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INTRODUCTION

For more than two years, four European trade unions of education workers, namely LIZDA (Latvia), LESTU (Lithuania), ČMOS PŠ (Czech Republic), ZNP (Poland), have been working under the Erasmus+ program on the project of “Development of Support System for Novice Teachers (SupportTeachers)”. The goal of the project is to create an electronic handbook for novice teachers and to design a system of recommendations to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession and promote effective professional support of novice teachers.

According to the “Education at a Glance 2020” OECD report, in 2018 young teachers under the age of 30 made up only a small part of the teaching staff. The share of young teachers in the partner countries of the project is below the OECD average: at the secondary school level of 3.03% in Lithuania, 4.06% in the Czech Republic, and 7.8% in Latvia; at the primary school level of 3.66% in Lithuania, 7.71% in Latvia, and 9.42% in the Czech Republic.

On 16-17 January 2024, the last meeting of the partners of the “Development of Support System for Novice Teachers” project took place in Riga, Latvia, and a final conference was held to close the entire project. A special handbook with recommendations on how to support novice teachers, how to attract more adepts to the profession, and how to keep currently active teachers in the profession will be drafted based on the project conclusions.

In her opening speech, the president of the Latvian teachers trade union of LIZDA, Inga Vanaga, emphasised that the European education sector faces common problems, namely of how to boost interest in the teaching profession and how to sufficiently appreciate and support teachers. Inga Vanaga said: *“Young teachers are our future. Therefore, this project has provided us with the opportunity to understand the global situation, identify the main problems, and develop an adequate solution plan. (...) During the course of the project, we clearly realised that young teachers want support, a sense of unity, and an exchange of experiences. Therefore, our activities do not end with this conference. It’s just the beginning. Working together, we have to find the most effective way of putting the knowledge gained within the project into practice and take concrete steps to implement practical solutions.”*



Lithuanian delegation

ABOUT THE PROJECT

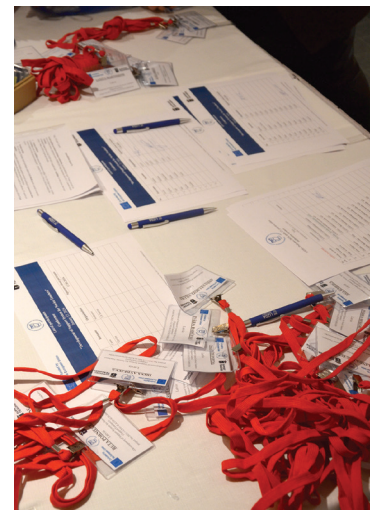
The four teachers trade unions: LIZDA (Latvia), LESTU (Lithuania), ZNP (Poland), and ČMOS PŠ (the Czech Republic) have decided to jointly review and map the position of and the support system for novice teachers in their respective countries. Common activities started in 2021 within the Erasmus+ programme project **The Development of Support System for Novice Teachers**.

Educational systems in all the countries listed above face the issues of a low number of "young" teachers and a low prestige of the teaching profession.





Towards the end of her presentation, Inga Vanaga said that Latvia is trying to solve the shortage of young teachers by involving students in the profession. Second-year students also enter schools because educational institutions struggle with an acute shortage of teaching staff. LIZDA has long emphasised the need to increase the number of available spots in teacher education. The second issue discussed may be resolved by the introduction of special scholarships for young teachers. In this area, Latvia has taken a significant step by introducing an additional scholarship of €300 for them. Attempts to offer young teachers various types of support also appear at the level of municipalities: service apartments, health insurance, transportation reimbursement, etc. This depends on the situation of individual municipalities. Somewhere, richer municipalities and richer schools even try to “buy” the best young teachers, which is not a welcome practice.



Līga Kļaviņa, a member of the Saeima (the parliament of the Republic of Latvia) Commission for Education, Culture, and Science, who was present at the conference, confirmed in her



speech that successful cooperation of the state, local government, Saeima, and trade unions is necessary to achieve strategic goals. *“We are all united by the desire for the government to work well and with maximum commitment, so that teachers are satisfied and well-paid,”* she said, acknowledging that retaining young teachers in the profession is clearly a problem that requires a strategic set of solutions.

The representative of the Lithuanian union of LESTU, Inga Puiša, confirmed that the prestige of the teaching profession is very low in Lithuania. There are several reasons, including insufficient salaries. Inga Puiš focused on the problem of reducing violence, which they are currently solving in the educational sector. *“We were shocked to find in an in-depth survey that almost half of the respondents had experienced some form of violence at school. From physical and moral to sexual violence against teachers. It involves verbal violence, filming, taunts, swearing and more. Unions advocate for zero tolerance of aggression towards teachers,”* she noted.

Inga Vanaga, LIZDA president

The Lithuanian trade union participation in the project was an impulse to draft a number of other initiatives to support young teachers. These include offering future teachers scholarships of up to €500 a month, attracting talented employees from other sectors to work in education, and support programs at the municipal level to encourage teachers to move to rural areas. The union also encourages thinking about strengthening the mentoring program and modernising the school environment to make novice teachers feel comfortable working at schools. They also paid special attention to the issue of administrative support for novice teachers, so that the main content of their work became teaching pupils, and not just struggling with paperwork.

Another key issue addressed by Lithuanian trade union representatives was the huge discrepancy between the reality of the industry and dry statistics. LIZDA often drew attention to this aspect in its work, especially during discussions with legislators and the Ministry of Education. Inga Puiša emphasised that only in-depth studies can show the real situation in the sector, not arithmetic statistics, which do not reflect real problems. Only in-depth studies can reveal how much time teachers in reality spend correcting homework and lesson planning. She stated that the urban statistical legend has long been the belief that the ratio of teachers to pupils in Lithuania was too high and that there were too many teachers. When the issue was investigated more deeply, it was concluded that there was a catastrophic shortage of teachers of chemistry and mathematics, for example.





Dorota Obidniak, ZNP

Polish ZNP trade union representative Dorota Obidniak focused on the fact that many young teachers leave schools after a short practice post completing their pedagogy studies because they are unable to adapt and settle in the profession. Like their Lithuanian and Latvian colleagues, Polish teachers struggle with the low prestige of the teaching profession, which is also significantly affected by insufficient remuneration. “Our survey has revealed that low pay is one of the main reasons why young people do not enter the profession and leave it quickly. Young professionals, who receive no extra pay, make an average of €797 per month. Moreover, the national average for experienced teachers barely reaches the minimum wage, set in Poland at €926 as of 1 June,” Dorota Obidniak said, adding: “As a result, young teachers represent only about 3% of all Polish teachers and the average age of those working in this sector is 47.” Representatives of the Polish union of ZNP summarised the findings from the project and prepared five pages of recommendations which will be presented to the government, parliament, and educational institution founders.

Compared to Poland, the salary situation of Czech teachers is much better. In the Czech Republic, young teachers aged 25-29 receive approximately €1,704 and their more experienced colleagues make €2,150. Around 2017, however, the relative salary of Czech teachers compared to the average salary of university-educated employees was among the lowest in the OECD. Back then, it amounted to 60-64%. Subsequently, there was a trend of increasing funds for education, and, also, teachers’ salaries.

In 2021, salaries in education grew to 79% of the salaries of university-educated workers (121% compared to average salaries in the economy), thus approaching the OECD average. In 2022, however, the relative salaries of teachers of all age groups dropped again. Effective 1 January 2024, the level of teacher salaries is set at 130% of the average wage in the economy. However, it is debatable whether this level will be maintained.

The level of teachers’ salaries is one of the main factors which influence the attractiveness of the teaching profession. The lack of teachers and the low attractiveness for adepts of this profession are linked to salaries. The aim of the salary increase is not only to attract more young people to the profession, but also to try to re-attract those teachers who have left the teaching profession at some point in their career and are now working in another field. Czech professional studies have shown that higher salaries could become one of the reasons why teachers would return to the profession.

Quality, qualified, and motivated teachers are important for setting and maintaining the quality of education. In the Czech Republic, there is a shortage of teachers of certain subjects and in certain regions, and the teaching population is aging. For this reason, among others, it is necessary to focus on the fact that new teachers should enter the education system on an ongoing basis and that this system should be able to retain them.

A questionnaire survey carried out by ČMOS PŠ pointed out a number of areas, which young teachers themselves perceive as a problem. This was, for example, a lack of hands-on training received at the pedagogical faculties and a lack of preparation on how to manage problematic pupils or problematic situations. It was also mentioned that the first years in the profession were difficult and novice teachers did not have sufficient support, for example, in the form of mentoring.



Czech delegation



In the autumn of 2023, the institute of novice and guide teachers was enshrined in Czech legislation. This is an important step which will have a great impact in practice. However, this new amendment does not remain without questions and implementation issues. For example, the law does not establish the amount of financial supplement for the guide teacher. Similarly, the system of further education of these guide teachers and the competence prerequisites for this position are not stipulated. Each school will set its own mentoring implementation standards, which could lead to different quality of mentoring offered by individual schools. More stringent requirements for the skills and qualifications of mentors are needed, as well as a specific training program for mentors.

Project partner meeting

Towards the end of the conference, all participants, divided into working groups, discussed and drafted the best recommendations for using the knowledge gained within the project in practice. Most groups talked about strengthening the quality of mentoring, bringing academic knowledge closer to the reality of schools, and focusing on the need for scholarships and budget-funded positions. All groups agreed that it is essential to increase the prestige of the profession.

