



National Research Report (NRR)

Latvia 2009



Authors

Ms Gunta KINTA, ReferNet expert, Academic Information Centre (*Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs*)

Ms Baiba RAMINA, head of Academic Information Centre (*Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs*)

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The preparation of this report has been cofinanced by the European Community.

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Abstract

COUNTRY: LATVIA

AUTHORS: GUNTA KINTA, BAIBA RAMIŅA

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 30.11.2009

The National VET Research Report (NRR) includes an overview of four vocational education research topics studied during the period 2005–2009 in Latvia. First two topics were proposed by CEDEFOP, while others were selected by the country, through the evaluation of national research priorities. The following research topics were described:

- (a) The benefits of VET;
- (b) VET and employment-related mobility and migration;
- (c) The prestige of vocational education;
- (d) The correspondence of vocational education programmes to the labour market.

Due to the lack of financial and human resources and low capacity the tradition of researching vocational education has not developed. The current economic situation has left even a greater negative impact upon this issue; as a result, the scale and the number of education studies in general have decreased to minimum. The studies outlined in the Report have predominantly been carried out in the framework of separate projects. When designing policy planning documents, some field studies are performed on the basis of the available statistics and situation analyses. However, these studies cannot be considered as scientific research, containing a description of the underlying theories, applied methodology, results and discussion.

Taking into account the above mentioned aspects, the choice of studies to include in the NRR was quite limited. Thus, as regards **the first topic** “the benefits of VET”, no information regarding suitable studies carried out in the recent years was available. At present, more attention is paid to the reduction of expenses in all fields of education; and exploring the benefits provided by vocational education is not set as a research priority at any level. Two studies included in the **second topic** “VET and employment-related mobility and migration” were carried out in the framework of the Ministry of Welfare Studies, which was part of the European Social Fund National Programme project Studies of Labour Market (2005–2007), while one study described under this topic was an individual initiative, proposed by the previous President of the State.

In the **third topic** “the prestige of vocational education” two studies were outlined, of which one was dealing exactly with the prestige of vocational education. This issue was chosen because it may be considered a policy priority. In 2008, the Ministry of Education and Science developed the concept *Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education (Profesionālās izglītības pievilcības paaugstināšana un sociālo partneru līdzdalība profesionālās izglītības kvalitātes nodrošināšanā*, approved in September 2009), which is one of the main vocational education

policy planning documents and which is a rather significant step in policy planning, since the previous planning document dedicated exclusively to vocational education was issued for the period 2003–2005.

The **fourth topic** “the correspondence of vocational education programmes to the labour market” is represented by one study with the same title, which was carried out as part of the Ministry of Welfare Studies (2005–2007), which was one of the European Social Fund National Programme projects. The cooperation between education and the labour market has been one of the directions indicated in several policy planning documents, e.g. the *Guidelines for the Development of Education for the Period of 2007–2013 (Izglītības attīstības pamatnostādnes 2007.–2013.gadam, 2006)*, the concept *Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education* (2009). This issue is frequently discussed in the context of improving the quality of education, which definitely is a major national policy priority.

Theme 1: Benefits of VET

COUNTRY: LATVIA

AUTHORS: GUNTA KINTA, BAIBA RAMIŅA

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 30.11.2009

Unfortunately, there are no studies carried out in Latvia related to the benefits of vocational education. This conclusion was drawn after making inquiries among the consortium partners and researchers.

Furthermore, education research institutions were approached, yet their activities do not include any studies dealing with the topic. The inquiries were addressed to the Humanitarian Institute of Riga Technical University, the Education Research Institute of the University of Latvia Faculty of Education and Psychology, the Scientific Institute of Pedagogy of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy, Daugavpils University, Rezekne Higher Education Institution, and Riga Technical College, which usually implement studies focusing on education and employment issues.

The lack of studies may be explained by the fact that a strong tradition of researching the vocational education has not developed in Latvia. Moreover, due to the current economic situation and the limited financial and human resources research activities have decreased dramatically.

Theme 2: VET and Employment-related Mobility and Migration

COUNTRY: LATVIA

AUTHORS: GUNTA KINTA, BAIBA RAMIŅA

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 30.11.2009

Abstract

The research topic includes two studies carried out in the framework of the Ministry of Welfare Studies (2005–2007). First, the study on occupational mobility is outlined, describing aims and objectives, as well as the main conclusions. Second, the study on geographic mobility is described. Furthermore, the study on labour force flow to Ireland is included, since Ireland is one of the most popular destination countries for migration.

2.1. National Research Questions and Issues

Some sectoral studies have been carried out on the labour market; however, there is a lack of systematic labour market research, and the skills to make medium-term forecasts are insufficient. The studies included under this topic were carried out as parts of projects: first, the Ministry of Welfare Studies (2005–2007), and, secondly, the study *Latvia and the free flow of labour force: the case of Ireland* (2006).

The first two studies described in this topic have a comparatively larger context. In the framework of the National Programme measure *Promotion of Employment* the third priority *Development of Human Resources and Promotion of Employment* was implemented in open projects *Support to conducting labour market studies* (2005–2007). Thus, the aim and objectives of these studies are in line with the National Programme – the Studies of Labour Market (2005–2007), which was financially supported by the European Social Fund. The National Programme aimed, firstly, to promote research dealing with employability and labour market issues, and, secondly, to foster evidence-based decision taking in employability policy.

The third study may be considered as an individual initiative, which attempts to address rather topical issues for society. Thus, this study does not seem to have direct links with other studies or national priorities.

As regards the statistics on the geographical migration of the population, inland migration is not as great as migration to other states. Long-term international migration balance in 2008 (– 2 542 inhabitants) has decreased by 72.15% comparing to 2002, because the number of immigrants has increased. The highest outland emigration in 2008 was to Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom, Byelorussia and the USA, while the highest outland immigration was from Lithuania. The majority of population lives in urban areas (67.9 % in 2008), of which

57.44% live in Riga and its district (Central Statistic Bureau of Latvia, 2009). Although the main population migration stream may be observed from rural regions to the capital city, during last 5 years the urban/rural ratio in the total number of population has not changed.

Two studies related to the topic were carried out by two research teams from the University of Latvia in the framework of the Ministry of Welfare Studies, which was part of ESF National Programme project Studies of Labour Market (2005–2007):

- (a) The occupational mobility of the labour force;
- (b) The geographic mobility of the labour force.

The study *Occupational mobility of the labour force* (2007) was performed with the **aim** to create the analytical basis and to obtain additional information to determine the appropriate labour market demand and supply.

The following **objectives** were set for the study:

- (a) To carry out analysis on the topic concerning the situation in Latvia;
- (b) To identify the role, types, current directions of professional mobility for providing flexibility in labour market;
- (c) To clarify the actual state of occupational mobility and identify the major factors determining occupational mobility;
- (d) To carry out electrometric analysis of the individual data for the occupations included in the list of studied professions and to identify, which occupations generally are mobile and which are not;
- (e) To work out proposals for improving collaboration between the stakeholders in order to maintain an appropriate flow of information concerning occupational mobility;
- (f) To develop alternative policies for promotion of the sector and to carry out their evaluation;
- (g) To work out recommendations for improving occupational mobility and for educational policies promoting occupational mobility;

Expert interviews, quantitative surveys, analyses of the previous research results, as well as the analyses of particular policy planning documents, laws and regulation were used as the major **research methods** in the study (Šumilo et al., 2007).

The **aim** set for the study *Geographic mobility of the labour force* (2007) was to evaluate the internal and external labour force mobility in order to explore the opportunities for ensuring a balance between labour market supply and demand. The study was focused on fostering a levelled development within different regions. The researchers worked out proposals for more effective promotion of employment and avoiding existing obstacles in the labour market.

The following **objectives** were implemented to achieve the aim of the study:

- (a) To evaluate the volumes and flows of external Latvian population migration, to provide description of migrants' motivation and features, their readiness to emigrate to obtain a job;

- (b) To analyse Latvian guest workers' experience and their motivation to return;
- (c) To evaluate the internal migration processes and daily mobility in Latvia, and to evaluate the different social groups' desires and readiness to participate in geographic mobility;
- (d) To analyse the foreign labour force in Latvia;
- (e) To prepare forecasts regarding the Latvian inhabitant migration;
- (f) To evaluate the possible influence of alternative work forms on internal mobility and the ability to balance the labour market opportunities in different regions, as well as to draft alternative migration policies;
- (g) To analyse the labour force geographic mobility from the cost effectiveness perspective (Krišjāne et al., 2007).

As part of the study, a survey with 8 005 respondents was carried out.

A large part of inhabitants migrating abroad choose Ireland as their destination, therefore, a study, initiated by the President of the State, was carried out to explore this particular example. The **aim** of the study *Latvia and the free flow of labour force: the case of Ireland* (2006) was to identify the main reasons and motivation why migrants in search of employment selected Ireland, to analyse the situational context, and to find out factors, which would motivate inhabitants to return to Latvia. During the study, the researchers visited Latvian migrants in Ireland and carried out the survey (Indāns et al., 2006).

The first two studies include a larger group of respondents, as well as more research activities than the study on migration to Ireland. Yet the latter includes more background information and quotations from the interviews. The key research findings in these three studies are described in the next chapter.

2.2. Key Research Findings

This section describes the main results obtained in the three studies, which are outlined under this topic. All three studies discussed the issue of geographical mobility, as well as pointed at the lack of systematic labour market research.

The researchers carrying out the study *Occupational mobility of the labour force* (2007) concluded that to meet the labour market requirements properly, long-term skill need forecasts should be provided. Occupational mobility may be characterised as a transition of professions within the labour market and may include both movement within the framework of the present work place by changing position and changing both the occupation and the employer. Occupational mobility was analysed applying the results of the labour force survey and employers' and experts' polls. The results of the labour force survey show that approximately 6.3% of economically active inhabitants were occupationally mobile during the period 1999 – 2005, i.e. they have changed their occupation at least once.

In total, occupational groups are distributed evenly by the level of incoming occupational mobility. Low-qualified professions have the highest indicators regarding the level of

outgoing occupational mobility. The most mobile occupations are salespersons and merchandisers.

Among the demographic indicators the age and the level of education have the most significant impact on occupational mobility. According to the collected data, the highest level of occupational mobility may be observed in the age group 24–34 years, while distribution is rather even among other age groups. Concerning education, individuals with vocational secondary education are the most mobile occupationally, while individuals with basic education constitute the lowest proportion of mobility. Significant differences in occupational mobility between genders were not observed. However, differences may be stated regarding nationalities: the representatives of Jewish and Latvian nationalities appear to be the most mobile; their mobility exceeds the average indicator.

According to the geographical location, the highest level of occupational mobility is in Gulbene and the Gulbene District situated in the north-eastern part of Latvia, while the lowest – in Daugavpils and the Daugavpils District situated in the south-eastern part of Latvia. Riga, the capital city, and the Riga District take only the 14th place regarding the proportion of occupationally mobile inhabitants among the economically active inhabitants. Yet 48.7% of all occupationally mobile Latvian inhabitants live in Riga and the Riga District, due to the highest concentration of inhabitants in the capital.

The labour force survey and experts interviews' indicate that the main factor having an impact upon occupational mobility is work remuneration. Personal development, unsatisfactory work conditions, as well as the inability to find a job in the place of residence, particularly in rural districts, are important factors, too.

Issues concerning the promotion of occupational mobility are addressed in sectoral policy documents on irregular basis. For some target groups, e.g. the unemployed, measures promoting inclusion in the labour market should be set up; yet the problem is not solved by complex activities.

Within the study three alternatives were worked out:

- (a) Promoting opportunities of occupational mobility in economically underdeveloped regions of Latvia by fostering entrepreneurship there;
- (b) Stimulating occupational mobility to reduce the number of vacancies in nationally significant sectors by focusing on engaging risk groups in the labour market; and
- (c) Promoting occupational mobility by stimulating measures related to the changes in the sectoral structure.

The alternatives proved to be important for the target groups and stakeholders, because they help to increase the level of income, in more efficient implementation of their direct functions and achieving the defined objectives (Šumilo et al., 2007).

The researchers carrying out the study *Geographic mobility of the labour force* (2007) concluded that the official data on geographic mobility processes provided by the Citizenship and Migration Board (PLMP) and its Population Register are incomplete. According to the law, the Register includes data on the declared, registered or stated address of each inhabitant

in Latvia and abroad. Furthermore, inhabitants, who live abroad for more than six months, have to supply the information on their address abroad to the PLMP. This regulation is frequently ignored; perhaps a large part of the inhabitants initially do not intend to stay abroad for a long time or to change their place of residence, or they want to retain an address in Latvia where to return to. Therefore, the researchers suggest making amendments to the law allowing inhabitants to declare more than one permanent residence.

Data collected in survey – 8 005 respondents of employment age – shows that approximately 20% of the respondents expressed a wish to emigrate with the aim of finding a job within the next year's time, of which only 50% had taken steps to fulfil their plans. The aforementioned 20% of respondents tended to be more often below the age of 24, men, with basic or general secondary education, from Zemgale and Latgale regions, qualified or less qualified blue collar workers, employees from such sectors as the hotels and restaurants, trade, forestry, construction, and the natural resources extraction and processing. Meanwhile, respondents with higher positions and accordingly higher remuneration were less interested in migration. The following were mentioned as the main reasons for emigration – higher payment (87.4% respondents), better working conditions and social guarantees, new experiences and personal development. Top countries for emigration were the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and the United States of America; to a great extent the choice was determined by better earning opportunities, personal contacts, or foreign language skills. The planned period for staying abroad mostly did not exceed one year, while 6% of the respondents wished to emigrate permanently. The majority of the respondents link their short- and long-term future with Latvia; they consider employment abroad as a way of gaining financial resources for subsistence.

The survey of Latvians employed abroad – in total 328 respondents – revealed that the main factors encouraging the return, apart from the possibilities to earn money, were family support, more human attitude shown by the employer and the state, decreased bureaucracy concerning the establishment and management of enterprises.

The cross-border migration was also explored, by interviewing experts from the local governments in border zones, e.g. the area of Valka in Latvia and Valga in Estonia. This migration predominantly is based upon socio-economic reasons.

The general reasons for internal migration are: family (52% respondents), work (30%), education (15%), and an obtained asset (8.1%). Survey data indicate that the migration between regions – Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Latgale – has decreased for the last 10 years, while migration to Riga and cities has risen. Migration to regions among inhabitants with higher education is negative, because the amount of inhabitants migrating to Riga is larger than of those migrating to regions. However, within the following three years, 11.4% respondents plan to migrate, of which 45% intend to move within the territory of their own local government, and 15.8% – to Riga.

10.9% of the respondents work in the territory of another local government, of which 46% work in Riga and its district. The inhabitants of Riga district are frequently employed in the territory of another local government, rather often – also the inhabitants of Zemgale and Kurzeme, but not the inhabitants of Latgale.

The researchers concluded that migration forecasts depended upon the socio-economic policies and the measures taken to promote economic development (Krišjāne et al., 2007).

Data collected during the **case study of Ireland** showed that economic concerns are not the only aspect motivating to migrate, though insufficient payment is mentioned most frequently. The other reasons for migration named are difficulties in private and professional life; unsatisfactory work conditions; lack of opportunities; undeveloped support network on the national, local government level, among the family and friends; as well as a lack of shared vision of the future of the state and the nation.

The results of the study disproved the assumption that mostly low-qualified labour force migrates; actually, these migrants are qualified with general or vocational secondary, uncompleted higher or higher education, who are employed at lower qualified posts or not according to their qualification. A considerable part of respondents had migrated to Ireland before Latvia joined the EU in 2004; migration started at the end of 90s.

The researchers concluded that the free flow of work force between Latvia and Ireland may be characterised by:

- (a) In most cases respondents employed in Ireland want to return;
- (b) Often respondents periodically live in Ireland or Latvia;
- (c) Respondents want to return to and work in regions they come from (Indāns et al., 2006).

However, conclusions made in the latter research may turn out to be over-generalised, since only 30 detailed interviews of Latvian inhabitants living in Ireland were carried out. To sum up, the data collected in these studies show that more systematic studies concerning employment and migration should be carried out to promote evidence based policy. State economic policy has a significant impact upon labour force migration. The following section contains major conclusions following from the studies described under this topic; it also provides some proposals for further research.

2.3. Conclusions and Proposals for Further Research

Since the project *Ministry of Welfare Studies (2005–2007)*, which included two of the studies outlined in this topic, was completed recently, a full evaluation of the impact of these studies cannot be provided yet. This project initiated large-scale labour market studies and laid the foundation for further researches on skill needs. Although the studies were carried out in the context of other National Programmes and the outcomes could be integrated within further long-term policy planning, the situation and labour market demands have changed due to economic recession. Therefore, more systematic studies analysing the present state of the labour market should be carried out.

The researchers helped to draw a **portrait of occupational migrants**. Mainly age and education level of migrants were discussed, since, as it was concluded in the study on occupational mobility, these have the most significant impact upon occupational mobility. The study on occupational mobility indicates that the highest level of occupational mobility is in the age group 24–34 years, while the data of the study on geographic mobility show that mostly people below the age of 24 are interested in migrating. Regarding the level of education, the researchers have different views: first, in the study on occupational mobility it

was clarified that vocational upper-secondary education graduates are the most and basic education graduates are the least mobile. Second, the study on geographical mobility reveals that individuals with basic or general secondary education are more eager to migrate. Third, data of the Ireland case study show that people with general or vocational upper-secondary, uncompleted higher or higher education migrate.

The other aspect included in the characterisation of migrants is their occupation. According to the researchers in occupational mobility study, incoming occupational mobility is distributed evenly among occupational groups. There is a disagreement concerning “low-qualified occupations”, i.e. the study on occupational mobility proves that in outgoing mobility individuals with low qualification participate the most; and qualified or less qualified blue collar workers tend to migrate more and employees in higher positions less, as the researchers in the study on geographical study concluded. While the researchers in the Ireland case study say that this assumption was wrong, and individuals with higher education do migrate, as well. The main factor to consider is whether the migrants or people willing to migrate are occupied according to their qualification and are in a comparatively high position in their enterprises. Speaking about particular professions most mobile occupationally and geographically are individuals from the following sectors: hotels and restaurants, merchandise operations, forestry, construction, and extraction and processing of natural resources.

Regarding the gender of migrants, in the study on occupational mobility major differences were not identified, while the other study on geographical mobility showed that men are more willing to migrate.

The researches provided also the main **reasons for migration**. In all studies payment and unsatisfactory work and/or social conditions were mentioned as the main aspects impacting migration. Thus, individuals tend to migrate abroad to gain financial resources and savings for living. Individuals also seek possibilities to promote personal and professional development. While discussing internal migration, the study on geographical mobility indicates that the major reasons for migration are family, work and education. In the current situation unemployment has become of crucial importance in migration.

Regarding geographical mobility the most popular **destinations and routes of migration** were explored. As researchers in the study on geographical mobility concluded, the most common destinations for outland migrations are the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and the United States of America, which in a way confirms the results of the case study on Ireland. The internal migration flow is mainly observed from regions to the capital city and other cities, which can be explained by the fact that the majority of higher education establishments and enterprises are concentrated in urban areas.

During the studies the researchers worked out **recommendations to improve some aspects of migration**, e.g. within the case study of Ireland, the researchers provided solutions for reducing migration to Ireland and encouraging Latvians employed there to return. All three included amendments to laws and regulations. The recommendations in the Ireland case study are rather general and abstract, involving, for an instance, state economic development and improving work conditions and employment relations; therefore, they were not included in this report. However, the proposals developed by the researchers engaged in the occupational mobility study were more concrete and the most important of them are listed below:

- (a) Efficient implementation of the policy for promoting occupational mobility, the occupational mobility guidelines for State and local government authorities should be provided by appropriate legal bodies.
- (b) Work remuneration in the public sector should be further increased, by increasing remuneration for occupations with a high outgoing occupational mobility.
- (c) To reduce the demand for labour force in low-qualified occupations, to address the labour force shortage issue, and to decrease the proportion of variable costs, a State aid programme for the mechanisation and automation of low-qualified work should be developed.
- (d) The education system, including lifelong learning, flexibility should be promoted to make education able to react efficiently to the changes in the labour market through ensuring occupational mobility opportunities. In schools, the proportion of compulsory general subjects (particularly sciences), and career consultations should be increased.
- (e) To promote gender equality, trade unions should focus more on issues connected to the employment of pre-retirement age women (Šumilo et al., 2007).

Yet a part of the recommendations mentioned above does not apply to the current economic situation, i.e. either the proposals are outdated or there is lack of financial resources for their implementation. Following the completion of the studies the situation in the labour market has already changed; therefore, new studies should be implemented regarding the flows of work force. At the moment, there is no information on further research in this field.

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Theme 3: The Prestige of Vocational Education

COUNTRY: LATVIA

AUTHORS: GUNTA KINTA, BAIBA RAMIŅA

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 30.11.2009

Abstract

The topic “The prestige of vocational education” is explored in two studies: first, “Prestige of vocational education in Latvia” (2007) supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science; and, second, “Education and labour market: Recommendations for improvement of concept ‘Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education’” (2009) implemented by UNESCO Latvian National Commission. Both studies provided some contribution to the development of the vocational education policy planning document, i.e. the concept “Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education”, which was approved later in 2009.

3.1. National research questions and issues

One of the issues currently discussed is the image or the prestige of vocational education. Mostly the term “prestige” is related to quality of education, to insufficient numbers of vocational education students, and to unequal attitude to general and vocational education. Raising the prestige of vocational education has been set as a priority in several policy planning documents. Furthermore, in September of 2009, the concept *Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education (Profesionālās izglītības pievilcības paaugstināšana un sociālo partneru līdzdalība profesionālās izglītības kvalitātes nodrošināšanā)* was approved, which particularly addresses issues related to vocational education prestige and which served as the basis for one of the studies outlined in this section. However, neither the policy planning documents, which include prestige related guidelines, nor the studies described in this section provide a clear definition of “prestige”; this might have lead to some terminological misunderstandings, particularly when collecting data during focus group discussions.

In recent years two studies concerning vocational education prestige have been carried out:

- (a) Prestige of vocational education in Latvia (2007);
- (b) Education and labour market: Recommendations for the improvement of the concept *Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education* (2009);

A brief description of the research methodology used in the mentioned studies follows.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education and Science (*Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija*) arranged and supervised a qualitative study *Prestige of Vocational Education in Latvia (Profesionālās*

izglītības prestižs Latvijā). The **aim of the study** was to explore the prestige and evaluation of vocational education among various focus groups, and to provide recommendations for measures promoting the popularity of vocational education. The following **objectives** were stated:

- (a) To analyse form 9 and 12 students', i.e. lower- and upper-secondary education graduates' further education choices by identifying the most significant determining factors and reference groups that influence the students' opinion and choice;
- (b) To analyse availability of information concerning vocational education opportunities for various groups, as well as to identify the most appropriate information channels and content;
- (c) To identify advantages of vocational education in comparison with general (upper-) secondary and higher education in the opinion of various focus groups;
- (d) To work out recommendations for promoting prestige and popularity of vocational education.

Firstly, two interviews and six focus group discussions, with the total participation of 40 respondents were used as **data collection methods**. Secondly, survey was carried out in 28 vocational secondary education establishments. The **focus groups**, which participated in the study included: form 9 students (lower-secondary education seniors), first year vocational education students, form 12 students (upper-secondary general education seniors), general education teachers, vocational education students' parents, and heads of vocational education establishments (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2007).

The UNESCO Latvian National Commission (Latvijas Nacionālā komisija) in 2008–2009 arranged the study *Education and labour market: Recommendations for improvement of concept "Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education"*. The draft Concept, which was approved in September of 2009, included both an overview of the major issues in vocational education and provided various problem solutions. The **aim of this study** was to identify the main problems within vocational education, to evaluate solutions included in the Concept and to develop recommendations for the improvement of the Concept.

Within the framework of the study three **focus groups' discussions** and one **opinion gallery** were organised with the aim of clarifying stakeholders' views regarding vocational education prestige and other problems. In total 20 heads of vocational education establishments, 17 social partners, and 22 vocational education students participated in the focus groups' discussions, 25 vocational education teachers participated in the opinion gallery.

During the discussions and in the opinion gallery the participants, on the basis of their expertise, shared views about such questions as the most essential problems and solutions within vocational education; prestige and quality of vocational education; lifelong learning and other functions at vocational education establishments; cooperation with employers; and the evaluation of solutions included in the Concept (UNESCO Latvijas Nacionālā komisija, 2009).

Both studies used similar data collection methods, i.e. focus group discussions, but the Ministry's study involved also individuals not directly connected with vocational education. This aspect provides some insight concerning vocational education prestige from different perspective, although the target groups are rather small, which may lead to over-generalisation of conclusions. The UNESCO's study explores more issues; thus, ensuring reasonable context for the expressed opinions by the participants. Generally, there are many similarities between the results of both studies, which are outlined in the next section.

3.2. Key Research Findings

The major findings and conclusions drawn in two studies discussed above are described in this subchapter. Since both studies included focus group discussions and other qualitative data collection methods, the results provided are qualitative and descriptive, without any quantitative statistics. Both studies highlight that prestige of and attitude towards vocational education strongly depends upon the availability of information about vocational education and the opportunities it provides.

Regarding the key findings in the study *Prestige of Vocational Education in Latvia*, initially, the focus group members' attitude towards vocational education was clarified. Form 9 students and vocational education students' parents showed a rather positive or neutral attitude towards vocational education, while form 12 students and particularly general education teachers tended to hold a negative opinion about vocational education.

Several **drawbacks of vocational education versus general education** were stated, which serve as obstacles for lower- or upper-secondary education graduates to choose vocational upper-secondary education. In all focus groups lack of information concerning education opportunities and occupations was mentioned. The other obstacles are listed below:

- (a) Form 9 students consider it to be "a serious decision", since by choosing vocational education programme 15–16 year olds have to select their future occupation.
- (b) Parents have objections against the long distance between home and vocational education establishments.
- (c) Parents hold opinions about inimical social environment at vocational education establishments.
- (d) Teachers have prejudices against vocational education as less qualitative compared to general education.

Form 9 students and parents also mentioned **factors, which motivate young people to choose vocational education**:

- (a) Form 9 students named an interest in the occupation; they consider their family's and friends' recommendations, which have studied or plan to study at a vocational education establishment; as well as they wish to change their daily environment and sooner become independent.
- (b) Parents wish to take into account their children's abilities and needs, and to promote their children's independence; they have a positive personal experience from their studies at

vocational education establishments; and consider that vocational education provides a secure foundation for the children's future.

Taking into account the data collected, the researchers developed **recommendations**, which would foster the popularity and the prestige of vocational education:

- (a) To raise the awareness among young people of the opportunities offered by vocational education, e.g. by developing a webpage on vocational education and occupations, organising workshops with vocational education students, teachers and graduates, and professionals, organising visits to vocational schools, etc.
- (b) To inform parents on vocational education benefits by placing analytical news and information in the national and local media.
- (c) To communicate with general education teachers by developing informative materials for teachers about opportunities offered by vocational education and providing analytical articles on the state of vocational education in pedagogical literature.
- (d) To establish cooperation between general and vocational education institutions in terms of students' personal development and education (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2007).

Some of the proposals coincide with the solutions reached in the UNESCO's study, which are listed below, e.g. information campaign on the possibilities of vocational education. These recommendations may turn out to be too general and require additional research on how to implement them.

In the **discussions arranged by UNESCO Latvian National Commission** on the prestige of vocational education participants highlighted problems and suggested possible solutions.

Heads of vocational schools and teachers tend to believe that the prestige of vocational education is unreasonably low; mainly due to the lack of objective and comprehensive information on vocational education opportunities and occupations. Moreover, the competition between vocational and general education, and the negative image of vocational education cultivated in mass media leave an adverse impact upon the prestige. However, vocational education prestige is closely related to the particular occupations and particular education programmes implemented at vocational schools.

The participants of the study, whose professional or study activities are connected with vocational education, mentioned several **problems** in vocational education system:

- (a) Lack of united education policy introducing reforms;
- (b) Lack of qualification framework that would be more labour market oriented, clear and consistent.
- (c) Unequal attitude towards vocational and general education, e.g. regarding the amount of funding, and an insufficient cooperation between vocational and general schools;
- (d) Lack of skill needs forecasts.

In order to promote the prestige of vocational education, the respondents offered the following **solutions**:

- (a) To make curricula more flexible providing opportunity for students to master several qualifications within the framework of one education programme;
- (b) To develop modules based curricula, thus providing more alternatives to the students;
- (c) To simplify the titles of education programmes, making them reflect the occupation acquired, making the content of the particular programme clear to employers, parents and students ;
- (d) To promote cooperation between vocational and general education establishments to popularise various professions, involving teachers and students;
- (e) To foster society's awareness of the processes within vocational education, vocational education establishments should provide information about vocational education opportunities; to organise national campaign on vocational education programme offer and content;
- (f) To improve prestige and to popularise occupations required for the development of the national economy, targeting the whole population;
- (g) To change the basic education (9 year education) standards in order to simplify the basic school curricula;
- (h) To introduce legal amendments eliminating the possibility of graduating from the basic school (9 years) with failing grades (UNESCO Latvijas Nacionālā komisija, 2009).

Both studies point out similar problems regarding vocational education prestige, for instance, insufficient public awareness of the possibilities offered by vocational education, lack of skill needs forecasts, which negatively influences the process of education planning. As regards the proposals, most of them in both studies are on large scale and require both legal amendments and additional funding. The next section outlines the main conclusions and provides proposals for further research.

3.3. Conclusions and Proposals for Further Research

This subchapter lists the main conclusions from two studies on the prestige of vocational education, as well as provides proposals for further research on this topic.

Speaking about target groups' attitude towards vocational education, it may be concluded that the attitude depends upon the personal experience regarding vocational education. For example, form 12 general education students showed a rather negative attitude, while vocational education students expressed a very positive opinion about their schools and vocational education. However, one of the drawbacks of the focus group discussions as a data collection method is that the persons involved do not wish or dare to criticise themselves or the institutions their represent, even though the discussions are anonymous.

The study arranged by the Ministry of Education and Science paid more attention to the factors motivating and discouraging young people to choose studies, mainly on upper-

secondary level, at vocational education establishments. Several factors were identified, and in fact they form a set of interconnected aspects. Some of these factors appear in the UNESCO study. First, the students and parents do not have information on vocational education opportunities; second, the cooperation between vocational education establishments and basic education establishments, which mainly represent general education, is very weak. Third, for young people (15–16 old) it is quite complicated to take a decision about their future occupation, when they have to choose a vocational education programme to study. The solution for this problem was provided in the UNESCO study: more flexible, module based vocational education programmes should be designed, and these should include more than one qualification. At present, the transition between vocational programmes is rather limited and usually within the framework of one programme one qualification is awarded.

During the UNESCO study the participants highlighted that the attitude towards vocational and general education is unequal. The society still holds a prejudice that vocational education is meant for young people unable or unwilling to learn. The data collected during the study *Prestige of Vocational Education in Latvia* show that general education teachers consider vocational education to be of poorer quality, which confirms the formal statements. In this context vocational education is treated as a separate system, although, as it was stressed in the UNESCO study, vocational education is part of the national education system. To take a typical example, the quality of vocational upper-secondary education is strongly connected with the quality of basic (lower-secondary and primary) education, because basic school graduates with or without adequate basic knowledge, skills and competences continue their studies on upper-secondary education level.

The significance of the links between vocational education and labour market was also stressed by the participants of the UNESCO study. The Concept, which was discussed, aims to strengthen the cooperation among social partners; thus, the topicality of this document is sound. The results of the study mentioned confirm the necessity to foster systematic skill needs forecasts on national level.

Under this topic two studies were described; the first may be considered as a part of field study before preparing a policy planning document, on the basis of which the second study was carried out. This policy document, i.e. the concept “Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in the quality assurance of vocational education” developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, was discussed among social partners rather long period before it was approved in September of 2009. Now the implementation of the Concept has started and results will become apparent during the coming years, which should serve as a subject for the next studies on the prestige of vocational education. However, it should be noted that prestige changes slowly over a long period of time; thus, longitudinal research activities should be implemented.

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Theme 4: The Correspondence of Vocational Education Programmes to Labour Market

COUNTRY: LATVIA

AUTHORS: GUNTA KINTA, BAIBA RAMIŅA

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 30.11.2009

Abstract: In recent years the correspondence of education programmes to labour market demands was explored within the framework of the study “Compliance of Professional and Higher Education Programmes with the Requirements of the Labour Market” (2007). The study included analysis of policy documents and previous research; evaluation of the employers’ requirements for employees; analysis of the students’ evaluation of the quality of education, the conformity of the employment age population with the labour market demands, as well as standards and programmes of higher and vocational education, etc.

4.1. National Research Questions and Issues

Several education planning documents stress that in improving the quality of vocational education, the strengthening of the relations between education and labour market is an important aspect. The main education policy planning document “Guidelines for the Development of Education for the period of 2007–2013” (2006) sets the aim to ensure the compliance of vocational education content and implementation with the demands of the labour market. The slow adaptation of the educational system to the economic demand is identified as one of the obstacles. However, there is a lack of systematic and continuous labour market research and forecasts of medium-term skill needs.

The study *Compliance of Professional and Higher Education Programmes with the Requirements of the Labour Market* (2007) was implemented by the University of Latvia as one of the 13 Ministry of Welfare Studies, which was part of ESF National Programme project Studies of Labour Market (2005–2007). Thus the aims and objectives of this study conform to the national policy directions. The Studies of Labour Market were carried out in order to identify and solve economic issues and to foster the reaching of policy aims. The development of human resources and fostering employment was set as a priority in the Studies of Labour Market (Sloka et al, 2007).

The **aim defined for this study** was to analyse and evaluate the compliance of vocational and higher education programmes with the requirements of the labour market by providing substantiated analytical basis for adequate development of education programmes for occupations demanded by the labour market.

In order to achieve the aim, several **objectives** were set, of which the following are more connected with vocational education:

- (a) To explore the procedure for developing and implementing occupational standards, to work out proposals for their improvement, and to study the conformity of the existing occupational standards with the labour market demands.
- (b) To develop a system for updating occupational standards, to provide recommendations for optimal cooperation of the stakeholders and the appropriate information flow.
- (c) To achieve the conformity of occupational standards with the Occupational Classifier developed by the Ministry of Welfare and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers; to clarify the links between occupational standards and the Occupational Classifier, and to develop a usable scheme, which would help to monitor the transfer of the occupational standards transition into the Occupational Classifier.
- (d) To clarify for which professions standards have been developed, for which ones are in the process of being developed, and for which ones standards still need to be developed.
- (e) To study, according to the specially designed list of 120 professions, how many students enrol and complete education programmes in particular professions; and to clarify the main reasons for drop out.
- (f) To collect employers', education establishments' assessment and graduates' self-assessment regarding graduates of particular education establishments. To analyse the gathered results by education establishments, and to work out recommendations for the improvement of particular education programmes or occupational standards.
- (g) To explore the impact of the tuition fee set for an education programme upon the choice of the corresponding profession, the quality of education and the assessment of the acquired education (Sloka et al, 2007).

Within the framework of the study the following **data collection methods** were used: analysis of policy planning documents and normative acts, secondary analysis of results gained in the previous studies, quantitative and qualitative survey of employment age population, the use of focus group method, expert interviews, and a quantitative poll. Respondents represented experts, employees, employers and graduates. In total, 20 025 inhabitants of employment age participated in this study, which is a comparatively large amount of respondents, and nine focus groups were analysed (Sloka et al., 2007).

According to the objectives listed above, the study focused more upon occupational standards and their development. The structure and the procedure for the development of occupational standards is set out in the Vocational Education Law (1999) and other related laws and regulations, e.g. the Procedure for Developing Occupational Standards (*Profesiju standartu izstrādes kārtība*, 2007). Occupational standards comprise a description of specific tasks and employee's duties, as well as the abilities and skills necessary to carry out those tasks. Standards also determine to which level of professional qualification each specific profession corresponds. When developing educational programmes, educational institutions have to ensure the acquisition of all the abilities, skills and knowledge mentioned in the occupational standards. The content of the final qualification examinations is also drafted in correspondence with occupational standards.

Usually standards are updated and reviewed as necessary, but no more frequently than once in 5 years. According to the Register of Occupational Standards, by May 2009, 434 occupation standards had been drafted and approved, of which 22 were added to the Register in 2008. The next subchapter outlines the major findings of the study.

4.2. Key Research Findings

This section briefly describes the key research findings of the study *Compliance of Professional and Higher Education Programmes with the Requirements of the Labour Market* (2007). The data collected during the study show that the pace of changes in the labour market requirements exceeds the pace of labour force learning. More than a half of the employers consider that the graduates of vocational programmes have insufficient practical skills and experience; mainly due to the rapid changes in the working conditions and technologies. Collecting information on skill needs, defining requirements, and altering education programmes and their implementation is a time consuming procedure; therefore, frequently at the end of the process the requirements are already outdated. In this context the role of lifelong learning increases, as a tool for continuous updating of knowledge, skills and competences. The researchers emphasize that cooperation between the system of education and labour market cannot be ensured by obtaining a single qualification once in a lifetime, but that a system should be developed that would allow improving or changing the qualification beyond education programmes.

The researchers recommend taking the following **measures for promoting compliance**:

- (a) After completing a basic theoretical courses, to combine school-based with work-place learning;
- (b) To partially transform practical training to traineeship in enterprises following theoretical studies, and before and, possibly, following the award of qualification;
- (c) To promote distance learning that helps to combine learning and work;
- (d) To involve the departments of education establishments, which are engaged in the production and services provision, in practical skills acquisition (Sloka et al., 2007).

However, it should be noted that most of the proposals listed above are already implemented in vocational schools and in vocational education; thus the organisation and process of the practical training at workplaces should be improved to meet the needs of all the stakeholders.

The researchers suggest that the stakeholders should be involved in solving the issues of vocational education. The most significant problems, which might be solved by applying the results of this study, are the following: promoting availability of lifelong learning and inhabitants' learning motivation; improving career education system and fostering the availability of career consulting services in the lifelong learning context.

In order to use resources in the education process more efficiently and to motivate students, the management of education funding could be transformed, allowing the majority of students to sign direct agreements with their future employers. The researchers consider that these agreements would both increase the students' responsibility and the employers' involvement in education processes.

Finally, the researchers suggest introducing legal amendments, e.g. harmonisation of terminology, and information availability and career development, as well as developing new ones, for example, regulations on qualification framework.

The study highlighted the necessity to promote closer cooperation between education and the labour market. One of the greatest issues is the slow adaptation of education to the changing economic requirements; therefore, employers should engage more with the education process. The next subchapter includes the main conclusions regarding the study and lists the proposals for further research.

4.3. Conclusions and Proposals for Further Research

This section includes the major conclusions following from the study on the correspondence of the education programmes to the labour market and proposals for further research. To obtain results, several data collection methods were used, which promotes validity of the study. Since the study explores both vocational and higher education programmes, in a way the focus on vocational education is lost. Occasionally vocational education issues are viewed from the (academic) higher education perspective, without deeper analysis of the particular context. Yet some of the proposals developed by the researchers may be worth considering.

The researchers point out the incapability of education to adapt to the labour market requirements completely and at a sufficient speed. To solve this issue, according to the researchers, vocational education students should have more work-based practical training. The employers should be more involved in the planning and implementation of the education process. However, when students have practical training in an enterprise, they may acquire knowledge and skills necessary to operate particular equipment, but not with a large variety of equipment employers have. Preparing education programmes is a time-consuming process anyway, and when they finally are implemented, the content is already outdated. Thus, more studies should be carried out on how to solve this issue and to find new approaches to the problem.

The other aspect that the researchers have highlighted is the promotion of lifelong learning system, which would ensure to the individuals the possibility to update and obtain new knowledge, skills and competences in their occupation. This is in line with the main lifelong learning policy planning document “The Guidelines for Lifelong Learning Policy 2007–2013” (*Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādnes 2007.–2013.gadam*, 2007) prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science, which aims to ensure the availability of lifelong learning for all social groups, to develop a high quality education offer for adults, providing sustainable competences for further socioeconomic and civic activities, and to form a legislative and administrative system involving various stakeholders.

The researchers suggest altering the management of education funding by introducing direct agreements between students and their future employers. On a small scale this financial instrument has been used by some enterprises or within the framework of some projects. Yet this recommendation, firstly, requires legal amendments and, secondly, may contain risk that it may turn out that the employer due to rapidly changing economic situation is unable to employ particular students, although the students have acquired knowledge, skills and competences targeted specially for this enterprise. Furthermore, in the current situation with unemployment rate of 14.1% (October 2009, State Employment Agency), the employers may

have more possibilities to choose employees, who have already adequate education and experience.

The correspondence between education and labour market has been set as one of the directions in several policy planning documents, which affirms the significance of this topic. Since labour market and industry changes constantly, continuous studies should be implemented. As mentioned above, currently the research activities are quite limited due to the insufficient financial resources.

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