

## REVIEWS

### Rationality and Universality: A New Historical Assessment of the Predecessor of Kaunas Higher Courses in Lithuania

On January 27, 1920, public higher education courses, known as the Higher Courses (Lith. *Aukštieji kursai*), were started in Kaunas, in the hall of the building of the Ministry of Education (which today houses Kaunas Maironis University Gymnasium). The school was founded a century ago and operated on a voluntary basis, and it became the forerunner of higher education in the independent state of Lithuania in the interwar period. The Higher Courses and the university, founded two years later, evolved under more difficult conditions than the higher education institutions in other independent Baltic countries. In the other Baltic countries, higher education was restored after the First World War drawing on the academic potential that had been displaced and damaged during the war. These people survived, which allowed their knowledge and academic experience to be put to good use. After the loss of the capital, Vilnius, in independent Lithuania, even the moral illusion of the historical continuity of the university, which was closed in the 19th century, was gone. The intelligentsia had to create a completely new academic base in the temporary capital, Kaunas.

Hence, the Higher Courses became an arena for the development of the academic community in the young independent Lithuanian state, where new ideas, different worldviews and attitudes began to emerge. On the basis of the Higher Courses, the University of Lithuania was founded in Kaunas in 1922. It gradually became a very important centre of science and culture. As in the other Baltic States, the University played a major role in the development of the society in the interwar period.

The day when the Higher Courses were started in Lithuania is considered to be the day of the institutionalization of science and studies in independent Lithuania. In 2020, Lithuanian academic community honoured this day by organising commemorative and other scientific conferences at which reports were read and later published. It has to be noted that an increasing number of scientific publications have been written which research the legacy created by the intellectuals of independent Lithuania as well as the process of founding

cultural and educational institutions. Articles containing significant historical and biographical data on these institutions are being published. All this provides opportunities to develop research and discourse on the role of universities, the contribution of individuals, and the significance of the development of higher education for society.

## The most significant historiographic assessment of the founding of the Higher Courses

In recent decades, historians have been involved in the study of educational, scientific and cultural development processes that took place in the independent Republic of Lithuania in 1918–1940. Attempts have been made to address and evaluate the development of the country's education and science policies. The historical situation of the launching of the Higher Courses has been analysed in greater detail in the article by Ieva Šenavičienė and Antanas Šenavičius (Šenavičienė & Šenavičius, 2000, pp. 40–48), which provides considerable historical data on the opening of the studies in Kaunas in 1920–1922.

Other scientific publications focus on the establishment of higher education in Lithuania and the processes which were conditioned by the founding and functioning of the Higher Courses in Kaunas. In his monograph *Higher Education in Lithuania in 1918–1940*, Česlovas Mančinskas (1996) has discussed the problems of organizing higher education studies in independent Lithuania. With reference to documentary sources, the author of the monograph identified the difficulties encountered in the process of the establishment of university studies (Mančinskas, 1996). The questions related to the policy of higher education, the ideological position of the academic society, the internationality of the university activities have been discussed in a research article by Audronė Janužytė (2013).

In current historiography, documentary sources and ego-documents referring to the founding of Kaunas Higher Education School, the persons, the accounts and scientific connections of these persons are stored in the manuscript collections of all major libraries and also in the Lithuanian Central State Archives. Very informative are the founding documents on higher education, study plans, study programs, minutes of the meetings of intellectuals' organizations, official letters and other correspondence. Of great value are also personal notes, manuscripts of reports, and texts published in the press. All this contributes to a better

understanding of the ideas and values of the academic elite.

The researchers reasonably conclude that the economic situation in the country, the practical needs in the fields of medicine and education encouraged the start of training of specialists in Lithuania. However, very limited state resources posed a problem and hampered the establishment of the university, which is why the government and politicians proposed training the necessary specialists abroad. Despite the practical difficulties encountered by Lithuanian intellectuals, the mathematician and educator Zigmās Žemaitis started to gather around him intellectuals who came to Kaunas from Vilnius or foreign countries. On a voluntary basis they all got involved in the process of founding the Higher Courses. This outstanding community also included such famous people as the naturalist Tadas Ivanauskas, the psychologist Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, the historian Augustinas Janulaitis, and others. They all worked for a common goal and actively participated in the social life of the country. (*Vytauto Didžiojo*, 2002, p. 77).

Basically, the academic communality refers to the recognition of common values and the pursuit of common goals which arose from common interests. However, even in this environment, positions on worldview and practical rationality may intersect, and sometimes professional competition begins to emerge. A review of the historical literature has shown that these features were also characteristic of the independent Lithuanian university community.

On the one hand, there was a strong emphasis on the practical importance of organizing technical, medical, agricultural and financial studies in this emerging academic community. On the other hand, disciplines in the field of humanities also played a major role. The directionality of the humanities, which was vital for strengthening Lithuanian cultural self-awareness, was strongly supported by the society and politicians (Juzefovičius, 2020a, p. 4).

According to the historian Ieva Šenavičienė, the views of various specialists of that time on the goal and tasks that would be achieved by the planned courses varied considerably. Some specialists recommended the versatility approach towards studies. In their opinion it had to be a general education institution, where participants would acquire general education, but not any specific profession. Others argued that the courses should immediately start training professionals in specific areas (Šenavičienė & Šenavičius, 2000, p. 40).

Presumably, the provision of universality would have been more applicable to

the development of the humanities and social studies, and the promotion of cultural education. Initially, however, the position of applied, specialized studies dominated as it was supported by the most active course initiators, among them Zigmās Žemaitis and Tadas Ivanauskas. Therefore, the directionality of specialized studies was emphasized and prioritized, even though the university's vision in the practical rationality and cultural aspirations did not differ substantially.

Data published in the historical literature show that the intellectual community decided to organize higher education studies without the state support. Thus, the Society of Higher Education was established. The Society statutes were drafted by Zigmās Žemaitis, Augustinas Janulaitis, Eduardas Volteris, and others. Although the academic orientation of the established intellectual organization, as well as of the Council, which was set to coordinate the activities of this organization, was described in a rather abstract way, the fundamental goal of the intellectual community at that time was obvious. The goal was to establish a multidisciplinary higher education institution in Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania. Besides, the need to form a social community of this higher education school and to mobilize intellectuals was also emphasized.

Historians specify that the founders of the Higher Courses in Kaunas were planning to establish a school which would implement and deliver training as well as pull together researchers to carry out scientific research.

The Higher Courses commenced at the beginning of 1920. The courses were delivered on a free basis. There were six departments: the Department of Humanities, the Department of Social Sciences, the Department of Mathematics and Physics, the Department of Life Sciences, the Department of Medicine, and the Department of Technical Sciences. The Higher Courses Association was established to raise funds from members of the society and Lithuanian diaspora, then finance the studies, and also pay symbolic salaries. Although the institution organizing the studies operated on a free basis, the Ministry of Education of Lithuania later granted allowances to the institution to purchase books for studies and to install teaching facilities.

The active founders of the higher education school in Kaunas became heads of the mentioned departments. Among them were Z. Žemaitis, E. Volteris, A. Janulaitis, T. Ivanauskas, M. Nasvytis, and J. Šimoliūnas. The first person to head the Higher Courses in Kaunas was Z. Žemaitis. He was succeeded by J. Vabalas-Gudaitis (1921–1922). Over 40 lecturers held lectures in the courses. The most important administrative issues about the studies were addressed in the Council

of the Higher Courses, as well as in the councils of individual departments (Šenavičienė & Šenavičius, 2000, p. 40).

Relying on memoirs and other ego-documents, historians point out that the studies began under difficult conditions, they were held only in the evenings and on the premises of individual state institutions. There was a shortage of books for studies, almost no equipment. These facts have been attested to in students' memoirs and diaries. In 1921, the training was already conducted on the premises of the former Commercial School on the corner of Mickevičiaus and Donelaičio streets. Later, the university, which was established in 1922, was set up in this building.

Historical research confirms that the Higher Courses were organized in line with the programs designed for training specialists. Besides, carrying out applied research was planned. This not only brought together the teachers who were involved in training professionals, but also the intellectuals who promoted cultural education and strengthened the students' cultural awareness. Mykolas Biržiška, Pranas Dovydaitis, Stasys Šalkauskis, Eduardas Volteris, Augustinas Janulaitis, Petras Leonas and many others merit particular mention for their input to the development of the society. They pursued the goal to combine the potential of the university studies and scientific research with the cultural life of the society. The contribution of these and other prominent scientists to the development of the society is thoroughly analysed in the biographical works by science and culture historians (Leonavičius, 2002; Pšibilskis, 2009; Vasiliauskienė, 2001; etc.).

In academic and socio-cultural terms, the contribution of the Department of Humanities of the Higher Courses was indeed of great importance. The Department of Humanities conducted studies in philology, literature, history and philosophy. The studies were theoretical in nature, yet with a practical perspective. They helped to build up the students' cultural awareness. Documentary sources on the establishment of studies in Kaunas are evidence of the efforts to connect the common European humanities framework with Lithuanian cultural and historical heritage (Juzefovičius, 2020a, pp. 4–26).

The intersection of different worldviews sometimes prevented university intellectuals from focusing on joint work. Still, it encouraged discussion, creative competition, and opposition to the prevailing cultural policy.

## New events to commemorate the Higher Courses: Enhancing the visibility of the courses

It has to be mentioned that on January 27, 2020, the centenary conference of the founding of the Higher Courses was organized by the scientists of Kaunas University of Technology and Vytautas Magnus University. Kaunas University of Technology and Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas have their origins in and are directly related to the founding of the Higher Courses and the establishment of the University of Lithuania. The video recordings of the presentations delivered at this conference, as well as all other conference materials, were made available online. All the materials were also published in a separate publication (*Nuo pradinės mokyklos...*, 2020).

The conference presenters focused on the historical situation and difficulties that the founders faced while organizing the Higher Courses in Kaunas. Presentations were also devoted to the issues of organization of training in medicine, law, technical sciences and the humanities. According to Audronė Veilentienė, researcher of higher education in Kaunas, the founding of the Higher Courses definitely shows that after the First World War there was a strong civil society in Lithuania. In the early 20th century, few people in Lithuania and abroad thought about the possible political revival of Lithuania and the return of the country to the political map of Europe. However, it did happen. If the Government of Lithuania had not been supported by people of the country who not only defended the state from enemies, but also managed to establish a higher education institution, there would be no state of Lithuania. (Veilentienė, 2020a, p. 31)

Presentations at this event were also given by researchers of Kaunas University Vidmantas Pekarskas, Valerijus Keras, Jurgita Spaičienė, Jonas Vaičėnonis, and others. At the conference it was noted that the Higher Courses not only attracted intellectuals and laid the foundations for training qualified specialists, but also promoted the dissemination of Lithuanian scientific terminology and the development of Lithuanian language of education. In addition, as stated at the conference, the experience of the best foreign universities was adopted during the process of the establishment of higher education. It also laid the foundations for international academic relations.

Speakers at the conference not only argued and reasonably emphasized the importance of carrying out specialized studies in separate disciplines, but also

revealed the aspirations of interdisciplinary universality. They also highlighted the development opportunities for students at the Higher Courses. For example, students of technical sciences were required to attend courses on general psychology and logic. Students of the life sciences studied physics, chemistry, mineralogy, etc. However, they also had to attend classes in psychology, logic, foundations of pedagogy, philosophy and the history of Lithuania. In addition to the compulsory subjects, humanities students were expected to attend courses in zoology, botany, political economy, hygiene and geography (Vaičenonis, 2020, p. 71).

In October 2020, a centenary conference of the founding of the Higher Courses in Kaunas, *Scientia et historia*, was organized by the Lithuanian Association of the History and Philosophy of Science. The papers delivered at the conference were published on the website of Lithuanian historians of science (*Scientia et historia–2020*, 2020). Speakers at the conference identified key historical facts, assessed the ideas promoted by the founders, and considered the significance of the organizational input of those who stood at the roots of higher education in Lithuania.

Audronė Veilentienė, referring to archival documents and manuscripts, described the ideas and activities of the founders of the Higher Courses, and the activities of the technical department. The researcher noted that most creators of the Higher Courses started their research activities while in the Lithuanian Scientific Society. The founders of the Department of Technology were also members of the Lithuanian Technical Society. The membership in these societies helped to bring scientists and engineers together, enabled targeted efforts in support of higher education, and formed the core of the research staff of the University of Lithuania (Veilentienė, 2020b).

Science historian Juozas Banionis recognizes the organizational contribution of Zigmās Žemaitis, the initiator of higher education studies as well as the establishment of the studies in mathematics. The author of the presentation focused on the study plans of the Higher Courses. The analysis showed that the teaching process was based on in-depth study of mathematics with a focus on the main components of mathematical theory. The subjects of higher mathematics were arranged according to the classical order common in other universities. Students of mathematics were required to pass the basic subjects of higher mathematics, which included analytical geometry, spherical trigonometry, higher algebra and determinant theory, differential and integral computations, descriptive geometry, integration of differential equations (solution), number theory, probability theory, and variational computation (Banionis, 2020).

In their presentation, Alina Šveistytė and Violeta Apšegaitė discussed the issues related to the establishment of the Department of Life Sciences, the setting up of the Research Station for Life Sciences, the opening of Museum of Zoology and the input of Tadas Ivanauskas, who played a crucial role in this creation process. The authors not only noted the importance of life science studies at the Higher Courses but also emphasized the significance of the research carried out in the field of zoology, which later laid the foundations for the scientific work at the University of Lithuania, established in 1922. (Šveistytė & Apšegaitė, 2020)

The presentation delivered by Asta Lignugarienė focused on the training of medical students at the Higher Courses. The author spoke about how physicians of different specialties (internal medicine, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, dermatology, psychiatry, etc.) were involved in the teaching process. The author also noted the difficulties encountered while organizing higher education courses. She presented facts taken from the press at the time, in which students discussed how the study process was hampered by highly limited resources, laboratories, specialized classrooms, and museums. The study process for students in their final years of study was usually held at the public hospital of Kaunas. For a long time, the courses did not receive adequate financial support from the state, so the poorer students could only afford to pay daily expenses for the courses. (Lignugarienė, 2020)

An overview of the manuscript legacy of Higher Courses, held at the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and an assessment of the value of these documents was presented in the report by Eglė Paškevičiūtė Kundrotienė and Rūta Kazlauskienė. The authors of the report indicated that the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, especially the Manuscripts Unit, is rich in materials about the organization and structure of the Higher Courses. The materials provide interesting facts about the lecturers and the subjects delivered at the Higher Courses. Also, there is a lot of information on a variety of higher education issues relevant to the society. A lot of materials can be recovered from the personal fund of Augustinas Janulaitis, who was the organizer of the law department and later a university lecturer. The fund contains various texts which include the Statute of the Higher Courses, minutes of the meetings of the law department, the topics of the lectures delivered at this department, student lists, exam sheets, etc. (Paškevičiūtė & Kazlauskienė, 2020)

The issues related to the organization of the studies in humanities at the Higher Courses, the contribution of scientists and cultural figures to the development of the society were also considered at the conference. The founding documents of



the Higher Courses show that there was a study plan which covered the activities of the humanities department in five sections. Firstly, it was planned to organize the studies in philology, literature, history, and philosophy. Then, the plans were designed to start training in pedagogical disciplines which had to focus mainly on theoretical issues, yet with an applied perspective to the humanities. It is worth mentioning that the study plans of the humanities department involved both theoretical and practical classes, the topics suggested the link between generality, universality and Lithuanian language studies. The contribution of Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, a psychologist and a pedagogue, was also of great importance in organizing the studies at the Higher Courses. In 1920, Eduardas Volteris, Pranas Dovydaitis, Augustinas Voldemaras, Petras Klimas, Juozas Eretas, and Augustinas Janulaitis started teaching students of the humanities. Later, other Lithuanian intellectuals and cultural figures joined the teaching staff. They helped to design and implement the study plans. They also took actively part in the promotion of education in the society (Juzefovičius, 2020b).

It is worth mentioning that some reports on the founding of the Higher Courses were also delivered at the conference of the Lithuanian Mathematical Society, the conference of the historians of Kaunas, and some other scientific conferences held in 2020. The reports have partly broadened the scope for evaluating the establishment of higher education in the context of other historical themes.

The conference reports put forward the conclusion that the Higher Courses, which evolved from an academic initiative, not only created the opportunity to start direct pedagogical activities at the higher education school, but also helped to mobilize a creative academic community. Although the persons came from widely different fields of science and ideological worldviews, most of them pursued the goal of founding a democratically functioning and modern higher education institution in Lithuania. They understood the significance of the interaction between science and society, and promoted free thinking and public cultural expression.

New historical research on the analysis in the origins, development intentions and transformation of science, culture and society is of paramount importance. The theoretical works of the culturologists of today on the assessment of the mission and goals of the twentieth-century universities, as well as their research on the role and input of cultural and public figures in strengthening societal-cultural identity are of great relevance (Juzefovičius, 2020b).

## Conclusions

The research carried out by Lithuanian historians has shown that the Higher Courses, which was founded in 1920 and functioned on a voluntary basis, was the predecessor of university studies in Kaunas. The establishment of the Higher Courses was primarily determined by the practical economic, medical and educational needs of the independent Lithuanian state.

To summarize the basic assessment of the founding of the Higher Courses, it should be emphasized that the university community in independent Lithuania recognized the need to carry out studies in different subject areas. The academic community also laid emphasis on the values fostering cultural identity. Academic intelligentsia strengthened the appreciation of the Lithuanian language, increased awareness in the historical and cultural heritage, and promoted the scientific, cultural and civic experience of foreign countries. The outstanding individuals shaped the cultural sociality of the emerging academic community, and supported the aim of adapting the experience of scientific and cultural expression for educating the society.

The Higher Courses operated until February 16, 1922 when the reorganization of the school into the University of Lithuania started. The founding of the State University in Kaunas took place on the initiative of the academic intelligentsia. The already developed teaching structure and experience in organization of studies were put to use. The aim was to combine applied specializations with the universality of studies. The university, founded on the basis of the Higher Courses, created the conditions for the development of cultural expression, i.e., scientific organizations were founded, publishing was organized, etc.

Specialists of the humanities and professors from other disciplines were both involved in the cultural and educational activities of the university community. Some of them placed greater emphasis on promoting specialized and applied studies at the university. Although members of the academic community often held different ideological or political views, this did not prevent them from working together to educate the society.

After the establishment of the University of Lithuania, students gradually became more active in cultural and educational activities. Student organizations were established, students benefitted from the experience of the university's professors, became acquainted with their diverse worldviews, educational judgements and creative experiences.

Currently, the historical study of the interaction between science and society has become meaningful as a result of discussions on the socio-cultural mission of universities both in the Lithuanian political space and in the academic environment. Therefore, the historical experience of educating the society, the development of the cultural identity and international character of Lithuanian science has made it possible to look into the formation of academic sociality and the development of “usefulness” for the society, the intersection of academic traditions and the present.

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