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Assessment of the European Union Structural Funds Support for Improvement of Quality in Higher Education in Lithuania: Approach of Experts in Higher Education

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Abstract. *The article analyses the effectiveness of support of the European Union Structural Funds (EU SF) in the programming period 2007–2013 as the financial instrument of public policy for the improvement of quality in higher education (HE) in Lithuania. Results of the expert evaluation revealed that EU SF investment was beneficial in respect of human capital, generation of ideas, fostering of created "products", and the quality culture of Lithuanian higher education institutions (HEIs); therefore, positive impact of use of EU SF support on HE quality can be expected. However, weaknesses related to efficiency, eligibility and sustainability of investment use have been also identified. Addressing these gaps highlights problems related to the main aim of the use of EU SF support in HEIs in Lithuania: the goal of effective quality improvement in higher education is accompanied by the goal to spend money.*

Keywords: *higher education, quality improvement, European Union Structural Funds support, public policy, assessment.*

Raktažodžiai: *aukštasis mokslas, kokybės tobulinimas, Europos Sąjungos struktūrinių fondų parama, viešoji politika, vertinimas.*

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is one of the most important factors in development of the knowledge economy (Gižienė and Markauskienė 2012, 1141; Yerevan Communiqué 2015, 1-4; Bucharest Communiqué 2012, 2). The Bucharest Communiqué stated that countries participating in the Bologna Process have undertaken to increase funding for HE as an investment for a better future (2012, 1-2). Lamanauskas (2008, 2) suggests that adequacy of financial and human resources determines to a large extent the realization in practice of HE quality improvement policy, when pursuing goals of both the higher education institution (HEI) and students. Hence funding is one of the conditions most largely affecting HE quality assurance.

Based on data of the portal of the European Union Structural Funds (EU SF) Assistance (2015), during the programming period 2007-2013, €55,000,000 was allocated from EU SF for internal and external HE quality assurance (QA) systems; efficiency and improvement of HE quality, internationalization and development of study programmes. European Union (EU) support enabled strengthening of the HE system at the institutional and national levels, showing public finance investment through EU SF to be a significant instrument for the improvement of HE QA systems.

However, EU financial resources for HE are often treated by politicians as a compensatory mechanism, considered as an opportunity to fill in gaps of national funding. According to scientists (Andersen 2012, 1; Estermann et al. 2013, 8), availability of EU funds stimulates the creation of national strategies designed to attract as much EU support as possible. Such a tendency means focusing national strategies to attract EU investment without the creation of strategies to meet the needs of national HE stakeholders themselves, reformulating their goals to align with goals for the use of EU resources.

Strict regulation of the use of EU SF support (defining in detail priorities, measures, activities of beneficiaries, planned results, etc.), and the aim of politicians to plug gaps in the national funding of HE, encourage project beneficiaries to harmonize project goals with EU strategic goals with the aim of becoming potential financial investment recipients. However, the state is responsible for the development of educational policy, and to receive support, authorities have to contribute to the realization of European tasks (Andersen 2012, 1; Nutarimas Nr. 789 dėl Žmogiškųjų išteklių plėtros veiksmų programos priedo patvirtinimo 2008; Švietimas, mokymas, jaunimas ir sportas 2014, 5). Therefore, funding as a regulatory instrument is used in HE in pursuing goals of both national authorities and the EU. This shows that receipt (absorption) of money becomes the most important issue, without focusing on the peculiarities, characteristics, and needs of HEIs. Dissonance between the needs of bodies in the HE system and goals defined by the authorities gives rise to the question whether EU SF support investment, as the financial instrument of public policy, was effective, and presumed the improvement of quality in HE in Lithuania.

The **research subject** – effectiveness of investment of EU SF support for the improvement of quality in higher education in Lithuania.

The **purpose** of the article is to assess the effectiveness of EU SF support, as the financial instrument of public policy, with the aim of improving quality in higher education in Lithuania.

Characteristics of EU SF investment for improvement of HE quality in Lithuania and their assessment

Funding is a driving force in the improvement of quality in higher education: EU SF support gives both assistance and opportunity to improve such quality through project activity. However, EU SF resources are accompanied by responsibility in respect of society regarding achieved results. The responsibility of beneficiaries in respect of society includes rational and efficient use of resources, quality and suitability of the created product/service, together with impact, benefit, sustainability and continuity of results achieved. Measurement of the indicators identified needs an instrument of public policy – assessment – to help determine the effective use of financial resources, responsibility of the parties concerned, and to reveal advantages and disadvantages. The importance of EU SF financial investment is demonstrated by the fact that, while improving quality in HE, more global goals are also being pursued to make Europe an advanced, economically strong and competent region worldwide.

Savickienė and Pukelis (2004, 26-28) consider quality in HE as the appropriateness of conditions provided by HEIs for the development of self-education and the obtaining of requisite qualifications, determined by a wide range of factors. Human resources are amongst the most important factors: academic and administrative staff of HEIs; competences of students and their motivation towards studies; cooperation with stakeholders; student-centred learning; academic mobility; and financial resources (Yerevan Communiqué 2015, 1-5; Bucharest Communiqué 2012, 1-5; "Europe 2020" 2010, 11; Nutarimas Nr. XI-2015 dėl Valstybės pažangos strategijos "Lietuvos pažangos strategija "Lietuva 2030" patvirtinimo 2012; Nutarimas Nr. XII-745 dėl Valstybinės švietimo 2014–2022 metų strategijos patvirtinimo 2013; etc.). Jongbloed and Vossensteyn (2001, 128), following the production process approach, view funding of HEIs not only as contribution, but also as tied to a product resulting from the actions of financial mechanisms. Therefore, funding is a fundamental factor determining all other factors, hence synergy of funding with other factors assuring quality in HE is particularly important.

The EU SF programming period 2007–2013 brought many changes to Lithuania's HE system. Substantial funding was provided for HE quality, its assurance and improvement. Activities of Lithuanian HEIs were funded according to the following measures (EU structural assistance portal 2015): 1. Improvement of Study System Efficiency; 2. Improvement of Study Quality and Increasing Internationalization;

and 3. Development of Study Programmes in the National Integrated Programmes. Total funding of €78,137,680.18 was allocated to 226 projects for the realization of these measures, including 193 projects completed recently.

Research by Pivoras and Skaburskienė (2012, 108) revealed that development of internal QA systems is stimulated not only by legal regulation but also by the funding of the activity under EU SF resources. In the programming period 2007-2013, 19 EU SF projects, including 15 completed projects with the value of €5,541,834.38, were funded for the improvement of internal QA systems; 4 projects are being implemented presently with funding to date of €2,005,265.83 (EU structural assistance portal 2015).

Additionally, EU SF support was also provided for the external QA system. During the programming period 2007-2013, the CQAHE,[a] the national external QA agency performing the function of external assessment, was funded for the implementation of 7 projects related to the development of the system of study-regulating descriptions, strengthening the external assurance system, improvement of the system for academic recognition of HE qualifications obtained in foreign institutions, implementation of quality management system in the CQAHE, creation of study-stage descriptions and study-direction description framework, and development of the activity of the LSMC.[b] The total value of these projects is €7,168,265.22.

Overall, financial injections under EU SF support to both internal and external QA systems of HE (and their separate parts) amounted over €14 million.

HE and its QA are invoked as measures to achieve socioeconomic goals (Bucharest Communiqué 2012, 1-5; Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2012, 2; "Europe 2020" 2010, 11; etc.). Gižienė and Markauskienė (2012, 1141-1147), researching investment in HE emphasize that, in accordance with the state's approach, development of a successful economy depends on investment in HE. The EU SF, which amounts to over one third of the EU budget, is the main instrument of the EU aimed at supporting economic and social restructuring of the whole continent (Štreimikiene et al. 2007, 1172).

Dapkus and Streimikiene (2014, 108), state that EU SF are the main source for growth of, and investment in, the Lithuanian economy. However, according to Estermann et al. (2013, 8), EU SF funds are not always identified in the income structures of HEIs, but are named and considered as resources of the national budgets. That is why it may not be possible to find information on the resources used for implementation of HE activities and creation of results, since EU SF contributions and benefits are not shown, despite the principles for use of the funding including public accountability and responsibility. However, on the other

[a] Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education

[b] Lithuanian Scientists Mobility Centre

hand, non-separation of EU SF investment from the national funds can be reasoned by consolidation of state and EU budgets.[c]

Jongbloed (2010, 10) says that funding of HE is a fulcrum rather than a self-contained process, as authorities use this measure to influence organizational behaviour. This means that funding facilitates pursuit of HE goals; however, control of financial mechanisms and instruments is in the hands of the authorities, which expect certain results from granted funding. Therefore, the scientists note the problem related to balance between duties and responsibility among HEIs and the state, and recommend providing more autonomy to HEIs.

According to Segalovičienė (2011, 437), assessment of public finance in the context of modern public management plays an important role, as special attention is given to the effectiveness of the implementation of public policy and the public sector value created by the money. Nakrošis et al. (2007, 6) describe the assessment as an analysis of the value of public policy (or elements of it), which is intended to improve public policy or to assess and account for its elements.

The Final Report on analysis of results related to the realization of activities funded by the European Social Fund in the area of education and research (2013), which provides assessment of MES[d]-administered projects under the EU SF support, shows that, when implementing the Human Resources Development Programme, the highest investment was made in HE. Thus, the highest number of products were created for HEIs. Having assessed EU SF investment in HE studies, the report states that insufficient attention is paid to assurance of quality of the products and enhancement of their use, as project beneficiaries had not been stimulated to do it. To detail this conclusion, problems can be observed in the use of products, as around half of them (46%) are used by the very institution implementing the project (single institution). It can be reasoned that the specificity of certain products (e.g. study programmes) means that they cannot be used in other organizations. Yet, it is emphasized that product users are not being appropriately identified and planned for. With respect to product quality, regardless of making good conditions for QA, quality requirements for the products were rarely applied. The main focus was on the control system regulating activities and finance (collecting detailed data related to activity implementation and finance), as well as requirements and restrictions of EU support, which complicated the creation of original and innovative products. Entrenchment of the mentioned problems was also based on insufficient product supervision; absence of goals for further use of the products and the lack of a motivation system of beneficiaries to use them; restriction of partnership among organizations; and other weaknesses (Europos socialinio fondo finansuojamų veiklų švietimo ir mokslo srityje įgyvendinimo rezultatų analizė. Galutinė ataskaita

[c] The Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania: http://www.finmin.lt/c/portal/layout?p_l_id=PUB.1.64

[d] Ministry of Education and Science

2013, 44-56). Therefore, it can be stated that the weaknesses revealed demonstrate insufficient effectiveness of the planning, implementation and control system, which may result in only partially assured quality of products and the process of their sustainability.

Insufficient quality and use of study programmes, internal quality management systems, methodical material and so forth, are also emphasized in the strategic evaluation of the EU SF support for the programming period 2014-2020 (Švietimo ir mokslo srities prioritetų 2014–2020 m. ES struktūrinės paramos programavimo laikotarpiui strateginis vertinimas. Galutinė ataskaita 2014). The evaluation advised continuing support of these projects, and investing in them with the aim of strengthening systems of control, systems of results assessment, and systems of beneficiary motivation. The advice and aims demonstrate significant problems in using EU SF resources without appropriate quality assurance of results, thus revealing inefficiency of the financial injection, and the aim simply to absorb money.

Programmes funded under EU SF are assessed at the national level, thus assessment is also envisaged in the national plan. The guidelines for methods of assessment of EU SF support distinguish three assessment paradigms: rational, constructive and pragmatic. Application of the paradigms and theories helps in understanding and explaining what policy measures enable the achievement of a desired result (ES struktūrinės paramos vertinimo metodų gairės 2011, 6). Assessment is carried out using criteria of relevance, efficiency, impact, usefulness and sustainability (Nakrošis et al. 2007, 35-36).

In order to assess the effectiveness of financial investment for improvement of the Lithuanian HE QA system, and to determine problems related to use of funding, the research presented in this article was based on the pragmatic paradigm (to improve public policy), and the following evaluation criteria:

- *Relevance* – the criterion used to reveal compliance of goals of financial investment with needs of target groups (HEI stakeholders).
- *Efficiency* – the criterion used to determine if there were, are, and will be, achievement of better results at the same costs.
- *Usefulness* – the criterion used to reveal positive or negative impact of financial investment on HE quality or on HEIs and their communities (to meet needs of target groups and to solve social and economic problems).
- *Impact* – the criterion used to reveal financial investment effects or their probability.
- *Sustainability* – the criterion used to determine probability of continuity of financial investment effects after the end of funding.

Research methodology

Sample. "Qualitative inquiry is rife with ambiguities. There are purposeful strategies instead of methodological rules. There are inquiry approaches instead of

statistical formulas. Qualitative inquiry seems to work best for people with a high tolerance for ambiguity. Nowhere is this ambiguity clearer than in the matter of sample size... 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, 242-243).

The concept of data saturation (applicable to all qualitative research employing interviews as the primary data source) 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 (Miles and Huberman 1994, 36; Bowen 2008, 140). Thus, estimating adequate sample size is directly related to the concept of saturation (Marshall et al. 2013).

The research was carried out based on the qualitative research strategy using the expert evaluation method – the expert interview. In total, 9 experts took part in the research. They represented the following groups of HE stakeholders: student representatives (from LNUS[e]); members of the National Bologna Expert Team; professionals of policy-making and implementing bodies of HE (from MES, CQAHE, RHEMAC[f]); and representatives of employers (from LBEC[g], VBEC[h]). Experts with specific knowledge in the area of HE QA, experience of teaching in HEIs, having published scientific articles, and holding management positions, expressed their approaches, opinions, and attitudes in respect of the effectiveness of EU SF support for the improvement of HE quality in Lithuania.

Data collection method. Data were collected through 9 individual interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Data analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed applying qualitative research transcription rules, recording pauses, laughter, and other non-verbal language. Analysis of research data was based on the method of inductive transfer of knowledge, when connecting separate facts and events into the whole and generalizing them. When carrying out the open coding, notes and titles were recorded in the text through its reading. Afterwards, the material was read again, attempting to describe all aspects of the content until categories and subcategories were generated from obtained codes, links were found, and groups were distinguished (Elo, Kyngas 2007, 109-111).

Instrument. The research was carried out using semi-structured interview questionnaire. Experts were asked questions to evaluate relevance, efficiency, usefulness, impact, and sustainability of financial instruments of public policy;

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[e] Lithuanian National Union of Students

[f] Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre

[g] Lithuanian Business Employers Confederation

[h] Vilnius Business Employers Confederation

and to determine weaknesses, obstacles and disadvantages of future financial investment activity.

Ethics. The research was conducted taking into account the following ethical principles: voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity (when presenting results, identities of the experts were encoded as follows: A1, A2, etc.).

Limitations. The expert interviewees represented only Vilnius city (the centre of political, economic and cultural life of the country). The qualitative research does not represent the position of the general population of HE stakeholders. Problems related to EU SF investment in the HE QA system, as revealed by the research, could be further explored through quantitative research.

Research results

When analysing expert evaluation regarding effectiveness of EU SF investment for improvement of HE quality in Lithuania, blocks of 4 categories were distinguished, and then each of them divided into subcategories.

The first category – ***benefit of financial investment for internal study QA systems of HEIs*** – consists of 4 subcategories. 1) *Financial support for development of HEI staff competences* – revealed benefit of funding for actualization of HE quality. According to representatives of students and policy-making and implementing bodies of HE, funding provided an opportunity to improve quality at the level of HEIs. Improvement was also contributed by staff training, which was designed to help understand what quality management is, and to promote team-building:

> *at the level of HEIs . . . stimulus was positive. . . . That topic is currently much more discussed than it was 4-5 years ago . . . there are more and more people involving in this discussion, more and more people trying to change something (A1).*
> *I hope that there is already certain . . . critical mass, which will allow moving without European money as well (A6).*
> *training to be organized for all members of staff . . . is actually very beneficial (A7).*

The subcategory 2) *innovative ideas for internal study quality management* consists of statements of representatives of students and the Bologna experts that they got ideas which are supported and highly evaluated in foreign countries:

> *projects to be implemented in the HEIs of Lithuania . . . were a stimulus forward . . . previously these ideas were strange (A1).*
> *particularly quality management of HEIs got very strong impulse (A4).*

Emphasis is given to subcategory 3) *development/strengthening of internal study QA systems*. Representatives of students and professionals of HE policy-making and implementing bodies evaluate positively implementation of the mentioned systems in the HEIs:

made quite [a] big move . . . systems developed in colleges . . . universities . . . can be seen (A1).
Projects . . . were implemented and funded for either development or strengthening of internal QA systems (A7).

Subcategory 4) *Success of projects related to joint degree study programmes* is reasoned by the approach of the Bologna experts that resources provided for joint degree study programmes were beneficial, as some projects funded from these resources made good conditions for further development of current joint degree study programmes:

there are . . . some successful projects, which really made and strengthened contacts . . . this is a good start and if these programmes now will be supported further – there will be benefit (A4).

The second category **– *impact of financial investment on the national external HE QA system*** – consists of 2 subcategories. 1) *Benefit to the external HE QA system and its institutions* is based on the opinion of student representatives that investment in the external study QA system stimulated positive changes. Also, in their view, the QA-related activity of public administration institutions, such as CQAHE and RHEMAC, became more active while undertaking additional functions related to the dissemination of HE quality culture:

money purposed for the external study QA system . . . has already increased . . . for the external – they work (A2).
at the national level, certain processes were really activated and they work and move well (A1).
when talking about CQAHE . . . RHEMAC . . . the state institutional level, about the external assessment . . . there was really very clear move forward. . . . there was return of investment (A1).

The next subcategory, made following the opinion of the Bologna experts and representatives of HE policy-making and implementing bodies, is 2) *success of national targeted projects*. It means that national centrally-planned projects, which set forward QA processes, were the best and most properly implemented:

results will be achieved to a large extent . . . where there are . . . national and in particular targeted projects . . . they are rather successful (A4).
the most successful . . . measures . . . were planned centrally. Impact of the national credit system project, it is really very high and deep for HEIs, it was . . . well organized (A4).
investment is very important, very necessary, without it we would do and move considerably less (A6).

The third category – ***problems related to efficiency of financial investment for HEIs*** – consists of four subcategories. The first – *problems related to functioning of developed internal QA systems and training formality* – means that the systems developed do not function properly at a practical level as HEIs lack organizational skills and distribution of accountability. Moreover, the problem related to system functioning is possibly affected by the ineffectiveness of training, which the Bologna experts judged as often non-beneficial. It should be noted that this subcategory contradicts the subcategory of the first category (*financial support for development of competences of staff of HEIs*), and divergence was noted between the Bologna experts and the professionals of HE policy-making and implementing bodies:

> *schemes that have been developed . . . they do not function properly . . . if . . . you get deeper . . . how the QA system functions, you can find that actually it does not function. . . . it is unclear who organizes (A1).*
> *they have been established, and it is unclear how well they function? (A2)*
> *various training courses were proposed, often organized very formally, not necessarily by highly qualified people (A4).*

The second subcategory – *lack of guidance on the structure and content of proposed internal study quality management systems* – indicates that there were no specific guidelines to assist HEIs in judging what internal QA system is appropriate. Representatives of HE policy-making and implementing bodies reported a lack of substance in how to establish the systems. Moreover, attempts were made to adapt foreign models for internal QA systems; however, there were no attempts to find simpler ways, acceptable to Lithuanian HEIs, to integrate more effective models:

> *there were no defined guidelines . . . what the internal system should be like . . . what it is foreseen to be . . . it was necessary . . . to provide in more structured and exact way . . . what its elements should be, what cross-sections should be made (A5).*
> *we took models . . . from foreign examples . . . adapted them to ourselves and do not dare yet to stray from them and search . . . for our own way . . . which would be simpler. Everybody develops . . . difficult strategies . . . but when we get them down . . . to the practical level . . . they do not always function (A1).*

Meanwhile, the third subcategory – *irrational use of funding of EU SF in the HEIs* – was generated from the opinions of all four groups of informants. In their view, funding was used irrationally. It did not lead to improvement of HE quality; the resources could have been spent more reasonably. Also, the subcategory substantiates the lack of determination and assessment of results from activity of internal QA systems. Here there is a contradiction with the first category, which reveals benefits of financial investment in HEIs. Representatives of the same groups of stakeholders emphasize both negative and positive aspect of benefit:

where there is development of internal QA systems . . . a lot of resources . . . were a kind of wasted . . . irrationally used (A4).
was it possible to do it better, I would say – yes (A5).
what I would like to highlight yet, it is that actually a lot of money was expended for piloting . . . it would be very interesting to see . . . who evaluated these piloting activities (A8).
there is no feedback on how internal QA systems function . . . it is only a mechanism . . . and . . . if it does something or does not do . . . there is another question (A2).

When talking in general, lack of efficiency of investment is highlighted, that renewal of study programmes at the level of HE system could have been effective; therefore, from evaluations of Bologna experts and representatives of HE policy-making and implementing bodies the fourth subcategory – *lack of efficiency of investment to renewal of study programmes* – was distinguished:

study programme renewal . . . investment will be only half-successful at the best (A4).
regarding investment which was made to renewal of study programmes ... it has been stated that it is not the most efficient investment (A7).
renewal of study programmes could have been considerably more efficient (A6).

The last category concerns ***limits of impact of financial investment***, consisting of 3 subcategories. The first subcategory is *dependency of results on priorities of HEIs*. This subcategory reveals that funding impact results depend to a large extent on approaches and defined goals of the HEIs themselves, as according to experts of HE policy-making and implementing bodies a very different view is observed when comparing HEIs and their achieved results:

It depends on HEIs. Some of them . . . are capable to use it . . . some raise goals . . . to earn . . . additional resources (A5).
depending on the HEI . . . on such internal requirements, on defined goals . . . we can see very colourful view (A6).
it is not enough just to write a text of that programme . . . it could be very perfect . . . but after that it is necessary to implement it in practice (A7).

The second subcategory – *problems related to regulation and assessment of use of investment resources* – indicates that a very clear framework was set in respect of what resources could be used for; therefore, the problem related to goals of use of investment occurred, as another goal, to spend money, appeared instead of the main goal – to assure and to improve study quality. Moreover, it has not been envisaged how to measure or assess the investment return, hence there is no stimulus to use funding properly:

There were rules that were . . . dictated as money could have been spent only for that but nothing else (A8).
this return has not been foreseen either to be measured or assessed financially (A9).
the goal is to spend money but not to assure quality of studies (A8).

The final subcategory – *lack of continuity and sustainability* – was distinguished from the evaluation of representatives of three expert groups, i.e. HE policy-making and implementing bodies, students and employers. They state that activity is not continued after the end of funding, thus there is no benefit and added value. Resources are not limitless and funding cannot be continuous. Moreover, it is also stated that investment is only initial aid providing initial capital, thus can be evaluated as a single injection. Representatives of the three groups of stakeholders perceive lack of continuity, which can therefore be treated as significant problem which should be discussed, and instruments of public policy should be examined for elimination of this problem:

a very good project is being implemented, however, when funding is over, the project team separates, and those activities are not supported . . . funding cannot be all the time continuous . . . as it . . . makes [recipients] accustomed to those external funds . . . then dependence occurs . . . if there is no further support . . . actually there will not be even created further additional value (A7).
It is not worth expecting efficient investment return (A9).
it . . . is just . . . such push, these money push some affair . . . forward (A1).

Analysis of the experts' evaluation on effectiveness of financial investment for assurance and improvement of HE quality reveals that positive changes can anyway be expected. However, based on the opinion of students' representatives, funding by itself cannot solve problems. According to them, it is not money that brings higher quality, but an approach; therefore, funding alone cannot essentially improve quality in HE. Meanwhile, the opinion of employers' representatives on the issue of financial investment was cardinally different. According to their evaluation, investment return and benefit cannot be expected. Moreover, employers highlighted the dependence of the country on EU SF: after the end of the support, activity also ceases. Representatives of all groups of stakeholders agree regarding irrational use of resources at the institutional level of HEIs. Nevertheless, professionals of HE policy-making and implementing bodies, Bologna experts, and representatives of students, tend to indicate not only the disadvantages of financial investment but also advantages, as well as the provision of opportunities to improve quality in HE at the institutional and national levels.

Discussion

Results of the research suggest that EU SF support resources, from the point of view of the idea, were beneficial for the management of HEI internal study quality; they also provided opportunities for HEIs to develop internal QA systems or to improve them. Pivoras and Skaburskienė (2012, 108-109) also note that support of EU SF funding encourages improvement of internal QA systems. However, scientists also highlight weaknesses of the internal QA systems, i.e. while there are separate quality assurance processes there are no uniform quality management systems. Results of our research also suggest the existing problem related to functioning of internal QA systems. Funding enabled HEIs to establish the systems, yet with apparent improper functioning of the systems they developed. This is shown in weaknesses related to the organization of the implementation of processes and procedures, distribution of responsibilities, non-applicability of models taken from systems of foreign countries, etc.

The Final Report on the analysis of results related to realization of activities funded by the European Social Fund in the area of education and science (Europos socialinio fondo finansuojamų veiklų švietimo ir mokslo srityje įgyvendinimo rezultatų analizė. Galutinė ataskaita 2013, 44-56) suggested that project products were seldom subject to quality requirements, and the project control system focused on control and collection of information of activities and finance, but not on effective assurance of product quality. Also echoed by our research, which revealed problems of effectiveness of financial investment in HE, were problems related to the functioning of developed internal QA systems, and efficiency of renewal of study programmes. Experts mentioned product defects resulting from weak control of quality requirements.

Poor application of quality requirements to products highlighted one more weakness – insufficiently well prepared and defined requirements. Problems revealed by our research relate to weaknesses in the areas of regulation and assessment of use of investment resources; uncertainty of rules, guidelines, structural elements (internal QA systems); and irrational use of EU SF resources. These deficiencies presuppose that there are weaknesses in the regulation of use of EU resources at the institutional level. Therefore, both the Final Report (Ibid.) and our research suggests that national-level state projects were more successful than competitive ones. Success of centralized targeted projects was conditioned by the fact that all target groups of HE sector of the country but not only one HEI and its stakeholders were envisaged as beneficiaries.

According to the opinion of representatives of all four groups (HE bodies, Bologna experts, employers and students), HEIs used resources irrationally, which hindered quality improvement. Irrationally-used resources do not make it reasonable to assert unambiguously that the aim of HEIs was possibly to just absorb resources. However, such an aim to just absorb resources can be reasoned, and at the same time

it is possible to detail and to determine a deeper reason for it based on the assertions of Andersen (2012, 1), Estermann et al. (2013, 8), that politicians consider EU SF investment as the source for compensation and filling gaps, and national strategies are being developed with regard to investment attraction opportunities. Therefore, the aim of HEIs to absorb resources can result from political decisions of national authorities taking the opportunity to use resources only for particular activities, perhaps not always necessary for HEIs themselves.

Evaluation received during our expert interviews, and the conclusions of the above-mentioned Final Report on results of use of EU SF resources, highlight lack of continuity and sustainability of products created under EU SF support. Correlation of results of both researches reveals that, after the end of investment period, activities are not continued, product use is minimal, and the very beneficiaries of the projects are not able to name precisely product users. Unused products and discontinued activities do not create added value.

This present research highlighted results that had not been touched by other research: different evaluation of EU financial support for the development of competences of staff by stakeholders (representatives of HE policy-making and implementing bodies positively evaluate the staff training, whereas Bologna experts are negative); weaknesses in establishment of internal QA systems; problems related to irrational use of resources; and at the same time the ability of HEIs to use financial opportunities provided for the improvement of study quality. Also, weaknesses were identified related to regulation and assessment of the use of EU SF, and sustainability of products created under financial support. Noting those results demonstrates the innovativeness of this research and its exclusiveness from other research. Moreover, the research results can also help representatives of HE policy-making and implementing bodies, and those of HEI, to focus on the removal of existing obstacles to effective use of public finance for quality improvement in HE. Disclosure of these obstacles enables the processes of using EU SF resources to be optimized.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Summarizing benefit and impact of the public policy instrument – EU SF investment in Lithuania's higher education QA system – positive changes which affect the development of HE quality can be discerned. However, based on existing weaknesses in the efficiency of investment use, it is asserted that HEIs are not capable of efficient management or rational organization of finances; though not only due to their own fault. It is notable that the problem's nature is reasoned by weaknesses existing at the national and international levels of policy of HE studies (regulation of investment use) that possibly demotivate HEIs in seeking to use resources for assurance and improvement of quality as effectively and efficiently as

possible. Presently, to obtain EU funding it is necessary to meet set rules and to use resources only under strict regulations. Therefore, it is necessary to initiate changes in the regulation of grant of EU SF support determining only guidelines for areas in which the resources could be used. It is important to provide opportunities for each HEI to distribute resources in line with its own planned goals, thus preventing the temptation to use the resources for unnecessary activities.

2. Moreover, differences of opinion amongst separate groups of stakeholders signal gaps in the search for mutual understanding and common compromise among stakeholders, as well as their inadequate involvement in decision-making. Furthermore, lack of sustainability in not connecting funding activities, processes and use of obtained results/feedback, conditions suspension of changes in assurance and improvement of study quality. Therefore, it is important to motivate HEIs to use EU SF support resources efficiently and rationally, to continue maintaining funded activities, and to seek added value through measurement and assessment of the financial return.
3. On the one hand, EU SF subsidies offer the opportunity to improve study quality, raising it to such a level as to be able to compete in the international context of HE. On the other hand, EU SF support through project activity in HEIs is used as a tool by national authorities to attract and absorb funds. Therefore, the most important goal of the state politicians and HEIs was to absorb and spend EU SF money, and the goal of effectiveness of assurance of product quality was secondary. That, in particular, conditioned an inevitable problem related to wasting resources. To avoid the mentioned defects in the use of EU SF resources, it is important to provide opportunities for constructive cooperation among those public administration institutions and representatives of HEIs participating directly in study quality improvement processes, to discuss planned areas and activities for the 2014-2020 programming period.

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Europos Sąjungos struktūrinių fondų paramos Lietuvos studijų kokybės gerinimui vertinimas: aukštojo mokslo ekspertų požiūris

Anotacija

Finansavimas, kaip reguliacinė priemonė, naudojama aukštajame moksle, siekiant nacionalinės valdžios (ir europinių) tikslų. Svarbiausia tampa pasiimti (įsisavinti) pinigus, o į aukštojo mokslo institucijų savitumą, charakteristikas, poreikius nėra įsigilinama. Disonansas tarp aukštojo mokslo sistemos subjektų ir nacionalinės valdžios sudaro prielaidą kelti probleminį klausimą – ar viešosios politikos finansinis instrumentas – ES SF paramos

investicijos buvo veiksmingos ir sudarė prielaidas pagerinti Lietuvos studijų kokybę? Tyrimo objektas – ES SF paramos investicijų Lietuvos studijų kokybei gerinti veiksmingumas. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra įvertinti ES SF paramos, kaip viešosios politikos finansinio instrumento, veiksmingumą siekiant pagerinti Lietuvos studijų kokybę. Tyrime naudoti metodai: mokslinės literatūros ir nacionalinių bei tarptautinių dokumentų analizė; ekspertų interviu.

Kokybinio tyrimo rezultatai leido išskirti 4 kategorijas, atskleidžiančias ES SF panaudojimo veiksmingumą Lietuvos studijų kokybei: finansinių investicijų nauda aukštųjų mokyklų vidinėms studijų kokybės užtikrinimo sistemoms, poveikis nacionalinei išorinei studijų kokybės užtikrinimo sistemai, finansinių investicijų aukštojo mokslo institucijoms efektyvumo problemos ir poveikio ribos. Diskutuojama su kitų tyrimų autoriais dėl tyrimų rezultatų, susijusių su vidinių studijų kokybės užtikrinimo sistemų diegimo ir funkcionavimo trūkumais, menka kokybės reikalavimų kontrole sukurtiems produktams iš ES SF paramos, nacionalinių projektų sėkmingumu, neracionaliu lėšų naudojimu, produktų tęstinumo ir tvarumo trūkumais. Taigi, empiriniai tyrimo rezultatai rodo, jog viena vertus, ES SF subsidijos inicijuoja galimybę patobulinti studijų kokybę pakeliant ją į kitą lygį, suteikiant galimybę konkuruoti tarptautiniame aukštojo mokslo kontekste. Kita vertus, ES SF parama per projektinę veiklą (aukštojo mokslo įstaigose) yra nacionalinės valdžios įrankis pritraukti ir įsisavinti lėšas.

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