



Latvia: System of Education

2007

euro  guidance



General background

Latvia is a small country in north-eastern Europe on the coast of the Baltic Sea. The landscape of the country is marked by lowland plains, rolling hills and thousands of rivers and lakes. Most of the territory of 64,589 sq. km or 24,937 sq. miles is less than 100 metres above sea level. Latvia has a moderate oceanic climate with average summer temperatures of +20 C and winter temperatures of -5C, but extremes of +30 and -25 or more are not unusual. Latvia is not richly endowed with natural resources, so its future depends in large measure on intellectual capacity, which is regarded as the nation's greatest resource.

The name "Latvia" originates from the ancient Latgalians, one of four eastern Baltic tribes that formed the ethnic core of the Latvian people (ca. 8th-12th centuries A.D.). The region subsequently came under the control of Germans, Poles, Swedes, and finally, Russians. Latvia is relatively new national state, founded on 18 November, 1918. Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and only regained its independence in 1991. Currently the population of almost 2.3 million inhabitants (in 2006) comprises Latvians- 57.7%, Russians - 29.6%, Byelorussians - 4.1%, Ukrainians - 2.7%, Poles- 2.5%, Lithuanians - 1.4%, Others - 2%. As of 2004, Latvia is a member country of the European Union. Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. The state language is Latvian, which belongs to the Indo-European family of languages.

Since regaining independence, Latvia has made considerable progress in the stabilisation and restructuring of its economy from centrally planned to free market. Reforms accomplished in the 1990's have strengthened the private sector. High domestic demand promotes development of services and especially trade and construction. The service sector, which contributed only 32% to the total value added in 1990, had more than doubled by 2002 to 71%. In 2007 the total GDP for Latvia was slightly under 11.3 million LVL or 4932 LVL per capita (up more than 10% from 2006). Unemployment was at 6.8%

In 1211, Christian missionaries from Germany founded the first school in the territory of modern-day Latvia. From the 13th to the 16th century, German was almost exclusively the language of instruction. Schools first started providing Latvian-language education in the mid- to late 16th century. The purpose was to spread literacy among the Latvian serfs, to promote knowledge of religious literature, including the Bible - translated into Latvian by Ernst Glük in 1689. The first textbooks in Latvian were alphabet books, the oldest of which were published in 1683.

From November 18, 1918, with the foundation of an independent Latvian state, the guaranteed right to obtain all forms of education in Latvian was established. From the end of 1919 compulsory primary education free of charge was established by law for children aged 8 to 14 (pre-school from age seven). The state also promoted the establishment of schools for ethnic minorities, with teaching in their native language. All types of schools were maintained by municipal or state authorities, and there were private teaching institutions as well. The University of Latvia was established in 1919. Overall, in the inter-war period (1918-1940) a modern, unified system of education developed in Latvia, consisting of primary education, secondary education, specialist secondary education, vocational education and higher education. In general terms, this structure of education is still retained today. Currently instruction is given overall in Latvian, which is the recognized official language. Latvia also has state-financed ethnic minority schools or classes at primary through upper secondary level where courses are partially presented in Belarusian, Estonian, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Polish, Roma, Russian and Ukrainian. State-funded higher education programmes are taught in Latvian.

Goals of the education system

According to the Education Law (1998; last amended in January 2007), the National Education Standards provide the strategic goals and main tasks of compulsory curricula, syllabus, basic principles and procedure for the assessment of education acquired by a pupil.

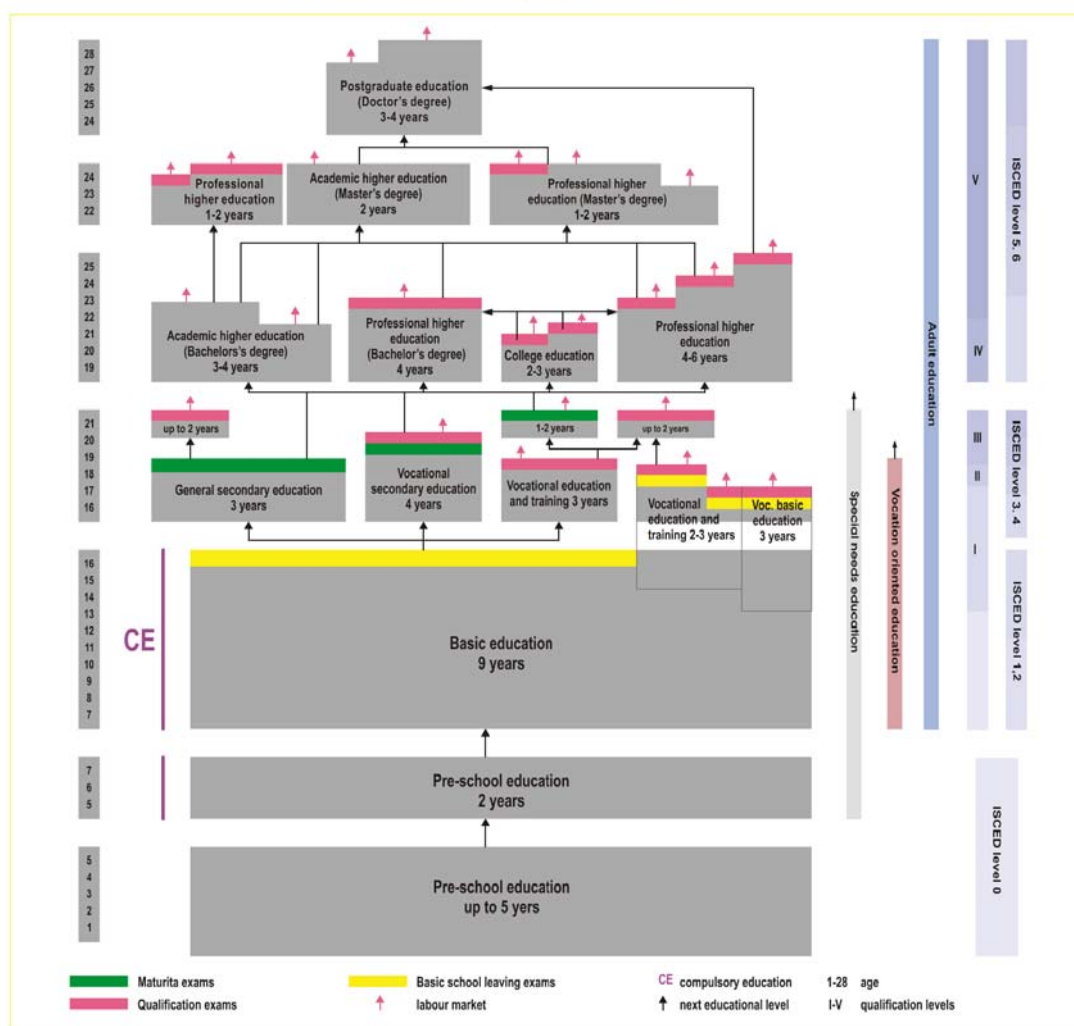
The long-range conceptual framework document approved by the Parliament in 2005: „The Latvian Growth Model: People Take First Place” proscribes a person-centred model for growth in Latvia. An educated and knowledge-based society becomes the key to internal and external national security. Thus the main goals of the Latvian education and training system are to support the building of a knowledge-based, democratic and socially integrated society, in order to increase competitiveness of the Latvian population and economy, and simultaneously preserve and develop cultural values typical for Latvia.

An analysis of performance in the education sector during the previous planning period (2002-2005)

indicated a shortage of pre-school education providers, unsatisfactory quality of basic education, low prestige of the teaching profession, poor fit between the education and training profiles offered by vocational and higher education and labour market needs, as well as barriers to access. In order to address these problems, as well as taking into account the new Long-term Model for National Growth and the National Development Plan, a new Basic Policy Framework for Education was approved in September of 2006. Particular attention is devoted to the quality of pre- and primary school education, the modernisation of vocational training and increasing the competitiveness of higher education. Emphasis is placed on modernising equipment and facilities for acquiring practical skills needed in the labour market. Effective measures for ensuring support to children with special needs and those facing social risk include capacity-building for education managers and teachers, as well as increasing cooperation between schools, parents and society at large.

Structure and operation of the education system

The Education System in Latvia



The Latvian education system consists of:

Pre-school and early childhood care

While pre-primary education was optional until the 2001/2002 school year, it became mandatory on 1st of September in 2002 for five- and six-year-old children. The objective of pre-school education is to foster the overall development of children and to prepare them to enter the primary stage of basic general education. It is provided by various pre-primary education institutions, kindergartens (nurseries) or at special pre-primary classes at general education institutions. Pre-school education is considered the first stage of general education and all children should complete it by the age of 7. In special cases where the child suffers from certain health or psychological problems, based on either parental request or doctors' recommendations, pre-school education can be continued until the age of 8. The entire teaching process is organised through playing various targeted games.

Basic (Primary and Lower Secondary) and Upper Secondary Education

Children in Latvia are obliged by law to attend school from the year when they turn seven till the age of 16. In some special cases the acquisition of basic education may last till the age of 18. In 2006 there were 974 general education day schools. Around 5.4% of schools were primary (grades 1-4), 48.6% basic schools (grades 1-9) and the rest were combined basic/upper secondary (grades 1-12) schools. The number of school-age children has remained fairly constant at about 226,000 annually with around 26,760 teachers. In the next six years the number of school children will decrease significantly (even up to 50% of the current total) due to low birth rates toward the end of the 1990's.

The basic school day comprises from 5 lessons in grades 1-3 up to 8 lessons in grade 9. The school year is 34 weeks long in first grade and 37 weeks in grade 9 per year. Compulsory curriculum includes 4 subject areas: Introduction to technologies and science; Languages; Art; Man and society. The curriculum for comprehensive education is defined by 20 subject standards. The average number of students per full-time teacher in basic education was 10 in 2006. After finishing basic education, most young people continue their education at upper secondary level in general upper secondary school, while about a fourth attends technical and further education schools.

General upper secondary education normally lasts for three years (grade 10-12). The school year comprises 35 weeks in 10-11 grade and 38 weeks in grade 12 with not more than 36 lessons per week and 8 lessons per day. The compulsory curriculum of 3-year general upper secondary schools is determined by the National Standard in the four standardised educational profiles: (1) comprehensive education, without intensive teaching of any particular subject and (2) the humanities and social sciences programme; (3) the mathematics, natural science and technical science programme; (4) the vocational programme, where the general education curriculum places emphasis on subjects in these particular fields.

Educational standards and Regulations regarding assessment of learning achievement for the compulsory school and general upper secondary school are drafted by the Centre for Curriculum Development and Examination which is a national administrative body reporting directly to the Minister of Education and Science, and are approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. Learning achievements of school children are assessed through exams organized both at school level and centrally at National level.

Other schooling arrangements

Children may attend vocation-oriented education in arts and music or another area of personal interest in addition to attending regular school. The so-called little art and music schools are generally founded and maintained by municipal governments.

This type of education is voluntary and provides for a person's individual educational needs and wishes. This education does not lead to a professional qualification.

The number of students enrolled in special interest education programmes has been increasing annually. In the 2001/2002 school year, 240,273 students were enrolled, but in 2005/2006 - 293,527 or 92% of the total number of students enrolled in general, vocational and special education schools.

Special education schools or special education classes within general education schools provide education for children with special needs that correspond to each individual's physical and mental condition. The structure of special education is very similar to that of the mainstream education, providing opportunities for persons with special needs to attain general knowledge and skills with a

strong emphasis on their applicability, thus facilitating social inclusion. There are 64 special education schools in Latvia. Almost all of these schools provide housing for their pupils in dormitories.

Vocational and Further Education

In 2006/2007 there were 92 nationally accredited vocational education schools in Latvia with a total enrolment of 40,439 students. The schools employed 4,824 teachers, 70% of whom were women. The majority of vocational schools in Latvia provide 2-3 and 4-year vocational education and training programmes at upper secondary level, and only some programmes are designed for basic vocational and training purposes.

The National Standard of Vocational Education and the Occupational Standards determine the curriculum content of vocational education programmes. Practical training on-the-job comprises at least 20-25% of studies. The theoretical part provides the knowledge needed in modern society: a command of languages, mathematics, natural sciences and social studies, and good communication skills. In addition, vocational training also underlines the following skills: entrepreneurship, global environmental awareness, internationalisation and citizenship. Sample curricula are drawn up by the Vocational Education Administration, an institution under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Science. Both Occupational Standards and sample curricula are developed in cooperation with professional associations representing different economic sectors. Based on the relevant standards and sample programmes, schools develop their own training programmes in accordance with the needs of the local labour market.

Basic vocational and training programmes are intended to provide training in simple trades for pupils who have not finished compulsory nine-year basic education by the age of 16. By successfully completing this educational programme, the pupil obtains a basic education certificate and may go on to upper secondary education. The number of students enrolled in these programmes is not large, only about 2.3% of the total. The aim of this form of education is to prevent marginalisation of pupils facing social risk.

Vocational education programmes lasting two or three years provide theoretical and practical knowledge required for a skilled worker. On completing such a vocational education programme, the student has not obtained a full upper secondary education. For this, an additional year of schooling is required. The proportion of students enrolled in these vocational programmes is 18% of the total.

Upper secondary vocational education programmes lasting four years provide much wider theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This is a full secondary education programme, so the school-leaver is entitled to enter higher education. Approximately 70% of students in vocational education choose upper-secondary programmes.

In 2006 there were 10,464 graduates of vocational education programmes. Of these, 43% with qualifications in engineering (including processing and technologies), 24.7% - services, 14% - commerce, 5% - information technologies, 5% - humanities and arts, 4% health care, 1.8% - agriculture, 2.5% other.

Higher education

Latvia has two sorts of higher education programmes - academic and professional. Such a division of higher education allows the student to choose either research or professional activity in the future. Professional higher education is divided into two levels. First level professional higher education programmes lasting 2-3 years after upper secondary education are provided by Colleges. Second level professional higher education programmes last at least four years after upper secondary education or two years after acquiring Bachelor's degree (3-year studies). These programmes, as well as higher academic education programmes are offered at universities or non-university-type higher education institutions.

The right to enter a higher education institution is held by all those who have completed general upper secondary education or graduated from a four-year vocational programme.

In Latvia, there are both state-financed and private higher education institutions. In 2007 of 60 accredited higher education institutions, 34 were university/non-university type institutions (19 of them government-funded and the rest founded by other legal entities or private individuals) and 26 colleges (18 - state and 8 private).

Of 43,860 students enrolled in 2007, 22% enrolled in post graduate programs, 1,982 were doctoral students. Of first-year students, 13% had completed upper secondary vocational education, while 87% had completed general upper secondary education. There is not a distinct disproportion between city and country-dwellers. The total number attending state and private higher education institutions and colleges was 129,497 students. Almost 63% of students are studying full-time. There were 4,926 full-time equivalent academic staff members employed, of whom 23% were professors. In Latvia there are 568 students per 10,000 inhabitants, which is the second largest proportion in the world. Foreign students comprised only 1.1% of total enrolment in 2007. Programmes for foreign students are mainly offered in English or in Russian.

Adult and non-formal education

Adult education in Latvia is supported by the principle of lifelong education. The Education Law (1998) specifically concerns the development of adult formal and non-formal education programmes. Arrangements for the provision of adult formal education are set by the Education Law, Vocational Education Law, Higher Education institutions Law and other statutes and regulations.

Different types of further education and training are offered to persons after graduating from general upper secondary or 2-3 year vocational education and training programmes. These programmes are focused on mastering professional skills and knowledge in line with the requirements of the respective qualification level. The training process and assessment of achievements are organised in a similar manner as in vocational secondary education and training programmes. In 2006/2007 290,279 persons were involved in further education, of those 24.7% received support from their employers to cover training costs.

Labour market training for the unemployed accounts for the largest number of participants in the adult education sector. Employment authorities provide a wide range of labour market training mainly targeted at unemployed adults. The courses are free of charge to persons who qualify for official unemployment status.

Adults can also follow a complete programme of basic education or upper secondary education at so-called evening schools.

The Teaching Profession

Teachers in Latvia are trained at five higher education institutions. Two training routes can be taken. The most common is a professional bachelor's degree programme lasting 4 years which provides a teaching qualification for a specific level of education (pre-school, primary, secondary) and, for secondary school teachers, a specific subject area. Pre-school and primary school teachers are qualified to teach all subjects. The second route requires two stages - a bachelor's degree (3 years) in Education Sciences, plus an additional two years of study in a second-level professional programme of studies to qualify as a teacher in a specific level of education and/or subject area. Vocational school teachers generally have a professional diploma in a vocational area with an additional qualification in vocational teaching.

Currently the teaching profession is not attractive due to low social prestige and relatively low salary levels. Of the total number of teachers in the general education sector (grades 1-12) 88% are women (70% in the vocational education sector). Additionally, 9.09% of teachers currently employed are at pension age. In 2000/2001 19% of teachers were 30 years old and younger; in 2004-2005 the proportion is only 15%. However, considering the decreasing numbers of school-age children in the upcoming 6 years, this should not create a drastic shortage of teachers.

Administrative and supervisory structure

The educational system is administered on three levels - national, municipal and institutional. The Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers and Ministry of Education and Science are the main decision-making bodies on the national level. The Ministry as the leading public administration institution in the field of education and science implements a single national policy and development strategy in education, develops education, science, sport, youth and state language policies, organises and coordinates their implementation, as well as develops draft regulatory legislation regulating the sector, and develops draft policy planning documents.

Every municipality supervises the pre-school, basic and general upper secondary schools located in its administrative territory and participates in funding the maintenance expenses of those educational institutions. A Board of Education is established by each municipality to perform its education-related functions.

Vocational education and training schools are mainly maintained and supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science in strong co-operation with branch ministries and social partners. Only art and music schools are placed under the authority of the Ministry of Culture. Private and municipal schools must be registered with the National Registrar of Education and comply with government education standards.

In the tertiary sector, decision-making, regulation, funding and governance are shared between the government and the institutions themselves. Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies established under national legislation, each with their own independent governing body (senate). The primary institution responsible for higher education is the Ministry of Education and Science which administers government funding, policy and programs. While higher education institutions are autonomous, they are accountable to the government via accreditation

Educational Finance

The national education budget in 2007 was slightly over 172 million LVL, up by 27.5% in absolute figures. The proportion of the education budget within the national budget was 4.89 % (4.79% in 2006).

Public primary and secondary general education in Latvia is free of charge and is financed from the municipal budget. At primary and secondary schools, the state pays teachers' wages, while the local authority finances the maintenance of the school building and grounds and covers other expenses connected with teaching. In 2007 the government subsidy to general education schools was almost 5.36 million LVL, or 3.11% of government expenditure on education.

Vocational schools in Latvia usually belong to the state or the local authority, which accordingly finances both teaching and maintenance of the school. Government spending on vocational education in 2007 amounted to slightly over 56 million LVL, or approximately 32.6% of the education budget.

Private educational establishments at primary-secondary level may set their own tuition fees. Accredited private lower and upper secondary schools receive a subsidy from the national government budget to cover teachers' salaries and related social security taxes in order to fund the provision of accredited lower and upper secondary education programmes. Accredited private vocational education schools receive a national government subsidy based on a training agreement between a government ministry and the training institution for the training of a determined number of persons in a specific vocational area.

The Latvian state finances all the higher education institutions belonging to the state. In 2007 government expenditure on higher education was slightly over 111 million LVL, or 64.3% of the education budget. The Higher Education Council allocates a certain number of state-financed study places in each field of studies. In 2007 there were 30 172 (23.3%) students funded by the state budget. Those students who pass their entrance examinations at state higher education institutions, but whose marks are not sufficiently high to grant them state-supported education, can take up studies as fee-paying students. Similarly, fees are charged at all private higher education institutions.

Adult education can be financed from the government or local government budget, employers' resources, learners' resources, donations and grants, as well as from other sources. There are different institutions on national and local levels involved in organisation and provision of adult education. The tuition fees for continuing or in-service education and training are established by training providers and covered by individuals or employers. Further training or retraining of persons who are legally classified as unemployed is financed from the state budget.

Performance monitoring, evaluation and research

The Laws on Education, General Education, Vocational Education and Higher Education proscribe the monitoring and assessment of each respective sub-sector of the education system by relevant national and local government authorities. Every education institution, regardless whether it is founded by national or local government or private concerns, must be registered with the National Registrar of Education. In order to begin providing education services, a licence must be obtained. The right to deliver nationally recognized diplomas and certificates is only conferred on education institutions accredited by the respective national institutions (the State Agency for Quality Assessment in General Education, the Vocational Education Administration and the Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre).

Statistics collected by the Ministry of Education and Science comprise 182 data tables on general education. This makes it possible to compare performance levels in Latvia with those of other countries in Europe, using the same indicators. The assessment indicators developed by CEDEFOP are applied in evaluating vocational education in Latvia. Preparation of annual statistical reports and policy planning documents on higher education is based on internationally comparable indicators.

The Institute of Education Research at the University of Latvia Faculty of Education and Psychology has participated in 10 major international comparative research projects as a member of the International Association for Educational Assessment since 1992, as well as in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000-2003-2006. A comparison of the PISA results over the three assessment cycles indicates that while there was a significant improvement in reading skills from 2000 to 2003 with a reduction of the percentage of students at or below level 1 from 30.6% to 23.7%, the average score in reading has dropped in 2006 (from 490 points to 470). Math skills, assessed in 2003 and 2006, show a slight improvement - from 482 to 484 points on average. The very small proportion of students performing at top levels (0.3% in science, 1.1% in math and 4.5% in reading) draws Latvia into a comparative level below OECD and European averages.

Major changes and issues since the 1990s

The break up of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence in 1990 has generated a considerable transformation in Latvia's system of education. The enrolment ratio in universities has doubled. The Latvian language has been restored to its former prestige and new utility. The process of modernizing syllabi and teaching standards has begun. Textbook content has been revised. All of these changes have been informed and guided by new legislation and new administrative decrees, and supported by public investment which in real terms was 16% higher in the year 2000 than it had been ten years earlier. Recent national budget endowment in education has also increased.

Local governments have become active in the improvement process of educational institutions through development and implementation of regional, county and community-level education policy. The facilities and equipment at education institutions have been modernized, information technologies are widely used and teaching methods and forms have been enriched. The National Tripartite Cooperation Council has established a Subcommittee on Education and Employment which is approves professional standards and is involved in the accreditation of vocational and higher education programmes. The Ministry of Education and Science has established a fund for distributing student loans.

Changes have occurred that irreversibly impact the development and improvement of the quality of education. By these criteria, among others, it can be said that generally education in Latvia had undergone a successful transition from a system effective for a planned economy to a system effective for a market economy and democratic society.

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7. Latvia, Vocational Education Development Agency (2006), Education and career Guidance in Latvia
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List of relevant websites:

Central Statistical Bureau, Latvia: www.csb.lv

Curriculum Development and Examination Centre, Latvia: www.isec.gov.lv

Fit For Europe: Education, Study and Career Information on Europe: www.fitforeurope.info

Gateway to Recognition of Academic and Professional Qualifications: <http://www.enic-naric.net/index.aspx>

Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre, Latvia: www.aiknc.lv

Information Network in Education in Europe: www.eurydice.org

Latvian Institute: www.li.lv

Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia: www.izm.gov.lv

State Education Development Agency, Latvia: www.viaa.gov.lv/Euroguidance

Vocational Education Administration, Latvia: www.izmpia.gov.lv

Table 1: Educational providers, students and teaching staff, 2006/2007 academic year

<i>Provider</i>	<i>Institutions</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Pedagogical staff</i>
Total schools	1,008	279,872	33,937
Day schools	974	266,111	30,138
Evening schools	34	13,761	1,058
Special schools	64	9,376	2,741
		<i>day/evening/special</i>	
Elementary (Grades 1-4)	53	72,669 / 14 / 3,021	1,031
Primary (Grades 5-9)	474	128,511 / 2,156 / 5,184	10,239
Secondary (grades 10-12)	383	55,555 / 11,591 / 11,171	18,868
Males	-	139,732	4,995
Females	-	140,140	28,978
VET	92	40,439	4,824
Males	-	23,662	1,411
Females	-	16,777	3,413
Higher Education	60	129,497*	4,926
State budget	37**	30,172	
Private/own funds	23***	99,325	

* 82,771 higher education students or 63.9% are females.

** Of those, 19 university-type and other higher education institutions, 18 colleges

*** Of those, 15 university-type and other higher education institutions, 8 colleges

Source: Adapted from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia data