

Implementation of the *School as a Learning Organisation* Approach in Vocational Education: The Case of Latvia

Gunta Siliņa-Jasjukeviča*

University of Latvia, Faculty of Education,
Psychology and Art, Latvia

Agnese Lastovska

University of Latvia, Faculty of Education,
Psychology and Art, Latvia

Ilze Briška

University of Latvia, Faculty of Education,
Psychology and Art, Latvia

Inga Linde

University of Latvia, Faculty of Education,
Psychology and Art, Latvia

Inese Lūsēna-Ezera

Liepāja University, Institute of Management
Science, Latvia

Abstract. Context. Recent studies recognise that the use of the School as a Learning Organisation (SLO) approach in educational management is the key factor ensuring a general education institution's ability to effectively implement the education policy goals and adapt to change as the use of SLO. Although vocational education has different predominant goals and different target groups, likewise general education, it is exposed to dynamic change and new challenges.

Purpose. Within the framework of the study, it was researched whether and how SLO can be applied in vocational education as the use of SLO facilitates a high level of professional competence of the management and academic staff, enhances common strategic vision, responsibility and autonomy, diverse collaboration, effective resource management, and the dissemination of knowledge and good practice, which are also important in vocational education.

Methods. Using qualitative data analysis, the paper analyses the experience of EU and OECD countries in the implementation of SLO in vocational education and identifies, which dimensions of the SLO model are represented in the policy and practice of vocational education in Latvia. In the focus group interviews with representatives of vocational education institutions of Latvia, the characteristics of the SLO approach in vocational education were studied, challenges were described and solutions proposed for the targeted implementation of the SLO approach in vocational education in Latvia.

* *Corresponding author:*

E-mail: gunta.silina-jasjukevica@lu.lv

Acknowledgment. The article was prepared under the European Social Fund Project No. 8.3.6.2/17/I/001 'Establishment and implementation of the Education Quality Monitoring System' within the framework of the research 'A model and tool to support the implementation of the school as a learning organisation approach in educational institutions.'

We would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers whose constructive feedback helped us to improve and clarify this manuscript, and the editors for their valuable work on this important issue.

Received: 17/05/2023. **Accepted:** 16/10/2023

Copyright © Siliņa-Jasjukeviča Gunta, Briška Ilze, Lūsēna-Ezera Inese, Lastovska Agnese, Linde Inga, 2024. Published by Vilnius University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Results. All 7 dimensions of the SLO can be found in the education policy documents of the EU and OECD countries and Latvia, as well as in the focus group interviews, which shows that there is a gradual progress towards the transformation of vocational education institutions into learning organisations.

Conclusions. For education policy makers: Since the features of SLO are only partially visible in vocational education documents in Latvia, the framework should be improved to cover all dimensions of the SLO, and norms and agreements on collective understanding should be harmonised in policy documents. For school representatives: Raise awareness of the staff of vocational education institutions of the essence of the SLO and its role in improving the quality of education and ensure that all dimensions of SLO are understood and addressed appropriately. For entrepreneurs: Help define the diverse, varied manifestations of professions in the sector in order to engage the individual potential of learners as effectively as possible. For researchers: Help find ways to resolve controversies by identifying good practice and research.

Key words: vocational education, school as a learning organisation, educational policy, education quality assessment

Mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos modelio taikymas vykdant profesinį mokymą: Latvijos pavyzdžiu

Santrauka. *Kontekstas.* Naujausiuose tyrimuose pripažįstama, kad mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos (angl. *School as a Learning Organisation, SLO*) modelio taikymas švietimo vadyboje yra pagrindinis veiksnys, užtikrinantis bendrojo ugdymo įstaigos gebėjimą veiksmingai įgyvendinti švietimo politikos tikslus ir prisitaikyti prie atsirandančių pokyčių. Nors profesiniam švietimui ir bendrajam ugdymui būdingi skirtingi tikslai ir tikslinės grupės, jie taip pat susiduria su dinamiškais pokyčiais ir naujais iššūkiais.

Tikslas. Atliekant tyrimą buvo siekiama nustatyti, ar ir kaip mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos modelis gali būti taikomas profesiniame švietime, nes tokio modelio taikymas padeda užtikrinti aukštą vadovų ir akademinio personalo profesinę kompetenciją, stiprina bendrą strateginę viziją, atsakomybę ir savarankiškumą, įvairų bendradarbiavimą, efektyvų išteklių valdymą, žinių ir gerosios patirties sklaidą – visa tai svarbu ir profesiniam švietimui.

Metodai. Taikant kokybinę duomenų analizę, straipsnyje analizuojama ES ir EBPO šalių patirtis diegiant mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos modelį profesiniame mokyme ir tiriama, kokios tokio modelio dimensijos reiškiasi Latvijos profesinio mokymo politikoje ir praktikoje. Fokusuotų diskusijų grupės interviu su Latvijos profesinio mokymo įstaigų atstovais buvo nagrinėjami minėto modelio ypatumai profesiniame mokyme, apibūdinami iššūkiai ir siūlomi sprendimai, kaip tikslingai įgyvendinti metodą Latvijoje.

Rezultatai. ES ir EBPO šalių bei Latvijos švietimo politikos dokumentuose, taip pat fokusuotų diskusijų grupių interviu galima rasti visas 7 mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos modelio dimensijas, o tai rodo, kad tolydžio vyksta profesinio mokymo įstaigų transformacija į besimokančias organizacijas.

Išvados. Švietimo politikos formuotojams: kadangi Latvijos profesinio mokymo dokumentuose mokyklos kaip besimokančios organizacijos bruožai matomi tik iš dalies, reikėtų tobulinti sistemą, kad ji apimtų visus modelio aspektus, o politikos dokumentuose suderinti normas ir susitarimus dėl bendro supratimo. Mokyklų atstovams: reikėtų didinti profesinio mokymo įstaigų darbuotojų informuotumą apie SLO esmę ir vaidmenį gerinant ugdymo kokybę, taip pat būtina užtikrinti, kad visos modelio dimensijos būtų tinkamai suprantamos ir taikomos. Verslininkams: padėkite apibrėžti svarbius įvairių profesijų reikalavimus atskiruose sektoriuose, kad būtų galima kuo veiksmingiau panaudoti individualų besimokančiųjų potencialą. Mokslininkams: padėkite ieškoti būdų išspręsti prieštaras naudodamiesi gera praktika ir moksliniais tyrimais.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: profesinis mokymas, mokykla kaip besimokanti organizacija, švietimo politika, švietimo kokybės vertinimas.

Introduction

In order to ensure high-quality vocational education in a context of dynamic change and constant challenges, it is essential that educational institutions have a high level of professional competence of management, teaching and academic staff, a strategic operational vision, responsibility and autonomy, diverse cooperation both inside the organisation and with other stakeholders, and effective resource management and transfer of knowledge and

good practice. Recent research and education policy documents recognise that the ability of an educational institution to effectively implement education policy goals and adapt to change is ensured by the School as a Learning Organisation (SLO) approach to educational management (Kool et al. 2019, 2020; Retna & Ng 2016; Senge et al. 2012; Watkins & O'Neil 2013).

The scientific literature does not provide a single, comprehensive definition of a school as a learning organisation. The model of school governance is considered in the context of the external environment and the conditions in which each individual school operates and interacts with other elements of the wider environment and other systems (Harris & Jones 2018).

The most common way of characterising a SLO is by using the model of Wales proposed by the OECD, which includes 7 dimensions:

- Developing and sharing a vision centred on the learning of all students;
- Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff;
- Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff;
- Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration;
- Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning;
- Learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system;
- Modelling and growing learning leadership (Kools et al. 2019, 2020; OECD 2016; Stoll & Kools 2017).

The SLO approach is widely recognised in general education in many countries around the world (Kools et al. 2020; OECD 2016; Stoll & Kools 2017) and is also included in the Education Development Guidelines of the Republic of Latvia for 2021-2027 (MK 2021). The characteristics of the SLO approach can be identified in the education systems of Denmark, Greece, Singapore, Portugal, Finland and other countries (Gopinathan et al. 2018; Greve et al. 2020; Halinen 2018; Huang et al. 2019; Ng 2008; OECD 2016; Papazoglou et al. 2020). However, there is no such consistency with regard to vocational education.

Vocational education differs from general education as it has different predominant goals and involves different target groups. The goals of general education are primarily related to the maximum development of learners' lifelong learning abilities and competences, inclusion in society, ensuring well-being and quality of life, strengthening and sustaining a democratic and civically active society (MK 2021).

The goals of vocational education, as recognised in the OECD's 2015 annual report, are primarily oriented towards the needs of the labour market and different sectors (improving the performance of enterprise, promoting business growth, research and innovation, and development of the economy as a whole,). It prepares people for work and develops the skills of citizens so that they can maintain employment opportunities and competitiveness and respond to the needs of the economy (OECD 2015), ensure sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience (EC 2020). Only occasionally is the availability of vocational programs determined by student demand or the capacity of educational institutions, and even then, there are restrictions and career counselling

becomes necessary to strike a balance between student demand and the needs of the industry.

General education is compulsory for all members of society, the decisions of parents or guardians are decisive here, while vocational education is mainly the choice of learners. Since vocational education and training are predominantly undertaken by adult learners with work and family commitments, the flexibility of the learning organisation (part-time, distance learning, etc.) to adapt to the needs of adult learners is noted as a high-level indicator.

The aim of the study is to research how the SLO approach, which has been validated in general education, can be implemented in vocational education.

Research objectives:

1. Find out which dimensions of the SLO model of Wales are represented in vocational education in the EU, OECD countries, and Latvia.
2. Study what features of the SLO approach can be found in the practice of vocational education in Latvia.
3. Describe challenges and propose solutions on how to implement the SLO approach in vocational education in Latvia.

Methodology

To explore global experience, research reports and recommendations examining vocational education in the EU and OECD countries as well as the vocational education policy documents of Latvia were analysed. From the vocational education quality criteria presented in all sources, those that can be interpreted as manifestations of the 7 dimensions of the SLO were selected, concluding which of them are present in the EU national education policies and which are not, as well as which aspects of each SLO dimension are considered more important in the EU and which are considered irrelevant in the context of vocational education.

The following documents were selected for analysis:

- The 2015 OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training in OECD countries (OECD 2015), which summarises the strengths and challenges of each country's vocational education and training system.
- The 2018 report by the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training Secretariat (EQAVET) on supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework through the EU quality criteria and indicators for vocational education and training, which analyses the extent to which these indicators are reflected in the 28 EU Member States (EQAVET 2018).
- The Council of EU 'Recommendations on Vocational Education and Training for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Justice and Resilience', which set out key principles to ensure the flexibility of vocational education and the ability to quickly adapt to the needs of the labour market and provide quality learning opportunities for both young people and adults (EU 2020);

- Vocational Education Law of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima 1999, Amendments to the Vocational Education Law in 2022);
- The performance indicators for educational institutions and the implementation of educational programmes (IKVD 2022) reflect the framework for vocational education in Latvia.

The type of data used in statistical studies varies from document to document, as they are presented in both percentages and absolute figures. The data are not directly comparable, but since the quantitative indicators made it possible to assess the extent to which these criteria have been adopted in different EU countries, they are also evaluated in Latvia (EQAVET 2018). The comparison of the documents reveals how the interpretation of the SLO dimensions differs.

In order to identify the features of the SLO approach in vocational education practice in Latvia, three semi-structured focus group discussions (one per school) with school representatives were organised, which provided an opportunity to obtain in-depth information by asking additional and clarifying questions where necessary (Gilbert et al. 2016). Three vocational education institutions were selected for the study on the recommendation of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia (MoES) and the Latvian Employers Confederation (hereinafter – LDDK). The non-probability convenience sampling (Galloway 2005) was used and teachers, administrators, and support staff (n=18) from the three vocational education institutions participated in focus group discussions, after which the deductive and inductive content analysis was used for data analysis.

All the procedures performed in the studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Results

Implementation practices of the SLO in vocational education in the EU and OECD countries

The manifestation of the 7 dimensions of the SLO model of Wales in vocational education in the EU and OECD countries, and in the normative framework of vocational education in Latvia is reviewed here.

Dimension 1. Developing a shared vision centred on learning of all students

One aspect of a shared vision relates to the scale at which the common standards are adopted. A shared vision of vocational education goals and quality standards is being developed in collaboration with industry experts/partners both at OECD, EU, and the national level and is being coordinated at different levels. While the EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training) quality framework is recommendatory, most EU countries have adopted it as the basis for developing national Quality Indicators (QI). The quality indicators and level descriptors defined by EQAVET can

also help each vocational education and training provider to develop, assess and improve its own systems and the level of service provision (EQAVET 2018; EU 2020).

The EU and OECD documents and studies, as well as the Vocational Education Law of the Republic of Latvia, do not actually address how to agree on a **common** vision within an educational institution (which would indicate both the autonomy of the educational institution and internal cohesion). It is only passingly mentioned that, in order to ensure that the vision and systems are understood by everyone, the educational institution, together with such actors of the educational process as employers and municipalities, should also be involved in the development of the qualification system and framework (EQAVET 2018; EU 2020, Saeima 1999; IKVD 2022).

The content, vision, goals, and quality criteria of vocational education are mainly aligned with the requirements of the labour market and the economy, and to a very limited extent with the identification and development of the individual potential of each learner to contribute to improving his or her quality of life (OECD 2015). Similarly, in Latvia, the shared vision of the school, industry, and politicians relates to the learning outcomes necessary for the economy, but there are no criteria related to promoting the maximum potential growth of each student,— this is the individual understanding and responsibility of each school and teacher (IKVD 2022, Saeima 1999).

Dimension 2. Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff

In vocational education policy, continuous learning is related to the continuous education of both learners and teachers. The criteria related to the continuous vocational education of learners are foreseen in the national systems of 23 (out of 28) European countries, i. e. in the majority of them. 18 countries also require continuous professional development linked to work-based learning. The document highlights the importance of staff development, which was not previously considered a priority for organisations (EC 2019).

On the other hand, continuous professional development of pedagogues is strategically planned in 56%, but regularly implemented in 41% of countries (in the form of teachers' meetings with external partners, to improve their performance). In a number of countries, continuous professional development of teachers is planned as a package together with the updating of standards and/or assessment/quality control systems (34%). Regular self-evaluation of teachers and the educational institution can also be interpreted as continuous learning, which at the national level is expected in 53% of cases. In vocational education, continuous learning for teachers can include measures to encourage practitioners to take up a career in education, balancing teaching skills with up-to-date knowledge and experience in the field as well as training for education providers on market developments (EQAVET 2018). The Council of the European Union Recommendation suggests the creation of a new culture of lifelong learning as one of the four key factors to ensure the sustainability of vocational education, emphasising the importance of digitalisation (EU 2020).

The regulations on professional competence development of teachers in Latvia state that teachers are responsible for their own professional development and that all teachers

must undertake 36 hours of professional development within 3 years (MK 2018). The educational institution's evaluation criteria also pay attention to the professional development system for teachers (IKVD 2022). The education policy documents of Latvia mainly focus on the role of teachers and school management in planning and implementing professional development, without mentioning other employees whose actions and professional performance can have an impact on students' learning and well-being at school.

Dimension 3. Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff

Documents and recommendations on cooperation in vocational education refer only to external partners, such as the government, employers, trade unions, and social partners. Only one criterion refers to teamwork and/or collaboration within the educational institution - 'early involvement of staff in planning' (53%) (EQAVET 2018; EC 2020). This can certainly also be interpreted as the recognition of the autonomy of the educational institution, but knowing how significantly this dimension affects educational outcomes in general education, there is considerable potential for development here.

The idea of an open and inclusive learning environment can be applied to this dimension of SLO, which is mentioned in only one document (EU 2020).

The following indications are included in the national recommendatory documents on education, which apply to all educational institutions in Latvia:

- the relationship between the social and cooperation partners involved in education changes from hierarchical and controlling to interdependent, complementary, and self-regulating, characterised by trust, coherence of goals, and clarity of roles and functions of the parties involved (MK 2021);
- teachers understand their role and place in curriculum delivery, trust their colleagues, and can cite examples of collaboration (IKVD 2022);
- the educational institution develops a strong sense of belonging to a community that is positive, fair, respectful, and inclusive (which would also indicate the quality of cooperation) (IKVD 2022).

The analysis of the expression of the dimension 'Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff' in the policy documents on vocational education in Latvia leads to the conclusion that the understanding of the need for teachers' collaboration and shared learning is similar in them, namely that it is a way for teachers to improve their professional performance and support each student's learning more efficiently.

Dimension 4. Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation, and exploration

In the Council of the EU Recommendations, research is mainly related to the development of a system for monitoring the quality of education. 66% of Member States envisage the development of data collection methodology, 41% envisage regular review and analysis of data to make data-based decisions, while only 28% envisage using early warning systems (EQAVET 2018).

Innovation is emphasised as a principle to regularly update the offer and qualification criteria of the programmes of vocational education and training (EC 2020). Another option envisaged is the creation of centres of professional excellence, which would act as catalysts for local business investment, and also for the implementation of innovations and well-thought-out specialisation strategies, for providing innovative services such as business incubators or innovative retraining solutions for workers (EU 2020).

In Latvia, the culture of innovation is defined in the evaluation criteria for both general and vocational education institutions as innovative and high-quality educational content, up-to-date curricula and competencies as learning outcomes, implementation of change, research and lifelong learning, introduction of digital systems and the latest technologies, the school principal's openness to change, and purposeful implementation of change (IKVD 2022). In the Vocational Education Law, innovations appear only once, in the assessment criteria of learning (Saeima, 1999). The dimension 'Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration' is indirectly integrated into the policy documents on vocational education in Latvia, as some of its elements, such as the research of professional practice and the collection of diverse data, are mentioned in the policy documents, they currently lack direct guidance on which innovations and how teachers should implement them in their daily practice, and consequently the implementation of innovations is left to the responsibility of schools and is not regulated at a national level.

Dimension 5. Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning

The OECD study (2014) does not yet focus on building data systems. In 2015, the EU called for the creation of harmonised systems for data collection to verify the effectiveness of vocational education, evaluate growth and identify what needs to be improved. In the 2018 EU report, the establishment of data systems to monitor the quality of education is already included as a separate criterion (EQAVET 2018).

This dimension of SLO is closely linked to the research culture, as it provides accessible data for monitoring the quality of education for all target groups involved. For example, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) offers a consistent set of criteria and levels of indicators for data collection and accumulation. In vocational education, special attention is paid to recording graduates' post-programme employment pathways to analyse the relationship between learning and employment possibilities, entering the labour market and career, and to improve educational programmes based on the analysis results.

The content of the collected information varies across the EU countries: Spain – unemployment rate by level of training; Lithuania – salary of VET graduates; Netherlands – how long it takes for trainees to find their first job; Scotland – data on young people moving from vocational education to higher education; Wales – information on learners' final goals (the project is in the coordination stage); Slovenia – satisfaction of learners and employers with learning outcomes; Malta – course completion and consequent certification of graduates, etc. The results of EQAVET's 2018 report show that

data is collected in 84% of cases in vocational basic education, and 44% in further vocational education (EQAVET 2018), whereas in Latvia this is not done at all.

The EU report also reveals that in many European countries, the rate of information accumulation is much higher than the rate of information analysis. This indicates that despite the well-worked out systems for collecting data and monitoring activities, the information gathered is not being properly used to improve the system (EU 2020).

In the education policy documents of Latvia, this dimension is outlined in a very general way. The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for the development and monitoring of data and information systems; only the procedure for evaluating the quality of education applies directly to the educational institution (Saeima 1999). The national policy documents of Latvia specify what data collection methods a school can use to assess its performance and plan necessary changes, but do not provide direct guidance on how the data should be analysed to draw conclusions about the need for a change in the organisation (IKVD 2022).

Dimension 6. Learning with and from the external environment and larger system

In vocational education, the SLO dimension of ‘Learning with and from the external environment and larger system’ is very important, both as a vocational education institution’s cooperation with external partners (entrepreneurs, employers and employees’ organisations, universities, other vocational education institutions and various public bodies such as chambers, committees, and councils), and as work-based learning. The Council of the EU sets out separate criteria for both the degree of responsibility of external partners (in some countries they have an advisory role, in others they are also involved in decision-making, for example, on the quality of education) and for the stage of the educational organisation in which they are involved (EC 2020). In Australia, for example, vocational education is a ‘sector-led system’ managed by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Ministerial Council (MINCO) under the Commonwealth and State and Territory Collective Agreement (OECD 2015). According to the Council of the EU study, cooperation is most active in planning vocational education and training goals, and least active in assessing and improving outcomes (EC 2020).

In as many as EU Member States¹⁵ European Union Member States, there is targeted cooperation between vocational education and higher education institutions to provide coordinated support to help students continue their studies at university (EQAVET 2018), whereas this is not happening in Latvia. On the contrary, the criterion ‘Service providers plan cooperation initiatives with other vocational education training providers’ is marked as ‘always used’ in only 8 systems, and this lack of systematic cooperation may have a negative impact on the culture of coherent quality assurance at a national level. Only four vocational education and training systems in the EU involve ‘industry/enterprises’ in both initial vocational education and further vocational education. This result shows that there is limited active and structured feedback between vocational education institutions and key labour market actors in 28 EU countries. Learners themselves are involved in quality assurance at a low level, which does not ensure that individual

needs are taken into account in further education (EQAVET 2018), although this is required by the education policy documents of Latvia.

Overall, the EQAVET survey (2018) reveals that there is insufficient contact and cooperation (both in the form of consultations and joint decision-making) between vocational education institutions and local authorities, entrepreneurs, universities, as well as with students, and the teaching staff themselves, to make learning and lifelong learning more effective. Nevertheless, with regard to work-based learning, the European Commission study (2019) shows that almost all member states recognise its importance. On the one hand, they provide a high-quality learning environment, on the other hand, they are a means of promoting partnerships with employers and the municipality.

Latvia does not present work-based learning as a norm for initial vocational education and further education (EQAVET 2018). The EU Member States, with the help of the EU Council, have set a target that by 2025 at least 60% of recent vocational graduates will have participated in work-based learning during their vocational education and training (EC 2020). The OECD recognises the systematic integration of apprenticeships, and more recently also systematic integration of work-based learning, into all vocational programmes as a highly successful way of developing skills and moving young people into employment (OECD 2015).

The SLO dimension ‘Learning with and from the external environment and larger system’ is frequently represented in the Vocational Education Law of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima 1999) – 28 times in total. It is mostly related to the involvement of different institutions in the establishment of the educational institution, the formulation of goals, and the quality supervision. The law often mentions the need to cooperate with institutions outside the educational establishment, but also places significant importance on the cooperation between the educational establishment and entrepreneurs, local authorities, sectoral expert councils, etc. To ensure such cooperation in vocational education, a special body known as the Convention has been established by law, making it mandatory rather than optional for educational institutions to participate (Saeima 1999). The documents consistently include work-based learning, which corresponds directly to the SLO criteria of Dimension 6.

Dimension 7. Modelling and growing learning leadership

This dimension of SLO includes the division of responsibilities, – who and to what extent is responsible for the quality of vocational education and staff learning, what is the responsibility of the educational institution and to what extent it is delegated.

The Council of the EU indicates that the approach used by vocational education providers depends on the degree of autonomy, flexibility, support, and funding of the vocational education provider, that a systematic and long-term interaction between systems and providers, and a balance between autonomy and responsibility, trust and tension, is important (EC 2020). At the same time, education policy documents and research seem rather cautious in defining this level of autonomy.

On the one hand, flexible and administratively efficient adaptation of professional education to local/regional needs is declared as a general principle. On the other hand,

it is recognised that the delegation of responsibilities to lower levels requires more rigorous quality assurance measures to guarantee quality and standards. Self-regulation as a common principle of the vocational education institution is considered only in the context of continuous improvements in the implementation of quality standards. Its discretion relates to the practical arrangements for vocational education provision, such as the offer/content of training, the choice of individual programme objectives, groups, staff recruitment or independent budget decisions (EQAVET 2018).

In the Vocational Education Law of the Republic of Latvia, expressions related to *Learning and Modelling Leadership* are included in the descriptions of education quality levels and refer to the learner leadership (Saeima 1999). This dimension is primarily understood as learning leadership implemented by students through organising self-directed learning, and the role of the school principal in guiding his/her own and other staff members' learning. On the other hand, with regard to teachers, there is a focus on their involvement in solving school-wide challenges and proposing ideas, with less emphasis being placed on the teacher as a professional who purposefully guides not only the student but also his/her own learning, by defining individual learning needs and setting an example of lifelong learning.

SLO in vocational education institutions in Latvia

In focus group discussions with the schools involved in the study (vocational education institutions - Prof.1., Prof.2., Prof.3.) using deductive qualitative contingency analysis (looking for examples of the specific dimension) and inductive qualitative contingency analysis (discovering new dimensions), a total of 7 codes were identified (see Table 1). Six codes representing the six SLO dimensions (their manifestations in the context of the school participating in the study) were coded using deductive qualitative contingency analysis (in Nvivo) and codes representing SLO characteristics were identified through inductive qualitative content analysis (in Nvivo).

Of the seven codes identified, six are SLO dimensions and were mentioned in all focus group discussions - Prof.1 (n=32), Prof.2 (n=30), Prof.3 (n=30) (see Table 1). One code – the characteristics of SLO was identified in two focus group discussions – Prof.1. (n=4), Prof. 2. (n=4). The frequency of the use of the codes indicates how broadly and extensively respondents talk about each issue, implicitly indicating what is topical or important to the respondent. The coding did not reveal any significant differences in the number of references between the focus group discussions, indicating that all participating schools are implementing the SLO dimensions to some extent and are able to substantiate this with concrete examples.

Taking into consideration that the representatives of the administration of vocational education institutions also participated in the focus group discussions, the questions related to the assessment of the implementation of the SLO Dimension 7 '*Modelling and growing learning leadership*' were not directly included in the interviews, but the answers were obtained by conducting a questionnaire, and the results will be further analysed in detail in the following publications.

Table 1. The number of references to SLO dimensions in vocational education institutions

Coded items according to the dimensions of SLO	Vocational education institutions			Total
	Prof.1.	Prof.2.	Prof.3.	
Dimension 1. Developing a shared vision centred on learning of all students	3	1	2	6
Dimension 2. Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff	5	6	4	15
Dimension 3. Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff	2	6	7	15
Dimension 4. Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration	6	5	5	16
Dimension 5. Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning	5	2	2	9
Dimension 6. Learning with and from the external environment and larger system	11	10	10	31
Total	32	30	30	92

The table shows that all the three schools have similar code ratios, with the most thought given to external cooperation outside school, while the other dimensions are observed considerably less. Dimension 1 ‘*Developing a shared vision centred on learning of all students*’ is the least referenced, therefore, the question arises whether this could be interpreted as delegating responsibility for learning outcomes to the learners themselves.

In different schools, the indicators of Dimension 3 ‘*Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff*’ and Dimension 5 ‘*Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning*’ differ considerably, suggesting that the manifestation of these dimensions depend on the priorities of the school itself rather than on a unified national framework.

The most frequently mentioned code (n=31) is Dimension 6 ‘*Learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system*’, which can be explained by the direct cooperation of vocational schools with employers (labour market) – Prof.1: “(...) we have about 30 employers who are involved in the learning process, so that they themselves also work and prepare their own people, who are needed in the industry”; Prof.2: “Yes, there is also cooperation with Latvia University of Agriculture (authors’ note – now called the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies), in cooperation with Riga Technical University. We actually even have teachers who work at universities and they have a second job here as well”; Prof.3: “Whereas I could mention the cooperation with general education schools specifically in the field of career support. Especially in recent years, secondary and primary schools have been very actively interested in vocational education opportunities. I receive calls and invitations... we visit them (general education schools) and they also visit us, both for workshops and for events... and, without a doubt, during the open days, this group is the most active”.

The least identified code (n = 6) is Dimension 1 ‘*Developing a shared vision centred on learning of all student*’, which can be justified by the opinion expressed in the focus

group discussions that students in vocational education have started their independent lives and that parental involvement in creating a shared vision is less important, as well as the fact that the goals and competences to be acquired by a student are already determined by the demand of the labour market — Prof.1: “ (...) *what competences should we have is determined by our employer*”; Prof.2: “*We have already very greatly switched to the system where there are the LDDK (authors’ note – Latvian Employers’ Confederation) industry expert councils, which tell us their common position, vision and development of the industry*”; Prof.3: “ (...) *for teachers, recently there was an event where we sort of created these strategies, we defined the main directions of how to teach.. and it’s not that only the management says that you have to teach this way... we all do it together*”.

The representatives of the vocational education institutions of Latvia were also asked to characterise the concept of the SLO and the representatives of two institutions were more aware and able to elaborate on it. Prof.1.: “*I would probably choose the keywords like quality, because now there is a lot of pressure on quality. Accessibility, to be accessible to all. Maybe there would also be target groups. They are both young people and adults.*”

“*The word organisation is associated with service, because the education we provide to both students and adults is the greatest treasure. We have to take into account their wishes and demands because they are our customers. And this is also from a multinational perspective, whether they are Ukrainians or Russian speakers. We try to provide this service to the best of our ability.*”

Prof.2.: “*For me, it means that we learn together and learn in a familiar environment.*”

“*It’s a kind of relentless learning... it’s not just the learners who learn, but the teachers and they teach each other.*”

“*A school is an organisation that, as colleagues have already said, teaches each other. Both the teacher and the student learn, the management learns, everyone learns together, with a tendency to be flexible.*”

“*Mutual cooperation, as colleagues have already said, in achieving common goals, in achieving knowledge, competences, skills... not only students, but also adults*”.

Vocational education institutions characterising the concept of the SLO highlight 1) access to education for all target audiences - from students to adults, which can be explained by the specifics of vocational education institutions - methodological centres, further education, and adult education offer; 2) quality assurance, which must be based on competences and labour market demand; 3) cooperation between the different stakeholders in education — students, teachers, school management, employers, etc.; 3) the learning process must be consistent, flexible and adaptable to change, involving not only students but also teachers and school management in the learning process.

The main impediments to the implementation of the SLO approach in Latvia, identified by the representatives of vocational schools, are lack of time, lack of financial resources, lack of energy/strength/work capacity and overload, lack of teaching materials

and methods, lack of teacher initiative, lack of teachers, lack of hierarchy, as well as difficulties in the implementation of the new content.

Conclusions and Discussion

All 7 dimensions of the SLO can be found in the education policy documents of the EU and OECD countries, as well as in the education policy documents of Latvia, which shows that there is a gradual progress towards the transformation of vocational education institutions into learning organisations. The vocational education system of Latvia is largely on this path: the dimensions of the SLO approach are identified in the guidance documents, but they are mostly not defined as mandatory in legislation.

Nevertheless, the SLO Dimension 6 '*Learning with and from the external environment and the larger system*' is convincingly represented in vocational education in Latvia, not only in legislation, but also in practice. The representatives of the vocational education institutions in Latvia talked most extensively about cooperation with external partners, for example, municipalities, education boards, and other organisations; about experiences of cooperation with the schools in Latvia and other countries; about the cooperation with industry professionals, companies and higher education institutions (in career education events, recruitment of teachers and interns, and conducting joint research).

This dimension is also closely linked to Dimension 2 '*Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff*', as the organisation of work-based learning, lifelong and continuous learning for teachers in cooperation with enterprises, employers and employees' organisations, the development and updating of curricula in line with innovation in the field (*culture of innovation*), as well as educational objectives and quality criteria (*shared vision*) are jointly discussed.

The EU (2020) and OECD (2015) recommendation to *set up data and information collection systems to monitor the quality of education* has been accepted by virtually all Member States, but the use of data and information for situation analysis and data-based decision-making is at a much lower level. The low importance of Dimension 5 '*Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning*' is also reflected in the statements of representatives of the vocational schools in Latvia.

This also indicates that the SLO Dimension 4 '*Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration*' is not being fully implemented. More effective use of data analytics in school management at all levels would help to reliably assess progress and make data-driven decisions on the future development needs of schools, including in collaboration with industry. The lack of reliable data or, on the contrary, the accumulation of redundant data is one of the **challenges** currently limiting the implementation of the SLO approach in vocational education. The question to be **debated** is how to make such data collection more important for the development of school as a learning organization, and how to balance a huge amount of new information (e.g. on learners' performance) with sufficiently simple and in-depth processing.

Dimension 3 ‘*Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff*’ is less developed in the legislation and practice of vocational education in Latvia. The attitude to this dimension of SLO varies from school to school, suggesting that it is an initiative and responsibility of the school rather than a compliance with regulations. A **debatable** contradiction arises here as, on the one hand, school autonomy is essential for the SLO and it might be limited by additional regulation. On the other hand, the implementation of this essential dimension of SLO, by fostering relationships and learning from each other, is crucial for the quality of education.

The least defined dimension across all sources is Dimension 7 ‘*Modelling and growing learning leadership.*’ Latvian legislation envisages learners’ initiative and leadership as a learning outcome, but the documents clearly describe only the responsibility of the head of the educational institution. This means that important aspects such as the ability of the teacher, the learners or the school to vary the learning process on their own initiative, adapting it to the situation or learners’ needs, are determined by the school’s internal rules or the teacher’s way of thinking.

This contradiction cannot be resolved without providing answers on the boundaries of the autonomy of the educational institution, the possibilities and limitations of the initiative of the head of the educational institution, teachers and learners, and the diversity of the learning process to ensure flexible adaptation to the individual needs and abilities of learners and to the current situation.

The least emphasised dimension in vocational education institutions is Dimension 1 ‘*Developing a shared vision centred on learning of all students.*’ Overall, it can be concluded that the representatives of vocational education institutions have only a partial understanding of the nature of the dimension, as it was mainly characterised as a process of creating a shared vision (discussions between stakeholders and politicians), rather than focusing on the content of the dimension – ‘students’ learning’. There is a **challenge** that the shared vision of a vocational education establishment is greatly related to aligning the learning goals and outcomes with the needs of the industry. Therefore, the **question** for further research remains how to align the needs of industry and the individual.

Therefore, the **challenge** for successful implementation of the SLO approach in vocational education is to harmonise the growth needs of the national economy and the specific economic sector with the discovery and development of students’ individual growth and personal potential. The **solution** could be found in evaluating the abilities and interests of each student, and creating flexible curricula/modules so that each learner could develop their individual abilities by getting to know their chosen industry, gaining professional quality, and thus developing their individual abilities and future career opportunities.

Recommendations:

- For education policy makers: since the features of SLO are only partially visible in vocational education documents in Latvia, the framework should be improved to cover all dimensions of the SLO, and norms and agreements on collective understanding should be harmonised in policy documents.

- For school representatives: raise awareness of the staff of vocational education institutions of the essence of the SLO and its role in improving the quality of education and ensure that all dimensions of SLO are understood and addressed appropriately.
- For entrepreneurs: help define the diverse, varied manifestations of professions in the sector to engage the individual potential of learners as effectively as possible.
- For researchers: help find the ways to resolve controversies by identifying good practice and research.

Overall, it can be summarised that vocational education in Latvia purposefully implements the SLO in practice. Conclusions obtained within the framework of the project ‘A model and tool to support the implementation of the school as a learning organisation approach in educational institutions’, will be refined and made applicable to practice.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

References

- European Commission. (2019). Study on EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET), <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/205aa0ac-460d-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- European Commission. (2020). Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. Official Journal of the European Union, 2020/C 417/01, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1606987593071&uri=CELEX%3A32020H1202%2801%29>
- European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training. (2018). Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, Draft Results of EQAVET Secretariat Survey, European Commission, Employment, social affairs and inclusion, EQAVET at VET provider level <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1548&langId=en>
- European Union. (2020). Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2020:417:FULL&from=BG>
- Galloway, A. (2005). Non-Probability Sampling, Editor(s): Kimberly Kempf-Leonard, *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*, (pp. 859–864). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-12-369398-5/00382-0>.
- Gopinathan, S., & Lee, H.M. (2018). Excellence and equity in high-performing education systems: policy lessons from Singapore and Hong Kong. *Journal for the Study of Education and Development*, 41(2), 203–247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02103702.2018.1434043>
- Gilbert, G. Nigel, & Stoneman, P. (2016). *Researching social life*. 4th edition. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Greve, C., & Sløk, C. (2020). When dialogue doesn't work: school reforms and lessons from Denmark. *Policy Design and Practice*, 3(4), <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2020.1858576>
- Harris, A. & Jones, M. (2018). Leading schools as learning organizations. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(4), 351-354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1483553>
- Halinen, I. (2018). The new educational curriculum in Finland. In *Improving the quality of childhood in Europe*, 7, 75–89. Brussels: Alliance for Childhood European Network Foundation.
- Huang, J., Tang, Y., He, W. & Li, Q. (2019) Singapore's School Excellence Model and student learning: evidence from PISA 2012 and TALIS 2013, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 39(1), 96–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1575185>

- IKVD (Izglītības Kvalitātes vadības dienests). (2022). Vadlīnijas izglītības kvalitātes nodrošināšanai vispārējā un profesionālajā izglītībā. [Guidelines for quality assurance in general and vocational education.] https://www.ikvd.gov.lv/akreditacija?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F
- Kools, M., & Stoll, L. (2016). What makes a school a learning organisation? OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19939019>
- Kools, M., Gouédard, P., George, B., Steijn, B., Bekkers, V., & Stoll, L. (2019). The relationship between the school as a learning organisation and staff outcomes: A case study of Wales. *European Journal of Education*, 54(3), 426 – 442, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12355>
- Kools, M., Stoll, L., George, B., Steijn, B., Bekkers, V., & Gouédard, P. (2020). The school as a learning organisation: The concept and its measurement. *European Journal of Education*, 55(1), 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12383>
- Ng, P. T., & Chan, D. (2008). A comparative study of Singapore's school excellence model with Hong Kong's school-based management. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 22(6), 488–505, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540810895426>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2015). OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training. Key Messages and Country Summaries. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/OECD_VET_Key_Messages_and_Country_Summaries_2015.pdf
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2018). Developing Schools as Learning Organisations in Wales, Implementing Education Policies. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264307193-en>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2014). Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.
- Park J. H. (2008). Validation of Senge's Learning Organization Model with Teachers of Vocational High Schools at the Seoul Megalopolis", *Asia Pacific Education Review* 9(3), 270–284.
- MK (Ministru kabinets). (2018). Ministru kabineta 2018. gada 11. septembra noteikumi Nr. 569 "Noteikumi par pedagogiem nepieciešamo izglītību un profesionālo kvalifikāciju un pedagogu profesionālās kompetences pilnveides kārtību". [Cabinet of Ministers Regulation of 11 September 2018 No 569 "Regulations on the Education and Professional Qualifications Required for Teachers and the Procedure for the Development of Professional Competence of Teachers".] Latvijas vēstnesis. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/301572>
- MK (Ministru kabinets). (2021). Izglītības attīstības pamatnostādnes 2021. - 2027. gadam. [Education Development Guidelines 2021-2027]. Latvijas vēstnesis. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/324332-par-izglitibas-attistibas-pamatnostadnem-2021-2027-gadam>
- Papazoglou, A., & Koutouzis, M. (2020). Schools as learning organisations in Greece: Measurement and first indications. *European Journal of Education*, 55(1), 43–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12380>
- Retna, K. S. & Ng, P. T. (2016). The application of learning organization to enhance learning in Singapore schools. *Management in Education*, 30(1), 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020615619665>
- Saeima (1999). Profesionālās izglītības likums. [Vocational Education Law.] <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=20244> Amendments to the Vocational Education Law on 11.10.2022. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/335871-grozijumi-profionalas-izglitibas-likuma>
- Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., & Dutton, J. (2012). *Schools That Learn (Updated and Revised): A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*. NY: Crown Publishing Group.
- Stoll, L., & Kools, M. (2017). The school as a learning organisation: A review revisiting and extending a timely concept. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 2(1), 2–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-09-2016-0022>
- Watkins, K. E., & O'Neil, J. (2013). The Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (the DLOQ): A Nontechnical Manual. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 15(2), 133–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422313475854>