

The future of **MEDICAL EDUCATION**

Rīga Stradiņš University educates future health professionals for the whole of Europe, because the future is work-based learning.



European society is ageing – this is no longer just a prediction but reality. As the number of people who have reached retirement age increases, society is facing a number of problems, and high-quality medical care is one of the most urgent. It is precisely for this reason that it is increasingly under debate whether Europe's largest universities will be able to prepare the necessary number of medical professionals. Rīga Stradiņš University (RSU) is frequently listed among the leading institutions that provide high-quality medical study programmes. It offers quality medical studies with the additional benefit that international students also have the opportunity to practise medicine in their home countries.

RSU is one of the most modern universities in the Baltics, with a wide range of study programmes in the fields of health care and the social sciences. RSU has received not only the highest ranking among Latvia's universities but also international recognition and acknowledgement of its accredited specialists. RSU guest professor Prof. Dr. Peter E. Goretzki, from the globally renowned and prestigious Charité university hospital in Berlin, says: 'I have had the opportunity to track RSU's growth over the decades. It has indeed been rapid, and RSU has built up a very good reputation in Germany. RSU is a success story, and it must continue on its path. This will undeniably make RSU the best university in the Baltic region.'

RSU is a very international environment: about a quarter of the students are internationals hailing from almost 50 different countries, most of them in Europe (e.g. Germany and the Nordic countries). Eleven of the university's study programmes are conducted in English. RSU Rector, Professor Aigars Pētersons, says: 'RSU is open and international. We believe that students of different nationalities enrich

the study environment and its processes, and we take care to ensure that foreign students get to know the Latvian culture and language, as well as make new friends. The international makeup of the student body gives added value to the learning process. We are currently actively looking at opportunities to expand our operations abroad, and we are in the process of establishing RSU branches in Germany, Italy, and Israel.' It should be noted that RSU students can already do their internships at teaching hospitals in Germany. Students make active use of this opportunity, and the university has received positive feedback from both students and the specialists who oversee them.

RSU has signed a cooperation agreement with the General Hospital in the northern Italian city of Bolzano, which will act as a teaching hospital for RSU. This is the second work-study partnership established abroad by RSU – the first was initiated less than two years ago at the Lukaskrankenhaus Academic Teaching Hospital in Neuss, Germany. The decision to partner with Italy was based on the large number of students coming from that particular region; there are currently nearly 100 students from Italy studying at RSU.

Toms Baumanis, Vice-Rector for Administration and Development at RSU, elaborates: 'RSU is working to ensure that students who wish to will be able to spend their praxis and final academic year abroad.' The goal is to provide students with a clinical and practical study environment, internship, and learning process in the environment and language in which they will ultimately pursue their professional careers. 'Education is becoming global. The opportunity to receive a quality education in one's own country can only be viewed as an advantage,' emphasises Baumanis.



RSU has recently begun its third cooperation project abroad. It will be in the fields of orthopaedics and traumatology at Bar-Ilan University and Ziv Medical Center in Israel. RSU also plans to open branches, for example, in the Nordic countries, with studies held in English. RSU students will be able to choose to go to any of the countries with which the university has a partnership, provided they have sufficient knowledge of the relevant language(s).

Simon Scheibner, an RSU student from Germany, points out the advantages that RSU offers: 'This unique environment, in which you can study with future doctors from 53 different countries, provides you with an amazing network. The companionship among the students is outstanding, as indicated by the more than 15 active student organisations at RSU. After having studied medicine in Germany for some time, I decided to return to RSU. Here, the use of modern equipment, accessible scientific work, and the curriculum are simply more impressive.'

Robert Ekman, a former president of the RSU International Students' Association, adds: 'RSU is the new home for students who dare to take the next step – to a new country, towards new studies, towards new opportunities. Plenty of clinical practice is given, and if you are outgoing, there are hours of extracurricular practice at your disposal. That first step can later take you further abroad for a year with the Erasmus programme, or perhaps to Germany or Italy for your internship – you can decide what's best for you.'

The opportunity to do a year of study in your home country or abroad is just one of the many benefits offered by RSU. RSU's location is very favourable in that Riga is the largest city in the Baltic states and has all of the advantages of a European metropolis. Moreover, Riga is now a major hub for international air traffic,

and the proximity of the airport to RSU's campus provides students with easy access to virtually anywhere in the world. Foreign students especially appreciate the short travel times to most European cities; for example, Germany and the Nordic countries are just a couple of hours away by plane.

Another advantage of studying at RSU is the personalised approach to learning, which is possible due to small class sizes and low student-to-teacher ratios. For example, in the dentistry programme, educators work face-to-face with groups containing no more than eight students. In other programmes, the number of students per group does not exceed twelve, ensuring that each student receives the full attention of his or her educators. Likewise, small groups mean that teaching staff can closely monitor the progress of each student, thereby facilitating that students meet the high requirements set by their programme of study.

'We care about our reputation. A diploma from RSU must be earned through diligent work and demonstration of the pertinent knowledge attained. Anything less is unacceptable,' asserts Baumanis. Speaking about RSU's partnerships abroad, Baumanis emphasises that with this opportunity, in addition to providing its students with internships, it is important for RSU to implement a clinical training process in which the student not only learns the theoretical principles of clinical work as expected 'on paper', but also participates and experiences the day-to-day reality of working at a health care institution together with experienced professionals. As Professor Goretzki puts it: 'In the daily work at a clinic, the doctor must be able to establish a systemic approach towards the patient based on specific symptoms, and not just give a general answer about the disease.'

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