

Celebrating Lithuania's Millennium: Overview of the System of Education and Science

This year marks a significant and outstanding anniversary for Lithuania – the millennium of the first mention of the name of Lithuania. This anniversary makes it possible to review the system of education and science of our country, namely, its origin, history, and the current situation.

A formal educational system began to take shape in Lithuania at the end of the 14th century. The first known school – the Cathedral School of Vilnius – commenced its activities over 600 years ago (1397).

In the 16th century, the entire educational system was created in Lithuania: primary education, non-higher education, higher education. A network of congregational schools was rapidly expanding, and Catholic schools were being consolidated. In 1579, the Vilnius Jesuit College (currently Vilnius University) was reorganised and became an academy, it was granted all privileges and rights of European universities.

The year 1773 saw establishment of a joint Lithuanian and Polish state educational institution, namely, the Educational Commission, which was the first ministry of education (using the current terminology) in Europe. It was supposed to reform the entire system of education and halt the process of disintegration of the state. Following the collapse of the Union of Lithuania and Poland in 1795 and incorporation of Lithuania into the Russian Empire, the Educational Commission discontinued its activities.

During the period of declaration of independence and formation of the State of Lithuania (1918 – 1940) and based on the system of education and teaching tendencies of Western Europe, education followed the basic principles of the national culture. In 1922, the intelligentsia's effort resulted in establishment of a university in Kaunas. In addition to this university, 10 other higher education establishments were gradually founded in independent Lithuania.

The early flourishing of education was terminated by the Soviet occupation. Lithuania's education became a part of the Soviet educational system: not only the content, but also the form of education changed. The entire educational system was controlled in a centralised manner from Moscow. Development of science at higher education establishments was isolated from science in other countries and became dependent on ideology. Nevertheless, Soviet Lithuania preserved the right to conduct teaching at schools in the mother tongue.

Education

In 1988, a reform of Lithuania's education started. The principles of reformation of the Lithuanian educational system were declared to be national affinity, democracy, humanity and change. At the end of 1992, a concept of the reform covering the entire educational system of Lithuania was adopted. The reform is currently being carried out in compliance with the provisions of the State Strategy for Education 2003-2012 as approved in 2003 by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. The principal objective of education is to help every child to understand the world and become an independent, active and responsible person, to assist every adult in acquiring a qualification and maintaining it by means of life-long learning. This is made possible by the increasing variety of educational establishments. Non-State

educational establishments are set up alongside State ones, secular educational establishments – alongside the educational establishments representing various religious confessions, also new educational establishments of ethnic minorities; alternative educational methods are selected.

Until the present day, the legal basis of education has been updated, and a transition has been made to 12-year general education and two-stage higher education (Bachelor and Master studies). The unified Soviet educational programmes were replaced with a new curriculum providing greater freedom of choice for an individual learner.

In 2002, a procedure for financing general education schools was altered, and the so-called ‘pupil’s basket’ was introduced. In other words, a shift occurred from financing of class groups to allocation of funds to a single pupil. The ‘pupil’s basket’ is a targeted grant of the State for the purpose of a pupil’s education.

In improving the Lithuanian educational system, considerable attention is devoted to modernisation of learning, improvement of conditions of learning, and harmonisation of the system of education. The Ministry of Education and Science purchases and transfers to municipalities school vehicles, namely, yellow buses, which are intended for transportation of pupils from distant villages to schools, schools are being speedily provided with computers. Since 2001, millions of Litas have been allocated each year for renovation of general education schools. One third of the general education schools have already been renovated.

Higher education

Higher education is acquired by studying at higher education establishments, namely, universities and colleges.

Lithuania has 30 State higher education establishments (15 university higher education establishments and 15 colleges) as well as 19 non-State higher education establishments (7 university higher education establishments and 12 colleges), 17 State research institutes, 18 university research institutes, and 8 State science institutions.

Lithuania is participating in the establishment of the common European higher education area. The professional qualifications acquired in our country are recognised abroad. Over a thousand of students and lecturers leave abroad each year for studies or internships.

In April 2009, the Seimas passed a new Law on Science and Studies, which provides for a major reform of higher education. The main goal of the reform is quality of education. Students want to acquire a high-quality education without leaving Lithuania, businesses are in need of highly qualified specialists, higher education establishments and research institutes – professional scientists, and the public – a guaranteed and secure future.

A high quality of studies and science will be attained through an efficient funding and modern management. Upon completion of the reform, research will be financed on a competitive basis, and higher education – according to the principle of the ‘student’s basket’. The students who received best marks in their tertiary education graduation examinations will study free of charge at a higher education establishment of their choice, others will be granted access to studies upon creation of an efficient system of state-funded loans. Such a system of funding will introduce a fair and transparent competition in higher education, where success will directly depend on performance. The studies of over 11,000 first-year university students and over 10,000 first-year college students will be funded by the State this year.

Higher education establishments will compete not only for the 'student's basket', but also for good lecturers. The higher education establishments will be able to carry out an independent remuneration policy, and the State will not regulate the salaries of lecturers and scientists in a centralised manner, hence it will be possible to promote lecturers by paying higher salaries to them and providing them with improved social and other conditions.

The public requires higher education establishments to be dynamic, improvement-committed, and responsible for their activities. The establishments will have more freedom in managing property; they have been granted the right to independently plan their strategy of activities, to be more active in solving the issues of development, merger, renovation of laboratories and dormitories; the principles of a transparent responsibility and accountability to the public have also been stipulated. On the basis of experience of Western Europe, a new model of management of State colleges and universities will be introduced, where the most important strategic decisions are adopted by the councils consisting of the academic community and the broad public.

The science and studies reform aims at attaining an ambitious goal – the bringing forward of the country's economy.

Lithuania's long-term strategic documents stress the necessity of a closer interaction between science, studies and business. The year 2008 marked the beginning of establishment of five integrated centres of science, studies and business. The centres are expected to help to create in Lithuania internationally recognised nuclei of science, studies and knowledge economy and speed up the creation of knowledge society.