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Legal and academic issues of higher education institutions in the context of work-based learning: Latvian case

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Abstract

The initial findings of the WBLQUAL Erasmus research project indicate that is accepted that a 'culture gap' and significant barriers exist between the worlds of academia and industry in a number of EU countries. These factors are most clearly expressed in the context of work-based learning, particularly when employees working in skilled jobs have a substantial base of knowledge and skills acquired through work experience and do not have a formal qualification (not necessary in relation to their employment) but aspire to have it. Employers also appear to require an educated workforce and have criticized higher education institutions for not adapting to their needs and being inflexible in their approach to work-based learning. The purpose of the research presented in the paper is to investigate and communicate some important aspects which can act as both a barrier to and an enabler of promotion of work-based learning in relation to higher education institutions. The findings are related to the specific situation of Latvia. The following main points are identified and examined in the research: a) the aspects of legislation that affect work-based learning, b) academic aspects in higher education institutions acting as barriers to and enablers of work-based learning from the point of view of three groups: senior management, faculty management, and practicing academics, and c) possible practical solutions for the facilitation of work-based learning. The main research methods used for research purposes are a study of legal acts regulating education in Latvia and their effect on work-based learning and conducting and analysing in-depth interviews with representatives of the three groups previously mentioned.

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Keywords: work-based learning; academic issues; barriers; enablers

1. Introduction

The aim of the Erasmus research project "WBLQUAL – An Approach to Qualification Through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU" (http://www.wblqual.com) is to produce a more effective way of improving skills and behaviours of work-based employees through the use of academic work-based learning programmes. In the framework of the project, the partners from five EU countries (UK, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Denmark) perform

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extensive research at three levels (employers, learners, and higher education institutions) within different academic institutions, across national barriers, and in a range of employment sectors to gain a deep understanding of issues, initiatives, and barriers held by representatives of the mentioned levels and to use this understanding to formulate a tripartite approach to work-based learning qualifications in the EU. The main result of the project is expected to be integration of findings and formulation of recommendations for best practice in the management of tripartite relationship in the context of work-based learning.

The paper presents findings of the Latvian partner in relation to legal and academic issues of work-based learning. It is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the system of higher education in Latvia and pays attention to legislation relevant to work-based learning. Section 3 provides results of the analysis of three in-depth interviews concerning academic view of work-based learning at levels of university's senior management, faculty management, and practicing academics. Section 4 summarizes main enablers of and barriers to work-based learning in regards to academia, as well as possible solutions of promotion of this kind of learning. Conclusions are given at the end of the paper.

2. Higher education in Latvia

2.1. Overview of the higher education system in Latvia

The system of higher education in Latvia distinguishes 2 types of study programmes - academic and vocational (more often called in Latvia as professional) (The Saiema, 2012a). Academic higher education is general higher education rooted in fundamental and applied science (The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). Its objective is to provide acquirement of theoretical knowledge and research skills and to prepare for independent scientific research activities in the chosen field or sub-field of science (Eurybase, 2010; The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011; The Saiema, 2012a). The content and volume of academic higher education is defined by the state standard of academic education (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2002). Academic study programmes lead to the following academic degrees (Eurydice, 2011; The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011): bachelor degree, master degree, and doctoral degree (scientific degree).

Professional higher education is rooted in applied science and art and prepares for professional activities (The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). It allows acquisition of professional qualification level IV and level V (The Saiema, 2012b). Professional higher education study programmes are divided into two levels (NIID.LV, n.d.; Eurydice, 2011). The content and volume of them is defined by the state standards of first-level professional higher education (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2007a) and second-level professional higher education (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2007b), accordingly.

The first-level professional study programmes (ISCED 5B) train specialists for the labour market allowing acquisition of complex occupations (bank employees, business professionals, information technology specialists, legal assistant, engineering staff), however, neither studies nor further professional activity is related to scientific research (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2007a). They lead to level IV professional qualification (NIID.LV, n.d.; Eurydice, 2011) which is defined as theoretical and practical qualification giving opportunity to carry-out complex performer's work, as well as to organize and manage work of others (The Saiema, 2012b). The duration of these programmes is 2-3 years and volume is in range from 120 to 180 ECTS.

The second-level professional study programmes (ISCED 5A) lead to level V of professional qualifications which is the highest professional qualification providing analysis, decision making, design, management, planning, and research possibilities in the respective branches (NIID.LV, n.d.; Eurydice, 2011; The Saiema, 2012b). There are either purely applied professional programmes which do not comprise a standard for an academic degree and last 4-6 years after secondary education or university-type professional studies which together with a qualification grants a bachelor degree and last 4 years. Moreover, there are also so-called "short" second-level professional higher education study programmes with duration of 1-2 years after the first-level professional higher education or academic bachelor degree (NIID.LV, n.d.). The volume of professional bachelor study programmes is at least 240 ECTS. The volume of professional master study programmes is at least 60 ECTS (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2007b). Figure 1 displays the overall system of higher education in Latvia.

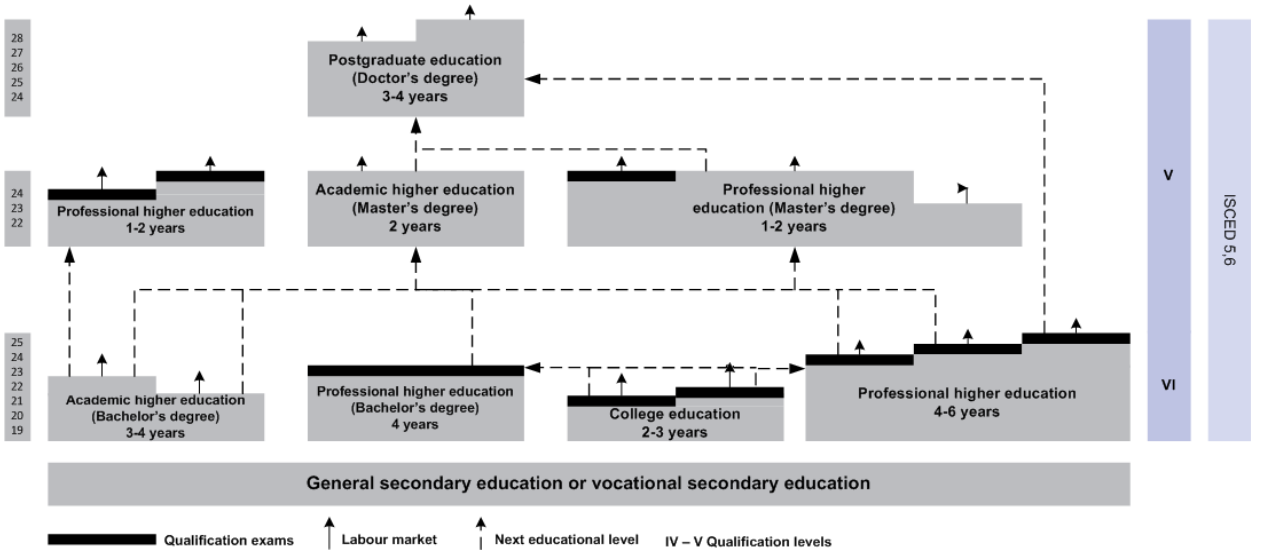

Figure 1. The system of higher education in Latvia (adopted from http://izm.izm.gov.lv/upload_file/en/education_system.pdf)

Higher education in Latvia is provided by two types of institutions (NIID.LV, n.d.): colleges and institutions of higher education which both can be private or public. Law on Institutions of Higher Education (The Saiema, 2012a) regulates their legal basis.

The first-level professional higher education study programmes can be implemented only by colleges which can act as (NIID.LV, n.d.; The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011):

- colleges founded by institutions of higher education where colleges can be independent structural units or first-level professional study programmes;
- independent educational institutions.

Institutions of higher education implement academic and professional study programmes, as well as research, scientific, and creative activities (NIID.LV, n.d.; The Ministry of Education and Science, 2011; The Saiema, 2012a). They are divided into university-type and non-university type institutions of higher education (NIID.LV, n.d.; Eurydice, 2011). The first ones provide education directed towards scientific and research work in the field of science. Therefore, they mainly implement academic study programmes and professional programmes related only to them. Non-university type institutions of higher education provide education oriented towards acquisition of professional knowledge and skills. Such institutions make research in specific fields of science, economics, and art (NIID.LV, n.d.). Figure 2 shows institutions implementing higher education study programmes in Latvia.

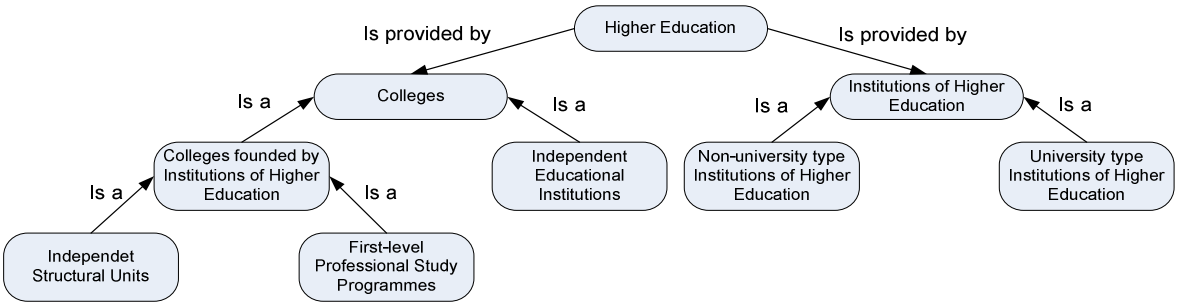

Figure 2. Institutions implementing higher education study programmes in Latvia

The main legal base regulating higher education in Latvia is the following:
- Law on Education (The Saiema, 2012c);
- Law on Institutions of Higher Education (The Saiema, 2012a);
- Law on Professional Education (The Saiema, 2012b);
- Law on General Education (The Saiema, 2012d);
- Law on Scientific Activity (The Saiema, 2011).

The Law of Education determines:
- rights and duties of the state, local governments, public organizations, professional associations, individuals, educational institutions, parents, and students;
- levels and types of education;
- types of educational institutions.

The Law on Professional Education defines:
- principles for organising, implementing, and awarding qualifications both for initial and continuous vocational education;
- division of tasks and competences and the relationship between employers, teachers, and students;
- role for social partners in vocational education;
- different pathways for pursuing vocational education;
- the structure of programmes;
- the funding principles.

2.2. Legislation relevant to work-based learning

In August 2011, amendments of Law on Institutions of Higher Education were adopted. The one of main points which appeared in them and is significant in the context of work-based learning is a concept of a "listener". A listener is defined as a person registered for mastering of a module or a study course at a university or college. After mastering the module or the course, the listener receives a certificate. A listener has rights to collect necessary amount of credit points (proved by certificates) and to ask a university or a college to evaluate its correspondence to a study programme or its particular stages (The Saiema, 2012a).

Another valuable change relevant to work-based learning is a regulatory act of the Cabinet of Ministers (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2012) related to recognition of learning outcomes gained in previous education or professional experience. According to the act, the mentioned recognition is delegated to a special commission which must be formed at the university or college. Its rights and responsibilities, as well as procedure for recognition of learning outcomes must be defined in regulations of University's Senate or College's Council, but staff of the commission must be approved by the rector of the university or the director of the college. Therefore, a person who wishes to recognize learning outcomes submits to a university or college an application for the recognition of learning outcomes together with documents proving the previous education or professional experience. If necessary, the commission may appoint exams for evaluation of learning outcomes achieved in previous education or professional experience. To recognize correspondence of learning outcomes achieved in professional experience to a course or a learning module developing practical knowledge, skills, and competences, the person passes an exam in the corresponding study course or learning module. In order to recognize learning outcomes achieved in previous education or professional experience, the following criteria must be fulfilled (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2012):
- documents provided by the person contain clear, unequivocal and full information on the learning outcomes achieved;
- at least one credit point (1,5 ECTS) may be granted for the learning outcomes achieved;
- the person's previous education meets the admission requirements of the respective study programme;
- in the exams passed, the person has demonstrated knowledge, skills, and competence appropriate to the study programme.

Learning outcomes achieved in professional experience can be recognized only (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2012):
- in a part of the study programme, which includes practice; moreover, the learning outcomes must be achieved in the thematic area which corresponds to the study programme;
- in a study course or study module that masters practical knowledge, skills, and competences.

Learning outcomes achieved in previous education can be recognized, if they meet the highest education level and are achieved (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2012):

- in a professional continuing education programme which provides fourth or fifth professional qualification level;
- in a specific study course or study module of the study programme mastered by the person as a listener;
- in a part of the study programme;
- in other non-formal education, excluding study programmes that correspond to the regulated professions.

According to (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2012), learning outcomes achieved in professional experience are allowed to be recognized by professional or academic study programmes. Moreover, only 30% of credit points of professional or academic study programmes could be granted by recognizing learning outcomes achieved in professional experience.

Both legal documents mentioned before must be considered as the main enablers of work-based learning in Latvia, because now they 1) allow recognition of already gained knowledge and experience, and b) define possibility to acquire courses missing for a degree/qualification. However, the main barrier is the current legalisation itself because it defines that a degree/qualification could be acquired only after fulfilling of all requirements of the study programme.

3. Academic view on work-based learning

During time period from December 2011 till March 2012 three face-to-face interviews with representatives of Riga Technical University (RTU) in Latvia were held and their results were analysed. The following representatives of three groups took part in the interviews:

- at senior (university's) management level, the head of Continuing Education Department - hereinafter "Head of CE Department";
- at faculty management level, the dean of the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (FCSIT) which at the same time is the director of the study programme "Computer Systems" - hereinafter "Dean";
- at practicing academics level, the assistant professor of FCSIT having 5 years experience of working in industry - hereinafter "Professor";

Taking into account that at the moment RTU does not offer special work-based learning programmes, the context of the interviews was related to compliance of study programmes to industry's requirements, main barriers to and enablers of work-based learning, as well as accreditation of prior experience and learning.

3.1. Compliance of study programmes to industry's requirements

The Professor pointed out that industry needs specific skills appropriate to its business. The Dean, in his turn, noted that industry uses a broad range of different products and technologies and each enterprise needs a small number of qualified staff which is able to work with these technologies and products. They both agreed that Latvian universities provide common skills and are oriented towards preparation of broad profile specialists which are not specialized in any specific tasks or goals, and, actually, they should not learn in detail, for example, how to work with products of some specific enterprise. Therefore, by the opinion of the Dean, for the university it is not cost effective to prepare students in such a way, but here another path can be used when an enterprise pays for such learning and then necessary staff is prepared. The Professor holds a view that professional study programmes offered at RTU correspond well to industry's requirements, but the situation with academic programmes is different as it was mentioned also by the Dean the university cannot provide necessary skills for each specific enterprise in full amount. Therefore, if each enterprise is taken individually, then correspondence is poor. In its turn, if all enterprises and common skills needed for them are taken together, then in fact the correspondence is good enough. At the same time, the Professor insisted that study programmes must teach field-specific knowledge and skills, for example, in the field of IT subjects related to economics must teach how to calculate costing of IT projects, but not the economics in general; language-related subjects must teach field-specific terminology, but not the literary language, etc.

Both the Dean and Professor paid attention that the faculty is ready to respond quickly to any enterprise inquiry to develop a specific study programme, because the faculty has enough young people, which actually do not have a big load in the study process and they have these potential reserves to respond. But at the same time, enterprises must pay for studies and must provide necessary infrastructure (enterprise-specific tools). Therefore, the university is ready to provide specific studies if the enterprise pays for a definite number of students prepared each year and it cares for infrastructure which corresponds to its business needs.

3.2. Main barriers of work-based learning

All the interviewees mentioned time planning aspects as main barriers for acquisition of a degree/qualification by people intensively working in industry, because the university in general and the faculty in particular does not have part-time studies and module-type learning. The Dean pointed out that it is necessary to take into account that the faculty has only full-time studies, but such learning as work-based learning should be planned in evenings, part-time, after work, but there actually must be two teachers for each subject: one, who works during the day time with full-time students, and another one who teaches during the evening, because it is not reasonable and acceptable for the most people to stretch all the day. Moreover, he noted that a barrier is also current legislation which defines that a degree/qualification can be acquired only after fulfilling of all requirements of the study programme.

Other barriers mentioned during the interviews are:

- very usually academic staff does not have experience of working in industry and therefore supplies “ideal theoretical” knowledge which could not be applied in practice;
- the faculty does not have a channel to know industry’s requirements and to respond quickly to them;
- regardless that the expectations of employers from work-based content include teaching multifaceted issues which would require cross-faculty cooperation, it is difficult to cooperate between faculties for provision of such content due to problems concerning funding allocation;
- lack of some qualification commission, which are able to evaluate previous experience and grant a degree/qualification.

3.3. Main enablers of work-based learning

The Head of CE Department pointed out as the main enablers changes in legislation mentioned in Section 2.2 as they both allow people working in industry enter into an academic environment and to receive a degree/qualification. He also noted that these changes will lead to appearance of such people and the university must react to them in an appropriate way. Moreover, he is sure that the university is ready for working with such people by offering module-type planning of study courses, flexibility in taking of courses, and raising motivation of the staff with additional salaries. Moreover, today with support of EU projects infrastructure of the university is quite good and modern in comparison with other institutions of higher education. Therefore, the university can offer new and modern equipment for training practical skills. Both the Dean and Professor mentioned as an enabler young staff available for extra work.

3.4. Accreditation of prior experience and learning

All the interviewees recognized that the university teaches not only practical skills, but also academic skills, knowledge, and experience, which cannot be acquired at workplace. Therefore, person’s work experience can be recognized through exams or by appointing the qualification commission. However, it is possible only for technology-oriented courses. The other part of courses included in a study programme like fundamental courses (physics, mathematics in engineering sciences) or courses teaching academic skills (like research) or soft skills (presentation, management) must be taken by the person and passed. By the opinion of the Professor, people in their work acquire practical, not academic knowledge and at workplace assessment criteria are terms, costing, work quality, but at the university assessment criteria are totally different, for example, achievements in research, skills in experimenting, etc. Therefore, direct comparability and correspondence among assessment criteria at workplace and at university can be achieved only through examination. The Dean supplemented this view by adding professional standards as a tool for achievement of comparability.

4. Enablers, barriers, and possible solutions for promotion of work-based learning

Table 1 and Table 2 summarize main enablers of and barriers to work-based learning found during the research presented in the paper.

Several possible solutions for elimination of barriers previously described were identified from in-depth interviews:

- For a specific enterprise: if an enterprise is interested in preparation of small number of specialists trained in specific technologies and products, it pays for preparation of them and takes care about appropriate infrastructure;
- For facilitation of the study process of people who are working:
  - Individual study plans which the university develops together with a person wishing to receive a degree/qualification taking into account his/her time and load restrictions, as well as previous knowledge, skills, and experience. This is supported also by the concept of a listener;
  - Part-time studies which allow people who are working to take courses in evenings;
  - Module-type planning of courses which allow people who are working to take missing courses in short period of time. However, modules are more suitable for post-graduate studies or mastering of some specific courses, not for acquiring the whole degree/qualification;
  - Distance learning allowing people to learn when, where and how they want and to visit the university only for receiving consultations and passing examinations.
- For recognition of professional experience or previous education: passing exams or submitting proves to some qualification commission. This now is supported also by the current legislation.

5. Conclusions

The higher education system in Latvia envisages variety of possible pathways for acquiring of different degrees and qualifications. Recently a new concept of the learner – "listener" - was introduced by the legislation related to higher education. It opens new possibility of work-based learning, but practical implementation of this opportunity is still hinder due to barriers stipulated by university's antiquities. Interviews hold at senior management, faculty management, and practicing academics levels shows availability of the future educational model supporting work-based learning. The university recognizes knowledge and experience acquired at workplace and in previous education. However, a student additionally passes other courses in the study programme needed for receiving of a degree/qualification.

Table 1: Summary of enablers of work-based learning

Enablers	Comments
Concept of a listener	This concept allows a person to collect necessary amount of credit points (proved by certificates) and to ask a university or a college to evaluate its correspondence to a study programme or its particular stages
Recognition of previous education and professional experience	The changes in legislation allows recognition of already gained knowledge and experience through the special commission formed at a university or a college
Modern infrastructure	The university can offer new and modern equipment for training practical skills
Readiness of the university for working with work-based learners	The university is ready to work with work-based learners offering module-type planning of study courses, flexibility in taking of courses, and raising motivation of the staff with additional salaries
Young staff available for extra work	The university has enough young people, which actually do not have a high workload in the study process and can be engaged in promotion of work-based learning

Table 2: Summary of barriers to work-based learning

Barriers	Comments
Conflict between needs of industry and content of study programmes	Industry needs specific skills in specific technologies and products, but universities offer common skills and teach wide-used technologies and products
Small number of "specific" specialists needed by industry	Due to the fact, that the most part of Latvian enterprises are small and medium size enterprises, each enterprise needs a small number of staff trained for working with specific technologies, but preparation of small number of specific specialists is not cost effective for universities
Lack of part-time studies	Part-time studies allow people who are working on regular base to take courses in evenings, therefore, lack of them in higher education institutions can be considered as a barrier
Not enough developed module-type learning	Institutions where course planning stretches each course through the whole semester demands from people who are working to attend the university each day or some days per week which usually is not acceptable for employees
Absence of a channel to know industry's needs	There is a poor link between academia and industry that does not allow universities to know industry's needs and expectations and to respond to them in an appropriate way
Necessity to fulfill all requirements of the study programme to receive a degree/qualification	The current legislation defines that a degree/qualification can be acquired only after fulfilling of all requirements of a study programme
Problems in cooperation between faculties	It is difficult to cooperate between faculties for provision of multifaceted issues expected by employers due to problems concerning funding allocation
Lecturers without experience of working in industry	Usually, lecturers do not have experience of working in industry and supply "ideal theoretical" knowledge which could not be applied in practice and, therefore, are unattractive for people who are working
Too much general content of study programmes	Study programmes very often include general subjects poorly related to the field
Incomparability of assessment criteria	There is difference between assessment criteria used at workplace and in academia

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