

QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION: IDEALS AND REALITY

Dear Readers!

The recently discussed issues of education quality are devoted full attention. The systems of quality control are developed, services are certified etc. All EU countries point to education quality as one of the most important political priorities. Despite the fact it is an excellent idea, the questions of how to ensure adequate education and how to achieve equally ranked education certification in all countries of the European Union arise. From the perspective of Lithuania, it is essential that university education gained at national level should be internationally accepted. Therefore, different legal and political documents approved by Lithuanian authorities in one way or another emphasize that ensuring quality education is a priority field.

Yet in the last decades of the past century, the universities worldwide closely focused not only on the quality of studies but also on the other services provided by modern universities. Every country of the European Union owns certain structures concentrating on the above introduced problems. For example, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was established in Great Britain in 1997. The Netherlands has two organizations - Association of Universities and Association of Universities of Professional Education. Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council looks at the situation in Finland etc. In this case, Lithuania is not an exception as since 1995, this field has been maintained by the Centre Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE). This organization implements the external quality assurance policy in research and higher education in Lithuania and contributes to the development of human resources by creation of enabling conditions for free movement of persons (<http://www.skvc.lt/en/?id=0>).

In regard to university life, it can be firmly stated that the problems of studying quality are given scrupulous attention. An apparent focus entirely on ensuring the quality of studies can be noticed in Lithuania. The classical principle of unity of science and studies cannot be considered as a suitable solution. The quality of studies and the process of studying are integrated and therefore determine one another (Lamanauskas, 2007). Finally, the world practice shows that the concepts of quality management are developed in at least four major fields including the processes of studies and scientific research, administration, designing

curricula of studies and teacher training. The central point is the understanding that quality cannot be bought in the market and is not something beyond institution boundaries. Everything will be determined by awareness that quality in a broad sense is conditioned by the quality of management (administration). Only professional management leads to qualified processes (institution work) whereas the latter ensure high-quality service. Otherwise, we can face a situation frequently encountered in the system of Lithuanian higher education. For example, after regaining independence, Lithuania suffered from lack of managers and lawyers, and thus national universities started implementation of the required curricula of studies. Presently, all universities in Lithuania train would-be managers. However, the problem is that the quantity of professionally prepared experts in the field is decreasing while at the same time, a total number of professional managers is increasing. Similar problems can be observed in a number of European countries.

As the understanding of quality may vary, a general agreement on the issue discussing quality is very important at least inside the institution. Quality is differently treated by academic staff, students, employers, social partners of institution, authorities and society in general. No special investigation is necessary in order to find out that the position of Lithuanian society on the quality of higher education and studies is not favourable enough. During the last decade, a number of young and gifted Lithuanian people have entered the universities and started working in the neighbouring countries. The process has been given a sound name *Brain Drain*. A free people's movement in the open world should be a natural process. However, the careless government's position on the analogous situations in some countries seems to be a surprise. When the situation becomes really complicated, the programmes aimed at 'recovering losses' are created. Nevertheless, similar measures can hardly be sufficient for making a substantial impact. Thus, the Overseas Lithuanians' Support Centre is responsible for running the project *Design and Implementation of Brain Drain Programme* the purpose of which is creating a programme for Lithuanian people studying and working in the foreign scientific centres. The programme encourages Lithuanian citizens moving back and implements a competitive financial mechanism that will be applied for arranging scientists' visits to Lithuania. A serious problem is that up to now, no official statistics on the degree of graduate students, scientists and other researchers' emigration from Lithuania has been prepared. Moreover, there is lack of information on national scientific research and available vacancies in the institutions of science and education. Frequent discussions under a negative shade lead to appropriate society's reaction.

It seems, not much is required in order the quality of higher education should become more outstanding and satisfy not only personal needs but also the requirements imposed by a certain country. However, increased financial support (which is a very important factor) cannot change the existing situation. Education is a complex system having different levels, sub-systems etc. that closely correlate and determine one another. It should be stated that training of secondary comprehensive school graduates is still not sufficient enough. Though, at a later stage, a number of students enter the institutions of higher education. After all, the learners having a certain level of knowledge, abilities and values are treated as the main staff for universities. Logically, if graduates' education is not good enough, a university fails to train high quality specialists. Meanwhile, worldwide practice shows that universities own high potential that is not always appropriately used. Statistics indicates that only 21% of

the EU citizens capable for work are graduates from universities, whereas the latter indexes in the US and Canada are 38% and 43 % respectively. The communiqué of the European Commission declares that ‘Europe needs modernised universities. The main question is how to increase our universities’ contribution to the Lisbon Agenda for more growth, and more and better jobs’ (Education and Training..., 2006). The document examines the quality of higher education provided by the European universities.

During the recent decade, due to reduced complexity, the programmes of social rather than natural sciences and technologies have been the most popular subjects studied. On the one hand, it is a common position, on the other– due to various reasons, the young generation in Lithuania and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe is not sufficiently focused on choosing sciences as subjects to be studied as in this case, in order to ensure the development and quality of programmes, apart from declarations, real financial and intellectual resources are required. Natural and technological sciences are primarily devoted to the development of manufacturing and technologies. Analogical sciences must be competitive under the circumstances of rapid globalization in the economical and informational space worldwide. However, only universities cannot improve the situation as a general clear national policy is required. It is worth pointing to the international ROSE research which disclosed that the youth’ interest in sciences and technologies was markedly decreased in the so called developed countries (ROSE, 2008). Certainly, teaching sciences and technologies in comprehensive schools should be enforced.

High quality higher education is a solid basis of individual and public intellectual property. Finally, the mission of higher education is to offer competitive priority to its receivers now and in the future. Not everything can be controlled by the existing market as higher education first of all, is an individual property. Therefore, it is not necessarily must be related to the labour market. Higher education is essential to a person him/herself (for young people in particular) in order to consider a personal model of life, to form a unique world outlook and to grow up as a personality and citizen. In this particular case, university implicitly orientating towards the needs suggested by the market, is not suitable for such mission. To save the idea of university worldwide, the latter aspect is exceptionally meaningful. Higher education cannot be treated as a purchase sold in the market.

Higher education policy becomes a key point. In any case, the quality of higher education cannot be independent neither from science and studying policy of a certain country nor from a policy of a particular university. University autonomy and administration and implementation of science policy at national level are two closely integrated components having a direct impact on higher education. The European Union has established high and ambitious standards. One of those is a steady increase of Europeans’ education. Thus, Lithuania must be ready to meet this challenge. The number of educated people cannot be enlarged. The quality of higher education is an integrated part of standard of living and citizens’ welfare.

References

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