

Approaching Quality in Lifelong Learning in the Slovak Republic (national overview)

1. Models describing quality assurance at institutions providing lifelong learning and cooperating with institutions responsible for strategic management in this area

In general experts in the SR maintain that the quality of the social system does not exist. Despite the fact that within the European Union a desire to find a common understanding of quality and its provision is proclaimed, there is still no clear definition of the quality in the social system. (Fonodova, 2011, Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation in the field of lifelong learning).

Within the European Union there have been a number of initiatives in education, including **EQAVET** (The European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training), **ENQA** (The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), **ENQA-VET**, **EQARF** (The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework), **EQAR** (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education), **QALL** (The Quality Assurance in Life Long Learning with a Focus on Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education), **CQAF** (The Common Quality Assurance Framework), **EQF** (The European Qualifications Framework), **ECVET** (The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training), **ECTS** (The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) and various projects within Leonardo, Comenius and other programmes.

Junaskova, 2011 (State Institute of Vocational Education and Training) states that the area of quality assurance in education requires syncretism, i.e. a need to integrate the views in this area. The key elements of any European and national activities in the area are:

- recognition of results of individual efforts
- recognition of educational results as an integral part of national qualification (qualifications systems are not processed in the Slovak Republic) and
- coordination of individual projects focused on the quality of lifelong learning.

Across the EU it is not uniformly understood what lifelong learning is. It seems that everyone is familiar with the definition but it remains underestimated especially in the areas of non-formal education and informal learning.

Similar inconsistencies and confusion exist in the understanding of quality lifelong learning: whether it is quality management, quality assurance, quality control, quality assessment or quality improvement, or whether all of them and whether there are some other aspects. Contribution to the unification of the understanding of quality in education is only a recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of June 18, 2009 establishing the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training no. 2009/C155/01. When trying to understand the LLL in the SR there are supposed several false facts:

- the state must take on full responsibility for LLL,
- formal education itself can lead to obtaining different levels of education,
- work on standards of education is the only important step towards achieving high quality education,
- it is necessary to separate the process of accreditation and national qualifications systems.

The status of quality assurance in the LLL in the Slovak Republic can be characterized as follows (Junaskova, 2011):

There is national legislation butis fragmented across sectors
There is a law on lifelong learning in the SR but...	...it does not deal with the lifelong learning in a complex way
In Slovakia many resolutions have been signed but...	...work aimed at putting them into practice goes just slowly ahead or has not been started yet
Steps shall be taken in the field of quality assurance but...	...are not sufficient for some groups of learners
There is an attempt to introduce self-assessment for the lifelong learning institutions in the SR but this brings just more red tape
In Slovakia there are rules for accreditation but...	...there are no qualification standards, but excessive bureaucracy, a too long approval process which discourages the candidates for accreditation

Steps of the Slovak Republic that are not aimed at quality and that characterize the current situation in the Slovak Republic are related to the link between research and development of lifelong learning. We can describe them as follows:

- low awareness of all players in the field of LLL;
- low or zero fiscal policy;
- insufficient involvement of partners who are employers;
- reluctance of institutions providing formal education to perceive the education market as a "commercial" market;
- underestimation of non-formal and informal education leading even to legislative ignorance (traditionalism, i.e. it seems that the Slovak Republic is not interested in recognition of education; many legislators and strategy establishers state that "the LLL is not suitable for the business world").

Steps of the Slovak Republic towards the quality which are also linked to research and development of lifelong learning:

- to start the revision process of **the Law no. 568/2009 on lifelong learning**;
- the ongoing process of proposing the National System of Qualifications;
- handle the number of projects dealing with quality lifelong learning;
- activities aimed at processing of "external quality assessment of LLL institutions";
- self-assessment of LLL institutions (however, it has not been unified yet and remains fragmented);
- establishing the National Reference Center for the Area of LLL - NIOVE - National Institute of Vocational Education;
- establishing a working group to assure quality of the LLL which will work within the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.



Other challenges for quality assurance when linking research and lifelong education in the Slovak Republic include in particular the effort to **define objectives, indicators and quality standards of linking of research results and the LLL**, to make clear what we want to achieve in the quality of research results and the LLL. It is also necessary to **define mechanisms for ensuring the quality of the link between research results and the LLL** to make clear how the Slovak Republic intends to achieve quality assurance. **When defining partners in ensuring the quality of the link between research results and the LLL** we find out for whom the quality assurance of the link is necessary. To meet the Deming PDCA cycle it is inevitable to ensure maintaining and improving of the quality of the link between research results and the LLL. This can be achieved by **defining new and progressive objectives in providing a high quality of the link between research results and the LLL**.

In general, the questions related to quality of the LLL strategy are focused on "How to avoid underestimation of skills and knowledge acquired in non-formal and informal learning?", "What mechanisms for recognition of prior learning are relevant and reliable?", "What incentive is needed to make the institution adopt and accept the quality assurance strategy?", etc.

The benefits of quality assurance in the LLL can be defined as follows:

- mobility (work and educational markets),
- employment,
- attractiveness of vocational education and training,
- equality of opportunities,
- support for disadvantaged groups of the population,
- response to sector requirements with regard to the lack of/ surplus of certain skills / qualifications,
- more flexible response to demographic changes in the country.

Shortcomings of the current educational system and counselling

The education system and counselling have insufficiently reacted to the needs of the labour market in the Slovak Republic in recent decades and typical of them is (Mikolaj, 2010):

- absence of an open system of lifelong learning for the labour market
- insufficient ability of the formal education system to respond flexibly to the need of new skills by establishing and introducing new subjects and studies
- mutual interrelatedness between formal and informal education system
- no recognition of informal education for purposes of qualification acquirement
- lack of state-guaranteed quality of informal education
- absence of ongoing monitoring and surveying the educational needs in the country
- absence of lifelong counselling for all phases of education and active life
- absence of a sufficiently transparent and effective way of financing the formal and informal education and learning
- insufficient development of key competences for lifelong learning
- persistence of gender stereotypes.

A brief SWOT analysis of the educational system (Milokaj, 2010)

strengths	weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an organized formal education system ▪ a rich offer and a relatively high interest in learning in the informal education system ▪ informal learning is a natural way of acquiring knowledge and skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ low flexibility of the formal education system ▪ outstanding system elements in informal education: <i>1. quality assurance; 2. financing; 3 recognition of learning outcomes</i> ▪ a high level of disorganization in the informal learning
opportunities	threat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ equality of the informal education system and the formal one ▪ use of the outcomes of the national project conducted by Academia Istropolitana to promote informal education: <i>1. certification of educational institutions, certification of lecturers, accreditation of educational programs; 2. national qualifications authority;</i> ▪ a shift in the assessment paradigm applied for learning outcomes. It has been based on measurement of inputs (length of education) and the shift is expected rather towards measurement of outcomes (results of the so-called education. "<i>Learning outcome principle</i>"), which is applicable also for recognition of results in informal learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ resistance of employers and of the formal system to recognize education obtained in the informal system ▪ disinterest of the decisive sphere to create conditions for implementation of innovative features into the informal system and resistance of the formal system to accept these innovative elements ▪ devaluation of formal and informal education

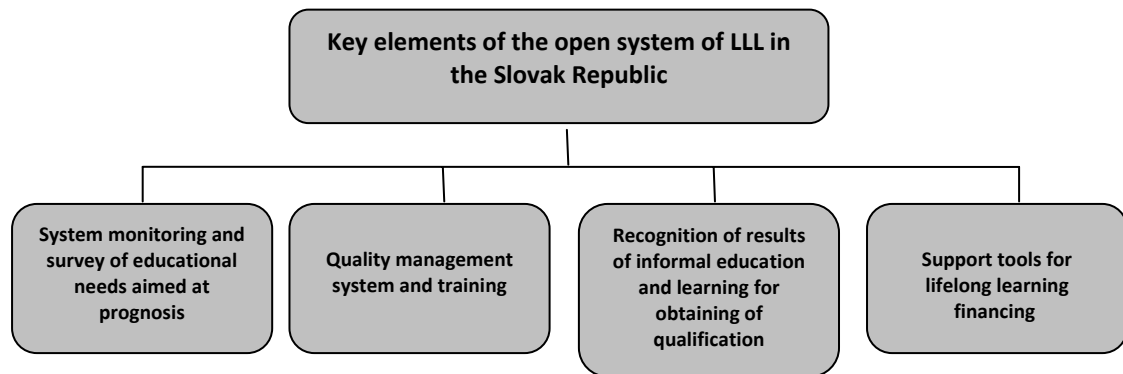
Description of the open system of lifelong learning in the SR for the needs of the labour market is provided in conceptions for individual subsystems of lifelong learning, covering all components of education - formal education, informal education as well as informal learning. These conceptions, mutually interlinked, were developed by Academia Istropolitana, the educational institution of the Ministry of Education, within the national ESF project "Establishing, development and implementation of an open system of lifelong learning in the SR for the needs of labour market." Expertise within the project started in 2004 and was completed in March 2007.

Elements of the open system of lifelong education in the Slovak Republic:

- System monitoring and survey of educational needs aimed at prognosis and the information system on the LLL.
- The high quality system of lifelong learning with emphasis on the quality of informal education and informal learning.

- Recognition of results of informal education and informal learning for obtaining qualification – permeability.
- Support tools for lifelong learning financing.

Graph: Key elements of the open system of lifelong learning



2. Internal procedures and tools applied by educational institutions leading to quality assurance of lifelong learning

Quality of the vocational education is partially guaranteed by the state through the evaluation by the Accreditation Commission of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic (small Accreditation Commission). The adoption of the amendment Act no. 567/2001 386/1997 statute on further education in 2001 strengthened the powers of this commission. Currently, the following continuing education activities must be accredited:

- educational activities targeted at public officials;
- educational activities funded from the state budget (there are exceptions, however, which are discussed in the part 050304 "quality assurance").

In order to obtain accreditation for an educational institution a concept of educational activities must be submitted (a project and pedagogical documentation, documentation of lecturers and material-technical equipment). Each project is evaluated by an expert group which is proposed by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. Accreditation of educational activity shall be valid for five years, but during that period there is no quality supervision of the accredited continuing education activities. Educational activities which are not designed for public officials and are not financed from the state budget may not be accredited. Despite this fact, many training providers apply for accreditation on their own initiative. For many institutions accreditation is an effective marketing tool: accredited activities are a sign of credibility of educational institutions in the eyes of the public. A specific rule applies to the accreditation activities of continuing vocational training for certain professions (for example in the health sector, education and public administration). Ensuring the quality of this type of vocational education is normally in competence of ministries under which the profession in question falls (such as security and quality evaluation of educational activities of health workers is under the auspices of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic). Business education is another type of training which is subjected to monitoring and thorough evaluation (especially in large companies with foreign participation). The results of such evaluations are generally not available to public. Monitoring and evaluation

are conducted also within trainings for unemployed people by providing employment services, social affairs and family and are publicly funded. Evaluation of the effectiveness of this type of training is based on number of the unemployed who found a job after training accomplishment. Some experts have suggested that this method of evaluation is not indicative of the true effectiveness of further training for the unemployed. It is assumed that many unemployed who have been involved in the education and later found a job would find the job also without participation in the educational activity. The current method of monitoring and subsequent evaluation of this ignores the fact. After having summed all the activities of vocational education and training which are subject to assessment, it is obvious that most of further education programmes financed by the participants themselves (for example very popular foreign language and IT courses) are not subjected to any systematic quality assurance. We can only assume that low-quality providers of continual education services gradually eliminate the competitive environment in this area. The issue of quality of the vocational education in the Slovak Republic is important: Act no. 455/1991 Coll. on Trades (Trades Act) as amended defines providing further education as a freelance business, which means that people who are interested in the business of providing some continuing education do not have to meet any specific criteria related to professional qualifications or experience. The Association of Adult Education Institutions (AAEI) has sought to improve the mechanisms for ensuring quality of trainings and in collaboration with two faculties has established a system of certification of teachers active in the field of further education. This system cannot be regarded as an official national system of certification of lecturers as the AAEI is not a national certification or accreditation authority.

3. Quality assurance indicators for lifelong learning

Indicators have not been established yet.

4. Ensuring professional development of providers of lifelong learning

Indicators have not been established yet.

5. Innovative practices aimed at improvement of the lifelong learning quality

In Slovakia there the innovative efforts are reflected in projects focused on the issue. We present examples of projects in progress and of the ones completed in the years 2010 – 2011:

2011 – 2013 Vocational Education and Training in Europe (EUROVET)

The aim of the project, which is coordinated by the Directorate-General for Vocational Training of the Ministry of Education Government of Aragonis, is to create a European network of vocational education and training in order to share experience and transfer innovations in this area to other member countries involved in the project. This goal is supported by the development of innovative tools supporting the coordination of decision-making actors in vocational education and training in different countries (e.g. VET Facebook, etc.).



2011 – 2013 Increasing Quality of Future Teachers within the Educational and Certification System

The project is based on a partnership of universities and national institutes from Austria and Hungary and coordinated by the National Institute of Lifelong Education. Its aim is to establish a national authority responsible for verification of qualification and proficiency of the teachers. It will ensure quality of the education through a continuous verification of the professional competence of teachers. The intention of the project is to transfer innovation in the field of continual education in compliance with analysis of the methodology for verification and certification of teachers in Austria. The project outputs in 2013 will contribute to establishment of the National Authority for Verification of Professional Competence of Lecturers in Slovakia in terms of creating a conceptual, legislative and implementation platform of education and certification.

2011 – 2012 Financing Training in Europe

The objective of the research project Financing Training in Europe coordinated by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) is to analyze the financial instruments of the EU member states which are applied to support further training and adult education. On the micro level the project analyzes the relationship between setting and actual implementation of co-financing of adult education. On the macro level the project analyzes the relationship between the nature of co-financing system of adult education, the context in which these tools are implemented and adult participation in education and training. The final comparative study of instruments in the EU member states will be published in March 2012, then the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic will be able to implement the outcomes into its educational policies.

2011 – 2012 Activities of the European Qualification Framework National Coordination Points with aim to implement the EQF at national level

In March 2011 on basis of the Decision of the European Commission the National Institute of Lifelong Learning became the National Coordination point for the European Qualifications Framework in the Slovak Republic. The fundamental objective of the project is to conceptually and analytically support the improvement of capacity of the workforce through qualifications defined by the learning outcomes embedded in the qualification framework. Specific tasks include establishment of methodologies and approaches to application of national qualification levels that are framed by the European Qualifications Framework for the description of qualifications and linking them with informal learning, counselling, support and provision of consultation for the key actors in the system and the social partners on how to apply qualifications framework in the field of informal and non-formal education and learning. The output of the task will be appropriate descriptors for non-formal and informal education and methodological support for future recognition of non-formal education and ensuring comparability of qualifications systems in the European environment.



2011 – 2012 European Life Long Policy Network (ELLPN)

The aim of the project, in which currently 29 European countries are involved, is to assist the member states of the European Union and the European Commission in development of the European cooperation in lifelong counselling for the field of education and employment. Project activities should examine how counselling as an integral element contributes to implementation of the sector strategies in the field of education, vocational training, higher education, adult education, employment and social inclusion. The aim is transformation of the activities ELLPN from the field of concepts into the field of implementation with a more structured cooperation with other sectors.

2011 – 2013 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

The international survey, conducted within this project, intends to find out what work experience the adult population in the Slovak Republic has and what skills and abilities are required for success in the working and social life. The Slovak Republic is one of the 25 countries implementing the survey. The survey is conducted through interviews in households that are randomly selected so that the sample of respondents (16 - 65 years old) represents the whole structure of the population in Slovakia. The aim of this international survey is to obtain comprehensive information on the level of adult education, their skills, work experience and skills that will enable the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and other central government bodies to improve quality and to expand the offer on adult learning which will correspond with their personal and professional development.

2010 – 2011 Continuous Cross Border Improvement of National Lifelong Learning Strategies (CCBI-NLLS)

The intention of the project is to share experience from the implementation of lifelong learning strategies between the three consortium members - Austria, Hungary and the Slovak Republic in order to develop, implement and improve the existing processes and implemented national strategies. Topic outputs that the members of the consortium define ("Partnership in the sub-sectors at national, regional and local level" - Hungary, "Recognition of non-formal and informal learning" - the Slovak Republic, "Motivation of learners" - Austria) within the project become an important element of the innovation transfer in the sphere of decision-making in the member states.

6. Quality assurance in recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL), prior learning assessment (PLA), or prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) describe a process used by colleges and universities around the world to evaluate learning acquired outside the academic sphere. Common ways in which individuals have acquired college-level knowledge include: corporate or military training; work experience; civic activities and self-study. This process has not been finished in



Slovakia as there is the basic requirement – the need for a developed National system of qualifications.

Conclusion

The quality of the LLL in Slovakia has not been reflected yet in any strategic document, there is only a proposal. The law No. 568/2009 on Lifelong Learning does not provide solution to the issue of LLL quality in a complex way and does not contain any direct reference to the links of research results and the LLL. Institutions of LLL approach the ensuring of quality in different ways (ISO standards, CAF, etc.). On the whole, perception and definition of the concept of quality in the LLL in Slovakia is heterogeneous and therefore there is a need to unify the approaches to the issue at the strategic as well as tactical level.

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