

The background features a stylized graphic on the left side. It includes a yellow graduation cap with a white tassel, and several overlapping silhouettes of people in shades of blue and grey. The overall design is clean and modern, set against a light blue background.

# PASCL Report

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**University of Latvia**  
**25 – 26 February 2016**



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Purpose of the review

The current report presents the analysis and findings resulting from the institutional review that was carried out at the University of Latvia as part of the Peer Learning for Student Centred Learning Project (PASCL) in February 2015.

The PASCL review aims to assist higher education institutions across Europe in implementing sound student-centred learning (SCL) strategies and approaches and to foster a culture of SCL. The project also allows for the identification of good practices that would feed into the project case study repository and could be used as practical advice for the implementation of SCL.

The idea of student centred learning has gained momentum in the European higher education policy discourse through the Leuven Communiqué (2009), where ministers reasserted the importance of the teaching mission, curricular reform and empowering individuals through a student centred approach. The student centred learning has been further emphasised in the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) and in European Commission communications and reports<sup>1</sup>.

The successful implementation of student centred learning depends on the efficient implementation of Bologna tools and policies, such as recognition and quality assurance procedures, the ECTS based on learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks etc. Carrying out these European-wide policy commitments at national and institutional level requires their translation within national plans for higher education and institutional strategies. In a diverse higher education landscape, student centred learning would entail a different and personalised approach, fitted to the educational context, to the various subject-based disciplines taught within an institution, to the diversity of its teachers and staff, the governing structures and not lastly to the makeup of the student body.

In examining the implementation of student centred learning at institutional level there are however a number of common features that encompass:

- Flexibility and freedom in terms of the time and structure of learning;
- More and better quality teachers who strive to share their knowledge;
- A clear understanding of students by teachers;
- A flat hierarchy within higher education institutions;

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<sup>1</sup> European Students' Union (2015). Overview on Student - Centred Learning in Higher Education in Europe: Research Study Brussels, p. 6-7 . <http://pascl.eu/wp-content/uploads/Overview-on-Student-Centred-Learning-in-Higher-Education-in-Europe.pdf>

- Teacher responsibility for student empowerment;
- A continuous ongoing improvement process;
- A positive attitude by teachers and students with the aim of improving the learning experience;

The report would generally look into these aspects and it would try to provide an assessment on student centred learning at the University of Latvia in Riga as well as to suggest possible areas for improvement.

## 1.2 Overview of the evaluation process

The institutional review on student centred learning was conducted by an international review team consisting of three members. The experts were selected by the PASCL project coordinators based on their wide-ranging experience in the assessment of higher education systems and institutions and their understanding of student centred learning issues.

The review team consisted of:

- Prof. Elena Dumova-Jovanoska, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Macedonia;
- Gigliola Paviotti, Researcher and Project Designer, Italy;
- Melinda Szabo, Project Officer, European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, Belgium.

The review report of the University of Latvia (UL) draws together information from the self-evaluation report (Annex 1) and the review team's observation during the site-visit that took place from 25 to 26 February 2016.

UL applied for the peer assessment exercise at the request of the national student organisation. The institution prepared a self-evaluation report (SER) and submitted it to the review team two weeks before the site-visit allowing sufficient time for the team's preparation. The SER was informative and covered the main principles of student centred learning.

The team would like to thank the University of Latvia for its hospitality and to express its sincere thanks to the contact person, Inta Jaunzeme for her support in setting up the review process, in organising the site-visit and in accommodating the different requests of the review team. Special thanks are extended to all those who participated and provided reviewers with helpful insight into the aspects of student centred learning at the University of Latvia.

## 1.3. Brief overview of the Latvian higher education context and the University of Latvia

### Latvian higher education

The Latvian educational system comprises of pre-school education, basic education, upper-secondary education and higher education. The higher education system is formed of both academic and professional higher education programmes. This includes 17 state funded universities and 17 of state-funded colleges, 16 private universities, 8 private colleges and 3 branches of foreign higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>.

Most students enrolled at state funded-universities have their tuition fees covered by public grants that are allocated on the basis of academic merit. About 63% of 1st cycle students and 49% of 2nd cycle students pay fees. The public grants are mostly available to students following courses in the priority areas set by the Ministry, namely: natural sciences, computer sciences and engineering.<sup>3</sup>

The Latvian higher education system is currently undergoing a number of reforms, i.e the development of a new financial model to reward quality, development of strategies to ensure equal access to higher education and reducing the fragmentation of study programmes, joint use of resources, strategies to attract foreign students, ensuring the employability of its youth population and reforms to develop an integrated and comprehensive research system<sup>4</sup>. One of the priorities is the reform of its quality assurance system and alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). During the transition period the State Education Quality Service from the Ministry of Education is responsible for the quality assurance and the licensing of study programmes.

While Latvia has already reached the European Union target of having 40% of 30-34 years old with tertiary education in 2013<sup>5</sup>, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions has constantly decreased in recent years, from 130.000 in 2004 to 89.000

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<sup>2</sup> Academic Information Centre, Quality Assurance in Latvian Higher Education system. [https://gache.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/20150219\\_pla-asem\\_lv2.pdf](https://gache.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/20150219_pla-asem_lv2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Eurydice, Facts and Figures National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education (2015/16) <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/img/covers/189EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Progress Report (2015). NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMME OF LATVIA FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "EUROPE 2020" STRATEGY; p. 70-76. [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2015/nrp2015\\_latvia\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2015/nrp2015_latvia_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> OECD, Education at a Glance 2015. Accessed at: [http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/education-at-a-glance-2015/latvia\\_eag-2015-67-en#page1](http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/education-at-a-glance-2015/latvia_eag-2015-67-en#page1)

students in 2014<sup>6</sup>. Latvia suffers from a brain drain of young people leaving the country for better paid jobs and a national demographic downturn in terms of the number of young people of school leaving age that could apply for a higher education degree. The drop in student numbers is coupled with a decrease in public funding that has fallen by over 40% between 2008 and 2014<sup>7</sup>, due mainly to the financial crisis.

Latvia has a strong culture of student involvement. The Student Union of Latvia (LSA) has over 20 years of existence and an active history in student representation and engagement in the national higher education policy debates. Most higher education institutions in Latvia foster a culture of student involvement, evidenced by the representation of students at both university senate and other levels of decision decision-making bodies.

Students participation is ensured by the national legislation, whereby universities have to ensure at least 20% of student representation in their decision making bodies.

#### University of Latvia

The University of Latvia (UL) is one of the largest comprehensive research universities in the Baltic States. UL was founded in 1919 as the national university with the mission to promote higher education, research excellence and national development. The evolution of the University of Latvia is strongly connected with the development of the country.

In the 1990 the university made a strong shift towards research and set as its main goal to become a world-class research centre. To this aim UL is supporting the development of 50 different research fields concentrated on four areas: the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and education sciences.

The national decline in student numbers was also felt by the university that experienced a 26% drop in students enrolled between 2006 and 2012. Currently the university registered 13.600 students in 123 of its academic and professional study programmes.

The university is characterised by a strong decentralisation, with its 13 faculties having significant autonomy over their operational and financial management.

UL selected two of its faculties: Faculty of Humanities and Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences as the focus of the student-centred peer assessment exercise.

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<sup>6</sup> EHEA National Report - Latvia (2015). Accessed at [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/SubmittedFiles/4\\_2015/144217.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/SubmittedFiles/4_2015/144217.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> EUA, Public Funding Observatory (2015). <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/governance-autonomy-funding/november-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

The Faculty of Humanities was created in 2010 as a result of a merger between the Faculty of Philology and Arts and Modern Languages. It is one of the largest faculties in terms of the number of students enrolled (1607 students) and number of study programmes offered at Bachelor (10 programmes), Master (11 programmes) and Doctoral (2 programmes) level. 7% of students enrolled at the Faculty of Humanities are international students.

The Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences offers both academic and professional higher education programmes in geography, geology and environmental science. There are currently 525 students enrolled in 10 study programmes of which 302 at Bachelor level, 163 at Master level and 21 follow doctoral studies.



## 2. Analysis and main findings

The following chapters details the main findings of the report, highlighting what the reviewers have learnt about how the institution understands the concept of student centred learning and the way it implements it.

The chapter draws an initial analysis starting at the institutional level after which, it focuses on the two visited departments, the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences.

The reviewers formed their views based on the self-evaluation report of UL, the SWOT analysis and the interviews with various stakeholders met during the two-days visit.

With a view to student centred learning the review team analysed the following aspects:

- The organisation setting, the procedures and guidelines that facilitates a SCL environment;
- The paradigm shift in practice;
- Students as change makers;
- Students in decision-making process;
- Student awareness of SCL;
- Teaching methods and teacher development;
- Teacher and course evaluations;
- Flexible curricula and individual learning paths;
- Student consultation in curricula development;
- Quality assurance and learning outcomes.

### 2.1 SCL at Institutional Level

The review team was pleasantly impressed with the culture of openness and readiness to discuss both the positive and less positive aspects of the institution with a view to move closer to a more student centred learning approach.

The aim of the university is to become a leading international research university. The policies and strategic plan of the institution reflect this aim, e.g. the number of research staff employed by the university is higher compared to that of the teaching staff. The review team also heard from the rector of its strategic plan to reorganise the study programmes according to a research branch. The new clustering of research programmes would create a framework for collaboration between different institutes and faculties and would therefore support a more integrated approach in the design of study programmes.

The university has a complicated structure that includes 13 faculties with a high degree of autonomy, various departments, research centres and administrative units. The configuration of the university does not seem to have a cohesive, fit for purpose arrangement, mostly due to its historical evolution, where different units or Faculties were later incorporated into the core structure of the institution. The review team formed the view that the current fragmentation and division of activities would not be favorable in establishing university wide policies on student centred learning or in enabling the transfer of know-how from one unit/institution to another.

The university has an overarching Student Service department that tackles a number of issues related to student information and social matters, career guidance, internship and offers of work, psychological consultation as well as student exchanges.

The review team was impressed with the mentoring programme developed by the Student Service Centre together with the Latvian Student Union to support 1st year students' adaptation and integration in a new learning environment. The peer-mentoring programme also helps reduce the risk of student dropout by ensuring immediate support to freshmen, which is the group most likely to dropout.

The Career Centre, also part of the Student Service department, provides information for students and graduates on various jobs and internship vacancies, as well as helpful advice for writing CVs and motivation letters. Students can also receive guidance in case they wish to change the direction of their studies. The review team however noted that the Centre's activities are rather singular, they are not coordinated with similar activities that are taking place at Faculty level.

The review team noted that the Centre's activities are rather dispersed with a focus on student registration matters. The Centre seems to lack a clear targeted strategy for student support services that would normally address learning resources such as libraries, study facilities and IT infrastructure, student counselling and mentorship. Activities focused on the financial assistance of students would presume an assessment of student's financial needs and credit points and therefore require a clearly separated strategy and approach. Similarly overseeing the registration for all students, would focus on mapping the student body, ensuring provision of information, releasing certificates etc., which would presume also some different modus operandi.

The reviewers were told by the Centre that a few initiatives were taken to facilitate access of students with mobility impairments. While this is an important step in tackling the needs of students with motor disabilities, the review team formed the view that there is little know-how or a concerted approach at university level to identify and fully address the needs of other potential vulnerable groups (e.g. students with learning disabilities, students from low-

socioeconomic backgrounds, orphans, ethnic minority groups, single parent students, LGBTI students etc.). Identifying such groups would allow the institution to develop a comprehensive strategy and put measures in place to widen access for underrepresented groups, reduce dropout rates and facilitate completion of studies.

The direct oversight of student support services is exercised by the Rector which is advised by the director of social services. The current arrangement does not seem to include a consultation with student representatives. The review team considered that missing out on students' input and contribution in the monitoring and review process of student services is counterproductive.

Students are otherwise very well represented in all governing structures of the university. The team noted the established arrangement for student representation in the governance structures and decision-making bodies, such as the Constitutional Assembly, University Senate, and other committees (e.g. Study Programme Committee) and councils. Students have guaranteed representation in the senate (20% of current members are students) and the right to veto all aspects related directly to student life. The review team also learned of the proposal launched by the Student Council to introduce internships and English courses, which earned the support of Senate and was adopted. The Student Council is not only involved in promoting student rights but also in other cultural events and activities meant to further promote the institution and the sense of belonging to the institution (Culture Exchange Programme, "Ride for your Rights" project, UNICA conferences).

The review team was pleased to learn of the recognition of prior learning procedure, mostly used for language courses and work experience. The institution successfully established this recognition practice in 2012 offering the possibility to assess students' skills and competences acquired outside of the university and thus allow for the design of flexible study plans.

In its self-evaluation report the university points out the bureaucratic and financial challenges faced in recruiting new professors and in particular foreign specialists and teaching staff. At institutional level, the Senate is responsible for announcing the call for new professor and associate professor vacancies. The Faculties are however responsible in conducting their own recruitment for readers and docents as well as for assessing the career progression of their staff. The reviewers learned of the legal language requirement that would dissuade foreign professors to work at a university in Latvia and thus limiting the options of the university to Latvian speaking candidates only.

The periodic assessment of professors is ensured through university regulation. It is carried out every 6 years (at every election term for academic staff position) taking into account scientific, teaching and organisational activities. The review team was pleased to learn that

the student assessment of teachers is also considered in the overall assessment of academic staff performance. In case of multiple negative reviews, the Study Programme Director would address the concerned teacher and suggest measures for improvement.

The opportunities for the professional development of teaching staff is ensured as part of the doctoral study programme training (provided within the pedagogic module). The university also has a Centre of Tertiary Didactic of the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art of the University of Latvia for staff competence development. The reviewers were told that the Centre of Tertiary Didactic is dedicated for training university graduates for a teacher position within the school system, and it is not used to the extent of ensuring pedagogical enhancement for UL professors. The university does however offer IT courses for the use of the Moodle platform, or courses for the use of library resources and repository to all its teaching staff.

With a view to the internal quality assurance processes of the university, the reviewers found that while UL has a well-designed system for the review of the curriculum and its study programmes the quality assurance system does not include any other policies and procedures that would address student support, academic units, administrative units, teacher evaluation, the relationship between research, learning and teaching etc. The information management system enabling the collection of key performance indicators, information on student progression, satisfaction, learning resources, career paths of graduates etc. is not an integral part of UL's quality assurance system. The reviewers found important to ensure the development of an effective and cyclical implementation of an internal quality assurance system within an institution that could foster a student centred learning environment.

## 2.2 SCL at Faculty level

The understanding of student centred learning varied among professors and students. Professors defined SCL in terms of ensuring and capturing the interest and involvement of students in their courses and the importance of understanding their needs while interviewed students saw SCL more in terms of creating learning opportunities from which they can benefit.

Professor understanding of SCL:

- "The teachers should be student oriented. With no students we have no teachers".
- "SCL means that we need to understand our students, their psychological needs and capacity".

Student understanding of SCL:

- "Organising the education process so that students can benefit from it".

- “The possibility to be part of our education.”

The review team stressed that there is not an exact definition for the institution to follow and the provided explanations on what student centred learning is are in fact complementing each other.

Given their autonomy, the faculties can work on a framework of entrepreneurial activity and income generation, which is more successfully harnessed in the field of exact and natural sciences compared to humanities.

The Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences has recently been moved to a modern building that opened in 2015 in the new campus of the UL. The building also houses the faculties of Biology, Geography and Earth Science, Chemistry, Medicine as well as the Department of Optometry and Vision Science. The new location allows for better interfaculty and interdepartmental collaboration. The Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences attracted and benefited from external finances (from the national government, from EU-funds and also from different companies) that allowed it to improve its research capacity. Students and both academics appreciate the new facilities as well as the supporting and inspiring working environment.

The university provides the framework in which faculties may conceive their programme structure, consisting of compulsory and elective courses. The students are given a set of courses they must follow to meet the core requirement of their study programme. They can further choose from a wide number of elective courses that are accessible online within a study programme catalogue. The review team learned that students appreciate the possibility to choose elective courses but find it difficult to navigate the system and narrow down their choices. The presentation of courses in the Moodle platform is helpful, but it is not offered for all courses. Students stated that they would find it helpful to have a more structured guidance on the type of study they could choose or to receive more counselling in their study planning.

In case students wish to change their study direction they can raise this matter with the Programme Director, who can advise them on a possible course of action. Interviewed students said that they are able to influence the pace of study as well as to increase or decrease the amount of courses within their study programme (to a certain agreed limit) however changing to a part time study option would not allow them to maintain the student grant. The review team was informed that student representatives also have the opportunity to raise issues and suggest changes to their study programmes in the meetings of the Study Programme Council.

The academic staff of the visited faculties are mostly young staff members. The review team learned that most of them divide their time between teaching and research with some of

them also allotting time to apply for external project funding or to coordinate different projects (e.g. joint study programmes). The opportunities to attract project funding and generate extra income in particular study fields seem to be quite challenging (e.g. humanities, anthropology). This in turn can affect the possibility to attract and retain staff members within such disciplines. This situation is sometime worsened by the fact that entry level teachers have among the lowest salary in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The team was impressed to learn that most courses have small size classes, thus allowing for an effective student - teacher interaction. Interviewed teachers said they are open to adapt their course structure and teaching method (as long as it is still in line with the agreed study programme) and have done so in the past following suggestions from the class. While students can change the pace of their studies and follow de facto part-time studies, they cannot apply for state funded study places. Part-time studies can only rely on study loan to cover tuition costs.

The online evaluation of courses within each faculty provides opportunities for the quality improvement of course curricula and the teaching and learning processes. Reviewers were told that the evaluation forms are very long and sometimes do not work within the Moodle platform. As the final results are shared with the assessed teacher and Programme Director, the results and impact of those assessments remains unknown to students who have assessed the course. This could explain the very low turnout of student responses (10% to 20% of students answer to the course assessment surveys) and shows that the online tool is not used to its full potential.

Students from certain fields of study (e.g. professional study programmes) have more opportunities for internships which is usually integrated in their study curricula. This opportunity is not that accessible for other students who would normally follow an academic track, even if such traineeships or internships are related to their study field.

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<sup>8</sup> Teachers' and School Heads' Salaries and Allowances in Europe 2014/15, p. 9  
[http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/facts\\_and\\_figures/188EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/facts_and_figures/188EN.pdf).

## 3. Areas for improvement

This chapter provides reflection on possible course of action for the consideration of the institution arising from the main issues addressed in the previous chapters. The main aim of this report is not to recommend singular actions, but to facilitate UL in its efforts to develop student centred learning and use this insight in order to create an institutional strategy or action plan for improvement.

### 3.1 General areas for improvement

The university could consider **identifying and encouraging mechanisms that increase and enhance cross-faculty contacts and cooperation** i.e. setting up framework for more interdisciplinary linkage and collaboration between different faculties, developing joint research projects, sharing expertise in project application and management, improved coordination in making available optional C-type of courses. This would in turn facilitate the sharing of good practices from one faculty to the other and address common issues in a more effective manner.

The university could consider a **reconfiguration of its internal quality assurance system** so as to ensure continuous internal feedback and reflection mechanisms e.g. developing its information collection and management system, linking the staff development programme and student services to quality assurance processes and outcomes. This could act as a catalyst for continuous improvement. As a framework to further develop the internal quality assurance the university could consider part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area<sup>9</sup>.

UL could consider to set up clearly distinguished approaches and strategies (in consultation with students and other faculty stakeholders) for student registration services (that usually include administrative tasks such as provision of information, releasing certificates) for student support services (that usually deal with career guidance, mentorship and psychological support, libraries, mobility programmes, housing, study facilities and IT infrastructure) and for financial assistance services (scholarships, loans, grants, lunch vouchers etc.). The separation would allow to better address the needs of a diverse student population by designing a **suitable strategy for student support services**.

The university could look into **widening the participation of underrepresented groups into higher education** while also enhancing its current financial and structural support to vulnerable groups that are of risk of dropout (e.g. students with learning disabilities,

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<sup>9</sup> See more at: [http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)

students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, orphans, ethnic minority groups, single parent students, LGBTI students etc.).

## 3.2 Specific areas for improvement

The university and faculties could in particular consider:

- Reforming the system for student feedback on teaching to ensure a higher response rate e.g. by linking access of students to the final exam results to the completion of the course evaluation; by making available the partial or aggregate data resulting from course teacher and course assessment as well as any potential changes carried out as a result of student's assessment.
- Increasing levels of staff funding in particular for entry level and ensuring recognition of exceptional teaching e.g. by setting up a system by which students can nominate teachers for an awards process.
- Making available and attractive some trainings on competence development for teaching staff also between election periods.
- Setting up different focus groups among faculties to jointly discuss and address similar issues, e.g. drop-out rates of students.
- Increase in the number of part-time study opportunities and making available study scholarships for such students.
- Developing the engagement with alumni networks and further exploring collaboration opportunities with such networks, e.g. extending the mentorships projects, job shadowing.



## 4. General conclusions and final reflections

The team recognises the significant contribution of the university in the Latvian society. The university has succeeded in maintaining high academic and scientific standards despite the current financial challenges, the national demographic downturn.

The review team would like to praise the University of Latvia for its current work on student centred learning, and in particular to point out as best practice examples the university's peer-mentoring of 1st year students, the successfully established procedure for the recognition of prior learning and for fostering a high levels of student engagement within the university.

It is the view of the team that the university benefits from a culture of openness that is conducive to student centred learning and it hopes that current report and recommendations will be a useful instrument in the university's plans to reorganise its study programmes and in the further development of student centred learning.

## 5. Annexes

Annex 1 - PASCL-Self-Assessment Report of the University of Latvia

Annex 2 - PASCL- Site Visit Agenda - University of Latvia