



Assessment of the ongoing higher education reforms in Lithuania

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Ongoing higher education reform in Lithuania	4
University network optimisation in Lithuania	7
Conclusions.....	10
REFERENCES.....	12

INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the Lithuanian higher education reform that began in 2017. Although some private higher education institutions (HEIs) exist in Lithuania, the present reform process and this report mainly address public higher education in the country. The first section of the report briefly provides some background as to why the reforms were needed, and what problems of the higher education sector they seek to address. In addition, the first section outlines the main objectives and pillars of the ongoing higher education reforms. The second section of the report addresses the area of the reform in which most progress has been made over recent years: namely, Lithuania's 'University Network Optimisation Plan', a term that generally refers to ongoing university mergers. This section analyses the main objectives and principles behind the implementation of university network optimisation, and includes the main steps and stakeholders involved in the process. In addition, this section identifies key problems and challenges in relation to the actual implementation of university mergers in Lithuania. The third and final section of the report concludes by summarising the ongoing higher education reform in Lithuania, and providing the authors' assessment of its main strengths and weaknesses.

ONGOING HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN LITHUANIA

Lithuania's higher education system suffers from a number of structural weaknesses and problems that require complex policy interventions:

- For demographic reasons, there has been a steady decrease of **new students entering first-cycle higher education** institutions in Lithuania. It is estimated that in 2020 the number of students entering first-cycle higher education programmes will be half that seen in 2011. Between 2012 and 2017, some HEIs have already seen the number of students entering first-cycle higher education programmes decrease by more than 40% (University of Klaipėda), 50% (Lithuanian Educational University), or even more than 60% (University of Šiauliai). Moreover, in 2016 around one-third of university-level study programmes and one-quarter of college-level study programmes in Lithuania admitted 10 or fewer students.
- To attract more students and funding, **many HEIs in Lithuania admit students who are not ready for higher education**. At certain Lithuanian HEIs, more than 50% of students who were admitted in 2016 did not meet the minimum admission threshold¹ that was later proposed in 2018.
- Lithuania's higher education system also suffers from a **low quality of studies**: according to data from the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lith: *Studijų Kokybės Vertinimo Centras* [SKVC]), only 6% of higher education study programmes evaluated in Lithuania between 2010 and 2015 received the highest evaluation scores.

¹ Every high school graduate in Lithuania aiming to enter a higher education programme has a 'competitive score' – a grade which is calculated on the basis of the results of state leaving exams and other factors. Students are then admitted to study programmes on a competitive basis, depending on their competitive scores. In 2018 The Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, together with the Lithuanian Rectors' Conference, approved minimum competitiveness scores for universities and colleges, representing the minimum score a student must receive in order to be granted a place in a higher education programme at a university or college.

Assessment of the ongoing higher education reforms in Lithuania

- Many higher education study programmes in Lithuania also **do not correspond to the existing needs of the market**: only around six in 10 (58%) bachelor’s degree graduates in 2016 obtained jobs that required higher education qualifications²;
- **Financial remuneration of academic staff in Lithuania is among the lowest** in the EU: according to a 2016 study, the average salary of Lithuanian researchers was only one-quarter of the EU-27 average.³ In parallel, funding given to higher HEIs is used inefficiently – in 2016, some institutions spent around 30% of their annual budgets on administrative/infrastructure costs.⁴

To address these structural weaknesses in Lithuania’s higher education system, in 2017 the newly elected Government initiated a comprehensive package of higher education reforms, which are planned to be completed by 2020. The main purpose of these reforms is to improve the quality of the higher education system on multiple levels. As mentioned, although some private HEIs exist in Lithuania, the reform largely addresses the country’s public higher education sector. The ongoing higher education reforms comprise three main pillars⁵:

- Reform of the system of funding for higher education in Lithuania
- Reform of the quality assurance system for higher education
- Optimisation of Lithuania’s network of higher education institutions (HEIs)

Each of these pillars aims to make specific changes or to address problems within the Lithuanian higher education system.

Table 1: Higher education reforms in Lithuania (2017-2020).

Reform of higher education funding system	Reform of higher education quality assurance system	Optimisation of higher education institution (HEI) network
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introducing first-cycle studies without tuition fees - Financial support to students in order to reduce the numbers of working students - Introducing a system of human resource monitoring and forecasting - Higher education funding model based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing salaries of academic staff and researchers; investing in improving the qualifications of academic staff - Reorganising study programmes by shortening the duration of some first-cycle study programmes to three years and bringing study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing effectiveness, creating synergies and concentrating the potential of higher education institutions by merging some institutions together - Institutions will spend less on infrastructure/buildings maintenance. Surplus property of HEIs left after the optimisation/mergers

² Aukštojo Mokslo reforma [Higher Education Reform]. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20\(2\)\(1\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20(2)(1).pdf)

³ MOSTA (2016). ‘Lietuvos mokslo ir studijų būklės apžvalga’ [‘An overview of the state of education and science in Lithuania’]. Available at: https://mosta.lt/images/leidiniai/Lietuvos_mokslo_ir_studiju_bukle_2016.pdf

⁴ Aukštojo Mokslo reforma [Higher Education Reform]. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20\(2\)\(1\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20(2)(1).pdf)

⁵ As will be made evident later in the report, due to a lack of systemic and methodical actions to implement the first two pillars of the reform, in practice and in public debate, the higher education reform process in Lithuania has generally been associated with the third pillar, i.e. the optimisation of the HEI network.

Assessment of the ongoing higher education reforms in Lithuania

<p>on performance agreements: introducing a performance and results-oriented funding system according to key quality indicators</p>	<p>programmes closer to the needs of the market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Results-oriented higher education quality assurance system that measures student employment rates, student satisfaction rates and the correspondence of study programmes to professional and scientific standards 	<p>(around 50 million EUR) will be reinvested into improving education quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Around 150 million EUR from EU structural funds will be invested to develop human resources in the optimised HEIs
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Source: Aukštojo Mokslo reforma [Higher Education Reform]. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20\(2\)\(1\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Auk%C5%A1tojo%20mokslo%20reforma%202017-05-02%20(2)(1).pdf)

Since 2017, due to additional funding being allocated by the Government for this purpose, salaries for academic staff and researchers have increased. As a result, between 2017 and 2018 the average salary of academic staff working in public HEIs rose by almost 18%, the highest annual growth in salaries they had seen over the last four years. This salary increase among academic staff was also almost twice the average annual wage growth in Lithuania (9.6%) over the same period.⁶

As of May 2019, however, while the first steps had been taken to implement the third pillar of the reforms (optimization of the network of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Lithuania), the implementation of systemic reforms to Lithuania’s higher education funding and quality assurance systems remained at the planning stage. Funding and quality assurance within Lithuania’s public higher education sector remains largely regulated by the Law on Higher Education and Research, adopted in 2009.⁷ One of the main reasons behind the lack of progress in these areas was the absence of a systemic and methodical approach to implementation that led to reforms contradicting existing national laws or not being adopted in a timely manner. For example, the Lithuanian Constitutional Court struck down a 2018 amendment to the Higher Education Law that would have granted the Ministry of Education and Science the power of accreditation over fields of study. The court ruled that such plans by the Ministry must comply with existing law and be announced in a timely manner. According to the court’s ruling, none of these conditions were met since the amendment was against the provisions of the existing Higher Education Law, and the proposed timeline did not allow HEIs enough time to prepare.⁸ Another reason for the lack of progress was that ongoing reforms in other sectors of education had led to a relative lack of stability in the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports: at the end of 2018, the Lithuanian Minister of Education, Science and Sports resigned after to a string of strikes by school teachers.

⁶ MOSTA (2019). ‘Dėstytojų ir tyrėjų atlyginimų augimas dvigubai greitesnis nei šalies ūkyje’ [‘Growth in the salaries of lecturers and researchers is twice as fast as in the national economy’]. Available at: <https://mosta.lt/lt/naujienos/8-naujienos/532-destytoju-ir-tyrej-atlyginim-augimas-dvigubai-greitesnis-nei-salies-ukyje>

⁷ Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/548a2a30ead611e59b76f36d7fa634f8?jfwid=rp9xf47k7>

⁸ L. Leišytė et al. ‘Higher Education Reforms in Lithuania’ in Bruno Broucker et al. Higher Education System Reform: An International Comparison after Twenty Years of Bologna, Brill Sense, Leiden, 2019.

UNIVERSITY NETWORK OPTIMISATION IN LITHUANIA

In early 2017, the Prime Minister of Lithuania created a Working Group on university network optimisation. The Working Group, presided over by the Minister of Education, Science and Sports, consists of a number of stakeholders, including experts and representatives of universities, academic staff, students, business and other sectors of society. The working group prepared a 'Public University Network Optimisation Plan' identifying the key goals, actions and results of the optimisation process, as well as providing an analysis of the state of Lithuania's higher education system. The plan was adopted by the Lithuanian Parliament (the Seimas) on June 2017.⁹ Although the Government ultimately envisages the optimisation of all public HEIs in Lithuania, including colleges¹⁰, the adopted plan focused mainly on public universities and the prospect of their mergers.

According to the adopted plan, the **key strategic goals** to be achieved by the optimisation of the public university network in Lithuania were as follows:

- Lithuania's higher education system must engage in internationally competitive scientific research, studies and innovation activity of the highest quality.
- Lithuanian universities should become centres of attraction for international students and researchers.
- The country's most important research and study fields should attract a critical mass of international-level researchers. The job of researcher and university lecturer must become one of the most prestigious in Lithuania.
- Research and studies should correspond to the needs of society, the country and business, thereby contributing to their constant renewal and competitiveness, as well as to technical and social innovations.¹¹

The plan also outlined several key **guiding principles for the optimisation of the university network, against which the results of university mergers should be assessed:**

- **Quality:** Higher education and the qualifications awarded in the university sector should be based on international-level R&D activities. Reformed study programmes in higher education should be updated according to the principles of modern didactics, while the management of higher education institutions should be organised according to the recommendations of external evaluations.
- **Relevance:** The reformed network of higher education institutions should meet the country's need for sectoral qualifications and research, based on long-term demographic forecasts, analysis of the needs of the labour market, and long-term national development strategies.

⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, Nutarimas Dėl Valstybinių Universitetų Tinklo Optimizavimo Plano Patvirtinimo 2017 m. birželio 29 d. Nr. XIII-533, Vilnius, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/e668d82060b411e7a53b83ca0142260e?ifwid=-2y4hh2gps>.

¹⁰ Two types of higher education institution exist in Lithuania – colleges (kolegijos) and universities. Colleges focus on practical training for specific professions, and usually offer three-year study programmes. Universities, by contrast, provide more general education with a broader scope that includes 'soft' skills in addition to 'hard' competences directly relating to the field of study. University-level study programmes in Lithuania usually last four years.

¹¹ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, Nutarimas Dėl Valstybinių Universitetų Tinklo Optimizavimo Plano Patvirtinimo 2017 m. birželio 29 d. Nr. XIII-533 [Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania Resolution on Approval of the State University Network Optimization Plan, 2017 June 29 No. XIII-533], Vilnius. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/e668d82060b411e7a53b83ca0142260e?ifwid=-2y4hh2gps>.

- **Effectiveness:** The network of HEIs should avoid the duplication of studies and research at city, regional, sectoral and, where relevant, national level.
- **Concentration of potential:** The network of HEIs should bring together the resources of researchers, teachers and infrastructure to ensure the highest quality of studies and the international competitiveness of the country's research sector.
- **Financial feasibility:** The transformation of the network of higher education institutions should be linked to the available financial resources, and aligned with the investment programmes of the country, city, region and sector.

In practice, these principles meant that after the merger **three types of universities should remain in Lithuania:**

- Wide coverage (classical) universities
- Technical universities;
- Specialised (sectoral) academies

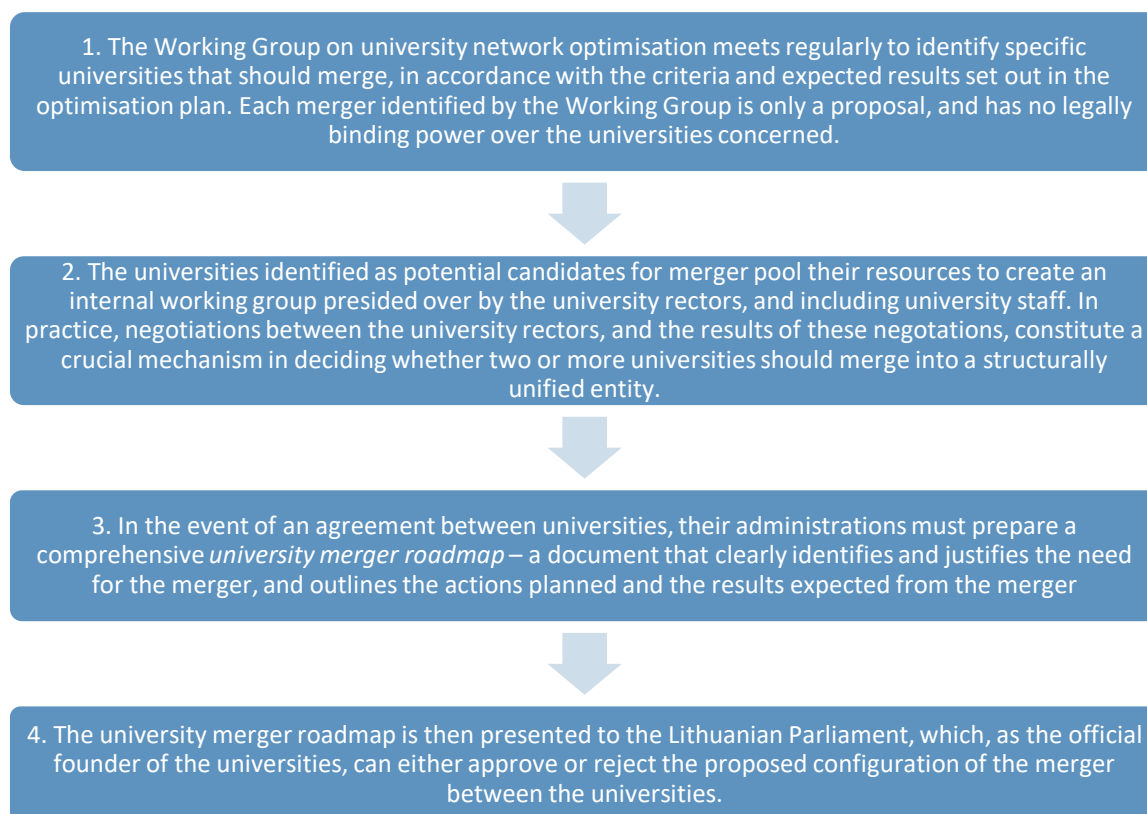
In addition, the working group that prepared the University Network Optimisation Plan also identified a number of other **specific actions that should be included in this reform:**

- Lithuania's two largest cities, Vilnius and Kaunas, were each planned to have one wide-range, classical research university. Each city could also have specialised technical, medical and arts universities.
- The other major cities in Lithuania, Klaipėda and Šiauliai, should maintain university-level research centres that correspond to regional needs, and which could be branches of other universities.
- Classical universities and the university-level research centre in Šiauliai (among other disciplines taught) should concentrate on the training of educators and teachers, as well as on scientific research in the area of education/teacher training.
- The Government of Lithuania should allocate special funds for the optimisation process (e.g. connecting the information systems of the universities that are merging, employment termination benefits for administrative staff who are made redundant, etc.).
- There should be no duplication of the same field of study in the same city.
- Initially, no branches were planned in Kaunas of the university of Vilnius, or of the university of Kaunas in Vilnius.

In addition to public universities, other key participants in the implementation of the University Network Optimisation Plan include the Government, the Ministry of Education and Science (now the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport), higher education quality assurance and monitoring institutions, as well as other stakeholders. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport was designated the overall coordinator of the optimisation process, while the Lithuanian Parliament (the Seimas) was designated the supervising body.

The overall process of university network optimization in Lithuania consist of the following steps:

Figure 1. The main steps involved in the university network optimisation process in Lithuania.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

As of May 2019, only two cases of university mergers have so far been approved by the Lithuanian Parliament:

- In 2018, Parliament approved the merger of three universities: Aleksandras Stulginskis University (a former agriculture university) and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (LEU) became branches of Vytautas Magnus University (VDU) in Kaunas. Aleksandras Stulginskis University became VDU's Academy of Agriculture, while the former LEU became the Academy of Education within VDU.
- Also in 2018, Parliament approved the merger of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VGTU) and Mykolas Romeris University (MRU).

In both cases, the main arguments for merging were the reduction of administrative costs and additional stimulus for interdisciplinary studies and synergy between different fields of study. For instance, it is expected that the merger of VDU and the former Aleksandras Stulginskis agricultural university will contribute to closer interaction between IT/engineering and agriculture, an area of collaboration that is increasingly relevant in an era in which agriculture is becoming more and more digitalised. It is expected that synergies between different fields will contribute to the development of emerging research areas in Lithuania, such as agro-innovations, climate change research, bioeconomy, artificial intelligence and so on.¹² Similarly, it is expected that the merger of VGTU and MRU will not only help to cut administrative costs, but will also contribute to closing the gap between research/technologies and society, government

¹² 'ASU, LEU ir VDU integracija' ['ASU, LEU and VMU integration']. Available at: <https://www.vdu.lt/lt/apie-vdu-kaune/asu-leu-ir-vdu-integracija/>

and markets, which would boost innovations in the country.¹³ As will be discussed below, however, the above mergers have in fact digressed somewhat from the original principles of the optimisation plan for the HEI network, and the criteria used to determine the configurations of these mergers are not entirely transparent or clear.

The implementation of the university optimisation process in Lithuania has experienced a number of difficulties:

- **The main source of challenges has been loose institutional coordination and the lack of legal and administrative instruments to implement the principles outlined in the University Network Optimisation Plan.** Although the University Network Optimisation Plan outlines specific aims, criteria and the results expected from university optimisation, the actual process of university mergers has often digressed from the original plan and its principles. For example, whereas it was considered inexpedient for universities based in Vilnius to establish branches in Kaunas, or for Kaunas-based universities to establish branches in Vilnius, the actual process of implementation has resulted in one of the universities in Vilnius (LEU) becoming a branch of a university based in Kaunas (VDU). Similarly, although one of the key principles of the original optimisation plan was the elimination of duplication of the same field of study within the same city, the recent merger of VGTU and MRU (a university offering programmes of study in law) did not eliminate the duplication of law studies in the capital city, Vilnius (the University of Vilnius also organises programmes of study in law).

Due to the lack of strong coordination and supervision from policy makers, as well as the lack of administrative/legal instruments for such coordination, the decisive catalyst in the outcomes of the university network optimisation process was negotiations and *ad hoc* agreements between the managements of the various HEIs. No instruments were applied to ensure that this process and its results complied with the key principles outlined in the optimisation plan. As a result of this loose coordination, the specific decisions behind university mergers often lack clarity or transparency, i.e. it may be unclear why a certain configuration of university merger was selected as opposed to other alternatives.

- Similarly, it is also not always clear what happens to the infrastructure (buildings, laboratories etc.) of the universities being merged. Although the Working Group on university network optimisation includes experts that provide recommendations in this area, **there is no general commonly agreed framework regulating the management of university property after the merger.**
- Another source of challenges to the implementation of the University Network Optimisation Plan was an **unstable political climate**: at the end 2018, the Lithuanian Minister of Education, Science and Sports resigned after a string of strikes by school teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

To address a number structural weaknesses and problems facing the country's higher education system, in 2017 the new Government of Lithuania initiated a comprehensive programme of reforms in higher education, which is planned to be completed by 2020. The main purpose of this reform process is to improve the quality of the higher education system at multiple levels. The reform consists of three main pillars: reform of the system of

¹³ 'Seimas nutarė: MRU bus prijungtas prie VGTU' ['Seimas decision: MRU will be connected to VGTU'], 2018 December 5. Available at: <https://www.vgtu.lt/vgtu-naujienu-portalas/naujienos/seimas-nutare-mru-bus-prijungtas-prie-vgtu/246059?nid=301717>

funding for higher education in Lithuania; reform of the system of quality assurance for higher education; and the optimisation of Lithuania's network of universities. As of May 2019, substantial progress had only been made only under the third pillar. A Working Group consisting of a number of experts and other stakeholders prepared a 'Public University Network Optimisation Plan' that identified the key goals, actions and results expected from the optimisation process, as well as providing an analysis of the state of Lithuania's higher education system. According to this plan, the main objective of university network optimisation in Lithuania was to improve the quality and international competitiveness of higher education in Lithuania, by eliminating the duplication of fields of study and institutional capacities, as well as by concentrating resources and infrastructure within the country's top HEIs. Some of the key actions in this optimisation process are university mergers, after which three types of universities in Lithuania should remain: wide-coverage (classical) universities, technical universities, and specialised (sectoral) academies.

According to the authors of this report, Lithuania's University Network Optimization Plan is highly relevant in addressing some of the key issues facing the national HE system, including fragmentation and a lack of resources, the low quality of some study programmes, a declining number of students, and the low salaries of researchers, academic staff and others. At the same time, the implementation of the university optimisation process in Lithuania has suffered from loose institutional coordination and a lack of legal and administrative instruments to implement the principles outlined in the University Network Optimisation Plan. As a result, the specific decisions behind university mergers often lack of clarity or transparency. Overall, the reform of higher education in Lithuania is highly relevant to increasing the overall quality of HE offered in the country, however the practical implementation of these reforms requires stronger coordination, in order to be transparent and to achieve the desired results. Progress and the continuity of higher education reforms in Lithuania will also depend on future political developments in the country – mainly the stability of the current Government and its programme over the coming years.

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