

# Quality Considerations in the Internationalization of Higher Education: the International Students' Experiences Within Joint Degree Studies

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**Abstract.** The paper discusses the considerations on qualitative indicators regarding the quality of the teaching and learning in joint degree studies. Method used for data collection was focus group discussions with students of joint degree programs implemented by seven European universities. Findings revealed that general dimensions on the quality of internationalization are focused on students and academic staff. Following the examination of student experience within joint degree studies in Lithuania, the key challenges faced by joint degree consortiums are highlighted.

**Keywords:** *internationalization, joint degree studies, quality of teaching and learning, qualitative indicators, international students' experiences.*

## Introduction

Internationalization, as part of implementing joint degree studies, is significant in today's higher education system (Oostenbrink et al., 2009; Obst et al., 2011). By enhancing the international dimension of teaching, research and service, value is added to the quality of our higher education systems. However, despite the advantages of internationalization, a question arises about the quality of the internationalization itself (Knight, 2008). The internationalized studies in this article are defined as comprising factors influencing the

development of competencies necessary for a person's future professional activity and independent life in the international, intercultural and global environment. These competencies can be developed in the home higher education institution (HEI) and beyond through international mobility or exchange programs.

The literature provides many similar definitions of a joint degree program (Kuder & Obst, 2009; Maierhofer et al., 2010). The most comprehensive interpretation was proposed by Rauhvargerset al. (2003): typically, in joint degree programs, students from each participating HEI study specified parts of the program at other HEIs, with periods of study and exams passed at partner HEIs recognized fully and automatically by the partners. Professors of each participating HEI may teach at other HEIs. Finally, the joint program should lead to the award of a degree.

While implementing joint degree programs, the focus is on internationalization at home, strengthening intercultural understanding within the academic community and strengthening international experience through incoming mobility. The efficiency of internationalization requires opportunities for direct contact among representatives of different nations and cultures, for example, to organize natural multicultural study processes, using methods requiring the active cooperation of representatives of different cultures (Nieto & Booth, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Tange & Jensen, 2012).

Implementation of joint degree programs has to focus on international partnership and cooperation (Olson, 2012) and outgoing mobility. In a joint degree program, mobility is the central compulsory aspect enriching students and lecturers with experience related to other cultures and other academic contexts (Bartram, 2007; Culver et al., 2012). Through implementation of a joint degree program, the HEI has the opportunity to use the support of the intellectual resources of other foreign HEIs in teaching, curriculum development, and research (Reichert & Wächter, 2000).

Lithuania pays regard to the internationalization of higher education through its support to HEIs for the development of international and intercultural dimensions of studies. In 2009–2014, Lithuanian HEIs received more than €63m from European Union (EU) Structural Funds (*europosparama.lt*, 2014) towards the improvement of internationalization, including the development and delivery of joint degree study programs. Currently there are over 40 joint degree programs in Lithuania (AIKOS, 2016).

Joint degree studies and issues related to their quality are not a new subject. However, attention in the literature is titled toward the quality of organizational and administrative aspects of joint degree studies. Research on joint degree programs provide suggestions for the management and quality assurance of joint degree programs, and recommending self-evaluation questionnaires (Kuder & Obst, 2009; Maierhofer et al., 2010). However, most suggestions concern the development stage of joint degree programs with too little attention paid to the quality of the teaching and learning process. Analysis and suggestions related to the implementation stage most often cover organizational and administrative aspects of joint studies, such as admission, registration, mobility, and the award and recognition

of diplomas. Moreover, self-evaluation questions suggested for joint degree studies could apply to any type of study program, and are dominated by such quantitative indicators as student and staff numbers, mobility statistics, and budgets (*How to manage joint study programmes?*, 2011; *Joint programmes from A to Z*, 2015). However, unlike traditional programs implemented by any HEI, joint degree programs feature specific international and intercultural interactions aiming to add value at both individual and institutional levels. Joint degree programs usually mean deeper and closer interactions. There must be harmonious cooperation among the HEIs, and sufficient compatibility between the different cultures of academic work. Few data are available on the teaching and learning process of joint degree studies already implemented. Studies focused on collaborative joint or dual-degrees were carried out by Bartram (2007) and Culver et al. (2012), investigating the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders regarding various strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of collaborative joint or dual-degree studies. Therefore, the following *research question* is raised in this study: “What are the quality indicators for joint degree studies what emerge within experiences of international students?”

The *aim* of this study was to reveal the experiences of international student’s regarding the quality of the teaching and learning processes within joint degree studies.

## Methodology

*Sample.* “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (Patton, 2002, pp. 242–243). The concept of data saturation entails bringing new participants continually into the study until the dataset is complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy. In other words, saturation is reached when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns, when nothing new is being added (Bowen, 2008). Thus, estimating adequate sample size is directly related to the concept of saturation (Marshall et al., 2013).

11 students (5 female and 6 male) aged from 26 to 39 years, who were studying for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year in Lithuania, participated in the focus group of the joint degree Erasmus Mundus program “Sustainable Regional Health Systems”, implemented by consortium A (HEIs from Spain, Hungary, Italy and Lithuania). The essential mobility principles were as follows: for the first semester, all students go to Spain; for the second semester to Hungary; and for the third semester (second year) they choose either Italy or Lithuania. Also, students can choose the country for writing their final paper. Students having a bachelor’s level education in the areas of social work, economics, health supervision and assessment, sociology, pharmacy and social health, represented four Asian countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal), and two African countries (Eritrea, Ethiopia).

9 female students aged from 23 to 25 years, then studying for the 1<sup>st</sup> year in Lithuania, participated in the group discussion of the second cycle joint degree program “Com-

parable Social Policy and Welfare” implemented by consortium *B* (HEIs from Finland, Austria, and Lithuania). The essential mobility principles were that students from all the universities start every semester with 2 weeks of intensive study in one of the universities; then during the rest of the semester, team contact is virtual. Lithuania was represented in this group by bachelor’s-level students in social work and economics. There was 1 student from the Ukraine.

*Methods.* Focus group discussions were organized in the two Lithuanian universities. Data collection was carried out in accordance with recommendations of Williams & Katz (2001). During discussions, the only people in the auditorium were the participants of a particular focus group and the moderator. The moderator introduced the concepts to be discussed, asked open-ended questions to stimulate discussion, encouraged participants to talk and interact with each other, and guided each discussion to keep it on track. Discussions were tape-recorded. Consortium *A* focus group discussion took 1 hour and 51 minutes; consortium *B* took 1 hour and 23 minutes.

The data analysis was based on the inductive qualitative content analysis approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). The process included open coding, creating categories and abstraction: 1) copying and reading through the transcript – making brief notes in the margin when interesting or relevant information is found; 2) going through the notes made in the margins and listing the different types of information found; 3) reading through the list and categorising each item in a way that offers a description of what it is about; 4) comparing the categories; 5) once all the transcript data were in categories, the data were reviewed in order to ensure that the information is categorised as appropriate.

*Tool.* To assess the quality of the joint degree program teaching and learning process within the implementation of a particular program, open-ended questions for students were formulated:

- Did you have the opportunity in all HEIs to develop your intercultural capabilities after having chosen to study different courses?
- Do lecturers in all HEIs, while analysing course objectives according to your individual sociocultural identity, enable you to think, organize and analyse information, resolve problems, in accordance with your cultural attitudes, and at the same time to learn from each other?
- Does each of you have sufficient time to understand the material discussed during lectures and seminars, and to carry out tasks during a set time?
- Was your internship under working conditions – in international or foreign enterprises and organizations - related directly to your future career?
- Did any of you participate in joint meetings of lecturers, administrative staff and students of the consortium, where (teaching and learning process) issues of the joint studies were addressed and solutions proposed?

*Ethics.* The research was conducted taking into account the following ethical principles (Jackson, 2010): voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity (when presenting

results, identities of the discussion participants were encoded as follows: M = male; F = female and a number; the names of the consortiums were encoded using the letters A and B).

*Limitations.* Self-reported data gathered from international students could contain potential bias determined by 1) the different cultural background of students, and 2) selective memory (remembering or not remembering experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past).

## Findings

Five qualitative categories were revealed after analysis of qualitative data regarding joint degree studies in higher education.

***Development of students' intercultural competence.*** Both consortiums develop the students' intercultural competence, however this aspect could be still further improved in consortium A.

*The optional courses cover a particular area, e.g. family, economics or unemployment. When studying these matters, cultural comparative context is obligatory. In the compulsory courses, there is also an intercultural comparative aspect, e.g. in the studies of welfare state theories, or comparative social policy. (BF2)*

*Our nationalities are different and we have different customs and religions. However, when having come to each university, I would like to have the possibility to choose additionally the optional courses that would reveal peculiarities of this country. However, there is no such possibility as we would need pay to extra for it. (AF2)*

Consortium B students' comments show that the students' intercultural competence is effectively developed, conditioned by curriculum content. If the opportunity to choose optional courses, reflecting specificity of a particular country was highly complicated in consortium A, this problem could be solved via development of teaching methods. Suitable teaching methods would help students to attain/improve their intercultural competence. To ensure the quality of these studies, consortium A could organize training for lecturers on the topic of the development of intercultural competence.

***Coherence of teaching and learning methods with the variety of intercultural attitudes.*** In the studies of both consortiums, the coherence of various teaching and learning strategies and methods reveals different cultural attitudes to the same course, i.e. objects of courses are analysed in the light of the attitudes of several cultures, comparing differences and similarities of different cultural perspectives.

*Every student has to analyse the object from his own regional context. (AF6)*

*We are being encouraged to change members of the work team as there is less benefit from discussions with persons from one's own country than with the same group members having different nationality. (BF4)*

*When studying “the Social Policy Systems”, every student had to analyse critically other models and systems from the approach of his own country and compare them with his own country. (BF5)*

Students' comments show that one of the most effective ways for students to show different cultural approaches towards the same course is the use of different national and cultural attitudes and outlooks of the students themselves, for their learning from each other. In this way, students are highly responsible for their own learning, as they have to prepare for lectures and be active participants in the studies.

***Flexibility of teaching and learning methods regarding the educational needs of international students.*** In consortium A, there is a lack of flexibility and adaptability of the teaching and learning strategies employed and the teaching and learning methods with regard to the needs and expectations of international students without decreasing academic standards; i.e. there is not much focus on differences of individual studying styles, pace, and material grasp of the study of different cultures.

*Such evaluation of the workload is necessary. It would enable us to plan better our learning time, according to our own way of studying, and national and religious customs. (AM1)*

*The workload is very big. But, if students think that they lack time, they can ask the lecturer for an extension of time to complete the task. (BF1)*

*Usually lecturers don't inquire how much time we spend on tasks. However, the time is sufficient, as more or less one month is given for completion of each task. (BF9)*

Students' comments show that students have sufficient time for fulfilment of their study tasks; however, they are not asked about time necessary for completion of each objective. People from different cultures treat studies (in terms of environment, time, action, space, power, individuality, competition, etc.) in their own way. In order to respond properly to the individual studying styles of the members of international groups, intending that everybody would achieve set learning outcomes, it could be appropriate to use systems of study time planning, checking, and correction. Use of such systems would show the differences between students within one group, and help evaluate the flexibility and applicability of the teaching and learning strategies.

***Development of students' competencies in professional situations within the international context.*** In both consortiums, organization of the internships, i.e. the variety of opportunities for the development of students' competencies in professional situations within an international environment, is an area for improvement.

*I was invited just to prepare presentations on health problems existing in my country: health of teenagers, reproductive health of population, etc. (AF6)*

*Group visits to institutions are being organized: e.g. it has been planned to visit a hospital; however, my thesis isn't related to hospital work at all and I'm interested in visiting institutions with activity related to the object of my paper. (AM3)*



*I applied to the European Institute for Gender Equality since an invitation for internship had been announced. However, I consider that there isn't much chance for us as people from all over EU may apply for these positions. (BF7)*

The HEIs of both consortiums have to take responsibility at the institutional level for the quality of the organization of the internships, not leaving this responsibility to students themselves. The Joint Academic Committee of each consortium has to require the management of each university to appoint people responsible for the organization of internships; also, at the institutional level to make agreements with the social partners regarding performance of the students' internships.

***The academic climate of cooperation between HEIs within the international environment.*** In consortium A, there is a lack both of interaction by the international academic community and of a culture of openness; the students from foreign countries feel isolated from the locals. In consortium B, a cooperation culture favourable for interaction and openness to new ideas and values dominates; there is an appropriate academic climate of an intercultural environment for the achievement of the desired aims of joint degree studies.

*I want to say something more: we feel separated from the local students. We don't feel comfortable and would like more contact with the local students. (AF4)*

*During the two-week intensive studies, many lecturers (even if not teaching at that time) attend meetings. Then common meetings for students, lecturers and coordinators are held, including discussions on students' needs and interests. (BF6)*

*In the sense of the courses and terms, universities are quite flexible and even "violate" their own internal procedures; they try to further adapt their systems to inter-coordinate and smoothly implement these studies. (BF8)*

Discussions with consortium B students show that stakeholder joint meetings and discussions concerned with disputes about the teaching and learning process and other aspects, are organized once a semester during these studies. Students are also involved, as equal members, in these meetings. This approach creates an inter-institutional quality culture and a positive academic climate in an intercultural environment, maintained by principles of interaction and openness to new ideas and values.

In consortium A, to ensure a climate favourable for quality studies, it is very important that the consortium should organize joint meetings. If this were to happen, lecturers of different universities would have the opportunity to meet for discussion on learning outcomes, teaching and assessment methods, etc.

Inadequate attention towards the integration of foreign students into the life of the HEI may result in the students' segregation and social isolation. Thus, at the local level each institution needs to overcome the isolation of such international groups, integrating them with local students and others coming in under mobility programs. This would be an efficient way to internationalize the experience of all local and foreign students, strengthening its comparative aspect, with the development of the skills and values of

international and intercultural communication and cooperation. Formation of mixed groups of students would contribute to the intellectual life of the universities – students would naturally learn about other cultures and evaluate their own behaviour in interaction with representatives of other cultures. They could share study skills, and the teaching and learning process would benefit. Foreign students, through contact with local students, would be able to get closely acquainted with the local culture, and to experience the local way of life. Local students could improve their English language beyond the classroom. There would be mutual benefit, and foreign students would not feel isolated.

## Discussion

The general dimensions of the quality of internationalization in higher education, focusing on students and academic staff, are evident from the findings.

Internationalization of higher education through joint degree studies stimulates the development of students' intercultural competence and their competencies in professional situations within an international environment. These findings echo the value added for students by collaborative dual-degree programs studied by Culver et al. (2012): the benefits of a dual degree perceived by all stakeholder groups (students, alumni, faculty, and employers) are related above all to cross-cultural skills and marketability of graduates. Another important conclusion derived from the work of Culver et al. (2012) was that stronger collaborations also need to be formed with industry partners.

Despite the scarcity of research on the quality of the teaching and learning process in joint degree studies, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the development of students' intercultural competence and development of their competencies in professional situations within the international environment. Findings of some studies (Campbell, 2012; Sample, 2012) indicate that a crucial step on the path to developing intercultural competence is curriculum and appropriate interventions (special training, assignments, etc.). Findings of studies dedicated to the employability of international students (Cai, 2012; Barker & Mak, 2013) show that despite the importance of cross-cultural skills, such skills *per se* will not guarantee employment. Professional skills are needed as well. Therefore, HEIs must enhance their partnerships with industry in multicultural settings by creating an information platform between education and the workplace, ensuring internship places for international students.

This confirms our assumption that joint degree studies' qualitative indicators reveal the quality of academic process (education and training activities), leading to the students' intercultural competence and an exceptional international experience in the workplaces of foreign or international organizations. As such, this must be used as a tool to help us collect and analyse the information necessary for evaluating and improving the quality of internationalized joint degree studies.



With the information collected from the qualitative assessment indicators such as application of methods developing the intercultural competence in the teaching of courses, and the geography and variety of employers hosting students for implementation of their internships, joint degree studies consortiums can proceed to the more important step of analysing how to help students to attain intercultural competence while studying different courses. Consortiums could also analyse how the HEIs make efforts to cooperate with employers to provide the conditions for students to consolidate practically their attained competencies, get acquainted wider with their future job specificity and essential aspects of their profession, and to join successfully the international labour market.

Findings of our research show that the academic climate within the international environment is formed through cooperation between various HEIs. The importance of smooth international cooperation and cooperation within the institution for the quality of internationalized studies was confirmed by the Olson (2012) investigation on factors that facilitate effective international partnership between foreign HEIs. It was found that the creation of a campus culture of internationalization is promoted by establishing cross-institutional committees or working groups consisting of central administration, professors, and students engaged in international partnership work. These structures, through engagement of the academic community, help examine diverse dimensions of internationalization, and provide recommendations as to how to improve their mechanisms for advancing internationalization. At the same time, they assist international students with their integration into the life of cooperating institutions through direct interaction with students.

Findings of our research on the inadequate integration of international students into the life of the hosting HEI and relationship with local students have resonance with the Bartram (2007) study on the sociocultural needs of students of jointly delivered programs. It was found that international students face barriers in developing and sustaining social networks in the host community, and poor social integration was even identified as a potential factor impeding the academic progress of international students. Our findings concur with the findings of a substantial amount of literature published on the issues on integration of international students, including researches done by Stronkhorst (2005) and Campbell (2012). Findings here show that even within joint degree studies (which have deeper and closer interaction between HEIs than many other activities of international cooperation) international students' isolation from the local students of hosting partner institutions remains very relevant. This fact highlights that the biggest challenge related to the implementation of joint degree programs is developing and maintaining communication among partners and inside the institution itself. Therefore, it is significant for the consortiums' institutions to interact in all the joint degree program aspects so that all its participants can cooperate smoothly. This may prevent cross-cultural misunderstanding and ensure a higher quality of experience for all students of joint degree studies.

Information collected illustrates the present culture of interaction and openness to new ideas and values of the international academic community. Joint degree studies consortiums can use such data to assess how stakeholders cooperate in the joint degree studies teaching and learning process and take crucial decisions on the enhancement of an academic climate of intercultural environment within joint degree studies.

Issues regarding sensitivity and flexibility of teaching and learning methods are of crucial importance in striving for quality in internationalized studies. Other authors such as Nieto & Booth (2010), Tange & Jensen (2012), within their researches dedicated to the diversity and sensitivity in situations of teaching and learning process in an international classrooms, revealed that organizers of international teaching are faced with the “diversity paradox”. Organisers must solve the problems of differences in language and culture and at the same time profit from diversity. Culture and language were the greatest challenges for both teachers and international students in the academic process. Therefore, as all mentioned researchers highlight, the competencies of academic staff are of crucial importance in seeking to enhance the quality of internationalization. Educators must be aware of different worldviews derived from other national and educational traditions they may encounter in a classroom, and work towards the understanding and knowledge of culturally different students. Teachers have to be able to offer a broad variety in content and methods, to adopt pedagogic strategies that enhance students’ opportunities to participate in the co-creation of knowledge.

Our findings confirm previous studies that a key role is played by the academic staff of a joint degree consortium, who should be aware of ways to successfully incorporate students’ cultural differences in the classroom and create a pedagogical setting. Having in mind that groups of joint degree programs consist of students from different countries, with different experience of previous studies and with different educational attainment, lecturers should be able to lead the study process of international student groups and be capable of solving problems resulting from differences of academic cultures of the consortium partners. Therefore, it is important to use qualitative indicators revealing the quality of the teaching and learning process to assess different academic practices of the consortium partners in the teaching and learning process for evaluating and improving the quality of internationalized joint degree studies.

## Implications

Joint degree studies consortiums can use information collected from qualitative assessment indicators to find out how students’ needs affected by sociocultural peculiarities are taken into account. Such assessment indicators could include: the differentiation and individualization of the teaching and learning of courses adapted to the sociocultural peculiarities of the students; course objectives, analysed in the light of differences and

similarities of different cultural attitudes; and learning opportunities in terms of time provided for students according to their individual studying style. Then if students are provided with opportunities to encounter the worldview of several cultures, and if the differences of student sociocultural identity and diverse educational experiences are taken into account, improvements can be made in the teaching and learning practice of joint degree consortiums to reinforce the quality of the internationalization experience.

Qualitative indicators are useful in revealing to the HEI community the value, and areas for improvement, of the studies implemented. The quality assessment of the practice of internationalization proved it is necessary to apply both quantitative and qualitative data assisting in the determination of quality of internationalization, making assumptions to predict the existing and potential deficiencies and improvement measures. Integration of the qualitative parameters into the quality assessment of internationalization reveals assessable areas of internationalization more objectively and comprehensively.

## Conclusions

The quality of internationalized joint degree studies has to be assessed and ensured not only during its development but also during its implementation, focusing on both administrative and teaching and learning aspects. The object of assessment must be the teaching and learning process itself, allowing examination of those aspects of educational activity which enable students to develop competencies necessary for the modern global labour market. It should be noted that the assessment of the quality of the internationalization (teaching and learning) process has an essential significance, as universally formulated assumptions about the importance and benefit of internationalization require evidence related to the value added by internationalization to the quality of studies. The reasoning is that the tangible and intangible investments in internationalization create changes and provide students with exceptional benefits. The assessment of quality of outcomes and the added value of internationalization at the level of each HEI of the consortium is significant due to the necessity to ensure consistency, reliability of internationalization and its value.

Selected qualitative indicators could show the relevance of joint degree programs preparing students for professional activity determined in the international context; how consortiums create a naturally international/intercultural educational environment and what methods are applied, providing the international comparative approach for the content of taught courses. How is diversity/pluralism ensured in the study process; by what ways and means is the impact of positive international experience of members of the HEI community ensured for their academic and professional activity; and what is the level of sustainable interaction among partners. These elements of the academic process have to be continuously and regularly assessed and thoroughly analysed so that all HEIs consistently and continuously contribute to its improvement. Open questions based on

qualitative indicators are one of the measures aimed at academic staff and management implementing joint degree studies to obtain clear feedback from students about the program's content and quality of the teaching and learning from all institutions, and to react accordingly at the consortium level.

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## Aukštojo mokslo tarptautinės kokybės aspektai: tarptautinių studentų patirtys jungtinio laipsnio studijų metu

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### Santrauka

Aukštojo mokslo tarptautinės jungtinio laipsnio studijos yra vienas iš svarbiausių Europos aukštojo mokslo plėtros prioritetų. Daugiausia priemonių yra sukurta jungtinio laipsnio studijų programų administravimo kokybei įvertinti kiekybiniais parametrais. Siekiant jungtinio laipsnio studijų integralios kokybės būtina vertinti ir dėstymo bei studijavimo kokybę remiantis kokybiniais indikatoriais, kurie pirmiausia išryškėja analizuojant studentų patirtis. Vykdytame tyrime išsikeltas tyrimo klausimas: „Kokie yra galimi studijų kokybės indikatoriai jungtinio laipsnio studijose atsižvelgiant į studentų patirtis tarptautinėse studijose?“ Tyrimo tikslas buvo atskleisti tarptautinių studentų patirtis, susijusias su dėstymo ir studijavimo procesais jungtinio laipsnio studijose. Straipsnyje pristatomas tarptautinių studijų dėstymo ir studijavimo kokybės vertinimo kokybinis tyrimas, kuriame atlikti sutelktų grupių interviu su 21 studentu, studijavusiu septynių Europos universitetų įgyvendinamas jungtinio laipsnio studijų programas. Duomenų analizei taikyta kokybinė turinio analizė. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad problemos, su kuriomis susiduria studentai, yra šios: tarpkultūrinių kompetencijų plėtotė, dėstymo ir studijavimo lankstumas pagal tarptautinių studentų poreikius, studentų kompetencijų plėtotė praktinėse situacijose tarptautiniame kontekste ir akademinio bendradarbiavimo klimatas tarp aukštųjų mokyklų tarptautinėje aplinkoje.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *tarptautinimas; jungtinio laipsnio studijos; dėstymo ir studijavimo kokybė; kokybiniai rodikliai; tarptautinių studentų patirtys.*

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