**Rapid Reform and Unfinished Business: An overview of the development of education in independent Latvia, 1991-2007.**

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**Abstract**

Education in Latvia has changed a great deal during the last 15 years. The development of an independent and democratic state education system has creatively combined elements of foreign experience and influence with the enrichment and further development of features of the earlier Latvian system. This article outlines the main steps in this process of change, then goes on to argue that there is still much to be done: firstly, to consolidate and secure the developments to date, and secondly, to enable a successful functioning within the European Union in a rapidly changing wider context.

**Stages of development in the education system**

Latvia regained its state independence in 1991. However, the beginnings of the developments and reforms could already be seen in the second half of 1980s in the atmosphere of the Awakening[[1]](#endnote-1) and political changes in Latvia and to a certain extent also in the Soviet Union. It is helpful to divide the process of change into 3 stages:

* a *first stage* from1990 to 1995, characterized by democratization and decentralization;
* a *second stage*, from 1996 to 2001, characterized by the development of the normative basis of the system and the implementation of corresponding reforms;
* a *third stage*, from 2002 onwards, characterized by further development, increasingly informed by the goal of a knowledge-based democratic and socially integrated society.

*The first stage*

In the first stage, the main features of the education system of Latvia were already changing in accordance with the needs of an independent and democratic state(Broks 1999; Ministry of Education and Science, 1995, 1998; OECD, 2001; Centre for Public Policy, 2003). The key features of this stage were the democratization and decentralization of the education system. The adoption of the *Law on Education* on 19th June 1991 ensured the initial legal basis of the education reforms. A depoliticization of education, parallel with a renewal of the democratic principles in the political and social structures, brought to an end the strict ideological control over the curriculum and teaching methods that had been a feature in the Soviet times. Alongside this depoliticisation was a liquidation of the state monopoly of educational provision. This guaranteed rights by law to establish private and non-governmental organizational educational institutions, creating greater diversity and, to some extent, competition among educational institutions. At the same time, there was a process of decentralization of the management of education. Several of the key decision-making functions shifted to local government and to schools and their principals. Higher education institutions found their autonomy strengthened as financial systems were decentralized.

The document *Education conception* *of Latvia* (Ministry of Education and Science, 1995) which was developed in the period 1994 to1995 was approved by the cabinet of Ministers on July 4, 1995. It was a wide-ranging document, dealing with: the formulation of goals and principles of education; components of the education system; the content of the curriculum; the nature of education programmes; education institutions, management and financing; educational levels. Later in the same year *The* *Law on Higher Education* was adopted (on November 2, 1995) and it consolidated a basically new legal foundation for the functioning of the institutions of higher education and for implementing higher education. In essence, it established the autonomy of higher education institutions.

Arguably, the transition from the education of the Soviet authoritarian system to the education system of a democratic state rested upon a fundamental change of the education paradigm - from the one based on communist ideology, towards a democratic, humanistic paradigm of education (Beļickis 1995, Bluma 1999)***.***  Such a change is reflected in many educational policy documents, in the publications of academics and commentators, and in numerous seminars and international projects in which teachers, education leaders and researchers of Latvia participated together with their foreign colleagues. Certainly, we have to keep in mind that the changes were necessarily rapid and that there was not much opportunity to reflect upon their implications or to develop shared, theoretically-informed understandings of them.

*The second stage*

The second stage of development began around 1996. In this stage, the education system was put in order and its normative basis was substantially supplemented and respective reforms were introduced to ensure the functioning of the system. During 1996 – 1999 the conceptual basis of the education reform was enlarged and a ‘second generation’ legal basis was developed. Thus on October 19, 1998 the new *Law on Education* was adopted, serving as a basis for mutually linked laws in the main sectors of education, for instance, *The* *Law on General Education* and *Law on Vocational education* adopted on June 10, 1999.

In publication of *The strategic programme of education development 1998 - 2003* (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998) defined four strategic directions for the development of the education system, as follows:

* increasing the quality of education (e.g. reform of the curriculum in basic education, improvement of teaching/learning methods, introduction of a centralized examination system for schools, introduction of the accreditation of institutions and study programmes in higher education);
* making more effective use of resources (e.g. improvements to buildings to make them more energy-efficient, revisions to the per-pupil funding mechanism, and differentiation of higher education student funding depending on discipline);
* securing the accessibility of education (e.g. children’s readiness for school, the possibilities of providing equally good educational opportunities for children coming from different social strata, addressing the problem of school drop-outs);
* institutional development (e.g. establishing a wider information system, review of the regional provision of school places relative to demand).

Within these strategic directions, it is worth noting that the process of reform was also characterized by three features. Firstly, reforms were comprehensive and involved the education system in all its sectors. Secondly, the pace of the reforms was fast and often major and essential changes were introduced within just a few months. Thirdly, the process was not simply ‘top down’, in that there were extensive debates, local initiatives and activities which made a serious contribution to reform. This last point is especially important. Issues of education policy were being discussed and resolutions suggested in different state government institutions as well as in public organizations and forums. There were regular conferences organized by the Union of Latvian Intelligentsia, the Latvian Education Forum, the Association of Latvian Education Leaders and others dedicated to topical issues in education. Trades Union representatives and the representatives of the employers also participated in the public forums. These conferences led to working out and adopting the above mentioned legislative documents and other related decisions and documents.

Also significant in this period was a flowering of international links, projects and initiatives. These provided (and indeed continue to provide) a series of opportunities to debate the education system of Latvia, offering a range of comparisons, analyses and potential refinements to developments or solutions to problems. Projects are supported by a wide range of sources including the EU (within the funding schemes of TEMPUS, Phare, Socrates/Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Lingua, etc.), the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Soros Foundation Latvia, and the World Bank. Latvia participates in many international comparative education quality assessment projects within the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and in the OECD Programme for International Students Assessment – PISA, in which it works together with all EU and OECD countries and many other countries of the world. The 2001 and 2002 *Reports on Education in Latvia* prepared by the Soros Foundation Latvia and the Centre for Public Policy Providus are symptomatic of this embedding of an international perspective in a process involving a wide group of educationalists, researchers and policy interests (see Soros Foundation, 2001; Centre for Public Policy, 2003).

*The third stage*

*The Education Development Conception 2002-2005* (approved in the Parliament on October 17, 2002) laid the foundation for the third stage of the development of the education system. Actually, it preserved the aims established in the 1998 Strategic Programme, re-emphasising quality, accessibility and effectiveness of financial arrangements, whilst also putting forward new tasks and defining new indicators for monitoring implementation. The integration of Latvia into the European Union (Latvia became a member state of EU on May 1, 2004) places special emphasis for this period.

A further policy document, *Basic Guidelines for Education Development Years 2007 – 2013* builds on the *Conception* and sets out further broad aims and the means for their attainment and monitoring for the whole ofthe Latvian education system for the next few years. The general aims presented in the document may be summarised as follows:

* to increase the quality of general knowledge, education about values, and life skills acquired by learners;
* to ensure an education ‘offer’ that corresponds to the development needs of the national economy;
* to increase and broaden the range of educational opportunities for different groups of the population in all regions;
* to strengthen the capacity for ensuring the quality and management of education

It is now widely recognised amongst policy makers and educationalists that as a naton, Latvia has to ensure that the outcomes of its education system articulate well with the ever-increasing quality demands and the competition that comes with a greater international connectedness. The living standards of people in Latvia and the development of the country in future depends, at least in some measure, on the effectiveness and quality of its education, on how well its citizens are prepared for professional work and free competition in the common European economic area.

**The most important achievements of the reforms of the education system**

The Latvian education system has compulsory period of basic education from age 5 to 16 (Grade 9), and after that a normal continuation into various forms of general or vocational secondary education that takes young people through programmes of between 2 and 4 years. The state or municipal preschool, basic and secondary education institutions are financed by the state. Private educational institutions may determine their own tuition fees. In this part of the paper, we discuss compulsory and general secondary education, vocational education and training, and higher education, before outlining some next steps in the reform process.

***Compulsory education and general secondary education***

After the regaining of Latvian independence, the number of children in preschool educational institutions (kindergartens) rapidly decreased. The state refused to give financial support to the broad network of preschool education institutions which in many cases were closely connected with production enterprises such as factories and collective farms which had by that time stopped working. Thus in 1990 almost 75 per cent of children up to age 6 attended the kindergarten, but in 1998 the proportion had fallen to only 40 per cent. However, the role of the preschool education and preschool institutions in child development was an issue that was much discussed. *The Law on Education* insists that pre-school education is essential for the all-round development of child’s personality, the strengthening of the child’s health and for getting ready to benefit from a basic education.

The new norm of *The* *Law on Education* about the compulsory preparation of all 5 and 6 year olds for school became effective September 1, 2002. It is for local government to ensure the implementation of this norm and to ensure that an associated set of stricter demands are realized in respect of the educational level reached by the pre-school staff themselves. Ministry of Education and Science figures show that by 2004, 96% of five and six year olds were involved in preschool education. However, there are still some difficulties in the availability of pre-compulsory kindergarten places for children younger than 5 years, which have declined in number in recent years. The response to this includes plans to attract private capital.

In 2005 there was some debate in Latvia about the possible redefinition of Grades 10-12 (i.e. for young people aged between 16 and 19) to make these part of the compulsory period of education. However, it now seems unlikely that a decision will be taken to bring this about. One of the aims put forward by the EU (European Commission, 2004)is that by 2010, 85 per cent of all 22 year olds will have completed an upper secondary education. In 2005 this number in Latvia was 81,8 % which is higher than the average percentage of the EU countries (77,3%) (European Commission, 2006)

The series of reforms outlined earlier have brought about some fundamental changes in the curriculum in both basic and secondary phases. More space is given to social and humanitarian subjects, and new text books and study aids have been developed, and respective in-service training courses for teachers have been organized. The curriculum has also been codified and documented in subject standards, which specify subject aims, content and the assessment of students’ achievement. The beginnings of this trend were visible as early as 1992.

The Ministry of Education and Science published a new *National Standards of Compulsory Education* in 1998. This defined a strategy for improving basic education including the aims and main objectives, pedagogic principles, content, students’ achievements and their assessment. The *Standards* also promoted changing the emphasis from knowledge acquisition to knowledge application, placing more emphasis on problem solving and ensuring better interdisciplinary links. The document served as an all-embracing ‘umbrella’ standard and new subject standards and syllabi for all subjects at basic school (Grades 1 – 9) were developed, with workshops, seminars and courses organized for teachers. This process took several years, being completed only in 2006. The end result is that each teacher may develop his/her own syllabus in the subject corresponding to the demands of the *Standards*. Alternatively, he or she may use the sample syllabus accepted by the Ministry of Education and Science. The development of a new curriculum and subject standards for upper secondary school education (Grades 10 -12) has been started in 2007.

It can be argued that during the initial stage of the education reforms too much emphasis was put on freedom of choice within the curriculum. For some years, secondary students had to master only 5 out of 12 subjects, namely Latvian language and literature, mathematics, a foreign language, history and sports. Students could choose the remaining 7 subjects from a rather vast spectrum of possibilities. One of the results of this was that many secondary pupils refused altogether to study natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. Such choices at secondary school severely limited the choices of subject open to students if they progressed to higher education and may in addition have had an adverse impact on their general capacity for successful further study. This problem was rectified through the introduction of *programs* in secondary education, so that instead of a free choice of subjects, students had now to choose from amongst four groups of options (or ‘directions’) available in secondary programs. The four possible ‘directions’ are:

* general comprehensive,
* humanities and social,
* natural and technical sciences (including mathematics)
* professional, in which the general comprehensive strand is supplemented with vocational studies

Educational institutions work out programs within these four directions, within a combination of (a) subjects compulsory to all directions, (b) subjects compulsory within the particular direction, and (c) options chosen by students, which may comprise up to 25 per cent of the total study load. Thus, the organization of the education system according to the principle of educational programs has been introduced; new state standards are being introduced thus promoting the improvement of the curricula and its better correspondence to the demands of the society and the job market. Alongside these changes there has also been a transition in the assessment system, which has moved from a 5 point scale to 10 point scale across all parts of the education system (Bethell and Kaufmane, 2005).

Teachers’ salaries in Latvia are still low compared with the average salary in Latvia and other countries, the GDP per capita and other relevant indicators. A plan for increasing teachers’ salary has been approved at the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Education and Science, but this is not seen as sufficient by many teachers and their Trade Union.

Recent years have seen the introduction of minority education programs. These attempt to support minority education interests whilst promoting social integration and the acquisition of the state language. For instance, from September 2004, in the state and local municipal Russian language instruction secondary schools (Grades 10 – 12), 60 per cent of subjects have to be mastered in the state language (Latvian). This is deemed necessary in order to ensure competitiveness in the job market and to help prepare those pupils whose mother tongue is Russian for an integrated citizenship.

The second and third stages outlined earlier have seen the Ministry of Education and Science establish centrally prepared, administered and assessed examinations. Beginning in 1997, this process has led to a uniform examination system which includes examinations at the end of the basic (Grade 9) and secondary (Grade 12) education stages. There are also state tests at the end of Grades 3 and 6. Each graduate of the upper secondary stage of schooling has to pass the 5 centralized examinations (in Latvian language and literature, the first foreign language, the subject determined by the particular school and in two further subjects according to student’s own choice). From 2004 onwards, applicants to higher education institutions were based on the results of these examinations.

Latvia is successfully participating in the international comparative educational studies which produce internationally comparable information. Latvia started participating in these programs immediately after regaining its independence in 1991[[2]](#endnote-2). It is now possible to look at the achievements of Latvian students in comparative terms over the last 15 years. Prominent here is the OECD Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) measurements in which Latvia has been participating since the beginning of the first cycle in 1998 (results are known for PISA2000, PISA2003, and PISA2006. The country is currently participating in PISA2009).

The attainment of 15 year old students of Latvia in 2003 has improved significantly if compared with year 2000. The increase of the average achievement of Latvian students is statistically significant and one of the biggest among the OECD PISA participating countries in all content areas of the study (mathematics, reading and science) (*Learning for Tomorrow`s World. First Results from PISA2003*). These results of the OECD PISA programme have been included as indicators in the EU Lisbon strategy (European Commission, 2006):

(Extract fromsection *‘29 Indicators for Monitoring Performance and Progress of Education and Training Systems in Europe’*):

- Percentage of 15 year old students with reading literacy proficiency “level 1” and lower on the PISA reading literacy scale;

 - Distribution and mean performance of 15 year old students, per country, on the PISA reading literacy scale;

- Distribution and mean performance of 15 year old students, per country, on the PISA mathematical literacy scale;

-Indicator N8. Distribution and mean performance of 15 year old students, per country, on the PISA science literacy scale.

(Extract from section *Five European Benchmarks in Education and Training*):

-By 2010, the percentage of low-achieving 15 year olds in reading literacy in the European Union should have decreased by at least 20% compared to the year 2000

(European Commission, 2006).

In Latvia the relative number of students with low reading proficiency in year 2000 PISA study was 30.6% but by 2003 it had decreased to 18%. In OECD and EU countries the number of students at mean performance level in reading during this time period even increased a little (from 17.9% to 19.1% in OECD countries and from 19.4% to 19.8% in EU countries). Thus in all the above mentioned indicators Latvia’s progress has been significant and positive (OECD, 2004).

Furthermore, the IEA Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) shows a considerable improvement in the results of Latvia’s students in Grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and science in the time period 1995 – 1999 – 2003 (Martin et al. 2004). Whilst the 2003 OECD figures show Latvian students to be close to (if just under) the average for participating countries, the TIMSS data shows that amongst its 49 participating countries, Latvia is already above the average level. Similarly, the reading proficiency of Latvia’s primary pupils (Grade 4) as revealed in the IEA Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) corresponds to the level of the best countries – Latvia takes the 5th place in the international scale (Martin et al. 2003). In the IEA Reading Literacy Study (RLS) study in 1992 Latvia’s 4th Grade pupils were on the international average level thus we may speak about a tendency of quality improvement, although it should underlined that the results of RLS and PIRLS are not strictly comparable.

Thus, the results of many international studies show that the achievement of Latvia’s students has considerably improved in the second half of the 1990s and the first years of the current decade. Progress in raising the quality of education in Latvia can be explained by the education reforms outlined earlier, the dedicated work of teachers, an increase in motivation of young people to study, as well as the country’s general economic growth.

As well as providing yardsticks for overall progress, the international comparative studies are also a rich source of information for monitoring reforms and for helping to steer future reforms (Kangro 1999; 2000). Thus, for instance, the achievements of Latvia’s students in TIMSS and (especially) in PISA2000 tests showed that Latvian students had lower results in tasks concerning practical application of knowledge. This has been taken into account when developing and introducing the new standards of compulsory education.

The national analysis of the international study data shows that Latvia needs to continue to increase the quality of education in rural schools because so far they do not provide the same quality education as schools of the capital and other cities.

Unfortunately, the latest results of OECD PISA 2006 and PIRLS 2006, published at the end of 2007, show no continued improvement of Latvian student attainments in reading, mathematics and natural sciences during 2003 – 2006. It is possible that the upward trend in these indicators has stopped, and if so, a number of negative factors may be having an influence. These may include a shortage of teachers, the dissatisfaction of teachers with salaries and other conditions of work, the relatively low status of the teaching profession in society, a high proportion of younger people in the workforce leaving Latvia, high inflation, and so forth.

### Vocational education and training

We now turn to consider the provision of vocational basic and secondary education (higher professional education will be grouped together with higher education in the subsequent section). During the Soviet period, the network of professional educational institutions developed to meet the demands of the very centralized policy of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the system of vocational education had considerable autonomy from the state in the form of Latvia as a Soviet Republic. Each of the vocational schools had a very narrow specialization and was connected with the big industrial enterprises and the needs of the collective farms. There were many relatively small educational institutions of a similar kind, operating in a highly dispersed manner.

The collapse of the centralized economies seriously affected the activities of the vocational educational institutions. Serious problems arose to do with a misalignment between courses and the rapidly changing demands of the job market. For example, some equipment and study materials rapidly became outmoded, and some teaching staff did not feel ready to work in the new conditions. The number of students in the vocational schools decreased rapidly as at the same time general secondary and higher education became more popular.

The process of reforming vocational education did not get underway until the middle of the 1990s (Country Monograph,2004). In the period 1995 to1998 the emphasis was put on working out the legal basis for reform. The *Law on Vocational Education* was adopted in 1999. Several projects concerned with the improvement of vocational education were implemented with the financial support of EU Phare projects, with funding provided by the Nordic Council of Ministers and also some international projects (Germany, Finland, Denmark, etc.). Latvia’s joining the EU and the binding demands were without doubt a main driving force of further reforms. These include the introduction of professional standards, licensing and accreditation.

At the end of the period of basic education, around 30 per cent of all students continue their studies in the vocational schools (OECD, 2001). There is little horizontal mobility between vocational/professional routes and general secondary educational routes. However, graduates of the general secondary schools may go on to complete vocational programmes in a shorter period of time than those who go straight on to these programmes from basic education.

The system of vocation al education in Latvia has a rather negative image. There are several reasons for this including: stereotypes prevalent in society, as expressed in the opinion that only those who are unable to study elsewhere join the vocational education system; the rather low status of qualified workers in the society; a lack of correspondence between the vocational curricula and the demands of the job market; focus of most people on general secondary and higher education.

Many employers consider that the vocational education institutions are rather distant from the demands of the job market. Their view is also that it is the task of the state (not the employers) to change the current situation. Sometimes the diversity of vocational curricula also seems puzzling to the employers. On the other hand, the contribution of employers in working out the standards is sometimes regarded as insufficient. There is evidence that a significant portion of the graduates of vocational training are not effectively employed. According to data of the year 2000, 42% worked in a profession other than the one in which they had trained, whilst 28% were unemployed. Only 30% were employed in the profession they had mastered (National Observatory, 2001).

The most popular fields in vocational training and among the curricula are engineering sciences and services. The number of students in agricultural programmes has rapidly decreased. It seems desirable that improvement of Latvia’s vocational provision should be continued and become more intensive because it could be considered the critical element in all the education system of Latvia (OECD, 2001).

***Higher education***

Latvian institutions of higher education are legal entities and ensure their own self-government in accordance with the Satversme (Constitution) of the given institution. The Constitutions of universities are approved by Parliament, and the Constitutions of the rest of higher education institutions by the Cabinet of Ministers. Together, the Ministry of Education and Science the Council of Higher Education and the Latvian Rectors’ Council ensure that the higher education institutions work in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Latvia.

The trends in enrolment of students in higher education during the years of independence have had a major influence upon the administrative decisions in this field. The total number of students in the period 1990 to 1993 was approximately equivalent to the number of students in the whole of the decade prior to independence, although the number decreased a little every year (from 46 000 in 1990 to 39000 in 1993). However, since 1994 the number of students has increased sharply every year and in 2004 it reached 130,693 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2005). Thus during the last decade the number of students in Latvia has increased by a remarkable 335%. In 2005 there were 556 students per 10000 inhabitants, the second highest participation rate in the world: The highest is in Canada, at 580 (in the USA it is 520).

Such an increase in the student numbers can be explained with reference to marked demographic changes and the desire of the young people as well as many adults to further develop their skills in order to be able to act more successfully and to find their place in this time of changes in the circumstances of building and developing their independent country. However, the increase in the number of students has leveled off in the last two years.

However, whilst the number of students increased more than threefold, the state budget resources allocated for higher education increased relatively insignificantly, and the total number of state funded study places actually remained unchanged.

The only source of additional resources for higher education institutions was from tuition fees paid by students. As a result in all state universities and higher education institutions there is an interesting combination of state funded and privately paid students and the number of the latter is increasing every year. By 2005 it had reached 77% of the student body. The number of private higher education institutions has also gradually increased, and their contribution into the total number of students in 2005 was 25% in undergraduate studies and 36% in graduate studies (Ministry of Education and Science, 2005). Very recently this situation has started to change, as the institutions of higher education begin to receive some funding for research and there is an anticipated increase in state funded study places in the natural sciences and engeneering study programmes.

The expansion of student numbers has seen an increase in the number of qualified teaching staff and a development of the infrastructure of the higher education institutions. Nevertheless, both these lag behind the very rapid increase in the number of paying students. Tuition fees cannot be always set at high levels because they would have a negative effect on access to higher education for some groups in society. One result of this situation is that higher education staff find themselves with increasing workloads because it takes many years for younger staff to become qualified with a Doctoral degree. Furthermore, Doctoral studies and an academic career are not very attractive options for young talented university graduates due to insufficient remuneration and the complicated and lengthy process of building a career.

In the coming years a demographic downturn will give higher education a marked decrease in the number of young students, particularly in the years 2010 to 2017[[3]](#endnote-3) However, we should bear in mind that there are always several other factors influencing the total number of students. For example, in 2005 a relatively large proportion of students were part-time (39%), and of these, more than half were over the age of 29.

During the years of independence the distribution of students between types of programme has changed rapidly. Notably, the proportion in social sciences has grown while the proportion in natural sciences and engineering sciences has decreased. This is connected with the fact that new economic conditions offer different and more diverse career possibilities and more employment in business management, economics, law, public relations, interpreting, and so forth. On the other hand, new forms of industrial manufacturing are just becoming established, and these can be expected to increase the demand for graduates in fundamental and applied sciences. Interestingly, the private higher education institutions mainly offer study programmes in social sciences. The state has recently reaffirmed a wish to increase the number of students studying natural sciences and engineering sciences.

The growth in higher education provision led to arguments for a national system of quality assurance. This became even more desirable in the light of the Lisbon Convention, part of the Bologna process concerned with qualification recognition (Council of Europe, 1997). Here, a significant condition for recognizing higher education qualifications abroad is the existence of the higher education quality assessment system in the particular country which can inform other countries about the results of its activities.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned tendencies and other factors, several essential reforms have been implemented in higher education in Latvia (Rauhvargers 2004). The first of these is a *higher education quality assessment system*. This is supported by a *centre for higher education quality assessment* and an *academic information centre*. The system built upon the licensing and accreditation processes mentioned earlier in this paper. Processes include detailed self-assessment and the participation of national and international experts. State standards in academic education and higher professional education have been developed and now present consistent and uniform requirements. Latvia is also a member of the European Diploma recognition networks ENIC/NARIC (European Network of Information Centres/Network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres).

Secondly, there has been the establishment of a *system of academic and professional degrees*, comparable with the European education space, which promotes the mobility of Latvian students in the European context and the studies of foreign students in Latvia. The transition to a system of 3 stages (Bachelor, Master and Doctor) in academic study programmes (which within the Bologna process was recommended for all European countries starting with 1998) was begun in Latvia at the beginning of the 1990s.

Thirdly, a system of *credit points* to measure student’s studying load has been introduced. A credit point is equivalent to one week of full time studies. Multiplication of Latvia’s credits by a factor of 1.5 converts them into ECTS credits.

Fourthly, the *unified diploma supplement* worked out by the European Council, UNESCO and European Commission has been successfully introduced. The University of Latvia has received the European Commission Recognition Award in 2005 for complete introduction of this policy.

Fifthly, the system of *study loans* has been established which increases the accessibility of higher education to less well-off citizens and facilitates students’ interest in education quality.

Sixthly, the transition to *single level doctoral degrees* has taken place and since 2000 the degree of habilitated doctor is not awarded;

Seventhly, there is a transition to *funding of education from the state budget according to a normative principle*. This means that educational provision is funded differentially according to the education fields and programmes (the lower ratios are in social sciences, the highest – in natural sciences, engineering sciences and medicine).

Eighthly, *students are admitted to higher education institutions according to the results in the centralized secondary school graduation examination*. In general the correspondence of Latvia’s higher education development to the process of creation of the European higher education area (Bologna process) was assessed as ‘very good’ in the Bergen meeting in 2005(Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2005) and in subsequent reviews.

### Further reforms

The foregoing discussion sets out an extensive and, in some respects, impressive series of developments in the education system since Latvian independence in 1991. In this final section we set out, in brief terms, those matters that appear to require further reforms. Essentially, we see these further reforms as necessary to consolidate the previous ones, and to secure the developmental trajectory we have been describing. We suggest that there are five matters on which processes of reform should now concentrate.

The first of these is the *optimization of the network* of educational institutions (including the vocational education institutions). There is an urgent need to look closely at every school on a number of dimensions, including academic results of pupils, the backgrounds of pupils, the role of the school in local cultural life, its role in plans for regional development. This is undoubtedly a painful process, but it is also wasteful of public resources to delay it any further. It is likely to result in some schools closing and others gaining additional resources and increasing in size. Having said that, it is not a process that can be reduced to a unitized, financial formula: When optimizing the school network we have to take into account the rational use of the allocated resources (the size of the school, the ratio between pupils and teachers, and other factors), but also the fact that the primary education institutions should be as physically close as possible to a child’s home. Optimization also includes doing more to ensure that educational provision is of comparable quality whether it is in Riga, a provincial city, or in any part of the countryside of Latvia.

The second matter is the *professional recognition of teachers*, which is now principally a matter of the increase of teachers’ salaries and the improvement of their working conditions. This is likely to make the profession more attractive to a wider group of suitably qualified individuals and will help considerably in overcoming the shortage of teachers. There have been two recent reforms in this area, one which set out different categories of professional teacher, and the other allowing holders of 3-year Bachelor degrees to teach without a prior professional qualification. Neither of these is likely to resolve the problem, and it seems that a more radical measure is necessary, such as a statutory linkage of teachers’ salaries to average incomes.

Thirdly, there remains much to do to achieve clearer and more uniform lines of *responsibility and accountability* in education. Universities and other education institutions are still answerable, in different ways, to 6 different ministries. In addition, there are many small private higher education institutions in which no research work is carried out and often these institutions rely on the contributions of professors from the leading universities in the licensing and accreditation of their study programmes. Yet the rules governing licensing and accreditation procedures demand that 50 per cent of the academic staff must be permanently based in the given higher education institution. Whether or not some contemporary practices are corrupt, there is clearly scope for more rigour in the use of the unified register of the academic staff of all institutions of higher education developed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

The fourth matter requiring attention is to do with *research integration.*  There is continuing fragmentation of research activity and expertise in Latvia. There are still Scientific Institutes (as a legacy from the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union) which exist outside universities, and their status is unclear. Thus the capacity of the established scientists working at the Institutes is not used in educating younger and newer scientists in the universities. At the same time the Institute scientists are somewhat disconnected from the substantive and methodological developments that universities often engage in, particularly with foreign partners.

Finally, there is a matter that is part-cultural and part-structural, to do with *disciplinary categories*. A Soviet tradition of a particular structure of scientific branches and sub-branches still persists and it frames the possibilities for academics and students in scientific degrees and doctoral study programmes. This structure is in some tension with epistemological trends in Europe and elsewhere, causing difficulties for interdisciplinary study. It is also likely to hinder new forms of partnership with some international researchers. Overcoming this problem will take time, but it is likely to require some deliberate action at the level of the Ministry.

**Conclusion**

Whilst this paper does not attempt to present a fully comprehensive account of all developments and reforms, or all the further steps that might be taken for improving education*,*it stresses some important trends produced by the rapidity of change and connected with the heritage from the past. These trends present problems which still have to be overcome. In order to build on the positive changes since independence (and just as importantly, in order to consolidate and make secure those changes) we would argue that there is a need for further urgent attention to the five key issues outlined in the previous section.

However, it is also vital that the matters are not addressed in a piecemeal fashion or as if they were isolated problems. There is a need for *systemic* as well as *systematic* action. As has been noted by several analysts, there is an increasing role for strategic management, and this is something that has at times been insufficient (OECD, 2001, Centre for Public Policy, 2003).

It is important not to underestimate the difficulties in bringing about the next developmental stages in the Latvian education system. The process is necessarily a complex and subtle one of balancing interests and competing demands and expectations. Reforms that promote the competitiveness and economic well-being of the society in the European Union could, if pressed too hard, conflict with preserving and developing the values and distinctiveness of Latvian culture. The challenge is as great, if not greater, than those faced by the earlier stages of reform in the immediate post-Soviet period.

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1. In journalistic and popular use of the late l980s and early 1990s, *Awakening* was a name for a peaceful process toward greater national autonomy, political reforms and civil liberties in Latvia. It was accompanied by creation of a broad political movement – the Popular Front of Latvia (similar *fronts* were established in Estonia and Lithuania). Triggered by Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika, the process for reform and autonomy inevitably turned into the movement for independence of Latvia because (just like in 1917) the central government of the USSR (Russia respectively) rejected any idea of real autonomy and transformations of confederate nature.

In its proper terminological sense, *Awakening* can only be attributed to the national awakening movement in Latvia in the middle of the 19th century, which was inspired by a broader European process and emerging reforms in Russia. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. During the Soviet years such participation in international comparative studies was not allowed. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The number of babies born in Latvia in 1991 – 1997 rapidly decreased to almost a half of its earlier level.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)