

# CHANGES IN QUALITY OF LITHUANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ASPECT OF ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

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**Abstract.** *This article deals with processes of change in quality of higher education in Lithuania, focusing on the aspect of organisational learning of the academic community. It is maintained that organizational learning empowers teachers of higher educational institutions to pursue common aims, develop their competencies at individual and collective levels, adapt to the constantly changing environment and accumulate new knowledge, reflecting on their activities. These processes and their implementation are determined by modern management of the higher educational institution, promoting every member of the academic community (teacher) to become a member of the learning organisation individually and in a team. Collective knowledge created in such manner undoubtedly makes impact on quality of higher education.*

**Keywords:** *changes in quality of higher education, learning organization, organizational learning.*

## Introduction

**The research problem.** The modern society is characterized by constant changes, global activities, excessive information, abundance of technologies, continuous knowledge building and its pragmatic use. Therefore, in order to cope with challenges of the 21 century individuals seek both to obtain required knowledge and to purposefully modify their learning and process information in ways that would enhance their learning, develop creativity and help to act in the conditions of continuous changes. Such new societal approach to learning also determines changes in quality of higher education in Lithuania, which are directly influenced by international agreements in the Bologna Process documents<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>(The Bologna Declaration (1999); Prague Communiqué (2001); Berlin Communiqué (2003); Bergen Communiqué (2005); London Communiqué (2007); Leuven and Louvain-La Neuve Communiqué (2009); Commission Communiqué “Europe 2020, A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, Brussels, (2010); Statement of the Second Bologna Policy Forum (2010); the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; “Supporting growth and jobs - an agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems” (2011); Bucharest Communication (2012); the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; “European higher education in the world” (2013).

It is evident that higher educational institutions have to face new challenges and new aims, which are exhaustively analysed in scientific studies (McMahon, Thakore, 2006; Bulajeva, 2011; et al.). In the functional aspect higher education is usually defined as the highest level of education, involving various aspects of scientific researches, implementation of general and professional education, encompassing personality development. On the other hand, the concept of higher education is perceived as dualistic as it focuses both on learning and work at higher educational institutions. Thus, it is not only students who are learning. Teachers, who teach students, must also constantly improve and pursue higher qualification. Processes taking place in the changing area of higher education inspire the aspiration to consistently manage changes, understand reality and situations, effectively plan and manage activities of the organization (Trigwell, 2001; Kvederaitė, 2009; Edintaitė, 2012). It becomes evident that the academic community has to prioritise the ability to build and share collective knowledge and values, developing the idea of *organizational learning*<sup>10</sup>, which unifies and enables the university community to naturally work together pursuing common aims; i.e., successful implementation of study aims and expected outcomes.

In recent years there have been a lot of discussions and articles about parameters of changes in quality of higher education. However, it has to be stated that so far it has still remained relevant to analyse learning environments favourable for today's reality of higher education, which are characteristic to the learning organization (Jucevičienė, 2007, 2008; Edintaitė 2012; Kvederaitė, 2009). Therefore, this article deals with processes of change in quality of Lithuanian higher education, focusing on dissemination of the idea of *organizational learning*, responding to the aim of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to seek formation of competitive European higher education, enabling the academic community to become active citizens of the democratic society, and creation of conditions for personality development in continuous learning processes. In response to that, the chosen *research subject* is changes in quality of higher education, enabling promotion of manifestation of teachers' organizational learning.

**The research aim:** to define trends of manifestation of organizational learning in the context of changes in quality of higher education.

**Research objectives:** 1) to discuss conditions inspiring changes in quality of higher education, 2) to disclose peculiarities of manifestation of organizational learning; 3) to highlight possibilities of organizational learning in processes of changes in quality of higher education.

The *methods* used in the article were theoretical analysis, analysis of scientific literature and documents.

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<sup>10</sup>Organisational learning takes place when people learn together, accumulating, analysing and using knowledge sources in order to contribute to implementation of aims of an organisation (Jucevičienė, 2007).

## The Conception of Change in Quality of Higher Education

In recent years, higher education is described alongside with *quality*, which has become a widely used concept. This is quite natural because changes in aims of higher education inevitably change the conception of quality assurance in higher education, which is determined by increasing massiveness of higher education, competition, changing societal requirements and students' expectations of study quality, growing public interest, accountability requirement, etc.

In general terms, quality of higher education is understood as suitability of aims pursued by the higher educational institution (compliance with the mission of the higher educational institution, stakeholders' expectations), suitability of material resources and conditions of the institution and effectiveness of activities in order to reach defined strategic aims. In other words, quality assurance in higher education is a process that ensures that higher education is in line with expected outcomes or established minimal requirements (Harvey, 2004).

It should be noted that official concern about the quality of higher education was expressed almost twenty years ago, when the European Ministers of Higher Education, responsible for higher education, approved *The Bologna Declaration*, which set the aim to create a unified *European Higher Education Area* by 2010. One of the key aims of this document is promotion of cooperation in Europe in the quality assurance area. The ideas of The Bologna Declaration are actively developed in *The Berlin Communiqué* (2003), *The Bergen Communiqué* (2005), *The London Communiqué* (2007) and in other Bologna Process documents, focusing on *quality of studies* as one of priority areas of higher education.

The conception of changes in quality of higher education is comprehensively analysed in studies conducted by foreign and Lithuanian scholars (Williams, 2009; Tavenas, 2004; Sallis, 2002; Harvey, 2004, 2008; Salter, Tapper, 2000; Vroeijerstijn, 1995; Pivoras, Skaburskienė 2012; Misiūnas, 2007; Savickienė, 2005; et al.). Different scientists define the aspect of the said concept quite differently. For example, A. Vroeijerstijn (1995) presents quality of higher education as a systematic and continuous process, involving the accountability element; E. Sallis (2002) presents quality assurance as a concept, which includes management, assessment, monitoring, improvement and culture; G. Žibėnienė (2006) defines quality of studies as certain systematic procedures, facilitating assessment and management of activities of the institution; J. Parri (2006) highlights both maintenance of the level of quality of higher education and its continuous improvement. Although the diversity of approaches towards quality of higher education, which have come to prominence, leads to multiple nature of the conception of quality, it is evident that the majority of authors follow the common position providing

sound arguments that demonstrate that *quality* is not a final result but a constantly changing process, grounded on:

- commitment of every member of the community to continuing improvement through activities;
- formation of the management system for improvement of quality;
- direct involvement of the community in processes of changes and improvement of quality.

In other words, universal participation of the academic community in processes of changes in quality is directly related to its readiness for changes, striving to improve professional competencies by means of the model of the *learning organization* (EUA, 2007). According to K. Watkins, V. Marsick (1992), the key principle of the learning organization is learning through action, reflection on personal experience, its reflection and change, opportunities to acquire new experience. This means that higher educational institutions must attempt to form the academic community in which all members share common aims, individually and collectively developing their competence, are able to get involved in the process of changes, take responsibility and adapt to the constantly changing environment.

### **Organizational Learning Manifestation Opportunities in Processes of Changes in Quality of Higher Education**

The discussed analysis of the conception of changes in quality of higher education demonstrates that we should not take the higher educational institution for granted but treat it as a dynamic process that results in a *non-finite quality of activities*. The perception that quality of education is a non-absolute criterion gives impetus to constantly change: develop in order to become a more effective and *learning organization*; i.e., the one that would purposefully grow, understand reality, dynamics and the situation in the market, which would effectively, efficiently and flexibly plan its activities (Šedžiuvienė, Vveinhardt, 2012).

The model of the learning organization is widely analysed by both Lithuanian and foreign authors (Bogard, 1991; Gersick, Bartunek, Dutton, 2000; Beresnevičienė, 2000; Kvedaravičius, Dagtė, 2006; Kvedaravičius, 2000; Simonaitienė, 2003; Bersėnaitė, Šaparnis, Šaparnienė, 2006; Andrikiienė, Anužienė 2006; Tubutienė, Poškutė, 2007; Jucevičienė, 2007; Trakšelys, 2011, etc.), providing a variety of descriptions of the *learning organization*. The term *learning organization* is still treated as a kind of neologism both in scientific literature and actual practice of organizations, which is namely inspiring its indefiniteness (Bukantaitė, Remeikienė, 2007).

Analysing the model of the learning organization, K. Trakšelys (2011) summarises characteristics of the *learning organization* describing it as an organization continuously creating knowledge, disseminating information,

promoting changes, understanding the importance of novelties, striving for renewal. It is important to note that strategy formation in the learning organization is treated as a learning process. Employees are involved in policy making of the organization, general formation and implementation of its vision and mission. In this context the *learning environment* becomes relevant, in which members of the organization should have their development opportunities, which would ensure learning in all links of the organization, invest in education, promote systematic thinking, personal mastery, team training, etc. Exploring the concept of the *learning organization* N. Šedžiuvienė and J. Vveinhardt (2012) distinguish several most important criteria: 1) culture of learning, promoting continuous learning and changes, which form the ideology of the organization; 2) knowledge as activities of the organization, grounded on knowledge and know-how (not just its accumulation but also sharing); 3) systematic thinking, creating and developing the universal learning system (the organization is perceived as a system); 4) flexibility – the organization's ability to adapt to trends of rapid changes, foreseeing changes; 5) collaboration – development of collaborating teams to break free from hindrances of communication transference. We have to note that the described criteria are identical to characteristics of the learning organisation mentioned by K. Trakšelis (2011) and inherent to insights of discussed authors, characterizing the *learning organization*.

Application of the model of the *learning organization* as an innovative tool in higher education is certainly attractive in the present time, when issues of changes in quality are actualized. Formation of the higher educational institution as an open and flexible *learning organization*, which is constantly improving, developing and creating new knowledge, would help the university to make contacts with the external environment, this way developing the ability to respond to its changes, accept information from outside and provide it with information about itself (e.g., about its achievements, cultural norms, traditions, future plans, etc.), ensuring mutual feedback. Such openness of the organization, according to V. Kanišauskaitė (2011), determines the vision, strategy, aims of the higher educational institution and creates favourable conditions for the university to promote changes in the environment in order to both survive and develop. Learning processes taking place in the *learning organization* enable the higher educational institution to develop its competencies, activity opportunities, empowering the academic community to learn, ponder, explore its perspectives and experience, and to transform obtained data into knowledge that would be accessible to all members of the organisation and significant for achievement of aims of the institution. Besides, such learning in the team enriches intellectual resources of the higher educational institution because discussions with colleagues turn the individual's acquired knowledge into the common property of the organisation. Thus, in the broad sense the *learning organization* can

undoubtedly *positively* contribute to the transformation of quality in higher education.

The prerequisite for giving a sense to the ideas of the learning organization and for making potential impact on quality of higher education is *organizational learning*. V. Tubutienė and S. Morkūnaitė (2008) argue that organizational learning is the key factor determining that the organisation is learning because the essential aim of the learning organisation is its members' continuous learning, improvement, knowledge accumulation and sharing. It is namely organisational learning that responds to these needs, empowering every member of the academic community to get involved in the learning organization: continually learn individually and collectively, cooperate, refusing the role of the passive observer, which so far has been inherent to scholars. This can be achieved through learning levels, which are analysed by T. K. Thomsen (2003), B. Burnes, A. Colour (2004), P. Jucevičienė (2007), V. Stanišauskienė (2007) and others. The authors examine three levels of organizational learning: single-loop, grounded on *operational learning*, i.e., questioning (What were our intentions? What have we achieved? What were we doing?), identifying mistakes of the organization, while their correction enables the organization to continue implementing its policy and aims; double-loop, related to *crisis management*, when learning involves identification, correction and modification of fundamental norms of the organization, including values and aims; triple-loop, associated with *review and reflection of previous activities* of the organization in order to master learning activities and insights. The said scientific studies state that all three levels of organizational learning are different but can be combined and applied at the higher education institution at the individual and collective level, depending on the maturation level of the institution.

In modern higher education area this dimension of organisational learning becomes significant for new knowledge formation, which helps to break free from the "frame" of one's experience and detect what is effective, seeking positive changes in quality of higher education in the successful and competitive learning higher educational institution (Walton, 1999; Kahane; 2004; Jucevičienė, 2007; et al.).

Namely the environment grounded on *organizational learning* at the *higher educational institution* turns into the denominator, which is a prerequisite for existence of modern and successful learning organization. *Organizational learning* helps to envisage individual and collective gaps, correct them through continuous improvement and the like. This positively shapes strategic performance of the organisation, outlines the direction in which the higher educational institution will turn: whether it will only be concerned about the learning process of employees as individuals (*learning-orientated* organization) or pursue to enable individuals' *organizational learning* and develop the shift in human resources. The described learning environment can inspire the need for

higher education to reconstruct itself, enabling academic community members to become more flexible and adaptable to rapid change and novelties, make responsible decisions and shed a new light on problems enabling the organization – the academic community of the institution – to constantly learn, seeking improvement of quality in higher education.

### Conclusions

1. Lithuania's accession to the European Union was followed by the radical reform in the higher education system, changes in the attitude towards the conception of quality in higher education. The Bologna Process documents and scientific studies present the conception of quality in higher education as a systematic and continuously ongoing process, in which actively participating academic community – students, teachers, scientists – experience changes in thinking and activities. Universal participation of the academic community of higher educational institutions in processes of changes in quality is directly related to its readiness for changes, striving to improve professional competencies, take responsibility and adapt to the constantly changing environment.
2. Disclosed dimensions of changes in quality of Lithuanian higher education have highlighted the need for giving a sense to the *learning organization* in the contemporary higher education, in which the academic community is empowered to create new knowledge, optimise information dissemination opportunities, promote changes, consciously perceive the importance of the need for novelties in the higher educational institution, seek constant renewal.
3. One of the key factors seeking improvement of quality in higher education is *organizational learning*, which empowers every member of the academic community to get involved in the learning organization: continually learn individually and collectively, cooperate, refusing the role of the passive observer, which so far has been inherent to scholars. Namely such learning environment can inspire the need for higher education to reconstruct itself, enabling academic community members to become more flexible and adaptable to rapid changes, make responsible decisions and shed a new light on problems enabling the organization to constantly learn, seeking *improvement of quality in higher education*.

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