

LATVIA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

In recent years Latvia has made remarkable progress in reducing its early school leaving rate, raising its tertiary education attainment rate, and improving basic skills attainment. It is now outperforming the EU average for all these indicators. Nevertheless, issues remain to be addressed to improve the quality of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (European Commission, 2015).

Latvia has introduced an eight-level classification framework to increase the VET's attractiveness and foster the comparability of national qualifications. Recognised education programmes from the formal education system (primary, secondary and higher education) are linked to a Latvian qualifications framework (LQF) level and a European qualifications framework (EQF) level. Master of crafts, journeyman and qualifications acquired in non-formal and informal learning will be assigned levels and referenced to the EQF as a second phase of national qualifications framework (NQF) is introduced. The policy document *Education development guidelines for 2014-20* (2014) ⁽¹⁾ set out the continued development of a national qualifications framework including the vocational education sector.

Current developments build on reforms initiated in the 1990s, particularly through the Vocational Education Law which set up a five-level structure of professional qualifications in 1999. This law was amended (April 2015) ⁽²⁾ to establish (by 1 January 2017) an eight-level LQF for vocational education diplomas and certificates to run alongside professional qualification levels. The Education Law (1998) was also amended in June 2015 (in effect from July 2015) ⁽³⁾ to include the definition of the LQF and its general characteristics; the law includes a new article which briefly characterises each level of the Latvian qualifications framework. Cabinet regulations have to be amended to define the

⁽¹⁾ <http://m.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=266406>

⁽²⁾ VET Law (1999) with amendments of April 2015 that include reference of five VET qualification levels to LQF: <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=20244>

⁽³⁾ Education Law (1998) with amendments about LQF and learning outcomes in June 2015: <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=50759>

LQF in more detail by end of 2016 ⁽⁴⁾, including changes to professional qualification levels to conform to amendments to the Vocational Education Law: adoption of these regulations will open discussions for extending the LQF (such as master of crafts and journeyman qualifications and qualifications acquired in non-formal and informal learning.)

Policy objectives

The framework, based on learning outcomes, is an important tool for describing the education system for both international and national stakeholders, and for ensuring greater lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals according to their needs. Adult participation in lifelong learning in Latvia was 5.5% in 2014, below the European Union average of 10.7% (European Commission, 2015).

The development of a comprehensive LQF aims to:

- (a) increase transparency and consistency of qualifications;
- (b) develop a comprehensive NQF in line with the needs of lifelong learning;
- (c) strengthen the link between the labour market and education;
- (d) strengthen cooperation of those involved in the design and award of qualifications;
- (e) increase public understanding of national qualifications and help build links to the EQF (AIC et al., 2012).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

There is growing emphasis on learning outcomes at policy and practice level; they are widely used in higher education and for occupational standards. The level descriptors of the eight-level framework are based on learning outcomes and are defined as knowledge (knowledge and comprehension), skills (ability to apply knowledge, communication and general skills) and competence (analysis, synthesis and assessment).

Subject-based outcomes in general education have been defined in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The ESF operational programme project ⁽⁵⁾,

⁽⁴⁾ According to Transitional regulation (item 40) of the Education Law.

⁽⁵⁾ Regulation No 670 of Cabinet of Ministers 24 November 2015, 'The implementation regulation of the operational programme 'Growth and employment', specific target 8.3.1. 'To develop competences based general education content', 8.3.1.1. measure 'Approbation and implementation of competences based general education content' (Latvian: *Darbības programmas "Izaugsme un nodarbinātība" 8.3.1. specifiskā*

introduced in 2016, began the development of a competence-based general education programme. National VET legislation does not refer to learning outcomes in its text, but other general education documents use the terms *mācīšanās rezultāti* or *mācību rezultāti* (both meaning 'learning results'), which are the closest direct translation of learning outcomes in Latvian. The VET sector is changing to a learning-outcomes-based system as VET institutions must use occupational standards when developing new vocational education programmes or altering VET programmes which have already been licensed (Cedefop, 2016). New cabinet regulations state that professional standards should be developed to conform to Latvian qualifications framework levels ⁽⁶⁾. By updating and improving the quality of occupational standards, and by a greater focus on learning outcomes, VET programmes are expected to improve (MoES, 2013b, p. 13). The content of vocational education programmes is defined by the State vocational education standards that are specified by the relevant cabinet regulations. These standards outline the strategic aims of education programmes, the mandatory content of education, and the basic principles and procedure for evaluating that content.

The development of modular vocational education is a policy priority as the Cabinet of Ministers approved regulations⁽⁷⁾ outlining measures such as the development of occupational standards, vocational education content, teaching/learning aids and assessment methods using the learning outcomes approach and EU tools ⁽⁸⁾. The framework for higher education is founded on

atbalsta mērķa "Attīstīt kompetenču pieejā balstītu vispārējās izglītības saturu" 8.3.1.1. pasākuma "Kompetenču pieejā balstīta vispārējās izglītības satura aprobācija un ieviešana" īstenošanas noteikumi <http://likumi.lv/ta/id/278201-darbibas-programmas-izaugsme-un-nodarbinatiba-8-3-1-specifiska-atbalsta-merka-attistit-kompetencu-pieeja-balstitu-visparejas>

- ⁽⁶⁾ Regulation No 633 of Cabinet of Ministers 27 September 2016, Procedure of elaborating occupational standards, requirements of professional qualification (if there is no approved occupational standard) and sectoral qualification structure, (Latvian: *Profesijas standarta, profesionālās kvalifikācijas prasību (ja profesijai neapstiprina profesijas standartu) un nozares kvalifikāciju struktūras izstrādes kārtība*) <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=285032>
- ⁽⁷⁾ Regulations on the implementation of operational programme's growth and employment specific objective No 8.5.2 'To ensure the compliance of vocational education to the European qualifications framework' (in force since May 2016).
- ⁽⁸⁾ The project is implemented by the National Centre for Education in cooperation with Employers' Confederation of Latvia, Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia and Cooperation Council of Farmers' Organisations. During the project it is planned to elaborate: 160 occupational standards/professional qualification requirements, 184 modular vocational education programmes, 80 teaching/learning aids, content of 210 professional qualification exams.

three Bologna cycles, based on learning outcomes. The Law on institutions of higher education includes the term ‘learning outcomes’, expressed as ‘study results’, and provides a brief definition of the term. The national standards for academic and professional higher education set acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences in line with EQF levels ⁽⁹⁾. Other documents relating to the HE sector, including the *Latvian higher education and high school development national conception 2013-20* (Higher Education Council, 2013), focus on learning outcomes. The accreditation regulation (July 2015) for HE institutions and colleges states that study programmes have to be developed consistent with defined aims and planned ‘learning outcomes’ (*mācīšanās rezultātiem*) ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The latest strategic document from the Ministry of Education and Science – the *Guidelines for education development 2014-20* (Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, 2013a) – provides continuity of policy planning from the guidelines of the previous planning period 2007-13 (Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, 2006) with a strong focus on learning outcomes-based principles in all educational subsystems.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education and Science has the leading role in developing and introducing the LQF. However, the ministry delegated responsibility for coordinating the referencing of the LQF to the EQF to the Academic Information Centre (AIC).

The Academic Information Centre was designated the national coordination point (NCP) and played a key role coordinating the referencing process, preparing and updating the referencing report, and communicating and disseminating information to all stakeholders. During the first stage of the referencing process (2009-11) the implementation of the LQF was supervised by

⁽⁹⁾ Regulation No 240 of Cabinet of Ministers 13 May 2014, *Regulation on State standard of academic education*, (Latvian: *Noteikumi par valsts akadēmiskās izglītības standartu*) <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=266187>

Regulation No 512 of Cabinet of Ministers 26 August 2014, *Regulation on State standard of second level professional higher education*, (Latvian: *Noteikumi par otrā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības valsts standartu*).
<http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=268761>

⁽¹⁰⁾ Annex 3 – Accreditation criteria (criterion 5.2.) of the accreditation rules (2015). Issued in accordance with the Law on higher education institutions the first paragraph of Article 9. <http://likumi.lv/ta/id/275560-augstskolu-koledzu-un-studiju-virzientu-akreditācijas-noteikumi>

the referencing working group, which included the main education stakeholders: ministerial representatives, national agencies, employer organisations, trade unions, student organisations, and education quality assurance agencies. The working group evaluated materials and level descriptors prepared by experts and recommended the agreed level descriptors to the Cabinet of Ministers (approved in October 2010). The group was also involved in the consultation on the self-assessment report produced in 2011-12. It remains to be seen how broad the support of different stakeholders for the outcomes of the referencing process will be in the future.

The Latvian NCP also intends to carry out a study in the second half of 2016 about the progress made in developing the LQF since 2010. Several events will be held to inform all parties involved with the LQF and the EQF.

The LQF is compatible with the four levels of the QF-EHEA. Most HEI programmes, and individual courses, will have their learning outcomes defined as part of this changeover. Quality assurance is also specified at different levels in the education system: at policy, programme and institutional level. The Education Law states that all educational institutions, except those which implement only interest-related education programmes, have to be accredited. Higher education institutions receive accreditation if at least half of the study directions they offer are accredited. Study directions are accredited either for two or six years; the application has to be submitted not later than 18 months after opening a study programme corresponding to the respective study direction. The Higher Education Council (*Augstākās izglītības padome*) is responsible for quality assurance in HE institutions, but since 2015 they have been licensed and accredited by the Academic Information Centre in line with amendments to the Law on higher education institutions ⁽¹¹⁾ and Cabinet regulations. The Latvian external higher education quality assessing agency ⁽¹²⁾ is an affiliate member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and has started the process for inclusion on the European quality assurance register for higher education (EQAR). Discussions are continuing about whether Latvian higher education institutions could choose to be accredited by an EQAR agency.

⁽¹¹⁾ Parliament of the Republic of Latvia (2015). Law on higher education (*Augstskolu likums*). LR Saeima 2.11.1995. <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=37967> [accessed 5.9.2016].

⁽¹²⁾ The Academic Information Centre (Latvian ENIC/NARIC, Latvian national coordination point for EQF, National Europass Centre and ReferNet) has also taken over the function of external higher education quality assurance in Latvia.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹³⁾

LQF developments are closely related to opening up the qualification system to competences acquired outside the formal system. The system for validating professional competences obtained outside formal education is new, only becoming a legal requirement in February 2011. Before January 2014 this process was part of the revised national lifelong learning strategy – *Guidelines for lifelong learning 2007-13* – adopted on 23 February 2007. This policy determined all policy developments until 2014. It was replaced by *Education development guidelines for 2014-20*, valid from May 2014, which defined the main terms such as formal, non-formal and informal education and emphasised validation as one of the key constituents of lifelong learning.

Since 2011, when a national legislative framework was introduced to validate non-formal and informal learning in general education and vocational and higher education, more than 2800 people have acquired professional qualifications through professional competences assessment (European Commission et al., forthcoming). The State Education Quality Service is the national institution which coordinates good practice and evaluates institutions before awarding them validation status ⁽¹⁴⁾. This pilot scheme led to methodological recommendations for educational institutions and examination centres: *Assessment of professional competences acquired through non-formal and informal education system* ⁽¹⁵⁾, published in 2015. The recommendations aid common understanding of the quality assurance principles for validating professional competences among stakeholders and to provide a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

Regulations of the recognition of learning outcomes achieved in previous education or professional experience relating to higher education was issued in 2012, in accordance with the Law on higher education institutions ⁽¹⁶⁾. These

⁽¹³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., forthcoming.

⁽¹⁴⁾ The State Education Quality Service is a project member in the ESF project *Development of sectoral qualifications system and increasing the efficiency and quality of vocational education* (2010-14).

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Assessment of professional competences acquired through non-formal and informal education system*, 2015 (Latvian: *Ārpus formālās izglītības sistēmas apgūtās profesionālās kompetences novērtēšana*):
http://www.ikvd.gov.lv/assets/files/pub/metodiskie/09_IKVD_RPUS_FORM_IZGL.pdf

⁽¹⁶⁾ Regulations No 36 of Cabinet of Ministers January 10, 2012. *Regulations of the recognition of learning outcomes achieved in previous education or professional*

regulations determine the procedures and criteria for the assessment and recognition of learning outcomes (for higher education) obtained through prior education or professional experience.

Higher education institutions in Latvia started using the ECTS system (together with Latvian credit points with a ratio of 1 LCP=1.5 ECTS) from the early 2000s as part of the wider introduction of the Bologna process.

NQF implementation

The framework has been formally adopted and is being implemented in two phases:

- (a) in the first (2009-11), formal Latvian education qualifications were included in the LQF and linked to the EQF;
- (b) in the second (2013-15), the established framework will be reviewed and complemented based on the new Vocational Education Law, Higher Education Law and the results of several existing ESF projects. For example, the ESF project *Development of sectoral qualifications system and increasing efficiency and quality of vocational education* (2010-15), has explored professions in 14 sectors by identifying relevant knowledge, skills and competences and placed them on the relevant LQF/EQF levels.

In 2016, the register of Latvian qualifications (¹⁷), an information system that contains data on qualifications referenced to the European and Latvian qualifications framework, has also been established, allowing the framework to become operational.

A total of 12 sectoral expert councils were established for the main economic sectors. They include representatives of sectoral employers' organisations, trade unions, the Ministry of Education and Science and other relevant ministries. Their main tasks are developing occupational standards; defining content of vocational qualifications and vocational examination requirements, enrolment of students in vocational education programmes, etc. The results of the ESF project, carried out in cooperation with employers, employees and educators, contributed to the development of 14 sectoral qualifications structures (core occupations, linked

experience (Latvian: iepriekšējā izglītībā vai profesionālajā pieredzē sasniegtu studiju rezultātu atzīšanas noteikumi).

<http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=242653> [accessed 5.9.2016].

(¹⁷) Latvian qualifications database: <https://www.latvijaskvalifikacijas.lv/en/>

occupations and specialisations have been defined) and the design of 14 sectoral occupational maps.

There is a general need to communicate the achievements of the LQF and its link to the EQF to a wider audience and strengthen ownership of, and commitment to, the framework. The key education institution – the Academic Information Centre – has been active in organising seminars and discussions on issues related to learning outcomes at different education and qualification levels and complementing the LQF with qualifications awarded outside formal education.

Regarding the sustainability of the framework, it has been compulsory since 2013 to indicate the LQF/EQF level in diploma supplements (higher education); the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No 202 ⁽¹⁸⁾ on the *Procedure of issuing State-recognised higher education certifying documents*, has updated the content of the diploma supplements to correspond to the results of referencing the education system to the EQF, by indicating either the Latvian qualification level, or the European/Latvian qualifications framework level or the EHEA qualifications framework level. From 1 January 2017, the documents certifying vocational education and vocational qualification (certificates) should also indicate the relevant LQF level. General education has not yet been discussed ⁽¹⁹⁾. Reference to LQF/EQF levels in all education documents will take place after amendments to laws and regulations during the second phase of the referencing process.

No major research has been conducted on the recruitment channels in Latvia or on the use of the NQF by the labour market. The basic communication channels are the monitoring organisations such as MoES, State Education Quality Service, organisations involved internationally in concomitant activities such as the Academic Information Centre (Latvian Enic/Naric), Europass, institutions carrying out validation procedures and institutions directly working with the main target groups like State Employment Service.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Regulation No 202 of the Cabinet of Ministers 16 April 2013, 'Procedure of issuing State-recognised higher education certifying documents', (Latvian: *Kārtība, kādā izsniedz valsts atzītus augstāko izglītību apliecinošus dokumentus*): <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=256157/>

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

Referencing to the EQF

Latvia referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area in October 2011. The current LQF and the referencing report include qualifications awarded within the formal education system. The NCP intends to conduct a study in the second half of 2016 on the progress achieved in setting up the LQF since 2010, the results of which will be used to produce a self-assessment report in 2017-18.

Important lessons and future plans

Setting up the national qualifications framework in line with the European qualifications framework and placing this issue on policy agenda has had an impact on the education system. The higher education sector is at the forefront of the changes: learning outcomes are defined in the Law of higher education institutions and research shows that most universities have completed the task of describing learning outcomes for all individual courses and programmes.

Such a process of change usually requires substantial time-frames but the transition has been rushed over the last six years. Consequently, further work will be needed to ensure that the LQF will continue to develop and improve, and to monitor the everyday use of learning outcomes at all levels of education.

The second important issue is to embed the LQF in qualifications, curricula, assessment and teaching practice, the success of which will be heavily dependent on the involvement and contribution of practitioners. They need to understand the concepts and have the tools to engage actively. The experience of setting up the first stage of the new framework shows that understanding concepts and promoting cultural change takes time. In particular, feedback loop processes need to be in place to ensure that the focus on learning outcomes and the assignment of qualifications to levels is systematically reviewed and renewed. Capacity-building on the ground seems to be the key. The views and expectations of different stakeholders need to feed back into policy development. Further work is necessary to implement policies, support teachers and include learning outcomes as part of their continuous professional development.

Further sources of information

Information on the referencing process and the self-assessment report is available on the Latvian NCP website (Academic Information Centre):

<http://nki-latvija.lv> or <http://nqf-latvia.lv> [accessed 5.9.2016].

Latvian national qualifications framework (LQF)

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral diploma (<i>doktora diploms</i>)	8
7	Master diploma (<i>maģistra diploms</i>) Professional master diploma (<i>profesionālā maģistra diploms</i>) Diploma of professional higher education, diploma of higher education (<i>profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms</i>), diploma of higher professional qualification (<i>augstākās profesionālās kvalifikācijas diploms</i>), second level professional higher education, total length of full-time studies – at least five years	7
6	Bachelor diploma (<i>bakalaura diploms</i>) Professional bachelor diploma (<i>profesionālā bakalaura diploms</i>) Diploma of professional higher education (<i>profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms</i>), diploma of higher professional qualification (<i>augstākās profesionālās kvalifikācijas diploms</i>), second level professional higher education, length of full-time studies – at least four years	6
5	Diploma of first level professional higher education (<i>pirmā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms</i>), first level professional higher (college) education, length of full-time studies – two to three years	5
4	Certificate of general secondary education (<i>atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību</i>) Diploma of vocational secondary education (<i>diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību</i>)	4
3	Certificate of vocational education (<i>atestāts par arodizglītību</i>)	3
2	Certificate of general basic education (<i>apliecība par vispārējo pamatizglītību</i>) (*) Certificate of vocational basic education (<i>apliecība par profesionālo pamatizglītību</i>)	2

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
1	Certificate of general basic education <i>(apliecība par vispārējo pamatizglītību)</i> (for students in special educational programmes for students with mental development disorders) (*) Certificate of general basic education <i>(apliecība par vispārējo pamatizglītību)</i> (for students in special educational programmes for students with severe mental development disorders or several severe development disorders)	1

(*) To be included in legislation.

Source: Academic Information Centre and Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia.

List of abbreviations

AIC	academic information centre
ENQA	European association for quality assurance in higher education
ESF	European Social Fund
EQAR	European quality assurance register in higher education
EQF	European qualifications framework
LQF	Latvian qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
VET	vocational education and training

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