

LECOLE

STUDY VISIT TO RIGA

28 – 30 MARCH 2023

Participants:

Latvia - Aina Špaca + Iveta Vērse + Linda Kluša + Aija Tūna + Lelde Kristiāna Paeglīte + Inga Bika

Greece - Chrysi Koundouraki

Iceland - Katrín Valdís Hjartardóttir + Ellen Dröfn Gunnarsdóttir

Portugal - Lília Vicente + Paula Pedroso

Day 1 - Tuesday, 28/03/2025

The opening meeting took place at the IAC premises, where the welcome was given by its director and partner in the project, Iveta Vērse, who presented the centre's activities.

It was then the turn of the representative of the Latvian Ministry of Education and project coordinator, Aina Špaca, to talk about the work developed by the department where she works, which, in addition to formal education, also coordinates non-formal career-oriented education (choirs, orchestras, dance, song groups, drama).

She then presented the Latvian education system, a country of 1.8 million inhabitants, with 21 204 teachers in the system, a number which, however, cannot be considered accurate since if a teacher is placed in 2 schools he/she will be counted twice. Compulsory education is 9 years and it is also compulsory for all children to attend 1 year of pre-school before entering the primary school. There is a national curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education, but schools are free to manage it as long as they respect the established output profiles of pupils.

The teachers' timetable in Latvia is 21 teaching hours and they have a weekly schedule of 40 hours, however they do not have to remain in school. The municipalities are responsible for selecting school principals, who must be trained teachers but do not have to have attended any specialization course. They only have to prove that they have been involved in managing a school for at least two years. There are no fixed mandates, which means that a headteacher can remain in a school for many years.

She dwelt a little longer on the reform of the education system that has taken place over the last 20 years. At its origin were: PISA results; the rapidly changing world, problems in enrolment in HEI abroad; there were too many subjects which fragmented the knowledge in general education cycle, which put them in a dilemma: generalization vs specialization.

The reform they are implementing is a competence based general education; the frame of competence based curriculum; subject areas instead of subjects; transversal skills; values/virtues; changes in the curriculum; exam of admission to HEI; and changes in the teaching approach. In short, they want the school to turn into a learning community.

In Latvia distance learning is an official option for any child/youngster, and they have developed specific distance learning programmes. The ones that most profit from this learning are emigrants who wish their children to attend the Latvian school system.

This was followed by a moment of presentation of the Latvian School Bag Programme by its national director Aija Tūna and her team members Lelde Kristiāna Paeglīte and Inga Bika. The first-hand dissemination of the video presentation of the programme already available on YouTube was made.



This is a state fund programme that aims to disseminate to children and young people the various cultural expressions of Latvia - music; drama; literature; dance; concerts; cinema; culture professionals. The funds are distributed proportionally to all entities connected with education at the national level, and these entities are responsible for managing the amount allocated to them by selecting the activities in which pupils, teachers and even parents may be involved. This programme is compulsory and all students in the country must participate. The municipal councils give a great support to the programme, namely with the availability of spaces destined to the events and with the support in the transportation of the students. "What started as an initiative, became a project and has now become a programme, which means that it will have a longer period of validity", said the coordinator.

They are currently trying to design the monitoring and evaluation process of the programme.



Ap After lunch we visited Rīgas Kultūru Vidusskola, which presents very particular characteristics since it is the result of the fusion of two schools: one of western cultural nature, predominantly catholic, with one of eastern cultural nature, namely Chinese and Japanese. It is located next to the Chinese embassy and its values are "Respect, Cooperation and Trust".

It teaches all 9 years of compulsory schooling. There are 11 senior classes and ¼ of the students come from outside Riga, from other parts of Latvia. The curriculum is divided into 5 structural programmes: Languages; Culture Production; Natural Sciences; Mathematics and Physics, and Communication and Social Sciences. Students can choose Chinese and Japanese as foreign languages, in addition to French, Spanish and Italian, and English is compulsory for all. They also attend classes in public speaking and politics. Due to its pedagogical approach, student numbers have almost tripled between 2001 and 2023 (see table below).

2001/2002	2010/2011	2022/2023
338 pupils	655 pupils	846 pupils
78 teachers	80 teachers	92 teachers

From this school, pupils wishing to continue their studies will have to go to a secondary school and to get there they will have to take an admission exam.

We were welcomed by 2 English teachers from the school and had the opportunity to greet the headmistress. We were given a guided tour of the school premises, but only a few lessons were taking place since most of the pupils had already finished their lessons.

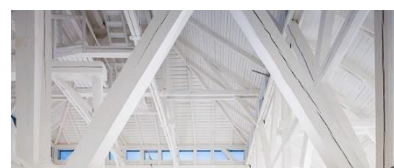
We then went to the Latvian National Art Museum where we got to know its face-to-face and digital educational programmes. Presentation was made by Lilita Pudule and Elina Berzina, majority of educational programmes are implemented in partnership with the Latvian School Bag programme.



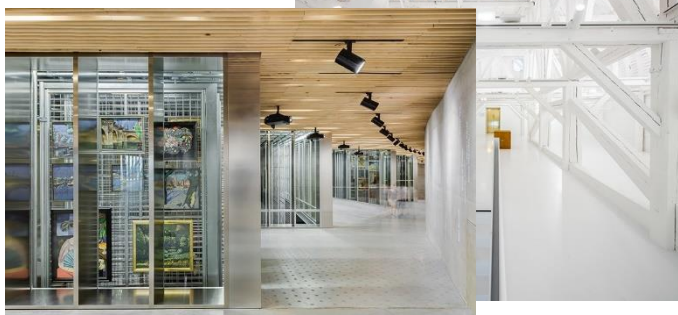
The museum is located in a magnificent building built in 1903, which has always remained a museum despite wars and occupations. It underwent the most recent renovation for 2 years and reopened to the public 6 years ago. It exhibits painting and sculpture by Latvian artists.

It presents a very interesting educational programme aimed at Latvian school pupils and their families. There are the so-called 'family bags', which are distributed free of charge to visitors to the museum and consist of various activities. There are also workshops, which require previous booking and comprise different themes and approaches according to the age group of the people for whom they are intended, e.g. 'How to create an Installation' for older people and 'Playing the Museum' for younger ones. The idea is that, from an early age, students come into contact with art, begin to understand and 'consume' it.

The monitors who run the activities have prior training provided by the museum itself to familiarise themselves with the materials and dynamics used and to better know how to interact with children and young people.



Besides the workshops, they also promote guided tours for the younger ones, and the 'attic' and the basement where they store the works of art are their favourite areas.



We were then offered a guided tour of all areas of the museum accompanied by the interesting narration of the guide Laura Dravniece.

Day 2 - Wednesday, 29/03/2025

Bus trip to the small town of Kuldiga, located about 160 km southwest of Riga. UNESCO heritage town, which has undergone several interventions in the restoration of some of its most representative buildings from medieval times and later. It has the oldest bridge in Latvia and the widest waterfall in Europe, 175 metres wide. Arms of the river run through the city, giving it a somewhat Venetian character.

The first presentation we attended was the secondary school which, due to renovation works, has its students and teachers distributed by 6 different schools. The 8th and 10th year groups were lodged in the music school, where we were welcomed by the headmaster, Andra Zvejniece, the deputy headmaster of the secondary school, Larisa Flugrāte, and two teachers who came to present the projects they have been developing with their students. A large banquet awaited us with various Latvian delicacies, both savoury and sweet. The town councillor for culture was also present.

Surprising was the way the sub-director of the secondary school made her presentation: using a PowerPoint with only pictures and some numbers, she referred to each of them in Latvian and then asked us to guess what she had spoken about and what message she had wanted to convey. Thus, she first referred to the old bridge and the waterfall, and regarding the school itself, she mentioned that it had 631 pupils and 62 teachers, and that in 2021 it had started to be renovated, and was expected to be fully functional again in the 2024-2025 school year. She showed several comparative photos of different spaces of the school before the intervention and how they are expected to look.

Although we didn't understand the language, we could grasp the message and as someone present mentioned "the language is not that important when you master the subject people are talking about". The Deputy Headmistress then made a reference to the Latvian School Bag and said that there are 3 moments of major importance at school level for the implementation of the program: the planning that must be done beforehand; the collaborative work between teachers of different subject areas; and the feedback after the work has taken place. She disclosed the activities that were developed last school year within the scope of the programme.

It was the turn of the history teacher, Antra Spulģe, to present the project "Cultural and Historical Heritage" that she developed with another colleague and which had the purpose of making students aware of the history and architectural heritage in Kuldīga and the surrounding area.

Next, the social studies teacher, Jūta Reķe, talked about the project she developed in collaboration with the Latvian language teacher 'Who am I? What is my role as a citizen?', which aimed to develop civic participation skills. The students started by doing a short reflection and filling in a diary on what they had done to help others. They were then introduced to NGOs and other organisations that provide help on various levels and they had to create their own helping organisation. They then visited social services in Kuldīga to understand their purpose, and at the end of the project they produced a news report.

The approaches presented by these teachers are in fact innovative in a very traditional educational system in which most teachers are very resistant to the change in practices that the new reform advocates, still claiming the textbook as the main support tool for teaching.

At the end of the presentations the principal of the music school (a person well known for being the founder of a popular a cappella group called "*Latvian Voices*" in Latvia and abroad) and before giving us a tour of the school premises, gave a presentation about the school she runs and about cultural education in general in Latvia.

This school has 170 pupils, 23 teachers and **approximately 17 graduates each year(??)**. The artistic education system in Latvia prepares students in the areas of music (different instruments); singing, dancing and various artistic fields. There are about 160 such schools

throughout Latvia, where about 15% of all pupils attend them for 6 to 8 years. Artistic studies are continued at vocational secondary schools (there are 24 in the country), after which they go on to conservatories. These artistic schools are financed by the state and the municipalities and because it is a very individualised education, it is estimated that each student that attends them costs the state around €1 300/year.

This was followed by lunch at the educational restaurant of the Kuldīga Technical School of Technology and Tourism, which has its restaurant open to the general public.

In the afternoon we started by visiting the building of the old 'Needle Factory' (for sewing), where we were welcomed by Mr. Rimants Sapfonovs. This started to be a needle factory. Later on and until 2003 it was used as an hospital and then it was rebuilt to be part of the Latvian Academy. It is considered as place for business, culture and education. They are both a digital innovation centre and a business incubator. They promote different types of workshops – woodwork; 3D prototyping; 3D printing – and they have now started a summer academy on 'Digital Services' which turned out to be very successful. They can only accept 30 students and for next summer they have already received over 700 registrations. Last year only one of the students was from Latvia. This space aims to promote autonomy and collaborative work to those who seek it.

The next visit was to the Kuldīga Regional Museum, where an independent space was created for children from pre-school to secondary school students, but also for senior citizens and adults with disabilities. The fact that teachers and students are increasingly bombarded with too much information led to the creation of this space, which is intended to be playful and provide, through games and other creative activities, contact with various materials and textures. Schools interested in visiting the space must register in advance and must inform the organizer of the type of activities they would like to see developed with their students.



The head of the space, Baiba Vētrāja, is passionate about what she does. A primary school teacher, she moved to Kuldīga about a year ago and has been running the space ever since. She is absolutely autonomous in designing and testing all the activities and materials she implements even though she has to send them to the museum's advisory board for validation. They have 15 different active classes prepared for that space which normally receives 2 to 3 classes/groups per day, exceptionally 4 and 5 on the same day.

She then gave us a free guided history tour of the museum. The same visit is given to each group of children and young people that the museum welcomes, and there is even a space where they can sit and draw/paint. The aim is for them to learn about the history of the region, and knowledge of the past helps them to better understand the present.

We left the city for Riga at 17:30.

Day 3 – Thursday, 30/03/2025

We started the day with a visit to a public school in Riga, Domdaris, whose name is an acronym of 3 Latvian words - Doma. Dari. Radi. - which stand



for Do, Think, Create. It is a 'state enterprise' as they receive state funding, the majority of the students come from middle class families and it is governed by the values of Responsibility, Community, Growth.

We were welcomed by the director who is also co-owner of the school, Dace Jaundāldere-Dātava and who told us that the school had started its activity in 2014 out of a desire to contribute to the change of education in Latvia. Although they have to respect the official curriculum, they have the autonomy to develop it as they see fit. At present, it has 380 students from pre-primary to 9th grade. Classes have an average of 15/16 students and the 8th grade class has 9 students. The teaching staff is very young (average age 25).

All pupils have English as a foreign language, with a choice of a second language, French and Russian being offered at the school.



Students in Grades 1 to 6 are not allowed to use mobile phones within the school and must keep them in what is called a 'mobile jail'. Students in Grades 7 to 9 may use them provided they respect certain rules.

On the day of our visit, everyone in the school (students and teachers) were dressed as old people, as part of a week called 'Don't come to school naked', which had one day dedicated to the 90's, one to the Mafia, one to professions. Our guides were the 9 pupils from class 8 who started by taking us to the library, having explained that once a week the older pupils read with and for the younger ones. We were also explained the images that are on the corridor walls and that correspond to a wall decoration project carried out in visual arts using the stencil painting method with images that convey messages, the theme of global warming being the most chosen. In the visual arts room we saw the masks intended for an MOB that the 4th year students had produced with the theme happy 😊 and unhappy ☹.

In the science room the pupils showed us how it is equipped and how much they enjoy the experimental lessons. The subject of physics starts in 8th grade. In 7th grade they have engineering.

In the canteen, where the students have breakfast and lunch every day, tables were set with French cuisine. They often hold these days dedicated to the gastronomy of another country. They have had German food, Moroccan food, for example.

The school has no gym, so physical activities are done outdoors whatever the weather conditions.

The beginning of the school year, on September 1st, is marked by a garden party for students and families.

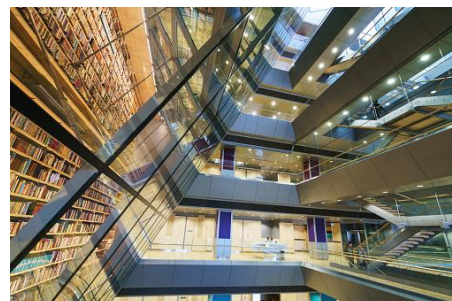
The students who accompanied us mentioned not only how connected they feel with each other, but also how supportive the teachers are and how comfortable they feel talking to them about anything.

After the visit we gathered in a circle in a room prepared for this purpose with the headmistress and our guide pupils. We introduced ourselves, asked questions and had a chat.

We noticed that the students are given a lot of autonomy to propose projects, topics for discussion and to run activities, which is the approach that the pedagogical direction considers the most appropriate to form autonomous and responsible future citizens, with the necessary skills to live in a challenging and competitive society.



This was followed by a visit to the Latvian National Library, an iconic building of modern architecture in Riga, designed in 1989 by the famous Latvian-American architect Gunnar Birkerts (1925-2017), who emigrated to the United States. It was built in the early 21st century and was opened in 2014.



We were welcomed by the head of the library's educational programme, Anita Smeltere, who has been working in this department for 6 years, and her assistant Laura.

The visit began at the library museum where the aim is to make visitors, especially children and young people, acquainted with the history of books in Latvia. It was surprising to learn that the book that is used as motivation for the approach that is made is 'If I were a Book', by the Portuguese writer José Jorge Letria, illustrated by his son André Letria. This was followed by a small presentation in the museum's 'classroom', aimed at older students, where they are introduced to: the importance of calligraphy, typewriting, the composition of texts to be printed, how printing works, but also to whom cases from the time of the Soviet occupation are given, leading them to understand how the library helps to unravel them.

A guided tour of this magnificent building followed, starting on the 13th floor and then descending to the 7th floor to stop in the library area dedicated to the younger ones and the activities promoted to encourage reading.

Once again, the initiatives that are promoted to make children and youngsters more curious, creative and autonomous were visible.

In the afternoon, the group met at the IAC premises where a balance of this study visit was made and the bureaucratic details inherent to the final phase of the project were dealt with.

Lisbon, 02/04/2023

Lília Vicente e Paula Pedroso

Team for Interdisciplinary and Training Projects from DGAE