

Executive summary

The performance of Latvian students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has improved significantly since the start of the millennium. Twelve years on, Latvian students have neared the performance of many of their peers in OECD countries and even scored slightly above the OECD average in science. Further, while ongoing demographic decline has significantly decreased the absolute number of students, the share of the population in education has grown considerably since the mid-1990s. Children start their educational career at a young age, younger than many OECD countries, and many continue into tertiary education. Sustaining this progress will be central to realising Latvia's goal of providing all its citizens with a high-quality and inclusive education for personal development, human welfare and sustainable national growth. Latvia aims to achieve this goal by increasing the quality of the education environment and supporting the development of professional and social skills; this in turn requires increasing the efficiency of the system.

This review has been undertaken as part of the process of Latvia's accession to the OECD Convention. Its purpose is to evaluate Latvia's education policies and practices in comparison with OECD member countries. The review looks at where Latvia stands on the eve of accession, and how far it has to travel to realise its educational aspirations. This international comparison brings to the fore the many strengths of Latvia's education system arising from its past commitment to learn from global best practice, but also highlights areas where further progress could be made. This review suggests how Latvia can overcome these challenges. It assesses current policies and practices against five important principles of well-performing education systems: a strong focus on improving learning outcomes; equity in educational opportunity; the ability to collect and use data to inform policy; the effective use of funding to steer reform; and extended multi-stakeholder engagement in policy design and implementation.

Improving education outcomes

Latvia has a relatively well-educated population and its students perform relatively well in international comparisons. Though the share of top performers in PISA 2012 was lower than in many OECD countries, compared

to the OECD average, Latvia has a smaller share of students lacking basic skills. Latvia aims to further improve the quality and equity of its education system through a range of reform measures on several fronts.

The single most important step Latvia could take to improve learning outcomes will be to establish the conditions for high-quality teaching and leadership to thrive. Latvia has already taken several steps in this direction. However, it should consider adopting a more systematic approach to reform with a comprehensive medium- to long-term human resource strategy for the education system. This should include raising salaries to nationally competitive levels, but as part of a well-designed career structure founded on teacher and school leadership standards that guide appraisals and inform professional development. It should develop a coherent assessment and evaluation framework built around educational goals and improving student learning and invest in teachers' assessment capacity. The ongoing reforms of vocational and tertiary education which are essential for improving the quality and (labour market) relevance of education should also be fully implemented.

Promoting equity in educational opportunities

Though Latvia has made good progress in expanding access and improving learning outcomes, the data suggest there still are considerable disparities in learning opportunities. Despite a range of policies, from compulsory participation in early childhood education and care for 5-6 year-olds to ensuring free basic and upper secondary education, there are marked differences in student performance between rural and urban schools, while students with special education needs and/or from at-risk groups do not benefit equally from quality learning opportunities. Reducing inequities will require greater and more targeted efforts to support students in rural areas and/or at risk of social exclusion. Latvia needs to strengthen the quality of teaching in rural schools and continue its efforts to integrate students with special needs in regular schools. Furthermore, at the tertiary level the funding model currently under development should be more equitable, moving away from the purely merit-based selection system to ensure promising disadvantaged students have access to free study places.

Gathering and using data to guide skill development

Latvia is committed to improving the quality and use of data for evidence-based policy making. It recognises the need to improve its education information system and the strategic use of research to inform its reform agenda. The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) intends to develop a comprehensive quality monitoring system, but only by 2023.

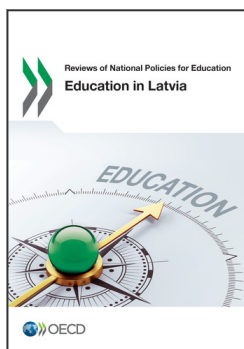
It should consider bringing forward the development of this system in order to enhance its capacity for evidence-based policy making and as such help Latvia achieve its education objectives by the year 2020. Vocational education and tertiary education have benefited greatly in recent years from a series of important research reports that have acted as a catalyst for education reforms. Such efforts should be continued and expanded to other levels of education. MoES should further strengthen its own capacity for data collection and analysis, and consider supplementing it with an independent research institution. At the school level there is much scope to strengthen self-evaluation and teacher appraisal to foster sustained school improvements.

Ensuring adequate and efficient education funding

Latvia's public expenditure on education and per-student funding at all levels are lower than many OECD countries which means that efficiency in education spending is especially important to make the most of what is invested. In the longer run, there is a risk that education spending will prove inadequate to achieve the desired outcomes of equity and quality, especially given the pressure to invest in other social services. Long-term efficiency gains depend on the success of the reforms in school and tertiary education funding which Latvia has already embarked on and will require making clear spending choices. Raising teacher salaries to nationally competitive levels will improve recruitment but will necessitate bigger class sizes and higher student-teacher ratios. The demographic decline will require Latvia to revisit the education system's capacity, including numbers of schools and tertiary education institutions, and staffing levels.

Engaging stakeholders in designing and implementing policy

Developing the professional and social skills of Latvia's citizens requires the full commitment of all stakeholders within the system and beyond. Latvia has a well-established culture of involving key stakeholders in the design and implementation of education policies and mechanisms to achieve this. There is scope for improvement, however. Realising Latvia's lifelong learning ambitions will require stronger co-ordination and collaboration across national and local levels, involving key stakeholders such as vocational schools, companies and non-governmental organisations. The recent structural involvement of social partners in vocational education through the Sectoral Expert Councils is a positive development, but it will take time and additional effort for this collaboration to flourish. At the tertiary level, there is much to be gained from further involving external stakeholders, such as companies or international researchers, in the governance of institutions.



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