



Lithuanian social policy in the last decade has downplayed the issue of unequal access to education

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Various analyses of Lithuanian educational policy reveal that education priorities do not include policy targets focusing specifically on reducing inequalities in education.

Description

In its session held on 3 May 2018, the OECD Council declared that Lithuania complied with the requirements for membership and decided to invite the country to become a member of the organisation. On 28 June, the Lithuanian Parliament ratified the agreement on Lithuania's accession to the OECD.

In October 2017 the OECD published a comprehensive report on education in Lithuania, which is an input to the accession process (OECD 2017). This report reveals the same conclusions and recommendations as those published in a paper produced by a group of academic experts (Zalimiene et al. 2011).

Zalimiene et al based themselves on 2007-2008 indicators to analyse the social justice situation at different levels of education: preschool, secondary education, and higher education (Ibid: 66-77). Social justice in education was interpreted and measured as equal opportunities (non-discrimination on the basis of gender, place of birth, etc.), recognition of diversity and provision of educational choices (for the most talented, for ethnic minorities, etc.), accessibility (no access restrictions based on financial capacity, place of residence, etc.) and compensation (allocation of additional resources to certain social groups e.g. disabled people).

The analysis revealed the factors that have influenced access to education for different social groups. These factors include place of residence (rural or urban areas), educational capital accumulated by the household, and income of the household.

At the pre-school level, the children most likely to benefit from the system were those from urban areas who lived in households with two parents and no children of less than one year of age. With regard to secondary education, households with two parents who lived in urban areas with only one child, and with at least one household member with higher education, had more favourable conditions. For higher education, children living in households with two parents and at least one person with higher education, and those living in households with income above the poverty line, had the best opportunities for access (Zalimiene et al. 2011: 85-86).

The National Education Strategy 2013-2022 broadly discusses access to education (Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania 2012). Nevertheless, six years later the OECD has described the same trends: "Overall, the impact of socio-economic status on [students'] performance has remained largely unchanged in the past decade. Lithuanian students from disadvantaged backgrounds are 2.6 times more likely to be low performers than their advantaged peers" (OECD 2017: 107).

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Urban-rural differences reflect the disadvantages stemming from the socio-economic and cultural environment: "Urban-rural differences ... of 15-year-old Lithuanians (-0.57) are half again as large as those found, on average, across OECD member countries (-0.35)" (ibid). The performance gap between students from rural and urban areas is much larger than the OECD average: it is roughly equivalent to a 1.5 year learning gap (ibid).

Lithuania is famous for having a high percentage of young adults who have completed tertiary education. In 2017, according to EUROSTAT, 55.6% (EU-28 average: 39.0%) of the Lithuanian population aged 25-34 had completed tertiary education. "However, it has not done so equitably. [In 2014] Among households in the lowest income quintile, only 16% have completed tertiary education – while among households in the highest income quintile 80% have done so" (OECD 2017: 180).

Outlook & commentary

The case of tutoring illustrates the inability to ensure equal opportunities in access to education. In 2017, the auditors of the National Audit Office found that 34% (40% in cities and 27%

in rural areas) of parents with school-aged children pay for tutoring services. A quarter of them had to hire tutors when their children were still at elementary school. 28% of parents said the reason they use tutoring services is due to poor teaching of the relevant subjects at school. 24% of parents admitted they would like to hire a tutor, but lack the money to do so (National Audit Office of Lithuania 2017).

In its comprehensive report on the situation of Lithuanian education, the Lithuanian Education Council, which is acting as the main expert body and provides consultations on strategic issues of education development, stresses the fragmentation of educational policy. It recommends that a common vision be developed, but ignores the issue of unequal access to education (The Lithuanian Education Council 2017).

Hopefully, Lithuania's accession to the OECD will help to prioritise the issue of inequality in access to education. It would be possible to add elements of a needs-based policy to the existing system, with its merit-based policy for funding tertiary education. For example, as suggested by the OECD, students from small rural schools taking the entrance competition for tertiary education institutions could be awarded an additional point to their scores (OECD 2017: 183).

Further reading

National Audit Office of Lithuania (2017). *Could Lithuanian Students Perform Better?*.

https://www.vkontrole.lt/pranesimas_spaudai_en.aspx?id=24385

OECD (2017). *Education in Lithuania*, Reviews of National Policies for education, OECD Publishing, Paris: <http://www.oecd.org/countries/lithuania/education-in-lithuania-9789264281486-en.htm>

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The Lithuanian Education Council (2017). *Lietuvos švietimo būklės 2013–2016 metais apžvalga [The Review of the Situation of Lithuanian Education in 2013-2016]*:

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https://www.sac.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/knyga-Socialinis-teisingumas_bpr.pdf

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