

THE SECOND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with education in the context of life-long learning. The author focuses on the role of education in the enhancing of the well-being of an individual as well as the society on the whole. The author points to the downsides of the terminology used in Latvia with regard to adult education. The second higher education is analysed based on the experience of the Department of Further Education of the Faculty of Engineering Economics of Riga Technical University.

Key words: education, competitiveness, knowledge, life-long learning, second higher education

Education and knowledge have a relevant role in the development of individuals and the society on the whole, it is an important means for achieving such goals as a developed economic and civil society and involvement of individuals in democratic, social and economic processes. An educated individual gains benefit not only privately, but as such also contributes to the development of the whole society, i.e. creating the so-called synergy effects. Thus education favourably affects the development of the whole state into a knowledge-based society, whose cultural, social and economic development is determined by the level of knowledge of its citizens.

It has to be remembered that knowledge and its application, as well as competences required by the contemporary labour market and everyday life are rapidly changing. Therefore, we have to differentiate between various levels and forms of education. This means that acquisition of education has to be viewed in the context of life-long learning, instead of treating education as a completed stage in a person's life. The traditional division of person's life into separate stages – childhood and youth, which are devoted to learning and studies, the mature age devoted to active employment, and the retirement age – is a rather outdated approach, taking into account present day requirements.

Moreover, social restructuring manifests itself as changes in the speed of life as well as interpretation of social roles. Nowadays it can hardly be expected that the knowledge acquired in the young age will be sufficient for the rest of person's life. The rapid changes taking place in the world require constant updating of knowledge. In the world, in which knowledge as a resource and a development factor will increasingly dominate over material resources, the role of education will definitely increase. In addition, the rapid development of technologies means that national economy will require

higher competence and expertise, which in its turn will call for higher level of studies.

The relevance of knowledge is also demonstrated by the employment rate – the rate of employment among educated/qualified persons is much higher than among persons with insufficient level of education, therefore it is essential to focus on and analyse the current situation in Latvia from the life-long learning perspective.

In Latvia, the same as worldwide, there is a demand for educated personnel having relevant survival skills (incl. communication and decision-making skills, logical thinking, ability to control emotions, defend opinion, demonstrate good foreign language proficiency etc.). The only way how a person can successfully integrate in the contemporary society is to flexibly adapt to changes, to act with due confidence and self-assuredness, and to learn how to efficiently use the information obtained. In the age of the information-based society these social development trends dictate their rules – the requirements individuals have to meet to improve the quality of their lives and to successfully compete in the labour market have become much tougher. At the same time, the information age is transforming into the knowledge-based creativity age, which calls for a more versatile content of education and forms of acquisition of knowledge. Therefore learning and education have to be viewed in their broadest meaning as a process of developing the abilities of each individual, helping to discover and open up every person's creative potential. This means that education should not be viewed as a tool and process for reaching local goals (particular skills, specific facts etc.), but it is essential to understand that education has to contribute to the development of a versatile personality, since real life is increasingly requiring abilities to resolve new problems and show initiative. Besides, the contemporary situation calls for a more

profound understanding of human, environmental and economic factors as well as poses new challenges with regard to education. This stimulates the development of new models of demand and supply in education.

Any society is divided into age groups, in which individuals fulfil different social roles based on the age and the experiences amassed with regard to particular social realia. There is a relatively well-established system of relationships among these age groups, which are manifested in the wide scope of social processes. This division is based not only on biological criteria but is conditioned also by cultural and social topicality (e.g., attitude towards education). Unfortunately, the studies of life-long

learning in Latvia have disclosed education terminology gaps, which hamper the understanding of the system of classification of education adopted in Latvia. Major problems are connected with the term "adult education". According to the LR Statistical Board, adult education is a versatile process, which ensures personality development and competitiveness of an individual in the labour market over the whole life span of a person (LR law "On education", LR Saeima (the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia), 29.10.1998). This definition is far too general, since the LR Statistical Board here refers only to the data on informal education, professional profile education and further education, ignoring formal education.

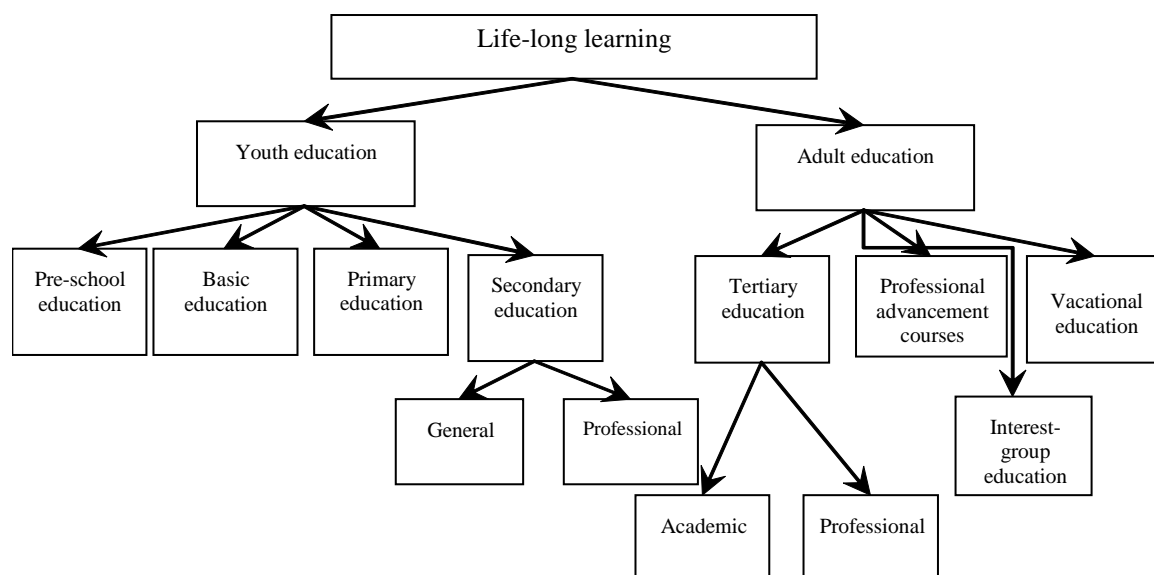


Figure 1. Division of life-long learning by stages

Figure 1 shows that it is possible to differentiate between various stages of life-long education. However, it has to be remembered that there are no strictly defined borders between them, since it is difficult to draw the line when a person becomes an adult, as this may differ from individual to individual within one culture as well as with regard to representatives from other cultures. According to P.Zimmermann, at the time of social restructuring the speed of life changes and also interpretation of social functions. Nowadays, it is possible to speak about transformation of borders between different stages in a person's life – with the tendency for the border of young age to be shifted onward, owing to the possibility of life-long learning [4].

At the same time, the need for higher education can be stimulated not only by different external socio-economic and political factors, but also by internal

motivation and needs, the main of them being:

- need for self-expression in both general and professional sphere of competence;
- need for increasing self-respect and self-assessment;
- increasing awareness of education as a valuable asset.

Let us turn to the second higher education as one of the forms of adult education. The necessity to acquire the second higher education is determined by a number of factors: interest about the specific field of science, the necessity to upgrade professional competence and raise quality of person's social life. The factors motivating adults to repeatedly undertake studies in the system of higher education are:

1. private business activities;
2. career growth possibilities;
3. current job responsibilities;

4. special interest.

To flexibly respond to the situation in Latvia at the end of the last century, Latvian tertiary education establishments started to offer special study programmes targeted at persons with a prior higher education. In 2000, the Faculty of Engineering Economics of Riga Technical University offered a possibility to master a second higher education in the area of economics and management of entrepreneurship. At first there were only 11 applicants and only 4 graduates. In the following years the number of applicants for studies to acquire the second higher education notably increased. Therefore, on 24 February 2003, the Department of Further Education (DFE) under the Faculty of Engineering Economics (FEE) was established. The DFE incorporated and implemented all second higher education programmes offered by the FEE. In such a way the RTU FEE ensured a possibility for students without economic education to undertake bachelor studies in economics or entrepreneurship and management. These further

education programmes has become very popular (in 2003/2004 there were 54 applicants, in 2004/2005 – 80; in 2005/2006 – 110). The applicants are students with education background in humanities, exact and natural sciences, as well as engineering sciences.

Currently, there are 139 students at the Department of Further Education in two second higher education programmes: “Economics” and “Entrepreneurship and Management”. The mode of studies is part-time correspondence studies with an increased number of contact hours (56% of the scope of full-time studies), studies are organised only on Saturdays, since all students are working and arrive to classes from all regions of Latvia.

The most popular programme is “Entrepreneurship and Management” with 65% of students, the runner up being “Economics” with 35% of students.

When analysing the students age structure, the oldest student is 57, and the youngest – 22. The structure of students is presented in Figure 2 below.

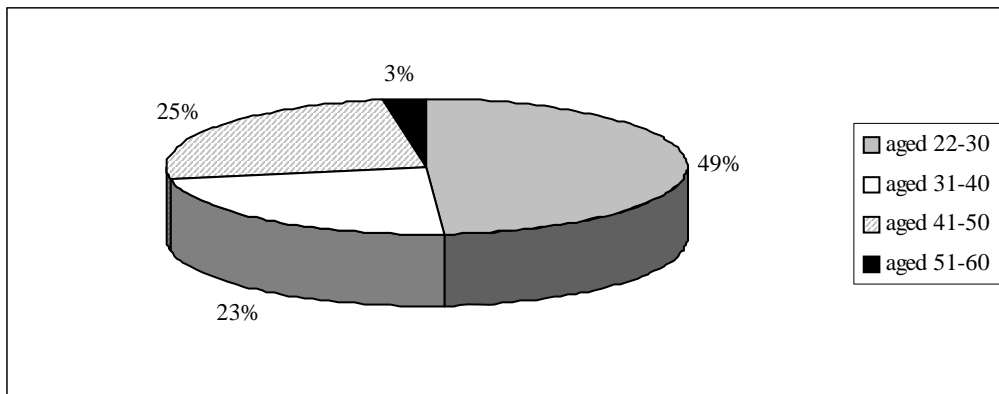


Figure 2. Students age structure in 2007, %

Figure 2 shows that the biggest number of students (49%) are aged 22 – 30, 3% of students fall within the group of 51 – 60 year-olds. 65% of students are women, 33% – men. At the same time, when analysing the share of women and men by study programmes, 84% of women students and only 16% of men students study in the programme “Economics”. In the programme “Entrepreneurship and Management” the proportion is almost equal – 54% women and 46% men.

The analysis of educational establishments students have come from (see Figure 3) shows that most of students (45.2%) have graduated from various engineering programmes at Riga Technical University.

Figure 3 shows that most students come from largest Latvian universities: University of Latvia (19.3%), Latvia University of Agriculture (19.3%),

18.5% of students are graduates of other (11) smaller Latvian higher schools, 2.2% are graduates of foreign tertiary educational establishments, mostly in the former Soviet Union, e.g., Russia, Belarus etc. The second higher education is undertaken not only by persons already having the bachelor degree, but also by persons having the master degree, mostly in engineering sciences, medicine and pedagogy.

An important indicator is successful academic performance of students, which proves their motivation to study and the willingness to acquire new knowledge. Assessment of students academic performance is rather high – average grade is 7.4. There is a tendency that some students undertaking the second higher education programme fail to settle their academic assignments at the time specified; however, in a month or two these academic debts are settled with a very successful assessment grade

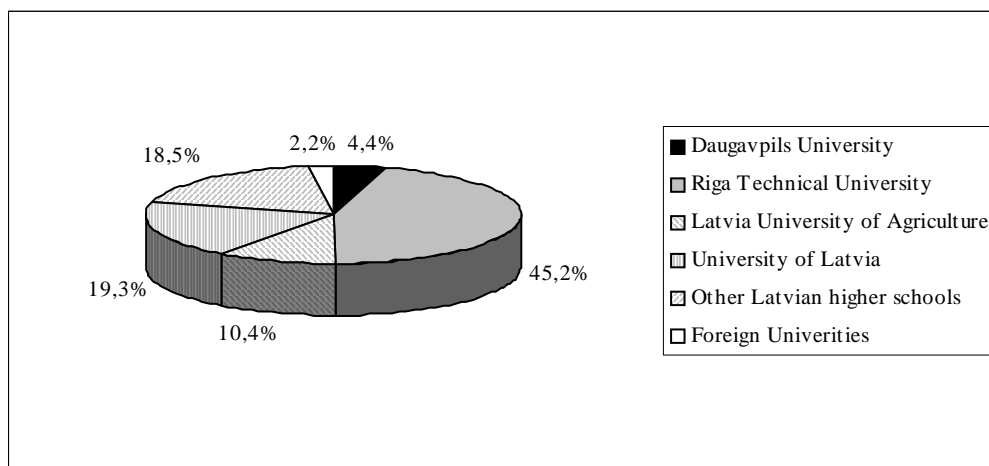


Figure 3. Prior tertiary education establishments, %

8 (very good) or 9 (excellent). The assessment grades for most students' academic papers are very high, since students' attitude is very responsible and they successfully combine theoretical knowledge with practice. The bachelor theses are qualitative research papers evaluated with very high grades – 8 (very good), 9 (excellent), or even 10 (outstanding). Part of students continue their studies in the master degree programme, which ensures further involvement of students in educational processes, which supports the principle of life-long learning. In 2006/2007, the graduates of second higher education programmes were offered a special master programme "Economics" with a specialisation "International and regional economics". 37 students joined this programme to further develop their knowledge in the field of in-depth studies of economics.

As for, dropouts, in the beginning the dropout rate was higher, i.e. 19% (now it is 12%). There was also a tendency that, if a person took an academic leave, very frequently he/she did not resume studies anymore. Currently, the desire to obtain

knowledge and receive the diploma has become stronger.

Nowadays we are facing rapid changes in the spheres of technology, communications, which in its turn trigger changes in the sphere of skills and knowledge required by personnel. The previously acquired skills become outdated and lose their marketability. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly update knowledge and upgrade qualifications through various education programmes currently offered by tertiary education establishments flexibly responding to the needs of life-long learning.

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