Chapter 4

Upper secondary general and vocational education in Latvia

This chapter reviews Latvia's upper secondary education system and also parts of its adult education system. Currently there is a stark divide between the general and vocational upper secondary education pathways and spending is low and responsibility for provision quite fragmented. Lifelong learning is underdeveloped in Latvia, with low participation and a lack of employer support for training.

In 2009 a comprehensive reform of vocational education was started aimed at raising its quality and relevance to the labour market, make it more attractive to students and enhance resource efficiency. The Latvian government should continue improving the relevance and quality of vocational education, strengthening the capacity of stakeholders to contribute to the process and closely monitoring its progress; narrow the divide between general and vocational tracks both through organisational changes and curriculum reform; and increase take up of lifelong learning.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Introduction

Upper secondary education is recognised as a major educational stage across OECD countries. Graduating from upper secondary education has become increasingly important globally, as the skills needed in the labour market become more knowledge-based and workers are progressively required to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing global economy (OECD, 2014a). Although it is not compulsory in Latvia, the vast majority continue to upper secondary education after completing basic education.

Latvia's upper secondary system (Grades 10-12) is largely school-based and is characterised by a stark divide between general and vocational pathways. Latvia's post-secondary non-tertiary education programmes are also considered to be part of the upper secondary level. In Latvia the term "vocational education" is generally used, rather than vocational education and training (VET), as most vocational education is implemented through school-based programmes that include periods of practical learning at school and in enterprises (MoES, 2015).

In 2009 Latvia embarked on a comprehensive reform to improve the attractiveness, quality and labour-market relevance of its vocational education with the involvement of social partners. It has set an ambitious target to equalise participation rates in upper secondary general and vocational education by 2020; that is a 50/50 split for all students finishing their basic education and entering Grade 10, compared with the 65/35 split in 2014/15. In recent years it has initiated reforms to optimise the vocational school network, modularise vocational programmes and establish professional standards, among other reforms. Although the reorganisation of the vocational school network is almost complete, further work is needed to improve the vocational curriculum.

Latvia's divided upper secondary system has long hampered efforts to follow the international trend of greater integration of general and vocational education to better prepare students for both further education and/or working life. Meanwhile the subject-heavy, knowledge-based upper secondary curriculum and teaching practices have not kept pace with the changing times. Participation in lifelong learning is low while many of the working-age population are believed to lack the skills they need to be more productive (OECD, 2015a).

This chapter starts with an overview of upper secondary education in Latvia. It continues with an in-depth discussion on a selection of key policy issues ahead and provides concrete policy recommendations for improvement for Latvia to consider.

Context and main features

Governance and financing

According to the General Education Law, everyone who has completed basic education has the right to enter upper secondary general and/or vocational education regardless of age. Although upper secondary education is not compulsory in Latvia, 89% of 25-64 year-olds had attained this level in 2013, compared with an OECD average of 75% (in 2012) and an European Union (EU) average of 72% (Eurostat, 2015b; OECD, 2014a).

The government and municipalities are responsible for maintaining schools in all areas of the country to ensure the accessibility of education. Although general upper secondary education is the responsibility of municipalities, the situation with vocational schools is quite different. In October 2014, 33 vocational schools were under direct control of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) with a further 7 governed by municipalities and other 8 by private providers whose provision is mainly aimed at adults. Fourteen vocational schools were directly supervised by the Ministry of Culture and one by the Ministry of Welfare. In addition one college that implements secondary vocational education programmes was under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, one under the Ministry of Welfare and nine were under the responsibility of MoES (MoES, 2015).

MoES has overall responsibility for the legal framework, governance, funding and content of vocational education. Since 2000, it has worked in co-operation with the National Tripartite Sub-Council for Cooperation in Vocational Education and Employment, which has representatives from employer bodies and trade unions, and 12 Sectoral Expert Councils (SECs) established in 2011. It also works closely with the State Education Development Agency (SEDA) whose role is to administer Latvia's EU structural funding.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the National Centre for Education was established under MoES to evaluate educational content and student achievement, and organise the development and revision of the basic and upper secondary curricula. A key function of the centre is to develop, administer and grade centralised general and vocational education examinations.

As there is no regional tier of government, MoES and other ministries have to work directly with each municipality. As covered in Chapter 3, schools and their school leaders (who are selected by the municipality) have considerable autonomy, regardless of whether they are governed centrally or by municipality.

Municipalities are required to ensure every child can acquire a secondary education and has access to extra-curricular programmes. Children can attend school in a different municipality to the one where they live, in which case the "home" city or municipality contributes to the costs incurred by the school they attend.

Whilst the cities and municipalities are bound by a set of statutory duties with regard to education, they appear to differ considerably in the way they discharge them, and the impression is that they act in a largely autonomous way. Each municipality has an Education Specialist and a Board of Education, whose head is appointed in collaboration with MoES. The boards have a wide range of responsibilities in terms of providing support to schools, but their key function is to ensure that local educational policy is implemented and to administer the state grants to schools.

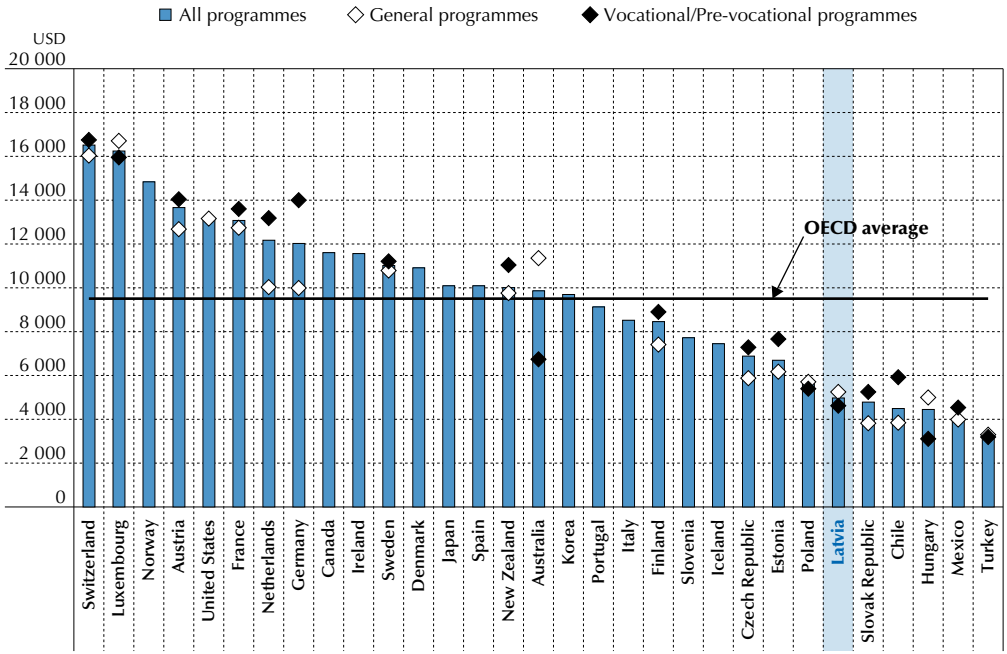
A requirement of the school accreditation process is that each school should have a "council of an education institution" comprising staff, parents, students and representatives from the local community, and a student council, although the level of involvement in decision making differs from school to school. There is no mandatory training for either board-level or council-level members.

As described in Chapter 3, the State Education Quality Service (SEQS) was founded in 2009 to, among other responsibilities, register and inspect educational institutions (public and private) and licence both general and vocational educational programmes through a uniform accreditation procedure of general educational and vocational educational institutions and programmes. It also acts as the National Reference Point for European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training. The external evaluation of schools and their programmes normally takes place every six years, although some education programmes are accredited for a period of two years. The evaluation process involves internal evaluation, school visits by the committee of experts and submission of evaluation reports to the SEQS which publishes the experts' reports on its website. Schools must publish their internal evaluation reports on their web pages.

Financing of upper secondary education

Latvia's annual expenditure per student by educational institutions for all services at upper secondary level in 2011 was USD 4 983. This stood well below the OECD average of USD 9 506, as seen in Figure 4.1 (OECD, 2014a). It was also below the level of USD 6 688 spent by its Baltic neighbour Estonia. In one of the schools visited for this review, a head teacher referred to the school budget as a "survival budget, not a development budget". However, in relation to GDP, Latvia spent 25% of GDP per capita on each upper secondary student, which is comparable to the OECD and EU21 averages[1] of 27%.

Figure 4.1. **Annual expenditure per student, by upper secondary educational institutions (2011)**



Countries are ranked in descending order of expenditure on educational institutions per student in upper secondary education.

Source: OECD (2014a), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en.

While on average across OECD countries, the cost per student rises in line with the level of education – from USD 7 428 for ECEC (3-6 year-olds) to USD 9 506 for upper secondary – in Latvia the costs for upper secondary (USD 4 983) are similar to the primary level (USD 4 982) and slightly below those for lower secondary (USD 5 019).

The difference in spending per student between general upper secondary education and vocational education is also unusual in Latvia. As Figure 4.1 shows, most OECD countries spend more per student on vocational programmes than on general ones, USD 9 307 and USD 8 613 on average respectively. This pattern is repeated in Estonia, for example which spends USD 6 153 per student on average on general upper secondary education, and USD 7 651 on vocational. In Latvia, in contrast, the levels are reversed: it spends USD 5 241 per student on general upper secondary education and USD 4 599 on vocational upper secondary education.

The maintenance of buildings and teaching resources are paid out of municipal budgets, apart from the schools financed directly by the central government. The evidence however suggests that some of the smaller municipalities lack the fiscal and human resource capacity to effectively manage their local school systems.

In addition, all of the 26 state gymnasia receive additional funding (EUR 1 423 per annum) for their regional role in the professional development of teachers. Questions have been raised about the effectiveness of this professional development approach (e.g. OECD, 2014b). MoES is currently piloting a new school funding model which will abandon the additional funding to gymnasia.

Vocational schools in Latvia are largely dependent on the finances provided through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Structural Fund, and the European Social Fund (ESF). Latvia also participates in a range of EU-funded projects designed to enhance vocational education. The Department of Structural Funds and International Financial Instruments of MoES has the key task of ensuring that these funds are used as efficiently as possible while SEDA manages the funds related to education. Latvia received EUR 54 million from the ESF to increase the attractiveness of vocational education and EUR 129 million from the ERDF to establish the first 11 of its planned network of 18 Vocational Education Competence Centres (VECCs; see below).

A clear challenge for the financing of vocational education is its sustainability once investment from EU funds falls way. This is also an issue for other EU countries, to varying degrees, but Latvia seems particularly dependent on this source of funding to drive forward its plans to improve both the status and quality of its vocational education system.

Vocational schools can generate additional resources (in the form of funds or equipment) by carrying out projects or commissions for local employers. Some 20% of the budget of the Riga Technical School, for example, comes from commercial activity and a further 10% from fee-paying short courses. Some employers also support schools by giving or loaning them equipment such as wood turning machines for carpentry classes.

No national data are available on employer and individual contributions to the financing of continuing vocational education, but international comparative studies find that the Latvian tax system does not encourage employers to invest in training (Cedefop, 2015). Nevertheless, MoES data collected in 2012 show that municipalities invested approximately EUR 2.25 million in non-formal education of 63 000 adults. The level and type of investment varied across the country with some local governments employing a range of strategies to support adults.

Another challenge for some vocational schools is that some municipalities have discouraged students leaving basic education from entering vocational education by impugning the reputation of vocational schools and offering benefits, including financial support, if students continue their studies in general education (IMF, 2013). There are reports that in some areas financial incentives have been offered to young people to remain in local government-controlled schools (IMF, 2013). The incentive for municipalities to act in this way stems from the current funding model. Unlike most vocational schools, general upper secondary schools are mostly owned by municipalities.

Organisation and size of the upper secondary school network

Education is held in high regard in Latvia with 94% of 15-19 year-olds entering the upper secondary phase in 2012, compared to the OECD average of 83% (OECD, 2014a). The level of upper secondary attainment is among the highest across OECD and partner countries and, as Figure 4.2 shows, upper secondary attainment rates are high for both younger and older generations in Latvia.

In terms of the organisation of upper secondary education, Latvia has largely followed the segregated or "divided" model found in many European countries like Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands with separate institutions for general and vocational pathways (Sahlberg, 2007).

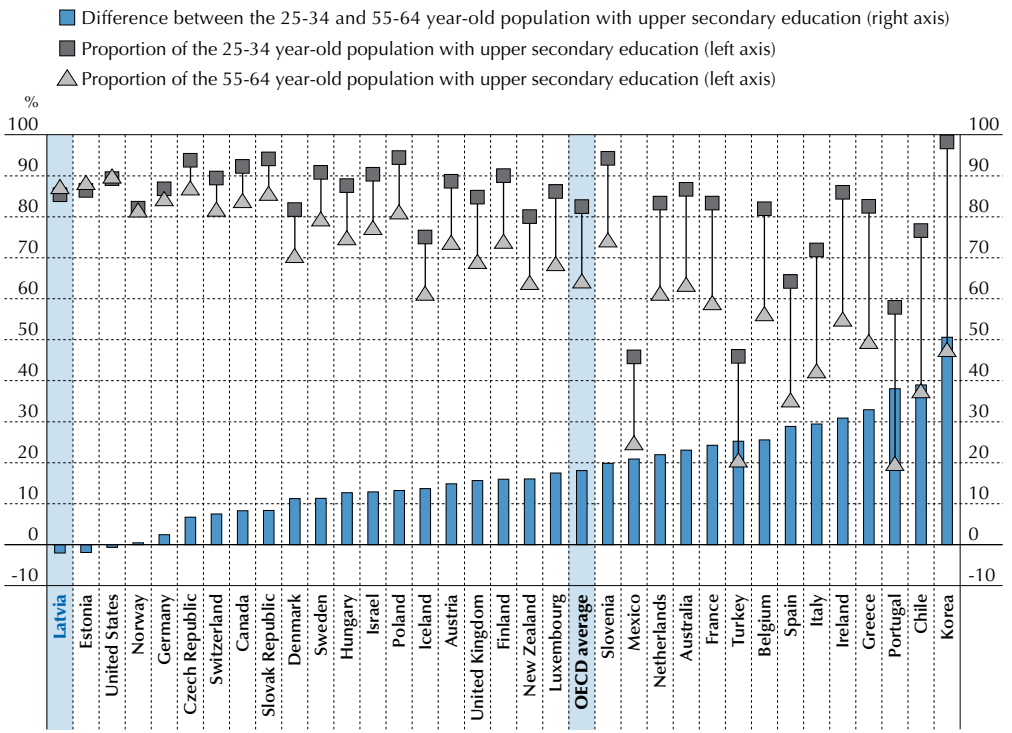
General upper secondary education

General upper secondary education lasts three years (Grades 10-12) and takes place in secondary schools (*vidusskola*), gymnasia *(gimnazija)* and evening schools *(vakarskola*). Secondary schools usually also provide lower secondary education programmes, i.e. the last grades of basic education (Grades 7 to 9), or the whole general education programme (Grades 1 to 12). This is partly driven by the small and decreasing student population, but it is believed such schools have a positive impact on children's aspirations and may facilitate the transition from one level to the next. Four secondary schools provide distance learning for students in remote areas and also for adults and new immigrants to the country.

In 2013/14 enrolments at general upper secondary level stood at 38 632 (Table 4.1), of which 28% were 20-29 year-olds and 4% 30-39 year-olds attending evening schools. The data show a slightly higher percentage of female students (53%) which is in line with the OECD pattern of higher levels of female participation in upper secondary education. The total includes some students who had completed vocational training (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015).

Figure 4.2. **Percentage of younger and older upper secondary-educated adults (2012)**

25-34 and 55-64 year-olds, and percentage-point difference between these two groups



Countries are ranked in ascending order of the percentage-point difference between the 25-34 and 55-64 year-old population with upper secondary education.

Source: OECD (2014a), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en.

As a result of Latvia's demographic decline and the resulting government policy to consolidate the network of schools discussed in Chapter 3, the number of upper secondary general schools has been reduced from 378 in 2005/06 to 358 in 2013/14. This reduction in schools is less than might have been expected considering the decline in student numbers of almost 30% over the same period. The number of evening schools has reduced from 34 to 25 during the same period, with enrolments falling by almost 23% for Grades 10-12.

Table 4.1. **Number of schools and students in upper secondary general and vocational education (2013/14)**

	Number of schools	Teachers	Students		
			Total	Males	Females
General upper secondary education (full-time schools)	358	4 609	30 375	13 830	16 545
General upper secondary education (evening schools)	25	548	9 608	4 926	4 682
Vocational upper secondary education	66	4 061*	26 464	15 901	10 563

Note: Students in special schools are not included.

* This number includes those teachers working also at the basic vocational education level.

Sources: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2015a), *Statistical Yearbook of Latvia 2014*, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, Riga, www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/nr_01_latvijas_statistikas_gadagramata_2014_statistical_yearbook_of_latvia_14_00_lv_en_0.pdf; Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2015b), "IZG08. General full-time schools (at the beginning of the school year)", *Statistics Database,* Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/Sociala/Sociala__ikgad__izgl/IZ0080.px/?rxid=a79839fe-11ba-4ecd-8cc3-4035692c5fc8 (accessed 1 August 2015); Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2015c), "IZG13. Enrolment in general evening schools by grades (at the beginning of the school year)", *Statistics Database,* Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/Sociala/Sociala__ikgad__izgl/IZ0130.px/?rxid=a79839fe-11ba-4ecd-8cc3-4035692c5fc8 (accessed 1 August 2015).

Vocational education

Latvia's system of vocational education is predominantly school based and state controlled. Vocational education is organised in three levels:

- vocational basic education (lower secondary)
- vocational secondary education (upper secondary)
- professional tertiary education, which can be divided into first-level professional tertiary (college) education and second-level professional tertiary (university) education (see Chapter 5).

Vocational education at lower secondary level, i.e. "vocational basic education", is implemented via vocational basic education programmes. Programmes are mostly provided by basic vocational education schools (*profesionālā pamatskolavidusskola*). Young people of at least 15 years old

can enrol in such programmes (ISCED-P 254) regardless of their previous education. They lead to a certificate of vocational basic education that allows progression to secondary level education and professional qualification at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 2 (such as cook's assistant).

Early leavers without basic skills are offered special vocational programmes (*profesionālā izglītības programma ar pedagoģisko korekciju*) for better integration into the education process. These programmes are mainly designed for students with intellectual impairment and dropouts from basic general education (MoES, 2015; Cedefop, 2015).

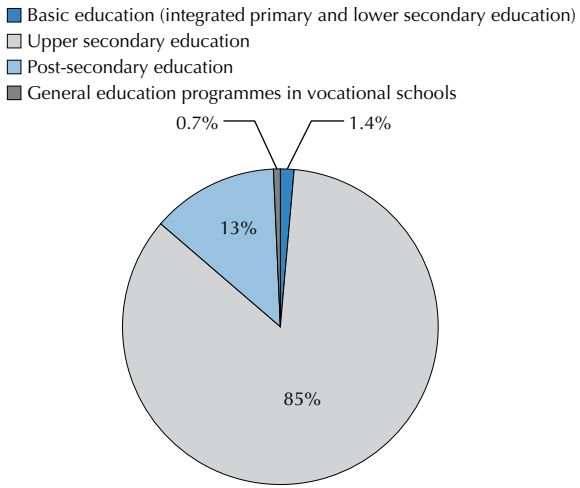
At the upper secondary vocational level (known as "vocational secondary education" in the Vocational Education Law) there are three types of programmes:

- Two- to three-year programmes leading to a certificate of vocational education and a professional qualification (EQF level 3) in a named occupation, but not granting access to tertiary education.
- Four-year programmes leading to a diploma of vocational education which grants access to tertiary education and a professional qualification (EQF level 4) in a named occupation.
- Post-secondary education programmes (which, despite their name, belong to the upper secondary level) primarily for 17-29 year-olds with or without a completed secondary education to help them acquire vocational skills. These programmes (generally 1-2 years) are mainly focused on the acquisition of professional skills. In 2014/15, 1-1.5 year vocational education programmes have been offered to 15-29 year-old students with basic or secondary education in the "Youth Guarantee initiative" using ESF support (MoES, 2015; Cedefop, 2015, see below).

Figure 4.3 shows that the vast majority of vocational education is provided at the upper secondary level (85%). It also shows that very few general education programmes are provided in vocational schools, evidence of the strict divide between general upper secondary and vocational education in Latvia.

Vocational students made up 39% of all upper secondary students in 2012/13 (see Table 4.1). This is lower than the OECD and EU average shares of 44% and 50% respectively (OECD, 2014a). Out of the 26 464 students in upper secondary vocational programmes in 2013/14, 60% were male but the gender balance is reversed for post-secondary non-tertiary provision. There are 6 colleges providing such programmes, with 3 945 students, 61% female (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015a).

Figure 4.3. **Distribution of vocational education students, by type of programme (2013/14)**



Source: Cedefop (2015), *Vocational Education and Training in Latvia*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4134.

Reorganisation of the vocational school network

As Chapter 3 covered, Latvia's demographic challenge and the continued tight fiscal climate are driving the restructuring of the school network, including vocational schools. In 2010, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Guidelines for the Optimisation of the Network of Vocational Education Institutions 2010-2015 that endorsed the reduction of the number of vocational education schools that MoES is responsible for from 59 in 2009/10 to 30 by 2015.

The reorganisation of the vocational school network is based on three principles: 1) accessibility – ensuring equal opportunities for the acquisition of vocational education; 2) co-operation – involving all stakeholders; and 3) resource efficiency – rational and purposeful use of the available funds (Cabinet of Ministers, 2010).

An important innovation coming out of the reorganisation has been the creation of the Vocational Education Competence Centres (VECCs). Since 2010 large vocational schools with more than 500 students have been gradually transformed into VECCs. These are to act as regional hubs for developing closer relationships with employers, provide high-quality vocational education for students (youth and adults), and develop pedagogical

support for other vocational schools, and, potentially, accreditation powers, including the recognition of prior learning for adults.

Schools have to meet specific requirements to obtain VECC status. These include the number of education programmes implemented, number of students, students' academic success, career management and co-operation with employers. The VECCs have to perform the functions of a regional or sectoral methodological centre, offer continuing education and teacher education, and assess professional competences acquired outside the formal education system. Once VECC status is achieved, schools get a 10% additional payment for personnel. By August 2015 a total of 14 vocational schools and 1 tertiary education institution had received VECC status.

Small vocational schools with fewer than 300 students are being combined with small general education schools and reassigned to the municipalities (MoES, 2015; Cedefop, 2015). This is expected to generate efficiency savings, as the municipalities can provide vocational and general education under one roof. Four vocational schools have come under the responsibility of municipalities between 2010 and 2014. During the same period 13 small vocational schools were merged with the VECCs.

The consolidation of the vocational school network is in its final stages and is expected to stabilise in the coming years, allowing reform efforts to focus on the improvement of curricula and teaching where further work (European Commission, 2015). There are no indications that, so far, the reorganisation of the school network has affected young people's access to vocational or upper secondary general education.

Content and structure of education programmes

Latvia maintains a bilingual education model with instruction available in seven minority languages: Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Estonian and Lithuanian. At least 60% of all subjects must be taught in Latvian at the upper secondary level, whether general or vocational, although every school can decide which subjects are taught in Latvian.

General upper secondary

The content of general upper secondary education is determined by MoES. Since Latvia gained independence in 1991, there has been a process of educational reform that has introduced subject standards to codify the secondary curriculum and specify subject aims, content and assessment.

In 2008, the National Standard of General Secondary Education and the Subject Standards of General Secondary Education were introduced. They stipulate the length of the school year (35 weeks in Grades 10 and 11 and 38 weeks in Grade 12), the number of lessons (not more than 36 per week) and the length of lessons (40-45 minutes).

They also instigated a major change by organising programmes of study into four fields (or "directions"):

- general education
- humanities and social sciences
- mathematics, natural sciences and technology
- programmes with a vocational/professional orientation (e.g. arts, music, commercial science, sports).

This reorganisation addressed concerns that students were given too much choice over the subjects they could study. Previously, only 5 subjects (out of 12) were mandatory, with students choosing a further 7 from a wide range of options. This was seen as problematic for two related reasons:

1. too few students choosing to study sciences; and
2. as a result, students were limited as to what they could go on to study at university (Kangro and James, 2008).

Nowadays, all students take eight mandatory subjects and each field of study requires between three and six additional mandatory subjects (Table 4.2). Schools can also offer further optional subjects, taking up 10-15% of the study time or offer additional in-depth programmes covering one of the mandatory subjects.

All students can also take two further optional subjects: basic computer programming (105 hours) and graphic art (70 hours). The total number of study hours is reduced for evening and extramural students. The curriculum places a strong emphasis on creating a Latvian identity whilst at the same time enabling students from different ethnic backgrounds to preserve their ethnic identities.

Several people that we interviewed – at various levels of the system – expressed their concern that the upper secondary curriculum and teaching methods have not kept pace with the changing times. Several noted that the curriculum had become too subject-heavy, even "saturated". A reform of the upper secondary curriculum that is to promote a competency-based approach is scheduled for the period 2018-20.

Table 4.2. **Curriculum subjects and number of hours for general upper secondary education (full-time)**

Subjects	Education programmes			
	General education	Humanities and social sciences	Mathematics, natural sciences and technology	Vocational/ professional oriented programme
Compulsory subjects *				
Latvian language	210	210	210	210
Minority language and literature	420	420	420	420
First foreign language	315	315	315	315
Second foreign language	315	315	315	315
Third foreign language		315		
Mathematics	420	420	420	420
Informatics	105	105	105	105
Sport	315	315	315	315
Physics	315		315	
Chemistry	210		210	
Biology	210		210	
Natural sciences		315		315
Latvian and world history	210	210	210	210
Literature	210	210	210	210
Music	70	70	70	70
Visual arts	70	70	70	70
Vocational subjects				280
Compulsory optional subjects *				
Economics	105	105	105	105
Ethics	70	70	70	70
Philosophy	105	105	105	105
Geography	105	105	105	105
Cultural science	105	105	105	105
Household	70	70	70	70
Politics and judicial science	70	70	70	70
Psychology	70	70	70	70
Health studies	35	35	35	35
Optional subjects				
Basic programming	105	105	105	105
Technical graphics	70	70	70	70
Total lesson load	**3 360-3 780**			

Note: * Subject to state general secondary education standard set.

Source: Cabinet of Ministers (2013), *Noteikumi par valsts vispārējās vidējās izglītības standartu, mācību priekšmetu standartiem un izglītības programmu paraugiem* [Regulations Regarding the State General Secondary Education Standard, Subject Standards and Sample Education Programmes], Regulation No. 281, Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia, Riga, http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=257229.

Content of vocational education – an area of reform

As with general upper secondary education, the content of vocational education is determined by MoES in co-operation with other ministries. Vocational provision is planned on the basis of data from the Ministry of Economics, which conducts medium and long-term forecasts of labour market skills. The Ministry of Welfare's agency, the State Employment Agency (*Nodarbinātības valsts aģentūrā*), also conducts short-term reviews of the balance between demand and supply in the labour market to inform the design of education and training programmes for the unemployed.

Since 2011 the Sector Expert Councils (SECs) have also been involved in this process to give sector stakeholders a say in developing vocational education content, in an effort to strengthening its quality and relevance. These newly established bodies comprise employer representatives (from industrial associations), central government representatives (from MoES and other ministries), and employee representatives (from the Free Trade Union Confederation in Latvia), based on a social partnership model. The SECs are to play a central role in the development of the new modularised vocational education programmes (see below). Working groups comprising teachers and industry specialists and the SECs will be responsible for evaluating how relevant the new programmes are to labour market needs.

Vocational upper secondary education is organised in eight fields of study:

- general education
- humanities and art
- social sciences, business and law
- physical sciences, mathematics and information technology (IT)
- engineering and manufacturing
- agriculture
- health and welfare
- services (e.g. hospitality, beauty therapy, environmental protection, transport, civil and military defence).

Students can switch to a different vocational field if they are assessed as being capable of meeting the requirements. All students have to study Latvian language and literature, foreign languages, mathematics, applied informatics, history, business, and sport.

The Regulations Regarding the State Vocational Secondary Education Standard and the State Vocational Education Standard state that the

theoretical part of vocational upper secondary programmes should consist of 60% general subjects and 40% vocational subjects. Among the general subjects 45% of lesson hours are spent on language and communication studies, 33% on mathematics, natural sciences and technical sciences and 22% social sciences and cultural studies (Cabinet of Ministers, 2000).

The development of practical skills is a key part of the vocational education curriculum. The content of each programme is divided between theory (general and vocational subjects) and practice (practical training). A minimum of 50% of any vocational programme must take the form of practical training. This can be done both in the vocational school and through a work placement, though there is no specification of how much time is to be spent in either site.

Post-secondary non-tertiary vocational education – which in Latvia is considered part of upper secondary vocational education – is organised in the same way as vocational upper secondary education, but with a greater emphasis on practice: the balance between theory and practice is 40-60. Students spend 65% of their time training in workplaces.

Providing all students with work placements has traditionally been a challenge for Latvia. Work-based learning and apprenticeships have been underdeveloped, partly due to the traditional "school-centeredness" of vocational education. Where they exist, they depend heavily on the voluntary involvement of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-enterprises that characterise much of the Latvian economy.

Since 2013, Latvia has been piloting work-based learning elements to provide a closer link between learning theory and practical work. In December 2012, Latvia, along with Greece, Italy, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Spain, signed a memorandum of understanding with the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research on co-operation in vocational education and training in Europe. In the academic year 2013/14 a total of 148 students and 29 companies were involved in the pilot project implemented by 6 vocational schools. The following year the pilot was expanded to include 12 to 15 vocational schools (to a varying degree), around 500 students and 200 companies (European Commission, 2015; MoES, 2015).

Latvia is aiming to introduce work-based learning system wide. To this end amendments to the Vocational Education Act have been adopted in 2015, and at the time of writing, work is being carried out to develop specific work-based learning regulations by the Cabinet of Ministers. Though undoubtedly a positive development, this pilot initiative is still separate from the existing apprenticeship provision organised by the Chamber of Crafts.

This pilot is part of a larger reform of vocational education in Latvia that aims to:

- promote vocational education quality
- ensure its relevance to the labour market
- ensure efficient use of resources to raise attractiveness of vocational education (MoES, 2015).

These reforms have included the establishment of the SECs, reorganisation of the vocational school network and the establishment of the VECCs. In addition Latvia is in the process of modularising its vocational programmes, establishing professional standards and aligning its level descriptors with the EQF; these efforts are led by the National Centre for Education (VISC). These are without doubt positive developments that respond to the concerns about the quality and relevance of vocational education of Latvia for its economy and society at large.

A recent European Commission report (2015) concluded much more work is needed to update the curricula and professional standards, however. Work is progressing slower than planned. The evidence from our review visit also suggests that some SECs are less well established than others, limiting their potential to contribute to improving the quality and relevance of vocational education in Latvia.

Assessment of student learning

Since the mid-1990s, Latvia has been moving steadily towards the central marking of final (summative) examinations at the end of the upper secondary phase. Regulations introduced in 2004 have intensified the shift away from school-based assessment (Bethell and Kaufmane, 2005). Schools can also organise entrance examinations for subjects that have not been included in a student's certificate of basic education.

In general upper secondary education, teachers evaluate student attainment at the end of each semester using a range of methods including written, oral and integrated tests; evaluation of individual and group work; project-based assessment; and written examinations. As at the basic education level, they use a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (fail) to 10 (outstanding). Students are issued with a report card showing their results. Progression from one grade to the next is automatic, while students who have underachieved are given extra tasks to bring them up to the required standard. Students only repeat a year if they have had a significant period of absence from school.

At the end of upper secondary education, students take central examinations and are graded using a percentage-based point scale. To qualify for the Diploma in General Secondary Education and a Statement of

Records, students have to complete their studies in a minimum of 12 subjects and pass centrally marked compulsory examinations in 4: Latvian language, mathematics, a foreign language of the student's choice, and an elective subject (chosen from Latvian and world history, chemistry, biology, and physics). If a student has not acquired grading in any of the subjects or state examinations, they are issued with a school report.

The data show that relatively few students take the central examinations in chemistry and physics: 7.9% and 5.1% respectively in 2015 (VISC, 2015). The Education Development Guidelines 2014-2020 highlighted students' lack of interest in science and the resulting risk of imbalances in the labour market. In this context, Latvia in 2015/16 is implementing a pilot project on physics, chemistry or natural science in 50 schools (about 800 students). The introduction of the fifth mandatory subject in the centralised examination will be considered after the pilot exam results evaluation.

Assessment in upper secondary vocational education follows a similar pattern with the use of the 10-point grading scale and a pass/fail grade for practical tests. To reach the standard for certification, vocational students have to score a minimum of grade 4 (almost satisfactory) in all subjects, including practical tests and a minimum of grade 5 (satisfactory) in the final qualification examinations. As well as their vocational subjects, they are examined in the Latvian language and literature, a foreign language, mathematics, and a subject chosen by the student.

As described above, the qualification received by students who have passed the final exams depends on the programme studied. The shorter (two to three-year) programmes at the lower grades of upper secondary vocational education lead to a certificate of vocational education and professional qualification at EQF level 4 but do not provide access to tertiary education. For this, students must complete a further one-year intermediate general secondary education "bridge programme" (Cedefop, 2015; Nuffic, 2014). This programme leads to a vocational secondary education diploma and a general secondary education certificate and is designed for those students who successfully completed a three-year second level vocational education programme ("Code 32" programmes; *arodizglītības programma pēc 9 klases*). In 2013/14, out of the 3 323 students who had completed such a programme the year before, 206 (15.3%) continued on to this one-year bridge programme.

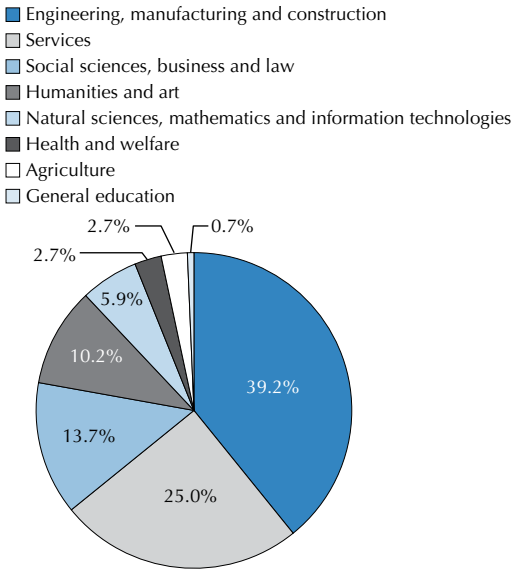
Such dual or hybrid qualifications are clearly valuable as they enable students to keep their options open. They reflect a trend in some European countries, discussed below, to develop double qualifications which are accepted for entry to both the labour market and tertiary education (Deissinger et al., 2013).

Graduation and completion

As of 2012, Latvia's upper secondary graduation rate of 90% is higher than many OECD countries (the OECD average is 84%). The average age of a first-time graduate from general programmes is similar to the OECD average at 19 years. Students in vocational programmes are on average 20 when they graduate, which is considerably lower than in many OECD countries where the average is 22 (OECD, 2014a).

The combined field of engineering, manufacturing and construction accounts for the highest enrolments in vocational upper secondary education (39.2%) (Figure 4.4). This is followed by services (25%) and social sciences, business and law (13.7%). The percentage of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects from upper secondary vocational education was 38.9% in 2012, above the EU average of 29.2% (Cedefop, 2015). According to the Latvian government, however, too few students continue their tertiary studies in STEM-related fields of study. It intends to raise the proportion of tertiary graduates in STEM fields from 19% in 2012 to 27% in 2020 (MoES, 2014).

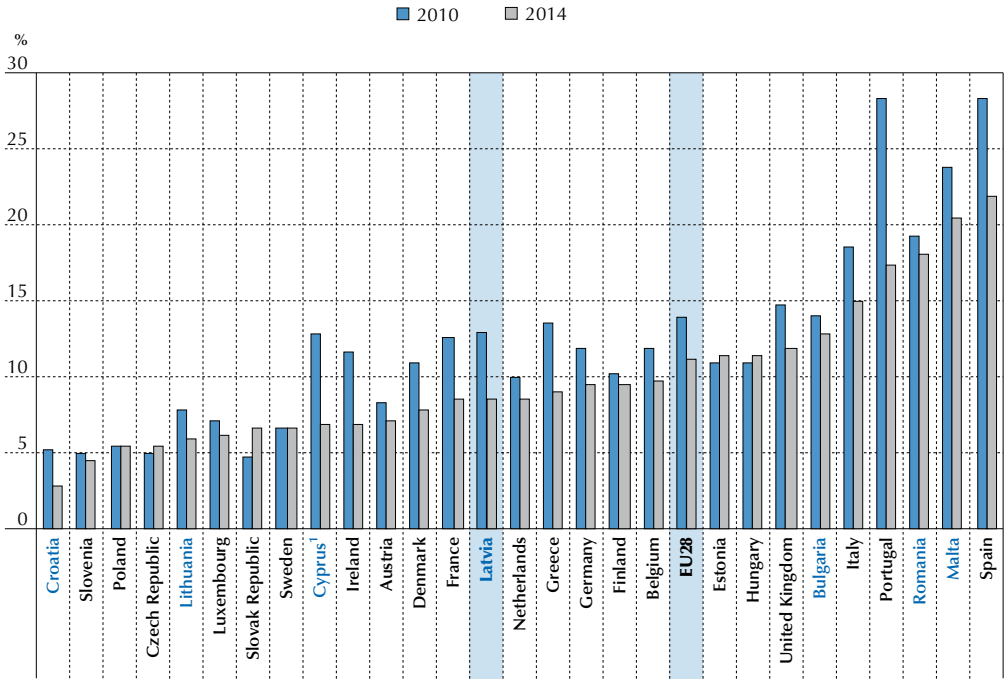
Figure 4.4. **Enrolment in vocational schools, by field of education (2013)**



Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2015a), *Statistical Yearbook of Latvia 2014*, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, Riga, www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/nr_01_latvijas_statistikas_gadagramata_2014_statistical_yearbook_of_latvia_14_00_lv_en_0.pdf.

Figure 4.5 shows that, like several other EU countries, Latvia has made good progress in reducing the percentage of early school leavers, i.e. the proportion of 18-24 year-olds who left school before completing upper secondary education and have not participated in further education or training.

Figure 4.5. **Early leavers from education and training, 18-24 year-olds**



Notes: Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.

1. Note by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to "Cyprus" relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of the United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

Note by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Union: The Republic of Cyprus is recognised by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Countries are ranked in ascending order of the 2014 percentage of early leavers from education and training.

Source: Eurostat (2015d), "Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status", *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en (accessed 15 July 2015).

With 8.5% early school leavers in 2014 – down from 12.9% in 2010 – Latvia has already achieved the Europe 2020 strategy target of reducing the share to below 10% by 2020 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). However this national average hides considerable differences within Latvia; early school-leaving rates are still about twice as high in rural areas as they are in urban areas and male students are considerably more likely to leave school early than female students.

There seems to be a conundrum here, however, for despite its high completion rates in upper secondary education, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 found only 25% of 15-year-old students in Latvia said they expected to complete a university degree (OECD, 2012a). Although this figure is some years old, it suggests that young people in Latvia may have lower educational aspirations than would be expected from their levels of educational attainment.

Gender segregation

A challenge for all vocational education systems is the mitigation of gender segregation. The situation in Latvia reflects the international tendency for male students to cluster in engineering and construction-related areas, whilst females are clustered in health care and personal services. In 2012, 67% of Latvian male graduates from upper secondary vocational education were from engineering, manufacturing and construction programmes, compared with only 9% of female graduates (MoES, 2015).

By contrast, 34% of female graduates were from services programmes and 34% from social sciences, business and law, whereas the proportions of male graduates from these fields were small (12% and 6% respectively). On average across OECD countries, the gender balance was relatively more even, with 48% of male graduates from engineering, manufacturing and construction programmes and 24% of female graduates from social sciences, business and law programmes (OECD, 2014a).

Teachers and school leaders

The teaching workforce in both general and vocational upper secondary education reflects the profile of the education workforce as a whole: predominantly female and ageing. In 2013/14, just over one-fifth of the teaching workforce (7 938 out of 41 034) taught in the upper secondary part of the education system, with 4 609 teachers in general upper secondary education and 3 329 teachers in vocational education. A further 693 teachers were teaching in evening school classes.

Latvia has very low proportions of young teachers working at the upper secondary level. Only 6.7% of upper secondary teachers were under the age of 30 in 2012 (Eurostat, 2014), compared to the OECD and EU21 averages of 9% and 8% respectively (OECD, 2014a). On the other hand, Latvia is faced with a considerable cohort of teachers above the age of 50. Over 44% of upper secondary teachers were 50 or older; 13% were 60 or older (Eurostat, 2014b).

Latvia's share of male teachers is also very low. In 2012 just 19.2% of teachers in upper secondary education were male, which is the lowest share among EU countries with available data (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015a; Eurostat, 2014b).

As discussed in previous chapters, Latvia pays its teachers less than many other OECD and European countries, and education is not generally regarded as a high status or attractive profession. Improving the image of teaching for both women and men would permit a more positive and balanced view of the profession (Kelleher, 2011). We believe that making teaching an attractive career option – for both men and women – will require basic salaries to increase in real terms (OECD, 2014c). One positive development is that MoES has recently taken measures to improve the situation, including the piloting of a new remuneration system (see Chapter 1).

In October 2014, the government adopted the Regulations on Necessary Teacher Education and Professional Qualifications, and Procedure for the Improvement of Professional Competences which determine education requirements and education acquisition procedures for vocational education teachers. Teachers without pedagogical qualifications must now have completed a 72-hour pedagogical course in a higher education institution. In addition, they must have either:

- tertiary education in a sector
- vocational upper secondary education or master of crafts-level qualification.

The requirement for a pedagogical course does not apply to those supervising practical work whose teaching load is less than 240 hours per year. Most vocational education teachers already have a tertiary degree; 92% in 2013/14 (Cedefop, 2015; MoES, 2015).

Teachers of general subjects (in general upper secondary and vocational schools) must have either:

- Tertiary education in pedagogy/education (bachelor's/master's degree or second level higher professional education) and a teacher's qualification in a particular subject.

- Tertiary education in the relevant subject (bachelor's/master's degree or second level higher professional education) and a teacher's qualification in particular subject (or studied in a teacher's education programme) or a pedagogical course/programme of at least 72 hours in a higher education institution.

As with vocational teachers, most teachers of general subject have a tertiary degree. The regulations determine all teachers should have tertiary education or must be in the process of obtaining one.

Continuing professional development (CPD) amounting to at least 36 hours over a 3-year period is now compulsory for all teachers, whether teaching general or vocational subjects. CPD must be agreed with the head of the school. The key vehicles for formal CPD in general upper secondary education are the A and B programmes provided by universities and other providers (see Chapter 3). Teachers can also participate in events organised by the "professional subject associations". However, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is not clear how active these associations are throughout Latvia or the extent to which they actually contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Throughout the years EU-funded programmes have played an important role in the CPD of teachers in Latvia, particularly in vocational schools. For example, EU funding gave 292 vocational teachers and apprenticeship supervisors in companies the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills in 2014 (European Commission, 2015). Given the intensity of the reform process, further investments in the continuous professional development are likely to be needed. Teachers will need opportunities to reflect on their practice and to share their ideas both within and across schools.

Their expertise also needs to be made more visible at a regional and national level. In general little is known about the professional development and further professional development needs of upper secondary teachers at the central level. This is particularly the case for those teaching in general education schools who are less the focus of national reform efforts.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 it is not clear how well teachers' initial education programmes are aligned with CPD programmes and processes today. During the first decade of independence, Latvia concentrated on the professional development of in-service teachers in order to support them in developing more innovative pedagogical approaches. There was no corresponding review of pre-service teacher education leading to concerns that even newly qualified teachers have been trained in a more conservative pedagogical tradition (Silova et al., 2010).

School leaders

A key person in any school is the school leader. In Latvia it is common for a single school leader to oversee Latvia's "general education" schools that combine both basic and upper secondary education (Grades 1 to 12). In both general education and vocational schools, school leaders are supported by deputy school leaders (MoES, 2015).

School leaders are usually teachers who were promoted to (deputy) principals upon passing a local competition. At the upper secondary level they are allowed to combine their leadership responsibilities with up to nine hours a week of teaching or other school activities although very few do.

Recruitment of school leaders depends highly on their teaching qualifications and experience, with leadership or managerial qualifications and experience only a secondary or even tertiary priority. There are professional development and support programmes in place for school leaders. There are no formal national regulations on school leader recruitment (ETUCE, 2012).

Participation in lifelong learning

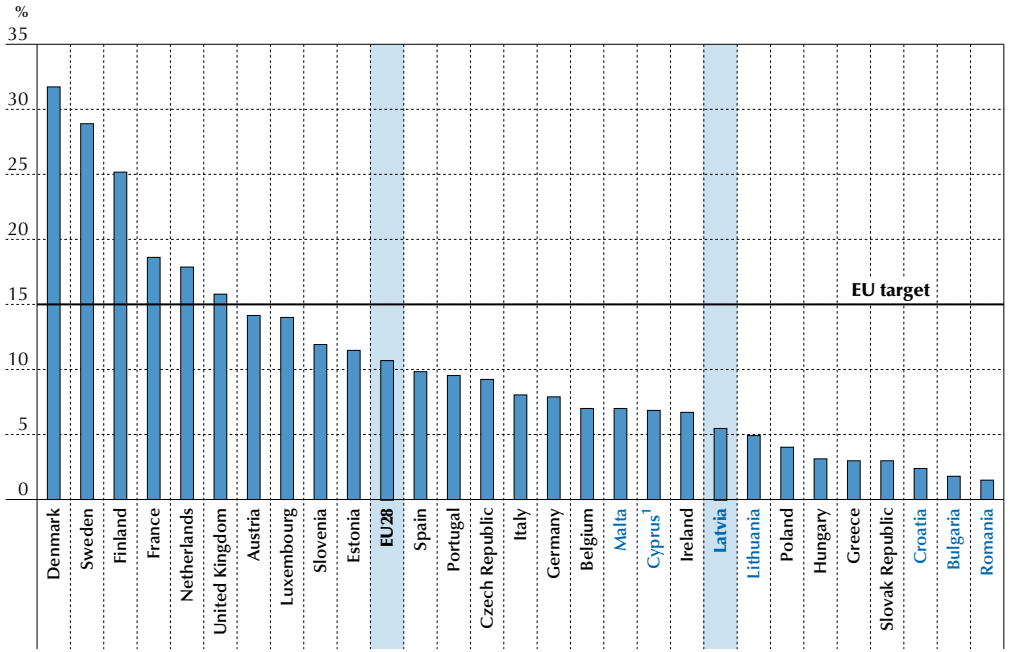
In Latvia there are a range of formal and non-formal education programmes and courses available for the working-age population. Within the formal educational system, adult education extends over general education (basic and secondary), vocational education, post-secondary education (further vocational training) and higher education (EAEA, 2011). Programmes can lead to a professional qualification when the study load is at least 480 study hours and 30% or more of the content is based on professional standards. Shorter programmes (of at least 160 hours) are also available but these do not lead to a qualification (MoES, 2015).

There are also a wide range of non-formal adult education opportunities, provided by national and local government and private education institutions. Since 2011, more value has been placed on informal learning acquired through working and personal life through the validation of professional competences acquired outside formal education. Accredited education providers and examination centres with a permit provided by the SEQS are permitted to carry out the validation process (EAEA, 2011; MoES, 2015).

A recent OECD report concluded that adult or lifelong learning in Latvia is underdeveloped while many of the working-age population are

missing the skills to become more productive (OECD, 2015a). Participation rates in both formal and non-formal forms of education and training among the working age population are low, compared with international standards (Figure 4.6). In 2014, a mere 5.5% of 25-64 year-olds participated in either formal or non-formal education and training. This was considerably below the EU average of 10.7% and the EU 2020 target of 15% (Eurostat, 2015a; MoES, 2015).

Figure 4.6. **Participation of adults (25-64 year-olds) in formal and non-formal learning (2014)**



Notes: The reference period is the four weeks preceding the interview. Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.

1. See note 1 on page 192.

Countries are ranked in descending order of participation rate.

Source: Eurostat (2015a), "Lifelong learning - Percentage of adult population aged 25-64 participating in education and training", *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&pcode=tesem250&language=en (accessed 15 July 2015).

Key policy issues

Policy issue 1: Improving the quality and relevance of vocational education

Research evidence clearly shows that vocational education and training can play a central role in preparing young people for work, developing adult skills and responding to the labour-market needs of the economy. Despite this role, vocational education and training has been oddly neglected and marginalised in policy discussions, often overshadowed by the increasing emphasis on general academic education and the role of schools in preparing students for university education. It has also often been seen as low status by students and the general public (OECD, 2010) and this is also the case in Latvia.

In response, Latvia embarked on a comprehensive reform of vocational education in 2009 to make it more attractive and improve its quality and relevance to the labour market through the involvement of social partners. The 2009 concept paper Promotion of Interest in Vocational Education and Participation of Social Partners in Assuring the Quality of Vocational Education (Cabinet of Ministers, 2009) marked the start of this process.

The review team fully supports these reforms. The reorganisation of the school network and establishment of the VECCs is progressing well, but work on the reform of the curriculum has been progressing slowly. Some SECs are less well established, limiting their ability to contribute to the reform effort. Another challenge is the lack of data and information to monitor progress and identify innovations and good practices worthy of dissemination.

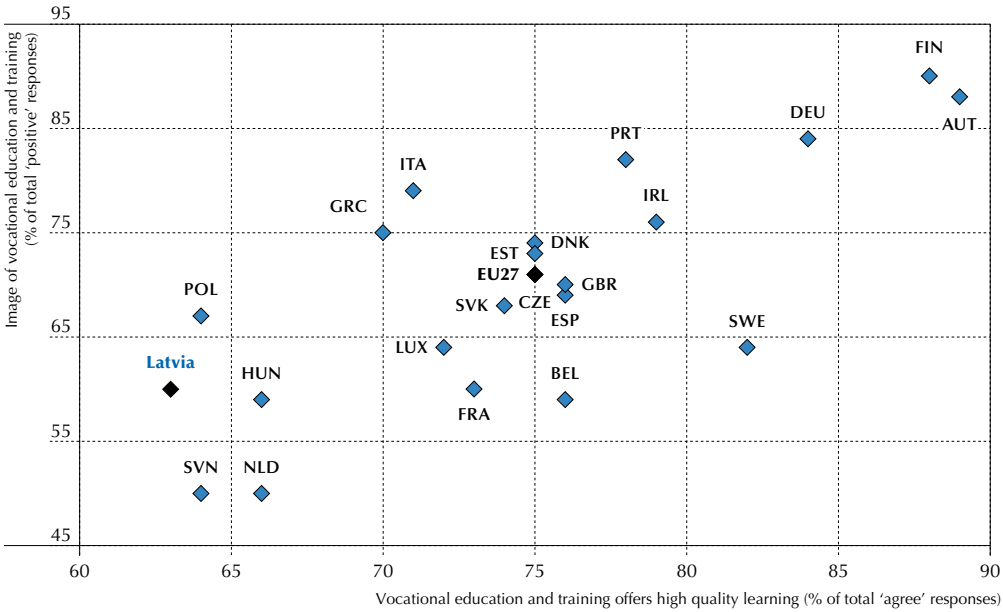
Lack of quality and attractiveness of vocational education – the imperative for reform

While in many OECD countries vocational qualifications offer young people a good chance of finding employment, they are sometimes seen as a second-class choice. In Latvia, vocational education has a similarly poor image, with students favouring a general upper secondary education over a vocational one. According to Eurobarometer (2011), the share of those who thought vocational education offers high-quality learning was among the lowest across EU countries (Figure 4.7).

This poor image of vocational education is not of recent origin but has plagued Latvia for decades. Back in 2001, the OECD review of Latvia's education system identified the lack of relevance of vocational education to the changing needs of the labour market (OECD, 2001). Many vocational school graduates lacked practical skills, either because they received no practical training or because what they received was of poor quality. The share of young people choosing to pursue vocational education over general upper secondary education consequently fell from 39% to 34% between 2002 and 2008

(Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015a). A key target of the ongoing vocational education reform is to equalise the share of students enrolled in vocational and general upper secondary education by 2020 (MoES, 2014).

Figure 4.7. **Perceived quality and image of vocational education and training**



Note: The following abbreviations are used in this figure: AUT (Austria), BEL (Belgium), CZE (the Czech Republic), DEU (Germany), DNK (Denmark), ESP (Spain), EST (Estonia), FIN (Finland), FRA (France), GBR (the United Kingdom), GRC (Greece), HUN (Hungary), IRL (Ireland), ITA (Italy), LUX (Luxembourg), NLD (the Netherlands), POL (Poland), PRT (Portugal), SVK (the Slovak Republic), SVN (Slovenia), SWE (Sweden).

Source: OECD (2015a) based on Eurobarometer (2011), "Attitudes towards vocational education and training", *Special Eurobarometer,* No. 369, European Commission, Brussels.

Involving employers and social partners to strengthen the quality and relevance of education

Ensuring that vocational education and training systems respond effectively to the needs of the labour market is a challenge faced by nearly all OECD countries (OECD, 2014b). Latvia's vocational education programmes need to be more closely aligned with demand. For example, Latvian government forecasts show a rising demand for highly qualified specialists in engineering, production (mainly electric and electronic engineering, metalworking, mechanical engineering and the food processing sectors), natural sciences, and information technologies. It also foresees that these sectors will face skill shortages (Cedefop, 2015).

Several OECD countries, like Austria, Finland, France, Germany and the Netherlands, have shown the usefulness of involving of social partners in designing the content and quality of education and training and supervision of the provision (OECD, 2014b; Box 4.1.). In these countries, social partners are often deeply involved in the design and delivery of education. There is frequent communication between educational institutions and labour-market actors, and, importantly, vocational education is responsive to the skills requirements of the labour market.

Latvia has also aimed to strengthen the connection between vocational education and the labour market in recent years through stronger engagement with social partners. As mentioned above, the 12 SECs were established in 2011 to strengthen sector stakeholders' involvement in vocational education content on a social partnership model.

Box 4.1. **Strong involvement of social partners in vocational education and training: Example from the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands 17 Centres of Expertise on vocational education, training and the labour market have been appointed by the Dutch Ministry of Education to perform legal tasks in the field of vocational education and training (VET):

- accreditation and assistance of work placement companies
- development and maintenance of the qualifications structure
- labour market research.

These centres of expertise are organised according to the different branches of industry and function as sector councils for VET. Although there are significant differences between the branches they represent, the centres are connected by their central role in the labour market. They support over 220 000 accredited work-placement firms responsible for the supply of over 500 000 training places for students at the senior secondary level.

Overall, the VET sector in the Netherlands is characterised by strong partnerships which include educational institutions and social partners. Either the institutions or the social partners can take the initiative to introduce new occupations or qualifications or renew existing qualifications, in dialogue with other parties. The importance attached to stakeholder input in the quality assurance system is demonstrated by the fact that one of the indicators in the Inspection Framework is the opinion of stakeholders regarding the VET institution, and their involvement in the design of the Practical Vocational Training Protocol and the educational programmes.

Source: EQAVET (n.d.), "Introduction to the VET system in The Netherlands", European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training website, www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/implementing-the-framework/netherlands.aspx.

This foundation of a social partnership model is a welcome development because of its potential to strengthen the quality and relevance of vocational education. The SECs are to play a very important role in the reform process

including the modularisation of vocational programmes, the development of qualification standards and the envisaged introduction of work-based learning. For example, the SECs are part of the working groups, also comprising teachers and industry specialists, responsible for evaluating the extent to which new programmes will meet labour market needs. The SECs could play a valuable intermediary role in helping to connect schools, colleges and universities with employers and employees to develop provision that matches developments in the labour market.

However, the review team have had to conclude that some SECs are clearly less well established than others, thereby limiting their potential to make a positive contribution to the quality and relevance of vocational education. Latvia is not unique in this; international evidence shows that overall the capacity and resources of similar partner organisations in other countries often vary from one economic sector to another. It depends on the interests and capacity of their leaders and staff. Shortcomings can be visible at national or regional level (ETF, 2013a) as they also are in Latvia.

To fully unleash the potential of the SECs to strengthen the quality and relevance of vocational education, they will need to be empowered and professionalised. An important step forward in this respect has been taken as the amendment of the Vocational Education Law (April 2015) which provided the legal framework for employers to participate in developing vocational education. With this amendment, the SECs can now also formally play a central role in the reform of vocational programmes. It will take time for some of them to reach their full potential but their active engagement and contributions will be essential, not only to the reform process, but also to develop the internal capacity of the SECs. Latvia should continue to monitor the capacity of the SECs and, where need be, take measures to further empower them.

Modularisation of vocational programmes and occupational standards

The content of vocational education is currently being restructured around a flexible modular approach. This is done as part of the ESF project, Development of a Sectoral Qualifications System and Improvement of the Efficiency and Quality of Vocational Education and Training, which started in 2011. With this development Latvia is following the trend in several other European countries to modularise vocational education programmes to enable them to adapt to changes in work technologies and organisation and to give students greater labour market flexibility (Pilz, 2012).

The modular approach is considered by some to be a "pump of innovation in education" (OECD, 2004). In Latvia, it is seen as a key driver to make vocational education more attractive and flexible, help reduce the numbers

of early leavers from education, and facilitate the recognition of skills gained outside the formal education system (MoES, 2014). The National Centre for Education (VISC) is leading the work on the modularisation of vocational education programmes, establishing professional standards and aligning level descriptors with the EQF. The approach will divide programmes into modules based on learning outcomes, including the use of relevant teaching/learning methods and indicators of achievement. Dialogue on alternative forms of assessing and evaluating learning outcomes in relation to the new modular approach has begun (Cedefop, 2015).

In 2013/14 a total of 56 modular vocational education programmes and the content of professional qualification exams for 30 professions were developed. The modules include sector-specific and general competences, and complementary specialisation modules help learners acquire specific competences within a sector. Modules for adult learners have been identified as well, thus supporting interaction between initial and continuing vocational education and training. Moreover in 2013/14, a total of 80 professional standards or basic requirements of specialisation qualifications, according to the needs of the economic sector concerned, had been elaborated or improved.

Progress in the development of modular programmes and occupational standards has been slower than planned, however. A recent progress report by the European Commission (2015) concluded that less than half of the profession standards, planned modular programmes and contents of the qualification exams have been updated and the reform is due to continue until 2023 (European Commission, 2015).

The need to strengthen work-based learning

Work-based learning plays an important role in ensuring that learning meets the needs of the labour market. The workplace provides a strong learning environment and facilitates recruitment, while trainees contribute to output. Work-based learning opportunities are also a direct expression of employer needs and can encompass a variety of arrangements including apprenticeships, informal learning on the job, work placements that form part of formal qualifications, and internships of various types (OECD, 2010, 2014b).

In Latvia, it is noticeable that policy documents refer to "vocational education" rather than to "vocational education and training", the term more commonly used across Europe. This reflects the fact that vocational education is primarily conducted within schools, rather than through a combination of school-based and work-based learning. Only a fraction of young people combine work and study in Latvia (OECD, 2015b).

Latvia has recognised this issue and intends to introduce work-based learning into vocational education programmes as part of its wider reforms (MoES, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, a pilot project of work-based learning is currently under way to assess the feasibility of such model in the Latvian context. Among other things, the pilot includes the development of a flexible curriculum (according to occupational characteristics) and sharing responsibility for teaching (theory) and training (practical) between school and enterprises. Students split their time between the school and the workplace, both of which contribute to the development of occupational expertise and other "employability-related" attributes. This promising pilot initiative is to be expanded in 2015 but its coverage is expected to remain insufficient (European Commission, 2015). Another possible limitation of the pilot project at present is that it is separate from the existing apprenticeship provision organised by the Chamber of Crafts. This isolation from the existing provision is a missed opportunity to engage employers who take apprentices, and to learn from the existing expertise in work-based learning.

Currently the apprenticeship system falls outside the formal education system and its qualifications provide access to neither the regulated professions nor the formal education system. There are also no mechanisms in place for those who dropped out from an apprenticeship before completing it to continue their learning (Daija, Kinta and Ramiņa, 2014). Integrating the existing long-standing apprenticeship provision into Latvia's education system may help to increase the status and attractiveness of vocational education. It would also provide a valuable source of expertise in work-based learning, enable vocational schools to form partnerships with more employers in both the public and private sectors, and generally strengthen the relationship between education and the labour market.

In developing its work-based learning model Latvia should therefore ensure it draws from the expertise of the existing apprenticeship system and, as intended, incorporate the apprenticeships organised by the Chamber of Crafts into the formal education system.

Expanding work-based learning in Latvia will be a challenge given the large proportion of SMEs and micro-enterprises in the economy but all countries, including those with well-established dual-system models, have to make continuous efforts to sustain the involvement of employers across all sectors (see Fuller and Unwin, 2012 for international case studies). The work-based learning pilots provide an important opportunity to evaluate the level of willingness of Latvian employers to commit to a formal apprenticeship model and to what extent a more differentiated approach might be required, one that offers apprenticeship alongside full- and part-time vocational education programmes with mandatory work experience and internships.

Motivating companies, especially SMEs, to provide quality work-based learning placements remains a challenge (European Commission, 2015). A number of countries provide examples of how to support smaller enterprises to enable them to recruit and train apprentices. These include creating pools of apprentices through sector-based group training associations so they can be shared among employers, as is done in Australia, England (the United Kingdom), Norway and Switzerland.

Latvia lacks a proper legislative framework regulating the relationships between apprentices and employers (e.g. on pay and training requirements) and effective incentives for companies to provide apprenticeships or practical training placements (European Commission, 2015). The development and expansion of a quality work-based learning system may require a system of financial incentives to facilitate the provision of learning opportunities on the employers' side (OECD, 2015b). A positive development in this context is the ongoing discussion with the government on the support measures for employers who offer training placements; these include labour tax exemptions for employers who offer training placements.

Employers in Latvia also need to do their part. They need to take responsibility for and ownership of the new work-based learning model by offering training places and quality supervision, among other actions. Research shows they have much to gain from it, including a better image, a potential positive impact on recruitment and even higher productivity. Research evidence also shows that in many cases the financial benefits of apprenticeships outweigh the training cost (ETF, 2013b). A survey of employers in Belgium, for example, has shown that, despite initial net costs due to the low productivity of novice apprentices, by the end of the training period productive returns from apprentices outweigh training costs (De Rick, 2008). The SECs will have an important role in engaging with employers and expanding the pool of enterprises offering training places.

The need for good data and information to monitor progress

The scale of the reform in Latvia will require careful monitoring and evaluation in order to keep it on track, identify barriers to timely and efficient implementation, and identify innovative and successful practice that should be shared across the system. More research on the accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education is needed, for example on ways to reduce the number of students that drop out or are expelled from vocational schools due to underperformance or non-attendance. This places demands on the country's systems for data collection and analysis on vocational education and for more research on education, skills and the labour market in general. MoES has recognised this as an area for improvement. Measures

include the strengthening of its management information system, the policy-analysis capacity of public administration and higher education and research institutions, and co-operation among the research community in Latvia.

To support these efforts and the wider reform process in general Latvia should consider introducing a number of new data sets and research studies. Longitudinal data would allow the tracking of individual education and employment histories and thus the ability to analyse the links between vocational education and later labour market experience. In order to track progress, some countries attach a unique identifier to each person. This identifier is in turn attached to a range of administrative data sets, including education, labour market and tax records. For example, in the United Kingdom, educational institutions have to return data on the participation, achievement and progression of every young person through the use of an Individualised Learner Record system. While such unified data sets raise privacy concerns, they can be a very efficient way of organising relevant data.

Another suggestion is robust labour-market data that can be disaggregated at the local, regional and sectoral level to plan and update vocational education systems. International studies emphasise the importance of collecting such data (OECD, 2012b). In New Zealand, the Department of Labour has developed a system for supplying regular labour market reports disaggregated to regional level and accompanying analytical tools to facilitate further analysis (Froy and Giguère, 2010).

An employer skills survey that provides data on employers' demand for and investment in skills, such as the model used in the United Kingdom since 2011, can help monitor employers' behaviour and demand for labour. This serves the needs of the key stakeholders: the governments, employers, education and training providers, individuals, and their career guidance advisers. Through this survey the government of the United Kingdom has access to a regular source of information about the changing skill needs in the labour markets and the extent to which employers are investing in training and engaging with government-funded initiatives such as apprenticeships.

Employers in turn can use the data to see how they compare with other organisations in their sector in their provision of training and in terms of their skill gaps or shortages. They can also monitor the key challenges and opportunities for their sector. Individuals and career guidance advisers can identify sectors and occupations experiencing particular skill shortages and any changes in the type of skills required. Education and training providers can also use the results to help adapt their provision so that it better aligns with employer and sector-based demand, and to monitor shifts in the type of demand.

Policy issue 2: Stark divide between upper secondary general and vocational pathways

One central question countries face when organising upper secondary schooling is the degree of differentiation between general and vocational education. In recent years a growing number have aimed for greater integration of general and vocational pathways in an effort to better prepare students for both further education and working life (OECD, 2007, 2014b). Latvia's strict division between vocational and general upper secondary education schools and programmes has long hampered efforts to follow this trend. Meanwhile, several studies, including our own, have noted that the subject-heavy, knowledge-based upper secondary curriculum and teaching practices have not kept pace with the demands from the labour market for school and college graduates (OECD, 2015a).

A "divided", school-based upper secondary system

Education systems across OECD countries vary greatly in the degree to which general and vocational studies complement each other and in the ways in which they are sequenced. Different practices reflect the historical, political and cultural traditions of individual countries (OECD, 2014a). Sahlberg (2007) identified three principal ways in which OECD countries organise upper secondary education:

- Divided school-based upper secondary school system with upper secondary education divided into general and vocational schools (e.g. Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands).
- Unified upper secondary school system whereby upper secondary education is organised within one school offering different programmes (e.g. New Zealand, the United States).
- Parallel school-based and work-based upper secondary school system whereby upper secondary education has school-based general and work-based vocational education options (e.g. Austria, Germany, Switzerland).

Latvia fits the first category, in which upper secondary education is largely school-based and divided into general and vocational schools.

Several OECD countries have in recent years aimed for greater integration and a softening of the divide between general and vocational pathways in an effort to better prepare young people for both further education and for working life (OECD, 2007, 2014b). The stark division between vocational and general upper secondary education schools and programmes in Latvia has militated against the partnership approach

required to share and develop the pedagogical and assessment approaches needed to support such integration.

The ongoing reorganisation of the school network together with other reform initiatives, like the ongoing modularisation of vocational education programmes and the intention to move towards a competency-based upper secondary general curriculum (MoES, 2014), provide Latvia with an opportunity to reconsider and narrow the divide between upper secondary general and vocational education.

As discussed above, many of Latvia's smaller vocational schools are being reassigned to the control of the municipalities and are to merge and/or collaborate with small general education schools or VECCs. This reorganisation is intended to better prepare "specialists" for the regional labour market, as well as lead to greater co-ordination and efficiency of the general and vocational education school network (MoES, 2014). There are some good examples of schools achieving this aim. The upper secondary school of Dobele, for example, has been offering vocational and general education programmes since 2011. The school's facilities are efficiently used, teachers of general study subjects work with general and vocational programme students, and more programmes are provided (Cedefop, 2014).

Municipalities and MoES should continue promoting such organisational and pedagogical innovations to narrow the divide between upper secondary general and vocational pathways. They should not overlook the need to strengthen the teaching and learning that takes place within them, however. Teachers need the time and support to draw on the growing body of innovative practice within the country and beyond, particularly in relation to creating more opportunities for situated learning so that academic and practical skills can be developed and assessed in context.

The gradual transformation of large vocational schools into VECCs, such as the Riga Technical School of Tourism and Creative Industry (Box 4.2), means they can offer both general and vocational upper secondary education programmes. VECCs can be considered promising innovations to the Latvian school system for several reasons, including their potential to further reduce the divide between the two educational pathways, but this potential does not seem to have been fully exploited yet.

Though in practice such innovations can come about naturally ("bottom up") MoES should consider more actively encouraging VECCs to blur the boundaries between students in general and vocational programmes. Collaborations with general schools are to be encouraged to allow them to benefit from pedagogical and methodological support, for example in authentic learning.[2]

Box 4.2. **Riga technical school of tourism and creative industry**

Originally founded in 1980 as a technical school, Riga Technical School of Tourism and Creative Industry was given the status of a VECC in 2014 and is the largest vocational school in Latvia with over 2 000 students and 255 staff. It operates as a "Government Company" and its activities are divided between: educational provision (70%), commercial work (20%) and short courses (10%). The school offers both general and vocational upper secondary education from basic through to diploma level and students can join a wide range of extra-curricular clubs. Vocational programmes are offered in the following specialisms (the asterisk denotes the two most popular and, hence, most selective programmes):

- catering services*
- hospitality*
- tourism
- patisserie
- food processing
- interior design
- fashion design
- sewing technologies
- beauty/hairdressing

The school works closely with the relevant SECs and has sector and employer representatives on its governing council. It has 1 500 agreements with local, regional and national employers to provide work placements for its students. It has a strong record of international partnerships and is involved in a range of European Union projects and initiatives (e.g. ERASMUS) from which both students and teachers benefit. The key aim of the school is to develop graduates who have the creative capacity, expertise and personal skills required to progress in the European labour market. This requires that teachers design and employ curricular, pedagogical and assessment approaches that generate opportunities for students to develop both occupationally specific and generic skills. IT skills are embedded in all subjects and developed through an integrated approach.

Source: Rīgas Tūrisma un Radošās Industrijas Tehnikums (n.d.), Rīgas Tūrisma un Radošās Industrijas Tehnikums [Riga Technical School of Tourism and Creative Industry] website, www.rtrit.lv/par-rtrit.

Double qualifications

To make the relationship between upper secondary general and vocational pathways more permeable some OECD countries with "divided" systems such as Austria, Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom have introduced double-qualifying pathways. These combined qualifications can

encourage lifelong learning, by enabling students to see the worlds of work and study as intertwined.

Latvia also provides its students with similar doubly-qualifying pathways. It offers students the bridge year programme mentioned above that gives access to tertiary education. Few students pursue this option, however. Instead most students choose four-year vocational education programmes that provide direct access to tertiary education.

The effective implementation of double-qualification pathways is a complex matter. It is demanding in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and requires strong partnerships between schools, enterprises and tertiary institutions (OECD, 2010). Within the Latvian education system the newly created VECCs are particularly well-placed to provide such pathways, as are the small vocational schools that are joining up with general education ones.

A subject-dense curriculum

Regardless of the organisational structure it is essential that all students acquire the range of skills needed for full social and economic participation, including access to decent work and/or further education. Countries have been softening the divide between general and vocational pathways to let students benefit from the best of both worlds through a range of measures, including reforming the upper secondary curriculum.

For example, Scotland (the United Kingdom) adapted its general upper secondary education curriculum in schools to include a stronger element of applied knowledge (e.g. product design and information systems) and included new vocational subjects such as hospitality, business studies and construction. This development was part of wider set of reforms that resulted in an increasing numbers of upper secondary students taking vocational subjects over the past decade, which can also be linked to the growth in professional and associate professional courses at post-compulsory non-tertiary and higher education levels (Canning, 2012).

Finland is in the final stages of reforming its national core curricula and local curricula. It has been preparing its new upper secondary education curricula since 2013, and will be introduced in the school year 2016/17. The aim is to cultivate in young people the dispositions and habits of mind often cited as being the building blocks for innovation and entrepreneurship. These dispositions include creativity, flexibility, initiative, risk-taking and the ability to apply knowledge in novel situations. This has necessitated a stronger focus on a closer alignment of academic and practical skills through a pedagogical focus on situated and problem-based learning. Importantly, Finnish employers have shown support for the reforms by sending strong signals to schools about the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions

that young people need in order to enter today's labour market and to face further future changes in the workplace and the economy more generally. Finnish industry leaders have stressed the importance of mathematics, science and technology in the school curriculum alongside the need for increased attention to be paid to creativity, problem-solving, teamwork and cross-curricular projects in schools (OECD, 2010).

Latvia's upper secondary curriculum provides students in both the general and vocational pathways with a rich diet of core and optional subjects. However, several reports, as well as people interviewed during our review visit, have raised concerns that the upper secondary curriculum and pedagogical traditions have not kept pace with the demands from the labour market for school and college graduates (OECD, 2015a).

In addition, during our meetings with teachers, school leaders and policy makers the terms "curriculum saturation" and "knowledge fragmentation" were frequently used when referring to the upper secondary curriculum. These concerns were echoed by the students we spoke to, who also expressed the desire to engage in more interactive and practical forms of learning. This is despite the fact that general secondary education students may opt for a vocationally oriented subject cluster, with a focus on subjects such as music, sports or economics (which does not result in the obtainment of any vocational qualifications). It currently is not known how many students participate in such programmes.

The subject density of the largely knowledge-based curriculum can be considered problematic for a number of reasons. First, in some schools not all the subjects can be taught by a teacher with the corresponding specialism. Second, in order to cover the curriculum, there may be a tendency to focus on the transmission of knowledge, leaving insufficient space for the development of interdisciplinary understanding, although effective schools ("learning environments") are the ones that promote "horizontal connectedness" across knowledge areas and subjects (Dumont, Istance and Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2013c). Third, this knowledge-led approach shapes the nature of both in-school and external student assessments and examinations, which are likely to privilege the memorisation of facts over and above the ability to demonstrate competences like learning to learn and critical thinking.

Latvia plans to review its upper secondary curriculum in the coming years, starting work in 2016 and implementing it from 2019. As with the plans for the basic education curriculum discussed in Chapter 3, the Education Development Guidelines 2014-2020 (MoES, 2014) reveal MoES intends to transform the largely knowledge-based upper secondary curriculum into a competency-based one. The intention is that the improved competency-based teaching content, including the use of ICT, will enhance students' learning

outcomes. The guidelines also refer to the development of content for new competences such as enterprising spirit, healthy lifestyle, financial literacy, civic education, human safety and the updating/revision of foreign language learning content and learning methodology for Grades 1 to 12. Reading the list of new competences, we do want to warn against once more "saturating" the curriculum – prioritisation may be needed.

Students in the vocational pathway have fewer lesson hours in general subjects than their peers in general upper secondary, while having to pass the same exams. Not surprisingly, average attainment levels of vocational students are considerably lower than those of their peers in general education (MoES, 2015). For example, among Grade 12 students in 2014, the average performance of general secondary education students in the mathematics exam, expressed as a percentage, was 49%. Meanwhile the average performance among vocational education students of the same grade in the same exam was 28%. Apart from demotivating students, this may have contributed to the poor image of vocational education, which stands at odds with Latvia's policy objective for vocational education.

Latvia may therefore want to reconsider the number of mandatory general subjects within the vocational school curriculum and to what extent they could be examined using different approaches, rather than paper-based exams alone. For example, the situated assessment approaches currently being tried in the work-based learning pilot are more fitting to a competency-based approach to teaching and learning (see also Box 4.3).

Box 4.3. **Examples of alternative assessment approaches to the final examination**

In **Slovenia** laboratory work in science is assessed as 20% of the final certificate in science subjects in the Matura examination. The laboratory work examination is part of the school-based examination for the final certification. The other 80% is based on external examination. The assessment of laboratory work in the final examination provides a strong incentive for teachers to use more student-centred, inquiry-driven laboratory work in their teaching, in line with curricular requirements.

In **Austria**, the qualification for entry to university or tertiary education uses a range of assessment methods to assess competences across the curriculum. These methods include:

- a multi-disciplinary paper on a research project
- a standardised, competence-based written examination at the end of the final year
- an oral examination in front of a representative of the examinations commission after the written examination, when they present and defend their project.

Box 4.3. **Examples of alternative assessment approaches to the final examination** *(Continued)*

These methods assess a wide range of competences, including those relating to communication, mathematics, science, languages, learning to learn, initiative and entrepreneurship, and social and civic competences. Importantly, they are assessed in relation to real-life contexts provided by the research project.

To assess a wider range of key competences, the state of **Baden-Württemberg** in Germany has introduced two new elements into the final examination for general education students in Year 10 in the *Realschule*:

- The EuroKom (European communication): This exam counts for around half of the final grade in the obligatory foreign language. Students take the 15-minute examination individually or in pairs and it consists of three elements: 1) a pre-prepared presentation, followed by questions, on a topic discussed and agreed in advance with the examining teacher; 2) an oral comprehension exercise; and 3) a role-play based on an authentic situation.
- In addition to written examinations in the core subjects of German, mathematics and the obligatory foreign language, pupils must also take a cross-curricular competence examination. Like EuroKom, this examination consists of a pre-discussed and pre-prepared presentation, followed by questions from the examiners. However, in this case the examination is taken by students in groups of between three and five, and must cover at least two curricular subjects. The examiners are teachers in these subjects, including an external moderator from a different school.

Source: European Commission (2012), *Assessment of Key Competences in Initial Education and Training: Policy Guidance*, SWD(2012) 371 final, European Commission, Strasbourg, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012SC0371&from=EN.

The reform of the upper secondary curriculum provides an excellent opportunity for change. Earlier steps could be taken, however, for example by allowing VECCs to experiment and develop alternative programmes and assessment approaches that can inform the reform of the upper secondary curriculum. The experiences of the work-based learning pilot could support such efforts.

Policy issue 3: Developing lifelong learning

As in many countries around the globe, Latvia considers education and lifelong learning as an essential prerequisite for economic development and promotion of national competitiveness, as well as to reach the highest welfare levels. In Latvia, lifelong learning encompasses formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning. By promoting lifelong learning the country aims to give every member of the public the opportunity to obtain and/or develop knowledge, skills and competences in accordance with the requirements of the labour market, and individual interests and needs

(MoES, 2014). Through the National Development Plan's (CSCC, 2012) strategic goal of "decent work" Latvia acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between high-quality education and a labour market that has the capacity to demand and utilise skilled workers (OECD, 2014b).

Despite this recognition and policy support, lifelong learning is underdeveloped in Latvia and participation is low compared to many EU countries even though many of the working-age population lack the skills to become more productive (OECD, 2015a). Low demand for formal and non-formal education, a fragmented policy structure involving 10 different institutions and limited incentives for employers to invest in the skills of their employees are among the factors contributing to the low participation in lifelong learning in Latvia.

Low adult participation in formal and non-formal education

Latvia has set itself the target to have 15% of the adult population actively involved in lifelong learning by 2020 (MoES, 2014). Data from the 2014 labour force survey show that a mere 5.5% of 25-64 year-olds participated, suggesting that it is a long way from meeting this target. The reference period for participation in education and training is the four weeks preceding the interview, as is usual in the labour force survey. The survey found a slightly higher proportion of Latvian women (6.2%) participating in education and training than men (4.8%) (Eurostat, 2015a).

In addition to the data from the labour force survey, information on education and training is available from the 2011 Adult Education Survey (AES). According to this survey, in 2011 4.3% of people in Latvia aged 25 to 64 took part in formal education and training during the 12 months preceding the interview, which was 1.1% lower than four years prior and lower than many other EU countries (Figure 4.8). The participation of Latvian 25-64 year-olds in non-formal education and training was 30%, also below the EU average (36.8%) and slightly lower than four years before (30.7%) (Eurostat, 2015e).

The AES 2011 also shows a higher proportion of women participating in formal and non-formal education and training than men in Latvia, 37.3% and 26.9% respectively. In many EU countries this difference is reversed, and much smaller, with an EU-27 average of 40.7% of men and 39.9% of women (Eurostat, 2015e).

Among younger adults, 38% of 25-34 year-olds participated in education and training in 2011 (Table 4.3), which was slightly higher than countries like Lithuania and Poland but still considerably lower that the EU average (48.5%) and countries like Luxembourg and Sweden where participation rates exceeded 75%. Participation rates of Latvian adults in education and training were below the EU averages for all age groups.

Figure 4.8. **Participation in lifelong learning (2011)**

Notes: Based on the adult education survey (AES). The reference period for AES is the 12 months before the interview. Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.
Countries are ranked in descending order of participation in lifelong learning.

Source: Eurostat (2015e), "Participation rate in education and training by age", *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-datasets/-/TRNG_AES_101 (accessed 15 July 2015).

Table 4.3. **Participation in lifelong learning, by age (%)**

	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 54 years	55 to 64 years
Luxembourg	81.4	72.6	72.1	49.4
Sweden	78.7	77.8	72.6	57.5
Finland	65.8	64.8	59.0	35.5
Estonia	64.5	51.6	48.1	32.6
EU 28	48.5	44.0	40.9	26.6
Latvia	**38.0**	**37.6**	**31.7**	**19.7**
Lithuania	37.3	30.6	28.0	16.2
Poland	36.0	28.7	20.4	9.6

Note: Based on the adult education survey (AES). The reference period for AES is the 12 months before the interview.

Source: Eurostat (2015e), "Participation rate in education and training by age", *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-datasets/-/TRNG_AES_101 (accessed 15 July 2015).

To increase participation rates to the desired level by 2020 Latvia has indicated it intends to extend a high-quality education offering, develop a regulatory framework and ensure effective resource management, including making better use of the existing infrastructure (MoES, 2014).

We agree these are important measures for increasing the demand for training and adult learning in the long run (OECD, 2015a). Investment in the skills of the young generation of working adults in Latvia will be essential for the (future) economy and society at large. Brain drain, an ageing workforce, historic low participation in lifelong learning and concerns about the quality and relevance of upper secondary education are among the factors that have contributed to the working population missing the skills to become more productive (OECD, 2015a; IMF, 2013; Zumente and Putriņš, 2011). This argues for the overall improvement of human resources, skills and capacity building.

Research evidence however shows that low-skilled adults are least likely to participate in adult education and training (OECD, 2013a). Data from the AES 2011 confirms this to be particularly true for Latvia. A mere 10.6% of adults with a lower secondary education or less indicated they had participated in education and training in the 12 months prior to the interview. The share was about five times higher for those with a tertiary education. This, combined with their generally lower employment rates, means that encouraging the low-skilled to engage in lifelong learning should be a priority for Latvia (OECD, 2015a).

National minorities were hit disproportionally by the economic downturn in terms of employment, suggesting that they should also be a policy focus. Although the factors behind these outcomes have not yet been fully identified, work experience and skill sets, including relatively weaker Latvian language ability, are likely to be relevant (OECD, forthcoming, 2015a; Falco et al., 2015a; Lehmann and Zaiceva, 2015). Insufficient public supply of both general and professionally oriented Latvian language courses for the adult population has in the past been identified as one of the barriers to the better integration of national minorities (Hazans, 2011). Language training however is now offered by the public employment service, as well as for employed under risk of job-loss as a part of lifelong learning programmes. Efforts to help national minorities to acquire the skills needed on the labour market should continue, combined with professionally-oriented Latvian language courses (OECD, 2015a).

The Youth Guarantee, initiated in 2014, is another promising initiative. The guarantee will support young people (aged 15 to 29), with or without prior vocational qualifications, to participate in short-term vocational education programmes. Up to 6 500 young people will have the opportunity to train for more than 90 careers for free until 2018. It must be noted though that the programme has been slow to start up and its visibility among the target group has been low. The Latvian government has recognised the situation and aims to address these challenges through a range of measures. This includes outreach measures to reach young people not in employment, education or training who are not registered at the public employment service. This is a new initiative and the fieldwork is expected to start in the beginning of 2016 (European Commission, 2015).

Another positive development is the reform of vocational education. The new modularised programmes, the involvement of social partners in setting occupational standards and the establishment of the VECCs that will co-operate closely with employers and offer continuing education to adults, will be key to increasing demand and ultimately participation in formal and non-formal education and training.

The VECCs are also charged with assessing and recognising professional competences that adults have acquired outside the formal education system, which may help further align the non-formal education and training of adults with the formal education system. The formal recognition of such skills is also expected to facilitate and stimulate lifelong learning among Latvian adults.

In addition, the VECCs will provide greater capacity for part-time learning. This seems important as according to the 2011 AES, 35% of Latvian adults (25-64 year-olds) who wanted to participate in education activities mentioned that they were hindered by conflicts between training and their work schedules (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013).

The need to ensure employer support for education and training

Evidence suggests that underinvestment in adult learning is often a result of barriers on the demand side. Some are simply unaware of the need and benefits of continued learning, while others face difficulties in investing in education and training (OECD, 2013a, 2013b). Time for education and training seems to be a relevant barrier, as mentioned above. Family circumstances were a barrier for 30.8% of Latvian adults participating in the AES 2011 while more than half (53.3%) mentioned high costs.

Current measures to support individuals' lifelong learning, including income tax deductions for employees, might not be enough to develop adult education and training. Further support is needed to ensure jobseekers and low-productivity workers obtain the skills needed by the labour market (OECD, 2015a).

Employers have an important role to play in supporting their employees' further education and lifelong learning by providing them with time and/or (partial) financing. They will need to overcome their own obstacles to investing in employee training such as lack of time and resources, workload pressures, and costs. International evidence suggests that SMEs are much more likely to use informal rather than formal education and training (OECD, 2012b). This suggests that affordability and return on investment in lifelong learning may be an issue. In the Latvian context of SMEs and micro-enterprises, policies should focus on incentives for formal training and recognition of informal skills development (OECD, 2015a).

Underdeveloped career guidance system

Effective career information and guidance systems are a key to making lifelong learning a reality for all. They can help to make the best use of human resources in the labour market as well as in education by allowing better matches between people's skills and interests and available opportunities for work and learning (OECD, 2014b). Access to high-quality, independent careers information, advice and guidance at key points in a school career, as well as later on in life, is therefore central to a successful schooling and lifelong learning.

In Latvia the provision of career guidance services is weak and fragmented. Responsibility for career guidance is shared between the State Employment Agency and the State Education Development Agency. The latter is responsible for providing career guidance in schools, while the State Education Agency provides guidance to registered job seekers. A wider advisory forum, the Cooperation Council for the Career System is also in place and the newly created VECCs are also intended to play a part (OECD, 2015b).

The data show that in 2013 only 36% of the population had received any career guidance while in education, against an EU average of 61% (European Union, 2014). In Latvia, young people have access to school-based careers information, advice and guidance in Grades 8 and 9 of compulsory education, which schools fund out of their own budgets. It is not known, however, how much schools invest in this. Prior to the economic crisis, extra EU funds had been available for teacher training in guidance, but this was curtailed due to the economic downturn.

In upper secondary education, teachers discuss tertiary education options with students, but it is not clear how much time is spent discussing other options, including employment. There is a risk that other career options, such as vocational education and training, might not be sufficiently explored. The ongoing review of career guidance in the education sector is intended among others to increase school staff capacity for guidance and to broaden the range of guidance activities for students. These measures could help to reduce the potential bias toward keeping students in general education.

Earlier and more intensive career advice and guidance might help to tackle the significant gender segregation in vocational education programmes, but earlier intervention is also needed to enable young people to decide between the general and vocational pathways. Latvia intends to strengthen the career guidance system as part of the larger reform of its vocational education system, but plans are at an early stage (European Commission, 2015). Examples from other OECD countries may help shape its career guidance system.

Internationally, developments in digital communication technologies are helping to improve and bring innovation into the career guidance field. Some countries (e.g. Austria and Australia) have national career-focused websites, whilst others have websites dedicated to different aspects of the education system (e.g. Germany and the United Kingdom for apprenticeship). A private initiative in Latvia has also recently resulted in a similar youth career portal, Prakse (www.prakse.lv). With EU funding Latvia aims to further develop the current national learning information website into a portal that among others will include individual user profiles, as well as career interest, aptitude and value self-assessment functions to help users identify suitable further education and/or occupation opportunities.

In Switzerland career guidance and information sessions are mandatory in secondary education and all teachers receive some training on labour market opportunities. In lower secondary education, students learn in their own schools about different career options and how to use the independent institutions for guidance related to all levels of education and training – the *Berufsinformationszentren*. These centres work closely with schools, and sometimes provide services at the school rather than their own offices. In

other countries, short internships or periods of work experience towards the end of compulsory education or at upper secondary level are used to give young people the chance to sample different types of workplace and occupational fields.

In the United Kingdom, the concept of "ambassadors" is widely used as a way to encourage young people to look beyond their current horizons. A long-standing example is the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network (STEMNET) (Box 4.4), which given the low numbers of young Latvians choosing to study STEM subjects, might offer a useful model.

Box 4.4. **STEM Ambassadors**

STEMNET (the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network) was established as a charity in 1996, funded by the British government. It works with schools and further education colleges and STEM employers in the United Kingdom to enable young people to meet inspiring role models and participate in STEM activities to bring learning and career opportunities to life. STEMNET uses over 27 000 volunteer STEM Ambassadors, from a wide range of STEM occupations across engineering, digital and life sciences to promote STEM subjects to young learners in a range of practical and engaging ways.

Source: STEMNET (n.d.), "STEM Ambassadors", STEMNET (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network) website, www.stemnet.org.uk/ambassadors/.

Lifelong learning: A fragmented area of policy

The government has an important role to play in promoting and removing barriers to adult learning, ensuring the portability of skills and improving information about training opportunities (OECD, 2012b, 2013a; Desjardins and Rubenson, 2013). Yet lifelong learning is a fragmented policy area in Latvia. Ten different institutions are in charge of implementing Latvia's lifelong learning strategy, in collaboration with a range of other stakeholders (OECD, 2015a; EAEA, 2011). These institutions include nine national ministries: MoES and the ministries of Welfare, Culture, Agriculture, Health, Regional Development and Local Government, Justice, Economy, and the Interior.

In addition, municipalities are also responsible for providing their residents with adult non-formal education. There is currently little information available on what non-formal education and training opportunities municipalities offer, nor on their quality. The economic downturn will probably have reduced the resources available to municipalities who in turn are likely to have reduced or in some cases stopped offering non-formal education and training opportunities to its residents. There however is no information to support this

assumption. This should be essential information for planning the provision of education and training of adults – formal and non-formal – throughout Latvia. The government has recognised the situation and intends to improve data collection on the non-formal education and training opportunities provided by municipalities on regular basis (MoES, 2014).

Although this variety of providers can have advantages in terms of diversity and innovation, the different offerings can also confuse students and employers or lead to the duplication of tasks such as curriculum design (OECD, 2014b). Further, although the main funds for lifelong learning are distributed from MoES and the Ministry of Welfare one can question whether in a small country such fragmentation is desirable and whether it is contributing to the slow progress in implementing Latvia's lifelong learning strategy (OECD, 2015a).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Continue improving the quality and relevance of vocational education

In 2009 Latvia embarked on a comprehensive reform to improve the attractiveness and quality and relevance of vocational education through the involvement of social partners. Good progress has been made with the reorganisation of the school network which is nearing completion, but progress on the reform of the curriculum has been slow. MoES should speed up this work also to ensure the overall reform doesn't lose its momentum. The empowerment and professionalisation of the SECs will be a prerequisite for this.

MoES's work-based learning pilot is without a doubt a positive development but even though its scope was increased in 2015 its coverage is expected to remain insufficient. Further expansion of the pilot will be essential to assess the feasibility of such a work-based learning model in the Latvian context. Latvia should draw on the expertise of the existing apprenticeship system organised by the Chamber of Crafts to develop its model and follow through with its intention to incorporate this apprenticeship system into formal education.

A quality work-based learning system will require a proper legal framework regulating the relationships between the apprentice and company (e.g. on pay and training requirements) and may need a system of financial incentives to facilitate the provision of learning opportunities on the employers' side but employers will also have to play their part and take responsibility for and ownership of the new work-based learning model as they have much to gain from it.

Lastly, the scale of the reform in Latvia will require more careful monitoring and evaluation in order to keep it on track and identify innovative and successful practice that should be shared across the system. MoES has recognised this and aims to strengthen its management information system and policy analysis capacity within Latvia. To support these efforts, and the reform process in general, Latvia should consider introducing a number of new data sets and research studies allowing it to: 1) track young people's progression through education and beyond into the labour market; 2) monitor and forecast labour-market changes and institutional responsiveness at local, regional and sectoral level; and 3) monitor employer behaviour and demand for skills.

Recommendation 2: Narrow the divide between general and vocational upper secondary education

Latvia's upper secondary education system has long been starkly divided between general and vocational pathways. The ongoing reorganisation of the school network and gradual introduction of modular vocational programmes provide Latvia with an opportunity to further integrate general and vocational programmes. The Latvian government should actively pursue this path to ensure its upper secondary students can get the best of both worlds.

Municipalities and MoES should continue promoting organisational and pedagogical innovations to narrow the divide between upper secondary general and vocational pathways. They should not overlook the need for teachers to have professional development and the time to collaborate and innovate. The VECCs can be considered particularly promising innovations for their potential to integrate the two educational pathways.

The planned reform of the upper secondary curriculum into a competency-based one could play a central role in this process. Latvia should be careful not to repeat the problems of the present curriculum and "saturate" the new one. It should use the opportunity to reconsider the number of mandatory general subjects within the vocational curriculum and explore to what extent they could be assessed other than through paper-based tests, for example the situated assessment approaches currently being tried in the work-based learning pilot. This may also help promote take up of the double qualification which provides students with greater opportunities and flexibility in their educational and career aspirations throughout their lives.

Recommendation 3: Increase efforts to raise participation in lifelong learning

Despite the policy support for lifelong learning in Latvia, lifelong learning is underdeveloped and participation is low. This while the evidence suggests many of the working-age population lack the skills to become more

productive. Latvia should therefore consider how the reforms in vocational education can further support the wider goal of promoting a culture of lifelong learning. Positive developments in this respect are the development of modular vocational education programmes and professional qualifications which will facilitate the portability of skills and the recognition of prior learning. The VECCs are also a positive development for promoting lifelong learning.

Although some important measures have been taken recently to improve career guidance in and beyond schools, Latvia should step up its efforts to establish a coherent career guidance system. In the economic recession the focus shifted from providing career guidance for school students to supporting the unemployed. This makes it crucial to re-establish career guidance in the education system.

Latvia should consider reviewing its incentive structures to Latvian employers for workforce development. Micro-businesses and SMEs in particular will need greater incentives to invest in training and to create the "decent jobs" which make the best use of their employees' potential.

The effective implementation of Latvia's lifelong learning strategy will require a full overview of the formal and non-formal education and training opportunities available. Currently no such overview exists with particular gaps in knowledge about programmes offered by the municipalities. The government should therefore carry out its intention to strengthen its data collection on all formal and non-formal education and training opportunities, including those within enterprises, offered throughout the country (MoES, 2014; Cedefop, 2015).

Latvia may need to reconsider how responsibility for the implementation of its lifelong learning strategy is distributed. Realising its goals for increased adult participation rates in education and training will require strategic co-ordination and collaboration across national and local levels, involving key stakeholders such as vocational schools, companies and NGOs. At present, responsibility for lifelong learning is fragmented across ten different institutions, possibly too many for such a small country. This may have slowed down the implementation of Latvia's lifelong learning strategy.

Notes

1. The EU21 average is calculated as the unweighted mean of the data values of the 21 countries that are members of both the European Union and the OECD for which data are available or can be estimated. These 21 countries are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

2. Authentic learning refers to a wide variety of educational and instructional techniques focused on connecting what students are taught in school to real-world issues, problems, and applications (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). It typically focuses on real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies and participation in virtual communities of practice (Lombardi, 2007).

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