

Abstract

Higher education plays a pivotal role in national development, nurturing skilled professionals, driving innovation, bolstering global competitiveness, and fostering civic engagement. This poster delves into the discourse surrounding the reform of higher education in Lithuania, examining its portrayal in the country's leading online news media outlets. Through qualitative research based on news articles, the study scrutinizes framing strategies, emphasizing prevalent themes such as responsibility, conflict, human interest, and economic implications. The findings unveil a nuanced discourse marked by diverse stakeholders' perspectives, including politicians and the academic community, exhibiting varying degrees of support and criticism. While opposition politicians predominantly expressed skepticism, the academic community showcased a spectrum of opinions, with university governance bodies particularly critical. The study underscores the intricacies of reform discourse and emphasizes the pivotal role of dialogue in shaping effective policy outcomes. Leveraging MAXQDA for coding, the project analyzed over 26,000 segments to derive comprehensive insights into the reform's dynamics and implications.

BACKGROUND

The 17th Government of Lithuania initiated a comprehensive reform of the higher education system in response to numerous pressing issues (Fig. 1), which caused a massive surge of information and discussions visible on various media.

Scholars highlight the media's pivotal role in shaping public policy discourse and influencing decision-making processes. Thus, understanding the media's coverage of the reform is vital for grasping its societal ramifications, shaping public debate, and evaluating policy effectiveness.

Recognizing the significant impact of media coverage on public perception and policy outcomes, a comprehensive study was undertaken to investigate the content of media cycle concerning the higher education reform in Lithuania, as part of the research project called Policy Issue Life Cycles in Lithuanian Media (CYCLE), which was carried out in 2020-2022.

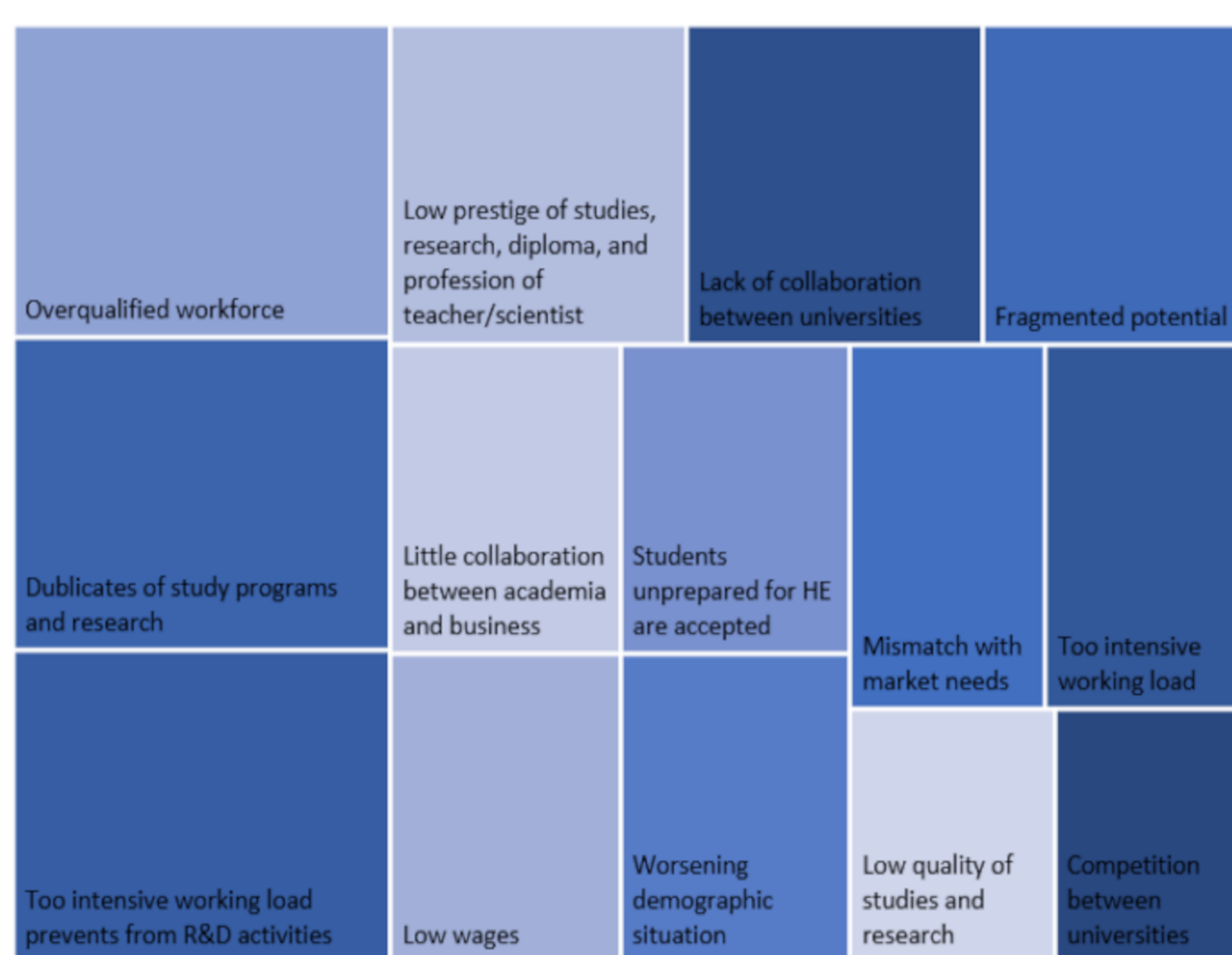


Fig. 1. Reasons for why a higher education reform was needed in the Republic of Lithuania

DISCOURSE CONTENT

The study on the news media cycle concerning Lithuania's higher education reform highlights significant trends (Figs. 4-5). Media attention peaked from late 2016 to the second quarter of 2017, focusing on **criticism** and **disagreements** surrounding the higher education reform. As the cycle progressed, diverse voices critiqued the proposals on the reform, leading to intense discourse with **contrasting viewpoints** of the different discourse actors (Fig. 7).

A second peak in the third quarter of 2017 centered on universities' **refusals to merge**, followed by a decline in media interest by the second quarter of 2018, indicating diminishing public attention on the topic.

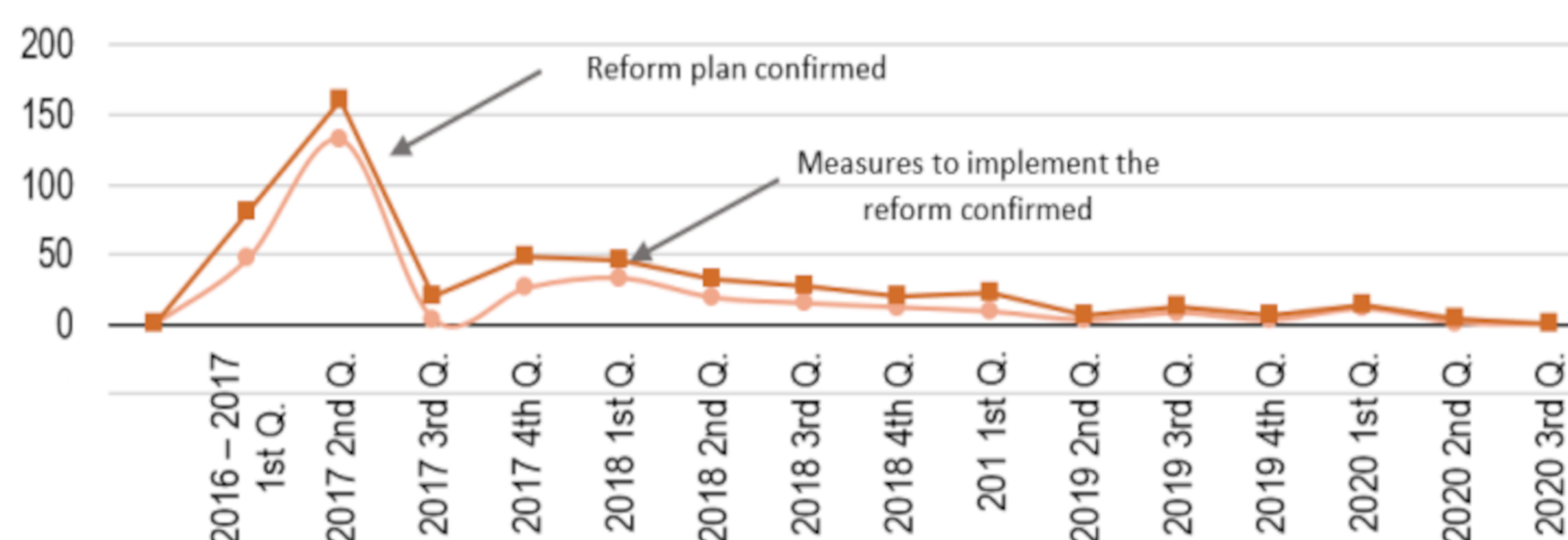


Fig. 5. The cycle of the communication on the higher education reform

The articles explore **issues** such as study quality, declining student numbers, mismatches between education and market needs, and the undervaluation of degrees obtained in Lithuania.

Concerns about research quality, excessive workload for university staff, funding disparities, and the overall state and prestige of higher education are also addressed.

Public and academic community perspectives, negative consequences such as damage to disciplines and administrative complexities, and the dynamics of university relationships are discussed.

Additionally, **positive impacts** on study and research quality, improved university management, and financial benefits are highlighted, reflecting the multifaceted nature of discussions surrounding higher education reform in Lithuania.

The distribution of articles on the higher education reform in news media covered various topics pertinent to the public (Fig. 6). The majority of attention was directed towards discussing the **reform** itself (almost 41% of all articles), followed by related **controversies** and **tensions** (slightly over 23%), **anticipated changes** in the reform (slightly over 13% of all articles), and the **implementation process** (slightly over 11% of all articles).

Discourse content	Quarters of the attention cycle														Total
	2016-2017 1st Q.	2017 2nd Q.	2017 3rd Q.	2017 4th Q.	2018 1st Q.	2018 2nd Q.	2018 3rd Q.	2018 4th Q.	2019 1st Q.	2019 2nd Q.	2019 3rd Q.	2019 4th Q.	2020 1st Q.	2020 2nd Q.	
Preparing the reform and legislation	5	21	2	2	1	1				1	1			2	36
Reform content															
Support	1	4		4	1				1					1	12
Critique	1	8													9
Implementation process	3	1			4	5	5	4	3		3	1	1	1	31
Issues related to the reform	8	24	1	8	9	7	3	4	1		1	1	2		69
Discussion about the reform	22	54	1	9	11	4	2	1	3		1	1	2		111
Impact of the reform		1								1					2
Total	40	113	2	23	27	17	11	11	7	1	6	3	8	1	270

Fig. 6. Topic distribution across the quarters (the peaks are marked in orange)

METHODOLOGY

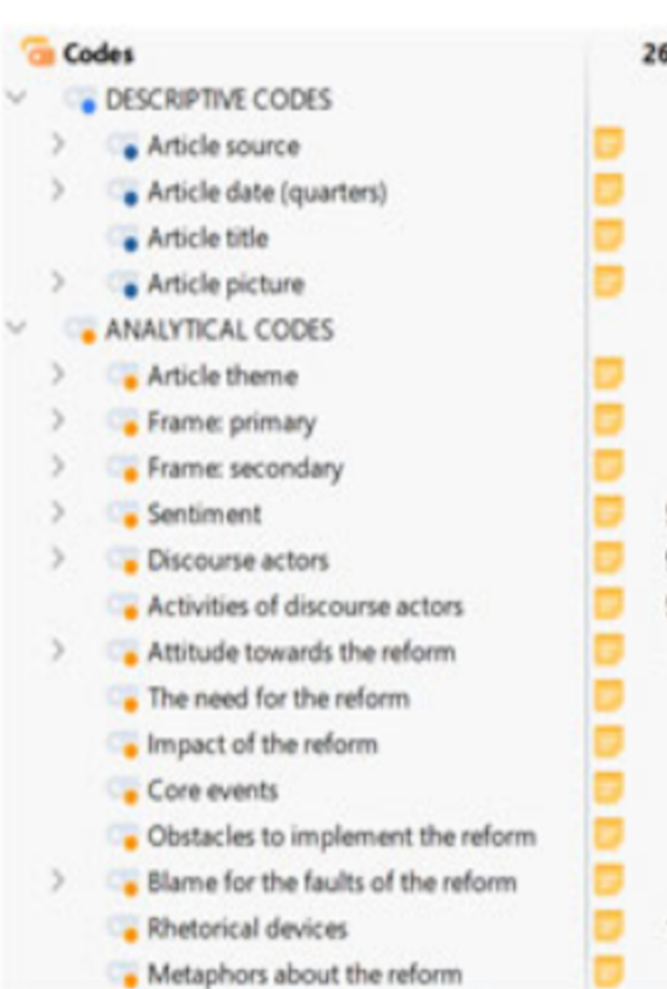


Fig. 2. Code clusters and frequencies of coded segments (n)

This poster is based on the findings of a qualitative research project on the news media cycle of the higher education reform in the Republic of Lithuania.

Code family	Inter-coder agreement test (%)
Article theme	100
Frame: primary	100
Frame: secondary	94.74
Discourse actors	92.46
Activities of discourse actors	86.35
Attitudes towards the reform	93.57
Explaining the need for the reform	92.31
Impact of the reform	97.3
Obstacles to implement the reform	100
Blaming for the failures of the reform	100
Key events in the implementation of the reform	100
Sentiment	98.43
Total	92.81

Fig. 3. Inter-coder agreement test results

The primary data were online news media articles from two most popular Lithuanian news sites, namely, DELFI and 15min.lt. Data were collected through a media monitoring service „Mediaskopas“, by searching for various keywords related to higher education reform. After removing duplicates, the final sample consisted of $n=502$ articles, out of which, $n=278$ were selected for the analysis on the basis of one criterion - the topic of the reform was the main theme of the article.

The initial deductive code structure is based on Downs' issue-attention cycle theory. Later, it was expanded by inductive coding, to better represent the content of the communication about the reform. The data were coded by using MAXQDA software. To ensure the reliability of the results, an inter-coder agreement test was performed on MAXQDA. Two researchers coded 30% of the data set. The code overlapping rate of X% at the segment level ranged between 86.35-100%, amounting to the total of 92.81% (Fig. 3).

In total, the project contains 4 clusters of descriptive and 14 clusters of analytical codes, both of which have subcodes. The total of 79 codes amount to 26.303 coded segments (Fig. 2).

DISCOURSE ACTORS AND THEIR ATTITUDES

In the discourse surrounding the reform of higher education in Lithuania, various actors participated in communication, expressing their positions on the reform. Through the chosen methodology, discourse actors were identified and coded $n=9,249$ times. The most frequently coded groups of discourse actors were associated with **two main forces of the reform** - politicians (total across subcategories $n=3,218$) and the academic community (total across subcategories $n=4,439$).



Fig. 7. Discourse actors according to their mentions

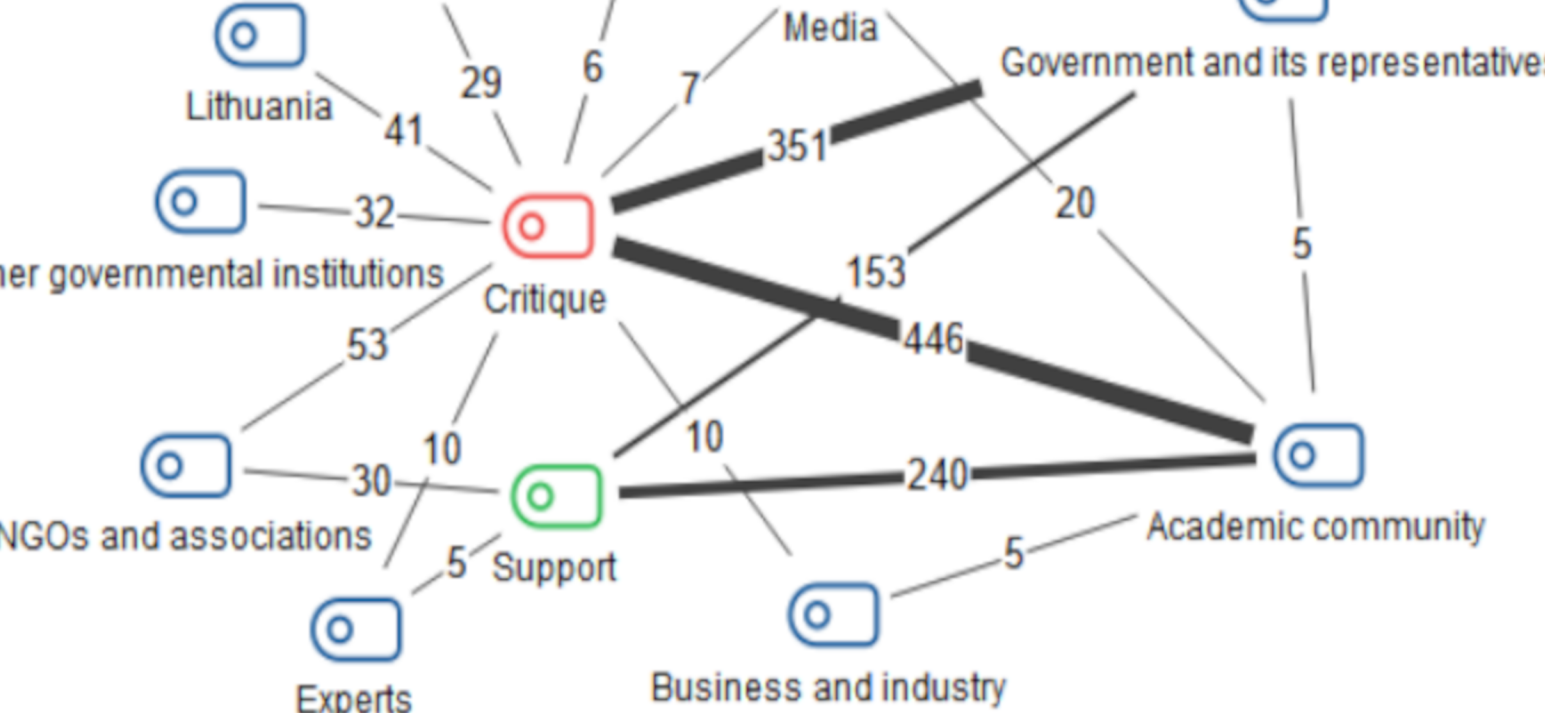


Fig. 8. Discourse actors and their attitudes towards the reform (code co-occurrence, min. co-occurrence $n=5$)

Academic community predominantly expressed **conflicting views** on the higher education reform, with university governance bodies notably critical. **Politicians**, primarily from the **opposition**, voiced the most **criticism** towards the reform, including key figures like opposition conservatives and some government officials. **Governmental institutions** showed **minimal critique**. While there was also **support** for the reform, it was considerably **less prominent** compared to criticism. Notably, **university rectors were divided** in their positions, with some supporting and others opposing the reform. Additionally, a significant number of **politicians** expressed **positive views** on the reform, esp. the members of the parliamentary education committee and other government officials from the ruling party.

FRAMING THE REFORM

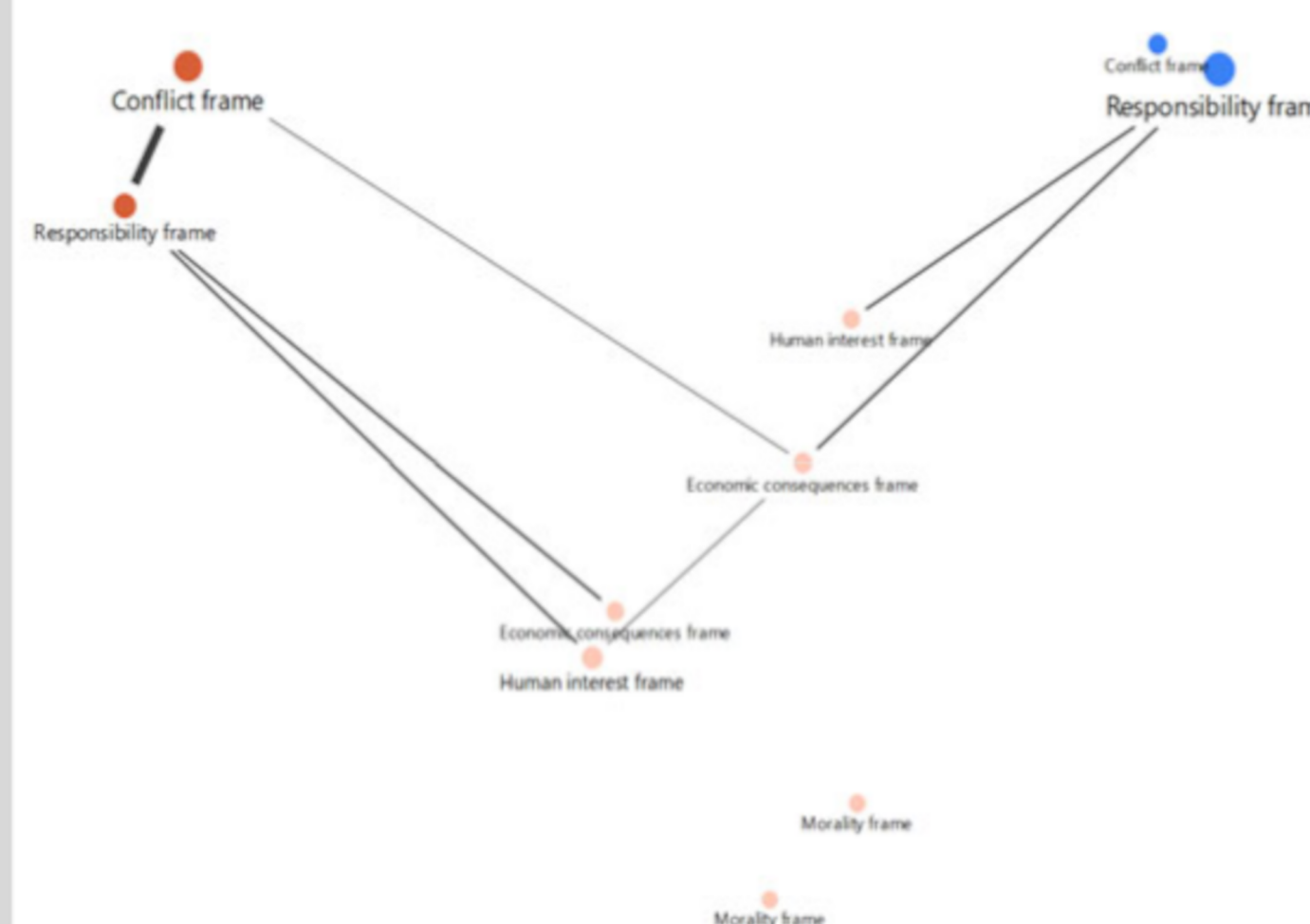


Fig. 4. Clusters of co-occurring codes under primary and secondary framing codes (min. co-occurrence $n=5$)

News articles about the reform primarily frame discussions within the realms of **responsibility** and **conflict** (Fig. 4). They often address debates among parliamentary and academic community representatives regarding the reform's planning and execution, assigning responsibility to various stakeholders. Conflict frames highlight disagreements among officials, the academic community, and the public regarding the necessity, process, and goals of the reform.

Human interest frames, though less frequent, touch on the future prospects of academic community members post-consolidation, often mentioning job loss concerns. **Economic consequence** frames discuss the savings from optimizing the higher education network and the required budget for implementation.

Secondary frames, while less common, exhibit similar trends, with **responsibility** and **conflict** frames prevailing. This dominance of responsibility and conflict narratives underscores a discourse marked by subjectivity, skepticism, criticism, and pessimism regarding the reform's impact and implementation process, indicating a need for effective dialogue among decision-makers across opposing views.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding higher education reform in Lithuania reflects a multifaceted dialogue encompassing various perspectives and concerns. Articles delve into issues such as study quality, declining student numbers, and mismatches between education and market needs, while also addressing concerns about research quality, funding disparities, and administrative complexities. While highlighting both negative consequences and positive impacts of the reform, news articles primarily frame discussions within the realms of responsibility and conflict. The dominance of these narratives underscores a discourse marked by subjectivity, skepticism, and criticism, indicating a need for effective dialogue among decision-makers. Importantly, analysis reveals a diversity of viewpoints, with both supporters and critics represented across political and academic spheres. Ultimately, while the academic community fundamentally expresses support for the reform, media platforms serve as crucial channels for highlighting shortcomings and divergences between stakeholders, emphasizing the ongoing need for constructive engagement and collaboration in shaping the future of higher education in Lithuania.