



Funded by
the European Union



Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija



Transforming Academic Careers in Latvia

A report on readiness for reform



Executive Summary

This report (Output 4) forms part of the project “Support for Institutionalising the New Academic Careers Framework in Latvia” (23LV24), funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), and implemented by the OECD, in cooperation with the Reform and Investment Task Force of the European Commission. It assesses the preparedness of Latvian higher education institutions and research organisations to advance reforms in doctoral education and academic careers, as at December 2024. It draws on evidence gathered during activities of the TSI project, including desk research, a readiness survey and interviews conducted as part of the project team’s mission to Riga in November 2024. It finds that:

- Higher education institutions are “in the trenches” of the reform to doctoral education. It is clear, however, that doctoral education is becoming more centralised as structured across institutions, as a result of the ongoing reform and recent changes to internal governance in many institutions. Institution leaders expect further improvements as the reform beds down, and as outstanding legislative amendments are completed.
- Doctoral students themselves provide a mixed viewpoint on the reforms. There is a considerable degree of uncertainty about the financial, administrative and regulatory implication of the changes. The transition period between the older, less favourable model and the new one will be particularly challenging and may lead to a lack of motivation for some candidates still attached to the old system. There are also many concerns among doctoral students about the expectations that will be placed on them in return for the more stable conditions attached to the new model.
- The financial outlook for doctoral education remains unclear and institutions have taken diverse approaches to handling this uncertainty. Many institutions hope to expand internationalisation and improve connections between higher education and the business sector, both of which remain underdeveloped compared to most other European countries.
- The wider cohort of academic staff remain subject to widespread financial instability and fragmented employment.
- Latvia’s smaller and more nimble higher education system and research provides it with some advantages in navigating and adapting to change and building relationships. Nevertheless, there appears to be substantial scope for improving information flow and practice-sharing within the Latvian higher education and research systems, for the benefit of all academic staff.

The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

Table of contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	4
Policy context	4
Outline of this report	5
2. Implementation perspectives on doctoral education reforms	6
Key features of the reforms	6
Reform progress as of January 2025	6
Recent trends	6
Progress with policy development and implementation	8
Progress on implementation within higher education institutions	8
Viewpoints from the higher education sector	10
Positive perspectives	10
Concerns and challenges	15
2. Implementation perspectives on academic career reforms	21
Key features of the reforms	21
Reform progress as of January 2025	21
Progress with policy development and implementation	21
Progress on implementation within higher education institutions	22
Viewpoints from the higher education sector	23
3. Interim reflections on reform readiness considerations for the immediate period ahead	26
Annex 1.A. Description of the readiness survey conducted for the project	29
Annex 1.B. Summary of OECD mission to Riga – site visits and international workshop on doctoral education	30

1. Introduction

Policy context

Latvia is on a pathway of complete reform of doctoral training and academic careers, aiming to create a more attractive, rewarding and stable environment to support academics and researchers. Reforms of this magnitude are imperative given the urgent need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Latvia's state-funded higher education and research system, considering demographic trends and the critical shortage of full-time academic and research personnel.

Reforms to doctoral education are well underway. A new model was formally introduced in September 2024, following amendments to the law on higher education institutions earlier in the year. The new model addresses the shortcomings of the previous approach, in which doctoral students¹ received minimal financial supports and had to seek additional funding through external research projects or other employment, often at the expense of their own research. The fragmentation of doctoral training for many candidates is perpetuated after they graduate and seek positions as academics in Latvia, where their career is likely to comprise a "portfolio of jobs" rather than a single, secure position (World Bank, 2018⁽¹⁾).

Additional reforms to the wider academic career framework are under development (e.g. criteria for the hiring and promotion of staff), are being piloted (e.g. tenure track positions) or have commenced implementation (e.g. incrementally increasing salaries for academic staff). The higher education system is also in the process of assimilating several other reforms – including reforms of internal governance of the higher education institutions, mergers and consolidation of the sector, changes in public funding policies for higher education and research and a relatively new approach to assessment of research activity. A revision of external quality assurance processes will get underway in 2025.

Managing this complex transformation requires careful coordination and monitoring, along with ongoing dialogue among national authorities, state higher education institutions and research organisations and other stakeholders. In this context, the European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force and the OECD are providing technical support, funded by the Technical Support Instrument of the European Union, to Latvia as it proceeds with implementation of the reforms. The current project is a continuation of several recent engagements between international organisations and Latvia to support policy analysis and development in the education sector, including in higher education. These include a series of projects involving the World Bank and the European Commission, Latvian authorities, sector representatives and stakeholders which supported the design, development and implementation of comprehensive reforms across the higher education system.

As one of the activities of the technical support, OECD officials and external experts have carried out an assessment of readiness of different system actors to absorb and embed the reforms. The results of this

¹ In this report the terms "*doctoral students*" and "*doctoral candidates*" are used interchangeably, even though it is understood that in the Latvian context these terms have historically had different meanings, referring to different stages in the doctoral training. In the Latvian tradition, doctoral students complete an examination after three or four years of (full-time equivalent) study and (if successful) become a doctoral candidate and commence a lengthy and complex "promotion process" to have their doctoral thesis externally examined and approved. As of the time of writing, it appears that no universally agreed term has yet emerged to describe the incoming doctoral students as of September 2024.

assessment, detailed in this report, are based on fact-finding activities carried out by the project team. This report also provides some brief reflections on areas where additional attention may be warranted to progress the qualitative improvements expected through the reforms. Other outputs of this project (such as the project inception report and the draft roadmap for implementation) contain more specific details on the Latvian reform agenda, along with a selection of relevant case studies of recent reforms in other OECD countries.

Outline of this report

This report uses a concept of “reform readiness” as a basis for analysing the current conditions in the Latvian higher education and research system that may support or inhibit the assimilation of the ongoing and future reforms to doctoral education and the academic career model. It considers readiness from three viewpoints:

- **Readiness of government/public authorities** – the actions taken by public authorities to establish frameworks for the reforms, enact necessary regulations, secure sustainable resources and monitor and evaluate their impact.
- **Readiness of institutions** - the preparedness of state-founded higher education and research organisations to implement and benefit from reforms, irrespective of their mission, size, governance, culture, or staff profiles.
- **Readiness of staff** – the adequacy of supports and development opportunities for academic staff (including doctoral researchers) to manage reform-driven workloads and expectations, build their skills and enhance their prospects for secure, successful careers in Latvia.

The next sections of the report provide an overview of the findings from the technical support activities carried out by the project team in 2024. The report considers the question of readiness for doctoral education reform and the wider academic career separately. The analysis mainly focuses on the doctoral education reforms, as these are (as of the end of 2024) far more advanced in their implementation. However, it also provides a preliminary viewpoint of perspectives on the planned academic career reforms, based on the evidence gathered by the project team. It draws on:

- evidence gathered through desk research on the Latvian context (including a review of legislation, background documents and media coverage).
- discussions with stakeholders, institution staff and leaders during site visits to Latvian higher education institutions by the project team in November 2024.
- proceedings of an international workshop on doctoral education which took place in Riga in November 2024; and,
- a readiness survey developed in consultation with the Working Group for the project and fielded by the project team in October 2024.

Annex 1a contains a description of the stakeholder readiness survey while **Annex 1b** provides an overview of the site visits and the workshop on doctoral education.

Two concise **progress reports** will be prepared before the end of the project implementation period (indicatively, in July 2025 and January 2026) which will update and further complement the information in this report. These progress reports will focus more on the reforms to academic careers and will be based on the information gathered during the upcoming project activities.

2. Implementation perspectives on doctoral education reforms

Key features of the reforms

The new concept for doctoral education in Latvia seeks to address many challenges in the incumbent tradition which was considered to have insufficient levels of professionalisation and lacked systematisation and centralisation of important aspects of doctoral study, including admission to programmes, supervision, and collaboration and networking opportunities (World Bank, 2018^[1]). Under the new model, a more professionalised approach, aligned with best international practice, is expected to be taken to doctoral education, within higher education institutions (HEIs). The reforms establish the following key principles:

- Doctoral education should be organised in the future through **doctoral schools**, established as structural units of higher education institutions. The doctoral school shall be responsible for ensuring that students have access to opportunities to conduct research, teach or engage in creative artistic work as needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the doctoral programme.
- **Employment contracts** are to be established between higher education institutions and doctoral students, paying at least EUR 1000 per month for 20 hours of study and research per week towards a doctoral dissertation. It is expected that doctoral candidates will be employed for the remainder of their time in research projects located with higher education institutions or state research organisations.
- **The salary provided to doctoral candidates is taxable**, and the candidate will accordingly be covered by social insurance.
- Doctoral candidates will be recruited through **open competitions for places**, organised through doctoral schools. Recruited candidates will be expected to complete their programme within three or four years and will be able to take a formal break from their studies if required.
- The employing higher education institution will establish a **fund to pay the salary of the doctoral candidate**, using state funds and funds from other sources.

Reform progress as of January 2025

Recent trends

Notably, even before the commencement of the new model, entry into doctoral education in Latvia has been on an upward trend. Between 2020 and 2023, the number of entrants per year into doctoral education has increased by 50% overall, and by more than 60% in state higher education institutions (from 482 entrants in 2020 to 769 in 2023 - (Official Statistics Portal of Latvia, 2024^[2])). This expansion contrasts with trends at other levels of tertiary education, where enrolments and entrants have decreased or levelled off in recent years (Table 1).

Current information systems in Latvia do not allow for a calculation of the non-completion rate of doctoral candidates, however, as Table 1 shows, the share of enrolled doctoral students that manage to graduate in any one year is relatively low, and flows of graduates are well below half of the inflow of entrants regardless of the time period assessed, indicating a substantial rate of non-completion or very long completion periods. The number of doctoral graduates has also increased in recent years, by about 30% between 2020 and 2023.

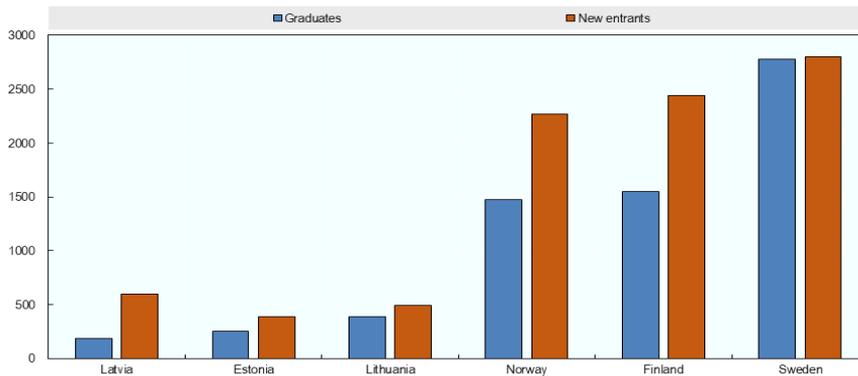
Table 1. Doctoral education is a growth area in the Latvian higher education system

Statistic	Level of education	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change 2020-2023 (%)
Enrolment	Doctoral or equivalent (ISCED 8)	2039	2032	3277	3254	59.6
	Master's or equivalent (ISCED 7)	18192	17444	16021	16298	-10.4
	Bachelor's or equivalent (ISCED 6)	44187	43556	43126	41668	-5.7
	Short-cycle (college) (ISCED 5)	14130	14344	12944	12797	-9.4
Entrants	Doctoral or equivalent (ISCED 8)	548	595	727	822	50.0
	Master's or equivalent (ISCED 7)	7107	6958	6215	6703	-5.7
	Bachelor's or equivalent (ISCED 6)	14817	15157	14174	15791	6.6
	Short-cycle (college) (ISCED 5)	6233	6327	5344	5596	-10.2
Graduates	Doctoral or equivalent level (ISCED 8)	120	149	183	158	31.7
	Master's or equivalent level (ISCED 7)	4372	4345	3730	3744	-14.4
	Bachelor's or equivalent level (ISCED 6)	6788	7150	6443	7027	3.5
	Short-cycle (college) (ISCED 5)	3245	3063	3066	3129	-3.6

Source: (Official Statistics Portal of Latvia, 2024^[2])

The most recently available comparative data shows that while the number of doctoral graduates from the Latvian system continue to lag other countries in the Nordic-Baltic Eight grouping, entry flows to doctoral education have increased recently and now surpass those of its Baltic neighbours, providing an opportunity, if managed correctly, for Latvia to substantially boost its supply of early-career academics and researchers. The commencement of the new measures should provide additional possibilities for talented researchers to enter and successfully complete doctoral education programmes in Latvia from 2024 onwards.

Figure 1. Entrants and graduates in Baltic and selected Nordic countries, 2022.



Source: OECD Data Explorer

8 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

Progress with policy development and implementation

At the policy level, substantial progress was made on doctoral education reform in Latvia in 2024. The main legislative changes underpinning the reform were completed in March 2024, and the new doctoral education model formally commenced in September 2024, although, as discussed later in this report, accompanying regulations will continue to be updated or created for some aspects of the reform in 2025. To ensure a smooth transition from the current doctoral education model to the new one, the changes are planned to be implemented gradually, with the transition period expected to end by 2027.

The project team visited campuses and carried out the readiness survey during the first months of the introduction of the new doctoral education measures. Higher education institution leaders and staff were therefore focused on resolving the immediate challenges arising from the commencement of the model. These problems stemmed from several sources. One difficulty was the delay in some cabinet regulations linked to the introduction of the new model, which had caused uncertainty in some institutions about the operation of the model in practice. For example, prior to the site visits, higher education leaders had expressed particular concern about the delayed regulations on the new employment modalities for doctoral candidates, which in some cases created hesitancy within institutions about establishing employment contracts and salary agreements with the new entrants and complicated the induction process for new admissions starting in 2024. However, the relevant regulations were signed off during the week of the OECD site visits (November 19, 2024), which was clearly a welcome development among staff responsible for doctoral education development (Latvia Cabinet of Ministers, 2024^[3]).

Another concern raised multiple times with the project team during site visits was the delayed completion of the regulations establishing principles for the allocation and financing of state-funded doctoral study places. Some institution leaders reported a lack of clarity on the financing that institutions could expect in the future from the state to cover the costs of doctoral education (i.e. over and above the allocation made for state salaries) and the types and extent of costs that would be covered by the state funding. This was creating uncertainty in some cases about the extent of supports they could provide to doctoral students.

On the financing matters, important developments took place very shortly after the conclusion of the OECD's visit. Firstly, on December 3, 2024, the Latvian Cabinet of Ministers introduced amendments in the regulations determining the procedure of financing doctoral studies from the state budget, outlining the basic principles for the allocation of state funded doctoral study places to state higher education institutions, and the procedure of allocating and calculating doctoral funding. These regulations specify the formula that will be used to disburse funding for doctoral candidates with and without employment contracts, considering the base cost of study programmes, the number of study places and the field of study (Latvijas Vēstnesis, 2024^[4]).

On the same date the Cabinet of Ministers also approved the pilot project for a more fundamental reform of the financing of higher education institutions, which is a departure from the current system of funding based on an allocation of state-funded study places. The objectives of the pilot project are to evaluate the effectiveness of the institutional funding system in Latvian higher education, as well as to identify challenges in the implementation of the proposed new model that need to be addressed. With these latest regulations, the transition to the new model of doctoral education is largely completed, although there are some outstanding regulatory requirements (see Section 3 of this report).

Progress on implementation within higher education institutions

Latvian HEIs commenced reform efforts within their institutions far ahead of the formal establishment of the reform, aligning many aspects of doctoral education admission and provision. For example, across HEIs, doctoral education programmes are now offered through advertised and structured application and admission processes with a specified theoretical duration of 3 or (more commonly) 4 years. Basic entry criteria are also converging - applicants for doctoral education programmes across Latvia are generally

expected to have a minimum level of English and a master's degree in a relevant field, similar requirements to most European countries².

At the same time, institutions have adapted the national model to serve the needs of their strategic objectives and research activities. The project team, in its site visits to the four HEIs that, together, train most doctoral candidates in Latvia (see Annex 1b) noted the significant progress in doctoral education development made within HEIs. The four institutions have each created models which are similar in many ways but also notably distinct, tailored to their unique contexts and specialisations (Box 1).

Box 1. Approaches to doctoral education across the four largest Latvian universities

In the **Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LULST)**, a new doctoral school commenced its operation in 2020 and has been established as a separate unit since 2023 under the supervision of the Vice-Rector for Science. There are currently eight distinct doctoral study programmes, focusing on agricultural, agrarian and food sciences, landscape architecture, information technology and engineering. The university creates a research environment for doctoral candidates primarily through disciplinary research centres, such as the Institute of Agricultural Resources and Economics, and the Forest Research Station, a public agency co-founded with the Latvian State Forestry Institute "Silava".

In **Riga Technical University (RTU)** a centralised doctoral school has been established in some form since 2010 and has been under continuous development, evolving from a doctoral unit that previously focused mainly on administrative coordination to the currently more comprehensive school that includes centralised skills training. RTU currently provides about 15 doctoral programmes in science and technology disciplines across five faculties and academies. Applications for state-funded doctoral education positions are organised through the announcement of vacancies for PhD positions, which tend to be linked to the ongoing research activities of the institution, and admissions are conducted based on competitive applications for the available positions.

In **Riga Stradiņš University (RSU)**, which has diversified from its original establishment as a medical university, doctoral education is organised into two main study groups – one for healthcare (admitting about 15 students annually) and one for social sciences (admitting about 5 students annually). RSU's recent focus has been on creating a "one-stop" service for doctoral students through its doctoral school. For example, the RSU doctoral school organises courses and seminars relating to important research and transversal skills, but also advises on funding opportunities, provides important wraparound services such as psychosocial supports and arranges opportunities for networking among students.

Finally, in the **University of Latvia (LU)**, doctoral education is also becoming more consolidated, especially in the context of the wider reorganisation and consolidation of faculties within the university. Doctoral education programmes are now offered and coordinated across four main branches of science (humanities, social sciences, medical and life sciences and natural sciences). In addition, doctoral schools are established for many topical areas to promote interdisciplinary collaboration across doctoral programmes and with external research organisations and other higher education institutions. Each doctoral school has a distinct governing body with membership drawn from LU, other Latvian universities and international experts.

Source: University websites and project team discussions with senior management in each of the four universities.

² although a tradition of direct entry to PhD study from bachelor's level is more common in North American and anglophone systems.

Viewpoints from the higher education sector

This section highlights key viewpoints (positive and negative) communicated to the project team about the reforms to doctoral education. These viewpoints were collated by the project team from discussions with institution leaders, staff and doctoral candidates during site visits and responses to the readiness survey. The viewpoints were also discussed with and reviewed by external national and international experts (Ms. Elina Petrovska and Dr. Alexander Hasgall, respectively) who advised this stage of the project.

Section 3 provides some reflections on issues that may impact on readiness and the capacity of different stakeholders to support and contribute to the reforms going forward, taking into account these viewpoints.

Positive perspectives

The higher education sector has demonstrated engagement in the reform process

During its activities, the project team formed an impression of commitment and enthusiasm across HEIs to make progress with reforms to doctoral education. This was evidenced in several ways. Firstly, the project team's research on the Latvian system and conversations with stakeholders in advance of the reform commencement highlighted the extent of reform that had already taken place in recent years. Secondly, HEI representatives have so far engaged heavily with the project team throughout the project. This engagement was particularly evident in the organisation of site visits with the project team. For the first round (with the four state-founded institutions discussed in Box 1 above) the relevant HEI representatives of the project Working Group, together with their colleagues, worked diligently to ensure that a broad representation of doctoral programme directors, supervisors and doctoral candidates from across study disciplines engaged with the project team. In pre-meetings, representatives also briefed the project team on the most topical reform issues for their institution. This extensive engagement led to rich discussions during the site visits, addressing diverse aspects of the reforms. A similar level of engagement is already apparent during the ongoing organisation of a second round of site visits (to indicatively take place in late May 2025), which will focus on the institutions not visited during the first round.

The extensive engagement observed by the OECD during its analysis and during the organisation of site visits was further underlined by the large volume of responses to the readiness survey of stakeholders, which attracted more than 600 responses to the questions on doctoral education. In addition to completing the fixed-response elements of the survey, over 250 of the individual respondents provided free-text contributions on the system and reforms, many of which went into extensive depth and detail (see Annex 1a). These qualitative contributions gave a wealth of insight from within the system, complementing the information gained from site visits and stakeholder interviews, and provided illustrative examples of the ways in which the current context and the reforms may impact at the level of individuals.

Doctoral education is becoming more centralised within institutions, likely supported by recent reforms to internal governance and consolidation of state-founded HEIs

The project team noted in its site visits a trend towards a more centralised and considered approach to doctoral education within each institution. It was clear that significant internal strategic planning and development had taken place across all sites in recent years, reflecting a strong commitment to improving the internal governance of doctoral education. Notably, these changes have been happening in parallel with systematic reforms of the structure and governance of Latvia's higher education system. A reform of internal university governance in Latvia came into effect in 2021, leading to the introduction of councils within state-founded higher education institutions with responsibility for financial and strategic oversight, working alongside the senate, which retained responsibility for academic affairs. Although challenges were noted in the implementation of the reform, due to revisions of the measures and the short timeline for

transition to the new model, the governance reforms have been largely accepted and appear to be in the process of bedding down within the sector (EUA, 2023^[3]).

The reforms to doctoral education are also taking place during a period of ongoing consolidation of the state-founded system. This consolidation is incrementally reducing the number of institutions through mergers, aiming to build critical mass in education and research across the state sector and improve the quality of higher education. In 2024 and 2025, for example, Riga Technical University progressed mergers with the Rēzekne Academy of Technology and Liepāja University, while the BA School of Business and Finance is expected to be integrated as a business school of the University of Latvia by the end of 2025. The project team also noted the efforts made by institutions to align its new approaches to doctoral education with consolidations of internal structures. As an example (but not the only one) the University of Latvia has simplified its internal organisation from 13 faculties and 15 institutes to 6 faculties and 3 institutes and accordingly consolidated doctoral programmes to align to the new structure.

These changes, while undoubtedly disruptive in the short term, in the long term have great potential to strengthen the capacity of Latvian HEIs to develop high quality doctoral education programmes, provide an enriched academic environment and improve collaboration and collegiality among doctoral candidates, supervisors, and research teams.

There is a widespread perception that doctoral education is becoming more organised and professionalised....

Although doctoral education development in Latvia still faces some serious challenges (as detailed later in this report), in general institution leaders, staff and students reported that the organisation of doctoral education within institutions had been improving in recent years. Recent developments mark a clear departure from the previous tradition of doctoral study in Latvia, which tended to be initiated through informal contacts between students and supervisors and progressed mainly through a one-to-one 'master-student' relationship. Institutions also have taken steps to formalise administrative arrangements for the supervision of doctoral candidates. In Riga Stradiņš University, for example, supervision is arranged through a tripartite agreement between the university, the supervisor and the doctoral candidate. Institution staff also reported that a multi-supervisor approach was becoming the norm, with new doctoral candidates more likely to have access to a supervisory panel or at least a second supervisor. This was generally perceived as a very positive development, particularly in cases where the joint supervision supported collaboration on research projects (such as having one supervisor from the HEI and one supervisor from a scientific research organisation).

This positive view of doctoral education reported during the site visits was in general echoed by respondents to the readiness survey. As Figure 2a shows, when asked about their perceptions of doctoral education within their institutions, most respondents agreed that doctoral programmes have a clear structure and path to completion. Most also agreed that mechanisms to support collaboration were provided within their institutions, with a particularly positive viewpoint on opportunities for collaboration across disciplines and interaction among doctoral candidates. Respondents also held a largely more positive view of the encouragement provided within institutions of the opportunities provided to young researchers to pursue innovative ideas.

“Doctoral education is becoming more responsible every year”

“It is not easy yet, but it will get easier with time, when all the rough edges are ironed out.”

- respondents to the project survey on readiness for academic career reforms (translated from Latvian to English)

12 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

Figure 2a. Viewpoints on doctoral education in Latvian higher education institutions

Number of respondents reporting along a 5-point Likert scale their agreement with each statement

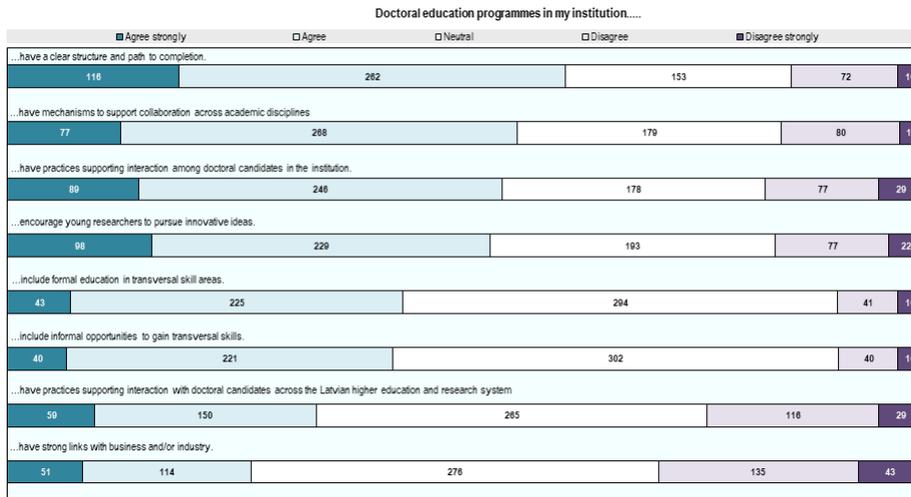
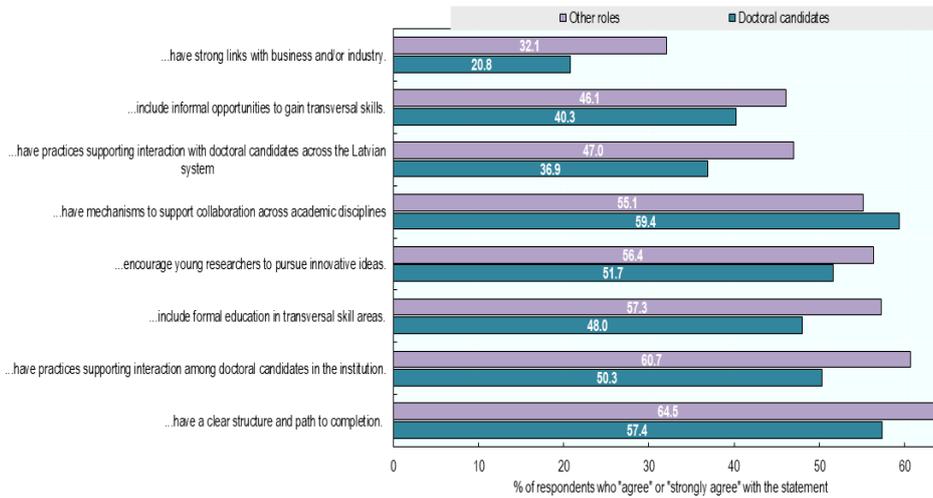


Figure 2b. Differences in viewpoints by type of role



Source: OECD (non-representative) survey on readiness for academic career reforms in Latvia. N = 619

There appears to be a slightly more positive view of doctoral education depending on the role of the respondent, with doctoral students in some cases being slightly less positive than staff in other roles (Figure 2b). However, such differences need to be interpreted with caution given the non-representative nature of the survey (see Annex 1a).

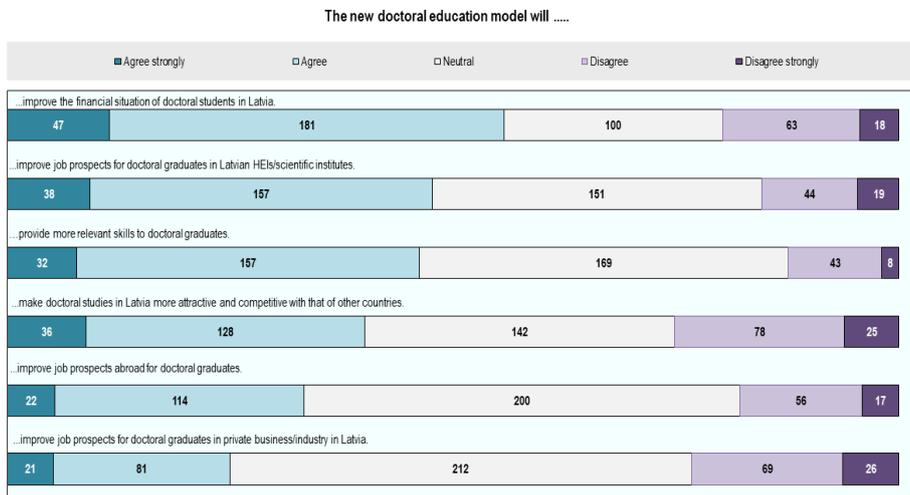
...and the new reforms are expected to lead to further improvements

In general, those interviewed during site visits reacted positively to the doctoral education reforms. A frequently articulated opinion was that the new model, combined with the institutional changes introduced in recent years, provides a more structured and predictable pathway to careers in academia and research. While the reforms are still at a very early phase, there was a clear sense that some types of PhD candidates will particularly benefit from the stability provided by the new salaries. This is particularly the case for candidates in fields where junior research positions tend not to be well paid (for example, many arts and humanities disciplines). The new system offers a more stable pathway to promotion and could allow a more diverse range of candidates into these fields. This marks an improvement on the current situation where there is a perception that only those with means can pursue a PhD in these fields as an 'expensive hobby'.

Survey respondents also tended towards a more positive than negative perception of the new model (Figure 3). The most positive views were expressed about the likelihood that the new model will improve the financial situation of doctoral students and their future job prospects in the Latvian higher education and research system. As Figure 3 shows, there is a tendency towards more neutral views of the new model, which is not surprising given its novelty. Nevertheless, the survey results suggest that there are high hopes within the system that the introduction of the new arrangements will further improve the prospects of doctoral students.

Figure 3. Viewpoints on new doctoral education model

Number of respondents reporting along a 5-point Likert scale their agreement with each statement



Source: OECD non-representative survey on readiness for academic career reforms in Latvia. N = 409 (respondents who were aware of the details of the new doctoral model)

14 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

A greater emphasis on wellbeing and the development of transversal skills is emerging.

In the survey, respondents reported less positive views about the current (formal and informal) opportunities for doctoral students to develop transversal skills (Figure 2). Relatedly, just under half of respondents who were aware of the new system also agreed or strongly agreed that the new model will help to improve the relevance of the skills developed during doctoral training (Figure 3).

Despite the somewhat mixed views expressed in the survey, during the site visits the team found that institutions were working to improve and centralise support and opportunities for skills development for doctoral students. Institutions shared their efforts to provide doctoral students with more options for skills development, networking and access to support. These included providing opportunities for networking across disciplines, such as the interdisciplinary doctoral school council and topic-focused doctoral schools established by the University of Latvia to facilitate connections across disciplines. Another example noted was the “new scientist breakfasts” organised by Riga Stradiņš University to allow informal exchanges between academics in different disciplines and career stages.

Regarding skills development, institutions reported increased emphasis on soft and transversal skills important across disciplines. Examples of ongoing skills development initiatives mentioned included training for doctoral candidates on scientific writing and applying for research grants (for example, at the University of Latvia) and training in English writing and the use of AI (for example at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies). Riga Technical University also provides training on soft skills such as communication and collaboration.

The project team noted that the emphasis on doctoral student wellbeing appeared to be more developed in some institutions than others, although it was discussed during all site visits. Where wellbeing initiatives were more advanced, the team found a prevailing recognition of health and wellbeing services not only as an important support for doctoral students, but also as a strategic imperative - a focus on wellbeing provides a more nurturing, attractive and productive research environment, with better outcomes in terms of research productivity.

“I am only at the beginning of my journey, but I feel supported by the PhD School at the University - supportive, encouraging, helping with organisational issues. For now it is enough.”

“I believe that the new PhD model is (at least in theory) geared towards making PhDs a valid and motivated choice; my personal experience is that doing a PhD alongside a job in business, even with high motivation, is very, very challenging. Time is what it is. And financial support is certainly a motivator in the new model.”

“Everything is great. I'm excited to study for my PhD and develop my academic and research skills.”

- respondents to the project survey on readiness for academic career reforms (translated from Latvian to English)

Concerns and challenges

Despite the positive outlook for the evolution of doctoral education provided in the previous section, the discussions during the site visits raised several concerns and difficulties related to the ongoing reforms. The responses to the readiness survey, and particularly the free text responses provided as, echoed many of these concerns. Each of these is discussed in turn in the following sections.

These identified issues can be roughly considered in two groups: 'teething problems' related to the initiation of the process and the transition period, and more structural issues arising from the wider context and challenges facing Latvia's higher education and research sector. The latter issues will require further attention from policymakers, stakeholders and institution leaders in the coming years as the new model develops and becomes embedded in the system.

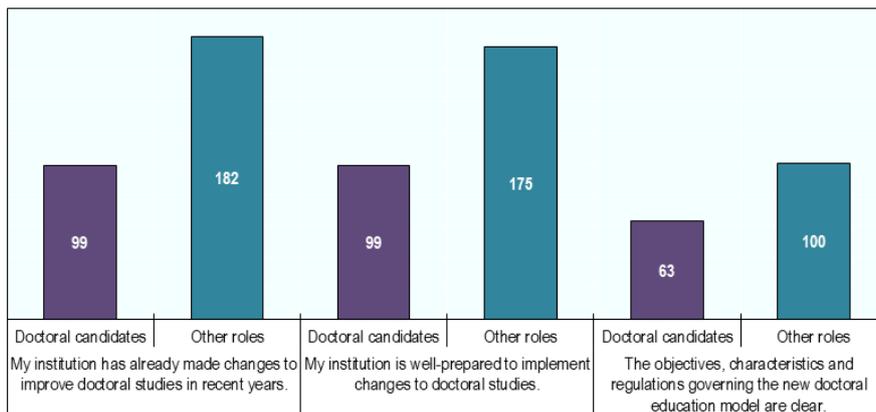
Doctoral students expressed mixed views on the recent changes

With the caveat that the readiness survey was not representative, nevertheless, doctoral candidates who responded appeared not to have as positive a viewpoint of improvements made to doctoral education as staff working in other roles within the higher education institutions, as Figure 4 shows. Some of the free-text contributions from respondents underlined this point, citing a lack of stability of doctoral study and the lack of structural support within institutions and the wider system.

It is important to note that the viewpoints expressed in the survey are more likely to reflect more the characteristics of the old model than the new model as most of the respondents who contributed comments were studying under the old model and will not qualify for most of the benefits provided by the new doctoral education model. Many interviewees on site visits and survey respondents mentioned this disparity in conditions that will exist during the transition period, expressing concerns that the current candidates may receive less attention, support and resources from the institution compared to the students entering under the more favourable new terms.

Figure 4. Doctoral students tended to report a less positive perspective than staff in other roles

Number of candidates who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, by role



Source: OECD non-representative survey on readiness for academic career reforms in Latvia. N = 409 (respondents who were aware of the details of the new doctoral model)

16 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

The transition period between the old and new model will be challenging

Unlike the entrants to state-funded places from 2024 onwards, legacy students are less likely to receive stable financial supports during the completion of their dissertations (i.e. after completing their doctoral degree examination) and are therefore more vulnerable to excessive workload, stress and overwhelm. Managing this situation will pose a significant challenge for institutions, supervisors and policymakers. Many of these concerns relate to the capacity of institutions and the system in general to manage the transitional period, which will continue until at least 2027, and during which time institutions will have to operate both the legacy model and the reformed model in parallel.

The team noted a certain tone of demoralisation in the survey comments from many candidates still pursuing doctoral degrees in the legacy model. Working alongside newer candidates with more stable conditions, there is a risk that they will be even more attracted to opportunities outside of academia in certain fields, especially if they perceive themselves as having limited job prospects within academia. Indeed, some interviewees indicated that it is already commonplace for doctoral candidates to only pursue the promotion process when there are clear post-doctoral opportunities available.

As an existing PhD student, I do not understand what my chances are of qualifying for any of the benefits of this new model, as far as I can see, none whatsoever.

- respondent to the project survey on readiness for academic career reforms (translated from Latvian to English)

There remains a persistent degree of uncertainty regarding financial, administrative and regulatory aspects of doctoral education, but clarity should incrementally improve as the reforms bed down

The project team encountered a pervasive sense of uncertainty and lack of clarity regarding the implementation of the doctoral education reform during site visits and in the survey submissions. In the survey results, less than half of respondents overall felt that they had clarity on the objectives, characteristics and regulations governing the new doctoral studies model (Figure 4). This was also heavily referenced as a challenge in the free-text responses received, with numerous respondents pointing out in detail the operational challenges faced within institutions while awaiting regulations.

Since the site visits, as outlined earlier in this section, new regulations have been published and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers which clarify officially some of the uncertainties. However, the feedback gathered by the project team also indicated some potential difficulties with the flow of information on the reforms within institutions. Some doctoral candidates and supervisors expressed uncertainties or limited understanding about the rules and policies on some matters within the institutions. These uncertainties related not only to external regulatory matters to be clarified legally by Ministry officials, but internal academic and research requirements for doctoral students, which appeared to some candidates to be dynamic from year to year and diverging across or even within institutions. Examples cited included the extent and type of publications required to be allowed to proceed to the defense, or formal requirements that appeared contradictory or were not possible to fulfil (for example, course attendance requirements that were not possible to fulfil within the candidate's schedule).

Despite these challenges, many stakeholders noted that clarity should continue to incrementally improve as the regulations became clearer and the transition towards the full implementation of the new model continues. However, as detailed below, some other difficulties and concerns raised are more systematic in nature, and without additional measures are likely to negatively impact the longer-term ability to achieve reform objectives.

The outlook for future public financing of doctoral education remains unclear....

There is no doubt that despite the increased investment in the Latvian system through the stage budget and international sources, the current financial situation remains difficult and the outlook remains uncertain. At the level of the State, Russia's war in Ukraine has diverted a greater share of Latvian state funding towards strengthening defensive capability. The Latvian higher education and research system must also compete for state funding with education and training in other sectors, which also suffers from underinvestment. Finally, reforms in many cases have been commenced using European funds, and their continuing availability of funding remains uncertain.

...and institutions have taken diverse approaches to handling uncertain conditions

In light of these uncertainties, institutions reported adopting different approaches to doctoral education—some focused on “quantity” - recruiting candidates on a large scale to build critical mass in research activity and provide adequate resources for research projects, with others electing to focus more on ‘quality’ – preferring to concentrate available resources on providing high quality support to fewer candidates.

Institutions were also searching for ways to build resources that could provide greater long-term stability in the funding levels required to adequately support doctoral education. Institution staff called for maximum flexibility in managing the funding allocated by the state for salaries of doctoral candidates. It was pointed out that doctoral candidates, especially in high-demand fields, may already be at times earning a higher salary from the institution than that provided from the state support. In that case, institutions could provide more stability by reserving the state funding for periods where the candidates salary may decrease – for example if their employment on research projects expired before the completion of their programmes. Institution representatives appeared unsure if this was allowed under the current regulations, but the issue may have been clarified with the publication of the regulations for employment in November 2024.

Another potentially adverse effect of the current uncertainties and challenges, mentioned across most of the sites, is a hesitancy in making longer-term investments in certain elements of their research capacity, such as research equipment and infrastructure or putting substantial resources into the development of industrial PhDs or international partnerships. The release of new cabinet regulations on financing state-funded doctoral education in December 2024 should at least begin to provide clarity and inform these future investments, even if the level of financing remains insufficient from the perspective of the institutions.

Capacity for high-quality supervision of doctoral candidates is a pervasive concern

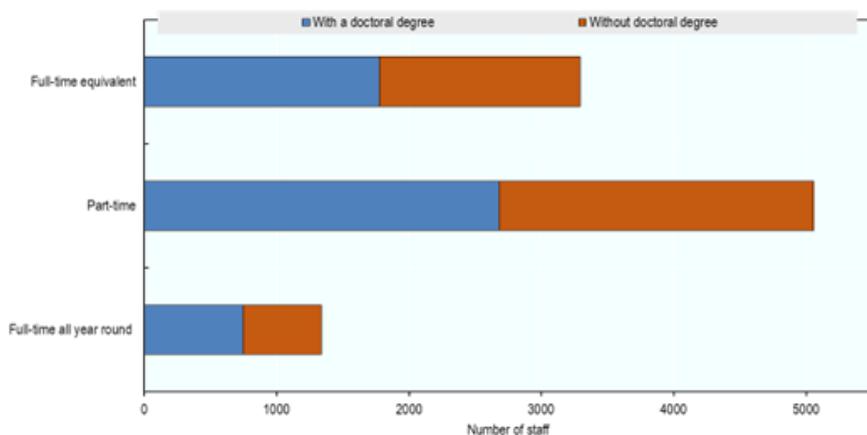
The project team perceived, in some cases, a mismatch between institution leaders', supervisors' and students' expectations and needs. As noted above, many institutions had begun to implement formal study agreements between staff and students to clarify expectations on both sides. However, much more is needed beyond administrative changes. During the site visits, while some supervisors highlighted a lack of formal training opportunities, several institutional leaders noted persistent challenges in engaging supervisors in initiatives to improve the quality of their mentoring. These difficulties were partly attributed to competing commitments of academic staff but also, in some cases, perceived lack of motivation among supervisors.

It is unclear yet whether the number of doctoral candidates will ultimately increase or decrease as a result of the new model, given that some institutions intend to focus on improving quality rather than increasing numbers of entrants. There is a significant risk that if the number of doctoral students increases in the coming years and with it the institutional commitment to their development expected in the new model, candidates will increasingly lack sustained access to high quality supervision. Despite efforts to increase their number, full time academic staff remain a relative rarity in higher education institutions in Latvia, and as of 2022 only slightly more than half of all staff had a doctoral degree (Figure 5). This means that a relatively low share of the existing cohort of academic staff may be able to take on a substantial supervisory

18 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

role. During site visits, supervisors expressed concerns about workload, pressure and job insecurity, with many working for at least one other institution or on multiple projects. Furthermore, even where supervisors are employed on a full-time basis at a particular institution, they report increasing expectations to contribute to the research productivity of the institution, leaving them overstretched and unable to devote sufficient time to effective student supervision.

Figure 5. Numbers of full-time and part-time academic staff in Latvia with doctoral degrees (2022)



Source: Personnel data for Latvia provided to the project team

Among the diverse group of supervisors that the project team met during the site visits, many reported on the degree of success they had achieved in supporting doctoral students to graduation, and there appears to be considerable variation in 'graduation rates' across supervisors. This may reflect differences between sectors or differences in the capacity and workload of individual supervisors, but it is also likely to be due to variations in practices and approaches to supervision at the level of institutions. For example, the project team heard that while in some HEIs it is mandatory for new supervisors to act as co-supervisors when they first start out, or for candidates to have a second supervisor in all cases. In other institutions this was not a firm requirement or even a possibility given limited availability of supervisory staff. As another example, some institutions were actively pursuing training opportunities for doctoral supervisors, including opportunities to learn from international best practices, while others appeared to have more limited resources available to focus on this important activity.

Different viewpoints on the capacity for doctoral supervision in Latvia were also highlighted in the survey, particularly in the free text responses. While some respondents described positive experiences with supervision and wider administrative supports, the overwhelming feeling was that the quality of mentorship available for doctoral candidates in Latvia was not sufficient and lagged other countries in Europe and beyond.

The new model provides more stability, but also raises concerns about increasing expectations placed on doctoral candidates

Many staff and candidates across the system highlighted, in both site visits and the survey, the insufficient financial supports that are available to candidates even with the new measures in place. Although more

stability is provided through the new salary, most doctoral students will continue to have to work in more than one organisation, or at least in more than one environment within the same higher education institution to support themselves financially. It remains to be seen what impact this will have on the workload and wellbeing of candidates.

Many doctoral candidates and institution staff expressed hope that the new doctoral model and salaries would create more stability and space to focus on their own research, rather than as a contributor to the research of others. However, concerns were also expressed about the expectations that might be placed on candidates in the context of an employment relationship. The team was struck by the extent of commitments taken on by some doctoral candidates in Latvia, who were working not only on funded research projects but expected to produce their own publication-ready research from the outset of their programme, contribute to teaching and tutoring of bachelor's students and carry out administrative tasks such as applications for research grants. Many candidates also reported struggling to meet the requirements to complete mandatory coursework and skills development courses, which were often not organised on a regular enough basis or arranged during periods where candidates had scheduling conflicts due to other commitments. In this challenging context, both candidates themselves and staff in other roles frequently expressed doubts about their capacity to complete their doctoral programmes within the newly expected timeframe of four years.

It was clear from the doctoral students interviewed that, despite the workload and time constraints that affect their quality of life, in many cases their enthusiasm for the scientific process and interest in their research topics motivated them to continue. Doctoral students in Latvia are often involved from the outset in dealing with the administrative and operational challenges that they will realistically face, at least in the early years of their academic careers, which arguably prepares them better for entering the workforce than doctoral students who enjoy more privileged conditions. At the same time, the project team formed the impression that workloads described by some doctoral students, carried out for a sustained period, can only be counterproductive to achieving their goals, putting them at risk of high stress and eventual burnout.

The site visits also highlighted disparities in financial situations of doctoral candidates across different programmes and fields of research. Doctoral students in STEM fields are often employed separately by research institutions or can participate in multiple research projects. While this does not negate potential job insecurity (e.g., when a research project ends), it means that there is often a disparity in income and potential future career prospects between STEM doctoral candidates and those coming from other fields.

Improving internationalisation remains a challenging prospect

A final key concern raised within all the institutions was how best to achieve the benefits of internationalisation for doctoral candidates. All institutions visited by the project team are concerned with attracting a higher share of foreign students to study in Latvia. There is a clear perception among interviewees that Latvia remains a less attractive option for doctoral study among prospective students from outside EU countries, as most talented candidates can achieve better terms and conditions elsewhere in Europe. Latvia also faces difficulties with attracting students from non-EU countries, who are required to pay very high fees and are often hampered by regulatory constraints, creating difficulties securing visas. Many interviewees advocated for a way to relax current regulatory requirements for non-EU candidates wishing to study in Latvia or provide more centralised supports for attracting students from abroad.

Aside from attracting students from abroad, outgoing mobility, although heavily encouraged by institutions, presents a serious practical difficulty for many Latvian doctoral students. Some doctoral students interviewed by the project team reported very beneficial international experiences that had enriched their experience and broadened their knowledge and skills. However, others outlined the difficulty of managing to secure time off from their work on research projects or other employment, where they felt they were needed, or at least could not manage without the salary during the mobility period. Since the new model

20 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

conditions only provide a part-time salary and Latvian students will continue to be employed on other projects, this barrier is likely to persist at least to some extent.

A majority of stakeholders, staff and students report a negative viewpoint on the connections between doctoral programmes and the business sector

While institutions reported efforts to better engage the private sector in their activities, there was overall a negative perception within the Latvian higher education system on the extent to which doctoral programmes related to industry needs. Many respondents and interviewees reported limited opportunities to develop inter-institutional collaboration within Latvia's higher education and research system, and, in some study fields, few opportunities to establish links with business and industry.

This viewpoint was also reflected in the relative negative assessment from survey respondents of the idea that the new model would improve employment prospects in the private sector in Latvia, with less than one-quarter of respondents agreeing with this statement (Figure 3), and only about one-fifth of doctoral candidates agreeing that doctoral education in their institutions has strong links with business and industry (Figure 2b).

Most institutions appeared yet not to have a clear strategic vision for the development of industrial PhD's, although they are recognised as a priority and an area of current weakness. As in other countries, practical and ideological matters limit their development in practice. For example, within companies, budgets are often approved from year to year, which is incompatible with the four-year horizon of a PhD programme, making companies unwilling to invest in them. Intellectual property issues were also cited as a major Staff and stakeholders expressed uncertainty about the best practices for establishing legal agreements on the ownership of inventions or research outputs from industrial doctorates.

2. Implementation perspectives on academic career reforms

Key features of the reforms

Unlike the reform to doctoral education which is taking place as a cohesive package of measures, reforms to the academic careers encompass many different aspects, which, as of the time of writing, are all at different stages of development. At a high level, the planned reforms comprise:

- a new system of academic staff categories, graded by career stage (P1-P4), including the definition of new practice-oriented or professionally oriented posts corresponding to the newly-defined stages.
- new selection and competency criteria for recruitment of academic staff
- introduction/standardisation of tenure-track positions
- new performance management and promotion policies and processes
- a new remuneration system
- salary increases for academic staff
- a revision of workload principles
- a new end-of-career plan

Reform progress as of January 2025

Progress with policy development and implementation

There remains significant uncertainty about the timing for rolling out some aspects of the academic career reforms. As of January 2025, the Ministry is in the process of preparing an update of the integrated concept for the reforms. This is a complex undertaking for officials, given the difficult financial climate in Latvia, and uncertainties regarding funding cuts in the education sector due to higher defence spending. Moreover, many reform elements have been initiated using European funds, after which national funding will be needed for long-term sustainability.

Nevertheless, while there are difficulties in establishing an overarching timeline, there continues to be incremental progress at the policy level on the establishment of different aspects of reforms. One of the areas where progress has been made is in the creation of tenure-track positions. While different forms of tenure-track already existed in some institutions, there have been efforts to expand the numbers of tenure track positions through pilot initiatives. In 2024 legislative updates prepared the ground for establishing a more systematic and standardised approach to funding tenure track positions going forward. The regulations provide for institutions to enter into an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Science regarding the allocation of funding for tenure of a professorship. Prior to finalising this agreement, the

22 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

university must submit necessary documentation, including confirmation of at least 30% co-financing and approved tenure regulations outlining internationally recognised scientific achievement criteria. State funding for professorial tenure may cover direct costs (such as professor and research team salaries, business travel expenses, acquisition of intellectual property rights, research materials, external research services, and publication costs) and indirect eligible costs for tenure implementation overheads and university administration, the latter of which capped at 20% of the allocated state funding (Latvian Cabinet of Ministers, 2006 updated 2024). While funding for tenured positions remains scarce, the regulations represent a step forward in terms of providing a framework for the future expansion of tenure-track.

In a related development, Latvia has also taken a significant step to ensure that the higher education and research area is open to internationalisation. In October 2024, amendments were adopted to the Law on Higher Education Institutions, which provide possibilities to attract highly qualified specialists without initial knowledge of the national language, while providing for a six-year transition period for new recruits to learn the Latvian language (Latvian Cabinet Ministers, 2024_m). This development appears to be generally welcomed within the system; however, it applies only in the case of exceptionally qualified candidates and cannot be applied more generally to the recruitment of researchers and assistants. It also must be considered in the context of the wider ongoing debate, in Latvia and many other European countries, about the extent to which English should be adopted as the working language in research and academia.

Another area where notable progress has been made is the increasing of staff salaries on an incremental basis. The latest pay increase took effect on 18 December 2024, increasing the lowest monthly salary rates by 2.6% for academic staff in higher education, which entailed a funding increase of more than EUR 2 million from the state budget in 2025. Further increases are foreseen in 2026 and beyond. However, monitoring progress on academic staff salaries in Latvia has proven a difficult endeavour both for the project team and public officials, due to the extreme complexity of the current system, which creates difficulty in accounting for accumulating earnings of individual academic staff with multiple jobs and incomes. It is expected that the draft Conceptual Note to be released in the first quarter of 2025 will provide additional clarity on the policy for setting minimum salaries for academic staff.

Progress on implementation within higher education institutions

As of January 2025, the development of different aspects of academic careers remains a very dynamic situation, and therefore it remains difficult for the project team to provide a summary assessment of progress on implementation within higher education institutions. Some initiatives, such as tenure track positions and professorships have commenced implementation as small -scale or pilot initiatives but given the early stages have not yet been fully embedded, nor has their impact been evaluated.

Nevertheless, the institutions continue to make incremental progress on various fronts. There are also promising signs that the institutions are beginning to play a more prominent role in some aspects of reform development. One particularly interesting initiative noted by the team is the ongoing COMPAC project being developed as a joint initiative between Rīga Stradiņš University and the University of Latvia. This project is developing a new framework for the assessment of academic staff competencies in Latvian which will support the transition process to the new academic career model. Its objectives encompass competence assessment, learning needs identification and professional development planning. It will involve developing a competence framework, including defining competencies at four levels, aligning them with career stages and creating an assessment system, as well as providing training and policy support by designing micro-modules for professional development and policy recommendations.

Further analysis of progress on implementation within higher education institutions will be developed in the context of the Progress Reports planned within this project during 2025.

Viewpoints from the higher education sector

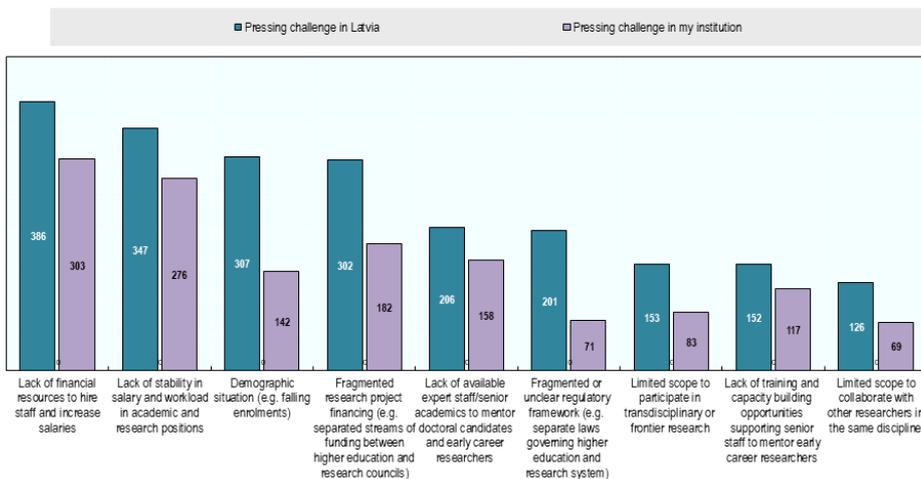
As noted, the OECD's fact-finding activities to date carried out in the context of this project have focused more on the immediate priority of doctoral education. Nevertheless, some viewpoints on the academic career in Latvia were gathered through the site visits and as part of the readiness survey. These viewpoints are briefly summarised in this section and will be further elaborated in the next written outputs planned for 2025.

Financial instability and part-time contracts remain core challenges for Latvian academics

The financial situation in the Latvian higher education sector continues to create challenging conditions for Latvian academic staff. In the readiness survey, lack of financial resources to hire staff and increase salaries was cited as the most pressing challenges facing academic career development in Latvia as a whole, and within individual institutions (Figure 6). This was followed closely by the lack of stability in salary and workload in academia and research positions. Providing more stable and predictable contracts and increasing salaries therefore remains the key priority in the sector.

Interestingly, for all the challenges listed in the survey question, respondents tended to consider the challenge more prevalent in the Latvian system as a whole than within their institutions. This might indicate that respondents believe that their institutions have been able to take some actions to partially address or mitigate the wider set of systemic challenges. The largest gap between the respondents expressing concern the Latvian system as a whole and their institution was in relation to Latvia's demographic situation and falling enrolments. This might indicate that a large share of staff believe that their institution can overcome demographic challenges at least in the short term. Indeed, the number of students enrolled in the academic year 2024/25 has slightly increased (by 1% from the previous year - (Central Statistics Bureau, 2025^[6])), while international enrolments have also been increasing in recent years.

Figure 6. Lack of financial resources remains the key challenge to improving academic careers



Source: OECD (non-representative) survey on readiness for academic career reforms in Latvia. N = 577

Komentēja [SC1]: You could enrich your analysis in commenting on:
 i) The particularly wide spread between «in LV» and «in my HEI» for the items related to fragmented financing and fragmented rules (Does it mean that the dual system (teaching/research) is mitigated at institution level?);
 ii) The spread regarding the item «demographic situation»

24 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

During site visits, institutions reported on their efforts to improve stability for students and their supervisors but also highlighted the challenges they face with aligning long-term human resources planning and multiple short-term funding streams (e.g. from research projects). Many reported a sense of being in “survival mode” – continuously searching out new project opportunities to stabilise funding but needing to also then continuously find ways to coordinate between different timelines and resources needs for each project. Finding ways to better manage and coordinate the diverse funding streams from different branches of the state and European funding will be the key to improving the situation for human resource development, and, in turn the research productivity and quality output from the system.

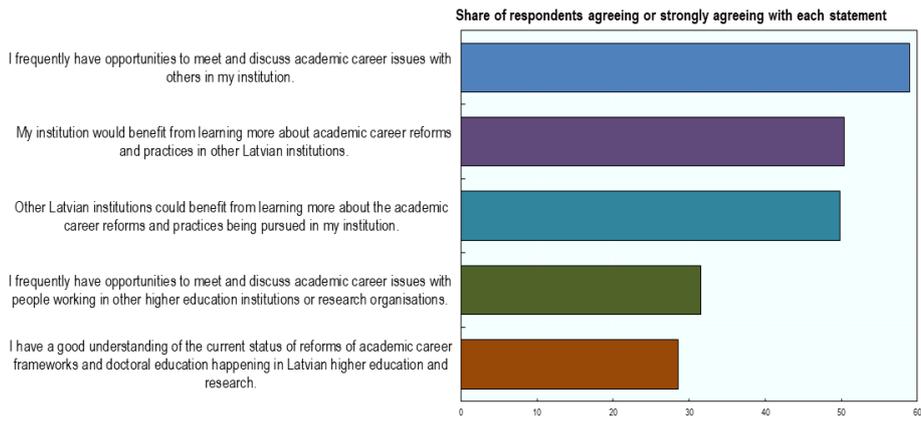
The comparative size of the Latvian higher education and research sector is advantageous in some respects

As Figure 6 shows, relatively few respondents to the readiness survey cited a lack of scope for collaboration with other researchers within the same discipline or to engage in transdisciplinary research as a pressing challenge for the Latvian system. The smaller size of the academic and research community was cited multiple times to the project team as an advantage that the Latvia system has over other countries, allowing for informal contacts to be made within and across disciplines, and making it easier for early-career researchers to quickly understand the scope of research on a particular topic or discipline at national level. Survey comments also highlighted the benefits of the small community, mentioning the flexibility of the system, opportunities to gain significant practical experience in fields where Latvia has a specialisation, and (in light of the small labour market for academic staff) good opportunities for talented and enthusiastic individuals to make quick progress in their careers, compared to some other countries.

There is substantial scope for improvement in information flow and practice-sharing within the system

Despite the networking advantages of Latvia’s smaller system mentioned above, site visits and the survey results both provided a very clear signal to the project team that, in such a dynamically evolving environment, all actors are having difficulty keeping up with and absorbing changing regulations that affect human resources issues within the higher education and research sector. The survey results showed that about half of respondents felt that, respectively, other institutions in Latvia could learn from their human resource practices and that their institutions would also benefit from learning from what others in Latvia were doing (Figure 7).

Figure 7. There is scope to improve knowledge and practice sharing on academic career issues within Latvia



Source: OECD (non-representative) survey on readiness for academic career reforms in Latvia. N = 577

3. Interim reflections on reform readiness considerations for the immediate period ahead

This report provided an overview of the key issues and challenges facing the Latvian higher education system as it works to integrate reforms to academic careers and doctoral education as well as absorb wider reforms with implications for human resource management.

Reform implementation efforts in Latvia are expected to lead to a more attractive academic environment, improved research and innovation capacity and eventually to provide wider economic benefits. In Latvia, this is a pressing challenge given the low number and age structure of academic and scientific personnel. But the reforms should also provide progressively better working conditions for staff and students across the system. International evidence shows that large-scale transformations in organisations can often lead to reduction in morale for staff, and that the qualitative aspects of organisational reform are just as important, if not more so, than the technical and administrative matters. The transition period may be an especially difficult time for morale of doctoral candidates. In particular, consideration should be given to institutional or governmental measures that could help to equalise conditions between students in the new and the legacy model.

As outlined above, several challenges must be addressed. These include the need for doctoral students to assume multiple diverse roles within the system, the potential lack of sustained access to high-quality mentorship, and the limited financial stability (though this is improving in some fields). Despite the enhanced conditions provided by the new model of doctoral education and the development of capacity within institutions to professionalise and centralise doctoral education, dropout and time-to-completion may not decrease as much as is hoped for. Key short-term priorities are to continue, as resources allow, to increase spending on higher education and research, to increase the motivation of all staff for professional development, and to improve the effectiveness of cooperation and information sharing between the Ministry, the heads of higher education institutions and their staff and students. In the medium term, improving policy planning and coordination are important priorities for the Latvian education and research system as a whole, ensuring that the perspective of all stakeholders can be gathered and taken into account in both strategic developments and technical and administrative matters.

Readiness of government/public authorities

Stakeholders hold a generally positive view of the doctoral education reform, but await further clarification

The project team found an overall positive viewpoint on the new doctoral education model across stakeholders but encountered a lack of common understanding across institutions on some aspects of the reforms, in some part due to delayed legislation. The Ministry has been progressing on developing these regulations as quickly as possible, given its limited capacity and many other competing commitments. Notably, as discussed, clarity on many issues was provided through the agreement of new cabinet

regulations even as the OECD was preparing this report. The currently outstanding requirements to be implemented, and their envisaged timeline for commencement, are:

- In 2025 (specifically by July) the state should prepare regulations governing the qualifications of supervisors of doctoral candidates and for the qualifications of members of Conferral Councils for doctoral degrees.
- The requirement for providers of doctoral education to achieve, by January 2026, a certain score (3 out of 5 points) in the international peer assessment of scientific organisations which is periodically carried out in Latvia.
- The requirement for the new doctoral schools to be accredited by the state by the beginning of January 2027, and a new approaches to accreditation to be defined, in the context of a wider transition in Latvia towards cyclical accreditation of institutions and away from study directions.

The complex regulatory framework and scale of ongoing reform will require careful coordination of legislative changes

Both institutions and the Ministry expressed their eagerness to the project team to have regulations in place as soon as possible relating to the academic career reforms, to provide clarity. At the same time, it is difficult to justify rushing the process given the complexity of Latvia's regulatory framework for higher education and research and the extent of ongoing reform of the sector. **also requires thoughtful and careful development of regulations to ensure that they do not create conflicts with other legislative provisions governing both higher education and research activity (or, indeed, the many planned changes to these provisions).**

For example, the new approach to accreditation of doctoral education must be defined in the context of national plans to streamline the overall approach to accreditation of higher education in Latvia. The project team understands that the new approach will involve a move from programme-level licencing to cyclical institutional accreditation. It will be vital to carefully align the approach to quality assurance of doctoral education with the provisions and methods for international assessment of scientific institutions in Latvia. The most recent of these assessments was completed in 2021 (Technopolis, 2021^[41]). The scores from this assessment will be fundamental to official decisions on who can provide doctoral education and in the allocation of state-funded doctoral study places in different research fields among institutions. Ministry officials have indicated to the project team that the research assessment procedures will continue, but the interval at which they will be carried out, and how this will align with cyclical accreditation of higher education institutions is yet unclear.

Finally, the project team formed the impression from its site visits that even on aspects of the new model where legislation or regulation had commenced, there may be diverging understanding or even misinterpretation of the regulation of institutions. Many institution leaders expressed concerns about potential over-regulation, while the Ministry highlighted to the project team that they have little intention of overregulating the implementation of the legislation, and that the design of the model and development of associated regulations was carried out in continuous consultation with stakeholders and institution representatives. The project team understood that further meetings are planned early in 2025 between the Ministry and officials, which will provide additional opportunities to clarify certain points.

Given the enhanced governance and growing strategic capabilities within higher education institutions, as well as the capacity constraints and workload of public officials, it may be a good moment to reflect whether the existing framework for designing, developing, and negotiating sectoral policies and reforms could be further optimised. This matter could be explored in greater depth during the next phase of the project, which will focus on developing a concept for a collaborative Community of Practice dedicated to academic reforms. It is also timely to consider this question given wider policy deliberations and reflections about the

28 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

capacities of the wider education policy ecosystem in Latvia (OECD, 2024^[77]) and efforts to improve evidence-based policymaking in all areas of the Latvian public service (OECD, 2024^[81]).

Readiness of institutions and staff

The project team was impressed by the extent to which institutions had already moved forward with reforms on their own initiative in recent years, in preparation for the commencement of the 2024 legislation. The implementation of reforms was notably different across institutions, indicating at least that institutions perceive themselves to have adequate flexibility to autonomously organise provision in the way that best suits their internal structure. The OECD also noted the capacity of institutions to collaborate among themselves on matters of doctoral supervision and research projects, highlighting the flexible and dynamic approach taken by staff to solving practical issues with reforms, and the extent of collegiality and personal connections that support cooperative arrangements within higher education and research.

One of the key challenges identified during the OECD site visits in terms of institutional readiness was the extent to which institutions were able to reliably organise coursework and skills development for doctoral students. Even after recent consolidations, many institutions may simply lack the critical mass and resources to offer a full range of skills development opportunities. With this in mind, more consideration should be given in the immediate future to ways of achieving efficiencies across institutions in the provision of this training, much of which would have some similarity across institutions, particularly in relation to the development of transversal skills. The Estonian Doctoral School example, presented in the international workshop, could be an inspiring example for Latvia to follow.

More generally, institutions could greatly benefit from increased opportunities to share practices, experiences and outcomes to promote the widespread dissemination of promising practices and approaches, given the diversity of approaches in different locations. In a political and demographic context that tends to encourage competition between higher education institutions, stimulating this form of collaboration can be challenging. However, examples from other countries (which will be further highlighted in the next activities of the Technical Assistance Project) show the benefits that can come from such practice sharing, especially in areas of common challenge, promoting the pooling of expertise and improving overall practice that can benefit the whole Latvian system.

A final area identified as requiring concerted efforts across Latvian higher education institutions is the development of robust capacity for the high-quality supervision of doctoral students. Effective doctoral supervision is critical not only for fostering academic excellence and research innovation but also for ensuring timely completions and the professional development of candidates – critical elements for the future of Latvian higher education and research. Collaborative initiatives, such as shared training programmes for supervisors or joint doctoral schemes, can help to build institutional capacity to support a growing and diverse doctoral student population.

Annex 1.A. Description of the readiness survey conducted for the project

The readiness survey was conducted between in October and November 2024 for an approximately 4-week period. Its objective was gathering perceptions on the on-going doctoral education reforms and to highlight emerging challenges with the implementation of the new measures. The survey was intended to complement the findings from the OECD site visits and group workshop carried out in November 2024 (see Annex B).

This survey was designed as a series of fixed-response questions with participants having the possibility to elaborate on their views regarding doctoral education in free-text responses. The survey was designed by the OECD Higher Education Team, translated into Latvian and programmed into Limesurvey. It was then sent to members of the Project Working Group and the Ministry of Education to distribute amongst academic staff, doctoral supervisors, doctoral students, doctoral candidates, employees of research institutions, among others. Most of the responses received were in Latvian.

Overall, the survey received 577 full responses, in addition to 42 partial responses retained where at least the doctoral education section was completed, with the overall number of respondents being 619. The response rate was considered very satisfactory but did not appear to be representative at the level of individual institutions and different roles of the respondents. The respondents mostly came from the four biggest HEIs in Latvia, and respondents had a range of roles in their institutions, although most were either doctoral candidates or doctoral supervisors.

Over 250 free-text responses were provided by the respondents as part of the survey.

Annex Table 1. Responses by job role and category

	Doctoral student/candidate	Doctoral student/candidate AND another role	Academic, professional, managerial staff (one or more roles)
University of Latvia	51	25	36
Rīga Stradiņš University	36	35	109
Other Institutions	27	43	79
Rīga Technical University	22	34	43
Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technology	8	17	54

Note: Data is based on a non-representative survey sample of 619 respondents
Source: Project survey on readiness for reform on academic careers

Annex 1.B. Summary of OECD mission to Riga – site visits and international workshop on doctoral education

In November 2024 the OECD Higher Education Team conducted site visits to the four biggest Latvian HEIs: Riga Technical University (RTU), Riga Stradiņš University (RSU), Latvia University (LU) and the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LULST). The project team reached out to the members of the Working Group who represented these universities and designed the site visit schedules. Of the 74,000 students who entered tertiary education in 2023/2024, half study at the three largest Latvian universities (University of Latvia, RTU and RSU), so the site visits to these HEIs provided the opportunity to meet with a wide range of doctoral education representatives.

The purpose of these site visits was to gather information from the doctoral schools, the administration, doctoral supervisors and doctoral students on the new doctoral education reforms in Latvia and challenges related to their implementation.

The site visits were organised in English. The visits that took place in the three Riga-based universities (RTU, RSU and LU) were organised so that the OECD met firstly with the doctoral schools and administration, then with the doctoral supervisors, and finally with the doctoral students, so that perspectives could be gathered independently. At the LULST, the OECD was able to meet with the doctoral school representatives, the administration of the university and doctoral supervisors.

The areas discussed, at the request of the institutions during the first part of the site visits, included the presentations of the doctoral school development at each institution, as well as the challenges relating to this, quality assurance, the impact of research and the timelines for reforms, attracting international academic staff and doctoral students, and using digital tools to promote doctoral study. Some HEIs, had specific concerns, such as the doctoral education experience in a clinical setting and other specialised areas, and how the new reforms would impact these.

The meetings with the doctoral students and supervisors were lightly structured, with the project team introducing topics as needed to facilitate discussion. These included the roles and expectations of and from doctoral supervisors about doctoral students, professional development opportunities for supervisors, the perceptions of support available for doctoral candidates and experiences with supervision, the value of international experience and what could be done to promote this, the role of collaboration with other sectors and the perceptions of future transition into academia.

The OECD also organised, in collaboration with the European Commission and the Latvian Ministry of Science and Education, an international workshop of doctoral education development in Latvia. The workshop took place on November 22, 2024, and was an opportunity to discuss the reforms to doctoral education and exchange views with international experts on challenges facing doctoral education in other European countries, specifically Estonia, Finland and Norway.

The workshop featured Dr. Aleksander Hasgall, former head of the EUA-CDE, who explored current trends and future directions for doctoral education in Europe, and Dr. Cláudia Sarrico, project lead at ReICO in the OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation, who spoke on what the future holds for doctoral graduates in Europe and beyond. The project team also presented the readiness survey during the workshop.

Finally, the workshop provided the opportunity for Latvian stakeholders to engage with speakers from abroad and from countries with similar challenges to Latvia. Ms. Monika Tasa, from the University of Tartu, spoke about the establishment of the Estonian Doctoral School. Ms Gro Luras, from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, talked about the Norwegian experience with cotutelle supervision and Dr. Minna Soderqvist and Dr Katri Eeva, from Aalto University, discussed the new doctoral pilot programmes in Finland and the progress made so far.

Annex Table 2. Doctoral Education Workshop Agenda. November 22nd, 2024

Welcome with coffee

09.45 – 10:00 Opening remarks and expert introductions

- **Welcome by Dr. Guntars Kitenbergs**, Vice-Rector for Science at the University of Latvia
- **Ms Ágota Kovács**, Policy Officer, European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support.
- **Mr Jānis Paiders**, Deputy State Secretary, Ministry of Science and Education of Latvia
- **Dr Gillian Golden**, Project Lead, Higher Education Policy, OECD Directorate for Education and Skills
- **Dr Claudia Sarrico**, Project Lead, Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO), OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation
- **Dr Alexander Hasgall**, former head of the European University Association Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE)

Main session: Transforming doctoral education - insights from Latvia and emerging international practices

10:00 – 10:30 Expert keynote: *Current trends and future directions for doctoral education in Europe*

Dr Alexander Hasgall, former head of the EUA-CDE

Discussion, audience Q&A

Moderation: Gillian Golden (OECD)

10:30 – 11:00 Expert keynote: *What does the future hold for doctoral graduates in Europe and beyond?*

Dr Claudia Sarrico, Project Lead, ReICO, OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation

Discussion, audience Q&A

Moderation: Gillian Golden (OECD)

11:00 – 11:20 **Are doctoral candidates and academic staff in Latvia ready for reform?**

Presentation of readiness survey results by the OECD Higher Education Policy Team

32 | READINESS REPORT – ACADEMIC CAREERS IN LATVIA.

Dr Gillian Golden, Project Lead
Ms Kristiana Egle, Analyst

Discussion, audience Q&A

Short comfort break (11.20-11.30)

11:30 – 12:30 **Emerging practices in doctoral education across Europe**

Within-country collaboration on doctoral programmes – the case of the Estonian Doctoral School
Ms. Monika Tasa, development adviser, Office of Academic Affairs, University of Tartu; general coordinator of the Estonian Doctoral School

Cross-country cooperation on doctoral education – experience of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) with cotutelle supervision
Ms. Gro Lurås, Senior Adviser in the Research, Innovation and External Relations Division, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU).

Innovating practices in doctoral programmes – pilots at Aalto University in Finland
Dr Minna Soderqvist, head of doctoral education services, Aalto University
Dr Katri Eeva, planning officer, Aalto University

Moderation: Ms Elina Petrovska, Latvian national expert

12:30 *Closing remarks and light lunch*
