

NQF state of play

 **Latvia 2018**

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Introduction and context

In recent years Latvia has made remarkable progress in reducing its early school leaving rate, increasing participation in early childhood education and care, raising the tertiary education attainment rate, and improving basic skills attainment. It is now outperforming the EU averages for all these indicators. The employment rate of recent graduates has fallen and is now below EU level (78.0% compared to the EU average of 80.2% in 2017). Participation in adult learning (7.5%) continues to be a challenge despite measures to boost it.

The Latvian education system is making progress on quality standards. The new competence-based curriculum in upper secondary is being implemented gradually and may improve learning outcomes. The aim is to complete curriculum modernisation by 2022. Access to quality education, however, is not fully equitable, with students in larger secondary schools and gymnasiums having much better access than students in the small schools more common in rural areas. Government pressure on municipalities to streamline the school network continues and may eventually lead to a network with fewer, but larger upper secondary schools that are better able to provide quality education. Shrinking student population and an ageing teaching corps point in the same direction. A new amendment to Latvia's Education Law, planned to come into force in 2020, gives the government the right to set the minimum number of students per class in upper secondary schools.

Latvia is preparing a gradual switch to Latvian as the sole language of instruction by 2021. Amendments in the Education Law passed in March 2018 abolish the possibility to have up to 40% of instruction in the minority language in minority secondary schools. There is concern for the 25% of students whose Latvian language proficiency in writing is not sufficient and that there could be an increase in dropout rates for Russian speakers.

The government is promoting STEM ([1]) subjects in higher education by increasing the proportion of publicly financed study places in order to achieve a better balance in the supply of skills. Latvia has one of the lowest shares of tertiary educated adults with a degree in STEM fields (European Commission, 2018).

The Latvian qualifications framework (LQF) was adopted in 2010 ([2]) and linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the

qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in 2011; the referencing report was published in 2012. Qualifications from formal education (VET, higher education and general education), were included in the first phase of implementation (2009-11). The second phase (2013-15) saw revision of a number of laws (Vocational education Law, Law on higher education institutions and Education Law) and was supported by several large ESF projects (focusing on aspects such as development of sectoral qualifications frameworks and evaluation of programmes). Government regulations ([\[3\]](#)) were amended accordingly to adapt the LQF to the current requirements of labour and education sectors. Journeyman and master craftsman qualifications are included in the sectoral qualifications frameworks that are referenced to the LQF, but these qualifications are not reflected in the LQF.

Policy objectives

The main objective of the Latvian qualifications framework was setting a united scale of levels for all qualifications, comparable with the qualifications of other countries via the EQF. The LQF expands individuals' opportunities for mobility between countries and between various institutions and education levels. It complements a parallel process: recognition of knowledge and skills acquired outside formal education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

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.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

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) ([4]).

Subject-based outcomes in general education have been defined in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The ESF operational programme project ([5]), introduced in 2016, began the development of a competence-based general education programme. A learning-outcomes-based approach has been implemented in VET since 2007. VET institutions must use learning-outcomes-oriented occupational standards (stipulating knowledge, skills and competences necessary to performing relevant professional activity) when developing new vocational education programmes or altering programmes which have already been accredited (Cedefop, 2016). By updating and improving the quality of occupational standards ([6]), and by a greater focus on learning outcomes, vocational education programmes were improved (MoES, 2013b, p. 13). In addition to occupational standards mentioned above, or requirements for professional qualifications and descriptors of the sectoral qualifications frameworks, the content of vocational education programmes is defined by the State vocational education standards 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. The Cabinet of Ministers approved regulations ([7]) outlining measures for developing occupational standards, vocational education content, teaching/learning aids and assessment methods using the learning outcomes approach and EU tools ([8]).

The qualifications framework for higher education is founded on three Bologna cycles, based on learning outcomes. The Law on Higher Education Institutions includes the term 'learning outcomes', and provides a brief definition of the term. The State 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 higher education sector, including *The National concept of the development of higher education and higher education institutions in Latvia 2013-20* (Council of Higher Education, 2013), focus on learning outcomes. The latest strategic document, *Guidelines for education development for 2014-20* (Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, 2013a), provides continuity of policy planning from the guidelines of the previous planning period 2007-13 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia, 2006) with a strong focus on learning outcomes-based principles in all education subsystems.

In 2013, the Latvian NCP also carried out the study *Introduction of learning outcomes in the Latvian education institutions* to assess how learning outcomes are introduced and used in education institutions in Latvia. The study revealed that work in the implementation and application of learning outcomes differs significantly by level and type of education; differences are seen also in education institutions of the same level and type. The differences could be explained by the fragmented education system, lack of common understanding, as well as the huge workload of education institution personnel and their lack of time. However, the majority of respondents saw the positive aspects of learning outcomes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education and Science has the leading role in developing and introducing the LQF. The Academic Information Centre was designated the EQF national coordination point (NCP) and played a key role in coordinating the referencing process, preparing and updating the referencing report, and communicating and disseminating information to all stakeholders. Since February 2008 it has the following tasks:

- a. to reference existing national qualifications levels to the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework;
- b. to ensure that transparent methodology is used to reference the national qualifications levels to the EQF;
- c. to provide access to information and guidance to stakeholders on how national qualifications relate to the EQF through the national qualifications frameworks or systems;
- d. to promote the participation of stakeholders in the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level in accordance with national legislation and practice.

During the first stage of the referencing process (2009-11) implementation of the LQF was supervised by 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 Bologna process initiated self-assessment report produced in 2011-12.

Following amendments to Vocational Education Law, Law on Higher Education Institutions and Education Law in 2015, the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 on the education classification of Latvia came into force in June 2017 and determined the descriptions of knowledge, skills and competences corresponding to the LQF levels and the conformity of the types of education programme with the LQF/EQF levels. With this regulation the LQF is now firmly embedded in Latvian education system.

As a result of the project *Development of sectoral qualification system and increasing efficiency and quality of vocational education*, 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 include developing occupational standards, defining the content of vocational qualifications and vocational examinations requirements, and enrolment of students in vocational education programmes. 15 sectoral qualifications structures were developed, including core occupations; linked occupations and specialisations have been defined (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Most higher education institution 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 education institutions, except those with only interest-related education programmes, have to be accredited. Higher education institutions receive accreditation if at least half of the study fields they offer are accredited. Study fields are accredited for either two or six years. The Council of Higher Education (*Augstākās izglītības padome*) is responsible for quality assurance in higher education institutions. Since 2015 study programmes and study directions have been licensed and accredited by the Academic Information Centre – Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA) in line with amendments to the law on higher education institutions ([10]) and Cabinet regulations. Since 2018, AIKA ([11]) is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and has been included in the European quality assurance register for higher education (EQAR).

Stakeholders are well informed of the existence of the LQF and they are actively participating in national discussions concerning LQF and its development. The Latvian NCP has encouraged exchange of views on the LQF via several studies ([12]) and events ([13]) at national level. In 2019, the Latvian NCP will present the updated referencing report to the EQF AG, prepared on the base of the evaluation studies conducted.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[14]

The system for validating professional competences obtained outside formal education became a legal requirement in February 2011, prescribing the procedure for validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes for acquisition of professional qualifications at LQF levels 2 to 4 ([15]). These regulations do not apply to regulated professions. Procedures for assessment and criteria for recognition of prior learning at LQF levels 5 to 7 were set up for higher education in 2012 ([16]). Validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is not carried out at LQF levels 1 and 8, for the validation of a full qualification in regulated professions, as well as for general education qualifications.

The validation process in higher education is largely decentralised, with education institutions provided with rights to conduct validation. In vocational education validation is also decentralised but to a lesser extent, with the State Education Quality Service, coordinating the process and delegating responsibility for validation of vocational competences to educational institutions and examination centres upon a formal evaluation.

Both in vocational education and higher education the occupational standards or programmes are used as a reference in validating non-formal and informal learning. To acquire a professional qualification a candidate is assessed in a professional qualification examination against requirements specified in occupational standards. Higher education institutions are allowed to assess the learning outcomes achieved in an individual's previous education or professional experience and, if they meet the programme requirements, to recognise them and to give appropriate number of credit points for it.

During the years 2011-17, 5 543 individuals acquired a certificate of professional qualification through validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes at LQF levels 3-4 ([17]). There is no centralised collection of data on the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes carried out by higher education institutions or colleges.

The main activities on the agenda concern further adjustments to the

system and nationwide measures aimed at promoting the availability and accessibility of validation among candidates. However, EU funds have been allocated to promote the system, strengthen its link to the labour market and do this inclusively of the groups at risk of unemployment: NEET youth, persons with unfinished and with education level LQF/EQF 3 or less, older than 50, and refugees. These EU funded projects will have a large impact on validation activities in Latvia, especially in the years to come, both through activities and duration of the projects that will last for five years. Most projects started in 2017, so it is still too early to evaluate the potential outcome. Project activities envisage provision of career consultations, skills audit and covering the costs of validation.

NQF implementation and impact

Development of the LQF started in 2009, building on reforms initiated in the 1990s, particularly the introduction of a five level structure of vocational qualifications in 1999 (through the Vocational Education Law). It was carried out in two stages: the first stage (2009-11) involved inclusion of formal qualifications in the LQF and referencing to the EQF; further development and revision took place in a second stage (2013-15). The Vocational Education Law (1999) was amended in 2015 and the initial five levels of vocational (professional) qualifications (still in use today) were referenced to the eight levels of the LQF ([18]). The Education Law (1998) was also amended in 2015 and now includes the definition of the LQF and its general characteristics. Consequently, the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 on the education classification of Latvia came into force in June 2017, determining the descriptions of knowledge, skills and competences corresponding to the LQF levels and the conformity of the types of education programme with the LQF/EQF levels. With this regulation the LQF is now firmly embedded in the Latvian education and training system.

The LQF is operational. Several large European Social Fund projects have supported its implementation. Strong emphasis has been placed on increasing the quality of vocational education and developing a system for sectoral qualifications linked to the LQF.

The Latvian EQF NCP conducted a number of studies to support LQF implementation. In 2013, there was a study on the development of LQF: *Referencing of the Latvian education system to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning and the qualifications framework for the European higher education area situation assessment*. This amongst others elaborated on a possible re-evaluation of the allocation of qualifications to LQF levels 1 to 4 ([19]). The study *International qualifications in Latvia* aimed to describe existing practice with regard to international qualifications and to raise general awareness about relating international qualifications to the LQF. The conclusions of the evaluations have already been used for the further development of the LQF (e.g. results after evaluating LQF levels 1 to 4) and proposals for change have been submitted to the respective authorities during the period since adoption of LQF. The results of the evaluation *The European qualifications framework for lifelong learning and the qualifications framework for the European higher education area: situation assessment*

in 2016 was used for preparing the updated referencing report in 2018-19. No major research has yet been conducted on the use of the LQF by the labour market (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

In 2016, the Latvian qualifications database ([20]), an information system that contains data on qualifications referenced to the European and Latvian qualifications framework, was also established, allowing the framework to become operational.

It has been compulsory since 2013 to indicate the LQF/EQF level in diploma supplements (higher education). The Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 202 on the *Procedures by which State-recognised education documents certifying higher education are issued* ([21]) have been amended to update the content of the diploma supplements to correspond to the results of referencing LQF to the EQF; it indicates either the European/Latvian qualifications framework level or the EHEA qualifications framework level. From 1 January 2017, LQF levels are indicated on vocational education certificates and diplomas. Implementation of Europass certificate supplements is under development. No decision has been taken on including LQF and EQF levels on certificates in general education.

The Latvian NCP develops its communication strategy annually and evaluates the results of the communication activities at the end of each year.

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 referencing report was published in 2012. Taking into account the development of education and changes in laws and regulations, an updated report will be submitted in 2019.

Important lessons and future plans

Setting up the national qualifications framework in line with the European qualifications framework and placing this issue on the policy agenda has had an impact on the education system and is one of the major driving forces for promoting the use of learning outcomes. 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.

Latvian ENIC/NARIC uses the LQF and other NQFs in recognising foreign qualifications.

It remains an important issue 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. The experience of setting up and implementing the Latvian qualifications framework shows that understanding concepts and promoting cultural change takes time. Feedback loops 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.

Main sources of information

- The Academic Information Centre is the Latvian EQF -NCP: <http://www.nki-latvija.lv/en/par-lki> [accessed 5.2.2019].
- EQF/LQF website: <http://www.nki-latvija.lv/en> [accessed 05.02.2019].
- The database of Latvian qualifications is available at: <https://www.latvijaskvalifikacijas.lv/en/> [accessed 5.2.2019].
- AIC, (2012). *Referencing of the Latvian education system to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning and the qualifications framework for the European higher education area: self-assessment report*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/Latvian%20Self-Assessment%20Report%202nd%20version_May%202012.pdf [accessed 5.2.2019].

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctor diploma (doktora diploms) Professional Doctor diploma in arts (profesionālā doktora diploms mākslās)	8
7	Master diploma (maģistra diploms) Professional Master diploma (profesionāla maģistra diploms) Diploma of professional higher education and Diploma of higher professional qualification (profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms and augstākās profesionālās kvalifikācijas diploms)	7
6	Bachelor diploma (bakalaura diploms) Professional Bachelor diploma (profesionālā bakalaura diploms) Diploma of professional higher education and Diploma of higher professional qualification (profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms and augstākās profesionālās kvalifikācijas diploms)	6
5	Diploma of first level professional higher education (pirmā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms)	5
4	Certificate of general secondary education (atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību) Diploma of vocational secondary education (diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību) Certificate of professional qualification (at secondary education level) (profesionālās kvalifikācijas apliecība (vidējās izglītības pakāpē))	4

3	Certificate of vocational education (atestāts par arodizglītību) Certificate of professional qualification (at vocational education level) (profesionālās kvalifikācijas apliecība (arodizglītības pakāpē))	3
2	Certificate of general basic education (9 years) (apliecība par vispārējo pamatizglītību) Certificate of vocational basic education (apliecība par profesionālo pamatizglītību) Certificate of professional qualification (at basic education level) (profesionālās kvalifikācijas apliecība (pamatizglītības pakāpē))	2
1	Certificate of general basic education (special education programmes for learners with (severe) mental development disorders or multiple severe developmental disorders) (apliecība par vispārējo pamatizglītību)	1

Acronyms

AIC	Academic Information Centre
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ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
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ESF	European Social Fund
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EQAR	European quality assurance register in higher education
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EQF	European qualifications framework
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LQF	Latvian qualifications framework
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NQF	national qualifications framework
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NCP	national coordination point
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VET	vocational education and training
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