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### **Recent Developments in Teacher Education in Latvia**

Keywords: teacher education, 2 models in teacher education in Latvia, Bologna process

The paper deals with the current situation in teacher education in Latvia – it focuses on two main models in teacher education in Latvia after 1991 – the concurrent (integrated) and consecutive models. Recent theoretical and practical findings,

problems in teacher education will be presented as well as the implementation of the Bologna process in teacher education in Latvia will be discussed.

In 1991 Latvia regained its independence after 50 years of being drawn into the Soviet empire. At the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Soviet empire collapsed and the former Eastern bloc countries one after the other declared their independence. These fundamental changes in the social political system brought about also essential changes in the educational systems of the former post-Soviet and Eastern bloc countries.

“The Soviet system of education including also university education was characteristic for a very strong regime with a steep hierarchic structure. All decisions were taken centrally in the Ministry of Education of the USSR and then transformed into detailed directions and regulations. The members of the education system were accustomed to follow these directions.” Bluma (2001, p.29)

The study curricula, including teacher education, in state universities and institutions of higher education were developed centrally during the Soviet times – the leading institution of higher education of the branch developed the curricula and then following the order from the Ministry of Higher Education of the Soviet Union these curricula had to be precisely implemented in all institutions of higher education belonging to that branch all over the Soviet Union. The exact implementation of the study curricula and developed plans was required and any deviation from the strictly regulated plans could lead to serious consequences. The situation was similar also in the general comprehensive schools – there were strictly regulated syllabi and many subjects were taught according to the same textbooks in all parts of the former Soviet Union (there were, however, some exceptions, like, the foreign language textbooks and, self-evidently, the textbooks of the mother tongue teaching). The teachers had to follow the didactic recommendations for using these textbooks in the teaching/learning processes in schools unreservedly. Therefore the collapse of the Soviet Union and the time of perestroika was also the beginning for serious changes in the educational systems which took several directions:

1. depolitization of education;
2. possibilities of choosing the type of education;
3. decentralization of the education administration. Zids (2001, p. 23)

As O. Zids mentions the “Depolitization of education – the restoration of the democracy principles in the political and social structures has stopped the former strict ideological control over the contents of education and the teaching methods which were used as an ideologically manipulated means of the young generation.”

Zids (2001, p.23)

A new framework Law on Education was adopted in 1991, providing, inter alia, for autonomy of HEI (Higher Education Institutions), defining academic and professional studies and a structure of academic degrees. During nineties there was an intensive process of evaluating the Soviet educational system and a transition to a more open and freer approach to educational issues. This time also marks Latvia’s joining the European and world’s educational and education assessment processes. In 1991 Latvia started its participation in studies organized by IEA (International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement) and in 1993 it was officially affiliated to this organization, thus Latvia starts and rapidly develops the internationally acknowledged education quality assessment system using the most updated methods in the world and cooperating with the leading experts in this field from all European Union, OECD countries and many other countries of the world. The TEMPUS projects and the projects funded by Soros Foundation Latvia exerted a significant role on the further education of Latvia’s educationalists and on their introduction to modern education theories (Knēts 2007); the greatest contribution of the many positively assessed projects was the involvement of teachers and university staff in active study and cognitive process and the process of exchanging experience, as well as special attention was paid to establishing institutional cooperation among European universities and their counter-parts in the neighbouring countries. Thus Tempus helped a wide range of very necessary tasks to be performed – not only to borrow methodology and buy books and equipment to improve the teaching and learning environment in Latvia but also to enter the reform process that was initiated in Western Europe and is still on-going. Tempus program facilitated establishing and the development of Academic Information Centre, and Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre, preparation of the Law on HEI (1995), Regulation on accreditation (1996). In 1999 Latvia signed Bologna declaration with already quite familiar structure of academic degrees and with a stable tradition of mobility of students and lecturers (started in Tempus and expanded in Socrates).

One of the first and most important TEMPUS projects in 1992 – 1995 was “Updating of Teacher Training and Educational Debate in Latvia”, in which there participated and collaborated 8 teacher training institutions of Latvia; Denmark's Lærerhøjskole, Odense, Denmark; Lund University (Sweden); University of the West of England (Great Britain). The current teacher education in Latvia and other countries participating in the project was analyzed within the framework of the project and the recommendations for updating teacher education along the recent developmental trends in Europe were developed.

The cooperation with the academic HEI staff and educationalists from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Great Britain, etc. provided an especially important contribution to Latvia's transition to a democratic and modern European level education, including the teacher education. Active discussions and workshops gave rise to new ideas, methods and theories which were adjusted and introduced in schools and HEI in Latvia, namely, critical thinking, cooperative learning, project work etc. and which now have become an indispensable part of the teaching/learning and higher education study process in Latvia.

The national Informatization and computerization program in the 90ies and the Latvian Education Informatization System (LIIS), as well as inclusion of the informatics as a separate subject in the curricula of general comprehensive schools and introduction of ICT courses in the study programs in higher education, and the application of ICT skills in teaching all subject at school and in delivering study programs at institutions of higher education also contributed greatly to Latvia's way to the knowledge society A.Kangro, I.Kangro (2004).

The teacher education in the above mentioned period was subjected to critical evaluation and already in 90s of the 20th century considerable changes were implemented in teacher education because there was a transition from the strictly determined teacher education system of the Soviet times to the teacher education which is characteristic of a more open, freer and democratic society with the main emphasis on the development of the would-be teachers as a versatile and educated personality at the same time providing qualitative education in the subject (subjects) of specialization.

The teachers in the independent Latvia are educated in accordance with the two main models of teacher education: integrated / concurrent and consecutive (Busch, 2002,

Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe 2002, Handbook of Teacher Training in Europe, 1994 etc.).

Both the models correspond to the basic trends and requirements of modern teacher training which the communities of EU countries and the documents and institutions regulating teacher education put forward. The University of Latvia in compliance with the Senate decisions of the University of Latvia implements both the teacher education models; and the authors of the article hold the opinion that it is the integrated model of teacher education that has proved its sustainability and gives more substantial potential in the education of future teachers because the young people who have consciously made up their mind to become teachers start their studies in the integrated program in which during all their studies and starting with the first year they are ensured a close and continuous link with their former and/or next working place – the school, through the observation practice and through the active teaching practice. “The advantage of the integrated model is the fact that it puts forward a single aim for the entire four to five year period of study, which is the opportunity to acquire the competences needed by today’s teacher. Such an aim secures a unity of purpose between the different study components – the scientific basis of knowledge of the subject (or subjects), teaching methodology, pedagogical and psychological studies, repeated teaching practice in schools, beginning with the earliest courses and other study components.” A.Kangro (2004) The studies in the integrated model are organized in an interdisciplinary mode thus providing students an opportunity to master both the subjects of pedagogy and psychology cycle and closely linking the acquisition of these subjects with the specifics of teaching methods (didactics) of the particular subjects the student has chosen as his/her specialization and the teacher of which he/she wants to become. In its turn, the subjects to be taught and the academic spheres on which they are based, are mastered from the point of view of the future profession, for instance, the education of the would-be teachers of English and German is not directed towards the broad academic philological studies but more to the acquisition of the basics of those branches of science which will be necessary in their everyday teaching work – thus, students do not acquire classic philological disciplines and their education focuses on acquiring the applied linguistics, intensive mastering of the teaching/learning methods and their analysis (like, peer teaching, etc.) as well as on observation and integration of the active teaching practice in the whole process of studies.

After the studies in the integrated model and in accordance with the effective legislation in Latvia the student is awarded the professional bachelor's degree in education sciences and the qualification of the teacher of the specific subject (subjects) – (160 credit points, 4 years of studies).

After the studies in the consecutive model the student first is awarded the bachelor's degree in the specific branch of science (usually 120 credit points, 3 years of studies) and then the student has a possibility to continue his/her studies in the professional program (40 – 60 – 80 credit points, a year, a year and a half, two years); the student masters the subjects of pedagogy and psychology cycle, the methods of teaching the specific subject, does the teaching practice and receives the teacher's qualification of the respective subject.

The latest trend in Latvia is that in the second cycle of studies after the consecutive model the student is also awarded the master's degree in educational sciences. The length of these programs is half a year or a year longer if compared with the professional programs. Thus the total length of studies in the consecutive model to obtain the teacher's qualification and master's degree in educational sciences is at least 5 – 5.5 years.

At present Latvia is more increasingly facing the problem of teachers' shortage because the young people unwillingly choose the teacher's profession due to different reasons : the relatively low remuneration and insufficient prestige just being two most important. The teachers of Latvia have expressed their dissatisfaction with the current situation by organizing strikes and causing sweeping debates in the society.

The Ministry of Education and Science has not completed putting in order the data of Teachers' registry and thus it is difficult to tell precisely how many and which subject teachers are need to fill the vacancies. The biggest shortage concerns the teachers of sciences (physics, chemistry) mathematics, informatics and foreign languages.

Despite the unstable situation and the dissatisfaction of teachers it should be stressed that many teachers continue working in the chosen profession.

Some worries are caused also by the fact that in Latvia these are not the pupils with highest academic achievements who want to become teachers in future but just on the contrary the pupils with average success. That contradicts the trends which are observed in the countries with most qualitative educational systems, for instance, Finland, Honk Kong, South Korea, etc.; some 5 -10% of pupils with highest academic

achievement in the mentioned countries want to become teachers despite the fact of going through entrance examinations and stiff competition 1: 10 (McKinsey). “The quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”. The conclusions drawn in this study should be taken into account when developing the vision of how the education system of Latvia will develop in future.

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