

LATVIA IN BOLOGNA PROCESS

Report on the reforms in Latvia's higher education on the way towards European Higher Education Area

By: Andrejs Rauhvargers,
Secretary General of Latvian Rectors' Council

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I BACKGROUND - Reforms in Latvia's higher education before adoption of Bologna declaration

Bologna process in Latvia should not be seen as the beginning of higher education reforms. Like in many central and eastern European countries, the beginning of reforms in Latvia's higher education started with the political changes in Europe at the end of 1980's - beginning of 1990's. Reforms in Latvia gained high speed after adoption of the Education Law on June, 19, 1991.

Hence, the principles and main action lines of the Bologna declaration „Towards a European Higher education Area” do not initiate reforms in Latvia, but rather shape the ongoing ones turning them into the overall stream of higher education reforms in Europe. Higher education reforms in Latvia in one way or already before the declaration as such was signed.

Changes introduced by the Education law of 1991

Adoption of this law was a turning point in Latvia's higher education since it provided legal background to a number of radical changes. Education law was adopted as a frame law; it provided just a rough outline of the changes and new principles, leaving clarification of issues to law on Higher Education Established adopted four years later. The most significant reforms introduced by the 1991 Education law^[1] were the following.

Autonomy of higher education institutions. Education law abolished gave higher education institutions autonomy, which is considered a compulsory precondition for development of higher education in the contemporary democratic societies^[2].

Division into academic and professional higher education. Education law stipulates that „higher education comprises higher academic education and higher professional education” and sets different objectives to the academic and professional higher education: „Objective of higher professional education is to prepare a person for independent highly qualified work in a particular field of social life, national economy, culture or health care. Objective of academic higher education is to prepare a person for a creative work in a particular branch of science”.

Introduction of bachelor and master degrees in academic higher education. Law on education provided for a major reform, in terms of which the five-year higher education programmes leading to a higher education diploma were replaced by a two-tier higher education system with bachelor and master degrees.

The reform that started with the adoption of the law also included a radical change of curricula including modernization of curricula and abolishing the burden of political subjects irrelevant to programmes that were compulsory in the period before independence. The introduced divide between academic and professional education was later found too sharp therefore the developments in terms Bologna process were intended to bring them closer again.

Opening possibilities to establish private HEIs. One of the most radical changes was introduced by the Law on Education was the provision, which allowed physical persons and legal entities to establish educational institutions. From this point on the private higher education in Latvia got off the ground.

Deepening of reforms: Law on Higher Education Establishments (1995)

Sharing power and responsibility. Law on Higher Education Establishments (LHEE) regulates relations between State and higher education, as well as the internal governance of higher education institutions more precisely. It provides the concrete appearances of autonomy and academic freedom, regulations for the establishment and liquidation of HEIs, kinds and competencies of the internal governing bodies of HEIs. The Law also sets the rights and obligations of the different groups of higher education staff and determined of the different staff categories.

LHEE clearly regards students as one of the groups of HEI staff and sets student quotas in all the collective governance bodies.

The Law lays down the status, objectives and functions of both the Rectors' Council and the Higher Education Council.

Bachelor-Master structure and division into academic and professional higher education. LHEE further strengthened the bachelor-master structure in Latvia's academic higher education, but the huge split between the academic and professional higher education remained. The professional higher education institutions were not allowed to carry out bachelor or master programmes. Bachelor and master's degrees in society were much more popular compared to professional higher education diplomas, therefore such provisions in law resulted in labelling professional higher education as second-rate.

Quality assurance and accreditation

Developments toward establishing of higher education quality assurance system in Latvia started in 1994 and in terms of Council of Europe's Legislative reform program. The principles of the QA system were elaborated jointly by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and it was also agreed to have a common expert pool.

According to the LHEE, a two-stage system of quality assurance was created in Latvia. *License* is needed start admission of students to a new programme. *Accreditation* was established as „evaluation of the quality of work organization and resources, as a result of which institution in question gains a status of a State – recognized higher educational institution”. A State – recognized higher education credential can be issued after completion of an accredited programme run by an accredited higher education institution, i.e. both programme and institutional accreditation was established.

Already the first Cabinet Regulations on Accreditation adopted in 1995 stipulated that each evaluation team should consist of at least three experts and that only one of these can be from Latvia. In practice, most evaluation teams comprise one expert from Western Europe or (more seldom) North America, one from Estonia or Lithuania and one from Latvia.

Thus, quality assurance system in Latvia was not created by the Bologna process. At the moment when Bologna declaration was signed, it already functioned and had gained momentum in Latvia, so that first round of accreditation was completed at the end of 2001.

Higher education system in Latvia before Bologna declaration

Structure of degrees and qualifications

At the time of signature of Bologna declaration Latvia had the following structure of higher education system (fig.1.).

Academic higher education. At that time in the academic higher education the bachelor-master structure was already established. Duration of bachelor programmes varied from 3 to 4 years. Holders of bachelor degree could either continue their studies towards a master degree, or choose 1-2 year programmes of professional studies. The latter did not qualify graduates for doctoral studies.

Duration of studies towards master degree was set five to seven years including bachelor phase. Master degree qualified for admission to doctoral studies.

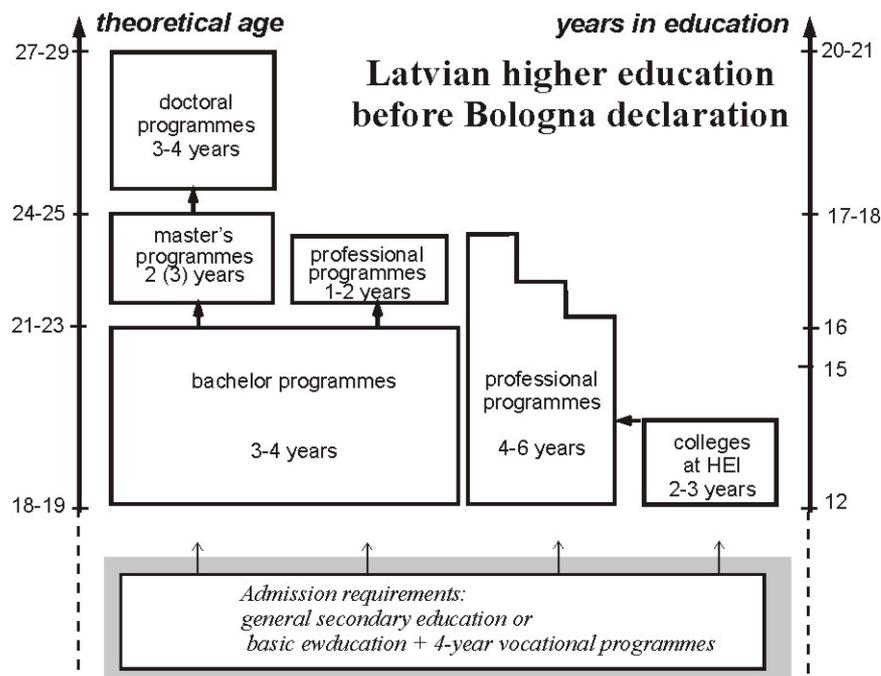
Professional higher education. Secondary school graduates could also engage in a variety of different labour market oriented professional study programmes of minimum 4 years duration.

Part of the higher professional education programmes were „purely professional”. These provided graduates with higher professional qualifications but did not qualify them for master studies.

Another part of professional study programmes ensured fulfilling a minimum standard for bachelor degree. Although a bachelor degree as such was not awarded, this group of programmes provided a professional qualification and eligibility to further studies towards master degree.

Graduates of such professional programmes as ones in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy that are traditionally seen as *university type* in Europe, the problem was partly solved referring to the above degrees as to „equivalent to master degree” and thus making the holders eligible for doctoral studies. In engineering and law the division of higher education into academic and professional resulted in parallel pairs of study programmes in the second cycle – in engineering one programme lead to qualification of engineer and the other to master degree in engineering; in law the programmes lead to lawyer's qualification or to master degree in law. In such a way, one group of second cycle graduates were eligible for professional activities and the other – for doctoral studies.

LHEE also provided for relatively short 2-3 year professionally oriented programmes offered by *colleges at higher education institutions*. Graduates of these programmes could either enter the labour market or transfer credits in their studies towards a professional higher education qualification.



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Figure 1. Diagram of Latvian higher education system before signature of Bologna declaration.

Credit system and Diploma supplement

Credit point system. At the time of signature of Bologna declaration, credit point system in Latvia was already implemented to a great extent. Latvian credit point system, similarly to other Baltic states and some Nordic countries, was based upon the definition of credit point as workload of one week of full-time studies, thus leading to 40 credits per year. As regards the number of credits, such system is easily compatible with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) - one Latvian credit is worth 1.5 ECTS credits. Latvia did not introduce the ECTS grading system. In contrast to a number of European countries, where credit system was first introduced for credit transfer after study periods abroad and usage of credit system also for accumulation only begun in terms of Bologna process, in Latvia credit system was used for accumulation from its very beginning, and duration of each programme was expressed in number of credit points.

Diploma supplement. At the time of signature of Bologna declaration, the main documents related to DS had already been already translated into Latvian, seminars had taken place where staff of HEIs were informed about DS and trained in creation of DSs, Academic Information Centre produced a short form of description of Latvian higher education system for attaching to DSs issued for the graduates of the particular academic year. Several HEIs already issued DS, at least to graduates of some programmes. Thus, Latvia started implementation of the Joint European DS earlier than several other European countries. However, DS is still not automatically issued to all graduates.

II BOLOGNA PROCESS: shaping and deepening reforms in Latvia

As already mentioned above, Bologna process did not initiate reforms in Latvian higher education but rather shaped and directed them into the overall stream of higher education reforms in Europe on the way towards European Higher Education Area^[4]. Bachelor-master structure was introduced in Latvia independently several years before Europe took joint course towards a two-tier structure, staff and student mobility was stimulated, first of all, by the EU TEMPUS^[5] and later SOCRATES programmes, as well as support through bilateral projects of several Western European and Nordic countries.

Some changes in Latvia which coincided with the start of Bologna process (e.g. changes in professional higher education brought by the law on Professional education in 1999^[6]) had actually been planned earlier.

At the same time a number of concepts^[7] that initiated further higher education reforms in Latvia, were targeted at compliance of Latvian higher education to the principles of Bologna declaration. Changes of legislation after

1999^[8] as well as academic^[9] and professional^[10] higher education standards have been targeted at Latvia's successful participation in the overall European reform process.

Conception of the development of higher education in Latvia

„Development conception of Latvian higher education and HEIs for the period until 2010” was elaborated by the Council of Higher Education which directed Latvia's towards the principles of Bologna declaration and action lines for creation of European Higher Education Area. Cabinet of Ministers supported this conception but decided that its principles have to be merged into overall conceptual documents for the education sector. In such a way, the principles of conception were endorsed, but no funding was assigned for their implementation. Strategic objective of the conception is - to develop Latvian higher education system with a view of, on the one hand, preserving its national development spirit, on the other hand, readability and recognition of Latvian degrees and diplomas both for employment on the European labour market and further studies in Europe.

Degree system. The Conception foresees to reduce the split between academic and professional higher education, first and foremost, by ensuring employability of graduates of academic programmes in the labour market and opening possibilities for the graduates of professional programmes to continue their studies in academic programmes and to engage in research or creative activities. It is foreseen in the conception that Latvia moves towards a two-tier higher education system with the two kinds of bachelor and master degrees – ones of academic and professional orientation.

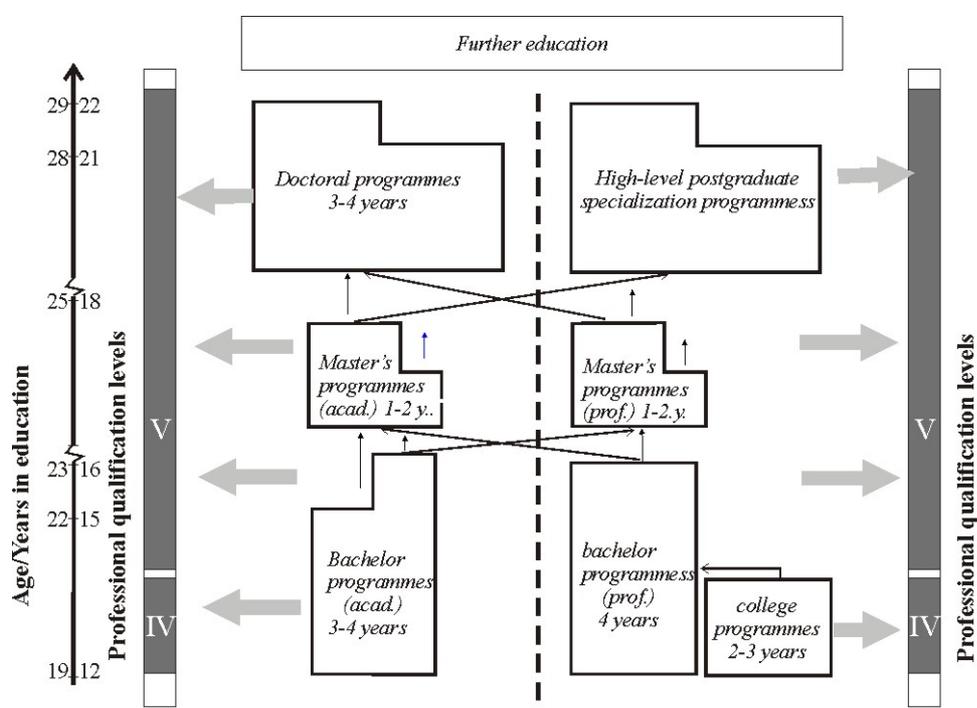


Figure 2. Conceptual diagram of Latvian higher education degree structure after implementation of the planned Bologna process reforms

The requirement that (names of) bachelor and masters degrees correspond to the branches of science should further be applied only to the academically oriented degrees. Holders of both types of bachelor degrees are eligible for admission to master studies and both types of master – to doctoral studies, except that in some cases additional requirements may be applied at admission of professional masters to doctoral studies. The diagram of the prospective degree and qualification system in Latvia is shown on Figure 2.

In this prospective scheme two-tier degree system implemented in both academic and professional higher education, and transfer possibilities from one sector of higher education to the other are established at every level. In addition to bachelor and master's degrees, short „college” programmes exist in the professional sector of higher education, which lead to a IV-level labour market qualification, but credit transfer is also possible if graduates continue their studies in professional bachelor programmes.

Employment of graduates. The conception foresees that, programmes leading to a bachelor or master degree are, where possible, at the same time oriented towards a profession and meet its standard. Where it is not possible, programmes should ensure a sufficient level of *transferable skills* (communication skills, skills of independent work and team work, management skills, ability to analyze results of the work, independent learning skills and ability

to define needs for new skills and independently acquire them) so that even at bachelor level holders can successfully find their niche in the labour market.

System of credit points. According to the conception, in order to stimulate mobility as much as possible and to ensure recognition of study periods, duration of studies has to be expressed in credit points. Credits should also be applied in part time studies and lifelong learning, gradually creating a system, fully compatible with ECTS. ECTS should be used to help HEIs to overcome the split between the academic and professional sectors of higher education.

Lifelong learning. In order to support LLL, programmes should be organized in a modular structure and the modules should be designed both for use of full-time students and with a view to ensure possibilities to return to higher education and acquire the additional knowledge and skills needed for further professional activities throughout life.

In quality assurance the conception foresees to improve and further develop the already established and functioning higher education quality assurance system in Latvia, as well as to ensure Latvia's active participation in European cooperation in higher education quality assurance.

Competitiveness of Latvian higher education. A great attention is paid in the Conception to the factors that stimulate competitiveness of Latvia's higher education system, first of all, to renewal of teaching staff and equipment and to strengthening of doctoral studies.

Bologna process aspects in the 2000 amendments of the LHEE and its supplementary documents

Degree structure and division into academic and professional higher education

The amendments of Article 57 introduce professional bachelor and master degrees (that were already foreseen by the conception) into Latvia's higher education system. Professional bachelor degree can be awarded after studies of at least four year duration, but professional master degree – after studies of no less than five years, including bachelor phase. It is also stated that holders of (both kinds of) bachelor degrees are eligible for master studies, and holders of master degrees – in doctoral studies. However, amendments do not include a provision abolishing the existing at least 160 credit point (240 ECTS) professional programmes, which lead to diploma certifying a 5th-level higher professional qualification (without awarding a bachelor or master degree). In practice, there will be a transition period in Latvia's higher education, during which the new professional bachelor and master programmes will coexist with professional programmes not leading to a degree.

Two more documents – *Academic education standard*^[9] and *Second-level higher professional education standard*^[10] – have been adopted to supplement the LHEE. These documents reflect a clear wish to reduce the split between academic and professional higher education and to ensure employability of graduates at all levels.

Academic education standard^[9]. Although the strategic goal of academic education (^[9], p.2.) still is „acquiring theoretical knowledge and research skills with a view to prepare for research activities”, it is stated in point 4 that „academic education is a precondition for scientifically grounded activities in respective professional field”. As regards the academic bachelor programmes, their professional aspects are further strengthened in point 12 - „the main objective of bachelor studies is providing graduates with a scientific basis for professional activities, developing ability for a scientifically-grounded analysis and independent problem-solving skills. Regarding the (academic) Master's degree *Academic education standard* sets only one objective (^[9], p.21) „preparation for independent research activities”. In terms of this standard measures to stimulate employability of graduates are only possible by using the wording in p. 22, which is not strictly oriented towards research activities: „to stimulate students to individually use their theoretical knowledge, cognitive and exploratory skills for solving particular problems”. Thus, professional master degrees are still the main avenue for solving the issue of employability at master's level.

Professional higher education standard^[10] sets requirements for the award of professional bachelor and master degrees. It determines the proportions between the programme components. In bachelor programmes 20 credits¹ should be allocated for general studies (including acquiring of the transversal skills), at least 36 credits for theoretical grounds of the professional field and at least 60 credits for professional specialization courses. The requirement that all professional bachelor programmes should include a practical placement of at least 26 credits is rather difficult to fulfil. It is important that Professional higher education standard allows to award professional bachelor and master degrees in a profession² and reinforces the rights of holders of professional bachelor and master degrees to continue their studies in master's and doctoral programmes respectively.

Definition of credit point. Amendments of the LHEE bring definition of credit point into legislation, setting credit point as study workload unit, corresponding to 40 hours of student's workload (one week of full-time studies), where no more than 50% of study time is allocated to contact hours. Credit system is further strengthened in higher academic and professional education standards, where both the total duration of programme and the workload of each component are expressed in credit points.

¹ NB! Here and further the workload is expressed in Latvian credit points. To convert into ECTS credits, the numbers have to be multiplied by a factor of 1.5.

² In contrast to Academic higher education standard, which allows to award degrees only according to the list of branches of science.

Division of higher education institutions. Amendments of law divide HEIs into university and non-university type, setting higher requirements for research and staff qualification to university-type HEIs. At the same no distinct substantially different features are set for be non-university HEIs. As a result, the two „types” are rather two different stages of development– a non-university HEI can strengthen research activities and thus „grow” into university type.

One - tear system of doctoral degrees. Amendments to Article 29 set new rules for selection of professors, associate professors and docents, taking on board and completing the transition to one-tier of doctoral degrees system in Latvia, started by amendments to Law on Scientific Activities 1998.

Lifelong learning. It is stated in Article 5 of LHEE that one of the tasks of HEIs is to take active part in and stimulate further education studies, thus including involvement in LLL into the tasks of HEIs.

Staff and student mobility. The list of tasks of HEIs in Art 5 of the Law includes cooperation with foreign HEIs, as well as stimulation of exchanges of staff and students.

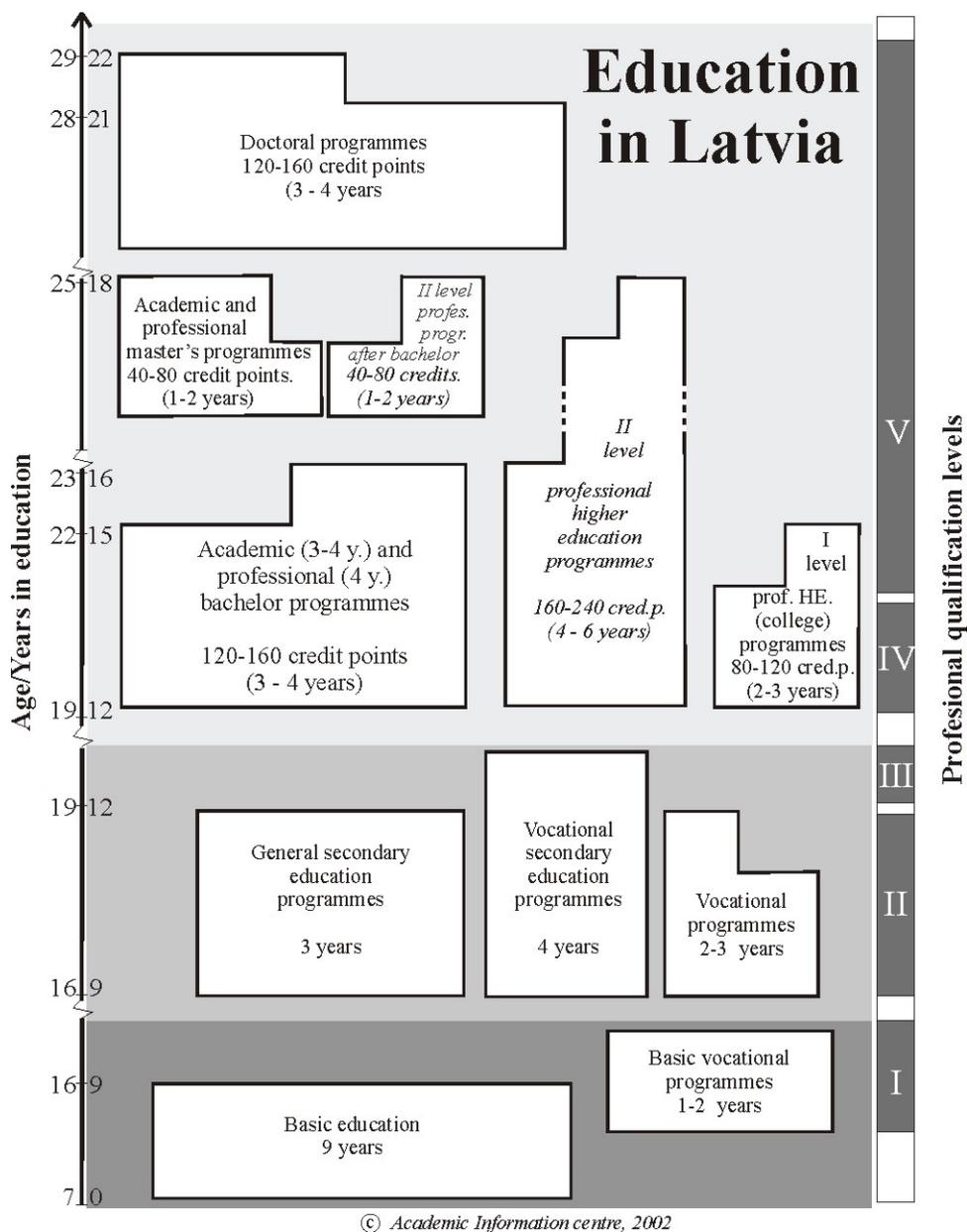


Figure 3. Diagram of the current degree structure in Latvia's higher education - professional degrees have already been introduced, but the non-degree Second-level professional higher education programmes still exist

Current degree and qualification structure in Latvia

The diagram in Figure 3 shows structure of degrees and qualifications in Latvia as it is now - according to the amendments to LHEE, adopted in 2000 and to standards of academic and professional higher education. After a full transition to bachelor and master degrees in professional higher education the second-level professional higher education programmes (marked with text in italic on the diagram) should only remain in selected professional fields, in which there is a strong motivation to keep long one-tier programmes and in which such programmes are likely to be kept in a number of other European countries (e.g. medicine and dentistry).

III STOCKTAKING: ACHIEVEMENTS AND NEEDS FOR FURTHER ACTION

This part includes conclusions based upon the survey of legislation, answers of Latvia's higher education institutions to the EUA questionnaire for Trends III report, as well as results of the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” held in Riga, December 4, and the following discussions^[1].

General conclusions following from results of the EUA questionnaire³

Questionnaire results demonstrate that Latvian higher education institutions fully support Bologna process. They believe that Bologna process will ease the recognition of Latvian degrees/ diplomas in Europe and the world.

Higher education institutions think that the creation of the European Higher Education Area will open new possibilities to European education systems and individual higher education institutions on condition that the above will be open enough to international cooperation and that they will take care of their competitiveness. Latvian HEIs are willing to increase their attractiveness, first of all, in the EU, but also in Eastern Europe, North America and other parts of the World.

Latvian higher education institutions unanimously consider that introduction of accreditation system of programmes and institutions has been useful and they support it also for future.

Latvian HEIs believe that European cooperation in quality assurance should take place as cooperation of National higher education quality agencies through ENQA rather than through establishing a European accreditation body. Such a solution will help to establishing mutual trust among the higher education quality assurance systems of different countries and it will further promote mutual recognition of qualifications.

Majority of Latvian higher education institutions have engaged in the Bologna process, but quite a few consider that their involvement is still not active enough. To activate the process inside higher education institutions, it is reasonable to start with improvement of student and staff awareness.

Latvian legislation should be examined with a view to find which clauses hinder involvement of higher education institutions in different aspects of Bologna process.

Conclusions regarding Latvia's higher education along the Bologna action lines

Transparent and comparable degree system

With a view to remove the split between academic and professional higher education and to create a symmetric degree system, Latvia has introduced professional bachelor and master degrees. The next step is to fully abolish the „second-level professional higher education programmes”.

It should also be considered in which particular fields *professional* Master degrees are really feasible and in which it is possible to make another step further changing to just one Master degree, preparing graduates for both doctoral studies and professional life.

Answers of European countries to this questionnaire will be used in the report „Trends and learning structures in higher education III”, which will reflect on the results of Bologna process in Europe in the period between ministerial summits in Prague in 2001 and in Berlin in 2003.

Diploma Supplement:

All the technical preparations in Latvia have been completed for a successful introduction of DS. The key documents are available in Latvian; a Rectors' Council working group has produced detailed instructions for filling Diploma Supplements. Each year Latvian ENIC/NARIC centre produces a description of Latvia's higher education system for use with the Diploma Supplements, reflecting on the peculiarities of Latvia's higher education system in the particular year. A number of higher education institutions⁴ started experimenting with Diploma Supplements already before adoption of Bologna declaration⁵. Some HEIs already issue DS in its present form and according to the instructions⁶, but it is not yet an overall phenomenon. Striving to ensure recognition of Latvian qualifications abroad, it is important that higher education institutions issue Diploma Supplements automatically and to all graduates.

Bachelor/master structure and division into academic and professional higher education

Transition to bachelor/master structure in Latvia's academic higher education started already in the beginning of 1990s. In this respect Latvia is ahead of quite a number of other countries engaged in the Bologna process. However, simultaneously with the introduction of bachelor/master structure in academic higher education, Latvia also introduced a too strict division between academic and professional higher education. As it is reflected in the study of Master degrees in Europe^[12], „In Latvia, Master degrees were initially understood as purely academic degrees and were not used for professional training after the Bachelor. Instead, post-Bachelor professional programmes were created and led to professional diplomas not giving access to doctoral studies. The amendments to the Latvian Higher Education Law of 2000 introduce professional Master degrees, thus solving this problem.”

When moving towards European higher Education Area, the division into academic and professional higher education should be reassessed taking into account that one of the cornerstones of the European Higher Education Area is employability of graduates at all levels. According to the opinions expressed by the participants of the conference „Latvia in Bologna process”⁷ and of the following Rectors' conference meetings, the divide between academic and professional higher education in practice is too strong and it does not always meet its goals. Now, when the introduction of professional bachelor and master degrees has already reduced the split between academic and professional higher education, it should be assessed^[11], if the right way is to adjust and accomplish the so far artificial divide into academic and professional education, or to return to unitary system of higher education. Such a system would then be, according to Bologna declaration principles, arranged along three main stages: bachelor, master and doctoral studies and graduates of each stage should be employable in one way or another. Results of studies of each stage should then be reflected in the credential and in the Diploma Supplement.

Answer to this question will determine the further development of the degree structure in Latvia; it will also influence the introduction of ECTS, help to determine more precisely the status of short-time professional higher education, kinds of documents certifying the professional qualifications, as well as the regulations for realisation of study programmes.

Employment of graduates

Cooperation with professional associations and employers in curriculum development should be further intensified with a view to stimulate employability of graduates. Higher education institutions should pay more attention to monitoring the success of their graduates in the labour market. Acquiring of core skills should be ensured in all study fields and at all levels, but especially at bachelor level. To start with, HEIs have to examine their programmes from the point of view of acquiring core skills. Employability of graduates is one of the most important aspects to be taken into account at further development of degree system in Latvia and revision of relations between academic and professional sector of higher education.

System of credits

Vast majority of Latvian higher education institutions have introduced credit point system based upon a definition of credit point as a workload of 40 hours of student's work (one week of full-time studies), that results in 40 credit points per one study year.

Since the beginning of its introduction (early 1990s in terms of the overall higher education reform), credit point system is used for credit accumulation. Credit point system has been recently endorsed by law and by the standards of academic and professional higher education. Both the duration of programmes and of individual courses is being expressed in credit points. A simple multiplication by 1.5 allows to recalculate Latvian credits into ECTS ones. At the same time, Latvia has not taken over the ECTS grading scale. A study of comparability of Latvian grading scale to ECTS one was carried out in 2001^[13] and simple software has been produced

⁴ Latvian Academy of Sports Education, Riga Technical University, University of Latvia

⁵ In some cases the supplements were issued according to an earlier UNESCO - recommended format

⁶ For instance, Turība business school issues DS to all its graduates already several years

⁷ Prof. I.Knēts, Rector of Riga Technical University, Prof. P.Bušmanis, Rector of Latvian University of Agriculture, and others.

allowing comparing achievements of students graded in Latvian 10-point system to the ECTS scale. Taken that most European countries are switching to ECTS (including such ones, which until recently had own credit point systems); Latvia should also consider a transition to ECTS.

Lifelong learning

Latvian higher education institutions realize their role and function in respect of LLL. In the next stage a more active offer of courses and programmes should begin. A generalised system for assessment and recognition of LLL results has to be created to ensure that it is possible to gain higher education credits through LLL. Content and level of studies corresponding to each credit point should be fully described when further implementing the credit system. Programmes should be arranged in modules so that these modules can be used also by LL learners.

Student and staff mobility

Student and staff mobility has grown during the years of Bologna process, but the growth is slow. Additional funding is needed in order to increase student and staff mobility. Student mobility would more or less fit the Bologna goals, if 10% of students had the possibility to complete a study period abroad. In practice it means⁸ that every year at least 2% of students should complete a study period abroad, i.e. each year the number of mobile students in Latvia should be at least 2000. For the time being, only 200 students (i.e. 10% of the estimated minimum number) per year have the opportunity to spend a study period abroad in terms of SOCRATES programme. Lack of resources is also the reason why the mobility periods of Latvian students are usually 3 months⁹ instead of the normal semester-long (6 month) periods. It creates additional difficulties – courses in foreign HEIs are usually planned in semester timescale, therefore after a period of half semester it may be difficult to express the results achieved in credits and to transfer them accordingly.

Staff can not be able to prepare graduates for Europe-wide labour market while working just at their home institutions and knowing just one- Latvian system. At the same time, it is evident that staff mobility poses the same problems as student mobility.

Socrates programme could serve as an excellent framework for mobility, but substantially greater financial resources are needed.

In most cases results of the study period abroad are recognized and credits are transferred. However, there is also evidence of such cases where it has been difficult to transfer credits. The problems may sometimes be rooted in the differences of educational systems and resulting difficulties to define, which particular study components in the Latvian programme can be replaced by the ones acquired abroad. In other cases HEIs relate the difficulties to transfer foreign credits to the fact that programme accreditation leads to a too strictly defined content of the programme. This aspect should cause no difficulties as accreditation regulations allow to replace up to 20% of programme contents with other adequate studies. Still, the bare fact that this problem is being mentioned is an evidence that at least the information on these issues should be improved. It can also be seen that the outgoing student mobility flow significantly exceeds the incoming one. It is an evidence of insufficient interest of students from European countries to study in Latvia and it calls for measures with a view to attract students from the countries involved in the creation of European Higher Education Area.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance is one of those fields where Latvia at the moment is ahead of a number of other Bologna process countries. Accreditation of programmes and institutions with involvement of foreign experts in each evaluation team started in 1996 and is now fully introduced in Latvia. State-recognized degrees/diplomas can be awarded after accreditation of both the HEI and the programme in question¹⁰.

According to Accreditation regulations^[14], only one of at least three experts in the evaluation team for a particular HEI or programme can be from Latvia. Assessment begins with a self-assessment report of a HEI or programme. Having received and read the evaluation report, the experts visit the HEI/programme and submit their expert evaluation reports. Decision upon accreditation is based upon expert evaluations. In the case of programmes, decision is taken by Commission for Accreditation of study programmes (further Accreditation Commission), but in the case of institutional accreditation – by Council of Higher Education.

Accreditation Commission (^[14], p. 12.) comprises representatives from Higher education Council, Rectors' Council, Latvian Research Council, Latvian Student Union, as well as Ministry of Education, Professional Education Cooperation Council and Tripartite Sub-council for cooperation in professional education and employment. Branch experts and representatives from the ministry in charge can be invited. HEIs and programmes may be accredited for 6-years, or, in case of shortcomings, for 2 years.

In 2001 Latvia completed the first accreditation round. It is stated in the renewed Accreditation regulations of 2001, that having accreditation for 6 years, programme should submit yearly self-assessment reports. If changes

⁸ Dr.A.Prikulis, Head of Latvian Socrates office. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” 04.12., 2003.

⁹ Prof. M.Jure, national ECTS coordinator. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process”, 04.12., 2003.

¹⁰ It should be taken into account that the bylaw of the HEI also has to be State- approved.

made in the programme are not greater than allowed by the Accreditation regulations¹¹, the repeated accreditation can be carried out in a substantially simplified way and it can be done by one expert.

Directions for further actions are the following:

- Information about the accreditation system and its results in Latvia should be disseminated through ENQA. It should be ensured that other European countries know and respect these results.
- In future more attention should be paid to the internal quality culture at higher education institutions, thus ensuring continuous improvement and also easing next accreditation rounds;

Latvian HEIs are convinced that introduction of accreditation has, first of all, stimulated improvement of the overall quality of higher education in Latvia. Analysis at preparation of self-assessment reports has initiated emerging of internal quality assurance mechanisms inside the HEIs. HEIs also think^[11] that possibilities should be sought to shift the emphasis from accreditation to a system based upon culture of permanent quality assessment and improvement inside HEIs. An in-depth analysis of the goals, gains, expenses and procedures of accreditation is also needed. The requirement that a professional programme can only be started if a standard is in place for the profession in question should be revised.

On January 9, 2003 Council of Higher Education established a working group that will elaborate proposals for amendments of accreditation regulations drawing from the results of the first accreditation round.

Role of students in the process

At most higher education institutions students are represented both in senates and lower level decision-making bodies. There are student representatives in the Council of Higher Education. Thus, in principle, student involvement in the process is fully ensured. At the same time student representatives¹² draw attention to the fact that students in Latvia are still not sufficiently informed about the process of creation of the European Higher Education Area calling to organize more information events for students.

In the next stages of Bologna process, a greater attention should be paid to a direct cooperation with student organisations.

Establishing joint degrees

In their Prague communiqué^[15] European ministers responsible for higher education have given a high priority to the establishment of joint degrees. As shown in a study on joint degrees in Europe^[16], work at establishment of joint degrees has a positive impact on all the main action lines of Bologna process. It is one of the most powerful tools on the way to mutual understanding between the different higher education systems which should result in better mutual recognition of credentials.

Latvian higher education institutions cooperate with foreign partners in joint curriculum development and establishing joint programmes already since the years of TEMPUS programme, the most important examples being cooperation among technical universities of Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as cooperation of agricultural universities of the same groups of countries. However, this cooperation has so far not ended up with award of joint degrees. Partly it can be explained by the gaps in legislation that hinder award of joint degrees in Europe as a whole^[16], but partly also with the fact that in the mid-1990's foreign partners considered cooperation with Latvian HEIs as their assistance to the Latvian partners and not a real joint venture. Still the past cooperation can serve as a platform to begin establishment of joint degrees.

With a view to establishing joint degrees, Latvia should, first of all, as recommended by Council of Europe Steering Committee for Higher Education^[17], look through its national legislation, to indicate and revise these clauses directly or indirectly hinder establishment of joint degrees. Additional resources should be assigned for support curriculum development with foreign HEIs.

One of relatively easy measures could be organization of a meeting of representatives of Baltic and Nordic countries with a view analyze the past cooperation through TEMPUS and bilateral projects and to indicate the feasible ways for further cooperation.

Other factors influencing Bologna process specifically in Latvia¹³

Staff renewal and qualification. Reforms of higher education in Latvia can not be successful without activities to grow up a new generation of teaching staff in Latvia. Number of teaching staff – and especially professors – does not fit the number of students. Renewal and inflow of a new staff generation is necessary to ensure high quality education. Two tendencies can be noticed^[7] in Latvia: in social sciences where the student number has rapidly grown and continues to grow, number of highest qualification staff, especially professors, is insufficient.

¹¹ Note that the regulations indeed give space for change and development and quite substantial parts of the programme can be replaced without a repeated accreditation.

¹² K. Ante - student representative at Council of Higher Education. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” 04.12., 2003.

¹³ NB: some of the issues below are specific to Latvia and may be not easily understood without a deeper knowledge of Latvian legislation.

In natural sciences and engineering, where number of students is not so big, number of professors is seemingly sufficient. However, their average age 56.5 years is seen as critical, especially knowing that the proportion of staff under 39 years of age is just 29% of the total. Staff renewal is an urgent need, but it can only be successful if carried out together with improving staff remuneration and measures to train more young people of highest qualification.

Thus, development of doctoral studies is a crucial prerequisite for successful implementation of Bologna process reforms in Latvia^[4]. Progress in development of doctoral studies can not be ensured only by raising salaries and scholarships^[11], the package should also include material and financial resources for research.

Staff selection. Right to select own staff is one of the basic components of autonomy. In the current situation, to select a professor, a HEI has to have an appropriately qualified Professor's council. In the case of small or new HEIs it is not always the case, so they actually have to turn to the bigger ones to elect professors for them.

If there is a vacancy of professor or associate professor at a HEI, Senate should have power to organize a Council for selection of professor while the oversight of the process could be entrusted to Council of Higher Education.

Staff salaries. Under conditions that 2/3 of higher education students are fee-paying, it is time to recognize that the State is only one of the stakeholders in the market. Accordingly, also in the state sector remuneration should be formed according to the situation in the higher education labour market both in higher education and in the professional branch in question.

Ensuring of the autonomous status of HEIs. Adoption of some new legal acts in Latvia has caused a need to re-formulate the status of HEIs in order to fit them into the institutional system. A proper reference to the autonomous status of HEIs in the legislation has once again become a crucial need. Several very important further aspects follow from the autonomous status of HEIs, such as rights and responsibilities of the leadership, personnel, owners of HEI and other stakeholders, and others.

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^[17] Council of Europe Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research. Meeting report, Strasbourg, 3-4 October, 2002, p. 9-10