

Climate change in vocational education: the EXPECT project visits Latvia.

The latest peer learning activity for the Erasmus+ EXPECT project (Exchange of Practices in Education for Climate Targets) took place in Riga, Latvia on April 4-5, 2022, with delegates from Finland, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK with Austria joining online.

Ilze Buligina from the Ministry of Education gave us an overview of Latvian Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy. Plans for the 2021-27 period include green transition as a key priority and all VET institutions must include practical green measures in their development plans.

Ilze explained that many students and parents still regard the 'general' route offered by local authority high schools as having greater value and this attracts 60% of post-16 students. The state leads on VET and is investing heavily in vocational colleges and new programmes to make VET more attractive. The VET reform process is creating a more modular, unitized and competence-based curriculum with refreshed content.

We then heard from a range of key civil society and NGO agencies working in the field: Inese Liepiņa from the Children's Environmental School (CES), an NGO which promotes environmental education and offers opportunities for young people to implement their project ideas and gain work experience. CES supports national and international environmental education projects, in-service training for teachers and school leaders, the production of education materials and organizes environmental camps for students.

CES supports key international projects such as the Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) program - a worldwide hands-on citizen-science education program. GLOBE's vision is to support students, teachers and scientists to collaborate on environmental investigations working with NASA, NOAA and NSF Earth System Science Projects (ESSP's) to study and research the dynamics of Earth's environment.

CES also promotes PULCHRA, an international EU-funded scientific education project supporting students to work with experts and local communities to research cities as urban ecosystems.

Inese also explained the cultural importance of the national Latvian School Youth Song and Dance Festival built on a nationwide network of local

associations. The festival aims to be climate-friendly using a climate calculator app. for students and organizers.

Līva Stāde, coordinator of the Latvia Eco-Schools programme, explained how student involvement in Eco-Schools promotes a better understanding of the environment, strengthens cross-curricular skills, develops positive attitudes, values and motivation and a desire to take action, not only in educational settings but also in the wider community, contributing to the development of environmental awareness.

Mihails Basmanovs from the National Centre for Education (NCE) briefed us about the 'Competence Approach to the Curriculum / School 2030' project which aims to develop a curriculum to support the knowledge and attitudes needed for the modern world. The current curriculum is being reviewed and improved and the project aims to train nearly 17,000 teachers, of whom nearly 5,000 teach in linguistically diverse settings.

Anna Doškina, Chair of Zero Waste Latvija (ZWL), which works with government, waste managers and producers to implement new projects and to develop new legislation to reduce the negative impact of pollution, promote sustainable development, support environmentally friendly alternatives, popularize the principles of a sustainable lifestyle, a circular economy and waste-free practices.

The focus then turned towards opportunities for student initiative and agency and we heard from Laura Treimane, Climate Policy Officer from WWF Latvia, who spoke about the views of young Latvians on environmental, nature and climate issues. A WWF Latvia survey showed that the majority of young Latvians aged 16-25 believe that global environmental crisis mitigation is very important. Laura is developing an 'Advocacy Academy' which would train young people to advocate for their future interests and develop their ability to influence policy.

We also heard from 3 of the young entrepreneurs who have developed a student start-up called 'Bewax'; Reinis Kiršteins (CEO), Andrians Zutis (marketing manager) and Madara Senkane (finance manager). Their business aims to address the problem of plastic pollution by producing a beeswax/cotton fabric which includes jojoba oil and pine resin. This is an environmentally friendly and reusable alternative to cling film for food preservation as we saw for ourselves by handling the samples.

Finally, Jānis Lielpēteris outlined how the Latvian Chamber of Commerce is helping to inform their business members about the direction of green policy and to promote discussion and reflection on sustainability issues from a business perspective via their Green think tank.

The second day saw us venture beyond the city of Riga for two fascinating visits: The Getliņi EKO plant is the largest municipal solid waste landfill in the Baltic States, jointly managed by the Riga and Stopiņi Municipalities. Jolanta Dāvidniece gave us a guided tour of what is one of the most modern landfills and waste recycling facilities in Europe, opened in 2015. The plant sorts and recovers materials and metal products for recycling and also generates biogas from biodegradable waste. Unrecyclable waste is stored in secure biodegradation cells protected from air or rainwater to produce methane which is burned on site to generate electricity and heat. The electricity is sold, and the heat is used in neighbouring greenhouses, where tomatoes, cucumbers and hanging flowers are grown.

Ogre Technical College, 40 km from Riga, offers over 20 vocational programmes organised in four departments: Forestry, Wood Products and Hunting, Hospitality and Catering, Computer Science, Electronics and Administration and Art and Design. Sigita Jasinska, Head of International Projects outlined the work of the college and gave us a guided tour and explained that the college has successfully overcome any sense of VET being a poor 'second choice' and it is now oversubscribed.

The college supports innovative teaching and promotes positive, co-operative relationships between students, teachers and enterprises. The college regularly achieves the Twinning School Label and meets the ISO 9001 standard. Since 2017, a Career Education Centre organises events for students and potential students and the college is also accredited to offer the International Baccalaureate Career-related Programme offering a broad curriculum with a vocational flavour. Ogre is keen to work with other VET providers abroad who are running the career-related IB.

Ogre aims to integrate issues of biodiversity, climate change and the extraction and consumption of non-renewable resources into students' learning, creating opportunities to explore and improve the environment around the college, using environmentally friendly tools and creating a more interesting, up to date curriculum.

The college has seen substantial EU Social fund investment in their infrastructure and equipment, and this was evident in the superbly resourced training kitchens and woodworking, forest machine, electronics, photo and video workshops.

We are very grateful to all the presenters who gave their time so generously to help us understand the Latvian context for sustainability education in VET settings. We particularly want to thank our hosts from the Latvian Chamber of Commerce; Liga Siceva, Head of EU Projects and Jurijs Dubatovka who put together such a great programme.

Eddie Playfair, Senior Policy Manager, Association of Colleges (AoC), April 2022.



