



Weekly Briefing

Latvia political briefing:
Status-quo of the Latvian Education and Science Policy
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Status-quo of the Latvian Education and Science Policy

Summary

Latvia's education and science policy reforms, aiming to foster a competitive knowledge-based society, are captured in this Latvia Political Briefing. The education system, encompassing equitable access for all residents, is supported by key legislation and aims to enhance foundational skills from early childhood to secondary levels, including vocational and higher education aligned with the Bologna Process. Language provisions, financial structures, and educational standards are designed to promote inclusion and quality. In science, Latvia aligns with global trends and local challenges, focusing on research excellence and innovation, supported by strategic documents for synergy with broader goals. The debate on banning mobile devices in schools reflects a tension between technological benefits and distractions. Changes in the doctoral model, introducing remuneration, aim to reduce dropout rates and improve research quality. These reforms underscore the importance of integrating technology responsibly and ensuring academic rigor, presenting both opportunities and challenges for Latvia's educational advancement.

Introduction

As nations around the world strive to adapt their education systems and scientific policies to the ever-evolving demands of the 21st century, Latvia is taking proactive steps to refine its approach to learning and research. This Latvia Political Briefing presents an overview of Latvia's current educational framework, a critical examination of its science policy, and the ongoing debate over the role of technology in classrooms. Through these lenses, it will be explored how Latvia seeks to align its educational and scientific endeavours with global trends while addressing unique national challenges—efforts that are emblematic of the country's dedication to fostering a competitive, knowledge-driven society.

Overview of the Education Framework in Latvia

The educational system in the Republic of Latvia is underpinned by a comprehensive legal and institutional framework designed to ensure equitable access to education across a broad spectrum of the population. This inclusivity extends to citizens, non-citizens, European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) nationals, Swiss citizens, permanent residents with appropriate permits, stateless individuals with recognized travel documents, third-country nationals with valid residency, refugees, those with alternative or temporary protection statuses, all of whom enjoy equal educational rights within Latvia.

The governance of the education system in Latvia is stratified across national, municipal, and institutional levels. Legislative pillars such as the Law on Education (1998), Law on General Education (1999), Law on Vocational Education (1999), Law on Higher Education Establishments (1995), and the Law on Scientific Activity (2005) constitute the backbone of the educational framework, setting out definitions, principles, and the competencies of governing bodies. The national decision-making apparatus encompasses the Parliament (Saeima), the Cabinet of Ministers, and specifically, the Ministry of Education and Science, which spearheads policy development and oversees educational standards and teacher training protocols.

Latvian, as the state language, is the medium of instruction in public educational establishments, although provisions are made for education in minority languages, with a stipulation for concurrent state language learning. This principle extends to the administration of vocational qualification exams, and the preparation and presentation of academic theses, with certain legislative exceptions allowing for other languages.

The financing of education in Latvia is characterized by a mix of state and municipal budget allocations covering tuition fees for pre-school, basic, and secondary education in public institutions. Higher education institutions, while receiving state support for designated student placements, also have the autonomy to levy tuition fees. A notable aspect of the Latvian education system is the provision for state-guaranteed loans for higher education students, alongside equitable fee structures for EU nationals and their dependents, mirroring those for Latvian citizens and permanent residents.

The pre-school education segment is geared towards children from the age of 1.5 years, with compulsory pre-primary education programs for five and six-year-olds not enrolled in kindergartens, aiming at holistic developmental outcomes. Similarly, the basic education

framework mandates a nine-year, single-structure education from age seven, focusing on foundational knowledge and skills necessary for personal and societal engagement. This framework allows for diverse institutional names and includes provisions for special needs education and preparatory vocational training.

Secondary education bifurcates into academic and vocational pathways, tailored respectively towards university preparation and direct workforce entry or further education. The curriculum is diversified into profiles reflecting general, humanities and social sciences, mathematics, natural science, technical, and vocational preparatory emphases, ensuring a broad spectrum of educational and vocational trajectories.

Vocational education at the secondary level is designed to meet labor market demands, embedding general education subjects within vocational curricula to facilitate continued education or entry into higher education programs. The system allows for a seamless transition from basic vocational training through secondary vocational education to tertiary levels, predicated on a rigorous assessment regime that encompasses both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

Latvia's higher education structure is aligned with the Bologna Process, offering academic and professional programs across three cycles - bachelor's, master's, and doctoral - with a binary distinction between university and non-university institutions. This framework supports a diverse range of academic and professional aspirations, facilitated by a non-centralized admission process that values national centralized secondary education examination results. The post-secondary non-tertiary segment offers further vocational training options, enhancing professional skills and qualifications for graduates of secondary education programs.

The assessment of educational achievements in Latvia employs a ten-point grading system, correlating closely with the ECTS scale, to ensure transparency and comparability of student performance across educational levels and institutions. This robust educational architecture reflects Latvia's commitment to fostering a knowledge-based society, underpinned by equitable access, rigorous standards, and a responsive governance framework.

Science Policy in Latvia

Latvia has adopted a strategic approach to science, technology development, and innovation through its foundational guidelines for the period of 2021–2027. This framework

aims to enhance Latvia's position in the global research and innovation landscape by fostering research excellence, increasing innovation capacity, and ensuring the societal and economic value of knowledge and research.

Latvia's science policy is designed within both global trends and local challenges. Recognizing the importance of aligning with international objectives like the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and the EU's Green Deal, Latvia also acknowledges the necessity of addressing its specific national needs, such as demographic trends, the requirement for a highly skilled workforce, and the need for digital transformation across all sectors.

The current science policy outlines two primary objectives:

1. **Developing research excellence and international cooperation:** Efforts will focus on human capital development, research infrastructure, international mobility, and the management and financing of the research system. This includes introducing a doctoral model, reforming academic career systems, and improving collaboration with industry and European research spaces.
2. **Enhancing innovation capacity:** This involves the digital transformation of the research and innovation system, knowledge and technology transfer, collaboration between research and the public sector, and science communication. The goal is to improve the transfer of knowledge to society, increase the application of research in addressing social challenges, and stimulate a culture of innovation.

Latvia's science policy is intricately linked with various national and EU-level strategic documents, ensuring coherence and synergy. These include Latvia's Long-term Sustainability Strategy up to 2030, the National Development Plan 2021–2027, the Education Development Guidelines, and the National Industrial Policy Guidelines, among others. The integration with these documents ensures that Latvia's science policy is not only aligned with broader developmental goals but also contributes significantly to achieving them.

The policy sets clear outcomes and performance indicators, aiming for significant advancements in research quality, international collaboration, innovation capacity, and the societal and economic impact of research and development activities. These include increased research funding, enhanced international visibility of Latvian research, and improved integration of research outcomes into economic and societal applications.

Latvia's science policy for 2021–2027 is a comprehensive and strategic framework aimed at propelling the country towards becoming a knowledge-based and innovation-driven society. By focusing on research excellence, international cooperation, and enhancing innovation capacity, Latvia aims to not only address its national challenges but also contribute to global scientific advancement and sustainable development.

Petition to Ban Use of Mobile Devices in Primary Schools

In the Latvian Parliament, the possibility of prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices in primary and elementary schools is currently under consideration. This deliberation was initiated in response to a proposal on the platform "ManaBalss.lv," aimed at banning personal electronic devices in these educational settings. The proposer of this initiative, Jānis Viegliņš, the principal of Valles Primary School, hopes that such a measure would enhance students' academic performance and their ability to concentrate on their studies, particularly among younger children.

The initiative was spurred by observations of students frequently engaging with their phones during breaks and struggling to set aside their devices once class begins, resulting in decreased concentration and learning efficacy. In advocating for this ban, Viegliņš suggests that it would allow students to focus more on their school environment rather than the virtual world, thereby improving emotional resilience and learning capabilities.

Although Valles Primary School has classroom guidelines discouraging phone use during lessons, these are not formally inscribed in the internal regulations. The principal advocates for a unified law across the country to prevent any single school from becoming a negative example for not having a clear policy on this issue.

Viegliņš argues for a centralized regulation that would uniformly prohibit electronic devices in primary schools. He acknowledges the conversation about autonomy, suggesting that while schools may permit devices for specific functions or tasks, a unified stance against general use is necessary.

This initiative was also influenced by a 2022 UNESCO report, which indicated that excessive smartphone use hampers learning acquisition and adversely affects children's emotional stability. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO, children are unable to concentrate on their studies for at least 20 minutes following

the use of a smartphone. However, UNESCO Latvia has clarified that the report does not call for member states to enact specific actions, such as banning electronic devices in schools.

In Latvia, the Health Inspection's recommendations advise that children up to 17 years of age should not exceed two hours of screen time per day. Restrictions on smartphone use in schools have already been implemented in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Rūdolf Kalvāns, director of Sigulda State Gymnasium and head of the Latvian Association of Education Managers, acknowledges that the habit of using smartphones is a significant issue in high school classes as well, not just in primary and elementary schools. Some schools attempt to limit this by creating special boxes where students can store their phones before class starts.

Kalvāns emphasizes the importance of practical enforcement and accountability measures if a ban were to be implemented, stressing that penalties should lead to an understanding and cessation of the prohibited behavior.

Silvija Reinberga, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Science from the "New Unity" party, notes that the Parliament already has several initiatives addressing the issue of electronic device usage and overall school safety. The Education Committee has held several meetings to work on various amendments, including restrictions on electronic devices. The committee's working group has reached a conceptual agreement that schools should establish their policies regarding the use of electronic devices.

However, a total ban is not being discussed, as educators use electronic devices for interactive activities that require, for example, scanning a QR code. Reinberga highlights the importance of using digitalization positively and critically, allowing for learning while managing information. The commission suggests that schools have the authority to set unique policies on how electronic devices are used, whether they are kept in lockers or bags, or if their use is restricted during breaks. The situation varies across schools, with some directors stating that the issue lies not with device use during lessons but with how they are used during breaks.

The Saeima's Mandate, Ethics, and Submissions Committee has unanimously decided to forward the citizen's initiative for further consideration to the Education, Culture, and Science Committee.

Policy Changes for Development of Science Industry

In Latvia, a novel doctoral program model is being implemented, wherein doctoral candidates will receive remuneration during their studies. On March 14, 2024, the Latvian Parliament adopted amendments to the Higher Education Law, introducing a new doctoral model, including a revised funding mechanism and providing doctoral students with remuneration for the duration of their studies, as well as establishing a unified doctoral process, according to information provided by the Parliamentary Press Service.

Despite the number of doctoral candidates being commensurate with Latvia's research capacity, the country ranks last in the European Union in terms of the number of doctoral degrees awarded, due to a high dropout rate among doctoral candidates. This situation was highlighted to the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Culture, and Science by the bill's authors from the Ministry of Education and Science, underscoring the necessity to alter the doctoral model.

A significant reason for the high dropout rate among doctoral candidates, as emphasized by the bill's authors, is the current funding model, which does not cover the actual costs of implementing doctoral programs and thereby threatens the sustainability of doctoral studies and does not encourage an increase in quality. The low income level of doctoral candidates – typically a stipend – adversely affects the amount of time a candidate can dedicate to their studies, the quality of their dissertation work, and, consequently, the number of doctoral graduates, which in turn affects the renewal of academic staff and scientific workers in the higher education and science sector.

The law has been supplemented with a new section on doctoral candidate employment. This stipulates that doctoral candidates will enter an employment contract for the performance of academic work to achieve study results. The new compensation regime will apply to doctoral students starting their studies in the autumn of this year, with the Cabinet of Ministers determining the method for calculating compensation. Doctoral candidates who began their studies prior to this change will still be eligible for a stipend under the previous system.

Doctoral study programs must now be organized within doctoral schools, which require a unified approach, and universities can establish them only if they demonstrate adequate performance in the specific field. Doctoral schools will ensure the implementation of doctoral study programs aligned with strategic specializations, including the development and defense

of dissertation work, theoretical research, or artistic creation, as well as the process of awarding doctoral degrees.

The amendments also clarify norms regarding the awarding of the Doctor of Science degree and the Doctoral Council, which is responsible for evaluating dissertation work and awarding the Doctor of Science degree. Similarly, the issue of awarding the professional doctoral degree in the arts and the State Examination Commission, responsible for evaluating the necessary theoretical research and artistic creative work for obtaining this degree, has been regulated.

Furthermore, the university will now have the right to annul a higher education diploma if it was obtained by violating academic integrity, including through dishonest conduct such as plagiarism.

As noted in the annotation to the bill, over the past two decades, the role and tasks of doctoral education have significantly changed, particularly in Europe. Doctoral education has become an essential link between the European higher education and research area, with its primary task being to provide individuals with doctoral degrees the best qualification for creating, implementing, and disseminating new knowledge and innovations.

Additionally, the Parliament adopted related amendments to the Law on Scientific Activity. These amendments will take effect on May 1 of this year, but the new doctoral model will be fully implemented from January 1, 2027.

Conclusions

The proposed changes within Latvia's educational and scientific system, aimed at enhancing the quality of education, fostering research excellence, and integrating technology responsibly, signify a progressive shift towards a more inclusive, innovative, and quality-driven framework. These initiatives could potentially elevate Latvia's position in the global education and research landscape, promoting a knowledge-based society that is well-aligned with international standards and local needs.

The introduction of remuneration for doctoral candidates represents a pivotal move towards improving the sustainability and appeal of doctoral programs in Latvia. By addressing the financial challenges faced by doctoral students, this policy could significantly reduce

dropout rates, increase the quality of doctoral research, and subsequently bolster the number of qualified researchers and academics. This, in turn, could enhance the overall quality of higher education and scientific research within the country, contributing to the development of a robust academic and scientific workforce.

Moreover, the parliamentary consideration to restrict the use of personal electronic devices in primary and elementary schools underscores a commitment to safeguarding the educational environment from potential distractions and fostering a more conducive learning atmosphere. By potentially mitigating the adverse effects of excessive screen time, such a policy could enhance students' focus, engagement, and emotional resilience, thereby improving educational outcomes.

However, these proposed changes also carry inherent risks and challenges. The prohibition of electronic devices in schools, while intended to enhance concentration and learning, might overlook the educational benefits of technology, and hinder the development of digital literacy skills among students. This policy could potentially create a disconnect with modern educational practices that increasingly integrate technology for interactive learning. Moreover, the enforcement of such a ban could present practical challenges, necessitating clear guidelines and measures to ensure its effectiveness without negatively impacting the learning experience.

The reform in doctoral education, while addressing financial barriers, must also ensure that the quality of research and academic rigor remains paramount. There is a risk that financial incentives could shift the focus from quality to quantity, thereby diluting the academic integrity and excellence that the policy seeks to promote. Furthermore, the transition to this new model requires careful planning and resources to avoid any disruption to current and prospective doctoral candidates.

In conclusion, while the proposed changes to Latvia's education and science system are poised to make significant contributions to the country's academic and research capabilities, careful consideration and management of the potential risks are essential. Balancing the integration of technology in education, ensuring the quality of doctoral research, and providing adequate support and resources will be critical in realizing the full potential of these reforms. Successful implementation of these policies could serve as a model for educational and scientific development, aligning Latvia more closely with global trends and reinforcing its commitment to fostering a knowledge-based and innovative society.

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