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Latvia

**Speech of Professor B. Rivza
Chairperson of the Higher Education Council of Latvia**

Higher Education in Latvia: Situation and Development in the 21st Century

With the regaining of independence in 1991, Latvian educational reform focused on the most urgent tasks: improvement of study structure; essential changes in the contents of study programmes, and retraining of the teaching staff.

The revision of the study programme included the establishment of bachelor and master academic degrees in Latvia. In the revisions to the curriculum or study programmes, which focused mainly on the humanities, social sciences and pedagogics, Latvia was aided greatly by several international programmes. Through the TEMPUS JEP projects, representatives of teaching staffs of leading European Universities, such as Bonn University and Berlin Technical University, worked with Latvian professors to improve the content and quality of study programmes.

In addition, Eurofaculty members located in Riga at the University of Latvia (as well as in Tartu, Estonia and Vilnius, Lithuania), work with the University to improve its curriculum and provide students with Western-based courses in political science, economics, and law. Another organization, the Civic Education Project, has placed visiting lecturers at several universities in Latvia both to teach courses in the social sciences using teaching methods and curriculum identical to that required in Western Europe and the United States and to help faculty with curriculum changes.

Many other projects might be mentioned. For example, the foundation of the study information centre, Hagen-Riga, at the Hagen Correspondence University in 1995. It is the only centre in the Baltic States. Its aim is to consult with the responsible representatives in the Baltic States about correspondence study plans, new trends in science, etc.

In the training and retraining of faculty, the TEMPUS individual mobility grants have provided the necessary funding and opportunities for teaching staff to learn in Western European educational institutions. This has benefited not only the teaching staff, but also contributed to the education of master's degree and doctoral students of Latvia.

Without the help of the EU and other international organizations, Latvia would not have been able to improve the technical basis and the quality of its study programmes at its institutions of higher education. This help came in the form of technical aid and financial assistance because Latvia could not afford both the upkeep and the development of its higher educational establishments.

Current Situation

At the present time, Latvia has 19 state higher educational establishments, including five universities and Latvia Medical Academy, which has university status. These are the largest educational establishments. Regional higher educational institutions are now evolving in Rezekne, Vidzeme, and Ventspils. This is a positive trend because most of the universities and institutions for higher education are located in Riga.

In addition, to publicly supported institutions, the law on education allows for private higher educational establishments. At present, there are 13 of these institutions with 10 percent of all first-year students enrolled in them. The areas of study provided by these schools are: business management, social work, psychology and jurisprudence. The private schools fill a void because the state system of higher education cannot accommodate all students who wish to enrol in these fields of study. All private higher educational establishments are to be accredited internationally. Unfortunately, these institutions are all located in Riga and do not provide additional geographical diversity for higher education.

During last 7 years, 8 State higher educational establishments and 13 private ones have been founded.

The number of students involved in higher education in Latvia is increasing rapidly. Following a decrease in the numbers of students from 1989 to 1991, the trend has reversed. In 1997-1998, there were 17,900 students enrolled and this upward trend is expected to continue. During the last 5 years, the student population has increased by approximately 4500 students per year. However, this upward trend might not continue past the year 2005. Since 1987, Latvia has experienced a decreasing birth-rate and when these students are ready for higher education, the number of students entering the system may decrease.

Problems with the Current Situation

The major problem facing higher education in Latvia relates to the number and the status of professors. The percentage of professors at Latvia's universities and Latvia Medical Academy was 11 percent of the academic staff in 1996. In Finland, it was 31 percent and in Estonia, it was 18 percent. The ratio of total students to professors in 1996 was 167:1 based on the total student number. Based on the budget student number, it was 94:1. In Finland, it was 68:1; in Estonia, 63:1. In addition, while the number of students has grown 2.3 times during the 1993/94 academic year, the number of professors has remained constant. The salaries of professors, already low, also remained constant.

Another problem with professors is the age structure. 60 percent of the professors are between 55 and 65 years of age. For example, the average age of senior professors at Latvia University is 57.5 years.

Without more and younger professors, Latvia will have to struggle to improve its level of higher education. In addition, more funding is required both for faculty salaries and for support of higher education.

What has been done to encourage the process of democratization and reforms in higher education?

The law on higher education of May 1995 provided for the organization of the Council of Higher Education of Latvia. The Saeima will confirm the Council of Higher Education consisting of nine members according to the proposal of the Minister of Education and Science. The following organizations will delegate a representative to the Council:

- Council of Creative Unions,
- Latvia Academy of Science,
- Association of Heads of Education of Latvia,
- Latvia Union of Doctors,
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The fields of higher education in the Council will be represented by one delegated representative from the organizations of rectors, professors of higher educational establishments and students approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. The Minister of Education and Science will represent the council in cabinet meetings. All the members of the council are elected.

The Higher Education Council (HEC) is to become a bridge between the higher educational establishments, society and state. It is to help to take objective decisions and therefore it has to solve many important problems. I shall mention only some of them:

1. to work out the national concept for the development of higher education and higher educational establishments, as well as to promote equal and harmonized development of all kinds of higher educational establishments and of higher academic education and of higher professional education;
2. to work out long term plans and proposals for the development of education and research within the system of higher education;

3. to work out proposals to raise the quality of research activities of higher educational establishments, the qualifications of staff and of the study programmes;
4. to forecast the number of students necessary for the country in general and to make proposals as regards the number of students financed from the state budget in each branch;
5. to work out proposals as regards the number of professors in higher educational establishments and to make recommendations on other issues related to higher education;
6. to submit to the Cabinet of Ministers an assessment of the draft state budget for financing higher educational establishments;
7. to adopt decisions on the accreditation of higher educational establishments at large and submit them to the Ministry of Education and Science for approval;
8. to prepare programmes for the integration of science and higher education and to implement them within the limits of its competence.

The Council of Higher Education has the right:

- to be familiar with the assessment and accreditation documents of the study programme of any higher education establishment;
- to require extraordinary accreditation for any higher educational establishment or for its programme of studies;
- to request the information necessary for its activities from higher educational establishment and state institutions. The resolutions adopted by the Council will be binding for the state institutions and higher educational establishments.

Proposed Solutions

To put higher education on a stronger financial basis and to remedy current problems, the Council of Higher Education has developed a strategic plan for the development of higher education in Latvia until the year 2010. With this plan, the higher education system should be able to cater for the 50,000 students projected to be in higher education at that time. The major ideas behind the plan are discussed below.

In the area of finance, it is proposed that the State budget must increase by 4% a year until the year 2010 if 50,000 students are to be supported. In addition, the State should provide not less than 1.8% of the GDP for the financing of education. This amount is consistent with the level provided in most developed European countries and, again, is necessary with the anticipated increase in the number of students. It will enable Latvia to support research, teaching staff and to improve the resources and infrastructure in the institutions of higher education.

To improve the number and quality of professors, it is proposed that special financing be implemented to help with doctoral study programmes and student support to increase the number of doctoral degrees. The number of professors should be increased to 17% of the academic staff. To ensure the quality of these professors, new professors must be elected in accordance with "The Statute of the Institutions of Higher Education". Newly elected professors must be knowledgeable in their fields as well as to demonstrate international experience related to their discipline. To encourage new entrants into the field, full-time salaries must also be increased.

Higher education in Latvia will proceed based on a two-tiered approach. Approximately 40% of those involved in higher education will be in non-university type programmes. This includes either two to three year study periods that lead to a certificate of qualification in a speciality, or three or more years of study that lead to a diploma of professional qualification. The remaining 60% would be university-type education leading a bachelor's degree or graduation from a professional programme of studies connected with science and research.

Latvia must also develop an internationally recognized accreditation and assessment system for the quality of studies in its institutions of higher education.

These are some of the basic goals for the development of higher education in Latvia. If we can succeed in reaching them, then Latvia can be confident in the quality of education provided to its students.

Development Priorities

- Provision for feasibility of education
- Differentiation of higher education
- Internationalization of education,
- Know-how of natural sciences and sustainable development
- Formation of centres of excellence - clear and effective way of improving the quality of studies
- Quality assessment
- Consolidation of international democracy
- Providing funding for higher education.