

EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN TERMS OF THE CONCEPT OF MODERN LIBERAL EDUCATION

Dear Readers!

At the outset of the 21st century, education evidently faces a number of challenges and transformations (frequently baseless) at all stages including national and international level. Such situation is primarily determined by political, economical and cultural changes in society life. New complex problems are encountered at the crossroads of global and local tendencies. On July 4th 2003, under the resolution No IX-1700 put forward by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, National Education Strategy 2003 – 2012 was approved. The document states that „education should be developing having in the forefront all new challenges and possibilities for a society... (Regulations of National Education Strategy, 2008). What kind of assistance should be given to the members of society? This is the key issue that needs to be clearly defined as we are living in a consumer-centred world based on consumerism and pragmatic morality. In general, modern Western Civilization is a capitalistic and global society mainly focused on consumerism. What is more, the attitude that this is the only universal and approved system is formed. Too many economy factors make impact on the pattern of life and thus on Lithuanian education. Economic logic determines education policy in Lithuania as well as in a number of countries. Education seems to be a sort of service that can be clearly noticed in the sector of higher education. Almost no ordinary life at university has been left – life is more focused on providing services, attracting customers, making money etc. It seems to be that the idea of university has been carefully hidden underground and waiting for more promising future. The students have become customers offering money for universities. Therefore, even a more pragmatic outcome is elaborated as the establishments of higher education are expecting everyone having enough money to pay for studies. Individual ability to study is undeserving and stays out of the way. Universities may vary from providing poor quality services to those very positively valued by the customers. However, I suppose that slight marking exists which once removed pushes a university towards the nowhere (only a name and signboard of an institution remain visible). More and more university degrees are obtained in Europe and North America as well as in the rich countries of Saudi Arabia, China and Japan. It comes with career opportunities and tells about our imaginary success. Nevertheless, it is only an external aspect including mobility, changes, variety etc. However, such paradigm of global education and production/consumerism contains prior evaluation. The market value of those unable to satisfy the established criteria significantly decreases and thus leads to uncertainty whether they can be appraised in general. In this case, *winner*s and *loser*s are formed in the system ‘prosumer – consumer’. The only question is about the quantity of those and whether the assumed winners are as they have to be. Certainly, it comes true. Still, even the most socialized capitalism (Scandinavian) fails to escape from the ideology of consumerism.

The young generation encounters the tendencies of society’s growth (or regression?), follows daily life and appropriately develops individual world outlook. It is true that comprehensive school

cannot aimlessly foster the values that should be cherished as a part of a schooling mission. The principles and values cherished or encouraged by school environment most frequently appear at a standstill in Lithuania. The world is different outside school walls. The youth experiences severe difficulties in such discrepancy and avoids trusting in school. They clearly distinguish between things declared at school and underlying reality. Axiomatic truth declares that the mission of education is fully accomplished when its evolution goes beyond a general development of society. However, to achieve the purpose, the Government must pay real rather than declarative attention to the education system. Supporting the ideas of modern education, knowledgeable society, the development of information technologies etc. is not enough to fulfil the task. Any state finds insufficient upraising education as a national priority because valuable and regular assistance is required. Nonetheless, the youth in Lithuania is observing other type of 'concern'. The teachers of comprehensive and the lecturers of higher schools are forced to go on strikes to show they are worth getting more attention than they are presently given.

Recently, Lithuania and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe very frequently run into a number of problems addressed to the system of higher education. The decrease of the quality of studies, corruption, insufficient financial support, the inadequacy in reality and university mission etc. are the issues in progress. Everyone knows that in order to survive and compete in a knowledgeable society, all countries, especially small ones, must learn how to create, accumulate and manage intellectual property. Knowledge is the only resource to be accumulated when using it. It is extremely important for small countries having insufficient natural resources. Yet in 1999, the rectors of 14 higher education institutions in Lithuania declared that on the 20th of December of the running year, a preventive action Higher Schools against Destructing Education would be performed and that no academic work would be done that day. It seemed to be a matter of great concern. If higher schools are made to go on a strike, obviously, serious problems may occur. Although almost a decade has gone, still the situation remains the same. The sector of higher education in Lithuania is waiting for going out again. A few weeks ago, mainly the same requirements for the Government were presented i.e. the salary of the teaching staff and operating-household personnel should grow 20 percent in 2009. Particular attention is devoted to improve the present situation and achieve that the Government should adequately support the students and allocate necessary finances for studying. Currently, considering different types of methodology, the Government totally spends only 48 percent of the sum of money required for studies. Another concern is the salary of staff as due to low compensation for work, universities may encounter difficulties in recruiting appropriately-qualified staff at all levels. In higher education sector some negative tendencies recently are observed. Many experts of higher education underline that the Western universities get attributes of the original enterprises (clients, services etc.). In the centre of attention the finance, services, and „the goods“, instead of formation / preparation of well-educated young people. The main mission of any university is positive influence on society development. Despite that the tendency of the estrangement of universities from the traditional value orientations is strengthened. Similar tendencies can be noticed in Lithuania. The universities that have been accepted as the temples of knowledge have become the tools of the powerful market. A.Samalavičius (2003) notices that one-sided orientation is very dangerous when a university becomes an institution of trade and highly specific vocational activity. Hence, following such logic, universities turn into the market and university education becomes a simple item. A customer always feels right in such higher education market. It seems to be clear that customers have different needs and possibilities to be accepted. Consequently, the curricula of university studies will be designed following the concerns of the companies that may appear as the potential employers of students. Bearing in mind that the post-soviet youth is not selective enough, it is likely that one will try to get the required diploma rather than necessary education. After all, in one way or another, the above introduced process is in progress. Besides, the problem is more than pressing. An evident satisfaction of students and businessmen' needs translate the university not into the force forming

society but into a usual market agent playing an invaluable beforehand defined role. Fundamental knowledge is not treated as a marketable product in such political-economical conjuncture. A narrow point of view creates an impression of disengagement. Universities take a flexible position on the market needs. Nevertheless, it seems to be an illusion. Even the satisfaction of the speedily varying market needs shows understanding that in order to effectively design the curricula of studies, a broad theoretical background, for example prognostic, is necessary. Universities carefully observe market fluctuations, and thus become doomed to failure.

An interesting point is that depending on the number of students per thousand citizens Lithuania falls into the category of the EU member states having the largest number of students, however, considering the average allocation received by a single student of a higher school, we are lagging far behind other European countries. Thus, the system though has limited resources, 'produces' a number of graduates. The number of received graduation certificates cannot be an index showing the level of education. Bright students and those having high motivation and ready for further studying choose the universities in Western countries. The process of the so called 'brain drain' is taking place. Different onetime actions are arranged to provide improvements on the situation (for example, Design and Implementation of Brain Drain Programme). Therefore, can we accept the present situation as an outcome of democratic education? Taking into account that democratic education is mediocrity-oriented mass education, the situation should not be a matter of great concern as this is a sort of education for the majority. So, the question is if '*liberal education*' vs. '*democratic education*' should be the only real way of overcoming the problem? 'Liberal education' is evidently not 'democratic education'. Simple life-based logic confirms that if having one thing, you lose another. Are the contracting parties facing the problems of higher education ready to choose another option? Are universities determined enough to form national policy and at least minimally participate in the process of arranging it or on the contrary, they will start receding from policy and stay 'shut in' becoming the blind executors of the beforehand adopted ideology? Several countries of Central and Eastern Europe have already dealt with the above introduced situation? An interesting example is that in 2004, the Chinese Government organized a conference and invited 30 leaders of the most prestigious universities worldwide including the representatives of Harvard and Oxford. The final outcome of all discussions was that China preferred fundamental education as the foremost one at national level.

Shortly after restoring State Independence, a conception of education at national level was formulated. It is a paradox, however, that in the above mentioned conception, we can hardly find such concepts as liberalism and conservatism. A major objective was to design a concept aimed at national traditions and the needs and interests of a modern society. The core of the conception is an effort to combine the conservative and liberal tendencies of education. Such steps as the renewal of gymnasias, the revival of teaching religion, awakening confession schools, look back at national culture and history etc. are the vital elements of the conservative tradition. On the other hand, a private sector of education, the right to choose educational institutions, competition among educational establishments, the growth of market relations etc. are the apparent elements of liberal policy. Within the period of almost 18 years of regained independency, the Lithuanian Government has changed from the extreme left to the extreme right wing. It can be treated as an objective stage of development in the post-soviet countries. A valid point is that the political forces of both sides have mainly failed to make corrections to the already formulated and implemented concept of education. A number of political decisions in the field of education have been reached in light of the business concerns of narrow political groups rather than taking into account clear value-based political attitudes. This type of behaviour is characteristic of the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe and is frequently narrowly accepted by western countries. I suppose that too liberal (which means cosmopolitan) attitude to education has a destructive character when fostering national traditions and values inherent to small countries. On the other hand, the liberal education system of Great Britain could serve

as a good example. This is a tradition of British education. However, it does prevent neither from corruption nor from the fictive organization of studies or receiving diplomas and in general, from plenty of problems encountered by the system of education. As far as you know, education policy was decentralized in the Soviet Union. Some countries have strict regulations issued but a few of those follow very liberal traditions. Both positions, after Aristotle, can be considered as extremities. Education in a modern world has turned into a huge market which means that relations here are not always based on values and common decency. The problems facing the illegal producers of the certificates of higher education, the counterfeiters of scientific degrees, illegal studies and establishments of 'higher education' have become burning issues in a number of countries. The powerful market demands not only for knowledge and real qualification but also for 'paper-based' pseudo-education. Thus, the conception of real education and background is being obviously devolved.

Liberal commercialized education in Lithuania is not the exact way to be followed. The approach of cosmopolitanism, disorganization and denationalization cannot be acceptable to Lithuanian people as it may cause national decline. In this case, I do not support a position that liberal education acts either as absolute evil or absolute good as much depends on the context and various circumstances. Proper (elite) education apparently brings neither honour nor conscience etc. for a person. Excellent education can be available for dishonest and corrupt people. Therefore, such education can be used for deceiving society on a broader scale. In this instance, the importance of national-value-based substructure in the whole framework of human education can be clearly noticed. Unfortunately, following only the liberal concept of education cannot act as the basis for forming such substructure. Only the citizen of Lithuania having emotional spiritual culture-focused relation with national and human historical experience uncloses new sources of property power for freedom and creatively develops informative and financial (economical) relations with all people (Srėbalius, 2002). Finally, manipulating the concept of 'citizenship' is very modern nowadays. However, the situation when citizen, citizenship, civil society, civil nation or civil education based schooling do not reflect even the smallest part of Lithuanian nation can only get to *homo sovieticus times* and nowhere else (Nainys, 2008). It is expected that Lithuania as well as the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe will find the most appropriate way to develop education and nation prosperity. It is worth making a question whether *eudaimonia* by Aristotle is somehow reflected in the current education policy? I dare to say it is not. Will we come back to the *Aristotle's Golden Mean* formulated in the 'Ethics' the essence of which the balance between excess and shortage? The question is still open and every idea about this issue will be accepted to be appreciated.

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