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Employers' involvement in the development of professional higher education Latvian experience and challenges

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to update lately (since the 2009th year) changes in educational policy-makers, employers and professional education cooperative institutional framework outlining the involvement of employers in the increasing importance of education development issues in Latvia.

The employers are actively involved in the development of professional higher education in Latvia, thus trying to the maximum extent to solve the problems of human resources availability and employment in all the branches of the economy. In general, this creates conditions for the achievement of the aim of the EU strategy "Europe 2020" to raise the importance of education and to correspond to the demands of the labour market in Latvia.

Abbreviations

CHE	Council of Higher Education
STCLA	The Sub-council of the Tripartite Cooperation in Labour Affairs
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
EU	European Union
ESF	EU Social Funds
IKVD	State Service of Education Quality
LBAS	Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia
LDDK	Employers' Confederation of Latvia
NEP	Council of Branch Experts
NTCC	National Tripartite Cooperation Council
PINTSA	Vocational Education and Employment Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council
RAPL TSA	Regional Development Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council
SDA	Social Security Sub-council
SIA	Limited Liability Company
TSNTSA	Transport, Communications and Information Technologies Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council
VAL TSA	Environmental Protection Affairs Sub-council
VANA	Health Care Sector Sub-council
VISC	National Centre for Education

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Nowadays national system of higher education should be considered as an indicator of a nation's identity and sustainability, which significantly influences the development of the economy, culture and social sector. Doubtless, higher education system is the integrating forge of traditional academic knowledge and learning tradition, innovative and creative ideas and approaches, which at the same time is an enhancing factor of the development of a person and future specialist. This is why receiving higher education is often considered to be the gauge of professional career, allows a person to acquire a certain status and/or social recognition being important social and cultural capital.

Nowadays, qualitative and effective development of modern higher education is with good reason featured on the list of development priorities of almost every democratic state, including the Republic of Latvia.¹

In the last 20 years, since the restoration of independence, Latvian educational system has changed significantly. However, current globalisation economic processes as well as European economic crisis processes create new demands and challenges for national education systems.

In some European Union states, especially in the new member states, a number of social problems are observed: high level of unemployment in remote territories, insufficient employment of women and elderly people, uneven development of territories and the lack of qualified specialists. This is due to the migration of the working force to the economically developed countries of the EU, the insufficient compliance of educational system with the demands of the labour market and limited competitiveness on the global market.

One of the objectives of the EU strategy "Europe 2020" is to not only increase the significance of education but also to adapt it to the demands of the labour market. In time of economic turmoil and crisis it is significant to prepare specialists in the shortest terms and at the lowest cost at the same time ensuring sufficiently high quality of education.²

Latvia is not rich in raw materials and energy resources, therefore the transition should be made from the manufacturing of low value-added products to the science-based economy in order to ensure its further development. That is why the development of Latvian higher education policy should focus on the development of qualitative working force, which is the base of the development of Latvian economy. At the same time this policy of higher education development shall identify and satisfy the demands of employers to the maximum extent possible.

It should be noted that the development of the working force is set as one of the most important priorities in the use of present and future EU structural funds (ESF). The implementation of the Operational Programme "Human Resources and Employment" of the National Strategic Reference Framework for 2007–2013³ is possible if the state policy is based on the deep, comprehensive and scientific analysis of the interaction of the labour market and educational system.

In 2007, the results of the ESF National programme's "Labour Market Research" project "Research of the Ministry of Welfare" research "Compliance of Professional and Higher Education Programmes with the Requirements of the Labour Market" were published. The research was conducted by the University of Latvia in cooperation with the sub-contractors SIA "GfK Baltic" and SIA "Baltkonsults".⁴ One of the objectives of the aforementioned research was to assess the graduates of various educational institutions from the viewpoint of employers, educational institutions and alumni. Observing the results of the research, "employers note employees' insufficient practical skills in the acquired profession".

¹ E.g. Latvijas Stratēģiskās attīstības plāns 2010. – 2013. gadam <http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=208079>.

² Komisijas paziņojums. Eiropa 2020: Stratēģija gudrai, ilgtspējīgai un integrējošai izaugsmei. Brisele, (2010) // http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/1_LV_ACT_part1_v1.pdf.

³ Plašāk sk. Valsts stratēģiskais ietvardokuments 2007.–2013. gada periodam. – Latvijas Republikas Finanšu ministrija: Rīga, (2007) http://www.esfondi.lv/upload/04-kohezijas_politikas_nakotne/VSID_2009.pdf.

⁴ Darba tirgus pētījums "Profesionālās un augstākās izglītības programmu atbilstība darba tirgus prasībām". LU: Rīga, (2007), XII + 232 lpp http://www.lm.gov.lv/upload/darba_tirgus/darba_tirgus/petijumi/profesionala_augstaka_izglitiba.pdf.

In 65% of cases practical skills of the employees with vocational education and in 53% of cases practical skills of the employees with higher education do not satisfy employers. In 11% of cases employers have objections to the theoretical preparation of the employees with higher education, in 21% of cases – employees with vocational initial education, and in 37% – employees with vocational basic education.⁵

In turn, the research published in August 2011 – expert examination of legal acts and politics documents “Social and Labour Market Development”⁶, which was conducted by Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) in cooperation with SIA EPC and financially supported by ESF, the conclusion was made that “although national priorities are taken into account in the planning of education, the educational system is not oriented on the solution of future problems and there may be the not enough of educated employees in separate domains. The system of education does not have a challenging role in the creation of future social and economic situation”⁷. The aforementioned research – expert examination marks one more interesting relation, which is: students are satisfied with the quality of the acquired education, but employers – on the contrary. As it is seen in the recommendations of the research – expert examination:

- “The need for the reform to raise the quality of professional and higher education may be tempered by the coordination of higher education, carefully examining the establishment of each new state educational and scientific institution and the opening of new educational programmes, as well as by the improvement of the quality of education by the means of programmes’ accreditation.
- It is planned to adjust the offer of education to the employment structure and to ensure the ability to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market. The measures are also desired to improve education promoting (challenging) the improvements of the economy for the fuller use of educational potential in the economy.
- To evaluate the following trend: higher education substitutes vocational education and the society’s educational level does not conform permanently (is too high) to the needs of the economy from the viewpoint of the efficiency of higher education; it is essential to figure out why higher education does not provide efficient return.”⁸

Much work has to be done in Latvia to make the offered education meet the demands of the labour market, and maintain more active cooperation of employers and educational institutions.

Materials and methods

In the research the following methods were used: analysis of the literature sources and analysis of normative documentation.

Results

Further we will observe what has been done in Latvia in the field of the active involvement of employers in the development of professional higher education and the correspondence of the offered professional qualification to the demands of the labour market.

Latvian state administrates many institutions which actively develop, make and implement significant political decisions. One of these institutions is National Tripartite Cooperation Council (NTCC), which started its work on January 1, 1999, inheriting the rights, duties and liabilities of the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ekspertīze par darbinieku atbilstību darba tirgum pēc izglītības valstī. – LBAS: Rīga, (2011) http://www.lbas.lv/upload/stuff/201109/par_darbinieku_atbilstibu_darba_tirgum_pec_izglitibas_valsti.pdf.

⁷ Turpat.

⁸ Ibid.

Tripartite Advisory Council of the Employers, Government and Trade Unions⁹. The aim of the NTCC is to coordinate and organise tripartite social dialogue of employers' organisations, state institutions and trade unions to harmonize the interests of these organisations in social and economic issues, thus ensuring the social stability of the state. Tripartite social dialogue is significant for the development, making and implementation of political decisions, especially concerning the labour market, labour law and social security. NTCC structure includes eight sub-councils:

- The Sub-council of the Tripartite Cooperation in Labour Affairs (STCLA)
- Social Security Sub-council (SDA);
- Vocational Education and Employment Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council(PINTSA);
- Health Care Sector Sub-council (VANA);
- Transport, Communications and Information Technologies Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council (TSNTSA);
- Environmental Protection Affairs Sub-council (VALTSA);
- Regional development Tripartite Cooperation Sub-council (RAPLTSA);
- Social Security Sub-council (SDA);¹⁰

NTCC and its sub-councils consider various social issues to agree on the decisions appropriate to all parties.

PINTSA started its work on March 24, 1999 as the Council of Professional Education Cooperation, which was "established to promote the cooperation of government, employers and employees (trade unions) organisations' cooperation in the development and implementation of the state policy in the field of human resources development, education and employment"¹¹.

PINTSA current regulations were approved by the NTCC meeting decision on July 16, 2008. PINTSA includes 15 authorised persons, who represent the interests of the same number of government, employers and employees (trade unions) organisations.

PINTSA main objectives:

- to examine the projects of the National Development Plan, concepts and legal acts and to provide proposals for their improvement in the fields of education, human resources development and employment;
- to evaluate proposals and provide recommendations to state and other institutions, which are engaged in the human resources development, education and employment;
- to promote the efficient spending of State budget resources on education, human resources development and employment;
- to promote the conclusion of cooperation agreements and projects with the EU and other countries' institutions in the fields of human resources development and employment;
- on the number of state financed students in vocational education in the country as a whole and in each region;
- on the changes in the network structure of vocational education institutions, educational and examination centres, and other institutions involved in vocational education;
- on the development and updating of professional standards and their correspondence to educational programmes;
- on the organisation of career education and professional orientation;
- on the organisation of continuing professional education in the framework of life-long learning;

⁹ Kas ir Nacionālā trīspusējā sadarbības padome? – Latvijas Vēstnesis: (2011) <http://www.lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi.php?id=241496>.

¹⁰ Nacionālā trīspusējā sadarbības padome (2013) <http://www.mk.gov.lv/mp/vaditas-padomes/ntsp/>.

¹¹ Profesionālās izglītības un nodarbinātības trīspusējās sadarbības apakšpadomes nolikums (2008) <http://www.mk.gov.lv/mp/vaditas-padomes/ntsp/>.

- to coordinate the work of Regional Councils of Vocational Education and Employment;
- to coordinate the development and operations of the Councils of Branch Experts;
- to fulfil other tasks determined in the regulations of NTCC and related to vocational education, human resources development and employment.¹²

PINTSA work is financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia from the State budget funds provided for this purpose, as well as contracting parties have the right to participate in the financing of PINTSA activities.

The ESF project “Development of a sectoral qualifications system and improvement of the efficiency and quality of vocational education and training” agreement number 2010/0274/1DP/1.2.1.1.1/10/IPIA/VIAA/001 was started on December 1, 2010. Four cooperation partners are involved in the implementation of the project – Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS), Employers’ Confederation of Latvia (LDDK), National Centre for Education (VISC), and State Service of Education Quality (IKVD).

The project will be implemented until November 30, 2013, its total financing is 2,5 mln. LVL. During the project it is planned:

- to review the content of professional education;
- to adjust the content of professional education to the results and needs of the research of the branches of the economy;
- to develop the structure of professional qualifications of the branches;
- to revise professional standards and update the main requirements of specialisations;
- to develop the recognition system for the skills acquired through non-formal education;
- to promote the restructuring of vocational education¹³.

It should be noted that thanks to the aforementioned project in Latvia “significant and long-awaited changes take place in the system of vocational education. Vocational education is the field where educators themselves cannot regulate neither the content of education, nor the processes connected with the acquisition of qualification, or teach the young the newest in the profession and the advanced technology. Talented manageress with leadership qualities are needed for this purpose and the result of education – interested and cooperative organisations of employers. It is necessary to agree on the most important issue: the distribution of the roles, responsibilities and impact among the government and municipalities, educators and the labour market”.¹⁴

Analysing the work done so far, it can be concluded that the branch research in the framework of the project is a significant benefit for the planners of professional higher education development. Based on branch research, accurate branch descriptions compliant with current demands have been made, specific specialists’ qualifications needed in branches have been identified, and professional qualifications’ structures for professions involved in basic branch activities have been developed.

Branch research has been performed in two stages. In the first stage “Branch analysis” the following information was collected and analysed: the trends in branch development in the EU and Latvia, branch product manufacturing and/or services providing, surveying of the personnel of branch enterprises, as well as surveying of educational institutions. In order to obtain reliable and accurate information, certain enterprises of a branch were surveyed with the aim to obtain quantitative data on the branch development forecast, employees, employees’ level of education, skills and competences from the viewpoint of employers. At the same time educational institutions were surveyed to obtain detailed and in-depth information on the educational institutions which are involved in the preparation of specialists for the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ VIAA veido Latvijas nozaru kvalifikācijas sistēmu (2013) <http://www.viaa.gov.lv/lat/strukturfondi/12111/>.

¹⁴ D. Traidās (2012) Lai sasniegtu mērķi–jāstrādā kopā. Nozaru un darba devēju loma profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. – VIAA: Rīga, speciālizlaidums 2012 http://www.viaa.gov.lv/files/free/62/12562/viaa_zinas_web_2.pdf.

branch, implementation of study programmes and evaluation of graduates from the viewpoint of the educational institutions.

In the second stage the recognized branch experts were interviewed to obtain detailed and reliable information on the current processes in a branch, working force resources and the influencing factors. This was followed by the processing and analysis of the obtained data, and, as a result, 14 “Branch descriptions” were developed according to the unified structure and information content:

- Boundaries of the branch research;
- Branch development trends in the EU states and in Latvia;
 - characteristic and forecast of branch development;
 - significance of the branch for the economy of Latvia;
- Comparison of the branch with the situation in other EU states;
 - characteristic of the branch enterprises;
 - market and its forecast;
 - investments and cooperation;
- Characteristic of the branch work force;
 - competences and skills of the branch work force;
 - availability of the branch work force on the labour market;
 - offer of the work resources and influencing factors;
 - branch personnel planning and selection;
- Offer of professional education;
 - characteristic of professional education;
 - compliance of the offered educational programmes with the needs of the branch;
 - cooperation between employers and educators;
 - limitations for education;
- Impact of external factors,¹⁵

as well as “Branch Qualifications Structures”, as a result:

- identified professions of the branch preparing the list of the branch professions;
- grouped core professions, specialisations and related professions of the branch;
- qualifications structure is developed grouping the core professions of the branch on the levels of the national professional qualifications;
- branch professions correspond to the levels of European Qualification Framework (EQF);
- the descriptions are developed for the core professions included in the qualifications structure.¹⁶

The second benefit of the ESF project is the established 12 Councils of Branch Experts (NEP), which have already started work. “ The significance of NEP cannot be overestimated, because human resources

¹⁵ Nozaru izpēte profesionālajai izglītībai. Nozares izpētes process un pirmie rezultāti. – Ernst & Young: Rīga, (2012) http://www.viaa.gov.lv/files/free/87/13387/prezentacija_konference_petijums_ey_19012012_preciz.pdf.

¹⁶ Ibid.

availability, employment, workforce productivity, specialists' qualifications and similar issues are the main conditions for economic growth. So, it is also the prerequisite of the development of Latvia".¹⁷

What is NEP, its aim, content and main objectives?

The aim of NEP is the complex solution of all the problems related to workforce and employment of a branch, from vocational initial education to higher education, from formal basic vocational education to adult continuing education, as well as to define the request to the educational system.

As it was said before, 12 Councils of Branch Experts have been established:

- Tourism, beauty care;
- Chemical industry and related branches – chemistry, pharmacy, biotechnology, environment;
- Metal working, mechanical engineering and mechanical science;
- Textile, clothing, leather and leather products manufacturing;
- Wood industry (forestry, woodworking);
- Construction;
- Energy;
- Food industry and agriculture;
- Entrepreneurship, finances, accounting, administration (wholesale, retail and marketing);
- Electronic and optical machinery manufacturing, information and communication technologies;
- Polygraphy and publishing, paper and paper products manufacturing and computer design;
- Transport and logistics.¹⁸

The work of NEP is coordinated by the Secretariat, represented by the branch consultants, who are delegated by the project cooperation partners – LDDK, LBAS and VISC. Organisations of branch employers or their associations, Latvian Chamber of Crafts, Ministry of Science and Education and line Ministries, State Employment Agency and other institutions are involved in the work of NEP on a voluntary basis. This mechanism of social partners' involvement ensures their cooperation and the implementation of the order principle, when the representatives of the branches of the economy forecast the number and profile of specialists in demand, as well as facilitate the development of flexible vocational education system.

NEP functions and main objectives in compliance with its aim:

- to conduct the research and forecast the development for the needs of education and employment;
- to develop professional qualification structures of branches;
- to coordinate and perform the expertise of professional qualifications of a branch;
- to develop the standard of branch core professions and the main requirements of professional qualification;
- to expertise and align the requirements of profession standards to the professions of a branch;
- to support the development of the content of professional qualification examinations;
- to expertise the content of professional qualification examinations;
- to delegate branch experts for the evaluation of the quality of vocational education (qualification examinations and accreditation);
- to delegate branch experts for the evaluation and recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal education in the framework of branch professions;
- organise cooperation with the vocational education institutions and examination institutions, which organise the award of professional qualifications;

¹⁷ J. Gaigals (2012) Valsts un politikas veidotāju atbalsts profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. Nozaru un darba devēju loma profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. – VIAA: Rīga, speciālizlaidums 2012 http://www.viaa.gov.lv/files/free/62/12562/viaa_zinas_web_2.pdf.

¹⁸ Nozaru ekspertu padomes (NEP) (2013) http://www.viaa.gov.lv/lat/strukturfondi/12111/?t1_id=12561&t1s_id=533.

- to coordinate the cooperation of vocational education institutions with branch enterprises and process information about the places for practical training;
- to develop and maintain expert data base;
- to develop the system of continuing vocational education and professional development;
- to make proposals for vocational education order and quality ensuring;
- etc.¹⁹

Conclusions

The overall analysis of the ESF project and already existing results allow the planners of the development of professional higher education – the administration of higher educational institutions, academic staff and, of course, students – to have high expectations for the further opportunities of complex solution of all the issues related to human resources availability and employment, thus assisting higher educational institutions in the formation of new study programmes which are correspondent to the demands of the labour market, while the students gain confidence that their employment opportunities will be ensured after the acquisition of the chosen profession and qualification.

Prof. Jānis Vētra, the Chairman of the Board of the Council of Higher Education (CHE) stresses that “The Councils of Branch Experts create the conditions for sustainable human resources development policy, thus providing higher educational institutions an opportunity for purposeful and meaningful planning and performance. The Councils of Branch Experts, being the institutions which represent the interests of all the employees of a branch, have the significant potential to formulate learning outcomes and participate in the subsequent evaluation of the achieved progress together with educational institutions”²⁰

In turn, prof. Arvīds Barševskis, President of Latvian Rector’s Council, Rector of Daugavpils University, stresses – “For us, the representatives of higher educational institutions, the opinion of branch experts about the conformity of our graduates to the demands of the labour market is very important. Doubtless, the Council of Branch Experts can become important advisors in the field of vocational education. The closer there is the cooperation with branch experts; the higher quality specialists enter the labour market”.²¹

But it should be noted, that the aforementioned institutions are not the only ones through which higher educational institutions obtain information about the needs of a certain branch and the requirements of the labour market. Employers are also represented in the CHE, one representative of each of the following institutions: LDDK, Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees, and LIVA Trade Union “Association of Latvian Education Leaders”.

In compliance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, p.16, Advisory Board is established in every higher educational institution. Advisory Board consults the Senate and Rector of a higher educational institution on the development strategy issues²². Usually, Advisory Board consists of the science, education, culture and economy specialists, who are recognised for their professionalism,

¹⁹ NEP funkcijas un uzdevumi (2013) http://www.viaa.gov.lv/lat/strukturfondi/12111/?tl_id=12561&tls_id=533.

²⁰ J. Vētra (2012) Nozaru ekspertu padomju atbalsts profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. Nozaru un darba devēju loma profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. – VIAA: Rīga, speciālizlaidums 2012 http://www.viaa.gov.lv/files/free/62/12562/viaa_zinas_web_2.pdf.

²¹ A. Barševskis (2012) Nozaru ekspertu padomju atbalsts profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. Nozaru un darba devēju loma profesionālās izglītības attīstībā. – VIAA: Rīga, speciālizlaidums 2012 http://www.viaa.gov.lv/files/free/62/12562/viaa_zinas_web_2.pdf.

²² Augstskolu likums <http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=37967>.

work experience, competence and achievements and are able to promote the development of a higher educational institution.

Therefore, it can be stated, that employers are actively involved in the development of professional higher education in Latvia, thus trying to the maximum extent to solve the problems of human resources availability and employment in all the branches of the economy. In general, this creates conditions for the achievement of the aim of the EU strategy "Europe 2020" to raise the importance of education and to correspond to the demands of the labour market in Latvia.

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