

The Lithuanian Case of Higher Education Reforms in Europe

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The Bologna process (based on the 1991 Bologna Declaration) has spurred higher education reforms in various European countries. The countries tend to use the Bologna process as a legitimization of their own national reforms. Some countries instigate certain recommendations of Bologna within their own higher education systems in regard to structural matters. However, at the same time, they try to avoid drastic changes in educational content—namely the curriculum change required for the bachelor's and master's degree structure. Thus, European countries follow the Bologna process selectively, and certain areas of higher education systems may remain untouched. The latter approach is especially visible in central and eastern European countries that intended to become EU members and used the Bologna process in part as legitimization for the accession to the European Union.

REFORMS DURING THE 1990S

Higher education reforms in Lithuania took place rather incrementally and represented an interaction between two strong powers—the state and the academic oligarchy. For a number of reasons—not in the least, access to the European Union—the higher education sector became a major focus. In the 1990s, the structural changes at the forefront of the Bologna-related reforms in Lithuania included the establishment of the European Credit Transfer System and the quality assurance system, as well as other factors. A three-tier structure was created at the beginning of the 1990s, based in part on the US model. Thus, the four-year bachelor's and two-year master's degree structure was, however, created without a full revision of study programs and teaching methods. Thus, the new study structures had a national character, with some international influence. The reforms were not all related to the Bologna process, despite the need to earn legitimacy by contributing to the “European higher education area.”

THE RESULTS SINCE THE 1990S

In spite of the incremental changes during the 15 years since the Soviet era, higher education reforms have remained stagnant in Lithuania. Given the lack of political will since the 1990s to instigate a drastic reform in this public sector, the “academic oligarchy” has retained its traditionally prestigious position. With inbreeding as a key feature, this higher education system lacks both cooperation among institutions in

Lithuania and the strong inclination to collaborate with universities abroad. Competition for students and resources has not been a focus of attention, as most of the funding allocations have been negotiated with the Ministry of Science and Education to ensure that everyone got their share. The universities have been accused of remaining ivory towers that are not responsible to society. At the same time, the academic oligarchy has complained that universities lack autonomy. According to these critical academics, universities are directed on how many undergraduate students to admit and must also account, to the state, for their spending. These academics often emphasize the Bologna process's recommendations with regard to university autonomy.

THE LISBON GOALS

Initiated by the European Council in 2001, the Lisbon strategy addressed enhancing the sustainable growth and competitiveness of the European economy. The strategy has been echoed in European higher education policy documents and in national higher education policies.

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After accession to the European Union, however, in Lithuania the Lisbon objectives became more focused on the legitimization of the reform of the higher education sector. The Lisbon goals and the contribution toward the creation of the European research area and increase of the competitiveness of the system have become more visible in the policy discourse. The discussions involved concerns expressed in the studies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank about Lithuania's possible loss in competition with other higher education systems. The situation was fueled by the urge to use the European structural funds after accession to the European Union, which would provide new resources for universities and colleges. As a result, there has been a proliferation of various programs, which in many cases have no real demand but do enable the hiring of more staff and provide major overheads for the central university administration. Some of the money raises the salaries of institute directors or other academic managers and professors. Part of the structural funds, however, do help with the upgrading of the much-needed research infrastructure, fostering international cooperation, or helping to develop institutional evaluation mechanisms in the quality assurance system of higher education.

STEPS TOWARD REFORM

The Higher Education Development Plan (2006–2010) has been proposed by the Ministry of Science and Education. Realizing certain inefficiencies in the system, in March 2007 the ministry created a working group for the reform of higher education and research in Lithuania. The need for reforms was also instigated by the strong political demands of more right-wing parties to liberalize the higher education system. At the same time, left-wing parties called for ensuring that access to higher education does not change. As a result, different players were invited to share opinions, and a proposal was advanced to transform the traditionally closed higher education and research system in Lithuania. The major issues on the table included higher education quality, governance, financing, human resources, and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The latest discussions of reforms definitely have had a neoliberal feel, with a priority given to ideas of efficiency of the higher education system. There is a much greater focus on the agenda of higher education to raise the country's economic competitiveness—in line with the Lisbon goals of raising the competitiveness of the European economy. The Lisbon objectives have to some extent taken over the legitimization of the reforms with regard to the Bologna process of the 1990s. It is too early to draw conclusions about the success of the reforms, but the involvement of various stakeholders and the vision of broad reforms increase hopes for prospects of a more radical change of the Lithuanian higher education landscape. ■

Germany's “Excellence Initiative”

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Although many factors contributed to what most policy observers saw as underperformance of German universities in the late 20th century, lack of differentiation of mission among institutions seems paramount. All universities were treated essentially as peers in teaching and research, with roughly equivalent salary scales and working conditions. In 2008, 88 public universities in Germany are authorized to

award doctoral degrees. Each of these institutions can claim to be what the United States calls a research-intensive university. Relative to the size of its economy, the number at this level is untenably large but unsupportable at a high level of quality. In fact, no German university appears at the top among leading universities worldwide in commonly consulted international rankings.

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On January 27, 2004, the federal minister for higher education and research in the Social Democratic government of Gerhard Schroeder, Edelgard Buhlmahn, electrified the academic community by proposing that the government simply select and support six universities to be Germany's top institutions of higher learning. With startling swiftness, in less than 18 months, key stakeholders reached an agreement to undertake a process called the “Excellence Initiative,” to be financed by an appropriation of 1.9 billion euros, shared 75 percent by the federal government and 25 percent by the states. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats were replaced by a grand coalition led by Christian Democrat, Angela Merkel. The new minister for higher education and research—Christian Democrat, Annette Schavan—quickly endorsed continuation of the Excellence Initiative.

SHAPE OF THE COMPETITION

In the compromises necessary to achieve consensus, the emphasis turned from an exclusive focus on identifying a few elite institutions to a more broadly based program to strengthen research and reform doctoral education throughout the university sector. Three competitions were organized. The first was for new “graduate schools,” which are intended to develop modern paths toward award of the doctorate. Winners receive about 1 million euros per year for five years, and about 40 awards were expected. The second was for “excellence clusters,” encouraging combinations of the strongest academic programs at an institution in innovative ways to promote high-quality interdisciplinary research. Winners receive about 6.5 million euros per year for five years and about 30 awards were expected.

The final competition was for a “futures concept,” intended to reorganize the university radically to enable it to compete against the strongest international standards. To qualify for entry into this competition a university had independently to win support for at least one graduate school and one excellence cluster. Winners receive about 14 million euros per year for five years, and about 10 awards were expected. Since winners in the futures-concept competition also receive funds for their win-