

# Higher education in Latvia

by Baiba Ramina

**As in many central and eastern European countries, the reform of Latvia's higher education system started with the political changes in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s.**

Reforms gained in speed after independence was regained in 1990 and with the adoption of the Education Law in June 1991. This was a turning point in Latvia's higher education system since it provided the legal background to a number of radical changes. The most relevant reforms introduced by the new law were:

- **Autonomy of higher education institutions.** The law abolished the direct subordination of higher education institutions to the state structures.
- **Division into academic and professional higher education.** The law stipulates that, "higher education comprises higher academic education and higher professional education" and sets different objectives for these two strands.
- **Introduction of Bachelor and Master levels in academic higher education.** This change facilitated a major reform, in which the five-year programmes leading to a higher education diploma were replaced by a two-tier higher education system.

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- **Shift from a fully state-funded higher education system to mixed funding.** The 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 in which higher education studies were fully state-funded.
- **Opening possibilities to establish private higher education institutions.** The law allowed physical persons and legal entities to establish educational institutions, and private higher education in Latvia got off the ground.

Aspects that were barely mentioned in the 1991 legislation were elaborated in much more detail in the Law on Higher Educational Establishments adopted on 18 October 1995. The relations between state and higher education, as well as the internal governance of higher education institutions, are more precisely described in this law. In addition, it provides more concrete autonomy and academic freedom, regulations for the establishment and liquidation of higher education institutions, and the types and competencies of their internal governing bodies. The

law also sets the rights and obligations of the different groups of higher education personnel, clearly attributing students to the personnel and determining quotas of students in the collective governance bodies. Positions of academic staff as well as their rights, obligations and selection rules are also fixed. The draft of a new law on higher education is being prepared and is now at the comment stage in Latvia.

## Quality assurance

Accreditation of programmes and institutions, involving foreign experts in each evaluation team, started in 1996 and is now fully introduced in Latvia. State-recognised degrees/diplomas can be awarded after accreditation of both the higher education institution and the programme in question. According to accreditation regulations, only one of at least three experts in the evaluation team for a particular institution or programme can be from Latvia. Assessment begins with self-assessment of the higher education institution or programme. Having received and read the evaluation report, the experts visit the

institution/programme and submit their expert evaluation reports. Decision upon accreditation is based upon expert evaluations. In the case of programmes, the decision is taken by Commission for Accreditation of Study Programmes, and for institutional accreditation by the Council of Higher Education. Programmes may be accredited for six years, or, in case of shortcomings, for two years. Latvia completed the first accreditation round in 2001.

## System of credit points

The Latvian credit point system, similar to that of other Baltic states and some Nordic countries, is based on the definition of a credit point as a workload of one week of full-time studies, thus leading to 40 credits per year. The system is readily compatible with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and one Latvian credit is worth 1.5 ECTS credits. However, Latvia has not taken over the ECTS grading scale. The credit point system was endorsed by law in 1998 and by academic and professional higher education. Both the duration of programmes

and of individual courses are expressed in credit points.

## Diploma Supplement

Latvia is participating in the Bologna process and there is a general awareness that this will facilitate the recognition of Latvian diplomas both Europe- and world-wide. The technical preparation was done for higher education institutions to successfully introduce the Diploma Supplement. Already implemented by individual universities since 1998, since 2004 it has been a state document annexed to diplomas and is issued by all higher education institutions.

## Higher education system

The system of higher education in Latvia is binary, with the current law making a distinction between academic and professional higher education, but it is not strictly institutionalised. Universities and other institutions of higher education generally run both academic and professional programmes. Three groups of programmes can be distinguished:

- academic programmes leading to academic degrees
- professional programmes based upon the standard of the first academic degree (thus making graduates eligible for further academic studies)
- applied professional programmes oriented towards higher professional qualifications

## Tertiary education (ISCED level 5)

Academic higher education programmes are based upon fundamental and/or applied science; they usually require a thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a Bachelor's degree (*Bakalaurs*) and Master's degree (*Magistrs*). Duration of Bachelor programmes may be three or four years at different institutions, and the Bachelor degree is considered a complete academic qualification. A Master's degree is awarded after the second stage of academic education (one to two years) and requires in total at least five years of university studies. The Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Vocational Education and Training stipulate two levels of professional higher education. The first level of professional higher education or college education (two to three

years) leads to the professional qualification Level 4. This gives a theoretical and practical background that enables the holder to perform complicated tasks as well as to organise and manage others in their work.

The second level of professional higher education (four to six years) leading to qualification level 5 gives the highest qualification of a specialist in a given field, and enables the holder to plan and perform research and scientific work in the field.

Having mastered a programme of professional higher education, students are awarded a professional qualification or a professional Bachelor's degree that can be followed by a further one to two years of professional or academic Master's studies. There are also the so-called 'short' second level professional higher education study programmes (one to two years), where qualification is obtained on the basis of the previously acquired first level professional higher education or academic Bachelor's degree.

In total the duration of professional qualification Level 5 study programmes is not less than four years after secondary education and not less than two years after college education.

## Postgraduate education (ISCED level 6)

A Master's degree or the equivalent is required for admission to doctoral studies (PhD), which last three to four years (full time). They include advanced studies of the subject in a relevant study programme (or an equivalent amount of independent research while working at a university, research institution, etc) and scientific research towards a doctoral thesis. Publications in internationally quoted scientific journals are required before public defence of the doctoral thesis as an integral part of a study programme.

## Number of students and higher education establishments

The number of higher education institutions and students has increased significantly in the last 15 years – from 10 institutions and 46 000 students in 1991 to 56 institutions and 131 000 students in 2005. The higher education establishments comprise 36 higher education institutions (20 state and 16 private) and 20 colleges. In a number of vocational fields it is pos-



Riga, Latvia

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sible to establish college programmes as the first level of vocational higher education in accordance with the Law on Vocational Education. Pre-existing post-secondary vocational education programmes, which were not regarded as part of higher education before 1 September 1999, have been restructured into college programmes leading to level 4 professional qualification. Fourteen new colleges received state accreditation in 2005.

Latvia has a high ratio of students within its population – 556 students per 10 000 inhabitants. Some 54.8% of all students are studying social sciences and law, while 13.4% have chosen various programmes in the education field, 9.2% engineering and construction programmes, 6.8% humanities and art, 5.5% natural sciences, mathematics and IT, 4.7% health and social care programmes, 4.1% services and 1.5% agriculture.

### Crediting system


A crediting policy for students is important with regard to accessibility of education, and owing to the continuous rise in study fees. The system of study grants and student loans for higher education

started in 1997. Study grants are intended for covering study fees and student loans for covering subsistence expenditures while studying. In 2000 the Cabinet of Ministers made a conceptual decision to start crediting from funds of credit institutions. In 2001 the first study loans and student grants were issued by credit institutions. The provision of loans to students and control of these loans is performed in cooperation with the Study Fund. From 2001 to 2005, 19 110 credits for study fees and 10 383 credits for study loans were issued, amounting to LVL 45 million.

### Development perspectives

In order to improve the quality of higher education programmes, their competitiveness, and to stimulate further development in the common European higher education area, as well as provide opportunities for higher education to meet demand, it is necessary not only to attract additional state funding, EU structural fund resources and private funding, but also to:

- continue the improvement of legislation and regulations in the higher education field

- renew and update the buildings of higher education establishments
- provide higher education establishments with modern equipment for studies, technologies and mainframe networks
- continue the on-going reform of academic personnel remuneration and salary increase in order to retain the staff in higher education institutions and to attract younger academic personnel
- provide for optimum study costs at higher education establishment;
- increase the competitiveness of universities as research centres
- develop e-studies in higher education;
- improve the social security system for students
- provide for the opportunity of students and lecturers to participate in international study-related and students' activities 

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