14  Multipurpose Accreditation in Lithuania: Facilitating Quality Improvement, and Heading towards a Binary System of Higher Education

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14.1  The Higher Education System

Since 1999/2000, the higher education system in Lithuania has been diversified. In September 2002, it consisted of 43 institutions which were of two types: 19 university-type (academies, colleges, seminaries, and universities) and 24 non-university-type called colleges (kolegijos).

Higher education institutions may be state owned or private (not belonging to the state). Currently, there are four private university-type and nine private colleges.

During the years of Independent Lithuania, student enrolment fluctuated. There were more than 63,000 students in 13 institutions in 1990/91. The numbers dropped in 1995/96: the student body then consisted of 54,000 persons. As from 1996, an incremental growth was observed (Education and Culture, 2001). In 2001, overall enrolment reached 115,000 students. 105,000 students (except doctoral) were enrolled in university-type institutions. In addition, 10,000 were enrolled in colleges.

Statistical data show that in the last five years the overall admission to universities and post-secondary education institutions (aukštesnioji mokykla) grew. In 1996, over 20,000 students were admitted to university-type institutions, and over 11,000 to Post-secondary Education Institutions. In 2000, universities admitted more than 34,000 students; however, admission to Post-secondary Education Institutions dropped to 10,000 (Lietuvos švietimas, 2000). This change is explained by the restructuring of the higher education system, when a number of Post-secondary Education Institutions became colleges. Therefore, we may conclude that the number of student admissions grew significantly.

Furthermore, the enrolment in undergraduate programmes grew substantially from 14,800 in 1996 to 22,700 in 2000. This growth is explained by two factors: the additional student admission in colleges (3,400) and growing access to education because of new entrants who pay tuition fees. Since in 2000 there were less than 37,000 secondary schools graduates, almost all of them could be admitted to either a higher education institution or to a Post-secondary Education Institution.
By allowing commercial studies (i.e. with full costs covered by the student), Lithuanian authorities improved access to higher education. Moreover, in the summer of 2002 the Seimas (Parliament) approved two amendments to the Law of Higher Education that introduced a symbolic obligatory tuition fee, 500 Litas (approximately 120) for newly admitted students. In 2000, universities admitted 13,179 students to undergraduate places financed by the state, and 9,517 to places with tuition costs to be borne by students. At the same time, more than 30 % of graduate students paid for their studies (Lietuvos Švietimas, 2000, p. 59). In the future, the Government plans the admission of almost 43,000 new higher education students supported fully or partially by the state; 25,600 undergraduates, 9,355 graduates, and 683 post-graduates at universities, and 6,325 at colleges. The remaining students will be admitted to programmes that require students to cover costs of tuition and fees (Decision of the Government, 2002). The additional revenues should help universities to improve the quality of studies by providing more funds for human resources and by renovating material resources.

Lithuanian higher education institutions provide the following types of programmes: consecutive and non-consecutive university programmes, and consecutive non-university programmes. Universities organise sequential studies in three stages: undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate (doctoral).

A university-level undergraduate study programme in Lithuania comprises 140–180 credit points (one credit corresponds to 40 hours of student work – in classes, independently, etc. – or 1.5 ECTS credits) and lasts between three and five years. Two-thirds of the subjects must be studied at the same higher education institution. There are three blocks of subjects: comprehensive humanitarian and social studies (at least 30 % of all credits); fundamentals of the branch of studies (at least 30 % of all credits); and specialised subjects (at least 30 % of all credits). Graduates at this level are awarded a bakalauras (Bachelor’s degree) or profesinė kvalifikacija (diploma of vocational qualification and certificate of graduation from a higher education institution). At the non-university level study programmes consist of at least 120 to 160 credits and last for at least three to four years. A professional qualification and diploma of higher education are obtained after successful completion.

Graduates with undergraduate degrees may apply for Magistrantūra (Master’s) or Specialiosios profesinės (Specialised professional) studies. Those who are admitted to the second stage programme may pursue specialised vocational studies (lasting for one to two years and comprising 40 to 80 credit points) or studies leading to a Master’s degree (lasting for 1.5 to 2 years and comprising 60–80 credit points). Master’s graduates have to defend a thesis or a diploma project. Upon obtaining this degree, the recipient can start doctoral studies or practical activity. After completing a professional, specialised professional programme, students obtain a professional (e.g. teacher, engineer, economist, etc.) qualification.