

## Intra Lūce

# Short Cycle Higher Education Development in Latvia

### Abstract

Education plays an important role in the economy and everyday life since economic well-being largely depends on the knowledge, skills and proficiency of the labour force. Thanks to the Bologna reforms, students and graduates are able to move freely throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) where qualifications are recognised as well as study stages and study programmes allow students to acquire knowledge, skills and competence. At the same time, it should be admitted that structural reforms are unevenly carried out within the EHEA, for example, provision of short-cycle education and practical implementation of standards and guidelines for higher education in Europe. Although the Bologna process is a voluntary one, it calls for urgent action to create a system of academic degrees in order to facilitate mobility of students, educators and researchers and ensure quality education and training, i.e., the degrees acquired at any higher education institution anywhere in the EHEA will be appropriately recognised elsewhere in this area both to continue studies and to participate in the labour market.

Keywords: short-cycle qualifications, short-cycle, mid-level specialists

### Introduction

Knowledge and skills are necessary to make one participate in the labour market. Employers recognise the importance of education and require that prospective employees are educated and competent in their speciality and, thus, specialists with higher education would likely enjoy an advantage. Rapid changes in the economy and globalisation processes mean that nowadays it is not enough to have basic knowledge and employees should constantly update their professional qualifications. Today it is no longer possible to acquire knowledge in 4–5 years that would be sufficient throughout one's professional lifetime because knowledge tends gradually to become out-of-date. This has led to the development and function of a national system of life-long learning so that those already employed would be given an opportunity to improve their competitiveness, raise their qualifications, and improve work efficiency, thus contributing to the gross national product and their well-being.

Short-Cycle Higher Education (SCHE) as the first level of higher education and the fifth level of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008) has become increasingly important over the past decade. A growing number of countries involved in the Bologna Process give the underlying programmes a formal position in their education system linked to a national qualifications framework.

In 1973, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined short-cycle higher education as “[...] postsecondary education of shorter duration with strong vocational elements, generally under the non-university sector of higher education [...]”. Today, the issue is still at the forefront of policy debates

in many countries because of more international uniformity resulting from the Bologna agreements (Cheps, 2012).

### **Short-cycle education**

The Bologna Process initiated by the Bologna Declaration and adopted in 1999 has resulted in fundamental changes in the European Higher Education Area.

The most important aspects of education within the Bologna Process are life-long learning, employment issues, financial support, system of degrees conferred, degree of openness to the outside world, data collection and quality assurance (The Bologna process: setting up the European Higher Education Area, 1999).

The “Europe 2020” strategy as adopted by the EU sets forth the obligation of states to make their educational system open to others and raise their significance, develop national qualifications systems and ensure that the criteria for success relate to the needs of the labour market (COM, 2010).

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for life-long learning is a significant step taken in achieving the aims listed above. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008) consists of eight levels whose goal is to promote life-long learning and facilitate mobility of the residents of different countries. By establishing reference values attributable to qualifications obtained in different European countries, the EQF indicators allow for easier and more accurate comparison of these different qualifications. The EQF indicators describe the level at which an individual has acquired his/her knowledge, skills and competences.

Each of the 8 levels is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications.

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area provides descriptors for cycles. Each cycle descriptor offers a generic statement of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of that cycle.

Associate degree refers to the qualification awarded after successful completion of the so-called short cycle in the EQF Higher Education Area. The short cycle fits within or is linked to the first cycle (or Bachelor’s level). The degree requires approximately 120 ECTS credits.

Undoubtedly, short-cycle education, in the light of the Dublin criteria (Dublin descriptors, 2008), as well as the EQF complies with EQF level 5 (EQF Level 5, 2008); thus, graduates acquire the relevant knowledge and skills at a level higher than that of general education and are qualified either to work or to pursue a profession or to continue studies in order to complete the first cycle of higher education. This means that short-cycle education will satisfy the demand of the labour market by educating and training mid-level specialists that are in demand. The challenge posed to short-cycle education is therefore to implement an intensive study programme that results in knowledge, skills and competences imparted to students in a particular field, which will permit graduates to develop novel or improve existing systems, products and technologies, as well as prepare the graduates for pedagogic work in their field. Short-cycle education should ensure that students reach a certain professional level of knowledge and are able to

independently take decisions, defend their choice, identify all technical and organisational problems encountered in the respective professional area, react to rapidly changing situations in a timely manner.

Short-cycle education in Latvia does not have a long history behind it. It was introduced in 2000 through changes in the Law on Higher Education. However, elsewhere in the world this form of education has a longer pedigree, for instance, in America where this form of education has been available since 1901. The legal basis for short-cycle education in Latvia consists of the Law on Higher Education Establishments, the Law on Vocational Education and the Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers “On the State Standard of First-Level Higher Vocational Education” (2001).

Short-cycle higher education is higher vocational education that lasts 2–3 years (120 ECTS – 180 ECTS).

The issue of non-university higher education, which is practice-oriented vocational training, has become topical since the beginning of the Bologna Process.

Non-university higher education began in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s when higher education ceased to be an elite pursuit and became a mass phenomenon. Consequently, the relative number of students in their age group increased from 8%–10%, and even approached 25%–30% in some countries. Once it became apparent that providing higher education required financial resources, it was found that studying at the university for a long period of time could not be financed to meet the demand for it. It also transpired that young people themselves were willing to acquire professional skills and enter the labour market as quickly as possible. It was found that educating as many as 30% of youth to the level of Master’s degree was inefficient as graduates holding a Master’s degree were ready to pursue research, had great ambitions to find a highly-paid job. However, in real life it turned out that such a large number of Master’s degree holders would find work that would take advantage of only part of their abilities – principally professional knowledge and skills rather than academic knowledge.

These problems became apparent in Latvia during the 1990s, as expressed in rhetorical questions posed by Andrejs Rauhvargers, former Vice-President of the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and Director of the Academic Information Centre of Latvia, “Do we face the same problem as Master’s degree holders do when after six years of study they often work at a job that requires all of their limited professional skills and only a fraction of the accumulated academic knowledge, don’t we? Are we so wealthy that we can afford to educate a specialist over five or six years, given that in the real world three years would suffice? Is it not the case that employers often accuse graduates from higher education establishments that they lack practical knowledge and skills?” (Rauhvargers, 2002, p. 37).

At present, the theme under consideration is topical since rapid changes in the economy as well as globalisation processes require employees to constantly develop their professional qualifications. As already mentioned, today it is no longer possible to acquire knowledge in 4–5 years that would be sufficient throughout one’s professional lifetime because the acquired knowledge tends to become outdated. Employers also require that prospective employees are educated and competent in their field.

Approximately one-fifth of all employees are over-qualified for their daily tasks. The study of the mismatch between education and the needs of the labour market has identified two key phenomena: over-education and under-education. In several European countries, there are between 10% and 30% of overeducated employees, and about 20% of undereducated employees. In certain countries, overeducated employees account for approximately one-half of all employees, for example, 45% in Russia, 36% in Ukraine, 26% in Cyprus, 24% in Lithuania, and 18% in Latvia (Tarvids, 2016). A simple example: an individual with a Bachelor's and even a Master's degree works as a cleaner; alternatively there is the phenomenon of excessive expectations and pre-conditions, for example, someone with experience in international project management has the post of assistant director at a small enterprise in the local market. These examples show that the labour market needs more mid-level specialists with a sound education and good professional skills and fewer specialists with the highest level of education.

Thus, short-cycle higher education plays a significant role within the system of higher education in most countries. At present, there are differences from country to country within the European Higher Education Area as how other higher education institutions recognise qualifications gained as EQF level 5. For example, short-cycle education corresponding to EQF level 5 has been introduced in Latvia, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Denmark, etc. At the same time, in the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Austria EQF level 5 is understood as further vocational education, in the United Kingdom (Scotland) – as a qualification gained through general education, and it is not practised at all in Lithuania. There are also differences in terms of the degrees conferred, for example, in the Netherlands this is an associate degree, in Latvia – a diploma of first level higher vocational education; in Malta – an undergraduate diploma, in the United Kingdom – a foundation degree, and in Ireland – a higher certificate.

In view of the fact that the Bologna Declaration clearly sets out three distinct levels of higher education, including the degree conferred at each level, this should also be implemented for the system of short-cycle education, defining it to be part of the first cycle of higher education and proposing to confer an associate degree at completion of the study programme. The experience of the Netherlands can be seen as an example to emulate, i.e., an associate degree was given official standing in 2006 as the outcome of two years of study at a higher education programme. Prior to this date, the Netherlands had undertaken a trial period to understand what this new qualification would comprise. As of 1 September 2013 the associate degree is legally defined as a new qualification that is based on the Law on Higher Education and Science and with this step short-cycle education programmes are part of the framework of higher education qualifications fully conforming to the Dublin descriptors.

The demand for short-cycle education is increasing year by year as there is a steadily rising demand for mid-level specialists. In respect of the situation in Latvia, the number of students enrolled in short-cycle education programmes increased four-fold between 2003 and 2015. In academic year 2003/2004 only 5% of all students in higher education were pursuing short-cycle studies; in academic year 2009/2010, this number was already 12%, whereas in academic year 2014/2015 20% of all students in higher education were enrolled in short-cycle study

programmes in Latvia. The Netherlands adopted a goal of having 20% of all university students in applied science disciplines to be enrolled in an associate degree programme.

According to the study on the demand for labour in the medium and long term carried out by the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia, at present there is a strong demand for specialists and it will also persist in the future, in particular, the demand for mid-level specialists. Hence, the number of individuals enrolled in the SCHE programmes will rise by 17.3% by 2030. The same study predicts that in 2030 job openings for individuals with higher education, including – SCHE, will comprise half of all openings. A similar trend is also expected in other EU member states (Ministry of Economics, 2013).

As mentioned above, demand is steadily rising throughout the world for SCHE due to the increasing demand for mid-level specialists in job markets. In its forecasts, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) predicts that demand will grow steadily for specialists with vocational qualifications up to 2020 (CEDEFOP, 2011).

Daniels Pavluts, former Minister of Economics, has made the following observation, “If we wish to become rich and avoid mass immigration, we should return to basics and teach engineering and exact sciences. Our real problem is a relatively large number of young people who enter the job market without any qualification or skill. Additionally, there are a large number of individuals in the job market who have received only elementary education and in 2020 this number may reach 127 thousand. At the same time, the demand for this kind of workers will fall, reaching 75 thousand in 2020” (Pavluts, 2013).

The Latvian Investment and Development Agency has issued a forecast of in-demand future professions in Latvia in such fields as transport and logistics, woodworking, commerce and administration, electronics and mechanical engineering, information technology, etc. According to the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia, there will be a demand for nearly 4500 IT specialists in Latvia by 2020. There is a lack of nurses, surveyors, telemarketing specialists, and others in the labour market (Latvian Investment and Development Agency, 2014).

There are an increasing number of employers who when confronted with an insufficient number of local mid-level specialists are ready to employ workers from third countries.

It has already been noted that SCHE (first level higher vocational education) has been implemented in Latvia since 2000. In 2003, there were 13 colleges in Latvia (9 state and 4 privately owned); today their number has reached 25 (17 state and 8 privately owned ones). SCHE programmes are also offered by five higher education institutions in Latvia (Ministry of Education, 2015).

In Latvia, colleges offer 99 accredited vocational study programmes. The largest number of study programmes is in the field of health care, i.e., 18 study programmes. The next most numerous category is in the field of property management and administration comprising 13 study programmes. The smallest number of study programmes is offered in the fields of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, veterinary medicine and food safety – 1 study programme, chemistry, chemical technology and biotechnology – 1 study programme, environmental protection – 1 study programme, and information and communication science – 1

study programme. At present, there are no study programmes offered in the fields of mathematics and statistics and veterinary science (List of accredited study programmes, 2015).

This trend is largely driven by the fact that short-cycle education can easily adapt to the demands and requirements of the labour market, educate and train competent specialists in a short period of time, thus raising the employment rate of graduates and decreasing the unemployment rate.

The importance of short-cycle education has been emphasised in the Yerevan Declaration (Ministerial declarations and communiqués, 2015), in which ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area agreed to include provision for recognition of short-cycle education in the European Qualifications Framework (QF – EHEA), taking into account the Dublin descriptors and conforming to European standards and guidelines for quality assurance; they also agreed to adopt regulations that higher education institutions in their countries would recognise short-cycle education qualifications even in cases when short-cycle qualifications were not part of their national education system.

The “Europe 2020” strategy as adopted by the EU sets forth the obligation of states to make their education system open to others and raise their significance, develop national qualifications systems and ensure that the criteria for success relate to the needs of the labour market (COM, 2010).

## Conclusion

At present, the Latvian higher education institutions practically offer the three-cycle Bologna programmes, including short-cycle higher education as part of the first cycle, upon completion of which a Bachelor’s degree is awarded. Latvia was one of the fifteen European countries that already by 2012 had completed the process of alignment of its national qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework. However, in order to strengthen the short-cycle higher education in the framework of education, Latvian laws and regulations on education should envisage that upon completion of short-cycle education an associate degree is awarded and it is part of a professional Bachelor’s level (2+2). It is important to note that the short-cycle higher vocational education provides an opportunity to quickly obtain quality education and professional competences that allow immediately entering the labour market, gaining experience and building a career.

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