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LIETUVOS EDUKOLOGIJOS UNIVERSITETAS

Evaluation and Drives of International Student Mobility across European Union Countries

Simona Biveinytė[1], **Raimundas Dužinskas**[2]

[1] Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, 39 Studentų St., LT-08106 Vilnius, Lithuania, ssimona.biveinyte@gmail.com
[2] Mykolas Romeris University, 20 Ateities St., LT-08303Vilnius, Lithuania; Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, 39 Studentų St., LT-08106 Vilnius, Lithuania, rduzinskas@gmail.com

Abstract. With rising demand for international education in Europe, today more higher education systems have become active in attracting international students. Hence, players in the global higher education market are highlighting their advantages in the higher education marketplace to become more competitive. As Lithuania has an ambitious desire to double the number of international students by 2025, this exploratory study analyses the important factors that will help to better target international students and put emphasis on the challenges to be refined in national education policies.

Keywords: *internationalization of higher education, international student mobility, Bologna process, factors of international student mobility.*

Introduction

Relevance of the study. As a participant in the Bologna process, Lithuania reflects the initiative to support and promote international student mobility. Therefore, Lithuanian national policy reveals an ambitious goal to double the number of international students by turning Lithuanian higher education institutions into an international research hub by 2025. This ambition raises a challenge in shaping an effective strategy to attract international students in a competitive European Union (EU) environment.

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Although in the last decade the indicators of international student mobility in Lithuania have been growing, the incoming mobility is still significantly low. The problem is compounded by the lack of research, as today little is known about the factors determining international students to choose the so-called 'non-traditional' destinations in the European Union, such as Lithuania. Therefore, it becomes necessary to study the factors that drive international student choice of study destination in EU countries. The determination of such factors will help to better target international students and design an international student-centered strategy.

The problem of the study – what are the most significant factors determining international students' decision to study in Lithuania and how are they evaluated?

The aim of the study – to evaluate the main factors driving international students' decision to study in Lithuanian universities.

Objectives:

1. To identify theoretical framework of factors affecting a student's decision to study abroad.

2. To determine the most significant factors that shape international students' decision to study in Lithuanian universities.

3. To evaluate these significant factors in Lithuania by performing comparative analysis to European Union countries.

1. Factors driving international students' decision to study abroad

The mobility of international students, or so-called horizontal mobility, defines the relocation of person to a territory beyond the permanent national residence to become a student at a higher education institution (UNESCO, 2017; Van Mol, 2014). It should be noted that duration and outcomes of study are the main criteria for distinguishing between degree and credit mobility as such forms exist nowadays (Ferencz and Wächter, 2012). This exploratory study focuses on the degree of mobility, which usually lasts more than a year. After successfully completing all courses required, the student earns a degree.

Chen (2007) and Wilkins et al. (2012), discuss that international students' decision to study abroad consist of two main problems – decision-making process and factors involved. The decision-making process represents different stages that are linked to consumer behavior studies, wherein different groups of factors are involved. One way to cluster these factors – is to utilize the theory of push and pull factors (Lee, 1966) as it enables a wide range of applications varying from personal motivation, regions, countries and supranational policy implications. The theory of pull and push factors explains why a person supposes destination A more attractive than destination B, extracting negative (push) attributes of sending and positive (pull) attributes of receiving country. The ap-

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plication of this theory can be found in McMahon (1992), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Kolster (2014), Ahmad and Hussain (2017) studies. The table below represents a broad overview of the possible push and pull factors based on mentioned authors.

Table 1
The push and pull factors based on various authors

Push factors	Pull factors
High recognizability, acceptance and perceived value of foreign degrees by domestic employers and higher education institutions	Accessible information about the higher education system and opportunities to study, enhanced recruitment policies, marketing efforts, promotions
Low quality of studies, insufficient access to specific program, admission requirements, high tuition fee	International academic recognition, reputation and image of the institution, prestige, low tuition fee
Cultural, economic, educational, linguistic, historical, political, religious ties to destination	Socio-cultural proximity: cultural, historical, linguistic ties
Desire of personal development, foreign language training opportunities, career prospect, international experience, intention to emigrate	The influence of relatives, recommendations of friends, Alumni, media, favorable emigration policies
Poor hospitality, negative climate, demographic issues, economic or political instability within home country	The host country's cultural climate, geographical location, affordable living cost
The highly positive perception on foreign degree	Favorable studying and living environment: international, foreign language/English speaking, multicultural, social life
Low perception of employment possibilities and local degree in the home country	Host country emigration policies, government relationships, service for international students, scholarships, government support, opportunities to work, regulations

Based on the literature overview, it is possible to categorize these factors that affect the international student' decision when considering study in particular country as follows:

- **Factors of the country and the institution environment**: security, multicultural environment, English-speaking environment, stable economic and political situation, climate;
- **Factors describing personal motivations**: language development opportunities, desire to establish international relations, career perspectives in the country, intention to stay in the country after graduation;
- **Factors linking the institutional reputation**: quality of studies, scholarships, recognition of acquired academic degrees in other countries, higher education institution ratings, admission procedure;

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- **Factors associated to financial aspects**: living cost, tuition fees, travel costs, visa fee, opportunity to work during studies;
- **Other significant factors:** family, friends, agents, alumni, media recommendations;
- **Factors linking sociocultural ties**: religion, culture, relatives living abroad, geographic proximity;
- **Factors relating government:** dotation, relations, institutional co-operation.

2. Research methodology

The Analytical Hierarchy Process method (hereinafter referred to as AHP) (Satty, 1980) has been chosen to determine the factors involved in the international students' decision to pursue higher education in Lithuania. Therefore, AHP is a useful technique to analyze complex problems dealing with multi-criteria decision making. Moreover, by combining mathematics and psychology, it empowers an accurate calculation of factor significance reflecting the preferred factors and its rating (Trinkūnienė, 2006). The principle of AHP method is the relative pairwise comparison of criteria and alternatives made by decision makers. By comparing two factors to each other at a time in a systematic hierarchy using the Saaty (1980) scale of significance estimates (see Table 2), it allows to derive the relative weight of judgment and determine the preference of all criteria that were compared. The implementation of systematic AHP analysis method falls into the following steps: 1) define the problem, 2) model hierarchical structure, 3) construct pairwise judgment matrix, 4) synthesize, 5) check consistency and 6) create rating.

Table 2
Possible relative significance estimates

Absolute Importance	Very strong importance	Much more important	Slightly more important	Equal importance	Intermediate values
9	7	5	3	1	8, 6, 4, 2

2.1. Data collection

Expert evaluation method which 'is widely used in sociological research to obtain empirical data in the field' (Tidikis, 2003, p. 515) was carefully chosen to collect data for the research. The selection of experts was performed in reference to Tidikis (2003) observation of necessity to select qualified experts with specific knowledge. Consequently, seven experts working at Lithuanian universities that specifically offer study programs in the field of social sciences were selected and a questionnaire employed.

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2.2. Phase of the research

1*) Define the problem*. The problem in this paper is defined in form of question 'what are the factors that have the greatest impact on the international students' decision to study in Lithuanian higher education institutions?'

2) *Modeling hierarchical structure.* The theoretical base of factors discussed in the first chapter were used to structure the problem and design the hierarchy. Consequently, thirty different factors were chosen based on various authors: McMahon (1992), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Chen and Barnett (2000), Kolster (2014) and Ahmad & Hussain (2017) to fill sub-criteria and formulate criteria (see Fig. 2).

3) *Construct pairwise judgment matrix.* The pairwise comparison performed by the selected experts produced data (judgments) for further matrix creation. However, when constructing such matrix, it requires to consider Satty's (1980) mathematical model which indicates that when there are n comparable elements, the result of the comparison is equal to the matrix A, whose dimension is nxm (1).

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} a_{11} & a_{12} & \cdots & a_{1n} \\ a_{21} & 1 & \cdots & a_{2n} \\ \vdots & \vdots & & \vdots \\ a_{n1} & a_{n2} & \cdots & a_{nm} \end{bmatrix} \quad (1)$$

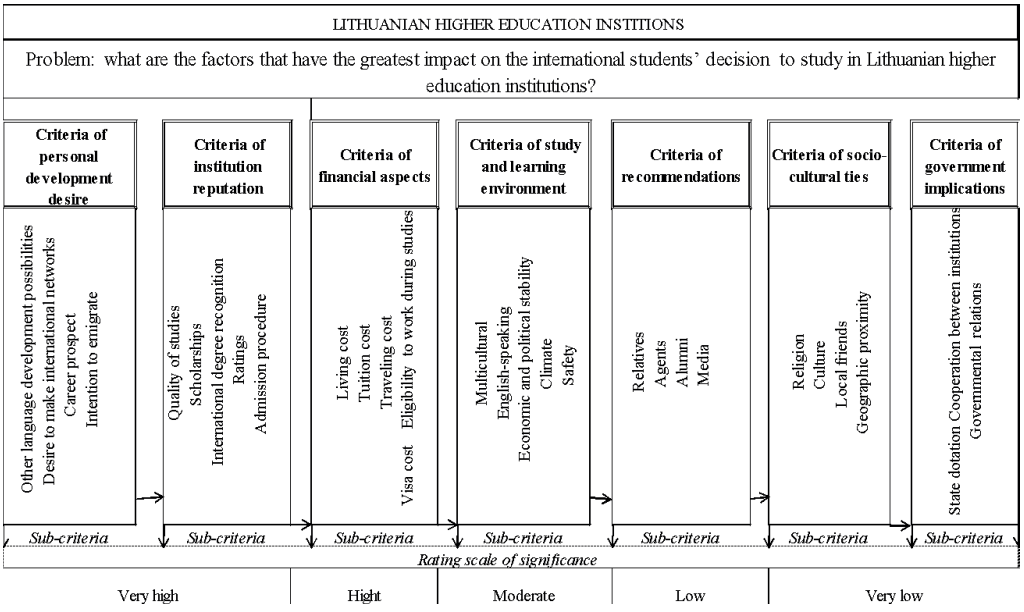


Fig. 1. Hierarchical structure of the international student's decision to study at Lithuanian Universities

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Then, the matrix elements or the comparative criterion ratio are expressed in accordance with formula 2:

$$a_{ij=}\frac{w_i}{w_j} \quad (2)$$

Given the first axiom, a reverse symmetric matrix should be formed. The significance of the factors is determined by calculating the relative weight of judgments i.e. calculating eigenvector vectors $w = [w_i]$ by using formula below (3):

$$w_{i=}\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} b_{ij}}{n} \quad (3)$$

4) *Syntheses*. Based upon Bernasconi and Choirat (2014) suggestion to better practice geometric mean for aggregating the judgements of individual experts, GEOMEAN function found in the Microsoft Office Spreadsheet (Excel) was used for the aggregation of judgments.

5) *Check consistency*. Checking the consistency of judgment matrix is a way to ensure that judgment within the matrix does not create contradiction respective to each other. Hence, it is necessary to calculate a Consistency Proportion (CR) (4):

$$CR = CI / RI \quad (4)$$

When Random Index (RI) value depends on the number of comparable elements n (see Table 3) and the Consistency Index (CI) can be defined as formula 5th, also, the largest eigenvalue vector (λmax) is required, which can be calculated as shown below (6). AHP analysis can be continued if CR < 0.10.

Table 3
Random index values

n	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
RI	0	0	0.58	0.9	1.12	1.24	1.32	1.41	1.45	1.4

$$CI = \frac{(\lambda max - n)}{(n-1)} \quad (5)$$

$$\sum_{i=1}^{n}(\sum_{j=1}^{n} a_{ij}\ \overline{w}) = \lambda max \sum_{j=1}^{n} \overline{w} = \lambda max \quad (6)$$

6) *Create the rating.* After making sure that the Consistency Ratio did not go over the allowed limit, the derivatives of the local and overall priorities were made to enable further rating creation of the most significant factors.

2.3. Data analysis

The analysis of the data showed that the financial criteria has the greatest influence on international students' decision to study in Lithuania (35%) and the following recommendation (21%). Consequently, the criterion of higher education institution reputation

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is less important than the recommendations, but somewhat more important than the criteria of the learning environment and personal motives, since it has close values to 12%, 11%, 10% respectively. According to the experts, sociocultural proximity and government-oriented criteria are least important (5%) to international student when considering earning a degree in Lithuania (see Fig. 2).

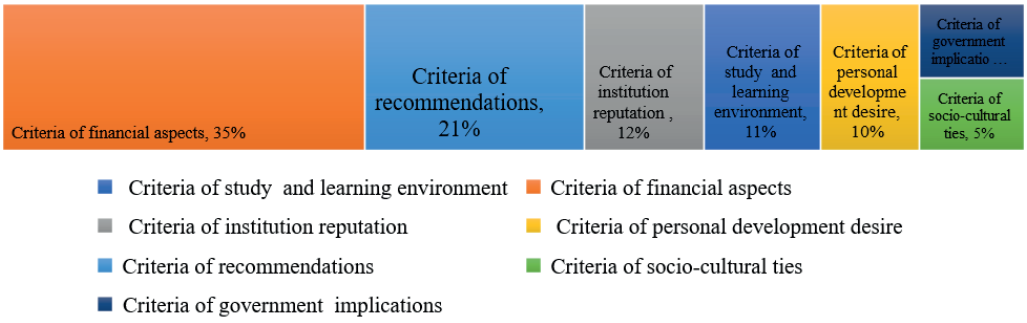


Fig. 2. The most important criteria for choosing a university in Lithuania to international students

After deriving overall priorities, the greatest influencers were found, and a rating was created (see Fig. 3). The study revealed that international students prioritize tuition fees when considering study in Lithuania. However, it should be noted that the tuition fees for students from EU/EEA countries remain the same as for Lithuanian citizens but for the students from countries other than EU/EEA become higher.

Surprisingly, the second factor turned out to be recommendation of alumni or former students. Apart from marketing efforts, it is possible to link the factor with underrepresentation of the Lithuanian higher education system regarding information sources and constant number of students coming from the same origin that promotes the country in such a way. The third driver is the opportunity to work as a student – this is an imperative factor for international students. The EU and EEA nations benefit by the fundamental rule of free movement as well as eligibility to work across the union without restrictions. Yet, other nationalities have limitations that are enforced by national labor laws. The international students also highly consider cost of living as it is ranked in fourth place according to significance. Other factors composing the rating are the recommendations of relatives which takes fifth place, and the prospect of career opportunities thereafter. Less important, however still appears in the rating, is the international recognition of the degree as well as the English-speaking study environment, eligibility to get a state scholarship and, finally, the multicultural environment in Lithuania.

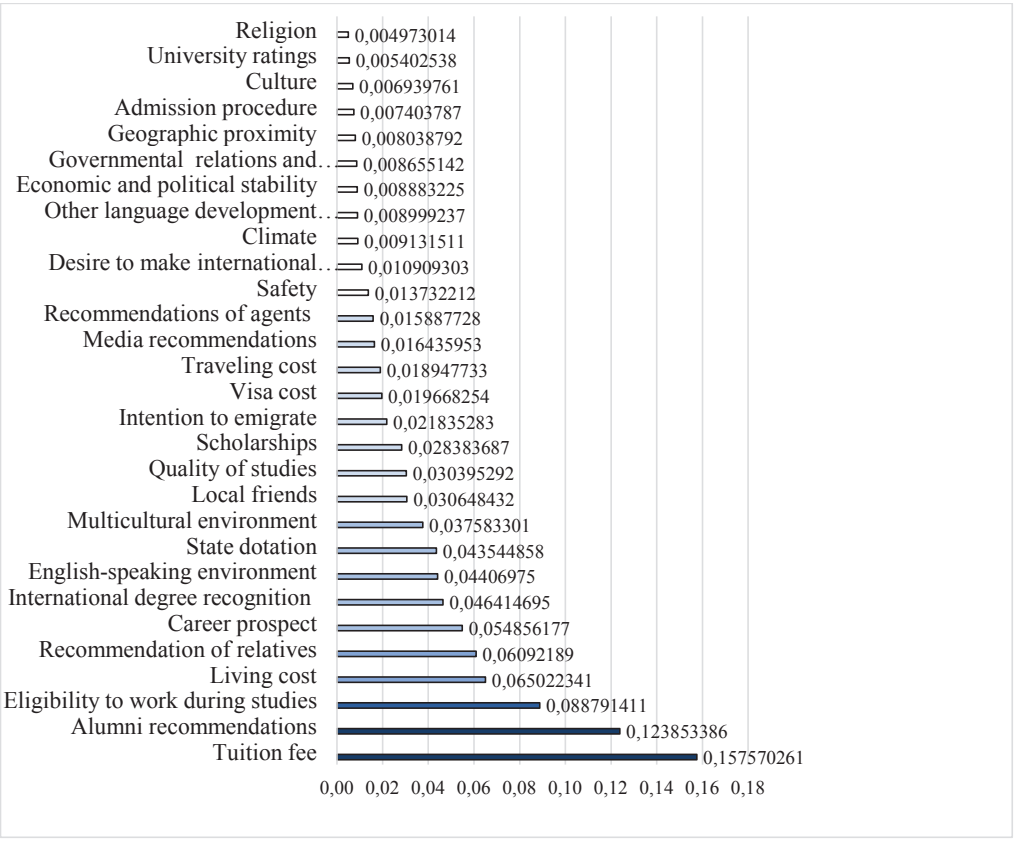


Fig. 3. Determining the most significant factors in the international students' decision to study in Lithuania

3. Evaluation of the most significant factors

Comparative analysis of Lithuania and selected European Union countries were used to evaluate factors in the rating derived. For comparative analysis the most common destinations of international students in the EU were chosen. As authors Kolster (2014) suggest, the factors were translated to measurable indicators (see Table 4). Also, standardized by using methods below to make the scores comparable and on a 10-point scale:

- Setting minimum and maximum scale intervals;
- Giving the highest possible score 10 also;
- Giving the highest possible score 10 for EU average.

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Table 4
Factors and measurable indicators

Factors	Measurable indicators
Tuition fee	Average tuition fee
Alumni recommendations	Data limitation
Eligibility to work during the studies	The number of working hours allowed in a week
Living cost	Price index
Recommendation of family	Data limitation
Career prospect	The number of months allowed to stay after graduation for job search
International recognition of degree	Participation in Bologna process at country level
English – speaking environment	The number of study programs instructed in English language
Scholarships provided by government	Data limitation
Multinational environment	The ration of international and local students in the country

As shown in Fig. 4, Lithuania is more attractive to international students in a few aspects. These consist of more affordable living costs which ranks in 4th place according to the importance. Also, Lithuania provides better opportunities for students to work while studying than other EU/EEE countries. However, the feasibility of work placements depends on the degree and compatibility with the study program. Moreover, another strength of Lithuania appears to be the international recognition of qualifications acquired in Lithuania among the Bologna process countries. Likewise, it refers to the quality assurance in higher education institutions and stands in 7th place in the rating.

On the other hand, tuition fees appeared to be essentially important for international students and noticed to be more affordable in foreign countries. Low state-regulated tuition fees exist in France, not to mention free higher education in Germany. Also, the comparison shows that France is the leader in the number of state-funded scholarships. Nonetheless, this dominance is partly based on the high number of higher education institutions within the country. In addition, the study programs where language of instruction is English the Netherlands and Germany dominate, hence international students have a very wide range of program selection dissimilar to Lithuania. In terms of job search, the best conditions for international students are provided by Germany, reflecting potential career prospects for international students and talent retention. Yet, Lithuania, France and the Netherlands – all are not as attractive as Germany due to the strict emigration policies. Also, a scarce desire to keep international students in a demographic downturn is less likely to occur.

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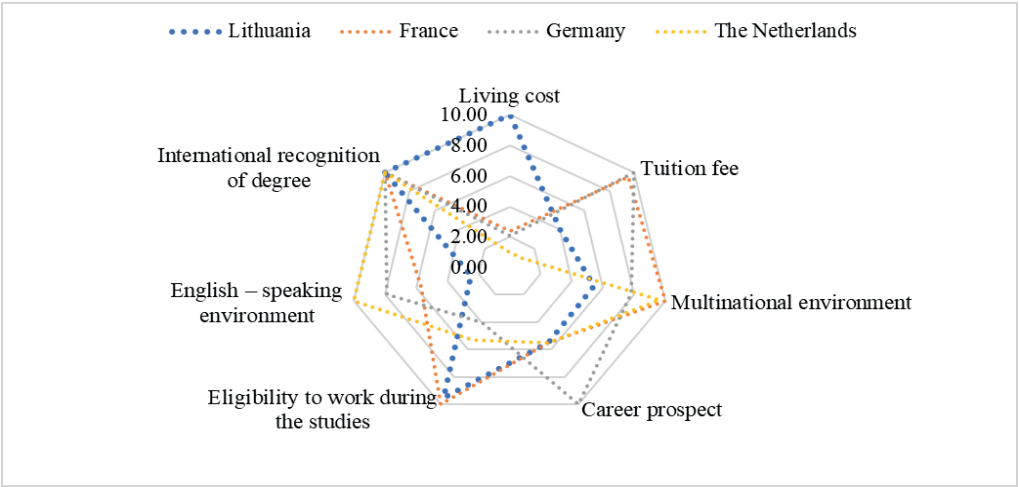


Fig. 4. The comparison of the most important factors determining the choice of international students: France, Germany, and the Netherlands

Conclusions

The study reveals that international student's decision to study in Lithuania is strongly linked to the financial criteria, particularly the size of tuition fees. Although the tuition fees in Lithuania are not as affordable as in other European countries, leveraging it with the cost of living, the overall cost may present more affordable live-study cost ratio to international students. Furthermore, not only tangible factors were exposed influencing these students. The second factor considered very important appears to be recommendation by former students (alumni). It refers to word of mouth, student's advocacy as well as critical weight on engagement in actives to maintain and enforce the alumni base. However, the recommendations of relatives also are valued as it provides more credibility to the international students. After evaluating the mentioned factors, the possible prospects of career, the international recognition of degree gained, the level of English usage in the study environment, state scholarship schemes and multicultural environment are considered in a logical sequence as described. On the other hand, the international students, when deciding to study in Lithuanian higher education institutions, pay very little attention to the academic ratings of the higher education institution, the complexity of the admission procedure, the economic and political stability in the country.

The evaluation of these most significant factors reflects the strengths and weaknesses of Lithuanian policies designed to recruit international students. The strength of Lithuania appears to be the international recognition of gained qualifications among the Bologna process countries that also refers to the quality assurance in higher education institutions. Furthermore, Lithuania offers affordable living and better conditions to

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work during study specifically applying it for non-EU/EEA citizens. Other significant factors such as the prevalence of the English language usage, the level of international exposure, the availability of state scholarships refers to the weakness as well as the size of tuition fees and the conditions for post-graduate job research (non-EU/EEA students).

Considering these remarks, national and higher education policy-makers can take steps to strengthen these weaknesses. This can be implemented through encouragement of part-time mobility to reinforce internationalization and engage in activities to use the opportunities of the international alumni network. The number of study programs in English should also be expanded and scholarship in specific fields must be considered in response to economic demands. On the other hand, representing the academic attractiveness of Lithuania, the strengths should be emphasized proclaiming the high quality of studies and the international academic degree recognition together with the opportunity to utilize the knowledge practically during study and the affordable cost of living compared with other EU countries.

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Studentų tarptautinio mobilumo Europos Sąjungos šalyse veiksniai ir jų vertinimas

Simona Biveinytė[1], Raimundas Dužinskas[2]

[1] Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, Studentų g. 39, 08106 Vilnius, ssimona.biveinyte@gmail.com
[2] Mykolo Romerio universitetas, Ateities g. 20, 08303 Vilnius; Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, Studentų g. 39, 08106 Vilnius, rduzinskas@gmail.com

Anotacija

Aukštojo mokslo internacionalizavimas yra atsakas globalizacijos procesui, kuris per pastaruosius dešimtmečius tapo bene privalomas. Todėl tarptautinis studentų mobilumas Europos lygio aukštojo mokslo politikos diskurse yra pageidautina plėtra bei būtina sąlyga švietimo sistemoms bei atskiroms aukštojo mokslo institucijoms dalyvauti konkurencinėje kovoje. Suaktyvėjusi konkurencija pasireiškia pastangomis pritraukti tarptautinius studentus bei tyrėjus, studijų eksportu į kitas šalis, mokslo produktų komercija bei aukštųjų mokslo institucijų reitingavimu.

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Tačiau ekonominės ir politinės turbulencijos sąlygomis Europos Sąjungoje numatomas naujų tarptautinių studentų mobilumo krypčių formavimasis ir bendras tarptautinio išsilavinimo poreikio augimas. Šios prognozės drąsina iki šiol „netradicinėmis" vadintas šalis ieškoti atsakymo į klausimą, kokie veiksniai lemią tarptautinių studentų studijų pasirinkimą užsienio šalyje, siekiant pritraukti tarptautinius talentus.

Lietuvos dalyvavimas Bolonijos procese atspindi iniciatyvą remti ir skatinti studentų tarptautinį mobilumą, kuris pastebimas nacionaliniuose dokumentuose, aukštojo mokslo institucijų strategijose. Siekis padvigubinti tarptautinių studentų skaičių ir paversti Lietuvos aukštąsias mokyklas tarptautinių mokslinių tyrimų centru, kuris aptinkamas valstybinių universitetų tinklo optimizavimo plano patvirtinime, kelia iššūkių formuojant tarptautinių studentų pritraukimo strategiją ir bendrą aukštojo mokslo tarptautinę politiką šalyje konkurencinėje kovoje su kitomis Europos Sąjungos šalimis. Nors per pastarąjį dešimtmetį Lietuvoje studentų mobilumo rodikliai gerėjo, vis dar jaučiamas nepakankamas atvykstančių tarptautinių studentų srautas. Todėl atsiranda būtinybė atidžiau pažvelgti į veiksnius, lemiančius tarptautinių studentų sprendimą studijuoti kitose Europos Sąjungos šalyse, įvertinti Lietuvos akademinį patrauklumą, kad būtų atskleistas ir viešinamas nacionalinės švietimo sistemos konkurencinis pranašumas.

Pasitelkus teorinį traukiančių ir stumiančių veiksnių orientyrą, šiame darbe nustatomi veiksniai, lemiantys tarptautinių studentų pasirinkimą studijuoti Lietuvos universitetuose, atliktas šių veiksnių vertinimas, atsižvelgiant į Europos Sąjungos šalių kontekstą. Tyrimui įgyvendinti pasitelkiama ekspertų apklausa bei analitinės hierarchijos proceso analizė. Tarptautinių studentų pasirinkimą lemiančių veiksnių identifikavimas leidžia nacionalinio lygmens aukštojo mokslo politikos formuotojams bei aukštųjų mokslo institucijų administratoriams tobulinti veiklos pasiūlymus.

Esminiai žodžiai: *aukštojo mokslo internacionalizavimas, studentų tarptautinis mobilumas, Bolonijos procesas, tarptautinio studentų mobilumo veiksniai.*

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