

# Education system in Latvia

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## The education system in Latvia

### 1. Background Information

#### Rights to education

Every citizen of the Republic of Latvia, holders of non-citizen passports issued by the Republic of Latvia, citizens of European Union, European Economic Area countries and Switzerland, permanent residents of the European Community holding a residence permit for Latvia, stateless persons in possession of a travelling document issued by the Republic of Latvia, third country nationals or stateless persons who are in possession of a valid residence permit for the Republic of Latvia, persons having refugee or alternative status and persons who have received temporary protection within the Republic of Latvia have equal rights to education in Latvia.

#### Legislation

Law on Education (1998) - a framework law containing definitions of all types and levels of education which defines general principles and determines competences of governing bodies.

Law on General Education (1999)

Law on Vocational Education (1999)

Law on Higher Education Establishments (1995)

Law on Scientific Activity (2005)

#### Governance of the Education System

The education system is administered at three levels - national, municipal and institutional. The Parliament (Saeima), the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Education and Science are the main decision-making bodies at national level. The Ministry of Education and Science is the education policy development and implementation institution that oversees the national network of education institutions, sets educational standards and determines teacher training content and procedures.

#### Language of tuition

In state and municipal educational institutions the language of tuition is the state language - Latvian. Education in other languages of tuition can be acquired in private educational establishments, as well as in state and municipal educational institutions where they provide educational (study) programmes for national minorities. Any student acquiring basic or secondary education in another language studies the state language concurrently, and takes an examination in the state language following the nationally set procedure and scope.

Vocational qualification exams are to be administered in the state language.

In most cases the thesis/diploma projects for getting an academic Bachelor (*Bakalaurs*), Master (*Maģistrs*) or scientific (Doctor's) degree shall be developed and presented in the state language, except the cases stipulated by legislation.

Qualification upgrading and retraining is provided in the state language if it is funded from the national or municipal budget.

## Tuition fee

The tuition fee for pre-school, basic and secondary education in a state or municipality founded educational establishment shall be funded from the national or municipal budget. A private educational institution may set a tuition fee for providing education.

In higher education programmes the state covers tuition fees for a certain number of students' places, according to the State Procurement in the respective academic year, and the respective students receive state grants. Each higher educational institution may set a tuition fee for the other students' places.

Any student is entitled to a state guaranteed loan for his/ her studies in higher education programmes. A foreign citizen or stateless person pays for his/ her education in accordance with the agreement concluded with the respective educational establishment. The tuition fee for the citizens of European Union countries and their children shall be determined and covered according to the same procedure as for the citizens and permanent residents of the Republic of Latvia.

## 2. Pre-school education (ISCED-P-2011 level 0)

Children are involved in pre-school preparation from the moment they start attending kindergartens or pre-primary education institutions. Pre-school education is available from the age of 1.5 years, but children may enter from 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 years of age. It is mandatory to participate in pre-primary education programmes for five and six year old children who do not attend pre-school education institutions. The objective of the pre-school education curriculum is to ensure multi-faceted development of a child's personality, to promote health and readiness to enter the primary stage of basic education. Pre-school education is considered a comprehensive first stage of general education and all children have to complete it by the time they are 7 years old. This deadline may be extended for a year due to specific health or psychological problems by parental request or doctors' request or recommendations.

Pre-school education can be delivered at various pre-primary education institutions (kindergartens) or at special pre-primary classes at general education institutions. Children with special needs attend special pre-school institutions or classes for children with special needs within general education schools. There are public and private pre-primary education institutions. Public sector institutions require that parents make a financial contribution to cover the cost of meals, but access to educational activities is free of charge. The fee in the private sector institutions covers full costs of the programme, except for salaries of pedagogues teaching pre-primary education to five and six year olds.

## 3. Basic education (ISCED-P-2011 level 1 and 2)

9-year single structure basic education (primary and lower secondary education according to ISCED) is compulsory for all children from the age of 7 and is generally completed till the age of 16, but may continue till the age of 18. The National Basic Education Standard determines the objectives and tasks, compulsory curriculum and the principles and procedures for assessment of basic education. The aim of basic education is to provide opportunities for acquiring the basic knowledge and skills required for community and personal life, to lay the foundation for continuing education, to promote the learner's harmonious development and to foster a responsible attitude toward one's self, family, society, the environment and the state.

### Names of educational institutions

Full basic education programmes are provided in educational institutions named *pamatskola* (basic schools). The educational programmes of the first six grades can be provided by primary schools (*sākumskola*). Secondary schools (*vidusskola*) may also provide a full programme of basic education. Basic compulsory education can also be provided by different educational institutions named *arodskola* (vocational school), *speciālās izglītības iestāde* (special education institution), *vakara (maiņu) skola* (night (shift) school), *internātskola* (boarding school), *sociālās vai pedagoģiskās korekcijas izglītības iestāde* (educational

institution of social or pedagogical correction) or in any other educational institutions providing basic education programmes.

## Assessment of educational achievements and issued documents

In primary school, in grade 1, knowledge and skills in all subjects acquired by pupils are assessed in a descriptive way without marks. Starting with grade 2, some subjects including the Latvian language, minority language and mathematics, but in grade 3 also foreign languages are assessed in a 10-point scale. But beginning from grade 4, pupils' achievements in all subject areas are assessed in a 10-point scale.

At the end of basic school students take centralized national examinations, and the number and content of these examinations is determined by the Ministry of Education and Science. Pupils having received assessments in all subjects of the basic compulsory education curriculum and the centralized national examinations receive a Certificate of basic education (*apliecība*) and a transcript reflecting their marks (*sekmju izraksts*). Centralized national examination assessments are reflected as a percentage of the total possible points achieved. The assessments received in the centralized national examination are recorded in the Certificate of basic education. These documents of basic compulsory education qualify students for admission to further education and training in secondary level educational programmes and serve as a selection criterion.

In case a pupil has not received an assessment in any of the basic education subjects or centralized national examinations, he/she receives a school report (*liecība*) providing the opportunity to continue education and training in basic vocational education programmes.

## Special needs education

Special schools or special education classes within general education schools provide education for children with special needs that correspond to their individual developmental disorders, abilities and health conditions. The structure of special education is very similar to that of the mainstream education providing opportunities for persons with special needs to attain general knowledge and skills with strong emphasis on their applicability, thereby facilitating social inclusion.

## Preparatory vocational education

Preparatory vocational oriented education in arts, culture and sport is available in addition to basic education. Participation is voluntary and provides the opportunity to prepare for further professional training in the chosen area.

## 4. Secondary education (ISCED-P-2011 level 2, 3 or 4)

There are two types of programmes at the secondary education level: academic secondary education programmes and vocational secondary education and training programmes. The main task of academic secondary education programmes is to prepare for further studies at university, while the vocational secondary programmes are more aimed at acquiring a vocational qualification, i.e. for entering the labour market and/or continuing education. When admitting students to secondary level educational programmes, schools are free to hold entrance examinations according to the basic compulsory education standard, except in those subjects for which students have already received assessments reflected in the basic compulsory education certificate.

### Academic secondary education programmes (ISCED-P-2011 level 3)

The National General Secondary Education Standard determines the compulsory curriculum of academic secondary education programmes, which are available in the following profiles:

A general education profile which includes educational programmes without specifically emphasized subjects;

A humanities and social sciences profile which includes educational programmes with special emphasis on subjects in the

humanities and social sciences;

A mathematics, natural science and technical profile, which includes educational programmes with special emphasis on mathematics, natural science and technical subjects;

A vocational preparation profile which includes educational programmes with special emphasis on specific vocational/professional areas (for example, in arts, music, business, and sports).

The National Standard requires that academic secondary education programmes of all profiles offered through full-time education contain 11 compulsory subjects. Each profile has its specific 2-3 compulsory subjects in addition. A secondary school may offer 9 other compulsory electives and 2 free electives. An academic secondary education programme in any given profile may be combined with a national minority educational programme, by inclusion of the minority language and other contents related to the minority's cultural identity and integration into Latvian society. General secondary education programmes offered at evening schools and via distance learning contain 9 compulsory subjects and offer 9 compulsory electives and 4 free electives, moving the subjects "third foreign language" and "sport" from the set of compulsory subjects to the set of free electives. The total number of subject lessons in an academic secondary education programme is 3,360-3,780 for full-time education, 2,520-2,940 for even schools and 1,470-1,680 for distance learning.

## Names of educational establishments

Academic secondary education programmes are provided in secondary schools (*vidusskolas*), evening (shift) schools (*vakara (maiņu) vidusskolas*) or gymnasiums (*ģimnāzijas*). Secondary schools are educational establishments, which also provide full basic educational programmes. Gymnasiums mainly provide only programmes of secondary education, but they may provide also partial basic compulsory education programmes beginning from grade 7 (students are 13 years old). Gymnasiums have to provide at least 2 educational programme profiles. Students of one class group study the programme of the same profile.

## Assessment of educational achievements and education credentials

Students of academic secondary education programmes are assessed throughout the learning process through oral, written, practical and combined assignments including tests, projects, portfolios or examinations.

When completing academic secondary education programmes, students shall take centralized national examinations. The content and procedure of these examinations is determined by the Ministry of Education and Science, and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. School leavers have to take at least 4 compulsory centralized examinations, and of them three subjects are determined by the Ministry of Education and Science, and one subject is chosen by the student himself/herself.

A Certificate of secondary education (*atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību*) and a certificate of the centralized exams passed with scores are awarded to all students who have received a positive assessment in all the subjects included in the chosen profile, and the national examinations. In case a student has not received an assessment in one or more subjects or national examinations, he/she receives a school report (*licība*). Only a Certificate of secondary education and a certificate of the centralized exams passed give students the right to continue education in a higher education programme.

## Vocational secondary education and training (ISCED-P-2011 level 2, 3 or 4)

The task of vocational education is to prepare the learner for work in a specific profession and to promote personal development, to promote knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to vocational qualifications and support competitiveness in changing socioeconomic conditions, to create motivation for professional development and continuing training, and prepare learners to continue education at a higher vocational education level.

Good communication skills, knowledge in mathematics, sciences and social sciences, ability to communicate in foreign languages, modern IT application skills – these are the requirements of labour market today, and therefore the acquisition of these subject areas and skills are included in curricula. Besides, in the course of mastering vocational education and training programmes,

attention is focused on the development of initiative, understanding of environment protection, intercultural issues, self-development of young people to help them to build their career and life successfully. The study process is organized in the way that the acquisition of theory interchanges with practical training in school workshops, laboratories, and on-the-job courses later in enterprises and organizations.

The National Vocational Education Standard and the Occupational Standards or qualification requirements as well as the sectoral qualifications framework determine the curriculum of vocational secondary education programmes.

## Names of vocational education establishments

Vocational secondary education can be accomplished in vocational schools (*arodskola*) and vocational secondary schools (named *profesionālā vidusskola* or *tehnikums*).

## Vocational education and training programmes and admission requirements

Vocational schools provide basic vocational education and training programmes (ISCED-P-2011 level 2), the duration of which is 1 to 3 years and vocational education programmes, the duration of which is 2-3 years. Applicants with completed basic education are enrolled in both types of vocational education and training programmes. Applicants without completed basic education may also be enrolled, but not before the calendar year when they are at least 15 years old; in this case they are provided with the opportunity to complete the general basic education programme alongside vocational training and obtaining a qualification.

The difference between these programmes is the following: vocational basic education programmes are focused on training that gives the possibility to carry out very simple tasks, corresponding to qualification Level 1 (Level 1 – allowing the performance of basic work assignments in a particular field of practical activity). While vocational education and training programmes for students with completed basic education are focused on acquiring the knowledge and skills required for Level 2 vocational qualifications (Level 2 – allowing independent performance of skilled workers tasks).

General education subjects are integrated in the content of vocational education and training programmes to such an extent that the graduates of these programmes are entitled to continue their education in vocational secondary education and training programmes to acquire knowledge and skills required for Level 3 vocational qualification, or to continue their education in a general secondary education bridging course (duration of this course is 1 year), thus obtaining the rights to study in higher education programmes.

Vocational secondary schools provide vocational secondary education and training programmes, the duration of which is 3-4 years after compulsory basic education or 1-2 years after accomplishing vocational education.

Vocational secondary education programmes are focused on mastering knowledge and skills required by qualification Level 3 (Level 3 –allows execution of tasks, including planning and organizing one's own work.). The amount of general education subjects integrated in the vocational educational curricula qualifies the graduates to enter higher education programmes.

## Assessment of achievements in vocational education

The principles and procedure of assessment of the acquired education and training are determined by the National Vocational Secondary Education Standard and the National Vocational Education Standard. In the course of education, assessments are carried out in theoretical and practical lessons, seminars, laboratory assignments, project consultations, independent study assignments, subject/ course examinations or tests in a 10-point scale. Various methods are used in the assessment: tests, project work, individual and team work, practical placement reports.

In order to complete a vocational secondary education programme, students must pass 5 centralized examinations. One of them is a vocational qualification examination. The remaining 4 centralized examinations are held in compliance with the terms and conditions for academic secondary education.

The leaving examination for vocational education programmes is a vocational qualification examination.

## Education credentials

A nationally recognized vocational education credential is issued after the completion of an accredited vocational education and training programme, passing vocational qualification examinations and other examinations required by the national vocational education standard.

Depending on the type of vocational education programme, all students who have passed the final subject and qualification exams are awarded a diploma or certificate: a certificate of basic vocational education and training (*aplicība par profesionālo pamatizglītību*), a certificate of vocational education and training (*atestāts par arodizglītību*), a diploma of vocational secondary education (*diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību*). Students of vocational education programmes who receive credentials attesting to the completion of basic or secondary education must sit the same National centralized examinations as students in academic programmes of the respective level. Only holders of a diploma of vocational secondary education are eligible for access to tertiary education: colleges or university professional education programmes.

## 5. Post secondary education (ISCED-P-2011 level 4)

Continuing vocational training or in-service training programmes can be acquired after graduating general or vocational secondary education and training institutions (duration 1 to 3 years) or in up-skilling/professional development programmes (duration not less than 160 study hours, which may be considered as a partial qualification). Internationally this level is called post-secondary, non-tertiary education. In Latvia this type of education is classified as secondary stage education. These programmes are focused towards mastering purely professional skills and knowledge in line with the requirements of the respective vocational qualification level. The study process, assessment of achievements are organized in a similar manner as it is done in other vocational secondary education and training programmes.

## 6. Higher education (ISCED-P-2011 level 5)

### Admission requirements

The admission procedure is not centralised: each higher education institution has its own admission board and criteria. From the year 2004 entrance examinations are replaced by the results of the national centralised secondary education examinations.

A Certificate of secondary general education (*atestāts*) or Diploma of vocational secondary education (*diploms*) is required to continue education at the level of higher education, both for academic higher education programmes or higher professional education programmes. The admission to these study programmes is mostly competitive, based on the results of centralized examinations. Higher education institutions may set additional requirements concerning some specific prior education or training, special aptitude or previous qualification (for example, in arts, music, sports). At least five months before the enrolment procedure begins, higher educational establishments shall inform which general secondary education programmes correspond to the respective study programme, which centralized examinations have to be taken, as well as what the additional requirements are. The selection procedures in different higher educational establishments and in different programmes may vary. These procedures mainly depend on the level of competition for each vacancy/students' places (both the state funded and self-financed). Some selection procedures also include an interview with the admission board representatives.

In case a secondary education Certificate or Diploma has been obtained abroad, then, in compliance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, this document has to be submitted for academic recognition of foreign qualifications to the Academic Information Center (*Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs*) (For more detailed information, please see their website: <http://www.aic.lv>)

## Names of education institutions

The system of higher education in Latvia is binary since the Law on Education Establishments sets a difference between academic and professional higher education, but it is not strictly institutionalised. Universities and other institutions of higher education mostly run both academic and professional programmes. Tertiary level or higher education is provided in colleges and higher education institutions.

A college (*koledža*) is an educational institution that provides programmes of the first level of professional higher education (ISCED-P-2011 level 5). Colleges are the newest type of professional education institutions in Latvia. Colleges have been developed as independent education institutions or as structural units (or just as a group of first level study programmes) within higher education institutions. In spite of the different names of education institutions, the legal status of college education is the same, because the requirements for developing and providing education programmes are unified.

A higher education institution (*augstskola*) is an institution of tertiary level education that provides second level professional higher education programmes and academic higher education programmes, where scientific, research and creative activity takes place. Higher education institutions are divided into university and non-university higher education institutions. At higher education institutions with the term "augstskola" in their name at least 40% of academic staff in elected positions must hold a PhD degree and institutions with the term "akadēmija" in their name must fill 50% of academic positions with PhD holders, unless otherwise determined by the Cabinet of Ministers, based on the specific sphere of activity pertaining to the education establishment (e.g. art, architecture, theology, security, maritime affairs or national defence).

University type higher education institutions are those providing bachelor's (ISCED-P-2011 level 6), master's (ISCED-P-2011 level 7), and doctoral (ISCED-P-2011 level 8) degree programmes, where at least 65% of the tenured staff hold a PhD degree, which publish scientific periodicals covering areas of teaching and research implemented by the institution and which have divisions or research institutes performing scientific research.

## Study programmes

Two groups of programmes can be distinguished: academic programmes and professional programmes.

Academic higher education programmes are based upon fundamental and/or applied science; they usually comprise a thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a bachelor's degree (*bakalaura*) or master's degree (*maģistrs*). Academic degrees are awarded in a certain area of science (there are 8 different thematic groups – education sciences; humanities and arts; social sciences, business and law; natural sciences, mathematics and information technologies; engineering sciences, manufacturing and construction; agriculture; health care and social welfare; services). The duration of bachelor's programmes may be 3 to 4 years at different institutions. The 3-4-year bachelor's degree programme is considered a complete academic qualification. A master's degree is awarded after the second stage of academic education and requires at least 5 years total of university studies.

The Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Vocational Education and Training stipulate two cycles of professional higher education – first cycle professional higher education also known as college education (2-3 years) leading to the professional qualification Level 4 (*diploms par pirmā līmeņa profesionālo augstāko izglītību*), and second cycle professional higher education leading to the qualification level 5 (2-3 years following a first cycle programme, or not less than 4 years following upper secondary education). The first cycle professional higher education programmes or college programmes prepare students to enter complicated professions (e.g. bank staff, business specialists, IT specialists, legal assistants, engineering technicians). The qualifications of the graduates correspond to professional qualification Level 4 that allows them to perform complex tasks under changing conditions, to take responsibility for the allocation of resources, to organize and manage the work of other specialists and/or workers. It also allows graduates to compete in the labour market or to continue their education in a related programme for obtaining a higher professional qualification. These programmes are considered to be "non-university" higher education programmes.

The qualifications obtained in the second cycle professional higher education programmes correspond to professional qualification level 5. (Level 5 – the highest qualification of a specialist in a given occupation). Level 5 provides the capacity for

independent analysis, to take decisions, to design and/or plan, to organize, manage and control and/or to carry out scientific research activities in a given branch. Usually a professional bachelor's (*bakalaura*) degree in a certain sector of the national economy is obtained simultaneously with the qualification. These programmes are considered to be "university-type" higher education programmes.

Upon completion of a programme of professional higher education, students are awarded a professional qualification and a professional bachelor's degree that can be followed by further 1-2 years of professional master's studies. The master's degree (*maģistrs*) of higher professional education is awarded if the total duration of studies is at least five years.

## 7. Post graduate education (ISCED-P-2011 level 8)

A master's degree or the equivalent degree (graduates of 5-6 year professional higher education programmes in Law and Medicine can continue education at postgraduate level directly) is required for admission to doctoral studies (Ph.D.). Doctoral studies last 3-4 years full-time. They include advanced studies of the subject in a relevant study programme (or an equivalent amount of independent research while working at a university, research institution, etc.) and scientific research towards doctoral thesis. Publications in internationally quoted scientific journals are required before public defence of the thesis as an integral part of a doctoral study programme. The Council of Science appoints a Promotion Council and sets the procedures for an award of Doctor's degrees.

## 8. Grading system

Educational achievements are assessed in a ten-point system: 10 – with distinction (*izcili*), 9 – excellent (*teicami*), 8 – very good (*loti labi*), 7 – good (*labi*), 6 – almost good (*gandrīz labi*), 5 – satisfactory (*viduvēji*), 4 – almost satisfactory (*gandrīz viduvēji*), 3 – weak (*vāji*), 2 – very weak (*loti vāji*), 1 – very, very weak (*loti, loti vāji*).

The marks 9 and 10 (very good) have the same function as the mark A in the ECTS grading scale – it means that the knowledge and skills correspond fully to the expected maximum level. Grade 8 (very good) is approximately equivalent to B in ECTS, 7 can be compared with C, 6 with D, and 4, which is used as the very lowest passing mark – with E.

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