

Policy of higher education quality assurance: opportunities and barriers to the development of Liberal Education in Lithuania

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DOI:10.13165/VPA-18-17-2-10

Abstract. *In the European and Bologna process documents the main aim of higher education (HE) is the creation of an advanced, competitive and economically strong Europe. Educated people who are able to create personal and career professional success are especially important for seeking this aim. Liberal education is widely understood as intellectual and cognitive formation, therefore it is an essential condition to ensure the development of educated and successful individuals. But the base of liberal education development is the policy of quality assurance (QA) in the HE which at the same time is a priority and a source of trust for European HE. The empirical results of this research shows that problems of policy of the HE QA in Lithuania are related to the lack of focus on successfulness of the personal life and motivational incentives for students, focus on development of the general and entrepreneurial competences, ambition of the state to control students' flows, lack of rational and systematic planning of the state and problems concerned forecasting of changes in the labour market, and different perception of the concept of quality by stakeholders. The fact that there are problems and shortcomings in the field of policy of HE QA, there is a lack of research involving liberal education in conjunction with the HE QA – poses a risk for liberal education development and for the creation of an advanced competitive and economically strong Europe.*

Keywords: *higher education, quality assurance policy, liberal education.*

Raktažodžiai: *aukštasis mokslas, studijų kokybės užtikrinimo politika, liberalusis švietimas.*

Introduction

Documents of the European Commission and those of the Bologna Process (Europe 2020 2010; Bucharest Communiqué 2012; Yerevan Communiqué 2015) and research (Gižienė and Markauskienė 2012, p. 1142, 1147; Kohont and Nadoh Bergoč 2010, p. 14-23) define the main goal of the HE as creation of advanced, competitive and economically strong Europe. Implementation of this goal depends on progress and competitiveness of individual states of the continent, and educated people capable to create their successful personal life and professional career is the main factor when seeking for the aforementioned goal. The essential condition for assurance of development of educated and successful personalities is the liberal education (Corey 2013, p. 195-199; Lawler 2013, p. 226-228; Čiužas and Adaškevičienė 2006, p. 52-53). However, the basis for development of the liberal education is the policy for HE QA which at the same time is the main source for trust in European HE.

Stakeholders of the Lithuanian HE evaluate quality of HE ambiguously. Lecturers and administrative staff of universities and colleges consider quality of the HE as good, whereas only some employers state that the quality is sufficient. Moreover, employers are not satisfied with competences of students and graduates, and students themselves evaluate their lecturers and teaching satisfactorily (Kalinauskaitė and Pauliukaitė 2014). Furthermore, in Lithuania, there are other obstacles affecting HE QA, i.e. unfavourable demographic situation – decreasing population in the country, lack of students' motivation towards studying and lack of QA in the area of enrolment into universities and colleges – lack of methods for checking of motivation (Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania 2009; Kalinauskaitė and Pauliukaitė 2014, p. 146-150, 206) and mass HE (Kember et al. 2011, p. 210). Therefore, from the one hand, universities and colleges have to help students to obtain and develop necessary competences to ensure their employment, and on the other hand, universities and colleges have to educate a free individual providing him with the freedom of choice.

In terms of the research, which includes areas of liberal education in conjunction with the HE QA, they are few, especially in Lithuania. Hereby, the **problem issue** is being formed in the article – does the policy of HE QA create opportunities to develop the liberal education in the Lithuanian HE?

The subject of the research – suitability of the policy of HE QA for development of the liberal education in the Lithuanian HE.

The aim of the research is to evaluate suitability of the policy of HE QA for development of the liberal education in the Lithuanian HE.

Characteristics of the policy of HE QA and its meaning for development of the liberal education

Recently it has been focused on pursuance of socio-economic goals and progress of the continent. The HE is defined as an instrument purposed for seeking of

these goals; however, to achieve high outcomes, it is necessary to assure quality of the HE (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012; Yerevan Communiqué, 2015; Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, 2012). That is why there is a need to form an efficient national policy of HE QA, echoing European political agreements.

The Bologna Process documents (Bucharest Communiqué 2012; Yerevan Communiqué 2015) reflect political decisions to adapt knowledge and competences necessary for adaption in the modern labour market into the HE (Aznar et al. 2013, p. 18-20). Beside the task to increase employability of graduates, there is a goal to make the HE as an open process wherein students could develop their intellectual independence and self-confidence, innovative approach and personal responsibility - in other words, to develop the liberal education.

It is noted in various scientific works (Corey 2013, p. 195-199; Lawler 2013; Čiužas and Adaškevičienė 2006) that the accent of the liberal education is freedom of the person. However, interpretation of freedom of the person slightly differs in works of different scientists. When analysing meaning of the liberal education from philosophical approach, Corey (2013, p. 195-199) says that it means not just freedom, release of the human but rather intellectual freedom. The liberal education provides opportunity to look at old things and see them newly, from the other perspective. Lawler (2013, p. 226) highlights that the goal of the liberal education is self-knowledge with the aim to understand what you (want and) are supposed to do. Čiužas and Adaškevičienė (2006, p. 52-54), state that the content of the modern liberal education includes education of the citizen of the open society. Furthermore, liberal education is based on the provision that all the people are equal and entitled to the right to learn. From this point of view, democracy demands the provision of the same quality of education for all, since democracy is dependent on educated citizens. Liberal education means empowering a person to act and participate in his personal and social life. Moreover, it also means that goals are set for personal development, citizenship, work and the passing on of cultural heritage (Mulcahy 2009, p. 468-469, 473-475; Simmons 2015, p. 89, 98; Corey 2013, p. 195-199).

Nevertheless, the scientific community is currently discussing the meaning of liberal education in the 21st century. The question arose from gaining an understanding of the usefulness of liberal education continuation as a construct to formulate new / alternative paradigm (Mulcahy 2009, p. 468-469).

Lawler (2013, p. 228-230), Aznar et al. (2013, p. 18-20) noted the existing contradiction between the modern HE and the liberal education. The general education, when studying such subjects, as the history, literature, and philosophy, is becoming less and less compulsory and they are changed by the need gain skills or competences necessary for flourishing in the competitive marketplace. Moreover, Lawler (2013, p. 230-232) criticizes the HE saying that it is becoming more and more vocational and career-dependent, thus decreasing its quality.

It is important to note that there are some reservations about the perception of European and American liberal education concepts. When analysing the American HE and the middle-class approach to it, Lawler (2013, p. 232) says that the modern HE poses a danger to the state. Political leaders have to know / understand who politicians actually are as free and rationally thinking people and what they are supposed to do being responsible not only for themselves but also for others. Meanwhile, based on Čiužas and Adaškevičienė (2006, p. 53-54), the modern liberal education, when cherishing education of the free citizen of the open society and helping to find the values that would be acceptable to the individual, causes danger to the national identity and values. At this point, very significant role falls to academicians who get a challenge to convey nationality as a personal value in the context of internationalized studies. To adapt to rapid changes in the life, a need inevitably occurs to apply innovative teaching and learning methods.

One of the ways that help adapt to changes in the life is the student-centred studies, which are focused on in Europe. To implement them, innovative teaching methods and active involvement of the student are needed, and to assure it – high quality of the HE (Bucharest Communiqué 2012; Yerevan Communiqué 2015). The student-centred studies are actualized in the works of scientists (Sajienė and Tamulienė 2012; Milišūnaitė et al. 2011; Kohont and Nadoh Bergoč 2009; Galkutė 2008), who say that the lecturer is expected to act as the partner and coordinator / organizer in this process. To realise this study program reorganization goal based on innovative teaching / studying methods, not only qualification of appropriate area of the lecturer but also capability to choose and apply various teaching / learning and evaluation methods, to make a wide-spectre choice for opportunities for independent learning is significantly important. Therefore, assurance of quality of academic staff becomes as the key tool.

In Lithuania, non-compliance of choices of studies by candidate students and needs in the labour market is being observed. According to Želvys (2013, p. 17), the most demanded study programs among students remain those of the social sciences and humanities, whereas, according to Vaicekauskienė (2013, p. 12-13), lack of policemen, social health specialists and other workers, who are required by the state and the labour market, is being observed. Therefore, presumption can be made that particularly due to this reason target funding of study programs, which prepare specialists required by the state, appeared. Moreover, the goal of the state to manage students' inflows are reflected by the number of state-funded places at the universities: for physical sciences – 1097, technological – 1531 whereas the areas that enrol the highest number of students, i.e. for social sciences – 756, for humanities – 488 of state-funded places. It do not create preconditions for students to choose their favourite studies, in contrary, the state-funded place becomes as the indicator of their motivation (Regarding distribution of funding in 2016 according to study areas 2016). It can be based on evaluation of instructors, whereby opinion on students' motivation towards studies is sceptical. According to them, students are not sufficiently motivated, and their non-motivation is demonstrated by their conduct and attitudes (non-attendance

of lectures, desire just to obtain the diploma), which impact on their study outcomes as well (Kalinauskaitė and Pauliukaitė 2014, p. 146-150, 206). However, students' motivation are being checked only when enrolling in studies providing the pedagogical degree. Following Milišiūnaitė et al. (2011, p. 11), the student is an active stakeholder of the learning process, who is responsible for his own learning, thus his motivation towards improvement is very important.

The liberal education assists in motivating students. Therefore, the liberal education helps educate dignity and correct self-understanding that we are not only productive machines. It is particularly necessary in the modern world wherein technological achievements bring to us innovations but at the same time complex challenges as well (Lawler 2013, p. 228-230).

Research methodology

Sample. The research was carried out based on the qualitative research strategy using the expert evaluation method – the expert interview. In total, 9 experts took part in the research. They represented the following groups of HE stakeholders: student representatives (from LNUS^a), members of the National Bologna Expert Team, professionals of policy-making and implementing bodies of HE (from MES^b, CQAHE^c, RHEMAC^d) and representatives of employers (from LBEC^e, VBEC^f). Experts with specific knowledge in the area of HE QA, experience of teaching in HEIs, having published scientific articles, and holding managing positions expressed their approaches and opinions.

Data collection method. Data were collected through 9 individual interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Data analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed applying qualitative research transcription rules, recording pauses, laughter, and other non-verbal language. Analysis of research data was based on the method of inductive transfer of knowledge, when connecting separate facts and events into the whole and generalizing them. When carrying out the open coding, notes and titles were recorded in the text through its reading. Afterwards, the material was read again, attempting to describe all aspects of the content until categories and subcategories were generated from obtained codes, links were found, and groups were distinguished (Satu and Kyngas 2008).

Instrument. The research was carried out using semi-structured interview questionnaire. Experts were asked to evaluate how much the policy of HE QA contributes

a Lithuanian National Union of Students

b Ministry of Education and Science

c Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education

d Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre

e Lithuanian Business Employers Confederation

f Vilnius Business Employers Confederation

to outcomes of the HE, i.e. gained competences of the graduates, suitability of their education in the labour market; conditions successfulness of the personal life; and impacts on social progress and economic competitiveness of the state.

Ethics. The research was conducted taking into account the following ethical principles: voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity (when presenting results, identities of the experts were encoded as follows: A1, A2, etc.).

Limitations. The expert interviewees represented only Vilnius city (the centre of political, economic and cultural life of the country). The qualitative research does not represent the position of the general population of HE stakeholders. Problems related to the policy of HE QA, which were revealed by the research, could be researched deeper through the quantitative research.

Research results

When analysing the expert evaluation on suitability of the policy of QA in the Lithuanian HE with the aim of successfulness in the life of the person, as of the educated, conscious personality creating preconditions for economically strong, advanced and competitive state, 2 blocks of categories were distinguished. They reveal importance of the impact of the policy of HE QA and existing opportunities as well as obstacles for development of the liberal education.

The first category – ***preconditions for employability and successfulness in the life of a person*** – consists of 4 subcategories. The subcategory *lack of attention for successfulness of the life of a person and significance of stimulation of personal ambitions* reveal opinion of representatives of employers and students that the educational system is not focused on successfulness of the life of the person and does not assure it. It affects negatively study quality. Also, representatives of students actualize a need of stimulation of personal ambitions as it is being associated with competition and contributes to creation of the economically strong state.

(A8) <...> *the educational system does not assure successfulness of the life to the person <...> motivation to choose own way of the life <...> that is why study quality is seriously affected negatively <...>*

(A1) <...> *personal ambition should be encouraged <...> it is a very great potential, which creates economically strong state <...>*

(A8) <...> *we miss exactly that successfulness of the life <...> it is really not valued <...>*

The second subcategory – *the need for strengthening of career guidance and career selection systems*, which is distinguished from the interview of the Bologna experts and employers, defines lack of informing and information on the HE, study programs, and reflects the weak point of the educational system – the career guidance and arising from it problems concerned criteria for choice of the university and lack of motivation towards studying.

(A3) <...> it would be necessary <...> to strengthen career guidance at the comprehensive school level that they had more information and knowledge <...> to make decisions.

(A4) <...> motivation should be aimed through career guidance system <...> it is not well developed <...> more attention should be given for information on the HE <...> for testing of children's capabilities <...>.

(A3) <...> when choosing the university the student <...> names many factors, among them – easier entrance, easier studies <...>.

(A8) <...> he considers what study program is easier to graduate from <...> career planning is in general the weakest point in our educational system.

Subcategory – *the problem concerned the state's aim to manage students' flows*, highlights the fact that the state, controlling choice of studies by students, makes impact on education of non-motivated and non-qualitative graduates. Representatives of students emphasize importance to allow graduates of the high school to choose such study programs that are particularly favourite to them, not impacting on it by the state funding. All aforesaid subcategories reflect lack of motivational incentives for entrants and students.

(A1) <...> such management of flows <...> can have many non-qualitative, non-motivated employees <...>.

(A2) <...> to seek not only state-funded places but, actually, what they would like to do <...>.

The last subcategory – *need for retraining and continuous learning, focus on education of the general and entrepreneurial competences* - particularly emphasises nuances of the changing labour market, present and future perspectives, when the general competences and retraining helps the person to be employed in various activities, to adapt to the nature of the changing labour market, etc. Meanwhile entrepreneurship and its education creates opportunity to the person to set up own business and job places that is one of the main competences in the present economic situation. These subcategories reflect opinion of students, employers and specialists of institutions forming and implementing policy of the HE.

(A1) <...> retraining <...> solves the problem <...> to be able to find the job in the labour market, to fill in <...> existing defects.

(A6) <...> the process should be continuous <...> to study additionally, to return to the university <...>.

(A1) <...> movement towards general competences is needed <...> to allow the person to be employed <...> as the person <...> skilled with the general competences <...> can be more productive, more useful <...>.

(A8) <...> big part is being lost <...> in all study programs <...> no attention is given to entrepreneurship <...> it is the problem <...> if we consider economically strong, advanced and competitive state <...>.

The second category set by the research – *preconditions for conformity of education to the labour market* – consists of 4 subcategories. Based on opinion of representatives of students, employers and specialists of the institutions forming and implementing the policy of the HE, the subcategory – *lack of rational and systematic planning of the state as well as problems related to forecasting of changes in the labour market* – was distinguished. It outlines that politicians lack systematic and rational approach in the area of planning of HE QA. Representatives of students state that there are no reliable forecasts on the future labour market and specialists required for it in future, what impedes for rational planning of the policy of HE QA. Analysis of opinions of representatives of students and employers show that it is reasoned by complexity of the forecasting and lack of its systems; however, it is emphasized that created systems are more reliable and more objective than opinions provided by a few individuals. Moreover, representatives of employers state that the present evaluation of conformity of study programs to the labour market is not suitable as it does not demonstrate conformity of education of the employee of the required specialty to needs of the labour market.

(A1) <...> *the state planning must be improved <...> essential weakness <...> absence of clear, systematic and reasonable planning.*

(A1) <...> *we do not have any efficient means, forecasts what the labour market will be in future <...> it is very difficult to forecast <...> there is always some error element but created systems are better than opinion of a few individuals <...>.*

(A8) <...> *we see the problem <...> non-conformity to the labour market <...> we evaluate improperly – such specialty is required or not required.*

(A5) <...> *there will be some non-compliance with the labour market <...>.*

(A8) <...> *the problem is that we try <...> to forecast what is impossible <...> what employees will be needed in the Lithuanian business <...>.*

In accordance with opinion of representatives of students and employees, to attract entrants to the specialties that are required and needed in the labour market, political decisions are necessary, which would impact on stimulation of motivation and interest of pupils in specialties relevant to the labour market, reasoning thus their qualitative learning and proper performance of work (subcategory – *need and importance of political decision stimulating interest / motivation of pupils in required specialties*).

(A1) <...> *if the authorities want to work on the fact that more pupils entered technical sciences <...> it is necessary to show to them charm of this science already at school <...>.*

(A8) *engineers are needed <...> but where to take them if there are practically no circles <...> space <...> for the young person to get acquainted with those engineering issues.*

Defects of the state planning and political decisions reason problems that are revealed by the following subcategory – *the problem of different and narrow perception of the quality concept by stakeholders*. The Bologna experts state that politicians understand forthright goals of the policy of HE QA, thus, the conflict occurs between narrow understanding of goals of the policy and potential goals that should be implemented. Representatives of students and specialists of the institutions forming and implementing the policy of the HE note that unequal understanding of quality also impacts on cooperation process among stakeholders as different results can be possibly expected and different interests are being intended to satisfy. Due to it, there is prevailing problem to involve stakeholders into processes of HE QA when they are being involved only formally.

(A4) <...> there is a conflict between too narrow understanding of goals related to QA and <...> potential <...> goals that should be.

(A1) <...> lecturers, students and administration often have very different imagination how and who should do <...> different parties have different approaches, interests <...> what concept is more qualitative <...>.

(A6) How to engage all interested parties into the quality process <...>. How to do it that <...> it wouldn't just formal writing of reports but it would be the process <...>.

Subcategory – *the absence of agreement between stakeholders and limiting opinions* – can be considered as the reasons for the aforementioned problems (of this category) as non-maintaining of dialogue between universities and stakeholders, non-seeing of the common view, when opinions expressed by representatives of association, various group do not include and do not reflect opinion of members of full group to be represented by this person, can condition occurrence of various problems.

(A1) <...> representative <...> comes alone with his own opinion.

(A1) <...> there is no discussions and considerations <...> what student should be when graduating from the university <...> when not talking people <...> pass each other and do not find common speech <...>.

(A3) <...> better understanding should be.

Discussion

When analysing opportunities for development of the liberal education in the context of the Lithuanian HE, importance of training of the general competences and their need in the competition of the current labour market reveals. However, Lawler (2013, p. 230-231) criticizes the HE stating that the subjects through which the general competences are trained (developed through the such as history, philosophy) are getting less and less compulsory and are being substituted by the need of skills that are necessary to be competitive in the labour market. Scientists (Aznar et al. 2013, p. 19-20) who were researching how students evaluated university missions, set out that

students tend to appreciate those universities that reflect their orientation towards employability but not values of the liberal education. Experts specified in the research on this issue that, in the policy of HE QA, there is lack of attention to both the general and entrepreneurial competences, which particularly help adapt to the present working environment. However, at the same time they emphasized importance of retraining and continuous learning with the aim to develop and to gain new competences (sub-category: *need of retraining and continuous learning, focus on training of the general and entrepreneurial competences*).

Evaluation of Bologna experts and representatives of employers received through this research demonstrates *problems related to career guidance and career selection*, which also reveal lack of motivation towards studying. MOSTA (Kalinauskaitė and Pauliukaitė 2014, p. 146-150, 206) research made in Lithuania revealed that students are not motivated as, according to lecturers, non-motivation of students is showed by non-attendance of lectures and desire just to obtain the diploma. However, this research shows that students' non-motivation might be also possibly impacted by the state's aim to manage students' flows making opportunities to them to study the state-funded programs but choosing not necessarily favourite studies (subcategory: *the problem related to the state's aim to manage the students' flows*). The fact that students choose studies due to the state funding on them presupposes another problem – lack of motivational incentives. Scientists (Simmons 2015; Corey 2013, p. 195-199; Lawler 2013; Mulcahy 2009; Čiužas and Adaškevičienė 2006) note that the liberal education is associated with freedom of the person, education of the citizen of the open society; however, the aim of the state to control students, when free of charge studies become as motives for choice of studies, does not make conditions for education of a free person. In accordance with employers and students, to attract entrants to the specialities which are in lack in the labour market, political decisions, which would impact on stimulation of pupils' motivation and interest in specialties relevant to the labour market, providing them with opportunity to test themselves at school, for instance, in the engineers' circles and other activities, thus making acquainted with scientific directions, are necessary (subcategory – *need and importance of political decisions stimulating pupils' interest / motivation in demanded specialties*).

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The policy of QA in the Lithuanian HE reflects aims of the policy of HE foreseen in the documents of the Bologna Process and other international documents; therefore, elements of the liberal education is emphasised and tendencies of their development through student-centred studies – active involvement and participation of students – are seen in the policy.
2. Development of the liberal education in Lithuania is challenged by problems existing in the formation and implementation of the policy of HE QA. These problems are related to students' motivation towards studies and lack of mo-

- tivational incentives as well as control of the students' flows by the state to meet blindly needs of the labour market. Students encounter barriers for freedom and opportunities to choose their favourite studies. It is becoming important to stimulate pupils' interest in necessary specialties in the comprehensive schools through non-formal education means, providing pupils with opportunity to get acquainted with specialties and science to attract more motivated graduates to enter appropriate study programs. It is necessary to initiate development of motivation incentives to the pupils (entrants) as well: to strengthen career guidance system in the comprehensive schools, providing pupils with information on study programs, determining their capabilities and helping to direct them appropriately. Also, more attention must be given to training of entrepreneurial and general competences of students to assure employability of the person.
3. Different interests of stakeholders cause the absence of unity nor does not allow to seek the goals of the HE and to implement the liberal education with joint efforts – to develop educated, with critical thinking personalities, which precondition social progress and state's economic growth. Institutions forming and implementing policy of the HE need to initiate the dialogue between universities and employers, encouraging understanding, helping to both sides to understand goals of HE and to balance interest as well as to agree regarding common intended results with regard to students' needs and perspectives of graduates. Regard of students needs and viability of graduates in the labour market and personal life would base values of the liberal education – education of the free person having freedom of choice as well.
 4. Therefore, the policy of HE QA could be identified as the balance instrument between development of the liberal education and meeting of needs of the labour market. However, it is being observed that the policy of HE QA lacks orientation towards success of personal life of graduates. The liberal education can help assure this success. Therefore, maintaining of the balance between the mentioned elements when seeking for success of the person as of educated, conscious personality, capable to adapt to changes, integrate into the modern labour market and to create to himself successful career and to contribute to social/state's progress is the highest challenge.

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Aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimo politika: galimybės ir kliūtys liberaliojo švietimo plėtrai Lietuvoje

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Anotacija

Europos ir Bolonijos proceso dokumentuose pagrindiniu aukštojo mokslo siekiu yra įvardintas pažangios, konkurencingos ir ekonomiškai stiprios Europos kūrimas. Šio siekio įgyvendinimas yra priklausomas nuo atskirų kontinento valstybių pažangos ir konkurencingumo, o išsilavinę žmonės, gebantys susikurti sėkmingą asmeninį gyvenimą ir profesinę karjerą yra svarbiausias faktorius siekiant minėto tikslo. Išsilavinusių ir sėkmingų asmenybių plėtrai užtikrinti esminė sąlyga yra liberalusis švietimas. Tačiau liberaliojo švietimo plėtos pagrindas yra aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimo politika - svarbiausias pasitikėjimo Europos aukštuoju mokslu šaltinis ir prioritetinė sritis.

Kokybinio tyrimo rezultatai leido išskirti aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimo politikos problemines sritis (darančias įtaką ir liberaliajam švietimui): dėmesio asmens gyvenimo sėkmingumui, studentų motyvavimo priemonių, dėmesio bendrųjų ir verslumo kompetencijų ugdymui trūkumas, valstybės siekis sukontroliuoti studentų srautus, valstybės racionalaus ir sisteminio planavimo trūkumas bei darbo rinkos pokyčių prognozavimo problemos, socialinių dalininkų skirtingas kokybės sampratos suvokimas ir kt. Tai, kad aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimo politikoje yra spragų, trūksta tyrimų, apimančių liberalųjį švietimą siejant jį su aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimu – kelia pavojų liberaliojo švietimo plėtrai, pažangios, konkurencingos valstybės kūrimui.

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