

THE ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY IN THE LATVIAN ADULT EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract. With increasing occupational mobility in the Western societies, where, among other drivers, economic cycles and digital transformation brought changes in labour demand, adults' access to the education system is becoming increasingly important issue. This refers both for upgrading skills and for retraining with a view to occupational change if the labour market demand for the initial occupation has declined significantly. The aim of this article is to analyse the institutional framework of the Latvian adult education and related institutions to assess what opportunities and what obstacles it creates for individuals to undergo the necessary training to enter a new occupation. Theoretically, the article is based on institutionalism theory, which explains the impact of institutions on the economic behaviour of agents, and middle-range theories on the impact of the structure of the education and labour market institutions on occupational mobility prospects. The analysis is based on a systematic examination of the legal acts and their amendments introduced in Latvia since 2009. The data suggest that Latvian institutional environment is generally favourable for occupational change, but specially targeted public policy support is aimed at the upgrading and retraining of medium- and low-skilled workforce, leaving the occupational transition of high-skilled workforce largely to their own discretion.

Key words: occupational mobility, mobility regime, labour market institutions, adult education, Latvia.

JEL code: J62, J24

Introduction

Technological advances and economic turbulences of modern Western economy reverberate in the labour market generating changes in occupational structure – the decline of some occupations and the emergence of others (Murphy, 2014). This pushes individuals towards transition between occupations in search of opportunities to maintain employment (Murphy, 2014). Indeed, intragenerational occupational mobility rates have increased around the Western world (Jarvis & Song, 2017). This process challenges existing education and labour market institutions that have been formed over time to grant stability to social life (Scott, 2008). Within this framework, one presumes that an individual performs qualified professional work based on the mastering of a certain set of skills. They are acquired through intensive training within the educational system, linking the future working life to the chosen occupation (Bol et al., 2019). As education is a guarantee of an individual's productivity (Van de Werfhorst, 2011), intention to change occupation requires an individual to return fully or partially to an initial education system that has not been supposed before. In other words, occupational mobility requires more than updating skills, which is the target of adult learning system (Saar et al., 2013). It challenges existing institutional arrangements and requires institutions to be able to support more fundamental retraining of individuals. However, there are concerns about whether institutional adjustments are progressing adequately to match changing labour market needs. This also contributes to the interest of scholars to develop various analytical tools to identify the impact of institutional arrangements on individuals' ability to perform occupational change which serves as a basis for comparative studies to determine the level of institutional support across the countries. One of the most comprehensive frameworks is proposed by the American sociologist Thomas DiPrete and colleagues (DiPrete et al., 1997).

In the 1990s, Latvia, like other post-Soviet countries that later joined the EU, underwent through extensive institutional transformations. The reorganisation was not even across various domains of social life. It affected the economy, the labour market, and the welfare system more than the education system. Moreover, the new institutional arrangements were largely based on the vision of international

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organisations (Saar et al., 2013) that led to various inconsistencies between institutions. Thus, countries had to develop higher coherence between them in the following decades. The provision of further training opportunities for adults was also among the issues to be resolved (BISS, 2020; Saar et al., 2013).

Under new circumstances, the Latvian economy has become largely dependent on developments in the global economy, accordingly, the demand for occupations is constantly changing (OECD, 2016). This in turn requires a coordinated response from the relevant authorities to support the individuals' need to adapt to changing labour market demands. Although some studies have been conducted in Latvia on the performance of the adult education system (BISS, 2020), they have not yet provided an answer on how supportive the Latvian institutions are of occupational mobility. Solving existing knowledge gap is the aim of this study.

For this purpose, the author applies the model developed by DiPrete and colleagues (DiPrete et al., 1997), answering the following research questions: (1) which occupational mobility regime is specific to Latvia, and (2) what additional characteristics are recommended to be included in the model based on the Latvian experience? The author assumes that the constant need for adaptation felt by Latvian employers and employees has created some formal or informal institutions that facilitate rather than hinder occupational mobility.

The author's research work to determine a mobility regime which is specific to Latvia is based on qualitative research method – document analysis which provides a comprehensive review of Latvian legal framework. As a most important turning point in contemporary Latvian employment and education policy took place after the economic recession, the analysis overviews the institutional arrangements and their changes since 2009. An overview includes nine laws and seven Cabinet Regulations, supplemented with empirical evidence from studies on the effectiveness of these arrangements.

Research results and discussion

1. Theoretical background

Institutions-mobility nexus. Institutions, as Scott (2008, p. 48) states, "are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life". The role of institutions is to ensure the durability and therefore predictability in any domain of society's existence which strengthens the motivation of individuals to undertake activities not only with short-term, but also long-term returns. Laws and regulations are the primary source of institutions – they shape behaviours of individuals and organizations and act as a redistributor of material resources (Scott, 2008). Meanwhile, institutions are also less formal cognitive systems that take the form of a shared logic of action (Scott, 2008, p. 51) and which may conflict with formal arrangements, thus changing their manifestations (Nee, 2005).

Formation of occupational-specific skills is an activity where the interests of two institutions – education and the labour market – overlap (Reichelt & Abraham, 2017). In modern society, learning and training, including, occupation-specific skills development, is devolved to educational institutions, while "the end product" of this process is used by the labour market. Thus, both institutions try to align their activities to achieve greater coherence of the skills with the labour market needs. However, these institutional arrangements have developed under certain conditions, thus, various cross-country variations can be observed.

First, variations manifest in the specificity or stratification of initial education (Saar et al., 2013). This refers to several features of education institutions, including the degree to which the upper secondary curriculum is adapted to the training of specific skills (general versus vocational), the opportunities of

individuals to change the chosen educational path on a later stage (path dependence of sequent education levels), the role of credentials in obtaining a job, and the organisation of school-to-work transitions (Bol et al., 2019; DiPrete et al., 1997; Saar et al., 2013). Greater coherence with the labour market is ensured by credentialism and learning embedded in the work environment (Bol et al., 2019), which, in turn, decreases level of later transitions between jobs and occupations (DiPrete et al., 1997). Here, a clear pattern is evident: once having chosen a vocational training path, individuals must make a significant effort to move on to more general or another vocational education. In contrast, with more general educational degrees, labour force has higher opportunities of being mobile across occupations (Bol et al., 2019).

Secondly, since obtaining education has required investment from both individuals and institutions, various arrangements have been created to guarantee further stability of employment relations. This, in turn, is ensured by labour market institutions such as employment regulations (regarding entry and dismissal conditions) and trade unions (DiPrete et al., 1997).

Thirdly, the employed need perpetual skill development, which, unlike initial education, is also undertaken by labour market institutions, pursuing to delegate this responsibility to employers (Cedefop, 2015; Saar et al., 2013). However, employers' investments in employees' training tend to take some specific form such as emphasis on general versus occupation-specific skills, focus on employees with certain level of qualifications or employment contract forms (Saar et al., 2013).

Further, as the employment relations can be broken due to business failures or greater economic downturn, employees may face unemployment, accordingly, welfare institutions become involved (DiPrete et al., 1997). Becoming unemployed, individuals have lost not only income from work, but also their access to training opportunities previously provided by employer. In closing this gap, public institutions are involved to a different extent. When marking these variations, the duration and extent of support for the unemployed were among the measures considered by Esping-Andersen when developing the typology of welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

The workforce skills development offered by employers and public institutions is referred to as the adult learning, but it is focused mainly on upgrading skills rather than comprehensive retraining (Cedefop, 2015). However, in an unemployment situation caused by a long-term decline in the demand for occupations, upskilling may not be a sufficient solution to re-entering the labour market, and more substantial investments in reskilling is needed.

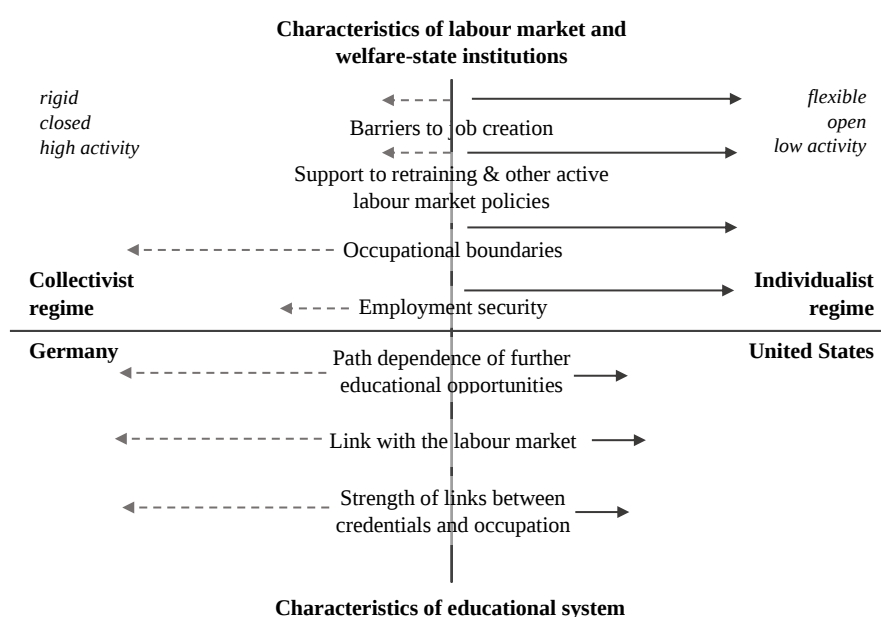
The above shows that institutions can be designed to support occupational mobility to varying degrees. Meanwhile, market processes that encourage the need to move across occupational boundaries are also increasing (DiPrete et al., 1997; Jarvis & Song, 2017; Murphy, 2014). Thus, the ability of institutions to support individuals in this transition may be important in reducing unemployment that is expected in the near or distant future. When assessing how institutions in different countries have been able to adapt to these needs, scholars classify them according to their mobility regimes. This allows to identify which institutions are coping with labour market challenges better (DiPrete et al., 1997).

Mobility regimes. When analysing the relationship between the amount of occupational mobility and education, labour market and welfare-state institutions, DiPrete and colleagues (DiPrete et al., 1997) have proposed a typology of mobility regimes. The authors connect the institutional framework for initial education with the arrangements to which the individuals are subjected in their later adult working life.

Figure 1 shows that each institutional arrangement is assessed in terms of rigidity or strength and flexibility or weakness. Accordingly, the lines going to the left show that the characteristic is expressed in a relatively strong way – the further the arrow goes, the more rigid the structure. Conversely, lines that tend to the right indicate the degree of flexibility of the institutional arrangement.

If institutional characteristics tend to be predominantly rigid, then DiPrete and colleagues call such a regime a collectivist regime; if characteristics tend to be flexible, then authors consider them individualist (1997). Figure 1 compares the German and the United States systems as examples of the extremes of these two regimes.

The collectivist regime is characterised by an impediment to occupational mobility, as the high protection of employment rights, stratified initial vocational education and credentialism create barriers to changes in further working life (DiPrete et al., 1997). Moreover, work-based learning, which dominates German vocational education, leads to both narrow specialisation (Bol et al., 2019) and development of the company-specific skill (see Tolbert, 1996) making them less portable across occupations (Murphy, 2014). Contrary, the United States are characterized by high mobility rates which stems out of lower employment protection and more general skills sets provided by the education system with weaker link to occupational structure (DiPrete et al., 1997).



Notes: The lines represent the manifestation of each respective institutional arrangement characteristic: rigidity/strength (towards left) or flexibility/weakness (towards right). Line length is relative, based on their assessment as provided by DiPrete and colleagues (1997). The dashed line shows the result of the evaluation of German institutional arrangements; the solid line shows the characteristic of institutional arrangements of the United States.

Source: author based on DiPrete et al., 1997, p. 326.

Fig. 1. **Characteristics of institutional arrangements and mobility regimes**

The cases discussed above do not indicate the role of active labour market policies and adults' retraining offers in determining mobility regimes. DiPrete and colleagues (1997) discuss Sweden as an example characterised by both high activity of labour market and welfare institutions and high mobility rates, concluding that despite the proximity of the characteristics of Swedish institutional arrangements to the collectivist regime, support for retraining encourages individuals to cross occupational boundaries.

2. Results

The results section is structured according to the types of institutional arrangements analysed by DiPrete and colleagues (1997).

Path dependence of further educational opportunities. Although the stratification in Latvian education system starts at upper secondary level, graduates of both general and vocational tracks have the same opportunities to shape their future educational path choosing between enrolling university and

entering the labour market. In the last case, they retain the option of returning to the formal education after the period spent in employment (Saeima, 1995; Saeima, 1998; Saeima, 1999).

Latvian education institutions have adapted to accommodate adults returning to formal education for retraining and upskilling. Favourable circumstances exist both in terms of flexibility of admission conditions and the possibility of applying for studies with state budget funds (Saeima, 2011). Flexibility in admission conditions manifests itself as exceptions for those applicants who completed secondary education before 2004 (Saeima, 2006) presuming no need to have passed the centralized examinations, which have been introduced as a general selection criterion after this date. Moreover, in 2011, the condition that first-time entrants to tertiary education receive priority for public funding was repealed. Thus, the access to study with state budget funds was increased for those who wish to re-enter university, for example to complete an interrupted degree or to pursue a degree in another field (Saeima, 2011).

Link of training with the labour market. Initial vocation training in Latvia predominantly is organised outside work environment (OECD, 2016) and the same pattern repeats regarding the upskilling of adults (Saar et al., 2013). Thus, the link with the labour market, both in initial and further skills development, is weak.

Occupational boundaries, strength of links between credentials and occupation. Since 2009, Latvia has experienced significant changes in the regulation that determines the development of the initial vocational curriculum and occupational structure. In 2011, Latvia has introduced Sectoral Expert Councils for strengthening link between vocational training and the labour market. Their duties are to develop the structure of sectoral qualifications, describe occupations and specialisations in the sector and develop their standards (Saeima, 2015).

Although new system of occupational standards has been gradually established in Latvia, it is mainly seen as a tool for the education sector to ensure coherent implementation of the curriculum (see Saeima, 2015). Apart from this stands the occupational structure, which is defined by the Classification of Occupations. It provides a description of the content of occupations, but since 2017 has excluded information on what qualifications an individual needs to be able to work in that occupation (Cabinet of Ministers, 2017). This means that employers are not obliged to recruit only those applicants who have appropriate credentials.

Besides, empirical studies indicate two major problems regarding effective delineation of occupational boundaries. First, a lack of a common understanding has been observed between different legal frameworks on how to define occupation-specific skills (Purmalis et al., 2019) which hinders the determination of boundaries at formal institutional level. Second, the occupational structure established in the Classification of Occupations in Latvia is followed to a significantly greater extent in the workplaces of the Riga economic area, while the occupational affiliation of labour force in the workplaces of more distant regions has become blurred (Rasnaca, 2011). Here, it becomes evident that informal arrangements, alongside formal institutions, play an important role in the definition of occupational boundaries. Meanwhile, such arrangements are favourable to occupational mobility.

Indeed, strength of the links between credentials and occupations are clearly observable only in the field of regulated occupations which refer to sectors whose activities affect the protection and safety of the society (Saeima, 2001b). These include various occupations in healthcare, legal and personal security services, transportation, construction, and energy (Cabinet of Ministers, 2006). Meanwhile, as monitoring whether employers fulfil the corresponding qualification requirements largely depends on the capacity of various supervisory institutions of the field (Ministry of Education and Sciences, 2019), and it has not been implemented transparently.

The State's efforts to introduce greater transparency and reduce skills mismatch rates are reflected in the new framework for the recognition of informally acquired skills. The creation of this procedure started in 2010 by adopting amendments to the relevant laws (Saeima, 2011; Cabinet of Ministers, 2012). Initially, since 2011, individuals had an opportunity to recognise skills corresponding to initial vocational training and college degree, but since 2018, corresponding procedure has been established to recognize university-level competences (Saeima, 2011; Cabinet of Ministers, 2018). This practice particularly supports the needs of working adults, as it enables them to ensure that their education is compliant with the formal arrangements. Even partial recognition of skills (as corresponding to certain tertiary education courses) reduces the time needed for adults to continue and complete their studies.

Latvia's employment security determined by the Labour Law is evaluated as relatively high, but empirical studies indicate difficulties in their compliance and the existence of various informal practices (OECD, 2016; Romele, 2017). However, the framework has become more flexible, with the adoption of amendments in 2021, that eased the procedure for dismissing workers with disabilities (Saeima, 2021).

Support to retraining and other active labour market policies. Two distinct long-established institutional support mechanisms for adult education and training have been provided through Latvian legal framework. They are, first, the obligation of employers to grant an employee a study leave; and second, upskilling or reskilling measures for the unemployed.

Obligation to grant study leave with or without salary retention is stipulated in the Labour Law (Saeima, 2001a). However, employers who have concluded collective agreements with the company's trade union usually offer more favourable conditions, including salary retention and systematically aligning working time with the employee's study regime (Zabko, 2020).

Public support for upskilling and retraining, including career counselling, has several restrictions (Cabinet of Ministers, 2011). First, the variation of occupations in which the unemployed can upskill or reskill are institutionally constrained. They are selected according to the short-term labour market forecasts prepared by the Ministry of Welfare (Paragraph 22, Cabinet of Ministers, 2011) with focus on medium-skilled occupations. Second, similar limitations can be observed for adults, who are primarily supported. The main target group is the unemployed without occupational credentials, as well as those whose occupation is no longer in demand on the labour market (Paragraph 26.1, Cabinet of Ministers, 2011). Although Latvia's spending on active labour market policies is considered low in international comparisons (OECD, 2019), support for upskilling and reskilling is considered significant in the subjective assessment of its beneficiaries (Hohlova & Rivza, 2022).

Barriers to job creation in Latvia are not directly related to business and employment regulation, but rather to negative demographic trends and skills mismatches (OECD, 2016). Since the growth in 2012-2013, which was associated with the recovery from the economic recession, the performance of economically active firms has been relatively stable (OECD, 2019).

Another public measure to support adult learning has recently been introduced in Latvia. The programme focuses on wide-scale skill development in both general and occupation-specific skills, leaving the choice of skill type and industry to be improved to the individual. However, the duration of the programme is currently limited to the period from 2016 to the end of 2023 (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016).

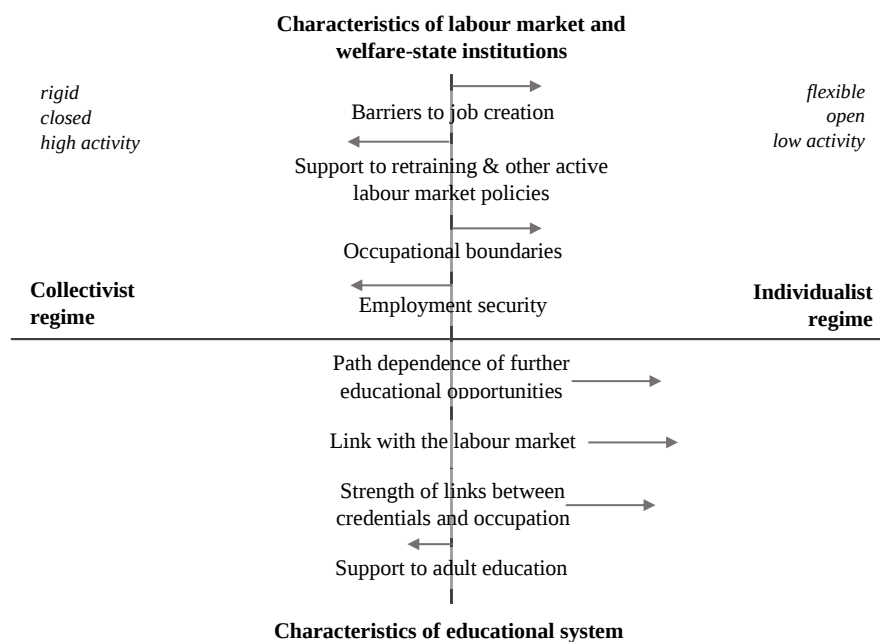
This programme can be considered as a substitute for the general reluctance of Latvian employers to provide on-job upskilling. The support was primarily targeted to working adults without credentials and those whose occupation was characterised by decline or oversupply. Besides, employees overeducated for their occupation or received recommendation to retrain due to their poor health condition were also eligible. It is evident that these conditions indirectly presume occupational mobility. However, the availability of the

programme was for several years limited to a single participation, regardless of the training type chosen (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016).

Despite the initial intention to provide training opportunities based on labour market forecasts, in practice, they were only partly considered. Thus, training was available both in occupations with high future labour demand and those that was expected to decline (BISS, 2020). Moreover, until mid-2020, support was available only once and the amendments to twice participation were adopted based on the need to reduce the decline of Latvian economy caused by the COVID-19 suppressing measures (Cabinet of Ministers, 2020; Ministry of Education and Sciences, 2020). From the lens of occupational mobility, these conditions are controversial. The restriction to participate in the programme is seen as a limitation on the opportunity of retraining, as an individual may need to undergo several consecutive training modules to reach the level of skills needed to work in a new occupation. Considering that working adults may not have been initially aware of the variety of options offered and the heavy reliance on the individual's own skills to guide their future learning, the support programme was too short to achieve the results originally intended by the policy.

3. Latvian mobility regime considered

Figure 2 summarises author's assessment of the performance of Latvian education, labour market and welfare institutions structuring the analysis around the domains evaluated by DiPrete and colleagues.



Notes: The lines represent the character of each respective institutional arrangement: rigidity/ strength (towards left) or flexibility/ weakness (towards right). Author has detected the length of line based on own assessment.

Source: author's own analysis based on institutional dimensions examined by DiPrete et al., 1997.

Fig. 2. Characteristics of education, labour market and welfare institutions in Latvia

On the labour market and welfare-state characteristics axis, employment security appears high and support to retraining is quite significant, as revealed in Figure 2. In turn, occupational boundaries appear weak and institutional barriers to job creation are rather low. On the axis of the characteristics of educational institutions, all the conditions that might otherwise be considered as barriers to occupational mobility are weak. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the institutional environment in Latvia is generally rather supportive to occupational mobility. Comparing Latvia's institutional arrangements with DiPrete and

colleagues (1997) model, it appears important to separate training support for working adults as measure standing outside specific work environment.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Latvian formal and informal institutions tend to support occupational mobility, emphasising the role of the individual in the process, which corresponds to individualist regime.
- 2) At formal institutional level, upskilling and reskilling support is focused on the low- and medium-skilled. While institutional arrangements are also favourable for the retraining of the high-skilled, these issues were less important for public authorities.
- 3) As Latvian employers are rarely involved in upskilling of their employees, it is advisable to emphasise the role of public policy in the model of mobility regimes by introducing a new dimension – "(public) support to adult education". This dimension is further recommended to include as separate institutional arrangement to be measured in the theoretical model proposed by DiPrete and colleagues (1997).
- 4) The need for adult upskilling and reskilling is expected to prolong, so public policy needs to consider the extension of support programmes.

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