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IBAR PROJECT

WP 12

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National Report of Latvia

QUALITY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Quality of Higher Education is directly dependent on what input it gets from the secondary education in terms of graduates – how well they are prepared to follow the curriculum, how smoothly they can pass the transition line and switch to the new role – students, with different requirements for independent choices and independent decisions. This study is an attempt to grasp the factors influencing this transition and find out what can be done to make the transition easier, to the benefit of quality of Higher Education.

Similarly to previous work packages we studied the policy documents at National and institutional level, interviewed people in universities responsible for internal policy making, for internal quality assurance, for work with the students of the first year. At this work package we also tried to find out what is happening at the other side of the transition line, and we interviewed people in schools and those who have direct influence on the secondary school. Altogether we interviewed 10 people from different management levels and 16 people who have to deal with first year students in universities, 8 people from schools and 4 persons from other institutions who are concerned with the policy in secondary schools. The 4 universities were as before, representing small (2) and large (2) institutions, comprehensive (2) and specialised (2), public (3) and private (1).

University of Latvia	LV	public	large	comprehensive
Business school „Turība”	LV	private	medium	specialised – business profile
Latvian Maritime Academy	LV	public	small	specialised – technical profile
Rezekne Higher School	LV	public	small	comprehensive

The schools reviewed were of general comprehensive type, vocational secondary education and secondary schools with some specialization, one of them being a private school. We followed the questions for semi-structured interviews prepared by the British team, and also asked for a broader view about relationship between the sectors of secondary and higher education in terms of objectives and quality issues.

NATIONAL POLICIES ON ALIGNING SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The Education law [1] stipulates that the purpose of the secondary education is to prepare young people for life in general, for work and for further education. Continuation of education after the secondary school is mostly understood as higher education; however, this is not explicitly said by the law, and can be disputed. The law foresees several types of programmes at the level of primary and secondary education, including also programmes of pedagogical correction for those young people who need specific care concerning certain subjects, these, however are only practiced at the level of primary education and not at transition from the secondary to higher education. The Law of General Education [2] declares that grades in the certificate of secondary education serve as the basis for competition to enter higher steps of education. The system of education in Latvia includes 2 types of secondary education: general (3 years) and professional (4 years); general secondary education has 2 types of schools: secondary school (vidusskola) and gymnasium (ģimnāzija), in addition they can offer programmes with advanced studies in a subject or a subject group. In all cases the graduates pass centralized exams in one or several subjects and get a certificate of secondary education that entitles them to apply for any type of higher education. After professional secondary schools graduates also pass qualification exams and get certificates for entering labour market as specialists in a particular profession. The universities can establish certain additional criteria for applicants, but as for the subjects of general education they have to rely on marks in centralized exams or (where those are not present) on marks in learning transcripts. The marks in centralized exams are built on comparative levels of performance in a given year similar to initial idea of ECTS grades, and do not show the absolute level by certain criteria. This means, that in principle the marks are not comparable for different years. The centralized exams were a subject of a recent discussion among the stakeholders, and it turned out that universities are of a different opinion than the National Centre of Contents of Education responsible for organization and contents of exams, and in fact the universities favour the idea of returning to entrance exams as they were before.

10 years ago a system of quality assurance for general and professional education was developed within a project funded by the World Bank. There is a set of 22 criteria, part of them are assessed only in a descriptive way (performance in centralized exams and marks in certificates of secondary education). The institutions are accredited for 6 or for 2 years, and in this respect the quality assurance is similar to Higher education. The difference is that the experts are recruited from among managerial staff, and they are not from foreign countries; this sets some limitations on expert judgment, as in a small country it is likely that the school managers will get into reverse positions (the today's evaluators will be subject to evaluation the next time). It is organized by an institution of Public administration submitted to the Ministry of Education and science.

Apart from that there is a system of evaluation of teachers; this is mostly done by taking stock of teachers' involvement in various courses of professional development, in cooperation projects

and their role and activity in leading the teaching and methodical work at school, regional or National level. The teachers get certain “quality degrees” that have an influence on their salary level and the scope of tasks they are charged with. The criteria have been elaborated in an ESF project, but the system has been developed only as a pilot phase; the Law on education is currently under revision, and the system is going to be defined by amendments to the law and by specific regulation issued by the Cabinet of Ministers. One of the factors that influences the quality of teachers not in the best way is the low prestige of the teacher profession (mainly because of the low salary level); this leads to low competition for studies in teacher training and low selection. This has been a general concern for a number of years, and the National policy was in favour of changes to the better, but, unfortunately it was delayed by the economy crisis; currently the salary of teachers is again a hot issue in the agenda of the Government.

The national policy on access to higher education is based primarily on two laws – Education Law [1] and Law On Institutions of Higher Education [3]; the procedure is regulated by the Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers: “Regulation on Requirements, Criteria and Procedure of Acceptance to Study Programmes” [4]. In general there are no restrictions for any graduate of secondary education to continue at the level of higher education, except that only about 1/3 of study places are funded by the State, and the rest have to find the financial means to pay. Although in theory the ‘Budget places’ are meant for the entrants with a better academic record, in practice the system is not optimal either for the students or for the State, because it does not ensure equal treatment through different study fields, and there are fields with higher competition and higher threshold of marks to get into budget places and fields with practically no competition; currently there is a discussion going on about how to change the mechanism of funding to a better satisfaction of all the interested parties.

This is closely related to the policy of carrier education. There are certain measures to acquaint the young people already in the primary school with various possible paths of training and work; however, the general trend is for majority to aim at general secondary education and further on at higher education, leaving the secondary professional education with less successful (academically) bulk. This trend is strengthened by the recently introduced principle “money follows the pupil”, making general secondary schools to fight for keeping the pupils as long as possible within their own walls and not helping them choose a different pathway. There is a system of carrier information and advice at the National level, but by its nature it cannot reach every pupil or parent, and only those who show special interest, can fully benefit out of it.

INSTITUTIONAL POLICY ON QUALITY AND PROGRESSION FROM SECONDARY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities do not have specific policy documents concerning progression from secondary to higher education. The policy manifests itself through activities towards secondary schools, arrangements for access and the work with first year students. The universities do not have specific funding from the National budget for this, and the academic and administrative staff organizes cooperation as part of their daily duties. In regional universities the cooperation is sometimes supported by municipalities (noteworthy a project in Rezekne University to have regular meetings between the schools, the university and the municipality). As concerns activities oriented to secondary schools, they are either informative, telling the young people what they can expect in higher education and in particular study field, and motivating – raising interest of the young people towards particular profession or towards specific study field. Information is offered through internet pages and through promotion materials that are distributed to schools or pupils. One of the events that are usually exploited is the annual exhibition “School 20xx” that is organized in Riga already for 10 years. Universities and faculties have their stands with information about the institution and the studies, and academic staff and students are there to answer questions of pupils and their parents. Other ways are publications in the National and local papers, open-door events, sending the materials to schools.

Motivating measures include competitions organized by subject area; these have been popular long time in sciences and maths, but nowadays also in some other fields; one that has gained high interest during recent years is “Enkurs” (anchor), organized jointly by Latvian Maritime Academy and Latvian Maritime Administration – this gives young people get a feeling of the maritime professions and helps recruitment of better applicants to respective academy and colleges. Another direction is so-called “Little Universities” organized by faculties of Natural sciences and consisting of delivering classes at regions and focusing on topics of interest. Still another is so-called research work of pupils organized by subject teachers in collaboration with faculties of universities in Riga and regions.

There is not much that universities can do to support pupils or their parents during the period of transition to higher education. Depending on the initiative of teachers, there are informal activities to help pupils adapt to the future studies, but they are usually oriented to more capable pupils. In regional universities where the two sectors work closer in general there are specific measures to assist parents and pupils to get adapted for studies (such project was funded last year in UR, and there is an intent to continue the activities on a regular basis).

ARRANGEMENTS FOR ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION (CROSS- REFERENCE TO WP6)

Universities rely upon results of secondary education. Depending on the interest of school graduates to the particular study programme there is more or less competition on state-paid study

places (the number of them in each study direction is defined by the Ministry of Education and Science. Certain number of seats is funded by municipalities, especially in regional universities. On top of that the Faculties decide on the number of fee-paying students that will be enrolled. Private institutions have only fee-paying students (except for very few fields where studies in state institutions are not offered), but there are occasional grants paid by the founders or by enterprises to encourage recruitment of good graduates to study for certain businesses. The situations from institution to institution widely differ in this respect. Also within institutions it is dependent on the particular field of studies – on the interest of young people and on the infrastructure and equipment necessary and present. In general there are more fee-paying students in social sciences, fewer in natural sciences and nearly none in engineering sciences. The economy crisis has the effect of reducing of enrolment in general, and the reduction is solely in the cohort of fee-paying students. The problem cases are arising in those study fields where there is a large influx of applicants with a very modest academic record; the requirements are usually too high for them to cope with the tasks successfully, and at the same time the number of students per academic staff is too high to have adequate assistance in their difficulties. The difficulty is sometimes aggravated by the fact that the first year is devoted to subjects taught by faculties other than the one responsible for the respective study programmes (e.g., General Chemistry for the students enrolled by Faculty of Medicine). As a result there is a high drop-out rate during the first year.

SPECIAL INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS – ACADEMIC, PERSONAL, SOCIAL, GEOGRAPHIC, ADMINISTRATIVE ETC – TO ASSIST STUDENTS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities have some specific adjustments in curriculum, placing general subjects in the first year and trying – where possible – to refresh the knowledge of the secondary school subjects. This approach is limited to just a few subjects, in particular natural sciences and maths. In some cases universities make efforts to align their curricula to the exit parameters of the secondary education. E. g., National history and culture subjects in academies of arts and musics. This approach is practicable in teacher training faculties as there is a sort of circulation of knowledge and, to some extent, human resources: the graduates of schools become students, then teachers, and some of the teachers move to the same faculties in universities to prepare the future teachers. In most study fields, however, the movement is linear: the graduates proceed on to academic positions, research or industry and never return to school. Here the universities build their curricula to the needs of labour markets other than schools.

In some universities there are so-called study advisers – lecturers, assistants, doctoral students act as advisers to first-year students, helping them find solutions in difficulties (some faculties in UL; UR plans to introduce the system from the next academic year). The lecturers also have compulsory hours of consultations during which the students can come and clarify certain topics. This is also one of the frequent suggestions made by schools or academic staff; to make it a

common system, universities would need more resources. There are not much data to draw trustable conclusions, but there is a tendency of reduced drop-out rate when such measures are in place.

The faculties also organize introductory courses to acquaint the freshmen with the structure of university, the contents of studies, the requirements, the grading system, the assessment types and so on. These measures, however do not help correct the main problem issue – insufficient skills for organizing one’s studies independently.

There are no special rules or regulations for teaching staff that work with first year students. In most universities there are no specific training courses for the teaching staff concerning work with the freshmen (UR is an exception in this respect). However, there is a compulsory course of pedagogics and psychology that every lecturer has to attend after recruitment, and that includes certain knowledge about the work with beginners; as the young lecturers more often than not get classes with first year students, one can say they have got some training to cope with the task..

First year students do not have a special system to follow their progress; however in all universities there is a computerized system where all the assessments are input and kept, and they are analyzed by the mid-level management to make certain corrective measures. The frequency of such assessments, however, vary from subject to subject depending on the tradition of departments and the individual style of lecturers. When the individual tests or home works are not done frequently, the students tend to believe they only have to attend compulsory classes; the individual work is reduced to minimum, and the rumor is spread that the workload is very low; this usually happens in subjects of social sciences where there is a large number of students per lecturer. In the subjects of Natural sciences there is usually a tradition of independent lab works already in the first study year. Some faculties (but not all) practice attendance lists collected in every class and submitted to the chair or the dean’s office. This gives an opportunity to notice not attending students and make inquiries or provide assistance (UR).to prevent early dropouts when students simply loose motivation for further studies. The measures may include suggestion of changing the chosen study programme (if the choice has been erroneous) or visit to the psychologist of the university (if there are adaptation problems).

PREPARATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS TO TAKE MAXIMUM ADVANTAGE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY OFFERED TO THEM

The legislation does not oblige to prepare secondary school pupils to studies in higher education. The clause in the Law on Education that secondary school shall prepare young people for further education is understood as any continuation – in an institution of vocational training, self-education and so on. As far as the requirements are considered, the ultimate indicator is

centralized exams. There is always an argument that the level of skills necessary in a particular subject is very different in different study fields, and students should choose the study field according to their previous preparation. The overall problem with the centralized exams, as quoted by academic staff in universities, is that the grades are not based on criteria that characterize the skills in an absolute way, and therefore they cannot show whether the level of knowledge is or is not sufficient (except for the ones with the grade F); also the general skills are not measured at all (exams are only concentrating on skills in particular subjects, not trying to check, e.g., the ability to collect and analyze information).

The situation is somewhat contradictory. On one hand, the universities would prefer high level of preparedness in the subjects that are profiling the particular study programmes, and the general opinion is that the graduates of secondary schools are not prepared well enough, except for the advanced level schools (state gymnasias). On the other hand, the school has to aim at a very broad profile so that the graduates would be able to choose any pathway of the subsequent studies or work, and this is a rather formidable task. There have been attempts to start specialization of young people already in the secondary school; unfortunately this led to massive avoidance of “difficult subjects” like Natural sciences and Mathematics, and we still reap the fruits of that mistake, having insufficient number of applicants that have good preparation in subjects necessary for university studies in exact and technical sciences.

Apart from knowledge there always certain unforeseen differences that a young person encounters when moving from the school to university. Thus moving from parents’ house to dormitory of the university requires a young person different skills and responsibilities; the planning of the schedule of classes with “windows” instead of uninterrupted sequence; team work, presentation skills. All this is trained in universities but not all the students accept the changes easily. Different universities and faculties have different opportunities to cope with this; in general the situation is better in small institutions and small faculties where more personal approach can be taken due to smaller number of students (noteworthy UR).

ALIGNMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE REQUIREMENTS FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION WITH THOSE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The system of QA is formally similar in secondary and higher education. For both levels accreditation is organized by an institution having the mandate from the Ministry of Education and Science. The school prepares a self-evaluation report that is considered by a team of experts and then a visit to school takes place to see how the academic process is organized. After that there is an evaluation report with a recommendation to accredit the school for 6 years, 2 years or not at all. As the schools are accredited it should be understood the quality requirements are fulfilled. What is somewhat confusing is the general secondary schools, the advanced schools (gymnasias) and vocational secondary schools can equally well fulfill the requirements, although

the time resources are different, and vocational schools have to reach the same standards in a nearly 3 times shorter time than the general secondary schools. Apparently the requirements are understood differently at the secondary level than in higher education.

One of the obvious differences is that the success of graduates in progression to higher education is not considered as an indicator of quality (in the way as the success of university graduates in labour market). The ultimate indicator being the marks in centralized exams does not work for smooth transition to the next level. One of the steps on the way to better alignment is modification of rules for grading in the centralized exams, namely raising the threshold for getting mark E from 5 to 10%. (Probably this should go all the way and establish the threshold for all levels up to A, so that the grade would have a quantitative value, not just show in which fraction the pupil has fitted.)

Another difference is the way teachers are evaluated. In higher education there is some bias towards the number of scientific papers as an indicator of lecturers' performance, however there is a number of parameters that characterize the pedagogical performance directly, including also the results of regular evaluation by students and colleagues. In secondary education the method that has been recently introduced is more seen as gathering documentary for teacher's portfolio. Also the success of pupils in competitions is not a trustful indicator because the system allows the particular schools and particular teachers to "collect cream" and therefore does not show the added value of the school in the process of teaching. Especially this can be said about large cities where teachers and pupils can easily move from one school to another.

FORMAL PROCESSES IN WHICH THE SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION SECTORS COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER:

There are no formal processes at National Level where the two sectors would communicate with each other. Apart from legislation and organization of centralized exams, the supervision over secondary schools is done by municipalities. Universities, on the other hand, are autonomous. The activities organized or funded at National level include research, elaboration of teaching technologies and aids measurements of performance according to certain generally known methods (e.g. PISA), but they do not concern policy debate. University staff is necessarily involved in these activities, but this is not a real communication between the two sectors as subjects

Universities organize conferences and seminars where cooperation between the secondary and higher education sectors is discussed. This is mostly done by universities involved in teacher training, such as University of Latvia and University of Rezekne. These universities are also involved in in-service training of teachers. There is cooperation between particular faculties and schools to organize "Olympic competitions" in certain subjects. The counterparts are secondary schools that have advanced programmes with a deeper involvement in certain disciplines. In regional universities (UR) a common practice is signing agreements with schools of the region,

foreseeing regular communication. This is especially important for teacher training faculties as they can successfully organize pedagogical practice of students in schools. This is also found in the Faculty of Education in UL.

ACHIEVING MORE EFFICIENT ALIGNMENT BETWEEN SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION SECTORS

Recommendations to a better alignment are addressed mostly to the governmental institutions. It is recommended to review the tradition of development of text books for schools; the present system encourages publishing new text books every year, which creates instability in schools and confusion among parents. The schools necessarily rely on text books much more than universities, and to reach comparable results the number of alternative text books in each subject should be limited and having authoritative recommendations.

The universities should become more self reliant. No external experts will have enough knowledge about the local political, social and economical framework in which the university is functioning, and the universities should build their own strategies, including also better alignment with the sector of secondary education. One of the directions is a better definition of the mission of the university and adjustments of the scope and contents of the study programmes to the mission (this is one of the directions that is currently discussed between the Ministry of Education and Science with individual universities; the different types are a research university (probable future of UL) and a regional university (UR) that necessarily should have different requirements for entrants and different quality criteria for the academic process; this ultimately is reflected also on relations between the university and the secondary school. Universities should also think (some already do) of relations with schools in other countries, as the current trend is an increase of applicants from abroad.

More systematic work is needed towards legal framework regulating the schools and universities. To start with, one needs to revise formulation of objectives for particular sectors and types of education as now they seem rather fragmented.

One has to revise the system of centralized exams making the grading criteria-based. The present system does not work together with the system of budget places in universities that are distributed by the Ministry of Education independently, without involving the applicants.

It is also noted that the existing measures could be improved and expanded by means of targeted funding from the state and municipalities. The increased funding is also necessary to improve infrastructure and equipment in universities, especially if one is working towards recruitment of applicants from developed countries.

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