

Lifelong Learning and Qualifications Framework as an Effective Instrument for Making it a Reality



Education and Training Systems

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Abstract

Lifelong learning has become a necessity for Europe which is characterized by rapid social, technological and economic changes. With the aspiration to integrate into the European Union Albania is intended to create a “Albanian space of lifelong learning”. European Union challenge of making a reality “lifelong learning” emphasizes the population aging trend, underscoring the need for a continuous update and upgrade of the knowledge, skills and wider competences. The implementation of lifelong learning is complicated due to some communication and cooperation gap existing between education and training providers on the one hand and the authorities at various levels on the other. Barriers between institutions and countries do not only impede access to education and training, but also affect the efficient use of knowledge and competencies achieved. This may be the case between the public - academic and private - commercial sectors from where it is necessary to ensure proper training to achieve in satisfactory figures the employment of qualified applicants and particularly of the researchers in both sectors. The problem is caused mainly by the lack of qualifications’ transparency, by the hesitation to recognize the “foreign” qualifications and by the lack of agreements between countries, which would allow citizens to transfer qualifications from one country to another. Such situation is also caused by the tendency to treat learning as achieved in the informal settings (for example in the workplace) as inferior regarding formal qualifications in the initial education and training process. These are some of the basic problems and challenges facing the lifelong learning that is being promoted today on how to create common policies for a European and national qualifications framework as a tool to facilitate lifelong learning.

Introduction

Furthermore training is a process that creates employment opportunities for the unemployed, it provides flexibility and mobility to all employees, so that it prepares them, how to maintain the workplace, as well as how to change professional activity, in accordance with the situation of the labor market. Life and work normally lasts longer than the period of initial professional education, therefore nowadays the continuous training is taking greater importance.

One long-term strategic objective of EU policies on education and training is making a reality the lifelong learning and mobility¹¹. It is noted that considerable progress has been achieved through cooperation, particularly in support of national reforms of lifelong learning, alongside with the modernization of higher education institutions and by the development of common European instruments to promote quality education, transparency of qualifications and mobility choices among countries.

Education and training systems in Europe should be fit after the demands of the knowledge society and in response to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. Opportunities should be created to provide education and training with tailored target groups at different stages of its life: young people, unemployed adults and those in jobs that are at risk where their skills are falling by the quickly changes. This new approach should include three main components: the development of local learning centers, promotion of new basic skills, particularly related to information technologies and the increase of the qualifications’ transparency.

¹¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528%2801%29:EN:NOT>

European cooperation in education has led to the development of a number of EU references on how to help students and how to support national reforms. In this context, there are developing common principles and recommendations are elaborated in the areas of key competencies for students, as quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training, increase of students' mobility, validation process of non-formal learning and informal guidelines for recognition qualifications abroad¹².

The European Commission in 2009 strengthened cooperation among the EU Member States the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training "ET" in 2020¹³ a continuation of the program for Early Education and Training in 2010 which started in 2001. However, in a rapidly changing world, lifelong learning should be a priority; this is the key to successful employment that allows people to fully participate in society.

Higher education contributes to making lifelong learning a reality. All countries are taking steps to adjust their national policy framework to achieve this goal and encourage higher education institutions and all stakeholders to increase opportunities for lifelong learning at higher education level, including recognition previous studies. One such activity should be an integral part of higher education activity. The Berlin Conference emphasized the need how to improve the chances/opportunities for all citizens, in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to follow the road of lifelong learning in higher education¹⁴.

Overview: The need to increase access to lifelong learning offered by universities

European universities have supported activities to promote a civilized and tolerant society and to prepare young people for their role in society and economy. They have shown that institutions are more resilient and adaptable to the development of their role following the evolving of society.

European universities are facing with steadily increasing demands of adapting to economic and social development of the concept of European Knowledge. The creation of the European Area of Higher Education and Research needed to consolidate and consider challenges to address lifelong learning, by using past achievements and best practices in this regard. Currently terminology lifelong learning encompasses many concepts, for that, the responsive European universities are working to create a culture of inclusive for recognition of all previously acquired qualifications in formal and informal way.

Currently in Europe required expansion in access to higher education that has nothing to do with the introduction of less qualified students, but need to support all students with the potential to benefit through its participation in higher education. This means an increasingly wide range of students with different interests and motives for learning throughout life, not only by providing professionals programs to faster adapt to the job market changing, but also for applications increasing opportunities for personal development through culture. This raises the issue of how to provide lifelong learning to be useful for individuals, employers and society as a whole.

Study Methodology

Study Methodology is built in accordance with the principles of comparative analysis. The analysis is focused on comparing the solutions proposed by strategic paper such as the Lisbon Convention of May 2009, Directive 2009 / C 119 / 02, the communiqué of the meeting of the Bologna education and current developments in the member states of the EU with Albanian documents in this area. Analysis was performed by

¹² Strategic objective 1: Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528%2801%29:EN:NOT>

¹³ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/general_framework/ef0016_en.htm

¹⁴ Communicate of the Conference of the Ministers responsible for higher education, Berlin, September 19, 2003.

reference methods and principles of strategic documents published in these developments compared with these issues in our country.

Objectives

Identification and study of issues is related to the development of professional skills of human resources, but also beyond, how to be adjusted to rapid changes and complexity of the global developing labor market. It analyzes the National Qualifications Framework as a tool to make tangible the wider access and diversified on lifelong learning.

1. How to establish an Albanian lifelong learning (LLL) space

In a framework of the opening to the world and the aspiration to integrate into the European Union, Albania aims to create "an Albanian lifelong learning space" as a part of the European area of lifelong learning. In this regard negligence, hesitation or indifference will negatively affect the economic, social, cultural and technological capabilities of the country and its competitiveness. So If such phenomena will lead and highlight the opportunity's inequality and social inequality among individuals and different social groups, It would become an obstacle to the achievement of social cohesion, and a barrier to the people's permanent integration process trying to increase their own welfare in their contemporary society. So in general, it will be delayed in the progress of the country and our society, becoming a trigger, in this way, even by the low rates of processes of EU integration.

Currently, in Albania , in the context of reforming the education system and establishing a new training system and supported by the activity of various actors in the field of learning, opportunities, that generally improved conditions, were increased in many cases for development of learning in formal¹⁵, non-formal¹⁶ and informal¹⁷. But, in general, acted without a comprehensive clear vision to lifelong learning and without a coherent and comprehensive strategy to support it. If so, is acting in the absence or weakness of the mechanisms necessary for the organization of cooperation between actors and supporters of the internal and external coordination and monitoring of their activities, as well as in terms of the scarcity of studies and relevant institutions.

Therefore, the developments were not systemic, not responded to the extent necessary political and economic changes socially occurring, needs and interests of today's economy and society in general and individuals in particular. So, with all the advances made in many ways, still do not have a modern education system. Similarly, vocational training system has not been fully stable and there are still limited opportunities for the development of informal and informal forms of learning. Creating an "Albanian area of lifelong learning" as part of the European area of LLL, is necessary and unavoidable, so represents a very significant challenge for Albania because:

Firstly, an undertaking of this kind, as can be understood from what was discussed above, is a major challenge for any country, no matter how developed is.

¹⁵ "Formal learning" is done in a structured and organized environment, such as: higher education institutions, schools, training centers or at work, that is clearly designed as a form of learning in intentional and planned way by student, trainees or student. A certificate is given at the completion of this learning time.

¹⁶ "Informal learning" is involved in the planned activities, not necessarily designed as teaching or as a form of containing important learning elements that is intentional, planned by students, trainees or students. In general, this activity can not be certified, but, in certain cases, may be certified.

¹⁷ "Informal Learning" is benefited from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. There is not a structured and organized activity and it is unintentional, unplanned and in general not certified.

Secondly, the reform processes in the field of learning in Albania should be broader, deeper and more complex than those in other European countries, due to the relatively low level and gaps that characterize this area.

Thirdly, the conditions for the implementation of the changes are unfavorable, due to the limited financial and material resources, relatively few number of specialists involved and especially to experts for specific problems in the field of learning, the absence or weakness the necessary institutions and mechanisms.

There have been permanent efforts by interested stakeholders to give impetus to the development of the premises to lifelong learning, so fragmented in different strategies or legislation, as well as promotional activities. However, it should be noted that for the design and successful implementation of the strategy of lifelong learning, special importance is the further deepening and expansion of cooperation in regional and European level, and beyond, both in terms of obtaining financial and material resources, as well as to exchange ideas, concepts, practices, fruitful experience, so that, to move towards the creation of a European area of lifelong learning, in line with other countries, without ignoring national cultures.

2. Albanian Higher Education Initiatives to Promote Lifelong Learning in our Country

LLL is a priority of higher education in Albania that helps all the students that like and have the opportunity to study in any age, in order to improve their skills in accordance with the needs of a free market economy. They can gaining further qualifications that are obtained by part-time studies which has become effective system from the academic year 2003-04. The system operates in such a course of study in almost all disciplines of study. Nowadays, this system is visited by number of students.

Progress is made in the restructuring of the higher education system in our country under the Bologna system, which would link it to the National Qualifications Framework, that will be held in accordance with the European Qualification Framework. European Higher Education Area will create opportunities for Albanian students to continue interrupted studies in Albanian universities in those of European countries, based on ECTS scores earned, without having to repeat previously acquired qualifications.

According to Law no.9741, date 21.05.2007 , "On higher education in Republic of Albania", amended,¹⁸ *"Higher education institutions offer study programs of continuing education, as a form of LLL."*¹⁹

In our country, according to the principles of the Bologna process, Higher Education Institutions are designed academic studies in cycles and university curricula based on ECTS and equip students with the diploma supplement. Universities are putting the bases for quality assurance standard also. After the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty²⁰, from the academic year 2004-05, our country has started the recognition of diplomas and certificates earned in foreign educational institutions abroad. This diploma recognition allows students to follow each program of study within the LLL, even doctoral programs. So that, the providing opportunities for LLL is included as an integral part of Albanian Higher Education Institutions normal activities, although much remains to turn it into a sustainable and qualitative activity and an integral part of their strategies.

¹⁸ Law no.9741, date 21.05.2007 , "On higher education in Republic of Albania", amended, Official Gazette no. 68, date 16.06.2007.

¹⁹ The same, Article 30.

²⁰ Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region.

Signed on 11.04.1999, ratified on 03.06.2002 and entered into force on 05.01.2002. Declaration contained in a Note Verbale from the Permanent Representation of Albania, dated 13 May 2002, and registered at the Secretariat General on 14 May 2002.

3. Qualifications framework as a tool to support lifelong learning in order to turn it a reality

Qualifications framework is established in many countries and sectors in Europe and beyond. It takes shape and appearance by national and sectoral characteristics in each country.

The major purpose of the Qualifications framework is to clarify (for students, parents, learning providers, employers, policymakers) the main directions to a particular qualification, how progress can be ensured, to which size the transfer is permitted and on which basis the decisions on recognition qualifications can be taken.

Questions about progress, transfer, accumulation, recognition and development of quality can be addressed only in a limited extent in the context of a national or sectoral framework only, therefore, the challenge is to build bridges between these frameworks and systems in order to be able communication, comparison and mutual trust.

According to the European Directive 2009/C119/02²¹, European policymakers have repeatedly requested the development and implementation of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), strengthening ties between frameworks at national and sectoral level, especially to support lifelong learning.

Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission of Education, February 2004²², for the implementation of the work program "Education and Training 2010"²³ gives priority to the development of a European Qualifications Framework as an essential contribution to the strategy of lifelong learning.

Maastricht Communiqué on December 14, 2004²⁴ for future priorities of enhanced European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET), the ministers responsible for VET in the 32 European countries, the European social partners and the Commission agreed to give priority to the development of the open and flexible European Qualifications Framework, providing a common reference to facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications that include VET, secondary and higher education.

In this context, at the Ministerial Conference in Berlin²⁵, September 2003, for the implementation of the Bologna process, the Ministers responsible for higher education in member countries of the Bologna Process, encouraged Member States to design a flexible framework of qualifications in higher education. The process ended with the adoption by the Ministerial Conference of Bergen²⁶ for the implementation of the Bologna process of the "Qualifications frameworks in the field of European Higher Education".

HEAL (European Higher Education Area) framework structure was endorsed by ministers of the Bologna Process in Bergen, consisting of three cycles, which will be mentioned below. This frame is a very important achievement, because it offers a comprehensive framework for higher education qualifications in 45 European countries. An important objective of EQF is support of lifelong learning by making it easy for students transition from learning to work, and be accepted in their own country or in other countries of the EU²⁷.

²¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528%2801%29:EN:NOT>

²² http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/profobuch/1_European%20documents/3_Education%20and%20Training%202010%20Programme_Eng.pdf

²³ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/projects/events/february_2008/documents/2010.pdf

²⁴ Maastricht Communiqué, http://www.eu2004.nl/default.asp?CMS_ITEM=9D72E2AC57E

²⁵ Communicate of the Conference of the Ministers responsible for higher education, Berlin, September 19, 2003 http://www.masht.gov.net/advCms/documents/4.deklarata_e_Berlinit_2003.pdf

²⁶ Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005 http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/050520_Bergen_Communique1.pdf

²⁷ Qualifications, introduction of the concept, Sjur Bergen.

Albania is involved in the process of establishing a National Qualification Framework in line with European Qualification Framework from the beginning of this European process and later as a result of the implementation of the Bologna process in higher education.

So, a good job is done for the creation of the Albanian Qualification Framework (AQF) in line with the European Qualifications Framework. In this framework the law is approved No.10 247, date 04.03.2010 "On Albanian qualifications framework" where put bases for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the Republic of Albania. This law is aimed, among other things, to promote the development of lifelong learning, including continuing development of skills for adults, providing the necessary enabling qualifications to ensure progress²⁸.

AQF shall summarize all types and levels of qualifications and certification, within a structure of eight levels. AQF is a package of eight reference levels, which are considered as a common and neutral point for education authorities and training in national and sectoral level. AQF structure facilitates the credits collection and transfer within each section of the frame and in other sectors. AQF is designed to provide access and taking part in European credit systems. AQF includes qualifications awarded at all levels and in all sectors of education and training, including pre university education, vocational and higher education from those required for entry to work and participate in society, to the qualifications necessary, at the highest levels of academic and vocational education.

At present, basis on the academic programs are designed AQF cycles in higher education by level 6, 7, and 8 (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate) and university curricula based on ECTS credit, as well as equipping students with diploma supplement. Quality assurance standards are under implementation and Higher Education institutions that offer programs leading to qualifications framework are in the process of institutional accreditation too. After the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, and from the academic year 2004-05, the recognition of diplomas and certificates earned in foreign schools has started according to divisions of NQF levels.

4. Conclusions

The necessity for taking concrete initiatives for the creation of "Albanian area of lifelong learning", considering this as a national priority. For creating "space Albanian lifelong learning", will be required as follows:

1. Acquisition of European vision for lifelong learning and in accordance with this, the development of a coherent and comprehensive national strategy, embodied in concrete indicators.
2. Awareness of the whole society, from decision makers to common citizens, the necessity and usefulness of lifelong learning by all the possibilities that exist for its realization.
3. Albanian Government need to remove legal barriers specific to prospective students to return to higher education and providing autonomy to set their own admission requirements and incentives for the development of lifelong learning in universities. Encouraging regional partnerships with local authorities, employers and agencies.
4. HEI need to address lifelong learning at the center of their mission and strategy and to cope with the complexity of the concept of lifelong learning as a key aspect of their activities and should develop relevant academic and professional guidance and career counseling.

²⁸ Law No. 10 247, dated 04.03.2010 "On Albanian qualifications framework", Article 4, paragraph d.

5. Establish the partnerships at local, regional, national and international level to offer attractive and relevant programs with a number of other educational institutions, employers, employee organizations, unions, as essential of being responsive, flexible and innovative.

6. AQF complete implementation in order to stimulate the development of qualifications, based on comparable international standards of knowledge skills and wider competences.

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Different Links

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