

Providing policy-makers and practitioners with resources to improve
the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area



PL4SD

peer learning for the
social dimension

Final Report

Lithuania

Version: Final agreed version

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Glossary

Abbreviation	
BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ECTS	European Credit, Transfer and Accumulation System
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education ¹
LAMA BPO	Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions for General Admission
LSS	Lithuanian National Union of Students
MOSTA	Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania
PL4SD	Peer Learning for the Social Dimension of Higher Education
SKVC	Center for Quality Assessment in Higher Education

¹ <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx>

1 Introduction

The current report presents the analysis and the findings resulting from the national review that was carried out in Lithuania in the first half of 2014 as part of the Peer Learning for Social Dimension Project (PL4SD).

Lithuania was one of the first countries that opted to participate in the initial series of the PL4SD Country Reviews. The participation of the country has been endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Science in Lithuania and has been confirmed by the project Stakeholders' Forum, formed by the members of the BFUG Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group (2012-2015).

The review was jointly coordinated by the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna (IHS, Austria) as leader of the PL4SD project and one of the project partners, the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW, Germany).

The PL4SD Country Reviews have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist Lithuania in the development of a coherent and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education.

Furthermore, the Review aims to highlight Lithuania as a role model, which wishes to look at its education and especially higher education system from the perspective of improving the social dimension of higher education. Both the project participants and the inviting Ministry are convinced that this type of review can lead to overall improvements in access to and delivery of higher education in the 21st century.

1.1 The social dimension of higher education

Research shows that a combination of three factors tends to determine educational success: student ability, material and immaterial (e.g. social and cultural) resources and opportunity. In particular, non-academic factors such as social background, financial resources, aspiration, flexible provisions of higher education and study framework conditions (e.g. balance between work and studies) affect participation and success in higher education. Additionally, student ability may have been affected by a person's material and immaterial resources at previous (e.g. secondary) educational levels.

Under the term 'social dimension' the Ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory countries have committed to improving the inclusiveness of European higher education, in recognition that study frameworks may have to be better diversified in order to assure opportunity for all members of society. The Country Review follows this Ministerial commitment:

In the **London Communiqué** of May 2007, Ministers responsible for higher education agreed on a common objective for the social dimension: *“that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”*.

They further emphasised the importance *“of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background”* and to continue their efforts 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.”*

Ministers also committed themselves to report on their *“... national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness”*.

In **Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve** (2009), Ministers pledged to *“...set measurable targets to widen participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade.”*

In **Bucharest** 2012, Ministers agreed to *“...develop a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing by 2013 in countries which request it and initiate a pilot project to promote peer learning on the social dimension of higher education.”*

The commitments undertaken by Ministers are based on the arguments of social justice (i.e. attaining educational success regardless of a person’s origin) as well as economic and societal gains (i.e. maximising the talent potential of individuals).

1.2 Structure of the Country Review

The PL4SD Consortium developed a framework for the Country Reviews that was detailed in the Terms of Reference and was agreed with the Ministry of Education and Science in Lithuania. The review process consists of a preparation phase of setting up the external review team and drafting of the Background Report, an implementation phase of developing the schedule for the site visit and the on-site review and the final phase of drafting and finalising the review report.

1.2.1 The external review team

The Country Review was conducted by an international review team consisting of four members of the PL4SD Consortium and three external experts who were selected based on their wide-ranging experience in the assessment of national higher education systems and their understanding of social dimension issues. Collectively their knowledge and experience enables them to sympathise with and comprehend the perspectives of policy-makers, HEI representatives, researchers and students. The external experts were nominated by the PL4SD Consortium and mandated by the Stakeholders’ Forum (consisting of members of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group of the Bologna Process, 2012-2015).

To establish that there was no known conflict of interest the curriculum vitae of experts was made available to the Lithuanian Ministry prior to the on-site visit.

The external review team was composed of the following experts.

External reviewers	Position and affiliation
Patrick Clancy	Lead Expert Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University College Dublin, Ireland.
Hanne Smidt	Policy expert Senior Advisor, European University Association (EUA)
Allan Pall	Student expert Former Chairperson of the European Students' Union (ESU)
Martin Unger	Project Leader, PL4SD Senior Researcher, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS)
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Melinda Szabo	Country Review, PL4SD Expert, Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW)

1.2.2 Background Report

The Background Report was developed two months prior to the site visit. The report was based on a predefined template following a series of guiding questions. A number of supporting documents were collected from the Bologna National reporting exercise, studies carried out by Eurydice, Eurostudent, Eurostat, the Eurypedia database as well as other material provided by the Lithuanian Ministry and Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA). In addition, the information provided by Lithuania on measures for improving the social dimension in higher education was also included in the report.

The Background Report was sent for further consultation to the Lithuanian contact persons and used to prepare the on-site visit and this final review report. An updated and elaborated version of this Background Report is provided in Annex 2 to this report.

1.2.3 Site visit

A preparatory meeting was carried out in Lithuania a month prior to the site visit. The Country Review coordinator met with the representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science to discuss the arrangements for the site visit, the timetable and to suggest possible

stakeholders that could be invited to meet and discuss the social dimension of higher education in the Lithuanian context with the review team. The meeting also helped to clarify matters raised during the preparation of the Background Report.

The site visit took place between 5 and 9 May 2014. The Lithuanian contact persons assisted the review team with the logistics and coordination of the site visit. An outline of the site visit schedule was developed by the review team and finalised by the national contact person (see Annex 1).

During the five-day visit, the review team interviewed approximately 80 individuals, separately or in groups. Discussions were held with the Vice-minister and other officials from the Ministry of Education and Science (department and units of academic mobility and continuing education, university studies etc.), with the Chair of the national students union (LSS), with representatives of the rectors' conference for universities (LURK) and colleges (LKDK), with the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA), with the national quality assurance agency (SKVC), with representatives of the association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (LAMA BPO), with the Department of the Affairs of Disabled (NDI), with the National Centre for Special Needs Education and Psychology and with the State Studies Foundation. The review team has also conducted interviews 'on location' with higher education institutions representatives at Vilnius University and outside the capital, at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas and at the regional Utena College in Utena.

The review team would like to thank the contact persons for their support provided in organising the site visit and for facilitating the research and documentation process. The review team is also grateful to the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science (*Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija*) for its hospitality and openness and to everyone who participated and provided reviewers with helpful insights into the social dimension issues of the Lithuanian higher education.

1.2.4 Structure and purpose of the Final Report

The Final Report draws together the analysis in the Background Report (Annex 2) and the review team's observations during the on-site visit.

The Background Report covers the main features of the Lithuanian education system (history, national context, general organisational framework and mechanisms and some central statistics). In order to grasp the issues that can affect the accessibility and fairness of the higher education system in Lithuania at various stages of the education system, the Background Report is structured into four sections: before entry to higher education, at entry, study framework and graduation and transition. This structure is repeated in the Final Report. The reviewers have considered both academic and non-academic factors that can affect the learning opportunities and learning success of students, and particularly of underrepresented groups.

For each of these four stages, the report details the main findings, highlighting what the reviewers have learnt about how the Lithuanian higher education system works, in a first

subsection, then provides an analysis of these findings with a reflection on possible future action. The main aim of this report is not to recommend singular actions, but to facilitate Lithuania in its efforts to see the whole picture concerning the social dimension and to use this insight in order to create a national strategy or action plan for improvement. To this aim the report closes with key recommendations arising from the four preceding chapters.

2 Analysis of main findings

2.1 Before entry to higher education

2.1.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage can generally be characterised as a qualifying and decision-making stage for students. The pre-tertiary level of the education system presents certain routes through the system that will facilitate entry to higher education to prospective students. At the same time, completion of a lower level of education will lead to exiting this level and therefore entails a decision on the part of the learner as to whether they want to, aspire to or can enter higher education. This is likely to be taken on the basis of their expected exit qualifications, the expected costs and benefits of entering higher education and the alternatives. An important characteristic is also the type of education a person is following, as it might be relevant in determining the chances to enter higher education (e.g. different opportunities for graduates of general schools and vocational schools). In many cases, research has shown that students from underrepresented groups are more pessimistic about the options regarding participating in higher education. For this reason, one of the main goals for improving the equality of opportunities and the inclusivity of higher education is to make special efforts to prepare prospective students beforehand, providing them with information about the available options and raising their aspirations.

2.1.2 What we have learnt

The Background Report highlights that there are two main paths to completing upper secondary education. These are the attendance of vocationally or academically orientated schools. The transition from the Basic School, which (almost) all Lithuanian pupils attend, takes place either at grade 9 or grade 11. In upper secondary education the share of pupils attaining the vocational track is 28%. The Background Report showed that many more males attend the vocational track than females. It is worth noting that this difference between genders is likely to be partially based on differential academic performance on the part of the females, which begin in earlier levels of education. According to PISA, Lithuania has one of the largest gender differences in performance in science and reading among PISA participating countries, in favour of girls². This segmentation affects transition paths, since most graduates of the vocational track attend colleges to study a Professional Bachelor and most graduates of the academic track attend university to enrol in general Bachelor courses. For this reason, this form of structural differentiation is relevant to the study of opportunities to attend higher education.

While the review team did not have the opportunity to study in detail the structure of the second level system it formed the impression that the high level of stratification of the second level system is not only present in the vocational/academic tracking system.

² OECD (2013), PISA results 2012, Lithuania profile view

Leaving aside the Youth Schools and Vocational Schools which have a clearly defined remit, the experts noted the multiplicity of school types: some stand-alone primary school which offer grade 1-4 only; Basic Schools which offer Grades 5-10, some of which also offer Grades 1-4; other Secondary Schools (*Gimnazija*) which might also offer all Grades 1-12. Such a differentiated structure, with a variety of transition points, offers scope for knowledgeable parents to make school choices, which maximise the opportunity for their children. In contrast parents with lower levels of education and more limited resources may be less capable of negotiating choices which maximise opportunities for their children.

Additionally, students from some rural areas may have more limited opportunities to access high performing schools. This issue is indicated in the PISA study,³ which shows a relatively strong correlation between the socio-economic profile of schools and the quantity or quality of resources. This means that the choice of and access to high performing (academic track) secondary schools can affect the likelihood of attaining sufficient exit scores to enter the high performing universities. It is important to assure that all prospective students from all regions in Lithuania have the same chance of obtaining access to a state-funding study place in the programme they want.

The final exit examination from secondary schooling can be classified as a ‘high-stakes examination’, because their performance determines the chance of obtaining a state-funded study place in the field and higher education institution of their choice (see section below). The first consequence of this system is that prospective students attending high performing academic track schools are more likely to attain these marks and this means that access to a high performing school determines to a strong degree a prospective student’s chances of a free study place. The second consequence of this system is that, according to our discussions, it has led to the development of a shadow system of education for supporting pupils’ preparation of the examinations outside of school; in some cases with the same teachers giving additional lessons for private fees. The third consequence is that such a system makes it hard for entrants taking a ‘second chance’ at entering higher education as adults (i.e. lifelong learners), who have left the school system many years ago.⁴

On the topic of raising aspirations, the review team learnt that universities and colleges send delegations to upper secondary schools in order to inform prospective students of their offers. This provides young people with the chance to discuss the opportunities for studying in different courses at different colleges and universities and they can benefit from the peer interaction and exchange of information with those who have already been admitted. However, it seems that these efforts are largely driven by a competition between higher education establishments to recruit high performing students in a system of declining numbers (see demographic developments in Background Report). It is also important that prospective students receive sufficient objective and neutral information on

³ OECD (2010), PISA results 2009 p. 42.

⁴ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): There is a recognition (grade conversion) system for the lifelong learners in order to equate their graduating achievements to the system that exists now. So technically there aren’t barriers to enter HE system for the adults who have finished school long time ago. But if the achievements were not sufficient, then of course it is more difficult to compete for the state funded place.

the opportunities and costs of studying in higher education from other sources. Although the evaluation team was informed of some central services to inform students, there seems to be a high reliance on prospective students (and their families) informing themselves.⁵

2.1.3 Analysis and reflections

This stage is typified by selection mechanisms within the educational system, which are meant to identify high potential prospective students, and by a multiple of decisions made on the part of pupils and their parents, which increase or decrease the likelihood of a pupil attending a certain programme at a certain higher education institution. The ultimate principle underlying the system is merit and the system aims to promote those with the highest merit. However, if merit is measured by the level of performance in the exit examination it is essential that all students be given the same opportunity to achieve to their maximum potential. The challenge for public policy is to ensure as far as possible equality of conditions so that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

One of the advantages of coming from a higher socio-economic group is that parents are well-informed about higher education and about the implications of earlier decisions about school choices and programme selection. In contrast students from families with no experience of higher education are dependent of external sources to fill this information deficit. This is an important consideration for all types of underrepresented groups, such as people from low socio-economic backgrounds, disabled students and – as shown in the Background Report – males.

For this reason, it is very important that as much information as possible on the chances of entering higher education is available to prospective students and their parents at upper secondary school level, but also at the commencement of secondary schooling, where a choice for a particular upper secondary school must be made. Whilst this information may be available from various sources, there appear to be insufficient central, comprehensive and relevant sources of such information.

The issue remains of whether pupils and their families could act on this information. For instance, the apparent disadvantage for pupils living in rural areas in terms of high performing schools cannot be compensated for individually – unless families move. In this case, providing support to schools from disadvantaged areas by e.g. improving the student-teacher ratio, enhancing the quality of teacher training and educational resources would be a worthwhile option. By ensuring an equitable distribution of educational opportunities, students' achievement would be less likely determined by the socio-economic status of their family or the geographic location of their school.

⁵ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): One of the examples of such central services could be the traditional fair “international exhibition of knowledge and education”, where prospective students can gather systemic information about their possibilities in HE. The fair is held every year in major cities and it attracts a lot of school leavers from various regions of Lithuania and is very popular among them. Pupils are usually brought to the fair by their teachers or other school representatives.

While the review team is not in a position to make specific recommendations about the structure of the second level system it is of the view that if equality of opportunity is to be achieved in higher education, the second level system needs to be evaluated to establish the extent to which all students are given an opportunity to compete on more equal basis (e.g. reducing the gap between quality of teaching, school resources etc.). This will also involve some additional affirmative action in favour of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from rural areas and other marginalised groups.

At the same time, there appears to be very little provision of second chances routes, which gives access to higher education. The problem with this approach is that, in the context of the whole system, the selection stage leads to a paradox: the paradox of the dual-track system is that the families with the most resources (i.e. material, cultural and social) have the best opportunities to receive high quality educational provision on all levels. Therefore, one of the main recommendations of the expert reviewers is for the Lithuanian education system, as a whole, to adopt a more comprehensive definition of merit, which includes relative merit, but also the right to multiple chances.

2.2 At entry to higher education

2.2.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage is characterised as the ‘selection’ stage of the higher education system. The entrance stage should ideally provide equal access opportunities to all prospective students. However, in most countries participation and representation rates of different societal groups are uneven, in particular when referring to groups from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities or when it comes to the choices of study fields for women and men. For this reason, the social dimension goal is to widen access, especially for these groups.

In order to understand this stage and its impacts it is therefore important to look at the general entry requirements for all groups of students. Second chance routes are of particular interest as well, as these routes include remedial support to help prospective students including mature learners, who have not followed the typical path to higher education entry.

2.2.2 What we have learnt

The pre-requisite for entering higher education is the school-leaving examination (*Brandos atestatas*). School students apply for a study place through the central admission system (LAMA BPO), which is based on common agreements between HEIs on the requirements for studying. Pupils apply for up to 12 choices, which are a combination of the choice for a specific university or college, a specific field of study and a choice for a state-funded study place or a fee-paying place.

As with many other post-Socialist countries, which have to cope with the dual challenges of high student demand and low public budget, Lithuania has a dual-track funding system.

This means that only a share of students can access free (i.e. state-funded) study places (around half of them) and the rest have to pay fees ranging between 1,000 € and 5,300 € per year for Bachelor studies. A prospective student qualifies for such state-funded places by achieving sufficiently high marks in the final secondary school examination (*Brandos atestatas*). The marks that were necessary to obtain a place in the last round of application are published on the LAMA BPO website. However, the final marks for any year are not pre-set, but a result of the interplay between supply of places and demand. In general, a prospective student will need higher marks to enter a university than a college and state-funded places go to the highest performing university and college applicants.

The reviewers note from discussions that there is remarkable acceptance for the system on all sides. This appears to be based on the clarity and transparency of the general system and the principle of merit behind it. At the same time, the reviewers were told that the requirements for the school-leaving examination for prospective students of certain subject areas have been changing over the past years (central admission system). This instability makes the system more confusing for prospective students to negotiate and may make it difficult for them to choose the right subject focus at the start of their upper secondary level (at 16).

A second factor to consider at entry to higher education is the cost of studies, which may be tuition-free for those who obtain a state-funded place at a university or college. Based on a special analysis of the Eurostudent V data from MOSTA, the reviewers note that the chance of obtaining a state-funded place seem to be relatively equal for students from divergent social backgrounds (i.e. students whose parents also went to university or college versus those whose parents did not). However, a further analysis did show that students from low social backgrounds are more likely to obtain a state-funded place at a college than a university.

For fee-paying students the cost of study varies according to the chosen field, depending on the cost of provision. While 38% of prospective students in a MOSTA survey stated that their application was motivated by the wish to study in a certain study programme (at a certain HEI), 42% stated that their choice was motivated by the chance of getting a state-funded study place. This shows that the regulation of state-funded places may have the unintended effect of steering study choice in a short-sighted manner that leads prospective students to make ill-considered study choices (based on financing opportunity and not on their interest and competence). In the interviews, the experts also heard that the popularity of social sciences (which make up more than one third of places in both university and college sectors) may also be motivated by prospective students, who do not obtain a state-funded place, seeking the cheaper study option.

Lithuania continues to have a high participation rate into higher education, with considerably more young people having a chance to attain higher education than in the past (i.e. 50% more students since 2000). The number of both public and private higher educational institutions in Lithuania has also increased in the last decade. However, the number of entrants to higher education declined in both the university and college sectors

between 2008 and 2010. This was followed by a significant increase in emigration among the 20-29 years old between 2010 and 2012. A possible explanation for the drop in the student population in all sectors of Lithuania's higher education (state-funded and fee-paying places in university and college sectors) is the combination of declines in both the state budget invested in higher education and private equity following the financial recession in 2008. Although funding in higher education has recovered in line with the recovery in the overall national GDP per capita, the overall number of state-funded study places has dropped (see Background Report). These developments can be considered in the context of the opportunity encouraging young adults (who have perhaps been abroad) back into the higher education system at a later date, e.g. through second chance routes.

2.2.3 Analysis and reflections

While the review team was impressed by the extent to which the current entry system was perceived as fair it has reservations about whether the present dual funding system is the best system to advance the social dimension of higher education. While the emphasis on academic merit has much to recommend it as the basis for allocating free places in higher education there is also a strong argument in favour of allocating free places on the basis of financial need. Recognising that a change of this nature is a major policy decision it is recommended that this debate should be part of the policy agenda. Students coming from families rich in financial, social and cultural capital are more likely to score higher grades in the school leaving examination; but they are also more likely to be able to afford to make some contribution to the cost of their higher education. It is questionable whether the granting of free state-funded places to these students is the best use of scarce ministry resources. In contrast, students coming from families with lower financial, social and cultural resources find it more challenging to achieve high grades in the school leaving examination and are also less able to pay tuition fees.

Although the current admission system is considered in general to be fair by those who were interviewed, there are implicit discriminations and influential factors, which the review team considers could lead to ineffective educational paths for student entrants from different social (high vs. low) and geographical (urban vs. rural) backgrounds. In particular, incentives should be reviewed in order to avoid prospective students making study decisions based on material means and expected costs. A significant increase in second chance opportunities for accessing higher education should be considered in response to the impediments which many students experience during their primary and secondary education. The demographic decline, which will reduce demand for third level education from school leavers, offers an ideal opportunity to advance this agenda. One option, which could be explored, is to set national targets for different under-represented groups and offer HIEs financial incentives to strive to meet these targets. Initiatives surrounding students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, older students, students with disabilities are obvious target groups. In respect of the latter we would urge a wider definition of disability that goes beyond physical disabilities. A second and perhaps initial

policy initiative might be to invite HEIs to make proposals to tackle this problem and to selectively fund the most promising proposals. The higher education system has already acquired a good deal of experience with targeted initiatives designed to meet skills shortages in the labour market, thus such initiatives can easily be accommodated within the existing funding model. For some populations of second chance entrants it may be necessary to develop access preparatory programmes as in general it is not appropriate that such students be required to take exit examinations designed for 18 year olds to demonstrate their readiness for higher education.

On a more general note, the entry routes to higher education seem to lack flexible learning paths and a certain amount of permeability between vocational education, higher education and lifelong learning arrangements. Second chance routes for non-traditional students who were not high-performers at school level or who choose to enter higher education later in life are hardly used. This is shown by the fact that the age group of 25-64 years is weakly represented and that there are only c. 8% delayed transition students in Lithuania compared to a Eurostudent average of 17% (Orr, Gwosc, & Netz, 2011, p. 225). One of the reasons is that state-funded places do not seem to be available to this group. This could be reconsidered, especially in the context of a declining population base. Additional criteria could be set up that go beyond the current LAMA BPO system, such as special quotas. Quota systems should be treated with sensitivity to prevent potential harmful effects of labelling underrepresented groups. Alternative routes (including alternative entry qualifications) could be offered as well for groups such as those from different social backgrounds, older students and disabled students, in order to actively pursue widening participation of these groups.

2.3 Study frameworks

2.3.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage is characterised by the progression towards the successful completion of studies within the higher education system. A central goal for the social dimension must be to ensure the retention and the learning progress of students regardless of their social and economic background. This ultimately means on one hand providing qualitative student support services, academic and career counselling, enabling a certain flexibility of study progress, and on the other hand ensuring direct support in the form of grants to achieving this objective. These are therefore important aspects, which the experts looked at during the review.

2.3.2 What we have learnt

For students, the cost of studies in Lithuania is amongst the highest in Europe, while their income is amongst the lowest (comparison with the participating countries in Eurostudent IV) with a high proportion of students choosing to work alongside their studies (around one third), especially those from low social backgrounds (Orr et al., 2011, p. 98). This shows that many students are faced with the challenge of matching work and studies.

The findings in the Background Report also show part-time students account for 25% of first cycle students enrolled in universities and 38% in colleges, with an even higher share of part-time students in the second and third cycle. Although part-time students are eligible to the same amount of financial support, they make higher financial contributions, as most of them pay full fees and carry out their studies over a longer period of time (up to 45 ECTS/semester). In the course of our interviews with representatives of HEIs, it was stated that organising additional type of courses for part-time students during weekends or in short-term modules presents higher costs and it has become financially unattractive. This calls into question whether part-time student status matches the need of this group of students for more flexible study provision over an extended period of time.

A special analysis of the Eurostudent V data by MOSTA shows that 41% of all students consider themselves to have serious or very serious financial difficulties. Furthermore, 53% of students without a state-funded place make the same statement about their financial difficulties. This means that financing studies is an issue for all Lithuanian students and especially for those, who are not on state-funded study places.

Despite concerns about the affordability of study places, the review team found that only few students take out a state-guaranteed loan. This may be due to the changing conditions of the loans (change to conditions of charging interest before the currently applicable cap of 5%) and students may consider the loan too risky over time. A specific issue is that Bachelor loan recipients may have to start paying back their loan whilst they study for a Master degree.

One striking aspect of student support is the exclusiveness of this provision to judgements on academic merit (i.e. study grants only available to those whose competitive scores are the highest). The merit approach is also found in the distribution of social scholarships. This approach discounts that social and private circumstances of individuals can affect study performance and discussions of the experts with interview partners suggest that it would be important to introduce a more encompassing idea of academic performance taking into account academic success, social circumstances and financial needs.

The review team also noticed that student support is mostly confined to financial support.⁶ It's equally important to consider investing in other forms of student support services, such as academic and psychological counselling, career guidance, peer-to-peer support, remedial classes in academic writing, math, English etc. These types of programmes and services would increase the quality of the student experience; ensure progress and lower dropout rates.⁷ The review team would also like to stress the low level of awareness about

⁶ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): Most higher education institutions also provide accommodation services to their students.

⁷ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): Financial support is allocated and coordinated at national level whereas academic support is initiated and implemented mostly at the institutional level. Academic, social services support provided by higher education institutions include career orientation and counselling, academic counselling, psychological services. Also institutions try to provide possibilities for the development of students' creative abilities by supporting various research societies, theatre and dance groups, choirs, sports clubs etc.

groups who might face possible forms of discrimination on campus i.e. LGBTI⁸ groups, religious groups, people belonging to a specific race.

With a focus on the HEIs, the review team suggests the need for further work in improving the monitoring of the student support measures (e.g. criteria for reducing drop-out rates, services of guidance and counselling, student-centred learning, etc.) and in closing the feedback loop between the information gathered (student evaluation questionnaires, focus groups) and the follow-up action taken by the institution. The interviews showed that there is little awareness of the importance of these actions for improving services both through planned monitoring and through feedback from stakeholders.

With respect to the public funding of higher education institutions, the reviewers note that the driving indicator is the number of state-funded places fixed by the Ministry of Education and Science. Whilst this system is clear, it means other important activities of higher education institutions are not supported, such as performance in regard to recruiting and retaining underrepresented groups (e.g. disabled students, students from low social backgrounds, lifelong learners etc.). At one university, the institution prided itself on its support of disabled students, whilst at one college, the profile focussed on providing well-qualified academics for the local and regional labour market. In discussions, the review team noted an interest in exploring ways to reflect the particular profile of individual institutions better in the institutional funding system. These types of practices could be extended to other universities or colleges to improve the successful progression of different underrepresented groups of students.

2.3.3 Analysis and reflections

The overall funding structure (institutional funding, fees and student financial support) of Lithuanian higher education system seems to affect the progress of certain student groups in higher education. Consistent with the concerns raised about the appropriateness of the current allocation of state-funded and self-funded places at the point of entry, the review team formed the view that financial problems are critical issues which impact on student progression and completion. While there is a needs-based scholarship scheme this is also circumscribed by what appears to be rather rigid performance criteria, which may not adequately take into account the challenging social, economic and cultural circumstances that some students are confronted with. In this context the quality of student support and counselling services are critical. The international evidence shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often need additional support to ensure study success. The issue could be addressed in rethinking the design of the financial support and on how it can best target disadvantaged groups. One aspect would be expanding the understanding of merit-based support in the case for both financial support, and counselling and social affairs. Focusing on possible needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable students within higher education according to a holistic approach (e.g. interlinked support networks, available

⁸ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)

learning resources that meet their needs), rather than just simply providing financial support, could prove to be more effective in successfully integrating these groups of students.

In order to provide a clearer stimulus for positive action on the part of HEIs, an instrument such as the currently envisaged bilateral agreements between the Ministry and individual higher education institutions could be applied, as it can make institutions' profiles clearer and provide direct funding for HEI-specific initiatives to develop strategies and measures for an inclusive learning environment. A further possibility is to introduce a reward scheme for HEIs, which are especially successful in addressing and achieving the need for flexible learning opportunities and for supporting non-traditional students.

While there are some data about the composition of the student body, a more systematic collection of data on the completion and drop-out rates of students or regarding the possibility of students to move between different statuses (i.e. from full-time to part time, from colleges to universities) should be made available to ensure a better understanding regarding the flexibility of the system and provide basis for future policy developments. In order to best understand motivations and individual issues, qualitative research (e.g. interviews, focus groups with students who have dropped out or have decided to change study course) could be used to complement quantitative monitoring efforts and to fine-tune policy measures in this respect.

2.4 Graduation and transition

2.4.1 Characteristics of this stage

The graduation and transition stage is characterised as the move into the labour market or further educational training. Successfully offering a more inclusive higher education system necessitates consideration of what happens after completion of a course of study.

2.4.2 What we have learnt

This was not the main focus of the Country Review. However an important point, which was discussed during the review, was the chances of college graduates, who complete their studies with a Professional Bachelor, to progress onto a Master course. From the perspective of the social dimension this is particularly important, since students of college courses tend to come from low social backgrounds. Colleges are currently not able to offer Master courses (although the experts were told of a current debate on this issue). This means that students have to go to a university to pursue further studies and the experts were told that this required a bridging course at a university before commencement of the Masters. Furthermore, since colleges tend to be in regional areas and universities in the cities, pursuing a Master also often required moving to a city. This was considered in interviews with students and staff at the visited college as a very restrictive practice.

One aspect of transition is from the HEI to the local labour market. The experts acknowledge the strong community engagement of some colleges in this respect.

2.4.3 Analysis and reflections

Examining the issue of transition from a college Professional Bachelor to a Master qualification, the expert suggest considering closer links between universities and colleges in the delivery of Masters. This can be done through specialised joint degrees or cooperative study programmes established between colleges and universities. A direct consequence would mean that more students who study at colleges have a better opportunity to progress on to a Masters programme, if they wish.

In terms of engagement with the local community to ensure smooth transition between higher education and the labour market, this is also something which could be supported through institutional funding of HEIs. Due to their geographical spread it is likely that colleges will make the most significant contribution here and this should be supported.

2.5 General comments

Aside from the specific findings, the reviewers would like to make four remarks on the higher education system and its treatment of the social dimension and one general recommendation.

- The review team found the general education system in Lithuania as transparent and rule-based. This appears to be reflected in the acceptance of the system by members of the academia and society.
- The system as a whole is driven by the principle of merit. This applies to the allocation of state-funded places. It even applies to the treatment of special groups such as disabled students, who are expected to compete on equal terms with all other student groups for their study place. And while there is a needs-based scholarship system in place, it is also circumscribed by demanding performance criteria for the retention of scholarships. Scholarships are also available as an incentive system to reward high levels of achievement. This merit system has the virtue of transparency and apparent fairness and can claim to have institutionalised the triumph of ‘achievement’ over ‘ascription’ reversing the inherent unfairness, which historically afflicted the stratification and reward system in many societies. However, the review team was struck by the virtual absence from the system of any evidence of an acceptance of the concept of *relative merit* or *relative performance*, common in other countries. Social science research, internationally, has demonstrated that inequalities in personal and family circumstances do not offer ‘a level playing field’ for all students, thus in a competitive system the odds are stacked in favour of those with superior resources. A feature of education policy in most countries is a growing acceptance that there needs to be some affirmative action in favour of those with limited personal, financial, social and cultural resources. Hence, in the spirit of the London Communiqué, if all social groups are to be represented in

higher education, and if some consistently fare worse in the competitive entry system, many countries have put aside reserved places for some groups such as the disabled and/or diversified their entry procedures to ensure reasonable participation levels for all social groups. These developments should not be seen as a rejection of merit principles but rather the outcome of a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between the opportunity structure and academic performance.

- In the discussions carried out with different actors, the review team noted the different understandings given to the concept of the social dimension in higher education. The notion appears to be mostly related to the financial support for marginal student groups, such as disabled students, students from very poor backgrounds and orphans. It's equally important to consider investing in other forms of student support services, such as academic and psychological counselling, career guidance, peer-to-peer support, remedial classes in academic writing, math, English etc. These types of programmes and services would increase the quality of the student experience; ensure progress and lower dropout rates.⁹
- Additionally, the reviewers noted after various presentations that the higher education system as a whole has a very narrow definition of students with disabilities by focusing on a definition from the labour market with the concept of degrees of “workability”. The reviewers encourage a more learner-orientated view of disability, which focuses on learning impairments and how to support them through special initiatives (as used for instance in the Eurostudent survey).

After reviewing the available reports and policy papers and following the on-site evaluation visit, the experts note that whilst there are individual measures and efforts on institutional level, there is less of a common approach and engagement throughout the system to address the multiple issues of the social dimension. This is often referred to as a “joined up approach”. The reviewers therefore highlight the fact that supporting students according to this wider definition means that all actors in the higher education system – in particular: policy-makers, higher education institutions and student organisations – must work together. The insights contained in this document are aimed at providing a baseline for such collaborative work.

⁹ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): Financial support is allocated and coordinated at national level whereas academic support is initiated and implemented mostly at the institutional level. Academic, social services support provided by higher education institutions include career orientation and counselling, academic counselling, psychological services. Also institutions try to provide possibilities for the development of students' creative abilities by supporting various research societies, theatre and dance groups, choirs, sports clubs etc.

3. Summary of conclusions and recommendations

Strengthening the social dimension of higher education cannot be done within the education system alone. Achieving the aims of the social dimension depends on developing a “joined-up approach” by successfully engaging different societal actors and by using the right steering and planning mechanism. This can be set up within Lithuania’ development of a national strategy for education based on the four stages covered in this report. The strategy should follow a national debate with all stakeholders of the education system and should be followed through by monitoring mechanisms.

To this aim the peer reviewers have formulated a number of recommendations below based on the reflection of the site visit and the previous analysis carried out:

1. The review team recommends that **all stakeholders be consulted in respect of their views on the social dimension** and that this should form the basis for a debate about what should be the national policy objectives under the social dimension. This debate needs to interrogate the notion of merit as currently embodied in national policy.
2. **Evaluate the operation of the second level system** to assess the extent to which all students are offered an opportunity to compete on an equal basis and assess the need for additional affirmative action to boost the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The review team also recommends introducing early intervention strategies to reduce the gap in performance between male and females.
3. **Re-examine the equity implications** of offering state-funded places solely on the basis of academic performance, taking no account of the financial position of families.
4. **Consider setting national targets** for the representation of currently under-represented groups.
5. **Introduce targeted funding**, for which HEIs would compete, by offering reserved places and/or alternative entry routes for currently under-represented groups.
6. **Offer financial incentives** for HEIs that develop innovative support programmes to boost the performance and retention of disadvantaged students.
7. Prioritise the development of **IT systems that track the performance and retention of all students in higher education** and monitor how this information is used at institutional level. Since socio-economic gaps in education achievement emerge early, an analysis that provides a **complete record of progress** through all levels of education for different groups (drawing from data collected at primary

levels until higher education level) would provide crucial information to policy-maker to identify emerging barriers and take efforts to remove it.

8. In the context of a declining student base, Lithuania's higher education could consider making use of **alternative (second chance) entry routes**, especially for older members of the population and returners from the labour market.
9. There are two general strategies in terms of policy development. One involves the government deciding on a **set of policy objectives** in relation to the social dimension and incorporating these in a range of integrated initiatives to be rolled out nationally. The other, perhaps more realistic option, would be for the government **to agree overall policy objectives** and to challenge the HEIs to come up with proposals on the understanding that targeted funding would be available to fund good quality proposals. The development of proactive strategies at institutional level should be done by first **broadening the understanding of underrepresented groups**. In practice some mixture of these strategies may be necessary. If the government was to face up to making changes in the funding system moving away from the total reliance on merit to access a state-funded place this requires action at national level. However, other proposed initiatives such as introduction of reserved places for under-represented groups, or other initiatives for widening entry routes, or proposals for strengthening student support and counselling services, could be bottom-up initiatives.

Postscript:

The authors would like to congratulate the Ministry for their openness in being prepared to take part in this review. In this, Lithuania is a role model for other countries. The authors would also like to encourage stakeholders in the Lithuanian higher education system to look critically at their system and at the allocation of learning opportunities for all within their higher education system. The authors are aware that – as externals – they can only provide reflections and suggestions in order to encourage this debate.

There has been a first response from the Ministry of Education and Science to the recommendations made here by the external experts. It is included in this document as Annex 3. The authors of this report would like to point out that one major issue for improving the social dimension is to understand how the education and higher education system works for certain groups. In this sense, there may be formal equity in that all persons are formally treated equally. However, some population groups may be less able to take advantage of this formal equity, leading to a non-intended real inequity. It is part of improving the social dimension to uncover such disparities and try to resolve them.

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- OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Mathematics, Reading, Science, Problem Solving and Financial Literacy*, Lithuania profile view <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=LTU&treshold=10&topic=PI>

3 Annex 1 – Schedule of on-site visits, 5-9 May 2014

Day/Time	Place	Participants	Focus of session	Other information
Monday (05.05)				
9:00 – 10:00	College Hall (Ministry) (A. Volano str. 2/7, Vilnius) 3rd floor	Dr. R. Vaitkus (Vice-minister for EU assistance in SMM) Dr. A. Žalys (General Director, Department of HE, Science and Technology, SMTD) J. Navickaitė (Senior Specialist, of Academic Mobility and Continuing Education Division, AMTMS) A. Levickas (Non-university division, KSS) D. Lukošūnienė (Head of Division, University Studies), A. Ambras Dr. L. Žadeikaitė (Head of Lower and Upper Secondary Education, PVUS), D. Vaišnorienė R. Labinienė (head of the Department of Special <i>Education</i> and Non-formal education, NUŠPS) L. Stračinskienė (Deputy Director, MOSTA), Zemyna Paulikaite	Meeting with ministry representatives on issues of social dimension from a national perspective. The experts will discuss how the various bodies envision the social dimension and what challenges they see currently and in the future. The interviewees will cover high-level policy, but also academic mobility and continuing education, university and non-university divisions, schooling, special education and non-formal learning and - at the close - the analysts from MOSTA, the ministry's research arm.	Švietimo ir mokslo ministerija (SMM) Link: http://www.smm.lt/web/en/contacts
10:15 – 11:00	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	Prof. Darius Rekis (Klaipėda University), Lithuanian University Rectors' Conference representatives Prof. Rita Liepuonienė (Vilnius College), Lithuanian Colleges Director's Conference representative	This session picks up on the institutions' perspective, asking about the HEIs' understanding of equal opportunities and how the HEIs' view their performance in this area. It asks what the competing incentives for HEIs are, e.g. how the funding system promotes or makes less attractive certain actions (like recruiting self-funding students	1. Lietuvos universitetų rektorių konferencija (LURK) Link: http://lurk.lt/en/ 2. Lietuvos kolegijų direktorių konferencija

			and - on a different matter - older students). What is the difference between universities and colleges and between private and public providers? How do HEIs deal with retention, assuring quality and helping students to graduate successfully?	(LKDK) Link: http://www.kolegijos.lt/
11:15 – 12:00	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	Lithuanian National Union of Students representatives (LSS) President – P. Baltokas	This session examines the lifecycle of students from an individual perspective: what are the main issues for potential students at school level? What are the main issues regarding the social dimension for students (e.g. work-study-life-balance)? Does the student union has any policies addressing the social dimension of higher education? Have they carried out any campaigns, projects in this respect?	1. Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (LSS) Link: http://lss.lt/en/http://lss.lt/en/ http://lss.lt/en/ 2. Lietuvos moksleivių sąjunga (LMS) Link: http://www.moksleiviai.lt/enhttp://www.moksleiviai.lt/en 3. Lietuvos mokinių parlamentas (LMP) Link: http://lmp.lt/
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch			
13:00 – 13:45	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	State Studies Foundation representatives - division of grants and financial support - division of loans	This session looks at who receives the support, in what form and how is the regulation of change from year to year (you lose the grant, if you underperform)?	Valstybinis studijų fondas (VSF) Link: https://www.vsf.lt/en and: https://www.vsf.lt/en/statistics

14:00 – 15:00	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education representatives: Nora.Skaburskiene@skvc.lt Almantas.serpatauskas@skvc.lt	Experts will look at the quality assurance and its role in enhancing the social dimension of higher education (student feedback system, admission criteria, study-life-work balance etc.).	Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras (SKVC) Link: http://www.skvc.lt/en/?id=0 http://www.skvc.lt/en/?id=0
15:00 – 15:45	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA) representatives questions regarding the analysis on social dimension in HE	An overview provided by the analysts of MOSTA regarding their understanding of the social dimension within the Lithuanian HE.	Mokslų ir studijų stebėsenos ir analizės centras (MOSTA) Link: http://www.mosta.lt/en/
16:00-17:30	Library	Internal closing session of PL4SD and Experts (closed session)	The experts will reflect on the site visit and draw together a number of conclusions that will be taken into the final report.	
Tuesday (05.06)				
9:00 – 10:00	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions (LAMA BPO) representatives - Ramunė Bakanovienė - other representatives	This session is dedicated to discussing the current admission system into Lithuanian higher education.	Lietuvos aukštųjų mokyklų asociacijos bendrajam priėmimui organizuoti (LAMA BPO) Link: http://www.lamabpo.lt/turinys/holders-foreign-qualifications
10:00 – 11:00	Trip to Kaunas (approx.. 1h 20m)			
11:00 – 12:00	Trip to Kaunas			
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch			
13:00 – 14:15	Vytautas Magnus University	Meeting with university leadership and any special centres for student support,	The session will address the following: 1. How do access routes to HE work in	Link: http://www.vdu.lt/en/abo

	M. Gimbutienės auditorium (K. Donelaičio str. 52–211, Kaunas)	counselling to discuss their perspective on providing fair and effective higher education	practice? (outreach, normal routes, alternative routes, special programmes/initiatives, advice and counselling, what makes an application successful); 2. What issues cause problems for retention and success? (monitoring of issues, initiatives to deal with the issue); 3. How are students supported in HEIs? What kind of support do they receive, do they need? (who provides support, who uses support, who does not);	ut-vmu/vmu-now-and-before/
14:30 – 16:00	Vytautas Magnus University	Vytautas Magnus university representatives, student’s union representatives, students with disabilities - Mantas Simanavičius (VDU) - Ieva Danilevičienė (VDU representative of students with disabilities) other representatives	Special focus group session on the impact of the special characteristics or issues of these “underrepresented” groups and the specific support they need.	Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas (VDU) Link: http://www.vdu.lt/en/ Ieva Danilevičienė (VDU representative of students with disabilities)
16:00 – 18:00	Trip to Vilnius			
Wednesday (05.07)				
08:30 – 10:00	Library (Ministry) (waiting for reply, will be specified)	The Department of the Affairs of Disabled at the Ministry of Social Security and Labour representatives	Discussion on what are the special provisions for disabled students? How many are supported and how successfully?	Neįgaliųjų reikalų departamentas prie SADM (NDT) Link: http://www.ndt.lt/en/
09:00 – 11:00	Trip to Utena			
11:00 – 13:00	Utenos Kolegija	Utena University of Applied Sciences representatives, students union representatives, students with disabilities, representatives from local government,	The session will be addressing the following: 1. How do access routes to HE work in practice? (outreach, normal routes,	Utena region has 37 thousand inhabitants. Utenos kolegija

		labour center and etc.	<p>alternative routes, special programmes/initiatives, advice and counselling, what makes an application successful);</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. What issues cause problems for retention and success? (monitoring of issues, initiatives to deal with the issue); 3. How are students supported in HEIs? What kind of support do they receive, do they need? (who provides support, who uses support, who does not); 4. Does the Utenos Kolegija have special relationships with the local industry / business and how does this interaction with the work of the college? 	Link: http://www.utenos-kolegija.lt/index.php?1457206098
12:00 – 13:00	Utenos Kolegija	Lunch break		
13:30 – 14:00	Utenos Kolegija	Short meeting with students from College	A short interaction with local students.	
14:00 – 16:00	Trip to Vilnius		(ministry will provide a minibus for this trip)	
Thursday (05.08)				
8:30 – 10:00	Vilnius university (Universiteto str. 3-238, Vilnius)	Vilnius University Students Union A. Varanaukas other representatives, students and etc.	Experts will have a talk with students from Vilnius University, focusing on the issues these students have, especially regarding work-life-study balance, and financial and academic challenges.	Vilniaus universiteto studentų atstovybė (VU SA) Link: http://www.vusa.lt/about-us
10:00 – 10:45	Vilnius university	Excursion at Vilnius university		Vilniaus universiteto studentų atstovybė (VU SA) Link:

				http://www.vusa.lt/about-us http://www.vusa.lt/about-us
11:00 – 12:00	Trip to MOSTA (Geležinio vilko str. 12, Vilnius)			
12:00 – 13:00	MOSTA	Open session for people and organizations with an interest in social dimension issues		15 people at one time
13:00 – 13:30	MOSTA	MOSTA representatives, PhD representative Rima Kalinauskaite – research for students with disabilities	Discussing with researchers the interview carried out with students with disabilities. Discussing with PhD students and other MOSTA researcher studies carried out on the Lithuanian HE.	
13:30 – 14:00	Trip to Ministry			
14:00 – 15:00	Library (Ministry)	- prof. dr. Marija Stonkienė (VU) - prof. dr. Romas Lazutka (VU) - doc. Dr. G.Purvaneckienė (VU) - dr. Ignas Dzemyda (MRU)		
15:00 – 16:00	Library (Ministry)			
Friday (05.09)				
9:00 – 13:00	Library (Ministry) 2nd floor	PL4SD experts team	Closed session. Final discussions with Ministry on what the main outcomes of the evaluation are to be.	
12:00 – 13:00	Dinner			
13:00 – 14:00	College Hall (Ministry) 3rd floor	Ministry and MOSTA representatives Press conference possible (will be specified)	Open session. Presentation of the main conclusion of the Country Review with reactions from the main interviewed stakeholders.	
14:00 – 15:00	College Hall (Ministry) 3rd floor			

4 Annex 2 – Background report

[The Background Report is provided as a separate document]

5 Annex 3 – Response to recommendations from the Ministry of Education and Science

This response was received on 19.09.2014 by the PL4SD Team. It is given verbatim here, with no additions.

Feedback regarding the PL4SD project final Country Review Report conclusions and recommendations:

1. The review team recommends that **all stakeholders be consulted in respect of their views on the social dimension** and that this should form the basis for a debate about what should be the national policy objectives under the social dimension. This debate needs to interrogate the notion of merit as currently embodied in national policy.

In Lithuania, a common system of support operates regarding social dimensions issues. A debate is undergoing between various stakeholders (ministries, government institutions, higher education and science institutions, students, etc.) regarding all social dimension issues. Recently wide discussions has been undergoing between variety of stakeholders regarding the new amendments of the Law on Higher Education and Research.

Biannually Ministry of Science and Education promotes Youth Initiatives under social, scientific, creative themes. Student and other organisations receive a possibility to research relevant topics and express their views.

Higher education at higher education institutions in Lithuania is financed under the education voucher principle – state money goes to the best entrants to a higher school of their choice. The equal to everyone education voucher includes salaries to lecturers, cost of study-related goods and services, and incentives to students. A joint admission to higher education institutions is organized in order to set the ranking. The ranking of students is set according to the scores of the secondary education (Matura) examinations, matriculation examinations (if any) of final scores for the year. Additional criteria include achievements in Olympiads, professional experience (admission to college programmes), etc.

Those who fail to receive state funding can opt to study at private or state institutions. Each institution of higher education determines the fees for these institutions. Students can take a state-supported loan to pay for the study costs or living expenses.

Students with high academic results after half of their studies and after they finish their studies can receive full coverage of their study expenses. In addition, students receives social grants and other support.

2. **Evaluate the operation of the second level system** to assess the extent to which all students are offered an opportunity to compete on an equal basis and assess the need for additional affirmative action to boost the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The review team also recommends introducing early intervention strategies to reduce the gap in performance between male and females.

3. **Re-examine the equity implications** of offering state-funded places solely on the basis of academic performance, taking no account of the financial position of families.

Second recommendation should be clarified.

The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania states, “Higher education shall be accessible to everyone according to his individual abilities. Citizens who are good at their studies shall be guaranteed education at State schools of higher education free of charge.”

State funding for bachelor studies is provided in the form of student vouchers to best entrants applying to universities and colleges. Student vouchers are awarded to incoming students based on their secondary education graduation results.

4. **Consider setting national targets** for the representation of currently under-represented groups.

National targets regarding under-represented groups are set in The National Programme for the Development of Studies, Scientific Research and Experimental (Social and Cultural) Development for 2013-2020 and The 2013–2015 Action Plan for the National Programme for the Development of Studies, Research and Experimental (Social and Cultural) Development For 2013–2020, etc.

5. **Introduce targeted funding**, for which HEIs would compete, by offering reserved places and/or alternative entry routes for currently under-represented groups.

6. **Offer financial incentives** for HEIs that develop innovative support programmes to boost the performance and retention of disadvantaged students.

New amendments of the Law on Higher Education and Research address these issues through introducing agreements with higher education institutions.

7. Prioritise the development of **IT systems that track the performance and retention of all students in higher education** and monitor how this information is used at institutional level. Since socio-economic gaps in education achievement emerge early, an analysis that provides a **complete record of progress** through all levels of education for different groups (drawing from data collected at primary levels until higher education level) would provide crucial information to policy-maker to identify emerging barriers and take efforts to remove it.

An educational institution Centre of Information Technologies in Education (ŠITC), founded by the Ministry of Education and Science, helps the Ministry to implement and apply information and communication technologies by provision the education community with necessary, secure, and up-to-date data and information. Strategic tasks of the centre are:

- collect, store and structure information on the Lithuanian education and science system, thus to analyse the data on information and communication technologies in education;
- implement, develop and manage the educational data bases, registries and information systems, and to coordinate their usage;
- warrant the provision of the education community with the necessary information to create, communicate and collaborate;
- organise and coordinate the in-service training of teachers and other employees of the educational institutions and organisations in the area of the application of information and communication technologies.

Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA), founded by the Ministry of Education and Science, draws up recommendations on the development of the national research and higher education systems, performs monitoring function, analyses the state of the Lithuanian research and higher education systems, and participates in the development and implementation of research and higher education policies.

8. In the context of a declining student base, Lithuania's higher education could consider making use of **alternative (second chance) entry routes**, especially for older members of the population and returners from the labour market.

Lithuania is actively looking for alternative opportunities to increase the number of groups with different learning needs entering universities. In 2014, Non-formal Adult Education law was passed which enables to apply new financing models to people, who seek to enrol in non-formal education programs at higher education institutions, as well as senior citizens and people whose situation in labour market is unstable. Since the year 2013, Lithuania has been applying a financing model that was directed towards the company employees who wanted to participate in short-term courses provided by higher education institutions. This model creates a premise for alternative studying opportunities and increases in the number of students.

9. There are two general strategies in terms of policy development. One involves the government deciding on a **set of policy objectives** in relation to the social dimension and incorporating these in a range of integrated initiatives to be rolled out nationally. The other, perhaps more realistic option, would be for the government **to agree overall policy objectives** and to challenge the HEIs to come up with proposals on the understanding that targeted funding would be available to fund good quality proposals. The development of proactive strategies at institutional level should be done by first **broadening the understanding of underrepresented groups**. In practice some mixture of these strategies may be necessary. If the government was to face up to making changes in the funding system moving away from the total reliance on merit to access a state-funded place this requires action at national level. However, other proposed initiatives such as introduction of reserved places for under-represented groups, or other initiatives for widening entry routes, or proposals for strengthening student support and counselling services, could be bottom-up initiatives.

Support for underrepresented groups in Lithuania is delivered through national social policy by a number up national (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, Ministry of Science and Education, etc.) and regional institutions (municipalities). There is a constant dialogue regarding social issues.

Taking in consideration the needs of underrepresented groups in Lithuania, new amendments of the Law on Higher Education and Research were suggested, for example - flexible opportunities for students to take temporarily academic leave under various circumstances.

Biannually Ministry of Science and Education promotes Youth Initiatives under social, scientific, creative themes. In 2014 student organizations are conducting two projects with the aim to identify underrepresented groups in Lithuania, research their needs and types of support they receive. The goal of the projects is to increase chances of students from socially vulnerable groups to join, learn and finish high school, to meet their needs through support mechanisms.

Recommendation should be clarified.