with this need.

“Students receive a customised study plan that includes compulsory study courses but also gives them the freedom to choose courses from different disciplines, such as the arts, humanities, and sciences. This method is designed to broaden their worldview and prepare them for both their careers and their lives. Moreover, every student has the opportunity to study foreign languages and other courses, underscoring our commitment to fostering lifelong learners, not just degree recipients,” says the Vice-Rector.

Reflecting on the World Economic Forum’s list of essential skills, the focus is on nurturing lifelong learning, emotional and social intelligence, and continuous professional development.

Prof. Kiršienė also highlights that the University is a key networking site, where vital professional relationships are formed: “While online lectures offer convenience, they lack the interactive and networking opportunities that in-person lectures provide. The person sitting next to you today could be your future colleague”.

An Unprecedented Case in Lithuania

More common in Anglo-Saxon cultures, *artes liberales* can be traced back to ancient Greece. Its introduction to Lithuania by the returning diaspora has been significant, albeit challenging due to the prevalence of state intervention in education in Europe.

The effectiveness of the *artes liberales* approach was perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the merger of three different universities. Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) successfully merged with Aleksandras Stulginskis University (now known as VMU Agriculture Academy) and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (now VMU Education Academy).

“This unprecedented merger in Lithuania brought together three institutions with vastly different cultures. It was the *artes liberales* philosophy, based on tolerance, openness, and a commitment to listening, that facilitated our coming together, allowing us to listen to each other and integrate
our diverse strengths. While university mergers often result in diminished academic potential, this particular merger has resulted in an exceptionally fruitful synergy,” explains Prof. Kiršienė, referring to the tangible outcomes of this integration.

Since the merger, Vytautas Magnus University has achieved remarkable advancements in science and academia, outpacing other Lithuanian universities in recent developments. In collaboration with its partners, VMU has formed the European University Alliance Transform4Europe and has seen a significant increase in its involvement and success in both national and international research projects. “Crucially, despite facing challenges such as the COVID pandemic, demographic shifts, warfare, energy crises, and other hurdles, there has been a significant uplift in salaries and job satisfaction among our University staff,” emphasises the Vice-Rector. The merger of three different universities
into VMU demonstrates the successful application of the principles of artes liberales, fostering tolerance, openness, and mutual enrichment.

**Scientific Breakthrough at the Intersection of Disciplines**

Prof. Kiršienė emphasises the importance of interdisciplinarity at the University, not only in the structuring of academic programmes, but also in the implementation of research projects. In 2023, VMU spearheaded two major international and interdisciplinary projects supported by the Horizon Europe programme: the Forest 4.0 project for the creation of a Centre of Excellence and the DIACOMET project, which aims to improve ethical and responsible communication in the media.

Another important project is DIGIRES, which focuses on identifying disinformation and boosting the digital resilience of the Lithuanian society online. The project uses artificial intelligence, an open-access corpus, and a specialised dataset to dissect disinformation in Lithuanian. Reflecting on the value of interdisciplinary research, Prof. Kiršienė notes the collaborative nature of these initiatives: “The success of such large-scale projects is greatly enhanced by interdisciplinary collaboration. I believe that it is at the intersection of different disciplines that future scientific breakthroughs will be made.”
VMU to Be the First in the World to Sequence the Wisent Genome: How Closely Are They Related to the Aurochs, the Symbol of Kaunas?

“In the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the protection of wisents was enshrined in the statute. It’s our historical heritage; hence, we must ensure their survival, enhance their diversity, and combat their diseases. All this necessitates sequencing the genome of the European bison, or the wisent, an endeavour currently underway. This marks the first global attempt to sequence the genome of these animals, thereby anticipating a major breakthrough. Furthermore, it merits investigation into the extent to which today’s wisents are related to the aurochs, the symbol of Kaunas, that roamed here 500 years ago,” says Algimantas Paulauskas, Professor at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Vytautas Magnus University, introducing the innovative project.

According to the scientist, wisents, which are listed in the Red List, are among the main protected animal species, and our country ranks second in Europe in terms of the population of free-ranging wisents, with approximately three hundred of them currently in Lithuania. In the previous century, wisents became extinct across Europe due to overhunting, yet the species was successfully recovered from the remaining populations in zoological gardens.

“Initial DNA analysis has revealed that Lithuanian wisents significantly differ from those in Poland or the rest of Europe. The Poles had a practice of transporting wisents more frequently to other countries, including Germany and Romania. However, Lithuania remained isolated, leading to the development of a unique genotype, which has not yet been fully elucidated and therefore needs to be sequenced,” explains Prof. Paulauskas, Director of VMU Research Institute of Natural and Technological Sciences and member of the European Bison Friends Society.

Genome Sequencing – a Highly Relevant Endeavour in the 21st Century

According to previous studies by VMU, there are two genetic lines of wisents in Lithuania: the Lowland and the Lowland-Caucasian, which require different care. The Professor asserts that to properly manage the care of Lithuanian wisents, it is necessary to separate these lines to avoid crossbreeding, which, in this case, reduces diversity, causes diseases, and contributes to the decline of the species. The European Bison...
Pedigree Book recommends that only the Lowland wisent line should be kept in Lithuania, while the Lowland-Caucasian line should be transported to mountainous regions or removed from the ranks of free-living wisent. The aim of this action is to restore the wisent population to its composition in the old times.

The new VMU project employs innovative, cutting-edge equipment and technology. Genome sequencing enables the reading of the unique genetic makeup of a specific animal or plant species or individual: the DNA information that determines the characteristics of an organism. Sequencing can help detect diseases at an early stage, breed more resilient animal species, conserve endangered species, improve agricultural food production, and understand animal evolution.

“New equipment has been introduced that allows for the immediate sequencing of an individual's genome: this enables personalised treatment. Overall, genome sequencing continues to be highly relevant in the 21st century; it has revolutionised genetics and continues to be immensely beneficial for practical purposes. However, the focus today is more on the human genome and less on animals, so there's still much to be explored,” says the Professor, emphasising the significance of the project.

Wisents are Migrating towards Kaunas

Dr. Artūras Kibiša, a researcher at VMU Research Institute of Natural and Technological Sciences and head of the Game Management Laboratory at VMU Agriculture Academy, explains that one of the primary objectives is to form a new herd from the relocated wisents. This involves acclimatising animals brought in from different regions to one another before releasing them into the wild in a new location. Currently, wisents are being relocated from Central Lithuania to the territory of Dzūkija National Park, in the hope that this will contribute to the enhancement of wisent pool.

“Wisent trapping is conducted in two ways: using a stationary and immovable trap installed at a specific site, or mobile, transportable traps. To minimise the stress on the animals, they are sedated at the moment of capture and when they wake up, they can walk out with the collar on, without even encountering humans,” says Dr. Kibiša.

He highlights that females are presently needed to form the herd; thus, if males are captured, they are equipped with collars with tracking devices. When such animals are released back into the wild, their migration is tracked. Such studies of freely roaming wisents have been ongoing for several years. Meanwhile, females are transported to Dzūkija and temporarily kept in an enclosure with males from a different genetic line until a herd forms, which can take up to a year. Once formed, the herd is released into the wild.

“A historic moment – thanks to the collars, we can see that wisents, which for many years lived closer to Panevėžys, are now migrating towards Kaunas. They are currently near Didžiosios Lapos. This same herd had lived near Lifosa phosphogypsum hills for some time, and last February, it successfully crossed the
Via Baltica, ending up near Vandžiogala. A week ago, it moved towards Lapės, thus, making a loop and expanding its territory. The fact that the wisents are moving and are not concentrated in one place means less damage to farmers’ fields,” says Dr. Kibiša.

In less than a decade, the number of wisents living in the wild has almost tripled. In 2014, there were 101 wisents, and by the end of 2022, the number increased to 280. Most of them, 204 in total, are located in Kėdainiai District.

Research Will Lead to Breakthrough in Genomics

The wisent sequencing project is being carried out by VMU Research Institute of Natural and Technological Sciences in partnership with Genomika, a genetics and biotechnology company established by VMU alumni and students. Ignas Galminas, one of the founders of the company and a doctoral student at VMU, highlights that one of the key missions of the company is to introduce global innovations to Lithuania and to develop priority innovations in the country in collaboration with international teams. One of the priority scientific areas of the company is the technology for storing data in DNA molecules. For its innovative work with this technology, the company has received numerous international awards and has been selected by the European Innovation Council to advance its research in this domain.

Galminas explains that the idea to sequence the wisent genome came about after seeing an illustration of the animal in a book about Prof. Tadas Ivanauskas – a naturalist, writer, and Doctor of Biology, who was also one of the founders of the Higher Courses, the precursor to the University of Lithuania (renamed Vytautas Magnus University in 1930). At the University of Lithuania, Prof. Ivanauskas pioneered the ideas of artes liberales and initiated the teaching of various disciplines, including genetics, ecology, and nature conservation, as well as the pursuit of research in new scientific fields in Lithuania.

“We thought it would be interesting to also sequence the wisent genome using innovative, cutting-edge methods. Once this idea took shape, progress was rapid; thanks to VMU scientists, a large team of our and VMU specialists was formed. When the idea was shared with the developers of pioneering DNA sequencing technologies, they also found it appealing. As a result, they’re sending their most advanced high-throughput sequencing device to Lithuania. We are confident that this project will pave the way for new discoveries, facilitating the sequencing of other animals, plants, and microorganisms. It will be a breakthrough in the field,” says Galminas.

The wisent’s genome sequencing project will be completed in just a month from project design to data analysis. „It’s lightning-fast! This achievement is particularly impressive when compared to the 20 years it took to sequence the entire human genome“, Genomika co-founder notes.
Significant Practical Benefits for Students

According to Prof. Paulauskas, the students and graduates collaborating in this and other innovative VMU projects undertake highly important work. The employed young people are not only financially compensated for their activities but also gain a significant practical benefit, i.e., experience that will help them to successfully secure employment in leading-edge companies. The project involves not only graduates or doctoral students but also undergraduate students still pursuing their Bachelor's degree.

“By participating in research projects, they learn the basic methods of working in a molecular laboratory and conducting DNA or genomic research. This will enable them to find employment, for example, in biotech companies. Our students are highly valued by employers such as Thermo Fisher, BioCity, and others because they have already gained practical experience and have learned to work with modern equipment in the updated laboratories of VMU on Akademija campus,” points out the Professor. The scientist reveals that the wisent genome project is just one of many ambitious endeavours being conducted or planned at Vytautas Magnus University. Plans are in place to construct a Green Tech Valley on Akademija campus, which will focus on top-tier research in the fields of environmental protection and ecology.

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Pianist Aspiring to Become a Lawyer

“\textit{I realised early on that the world around me was cruel and that I needed to know how to defend myself. This can be achieved by understanding the laws. The adversarial principle upon which courts operate, where two different parties present their rights, and the ability to defend oneself with knowledge rather than fists, fascinates me deeply. I believe that by nature, I am more akin to a lawyer than a musician. However, the piano has been my calling and my passion since childhood,}” says Silvija Beatričė Petkevičiūtė, a second cycle student at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) Music Academy.

Having begun to play the piano in early childhood, she has obtained two Master’s degrees – one in Singing of Concert Genres and the other in Piano Performing Arts. She is continuing her studies, now learning to play the accordion and further delving into the field of law, which has intrigued her since adolescence.

However, it is not just her creative talents or her proficiency in six foreign languages that set her apart from her peers. The young woman, who has been blind since birth, says that much of her success can be attributed to her dedicated teachers, who, often working beyond their official hours, have not hesitated to adapt their conventional teaching methods for the sake of the talented pianist.

Between Music and Law

She recalls that already at the age of three, her parents could not keep her away from the piano. “My father taught me my first melodies on the piano. Since I was not yet attending kindergarten, in the evenings, when all the other children had left, I would visit my grandmother, who worked there as a night watchwoman. There, I immersed myself in music, playing whatever seemed beautiful to me, even though I did not know any notes or how to play any specific compositions,” recalls Silvija Beatričė. She soon began to transform these improvisations into musical pieces, the first of which she composed at the age of four – a piece she can still play today.

In the first grade, her music teacher noticed her talent and persuaded her parents to allow her to attend a music school. However, both her parents and others around her questioned this choice and suggested that she try other instruments. “By then, I had already decided and knew that I wanted to be a pianist. Nothing has changed to this day,” she asserts.

After watching a film as a teenager in which the protagonist studied law, the pianist quickly became fascinated with the profession. “Of course, a film can easily inspire, but it’s uncertain whether it reflects reality. I attended several summer schools for schoolchildren organised by VMU, where I attended
lectures on law. The lecturer Mindaugas Bilius recognised my aptitude. This experience reassured me that the film I had seen was indeed a reflection of reality. However, I had no intention of dropping music and considered law as an additional specialisation,” says the student, having faced questions about the feasibility of balancing music and law, two incredibly demanding and different specialisations.

Nevertheless, after completing school, Petkevičiūtė pursued studies in Piano Performing Arts. She admits that she had considerable reservations about the complexity of these studies, further exacerbated by those around her, which made her reconsider her decision to take up a minor studies in Law. “Now that I was studying Accordion Performing Arts, I told myself that if I could manage to write two Master’s theses and prepare two full exam programmes within a year, I could manage both my major and minor studies. Better late than never,” says VMU Music Academy student, who has obtained Master’s degrees in Piano Performing Arts and Singing of Concert Genres this year.

Teachers Do not Count Working Hours

The young woman, who seeks to be a professional musician, admits that the period when she had to study two programmes at the same time was particularly challenging. “Due to the lack of necessary audiobooks, there were many questions as to how I would manage to write my Master’s thesis. Therefore, I decided to undertake a creative project, exploring how non-musical phenomena such as poems, certain sounds, or symbols, can be encoded in musical language without words. Having studied composition for 10 years with the late Vidmantas Bartulis, a renowned composer, all the experience I had gained helped me to carry out this creative project without waiting for the necessary literature to be made available in audio format,” says the musician, who has been visually impaired since birth, reflecting on the challenges she faced during her studies.

She reveals that it takes much longer for her teachers to prepare her to learn a new piece than it does for an average student. The musician explains that she first masters the notes and rhythm before devising a musical plan. Silvija Beatričė jokes that with each new piece, her teacher feels as though starting anew with a first-grader, who, after a few lessons, develops into a student.

“We spend the first few lessons just learning to play the notes in a basic manner, without any amplification or softening. Once the fingers are familiar with their positions, we then explore how to adjust the volume to play softer or louder. It’s an interesting process, albeit protracted. But, like everyone else, we must adhere to deadlines. It all became more manageable when, a few years ago, I developed a system for audio sheet music, similar to an audiobook, but with recorded notes. This way, without the teacher’s help, I can rewind the recording as many times as I need and repeat the parts I want, which speeds up the whole process considerably,” says the pianist.
The young artist notes that her success as a student with a disability is determined not only by the complexity of her individual needs but also by the goodwill of her teachers. “For my minor studies in Law, teachers sometimes have to retype the lecture materials manually on the computer, as the screen-reading software I use is only compatible with certain file formats, such as those devoid of images. Teachers often undertake this task without counting their working hours. If everyone made a little extra effort to accommodate students with individual needs, the University would surely lack nothing,” says Petkevičiūtė, who, alongside her studies and concert preparations, willingly assists other students.

A Boundless Will for Creativity

The pianist, who has earned three higher education diplomas and performs in Lithuania and abroad, not only plays the piano and sings, but has also published her poetry book written in three languages. “Music carries rhythm, and poetry carries rhyme. For me, these elements are deeply interconnected. Thus, the book comprises 17 of my poems in Lithuanian, English, and Russian, and one printed in Braille. We also decided to include a CD featuring a cycle of seven pieces for piano that I composed and recorded,” the young author describes her poetry book “Preludes of Soul”, emphasising that the piano has been her calling and passion since childhood.

Singing came into Petkevičiūtė’s life when she had to choose an additional subject at music school. This led to her taking solo singing lessons and improving her voice, and by the age of 17, she was already performing in various cities across Lithuania. “There were many concerts where I only sang, as not every venue could provide instruments. Piano music appeals to a more specific audience, whereas everyone enjoys singing,” says the student, who is now advancing her musical journey by studying Accordion Performing Arts, explaining her decision to specialise in Singing of Concert Genres.

She was encouraged to choose this instrument by VMU Music Academy students from China, who dubbed the accordion a “portable piano”. “I thought it was a great idea! The accordion is an excellent alternative when a piano isn’t available. It’s a mechanical instrument from the first half of the 19th century that offers a much more beautiful and natural sound than an electronic keyboard, akin to a compact version of the piano. It allows you to play the same pieces as on the piano,” notes the musician, explaining that her decision to learn another instrument has broadened her horizons as a pianist.

Outstanding Recognition Abroad

The pianist, who has given performances in various Lithuanian cities and abroad, considers herself to have been born under a lucky star, which she attributes to her ability to manage stress before performances. She believes that if you do not feel nervousness when stepping onto the stage, then playing has become merely a job, and as a musician, you are no longer capable of conveying your emotions to the audience. According to Silvija Beatričė, who has taken on the role of a concert host several times, it is extremely important to feel a connection with the audience.
“You have to know when to use humour and when to convey something serious. The overall mood of the audience – whether they are receptive, bored, or displeased – can often be inferred from certain sounds,” she says. Petkevičiūtė still has memories of the extraordinary reaction of the audience, not as a host, but as a participant in an international competition for young talents in the United Kingdom. She says that at the time, as a 14-year-old, she not only had the opportunity to compete against talented pianists from all over the world and attend lectures at the Royal Academy of Music in London but also experienced a great deal of anxiety when she learned that she was one of the youngest contestants.

“I went on stage overwhelmed by pessimism, convinced that it was futile to expect any form of victory. I remember the moment I lifted my hands from the piano after performing Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” and Čiurlionis’ “Prelude in F minor”. A deafening silence followed. There was no applause. Confused, I feared that my performance had been subpar, though it seemed that I hadn’t really made any mistakes. The audience’s silence didn’t help at all. It turned out that they were just standing there in awe. I couldn’t believe it. Soon, I heard applause. For me, it was a profound affirmation from the audience that people enjoyed it immensely,” recalls Petkevičiūtė, who was then unanimously voted the first-place winner by the jury.

Combining the Incompatible

In addition to learning a new instrument, Petkevičiūtė is also studying her dream minor studies in Law. VMU student says that combining such different fields of study is challenging, but working in different faculties offers a deeper insight into the life of the University community.

“Inevitably, one area always suffers. But if I were forced to choose only law and give up music, I’d feel truly bad,” admits Petkevičiūtė, who has set herself the goal of not only combining both study programmes but also finding the time to create, which she admits is sometimes hard to come by.
Ukrainian Students Feel at Home at VMU

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) has welcomed more than three hundred Ukrainian students and, on the initiative of the First Ladies of Lithuania and Ukraine Diana Nausėdienė and Olena Zelenska, opened the Centre of Ukraine, a humanitarian and educational space established in the premises of VMU Education Academy in Vilnius. To support Ukrainian academia, VMU Centre of Mariupol State University was created in Kaunas. Ukrainians studying at VMU keenly participate in community activities, volunteer at the Centre of Ukraine, and firmly believe that the experience gained at the University will aid them in rebuilding their homeland.

Organising Meetings

In March 2022, Kyiv resident Kateryna Strutynska arrived in Lithuania. Originally planning to stay here for a few weeks or months, Strutynska ended up settling in Kaunas a the long term; the young woman with a Master’s degree in Law enrolled in the second cycle study programme “Diplomacy and International Relations” offered at VMU.

“We could never have imagined that the war would last this long. My parents’ close friends live in Kaunas, and they welcomed us with open arms. I’m incredibly grateful to them for everything. I have no regrets about choosing to study at VMU. I really like it here, and it’s a great opportunity to get a European education and test myself in a new field. The teachers are kind and friendly, and VMU community is always there to help you,” says Kateryna, who feels at home at the University not only because of the large Ukrainian community at the University but also because of her circle of friends, which includes students from various parts of the world.
She eagerly participates in the activities of the Ukrainian community; students use Telegram channel to discuss various topics, address issues, assist each other, and organise meetings.

“We always strive to address the topic of the war, so that the world and the people of Kaunas don’t forget it. We do this by organising various meetings; for example, on 24 February, to commemorate the anniversary of the war, we took to the streets with our self-made posters. We also took part in the discussion about opening the Centre of Ukraine in Kaunas, similar to the one in Vilnius,” says Strutynska.

Strutynska’s greatest passion is singing. In the summer of 2022, she organised a concert for Ukrainians at the now closed CulturEUkraine centre set up by “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022”. Alongside other artists, she sang Ukrainian songs and collected donations for the war victims. In the future, she plans to volunteer at the Centre of Ukraine in Vilnius.

**Living in the Moment**

Coming from a big city, Strutynska sometimes experiences boredom and a lack of activities in a smaller city compared to Kyiv. But she admits that when one’s country is at war, a quiet and peaceful environment is the best place to live.

“At first it was hard to get used to living here because I always wanted to go back home (and I still do). I missed home a lot, but with the support of my friends and my beloved, whom I met in Kaunas, I have adapted much better. I truly appreciate this immense support from Lithuanians. They are wonderful people,” says the young activist.

In her view, Lithuanians can serve as an example to other nations with their strong political stance and patriotism. “Throughout my time in Kaunas, I haven’t heard any negative comments about my country from Lithuanians. They are true patriots, and that truly amazes me. I also adore the nature and the beautiful roads here,” she says, enjoying every moment of her life in Lithuania and refraining from dwelling on distant plans.

“Before the full-scale war, I used to meticulously plan everything, but now in Ukraine, we say: we don’t know what will happen in the next minute, so how can you ask us about our plans? First and foremost, my plan is to complete my studies at VMU, and then we’ll see. Of course, my deepest wish is for the war to end as soon as possible, so that all Ukrainians can return to their beloved homeland,” claims Kateryna.

**Sharing Experiences with Peers**

Oleksandr Shyba, a student of economics at VMU, dedicates all his free time to volunteering at the Centre of Ukraine. He assists in organising various workshops, events, language courses, and children’s camps.

“The opening of the Centre of Ukraine in June 2022 was an extraordinary event, as this Centre is unique in Europe. It’s a great honour for me to be part of this project and to work with a wonderful team of volunteers who provide all the necessary support to Ukrainian women and children who have had to flee their country because of the Russian war,” says Oleksandr. For him, volunteering is the best way to maintain a bond with his homeland.

“Throughout volunteering, I not only help people and preserve our traditions, but I also gain new experiences and meet interesting people. I spend a lot of time listening to war stories, and although they are full of sorrow, they also carry a sense of hope, which motivates me to continue volunteering,” he says, sharing his experiences at the Centre of Ukraine and VMU with his peers in Ukraine.
Students from Three Kaunas Universities Joined Forces

Unlike most students from Ukraine, Volodymyr Vasylenko, a doctoral student in the field of Biology at VMU, came to Lithuania four years ago, long before the full-scale war, to take up a job at VMU Faculty of Natural Sciences. He is currently a junior researcher at VMU Research Institute of Natural and Technological Sciences.

When the full-scale war broke out, he joined the team of VMU Ambassadors, a group of 60 students from all over the world, who are prepared to answer questions, give advice, or otherwise help international VMU students.

“The University community provides us with immense support, as the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and the International Cooperation Department organise various events for Ukrainians. Our students also take part in the University activities, conferences, Transform4Europe Alliance events, and Erasmus Days,” explains Vasylenko. He says that Ukrainian students are already well acquainted with the country, so they know which activities they want to participate in and how to find them.

After arriving in Lithuania, he interacted with Ukrainian students from other universities, and when the full-scale war broke out, he joined them in the CulturEUkraine initiative, a centre established in Laisvės alėja. “We wanted to organise something for students so that they could disconnect from the news and relax a little. So, three Kaunas universities, which celebrated their their common centenary in 2022, joined forces and organised an informal programme for Ukrainians. Students gathered at weekends, played board games, visited museums, attended sports events, and travelled around Vilnius, Trakai, and Palanga,” he says. Volodymyr states that despite the closure of the CulturEUkraine centre, they continue to organise various activities on their own.
Vytautas Magnus University maintains long-standing close relations with Ukraine and its academic community, with which it has signed more than 30 cooperation agreements.

In the summer of 2022, on the initiative of the First Ladies of Lithuania and Ukraine, Vytautas Magnus University opened the Centre of Ukraine in Vilnius, which has become not only a focal point for bringing together the Ukrainian community but also a significant centre for cultural diplomacy, supporting Ukraine in the Euro-integration processes and enhancing its academic potential.

The Centre has already had over 37,000 visits from Ukrainian community and frequent meetings with high-ranking officials and guests from abroad. At the beginning of 2024, the Centre was visited by the President of Ukraine and VMU Honorary Doctor Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

After establishing a cultural centre in Vilnius, VMU extended the initiative to Kaunas. In the autumn of 2023, Mariupol State University Centre was opened in Kaunas, with the aim of ensuring that Mariupol University continues its activities not only in Kyiv but also here at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas.

Mariupol Centre develops educational, research, and cultural relations; supports exchanges of teachers, researchers, students, and administrative staff; encourages the sharing of educational materials; supports joint events related to Lithuanian studies; and promotes educational programmes of Mariupol State University and the prospects for research opportunities for Ukrainian youth in Lithuania.
Russia Has Totally Excluded Itself from the Civilised World

“Theoretically, I don’t see why Russia cannot return to the civilised world. Germany did so after the Second World War, after all the atrocities, the mass murder, the destruction. But with Russia it will be much more complicated – Russia will not be occupied, there is no external force imposing a confrontation with the past. It will be the Russians themselves who will have to do it, and I just don’t see how it’s going to happen. There are very few Russians who understand and feel the guilt,” says Prof. Robert Van Voren, the Head of Andrei Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development at Vytautas Magnus University.

The fate of Russia was extensively discussed at the Sixth International Leonidas Donskis Memorial Conference “Will Russia Survive in 2024?”, organised by VMU Sakharov Centre in September 2023. The Conference brought together diplomats, security experts, human rights activists, public figures, and journalists from the USA, Finland, the Netherlands, the UK, Ukraine, and other countries. The participants discussed what should be done in order to stop Russia threatening its neighbours, how to help the people of Russia to build a democratically governed state that operates in accordance with international law, and how to ensure that those responsible for crimes in Ukraine and other countries under attack are brought to justice.

According to Prof. Van Voren, today, Russia has lost the right to exist, at least in its current form. “In Soviet times, I had dissident friends in Moscow who...
told me: ‘We were just born in the wrong country, we don’t belong here’. But they were the hope for the future, and that hope disappeared already in 1993. Since then, Russia has been on a downward spiral, and I hope that this spiral will end with the disintegration of the country,” said the Head of VMU Sakharov Centre.

We Live in Dangerous Times Reminiscent of 1939

The human rights defender, political scientist, and the Chief Executive of the Global Initiative on Psychiatry Prof. Van Voren says that we are living in extremely dangerous times that are reminiscent of 1939: it is possible that the world is on the brink of major global upheavals. Russia is one of the greatest threats to democracy and peace in the world, and, over the last two decades, it has turned from a weakening democracy to a neo-totalitarian state: not only does it terrorise its own people, but it also pursues an aggressive policy towards its neighbouring countries. But there is no shortage of other threats in the world today.

“It’s not just Russia and Putin. It’s also China, it’s the climate, and it’s the rise of political clowns like Trump, Le Pen, Wilders now in the Netherlands, and Orban in Hungary. Democracy is under very serious threat and if we don’t act, we will lose the battle, I’m sure. We should realise that a comfortable life without taking a stand is the road to disaster. Yes, it’s not easy, but if we want to continue to be able to say what we think and live the lives that we like, we have to do something now. My friends in Ukraine are facing this choice more painfully than we are, and many have gone to the front. But in fact we have a front too. It’s just that we often prefer not to see it,” notes the political scientist.
Andrei Sakharov: One of the Key Moral Figures of the 20th Century

VMU Andrei Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development, directed by Prof. Van Voren, is named after the Nobel Prize Winner, human rights activist, and physicist Andrei Sakharov. The Centre pays particular attention to issues of human and civil rights, as well as to research and studies on the policies of Central and Eastern European countries: how they are upholding their international commitments and pledges to protect human and civil rights.

Along with the Czech dissident and later president Václav Havel and the President of South Africa Nelson Mandela, Andrei Sakharov is one of the most prominent moral figures of the 20th century. In his country, Sakharov played an important role in the defence of human rights and was often described as the national conscience.

“I understand that at a time when Russia is waging a war of destruction in Ukraine and repression in the country has reached levels not seen since Stalin, it is difficult to imagine a person from Russia as an example. However, Sakharov never thought of himself as a Russian. He was a man of the world, who grew up in a multinational empire and a country based on terror and repression, which he was determined to oppose. At all costs. He took this decision consciously and accepted the consequences, which included being exiled to Gorky, where he suffered psychological and physical torture. Sakharov believed in human rights and lived them. For him, nationality was not important – he supported everyone, from Crimean Tatars to Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Estonians,” says Prof. Van Voren.

Sakharov first gained fame as the inventor of the hydrogen bomb; however, later on, he grew concerned about the consequences of his invention for humanity and started campaigning against nuclear arms, actively opposing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Eventually, he became the principal representative of the human rights movement in the Soviet Union. Thanks in part to his efforts, the Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed, and in 1970, despite pressure from the regime, he co-founded the Committee on Human Rights in the USSR. In 1975, Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Because of his activism, his criticism of the regime and his efforts to free dissidents, Sakharov lost all his privileges. The physicist’s career was ended, his family was harassed, and he was exiled to the closed city of Gorky, where the activist was monitored by the Soviet police and his contacts with the abroad were restricted. But to Sakharov, all this was less important than freedom.

“His example shows that you can make a decision, you have a choice. Just like now: you can pretend that the war in Ukraine doesn’t affect you and isn’t important to you, or you can take a stand and understand that we all have a role to play here and we all have to defend our freedom. It’s difficult to gain freedom, but very easy to lose,” notes the Professor, adding that Sakharov’s activities should inspire people to defend democracy and human rights, not to take freedom for granted: to remember the past, to learn from mistakes, to act and to use knowledge to defend this freedom. These are the key goals of the Sakharov Centre.
Educating “Agents of Change”
Is Most Important

“What I’m most proud of is when we have students as interns and they leave and build their careers. When I see that the seeds we planted grow into beautiful flowers. That’s why we do what we do – we try to create “agents of change”. Of course, we also organise great conferences and exhibitions, but for me, the most important thing is the people: I love helping students grow and find their own path in life,” explains Prof. Van Voren.

When asked about plans for the future, the political scientist reveals that Andrei Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development is planning to hold the 14th International Sakharov Conference in May 2024. There are also plans to open new, reconstructed premises of the Centre. The archives of the Centre are constantly updated with collections of books by renowned sovietologists, scientific and other publications. However, most importantly, the Centre aims to invest in the preparation of “agents of change”.

“We will need many to turn the tide and win the war against dictatorship and oppression. We have no time to lose!” says the Professor.
A Person Who Loves Their or Her City Will Contribute More to Its Welfare

“Not everyone enters university with a concrete vision of what they want to be or do in life. In fact, I doubt whether it’s possible to know and imagine what the studies are going to be like before you experience them. Even though I didn’t graduate from any art school and didn’t imagine myself as an artist, I was fascinated by the idea of doing creative work,” says Ana Kočegarova-Maj, the graduate of the Faculty of Arts of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) and the Head of the Programme of “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022” (Kaunas 2022).
According to Ana, managing a large-scale project not only allowed her to see Kaunas in a new light but also brought new lessons and experiences. “I’d like to believe that the citizens of Kaunas have started to take more pride in their city, recalling the project ‘Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022’. I hope it has helped them to strengthen their European identity, enabling them to see themselves not only as part of Europe but also as an important centre for fostering European cultural processes and Western democratic values,” says Ana.

She also admits that she had to learn to balance multiple areas, ranging from leadership and administration to human resources management, right from the start of her new role. “I had to learn to work in areas completely unrelated to art history and criticism,” says the graduate of VMU Faculty of Arts where she obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Art History and Criticism, followed by a Master’s degree in Cultural Heritage and Tourism.

The Project Is Unique in Every City

Recalling the beginning of her career path, the Head of the Programme of “Kaunas 2022” says that while still a student, she realised that her decision to study art history and criticism was a good one. “Art history and criticism studies are very comprehensive. Not only did we learn about art and its history, but we also studied history in the broadest sense. We also studied communication-related courses: not only how to analyse texts but also how to write them. After graduation, a wave of success led me from one job to another. When there was a vacancy for a guide at M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, I got a job there, and later I worked at VMU Art Gallery 101. I looked for opportunities, always trying to get involved in cultural events or volunteering,” shares Ana who, before taking on the role of the Head of the Programme of “Kaunas 2022”, had earlier curated projects for Kaunas Biennial.

Speaking about the experience gained in the project “Kaunas 2022”, VMU alumna who was responsible for the implementation of the programme, notes that it brought new lessons for every participant. “This project is unique in every city, and its implementation is a continuous learning process. Throughout the process, you’re both creating it and looking for solutions to implement it. It is an experience that will never be repeated. This is what makes it so interesting and complex,” she says, recalling the peculiarities of implementing “Kaunas 2022.” Although the vision, aspirations, and artistic programme of the project were planned in advance, no one had clear answers about how everything would unfold.

“The project underwent many metamorphoses, from creative approaches to the implementation of partnership forms. All of this required experimentation, development, and adaptation as part of the learning process. More than half of the project tasks were administrative in nature, and contrary to what one might think, they were not tedious at all. On the contrary, you get to experience the administration of the creative, cultural, and public sectors, with its various challenges and the search for appropriate solutions. You also learn how to manage a public institution and a team, organise public procurement for creative or cultural projects, manage partnerships, and plan budgets,” says Ana describing her work during the project.

When asked what helped her stay inspired in a responsible position in such a large project, the Head of “Kaunas 2022” Programme does not hesitate to say – it was the people around her. “It’s a blessing to work in such a team. We gathered incredibly interesting, talented, and highly experienced people from the creative field: scientists, curators, producers, artists, and creators, as well as many wonderful ideas that had not yet had the chance to be realised or ‘dreamt up’. The opportunity to do what you had been dreaming about for a long time was the driving force for all of us,” reveals the speaker.

According to one of the project leaders, even though “Kaunas 2022” initiative officially ended, the related activities continue to this day. “During the project, various formal and informal institutions, collectives, and initiatives were formed within the framework of “Kaunas 2022”. Many successful, publicly acclaimed, and culturally significant initiatives, such as the ConTempo Festival, the Fluxus Festival, and many others, will continue to be implemented,” says Ana, emphasising the continuity of the project.
Ensuring Residents Feel Good in the City Was a Top Priority

Looking back on how the relationship of Kaunas residents with the city changed during the project “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022”, the young leader emphasises that the initiatives implemented during the project were primarily aimed at enabling the residents of Kaunas city and district not only to see their home with fresh eyes but also to strengthen their individual connections to the surrounding places, history, and the various narratives in Kaunas city and district that are embedded in their identity.

“I believe this mission was the most important contribution any Capital of Culture can offer. It’s that sense of pride, that connection to the place where you live that is immensely beneficial for the city. Perhaps that’s sometimes more important than some buildings, festivals, or pleasant experiences. It’s also important in a practical sense because a person who loves his or her city and district is willing to do more for it, is more engaged, happier, and generates more positive outcomes,” notes Ana.

Reflecting on her own relationship with Kaunas, Ana claims that it was her studies in art history and criticism, and later in cultural heritage and tourism, particularly the focus on the modernist period of Kaunas, that instilled in her this love for the city.

“The Capital of Culture project enabled us to delve into even more diverse layers of the history of the city and its different areas. In the process, the identity of both the city and the district developed, which I had the opportunity to observe and assess in a much broader European context. Just as I had the opportunity to assess the identity of Kaunas in the defence of freedom, its status as a multicultural city with a multi-layered historical experience, the resilience of its citizens, the natural urbanism of the city and the district, and our archaic – in the best sense – identity associated with it, as well as the international relations of the city with the world and Europe. Kaunas is truly a wonderful city to live in, to explore history, and to create. One of the most memorable discoveries is that the successful project “European Capital of Culture” serves as a living proof of the willingness of our cultural sector to cooperate, despite various challenges, and of the extensive competences of the people working within it,” says Ana, expressing her joy over the strengthened ties in the cultural community.

Indeed, the efforts to bring together various initiatives in “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022” have received extraordinary recognition. On 16 February 2023, the President of the Republic of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda awarded Ana Kočegarov-Maj, along with other project creators, the Medal of the Order for Merits to Lithuania. The Head of “Kaunas 2022” Programme finds receiving such an accolade truly gratifying. “I’m glad to have been born in a country where cultural and creative activities are recognised and valued as important for strengthening our identity and fostering connections between Lithuania and the world,” she concludes the interview.
The initiatives implemented during “Kaunas 2022” were primarily aimed at enabling the residents of Kaunas city and district not only to see their home with fresh eyes but also to strengthen their individual connections to the surrounding places, history, and the various narratives in Kaunas city and district that are embedded in their identity.

In 2022, when Kaunas became the European Capital of Culture, Vytautas Magnus University was an official partner and together they implemented projects of various scales.

One of the major University projects in the Programme was an international symposium “Idea of Europe”. There was a special presidential debate during the event, in which the leaders of five European countries discussed the future of Europe and what it means to be and remain a European.

The President of the Republic of Lithuania Gitanas Našėda, the President of the Republic of Latvia Egils Levits, the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda and the President of Romania Klaus Iohannis took part in the discussion. The President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskij and the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen addressed the participants of the symposium remotely.
“As uncertainty is becoming the new motto of our lives, the entrepreneurial philosophy is useful in every area of life. Entrepreneurship is much more than the tendency to see the profit line as the end-result in everything. It is a broader set of characteristics that provide a person with more space and more freedom, without narrowing everything down to economic benefit measured only in money,” says Assoc. Prof. Justinas Kisieliauskas, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU).

The European University Alliance Transform4Europe, which unites VMU and ten other European universities, aims to educate and train knowledge entrepreneurs, i.e., people who are able to recognise, seize, and create opportunities to contribute to innovation and change. The European Union recognises entrepreneurship as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning needed today and in the future.

Entrepreneurship is described as a kind of philosophy, a way of thinking dedicated to generating ideas, implementing them, and initiating transformations. As noted by Assoc. Prof. Kisieliauskas, developing this philosophy means improving one’s skills in problem solving, creativity, risk management, pursuit of goals, teamwork, leadership, and many other abilities that are highly valued by employers today. He also adds that these skills in turn help organisations to develop various innovations.

“The ability to create the conditions for innovations or to develop the innovations themselves eventually ensures a competitive edge. Whether it’s Apple, which has integrated a player, a browser, a camera, and now an average AI-based personal health assistant into a phone, or the Lithuanian company Vinted, which is gathering a community based on more sustainable consumption – all of these types of organisations share the ability to discover horizons of value in places where no one has ever been before,” says Assoc. Prof. Kisieliauskas.

Minded: One of the Best European Entrepreneurial Experiences

The development of such abilities is the goal of the Centre for Enterprise Practice Minded, which was established at VMU seven years ago and has since gained recognition in Lithuania and Europe as a unique initiative. The Centre offers a minor study programme Entrepreneurship Academy, which can be chosen by any VMU student, regardless of their specialisation, as a secondary discipline alongside their major studies. The programme develops entrepreneurial competences and allows students to acquire practical skills for identifying and implementing ideas as well as solving problem situations. At the European Enterprise Promotion
Awards 2018, Entrepreneurship Academy was selected as one of the three best experiences in Europe in the category “Investing in Entrepreneurial Skills”.

The students of Minded participate in smart internships, during which they successfully implement team projects aimed at solving practical challenges faced by real business enterprises as well as social issues faced by various institutions and towns or cities in Lithuania. Last year, thanks to the students’ efforts, a leisure space for pupils was created in Įslaužas, a sub-division of the quiz game Auksinis Protas was opened in Vilkija, a new sports hall was established in Kybartai, film screenings for the town’s youth were initiated in Ariogala, and a birdhouse workshop for pupils as well as a birdhouse installation event for the town’s community were held in Babtai. And these are just some of the community projects that have been completed.

Minded actively cooperates with over 80 business companies and social partners, which provide students with opportunities to implement various projects in practice, to work on real issues, and contribute to the improvement of existing products or the development of new ones. These organisations include Žalgiris Kaunas, Hostinger, Kilo Health, Jorus, and many others. Students also have the opportunity to talk to representatives of various organisations, professionals in their fields, who give lectures, participate in expert circles, and evaluate students’ results as members of commissions.

Close partnerships have also been established with various organisations that have been building the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Kaunas: KaunasIN, Kaunas Tech Park, the Innovation Agency Spiečius in Kaunas, Junior Achievement Lithuania, and others, thanks to which successful young businesses and start-ups are regularly developed in the city. Working on real business tasks and keeping close contact with the above-mentioned companies, which foster and encourage entrepreneurship, will help students implement the largest practical project of their studies: the creation of their own company.

More than a thousand of university students and school pupils have already taken part in the activities of the Centre for Enterprise Practice Minded. Over 100 practical challenges have been solved. Students are supported by a team of more than 30 experienced mentors. Minded has already organised more than 30 camps dedicated to competence development.

Among the many successful Minded alumni are the creators of the Kondigno board game, adapted for the visually impaired, which won the award “For more sustainable world” at Kaunas Start-Up Awards 2023.

Practical Experience Makes Graduates Attractive to Employers

Currently, Minded also offers a BA study programme Creative Business and Innovation Design, which is practice-oriented: students implement projects in cooperation with business companies and social organisations. This study programme is based on analogous examples from prestigious universities around the world, such as Stanford, Harvard,
In the third year of studies, students develop their own start-ups, applying the knowledge they’ve acquired. This makes our study programme unique in Lithuania,” says Assoc./uni00A0 Prof./uni00A0 Stripeikis, adding that lectures in the programme are given not only by academic experts, but also by business representatives and social partners.

The Minded studies also stand out due to the use of the EQ Thinking Model, which divides the programme into three stages: personal growth, idea generation, and practice.

“In the first stage, students identify their own personal competences, mentors guide them and help them to grow, and students are immersed in the learning process, which brings experience. In the second, creative stage, students are given the tools to recognise ideas, evaluate them, test them, and select the best ones. And the third stage is practice-oriented: to complete the learning cycle, an idea must be put into practice in the real world, as a specific project or initiative, or as a created prototype or a start-up, or perhaps even a company,” says the Head of Minded.
In seven years of activities, the Centre Minded has received numerous international awards. **Entrepreneurship Academy** has been selected by the European Commission’s research consortium University-Business Cooperation in Europe as one of the top 50 case studies of successful university-business cooperation in Europe and worldwide. The University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN) has recognised the EQ Thinking Model used by Minded as good practice at international level.

### Building a Network of Business Representatives and Mentors

Assoc. Prof. Stripeikis claims that one of the top priorities of Minded at the moment is to improve the activities of the BA study programme and to provide quality services to students. A new VMU mentorship model is being developed, which will stand out for its innovation not only at the University, but across Lithuania.

“It will be a mentorship programme that describes the role of the mentor in the study process. Mentorship has several levels: it can be individual, team-based, and organisational. The roles and skills required of mentors vary greatly at different levels: sometimes, they’re needed more as experts; sometimes, as coaches or discussants who share their life experience. Alongside this, we’re planning to consolidate the Minded mentor community network, which will consist of business representatives and the organisation’s mentors. Companies see the benefits of mentorship processes: as mentors in our programme, they receive the latest tools and can transfer this experience to their organisation. Moreover, the quality standards of the processes implemented by partners will be ensured and maintained through regular short-term learning experiences, after which a certificate is awarded. This is the globally-recognised format of micro-credentials, which is currently on the rise,” explains the Head of Minded. The implementation and recognition of micro-credentials in European businesses and institutions has recently been endorsed by the Council of the European Union.

“As soon as they enter the job market, Minded graduates can already demonstrate very specific cases of their success and thus improve their careers, becoming more attractive in the market, because nowadays, employers want more than just knowledge: they ask, what experience you have and what projects you have implemented”

“I've encountered initiatives similar to Minded in many universities that offer business-related studies, e.g., Bocconi University in Italy and Aalto University in Finland. The main similarity is a creative ecosystem built through various elements of the studying experience, from the environment and the tasks to the process of organising studies itself. All this creates favourable conditions for lecturers and teachers to innovate, make mistakes, and learn. VMU Minded is a relatively young entity that hasn’t yet birthed a new Lithuanian unicorn, but here, as in other countries, exceptional entrepreneurial individuals are nurtured,” asserts Assoc. Prof. Kisieliauskas, Vice-Dean of VMU Faculty of Economics and Management.
A Model that Enables Students to Design Their Own Study Path

“The war in Ukraine, the COVID pandemic, and other unpredictable global events have shown that interdisciplinary knowledge and skills are the key to future solutions. This is guaranteed by the concept of artes liberales – only individuals with a comprehensive education will be able to operate successfully in an ever-changing labour market and society,” says Dr. Simona Pilkienė, Vice-Rector for Studies at Vytautas Magnus University.

Broader Perspectives for Learning and Work

According to the Vice-Rector, the distinctiveness of the artes liberales concept lies in the student’s role in the study process and the possibility of designing one’s own study path. “While the concept of artes liberales is widespread in the USA, it is not as popular in Europe and is usually applied only to a small part of studies, such as a single programme or faculty, but not university-wide. The study model implemented at VMU is the only one of its kind not only in Lithuania, but also in the Baltic States. The University offers 14 of the 17 groups of study fields available in Lithuania,” says Dr. Pilkienė.

According to the Vice-Recto, the concept of artes liberales encompasses interdisciplinarity, internationality, and the highest level of student individualisation: “A recent international University assessment highlighted a distinctive aspect – VMU offers the widest range of opportunities for students. And it’s true – we are a university that has the most to offer to those who choose to study here”.

Dr. Simona Pilkienė, Vice-Rector for Studies.
Students at VMU can not only design their study programme, but also choose minor studies, thereby further expanding their opportunities. Every first cycle or second cycle student has the opportunity to choose from around 50 minor study programmes. This allows them to study two programmes at the same time and thus gain an advantage in the labour market.

VMU also offers the Academia Cum Laude individual study programme, which enables motivated first cycle students to go beyond their main studies, to delve more deeply into their personal study topic, and to work with top-level scientists and researchers, or renowned artists.

Internationality Reflected in Activities and Strategy

The unique study model has also received international recognition: VMU is the only university in Northern and Central Europe and one of the 50 universities in the world to offer the International Baccalaureate Studies (IBS) and the UNESCO Certificate in Curriculum Design and Development.

The Vice-Rector is pleased that over the past years, the University has become a committed international partner and has been entrusted with the responsibility of shaping European higher education policy, which is a very significant step. In this regard, the competences of the University’s teachers and researchers in this field are very important. According to Dr. Pilkienė, the internationality of VMU will only increase, as the chosen activities and strategy become everyday practice, inseparable from other activities.

The Vice-Rector notes that it is precisely the concept of artes liberales studies that creates opportunities for students coming from other countries to choose courses offered by different academic units and to study together with young people from both Lithuania and abroad. Teachers also enjoy the excellent working conditions.

“We have around 15–18% of foreign students and teachers, and this number is steadily growing.”
Together with nine other European universities (Saarland University in Germany, the University of Alicante in Spain, the University of Trieste in Italy, the University of Silesia in Katowice in Poland, Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’ in Bulgaria, the Catholic University of Portugal, Jean Monnet University in France, the University of Primorska in Slovenia, and the Estonian Academy of Arts), and an associated member – Mariupol State University in Ukraine – we have established the European University Alliance Transform4Europe, whose goal is to create a future European university without borders or restrictions,” explains Dr. Pilkienė.

Based on our experience with the artes liberales concept, together with the partners of the Alliance Transform4Europe, a unique opportunity to acquire additional competences by studying “Bachelor tracks” has been offered to the University students.

**Ecosystem of Lifelong Learning**

Drawing on the experience of foreign partners and the artes liberales concept, the University has developed unique study programmes for the new generation of teachers, which are now recognised at the international level. “The University has become the largest teacher training centre in Lithuania. It educates more than 1,300 students, trains teachers at all levels of education in all three study cycles, and admits around 500 teachers each year for further training or retraining,” says the Vice-Rector.

VMU also pays attention to the little ones: educational researchers develop and implement educational innovations in VMU kindergarten “Academy of the Little Ones” (Mažųjų akademija) and in the “Gifted” centre, where gifted and talented children from all over Lithuania are educated using a methodology developed in collaboration with partners from Israel.

According to Dr. Pilkienė, the University offers not only a wide range of studies but also a variety of activities. “We have developed an ecosystem of lifelong learning: we have a kindergarten, a centre for gifted children, a network of VMU schools and classrooms, and the World Lithuanian University for the inclusion of Lithuanian diaspora, and we conduct university studies in all cycles, as well as qualification courses, courses for the public, and other learning
activities. There is no other university in Lithuania with such a broad profile, offering people of all ages opportunities to choose what and how to study. And we can offer all of that,” says the Vice-Rector.

**Dialogue with Businesses**

VMU maintains a constant dialogue with business representatives. The University currently has over 500 partners from both the public and private sectors and more than 4,300 internship placements, often resulting in students securing long-term employment.

“Social partners contribute to the development of students’ practical skills by giving lectures, providing opportunities for practical training in companies, solving specific company case studies and providing solutions, and participating in business and student hackathons. In certain fields, partners work cooperatively: they organise laboratory work and internships in their infrastructure facilities, participate in the preparation, improvement, and marketing of study programmes, organise and fund student traineeships, and award scholarships to students,” says Dr. Pilkienė.

The opinions of business representatives and changes in the labour market are important for the University, as integrating business into the study curriculum is one of the ways to improve studies. Businesses are interested in the rapid preparation of employees.

“For certain specialities, vocational training or additional courses may indeed suffice. However, when considering the long-term perspective and defining what makes a good employee, any employer will state that a good employee is capable of communicating in at least one foreign language, preferably two or three. A good employee is also someone who can make prompt decisions in uncertain situations and collaborate effectively in a team. This requires interdisciplinary knowledge, which can only be acquired through university studies,” says VMU Vice-Rector.

The concept of *artes liberales* encompasses interdisciplinarity, internationality, and the highest level of student individualisation: a recent international University assessment highlighted a distinctive aspect – VMU offers the widest range of opportunities for students.
The Green Deal has probably caused the most confusion in the forestry sector. On the one hand, it aims to significantly reduce CO₂ levels in the atmosphere, with forests playing a crucial role in absorbing carbon dioxide; on the other hand, there is a growing demand for eco-friendly raw materials, including wood, in the energy sector and various industries.

Vytautas Magnus University is currently implementing the project “Forest 4.0” in collaboration with partners from Lithuania, Sweden, and the business sector. The aim of the project is to establish a Centre of Excellence that utilises the latest technologies to find optimal solutions for the evolution and development of forestry. Prof. Tomas Krilavičius, Dean of the Faculty of Informatics of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) and leader of the project “Forest 4.0”, believes that when addressing the sensitive issue of forest maintenance and economic use, it is essential to meet and cater to the needs of all social groups, not just a select few.

Gintautas Mozgeris, Professor at the Faculty of Forest Sciences and Ecology of VMU Agriculture Academy, says that the use of smart technologies in forest management would not only enable a wide range of information to be gathered about the processes taking place in forest ecosystems, but would also make it easier to predict and prevent potential risks.
Forests Can Accommodate Both Economic Activities and Recreation

Prof. Mozgeris notes that forest ecosystems and forestry are currently facing a diverse array of challenges: “The consumption of wood and biomass for energy production is increasing, alongside the growing uncertainties due to climate change and human efforts to mitigate it. Additionally, there are the complex dynamics of global markets and an increasing focus on the social function of forests.” Therefore, he argues that the application of smart technologies in forest management would not only provide a wealth of information about processes occurring within and around forest ecosystems but also facilitate the decisions humans need to make regarding forest ecosystems. Prof. Krilavičius is convinced that it is crucial to achieve a balance in forest management to ensure that forests provide benefits to all stakeholders, including timber processors and loggers, as well as those who want to see as much greenery as possible.

The leader of the project “Forest 4.0” emphasises that current technologies allow for much more precise and effective forest monitoring than was possible in the past. He observes that the way forests are planned today will determine their condition for decades or even centuries to come. “We, therefore, need to develop projections and forecasts to help us decide how to manage our forests today to ensure their successful growth, development, and utilisation for the next fifty or a hundred years,” says Prof. Krilavičius.

Speaking about the project “Forest 4.0” implemented by VMU, its leader Prof. Krilavičius explains that the primary aim of the project is to establish a Centre of Excellence. This centre will explore how artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and other new technological solutions can be integrated into forestry and the circular economy. “If our plans involve replacing metal or reinforced concrete products with wood, it naturally follows that we will need to fell some trees. Of course, parts of the forest must also be reserved for recreational needs. Forests are crucial not only because they absorb CO₂ and produce oxygen but also because they are ecosystems and habitats for various species,” says Prof. Krilavičius. He emphasises the importance of achieving a balance between these aspects to ensure that no single interest group can over-exploit the forest.

Are Forest Areas Shrinking or Expanding?

Prof. Mozgeris observes that, although there is currently a huge diversity of views and objectives regarding one of the most important national resources – the forest – the reality is quite optimistic: “I’d say that the volume of trees in the forests of Lithuania today is higher than it has been in the last half millennium. In terms of forest land area, we rank around 16th in Europe, and in terms of the national GHG (greenhouse gas) absorption targets per hectare of the forest land, we rank as high as 11th.”

The Professor provides the following figures: “In Lithuania, up to 3 million cubic meters of tree stem volume naturally die and around 11 million is harvested every year, while the increase in forest resources still amounts to almost 6 million cubic meters annually.”

Prof. Mozgeris shares data from a study conducted by the State Service for Protected Areas, which shows that there are currently just over 150,000 hectares of land in Lithuania where the expansion of forest land is possible, i.e., it is not limited by current land use and the Lithuanian legal framework. “This suggests that Lithuanian society has other priorities in non-forested areas that outweigh the importance of afforestation,” he says, commenting on the limited potential for increasing forest areas.
Suggests not Painting a Bleak Future

Speaking about the future prospects for the forests in Lithuania, Prof. Mozgeris says he does not want to take an easy route and start painting a stereotypically bleak picture of the impact of climate change on forests.

“It would depend on the scale chosen – global assessments don’t necessarily apply to Lithuania. While the global forest area has declined this century, it has increased by 13.5 million hectares in Europe. The annual loss of global forest cover between 2010 and 2018 was significantly lower than in 2000–2010. Climate change and efforts to mitigate it can present not just threats but also opportunities, such as increased tree growth and higher demand and prices for timber and so on,” he believes.

“However, steps are already being taken to make forestry more adaptive, efficient, transparent, and participatory,” says Prof. Mozgeris.

Neither Emotions nor “Paper” Planning Can Solve Problems

Prof. Krilavičius assures that the project “Forest 4.0” does not aim to propose specific solutions to decision-makers. VMU scientist discusses the emerging opportunity to make decisions that are not solely based on a single logic – quick business interests or unjustified emotions: “We are developing tools that will enable decision-makers to make informed decisions based on research, data analysis, and observation. In this way, decision-makers could predict the outcomes of various decisions and their impact on the entire ecosystem.”

The scientist is convinced that new tools using the latest technologies will make it possible to calculate or model scenarios that were impossible to calculate five or ten years ago. “Currently, we’re working with datasets that cover the whole Lithuania. The project partners in Lithuania are analysing Lithuanian data, while those in Sweden are analysing Swedish data. However, our goal isn’t just to focus on these two countries but to look more broadly at how various decisions might affect the entire EU ecosystem. The forests in Latvia or Poland aren’t so far away that they wouldn’t have an impact on us. Thus, what happens there is also important for us,” says Prof. Krilavičius.

Greenwashing: Do not Be Deceived

“Smart forest management is also crucial because carbon farming is set to become a global phenomenon, and carbon credits (or certificates; a business model where farming generates additional, long-term carbon stocks, earning a special certificate that can be sold to polluting industries, airlines, etc.) will be perceived and sought after in a manner similar to, for instance, the EU agricultural subsidies. After all, forests play a vital role in removing huge amounts of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere,” says Prof. Mozgeris.

At the same time, the scientist warns that it is particularly important to avoid practices observed in the emerging carbon credit market, where greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters purchase credits that realistically do not contribute to reducing emissions or enhancing absorptions. “Currently, the understanding of some of the processes involved in GHG emissions management in Lithuania is very limited. Even though GHG accounting is carried out strictly according to international standards, as scientists we have uncertainties about emissions, for example, in drained wetland soils, especially if there are plans to restore the hydrological regime,” says Prof. Mozgeris, discussing the forthcoming challenges of the project. He mentions that, as part of the project “Forest 4.0”, there are plans to install a GHG flux monitoring tower that will be able to track greenhouse gas emissions in real time over a radius of more than 100 kilometres.

“We are also planning to utilise mobile equipment for long-term GHG balance monitoring, which will allow us to determine what happens to the
"If we humans do not stop what we are doing now, if we do not change our approach to nature and do not start respecting it, we will get into a lot of trouble. It is evident that we are already in trouble and it is happening before our eyes," says Professor Birutė Galdikas, a world-renowned anthropologist and Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) Honorary Doctor, who has been working in the field of environment and orangutan conservation for half a century.

Professor Galdikas is known worldwide as the first scientist to start a thorough study of orangutans. Due to her work, the knowledge about the behavior, habitat, and diet of this type of great apes was greatly expanded. In 1971, she established the first orangutan observation centre in Tanjung Puting National Park, located on the Indonesian island of Borneo. Galdikas continues her work in this center to this day.

The anthropologist emphasizes that a forest has a highly beneficial effect on human well-being. "Walking in Godly silence – which is the forest – is an extraordinary experience that refreshes the soul. In Japan, doctors prescribe "forest bathing" (shinrin-yoku in Japanese) as a medical procedure," Professor Galdikas notes. This is what the Japanese call every visit to the forest – listening to birds chirping, leaves blowing, and observing the nature of the forest.

According to Birutė Galdikas, the biggest threat to orangutans today remains palm oil plantations, which are created by initially burning tropical rainforests, and thus the habitats of primates and various other animals. Other threats include poaching, illegal logging, mining and fires. For those who wish to protect the environment and orangutans, professor advises not to use palm oil, to protect and plant trees and to recycle paper. And not only for the great apes, but for humankind itself, which is struggling today with the consequences of climate change.

In 2023 Prof. Birutė Galdikas visited Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. During her meeting with the university's community, the professor held a public lecture 'Where Have the Males Gone?'. You can watch the lecture here:
Multiculturalism and Multilingualism Are Strengths to Be Fostered

“The openness of the artes liberales study model to languages and cultures, cooperation with foreign partners, student and teacher exchange programmes, and the increasing number of double degree programmes with partner universities signify that the University promotes internationality and scientific progress,” says Assoc. Prof. Vilma Bijeikienė, Vice-Rector for Communication at VMU.

■ Assoc. Prof. Vilma Bijeikienė, Vice-Rector for Communication.
One-fifth of Vytautas Magnus University community consists of international students and staff, over a quarter of the programmes are taught in English, and students can choose to study a foreign language from more than 30 on offer. According to Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė, when it comes to internationality two directions are important: on the one hand, creation of an international environment at University, the so-called “internationalization at home”, and, on the other hand, promoting student and teacher mobility, studies and internship abroad, international summer schools and other outreach activities.

From English to Farsi

“One of the main components in the development of the internationality of VMU is the opportunity for students, teachers, and non-academic staff to learn foreign languages. Thanks to the artes liberales study model, we have created favourable conditions for students to learn languages, regardless of their study programme. In our University’s study model, foreign languages are integrated into both compulsory and elective credits in all first cycle and integrated study programmes,” says the Associate Professor.

She explains that in addition to the languages most commonly chosen in Europe, such as French, Spanish, or German, the University also offers less commonly taught languages. If there is a group of the interested students, courses of languages such as Farsi, Old and Modern Hebrew, Georgian and other may be offered. In addition, the University has recently started offering the Ukrainian language courses.

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One Language Is not Enough

“Linguists and anthropologists have long established the principle of linguistic relativity. This means that language influences our thinking, and our perception of the world. Therefore, English alone is not enough to create an inclusive, multilingual, and multicultural environment. The competence of a language is not only a means of communication; this competence also enables us to empathise with others and to understand how culture is revealed through language,” says Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė.

VMU Vice-Rector for Communication notes that although the world is becoming more globalised, cultures are getting more intertwined, and we all
are becoming multicultural, there are still cultural differences related to our first languages.

The Vice-Rector emphasises that language learning also develops creativity and the ability to express oneself. “Linguists have proven that knowledge and active use of languages enhance cognitive abilities throughout one’s life, from early childhood to old age, and helps prevent dementia. Additionally, multilingual schoolchildren are able to complete a wide range of tasks more easily than their monolingual counterparts,” says the Vice-Rector.

Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė provides data on the pragmatic benefits of knowing languages: “Competences of languages other than English increase the likelihood of getting a better job and a higher salary. In Lithuania, this amounts to around 15–20%.”

Although there is a widespread belief that it is only possible to master a language in the childhood, Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė argues that this myth should be dispelled. “It’s possible to learn and master languages at any age, but it’s just easier to do it in the childhood; moreover, the skills acquired then significantly aid in language learning during adulthood. The student years are also very favourable for language learning,” explains the Vice-Rector.

Inclusive Study Environment

Speaking about internationality at VMU, Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė emphasises that learning and using languages is only one component of internationality. “We place great importance on creating an inclusive communication and learning environment that allows students from diverse linguistic and cultural
backgrounds to successfully integrate into the study process and VMU academic culture. After all, our University welcomes students from around 50 countries every year, each bringing their own cultural foundation,” says the Vice-Rector.

Achieving this goal is facilitated by well-functioning mentor, VMU ambassador, and various introductory programmes, which allow students to get acquainted not only with the overall infrastructure and environment of the University, but also with the study model.

“It’s important for us to involve international students in joint activities with Lithuanian students. We have numerous language and culture clubs and other student organizations, and together they organise a variety of events and come up with different activities,” says Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė, discussing the realities of building the University community.

To promote inclusivity, there are opportunities for Lithuanian and international students to study together in groups. Courses are taught in both English and Lithuanian, enabling many international students to learn Lithuanian.

“Although Lithuanian is not compulsory, it is highly recommended. We are delighted that more and more international students are learning it, and some are even continuing their studies in Lithuanian,” says the Vice-Rector.

The Vice-Rector is happy that international students are getting more opportunities for internship in international companies and other organizations. “I still remember a notable example of cooperation with state institutions: when Lithuania was faced with an influx in illegal migration from Belarus, VMU international students who spoke various Middle Eastern languages took on the role of interpreters,” says Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė.

Towards sustainable multilingualism in academia

“For us, as for other small nations, an only English approach to could lead to an undesirable outcome. We are therefore well aware that merely conducting studies in English doesn’t constitute internationality. We want students to understand that English is only a means of communication, not a substitute for our first and other languages. We want the Lithuanian language to be globally recognised, visible, and used in the fields of science and academia,” says Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė.

She points out that studying in a multilingual environment is key to understanding that multiculturalism and multilingualism are assets that we must foster: “We strive for a sustainable approach to multiculturalism. We want our students to go out into the world with an understanding of the importance and value of their own first language and culture, as well as other languages and cultures.”

Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienė believes that this is the direction in which the entire state policy should be oriented: attracting teachers, researchers, and
young talents from abroad and creating favourable conditions for them should be one of the country's priorities.

“We need to position Lithuania as a country with high-quality higher education, attracting both students and researchers. We have yet to fully exploit the potential of higher education in Lithuania, which is particularly important for a small country like ours.”

**Competences for a Successful Life**

Assoc. Prof. Bijeikienë says that internationality at the University also develops students’ soft skills “Firstly, flexibility to adapt to various situations and to perceive otherness in its broadest sense – not just as linguistic or cultural otherness, but also as the ability to listen and understand different opinions and ways of thinking. It also involves the ability to present oneself in a more flexible and diplomatic way.”

Secondly, studying in a multicultural environment develops the ability to bring people together and work in a team.

“We place great importance on creating an inclusive communication and learning environment that allows students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to successfully integrate into the study process. After all, our University welcomes students from around 50 countries every year, each bringing their own cultural foundation.”
In the latest QS World University Rankings, which evaluated nearly 3,000 institutions, Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) has significantly improved or maintained its high scores, especially in the area of international engagement, where it remains the leader in Lithuania in terms of the number of international students.

In the first semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, 580 international students arrived for mobility and full-time studies, including 49 students from Indonesia, all of whom received scholarships from the Indonesian government. VMU is the only university in Lithuania participating in the unique inter-university cooperation project with the Indonesian International Student Mobility Programme IISMA.

In the first-ever QS World University RankingsEurope 2024 VMU also received outstanding rankings: it was ranked 30th for Inbound Exchange Students and 114th for Outbound Exchange Students.

VMU students participating in the Erasmus+ and VMU’s bilateral exchange programmes for part-time studies, internships, and short-term courses have the opportunity to travel to any company or organisation worldwide, as well as to over 700 partner universities in 78 countries. In addition to European countries, VMU students can participate in bilateral exchange programmes in such far away countries as the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Tanzania, and others. More than 200 VMU students take advantage of this opportunity every year.

Students can also complete internships lasting from one to six months in Lithuanian communities and Lithuanian heritage schools around the world. Every year, more than 160 VMU students and graduates venture abroad for this purpose.

Find out more in the VMU and Transform4Europe alliance talk show, Transforming the Academic Universe.
“[My] choice of the legal profession was profoundly influenced by the historic period of Lithuania’s restoration of independence and the building of the young state. From a young age, together with my parents, I actively participated in various liberation events from the Soviet Union. The spirit of revival that prevailed at Sąjūdis rallies and congresses, the various liberation events – from voluntary work in restoring Basanavičius’s birthplace to the Rock Marches throughout Lithuania, the very act of independence restoration, and finally, the events of 13 January, when, at the age of fourteen, I spent a week by the bonfires protecting Lithuania’s freedom – these experiences ultimately shaped my inner attitude towards choosing a profession related to state and human rights, and the aspiration to dedicate my life to the well-being of the Lithuanian state and nation,” says Dr. Mindaugas Šimonis, who worked in the Lithuanian court system for twenty years, and is currently an attorney-at-law and a teacher at the Faculty of Law of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU).

The attorney explained that after finishing school, he had to choose between law and political science, ultimately selecting law because it is a fundamental social science that offers a wide range of career opportunities after graduation. These opportunities range from diplomatic service, work in state governance, law enforcement, and justice institutions, as well as practising at the bar, to engaging in activities within a vast and highly diverse private sector. Dr. Šimonis hoped that his profession would serve as a gateway through which he could contribute both to the building of the young Lithuanian state and to significant social processes.

Contributed to the Reform of the Judicial System

The attorney recalls that the five years he spent working at the Supreme Court of Lithuania (SCL)
two decades ago were among the most interesting and creative professional stages for him as a young legal professional. He worked extensively with authoritative, long-standing judges and law professors who were shaping the foundations of the law of the reviving state, prepared draft decisions for the Court of Cassation in a responsible manner, and contributed to the formation of judicial precedents, which became particularly important following the new Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania that entered into force on 2 July 2001. Working at the Supreme Court provided excellent opportunities to acquire professional wisdom and culture, as well as the ability to interpret, develop, and elucidate the law professionally, which is essential for the legal profession.

Later, when leading the courts and with extensive experience in the legal system, the lawyer contributed to the first reform of the judicial system by merging district courts, creating court administration instruments, introducing new legal institutes in the work of the court, and contributing to ensuring transparency, independence, and impartiality of courts and judges to achieve the quality of justice. Dr. Šimonis gained extensive international experience through traineeships and conferences in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and other countries, serving as an expert in justice in the Council of Europe in Croatia and Georgia and conducting training in the Czech Republic, Poland, and even Tunisia in collaboration with US judges. According to the attorney, this experience makes it easier to compare differences between legal systems and cultures in different countries and to identify areas where Lithuania still needs to improve.

**A Lack of Compassion for Human Rights**

Sharing his thoughts on the current state of human rights and the state governance and law enforcement institutions in Lithuania, Dr. Šimonis notes that much work remains to be done to reach the standards of a modern Western state and society, characterised by high respect for individual autonomy, compassion for individual human rights, and attention to legal culture and professional ethics.

“Surprisingly, there are still many remnants of the Soviet era, where the authorities and their representatives don’t serve the people, don’t assist in exercising their rights, or don’t safeguard their legitimate interests, but, on the contrary, often bureaucratically constrain them by performing their duties in a narrow manner. Next to them, there are institutions where human rights and the principles of sound public administration are merely legal declarations, which in reality are completely disregarded. I believe the entire legal community must actively contribute to the eradication of these negative phenomena, which harm the development of the Lithuanian state and lead to people’s mistrust of public authorities. When
cases of abuse by public officials and civil servants are identified by courts or control authorities, the responses should be aimed at systemic change rather than just resolving individual situations. In Lithuania, I see a lack of activism within the legal community aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the legal system, compassion for individual human rights, and rejection of injustice,” says Dr. Šimonis.

High Standards for Law Students

According to Šimonis, a modern lawyer must responsibly engage in continuous professional development. It is a profession that requires constant learning, critical analysis of each situation, application of legal regulations on an individual basis, consideration of the principles and doctrines of the law, and keeping abreast of ever-changing legislation. “The work of a lawyer has significant implications for society and the state; thus, professionals in this field must be meticulous, caring, responsible, well-educated, knowledgeable in a wide range of areas, with a penchant for learning and a commitment to honest service,” says Dr. Šimonis. He also asserts that university admissions to law studies must take into account the specific requirements of the legal profession and should, therefore, only consider applicants with very good or at least good grades in various subjects. Law students themselves should be ambitious and inclined towards in-depth legal studies, where the primary focus must be on the study process itself.

“When visiting foreign universities, it’s the motivated and responsible students who study independently in the university libraries and devote their all attention exclusively to the study process that truly stand out. In Lithuania, I observe a concerning trend: students often fail to even read all the textbook
material, many skip lectures, and generally do not pay enough attention to their studies. Law studies are inherently complex, demanding both time and attention. On the one hand, they require precise, logical thinking and the ability to assess causal links between various phenomena and laws. On the other hand, a lawyer must be able to articulate thoughts fluently, both orally and in writing, as effective legal work largely depends on fluent communication," says Dr. Šimonis, emphasizing the versatility of the profession and adding that many skills in the field of law only come with experience.

**The Use of Technology is Inevitable**

Like other professions, lawyers have greatly benefited from new technologies, which have made it possible to perform certain tasks more quickly and efficiently: accessing and processing various data in registries, collecting evidence, conducting complex technical and other expert analyses, investigating various complex events, finding the best legal precedents and scientific data, and adapting them to individual cases.

However, with the advancement of technology, new challenges have emerged, such as the challenge of patenting new technologies themselves, which requires legal proof of how one technology differs from another. Collaborations with experts from other disciplines is often necessary, especially when specific scientific and professional knowledge, as well as high competences in other professional fields, are needed.

“The use of technology is inevitable in a lawyer’s work, as it enables the collection, thorough investigation, and evaluation of significantly important evidence in a wide range of legal proceedings. A lawyer must be technologically literate and adept at using technology because it is essential in everyday practice,” says Dr. Šimonis.

**VMU: Distinguished by Its Interdisciplinarity**

The lawyer, who completed his doctoral studies at VMU and dedicated his dissertation to the quality of justice, values the additional scientific competences he has acquired and the opportunity to collaborate with other scientists in his professional activities and to employ law and other sciences in solving practical problems.“Interacting with colleagues from VMU has broadened my scientific perspective, as this University is distinguished by its interdisciplinarity and openness of scientific thought. My doctoral studies at VMU have contributed significantly to the application of scientific methods in legal practice, as legal reasoning should not be chaotic, but a precise and consistent process, grounded in a methodologically sound interpretation and application of the law. Continuing university studies have enhanced my ability to manage complex processes, both in my former role as a judge and in my current practice as an attorney,” says Dr. Šimonis.
Literary Festival is a Valuable Asset for a City

“For a long time, I felt a moral responsibility to finish every book I had started reading. But I have come to realise that it is better to reread a book with which you feel a connection several times than to force yourself through a book that you do not enjoy. I think that with age and experience comes the realisation that the time we can devote to reading is limited, so we should not measure our reading experience only by the number of books we have read,” says one of the founders of the festival “Kaunas Literature Week”, Associate Professor Rūta Eidukevičienė, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU).

The academic notes that the rapid pace of life has not bypassed the literary world, where book publishers are paying less and less attention to text editing and quality translations. Furthermore, readers are finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on reading longer or more complex texts. “This is why, at the festival, we want to devote more time to discussions, to delve deeper, and to hear the author’s perspective, rather than merely skimming over the text,” says the literary scholar.

Aim to Introduce Lesser-Known Authors in Our Country

“In Lithuania, we enjoy a wealth of literary events; however, we have noticed a lack of the ones that are more conceptual and that could be developed at an academic level. Together with my colleague Laurynas Katkus – a writer, translator, and art director of the festival – we thought that the University would be an excellent venue for this endeavour. We wanted to offer a more academic, in-depth discussion format and provide a platform for a wider range of readers to discuss issues of public concern with the writers,” explains Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė.

However, the first Kaunas Literature Week, which took place in 2021, faced quite a challenge: its planning took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving its organisers uncertain until the last minute whether the event would take place at all. “The war in Ukraine that broke out last year also changed the course of the festival. As organisers, we are learning and growing together with the festival. We are continuously exploring formats that suit and appeal to the audience, and we take inspiration from events in other countries. We are also pleased with the growing circle of festival visitors and the already formed core of the audience, who are keen to know what the festival will offer in the future,” says VMU Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė.
According to one of the event organisers, while there are many great literary initiatives in the city, such as the Youth Slam Nights, the idea was to bring them and the events organised by partner institutions under one roof for at least a week and make them more visible. Having its own literary festival is a valuable asset for a city, as it not only enriches its cultural life but also helps to bring the community together and forge international and local partnerships. For a long time, Kaunas hasn’t have writers of such status and authors of such geographical and linguistic diversity, so today there is certainly something to be happy about and proud of.

“Any intellectual debate is important for the city. When inviting authors, we always select relevant topics, and the festival has already established certain sections that are important to us and have become traditional, such as “Emigrees and Locals”, which brings together writers who were born or lived in Kaunas and those who came here later, or the “Night Café”, which is dedicated to the synthesis of literature, theatre, music, and other creative fields. We also have the “Discoveries” section, which aims to introduce the audience to authors from lesser-known literary regions or whose texts have not yet been translated into Lithuanian,” says Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė, discussing the creation of new and the revival of the city's old cultural traditions.

Mission: to Help Young Writers Discover Their Talents

According to the Dean, one of the main missions of the festival is to bring together young writers and help them present their work. “For several years now, we have been collaborating with the LiteraTour literary festival in Luxembourg, to which we also invite young Lithuanian authors. The best authors, selected by the Lithuanian jury, travel to Luxembourg to present their work live to an international audience and have their texts published in several languages. This
serves as an encouragement to dare to present their work both in Lithuania and abroad. The festival also includes the “New Winds” section, where selected authors share their work with the festival audience,” says Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė, highlighting the opportunities “Kaunas Literature Week” offers to young creators.

During the festival, young creators also have the opportunity to participate in creative workshops. “The first was dedicated to the essay genre, with the prose writing workshop led by Danutė Kalinauskaitė, Kaunas-born author and winner of the National Prize. In 2022, we held a poetry workshop, and last year, in 2023, we organised an international drama writing workshop,” shares one of the organisers of “Kaunas Literature Week”, who is pleased that a significant number of students and graduates of the second cycle programme in Literary Arts, Criticism and Communication also contribute to the organisation of the festival.

“The second cycle programme in Literature introduced at the re-established VMU more than 30 years ago differed significantly from what we teach students today, as it has continuously evolved to reflect the times. After the re-establishment of the University, the core of the teaching staff consisted of many inspiring individuals from the Lithuanian diaspora who promoted interdisciplinary literary research. Naturally, the concept of the study programme also evolved, and a few years ago, its scope was broadened even further. Now, we offer a study programme entitled ‘Literary Arts, Criticism, and Communication’, “ explains one of the teachers in the programme, discussing the innovative approach to literary studies.

Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė notes that the artistic and communicative elements incorporated into the programme closely align with the festival organised by VMU. “Our curriculum covers literary life – not only reading and text analysis but also the dynamics of communication in the contemporary literary field among critics, authors, and publishers, as well as the organisation of literary events. The studies progress with the times, making the festival an ideal opportunity for students to see and experience the tasks of the literary field,” says VMU Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė.
Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė is particularly fascinated by writers who are able to combine the talents of a scientist and a writer. Kazys Almenas, an engineer, physicist, and author of adventure novels, who received an Honorary Doctorate from VMU, and Paolo Giordano, one of the most renowned contemporary Italian writers with a doctorate in particle physics, who participated in the festival, are examples of this synthesis. Such intersections perfectly embody the concept of *artes liberales* fostered by VMU and can inspire creative young people to take up writing, regardless of their field of studies.

Paolo Giordano, who attended this year’s “Kaunas Literature Week”, holds a similar view. Despite his background in physics, the author, who is now carving a career in literature, argues that the current division between the humanities and sciences is a product of how ideas were developed in the 20th century. “Think of Goethe, for instance. Think of Alexander von Humboldt. They would move freely from one domain to the other. So, the first step is not to assume that this is something inevitable or natural. It’s a product of the way science and humanities are taught in school, where all subjects are separated from each other. Students are given the idea that if they are good at one thing, they’re probably not so good at other things. There’s a lot of cultural construction in this that needs to be dismantled. We should promote learning that is intersectional. Hybrid study courses. There are some, especially in some countries, but we need this to be way more spread,” says Giordano.

The writer believes that today’s young people are less inclined to make a strict distinction between the humanities and sciences. “Younger people are immersed in the tech world, they simply can’t avoid it. And through it, they’re exposed to a lot of different things. We have to implement changes fast because the world we live in is being increasingly shaped by science and technology. We need citizens who can decipher it – people from the humanities who can enable us to make sense of this world,” says Giordano, one of the most prominent contemporary Italian novelists.

**Any Discussion about Literature is Valuable**

Speaking about contemporary literature, its researcher Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė highlights its diversity both in terms of genres and dissemination
channels. “I believe that both new channels, such as ‘Bookstagram’, and more traditional ones are valuable, especially if they encourage someone to discover one text or another. Alternatives such as e-books, audiobooks, and artificial intelligence are also emerging and posing challenges for publishers. Despite all the innovations, there is always value in reading a detailed review or attending an event to meet the author of the book. The recently established Literature Week Club, where literary professionals and readers share their impressions of books they have read, is an excellent way of doing this. Any form of dissemination and discussion of literature is valuable,” says the Dean pointing to the emergence of writers with diverse professional and cultural experiences and the new themes that emerge as a result.

“In recent years, themes of memory, migration, and the portrayal of multi-generational family sagas through literary narratives have become particularly relevant. There’s also an increase in prominent female authors. In times of global unrest, the interest in escapist literature, which gained popularity during the pandemic, continues, and various genres of literature also find their readers. Everything that concerns society finds its reflection in literature,” says Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė, describing contemporary literary trends and noting that despite the dominance of digital technologies, students still enjoy picking up a physical book.

“Not everyone comes to the university having read all the great works of literature. A book is a collective work of art, so learning by physically holding it is important – from its scent and cover design to the overall emotional experience it evokes. Paper books are undoubtedly here to stay, and young people are gradually discovering them,” says the academic, while also acknowledging a worrying trend: recent school leavers are often inclined to interpret a literary text, evaluate it, and express their own opinions, but find it difficult to carry out basic text analysis.

“Students can easily articulate why they like or dislike a text, and they can discuss in abstract terms, but when asked to pinpoint specific aspects, such as the narrative perspective or the style in which the text is written, they encounter difficulties,” VMU teacher shares her observations.

**Encouraging a Leisuredly Appreciation of Literature**

A worrying trend, according to Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė, is the current situation where there are more people writing than reading. “There’s a growing trend of attempting to articulate individual problems based solely on personal experiences, which attributes only a therapeutic function to writing. Equally worrying is the publishing industry’s rush to release as much content as quickly as possible, with less and less attention paid to editing. Reading texts riddled with stylistic and translation errors is unenjoyable and reflects the fast pace of life in our society. At our festival, we want to devote more time to discussions that allow a deeper exploration of texts and author’s perspectives, ensuring that they are not only intellectually stimulating but also lively and witty,” says one of the founders of the festival “Kaunas Literature Week”.

To include more discussions with authors in the festival, this year, for the second time, the autumn sessions of “Šeteniai Readings”, which take place in Kaunas and Czesław Miłosz’s hometown Šeteniai, were organised. “For these readings, we invite a renowned author to present a specially written text addressing contemporary societal issues. Last year’s guests included one of Ukraine’s most celebrated writers, Yuri Andriukhovich, and Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich. This year, we had a Latvian literary star, Nora Ikstena. In the future, we want to further increase the literary activity in Šeteniai,” adds Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė, promising that next year, the festival attendees will have the opportunity to see world-class literary figures.

“We remain committed to presenting lesser-known and noteworthy Lithuanian and foreign authors, with a continued emphasis on youth. The programme of the festival is characterised by its diversity, covering a wide range of regions, genres, and themes,” concludes Assoc. Prof. Eidukevičienė.
Younger people are immersed in the tech world, they simply can’t avoid it. And through it, they’re exposed to a lot of different things. We have to implement changes fast because the world we live in is being increasingly shaped by science and technology. We need citizens who can decipher it. People from the humanities who can enable us to make sense of this world
An Authentic Part of the University: Reflecting on the History of the Whole Nation

“It is natural that scientific tasks of botanical gardens evolve and their activities expand over time. Today, facing the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, botanical gardens worldwide are devoting considerable attention to the conservation of wild flora and endangered, rare plants. Our VMU Botanical Garden in Kaunas is no exception,” says Dr. Nerijus Jurkonis, the Director of the Garden, reflecting on the century-long evolution of the Garden and its continuing primary mission – to be an inseparable part of the University, serving as a base for research and studies.
The centenary of VMU Botanical Garden provided an opportunity to reassess its footprint as an institution, both within the University and in a broader national context. What echoes of its century-long history still resonate today?

In 1922, with the founding of the University of Lithuania in Kaunas, the idea of establishing a university botanical garden began to take shape. The chosen location was the area of the manor park in Aukštoji Freda, a suburb of Kaunas. Adorned with impressive ponds, this area once belonged to the landowner Józef Godlewski and included a part of the defensive installations of Kaunas fortress.

The fact that the Botanical Garden, established a century ago, was not set up on a vacant site contributed significantly to its uniqueness: there was already a manor ensemble, various outbuildings, a manor park, an established pond system, and a unique landscape. However, the area had been damaged and neglected during the First World War, so the original founders had to undertake considerable work to transform it into what would resemble a botanical garden.

I would say that our Botanical Garden reflects the history of the whole nation: the first half of the 19th century left its imprint here with the establishment of a manor house ensemble and a park. In the second half of the 19th century, as Kaunas was transformed into a fortress, fortifications were built in this area, including an artillery yard, and it even served as the residence of the fortress commandant. The later period covers the era of Lithuanian independence, when state institutions and a university were established, and alongside these developments, the Botanical Garden began to develop, with the Greenhouse and redesigned spaces becoming its distinctive features.

Over the years, the face and direction of VMU Botanical Garden have been shaped by its various directors, but without doubt, the most significant influence on the Garden – as we see it today – was its first director, Prof. Constantin von Regel, a Swiss-origin scientist, who joined the University of Lithuania specifically to advance the science of botany and to establish the Botanical Garden.

Having travelled extensively and familiarised himself with the structure and equipment of contemporary botanical gardens, he sought to implement the best ideas in Lithuania. Consequently, he invited the renowned park and garden architect Karl Rauth from Hanover, Germany, who drew up a detailed plan for the layout of the Garden, modifying the network of old paths in the park while preserving its English landscape style.

Between 1923 and 1925, construction began on another structure that would become a symbol of the Garden: the first Greenhouse, built according to the design of the German firm Höntech and completed in 1938. It featured four sections with constant temperature control and a large pool for tropical plants, alongside a dendropark and a Plant Systematics sector.

All this was evidence of the persistence and methodical approach in achieving the goal of creating a modern and progressive botanical garden, drawing inspiration from the best European botanical gardens of the time.

Equally important is the fact that, right from the start, the Garden was perceived as an inseparable part of the University and was established primarily as a base for research and studies. This was, and still is, its primary purpose and mission.

How have the activities of VMU Botanical Garden evolved over the years?

Within just a few years of its establishment, the Botanical Garden became not only a training base for students, but also an important centre of botanical sciences in Lithuania. The first printed publications appeared and the first seed list was compiled. Gradually, public interest in the Botanical Garden increased, leading to the organisation of guided tours and the publication of educational volumes.

Considerable attention was devoted to plant acclimatisation, introduction, and genetics, plant diseases and pests, systematics, and other related topics.
After the war, efforts began to restore the destroyed plant collections and expositions. New plant varieties were developed, various sectors, including Dendrology, Plant Systematics, Ornamental Plants, Geographical (Greenhouse), Pomology, Medicinal and Technical Plants, and Food and Fodder Plants were formed, biochemical research on medicinal plants was conducted, and the phenology of many native and introduced plants was observed.

During the Soviet occupation, the University in Kaunas was dissolved and partially relocated to Vilnius, leading to changes in the governance and scientific objectives of the Garden. During the Soviet era, the focus shifted to useful plants, the introduction of other crops, and their adaptation to our local conditions. Extensive work was undertaken in the field of breeding of not only ornamental plants, but also grapes, apricots, and other crops.

After Lithuania regained its independence, in 1992, new collections of berry plants were established in the Pomology sector. In addition, breeding work on blueberries and cranberries was started, and research was conducted on the prospects of introducing and cultivating forest medicinal and berry plants and berry cultures, such as large cranberries and blueberries, in Lithuania.

It is worth mentioning that one area that has remained consistently relevant since the founding of the Botanical Garden is that of medicinal plants. As early as 1924, Kazimieras Grybauskas established the Sector of Medicinal Plants and successfully expanded it. Work in this area has persisted throughout the century, ranging from promoting cultivation among farmers to various studies, acclimatisation, and the development of new varieties; for example, the hop varieties developed in our Botanical Garden and valued by brewers have survived to this day. Contemporary research has advanced to the next level – analysing the active substances of medicinal plants, collaborating with pharmaceutical and biotechnology scientists, and exploring the applications and uses of plants – with the Botanical Garden serving as a crucial base for the practical aspects of the research.

The fact that the importance of VMU Botanical Garden has remained constant over the years, both in science and education as well as in society, despite changing activities, is evidenced by the block of stamps issued by the Lithuanian Post Office to commemorate the centenary of the Garden in 2023. This serves as a testament to the recognition of our national importance as an institution.

The rapidly changing global context is also reshaping the mission of botanical gardens, revising their objectives, and even altering the nature of their activities. To what extent does VMU Botanical Garden reflect global trends and contribute to the global mission of botanical gardens?

Today, grappling with the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, botanical gardens play a vital role in the conservation of wild flora and endangered, rare plants. Increasingly, rare plants specific to the region of a particular botanical garden are collected from known habitats and added to the collections of the Garden, where they are preserved and, when necessary, reintroduced into their natural environment.

In our Botanical Garden, the Flora taxonomy exposition alone offers a rich diversity of wild plants (714 species across 53 families). We preserve over 100 endangered plant species in Lithuania, and an additional 258 collection numbers are assigned to the Lithuanian National Plant Genetic Resources.

It is worth noting that we have been a member of the Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) for 30 years. This organisation unites over 800 botanical gardens from more than 100 countries and was established in the United Kingdom in 1987. Its aim is to mobilise botanical gardens and build partnerships to help protect biodiversity, which is essential for the well-being of humanity and the planet.

We engage in extensive communication and collaboration with colleagues from other botanical gardens, making the trend very clear: we need to work together to raise awareness of how to better
manage and conserve existing plant diversity in the face of the current global challenges, namely the need to adapt to climate change and seek solutions for a more sustainable way of life.

There is increasing talk that it is time for botanical gardens to reorient, i.e., to engage more with the public and use their expertise to help improve the cultivation, care, and effective conservation of biodiversity, and that the knowledge gained from the expositions and collections of botanical gardens needs to be returned to nature and that there is a need to forge new partnerships, adopt a broader perspective, and find ways to help people understand the significance of plants.

We assist the BGCI in gathering and synthesising information on how botanical gardens respond to natural disasters, such as heatwaves, storms, cyclones, and fires. After receiving systematic data from us and other botanical gardens, teams of scientists analyse and learn from the observations. For example, they determine which species of trees and other plants are most resistant to heat, drought, fires, and strong winds. This information is vital for developing recommendations on which tree species are suitable for street planting and understanding their role in mitigating extreme climate effects, such as when cities become hotspots of unbearable heat.
Another significant development in recent decades has been the opening of botanical gardens to the public, leading to efforts to engage and educate the public. Naturally, this also requires investment in infrastructure. After all, we live in the 21st century, and visitors expect contemporary conditions: from a modern and comfortable infrastructure of the garden itself to information systems.

At VMU Botanical Garden, we respond to this need to engage with the public. When inviting people to the Garden and organising events, we ensure that each event incorporates an educational element. Even if visitors come for a cultural entertainment event, such as a concert or a play, as they stroll through the Botanical Garden, they will encounter displays, plant labels, and exposition descriptions, and through these simple means, they will effortlessly learn about the plant world.

Our events also cater to different age groups: from science festivals aimed at schoolchildren to the Fascination of Plants Day for the youngest and The Night of Scents, our largest botanical summer celebration, which attracts families. We experience a massive influx of visitors during the plant flowering weeks and host a variety of educational activities and guided tours throughout the year. Our constant goal is to demonstrate that there are no “ugly” or “bad” plants and to captivate and reveal the astonishing diversity, richness, and beauty of flora to as many people as possible.

What role does the Botanical Garden play in today’s University?

It is interesting to note that in today’s Vytautas Magnus University, the Botanical Garden serves as an authentic link between the inter-war VMU and the re-established VMU of today. In fact, the Botanical Garden is the only facility that has remained in its original location throughout the century since its foundation, neither closed nor moved.

The Botanical Garden maintains a strong scientific direction and educational mission, closely aligned with the foundational principles of artes liberales of Vytautas Magnus University. Importantly, the
Garden is not solely a research and study base for any faculty; rather, it is utilised by teachers across various study programmes within the University. Furthermore, the Botanical Garden serves as a resource for various educational institutions in the region, from vocational training centres to universities, in areas such as planting, floristry, and agriculture. For students of agronomy, horticulture, and pharmacy, it offers an excellent base for practical lectures and scientific research.

Another significant aspect is that, over the past decade, the Botanical Garden has become an important venue for conducting educational activities, catering to all societal groups, from the youngest to the oldest. Given that the Education Academy is now an integral part of VMU and Kaunas has emerged as the primary centre for teacher training in Lithuania, the Botanical Garden has become a focal point where future educators can engage in practical training and explore and use the Garden for preparing and delivering lessons in natural sciences, nature education, and biology, as well as for implementing various teaching methods, among other activities.
Teacher training, like the education system, is constantly undergoing changes. By now, probably everyone has heard the heated discussions about the updating of curriculum content, inclusive education, and other innovations. Of course, not everything that is communicated in the public sphere has a positive influence on young people or motivates them to become teachers.

According to Prof. Lina Kaminskienė, Chancellor of the Education Academy of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), it is also important to acknowledge the positive developments, i.e., the strengthening of school communities, the growth of teachers’ professionalism, and meaningful projects that enrich our children’s education. For those who embrace challenges, knowing that every day in school and the classroom will bring surprises, choosing the teaching profession is the right decision.

**Best Results Are Achieved Through Integrated Efforts**

VMU Education Academy actively cooperates with Lithuanian municipalities. During this academic year, Prof. Kaminskienė has had the opportunity to visit and meet with numerous leaders, staff, heads of schools, and pupils from Lithuanian municipal education divisions. It is evident that regions boast highly impactful and meaningful initiatives, alongside quality educational activities.

“Although I have not yet heard very worrying remarks about the shortage of teachers at the meetings,
everyone can see the emerging trends, and the municipalities are devising strategies to ensure that the municipal educational institutions do not face a shortage of teachers. We consistently discuss and coordinate joint activities to attract more young people to the teaching profession. These include the Young Teacher Club in Kaunas district, the Education Sciences Class at Kaunas Maironis Gymnasium, and the fruitful cooperation with Tauragė and Alytus municipalities in the education of gifted children and STEAM activities,” says Prof. Kaminskinė.

She firmly believes that the best results are achieved through integrated efforts: when municipalities pursue their own vision, develop modern infrastructure, enrich cultural life, and create attractive social and economic conditions. In other words, people move to places where they want to live and work. A school does not operate in an isolated environment; it is an open community ecosystem. Of course, a lot depends on the leadership of the school head, progressive thinking, and the creation of a psychologically safe environment for teachers and students.

**Teaching Extends Beyond the Boundaries of a Single Discipline**

“The success of the teaching profession largely depends on proper education and a calling, as well as on the individual’s maturity and holistic view. On the other hand, it’s equally important to develop competences in professional resilience, which will enable one not to forsake the chosen professional path in challenging situations. In today’s university studies, it’s not only educators but also the entire academic team of the university, including psychologists and representatives of the Natural Sciences, Arts, Technological Sciences, and Neuroscience, who contribute to the development of the various competences needed by teachers. This demonstrates that the teaching profession is interdisciplinary and transcends the boundaries of a single discipline, as educating a person is both a challenge and a great privilege,” explains Prof. Kaminskień.

The Chancellor of the Education Academy is happy to see students who inspire with their choices and attitudes towards studies and work, who are demanding of themselves and their teachers, and who are creative. She notes that there are many wonderful examples of individuals entering university who decide to become teachers as early as in primary school, and those who find their calling later. Such stories are numerous and diverse. The way they talk and communicate about teaching and how they celebrate their students’ achievements is also uplifting. Some of them go as far as doctoral studies, and you can see their eyes light up when they talk about education, innovation, and experimentation. Failures occur, and other choices are made, but this is a natural part of finding suitable studies and one’s calling.

When asked why it is worth choosing the teaching profession, Prof. Kaminskié emphasises that a teacher is a leader, an innovator, and a creator. And being a teacher is an honour: “I’ve no doubt that the majority would agree. Let’s learn to appreciate teachers, trust them, and not overload them with pointless tasks. There’ll always be a shortage of good teachers.”

**The Teaching Profession Attracts Considerable Interest**

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vaida Jurgilė, Head of the first cycle study programme “Subject Pedagogy” at VMU Education Academy, believes that, based on the last year’s enrolment results, the teaching profession is attracting considerable interest. While it is possible that many students may choose these studies for the scholarships offered, she is inclined to believe that young people are often inspired by their own teachers or family, by the positive examples they observe, and by the respectful and dignified relationship that can exist between the teacher and the student.

“In many cases, young people choose this profession out of a deep desire for self-expression, or simply, as the students themselves put it, in pursuit of meaning. Nevertheless, teaching has its own challenges, as it requires constant adaptation to the need for continuous improvement of knowledge. The daily acquisition of experience
and the opportunity for us to learn and develop are paramount. One must always be learning and seeking new ideas, capable and willing to get to know their students, and possessing clear goals and aspirations,” she says.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurgilė works with a large number of prospective teachers. She finds it particularly interesting to hear from students who, after three years of studying in a different field, such as medicine, decide to switch to VMU Education Academy to study teaching. When asked about their decision, especially considering how far they have come in their studies, future teachers mention finding a space for creativity and tolerance here. Some admit that they initially resisted the teaching profession because their parents are teachers, but eventually realised it was their calling and came to appreciate the nuances of teaching.

“What’s most encouraging are the students who come with a firm understanding of what they want to be and who are actively striving to become teachers, ready to challenge the stereotypes associated with the profession. It’s incredibly gratifying to hear that future teachers will be the ones shaping the next generation for Lithuania,” says the Head of the first cycle study programme “Subject Pedagogy” at VMU Education Academy.

Building a Relationship with a Teacher is Important for Students

Prospective teachers’ skills are developed during their studies, practice, and professional career by observing, analysing, and reflecting on their experiences, constantly assessing their perceptions, thinking, and behaviour, and discussing them with colleagues and university teachers. Reflective skills thus become an essential tool for evaluating and enhancing pedagogical practices based on experience.

“It’s important for students to build a relationship with their teacher based on respect and support. Every student wants to feel good, which is why support is heavily emphasised. It’s very common to hear that students have been encouraged or inspired by their motivating teachers. This is a significant acknowledgement because students who appreciate their teachers in this way demonstrate a strong intrinsic motivation to learn, as they receive considerable attention from their teachers,” says Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurgilė.

According to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurgilė, it is of paramount importance for a subject teacher to be an ambassador for his or her subject. Students often highlight their admiration for teachers’ profound subject knowledge, finding such expertise both inspiring and exemplary. Equally important is the teacher’s ability to articulate the relevance of their subject, whether explaining the significance of mathematics or the reasons for studying geography. Teachers often hear, “Will I really need this in the future?” Therefore, when studying to become a subject teacher, the first task is to learn to provide compelling justifications.
Teacher training emphasises a broad and well-rounded education that focuses on each student’s self-actualisation. It offers opportunities to gain knowledge in various fields, learn foreign languages, and develop a wide range of skills in practical laboratories. Students are offered traineeships or internships abroad, allowing them to engage in educational activities in various countries and institutions of the European Union and to collaborate with international colleagues. All this enhances the motivation of future teachers during their studies.

**Convinced by Stereotypes About Teaching**

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurgilė says that young people are very convinced by certain stereotypes about teaching. They think it is a very dull and undignified job, which requires constant relationship building and keeping up with innovations. According to her, a young person who is genuinely interested in becoming a teacher will notice that the profession is receiving attention and that environments are being created in which self-confident and competent teachers who are not afraid of challenges can develop.

"Teaching is for those who are not afraid of making mistakes, who pursue their goals, who are responsible, tolerant, self-confident, and free individuals. Thus, the motivation for someone considering pedagogy studies could be related to the desire to be a new generation teacher-leader, responsible for societal development. And perhaps what might motivate a young person the most is that, in this profession, stagnation and established rules and norms seem to disappear.

It would probably be wrong for a teacher to always stay the same or to continually use the same teaching methods, so every lesson, no matter how many years you have been teaching your subject, should be a new discovery. You’re always looking for new ways to engage and inspire your students. This means you have space for creativity and innovation, and, most importantly, as I’ve already mentioned, if you want to express yourself or are searching for meaning, then this profession is for you. And it’s truly a promising one,” emphasises Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurgilė.

In today’s university studies, it’s not only educators but also the entire academic team of the university, including psychologists and representatives of the Natural Sciences, Arts, Technological Sciences, and Neuroscience, who contribute to the development of the various competences needed by teachers. This demonstrates that the teaching profession is interdisciplinary and transcends the boundaries of a single discipline, as educating a person is both a challenge and a great privilege.
"In pursuit of the European sports model, characterised by the central role of sports federations and based on a wide range of parties, from municipal centres and National Olympic Committees to coaches, athletes, and volunteers (who play a key role in supporting the entire sports structure), it is necessary to ensure the training of a new generation of sports professionals that adheres to modern international standards," says professional athlete and VMU researcher Assoc. Prof. Aušra Lisinskienė.

Sports Coaches with Extensive Expertise and Erudition

In 2022, VMU Education Academy launched the first cycle study programme “Sports Studies” in the field of Competitive Sports. The Head of the programme Assoc. Prof. Lisinskienė says that VMU study programme “Sports Studies” is authentic and unique as it is the only one in the country that focuses specifically on the modern training of sports coaches, adopting a broad, integrated, and holistic perspective towards the representatives of this profession.

“The study programme “Sports Studies” introduces a new concept of coach training in Lithuania and is the only programme of its kind to train coaches in all sports disciplines. This study programme is also characterised by its focus on contemporary training of sports coaches, which adopts an integrated and holistic approach and prepares sports coaches endowed with extensive expertise and erudition, who are distinguished by their competence, leadership,
broader skills, and knowledge,” says the Associate Professor.

The study programme “Sports Studies” is also unique in that it offers students the opportunity to choose alternative study courses that deepen and complement their coaching qualifications, such as “Sports Psychology; Coach leadership in Lithuanian national club “Kaunas Žalgiris”; Strength and Conditioning; Mastery of Personal Trainer; and Performance Analysis”, which are essential for enhancing the competences of coaches in all sports.

**Achievements in Various Sports**

VMU offers its students not only innovative studies but also top-tier sports infrastructure. The President Valdas Adamkus Sports Centre, currently the largest university sports complex in Lithuania, adapted to different sports and needs, is dedicated to high-performance athletes and students who want to build their lives and careers around these activities.

VMU athletes won 45 medals at the SELL Games in Tartu in 2023.

Swimmer Kotryna Teterevkova, the best female athlete of VMU and second among the top ten of the best Lithuanian student-athletes of 2023.
Following the introduction of the study programme “Sports Studies”, the University has seen an increase in the number of athletes from various sports, as well as high-performance athletes, who are provided with excellent conditions for both studies and training, enabling them to achieve high levels of performance.

Recently, VMU has emerged as a distinct leader in university sports in Lithuania and the Baltic States, ranking among the top ten European universities with the highest sports achievements. In 2023, VMU athletes achieved impressive accomplishments in various sports, ranging from basketball to volleyball and swimming.

- VMU men’s beach volleyball duo won the title of European University Beach Volleyball Champions.

- VMU student Rūta Meilutytė, the best female athlete of 2023, became the World Swimming Champion, broke the world record, was named the best swimmer in Europe, and earned a ticket to the 2024 Paris Olympics. Rūta appeared in the latest VMU video, which you can watch here.
VMU 3×3 men’s basketball team, world student champions of 2023.

This study programme is also characterised by its focus on contemporary training of sports coaches, which adopts an integrated and holistic approach and prepares sports coaches endowed with extensive expertise and erudition, who are distinguished by their competence, leadership, broader skills, and knowledge.
The Uniqueness of VMU Must be Preserved

“The artes liberales system, which provides a broad education, is becoming increasingly important – it’s no coincidence that in their external evaluations of Vytautas Magnus University, international experts have repeatedly emphasised its uniqueness and the need to preserve it not only at the University but also at the national level. There’ll always be those in the community, especially young people, who don’t fit into the established programmes. Likewise, there’ll always be those who search and create. Therefore, the learning system should be developed in such a way that it doesn’t confine learners to a narrow programme framework, but rather allows them to design their own tasks and curriculum,” says VMU Rector Prof. Juozas Augutis, discussing the benefits of the principles of artes liberales (liberal arts) applied at the University.

According to the Rector, the significance of artes liberales has long been proven and confirmed. VMU, which has become the most comprehensive university in Lithuania, applies these principles in its programmes for good reason: it fosters a broad education that extends beyond the specialisation of a student’s chosen programme. For example, irrespective of their major, students can opt to pursue minor studies in a different field, take courses in IT, philosophy, or other courses, and improve their entrepreneurial, IT, and other skills. Prof. Augutis emphasises that interdisciplinarity today is a return to the origins of science, as disciplines were not so rigidly divided in the beginning, with the division later being driven by industrial changes.

“This system has existed for many centuries – as far back as the Middle Ages, the liberal arts served as a method for growth, development, and education. In modern times, they have taken on different forms, yet, surprisingly, their importance is only increasing. Over the past two hundred years, the rise of industry, with its demand for specific, narrow knowledge, might have prioritised more focused methods, but now, we are witnessing a resurgence of broad horizons for human activity and free expression. And the system of broad education is becoming increasingly important,” says VMU Rector.

As noted by the Rector, the principles of the liberal arts are now being applied more and more widely – even very conservative educational institutions are gradually introducing elements of this system, allowing students to organise their studies more flexibly and to combine different study fields. Unfortunately, due to bureaucratic requirements, it is not yet possible for the
University to fully implement the principles of *artes liberales*, for example, to allow students to enrol not in a specific study programme, but in a much broader group of programmes, such as the humanities, and to choose the courses they prefer later.

### Decline in the Youth Population is Among the Biggest Challenges

Prof. Augutis, who is concluding his second term as Rector, notes that his tenure has been full of challenges. “As I like to joke, if you don’t achieve everything in one term, the community leaves you to repeat the course for another year. I’m very happy that the University is moving in an excellent direction and is developing dynamically, but there has certainly been no shortage of challenges: from issues related to the University merger and the pandemic that has affected everyone, to the ongoing demographic changes with lasting negative effects. There’s a shortage of students not only at the University, but also across the country. There’s also a shortage of teachers in schools, which is a challenge for us, as one of the leading teacher training centres, to meet,” says the Rector, further adding that VMU is putting substantial efforts into encouraging more top students to choose education studies and become teachers. The modern VMU Teacher Training Centre, with its high quality and modern infrastructure, is also dedicated to this purpose.

The Rector emphasises that in Lithuania, the decline in the youth population is faster than the decline in the total population. Over the past decades, Lithuania’s population has fallen from 3.5 million to 2.8 million (about a 20% decrease), while the number of young
people, including university graduates, has halved – from 65,000 to 30,000. Consequently, there is now a noticeable shortage of people in almost all sectors, especially those holding a higher education degree.

VMU has the Most Amazing Community in Lithuania and Beyond

When asked about the University’s greatest achievements and strengths, Prof. Augutis points to its community and its people, who continue to impress with their creative synergy. This has been particularly evident since the merger of the universities, when VMU was joined by the Education and Agriculture Academies. As a result, VMU is now considered a classic university, encompassing all fields of science and study, thereby facilitating greater opportunities for effective collaboration between its various departments.

“VMU has the most amazing community not only in Lithuania, but beyond. No one could convince me otherwise. The community members have both delighted and astonished me with their resilience, dedication to the University, ingenuity, creativity, and scientific potential. With the expansion of our community, following the integration of communities from two other universities, new and unique projects have emerged, such as the Horizon Twinning project Forest 4.0, which focuses on the application of artificial intelligence technologies in forest management and accounting. This would not be possible within separate universities,” says Prof. Augutis.

To strengthen scientific research, the University has established new research institutes in the fields of education, bioeconomy, and natural sciences, among others. Additionally, VMU is increasingly collaborating with the business sector, for example, through joint projects with various companies.

The Rector highlights that VMU representatives demonstrate leadership in various fields, notably through their participation in the European University Alliance Transform4Europe. This Alliance has become one of the most prominent of its kind, largely thanks to the University’s contributions. Moreover, on the initiative of VMU, Mariupol State University in Ukraine, which has been forced to relocate after its buildings were destroyed in the war, has also become a member of this Alliance.

Future Plans: Increasing the University’s Well-being and Internationalisation

In discussing the goals for the near future, Prof. Juozas Augutis says that maintaining the high quality of science, studies, and community life, ensuring equal opportunities and compliance with gender policies, and improving infrastructure remain the top priorities.

“We are seeking ways to renovate the old dormitories and are considering buying new ones. Our dream is to establish a European-level nature research centre on VMU academic campus, for which we have all the necessary prerequisites – Nemunas Valley, excellent infrastructure, laboratories, and the aforementioned synergy between scientists. We also have high hopes for the Alliance Transform4Europe: it offers the chance to become a European university within a large alliance, to develop studies and science with other strong universities, to offer new opportunities for both students and researchers, and to facilitate
seamless movement across eleven European universities, their laboratories, and lecture rooms. Staff salaries are also a priority; we aim to further increase them in 2024,” says VMU Rector.

Since its re-establishment, VMU has been among the most international universities in Lithuania. Currently, nearly 20% of its community consists of foreigners, and the number is increasing every year. In the future, according to Prof. Augutis, the University should further pursue its international orientation, not only as a member of Transform4Europe, but also by expanding cooperation with universities worldwide. For example, there are plans to establish a Lithuanian Centre in Taiwan, similar to the Taiwan Centre that has been operating at VMU for the past ten years.

“There comes a time when quantity becomes quality, as evidenced by our existing agreements with hundreds of institutions worldwide. We have close cooperation with Ukraine, East Asia, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. It’s possible that, on our initiative, such alliances or university branches will emerge not only in Europe, but elsewhere around the globe as well. VMU could potentially establish departments or associated structures in other parts of the world,” VMU Rector briefly outlined his vision for the University’s future.

Over the past two hundred years, the rise of industry, with its demand for specific, narrow knowledge, might have prioritised more focused methods, but now, we are seeing a resurgence of broad horizons for human activity and free expression. And the system of broad education is becoming increasingly more important
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