Quality and Higher Education in International and National Context

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to evaluate the influence of the international Bologna process on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and development of higher education in Latvia. Research on the concepts and approaches of "quality assurance" in higher education (HE) indicates that there is a number of differences between the common understanding of the general approaches of Quality Management developed by quality professionals and used in business, and the "quality assurance" methodology in EHEA which is built on three processes only – evaluation, accreditation and audit. Higher education institutions (HEI) are looking for a higher level of effectiveness across all functions and processes and are often choosing the Total Quality Management approach as a strategy to succeed. Requirements of external international environment are a competitive force asking for new competence of graduates – ability to align with international labour market requirements. Therefore the paper also reflects on issues of the influence of the Bologna process, European Qualifications Framework and European Union (EU) mobility programs on the skills and abilities of HEI graduates in international and national context. The paper includes authors' proposals for clarification of the meaning and content of the concept "quality assurance" in education.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Quality Management, Bologna Process

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 the education ministers of the Bologna process signatory states invited the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) [the European Association (Network, until 2004) for Quality Assurance in Higher Education], "through its members, in cooperation with the EUA (the European University Association), EURASHE (the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) and ESIB (the National Union of Students in Europe, today the European Students' Union, ESU), to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance", and "to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Bologna Follow-Up Group to Ministers in 2005" [8].

In 2005 ENQA published the "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)", which were accepted by the European higher education ministers at the 2005 Bergen meeting. The ESG consist of three parts: internal quality assurance within higher education institutions; external quality assurance of higher education institutions; and external quality assurance of quality assurance agencies. The third part of the ESG was designed to answer the question of what the next step will be once quality assurance agencies meet the ESG. First, meeting the guidelines allowed for full membership of ENQA. As of July 2010, ENQA counts 39 full members, all meeting the ESG. Second, the education ministers' summit argued for need of more transparency in the accreditation process, not limited to just European public quality assurance agencies, therefore an independent register of trustworthy quality assurance agencies EQAR – the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, was established in 2008. The EQAR publishes and manages a register of quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the ESG; it currently has 26 members from 12 European countries.

2. QUALITY TERMINOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

In order to apply the ESG in practice, a common understanding of its terms across different linguistic and national contexts is a prerequisite. The majority of people working with the quality assurance issues in the European higher education institutions and accreditation bodies work in their native languages rather than English, thus creating room for different interpretation of the meaning of terms when translating them from English into local language. In addition, there is no guarantee that even native English speakers will always mean the same things by the same terms. This was clearly demonstrated during the ENQA workshop in Warwick in June 2006 which brought together representatives from a wide range of higher education quality assurance agencies, representing 16 different countries and at least 12 different languages. The discussion focused mostly on the use of English as a 'mediating' language for the European quality assurance community and the impact that this has on the clarity of communication [5].

For example, different understanding and usage of the term 'quality assurance' was discussed, a term imported into higher education from the world of business (and primarily from the sector of manufacturing) as is the related term 'quality control'. In France, for example, 'quality management' has often been used instead of 'quality assurance' in the translation, with the intent of instilling a sense of responsibility in the academics to manage quality for themselves. An interesting point was also raised by a Russian delegate explaining that in their system the word following 'quality' depended on the audience addressed i.e. *quality assurance* for broader society, *quality control* for regulators and *quality enhancement* - for the higher education sector.

Many of the difficulties in communicating ideas, processes and procedures regarding quality assurance arise both from the number of languages used and, interestingly enough, to a great extent from having adopted English as the common international language to ensure a common understanding. In addition, many terms used in quality assurance do not easily translate from English into other languages and vice versa. The use of English as the mediating language can also give rise to

misunderstanding and even a misplaced sense of effective communication [5].

ENQA refused to draft and publish a much needed "Glossary of Terms in Quality Assurance in Education". According to ENQA, there have been numerous requests to develop authoritative and comprehensive glossaries of concepts, words and terms used in quality assurance in Europe, but these have invariably proved to be of limited value because of the difficulty in agreeing on the meanings of the concepts and words themselves in English.

Different authors at different times have given definitions of in quality terminology according to their own vision. Therefore the authors would like to emphasize the significance of 'speaking a common language' if we are to reach the common goal – harmonized and improved outcomes and outputs of higher education in international context.

Quality assurance in quality management

The second paragraph of the ESG executive summary is marked with the following footnote: "The term 'quality assurance' in this report includes processes such as evaluation, accreditation and audit". Let us review, how this statement fits in the theoretical framework of quality theory in general and that of quality in higher education in particular.

The quality movement over its long period of historical development still does not have a well-established basis in management theory. According to B.Bergman & B.Klefsjö [3] and D.Kroslid [13], the development of the quality movement can be considered from two viewpoints: either as a four phase (Quality inspection – Quality control – Quality assurance – Total Quality Management) movement, or as movements of two schools of thought – the deterministic school and the school of continuous improvements. Such world-famous quality 'gurus' as Deming, Juran and Ishikawa are related to the latter one.

According to Juran's approach [12], managing for quality makes extensive use of three managerial processes:
- designing or planning for quality;
- compliance, controlling or assuring quality;
- improving or creating breakthroughs in quality.

These three processes are all interrelated and are known as the *Juran Trilogy*.

If we look at the definitions provided by the international standard ISO 9000:2005 - Quality Management Systems - Fundamentals and Vocabulary, we can find the following terms and explanations:
- *quality management* includes all the activities that organizations use to direct, control and coordinate quality. These activities include formulating a quality policy and setting quality objectives. They also include quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement.
- *quality planning* involves setting quality objectives and then specifying the operational processes and resources that will be needed to achieve those objectives.
- *quality control* is a set of activities intended to ensure that quality requirements are actually being met.
- *quality assurance* is a set of activities intended to establish confidence that quality requirements will be met.
- *quality improvement* refers to anything that enhances an organization's ability to meet quality requirements.

The simplified structure of Quality Management and its components according to the provisions of the standard ISO 9000:2005 is depicted in Fig.1.
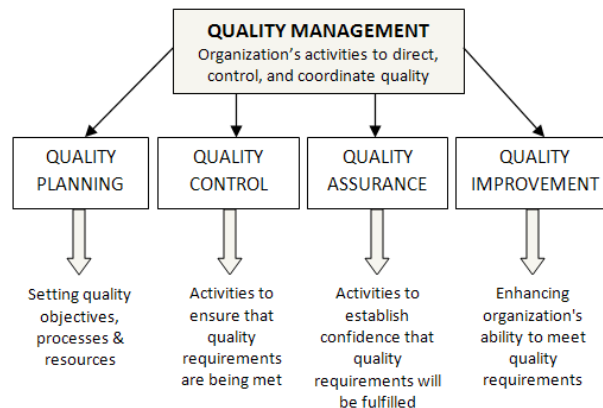

Figure 1. Relationship of Quality Management and its components [according to ISO 9000:2005]

If we compare the above mentioned models of quality management, it is evident that quality assurance as a set of activities providing confidence, that quality requirements will be fulfilled, plays a certain role as in the four phase model of B.Bergman & B.Klefsjö, as it does in the Juran Trilogy and the quality management structure of ISO 9000:2005 standard.

The meaning of quality assurance in higher education

As mentioned before, the term 'quality assurance' in ESG implies evaluation, accreditation and audit processes.

The glossary [9] gives the following explanations of these processes in the context of higher education:
- *evaluation of quality* is the process of examining and passing a judgment on the appropriateness or level of quality.
- *accreditation* is the establishment of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, program or module of study.
- *audit* is a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes.
- *assurance of quality* in higher education is explained as a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to the threshold minimum requirements.

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) explains in its glossary [2] the term 'quality assurance' as follows: "The policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. It includes checking that the quality control (QC) procedures are in place, are being used and are effective. It requires actions internal to the organization, but may also involve actions of external bodies. It includes course design, staff development and the collection and use of feedback from students and employers.

In manufacturing, quality assurance (QA) is a managerial level task. Because the line/managerial distinction is blurred in academia, and because the analogy with production is not perfect, the QC/QA distinction is not sharp. Quality audit (qv) reviews both QC and QA procedures.

Quality assurance is also used as a general term, to refer to the range of possible approaches to addressing the concern for quality in HE."

As noted also by N.Dragulanescu and R.China [7], quality assurance' is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations; it is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances. Similarly, the word 'standards' is employed in a variety of ways across Europe,

ranging from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to more generalized descriptions of good practice. The words also have very different meanings in the local contexts of national higher education systems [8].

It is the authors' belief that without considering the overall context of quality management these three processes – evaluation, accreditation and audit – alone cannot ensure quality of education. There is just one question to answer before we can discuss the quality of education – what do we understand by each of the terms and is our understanding uniform?

Historically, accreditation has been the most visible element of reflective review within higher education. Through a process that includes self-assessment and peer review, the professional, special focus and accrediting agencies, accreditation provides a regularized, structured mechanism for quality assurance and improvement for higher education community [15]. Following the logic of ESG terminology and its explanation in the glossary [9], accreditation essentially is a process that comprises audit and evaluation – in order to establish the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, program or module of study (*accreditation*) it is necessary to check whether the procedures are in place to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes (*audit*) and to examine and pass a judgment on conformity of the level of quality to established requirements (*evaluation*).

The term 'quality assurance' is in fact broader in ESG than its authors' footnote definition stating that it "includes evaluation, accreditation and audit". Part 1 of the ESG, devoted to internal quality assurance within HEI confirms this: "*Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance:* Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders [8]." This requirement clearly indicates that there should be not only quality assurance, but also quality planning, quality control and quality improvement components in HEI; or – speaking in terms of ISO 9000 standards, HEI should have a *quality management system.*

Quality management systems for higher education

Quality management – planning, control, assurance and improvement – systems started to emerge in European higher education at the same time as Bologna process begun, and were gradually developing in both the regulatory and voluntary spheres of HE, taking into account the differences in study goals, content and activities of academic and professional studies.

In the *regulatory sphere* of higher education – fields such as medical, maritime, construction, pharmacology, food, etc., the most appropriate way of conformity assessment of the study programmes or modules, according to the authors, would be either a quality management system designed on the basis of standard ISO 9001 requirements or a conformity assessment based on internal (the first party's) audit statement, external (the third party's) audit report developed according to the requirements of ISO 19011, and possibly the issuance of the self-assessment and/or peer assessment reports.

In the *voluntary sphere* the higher education institutions can choose one of two options:

- to develop a quality management system based on ISO 9004, IWA-2 (guidelines on application of ISO 9001 to higher education institutions) which envisages preparation of conformity certification documents: internal conformity self-assessment report and external peer assessment report in accordance with the requirements of standard ISO 17040, or
- to create a quality excellence system according to quality award models; this option envisages preparation of quality award application and assessment of conformity through the recognition of excellence by a professional institution.

The excellence model in HE extends the current business excellence models (EFQM Excellence model in Europe, Baldrige model in the USA) to address the specific needs of higher education and it does so, taking into account the standards and terminology used in accreditation. The result is a model that benefits from the strengths of both the excellence awards and accrediting frameworks [15].

Combining all these factors affecting quality in HE, a dynamic model of a national higher education Quality Management System (QMS) in European context is proposed (Fig.2).
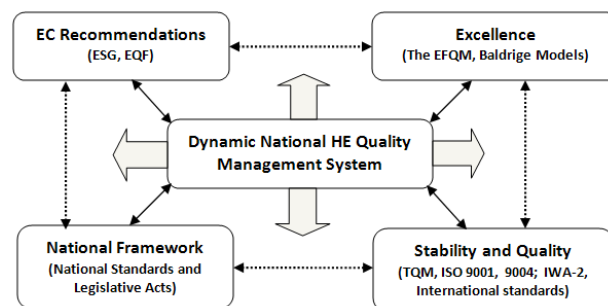

Figure 2. Main factors that can influence the evolution of National HE QM system in the context of current approaches

This model integrates the principles of Quality Management [11] and process approach; appropriate criteria of Excellence models; requirements of international standards (ISO 9001, 9004, IWA-2); ESG recommendations; descriptors of knowledge, skills and competence for learning outcomes of the levels of qualifications defined by the European Qualifications Framework; as well as national legislative acts related to accreditation and quality of higher education institutions.

3. REQUIREMENTS OF EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT TO EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION ASPECTS IN LATVIA

As demonstrated earlier, quality in higher education is affected by several factors and development of quality management system should take into consideration all of these. These factors, however, are not limited to regulatory frameworks and internal aspects of higher education institutions; the quality of higher education nowadays is affected greatly by the external factors both on the national and international level. The discussion of quality in higher education would be incomplete without touching on these aspects.

The environment in which the HEI operate is becoming more open to the increasing international influences and competition, thus creating more and more opportunities for partnerships across Europe and the rest of the world. This, in turn, leads to increasing opportunities for international studies. Rapidly changing environment increases the choice available to

students. Thus, HEI must embrace the internationalization of education and exploit it for the development and improvement of knowledge and well-being of each individual. The strategy of internationalization requires diversifying the study programmes available, attracting guest speakers and students, and involving students and academic staff in various international collaboration projects.

Internationalization strategy includes specific tasks and activities to attract students and foster international collaboration so as to attain the strategic goals of HEI and the common education space of Latvia and foster coherent actions of the parties involved. In order to attain the goals set for Latvia's education system and offer innovative education, each HEI should develop its own strategy and programme for international development (internationalization), including the following issues:
- develop study programmes, professional education and internationalization programmes;
- improve foreign students' experiences in Latvia and local students' international experiences and facilitate active exchange of students;
- develop and maintain international partnerships, create associations;
- develop skills of personnel and motivate employees to participate in internationalization.

Mutual agreements and contacts of HEI as well as activities in international recognition of education and academic achievements on EU level are gaining in importance. One of the main achievements over the last decade is development of bilateral and multilateral study programmes. EU-organized mobility programmes, such as *Erasmus* and *Socrates,* are also based on institutional recognition agreements. Since this type of academic mobility is becoming more and more widespread, we can predict growing need for agreements between HEI, especially in regard to mutual recognition of study periods. This factor will be substantial in recognition for academic purposes, yet it will play a role in recognizing the professional competencies as well.

It must be noted, however, that labour market as one of the driving forces of the content and quality of education attributes high value to international recognition of qualifications and education. Since labour market uses and applies the learning outcomes in real life, quality of education cannot exist separately from it. This is especially important with the free movement of labour in the open European space.

Thus, in order to embrace the internationalization and the demands of the external environment, and to develop a common understanding of the quality in higher education, such institutional agreements and best practice must be established within the existing common European system, e.g., Lisbon strategy or Bologna declaration.

The central role in Bologna process is dedicated to education mobility and recognition of qualifications. It seems fair to claim that mutual recognition of the qualification gained in other countries should be perceived as a bridge that allows people to transfer from one education system to another in the lifelong learning process without losing their „property" (i.e., the qualifications gained elsewhere) [14]. Bologna declaration speaks of the convergence of education systems, yet at the same time it does not insist on harmonization of all national systems, nor does it claim the implementation of the suggested system will solve all the related problems. The Bologna declaration envisages a common system as a framework that would facilitate mutual cross-border recognition of higher education while still allowing for differences within this common framework. The importance of retaining individual differences

is also emphasized by management thought leaders, including USA scientist and practical management and leadership consultant I.Adidzes, who has said – „Management education of leaders of different countries should not be copied from a culture totally unlike their own. The education has to fit the needs of the country in which these leaders operate [1]."

The importance labour market puts on the recognition of higher education further emphasizes need for new tools for assessment and recognition of individual qualifications in the common European labour market.

EU member states have developed a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which describes qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competencies and profile. EHEA, in turn, has developed an overarching framework of qualifications, comprising of three cycles (including the possibility of intermediate qualifications – according to national systems) and containing generic descriptions for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.

EHEA ensures coherence between the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA and the broader Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning [17], encompassing general education as well as vocational education and training.

Development of national and European frameworks for qualifications is an opportunity to further embed lifelong learning in higher education system. This is achieved through recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal learning providing access to, and acting as elements in, higher education programmes.

The decision of the European Parliament and the European Council on implementation of a common Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (*Europass*) [6] is binding for Latvia as well. *Europass* system includes the following currently independent elements:
- Europass Curriculum Vitae;
- Europass Diploma Supplement – a diploma supplement for higher education;
- Europass Certificate Supplement. This document has not yet been introduced in Latvia;
- Europass Language Passport;
- Europass Mobility.

Introducing *Europass* in Latvia has created certain options for the providers of the education service offering and the labour market – including the international or at least the European one – to try speaking a common language. Success in making such documents comprehensible to the employer, especially if across the European space, and implementing those in real life would be a significant move towards sustainable long-term development of education system. However, as much as we would hate to admit, the educators and employers still speak different languages; they have different goals and expectations. Thus, there is still ample room for improvement.

Europass Certificate Supplement will also be introduced in Latvia. It does not replace the original documents of education and qualification, nor does it guarantee automatic recognition of the document. However, this Certificate Supplement creates a logical link to the profession standard and would thus make the professional qualifications awarded to the graduates of vocational secondary education and higher education in Latvia clear and easy to understand in the rest of Europe and possibly, across the world. It is meant to give a concise description of the major knowledge, skills and competencies gained during the study process. Thus, the development of the Certificate

supplement in Latvia must be closely related to the profession standard.

Evaluating the interaction between the education system and its services and the labour market, it is important to take into consideration the levels of education and the ability to change qualifications easily when transferring between two qualifications with minor differences in the competences required. The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning should serve as the basis for the purpose and professions (positions) should be classified according to the minimum essential levels of education required for performing the job, as well as by their main fields of activity, based on the main and sound long-term competences.

According to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), several definitions used in the education system require additional explanations [18]:

- *qualification* means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards;
- *national qualifications system* means all aspects of a Member State's activity related to the recognition of learning and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. This includes the development and implementation of institutional arrangements and processes relating to quality assurance, assessment and the award of qualifications. A national qualifications system may be composed of several subsystems and may include a national qualifications framework;
- *national qualifications framework* means an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society;
- *learning outcomes* means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

Learning outcomes are one of the most important elements in the Bologna process. This lets us conclude that the documents certifying qualifications should be devised such as to be understood across borders.

The authors believe that it is possible to create a model of national qualifications framework in Latvia that is easily understood in the common education space of Europe. The scientists of University of Latvia and the researchers involved in the EU Structural Funds National Programme "Labour Market Research" have reached a similar conclusion [16].

The EQF has eight levels, four of which correspond to the European higher education qualifications framework – three of these are the cycles developed in the Bologna process (bachelor's, master's and doctor's) and the fourth – the short cycle programmes within the first cycle of Bologna process.

It becomes evident that the existing structure of professional qualification levels should be changed in Latvia. It seems only rational to reorganize it according to EQF levels; this way the structure of higher education would be built of three separate and different professional qualification levels, namely: level 6 for the award of Bachelor's degree, level 7 – for Master's degree and level 8 – for Doctor's degree. At the moment, however, the system is rather confusing since level 5 professional qualification is awarded both after graduating from Bachelor's as well as Master's professional study programmes.

In addition, the higher education system in Latvia is split into academic and professional education with two award systems – that of degrees and of qualifications. Such a complicated system creates additional confusion both in the general public, and also in the local and international labour market.

European qualifications framework covers the whole system of education and helps develop a common approach to lifelong learning. In 2005 a project on higher education qualifications framework in Latvia, proposing also the inclusion of the profession standards in the overall system, was presented. However, the implementation of this crucial project has not yet been completed.

The Action plan of the higher education and science reform in 2010-2012 envisages defining the learning outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills for every study programme and course, according to the unified qualifications framework (up to 2012), and assess the quality of study programmes, resource availability and sustainable international evaluation, applying adequately developed methodology (up to 2011). Therefore issues tackled in this article are important in Latvia today with regards to the higher education reform, which in authors' viewpoint, is a highly positive trend.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Even though significant progress has been made since the 2005 Bergen meeting of European education ministers, and our focus is now on reaching Europe 2020 goals, we are far from enjoying the results obtained in quality management in higher education. There is still no clear and unequivocal understanding of the terms like 'quality assurance', 'quality management' and similar amongst staff of HEI and civil servants. As mentioned in [10], it seems that quality has become "a play for ministries and agencies, quality on the shop-floor level and student learning experience certainly have not gained the centre stage of attention in this development".

The consequent lack of a shared linguistic understanding is one of the major stumbling blocks for the full development of the European Higher Education Area, at least in terms of shared values for quality assurance. If we are to achieve a common European, national and institutional level understanding on development of quality management system in higher education, agreement on the uniform use and understanding of the terminology is the most crucial first step.

The authors suggest adopting the most widespread four-step approach to QMS of business world for the HE environment as well. Additionally, understanding that *quality assurance*, which includes accreditation of study programmes or HEI, cannot be attained without introducing functional remaining components of QMS is of crucial importance.

QMS in HEI must be built as an integrated and dynamic system, considering all the factors influencing such a system – an appropriate internal quality management system model of HEI, requirements and recommendations of the national and European legislation, requirements of accreditation bodies and movement towards sustainable excellence in attaining the goals of education.

External environment influences, including globalization and labour market demands, put additional pressure on the HEI and quality management systems in HE. Increasing internationalization and student mobility forces HEI to not just reconsider and constantly improve their offering but also expand their international presence through partnerships with other HEI and hence, recognize the education obtained elsewhere. Labour market as the consumer of the products of

education system, in turn, demands a certain level and quality of learning outcomes as well as recognition of the qualifications across borders, which is important not just in the common European space, but across the globe. This brings quality, conformity with labour market as well as need for common or comparable standards and international recognition of education to the forefront of education systems.

Institutional agreements should be regarded as one of the ways of implementing a common process of diploma recognition. However, since these are bilateral or multilateral agreements between specific institutions, authors deem necessary a higher level overarching common process of diploma recognition across European space as a step towards convergence of education systems. Authors conclude that *Europass* system and also the EQF should be at the core of this.

It also seems that the European regions characterized by active and intense collaboration among universities, ministries, public organizations and entrepreneurs of different countries will be the first ones to attain the goals of Bologna declaration [4].

The authors come to conclusion that European Qualifications Framework allows comparing national standards and alleviates diploma recognition, mobility and cooperation in professional and higher education. Therefore, the methodology of development of profession standards, evaluation system and evaluation methodology as well as definition of competencies and labour market requirements should all be designed according to the common understanding of Bologna process requirements and conform with learning outcomes and forms of education. Following the latest European trends, the description of skills and knowledge as well as model of competencies could be devised around the eight qualification levels defined in EQF and correspond to the professional qualification levels assigned to lifelong learning. Thus, one of the primary tasks to attain the goals of Bologna process in implementing a common qualifications framework and competence transparency model in Latvia is harmonizing levels of national qualifications framework with the descriptors and levels of EQF.

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