



INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS IN LATVIA

Study Report

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
AHLEI	American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute
UNO	United Nations Organization
USA	United States of America
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training <i>(Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle)</i>
CIDESCO	Association of Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology <i>(Comité International d'Esthétique et de Cosmétologie)</i>
COC	Certificate of Competency
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IKVD	State Education Quality Service <i>(Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests)</i>
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
ITEC	International Therapy Examination Council
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia
LQF	Latvian Qualifications Framework
CoM	Cabinet of Ministers of Republic of Latvia
SEC	Sectoral Expert Council
NQF	<i>National qualifications framework</i>
SeaTALK	Online platform for maritime English resources
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
STCW	International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers
TedQual	Certificate of World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

In this study the term of qualification is explained regarding the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (April 2008) – formal outcome of an assessment and validation process, which is obtained when a competent body determines that a person has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.

Increasingly diplomas and certificates (qualifications) are awarded at international level – outside the national education systems. Globalisation and cross-border mobility of citizens have urged various international associations, large corporations, international learning centres, as well as other organizations to design education and/or examinations standards in their sector; thus, ensuring that the acquired knowledge, skills and competences are assessed according common requirements in different countries.

Similarly there are enterprises and education institutions in Latvia, which have issued international qualifications for more than 20 years, e.g. Baltic Computer Academy that was the first this kind of education and testing centre in the field of information technologies in the Baltic States, and the second – in the territory of the former Soviet Union. These “non-state” education documents, which have a certain range of users and functions, may serve as an alternative/additional choice for education documents awarded within national formal education system. This situation was caused by several circumstances; the results of Cedefop’s study (2010)¹ indicate that the following aspects facilitate changes² in the procedures of certification, content and functions of qualifications:

- Globalisation of economy and labour market;
- Development of existing qualifications systems through the European level cooperation and Exchange of good practice;
- Development of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) and international qualifications systems, elaboration of level descriptors;
- Increase in migration flow;
- Demand for narrow specialisation;
- Increasing number of international corporations;
- Necessity for a common understanding of particular qualification;
- Global studies and analyses of qualifications;
- Shift towards learning outcomes based approach.

Another Cedefop’s study (2012) focusing on the international qualifications offers justification why society – including employers and employees – needs different forms (scale) of qualifications, i.e. more frequently citizens need qualifications, which may be used in more than one country; while employers should be able to evaluate the level of candidate’s knowledge, skills and competences – whether it corresponds to particular requirements. The demand for such qualifications may be observed in the fields of information and communication technologies and transportation in particular. The international organisations and sectoral associations already have significant role in designing and issuing qualifications in the mentioned sectors; as a result knowledge, skills and competences needed for a profession are determined³.

¹ Cedefop. *Changing Qualifications: A Review of Qualifications Policies and Practices*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Union, 2010.

² Traditionally the development, provision and awarding of qualifications has been responsibility of national education authorities, more frequently – of national education providers.

³ Cedefop. *International Qualifications*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012.

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Data of European Commission (December 2014) show that:

- 38 countries participate in the development of European Qualifications Framework (EQF);
- 25 NQF have been established⁴;
- 23 countries have referenced their NQFs to the EQF;
- 30 countries still actively organise the referencing process.

Countries that have well-established NQFs, e.g. United Kingdom, Ireland, Malta, organise or have organised revision of their qualifications frameworks in order to ensure their correspondence to changing requirements of society and education/labour market. Regarding the experience obtained during the development of EQF, one of the action priorities determined by the EQF Advisory Group is the external dimension of EQF – cooperation with countries outside the European Union and enlargement of range of qualifications imparted in the EQF. To explore the potential development of the EQF (and, thus, of the NQFs), the European Commission currently evaluates possibilities to include the international qualifications in the EQF.

From the very beginning, the inclusion of international qualifications in the EQF and NQFs was stated by the Article 12 of Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the EQF (2008)⁵: “[...] The European Qualifications Framework should, moreover, enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to a common European reference point and thus show the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems. [...]” Therefore, the EQF Advisory Group set up a working group, which explores sectoral international qualifications – with the particular focus on the sector of welding – awarded in several countries (first studies were carried out in summer 2013). The working group intends to clarify how sectoral international qualifications could be referenced to the EQF.

National qualifications framework in Latvia was designed and referenced to the EQF in 2011, on ground of the amendments (5.10.2010) to the Cabinet of Ministers (CoM) Regulations No. 990 “Regulations on the Latvian education classification” (2.12.2008). Since referencing of national qualifications is a complicated process, at present only formal qualifications are included in the Latvian Qualifications Framework (LQF), as these qualifications have more precise legal framework and stakeholders have agreed on their level descriptors of learning outcomes. As qualifications frameworks should impart various qualifications obtained in different contexts, the Academic Information Centre (AIC) decided to conduct first analysis concerning the opportunities to include the international qualifications, which are issued in Latvia, in the LQF.

The **aim** of this study was to explore:

- Concept of international qualifications;
- Which international qualifications are issued in Latvia;
- Whether international qualifications should be referenced to the LQF.

In order to achieve the aim, the following **research questions** were formulated:

- What are international qualifications?
 - Definition;
 - Purpose;

⁴ Some countries, e.g. United Kingdom, have established several NQFs.

⁵ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, 23 April 2008.

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- Functions;
 - Translation of the term in Latvian.
 - Whether and how international qualifications are reflected in the legal regulations of the Republic of Latvia?
 - Whether and where international qualifications are reflected in the Latvian education system?
 - What is the experience of education institutions, private enterprises and education centres regarding international qualifications?
 - What are advantages and drawbacks of international qualifications?
 - Should Latvia include international qualifications in the LQF?

METHODOLOGY

The succeeding data collection methods were used in this study:

- Analysis of literature and legal regulations (definition, findings of previous research, present legal framework);
- Partly structured interviews (see Appendix 1) with the representatives of education institutions and education/testing centres, which provide international qualifications (their experience as regards international qualifications). In total 15 interviews were conducted about international qualifications from various sectors, e.g., languages, welding, information and communication technologies;
- Online survey for the representatives of Sectoral Export Councils (SEC) about their experience concerning international qualifications (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire was completed by nine representatives of SECs from various sectors, e.g. mechanical engineering and metalworking; tourism; hospitality and beauty; and power industry;
- Discussion of focus groups on the advantages and drawbacks, significance of international qualifications in the Latvian education system (results are outlined in Appendices 3 and 4). Discussion arranged in two working groups was attended by 79 representatives of education institutions, which issue international qualifications, employers' organisations, sectoral associations, higher education institutions, state education authorities.

CONCEPT OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION

The analysis of available literature and legal documents on international qualifications (*starpautiskā kvalifikācija*) indicates that only publication in Latvian outlining in more detail the concept of international qualifications is Cedefop's study "International Qualifications (2012) translated by the Academic Information Centre. This fact proves the necessity of study, in order to obtain complete overview – what international qualifications may be acquired in Latvia.

The concept of international qualification is not defined in the Latvian legal documents, as well as it is not used there. As a result, the international qualifications are not specifically highlighted in the Latvian education system.

The term of qualification is mentioned in the Latvian legal documents in the context of professional activity. As regards education system, usually the term "professional qualification" (*profesionālā kvalifikācija*) is applied to describe a document certifying education in particular (vocational/professional) education sector.

Education Law (1998)⁶ defines the following terms:

- Professional qualification – evaluation of educational and professional proficiency with respect to a particular profession, confirmed by documentary evidence; and
- Professional qualification document – a document that attests to professional qualifications and grants the right to apply for a position in a specific profession at a level in conformity with the qualifications, or to obtain relevant certificate for employment in private practice.

Whereas, Vocational Education Law (1999)⁷ stipulates levels of professional qualifications – theoretical and practical preparedness, which provides an opportunity to perform work corresponding to a certain level of complexity and responsibility.

Law "On the Recognition of Regulated Professions and Professional Qualification" (2001), Article 34⁸ enlists professions, which content is determined by international agreements, as well as professions, which minimum requirements are state by the EU. This law also explains the succeeding concepts:

- Professional qualification certificate – a document issued by an authorised institution in accordance with the procedures specified by law, which certifies the professional qualification or specific level of the professional qualification of its owner, or certifies that its owner has successfully fulfilled the certification requirements for the acquisition of a specific profession or professional specialisation (including work involving new materials, machinery and technology);
- Aptitude test of qualification – an assessment of the professional knowledge of the applicant performed by institutions, which issue the certificates of the recognition of a professional qualification in the regulated professions. This test aims at evaluating the abilities of the applicant to work in the regulated profession in the Republic of Latvia.

The white paper "Raising attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners within vocational education quality assurance" (2009) prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) provides definition of professional qualification – evaluation certified by a document of the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences relevant to a certain specialisation⁹.

⁶ Saeima, Education Law, approved on 29.10.1998, in force 1.06.1999, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=50759>.

⁷ Saeima, Vocational Education Law, approved on 10.06.1999, in force 14.07.1999, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=20244>.

⁸ Saeima, law "On the Recognition of Regulated Professions and Professional Qualification", approved on 20.06.2001, in force 20.07.2001, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=26021>.

⁹ Ministry of Education and Science. Raising attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners within vocational education quality assurance. White paper. Riga: Ministry of Education and Science. 2009, page 5, http://izm.izm.gov.lv/upload_file/prof_konsepcija_ar-MK-rik-629.pdf.

Frequently the term of qualification is used in a wider sense – when speaking of education obtained or professional competence possessed by an individual, i.e., person's ability to perform certain professional activities. As Bergan (2007) emphasises, qualification consists of complicated structure, because every employee, apart from particular professional skills, should master general knowledge, skills and competences¹⁰.

English term "qualification" mostly imparts the wider sense of the concept – it refers not only to the education document, but also to the relevant context, i.e. the acquired education programme. For an instance, Bergan (2007) writes that qualification describes of what a person knows, understands and is able to do¹¹, which, in fact, corresponds to the definition of learning outcomes. Thus, the English term "qualification" cannot be always translated in Latvian as education certifying document (diploma or certificate).

In accordance with the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the EQF (2008)¹² and recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the ECVET (2009)¹³, the concept of qualification is described in a wider context – qualification is formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent institution determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. The discussion concerning the concept of qualification has risen in the recent years, due to the increasing interest in the development of a common, learning outcomes based qualifications framework in Europe^{14 15 16}. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do when completing a certain period of learning and they are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. Hence, in the context of EQF, term of qualification is related to all the types of education (vocational/professional, general and academic education), all the stages of education (basic, secondary and higher education), and all the forms of education (formal, non-formal and informal).

The definition of qualification proposed by the European Parliament and of the Council is formulated for large context, and it comprises several elements¹⁷:

- Learning outcomes – qualification as a diploma or certificate should demonstrate what can be expected from its holder, what should they know, understand and be able to do (what knowledge, skills and competences an individual possesses);
- Assessment and validation process – qualification is awarded on ground of clear learners' assessment procedure and criteria, which reveal knowledge, skills and competences acquired by individual learner;
- Need for standards – standards (occupational and education) have an essential meaning in terms of obtaining and awarding qualification, because they determine what a learner should know, understand and be able to do. Standards may be considered as a foundation for the entire process of acquiring a qualification. Standards also state the significance of qualification in labour/education market, as they define the level of attainable learning outcomes;

¹⁰ Bergan, Sj. *Qualifications – Introduction to a Concept. Council of Europe higher education series No. 6. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007.*

¹¹ See previous footnote.

¹² *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, 23 April 2008.*

¹³ *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, 18 June 2009*

¹⁴ Bergan, Sj. *Qualifications – Introduction to a Concept. Council of Europe higher education series No. 6. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007.*

¹⁵ Coles, M., Werquin, P. *Qualifications systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning. OECD Publishing, 2007.*

¹⁶ *Cedefop. The Dynamics of Qualifications: Defining and Renewing Occupational and Educational Standards. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.*

¹⁷ *Cedefop. International Qualifications. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012.*

- Recognition process – value of qualification depends on the fact whether it is officially validated and recognized (e.g. qualification entitles for further education or employment). Recognition process appears to be the final step in education, because it certifies that education process has been implemented according to specific requirements and qualification can be trusted;
- Role of competent body – an institution authorised to issue qualifications.

Since the analysis of literature did not provide precisely formulated definition for the concept of international qualification in Latvia, during this study the succeeding explanation was composed: **international qualifications** are qualifications, which standards and assessment requirements are designed by an international institution, organisation, or enterprise with the aim to conduct trustful and internationally comparable evaluation of candidate's knowledge, skills and competences; the right to provide learning activities and/or testing is assigned to the institutions, which capacity has been ascertained through a certain accreditation process, in more than one country.

Cedefop's study on international qualifications (2012)¹⁸ points out that international qualifications are awarded by a large range of bodies that have different objectives and functions. Therefore, international qualifications should be described according to five aspects:

- Purpose – why specific confirmation of individual's knowledge, skills and competences regarding particular requirements is necessary, e.g. to obtain right to perform certain tasks, work with particular technologies, or work in specific professions; in some cases these requirements of international qualifications are intended for protecting interests of specific professional associations or unions;
- Type – what is the volume of qualification, i.e. whether individual has acquired full qualification (e.g., initial education has been completed and right to work in a certain profession has been obtained) or partial qualification/separate module (e.g., a specialisation has been mastered, skills have been updated), and how long time qualification are valid, because international qualifications may be awarded for life or for a certain period of time; therefore, their holders periodically have to certify their knowledge, skills and competences;
- Coverage – where qualification may be used (geographical and institutional scale);
- Competent body – which institution may award qualifications, i.e. international organisations, international sectoral associations, international enterprises, European institutions (e.g., European Aviation Safety Agency);
- Currency – what aspects prove the value of the obtained qualification that is determined by several aspects, e.g. learning outcomes attained by a graduate, qualification awarding body, information about learning/teaching process and learning outcomes, type of education quality assurance, method for learner's assessment, education and/or occupational standards, regularity of qualification update.

¹⁸ See previous footnote.

In terms of this study the respondents' views concerning potential definition of international qualification. The respondents' replies included both general statements about international qualifications and specific features of international qualifications. Several aspects featuring international qualifications that were mentioned by the respondents were similar to those outlined in Cedefop's study (2012), e.g. characterisation of international qualification designer (competent body), requirements for education and testing centres (currency). The features of international qualifications named by the respondents may be divided as follows:

- **What is designer of international qualification?** International corporation, international institution, international sectoral association, international education centre (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Types of international qualification designers



- **Who makes decision about awarding international qualification?** National experts, certified representatives of qualification designer, designer of qualification.
- **What is the purpose of using international qualification?** Professional – professional development, promoting competitiveness and career progression; academic – for continuation of education in other country; quality brand – sectoral confirmation for the quality of implemented education programmes.
- **What qualities does standard of international qualification have?** Common in entire world with unified assessment criteria. Topical because formal education cannot always adapt to rapidly changing industry. Having clear learning outcomes to be demonstrated by candidates. Including measurable and clearly defined level of knowledge in rather narrow speciality.
- **What are requirements for the providers¹⁹?** Requirements determined by a qualification designer or producer: regarding education process, testing procedures, equipment and tools, teaching staff, work safety. Introduction of unified and precise procedures is highly important; the procedures are common across the globe and monitored regularly (i.e. through the external quality assurance) by qualification designer. Frequently there is requirement to separate education process from the assessment (examination).

¹⁹ In this report term "provider" refers to education and/or testing centres, education institutions, sectoral associations and other bodies that offer and/or award international qualifications.

Figure 2. Bodies involved in designing, providing and awarding international qualifications



Designer of international qualification regarding the needs of sector elaborates requirements for the acquisition of particular international qualification. The designer of international qualification frequently also provides content, form and technical implementation of examination, which providers arrange for the candidates – including testing centres – in various countries (see Figure 2).

The functions of providers may be varied: first, only the technical provision of examination (necessary equipment for examination); second, implementation of courses to help candidates in preparing for examination. Development of examination tasks may be assigned to a mediator, e.g. in the sectors of information technologies, languages, namely the designer of international qualification elaborates specific standard, but mediator (e.g., Prometric, Pearson VUE, ETS) ensures elaboration of relevant exam content and its implementation. The provider in their country ensures a secure opportunity for candidates to prepare for and take the examination according to the requirements of international qualification designer. The procedure for awarding international qualification varies by sector, and it is determined by the designer of international qualification. The responsibility of issuing qualification document lies with the designer of international qualification or their appointed representative (e.g. a provider).

RESULTS OF STUDY ON INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Course of study

The interviews with the representatives of education institutions and education/testing centres (providers²⁰) were conducted in autumn 2014.

Initially through studies of available literature and legal documents, potential education institutions and education/testing centres that could provide international qualification were identified. These bodies were contacted to acquire more precise information about their qualification offer, and regarding this intelligence respondents for interviews were selected. To collect data, partly structured interviews were used (see Annex 1). Interview consists of 15 questions, which focus on the following topics: information about interviewee, definition of international qualification, characterisation of the international qualification provided by the interviewee's institution, procedure for obtaining and awarding international qualifications, advantages and disadvantages of international qualification etc.

In addition, online survey of the representatives from Sectoral Expert Councils (representatives of SECs) was carried out in order to obtain views not only from providers of international qualifications, but also from consumers. The questions of questionnaire were designed similarly to the interviews for a better comparison of data. The questionnaire comprises 11 questions concerning the succeeding themes: information about respondent, how frequently respondents deal with international qualifications, their meaning and use in labour market, differences between qualifications in formal education system and international qualification, advantages and disadvantages of international qualification etc.

On November 14, 2014, Academic Information Centre arranged conference "Opening up the National Qualifications Frameworks for International Qualifications" to present initial results of this study and start discussion about the meaning of international qualifications in the Latvian education and labour market, as well as necessity to include them in the LQF.

The following questions were formulated for the discussion:

- What are international qualifications and what is their meaning in education and labour market?
- Should Latvia reference international qualification to the LQF?
- What is the most suitable solution for including international qualification in the LQF?
For instance:
 - Examinations in formal education – equal to international qualifications;
 - International qualifications as a part of formal education system
 - Referencing the system of international qualifications to the LQF and EQF.

²⁰ In this report term "provider" refers to education and/or testing centres, education institutions, sectoral associations and other bodies that offer and/or award international qualifications.

Information about the respondents

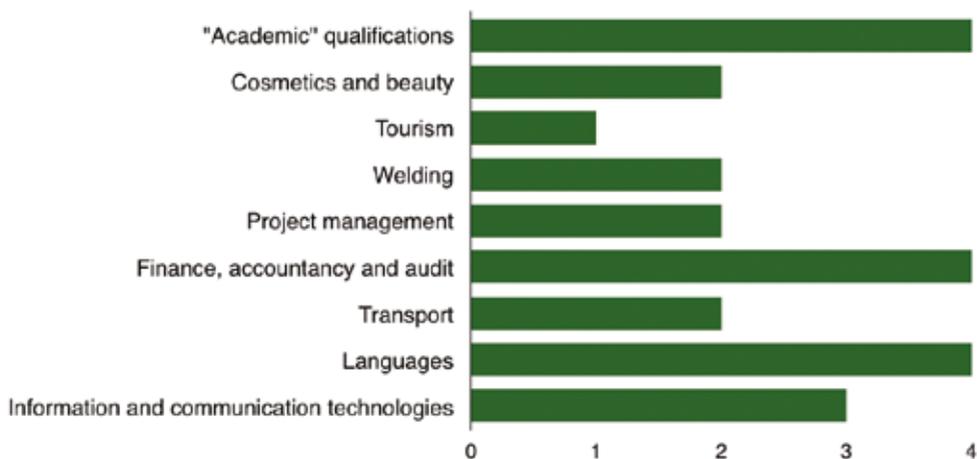
Providers

In total 15 partly structured interviews were conducted, of which:

- 6 were with the representatives of higher education institutions;
- 2 were with the representatives of vocational education institutions;
- 1 was with the representative of general education institutions;
- 6 were with the representatives of education and/or testing centres that provide one or several international qualifications.

The interviewed providers offer international qualifications of various sectors, which in terms of this study were divided into nine categories, e.g. languages, welding information and communication technologies (see Figure 3). The providers included in the study deal with international qualifications in several sectors. The "academic" qualifications mentioned in the illustration refer to the international qualifications, which provide opportunity or entitle their holder to study abroad, e.g. International Baccalaureate. The most popular international qualifications provided by the interviewees' institution in Latvia are listed in the Appendix 5.

Figure 3. The sectors represented by the interviewed providers



More than a half of the interviewed providers have worked with international qualifications for more than 10 years (see Table 1), which indicates – such service has been offered to the Latvian society for comparatively long period. One third of providers point out that the opportunities to acquire international qualification are ensured rather recently (1-3 years). The results of interviews prove the fact that this issue has become more crucial as new actors appear in the market of international qualifications.

Table 1. Experience duration of the interviewed providers regarding international qualifications (frequency and %)

Duration of experience	Frequency	%
More than 10 years	8	53%
1-3 years	5	33%
4-6 years	1	7%
7-10 years	1	7%

Representatives of Sectoral Expert Councils

The questionnaire was completed by nine representatives of SECs, who represent six SECs:

- Metal working and mechanical engineering industry;
- Chemical industry and related industries – chemistry, pharmacy, biotechnology, environment (2 respondents);
- Business, financial, accountancy, administration industry (wholesale trade, retail trade and business science) (2 respondents);
- Tourism and beauty industry;
- Printing and publishing industry, paper and paper products manufacturing and computer design;
- Power industry (2 respondents).

Although international qualifications have been available in Latvia for more than a decade, in several sectors their popularity is rather limited. The data of survey with the representatives from SECs shows that the majority of respondents have experience of more than ten years (see Table 2).

Table 2. Duration of the SEC representatives' work experience in the sector from (frequency and %)

Duration of experience	Frequency	%
More than 20 years	4	44%
11-15 years	2	22%
1-3 years	1	11%
4-5 years	1	11%
16-20 years	1	11%
6-10 years	0	0%

Two thirds of the representatives of SECs seldom work with international qualifications, the remaining one third of respondents indicate that they have never encountered with international qualifications (see Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency of encountering international qualifications in the work by the representatives of SECs (frequency and %)

Frequency	Frequency of reply	%
Seldom (once a year)	6	67%
Never	3	33%
Regularly (once a month)	0	0%
Often (one a week)	0	0%
Constantly	0	0%

Participants of discussion

The conference was attended by the representatives of institutions that deal with international qualifications, higher education institutions, state education authorities, as well as of national coordination points for EQF from other countries. In total there were 79 participants in the conference.

CHARACTERISATION OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AWARDED IN LATVIA

The question concerning the international qualifications offered by the interviewed providers helped in clarifying the purpose and type of these qualifications. Namely, justification for the necessity to obtain the relevant international qualifications (purpose) and the volume of qualification or duration of education (type) was explored. See Table 4.

Table 4. Providers: types of international qualifications (frequency and %)

Purpose	Frequency	%
Entitles to perform a certain professional activity	6	20%
Entitles to enrol higher education institutions abroad	5	17%
Quality brand	4	13%

Type	Frequency	%
Entire education programme or large part of it complies with international requirements	5	17%
Internationally recognised education courses or examination of narrow speciality	4	13%
Examination in narrow speciality, with the results that are internationally recognised	4	13%
Study module/course that is integrated in higher education study programme	2	7%

Purpose

The purpose of international qualifications awarded by various private education/testing centres mainly is ensuring additional right and advantages in labour market, e.g. in the field of information technologies, project management, finance management, accountancy, audit, as well as in welding. Also education institutions, which issue education documents included in the formal Latvian education system²¹, offer international qualifications for such purpose (additional right and advantages in labour market), e.g., tourism, welding, as well as provides education for obtaining international qualifications in the transport sector.

Most frequently formal education institutions obtain right to award international qualifications with the aim to certify the operational quality of education institution, i.e. the education institution receives a "quality brand". In the most cases the acquisition of such right involves accreditation process (quality assessment) conducted by an international sectoral association in accordance with set quality criteria. The results of interviews show that such quality brands have been obtained, e.g. in the fields of tourism, information technologies and finance. Often education and examination content and form is comparatively little regulated for these international qualifications, as emphasis is put on the quality of education and examination procedure, as well as on quality of education institution management that should correspond to the determined requirements.

Usually education and testing centres (fewer formal education institutions) offer international qualifications, which entitle their holder or improves their chances enrolling higher education institutions abroad (so called "academic" qualifications). Mostly it is related to, first, certifying language knowledge at a certain level, e.g. by obtaining language skills evaluations of TOEFL²² and IELTS²³. Second, the main purpose of international qualifications may be ensuring their holders an opportunity to study in a higher education institution abroad, e.g. International Baccalaureate programmes (provided by general education institutions).

Type

The results of interviews on the types of international qualifications awarded by the providers prove that private education and testing centres offer education courses and relevant final examinations of rather narrow speciality. The providers note that to acquire some international qualifications, candidates may apply only for the examination without attending preparatory courses. Thus, the candidates perform self-assessment to decide whether they possess necessary knowledge and skills for passing the examination.

Diploma of International Baccalaureate in general secondary education may be obtained after two-year course in the last grades of secondary school. Meanwhile, the international qualifications provided by higher education institutions are integrated in education programmes as one of the modules, which may be selected by students, or entire education programme has been designed in accordance with the international requirements. Adapting entire education programme to the international requirements is characteristic to education programmes leading to a qualification in a regulated profession listed in the law "On the Recognition of Regulated Professions and Professional Qualification", article 34²⁴; their content is stipulated by international agreements.

²¹ Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No. 990 "Regulations on the Latvian education classification", in force on 06.12.2008 (last amendments on 26.09.2014), <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=184810>.

²² The Test of English as a Foreign Language (developed in the USA).

²³ The International English Language Testing System (developed in Great Britain).

²⁴ Saeima, law "On the Recognition of Regulated Professions and Professional Qualification", approved on 20.06.2001, in force 20.07.2001, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=26021>.

REQUIREMENTS OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

According to the results of interviews with the providers, requirements to acquire international qualifications set by their designers are varied. The designers of international qualifications may determine content of both education and examination, or only for the examination. In the latter case preparatory course prior examination is not compulsory requirement at all for a candidate to apply for an examination, e.g. when obtaining international qualifications in the field of information technologies and languages.

When the content of education course is regulated, the requirements differ in terms of their scale. The designer of international qualification may determine both the content of compulsory education course and elaborate recommendation on a part of content for distance learning, e.g. through learning aids (AHLEI²⁵, International Baccalaureate, ACCA²⁶). The results of interviews reveal that in parallel to the educational content elaborated by the designer of international qualification, the requirements outlined in the Latvian occupational and/or state education standards are followed (e.g., CIBESCO, ITEC and International Baccalaureate). Thus, learners/candidates are ensured an opportunity to acquire both international qualification and international qualification.

Table 5. Providers: occupational and/or state education standards, which are used for elaborating the education courses of international qualifications (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Applied standards	Frequency	%
Standard developed by a designer/association	11	42%
National level standard	8	31%
Standards developed at European level	4	15%
Other international standards (ISO)	3	12%

Development of technologies, especially in the sector of information technologies, facilitates changes in the content of education course and examination regarding the decisions made by the international associations or designer of relevant international qualification. The content of language education is impacted by the "Common European framework of reference for languages"²⁷. While the content and procedure for education course and examination in the sectors related to technologies is designed according to the requirements of the relevant ISO standard (e.g. in welding), as well as Cabinet of Ministers regulations (e.g. in welding CoM regulation No. 588²⁸). When the purpose of international qualification is awarding a quality brand to the education content elaborated by the education institutions (e.g., Euro-Inf Quality Label, study module "Finance management" certified by the SQA, TedQual), the content of both education course and examination is stipulated by the education institution and relevant state education and/or occupational standards.

²⁵ AHLEI – American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute.

²⁶ ACCA – Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

²⁷ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp.

²⁸ Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No. 588. "Procedures for the certification of welders and fault detectors in the regulated sphere", in force 15.09.2006, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=140191>.

COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION USAGE

The interviewed providers mostly consider that particular international qualification is recognised around the globe, but not all countries are represented in the relevant international association, as well as not all countries apply the specific technology. Therefore, some limits exist to the coverage of international qualification usage. The results of interviews indicate that as regards the coverage of international qualification usage, it should be taken into account that:

- Leading countries or world regions, e.g. Europe or USA, may stipulate different requirements for qualifications in several sectors (e.g., welding, audit, language education);
- In some cases candidates may select specialisation for international qualification for the needs of particular country or region (e.g., ACCA);
- Qualifications may be connected with a specific country (e.g., ITEC, study module "Finance management" certified by the SQA) or education institution and its network; thus, such qualifications may be recognised in the country, but may be sufficiently popular to ensure some advantage for its holder when competing in the labour markets of other countries.

ADMITTANCE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CANDIDATES OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION

Regarding the replies of providers, in the selection of candidates for international qualification several aspects are considered simultaneously (see Table 6). The most frequent requirement for admittance (in 40% cases) is level of previous education, yet in 13% cases the candidates do not need to certify formally their ability to comply with the requirements for education course and/or examination, as they have to perform self-assessment. Thus, the candidate evaluates their knowledge and applies for taking examination.

Table 6. Providers: admittance requirements (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Admittance requirements	Frequency	%
Particular level of previous education	12	40%
Interview, selection, piloting work	6	20%
Self-assessment	4	13%
Professional experience	3	10%
Level of previous education and professional experience	3	10%
Level of previously obtained international qualification	2	7%

ASSESSMENT METHODS OF LEARNERS' ACHIEVEMENTS

The providers' replies reveal that to assess the candidates of international qualifications the applied assessment methods equally are used both face-to-face and online. In some cases, in addition to final examination, candidates have to participate in a compulsory qualification practice outside education institution.

According to the results of interviews, the providers represent sectors that consider practical skill examination to be highly important through performing tasks in special laboratory or work environment, e.g. welding, transport, information technologies, cosmetology, as well as often in language tests. Frequently practical tests are joined with theoretical tasks in the foresaid sectors. The candidates should obtain positive assessment in the both parts of examination. The course of examination often is filmed, as a result the designer of international qualification may evaluate the candidates, confirm the assessment of local experts or at random check the quality of examination procedures. The qualification of teaching staff may be also checked through the video records of lectures.

Table 7. Providers: learners' assessment methods (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Assessment methods	Frequency	%
Examination on theory and practical tasks on the site	8	33%
Online tests	5	21%
Online test on theory and practical tasks	3	13%
Written examination on the site	3	13%
Compulsory practice	3	13%
Complex online tasks	2	8%

The results of interviews reveal that frequently online tests are used. In most cases these examinations include problem solving or situation analysis tasks. Online tests mostly are corrected by the designer of international qualification, i.e., relevant online application or medium institution that provides technical support for the testing (see Figure 2).

When tests are corrected in Latvia, the process is conducted in several levels, i.e. each work is checked by several persons. In case of written paper tests, frequently the works are scanned and sent to the designer of international qualification for an independent evaluation.

The providers highlight strict requirements for the candidates in terms of taking examinations, e.g., when tests are taken online, it is not possible to download the work repeatedly, as well as after unsuccessful examination the candidates cannot apply for repetition at once. Limitation to the duration of period between first and second try varies by sector. When a candidate is caught cheating, they are denied to ever obtain the international qualification.



The elaboration of examination tasks is arranged centrally in connection with the relevant sector and its latest demands. The updating of requirements for international qualification is continuous process; therefore, education and/or testing centres and their teaching staff need to be flexible.

When acquisition of international qualification is integrated in a formal education programme, there are examinations in course of studies (online tests) and assignments of other type, e.g. group work, tasks in learning simulator, research paper or even social activities. In the conclusion of studies, the candidates take both examination elaborated at education institutional or national level for obtaining formal qualification and examination developed by the designer of international qualification for obtaining the international qualification. As mentioned before, to master an international qualification, candidates may be required to participate in training practice outside education institution, e.g., maritime activity, cosmetology.

Regarding the results of interviews, when the designer of international qualification, in addition to the examination, has foreseen education course, the providers use teaching aids prepared by the designer of international qualification, or they prepare the materials according to the set requirements, or work with the combination of both kinds of materials.

DOCUMENTS CERTIFYING THE OBTAINED INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION

The results of interviews indicate that in majority cases the succeeding documents certifying an international qualification are issued:

- Certificates, and perhaps report of qualification holder's results (certificate supplement), including the description of mastered skills, e.g., in welding;
- Diplomas that are awarded for acquiring education programmes that are large in terms of time, full (not only their part), e.g. diploma of International Baccalaureate, CIDESCO. In such cases parallel to the international qualification, Latvian formal qualification is issued too.

The providers mention two the most popular ways how the successful candidates receive documents certifying their international qualification:

- The documents are sent via mail;
- The copies of documents may be printed by the holders themselves from the database of the designer of international qualification.

The results of study reveal that the manner how the information about international qualification holders is stored may be different. The register of international qualification holders is hosted by the providers at national level, still in the most instances there is a common register supervised and owned by the designer of international qualification. The latter example ensures a unified list of international qualification holders; thus, everyone may confirm the authenticity of education documents. As a result, education document in paper format is not the major confirmation for the obtained international qualification – the most important is the number of international qualification allocated in the online register. The input of data for the common register is ensured centrally, yet when the results of examination are primary evaluated at the education institution level, data is provided by the education institution with access codes to the global database.

One of the interviewees pointed out that, in addition to the documents certifying qualification, graduates are provided with rules on using a quality brand. These regulations outline procedures how the quality brand should be used in representative materials, brands of enterprises etc.

RENEWAL OF THE PREVIOUSLY OBTAINED INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION

As the majority of providers indicate, international qualifications require regular update and/or test of knowledge, skills and competences (see Table 8). The procedure and frequency for re-examination depends on the specific requirements set by the designer of international qualifications, i.e., type of examination (test, portfolio) and the frequency in different sectors may be varied.

The “expiration date” of international qualifications demonstrating knowledge of languages is two years, because without an active use of language, the level of knowledge diminishes; therefore, every time the candidates have to demonstrate their knowledge in examination. Regarding the sector of information technology, it is often necessary to update and test knowledge, since the developer constantly offers new technological solutions. Regular tests may not be necessary if the holder works at a certified company that meets certain requirements.

The holder of international qualification receives notice of the need for repeated examination. To obtain the international qualification again, the candidates are often required to ensure evidence that their everyday work involves the specific technology or work in specific field, e.g., accountancy, project management, welding, as well as that they improve their experience (e.g., professional literature studies, conferences, courses, publications). The renewal of the previously obtained international qualification may be arranged in the form of repeated examination or examination along with the evidence of experience. It may also include the acquisition of additional international qualification, e.g. in the sectors of information technology and transport, particularly in relation to the international qualifications that have been developed on several levels.

Table 8. Providers: necessity to renew the international qualification (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Necessity to renew	Frequency	%
Need to renew	11	61%
Do not need to renew	5	28%
Do not need to renew, but the knowledge periodically becomes out-dated	2	11%

The participants of focus group discussion consider that it is impossible to avoid different requirements (examination, accumulating method or repeated examination is not required) regarding the renewal of the previously obtained international qualification in various sectors. However, the limited “expiration date” of international qualifications creates significant difficulties to include them automatically in the qualifications framework of formal education.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The results of interviews with the providers show that the designer of international qualification has made the initial quality assessment (licensing) visits to all the education and/or testing centres. These visits are necessary to evaluate the facilities and equipment, personnel and quality management system on the site. The further system for the quality assurance of education institutions varies with the guidelines set by the designer of international qualification. As the results of interviews reveal, when the relevant education and/or testing centre has already been accredited by a widely recognized designer of international qualification, the initial accreditation is not made in full scale, since the institution has demonstrated the required reliability. The decision on the procedure (scale) for the repeated accreditation is made by the relevant designer of international qualification.

The results of interviews with the representatives of institutions, which issue an international qualification with the purpose of quality brand, reveal that during the initial accreditation the main focus is on the system for the internal quality assurance of education institution, ethics, as well as on the communication with the candidates of international qualifications. Less attention is paid to the specific learning outcomes, while their coherence with teaching methods and education programme as a whole is assessed.

After obtaining the initial accreditation, the designer of international qualification usually organises regular inspections, both on the site and distant monitoring of the situation including a periodic evaluation of the self-assessment reports produced by the education institutions and examination results. Furthermore, the designer of international qualification may use the "secret buyer" method to verify the quality of services provided. The sectors, in which specific technical equipment (e.g., simulators or measuring devices) is very significant, are subject to regular inspections of equipment; these tests and modernisation of equipment involve significant costs, but ensures the necessary quality of education and/or examination process.

The results of interviews indicate that the quality level of education institution is affected by the process of final examination; therefore, in all cases, the procedures of examinations have very strict requirements, including in relation to the candidate's personality, qualification of the examiners. In order to ensure quality of examinations, in most cases the examination is held by individuals, who have not been engaged in education, e.g., a local expert and/or delegated representative of the designer of international qualification.

The examiner often also performs quality control functions, i.e., evaluates the facilities and equipment, and other quality aspects on the site. Furthermore, the examiner can assess the preparedness of candidates. If the examination is conducted online (in e-environment), the designer of international qualification assesses the results, and the employees of testing centre do not know the result of the candidate, which ensures their neutrality and minimizes subjectivity in the evaluation.

If the education and/or testing centre also offers education course, according to the results of interviews, there are different requirements for the qualifications of teaching staff. Teaching staff often have to obtain the relevant qualification to be allowed to teach the education courses elaborated by the designer of international qualification. Relatively often teachers are accredited together with the education institution.

According to the results of interviews with the providers, the designers of international qualifications offer voluntary, experience exchange seminars for the teaching staff. These seminars may also focus on the issues of quality improvement for the procedures of education courses and examination; thus, offering an analysis of the most frequent problems identified at education and testing institutions.

The quality assessment in relation to international qualifications is implemented at the national level, as well. For example, the State Education Quality Service (IKVD) ensures quality assessment of the providers, which offer continuing education programmes or professional development programmes. Meanwhile, the quality of international qualifications that are provided in parallel to formal education or is its integral part (module) is assessed by: the higher education accreditation institution (higher education institutions), and IKVD (vocational and general secondary education institutions).

Table 9. Providers: significance of ensuring the system for internal/external quality assessment (frequency and %)

Evaluation	Frequency	%
Significant	14	42%
Rather significant	1	31%
On average significant	0	15%
Rather insignificant	0	12%
Significant	0	12%

The results of interviews with the providers concerning the significance of quality assurance indicates that the high quality of services is the only way to keep the trust of customers, as well as ensure the international recognition of awarded international qualifications. Strictly following the quality requirements is the only way to maintain the international qualification designer's trust, and, thus, retain the right to issue international qualifications. The providers' views on the importance of quality is summarised in Table 9.

As the providers point out in the interviews, if the international qualification is offered in parallel to formal higher education, all quality assurance procedures implemented by the designer of international qualification facilitate the performance quality of teaching and administrative staff both directly and indirectly involved in the implementation of study programme or module. In addition, the provision of international qualifications allows proving the competitiveness of higher education institutions in the global education market, as well as provides teaching staff the opportunity to visit various global forums, in which to share experiences and learn about the latest trends in the sector.

The study results show that, in parallel to the compliance with a set of international requirements, the education and/or testing centre often obtains additional evidence of their activities and the quality of services provided. Sometimes this added quality brand fosters qualification holder's career development in a particular country, region or enterprise.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL AND FORMAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

As the interviewed providers highlight, the international qualifications are recognised in other countries and do not require special recognition procedure, as a result, increasing the competitiveness of the international qualification holder in the labour market, because international qualification can entitle its holder to perform a certain professional activity, e.g., maritime, welding (see Table 10). When two job candidates have obtained an international qualification, employers can easily compare their abilities, since qualification examination and its procedures for all the holders of relevant international qualification have been the same. The employer can be certain that the candidate has a up-to-date and relevant knowledge and skills certified during the examination. Often, especially in the information technology sector, this knowledge can be described as a specific and profound, and international qualification is evidence that its holder works in accordance with certain requirements. The interviewed representatives of language education and testing institutions point out that special attention is paid to the further practical application of language; furthermore, education course may be adapted to the customer's specific needs.

Table 10. Providers: differences between the international qualifications and qualifications awarded within national education system (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Differences	Frequency	%
Popularity of qualifications	6	33%
Knowledge depth and compliance with the latest trends	5	28%
Qualification holder's competitiveness in labour market	3	17%
Requirements for acquiring education	2	11%
Qualification holder's right in labour market	2	11%
International comparability, reliability of examination	2	11%

When commenting on links between formal education and international qualifications, the providers indicate that they are like additional "bricks" for formal education, certifying qualification holder's advanced skills. By contrast, as number of the providers state, the Latvian formal education is not as well understood by employers abroad, yet it provides the breadth of knowledge and horizon, the ability to analyse topical issues in sector and the ability to offer a wide range of solutions to problems, which is not so characteristic of international qualifications.

The results of survey with SECs' representatives show that the significance of international qualifications in the labour market mainly depends on the sector (see Table 11). Namely, there are sectors in Latvia, in which international qualifications may be important, meanwhile, there are also sectors, in which international qualifications are not awarded in Latvia.

Table 11. SECs' representatives: meaning of international qualifications in labour market, in comparison with formal education qualifications (frequency and %)

Replies of respondents	Frequency	%
Depends on the sector	5	56%
Yes, international qualifications are less significant	2	22%
No, international qualifications are more significant	1	11%
Reply is non-interpretive	1	11%

Regarding the differences between international qualifications and formal educational qualifications, SECs' representatives highlight the recognition of international qualifications, qualification holder's advantages in the labor market, as well as the depth of obtained knowledge and its compliance with the latest trends (see Table 12). It should be noted that the same features are also emphasized by the providers (see Table 10).

Table 12. SECs' representatives: differences between the international qualifications and qualifications awarded within national education system (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Differences	Frequency	%
Popularity of qualifications	7	30%
Qualification holder's competitiveness in labour market	4	17%
Knowledge depth and compliance with the latest trends	4	17%
Qualification awarding body	3	13%
Requirements for acquiring education	3	13%
Qualification holder's right as regards further education	1	4%
Reply is non-interpretive	1	4%

INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION HOLDERS' ADVANTAGES AND DRAWBACKS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Advantages

As the major advantage of international qualification holders in the Latvian and international education and labour market, the providers mention – the international qualification obtained contributes to job seeker's competitiveness in the labour market.

This aspect is promoted by the international recognition of qualification; depth and topicality of knowledge possessed by international qualification holder (see Table 13). The acquired international qualification serves as a guarantee that its holder has accurately measured and appropriate knowledge and skills corresponding to a certain standard and the latest trends. Such knowledge is particularly appreciated by employers abroad, as well as by international corporations, which have entered in the Latvian labour market.

Table 13. Providers: advantages of international qualification holders (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Advantages	Frequency	%
Promoting competitiveness in the labour market	16	31%
International popularity	8	16%
Specific, thorough and up-to-date knowledge	8	16%
Harmonising qualification system and ensuring opportunity to have an objective comparison of qualification holders' knowledge, skills and competences	7	14%
High salary and social guarantees	5	10%
Ensuring the right to further education	3	6%
Excellent reputation	2	4%
Enlarging horizon	1	2%
Allowing flexible time planning	1	2%

The knowledge and skills provided by the international qualification, it is also confirms its holder's good reputation and high ethical standards. The providers indicate that the importance of international qualifications increases when enterprises apply for a high level of procurement and projects. Consequently, employers are increasingly aware of the significance of international qualifications, as well as perceive them as an investment in their company's future. During the interviews the providers emphasize labour market globalisation and the fact that the international qualification also confirms its holder's ability to work in an international team, as well as their language skills in the professional field.

All these factors ensure a competitive salary, career development and mobility opportunities to the holder of international qualification. Moreover, all these advantages mostly may be obtained through education courses and/or passing examination, which – in comparison to the formal education – takes a shorter period of time.

If the international qualification is included the formal education, the providers as advantages name a large part of the previously listed aspects, as well as the fact that the students have internationalised learning environment, thus, they have a better understanding of the education process abroad. In addition, the acquired international qualification often may be recognised as a part of higher level formal qualification, e.g., study subjects mastered within the International Baccalaureate programme may be recognized as equivalent to the corresponding first year Bachelor's study courses by some higher education institutions abroad.

Table 14. SECs' representatives: advantages of international qualifications (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Advantages	Frequency	%
International popularity	9	39%
Promoting competitiveness in the labour market	8	35%
Harmonising qualification system and ensuring opportunity to have an objective comparison of qualification holders' knowledge, skills and competences	4	17%
Ensuring the right to further education	1	4%
Enlarging horizon	1	4%

According to the representatives of SECs, the major advantages of international qualification holder are popularity of obtained international qualifications, as well as better competitiveness in the labour market (see Table 14). The international popularity implies a clear level of knowledge, skills, competences, moreover, at a certain level of quality, known and assessed by the employers in other countries. The international qualifications contribute to the competitiveness of their holders in the Latvian labour market, especially in large enterprises with foreign capital, as well as abroad. The international qualifications provide the ability to perform specific job tasks that individuals without international qualification may not implement, e.g., welding.

The representatives of SECs emphasise the significance of international qualifications when aligning the sector with definite stages of qualification; thus, ensuring opportunity to have a qualitative comparison of personnel's knowledge, skills and competences, which is especially valuable for recruiters.

Some representatives of SECs also mention international qualification holder's right to further education, as well as the provided opportunity to broaden their horizons by acquiring additional qualification.

The participants of focus group discussion highlight that the advantages of international qualifications refer to the competitiveness of education institutions providing international qualifications, and the support ensured for the professional development of teaching staff.

Drawbacks

The results of interview with the providers regarding the obstacles international qualification holders face in the Latvian and global education/labour market show that the most crucial problems are related to the successful introduction of these qualifications in Latvia (see Table 15). Namely, international qualifications are not always recognized as a serious document certifying qualification, as well as international qualifications are not included in the NQF, although they comply with international requirements. As a result, the importance of international qualifications is reduced in the Latvian labour market.

In order to solve the issues as regards the status of international qualifications at national level, the providers suggest including them in the Latvian Qualifications Framework. This step would promote the popularity of international qualifications, as well as would raise their prestige among the local employers. In addition, it would allow validating in the formal education context at least a part of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences.

Table 15. Providers: obstacles for the holders of international qualifications (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Obstacles	Frequency	%
Existing problems in relation to successful introduction of international qualification in Latvia	11	29%
Little meaning in the local labour market	8	21%
No/little information on the international qualifications	4	11%
High costs for obtaining an international qualification	4	11%
Doubts about the quality of international qualifications	3	8%
Large work load to prepare for examination	3	8%
Complicated in terms of time planning, in addition qualification needs to be renewed	3	8%
Poor foreign language skills limit candidates' opportunities	2	5%

Another obstacle, mentioned by the providers, is the incomplete awareness of employers regarding the international qualifications, when their enterprises or institutions hardly work in the international market. Simultaneously, employers may state unnecessarily high requirements for job applicants, e.g., requiring a formal education diploma of a certain level, although the relevant international qualification is sufficient evidence of the applicant's knowledge, skills and competences. The employer may also require obtaining some very specific certificate for the candidates to be allowed working in the enterprise (e.g. welding). However, part of the providers also points at the opposite trend: employers choose low-skilled employees with no education in the relevant sector, which contributes to the unfair competition and undermines the image of the sector (e.g., tourism, beauty).

The providers name various obstacles related to the acquisition and renewal of international qualifications. Mostly the acquisition of international qualifications is expensive; hence, the expenditures limit the opportunities of employer and individual candidates to obtain them. Furthermore, education courses and/or examinations are organized in a specified time, meaning that the candidate has to adapt to the qualification renewal schedule set out by the designer of international qualification, and the candidates have to wait for the confirmation of the obtained international qualification. It should be noted that the majority of international qualifications have to be regularly renewed. Therefore, the candidates continuously need to obtain and accumulate evidence of their achievements, as well as improve their knowledge.

Some providers as a negative aspect in relation to employment and education opportunities mention language skills. There are international qualifications that may be obtained without knowledge or poor knowledge of foreign languages (e.g., welding, beauty), which reduces their holders' capacity to compete in the international labour market.

In the contrast, part of providers emphasised that the holders of international qualifications in fact do not have any obstacles – these are more systematic issues that are gradually addressed.

Similarly, the representatives of SECs as the main obstacles of international qualifications name rather complicated introduction of international qualifications in Latvia, as well as their little meaning in the labour market (see Table 16).

Table 16. SECs’ representatives: drawbacks of international qualifications (frequency and %, several replies possible)

Drawbacks	Frequency	%
Existing problems in relation to successful introduction of international qualification in Latvia	6	40%
Little meaning in the local labour market	4	27%
No/little information on the international qualifications	3	20%
High costs for obtaining an international qualification	1	7%
Doubts about the quality of international qualifications	1	7%

The representatives of SECs enlist problems both at national and international level, which hinder the agreement between the relevant sector and the public education authorities to arrange relations between formal education and international qualifications. This uncertainty delays the possibility to establish new institutions with the right to award international qualifications, as well as reduces the interest of employers to use the existing institutional services for their staff qualification development. As a result, the employers are reluctant to involve in solving the issues. The mentioned problems causes other obstacles, i.e., the little meaning of international qualifications in the Latvian labour market, as well as the small amount of information available about this topic for both employers and general public.

Some representatives of SECs stress the high costs associated with the acquisition of international qualifications, as well as show their doubts regarding the equal approach to providing and awarding international qualifications, which should be ensured by a range of enterprises/organizations in various countries.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND NECESSARY IMPROVEMENTS

During the study, the respondents proposed several solutions how different aspects in relation to the international qualifications in Latvia could be improved.

Proposed by: education centres, formal education institutions, Sectoral Expert Councils

- To initiate a dialogue with the state authorities in order to promote cooperation between non-formal and formal education.
- To establish procedures for referencing international qualifications to the LQF; this could be undertaken by higher education institutions, education centres and/or sectoral associations through the implementation of projects.
- To include study subjects/courses that meet the requirements of international qualification designer in education programmes.

Proposed by: education centres, Sectoral Expert Councils

- To raise awareness of international qualifications; to change the public attitude regarding the possibility to determine individual's level of knowledge through online tools, because at present some prejudices may be observed.

Proposed by: education centres, formal education institutions

- Education institutions highlight the necessity of introducing learning outcomes approach to facilitate the relevant assessment of international qualifications. This would ease the allocation of certain number of credits to the international qualification, as well as determining the appropriate EQF level; thus, allowing the integration of international qualifications in the formal education.
- To find possibility including the international qualifications in the LQF to foster their visibility and prestige both among employers and higher education institutions.
- Employers should use international requirements in the evaluation of their employees in order not to create their own criteria.

Proposed by: education centres

- To follow the services provided by various education institutions at national level; to compose the "white list of education institutions/centres" offering international qualifications.
- To change the legal regulations, allowing employers to grant educational leave to the employees who wish to obtain international qualifications.
- To take over the best practice of international qualification designers, not to invent some methods, since a range of materials and methods have already been developed – they should be only adopted to the Latvian needs. This refers not only to the education according to the latest trends, but also to the evaluation of employees in enterprises and institutions.

Proposed by: formal education institutions

- If higher education institution in parallel to formal education offers an international qualification, it should be taken into account in the quality assessment procedures (accreditation), as well as when calculating the number of state funded study places for certain study programmes and allocating additional funding.
- If vocational education institutions (e.g., in welding sector) offer the opportunity to obtain international qualification, financial support should be provided to facilitate initial and continuous teacher education in Latvia.

Proposed by: participants of focus group discussion

- International qualifications could be included in the EQF/LQF, as it would foster their possible integration within formal education programmes of certain and appropriate level. This step would also help in understanding what level of knowledge, skills and competences the person has, thereby, increasing their competitiveness in the labour market.
- Yet, first, in terms of sectors profession maps should be arranged, occupational standards should be reviewed, as well as the requirements for qualifications should be explored to determine which qualifications should be referenced to the international requirements, and to which LQF level they correspond.
- Higher education institutions that offer international qualifications should be given advantages; it could also be one of the criteria for evaluating quality of education institutions and distributing state funded study places.
- International standards and specified learning outcomes could be adapted to the Latvian formal education, as well, because it would assist in following the progress of each sector. In addition, the understanding of educators and public should be promoted regarding the principles of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

During the study 15 interviews concerning the international qualifications awarded in different sectors were conducted, and the questionnaire was completed by nine representatives of Sectoral Expert Councils from six sectors. The small number of respondents was due to the fact that Latvia is not large country and some international qualifications are offered and/or awarded only by a single provider. Wider audience was engaged in the focus group discussions about the advantages and drawbacks of international qualifications.

The international qualifications so far have not been included in the Latvian education system and legal framework. The definition of international qualification has not been elaborated in Latvia; therefore, Academic Information Centre – EQF National coordination point formulated its own definition for discussion: international qualifications are qualifications, which standards and assessment requirements are designed by an international institution, organisation, or enterprise with the aim to conduct trustful and internationally comparable evaluation of candidate's knowledge, skills and competences; the right to provide learning activities and/or testing is assigned to the institutions, which capacity has been ascertained through a certain accreditation process, in more than one country.

The international qualifications are awarded both by formal education institutions and education and/or testing centres in Latvia.

The awarded international qualifications vary with their purpose, type, requirements for candidates and assessment methods etc. They are mainly based on the standards elaborated by the designer of international qualification, and internal/external quality assurance has an essential meaning in the awarding of international qualifications.

The providers and Sectoral representatives have similar views concerning the advantages and drawbacks of international qualifications.

As the most important advantages of international qualifications were named:

- Promoting competitiveness in the labour market;
- International popularity;
- Topicality of obtained knowledge and skills.

The international qualification obtained facilitates job seeker's competitiveness in the labour market, as well as ensures a competitive salary, career development and mobility opportunities to their holder. As regards the quality of acquired education, the international qualification serves as a guarantee that its holder has knowledge and skills corresponding to a certain standard and the latest trends. The holder of international qualification is able to work in an international team, and usually has a good command of foreign languages. For the employed adults it is important that acquiring international qualifications – in comparison to the formal education – takes a shorter period of time.

The most significant drawbacks of international qualifications are as follows:

- The international qualifications have a little meaning in the local labour market and little information is available about them;
- The international qualifications are not included in the LQF, and they are not always considered as a serious document certifying qualification;
- Incomplete awareness of employers regarding the international qualifications may be observed especially when the enterprises or institutions do not work in the international market;
- Mostly the acquisition of international qualifications is expensive, thus, limiting the availability of international qualifications.



The results of study allow concluding that in order to initiate discussion about relating international qualifications with qualifications frameworks, general awareness of international qualifications should be raised. Many international qualifications may be obtained through online examinations; therefore, the public attitude – existing prejudices – should be changed regarding the possibility to determine individual's level of knowledge through online tools. A crucial aspect for integrating international qualifications in the formal education system is introducing and using learning outcomes approach to facilitate the relevant assessment of international qualifications.

Both the providers and sectoral representatives propose to initiate a dialogue with the state authorities in order to promote cooperation between non-formal and formal education. For example, this step would facilitate validation of non-formal education and integration of learning outcomes achieved through the international qualifications within formal education programmes of appropriate level.

Neither interviews, survey nor discussions provided complete answer whether international qualifications should be referenced to the Latvian Qualifications Framework. The expressed views concerning this issue are varied; therefore, further assessment and discussions are necessary.

ANNEX 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Academic Information Centre with the support of European commission (project "European Qualifications Framework – National Coordination points", No. 379015-LLP-1-2012-1-LV-KA1-EQF_NCP) is conducting interviews with the representatives of education institutions and centres about the international qualifications. In terms of this study international qualifications are qualifications that are provided and/or awarded by an international institution, organisation or enterprise.

The aim of the interviews is to clarify what international qualifications may be obtained in Latvia, as well as to assess the advantages and drawbacks of international qualifications in the Latvian and global labour market. In the course of study it is planned to elaborate proposals for the improvement of legal regulations in order to lessen obstacles to the acquisition and use of qualitative international qualifications in Latvia and other countries.

1.	What is in your opinion an international qualification? How it could be defined?			
2.	What is your experience in relation to international qualifications?			
2.1.	How many years has your institution awarded international qualifications?			
	1-3	4-6	6-10	10-...
3.	What international qualifications does your institution provide/award?			
3.1.	How often do the individuals, who have obtained the relevant qualification, need to renew their qualification?			
3.2.	Coverage of international qualifications provided by your institution:			
	Global	Within member states/ organisations of a certain sectoral international association	Country or institution that use a specific product	Other
3.2.1.				
3.2.2.	Comments:			
4.	What documents certify the acquisition of the particular international qualification?			
5.	How is the quality of international qualifications awarded by your institution promoted? For example, accreditation, certification, regular self-assessment.			

6.	How important is ensuring internal/external quality assessment system?
6.1.	Please evaluate in scale of 1-5, where 1 – insignificant, but 5 – very significant: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
6.2.	Comments:
7.	What learners' assessment methods do you mostly apply during the acquisition of international qualifications? For example, tests, examinations, hands-on tasks.
8.	What occupational and/or education standards are used when designing education programmes?
9.	How many learners acquire international qualifications at your institution per year?
10.	What is the difference between international qualifications and qualifications awarded within the state education system?
11.	Where [what institution] else are international qualifications awarded in Latvia and what is the procedure?
12.	What are advantages of international qualification holders in the education/ labour market in Latvia and other countries? [3 could be named]
12.1.	1.
12.2.	2.
12.3.	3.
12.4.	Comments:
13.	What obstacles international qualification holders face in the education/labour market in Latvia and other countries? [3 could be named]
13.1.	1.



13.2.	2.
13.3.	3
13.4.	Comments:
14.	What should be improved in relation to the international qualifications? For example, amendments to legal regulations, awarding procedure.
15.	What else would you like to add concerning the international qualifications?

ANNEX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SECTORAL EXPERT COUNCILS

Academic Information Centre with the support of European commission (project "European Qualifications Framework – National Coordination points", No. 379015-LLP-1-2012-1-LV-KA1-EQF_NCP) is conducting survey with the representatives of the Sectoral Expert Councils about the international qualifications. In terms of this study international qualifications are qualifications that are provided and/or awarded by an international institution, organisation or enterprise.

The aim of the survey is to clarify what is significance of international qualifications in various sectors, as well as to assess the advantages and drawbacks of international qualifications in the Latvian and global labour market. In the course of study it is planned to elaborate proposals for the improvement of legal regulations in order to lessen obstacles to the acquisition and use of qualitative international qualifications in Latvia and other countries. Data collected in this survey will be used in summarised blocks. Filling in the questionnaire takes 10 minutes.

Please complete the questionnaire **by October 31.**

1. Duration of your experience in the sector:

- 1-3 years
- 4-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years _____

2. Your SEC is:

3. How frequently do you encounter with international qualifications (certificates) in your work?

- Never
- Seldom (once a year)
- Regularly (once a month)
- Often (once a week)
- All the time

4. When (in what cases) do enterprises of your sector encounter international qualifications? Several replies are possible.

- Selection of job candidates
- Employees' further education
- Procurement
- Contests (project applications)
- Assessment of employees' performance
- Other reply _____



5. How significant are international qualifications in the selection of job candidates in the enterprises of your sector?

- None
- Little
- Average
- Great
- Essential
- Other reply _____

6. Which are the major international qualifications in your sector? Please name the most important ones if they can be identified.

7. Do international qualifications have lesser meaning in the labour market than formal education diploma?

- Yes, they have lesser meaning
- Depends on the sector
- No, they have greater meaning
- Other reply _____

8. What is the difference between international qualifications and qualifications awarded within the state education system? Several replies are possible.

- Institution awarding the qualification
- Requirements for obtaining education
- Qualification holder's right in terms of further education
- Qualification holder's rights in the labour market
- Qualification holder's competitiveness in the labour market
- Popularity of qualifications
- Depth of knowledge and its compliance with the latest trends
- Other reply _____

9. What are three most essential advantages of international qualifications?

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Other reply _____

10. What are three most essential drawbacks of international qualifications?

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Other reply _____

11. What else would you like to add concerning the international qualifications?

ANNEX 3. RESULTS OF CONFERENCE DISCUSSION – WORK GROUP A

International Conference „OPENING UP THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS FOR INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS”

On 14 November 2014, Riga

Work group was chaired by: **Jānis Vētra**, *chairperson of Higher Education Council*

Examples of international qualifications were presented by:

- **Arnis Bankovičs**, *Latvian Maritime academy, director of Sea Transport Department*
Experience of Latvian Maritime academy
- **Īriša Zvagule**, *Baltic Computer Academy, head of Learning Solutions Department*
Experience of information and communication sector specialists regarding the international certification in Latvia

Comments and opinions of participants

Question for discussion: should Latvia include international qualifications in the LQF?

- The requirements of certificate for European Computer Driving Licence are already imparted in secondary education programme, yet the certificate is not awarded automatically to each graduate.
- The terms “generic education” (vispārīgā izglītība) and “general education” (vispārējā izglītība) should be used precisely regarding the context.
- It is essential “not to rush things”. The relevant processes will occur in other countries that have more extensive experience of developing qualifications frameworks, and then we will be able to use the best experience.
- International qualifications should be linked with the NQF, because this would help in arranging them according to the relevant levels and it would be clear, which level of education programme should comprise the particular components of international qualification. Such step would also facilitate validation of previous experience at a certain education level.
- The obtained higher education qualifications (Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral degree) remains for lifetime, but the sector continuously experiences progress. Therefore, some certificates are needed to certify development and update of skills. In maritime sector this is carried out through up-date and refresher courses, as well as new course are introduced and relevant certificates are awarded.
- In the maritime sector qualifications should be automatically included in the LQF, as they have been created rather long time ago; in addition, maritime professional requirements are closely linked to the requirements of Convention that determines the possibility to perform this international professional activity.

Question for discussion: do international qualifications reduce opportunities for employability outside the particular sector?

- As regards the maritime sector, higher education institution issues national higher education diplomas that indicate reference to the level of education and may be used when applying for a job in other sectors through the assessment of knowledge, skills and competences mastered. The maritime sector (including the positions on the coast) requires both education diploma and certificate of professional qualification.



In order to get a work in the international seafaring, higher education diploma issued by a higher education institution is not required, but certificate of relevant level professional qualification (COC – Certificate of Competency) is necessary.

- Diplomas that do not belong to any country may not be recognised according to the Lisbon Convention, because no country has accredited the particular education programme and it is not included in a NQF.
- In the personnel procurement procedures frequently level of education is indicated that does not reflect international qualifications.
- EU often performs activities in double, which makes the system more complicated, as such steps creates system where it already exists, e.g. in the maritime sector EU has issued a directive, which to a great extent is based on the requirements of International Convention (STCW).
- Problems in choosing profession in other field than education rise when person wishes to return, because gradually necessary skills are lost, particularly in the maritime sector.
- In order to return to the maritime sector, half year practical training should be acquired and examinations for work duties of one level below should be taken.
- In the case of Baltic Computer Academy, international certificates are not connected with Latvia, because they are designed by an international enterprise, but the process is implemented in Latvia.
- The only stakeholder, who mostly recognised international qualifications, is employer, not the particular country. Still in the maritime sector – international qualifications are recognised at the national level.
- Persons who have acquired international qualifications should not be required compulsory higher education, too.
- In the Latvian construction sector, the categories awarded in the Soviet Union still have an essential role, which indicates that non-formal “qualifications” may be significant in the labour market.

Question for discussion: what is the meaning of renewing the acquired qualifications in the context of international qualifications and what should it be?

- Perhaps an online tool should be elaborated to identify topicality of certain skills proved by various activities, which are recorded and accumulated in a certain period of time in this register.
- Perhaps a regular examination is needed to assess the person’s skills.
- For serious qualifications the renewal of previously obtained qualifications is necessary.
- Mariners have to participate in competence maintenance courses every 5 years, as well as obtain all the major certificates every 5 years (examination may be voluntary).
- The Latvian Seamen’s Registry is accredited by the IMO every 5 years.
- Public Russian language skills decrease; the assessment of language skills carried out before some time, e.g. after secondary school, may not be considered adequate.
- Quality criteria are crucial when mastering a language – how many hours are allocated to the activity and whether professional knowledge should be built on the general foundation..
- Language skills minimum has been elaborated for nurses, as well as Railway portfolio.



Question for experts: why language qualifications are excluded from the studies about the international qualifications?

- Language qualifications are not included because it is very complicated.
- At present the focus is on the sectoral qualifications.
- IMO has stated English as a compulsory language and relevant language standard has been elaborated in accordance with the existing IMO standard. The project “SeaTALK” attempts to implement this idea; the project report is expected in 2015.

Conclusions

The participants of discussion indicated that international qualifications should be included in the qualifications framework, because this step would facilitate the integration of these qualifications in particular education programmes of a certain level. Furthermore, everyone could understand what level knowledge a person possesses; thus, increasing their competitiveness in the labour market.

Conclusion was drawn that the “expiration date” for the certificates of international qualifications creates essential difficulties to include them automatically in the formal education qualification system.

According to the discussion, international standards and their learning outcomes should be adopted also in the Latvian formal education, as this would allow following the progress of each sector more successfully.

Different situations may be observed regarding the renewal of obtained international qualifications, because both repeated examination and accumulating method may be used, as well as the repeated knowledge test may be not required. These differences in various sectors cannot be avoided.

ANNEX 4. RESULTS OF CONFERENCE DISCUSSION – WORK GROUP B

International Conference „OPENING UP THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS FOR INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS“

On 14 November 2014, Riga

Work group was chaired by: Sarmīte Valaine, National Centre for Education, director of Education Content Department – head of Vocational Education Content Provision Unit

Examples of international qualifications were presented by:

- **Līga Peiseniece**, *vice rector for academic affairs of BA School of Business and Finance*,
Experience of BA School of Business and Finance in awarding Scottish qualification
- **Nelliņa Janaus**, *director of CIDESCO International Riga School of Cosmetics*
International CIDESCO qualification

Comments and opinions of participants

- Centralized professional qualification examinations:
 1. The theoretical and practical part should be assessed separately to provide graduates with good practical skills;
 2. CIDESCO teachers do not know what the theoretical test questions will be included, they are changing every year; therefore learning is more focused on the acquisition of real knowledge and skills, rather than final examinations;
 3. Uniform assessment criteria are necessary for the examinations to ensure international comparability of qualifications awarded.
- Learning outcomes demonstrate the LQF level to which qualifications should be referenced; placement of qualifications in the framework cannot depend on the educational institution awarding the qualification.
- Education should focus on learning outcomes, but specialists currently working in education lack knowledge about learning outcomes and qualifications framework. Often due to this ignorance the level of professional qualification, specified in the occupational standard, is accidentally mixed with the EQF/LQF level; therefore, the occupational standards should also reflect the EQF/LQF level.
- Situation by sector in connection with the requirements and awarding of qualifications is different; in certain sectors, this system is organized: the requirements for the acquisition and awarding of qualifications have been formulated, international committee assesses examinations. Consequently, it is not known how long time is necessary to reference the qualifications awarded in the sectors to the requirements of international qualifications.
- To ensure the inter-comparability of qualifications, qualifications by sector should be linked to the same EQF levels in all the countries.
- The international qualifications awarded in Latvia should be referenced to the LQF, but during this process the experience of other countries should be considered. It is important that learning outcomes are harmonised in sectors, as well as the quality assessment system for the requirements and awarding of qualifications should function.

- At present it is not known how qualifications will be aligned with international standards in regulated professions, which will take place first – the regulation of qualification requirements or their referencing to the international qualifications. Sectoral expert commissions should be established to decide how and to which LQF level national qualification should be linked. While the Ministry of Education and Science should address issues related to the international qualification referencing and recognition.
- To reference the existing qualifications in sectors to the international requirements:
 1. Revision of occupational standards should be conducted – the requirements for existing qualifications in sectors should be determined, in terms of sectors qualifications could be referenced to the LQF. Education qualifications for adults should be separated from the initial qualifications, different levels should be stated for them, because practice of certain professional activities is associated with a significant responsibility, which cannot be performed by young people after the initial vocational education programmes;
 2. It is necessary to consider whether the education of citizens is funded through self-financing or public funding. For a long time, labour market forecasts have not been carried out in the country – what specialists are needed, – thus, for years education institutions have prepared the unemployed.
- At vocational secondary education level, the Sector Expert Councils determine the labour market forecasts, when developing the requirements for education offer.
- When evaluating whether reference national qualification to the international requirements, labour market demands should be taken into account, whether and which qualifications in the sector should be referenced.
- Within the sector, experts should evaluate to which LQF level particular qualification corresponds.
- Education institutions should be free to choose whether to offer international qualification or only the national qualification; the awarding of international qualifications would serve as a reputation brand of education institution.
- All qualifications cannot be automatically referenced to appropriate LQF levels, as there are differences between the sectors. Within the sector, study should be conducted to explore the requirements of qualifications, evaluate which qualifications should be harmonised with the international requirements, and which qualifications – to the national requirements, and then the appropriate LQF and EQF level for the qualifications should be determined.

Conclusions

During the discussion, the participants agreed that international qualifications should be included in the LQF, but, first of all, study should be conducted within sectors – what are the requirements of qualifications and which qualifications should be harmonised with the international requirements, as well as to which LQF level the qualifications correspond.

Advantages of international qualifications:

- International qualifications provide competitiveness of education institutions offering them.
- International qualifications contribute to teachers' professional development.



Challenges of international qualifications:

- The transition from vocational secondary to higher education is not harmonised; vocational education graduates should be granted advantages in the higher education study programmes of relevant sector.
- Structured profession maps have not been elaborated; therefore, the requirements of qualifications are not known, as well as their corresponding LQF level.

Suggestions for improvement:

- The Ministry of Education and Science should grant benefits for the higher education institutions (in terms of funding), which offer international qualifications – this could be one of the criteria for assessing the quality of educational institutions and distribution of state funded study places.
- Sectoral studies should be undertaken – which professions in the sector should be harmonised with the international requirements.
- Sectoral profession maps should be organised in order to reference qualifications awarded in the sectors to the LQF and EQF levels.
- System of occupational standards should be organised, i.e., the content of occupational standards should be reviewed, e.g. responsibilities and tasks described are overlapping.
- The understanding of education employees and society should be promoted in terms of the principles of learning outcomes.

ANNEX 5. MOST VISIBLE INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AWARDED IN THE EXPLORED SECTORS

Sector	The most visible international qualifications (or their groups)
“Academic” qualifications:	International Baccalaureate TOEFL IELTS Cambridge English
Cosmetics and beauty:	CIDESCO ITEC
Tourism:	AHLEI TedQual
Welding:	DVS PersZert European welding qualification ISO 9606
Project management:	PMP PRINCE2
Finance, accountancy and audit:	ACCA CIA Study module “Finance management” certified by the SQA
Transport:	STCW – COC
Languages:	TOEFL IELTS Cambridge English
Information and communication technologies:	Adobe qualifications Cisco qualifications IBM ²⁹ qualifications ITIL ³⁰ qualifications Microsoft qualifications LINUX qualifications Oracle qualifications CompTIA ³¹ qualifications ECDL ³²

²⁹ IBM – International Business Machines Corporation.

³⁰ ITIL – Information Technology Infrastructure Library.

³¹ CompTIA – Computing Technology Industry Association.

³² ECDL – European Computer Driving Licence.



NOTES



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