

# Latvia in Bologna process

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

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### Reforms before adoption of Bologna declaration

Bologna process in Latvia should not be seen as the beginning of higher education reforms but rather as their continuation and shaping. 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.

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 and often filling them with a new or changed content.

Higher education reforms in Latvia in one way or another and more or less successfully touched most of the aspects formulated in Bologna declaration already before the declaration as such was signed. To some extent, reforms in Latvia started already before regaining independence in 1991 – at the end of eighties when, on the one hand, the centralized Moscow control over the curriculum contents grew looser and, on the other hand, in conditions of the overall liberalization it became possible to start cooperation with the Western countries, thus gaining more information regarding the higher education in Europe and the World. Before regaining independence no radical changes in the curriculum contents were possible that would allow revising the presence of compulsory political subjects in all the study programmes. However, in this period the first cooperation with Western universities already started, which, at least in some individual cases grew into changes in the course curricula of particular subjects and into first cases of support to Latvian higher education institutions - mainly in the form of used equipment and textbooks. Reforms gained high speed after adoption of the Education Law on June, 19, 1991.

#### *Analysis of legislation*

##### **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. Some of these changes were introduced by law without a proper research and in-depth analysis, and they also somewhat caught by surprise the higher education society, which at that time still lacked sufficient information on the higher education developments in the World. As a result, not all of the well-intentioned changes later turned out in a positive way.

The most significant reforms introduced by the 1991 Education law <sup>[1]</sup> were the following.

##### **Autonomy of higher education institutions.**

Education law (Art. 40) abolished the direct subordination of higher education institutions to the State structures, and gave them autonomy, which is considered a compulsory precondition for development of higher education and as such is considered a „must” in the contemporary democratic societies<sup>[2]</sup>. At the same time one must note that the 1991 Education law was intended as a frame law to be accompanied by laws regulating each particular sector of education. For this reason, the stipulations in the Education law were very brief and provided just a rough outline of the changes and new principles. This happened also to the autonomy issue – autonomy of higher education institutions was simply declared without any additional conditions. Thus, in contrary to the legislation of e.g. the Western European countries, which granted autonomy but at the same time stipulated the responsibility of higher education institutions and regulated the relations between higher education institutions and other stakeholders (government, employers, students, parents etc.), the Latvian law of 1991 did not foresee accountability of higher education institutions before society, introduction of a higher education quality assurance system or other mechanisms that would allow other stakeholders carry out influence upon the functioning of higher education sector.

For the Ministry of Education and science Law of 1991 only foresees a competence in „issuing of licences for opening of educational institutions, changing their profile or status” (Art. 8. p 4 and 5). As

regards the competence of the Ministry to „implement the State policies in education” (Art.8, p.1), no real mechanisms were foreseen in the law, to allow the ministry carry out the above competence in the autonomous higher education institutions functioning according to their bylaws. Taking into account the frequent changes of ministers of education and science<sup>1</sup>, the latter aspect also had a certain positive effect – it did not allow carrying out premature reforms before they were discussed with the HEIs.

In such a way, granting autonomy to higher education institutions, in itself being a progressive and absolutely necessary step, hindered further development of legislation – attempts to adopt legislation regulating particular aspects of the functioning of HEIs were considered as a threat to autonomy. This was one of the reasons why adoption of the law on Higher Education Establishments took place more than four years after adoption of the Education law.

### **Division into academic and professional higher education**

Articles 38 and 39 of Education law stipulate that „higher education comprises higher academic education and higher professional education” and set 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 levels in academic higher education**

According to Articles 44 and 45 of the law, persons who have acquired a higher professional education programme, are awarded an appropriate professional qualification, while persons who have acquired an academic higher education programme, are awarded a bachelor or master degree. This change of legislation 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 and military subjects. Unfortunately, the changes also included diminishing professional aspects in the bachelor and master programmes. It most heavily affected acquiring of professional skills and competencies –it was left to professional programmes. The latter tendency was even more strengthened by difficulties to provide students with practical placement possibilities and by lack of the

necessary technical support and funding, so that altogether it was easier to carry out such „academic” programmes in which the practical training aspects were reduced to minimum. The above difficulties still exist, but they were particularly strongly felt in the first years of independence.

Each particular change introduced by the Law of 1991 was rooted in logical considerations, but altogether they also produced negative effects. Looking from a formal point of view, a contradiction can be found in the bare fact that, while a strict division into academic and professional higher education is more characteristic of the continental Europe, where these two sectors of higher education are also institutionally divided between universities and non-university institutions, and where each group of institutions have their specific objectives, curriculum contents and mechanisms how curricula are developed, selection principles of staff and students etc.; the names of bachelor and master degrees were borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon systems, where academic and professional higher education is not strictly divided between programmes and institutions and where a bachelor or at least master is usually also trained to be a professional of the appropriate field.

If the Law of 1991 was consistently implemented, it should have lead Latvia to a situation with most young people studying in the professional programmes and only a small number of them preparing themselves to „a creative work in a branch of science”, especially in the first years of independence, when the possibilities to find employment in researcher were shrinking in Latvia. However, it did not happen - internationally renowned bachelor and master degrees were much more popular among the students and their parents compared to the qualifications awarded in the professional higher education. As a result, a great number of young people studied in the programmes that should have lead to research activities and not to employment. This phenomenon in turn caused dissatisfaction of employers with the result achieved.

### **Shift from a fully state-funded higher education to a mixed funding**

Article 43 of the 1991 Education law includes a provision that „ for all studies a study fee shall be fixed, which can be fully or partly covered by the State”, thus putting an end to the traditional system where higher education studies were fully state-funded. Under the conditions where the State was unable to provide funding for studies of all those who wanted to study, this new approach allowed those who were qualified for higher education studies but failed in the competition for State-funded study places, to study covering study fees themselves. According to the law, the study fee could be covered either by the students themselves or by other persons or legal entities. It is self-evident that, especially before the system for study loans was established several years later, these changes created uneven access to higher education for

<sup>1</sup> In the period between 1992 and 2002 Ministers of Education and Science in Latvia changed 11 times. In addition, two times a separate post of State minister in Higher education and research was established and abolished after a relatively short time.

young people from different social groups. Those who could not find funding for their studies, needed a better secondary education background, since their only possibility to study was gaining a state-funded study place in the contest.

It was stated in the Law of 1991 (Article 43) that „State provides funding for preparation of the necessary number of specialists and determines its requirements towards the qualification of these specialists”. At the same time, especially before the Higher Education Council was established in 1996, the State (in the face of Ministry of Education and science) did not have any practical mechanisms that would allow it either to forecast the number of specialists needed per branch of national economy, or to determine their qualification requirements. As a result, the breakdown of state-funded study places by study fields usually was set proportionally to the number of students in the same fields or institutions in previous years and to the funding available. It should also be noted that the still-existing mixed study funding established by the Law of 1991 leaves the State with very little possibilities to influence the breakdown of graduates by study field. It is self-evident that the State can only change the allocation of state funding to fields studies. Under the circumstances where the number of State-funded study places comprises just a little above one third of the total number of students, distribution of students by study fields is in practice not determined by state influence, but by the popularity of different study fields in the eyes of applicants and their parents, which does not necessarily reflect the overall development of national economy. The above to a great extent explains both the exaggerated number of students in study fields such as economics, business administration, law and some other fields, and insufficient student number in e.g. engineering and sciences.

#### **Opening possibilities to establish private HEIs**

One of the most radical changes was introduced by the provisions of the Article 14 of the Law on Education, 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.

#### **Reforms introduced by Law on Higher Education establishments (1995)**

A number of aspects that were barely mentioned in the Law of 1991 were elaborated much more in detail in the Law on Higher Educational establishments (further LHEE) adopted on October 18, 1995.

#### **Sharing of power and responsibility**

The relations between State and higher education, as well as the internal governance of higher education institutions are more precisely described in the Law on HEI. As well, the Law 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. Interestingly, the fact that the law of 1995 was a law on *higher educational establishments* and not a law on *higher education* had some positive effect to HEIs – it helped HEIs to protect their special status when resisting the numerous attempts to apply to them the same legal regulations that deal with any kind of state institutions.

The Law also sets the rights and obligations of the different groups of higher education personnel, clearly attributed students to the personnel of HEIs and determined quotas of students in the collective governance bodies. Positions of academic staff as well as their rights, obligations and selection rules are fixed, as well.

It should be noted that the Law lays down the status, objectives and functions of both the Rectors' Council, which already existed as a collegiate body of HEIs at the time when the law was adopted, and the Higher Education Council, which was established because it was foreseen in this law. Rectors' Council (Art. 64) works out proposals to the Minister of Education and Science regarding the further development of higher education, provides its opinion regarding draft laws and other legislation in the field of higher education, represents Latvian HEIs abroad and deals with other higher education issues within the scope of its competencies. Higher Education Council is established as a legal entity. It works out the State strategy in higher education, carries out the cooperation between State, HEIs and society in developing of higher education, and oversees the quality of higher education (Art. 65). Structure, functions and rights of the Higher Education Council are further elaborated in the articles 66-74 of the Law.

#### **Curriculum organization and contents**

Taking into account that the law of 1995 is named „Law on Higher Educational establishments” and not „Law on Higher Education”, it is legally targeted at organisational issues of higher education rather than content issues. Thus, for instance, the law does tell, which characteristics of a study programme should be included in a programme description (Art 55), but it does not provide further details compared to the law of 1991 regarding the objectives of academic and professional higher education. While laying down regulations regarding the organizational aspects of study programmes, it is also stipulated that the requirements for completion of academic study programmes should include working out and defence of a bachelor or master thesis as a compulsory component, while the completion of a professional study programme *may include* a working out and defence of a final thesis or project (Art. 58).

In its initial form (i.e. before the amendments of 2000) LHEE stimulated further strengthening of bachelor-master structure in Latvia's academic higher education, but it also deepened the split between the academic and professional higher education. The interpretation of the bachelor degree was somewhat strange - according to the law, three- and four-year

bachelor programmes could coexist in Latvia. At the same time the wording „study programmes after completion of which a document certifying higher education is awarded, can not be shorter than four years in duration” in fact declares that three-year bachelor programmes do not provide a „completed” higher education.

### **Divide between the academic and professional higher education**

Article 3 of the LHEE divides higher education institutions into three groups: universities, professional HEIs and „other HEIs”. The law also uses a term „academic HEI” (Article 57) which is not further explained. As it follows from the context, „academic HEI” are, in fact, universities and “other HEIs” together. According to Article 57, studies towards master degree are only possible at academic HEIs. Although it is foreseen in part 2 of Article 3 that „a HEI can carry out programmes of both academic and professional studies”, it follows from the part 4 of the same Article 3 and from parts 2 and 5 of Article 57, that, in reality, studies towards bachelor and master degrees can only take place in academic HEIs. Due to the fact that bachelor and master’s degrees were more popular in society compared to professional higher education diploma, such provisions in the law resulted in a trend that every higher education institution tried to be included in the group of „other’ HEIs. Unfortunately, this phenomenon discredited the professional higher education - instead of underlining the specific mission of professional higher education to prepare the graduates for a highly qualified work, it created an impression about professional HEIs as second-rate HEIs and labelling the whole professional higher education as second-rate.

### **Recognition of foreign qualifications and information on Latvia’s higher education**

When assessing Latvia’s engagement in the international developments and, in particular in the establishing of European Higher Education Area (the Bologna process), it is important to admit that, already in its 1995 edition, Latvian LHEE already based credential evaluation/ recognition of foreign qualifications upon those principles that formed the backbone of the Lisbon Convention<sup>2</sup>. The law delegated assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as participation in the European recognition networks and information provision about Latvia’s higher education system, to Latvian Academic Information centre (Art. 85). In such a way, the law of 1995 paved the way for ratification of Lisbon Convention in Latvia in the beginning of 1999 – something that some countries participating in the Bologna process still have not done several years later.

It should be admitted that, trying to prevent too voluntary recognition decisions by the HEIs, the Law delegated them only the right to take recognition

decisions in the case of study periods, leaving decisions upon recognition of full qualifications to the ENIC/NARIC centre. As well, before later amendments the LHEE delegated the assessment of doctoral degrees to the habilitation councils, thus tearing doctoral degrees out of the overall system for recognition of foreign qualifications.

### **Quality assurance and accreditation**

The starting point in the establishing of higher education quality assurance system in Latvia is the international seminar on higher education quality assurance, organized by the Council of Europe in Riga October 24-25, 1994. Well-known European quality assurance experts were chosen as speakers at this seminar and participants were selected from the leadership of higher education institutions and high-ranking ministry officials from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The need to establish quality assurance system was widely discussed and it was agreed that Baltic states should cooperate in establishment of the quality assurance systems with a view to establish comparable criteria and procedures in all the three countries and to further use each other’s experts in the evaluation teams.

At the end of the seminar Ministers of all the three states arrived and they signed a protocol on Baltic cooperation in higher education quality assurance. For further coordination of actions in establishing of quality assurance systems and recognition of foreign qualifications, the ministers also decided to establish Baltic Higher Education Coordination Committee (BHECC). BHECC included representatives from Rectors’ conferences, ministry representatives responsible for establishing the quality assurance systems, and heads of the recognition centres (ENIC/NARIC). Cooperation through the BHECC helped establishing comparable higher education quality assurance systems in the Baltic States using each other’s experts in the evaluation teams visiting higher education institutions and programmes. As well, BHECC drafted a Baltic recognition agreement to complement the Lisbon Convention. To speed up implementation, it was first signed in 1999 as a protocol between heads of recognition centres, but in 2000 it was signed by Heads of States as an agreement between states.

According to the LHEE of 1995 a two-stage system quality assurance was created in Latvia. *License* gave the right to start admission of students to the programme in question awarding qualifications in the name of HEI only (such qualifications (degrees, diplomas) were not state-recognized before accreditation). *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. The rights to issue State-recognized documents are only given to these HEI, which are also accredited institutionally (Art. 9, part

<sup>2</sup> A well-advanced draft of the Convention already existed at the time when the LHEE was adopted in Latvia

(1) and (2)), i.e. both programme accreditation and institutional accreditation is required.

Since the first Accreditation Regulations approved by the Cabinet on Nov 28, 1995 each evaluation team should consist of at least three experts. Only one of the experts can be from Latvia, the other two should be from abroad. Foreign experts are sought upon recommendation by the body responsible for higher education quality assurance in the respective foreign country. In practice, most evaluation teams comprise one expert from Latvia, one from Estonia or Lithuania and one from Western Europe or North America.

Thus, quality assurance system in Latvia was 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**

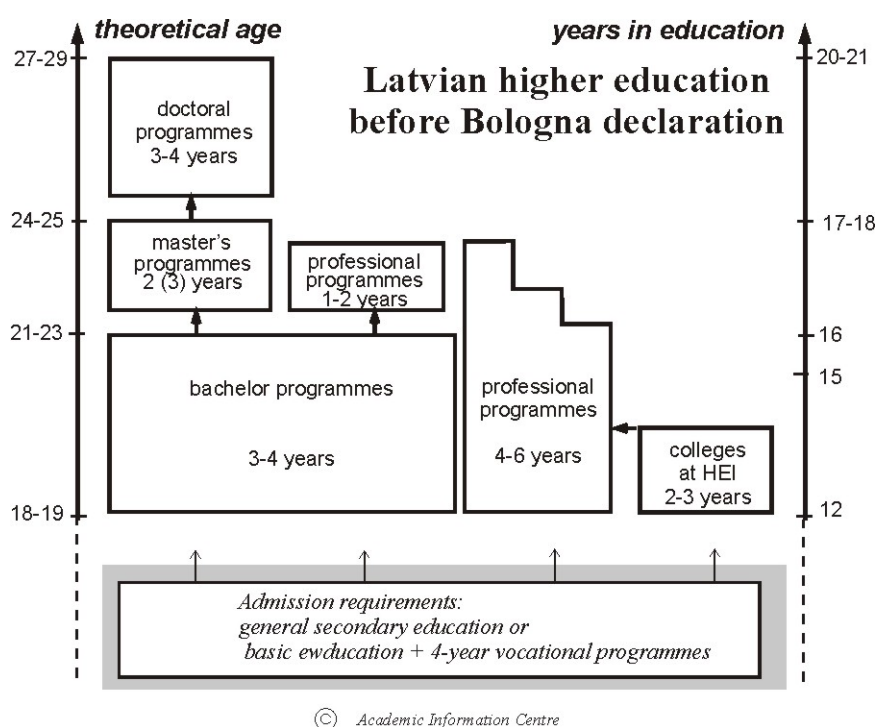
According to the 1991 Education law and the LHEE, at the time of signature of Bologna declaration there was the following structure of higher education system in Latvia (see fig.1.).

**Academic higher education.** At that time the switch to a two-tier bachelor-master structure had already taken place in Latvia (unlike a number of other European countries where it only begun in terms on Bologna process). The duration of bachelor programmes was 3 or 4 years and holders of bachelor degree could either continue their studies towards a master degree, or choose 1-2 year long programmes of professional studies. In such a way, one of the functions of master degree known in Europe<sup>[3]</sup> – professional training after bachelor – was missing in Latvia.

Duration of studies towards master degree was set five to seven years including bachelor phase. Master degree was a prerequisite to doctoral studies. Graduates of post-bachelor professional programmes did not qualify for doctoral studies - they had to complete master programme first.

**Professional higher education.** A variety of different professional study programmes existed and their minimum duration was set to four years.

In reality there were two kinds of higher professional education programmes with admission after secondary school: „purely professional” ones and those, which included bachelor’s standard. Graduates of the „purely professional” programmes were awarded



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

a diploma certifying a qualification of professional higher education and they were not eligible for admission to master studies. Graduates of such professional programmes, which included bachelor’s standard, were awarded a professional qualification and were also eligible to start studies towards master degree. In such a way, there was an inconsistency in Latvian higher education system – although the

programme included bachelor standard, the graduates were not awarded a bachelor degree – the latter was reserved to the „purely academic” studies. Besides, according to the Article 57 part (2) of the law, names of bachelor degrees have to correspond to the list of branches of science, hence, the interdisciplinary or professionally oriented bachelor degrees could not be awarded.

Another inconsistency relates to these programmes that prepare for professional activity, but at the same time are traditionally seen as *university type* in Europe, such as medicine, pharmacy, law and engineering. As regards medicine, dentistry and pharmacy, 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.

#### **Credit point 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.

In the beginning credit system was not described in the legislation, therefore different HEIs interpreted it slightly differently.

**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.

## **REFORMS IN LATVIA’S HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN BOLOGNA PROCESS**

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 <sup>[4]</sup>. 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<sup>[5]</sup> 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<sup>[6]</sup>) had actually been planned earlier.

At the same time a number of concepts<sup>[7]</sup> 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<sup>[8]</sup> as well as academic<sup>[9]</sup> and

professional<sup>[10]</sup> 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.

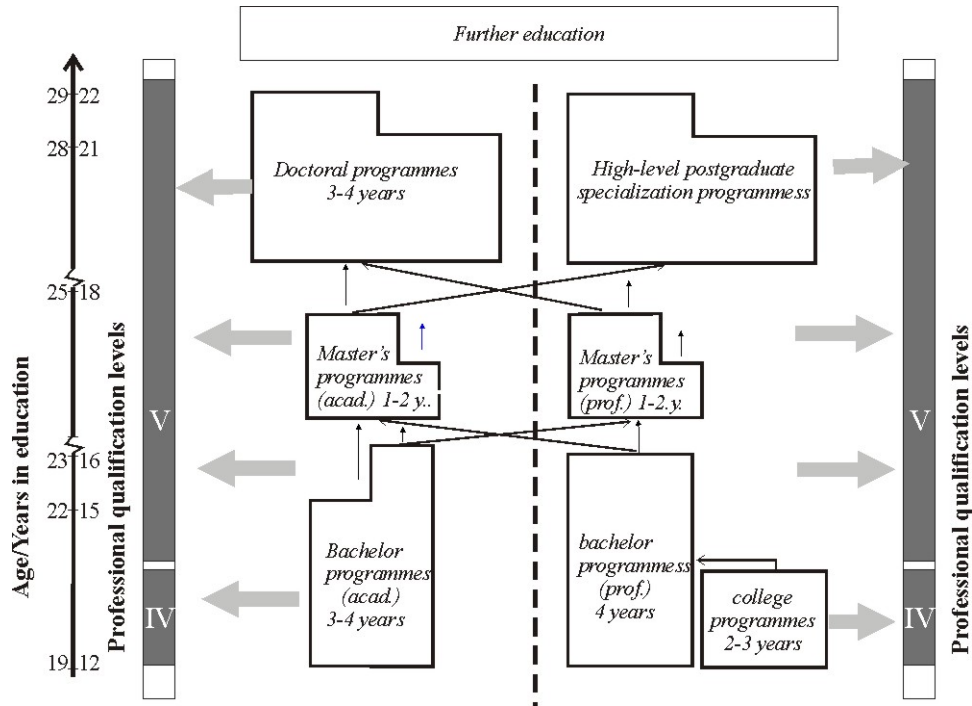


Figure 2. Conceptual diagram of Latvian higher education degree structure after implementation of the planned Bologna process reforms

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 (first-level professional higher education programmes) exist in the professional sector of higher education, which lead to a labour market qualification, but credits are transferred 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 in

dependent 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 *second-level higher professional programmes*, which lead to diploma certifying a higher professional qualification (without awarding a bachelor or master degree). In practice, the latter means a that 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*<sup>[9]</sup> and *Second-level higher professional education standard*<sup>[10]</sup> – 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**<sup>[9]</sup>. Although the strategic goal of academic education (<sup>[9]</sup>, 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 (<sup>[9]</sup>, 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**<sup>[10]</sup> sets requirements for the award of professional bachelor and master degrees. It determines the proportions between the programme components. In bachelor programmes 20 credits<sup>3</sup> 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 profession<sup>4</sup> 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.

#### **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 - tier 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.

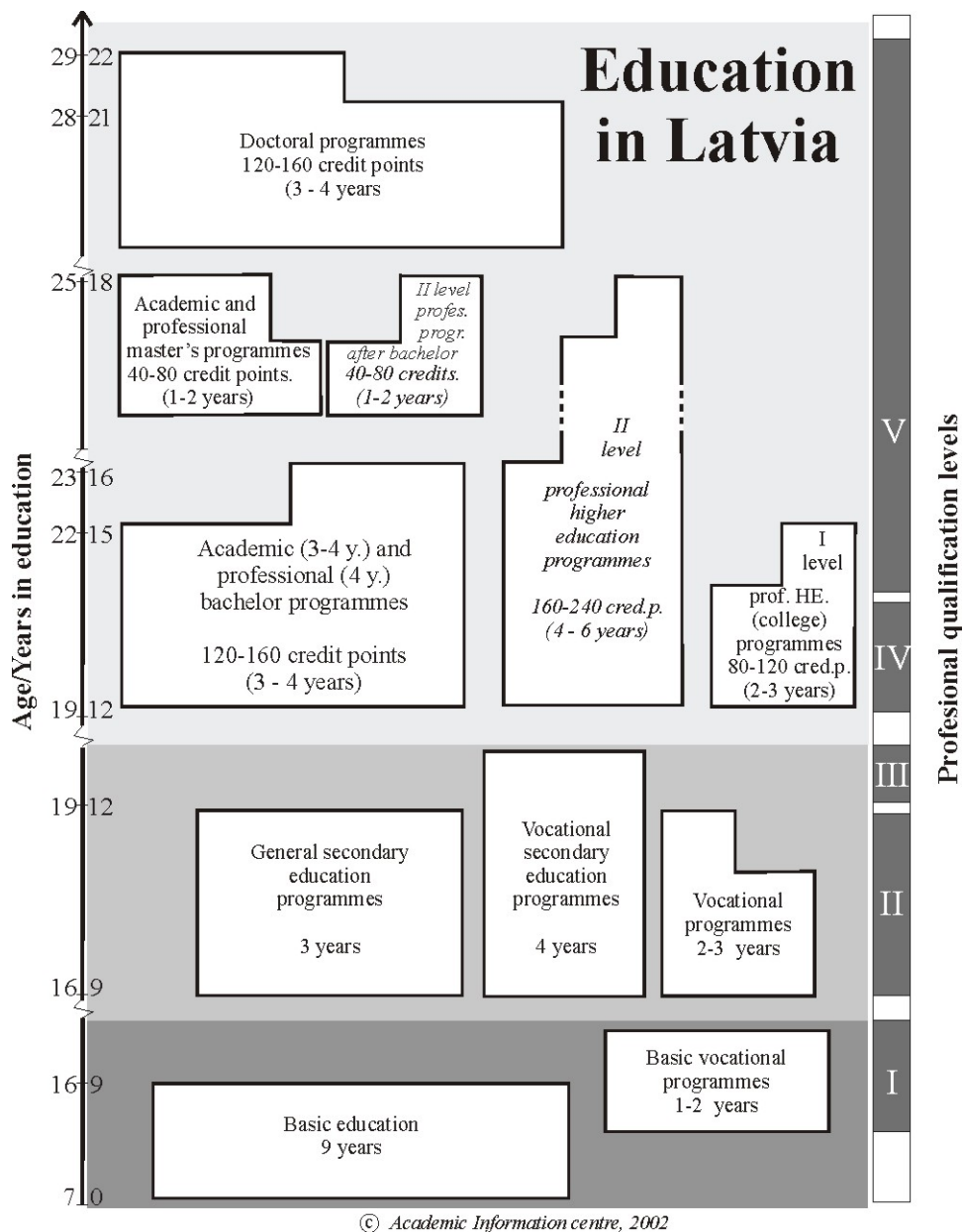
**Lifelong learning.** It is stated in Article 5 of LHEE that one of the tasks of HEIs is to take active part in and stimulate further education studies, thus including involvement in LLL into the tasks of HEIs.

**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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Academic higher education standard, which allows to award degrees only according to the list of branches of science.





**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).

# ACHIEVEMENTS IN BOLOGNA PROCESS IN LATVIA 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<sup>111</sup>.*

## ***General conclusions following from results of the EUA questionnaire<sup>5</sup>***

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 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”.

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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.

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.

### **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 institutions<sup>6</sup> started experimenting with Diploma Supplements already before adoption of Bologna declaration<sup>7</sup>. Some HEIs already issue DS in its present form and according to the instructions<sup>8</sup>, 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<sup>12</sup>, „In Latvia, Master degrees were initially understood as a 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.”

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<sup>6</sup> Latvian Academy of Sports Education, Riga Technical University, University of Latvia

<sup>7</sup> In some cases the supplements were issued according to an earlier UNECSO - recommended format

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Turība business school issues DS to all its graduates already several years

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”<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>[11]</sup>, if the right way is to adjust and accomplish the so far artificial divide into academic and professional education, or to return to an integrated system of higher education, which, would then be, according to Bologna declaration principles, arranged along three main stages: bachelor, master and doctoral studies. Results of studies of each stage should then be reflected in the credential and in the Diploma Supplement and graduates of each stage should be employable in one way or another. 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<sup>[13]</sup> and a simple software has been produced allowing to compare 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 means<sup>10</sup> 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 months<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Prof. I.Knēts, Rector of Riga Technical University, Prof. P.Bušmanis, Rector of Latvian University of Agriculture, and others.

<sup>10</sup> Dr.A.Prikulis, Head of Latvian Socrates office. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” 04.12., 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Prof. M.Jure, national ECTS coordinator. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process”, 04.12., 2003.

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 question<sup>12</sup>. According to Accreditation regulations<sup>[14]</sup>, 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 (<sup>[14]</sup>, 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

<sup>12</sup> It should be taken into account that the bylaw of the HEI also has to be State-approved.

regulations of 2001, that having accreditation for 6 years, programme should submit yearly self-assessment reports. If changes made in the programme are not greater than allowed by the Accreditation regulations<sup>13</sup>, 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<sup>[11]</sup> that possibilities should be sought to replace the existing double checking of each programme – at issuing the licence to admit students and at accreditation – with 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. Taking into account that a professional standard is elaborated and approved outside higher education sector, its absence should not prevent starting a study programme, at least not one funded by the study fees of students.

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 representatives<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> K. Ante - student representative at Council of Higher Education. Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” 04.12., 2003.

### **Establishing joint degrees**

In their Prague communiqué<sup>[15]</sup> 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<sup>[16]</sup>, 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<sup>[16]</sup>, 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<sup>[17]</sup>, 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 Latvia***<sup>15</sup>

**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<sup>[7]</sup> 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. 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<sup>[4]</sup>. Progress in development of doctoral studies can not be ensured by ensuring salaries and scholarships only<sup>[11]</sup>, the package necessarily includes material and financial resources for research.

The procedure for award of doctoral degrees are awarded in Latvia is. Once a HEI has the powers to award doctoral degrees and doctoral programme in question is accredited, it should have an autonomous power to award degrees and expertise of thesis by an outside institution before defence is an unnecessary bureaucratization of the process.

Recognition of foreign doctoral degrees should be addressed, as well<sup>16</sup>. Taking into account that doctoral degree is internationally treated as the highest university degree, it, as well as any other degree, has to be recognized according to procedures established by the Lisbon Recognition Convention. It means that a doctoral degree awarded by a foreign HEI having powers to award doctoral degrees in a State party to Lisbon convention, it should be recognized if no substantial differences can be demonstrated. Any requests to re-defend a foreign doctoral degree in Latvia or to organize an expertise of thesis are, in fact, violation of the Convention.

**Staff selection.** Right to select own staff is one of the basic components of autonomy. In the current situation selection of professors and associate professors in some cases turns out as a monopoly of some higher education institutions<sup>[11]</sup>. (The latter regards the regulation that 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.

**Additional income of state HEIs.** Additional incomes earned by state HEIs should be kept in State treasury or in accounts of state-selected banks, but

<sup>15</sup> NB: some of the issues below are specific to Latvia and may be not easily understood without a deeper knowledge of Latvian legislation.

<sup>16</sup> B.Ramiņa, Director of Academic Information centre (Latvian ENIC/NARIC) Intervention at the conference „Latvia in Bologna process” 04.12., 2003

they have to be available for the use of HEIs according to a Senate-approved breakdown.

**Properties of HEIs.** It is important that these state properties that are at disposal of HEIs legally become properties of HEIs. It is the main precondition for rational usage of premises, raise of cost-efficiency and attraction investments to higher education sector. Transfer of state properties to HEIs should not be linked to establishment of new administrative powers, e.g. chancellors, not subordinated to collective decision-making bodies of HEIs. It is already stipulated in the legislation that rector, who has to be approved by the Cabinet of Ministers, is responsible for all functioning of the HEI, including the finance and property management.

**Ensuring of the autonomous status of HEIs.** Adoption of Commercial law and its coming into force has caused a need to re-formulate the status of HEIs in order to fit them into the institutional system. Proper reference to 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, typology of HEIs according to the specific of their academic activities, and others.

### *Coordination of the process in Latvia*

A better coordination among the stakeholders would stimulate the process in Latvia. Bologna process in Latvia moves at a sufficient speed, but different kinds of activities are rather spontaneously initiated by different stakeholders: Rectors' Council, Council of Higher Education, Ministry, Academic Information centre (Latvian ENIC/NARIC), Academic Programme Agency, Higher education Quality Evaluation centre, HEIs or students.

To coordinate the process, a working group should be established consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, Rector's Council, Higher education Council, and Latvian Student association. The task of this group should be coordination of action, preparing proposals and spreading information. In its everyday life the Working group would cooperate with the Bologna coordinators at higher education institutions.

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