

Status Quo Report on Student Engagement with Society

Qual-AI-ty Engagement Country Report: **Latvia**



Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices
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MCAST



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Project: Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices

Consortium Partners

Riga Technical University

The University of Twente

Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)

European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

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1. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

1.1. Geographical

Latvia, one of the three Baltic States and a member of the European Union, is situated in the north-eastern part of Europe, on the east coast of the Baltic Sea, bordering Lithuania, Belarus, Russia and Estonia. The landscape of the country is marked by lowland plains and rolling hills, with thousands of rivers and lakes. Most of the countryside is less than 100 metres above the sea level. The weather in Latvia is governed by a moderate oceanic climate and it is quite changeable. Summer (June–August) is usually warm or hot with the average temperature of about +20° C, but time to time it may reach also +30° C and more. In winter (December–February) snowfall is common, and it is rather cold with the average temperature of -5° C, but the temperature may drop to even -25° C or more.¹ There are four nature reserves in Latvia which occupy approximately 0.4% of the country. Nature conservation and activities related to it are also a precondition for sustainability of society. Also, the Baltic Sea is one of the most intensely used seas on the planet and there is also a possibility of engaging in various activities which are organised by WWF and meant to protect and preserve it – especially for students who are interested in geography, biology etc. For instance, there is a possibility of engaging in the Academy of Defence and gain new knowledge on the subject. The Academy is also organised by young people.²

The population in Latvia is about 1.9 million.³ The largest ethnic groups are Latvians (59%), Russians (28%), Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians and Jews.⁴

¹ Higher Education in Latvia. Study programmes in Latvia, offered in foreign languages. Riga: 2009, available: https://viaa.gov.lv/files/news/3901/higher_education_in_latvia_3ed.pdf

² Pasaules Dabas fonds, available: https://lv-pdf.panda.org/iesaieties/aizstavibas_akademija/

³ “Iedzīvotāju skaits Latvijā sarūk lēnāk”, 28.10.2020., available:

<https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/316616-iedzivotaju-skaits-saruk-lenak-2020>

⁴ Higher Education in Latvia. Study programmes in Latvia, offered in foreign languages. Riga: 2009, available: https://viaa.gov.lv/files/news/3901/higher_education_in_latvia_3ed.pdf

1.2. Individual

HEI student share by gender is quite equal in Latvia, although in the last decade the percent of women has been steadily higher than the percent of men. However, the percent of men tended to grow in the last 3 years, while the percent of women decreased slightly. Still, there are more women among students than men. See Chart 1 and Chart 2⁵ for dynamics of gender of students in Latvia.

CHART 1. HEI student share by gender in Latvia (2010–2020)

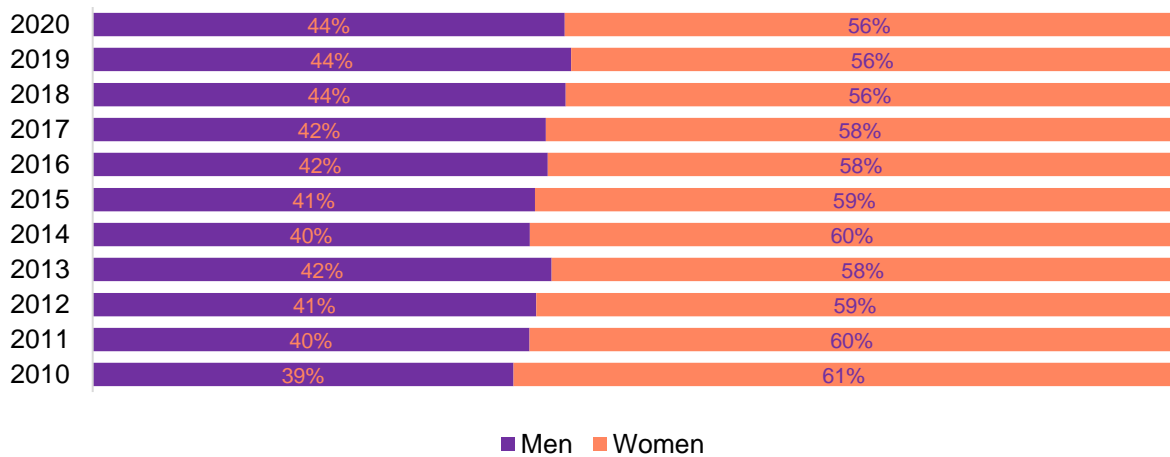
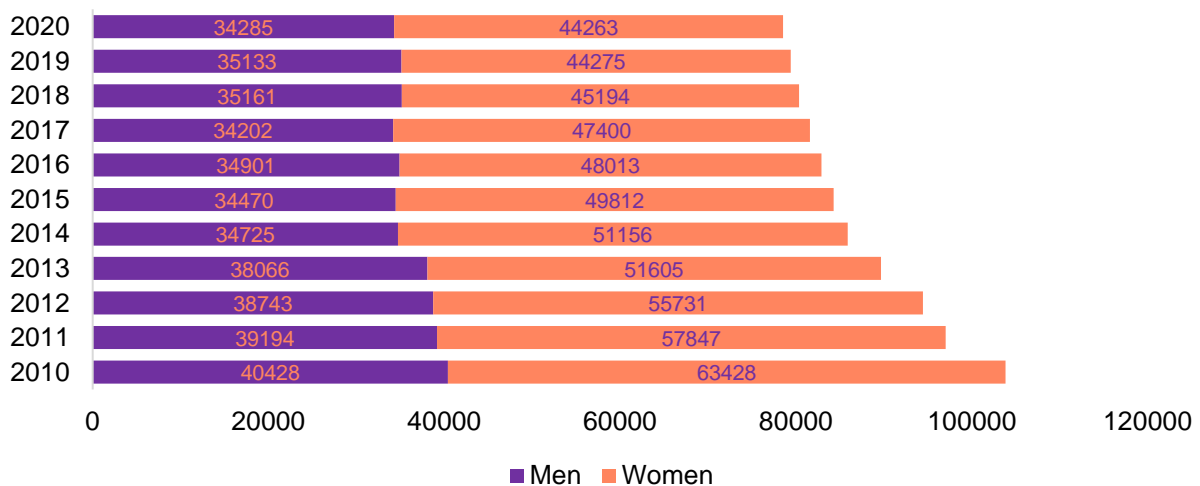


CHART 2. HEI students by gender in Latvia (2010–2020)



⁵ Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia, available: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_IZG_IG_IGA/IGA010/

There has been a tendency for the average age of students to rise in Latvia; the number of 18–20-year-old students was larger in 2010 compared to 2020. Whereas, the number of 31–39-year-old students has a steady tendency to grow, which means that, most likely, the number of working students (and students with families) is growing too. That may have an impact on student engagement in Latvia in general. See Chart 3⁶ for dynamics of HEI students by age in Latvia.

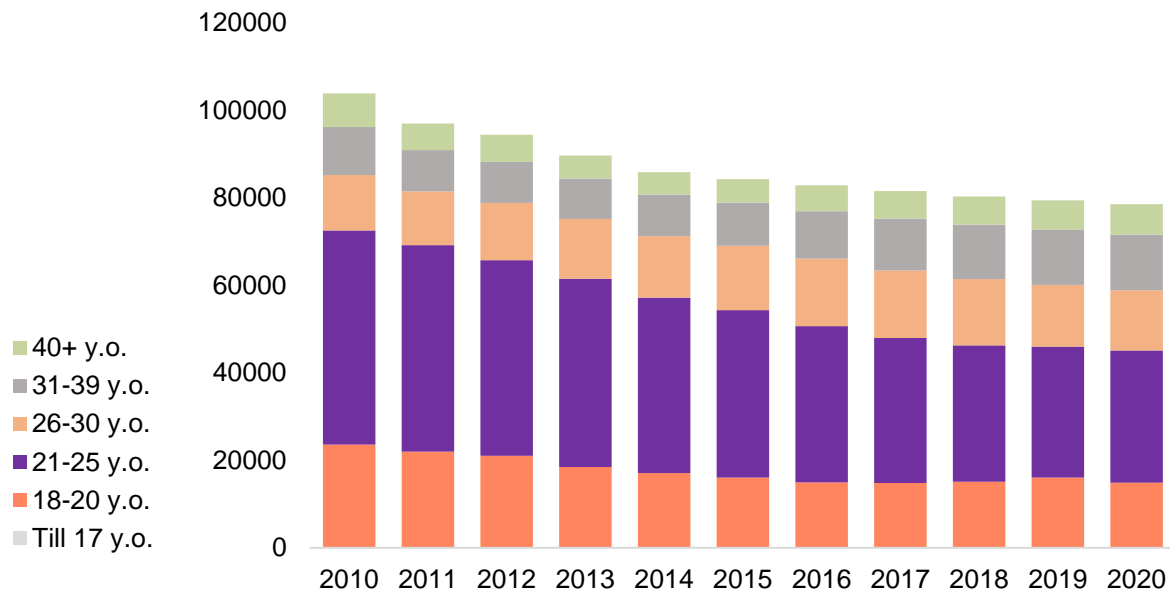
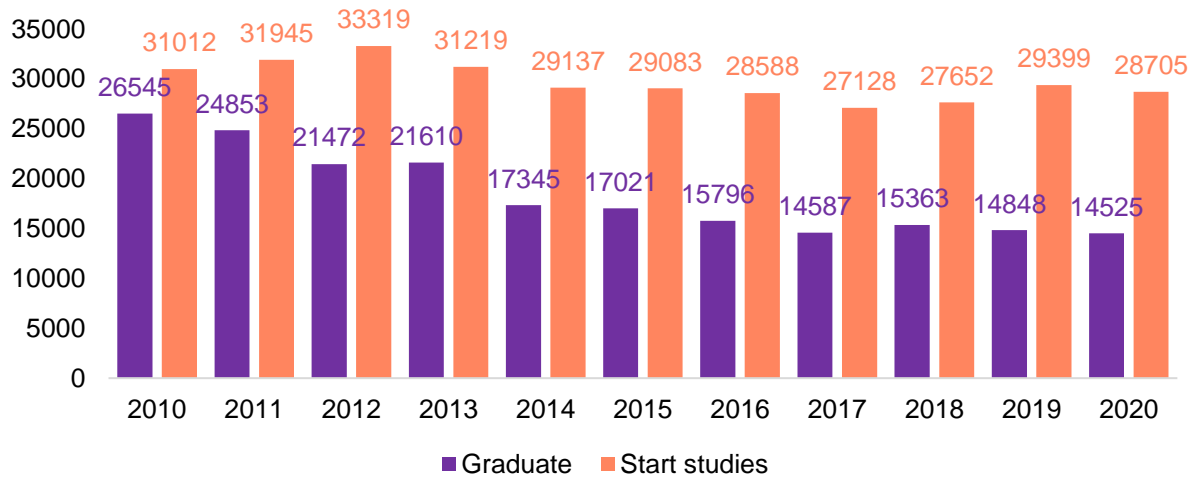


CHART 3. Number of HEI students by age in Latvia (2010–2020)

In 2019, there was the largest number of matriculated students since 2013 – 29 399 new students. The number had risen by 6% compared to 2018.

⁶ Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia, available: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_IZG_IG_IGA/IGA010/

CHART 4. HEI students in Latvia (2010–2020)



The number is rising because the number of foreign students and also the number of graduates of secondary schools is rising. Besides, in the past few years, a bigger number of those who are older than 30 years began studies. In 2019, 66% of 29 000 of the newly enrolled students began studies in state universities/academies, 20% – in private academies, 9% – in state colleges and agencies of universities/academies, and 5% in private colleges.⁷ In 2020, there was a slight decrease of the number of matriculated students – 28 705 students began their studies in various universities (See Chart 6 for dynamics of graduated and matriculated students in the past decade.⁸)

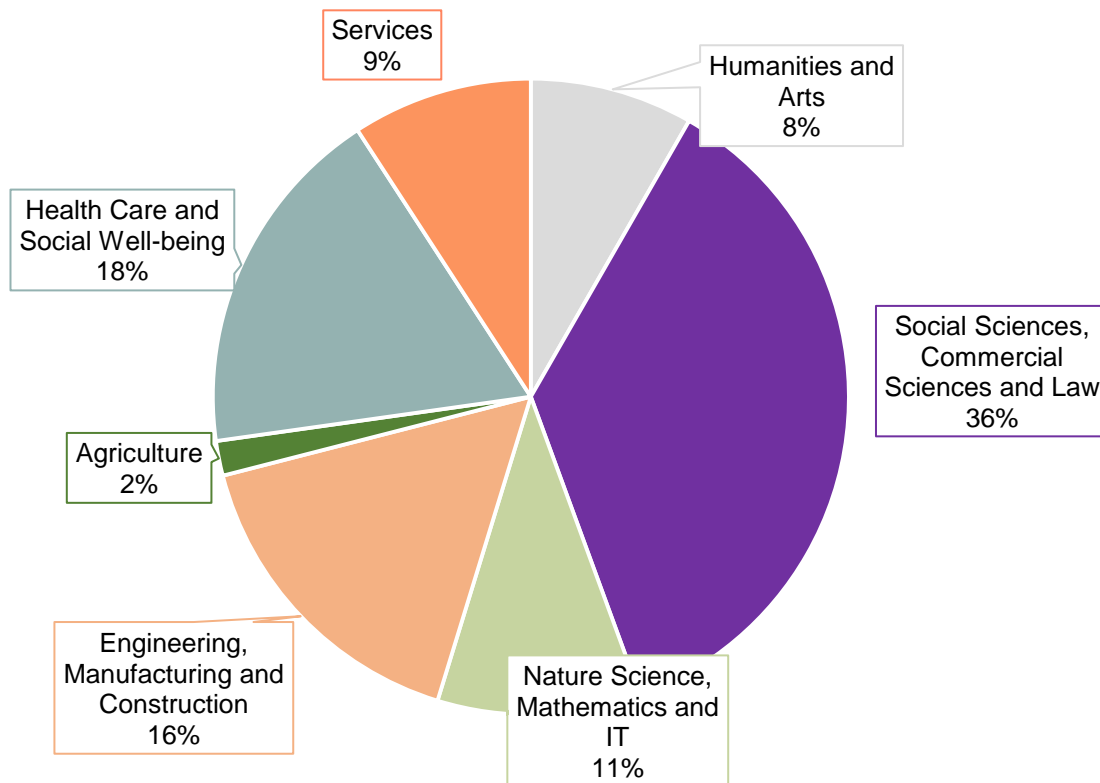
There are eight thematic educational areas in Latvia: Education, Engineering Science, Humanities and Arts, Agriculture, Social Science, Health Care, Natural Science, and Services. The most popular BA educational thematic groups in 2020 were “Social science, commercial science and rights” (36%), the largest number of the newly enrolled students were in the group of educational programmes “Management and administration”. 16% of the students were matriculated in “Engineering Science, production and construction”, most of their choices were for the subgroups “Electronics and automatics” and “Mechanical Sciences”. There are no radical changes since 2010 in proportional distribution in thematic groups, still, more students are interested in “Services”, “Natural Sciences, Mathematic and IT”, especially in IT. The steepest drop

⁷ Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2019. gadā. Statistikas dati, Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/2122/download>

⁸ Data from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, available: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_IZG_IG_IGA/IGA030/

in the number proportionally was in the educational thematic group “Humanities and Arts”.⁹ See Chart 5 for more details.

CHART 5. HEI students by study areas in Latvia (2020)



Of all those students matriculated in higher-level studies, 7 thousand were matriculated in master-level studies, in academic master and professional study programmes, the highest number since 2008. In master level studies, the number of matriculates started to increase gradually in 2017 after a long period of recession. In master level studies, admissions represent 25% of all those matriculated in 2019. In master level studies, 22% of those matriculated are in the thematic group “Health Care and Social Welfare”. In 2019, 490 students were enrolled in Doctoral programs, by 8% more than in 2018. In doctoral studies, however, the number of matriculates tends to decline.¹⁰

At the beginning of the academic year 2019/2020 the number of students in higher education institutions in Latvia was 79 thousand, which is lower by 1% than at the

⁹Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia, available: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_IZG_IG_IGA/IGA030/table/tableViewLayout2/

¹⁰Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2019. gadā. Statistikas dati, Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/2122/download>

beginning of the academic year 2018/2009. The number of students in higher education institutions has been declining for a long time: since the academic year 2005/2006, the number of students has fallen by 39%. In the period from the 2001/2002 academic year, the steepest reduction in the number of students compared to the previous academic year was between the academic years 2009/2010 and 2011/2012, when the number of students decreased by an average of 6% per year.¹¹

At the beginning of the academic year 2019/2020, for 11 thousand of the staff of universities and colleges it was the place of basic employment, of them 53% were general staff (including administrative staff) and 47% were academic staff. At the beginning of the academic year 2019/2020 in the higher education institutions of Latvia, the number of academic staff for whom the institution concerned was the place of election or the place of basic employment was 5 thousand. Compared to the academic year 2018/2009, the number of academic staff for whom it was the place of basic employment had decreased by 2%. In turn, the share of academic staff with degrees had increased and reached 60% in the academic year 2019/2020, which was the highest proportion of academic staff with degrees in modern Latvian history. In the academic year 2019/2020, 56% of the academic staff elected in the institution concerned were women. However, the proportion of men and women varied in different positions. The highest proportion of women was in the lecturer's position (66%), but the lowest in the professor's capacity (46%).¹²

1.3. Structural, Legal and Organisational

Latvia's higher education relies on a three-cycle structure: bachelor, master, and doctoral level studies. Academic higher education programmes are based mostly upon fundamental and/or applied sciences. They usually comprise a research paper or thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a Bachelor's degree and Master's degree. The duration of Bachelor's degree programmes may be three to four years, depending on the study field and educational programme. A Master's degree is awarded after the second cycle of academic education and requires at least five years of university studies altogether (including the three to four years of Bachelor's degree). The doctoral degree lasts three to four years in full-time studies. It includes advanced studies of the

¹¹ Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2019. gadā. Statistikas dati, Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/2122/download>

¹² Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2019. gadā. Statistikas dati, Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/2122/download>

subject in a relevant study programme and scientific research towards a doctoral thesis; it awards the title of PhD.

The Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Vocational Education determines the professional higher education. A short-term college education (two to three years) leads to an ISCED 5 professional qualification, which is the first level professional higher education diploma. A longer term (four to five years), leads to an ISCED 6 professional qualification and awards students with a professional qualification and vocational Bachelor's degree that can be followed by a further one to two years of vocational Master's degree studies. The Master's degree in professional higher education is awarded after at least five years of studies.¹³

Law on Education (1998) – a framework law containing definitions of all types and levels of education which defines general principles and determines competences of governing bodies.

- Law on General Education (1999)
- Law on Vocational Education (1999)
- Law on Higher Education Establishments (1995)
- Law on Scientific Activity (2005)
- Law on Institutions of Higher Education (Currently updates are being prepared).¹⁴

The Law on Institutions of Higher Education makes distinction between university-type and non-university-type institutions. While non-university-type institutions run professional programmes, universities often offer both academic and professional programmes. The law defines four determinant criteria for a university status:

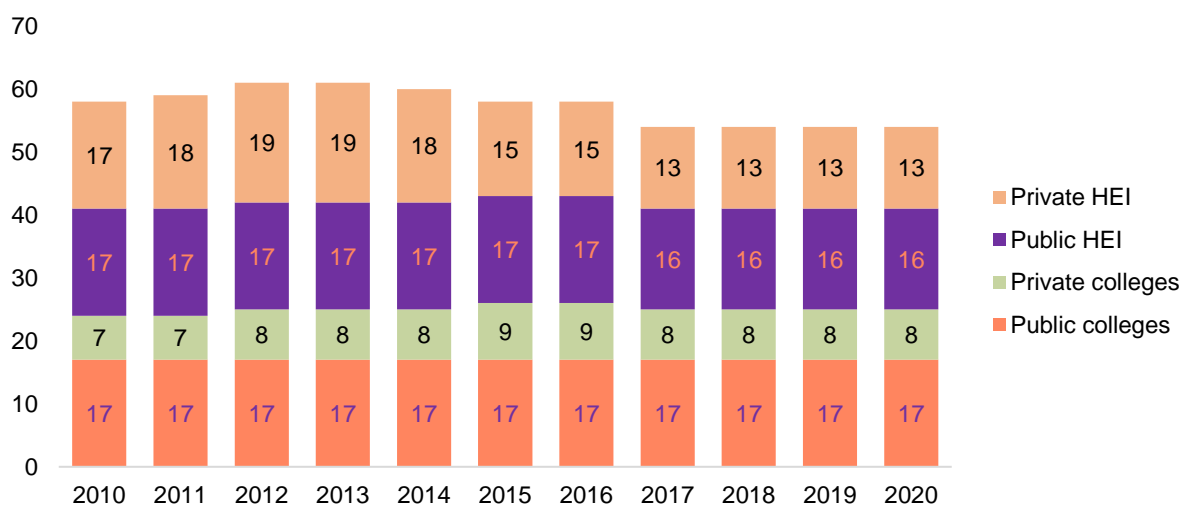
1. implementation of bachelor, master and doctoral study programmes; assertion of doctoral thesis occurs annually,
2. at least half of persons elected in academic posts hold a Doctor's degree,
3. institution issues scientific publications and
4. establishes scientific institutions or units in the main scientific disciplines corresponding to the implemented study programmes.

¹³ Euroeducation, available: <https://www.euroeducation.net/prof/latviaco.htm>

¹⁴ Education System in Latvia, Ministry of Education and Science, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/education-system-latvia>

College may function under higher educational institution and also as an independent institution. Colleges provide first-level higher professional education considered as the first phase of the second-level professional higher education programmes offered by a higher education institution. There are public and private (i.e. established by legal persons as defined by the legislation) higher education institutions.¹⁵ The number of public higher education institutions is higher than the private ones (see Chart 6).

CHART 6. Number of HEI in Latvia
(2010–2020)



The number of higher education institutions in Latvia¹⁶

In 2019, in Latvia there were six universities, 21 academies, 17 colleges, 8 colleges – agencies of state academies and universities and two affiliates of foreign academies. The number of higher education institutions has not changed since 2017. The number of universities is not characterized by rapid turnover, the relatively major changes since 2003 were seen in the number of colleges, which grew from 14 to 25.¹⁷ In 2014, the most popular study programmes in the English language among internationally mobile students were in business, medical sciences and social sciences. Nearly all international students and most local students study in Riga, where the largest public and private higher education institutions are situated.¹⁸ Thus, the context of such

¹⁵ Types of Higher Educational Institutions, available: <https://www.euroeducation.net/prof/latviaco.htm>

¹⁶ Data from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, available: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_IZG_IG_IGP/IGA060/table/tableViewLayout1/

¹⁷ Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2019. gadā. Statistikas dati, Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/2122/download>

¹⁸ Ali Ait Si Mhamed, Zane Vārpiņa, Indra Dedze, Rita Kaša, "Latvia: A Historical Analysis of Transformation and Diversification of the Higher Education System", *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries* (Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education, 2018), pp. 259-283, available: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6_10

situation predisposes that all main activities for foreign students are located in Riga; therefore, also the student engagement in all trajectories described above will be easier and more effective in Riga.

1.4. Environmental

State Research Programme of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development “Sustainable development of the territory and rational use of land resources”. The overarching goal of the programme is to promote knowledge-based, sustainable and efficient use, management and planning of land resources in accordance with the social, economic and climate change challenges and available human resources and their potential, skills, competences and life strategies. The programme aims to strengthen the links between research and policies with a territorial impact: to develop new knowledge, approaches and methods for sustainable and inclusive spatial development planning aimed at the efficient use of land and water resources in accordance with the social, economic, ethical and climate change challenges and opportunities, – to prepare a scientific substantiation, information base and methodological approach for the assessment of the potential of Latvian landscapes and sustainable management, as well as to strengthen the link between research, public administration and society. The total funding of the programme is 405,000 euros and the implementation period is 2020-2022. The programme is financed from the resources of the state budget sub-programme 30.00.00 “National Development Aid Instruments” of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development.¹⁹

In 2020, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and Rīga Stradiņš University signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on the exchange of information, skills and experience, thereby reinforcing the use of modern technologies and data in medical development. The Memorandum was signed remotely with the aim of promoting knowledge transfer from the academic environment to economic development – strengthening the economy with highly qualified specialists, new high value added products, technologies and services, and developing the export capacity

¹⁹ Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrijas VPP “Ilgtspējīga teritorijas attīstība un racionāla zemes resursu izmantošana”, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/vides-aizsardzibas-un-reģionalas-attistibas-ministrijas-vpp-ilgtspejiga-teritorijas-attistiba-un-racionala-zemes-resursu-izmantosana>

of Latvia's knowledge economy.²⁰ Riga Technical University invited Latvian organizations and companies to become members of the EIT (European Institute of Innovation and Technology) Climate-KIC contact point for the Knowledge and Innovation Community (EIT Climate-KIC). The aim was to participate in the EIT Regional Innovation Framework to promote climate innovation across Europe.²¹

1.5. Political

Latvia developed into a democracy after regaining independence in 1991. Elections are regarded as free and fair, and freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected in practice. However, corruption remains a major problem affecting politics, the judiciary, and the wider criminal justice system. The country's ethnic Russians face discrimination, still, in October 2019 the Parliament – Saeima passed legislation that will grant automatic citizenship to Latvian-born children of noncitizens in 2020. Latvian political parties organize and compete freely.

However, Latvian political candidates cannot run as independents, and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office. Parliamentary elections often result in the entry of new political parties to the Saeima. The Latvian constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat Saeima, whose members are elected to four-year terms. In 2018, the last parliamentary election was viewed as competitive and credible, and stakeholders accepted the results. The unity leader Kariņš successfully formed a coalition in January 2019. The president has traditionally been elected through a closed vote but in late 2018 the outgoing Saeima amended the constitution to make future balloting open. The former European Court of Justice judge Egils Levits was the first president to be selected through an open ballot in 2019.²²

According to The Youth Politics State Programme, the youth policy guidelines for 2021–2027 are: 1: Strengthening the quality of youth work; 2: Establishing and developing a framework for working with youth; 3: Promoting greater and more active participation of young people; 4: Skills and abilities needed for the labour market and

²⁰ RSU un VARAM sadarbības memorands sekmēs kopīgu projektu realizēšanu Latvijas un Eiropas mērogā, RSU.lv, 30.11.2020, available: <https://www.rsu.lv/aktualitates/rsu-un-varam-sadarbibas-memorands-sekmes-kopigu-projektu-realizesanu-latvijas-un>

²¹ RTU aicina dažādas organizācijas un uzņēmumus aktīvi līdzdarboties klimata inovāciju veicināšanā Eiropā, RTU.lv, available: <https://www.rtu.lv/lv/universitate/masu-medijiem/zinas/atvert/rtu-aicina-dazadas-organizacijas-un-uznemumus-aktivi-lidzdarboties-klimata-inovaciju-veicinasana-eiropa>.

²² Freedomhouse, available: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/latvia/freedom-world/2020>

for independent life promotion; 5: Promoting the inclusion of young people with limited opportunities.²³

1.6. Economic

The **economy** is in a broad-based upswing led by domestic demand. Fast earnings increases are supporting private consumption. A strong rebound of investment pushed GDP growth rates above 4% in 2017 and 2018. GDP growth is expected to slow around 3% in 2019 and 2020, as world trade weakens, and investment slows to a more sustainable pace. **Unemployment** has been decreasing fast and job vacancies are continuing to grow. Latvia continues to lose workers through migration and more than 40% of all emigrants between 2009 and 2016 were high-skilled. This contributes to rising skill shortages. Along with a 13% rise in the minimum wage in 2018 this has fuelled wage growth, which is running at roughly 8%. Exporters still enjoy rising market shares and strong profitability, although continued increases in unit labour costs could ultimately undermine their competitiveness. After the administrative-territorial reform in 2009, the **municipalities** were relatively small. This undermined the provision of high-quality public services, including education and public transport. The government initiated a territorial reform in 2021 aiming at reducing the number of municipalities significantly. This should entail large efficiency gains and help address the deepening rural-urban divide. Core **inflation** has been firmly anchored around 2%. While private sector debt and non-performing loans have fallen fast to comfortable levels and the banking sector is well capitalised, credit growth remains close to nil. Banks remain cautious after heavy losses, partly caused by inefficient insolvency procedures, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. The widespread under-declaration of income also plays a role. **Anti-money laundering** efforts have been stepped up. Latvia banned its banks from servicing certain types of high risk “shell companies” and oversaw a reduction in non-resident deposits by more than 60% to reduce money-laundering risks. Based on recommendations of international experts (Moneyval, 2018) the new government, assisted by the OECD, works on implementing an action plan that would strengthen the quality and capacity of Latvia’s supervisory, control and law enforcement bodies and enhance international cooperation on anti-money laundering and combating of terrorism financing. **Income inequality and poverty remain high**. Living standards have improved fast overall, but regional disparities in income per capita are pronounced. Social protection is limited and housing conditions are poor for a relatively

²³ Jaunatnes politikas valsts programma 2021–2023, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/7091/download>

large share of the population. Taxes and benefits could do more to lower inequality. Personal income tax reform has lowered labour taxes for some lower-income households. Yet, a new social contribution earmarked for health spending has limited this effect. Taxes on higher income workers and progressivity remain limited, as more than 90% of taxpayers pay the lowest rate of 20%. Social assistance remains low and while they improved, work incentives for accepting low wage jobs remain limited for benefit recipients. **Latvia needs stronger productivity growth to improve living standards.** This would help to counteract the effects of ageing and emigration of high-skilled workers. Productivity growth has slowed down after 2008, as the financial crisis impaired the credit channel impeding stronger capital deepening and investment in innovation. Shortages in skills needed to take up digital technologies and weak competition in some sectors with an important presence of state-owned and municipal enterprises (SOEs) hold back productivity, too. High informality hinders stronger investment growth and inclusiveness. A widespread practice of under-declaration of income weighs on tax revenues, much needed to invest in education and infrastructure, on workers' training opportunities and on firms' access to finance. It also makes for patchy pension contribution records. The government is working to strengthen the capacity of the tax administration and other law enforcement agencies, but progress with filling vacancies has been slow and lenient sentences continue to impede the fight against tax crime. **Innovation performance is weak.** Only a few firms innovate, and R&D spending is relatively low. The supply of researchers and research quality are weak. Various measures to promote knowledge transfer are in place but researchers have little incentive to collaborate with industry. The government has reformed institutional financing to reward performance and promote consolidation. Taking these reforms further would improve efficiency and make room for higher wages and better working conditions for researchers to attract more qualified personnel. Limited access to affordable housing in dynamic areas impedes access to jobs. Unemployment and income differences between Latvia's regions are large but buying a new home in booming areas is out of reach for most workers. Both the private rental and the social housing sectors are very small. The government plans to develop the private rental market by supporting access to long-term finance and housing with limits on rents, a welcome move.²⁴

²⁴ OECD Economic Surveys, Latvia, available: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/latvia-2019-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

1.7. Social

Social life of Latvian inhabitants this year faced plethora of changes due to emergency situation. Additionally, Latvia still has a problem of aging population and population decrease in general.

Descending population trend is one of the most problematic issues for Latvia. The decrease in the number of inhabitants is determined not only by the natural population decline, which has been preserved in Latvia since 1991, but also by migration, the negative balance of which has also been observed annually for a long time.

At the same time, declining trend of live birth observed with a significant drop by 12% in 2020.

In a public opinion poll which, was conducted within the framework of the study project reCOVVery-LV funded by the Latvian state research programme in the University of Latvia, it was clear that, compared to the September survey, respondents' satisfaction with life had deteriorated by an average of 0.4 points. Deterioration of the assessment was observed in all socio-demographic groups, but especially in the groups of young people, middle-aged, Russian-speaking, public sector employees, families with children and high-income respondents.

Since January 2019, the regularity with which respondents tend to be informed about political issues had decreased, but the social activity of respondents had increased, discussing political events with peers more often. During the pandemic, the number of opinion leaders had increased, and the share of opinion seekers had decreased. The share of politically alienated had not changed significantly.

Despite the decline in confidence in the EU institutions observed in the September survey compared to May 2017, the public sentiment towards the EU had significantly improved since September: the share of positive assessments of both the EU as a whole and Latvia's membership in the EU had increased. Examining the type of respondents' attitudes towards the EU, it was revealed that the share of optimists had significantly increased, but the share of deniers had decreased, especially in Latvia's ethnic minority communities.²⁵

²⁵ Based on source: LATVIA STATISTICS IN BRIEF 2020, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

1.8. Technological

The availability of information and communication technologies (ICT) and digitalized courses makes it possible to continue learning when physical interactions are no longer possible.

Among Latvian higher education institutions, the most popular e-learning environment is the *Moodle* platform, which is used in the majority of Latvian HEI since 2007 (Informatīvais ziņojums, 2013). As in other countries, Latvian higher education also faces a digital challenge: it needs to adapt traditional teaching methods and offer a mix of face-to-face and online learning possibilities, such as MOOCs, which allow individuals to access education anywhere, anytime and through any device (European Commission, 2013).

The implementation of MOOCs is a good opportunity and gives impact to learning media in Latvia on the national and international level. It is an opportunity for learners to develop independent and self-determined learning skills for lifelong learning, to develop information and digital literacy, as well as to improve foreign language skills. It is a challenge for educators as improvement of professional qualifications by acquiring new and innovative pedagogical methods for teaching and sharing of experience. (Source: Birziņa, Rita; Na-Songkhla, Jaitip (2019)²⁶.

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (IEA ICCS 2022) will be implemented in Latvia by the end of 2023. The study will make a significant contribution to improving the quality of education in Latvia in the future. Analysis of the study will provide answers to questions such as the **role of students in global citizenship and in environmental sustainability; social interactions at school; the use of new social media for civic engagement; digital citizenship; and migration and diversity.**²⁷

²⁶ Impacts of Educational Technologies on Learning Engagement â A Case of Latvian and Thai's Learners. *International Journal of Smart Education and Urban Society*, 10(4), 40–54. doi:10.4018/IJSEUS.2019100104)

²⁷ An international study will measure the level of civic competence of Latvian students, Ministry of Education and Science, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/article/international-study-will-measure-level-civic-competence-latvian-students>

2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

2.1. Students and Volunteering

National level

Students are active in volunteering movements throughout the country. Although there are no precise numbers of activity, students are more likely to engage in voluntary work.²⁸ The information is available on the internet, in social media and volunteering databases. Also, there is a possibility of volunteering to NGOs in Latvia. In some universities, there is a possibility of going to Career Centres and volunteer in the area of interests.²⁹

Volunteering of students is oriented towards public good, and also helps to develop new skills and attitudes. In Latvia, according to Youth Law, Paragraph 9, voluntary work of youths is organised in accordance with the Law on Voluntary Work.³⁰ Students can engage in voluntary work through their universities or NGO, or youth councils. In Latvia, approximately 50% of youths volunteer at least one time in their lives³¹. Volunteering movements include such areas as culture and arts (for example, Film and Theatre festivals), environment (funds for nature, local municipalities, sorting of waste etc.), sports (games, sport clubs etc.), education (mentoring and participating as volunteers in education organisations) and social activities (probation service, work with seniors, children, work in hospitals etc.). For example, in 2020/2021 medical students of Rīga Stradiņš University were volunteering in order to prevent effects of Covid-19 crisis in Latvia.³²

The main drivers behind student volunteering are (1) the possibility of gaining new experiences and competences; (2) volunteering matches the studies and interests of students; (3) socialization; (4) bonuses from volunteering (for example, if students are volunteers in music or theatre festivals, they can attend concerts for free etc.).

Critical supportive mechanisms for students' engagement in society as volunteers: (1) strategies for voluntary work in universities and local governments; (2) departments in

²⁸ Pētījums "Brīvprātīgā darba iespējas Latvijā un tā ieguldījums tautsaimniecībā", Pētījuma noslēguma ziņojums. Pasūtītājs: LR Izglītības ministrija, Īstenotājs: SIA "Analītisko pētījumu un stratēģiju laboratorija", Rīga, 2011, 57. lpp., available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/media/4036/download>

²⁹ Centre for Career of University of Latvia, available: <https://www.karjera.lu.lv/en/about-us/news/>

³⁰ Law on Voluntary Work, available: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/275061-brivpratiga-darba-likums>

³¹ Data from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, available:

<https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-raditaji/meklet-tema/1436-starpautisko-jaunatnes-dienu-latvija>

³² "Aicinām pievienoties RSU studentiem brīvprātīgajā darbā vīrusa ierobežošanas pasākumos", available: <https://www.rsu.lv/aktualitates/aicinam-pievienoties-rsu-studentiem-brivpratigaja-darba-virusa-ierobezosanas-pasakumos>

universities/local governments where students can apply for volunteering; (3) guided self-initiative; (4) feedback on the results of voluntary work.

2.2. Students and Employment

University level

According to “QS Graduate Employability Ranking 2020” rating, the results of Riga Technical University improved in 2019. It is now between Like University of Latvia, it is also in place 201–250.³³ In 2019, 82.2% of Riga Technical University graduates were employed.³⁴ In accordance with several rankings of 2020, Riga Technical University is number one between universities in Latvia and in accordance with the “Times Higher Education Impact” ranking it is among TOP 200 universities in the world.³⁵

In Latvia, the TOPs of the most recommended schools and studies of employers are designed to provide young people with direct information on the labour market by helping graduates of elementary schools, secondary schools and vocational education to make the right choice of further education, which would result in a successful career. The most recommended educational institutions and study programmes by employers is a good informative tool for graduates, since it was developed by a wide variety of Latvian companies who are interested in bringing knowledgeable specialists to the labour market. For more than eight years Riga Technical University has been TOP1 University. Other universities from TOP5: University of Latvia, Business Academy “Turība”, Latvia University of Agriculture and Bank Academy.³⁶

National level

In Latvia most students are employed at the time of their studies, and, since 2017, this tendency has been growing. In 2017, 61% of students were employed while studying

³³ QS Graduate Employability Rankings, available: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/employability-rankings/2020>

³⁴ Augstākās izglītības iestāžu absolventu darba gaitas 2019. gadā, IZM, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/11040/download>

³⁵ RTU Latvijā saglabā līderpozīcijas prestižajā “QS World University Rankings”, available: https://www.delfi.lv/campus/raksti/rtu-latvija-saglaba-liderpozicijas-prestizaja-qs-world-university-rankings?id=52215475&fbclid=IwAR0hKYBZFkRbGxHMgmKbjli_QIUw3rt53RRF4FA252Ps_JoYY-ti_PM0gKI

³⁶ Darba devēju ieteiktāko skolu un studiju TOP 2020, available: <https://likta.lv/darba-deveju-ieteiktako-skolu-un-studiju-tops-2020/>

(in 2009, only 32%), and 12% had irregular jobs.³⁷ On the national level, in 2019, the employment level of graduates was 65%.³⁸

Critical supportive mechanisms for driving student employment are: (1) initiative from the university; (2) cooperation between universities and local and global businesses; (3) cooperation between university and local governments; (4) possibility of getting a place for internship; (5) engaging master and doctoral students in the teaching process at the university.

The main stakeholders inside and outside universities that are relevant for student employment are: (1) universities; (2) local and global businesses; (3) state organizations (ministries, media); (4) local governments.

2.3. Student Engagement and Participation in Democracy

University level

When it comes to student participation in democracy on a university level, students can take part in student self-government, where student self-government accepts complaints from students about problems at the university and tries to solve these problems with the council of university on behalf of the students. Student-governments create mentoring programs, seminars, conferences, everything to help students ensure better study circumstances and opportunities.

Every university in Latvia has their own student self-government, and every faculty of the university also has their own student self-government. Riga Technical University, for example, has 9 faculties and the grand total of 392 students that are members of their faculties' student self-government with the Faculty of Engineering Economics and Management (with 83 members in their student self-government) being the most active one. Students can sign up for participating in the faculty's self-government and can be elected to higher positions by simple vote majority. The elections take place every year; therefore, one might argue that the accountability for student self-government is much higher than any other real government. Furthermore, there is also student self-government of all the faculties combined where the procedure to be elected is much more complicated than an individual faculty's student self-government, but, nonetheless it is based on democratic principles and procedures. Any member can suggest changes in the rules and suggest alternatives to the

³⁷ Studentu sociālie un ekonomiskie dzīves apstākļi Latvijā 2017, LU:FSI, 2017, p. 38., available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/media/3943/download>

³⁸ Augstākās izglītības iestāžu absolventu darba gaitas 2019. gadā, IZM, available: <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/11040/download>

approved decisions. In addition, the way student self-government makes decisions is also democratic but complicated to say the least. Nevertheless, the process of running a student self-government is teaching students the valuable fundamentals of democracy and giving a chance to take part in it.

National level

There are 18 major youth organizations for students to participate in Latvia, some of them are a part of a political party while others have their main focus on fighting for equality and human rights. For instance, Protests.eu organization is fighting for LGBTQ community and their rights in Latvia as well as other political and human rights issues. While other organizations, such as Restart.lv, which is a youth organization of the most popular Latvian political party “Saskaņas centrs” is inviting their potential followers to join the organization in order to have the opportunity to meet Latvia’s most influential political leaders. They also claim on their website that every member of the youth organization has the chance to submit their projects and pitch their ideas for improving the country. Another youth organization in politics on a national level that is positioning itself more aggressively than others is NAJO (Nacionālās apvienības jauniešu organizācija), which is also a youth organization of one of Latvia’s major political parties (Nacionālā apvienība). Their message to the potential members is that Latvia needs more young and active students to join to fight for preserving Latvia in a Latvian way. While they also organize cultural preservation events, their main focus is on political issues, thus making students participate in the democratic processes in Latvia.

The main motivation behind student participation in democracy: (1) interest and information about processes in the state and society; (2) possibility of engaging in NGOs; (3) possibility of gaining new knowledge and competences; (4) possibility of having an impact on academic processes in universities (through student governments).

The main stakeholders that are relevant for the student engagement in democratic processes are (1) universities; (2) student governments; (3) political parties; (4) NGOs; (5) local governments.

2.4. Students and Cultural Expressions

University level

The RTU Cultural Centre offers to students the opportunity to spend their time outside studies creatively and excitingly by engaging in one of the 12 cultural collective or interest clubs. RTU students feel themselves standing safely on the big stage, participating in the General Latvian Song and Dance Celebrations, the Song and Dance Celebrations of the Baltic students in Gaudeamus and international competitions, festivals, and developing and certifying the cultural life of RTU over 60 years. 12 cultural collectives include choirs, folk dancing, Big Band, student theatres, post-folk ensemble, vocal ensemble and Dance Club. All collectives are led by professionals, except Dance Club, which is initiative from various people who dance folk dances.

National level

In every university and academy in Latvia, there are cultural collectives for students. Mostly there is a possibility of engaging in choirs, folk-dance collectives, orchestras or bands and theatres. Also, there is a possibility to engage in collectives for applied arts. Student theatres can participate in the Amateur Theatre festival in Riga, as well as in the Theatre Days. Important cultural event where choirs and dance collectives take part is Latvian Song and Dance Festival – one of the largest amateur choral and dancing events in the world and an important part of Latvian culture. As one of the Baltic song festivals, it is also a part of the UNESCO Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list since 2008.³⁹

There are also various student media – *Louder* in Rīga Stradiņš University, Radio NABA in University of Latvia (UL) etc. Non-profit radio NABA started broadcasting at the end of 2002 and came into existence with the support of University of Latvia and Latvian National Radio and became the 6th Latvian Radio channel. It can be considered a continuation of student Radio KNZ traditions, yet the broadcast content of Radio NABA is more varied in both informative and musical aspect. Programs are managed by students of UL, and in cooperation with various cultural organizations for 11 years NABA has been organizing the international culture (music, dance, theatre, arts, and nature friendly life-style) festival *Laba daba*.

Supportive mechanisms, critical for driving student cultural expressions: (1) strategy of universities; (2) financial strategies in universities and governments for student cultural expression; (3) departments of culture in both universities and local

³⁹ Vispārējie latviešu dziesmu un deju svētki, *Nacionālā enciklopēdija*, available: <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/10526-Visp%C4%81r%C4%93jie-latvie%C5%A1u-dziesmu-un-deju-sv%C4%93tki>

governments; (4) financial and strategic support from the state; (5) students' self-initiative.

The main stakeholders inside and outside universities that are relevant for the student cultural expressions are: (1) universities; (2) governments; (3) state.

2.5. Students and Teaching and Learning

University level

Various platforms are available for practical involvement in research and science at RTU. Scientific research at the university is an important part of the study process and is carried out within every study program. The strategic goal of RTU research is to analyse and provide solutions to pressing technical and social problems. For example, in cooperation with "Latvenergo" AS, the Faculty of Electrical and Environmental Engineering has set up a creative workshop for students, with an aim to develop their practical skills in electronics and electrical engineering, whilst promoting interest in these areas. In their free time at the workshop students are able to consult with the teaching staff and develop electronic and electrotechnical circuit layouts, printed circuit board design, circuit soldering and testing, as well as microcontroller programming. There is also the RTU Robotics Club, which unites people with an interest in robot construction. The goal of the club is to promote interest in robots and related industries such as electronics, mechanics and programming. The club also aims to develop the robotics movement in Latvia, train new robot builders and build world-class robots. Students from doctoral and master's programmes are involved actively in research projects and also in academic work.

National level

In order to establish the number of students in universities, there are various systems in Latvia. For example, in University of Latvia, which is statistically the largest of the universities, there is a curator programme which is meant for helping the new students to adapt in the academic environment as well as in study work and to help to preserve motivation for studies. The aim of the programme is to reduce the number of dropout students. Also, there is a mentor programme which works similarly. In almost all biggest universities in Latvia there are similar curator or mentor programmes where students involve in order to help first-year students to cope with the studies. Besides, there is a problem with the ageing of academic personnel in Latvia, and this is also the reason why guidelines of doctoral studies in most universities include an aim to

educate competitive highly qualified specialists who take part in international academic circulation for academic work at universities and other higher educational establishments, as well as for research and organizing work in public or private institutions.

3. INPUTS, OUTPUTS AND IMPACTS

In each trajectory different resources are used, but human resource is of great importance in all of them, although in each trajectory there will be slight differences of how human resources are used. Mostly, these are employees of universities, NGOs, political parties, local businesses etc.

Financial resources are also of great importance, especially in students' engagement in democratic processes, cultural expressions and teaching and learning – without strategic financial plan on the university, local government and also national level these trajectories would not be possible. In the state budget as well as in universities' budget there are financial positions for cultural activities, students' participation in democratic processes etc. There is also a possibility of getting financial support for projects from various foundations.

Outputs

Tangible results:

1. more active voluntary work, which is promoting sustainability of the society;
2. new workplaces created;
3. young specialists working in their areas and thus promoting and establishing the economic situation;
4. the renewal of academic staff in universities;
5. more qualitative academic research.

Intangible results:

1. renewal of human resources, who actively engage in democratic processes;
2. changes in society, which has a positive impact on sustainability and development;
3. diversification in cultural life;
4. diversification in social life.

Impacts

On the individual level the impact can be different in each trajectory: students gain new knowledge and competences, their financial situation becomes better, they may have influence on political processes and cultural events. Also, the academic skills of students are improved.

On the organizational level, the academic staff renewal is of great importance, as it is a possibility of implementing new research and developing new necessary study courses. Also, the cooperation between universities and local businesses strengthens. The student engagement in voluntary work and culture may improve the public image of universities.

On the regional/national level, student engagement in all trajectories has an important impact on the sustainability and development of the society – the society becomes more democratic, flexible and modern, new workplaces are created, the variety of cultural expressions grows, and the new scientific research invests in the development of society, economy and culture.

4. BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The barrier can be described as multidimensional, because it is combined from various problems which overlap on the individual, organizational and national levels. The specifics are, as explained above, that most students work in parallel with their studies, and this is the main reason which complicates student engagement in all trajectories, except employment. Mostly, the reason why students work is because of the study fees (although there is a possibility to ask credit from the state). Another aspect is bureaucracy; in some cases, it may delay cooperation agreements between universities and local businesses. The possibility of engaging in voluntary work has decentralized infrastructure which makes engagement and getting the information complicated. Also, as much as universities would like to engage students in the research and teaching processes, in some areas (humanities and arts) it may be a question of lack of financial resources.

Opportunities

In order to create opportunities that could stimulate student engagement in all trajectories and to create strategies for student engagement, a few preconditions are necessary:

- (1) targeted cooperation between student governments and NGOs providing an opportunity for voluntary work;
- (2) local and state benefits for new businesses established by students (tax reliefs, grants, targeted policy for developing start-ups etc.);
- (3) targeted cooperation between universities and local businesses;
- (4) targeted cooperation between political organizations and student governments;
- (5) targeted strategies of student engagement in teaching and research.

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