INFORMATION ABOUT ELEARNING STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LITHUANIA IN THE CONTEXT OF ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

dr. Marija Stonkienė
Vilnius University, Faculty of Communication
Department of Information and Communication
E-mail: marija.stonkiene@kf.vu.lt

Abstract. This paper represents discussion and research of information about eLearning opportunities in Lithuania as playing a crucial role in ensuring accessibility to higher education. Research aim is to analyze Open Information Counselling and Guidance System (AIKOS) and Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) websites for the provided information about distance learning possibilities in first-cycle studies (including Integrated studies) in Lithuania. Results of the performed analysis of specific educational websites highlighted the problem about the lack of information about the first-cycle and Integrated studies based on eLearning in higher education institutions in Lithuania: such information is not provided on Open Information Counselling and Guidance System (AIKOS) website while Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) presents insufficient information and leaves this function on higher education institutions responsibility. During the admission processes in 2013 performed by Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures only two state-run higher education universities (International Business School at Vilnius University and Vilnius Gediminas Technical University) offered first-cycle study programs based on eLearning and only 8 different first-cycle study programs based on eLearning (one study program in full-time and seven of them in part-time mode) were offered. That is less than 1 percentage of all first-cycle and Integrated study programs offered by higher education institutions during the admission in 2013. Research showed that higher education institutions, i.e. colleges do not provide any kind of information about the usage of information and communication technologies (virtual learning environments) in study processes even if they are used as supporting implements in teaching and learning processes (i.e. blended learning). Moreover education statistics provides us with the information that in Lithuania there is a great need and potential for online courses, blended learning and even eLearning opportunities.

Keywords: "social dimension" of higher education, information and communication technologies ensuring accessibility to higher education, distance learning (eLearning), information about study programs based on eLearning. AIKOS, LAMA BPO.

Introduction

When analyzing higher education policy L. Bell and H. Stevenson emphasize that “education policy has always been about much more than economic policy, it is social policy too” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006) and according to experts social functions of higher education policy are linked not only with welfare of the general public but with social cohesion also. Therefore it supports emphasis on social dimension of higher education that generally is associated with justice in higher education and is known by number of different terms: social equity, equality in higher education (AM, HE), equal opportunities, equal access on ability to access higher education. In European political documents social economy circumstances...
related to higher education are defined with term *social dimension*. The crucial role of social dimension of higher education is to ensure equal opportunities to all citizens for access to higher education irrespective to their socio-economic background or other socio-economic circumstances, as well as to ensure they would be able to acquire and develop high level skills and competencies and use them effectively. Social dimension in higher education is directly related to higher education availability as its aim is to ensure social justice (to challenge inequalities and to prevent the marginalization of minority cultural) that every individual from different types of social groups would be able to access higher education. Social dimension is conceived as a process that includes overall aims and range of actions whereas the aim is perceived as education availability or so-called social justice (equality in higher education) and the range of actions is perceived as social economic environment that includes activities (measures) and specificity of methods.

Higher education availability is conceived as multiple incentives and conditions that are determined by access to education in higher education institutions, efficacy and quality in studies and also learning as well as achieved significant study results on individual and social basis and their use as a whole.

According to H. B. Long and R. Hiemstra higher education is not only social and cultural element it is political and economic element also therefore higher education aims should be discussed and considered in social, economic and political contexts (Long, Hiemstra, 1990). Political situations, economical circumstances and alterations in social policy cause changes in higher education. P. G. Altbach, L.Reisberg and L. E. Rumbley when discussing forces that affect higher education system emphasize that higher education is shaped not only by growing competition in higher education field, globalization challenges, massification and universalization processes in higher education, new teaching methodologies and requirements for quality assurance, shifting funding structures (financing schemes) of higher education, framework of academic profession (diversification and specialization, activities and roles) and research areas but it is also shaped by information and communication technology which penetrates into higher education (e.g. electronic publication of scientific journals, technologies usage in teaching and learning processes etc.) (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2009).

In agenda for the modernization of European higher education “Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernization of Europe's higher education systems” it is pointed out that teaching and learning processes based on information and communication technologies are essential to ensure accessibility to higher education. In updated agenda for the modernization of European higher education it is proposed to place greater emphasis on applying new trends in teaching and learning processes to: encourage a greater variety of study modes (e.g. part-time, distance and modular learning, continuing education for adult returners and others already in the labor market), more effective and personalized
learning experiences (i.e. exploit the potential of information and communication technologies, eLearning and blended learning, increase the use of virtual learning platforms) (Communication from The Commission to The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions, 2011, page 7). This document also highlights the fact that information and communication technologies result a significant changes in business models of higher education institutions, completely new audiences will be introduced to a higher education field (e.g. individuals following one single course but not a complete programme; different age ranges etc.), and for new services (e.g. assessment; certification etc.). It will be pressure on higher education institutions to rethink their responsibilities to public also (ibidem). New educational trends in teaching and learning processes that attract new learners are known as Open Educational Resources (OER) and, in particular Open Courseware (OCW) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). With a view to increase the quality of study content it is expected that these new trends in education will not only internationalize curricula but incentive some changes in cost structures of higher education institutions and engage them to pave the way in worldwide partnerships (ibidem). It is noted that information and communication technologies are playing a crucial role in the modernization of higher education especially by creating conditions for accessibility to higher education, and ensuring effective and high quality studies. In “Council conclusions on the modernization of higher education” (2011/C 372/09) attention is drawn to the importance of providing information on educational opportunities. For seeking to increase accessibility to higher education information about studies based on information and communication technologies is vitally important because this type of information lets individuals choose suitable studies with either flexible timetables or flexible learning paths. Therefore in the context of ensuring and improving accessibility to higher education information can play a fundamental role especially about first-cycle studies that are implemented with the support through information and communication technologies, virtual learning environments (e.g. eLearning; hereinafter the term “eLearning” will be used as it is used in Lithuania political documents and also is coherent and consistent with existing public speaking practices in Lithuania). This kind of information primarily is searched on the Internet and higher education institutions websites.

The aim of this paper is to identify whether the information about eLearning studies is available on Lithuanian websites that are presenting information about higher education situation in Lithuania and if the eLearning possibilities are offered in higher or universities studies. This paper also covers analyze of information about higher education studies on specialized websites that are executed under public projects such as Lithuanian eLearning System (EMSaS) and Development of Lithuanian eLearning infrastructure (LieDM).
In this study the following objective was posed: to analyze both Open Information Counselling and Guidance System (AIKOS) and Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) websites for the provided information about eLearning possibilities in first-cycle studies (including Integrated studies) in Lithuania. Analyzed information covers study programs that were offered by higher education institutions in Lithuania during the admission processes in 2013.

The present study is based on qualitative content analysis of websites, abstraction, analogy, generalization, deduction and synthesis methods.

**Information about eLearning in Lithuanian higher education institutions: AIKOS case**

In Lithuania to ensure availability and accessibility to higher education by using information and communication technologies the infrastructure is developed with the aim to establish Lithuanian Distance Education Network (LieDM, http://www.stat.gov.lt/lt/pages/view/?id=2505) and to ensure open access to scientific publications. Lithuanian Distance Education Network (LieDM) developed under the programme “Lithuanian Virtual University 2007 - 2012 (LVU)” approved by the resolution of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania No. ISAK-791, issued on 27 April 2007. The programme consists of four tasks: to foster eLearning processes in virtual environment (EMSaS); to develop Lithuania eLearning infrastructure (LieDM); to develop integrated Lithuanian science and study information space (LABT); to develop Lithuanian science and study planning, management and self-service infrastructure (LieMSIS). Lithuanian Distance Education Network (LieDM) provides Lithuanian higher education institutions with possibilities to use information and communication technologies (i.e. virtual learning environments) in higher education (study processes).

On the basis of the detailed information obtained from AIKOS in Lithuania in 2013 there are 24 universities of which 14 of them are state-run universities and 10 non-state-run universities and also 24 colleges that 13 of them are state-run and 11 non-state-run. In colleges there are 473 study programs overall while in universities there are 1584 of them (597 undergraduate (Bachelor) study programs, 17 – Integrated, 16 Non degree studies (excluding residency), 761 graduate (Master) study programs and 193 postgraduate (residency) study programs ). While analyzing statistical data it is noted that the use of information and communication technologies in study processes has grown particularly in colleges (in 2005-2006 there were 18 online courses, in 2009-2010 the number has growth up to 156 and in 2012 there were 212 online courses) while in universities this number has decreased by 2.7 times (from 2622 to 960 online courses, in 2010-2011 the number increased slightly by 103 online courses) (Švietimas 2011, 2012).
According to the information provided by AIKOS there are 1054 first-cycle study programs in Lithuania at this time: 593 undergraduate study programs in universities, 461 – in colleges and 18 integrated study programs in universities (2013 data). All information about study programs provided on AIKOS website is represented structured form with following attributes: state code, new state code, name of a study program, institution, qualification granted, credits (ECTS), mode of studies (full-time, part-time), duration of study program in years (information is only provided about students that are admitted up to 2009, relevant information about length of study program is not provided anymore), and number of students. There is no information provided about study programs with the eLearning possibilities. It should be noted that information available on AIKOS website is addressed to a wide audience: individuals who are seeking for higher education in universities or colleges, those who are planning to gain vocational (professional) education or those who are just starting basic education stage (pre-primary, primary and secondary education). On the website the main aim of AIKOS is highlighted: “to provide qualitative information on the possibilities of distant learning, and to inform and consult a wide range of users irrespective of their age<…>” (Open Information Counselling and Guidance System, 2013).

Therefore information on AIKOS website is provided in structured blocks according to the possible users groups, 14 different groups are characterized overall but if it would be pointed out to the groups for which information about higher education and its accessibility is prioritized only 5 of them remains: entrants, persons who are enhancing qualification, disabled people, immigrants and prisoners. When analyzing information provided to specific groups of users it was noted that information about higher education study processes and study programs is only available for the entrants group. For disabled people information about accessibility to higher education is published but unfortunately it is related only with vocational education and availability to the financial and social support (information block Privilege, Social safeguards, Support) and no information about studies with eLearning possibilities and/or study environment adapted for them. Therefore the remark can be made that information about accessibility to higher education on AIKOS is very fragmented regardless of focused users groups they have made. Information that could be relevant to one or another group is not fully provided or not provided at all, e.g. for disabled people it is crucial information about infrastructure of higher education institution as well as information about flexible timetables and/or flexible learning paths etc. While presenting study programs quite detailed information is provided: state code (also a new state code), ISCED code, level and/or type, study area (also a new study area according to updated classifier), study field (also a new study field according to updated classifier), field and sub-field of education, information about accreditation (date of accreditation, number of decree, type of accreditation and term of the repeated accreditation),
qualification degree granted, admission year, mode of studies, and number of admitted students. After all on AIKOS website there is no information about eLearning opportunities presented.

**Information about eLearning in Lithuanian higher education institutions: LAMA BPO case**

When speaking about eLearning as one of the implements to enhance accessibility to higher education it is also important to analyze information that is available on Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) website especially when admission processes are held. In Lithuania admission processes for the first-cycle studies are organized and coordinated by one Association while using one admission system on the country level. Admission is executed (which is based on principle by ranking entrants) by the same Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) that was approved by the resolution of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. It should be noted that admission to the first-cycle studies is maintained by the same principles whether entrants are applying to state-funded studies or not. Since 2010 admission processes were transferred onto the Internet: entrants’ admission applications are filled and sent only online, admission processes are held at the same time for both universities and colleges. All data from entrants’ certificates that is crucial for admission is gained from specialized databases automatically with no interposition of entrants.

In contrast to the AIKOS website information about eLearning in first-cycle and Integrated study programs is available on LAMA BPO website. According to this source eLearning is only available in part-time studies (*Int –part-time distance studies*). However it not possible to search information about study programs by this criteria. During the admission processes in 2013 first-cycle and integrated study programs both in universities and colleges are descriptive by these attributes: state code of study program, state code which is indicated in application, institution, and name of a study program, specialization or minor study field (fields), city (in which study program is held), mode of studies (full-time or part-time), duration (in years usually) and also additional information about the study program if needed. Opportunities in eLearning are provided as additional information.

According to LAMA BPO data there were 9 students admitted to first-cycle studies with eLearning opportunities in 2013. Only two state-run higher education institutions offered such opportunity: International Business School at Vilnius University (VU IBS) and Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VGTU). These institutions offered 8 different distance study programs: 7 study programs in part-time study mode (duration of the study program is 6 years) and 1 in full-time (duration of the study...
program is 3.5 years). It is approximately 1.4 percentage of all first-cycle and integrated study programs offered by higher education institutions during the admission in 2013.

1 Table. First-cycle and Integrated distance study programs offered during Admission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study program(specialization)</th>
<th>State code</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Duration (in years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International business</td>
<td>612N12001</td>
<td>VU IBS</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business information systems</td>
<td>612J20003</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical engineering: Machinery Design</td>
<td>612H33001</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Services Systems</td>
<td>612H24002</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Engineering: Building Construction and Design Management</td>
<td>612H21002</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Technologies and Management: Construction Economics and Business Construction Technologies and Management</td>
<td>612J80001</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunication Engineering: Telecommunication Management</td>
<td>612H64002</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport Engineering: Automotive and Equipment</td>
<td>612E20002</td>
<td>VGTU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Admission to the first-cycle and Integrated study programs in higher education institutions in Lithuania in 2013. (http://www.lamabpo.lt/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Program%C5%B3%20s%C4%85ra%C5%A1as%20universitetams1.pdf)

When analyzing information about eLearning opportunities in higher education it is noted that both VU IBS and VGTU provides information very differently. VU IBS shares the fact that particular study program is offered as eLearning while VGTU gives more detailed information about lectures and meetings timetable and organization of the whole study process (lectures are held from 8.30 to 21.30 in the first six days of first month every semester and later study process transfers to the virtual learning environment).

Since information about study programs in Lithuanian higher education institutions (both universities and colleges) is provided similarly on LAMA BPO website therefore all study programs run in colleges are presented under the same attributes (mentioned above) as well as the information about eLearning opportunities. On LAMA BPO website it is published that there is only 1 first-cycle study program in college (University of Applied Science (VKK)) that part of it is based on eLearning. That is Business management study program (available specializations: Trade Business Management, Business Administration and E-business Management), state code is 653N20011, available in full-time (duration is 3 years) and part-time (duration is 4 years).
Performed analysis of the information provided on LAMA BPO website draws attention to the fact that very small number of first-cycle and Integrated study programs based on eLearning (or even blended learning) is offered in Lithuanian higher education institutions. Only two state-run universities offered that type of studies and none by colleges. As results show there is less than 1 percentage (0.8%) distance based learning studies of all first-cycle and Integrated study programs available out there in Lithuanian higher education institutions. Therefore significant concerns arise when considering the fact that in Lithuania the government pays huge attention to the eLearning infrastructure and its development with the provision of funding mechanisms and eLearning trends is starting to evolve in education fields (in regard of the numbers of prepared eLearning courses in higher education institutions). On the other hand it can be assumed that due to specific higher education characteristics in Lithuania eLearning is taking the shape of blended learning, i.e. it complements traditional teaching and learning methods with more effective and personalized (individualized) learning arrangements also with a greater variety of study modes and interactivity opportunities. It is also important to indicate the fact that there are a great number of prepared online courses in higher education institutions but only one institution provides information about eLearning possibilities.

According to the analysis results there are significant reasons to concern about the lack of information provided by AIKOS and LAMA BPO on eLearning possibilities in first-cycle and Integrated studies in higher education institutions. On AIKOS website such information is not available at all. On LAMA BPO website eLearning possibilities in first-cycle and Integrated studies in higher education are presented but this type of information is only at higher education institutions disposal.

Conclusions

Information about variety of educational opportunities is playing a crucial role in ensuring accessibility to a higher education. Therefore providing information about opportunities in higher education institutions for individuals from different types of social groups helps to build and develop higher education availability. Information and communication technologies used in study processes also come to the assistance of ensuring and enhancing accessibility to a higher education. Moreover effective use of technologies in studies is directly related to dissemination of information, a process through which a wide range of users is provided with information about opportunities in higher education studies for individuals from different types of social groups.

Results of the performed analysis of specific educational websites highlighted the problem about the lack of information about the usage of information and communication technologies in first-cycle and Integrated studies in higher education institutions in Lithuania. ELearning opportunities in higher education...
education in Lithuania are presented on Open Information Counselling and Guidance System (AIKOS) and Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) websites but in a very fragmented way. Therefore society is not fully aware about eLearning opportunities and to ensure accessibility to a higher education for a wider range of individuals more detailed information is necessary.

Open Information Counselling and Guidance System (AIKOS) do not provide any kind of information about eLearning opportunities in first-cycle and Integrated studies in higher education institutions in Lithuania. Information on AIKOS website is structured into the specific topic blocks that are directly related to the types of individual groups that information is presented for, i.e. different types of social groups that are characterized. Nevertheless information provided on the website about the accessibility to higher education for different types of social groups is poorly and insufficient; there is no information about flexibility in learning paths and studies. Results of the performed analysis shows a lack of attention from the Ministry of Education's for communication of distance learning.

On the contrary to the AIKOS website Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures (LAMA BPO) provides with the information about eLearning possibilities in first-cycle and Integrated studies in higher education institutions (both universities and colleges) for which the admission was held in 2013. However this type of information still is left on higher education institutions responsibility.

Attention needs to be paid to the fact that there are only few first-cycle and Integrated study programs based on eLearning especially if considering the fact that Lithuania government pays a huge attention to the usage of information and communication technologies in study processes with provision of specific funding mechanisms and supplies. During the admission processes in 2013 performed by Association of Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania to Organize and Coordinate Common Admission Procedures only two state-run higher education universities (International Business School at Vilnius University and Vilnius Gediminas Technical University) offered first-cycle study programs based on eLearning. It should be noted that none of all colleges in Lithuania offered this. During the admission in 2013 it was offered only 8 different first-cycle study programs based on eLearning (one study program in full-time and seven of them in part-time mode) and that is less than 1 percentage of all first-cycle and Integrated study programs offered by higher education institutions during the admission. Therefore it can be assumed that in higher education institutions in Lithuania eLearning is taking the shape of blended learning, i.e. it complements traditional teaching and learning methods with more effective and personalized (individualized) learning arrangements also with a greater variety of study modes and interactivity opportunities.
Research showed that higher education institutions, i.e. colleges do not provide any kind of information about the usage of information and communication technologies (virtual learning environments) in study processes even if they are used as supporting implements in teaching and learning processes (i.e. blended learning). Moreover education statistics provides us with the information that in Lithuania there is a great need and potential for online courses, blended learning and even eLearning opportunities.

References


Švietimas 2011 (2012). Vilnius. ISSN 1392-978X.

Research sources:


Informavimas internete apie nuotolines studijų programas, teikiamas Lietuvos aukštosiose mokyklose aukštojo mokslo prieinamumo didinimo kontekste

dr. Marija Stonkienė

Straipsnyje pristatomas informavimo apie nuotolines studijas Lietuvoje kaip aukštojo mokslo prieinamumo didinimo priemonę valstybės lygiu tyrimas. Atlikiant šį tyrimą buvo analizuojama informaciją apie galimybes
studijuoti nuotoliniu būdu, pateikiama atviroje informavimo, konsultavimo ir orientavimo informacinėje sistemoje (AIKOS) ir Lietuvos aukštųjų mokyklų asociacijos bendrajam priėmimui organizuoti (LAMA BPO) tinklalapyje, organizuojant priėmimą į nacionalines aukštąsias mokyklas 2013 m. Atliktas tyrimas atkreipė dėmesį į nepakankamą informavimą apie Lietuvos aukštysto mokomojo nuotolinių būdu teikiamas pirmosios studijų pakopos ar vientisųjų studijų programas nacionalinėse aukštystose mokyklose: atviroje informavimo, konsultavimo ir orientavimo informacinėje sistemoje (AIKOS) tokia informacija neteikiam, Lietuvos aukštųjų mokyklių asociacijos bendrajam priėmimui organizuoti (LAMA BPO) tinklalapyje tokia informacija teikiam, tačiau jos teikimas palikta aukštųjų mokyklių dispozicijai. 2013 m. priėmimo studijų programas nuotoliniu būdu stūlė studijuoti tik dvi Lietuvos aukštystosios mokyklos (Vilniaus universiteto Tarptautinio verslo mokykla ir Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universitetas), buvo siūlomos nuotolinių būdu studijuoti 8 pirmosios studijų pakopų studijų programas (viena nuolatinių studijų programa ir 7 ištęstinių studijų programos), o tai yra kiek mažiau nei 1% 2013 m. pasiūlytų studijų programų. Lietuvos aukštosios mokyklos (išskyrus Vilniaus kooperacijos kolegiją) nepateikia informacijos apie informacijos ir komunikacijos technologijų (virtualių mokymosi aplinkų) naudojimą studijose (mišryų mokymąsi), nors švietimo statistiniai duomenys atskleidžia Lietuvoje esant tokį nuotolinio mokymo dalykų (modulių) teikimo potencialą. Atlikto tyrimo duomenys rodo nepakankamą LR Švietimo ir mokslo ministerijos dėmesį komunikacijai apie nuotolinių studijų glimybes nacionalinėse aukštystose mokyklose.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** socialinis aukštojo mokslo matmuo, informacijos ir ryšio technologijų naudojimas aukštojo mokslo prieinamumo didinimui, nuotolinės studijos (e.studijos), informavimas apie nuotolinių būdu teikiamas studijų programas, AIKOS, LAMA BPO.