Improvement of Accessibility of Higher College Education in Lithuania
Applying Forms of e-Learning

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Abstract: The article analyses how the diversity (different types of institutions, study forms and modes) enhances accessibility of college higher education to students as well as to society, whose members aim at professional development or retraining. Though the students’ attitude towards distance studies and possibilities of distance learning in different colleges has been intensively investigated in recent works of researchers, the role of distance studies as a means of professional development or retraining for society has been under-researched. The goal of the article is to analyse improvement of access to higher college education in Lithuania applying a variety of e-learning forms. The reach data were obtained employing method of scientific literature and documents analysis, and qualitative research method: written survey. To validate the data of internet website analysis, the questionnaire survey of 23 college staff members in charge of distance studies/studies was additionally carried out in 2014 and the data were received from 10 colleges. Taking into consideration the results of the conducted analysis of documents, literature, internet websites and survey, recommendations for improvement of e-learning activities seeking to address requirements imposed on higher education, developing students’ competences and ensuring the paradigm of life-long learning are proposed. Generalising, it can be stated that accessibility of higher education is improved employing a wider variety of e-learning forms.

Keywords: college higher education, accessibility, distance education.

Introduction

Traditionally higher education was separated from society for a long period of time and approached as an autonomous institution. However, since the middle of the 20th century, the society itself has set out its various requirements to higher education as a social institution, which have been predetermined by tendencies in development of knowledge (information, technologies) society. Higher education under influence of various social factors and responding to their pressure has become mass rather than elite phenomenon and, thus, has provided different society strata with a better access to it.

The paradigms of knowledge society and mass science have resulted in diversification of higher education: higher education institutions, which targeted at different missions, were established and colleges, non-university higher education establishments, started functioning beside universities, which offered a wide range of study programmes focused on professional qualification. The diversity of missions of the governments of many countries and training possibility, which is determined by social factors, is evaluated and acknowledged as public benefit (Hazelkorn, Huisman, 2008).

The diversity is one of the key factors, which predetermines efficiency of the system of higher education, social mobility and innovation, creates close relations with society and the labour market and fulfils their expectations. According to Frans van Vught (Vught, 2008), the variety is most beneficial to the labour market as it responds flexibly to and addresses needs of its institutions. Taking into account the fact that the importance of higher education to economic development and social development has been strengthening, knowledge society has to pursue extensive collaboration among different groups (government, society, business and science). All the roles are necessary and all partners need each other to ensure success of processes (Reinhartsen, 2003 cited by Vukasović, 2003). R. Želvys (2003) states that education is influenced by the conception of free market and educational institutions more and more often offer their services. Innovations have to be applied in the knowledge society making attempts to maintain close collaborative relations with labour market institutions.

Thus, the article analyses how the diversity (different types of institutions, study forms and modes) enhances accessibility of college higher education to students as well as to society, whose members
aim at professional development or retraining; it also discusses principles, similarities and differences of organisation and implementation of distance studies as one of the most innovative study forms in private and state colleges.

It is emphasised that having analysed the works by Lithuanian researchers it may be stated that distance studies for professional development or retraining are in great demand. According to D. Jurgaitis, D. Kaklauskienė, L. Kaklauskas (2003), who conducted students’ opinion survey, 6.3% (27 out of 510) of the respondents expressed a negative attitude to distance studies, whereas 57.4% (293 out of 510) of them demonstrated a positive attitude and 240 (32%) of the students in the survey did not provide any answer to this question; more than half of the respondents support colleagues, who are students of distance studies. Thus, it can be concluded that favourable social environment is created for retraining, which encourages development of an employer applying methods of non-traditional studies. The Report on Assessment of Quality of Distance Studies in Lithuanian and Foreign Higher Education Schools (Janilionis, Abarius..., 2006) also indicates that pursuing better accessibility of studies and enhancement of professional qualification of the labour market actors, inevitably distance learning becomes one of the most acceptable forms of learning. In 2007 the research on needs of providers of distance learning services and on learning motivation of students of distance studies was conducted (Rutkauskienė, Butkevičienė, 2007; Mušankovienė, 2007) and its results showed that the main goals of individuals learning remotely include plans to develop professionally, to seek career advancement, to obtain diploma, to get education in general, to train for profession and to acquire a speciality.

Having conducted research, M. Teresevičienė, V. Zuzevičiūtė (2007) and others pointed out that the respondents are mainly motivated to learn remotely by the provided opportunities to manage own time more flexibly, to study only what is interesting and useful, to study in a convenient place and at desirable pace and, thus, to develop their skills and abilities. Three fourths of respondents pointed out that they were satisfied with courses. The attitude of elder respondents towards perspectives of distance learning in Lithuania is most optimistic. A. Rutkienė, E. Trepulė (2009) state that application of distance teaching or its elements in the system of adults education would expand possibilities of development of study programmes and application of modern teaching methods, would improve accessibility of learning as well as bring learning closer to learners.

Though the students’ attitude towards distance studies and possibilities of distance learning in different colleges has been intensively investigated in recent works of researchers (Giedrimienė, Donieliienė, 2010; Klapatauskiienė, 2008; Tautvydienė, 2008; Kiaunienė, 2008; Pūstelninkas, 2009), the role of distance studies as a means of professional development or retraining for society has been under-researched.

**Methodology**

The goal of the article is to analyse improvement of access to higher college education in Lithuanian applying a variety of e-learning forms. The reach data were obtained employing method of scientific literature and documents analysis, and qualitative research method: written survey. In 2014 23 colleges were functioning in Lithuania: 13 state and 10 private higher education institutions. To validate the data of internet website analysis, the questionnaire survey of 23 college staff members in charge of distance studies/studies was additionally carried out from September to October 2014 and the data were received from 10 colleges: 6 state and 4 private institutions. Taking into account that a number of colleges do not implement distance or blended studies, it can be stated that the number of the respondents exceeded 50 percent.

**Results and discussion**

Aspects of college establishment to increase accessibility as reflected in documents and Lithuanian legal acts. The beginning of foundation of non-university higher education sector is related to Lithuania’s joining of the Bologna process in 1999 (What is Bologna..., 1999) and attempts to integrate into the European higher education area. The structural changes in higher education, i.e., establishment of the college sector, facilitated more flexible and open responsiveness of higher education to society needs.
Analysing the Regulations of Preparation for Establishment of Colleges (Regulations of Preparation..., 1999), the tendency to have private colleges in the system of Lithuanian higher education was clearly observed because a number of exceptions in the criteria of the structure of college network, size of colleges (minimal number of students), study fields were made aiming to establish private non-university higher education institutions. This created prerequisites for diversification of the non-university higher education sector with colleges of two types (state and private), which not only promoted competitiveness but also better satisfy needs of society to pursue higher education. The indicator of availability may be improved not only applying the principle of regionality but also introducing innovative means i.e., distance teaching, whereof importance is emphasised in the White Book (The White Book..., 1999).

It should be pointed out that having established the first colleges and having approved the strategic documents of higher education policy, the majority of them underlined the importance of distance studies. The key priorities of higher education policy were presented in the publication “Education Guidelines: Lithuanian Education Development Strategic in 2003–2012. Draft.” (Švietimo gairės..., 2002), which served as basis for the provisions of the National Education Strategy 2003–2012 (Provisions of the National..., 2003) and were coordinated with other national and European strategies and reforms as well as with priorities of European Union education policy. The Educational Guidelines (Švietimo gairės..., 2002), presupposes five main principles of educational system development: accessibility, contextuality, efficiency, continuation and diversity The Educational Guidelines (Švietimo gairės..., 2002), and the National Education Strategy 2003–2012 (Provisions of the National..., 2003) provide for several important objectives of the system of higher education: to create a system of constant coordination of specialist training and labour market, to develop the diversity of adult education forms that are accessible to each individual (extramural, part-time evening, distance studies) emphasising the importance of continuous learning. Implementation of distance learning is also underlined in the Programme of Implementation of the Provisions of the National Education Strategy 2003–2012 (Dél vakstybinés švietimo..., 2005).

The first analyses The Report of the Implementation of the Provisions of the National Education Strategy 2003–2012 in 2003–2006 (summary) (Valstiybinés švietimo..., 2006) revealed a progress in the college education sector, which is seen as a natural developmental process mostly initiated by the academic community itself. Firstly, the availability of various forms and modes of studies (individual study programmes, non-consecutive and bridging studies, extramural, evening and distance studies) emphasising the importance of continuous learning. Implementation of distance learning is also underlined in the Programme of Implementation of the Provisions of the National Education Strategy 2003–2012 (Dél vakstybinés švietimo..., 2005).

The programme Information Technologies for Science and Studies (2001–2006) was launched in accordance with the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of RL No. 30 January 2001; No. 115. (The Programme Information ..., 2001). The programme consists of three closely interrelated components: Lithuanian Scientific and Study Information System (LieMSIS), the Lithuanian Distance Learning Network (LieDM) and the Lithuanian Academic Libraries Network (LABT). This programme significantly contributed to development of distance studies in higher education institutions and provided a starting point for organisation of distance professional development courses for society. In 2005 the Strategy for Development of Distance Learning Network was approved, which emphasised collaboration and links of various institutions at regional, national or European level, strengthening of collaboration between public and private sector. The Order of the Minister of Education and Science of RL No. ISAK-791 of 27 April 2007 approved the Programme of Lithuanian Virtual University for 2007–2012 (Lietuvos virtualaus..., 2007). Employing the accumulated experience and the infrastructure of information technologies, it aimed to develop Lithuanian Virtual University by joint effort of institutions, which would function following the network model and assist institutions in their development of activities in the virtual space providing services to people of Lithuania and competing in the world markets.

However, implementation of distance studies in the sub-system of higher education has not been widely and specifically legally regulated. The Description of Full-time and Part-time Studies approved by Order No.ISAK-1026 of 15 May 2009 (The Description..., 2009) provide only a mere reference
that “Contact work may be implemented remotely”. Thus, higher education institutions define the procedure of distance studies by their internal documents that regulate the study process.

**Practical aspects of organisation of distance studies in colleges.** To identify the extent to which information on opportunities of distance studies in colleges is accessible to society, how such studies are implemented, what is their focus, the internet websites of college higher education institutions were analysed. It should be emphasised that a wide variety of courses and seminars are offered in all state colleges developing the paradigm of life-long learning, creating conditions for working people to acquire needed knowledge, to improve or change the obtained professional qualification, actively involving in retraining of the unemployed, enabling specialists to retain competitiveness in the labour market, etc. However, if all the state colleges announce the information about the organised courses to society, no such information is available on the websites of four private colleges and it may be concluded that such services are not provided.

The results acquired after the analysis of the internet websites of colleges may be divided into four groups.

1. **Provision of services to society using various forms of distance learning.** Clear and easily accessible information oriented to society in the region is announced only on the website of one state regional college (out of 13 state colleges): it is announced that professional development services are provided in this institution and that learning material has been specially prepared for courses. Distance Studies Centre is set up in the institution "to expand collaboration of higher education schools in the sphere of studies and to create the system of distance learning in Lithuania that is based on newest technical equipment of telecommunications, allows to use the most modern teaching/learning technologies and integrates Lithuanian citizens into information society". In the college students have access to virtual learning environment (open source learning platform Moodle), video conferences are organised using special equipment; various events for society (conferences, seminars, meetings) are broadcast through network of video conferences; records may be viewed at convenient time using Video Conference Support System (ViPS). The website also informs that distance studies have been implemented in the college since 1999, when a classroom of distance learning as well as Distance Studies Centre were set up in the college implementing the project “Development of Distance Teaching in Lithuania (LieDM-2)”.

It should be pointed out that different results were obtained after analysis of websites of private colleges: the number of private colleges, which implement distance studies, is bigger compared to state ones. Three largest private colleges, which strongly and to big extent involve in distance studies, perceive that only systemic and persistent work may bring desired results. Therefore, separate units, which are in charge of organisation, coordination and development of distance studies, are established in the colleges. Thus, professional development courses and consultations are also offered as distance services. It should be emphasised that one of all the colleges in Lithuania, ensures access even to the requirements for material of distance studies are, i.e., for their structure and content.

2. **Planned development of distance services to society.** Two regional colleges that are distant from the capital of the country have established separate centres, which organise and coordinate distance studies in the intuition and the region. Though the website of one of the colleges contains the following information that "currently the services are provided in two forms: real-time video conferences are held and distance courses in virtual environment are provided", further information is limited to various non-distance courses. It is important to emphasise that presenting their missions, both colleges announce their aims to strengthen their link with business companies, to become the centre of attraction in the region providing services of distance learning to society. Thus, regional colleges understand the benefit of distance studies ensuring implementation of lifelong learning conception. Students of these colleges have access to virtual learning environment Moodle and video lectures or even to use system of team work (First Class).

3. **Integration of distance learning into the traditional process of education.** Though seven state and five private colleges declare that they aim to integrate distance teaching into the system of traditional teaching, no units, which are in charge of centralised coordination of distance studies, have been set up and this process is integrated into activities of other units (research, studies, IT, etc.) Students have
access to virtual learning environment Moodle; in several colleges information is announced about opportunities to use visual video conferences. This system may be used not only for lectures but also for conferences, meetings, student counselling, oral accounting, presentations, etc and may provide a record an evidence of implemented activities. Training courses for society are organised by specially established units/centres or by responsible people in faculties.

4. Distance studies are not organised. Having discussed all the aforesaid groups of colleges, three specialised state and two private colleges (where specialised, practical study programmes are offered) should be singled out as they do not provide any information about accessibility of virtual learning environment to students. Moodle may be used in one of the specialised colleges, but learning environment itself has to be developed by teachers themselves. Such passive attitude may have been conditioned by the opinion of college administration and teachers that it is difficult to organise studies in the study field of technologies.

Analysing the data of survey, it can be stated that the students of the colleges, which provided data, may choose separate distance study subjects in their study programme, which allows to conclude that mainly blended studies are organised (blended studies refer to the mode of learning, when study material is delivered or contact work between students and teachers is implemented at least in part through distance means). Four colleges, which may be considered leaders in this sphere, are singled out as they state that organise distance studies and provide students with a possibility of studying the whole study programme. These data validate with the ones acquired analysing the internet websites of colleges.

The results of the survey reveal that students’ attitude towards distance studies is positive (five state and three private colleges; in the rest of the colleges it is partially positive). According to V. Navickienė (2011), establishment of conditions for distance learning is an important criterion describing innovativeness of colleges (55.5% - highly important 41.2% - rather important; the sample: 397 students from various regional colleges). Establishing statistically significant values, only one significant difference was observed between opinions about distance services in colleges of the respondents from private and state colleges: created conditions for distance learning are highly important to 68.3% and rather important to 27.6% of the respondents from private colleges and this is highly important only to 50.3% (rather important – 46.7%) of the respondents from state colleges. Therefore, it can be concluded that distance learning is still an innovation to the respondents. However, the students, who have chosen private colleges probably due to more flexible conditions of studies, have to combine studies and work and this form of learning may be of importance to them.

Despite the clearly expressed demand for distance studies, the responses provided by the respondents indicate different reasons, which impede development of distance studies: firstly, it is related to specifics of study programmes. A number of the respondents think that study subjects in the area of technologies, biomedical or physical sciences are not adaptable to distance studies because of practical works and specifics of teaching tools (“Laboratory works are performed only in special laboratories, whereas professional training is carried out in workplaces, etc.”). Secondly, insufficiently developed administrative staff members'/teachers’ competences of distance studies organisation and management are observed; teachers are not able to use the full potential of virtual environments tailoring them to meet the needs of students of distance/blended studies. Thirdly, teachers’ information communication technologies skills are underdeveloped. Fourth obstacle is lack of students’ skills and motivation (“Strong motivation is needed to do everything on your own." "Students do not follow timetables and want to participate, when it is convenient to them but not when it is indicated by teachers."). Fifthly, the works and responsibilities are improperly distributed. The analysis of the research data disclosed that the biggest load of work is ascribed to a teacher organising and implementing the whole of the study process (data from three private and four state colleges). In two private and one state college the volume of work is distributed between the Distance Studies Centre and a teacher and the Centre even assumes the bigger proportion of workload. Such data confirm the aforesaid statements that work is more fluent and efficient when a teacher may rely on professional and ongoing assistance. Sixthly, private colleges face problems with accounting of workload: “Teachers in private colleges are usually part-time staff members and such work has to be paid additionally”. Seventhly, the conducted work is not remunerated ("Since preparation of the module of distance studies is unpaid work, and it requires a
lot of effort, teachers are not interested in it. Elderly teachers are not eager to involve in development of such studies.")

More than half of the respondents agree that a lot of study subjects may be learn remotely but additional work of teachers and abilities to organise such studies employing all the possibilities of virtual environments are needed ("There exists a wide choice of IT tools, with the help of which all the activities in the classroom may be implemented remotely, including laboratory works. In fact, it may be complicated, expensive and inconvenient but it is possible." "Problems occur with study subjects of arts, which may also be taught as distance ones. However, a teacher should allocate a lot of time recording video lessons as well as work individually organising seminars as video conferences or employing other internet tools.").

Despite emerging problems or failures, the respondents provided the following insights about distance studies:

- better accessibility of study materials and saving of time;
- increase in variety of study forms and methods;
- possibility of organising and assurance of self-dependent work ("The decreasing volume of contact work and increasing volume of self-dependent work make blended learning or distance studies inevitable");
- demand is reflected in the increasing percentage of students, who ask about availability of distant studies and possibilities of active use of virtual learning environment ("I have never heard that anyone would have rejected such studies. Most frequently students themselves ask for such an opportunity and point out that it is convenient for them." "The surveys carried out twice a year reveal students' satisfaction with distance studies because more than 50% of them live abroad." "Students are used to social networks and to communication through them; therefore, such studies are quite natural to them").

One of the answers of the respondents presents a very comprehensive and precise explanation of benefit of distance studies as well as a direction for their possible development: "Pursuing better integration of distance teaching/learning and increase in the quality of teaching, it is necessary to promote collaboration of teachers, colleges and universities, to develop and share the created courses to provide students with more accessible learning material. Teachers should envisage not only additional work in the use of virtual study environment but also the benefit they actually get (they learn to apply latest technologies, have permanent storage for learning material and have access to it anytime and anywhere, can show recoded lectures or deliver them as video conferences). It would be perfect if as many as possible teachers could take part in development of MOOC courses. We are glad that this process has started."

Analysing the forms of distance learning applied in colleges, it should be emphasised that this initiative is strictly supported by administration only in two state and three private colleges, where teachers are obliged to place the goals, objectives and assessment criteria of study subjects in the virtual environment in the beginning of each semester. Only in one state college filmed materials of each lecture are available online. In one state and one private college no requirements are imposed on distance study environment and material – this is used only on initiative of teachers themselves. Referring to distance courses organised to society, only one state college organises such courses and points out that they are more popular than usual (the acquired results validate with the results of the analysis of internet websites). One private college has plans to launch such courses in the nearest future. According to the opinion of the respondents from one state and two private colleges, there is no demand for distance courses. All the other colleges have chosen organising of courses in traditional form. On the basis of the research conducted by V. Navickienė (2011), it can be stated that courses offered by colleges are relevant and necessary to employers but the academic community of the college has to allocate time and efforts to attract society members to them. This is particularly important for colleges of biggest cities because regional colleges, being only institutions of this type in the region, establish closer collaboration with social stakeholders and other labour market institutions. It is obvious that training courses organised by academic community members of regional colleges are
known and necessary for employers, whereas there is no point in organising these activities in colleges in big cities or it has to be done very insistently or investing a lot into system of marketing.

Thus, the conducted analysis of the internet websites and the questionnaire survey disclosed that state and private colleges make attempts to improve accessibility of college higher education implementing distance studies, though other aspects for improvement may also foreseen.

Conclusions

The proposed distance studies and various e-learning forms (video conferences, Video Conference Support System, team work system FirstClass, MOOC courses, etc.) improve accessibility of college higher education studies to students and other individuals, who have ambitions to develop professionally or to get retrained and to remain competitive in the labour market. Such studies most frequently are necessary to working people, individuals living abroad or part-time students because they provide with a possibility of planning own time, combining of work and studies, choosing appropriate material, learning pace and place. Though college study programmes are more targeted at practical studies but employing opportunities of virtual environments, forms of e-learning and improving teachers’ competences it is really possible to implement distance studies.

Aiming to introduce distance studies as widely as possible, support from administration of higher education school, establishment of goals as well as centres/units, which provide constant administrative, methodological and academic support to students and teachers developing and using virtual learning environments, various e-learning forms should be ensured. The acquired research data show that colleges, which have separate units in charge of planning, coordination, implementation and development of activities of distance studies, have achieved best results. It should be emphasised that emerging problems are solved much faster and more flexibly when close collaboration of centre/division of distance studies with teachers and college administration is ensured.

Generalising the research results it can be stated that college higher education institutions underemploy advantages of distance studies providing various services to society. Institutions are more oriented towards students but numerous scientific studies reveal that professional development seminars and courses as well as other activities are attractive and acceptable to society (employers, employees, unemployed, school learners). Therefore, colleges should invest more effort and search for ways how to strengthen the link with society carrying out the aforesaid activities.

Bibliography


