

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS – FROM STATUS QUO TO CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT: The following text is about the growing trends for creating a culture and a framework for life-long learning at a policy level in Macedonia and the factors explaining for the recent upsurge of interest in it. One possibility is to perceive and analyze the life – long learning through a) national qualification framework, b) assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning, c) life – long learning guidance, d) transnational mobility. Within each of these, life - long policies call for comprehensive analysis of pathways and transitions throughout the entire life cycle.

Today the vocabulary is different, with champions to the merits of recurrent education and life – long learning, and enriched with a debate of policy makers, politicians, academic and employers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Creating a culture and a framework for life-long learning has been at the heart of the Macedonian education policies for a longer period of time. Lifelong policies call for comprehensive analysis of pathways and transitions throughout the entire life cycle. Transitions between the world of learning and the world of work takes several forms – from home to school, from school to work, and from work back to education. The narrow set of progression between different programmes and levels of education and different labour market conditions present the state-of-the-art of this underdeveloped yet important field. The main dividing line in the national context between the pathways in education runs between general and academic education on one hand, and employment oriented vocational education and training on the other, hence, clear-cut differentiation occurs in the structures of upper secondary education. Attempts to integrate general and vocational content in the same programmes, and to build bridges and ladders between separate general and vocational tracks, all contribute to the parity of appreciation and comparative value of general-academic and vocational-technical education at higher education level. The introduction of the credit system such as European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is a focal point for earning credits outside higher education, including lifelong learning, provided that the admitting university recognizes the same.

The Macedonian engagement in the development of the National Qualification System (NQF), measures undertaken to assess and validation of non-formal and informal learning, establishment of life-long learning guidance system and the initiatives to promote transnational mobility are the major transversal policy objectives for the implementation of the life-long learning system.

1.1. Development of national qualifications framework (NQF)

At the national level, the development of national qualifications framework (NQF) has been fostered by the meta framework - European Qualification Framework (EQF), as an approach to integrate different parts of country's qualification system which in most of the cases has little communication and connection between different subsystems. This is mostly commonly found between the higher education and the VET. The intention behind the preparatory work at the national scene

is to provide a quality and transparent education and training system, i.e. to respond to the 'knowledge-based economy' demands, to increase the economic growth and employment rate as well as the economic and social cohesion degree and practice for a democratic society. The main areas around which the NQF is build are the following:

- Reference levels that describe different types of knowledge and skills which are a part of the various qualifications,
- Quality-assurance principles,
- Methods for identifying knowledge or abilities acquired through various study and training programs.

Provisions of the VET legal framework, in particular the licensing and accreditation of the potential providers and programmes and the VET centre, form a knowledge base that significantly contributes towards recommendations for the development of quality-assurance procedures.

1.1.1. *Macedonian National Qualification Framework – current state of play and progress*

The NQF classification structure is developed as a hierarchy consisting of several levels. The number of levels is determined on a more or less arbitrary basis with qualifications assigned to levels in terms of some principles of discrimination. At the beginning of the development process, the framework has eight levels corresponding to the eight EQF levels and the Bologna cycles. Qualification sub-levels in reference to the existing system in the country are at four of these levels. Based on the EQF and the Bologna Framework, the top four levels of the NQF relate to the three Bologna Cycles and the Bologna short cycle. In sum, the first degrees would be at level six, Masters Degrees at level seven and Doctorates at level eight. Any short cycle provision developed in Macedonia would be at level five. Final decisions regarding the higher education qualifications will be made by the higher education sector.

Level four, is the level at which qualifications which give direct access to higher education are placed and the main qualification in this category is the State Matura. The School Matura and the VET Matura would most likely come at this level.

Level five is shared between Higher Education and VET in the NQF, also includes Specialist Education Diploma and the Craftsman's Examination Diploma. However, the final decision will be made when the level descriptors are

developed. Other formal VET qualifications will be most likely placed at levels two and three.

Both the formal and the non-formal Primary Education Diplomas are likely to be placed at level one and basic qualifications for adults will be at level one, two and three.

Table 1. Alignment of the Macedonian National Qualification Framework with the European Qualification Framework

NQF level		General Education	Formal VET	Formal and non-formal AE and training	Higher education	EQF level
VIII						8
VII	VIIA					7
	VII B					
VI	VIA					6
	VIB					
V						5
IV						4
III						3
II	IIA					2
	IIB					
I	IA					1
	IB					
	IC					

Source: TA to the MoES on Life – Long Learning (2009), Ministry of Education and Science of Macedonia, (2009)

The sub – levels, the dilemma whether these are real sublevels or different types of qualification at the levels is expected to be resolved with the development of descriptors. The sub-levels are intended to accommodate existing and new qualifications as follows:

- level IB and IC would contain qualifications for adults who were working towards functional literacy and numeracy,
- levels IIA and IIB would accommodate the 2-year and 1-year vocational training certificate respectively,
- levels VIA and VIB would accommodate the 4-year and 3-year Bachelors respectively,
- levels VIIA and VIIB would accommodate the Masters and Specialist Study respectively,

The third column is for the certified courses in professional studies and vocational skills at different levels that are offered and/or funded by the employers, the Chambers, Ministries, the Employment Agency, employers, the Agency for Entrepreneurship, the Macedonian Training Association, private trainers, Civil Sector Organizations (NGOs). The NQF should enable organisations and individuals to relate their qualifications to each other with reference to the levels regardless of the means by which they have been attained. Finally, the National Qualification System and Framework in combination with the assessment and validation of non – formal and informal learning promotes flexible learning pathway, enabling individuals to transfer their learning outcomes from one learning context to another.

The introduction of the quality assurance process will improve and foster the credibility of qualifications and the transparency of the processes associated with them to national stakeholders, but also to international agencies and organizations which may

give recognition to the qualifications of migrant students and workers. The three folded quality assurance process proposed for the Macedonian NQF is refers to the quality of the qualifications which are entered in the framework, the certificates awarded for learners who achieve the qualifications and the processes which lead to certification. Both, the qualifications in the NQF and the institutions which can assess learners and/or issue certificates for these qualifications will be verified¹ under the set of criteria that are developed. The management of these quality processes will take place at nine stages.

As seen from the strategic management perspective, the overall management should take the form of a commission, council or other body capable of looking after the interests of all areas of education and training in the country whose membership include the Ministries of Education and the Economy, the Ministry of Labour or the Employment Agency, employers and unions, and possibly other agencies and stakeholders.

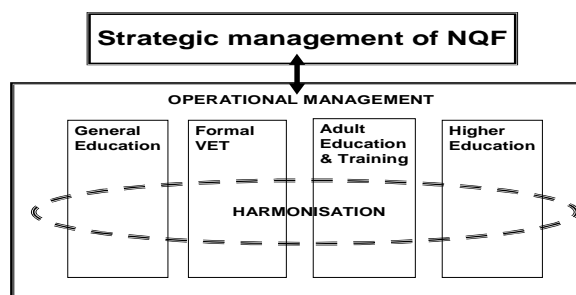


Figure 1. Strategic and operational levels of the Macedonian

Source: TA to the MoES on Life – Long Learning (2009), Ministry of Education and Science of Macedonia, (2009)

1.1.2. Assessment And Validation Of Non-Formal And Informal Learning

The establishment of flexible learning pathways that will enable the individuals to progress within and across different learning contexts and different education and training types is a priority in the Macedonian life – long learning strategies. Measures focus on transitional points within the formal system and those focusing towards formal systems (Kuzmanoska, 2011). This is precisely the ideological core of the life - long learning argument. The huge reservoir of non-formal and in-formal learning that gives the basis for important parts of the national economy needs to be made visible, since the intention is not merely easing the use of existing competences but also improving the quality of these. Methodologies for assessment and recognition of non-formal and in-formal learning are often regarded as tools for quality improvement, covering not only single enterprises but whole sections of the economy. However, the step from intention to implementation is almost a quantum leap. Legal and political moves, the latter is the government programme (2006), the new legislation targeting adult education and the life-long learning strategy in respect to the former, made through the educational reforms of varying scope, pave the way for the actual introduction of assessment and recognition process.

The activities have to be monitored during the implementation phase as to indicate whether the positive intentions are

¹ In the higher education area the verification is referred to as accreditation.

genuinely translated into practices which actually affect and serve individuals and enterprises.

The overall picture regarding the past, current and future events setting the change of lifestyles within a broader societal agenda has changed the expectations that fewer people have a single occupation in their lifetime, and increasingly there will be *serial careers* or *portfolio of careers*. A portfolio lifestyle includes work, learning, home, community and leisure pursuits in complex and overlapping patterns, and as its best offers the opportunity to tailor these to particular interest and priorities (Cooper, 1996).

If there are many influences ranging from changes in the personal priorities to economic and political changes, and open opportunities which are at least uncertain and perhaps quite unpredictable, we can interpret a successful strategy for learning and work as *flexible planning*. These circumstances mirror the adaptation to new priorities, coping with setbacks and seizing new opportunities and echo the plans of individuals for a range of possible outcomes and a range of routes through which the aims in life can be achieved. The learning culture comes at the forefront when the organization recognizes the benefit to encourage and support learning beyond the needs of the workplace. Life – long learners progressing through portfolio lifestyles, need to build on learning already taken, to select the exact learning necessary, without unnecessary additions, and to fit this alongside many other activities in their portfolio lifestyles (Cooper, 1996). In parallel, the response of the providers of education and training has to be developing flexible learning opportunities.

A remedy to make up for the deficiencies of life - long learning is the transformation of the funding structure of post-compulsory learning and the unified system of funding for adult education and training. Provision of the establishment of the Learning Bank (Commission on Social Justice/Institute for Public Policy Research, 1991), would be enabling everybody to have an access to life – long learning. Although still an idea in an infancy phase, the functioning of the Learning Bank will be challenged with the task to counter balance the main features:

- Equity

Availability to learners throughout their career span with funding on an equitable basis, without discrimination between different types of learning;

- Buildings on credits

Modular credit based achievement structure provides the funding structure of the Learning Bank thus allowing mobility and choice;

- Individual learning accounts

The Individual Learning Account's dominant strength is that would overcome the existing impasse between different parties regarding the funding of the training while at the same time enabling individuals and other interested parties like employers and stakeholders to contribute with shared costs.

- Partners in funding

Promoting partnership in the funding of learning, between the state (including perhaps the “leveraging” of private finance), employers and individuals.

1.1.3. Life - long learning guidance

Macedonian estimations are that the average level of life-long learning by 2010 should reach 8-10% for the adults (age group 25-64). Participation in lifelong learning is central to the achievement of the Lisbon objectives hence relevant national authorities should in particular promote the participation in lifelong learning of population which have hitherto been weakly represented (Kuzmanoska et al., 2007).

The country is embarking on setting up a life-long guidance system whilst the development of national cross-sectoral feedback mechanisms urges to entire engagement of the Government itself, employers as well as other social partners and experts with relevant expertise.

1.2. Transnational mobility

The Parliament has passed the Law for establishing the National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility in September 2007. The National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility is a newly formed legal entity in charge to carry out Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 consisting of several sub-programmes: Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Gruntving, Jean Monet, and the Transversal Programme. Participation in these EU programmes will become the main driver of mobility of learners. The financing of the National Agency is provided from the Budget of Macedonia and from the European Commission, in accordance to the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the European Commission.

2. REAPPRAISAL OF THE FLEXILIFE OF THE GRADUATES

Confronted with the considerable uncertainty and instability regarding employment prospects, the current emphasis on continuous professional development tends to translate into the reality of education and training instead of jobs, of “learning now, jobs later” (Shor, 1986:131). This is the best policy to address the constant and above all unpredictable change, whereas there is no certainty over what kind of jobs, what kind of skills will be required and available in the future, such training schemes are seen as blurring the troubled links between education and employment (Shor, 1986:114). There is another hidden dimension that needs to be addressed, workers that are more highly educated now compared to any other time in the history. Under the circumstances when knowledge and skills are entering the picture thus contributing to intellectual, psychological, geographical mobility and flexibility, what would be the flexilife of the graduates in terms of overabundance of graduate – educated members of the workforce and the upcoming, rising tide of overeducated and underemployed graduates?

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