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Principles and general objectives of education

The main objective of the education system is to provide all citizens the opportunity to develop into spiritually, culturally and physically well-developed, free, responsible, and creative persons. The basic educational principles are the principles of humanism, democracy, creative activity, good morals, and professionalism. The main tasks of the education system are: to promote the formation of an apt and well-bred, spiritually and physically well-developed, active person; to promote the growth of an independent, conscious and responsible person in a democratic society; to promote the growth of a person who acquires and enriches in a creative manner the values of the national culture and the culture of humanity; to promote the formation of a competent professional, able to compete; and to create the conditions necessary for using the opportunities to obtain lifelong education.

The three priorities set forth in the Latvian National Development Plan 2007-2013 are: an educated and creative individual; technological excellence and flexibility of companies; and development of science and research. The strategic objective is education and knowledge for the growth of the national economy and technological excellence. For the country's continuous and balanced development at all levels, it is necessary to shape an educated and knowledgeable society by providing a coordinated and planned creation, accumulation, dissemination and application of knowledge. In such a context, Latvia's education system plays the main role in developing creative and determined individuals by providing opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills during one's whole life. The quality of education has to meet the increasing demands of modern society and the national economy. The country's task is to give every individual the opportunity to acquire a general primary and secondary education, as well as good quality higher and vocational education. The educational process is oriented towards the individual's ability to acquire knowledge independently and to widely use it in every sphere of human activities. As knowledge becomes the country's strategic wealth and the main resource for economic growth, an individual can become an active employer or a highly qualified specialist, an employee who can achieve a high labour productivity. (Ministry of Regional Development and Local Government, 2006).

Laws and other basic regulations concerning education

Education acts, other normative acts and the national government budget are adopted by the Parliament (*Saeima*). The Cabinet of Ministers adopts legal acts of national importance. The Ministry of Education and Science prepares normative documents and statutes for all educational institutions.

The Education Law adopted on 19 June 1991 and amended in 1995 and in 1998, has been the basis for the country's educational policy. In 1991, the Education Law determined the main principles and aims of education. The law was adopted when Latvia was going through the transition period from a planned to market



economy. It stipulated the general principles and tasks for the organization of the new education system as well as the competence of each level of public administration in the educational process. A new **Education Law** was approved on 29 October 1998 replacing the 1991 Law; it was last amended in December 2010. The **General Education Law** of 1999, last amended in December 2010, regulates the activities of persons in public and self-government educational institutions and other persons involved in the process of implementation of general education, specifying their rights and duties.

The Education Law contains the main principles regarding education, including the equal right of all residents to education, irrespective of their social and material status, race, nationality, sex, membership in religious or socio-political organizations, and occupation. This right is guaranteed by the State and local governments (*pagasts*). This Law also defines the educational structure as well as the types of educational institutions.

The **Law on Higher Education Institutions** adopted on 2 November 1995 and last amended in March 2006 regulates the higher education system (universities and colleges); amendments introduced in 2000 replaced the former five-year programmes with professional bachelor's and master's degrees in line with the implementation of the Bologna process. The **Vocational Education Law** of 2001, last amended in July 2010, regulates the operation, management and development of the vocational education system.

The **Law on the Official Language** provides for the right to education in the native language and respective guarantees also for the non-Latvians living in Latvia. The State should create conditions for the implementation of this right.

Article 112 of the **Constitution** (last amended in April 2009) stipulates that: everyone has the right to education; the State shall ensure that everyone may acquire primary and secondary education without charge; primary education shall be compulsory. Section 20 of the amended General Education Law (2002) specifies that the preparation of children from 5 years of age for the acquisition of basic education shall be mandatory; self-governments shall ensure the preparation of children from 5 years of age for the acquisition of basic education in their administrative territory. Section 32 of the Law stipulates that the nine-year basic education programme shall be compulsory and provided free of charge in public educational establishments (Section 38). General secondary education (grades 10-12) shall be provided free of charge in public educational institutions (Section 47). Starting from the school year 2009/10 it has been decided to make preschool education for 5- and 6-year-olds optional again (mainly due to the economic situation of the country); however, public funds were provided and therefore it was kept mandatory. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10; Eurydice, 2010).

Administration and management of the education system

The management structure of the education system corresponds to the State administration structure. Management of the education system is accomplished at the national, municipal and institutional levels. The state and the local governments set up administrative units and education support institutions.

At the national level, the Cabinet of Ministers develops educational policies and strategies and adopts legislative acts concerning education. The competence of the Cabinet of Ministers also includes developing curricula once in four years and their submission to the Parliament for approval. The **Ministry of Education and Science (MES)** supervises vocational schools, vocational gymnasias and technical schools, colleges, higher educational institutions, boarding schools for orphans and abandoned children, and schools for children with special needs. The **Education Inspectorate** is a state control and education quality supervisory body. Its task is to examine on a regular basis whether the operation of educational institutions is in compliance with existing regulations, and to ensure observance of public rights in the field of education.

The main functions of the **State Education Quality Service**, established in 2009 under the supervision of the MES, are the following: license general and vocational education programmes; ensure quality assessment of general and vocational (except higher professional education) education programmes, educational establishments and exam centres; keep the databases and registers of institutions of education and science; carry out state monitoring (supervision) in education and science; carry out the certification of pedagogues' private practice; analyze self-assessment reports of educational establishments and monitor the development of accreditation commission recommendation; provide and coordinate assessment of professional competence in the non-formal education system, and authorize an accredited educational institution or accredited examination center to assess professional competences in the non-formal education system.

The **National Centre for Education (NCE)**, formerly the Centre for Curriculum Development and Examinations) develops procedures for evaluating educational contents and pupils' achievement, and organizes the development and revision of basic and secondary education curricula. It also organizes the assessment and approval of textbooks, develop materials and common procedures for state examinations, organizes state language proficiency examinations (since 2001), and addresses issues regarding further education of educational staff (since 2002). The main tasks of the Department of Curriculum Development (unit of general education) are to provide curriculum development in general education, monitor its implementation and coordinate the development of textbooks meeting the general education standards. In cooperation with municipalities, the Department of Hobby Education and Continuing Professional Education (unit of hobby and values education) support the organization a variety of activities outside the formal education for children and teenagers. The Department of National Examinations administers the state examinations system in the country.



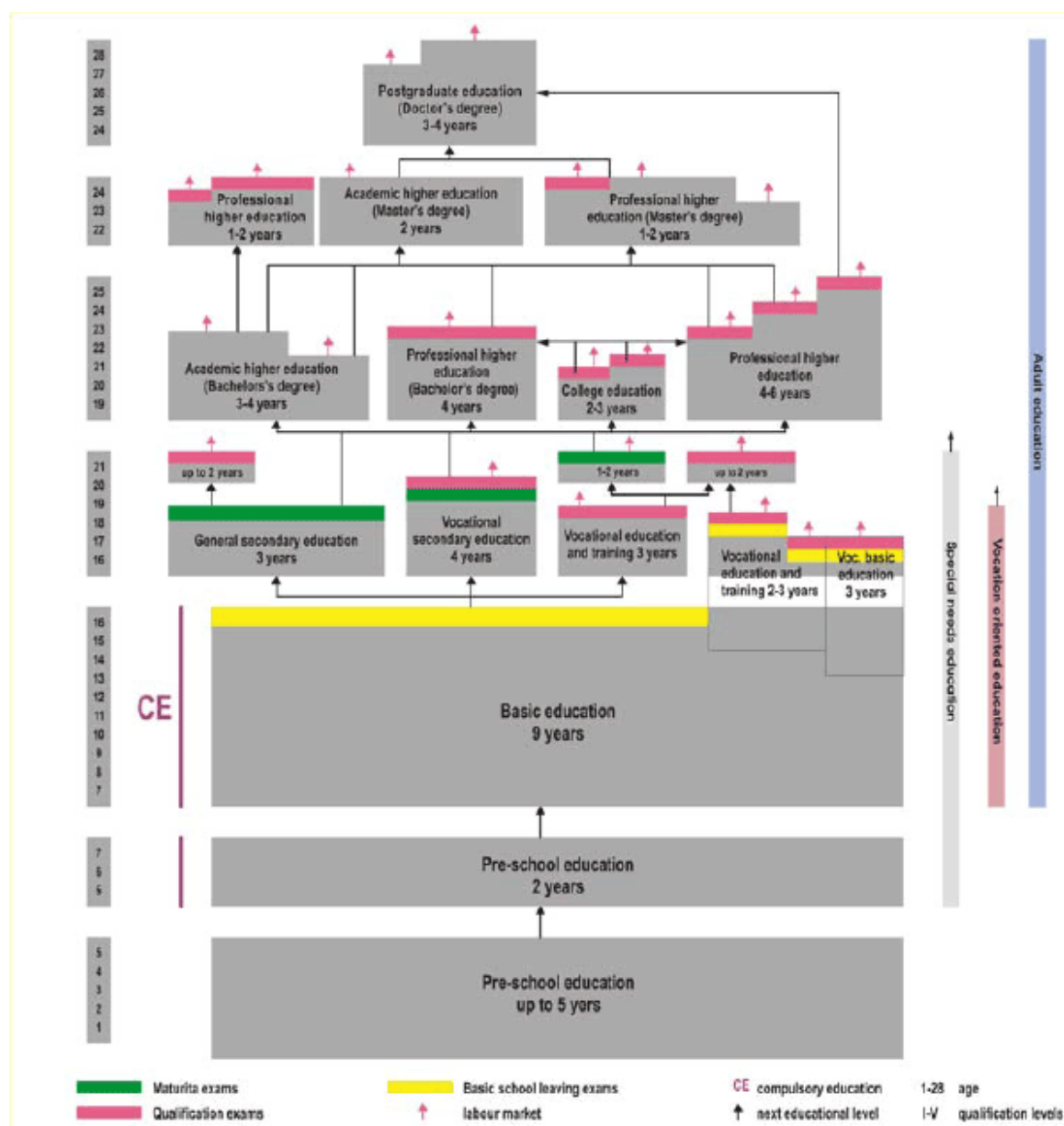
Other ministries, after the approval by the Ministry of Education and Science, submit proposals to the Cabinet of Ministers on establishment, reorganization or liquidation of state education institutions. They determine the educational contents in special subjects/courses and design the curriculum. They also design and approve the standards of professional education curricula, provide for control of the educational institutions under their authority as well as set the order for state examinations in the accredited education curricula. The process of accreditation of higher education institutions is under the responsibility of the **Council of Higher Education** and the Foundation **Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre**. The main aim of the Foundation is to organize examination and quality evaluation of higher education institutions and their study programmes using the methodology recognized by the European Union which includes: self-evaluation of higher education institutions and their study programmes; external evaluation by independent experts based on experts' visit to the higher education institutions; publication of evaluation results, and continuous quality improvement process. The objective and tasks of the Foundation are to provide consultations on issues of higher education institutions quality evaluation, and to train experts involved in the evaluation and improvement of the higher education. The objective of the Foundation is to collect, preserve, publish and to disseminate information on the quality, licensing and accreditation of the higher education institutions and their study programmes, to carry out scientific research on higher education development, and participate in projects aimed at improving of the quality, effectiveness and accessibility of higher education.

At the municipal level, the *pagasts* and the city governments supervise preschool institutions, elementary, basic and general secondary education schools, with the exception of the national and private educational institutions. The regional governments supervise boarding schools, special schools and classes for children with impaired mental development, children's homes and supplementary education establishments, with the exception of the national and private educational institutions. **Education Boards** at the regional, municipal or city levels coordinate their activities with local communities and self-governments. Branch ministries supervise vocational schools and gymnasia, technical schools, colleges and higher education institutions—with the exception of private institutions. Branch ministries finance and supervise the educational institutions under their responsibility; control their activities and the use of the national government financial resources; organize the development of educational programmes; and organize, in cooperation with the MES, the licensing and programme accreditation of the institutions under their supervision.

According to the General Education Law, a **Pedagogical Council** chaired by the head and comprising all educators of an educational institution shall be formed in basic education and general education establishments for dealing with different issues related to the educational process and drafting the operational plan of the institution (Section 12 of the Law). A **Council** of the educational institution shall also be established in order to ensure the cooperation of the self-government and parents (Section 13 of the Law).

Structure and organization of the education system

Latvia: structure of the education system



Pre-school education

Preschool education (kindergarten) caters to children aged less than 6 or 7 years. Kindergartens are established and maintained by local governments and private organizations. The amended General Education Law (2002) envisaged compulsory preschool education for 5- and 6-year-olds. Starting from the school year 2009/10 it has been decided to make preschool education optional again (mainly due to the economic situation of the country); however, public funds were provided and



therefore it was kept mandatory. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10; Eurydice, 2010).

Primary and lower secondary education

Basic education (primary and lower secondary education) is compulsory and lasts nine years (grades 1-9); the admission age is normally 7 years. Children can enrol one year earlier or later, depending on their state of health and psychological preparedness and in conformity with the wishes of their parents and the opinion of the doctor or the psychologist. Basic education is divided into two stages, i.e. grades 1-4 (elementary school) and grades 5-9 (basic school). At the end of grade 9, students who have obtained the prescribed scores in all subjects are awarded the basic education certificate.

Secondary education

General secondary education lasts three years (grades 10-12) and is provided in general secondary schools and gymnasia (gymnasia can also offer grades 7-9 and may organize entrance examinations). Public general secondary education institutions can organize entrance examinations to grade 10 (but not in those subjects in which students have acquired a certificate of basic education). Students who pass the final examinations at the end of grade 12 are awarded the general secondary education certificate. Vocational education is offered by different types of schools: vocational basic school (two-year programmes, also for those who have not completed the basic education cycle); vocational secondary school (two- or three-year programmes after basic education); vocational gymnasia (four-year programmes after basic education, also for obtaining general secondary education); and vocational school (one- or two-year vocational training programmes after general secondary education). Concerning professional secondary education, two programmes are offered: a four- or five-year programme after basic education (also for obtaining general secondary education); and a two- or three-year programme after general secondary education.

Higher education

Higher education is provided by colleges (mainly offering programmes leading to a first-level professional diploma/degree) and universities. First-level professional higher education programmes usually last two or three years (equivalent to 80-120 credits), while second-level programmes leading to the professional qualification of specialist last four years (at least 160 credits). At the university level, bachelor's degree programmes (first or undergraduate degree) last three to four years. Master's degree programmes (second degree) normally take one or two years to complete after the bachelor's degree. Doctoral degree programmes last three to four years after the master's degree.

At the primary and secondary levels, the school year comprises 36 teaching weeks, from the beginning of September until the end of May. As stipulated in the General Education Law (last amended in December 2010), the school year at the basic education level should consist of 34 five-day teaching weeks in grade 1, 35 weeks in grades 2 through 8, and 37 weeks in the ninth grade (Section 36 of the General Education Law). The school day should not exceed: 5 lessons in grades 1 to 3 (up to



22 lessons per week in grade 1, in force since September 2005; and up to 23 lessons per week in grade 2 since September 2006); 6 lessons in grades 4 to 5; 7 lessons in grades 6 to 7; and 8 lessons in grades 8 to 9 (Section 34). At the secondary level, the school year should consist of 35 teaching weeks in grades 10 and 11, and 38 weeks in grade 12 (Section 46). The lessons load in grades 10 to 12 shall not exceed 36 lessons per week, and the number of lessons per day shall not exceed 8 lessons (Section 44). Lessons normally last 40 or 45 minutes (usually 40 minutes at the basic education level), depending on the decision of the school head. At the higher education level, the academic year consists of 40 credit points, one credit point corresponding to one week of studies (not less than 40 academic hours per week, each lasting 45 minutes). The academic year is usually divided into two semesters (three trimesters in a few institutions).

The educational process

Educational institutions prepare their curricula in compliance with the State standards and in consultation with parents, pupils and the local community. The main activities of the National Centre for Education (formerly the Centre for Curriculum Development and Examinations—CCDE) include developing and improving the curricula, subjects standards and contents, as well as developing the system of State tests. Every year the National Centre hires about 1,000 teachers from primary, secondary and tertiary establishments in order to develop educational contents and tests.

The structure of the curricula includes: the goals and objectives; requirements regarding the previously acquired education; the content of education as a unified whole of subject contents; the implementation plan; criteria and procedures for evaluating pupils' achievement; and assessment of the staff and the financial and material resources necessary for the implementation. An educational institution may deliver only licensed educational curricula. Curricula are licensed (recognized as ready for implementation), accredited (tested with respect to the quality of activities and results) and registered in accordance with the procedures prescribed by the Education Law. This process is supervised and controlled by the Ministry of Education and Science.

In 1992 a system of national standards for specific subjects was put into place. These regulatory enactments define the aims and tasks of the subject, the compulsory part of its contents, and basic criteria for assessing pupils' knowledge and skills. In order to develop subject standards, work groups were organized (3-5 persons) consisting of teachers of primary and secondary schools, university teachers, and textbook authors. The subject standards were approved by the Consultative Board of the educational subject and were passed onto the teachers for evaluation. These had the status of draft standards for one year, a period within which any interested person could submit objections, propose supplements and improvements. After one year the subject standards, complete with the amendments, were approved, and its implementation in schools was commenced. These subject standards have been revised.

Subject curricula are prepared by the National Centre for Education (NCE) by involving teachers, professional associations of teachers, scientists, textbook authors,



and other interested persons. The content of teaching included in a subject curriculum is more extensive than the content specified by the educational standard of the relevant subject. The structure of the subject curricula includes: goals and objectives; teaching content; the sequence of acquisition of the content, and the time intended for acquisition; forms and methods of evaluation of the results of learning; and a list of teaching resources and methods used for the acquisition of the content of teaching. A teacher is entitled to prepare his or her own subject curriculum, in compliance with the general educational standard of the subject and the general curriculum which includes the curriculum of the relevant subject, or to select any of the previously prepared subject curricula.

In 2001 the Ministry of Education and Science approved the General Education Curricular Reform Plan to be implemented by 2004. The objective of the Plan was to introduce, in compliance with the Education Law and General Education Law, a state-guaranteed and regionally administered quality and effective basic and secondary education system, providing all school-age children, according to their needs, with the acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for their social and personal life. Standards for 15 basic education subjects and a draft standard for one subject were prepared for approval in 2003. The quality of teaching literature was also improved. The then CCDE developed a new regulation for textbook approval. (MES, 2004).

The implementation of the basic education curriculum reform was started in September 2005. The reform introduced changes and new subjects (such as integrated social sciences) in the existing curriculum and increased the teaching-learning time. A number of new subject standards have been developed in order to ensure a better interrelation between subjects and the acquiring of basic skills instead of overloading pupils with factual materials. (Eurydice, January 2007). A model basic education curriculum and syllabus that schools can use for developing their own curricula was developed by the MES and formally adopted in 2009.

Pre-primary education

Preschool education is the first stage of the education system, where the family plays a leading role. Preschool education (kindergarten) caters to children aged 1 to less than 6 or 7 years. The amended General Education Law (2002) envisaged compulsory preschool education for 5- and 6-year-olds. Starting from the school year 2009/10 it has been decided to make preschool education optional again (mainly due to the economic situation of the country); however, public funds were provided and it was kept mandatory. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10; Eurydice, 2010).

The State administers material aids, provides support for families with three or more children, and provides opportunities to place children in kindergartens partially covering boarding costs. Kindergartens are established and maintained by local authorities (municipalities), private legal entities and physical persons. Kindergartens, particularly in rural areas, also serve as consultative educational centres for residents in matters of childcare and education for preschool age children.

The main objectives of preschool education are to: encourage children's mental, physical and social development; enhance initiative, curiosity, independence

and creative activity; strengthen health and develop communication and cooperation skills; prepare children for basic education; and develop children's individuality and self-confidence. Activities involve mainly play. The preschool programme usually covers the following areas: personal development; socio-affective and physical development; development of intellectual skills; development of creativity; adaptation to school life; and practicing of the state language (Latvian). Activities mainly aim at getting acquainted with environment and social life, learning the native and the state language and literature, and learning basic mathematical notions. The list of subjects also includes drawing, needlework, construction, sports and music. Kindergartens can use a language of instruction other than Latvian (Russian, Polish, etc.), according to parents' wishes. All kindergartens also provide instruction in the state language (Latvian).

Children with posture, speech, sight or hearing defects, impaired mental development or health problems, have the opportunity to attend special groups, where they receive the attention of highly qualified specialists, pedagogues, and doctors. Kindergarten instructors normally are holders of secondary and higher education diplomas. They plan their activities in accordance with the programmes defined and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), and develop their own programmes as well. Parents who care for their children at home have the opportunity to take them to play groups for a couple of hours per day, where they are prepared for learning at school under the supervision of experienced pedagogues. In 2005 the MES prepared a document on the basic skills to be acquired by preschool age children before starting basic education in order to help preschool teachers who are responsible for drawing the preschool programme of activities for each group of children in accordance with MES guidelines. The requirements have been defined in accordance with the main tasks of the preschool education programme implementation. (Eurydice, 2010).

Children are organized in groups according to a school model (i.e. children of the same age) or a family model (children of different age). Preschool institutions can implement both or either one of the models. The head of a preschool institution may organize grouping of children also by nationalities, depending on the demands of parents. Usually preschool institutions operate all year round with a break during the summer holidays lasting one to two months (usually in July and August). Preschools that provide full-day childcare services usually are open daily from 7:30 a.m. till 6:00 p.m., except Saturdays and Sundays. Some preschools also offer 24-hour services. Typically, the amount of daily time devoted to intensive learning is as follows: 15 minutes for children up to 2 years; 25 minutes for 2-3-year-olds; 30 minutes for 3-4-year-olds; 45 minutes for 4-5-year-olds; and 120 minutes for 5-7-year-olds. (*Ibid.*).

According to national data, in 2003 there were 531 preschools operated by municipalities and 22 preschools founded by legal entities and physical persons. There were 68,526 children enrolled in preschool education programmes (of whom 34,640 children aged 5 and 6 years) and the number of teachers was 9,357 (of whom 38% had higher education).

According to the MES, in 2008/09 there were 570 preschool education institutions with a total enrolment of 82,169 children and 9,298 pedagogical staff. Latvian was used as language of instruction by 74% of preschools. (Eurydice, 2010).



The Central Statistical Bureau reports that in 2010/11 there were 591 preschool education institutions with a total enrolment of 88,226 children (of whom 71,960 children in the age group 3-6 years).

Primary and lower secondary education (basic education)

Basic education (primary and lower secondary education) is compulsory and lasts nine years (grades 1-9). Basic education is divided into two stages, i.e. grades 1-4 (elementary school) and grades 5-9 (basic school). The fundamental objectives of compulsory education are to: provide students with the basic knowledge and skills necessary for social and personal life; form a basis for further education; favour the harmonious development and growth of personality; and promote a responsible attitude towards oneself, the family, the society, the surrounding environment, and the state.

In order to promote the development of the pupils' knowledge and skills, the constituent parts of the curriculum are considered to be: (a) languages (including Latvian, minority and foreign languages); (b) the basics of technology and science (mathematics, natural sciences, domestic science, geography, and computer science); (c) arts (music, visual arts, handicraft); and (d) man and society (history, social sciences, geography, domestic science, handicraft, sports). The basic education curriculum should ensure that every student: acquires basic knowledge of language and mathematics; has an understanding of nature and society, moral and ethical values; acquires the knowledge and democratic values necessary for a citizen of Latvia; learns to study and acquires basic ICT skills; has the possibility to engage in creative activities; acquires knowledge in Latvian, European and world culture heritage; and develops communication and cooperation abilities.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) defines sample curricula. In the sample curriculum for basic school, the specified subjects and lessons per week have been set forth. Each school prepares its own curriculum, taking into consideration the standard requirements, teachers' qualifications and students' interests. This means that schools can also offer subjects not included in the Ministry's sample curriculum. In this case, the school itself defines the educational standard for the particular subject, which must be approved by the MES. The Ministry develops sample curricula both for the schools with Latvian as language of instruction and for the schools using languages other than Latvian. The main difference is that in the curricula for the schools with other languages of instruction, Latvian is also a compulsory subject.

As mentioned, the General Education Law (last amended in December 2010) stipulates that the school year at the basic education level should consist of 34 five-day teaching weeks in grade 1, 35 weeks in grades 2 through 8, and 37 weeks in the ninth grade. The school day should not exceed: 5 lessons in grades 1 to 3 (up to 22 lessons per week in grade 1, in force since September 2005; and up to 23 lessons per week in grade 2 since September 2006); 6 lessons in grades 4 to 5; 7 lessons in grades 6 to 7; and 8 lessons in grades 8 to 9 (Section 34 of the Law). Lessons normally last 40 or 45 minutes (usually 40 minutes at the basic education level), depending on the decision of the school head.



The national standard for basic education indicates the general principles that are at the basis of the teaching process of every lesson. These principles are: effective learning requires a favourable class environment; teachers should take into account students' learning differences; learning involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values; pupils learn more effectively if they ask questions and find answers independently, and if they link what they learn to their life experiences; also, pupils should be evaluated through various methods, including self-evaluation.

The subject standard has evolved from a “content standard” to a “skill standard.” In such standards an important role is played not only by the learning material and knowledge of a pupil, but also by the skills of mental work acquired during class activities for any educational subject. Currently, in grades 1-4 most subjects are taught by one teacher (generalist), with some subject specialists or semi-specialists for separate subject classes. In grades 5-9 a specialist subject teacher or semi-specialist teacher teaches each subject. (Eurydice, 2010).

One model curriculum is proposed for schools using Latvian as means of instruction. Furthermore, four models of bilingual curricula have been proposed for minority schools, so that the pupils of such schools may acquire, bilingually and in Latvian, the same educational content as the pupils in schools using Latvian. In all ethnic minority schools, pupils have to study Latvian as the official language. The first foreign language studied is determined by the school; generally it is English, German or Russian. The sample curriculum does not specify which foreign language should be taught first.

The subjects included in the MES sample curriculum are compulsory. The sample curriculum also includes optional classes. These are intended for pupils who show a special interest in one particular subject (children's rights, environmental education, health education, principles of economy, etc.), if a teacher with the required qualifications is available. However, most of these hours are devoted to amateur art. The suggested weekly lesson timetable in 2001 is shown in the table below:

Basic education: suggested weekly lesson timetable

Subject	Number of weekly periods in each grade								
	First stage				Second stage				
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX
Latvian language	8	8-9	7-8	8-9	4	3-4	3-4	3-4	3
Literature	-	-	-	-	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3
First foreign language	-	-	3-5	3-4	4	3	3	2-3	2-3
Second foreign language	-	-	-	-	-	3-5	3-4	3-4	3-4
Mathematics	4	4-5	4-5	4-5	5-6	5-6	6	5-6	5-6
Computer science	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Natural sciences	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Biology, zoology and human anatomy	-	-	-	-	-	1-2	2	2	2
Physics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2-3	2
Chemistry	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Geography	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2
<u>Social sciences:</u>									
Ethics	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Introduction to economics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1-2	-
Civics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1-2
History	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2-3
<i>Domestic science</i> [Home economics]	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2
Health education	-	-	-	-	1-2	-	-	-	-
Sports	2	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3
<u>Artistic education:</u>									
Music	2	2	2	2	2	2	1-2	1-2	1-2
Visual arts	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-2	2	1-2	1-2	1-2	1
Handicraft	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-2	-	-	-	-	-
Total weekly periods (max.)	20	22	24	26	28	30	32	34	34
Optional lessons	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
Individual/group activities for children with special education needs	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, 2001. Each teaching period lasts 35 minutes in Grade I and 40 minutes in Grades II-IX. There should be not more than five teaching periods per day in Grades I-III, six in Grades IV-V, seven in Grades VI-VII, and eight in Grades VIII-IX.

Some schools specialize in teaching foreign languages (English, German and French), starting from the first grade; their curricula are approved by the MES. The specialized schools receive extra resources for language teaching. The other schools start teaching a foreign language from grade 3. Pupils may study a second foreign language in grade 6.

In 2004 two new subjects, i.e. ethics and introduction to Christianity, were introduced in grades 1-3. Parents have to choose one of these for their children. A new integrated subject ('social sciences') has been introduced in grades 1-9 which combines contents from ethics, health education, introduction to economics, and



civics, and will also include lessons devoted to guidance and counselling. Teachers have the right to choose their own pedagogical methods and they may also choose textbooks. Selected methods should achieve motivation, activity and involvement of students, and promote independent learning habits, changing the role of the teacher to that of observer, consultant and participant. The selection of teaching methods is also made with respect to the skills to be acquired by students. (Eurydice, 2010).

Teachers continuously assess students' progress using a grading scale 1-10 and a non-grade system (pass/fail or descriptive assessment). Descriptive assessment means that parents receive a short oral and written assessment report on students' progress, describing development of knowledge, skills, attitude towards learning and class participation. At the end of grade 9, students sit the state examinations and tests and if successful they are awarded the basic education certificate. Tests may be organized in a written or combined (written and oral or practical part) form. Examinations may be organized in written, oral or combined form. The examination subjects are: mathematics; Latvian (or other native) language; Latvian language (for minority students); history of Latvia and the world; and foreign language.

It is important to note that learning achievement of grades 1 pupils is evaluated without marks. A brief oral and written evaluation is given regarding the educational activities of the pupil, and his or her style of work, communication and cooperation skills, attitude to learning and the dynamics of the educational achievements. In grades 2 and 3 pupils are evaluated according a ten-point scale in all subjects except native language, mathematics, Latvian for minority pupils, and natural sciences (in grade 4), for which a descriptive assessment is used. In grades 5 to 9, students are evaluated by the ten-point scale in all subjects. At the end of the grades 3, 6 and 9 students have to pass centrally-determined tests in certain subjects. The test assessments in the third and sixth grades are taken into account for the pupils' end-of-year evaluation. Students receive a school report showing grades obtained in every subject at the end of each semester. Usually progression to the next year is automatic. However, students who have not adequately mastered curriculum content may be required to repeat the year. In June 2007, amendments in the existing regulations were adopted, prescribing that a student shall not move to the next class if he/she has obtained lower than '4' in more than one subject in grades 1-4, and more than two subjects in grades 5-8. (*Ibid.*).

According to the MES, in 2008/09 the total enrolment at the basic education level (grades 1-9) was 187,281 students (not including special educational needs schools and classes) and the number of teachers was 20,037. The overall pupils-teacher ratio was 9.3:1. At the beginning of the school year 2008/09, there were 75,943 pupils enrolled in grades 1-4, 70,866 pupils in grades 5 and 6, and 47,464 students in grades 7-9 (including special education schools and classes). (*Ibid.*).

The Central Statistical Bureau reports that in 2010/11 there were 858 general schools (including 367 secondary schools offering grades 1-12) and the total enrolment was 229,039 students. The total enrolment in grades 1-9 was 174,717 students, and 54,322 students in grades 10-12. The total number of pedagogical staff in general schools was 23,938.

Secondary education

General secondary education lasts three years (grades 10-12) and is provided in general secondary schools and gymnasia (gymnasia can also offer grades 7-9). Vocational education is offered by different types of schools: vocational basic school (two-year programmes, also for those who have not completed the basic education cycle); vocational secondary school (two- or three-year programmes after basic education); vocational gymnasia (four-year programmes after basic education, also for obtaining general secondary education); and vocational school (one- or two-year vocational training programmes after general secondary education). Concerning professional secondary education, two programmes are offered: a four- or five-year programme after basic education (also for obtaining general secondary education); and a two- or three-year programme after general secondary education (college level).

The main objectives of general secondary education are: providing students with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for further education; encouraging the development of their personality and of their physical and mental capacities, as well as developing their understanding of health as a condition for the quality of life; encouraging the development of a positive, critical and socially active attitude, as well their understanding of rights and obligations of Latvian citizens; and developing the ability to study independently and improve knowledge as well as creating motivation for lifelong learning and a purposeful career. The main objectives of vocational education are to: prepare students for working in a certain profession, promoting their development as an open, responsible and creative personality; support the development of skills and knowledge for attaining a second- or third-level professional qualification; promote a positive attitude towards other people and the state, favour self-confidence and ability to undertake responsibilities of the Latvian citizen; and motivate students for professional development and further professional education.

The national standards of general secondary education were adopted in September 2008 and the new subject standards were introduced accordingly. The contents of the general secondary education programme are organized into six learning areas: languages; mathematics and information technologies (IT); sports and health; sciences; social sciences; and the arts. In the new national standards the focus is on the development of basic skills and their application in real life situations.

As mentioned, the General Education Law (last amended in December 2010) stipulates that at the general secondary education level, the school year should consist of 35 teaching weeks in grades 10 and 11, and 38 weeks in grade 12 (Section 46 of the Law). The lessons load in grades 10 to 12 shall not exceed 36 lessons per week, and the number of lessons per day shall not exceed 8 lessons (Section 44). Lessons normally last 40 or 45 minutes, depending on the decision of the school head. Concerning vocational secondary education, the school year normally comprises 40 weeks (including field practice). At the general secondary level the total study load ranges from a minimum of 3,150 to a maximum of 3,780 lessons over three years. The minimum study load in vocational secondary programmes is 5,760 lessons (for programmes offered after the completion of basic education). (Eurydice, 2010).



At the general secondary level, students can choose among four streams, i.e. comprehensive/general; humanities and social studies; mathematics, natural sciences and technology; and vocationally-oriented (such as music, sports and business studies, not leading to the award of a professional qualification). The compulsory subjects for all general education programmes include: Latvian language and literature; first foreign language; second foreign language; mathematics; history; physical education and sports, business studies; and computer studies. Each stream includes a group of specific compulsory subjects. Students and schools are free to choose about 25% of the programme.

As in the case of basic education, in grades 10 to 12 a 10-point grading scale is used for assessing students' learning achievement. Students receive a school report showing the marks in every subject at the end of each semester. Grade 12 students receive the school report at the end of the first school term. In the national examinations at the end of upper general secondary education, students are evaluated at six levels (A to F levels, where A is the highest and F is the lowest level). Since approximately 13% of students enrolled in grade 10 do not complete secondary education due to their low educational achievements or dropout, in June 2009 it has been decided that a student shall not move to the next grade if his/her assessment in any subject is lower than '4'.

At the end of general secondary school students must complete and be assessed in all subjects prescribed by the chosen programme and have to pass the final state examinations. There are at least five examinations and no more than four tests in compulsory subjects. Compulsory examinations include: mathematics; Latvian language and literature; the compulsory subject according to the stream chosen; one subject chosen by the student; and one subject determined by the school (provided that the study load has been not less than 105 teaching lessons).

The collapse of the centralized economy as well as other changes that took place as a result of independence influenced the very basis of vocational education. From 1991 to 1996 there was a sharp fall in the number of students in vocational education institutions. From 1996 until 2000, this decrease in student numbers intensified, as secondary professional pedagogical schools were transformed into tertiary-level institutions. In 1999/2000, there were 121 institutions of professional education, among them 74 vocational schools and 46 secondary professional schools.

Under the supervision of the MES, more than 200 programmes are offered by the professional education institutions in different fields, such as: energy, woodworking, chemical industry, transport, services, marketing, management, tourism and agriculture. All subjects are compulsory and fall into three blocks: practical training, specialty subjects and general education subjects. A 10-point system is used for the assessment of knowledge and practical skills. In order to complete a professional education programme, students have to pass a qualification examination, a national examination, or a defense of the diploma project. For the defense of the diploma project and the qualifications examination, independent commissions are set up consisting of specialists and employers. Successful students receive a national diploma specifying the title of the profession and the level of education attained.



The Central Statistical Bureau reports that the total enrolment at the upper secondary level was 87,745 students in 2010/11 (of whom 42,652 were girls). In 2010 there were 83 vocational schools and the total enrolment in vocational schools was 35,767 students. The total number of pedagogical staff in vocational education institutions was 4,261.

Assessing learning achievement nationwide

In the year 2000 the Education System Improvement Project (ESIP, completed in 2004) was launched by the World Bank and the Government of Latvia. Within the ESIP a School Evaluation Sub-component was set up in order to develop a new system of school evaluation. Its main tasks were to develop a model of self-evaluation for schools, to disseminate methods of self-improvement on national level, to produce a handbook for schools and to review the process of external evaluation.

In August 2005, the State Agency for Quality Evaluation in General Education was established for the accreditation of educational institutions and programmes as well as the certification of school heads, to be carried out on the basis of the methodology developed by the ESIP. Since 2009, the National Education Quality Service applies an objective and comprehensive procedure for quality evaluation in general education by organizing the accreditation process of general education institutions and programmes as well as certification of school heads of public basic and secondary education institutions. (Eurydice, 2010).

Teaching staff

Preschool and primary education teachers shall have higher professional pedagogical education. Secondary education teachers shall have academic education corresponding to the subject taught and higher professional pedagogical education.

These requirements are set by the 1991 Education Act; however, school managers may contract pedagogical staff who do not meet the requirements, but will obtain a higher professional education. Most teachers have an adequate higher or secondary pedagogical education. However, for different reasons (such as shortage of teachers with adequate training, unemployment in other professions, etc.) the school management has been forced to employ staff with incomplete pedagogical education or even with completed secondary general education only.

All general education teachers have to complete higher pedagogical education resulting in an academic degree or a professional diploma in pedagogy and obtain teacher's qualification in the respective level of education. This requirement has become compulsory in September 2004. Schools are responsible for the recruitment of teachers and play a direct role in the selection process. Teachers do not have a civil servant status, and their contracts are based on the general employment legislation.

As regards pre-service teacher training, the subjects to be studied have become more varied. The following courses are relatively new: philosophy of upbringing; introduction to the philosophy of education; the philosophical, psychological and legal aspects of education; environment; etc. The content of the history of pedagogy has



been revised. Among the new courses, are: branches of world pedagogical practice; historical comparative analysis of the concept of pedagogy, etc. Several courses on alternative pedagogy (Montessori, Freinet, etc.) have also been included. The general pedagogy course has been broadened, to embrace comparative pedagogy, pedagogical communication, family, preschool, primary school, environmental, and health education. Courses such as applied pedagogy, educational technologies, didactic of individual subjects, have also been introduced. More attention is being paid to the improvement of pedagogical skills, school management, growth of the civil conscience and responsibility, intercultural problems, and environmental issues.

Bachelor's and master's degree programmes have been introduced in Latvian pedagogical higher educational institutions, providing insight into pedagogical research, and doctoral degree programmes in pedagogical science. Normally, practice in school is a compulsory part of pre-service teacher training programmes.

According to the existing norms, the teacher's workload should be 21 classroom periods per week. Actual workloads may differ and sometimes exceed 40 periods per week. The average workload for a teacher in 1994/95 was 23.5 classroom periods per week. To the number of lessons (the so-called nominal hours) are added hours for checking the pupils' written work in mathematics and languages (one to four hours per week, depending on the number of pupils); class tutorials (three hours per week, if the number of pupils does not exceed 25); and a certain number of hours for other educational activities. As a result, the number of nominal hours that must be paid (against the basic load of twenty-one hours) is larger than the average number of classroom periods.

Until 1990, all in-service training of teachers was organized and provided by the Teacher Qualifications Institute. Teachers had to attend compulsory courses at least once every five years, and they were financed by the national budget. Courses are now offered by different organizations, and the financing system is different (state financing, local authority resources, private resources). The following in-service training programmes are offered:

- study programmes: academic programmes (to obtain a bachelor's or a master's degree in pedagogy or the didactics of a subject); professional qualification programmes (occasionally the academic and professional qualification programmes can be combined and obtained simultaneously);
- in-service training programmes, which can be grouped according to main subject: management theory and practice; pedagogy; educational psychology; educational philosophy; methods of teaching a particular subject; vocational education; special education; etc.

The academic and the professional qualification programmes are offered by higher education institutions only in the form of extra-mural or full-time training combined with extra-mural training. In-service training programmes are offered by higher education institutions and other institutions such as school boards, the Latvian Adult Education Union, etc. As for the content of in-service training programmes, attention is paid to methods of teaching particular subjects, educational philosophy and methodology. The participants learn new concepts of pedagogy, educational psychology, and different methods of work in school. A considerable place in



teachers' continuing education is taken by programmes where the accomplishment is shared with foreign educators and lecturers. These programmes are carried out both in Latvia and abroad (mainly Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and England).

The reform of teacher salaries was initiated in 2000. A minimum salary for a qualified teacher has risen 50% in the period from 2000 to 2004. In 2005, a programme for raising teacher salaries 2006-2010 was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. Its aim was to ensure a continuous increase of teacher salaries to approximate it with the mean rate of teacher salaries in European Union countries. It entailed changing the wage rate attraction to the average wage in the public sector. (Eurydice, January 2007). However, due to limited financial resources, in 2009 and 2010 no funding was allocated for this activity. Actually the state funding for teachers' salaries in 2009 was reduced by 25.2% comparing to 2008, and in 2010 by an additional 14.9%.

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Web resources

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School Portal: <http://www.skolas.lv/> [In Latvian. Last checked: November 2011.]

State Education Development Agency: <http://www.viaa.gov.lv/lat/> [In Latvian and English. Last checked: November 2011.]

For more detailed and updated information consult EURYDICE, the information network on national education systems and policies in Europe:
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php

For updated links, consult the Web page of the International Bureau of Education of UNESCO: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm>