

## FACTORS PROMOTING DIVERSIFICATION OF COLLEGE EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

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### Abstract

Employing the methods of analysis of documents that regulate college education (40 entries) and group discussion with academic communities of colleges (7 focus groups), attempts are made to analyse the factors, which foster the diversity of non-university education in Lithuania revealing its impact on society. While conducting the analysis of factors, which foster the diversity of non-university higher education, three interrelated factors may be singled out: the Bologna process, which has influence on the national educational policy, whereas legal acts passed by the government encourage establishment of colleges of different legal status. The influence of diversification of non-university higher education on society is also studied.

**Keywords:** non-university higher education in Lithuania, Bologna process, influence on society.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The system of higher education in Lithuania, which is preconditioned by the paradigms of knowledge society and mass higher education, more than a decade ago underwent the process of diversification, introduced a binary system and established institutions of college higher education. In the initial stage of their establishment, the academic communities of colleges faced difficulties determining their real purpose, purifying and detaching it from the purpose of universities, which were frequently followed, sometimes components of their activities were copied or targeted attempts were made to align colleges with the university sector. However, having generalised their experience and the attained results over a certain period of time, academic communities of colleges perceived own differences, which became their strengths later and chose own direction of development. It can be stated that a decade after the start of establishment of colleges, the current period is referred to as a stage of enhancement of their daily processes, activities and exceptional features, such as strong emphasis on practice-oriented higher education with professional qualification, maintenance of close collaboration with social partners and others. Thus, the article focuses on a comprehensive presentation of the development of non-university higher education in Lithuania and on external factors that facilitate its variety and influence on society.

The *problem* of the article is presupposed by a question: what external factors have the most considerable influence on and enhance diversification of non-university higher education in Lithuania.

*The object:* factors, which enhance diversification of non-university higher education in Lithuania.

*The goal* of the article: to analyse factors, which enhance diversification of non-university higher education in Lithuania revealing the influence of this phenomenon on society.

*The objectives:*

1. to reveal the development of non-university higher education distinguishing the periods of its development.
2. to analyse the impact of diversification of non-university higher education on society.

The following research methods were applied in the article: analysis of scientific literature and documents; the focus group of college academic community. According to Bitinas (2006), the focus group method aims to reveal not only experience, attitudes and other analysed features of participants in the process of education but also group peculiarities, i.e., concentration, prevailing values, public opinion, peculiarities of social environment of education, satisfaction with the process of education and its defects, etc. Therefore, a group in-depth semi-structured interview was chosen due to its provided opportunities to a researcher to directly contact with the informants. While carrying out such an interview, the strategy of selection of homogeneous cases was applied, which is more frequently employed pursuing better well-being and more

concentration of a group (5-7 respondents) on the research problem. The criterion-based selection was applied for colleges. Seven groups consisting of members of academic community were formed in private and state colleges from various regions of Lithuania: deputy directors for academic affairs, deans, vice-deans and heads of departments, different divisions and centres as well as college teachers.

## 2. PERIODS OF NON-UNIVERSITY HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

The analysis of the documents regulating the college activities from their establishment to 2010 revealed four periods in development of non-university higher education (Fig. 1):

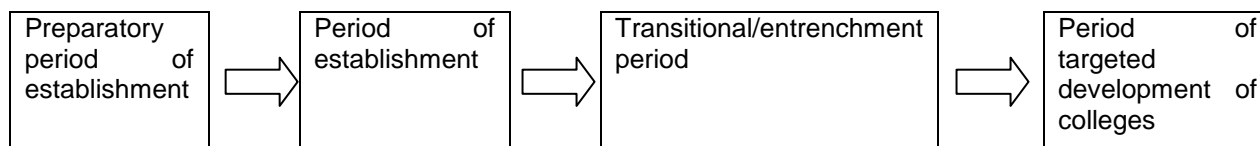


Fig.1. Periods of non-university higher education development

It is complicated to point out exact boundaries of the periodisation as frequently different individual development of non-university (college) higher education institutions has to be considered. The most exact boundaries may be indicated only in the preparatory period (prior to 2000) and the period of establishment (the main network was formed from 2000 to 2003).

### 2.1 Preparatory period and college establishment period (1999–2003)

The beginning of foundation of non-university higher education sector is related to Lithuania's joining of the Bologna process in 1999 and attempts to integrate into the European higher education area. However, the year of 1991 is considered to mark the beginning of strategically planned establishment, when advanced vocational schools were set up and this was provided for in the Regulations of Preparation for Establishment of Colleges (1999). Setting up colleges, the experts of the European Council provided a positive evaluation of the key articles that regulate establishment and activities of colleges, which further became integral parts of the Law on Higher Education (2000).

The creation of the binary higher education system was based on the experience accumulated in economically developed European countries, whereas the basic guidelines for higher education reform were formulated in 'The White Book on Higher Education in Lithuania'(1999) published by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. Its introduction emphasises that the White Book of Higher Education was drawn up with assistance of the experts from EU PHARE programme, structuring the best experience of higher education development in Western Europe. Though the first recommendations to establish non-university higher education institutions were outlined in 'The White Book on Vocational Training' (1999), 'The White Book on Higher Education in Lithuania' (1999) served as framework establishing the non-university higher education sector in the country.

The block of documents of the period of preparation for establishment of colleges and the period of college establishment is comprehensive and legal acts supplement each other. Therefore, the highest ranked advanced vocational schools were reorganised into the first regional colleges within one year (1999–2000) and started their activities 1 September 2000. The structural changes in higher education, i.e., establishment of the college sector, facilitated more flexible and open responsiveness of higher education to society needs.

While conducting selection of the best advanced vocational schools for reorganisation of them into colleges, 9 criteria for foundation of colleges were singled out in the Regulations of Preparation for Establishment of Colleges (1999). The analysis of the aforesaid documents revealed that in the period of preparation for establishment of non-university higher education sector minimal requirements were established for advanced vocational schools, which had intention to become colleges. Moreover, Article 14 (2) and (4) of the Law on Higher Education (2000) and the Procedure for Establishment of Higher Education Institutions (2000) provide for lower requirements compared to those for establishment of universities: state college is established upon the submission of the Ministry of Education and Science. This reveals attempts of the Government to expand the network of higher education establishments in Lithuania supplementing them by colleges, which should contribute to availability of higher education and to reduction of financial costs of training highly qualified specialists who are capable of meeting the needs of the national economy.

Not only the process of optimisation, which conditioned merging of advanced vocational schools of different profiles into colleges, but also certain more liberal tendencies in college establishment were criticised in later documents (for example, The Framework of the Conception of Development of University and Non-university

Studies, 2000). There was no reason for such criticism because setting up of colleges was encouraged not only by the Government or satisfying the needs of society, rapid changes in the national economy or technologies but also by developmental tendencies prevailing in higher education in Europe, into which steps were made to integrate the system of Lithuanian higher education. Higher requirements would impede the process of college establishment; therefore, saving the time, fast reorganisation of *advanced vocational schools was conducted providing for accreditation of colleges after the transitional period of 3-5 years. This is a sufficient period of time for corrections and improvements of various activity processes on the basis of the requirements of the Bologna processes and considering tendencies in development of non-university higher education sector of European countries.*

Analysing the Regulations of Preparation for Establishment of Colleges (1999), the tendency to have private colleges in the system of Lithuanian higher education was clearly observed because a number of exceptions in the criteria of the structure of college network, size of colleges (minimal number of students), study fields were made aiming to establish private non-university higher education institutions. This created prerequisites for diversification of the non-university higher education sector with colleges of two types (state and private), which not only promoted competitiveness but also better satisfy needs of society to pursue higher education.

The process of college establishment was firstly based on the principles of regionality and optimisation, which make up the basis for financial as well as intellectual efficiency (available resources of advanced vocational schools, intellectual potential); secondly, the principle of multilateralism (training of specialists for different sectors of economy), which enable graduates of non-university higher education studies to better adapt to satisfaction of needs of institutions in the national labour market.

One of the main goals of non-university higher education is to improve availability of higher education, to enable as many people as possible to acquire higher education "conforming to the contemporary level of science and technology". The indicator of availability may be improved not only applying the principle of regionality but also introducing innovative means i.e., distance teaching, whereof importance is emphasised in the White Book (1999).

## 2.2 The period of transitional/entrenchment of colleges

It is problematic to determine the boundaries of the period of transitional/entrenchment of colleges due to different time of their foundation: when some higher education institutions (colleges) were already carrying out their activities, other advanced vocational schools were preparing for reorganisation into colleges. Therefore, it can be stated that the period of transitional/entrenchment of colleges started not at the same and lasted from their foundation to the first external accreditation (and for a short time after it, 2003–2006) and that during the process, the directions for further improvement of activities.

During the transitional period academic community faced a task to enhance their position in the society, among labour market institutions, to improve activity indicators and to increase the number of students, which namely manifest the growing confidence and demand for college study programmes. This period is not marked by abundance of documents that regulate activities of colleges and the majority of the adopted ones are related to various quality parameters.

In accordance with the **quality criteria** provided for in the Descriptor of Procedure of College Quality Assessment (2004), nine areas of college activities were evaluated: *management; study planning and its implementation; applied scientific research and relation with partners in Lithuania; international relations; material and financial resources; human resources; system of internal quality assurance; system of achievement assessment; demand for trained specialists*. Though carrying out the selection of advanced vocational schools to be reorganised into colleges, nine criteria for establishment were also outlined in the Regulations of Preparation for Establishment of Colleges (1999), they focused mainly on the assessment of areas related to the study process and its organisation. Therefore, conducting college quality assessment for the second time, a considerable attention was laid to *applied research and relations with partners in Lithuania, demand for trained specialists, etc.* Generalising, it can be stated that during **the assessment period the main attention was allocated to the quality indicators, which in the beginning of college establishment were evaluated positively in advance, setting the goal to improve them in future.** The foundation of colleges in Lithuania was enhanced successfully creating the European higher education area.

## 2.3 Period of targeted development (encouraged by the Bologna process)

The documents adopted during the period of targeted development of colleges were mostly influenced by the requirements of the Bologna process. The documents of this process presupposed the dimension of equality

of colleges and universities, diversification of higher education is positively evaluated, which better meets various individual, academic and labour market needs (The Communiqués of Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003)). The study programmes were approved initially using the study credit system, academic communities developed international relations and started planning applied research and principles of quality assurance were formed.

Academic community of colleges constantly follow the documents of the Bologna process pursuing improvement of various activities of a higher education institution to be able to become full-fledged actors in the European higher education area: to improve social conditions, to reduce social inequality, "to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity" (London Communiqué, 2007).

The growing international mobility of college students and academic community should be pointed out, which is regularly encouraged and underlined in all the Communiqués adopted during the Bologna process (The Key Documents of the Bologna Process, 2005; London Communiqué, 2007). This process particularly intensified after the introduction of the degree of professional bachelor, because the degree conferred by colleges in Lithuania was easily comparable and understandable in other European countries. The Programme for Promotion of Internationalization in Higher Education (2008) aimed to encourage internationalisation of college activities through programmes of professional development of staff members. Other factors of changes include supplements to diplomas, intensification of applied research and others.

Due to dynamics characteristic of the binary system and efforts of colleges themselves to improve, changes *in the mission of college higher education are introduced*: currently, the majority of colleges, both state and private, mostly target at promotion of internationalisation and development of scientific applied activities. Being part of the system of higher education, colleges are incapable of making certain policy-related decisions at national level related to their activity, therefore, it can be stated that for a few years the academic community of colleges will focus on improvement and consolidation of their activities and processes.

Thus, the Bologna process was one of the real factors (since 1999) for about ten years, which directly encouraged and accelerated diversification of Lithuanian higher education and established conditions for creation of the sector of college higher education.

### **3. INFLUENCE OF DIVERSIFICATION OF COLLEGE HIGHER EDUCATION ON SOCIETY**

The governments of the majority of countries evaluate and acknowledge the diversity of missions and teaching opportunities, conditioned by social factors, as a public benefit (Hazelkorn, Huisman, 2008) because diversification of higher education results in establishment of more favourable conditions for satisfaction of needs of various social groups (students, academic community, labour market, policy-makers). Having analysed the conception of external diversification, the provided benefit and predetermined processes in the scientific literature (Birnbaum (1983), Huisman (1995), Vught (2008) and others) and on the basis of the systemic analysis of European non-university higher education carried out by Kyvik (2004) the following processes (availability, social mobility, efficiency, dynamics, innovation, competitiveness), conditioned by external diversification, were single out and the research was conducted following the designed model. Employing the results of focus groups of college community members, this part of the article concentrates on the analysis how institutions of college higher education satisfy the needs of society and the research data are compared to the goals set in the documents of the Bologna process to national higher education systems.

The Communiqués of Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen 2005) and the London Communiqué (2007) in particular, which all were adopted during the Bologna process (The Key Documents of the Bologna Process, 2005) call for improvement of social conditions, reduction of social inequality and provision of adequate student services, creation of more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and widening of participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity (London Communiqué, 2007) in the European higher education area. Therefore, analysing the process of availability in establishments of college education, various social aspects are revealed, which depend on its external identification.

Having analysed the theoretical aspects of the concept "availability", Laužackas et al. (2003) stated that *availability of education* refers to provision of all members of society in the process of their continuous learning with clear education opportunities, which are neither too expensive nor too demanding. Availability is an aggregate of conditions, which ensure efficient learning as well as its outcomes, which are personally and



socially favourable. Thus, analysing the process of availability, the regional **distribution of colleges** was firstly analysed as the factor, which had the most considerable influence on society.

The data of the qualitative research (focus groups) revealed that regional colleges undertake their own mission: they are firstly chosen by members of society of this region and surrounding districts, whereas people from various Lithuanian regions come to study to colleges of Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania). Availability is promoted not only through convenient geographical distribution of college network but also offering a variety of **study modes**. Colleges flexibly respond to students' needs to choose certain modes of studies and, thus, create conditions for better availability of college higher education. Next to full-time studies, all the institutions of college education offer part-time studies, with exception of the study programmes, which, according to the informants, *"cannot be implemented in the part-time mode due to lack of practical work hours"*.

After the first external assessments of colleges, when positive conclusions were received, members of society started to choose colleges for studies and the numbers of enrolled students increased significantly. It is important to mention that some colleges also offered evening studies (daily from 6 p.m – 9 p.m.), though the criteria for their demand were not identified. Such evening studies were not organised in every college because, for example, the research carried out in one of the private colleges of western Lithuania did not reveal such demand for evening studies. On the contrary, the evening studies in one of the colleges of eastern Lithuania were offered in order to flexibly respond to students' ability to combine studies and work. This is one of the reasons why the numbers of part-time and full-time students are higher in colleges of all regions compared to those of full-time studies.

Creating better conditions for availability, external diversification of colleges enables students from various social strata and different age groups to choose college higher education studies. Though state and private colleges are chosen by individuals from different social layers, it cannot be unambiguously stated that private education establishment create favourable conditions only for students with higher income: a large private college has a possibility of applying various discounts for tuition fee to orphans and disabled students and for financial incentives to students with best academic achievements. Such principles are used by some small private colleges. The informants pointed out that *"income accumulated from rent of classrooms and the hall is used to pay grants to socially disadvantaged students, financial support before Christmas or Easter"*.

The state colleges located in the districts (except that of Vilnius) particularly encouraged disabled, socially disadvantaged individuals and young people from large families to proceed to college higher education because they had hardly had any opportunities to go to study in higher education establishments in other towns. Choosing the college, which is geographically closest, an individual solves a problem related to accommodation and rent, living expenses and other financial issues. Socially disadvantaged students are entitled to social grants as well as to loans for studies allocated by the State Studies Foundation. Moreover, the informants also indicated that *"frequently after 2 or 3 years students, who due to financial issues terminate their studies in colleges of big cities, return to continue their studies in the colleges of their regions."* The colleges located in Vilnius (capital) or other cities are chosen by students of better social status and by those individuals, who have ambitions to establish themselves in Vilnius as a city of better opportunities. Therefore, a regional network of colleges improves and creates favourable conditions for members of society to obtain the degree of professional bachelor, which is conferred after non-university higher education studies.

Though experience of European countries point out that in the initial stage of college establishment, they are under influence of the university sector (Clancy, 1997), the research conducted in Lithuanian higher education establishments revealed a particularly small number of such tendencies. It can be stated that such trends are observed only after several years of college activities: in the informants' opinion, extreme hostility from community of universities was observed in the beginning of activities but over the last years bigger extent of collaboration between colleges and universities has been identified, for example, joint conferences, projects and counselling on different issues.

It should be emphasised that practical training of specialists of narrow specialisation and high qualification, practical experience of teachers serve as foundation, which allows academic community of all colleges to feel and consider themselves not only equal to the community of universities but also even advantaged. The informants point out that *"over the last years the universities have felt advantages of practical training provided by colleges and have invested a lot into establishment of business incubators"*. Practical teaching is the basis, which creates better employment perspectives. Colleges observe the principle of efficiency, thus, middle level specialists are trained within a shorter period and this allows to save state money allocated to

the sector of higher education. Moreover, college communities see themselves as more flexible and faster responding to changes in the labour market because they are able to faster revise and adapt their study programmes.

Academic communities of large private and state colleges emphasise the necessity to ensure as rich and varied choice of study programmes as possible, though understanding about the necessity of the variety and number of study programmes in both types of colleges differs. However, academic community members of private colleges relate this to the number of students, which ensures financial stability of a private institution. The study programmes in social sciences, humanities and arts are more frequently implemented in private colleges but after the external assessment of study programmes (one of the procedures of quality assurance) studies in humanities were withdrawn (Leišytė, Navickienė, Zenkienė, Želvys, 2009). On the other hand, the majority of academic communities in state colleges pointed out that the variety of study programmes is closely linked with attempts to satisfy needs of the rapidly changing labour market but mainly with considering the needs of society in the region (or trying to attract students from other regions) and, according to the informants, *“it is a balance between supply and demand.”*

It should be emphasised that economic benefit provided by state and private colleges to the regions is similar. All the colleges state that they significantly contribute to economic development of the region while training highly qualified specialists, who most frequently get employed in institutions of the same region or, according to the informants, *“establish own business enterprises”*. During the survey, the members of academic community of one of the regional colleges mentioned the aspect, which is characteristic of all the regional and probably some private colleges: developing activities in the regions, creating strategic plans college community members are included into the committees for regional development. It clearly shows that activities of colleges in the regions are important and opinion of academic community members is considered. Moreover, more and more companies and institutions in regions are involved in implementation of government projects. The colleges set up in regions have invigorated and helped to retain and develop service, trade and other spheres, which obviously stimulate economic growth: students, who live in the same region or come to study in such colleges buy food, have their shoes repaired and hair cut, use public transport services, etc. Thus, they have also contributed to demographic growth in the region: more young people have stayed in the regions after their studies, youth life and activities have been becoming more active.

The nature of social benefit received from large and small private colleges contains certain differences. The social benefit received from the largest private colleges in most cases is related to financial support. For example the informants pointed out that foster homes received support on the occasion of Christmas *“as the students took children from socially disadvantaged families to performance”*, collectives of retired people also receive support, etc. Small private colleges pointed out that their social benefit is expressed through legal services to society free of charge or through implementation of a social project. Different events and contests for society were indicated only by the informants from the colleges, which have long-established traditions that derived from former advanced vocational schools; moreover, they indicated the activities, which are very rarely implemented in colleges, i.e., celebration of Lithuanian national festivals: *“despite big numbers of representatives of different ethnic groups, we are concerned about this”*.

Differently from the informants in private colleges, the ones from state colleges (especially if there is only one higher education institution in the region or it is particularly active and seeking the dialogue with society) pointed out various traditions, events very well known to the society of the region. It can be stated that the majority of regional colleges fulfil the mission ascribed to them: *“to become the centres of intellectual and educative activities in the regions”* (The White Book on Higher Education in Lithuania, 1999). This may be explained by the fact that colleges located in the centres of the region face fewer challenges compared to the ones in the cities (Vilnius, Kaunas or Klaipėda) because cultural life is less intensive in the centres of districts and, therefore, the interest of society members is bigger and information is easier accessible. On the other hand, the life is saturated with cultural activities in cities and it is a more challenging task to attract society members into organisational events.

Analysing innovation of colleges, it can be pointed out that this factor embraces close collaboration with business world, i.e., flexible reaction to needs of labour world designing new study programmes, introducing new specialities, which are offered only in institutions of college higher education; professional development courses for employees offered by academic communities to labour market institutions, introduction of distance learning. However, depending on diversification of colleges, this activity is implemented differently. Professional development courses are organised most intensively in state regional as well as specialised colleges, which are located in smaller towns and frequently they are the only higher education institution in

the region. According to the informants: “*various programmes of non-formal and non-vocational education are offered to individual society members or they are purchased by companies*”. Moreover, trainings are held employing the funds of the European Union through projects. Academic communities of state and specialised colleges accumulate ideas about innovative activities from each other or foreign partners. The informants pointed out that they “*learn from each other and from foreign partners*.” Timetables of professional development courses are flexibly adapted taking into account the needs of course attendees.

Professional development courses in colleges (state and private) located in big cities are not offered at all or they are single rare cases as competition with long-established and experienced companies, which specialise in counselling and professional training courses, is hardly possible. One private college, established by the Lithuanian Union of Cooperatives, is an exception. Members of academic community of this college are obliged to hold various courses to members of the Cooperative Unions. According to the informants: “*The Lithuanian Union of Cooperatives, I think, gets immense benefit from our college*”. Such experience to staff members of the college is particularly useful as it encourages to search for various forms and methods of organising professional development courses to other members of society, for example, according to the informants, “*professional development courses for the unemployed were organised*”.

Generalising, it can be stated that the colleges are not capable of self-dependent carrying out of innovative activities yet as they are young institutions of higher education. Innovation is more clearly manifested through close collaboration with the society and labour market institutions rather than through development of new products and technologies.

Social mobility may be approached from several aspects: firstly, it is related to a possibility of resuming studies after a break; secondly, to having a permanent possibility of retraining (lifelong learning as an activity in the Bologna process); thirdly, to employment perspectives (related to easily understandable and easily comparable system of degrees) (The Key Documents of the Bologna Process, 2005). Another aspect of social mobility, which includes international mobility of students and academic community, is constantly promoted and emphasised in all the communiqués adopted during the Bologna process (The Key Documents of the Bologna Process, 2005; London Communiqué, 2007) but it is not the object of this article.

Institutions of college higher education provide individuals, who terminated their studies for one or another reason (academic failure, going abroad, etc.), with a possibility of returning to studies after the break or acquisition of a new qualification. This tendency of social mobility has emerged over the last several years (since 2007): graduates eagerly return to the same colleges, where they used to study, and choose other specialities. This demonstrates their confidence in and satisfaction with the study services provided by the college. However, once again it is proved that contemporary labour market requires regularly renewed or absolutely new competences. It should be emphasised that colleges provide their students with narrower and focused educations; therefore, if more universal competences are needed, re-training is required. This was provided for in the White Book on Higher Education in Lithuania (White Book on Higher Education in Lithuania, 1999) while setting up institutions of college higher education.

More and more members of the society, who are holders of university education diplomas or even master degrees, proceed to obtaining of professional qualification. Thus, study field or even study area may be changed during college studies: on the basis of the examples provided by the informants, it is obvious that graduates from technical study programmes tend to choose social ones, whereas specialists in the humanities choose the study programmes in economy, etc. Though studies are not state financed for students, who have already obtained college education or higher university education, this does not prevent individuals from attempts to meet the requirements imposed by the labour market.

It should be pointed out that colleges started entering the international mobility as full-value and active members most actively in 2007, i.e., when they were entitled to conferment of professional bachelor degree. This is related not only to the requirement for easily comparable degrees but also to other mobility-related reasons. International collaboration is positively evaluated as it contributed to international acknowledgement in the international higher education area. It should be pointed out that students in small towns have perfect opportunities to get employed by international companies after their participation in international exchange programmes. The informants stated that directly contacting academic community of colleges “*employers themselves search for such students, even though they are still studying in the last years of their studies*”. This is conditioned by the acquired competences: good command of foreign languages, intercultural awareness, communicative skills and others.

Colleges located in small towns face challenges organising international student exchange in their colleges. The reasons for such situation include not only geographical location of a town, size, attractiveness but also

safety, which may be complicated to ensure for all students. According to the informants, large state colleges, which offer a wide range of study programmes and are capable of sending students from almost any study programme to study in any country of the EU, have evidenced “a twofold or threefold increase in international mobility”. These processes were particularly promoted by innovation in Erasmus exchange programmes, i.e., by students' internships in foreign companies, what created opportunities for gaining experience in the international labour market. Active mutual international exchange is observed in such colleges because sufficient potential of academic staff members, who are able to teach in English or in other languages, is available. This is also confirmed by the initiative of teachers themselves to teach in other countries.

Generalising the aforesaid, it is possible to point out that some of the objectives (sometimes included into the strategic activity plans) of the majority of colleges embrace striving for acknowledgement in the international higher education area, creation of attractive image of an institution encouraging international mobility of students and making attempts to attract as many students from foreign countries as possible.

Analysing the opinion of the informants about the cycles of education offered in colleges, attention should be paid to the fact that the Bologna declaration (1999) provides for a two cycle system of studies and the duration of the first (pre-diploma) one should last at least 3 years; later in 2001 the Prague Communiqué emphasised once again that “ bachelor's and master's degrees, or comparable two cycle degrees, can be obtained at universities as well as at other higher education institutions“. The institutions of college education in Lithuania pursued the right to confer professional bachelor's degree for 7 years (2000–2007), therefore, such education without any degree was hardly understandable in the European higher education area.

Authorisation of private college higher education to confer the qualification degree of professional bachelor added honour and acknowledgement to college studies because more motivated and talented students started to choose the study programmes. Thus, the society started to evaluate private colleges in a more favourable way. Moreover, the number of graduates from advanced vocational schools, who having chosen the form of individual studies, returned to obtain the professional bachelor's degree, went up considerably.

The degree of professional bachelor conferred in institutions of college education significantly promoted international exchange of students and academic communities of colleges and project activities; a supplement to diploma of college higher education provides graduates with better international employment perspectives because it creates opportunities to easier compare the professional qualification obtained in different countries.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Thus, the Bologna process is seen as the key factor, which has promoted the diversification of higher education in Lithuania. Having validated the binary higher education system, higher education is able to meet society's needs in a more flexible and open way.

The exhaustive analysis of the documents that regulate activities of colleges from their establishment to 2010 allowed to single out four phases in college education development: preparatory, establishment, transitional/consolidation and targeted development periods. The article comprehensively discusses factors, which encourage diversification of college education during each of the aforesaid periods. It should be emphasised that the Bologna process is related not only to the beginning of college establishment but also is one of the key factors, which predetermines the content of documents that regulate the period of targeted development of colleges: for example, the dimension of equality between universities and colleges is presupposed, development of international relations and applied research are enhanced, the principles of quality assurance are formed (The key documents of the Bologna process, 2005; The London Communiqué, 2007), etc.

The analysis of documents that regulate college education discloses a clear tendency to include private colleges into the system of Lithuanian higher education, since while developing this sector, a number of exceptions are applied regarding the college network structure, size of an educational institution (minimal number of students) and criteria of study fields in order to promote setting up of college education institutions. It should be pointed out that on the basis of the results of research acquired during the group discussion with academic community of colleges, the article highlights and elaborates on differences in state and private colleges. For example, the established state regional colleges encouraged and enabled representatives of various social strata (particularly welfare-dependent individuals or young people from large families) to acquire Professional Bachelor's degree, to develop professionally or to obtain a new qualification; closer and more efficient collaboration with various social groups or labour market institutions occurs in these educational institutions. On the other hand, academic community of private colleges



considers the principle of regionalism less and focuses their activities on the needs of the country. However, it can be stated that private colleges are more flexible compared to the state ones in several aspects: more flexible process of student admission; employment of a bigger number of doctors of science and practitioners, faster process of distance learning, better developed system of marketing, generation of innovative ideas, which is preconditioned by easier use of financial resources. The article highlights problem spheres, which impede diversification of college education.

Generalising the qualitative research, it can be stated that, firstly, the legal acts adopted between 2000 and 2010 have conditioned the change in higher education and its variety in several aspects - type of management (state – private): establishment of private colleges is encouraged and supported, geographic location (regional – city): on the basis of rationality principle colleges are set up in the regions; change in level of training: non-university higher education and provided qualification are replaced by the degree of professional bachelor; legal status (public institution – joint-stock company): non-state higher education institutions may change their legal status – public institutions may be reorganised into joint-stock companies; study forms: full-time, extramural and evening studies were changed into full-time and part-time studies; study fields: establishment of specialised (social, technological , arts) and multidisciplinary college). Secondly, diversification of higher education has encouraged the processes of availability, social mobility, efficiency, dynamics, innovation and competitiveness. Thirdly, external diversification of colleges results in social, economic, benefit to society based on innovative activities.

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