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LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGIES OF LATVIA: ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ELIMINATING THE BARRIERS TO CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Introduction

One of the essential key competences nowadays is learning-to-learn that may be developed life long. Lifelong learning is becoming more and more significant.

The term *lifelong learning* pays attention to the time factor – it means education life long, which may occur independently or periodically (Ceļā uz mūžizglītību, 2007). Learning may take place anywhere and in any form: here we mean formal, non-formal and informal education. It occurs from cradle to old age and its mission is to help a person develop himself/ herself, improve their life quality both for work and personal satisfaction. The countries have developed and adopted their Lifelong Learning Strategies and Action Plans for their Implementation in order to promote education and learning.

Lifelong learning issues in pedagogy

The great scholar and educator L. Vigotskis (Vigostkis, 2002) pays attention to lifelong learning emphasising the necessity to develop the skill of learning-to-learn. This skill should be developed life long. It influences the development of all competences the same as communication in native tongue and in foreign languages does.

Nowadays the growing demand of the society for knowledgeable, innovative, creative and competent employees, who are able to think strategically and adapt to the new ever changing situation set new requirements for the education. Learning-to-learn has become one of the key competences and a special role is paid to lifelong learning.

N. Kokosalakis (Kokosalakis, 2001) claims that lifelong learning has become a fundamental goal of education policy both in national and international level and it is often used as a tool for developing of information or knowledge society.

However, it should be added that nowadays the knowledge becomes out-of-date much faster than ever before. J. Markoff (Markoff, 1996) implies that 20% of the knowledge that has been created in a company becomes out-of-date in less than a year.

In its turn, P. Renard (Renard, 2001) considers that 30% of the knowledge that we will be teaching in the coming ten years has not been discovered yet. Therefore it is vital to

return to the competences that tell us how to do the things, to the ability to transform knowledge into action, to key competences. He points out the following key competences: learning-to-learn, skillful and appropriate use of ITS, understanding of science and social skills, coexistence skills, tolerance and empathy. It partly coincides with the EU recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning (OECD Publication Identifies Key Competencies for Personal, Social, and Economic Well-Being, 2003; Implementation of Education and Training 2010 Work programme. Working Group B “Key Competences”. Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. A European Reference Framework, 2004; Lifelong learning and key competences for all: vital contributions to prosperity and social cohesion, 2005; Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, 2005) in which learning-to-learn and digital competences are emphasised.

However, it has to be marked that nowadays the lifelong learning concept itself is changing. The changes are promoted by the link between the requirements of the labour market and learning lifelong (More, 2001; Young, 2003; Bjornavold, 2005; Katz, 2000).

There are different approaches to defining the term *lifelong learning* starting from the definition developed by K.P. Cross (Cross, 1981) in which the author defines it as a self-directed development, which means to understand oneself and the world and which includes the acquisition of skills and abilities – the only true values that we cannot lose; to the ones by P. Jarvis (Jarvis, 1995, 1999) who defines lifelong learning as any activities planned, based on the principles of humanism, oriented towards the learning of the actors involved and as a result promoting their understanding. These activities may occur during any stage of life.

The National Strategies for Lifelong Learning in Latvia (2007-2013) define lifelong learning as the education process that takes place life long and is based on the people's changing needs to acquire knowledge, skills, experience in order to promote or change their qualification according to the requirements of the labour market and one's own interests and needs and it develops one's natural abilities alongside with the promotion of new competences (Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādnes, 2008:6-7).

Lifelong Learning in Latvia: the perspective and the barriers

The National Strategies for Lifelong Learning in Latvia (Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādnes, 2008:10) emphasize adult education, which is the least developed sector of all those providing education in Latvia and is not clearly revealed in the documents. The work has been commenced to create a holistic education system in order to promote the connection between all the stages of education providing the population of Latvia with a possibility to learn during every stage of life in all the spheres.

The Strategies (Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādnes, 2008:11) envisage the following situation in 2013 describing Latvia as a country in which:

- people perceive their education as the main resource of prosperity and they have an opportunity to learn in all the spheres during every stage of life from childhood to old age irrespective of their age, gender, educational background, place of residence, ethnic group, the level of income and functional disabilities;
- people possess confidence, initiative, knowledge, creative approach and skills to participate in economics, social and political life;
- because of the people's attitude learning life long, a tidy, enabling socio-cultural environment has been created;
- people's knowledge, skills and abilities are developed and promoted in order to raise work effectiveness and secure socio-economic development of the country, based on highly qualified labour;
- people have free access to information, consultancy, education and support in order to make the most effective decisions concerning the changes and feel safe during the period of changes;
- under the influence of ITS the creation of new learning approaches will be continued, its scope will increase, the contents will become more profound, access and organisation will be improved.

Just half a year ago this idea would have seemed very positive and the aims – far-reaching and embracing all the spheres and everyone but now with the changes in socio-

economic situation, especially after the events of the last couple of months, it seems a very unrealistic and vague picture. It has to be marked that in the present socio-economic and political situation first of all the people's basic needs should be catered, such as, people's employability, the right to get medical aid and care, pensions and social help, etc. It may seem that no one cares about lifelong learning at the moment. However, scholars, educators, including policy makers in education, must be a step ahead and create a vision what the education will be like after the crisis is over; they must have a far-reaching goal. Therefore it is important to analyze the barriers to lifelong learning and the possible ways of their solution.

T. Koke (Koķe, 2008) groups the barriers to lifelong learning into the following four groups:

- Political: the state policy is not coordinated enough, there is weak coordination among ministries, not complete legislation in lifelong learning, not enough support;
- Informative: there is not enough access to detailed and actual information about adult education on the level of an individual and society;
- Situational: lack of support of the family and the social environment for the individual's inclusion into learning;
- Inner, personal: lack of enterprise and uncertainty, which have developed based on people's previous learning experience; education is not a value itself.

The Lifelong Learning Strategies of Latvia mention the following barriers to lifelong learning (Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādnes, 2008:14-15):

- lack of accessibility to the environment for the people with functional disabilities;
- not enough opportunities for people having imprisonment to continue/complete/improve their education;
- the low education level of the ethnic group of Roma;
- underdeveloped infrastructure in the countryside, which diminishes the rural inhabitants' possibilities to lifelong learning;
- not enough attention is paid to the people who are to retire soon or are retired now;
- not enough attention is paid to requalification of young mothers after their maternity leave and their inclusion into the labour market.

There is formal recognition of students' grades (credits) acquired during the previous education stages in higher education, the transfer of credits among different higher educational institutions has been achieved but at present in the country there are not instruments that provide recognition of the education, skills and knowledge acquired in non-formal education suggested by the requirements of the Bologna (BFUG, 2008).

According to the EU Recommendations following Bologna Declaration (BFUG, 2008) it is recommended for the countries to improve employees' professional skills. Higher education institutions should be actively involved in this process so that updating of employees' skills would take place in a professional setting, in cooperation with highly qualified experts in the field. Therefore another recommendation is that lifelong learning should be integrated into the strategy of each institution and into the professional environment. More attention should be paid to mobility – both to the students and the educators' mobility as well as to the creation of the so-called "mobility windows" that help the students without any barriers to study abroad for a term or a year and afterwards successfully continue studies at their home university again. This is the problem that is being solved in Latvia at present. There are higher education institutions, which have solved it completely and students may continue their education in further study years without having to take any extra exams, but, unfortunately, we cannot say that the problem has been solved in all the higher education institutions yet. The Recommendations suggest promoting the development of knowledge intensive society, which is based on the triangle of research, education and innovations. This should be taken into account when designing the collaboration project among the countries in lifelong learning field.

Financing mechanisms of Lifelong Learning policy in Latvia

Concerning resources and administration of lifelong learning policy in Latvia it has to be marked that the education system of Latvia is not developing as a lifelong learning system from the formal aspect. There are no documents that regulate the financing system of adult education. Attention is not paid to the development of legislation in connection with the

versatility of the offer, its quality and accessibility for everyone irrespective of age, gender, ethnic group, functional disabilities, place of residence, and the level of income.

Financing mechanisms of Lifelong Learning policy in Latvia (<http://izm.izm.gov.lv/nozares-politika/izqlitiba/muzizqlitiba.html>, 2009) form two groups:

1. The Ministry of Education and Science provides the financing of Lifelong learning policy of Latvia by attracting the finances of the EU Structural Funds and other financing sources.

In the period from 2005 to 2008 in order to introduce Lifelong Learning Strategies seven projects were implemented: six of them in the regions of Latvia and Riga City and one was implemented by Latvian Adult Education Association. The total amount of the finances in the projects was 1 644 243 LVL, 75% of the finances (1 215 450 LVL) from ESF funds and 25% (405 150 LVL) was the financing from the state budget.

In the planning period from 2007 to 2013 funds have been allocated to sub activity 1.2.2.1.3. "Support for specific spheres of lifelong learning policy" within the operational programme "Human resources and employment" with the aim of supporting the implementation of lifelong learning policy and its access to adults who have the least access to education and continuing education possibilities, incl. access of lifelong learning to imprisoned people and to the persons released from imprisonment. In this case the beneficiaries are: the Latvian Prison Administration and State Probation Service, a state institution which according to laws and regulations has been conferred the right to implement the state policy of imprisonment as precautionary measure and restriction of liberty as a punishment.

In order to promote learning the Ministry of Education and Science has used an opportunity to apply for the European Commission grant "Establishment and Implementation of National Lifelong Learning Strategies – Education and Training 2010" and has received support for promotion and development of lifelong learning. By implementing this grant the events promoting lifelong learning are being organized, including the conference "Lifelong learning for personal growth and the country's development" held in October 2008.

2. Regional approach and planning of economic development of local governments in Latvia is closely connected with the planning of human resources development.

5 planning regions and the City of Riga have worked out the plans for the development of lifelong learning, whose introduction is envisaged by implementing the support of the EU Structural funds for the period of 2007-2013 (refer to *Table 1*).

Table 1.

The Financing of Adult Education in Regions (the year 2007)

Regions	Financing for adult education, LVL*			The number of persons educated		The number of adults in the territory**
	The proportion of provided information cf. to the number of all institutions (local governments, regional boards, etc.) in %	The allowance (incl. salaries, maintenance costs)	Financing of programmes	The number of persons	The number of hours (persons x the average length of the course in hours)	
Kurzeme region	39	105 486	132 989	4 820	120414	258 685
Zemgale region	27	839 018	304 941	7 162	264 249	241552
Vidzeme region	11	34 380	36 374	3 668	148 600	204 423
Latgale region	67	325 432	153 930	6 794	136 668	307 020
Riga region	31	171 380	242366	7 683	717 681	951 162
Total	36	1 525 696	870 600	30 127	1387 612	1 962 842

* The budget of local governments, not incl. ESF and ERAF projects

** Adult – a person who is 15 and older (is of the age of being capable to work and beyond that age) according to the data of Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, year 2007

Source: Financing mechanisms of Lifelong Learning policy in Latvia. [retrieved on 14.06.2009].
 Accessible: <http://izm.izm.gov.lv/nozares-politika/izgltiba/muzizgltiba.html>

While the EU financing is not allotted yet lifelong learning in the regions is provided by the initiative and support of local governments, private education centres, regional higher educational institutions, evening classes, non-governmental organizations, etc. Thus the offer basically is fragmented and situative and lacks uniformity. There is weak cooperation among lifelong learning education providers. One of the largest regional centres in Latvia is Yelgava Regional Adult Education Centre, which carries out a complex lifelong learning offer

for the inhabitants living in the given territory. It comprises continuing education, non-formal adult education and teacher professional development courses.

Lifelong Learning in Latvia: elimination of the barriers to continuing education and training

According to the decree of the Ministry of Regional Development and Local Government ad hock group of experts “An educated and creative person” was formed to implement the tasks envisaged in the National Development Plan of Latvia for the period of 2007-2013. The tasks, among the others, also include the creation and development of qualitative and versatile offer for lifelong learning (Latvijas Nacionālā attīstības plāna 2007.-2013.gadam ekspertu darba grupas „Izglītots un radošs cilvēks” 2008.gada I pusgada ziņojums, 2008). The experts under the guidance of the rector of Banking Academy prof. T. Volkova, has worked at compiling of the reports: “Providing Qualified Educators” (during the last quarter of 2007) and “The Creation of Effectively Functioning Lifelong Learning System” (in 2008). The experts conclude that priorities stated in the Lifelong Learning Strategies of Latvia for the period of 2007-2013 do not cover all the aspects of lifelong learning, and the quality of the provided courses does not prove the quality of their content.

The experts point to certain directions in order to improve the lifelong learning quality:

- Competence based education;
- The leading role of higher education establishments in the lifelong learning system;
- Effective coordination of lifelong learning policy;
- The role of regional coordinators in the lifelong learning system;
- The financing mechanisms of lifelong learning;
- The participation of the State Employment Agency in the lifelong learning system.

The ad hock group points out that the Ministry of Education and Science, the State Employment Agency, other ministries and agencies, planning regions, all level and all kind of education institutions, Latvian Adult Education Society, local governments, non-governmental organizations, libraries, enterprises should be involved in the processes of lifelong learning in order to develop a qualitative product.

The main conclusions from the report of the expert group are as follows:

- The creation of laws and regulations that would secure the recognition of acquired knowledge and skills gained in the informal and non-formal education institutions;
- Higher education institutions must take the leading role in implementation of lifelong learning policy in order to secure the quality of educators and the study programmes;
- The Board for the Development of Lifelong Learning should be formed in order to effectively coordinate the lifelong learning system;
- The Ministry of Education and Science should carry out comprehensive supervision of lifelong learning system;
- The financing system for lifelong learning must be set and created.

Taking into account the complicated socio-economic situation in Latvia and the world it is vital to evaluate the situation, consider carefully all the possible sources of financing for lifelong learning and set its priorities. At the moment there does not exist serious planning as to what kind and how many specialists will be needed for the country in the nearest future not to say anything about the period of 20, 30, 40 years. It is clear that the system of vocational education in Latvia has been ruined. We have one of the largest number of students in Europe compared to the number of school leavers but very few pupils choose vocational education.

It is especially topical at the moment to adapt the education system of the country to the existing new situation taking into account the unfavourable demographic situation and the aging process of the society, to adapt the education system to the requirements of the labour market (Programma Mūžizglītības politikas pamatnostādņu 2007.-2013. gadam ieviešanai 2008.-2010. gadā, 2008) and therefore it is necessary to explore the situation why the students do not choose the vocational track, study the factors and tendencies and offer solutions for the improvement of the vocational education system in the country.

We could gain from the experience of other countries where vocational education has been developing successfully. On the other hand we are ready to share the research instruments that have been created in cooperation with our research partners from UNED (Madrid) and Tübingen (Germany). In 2003-2006 a new instrumentary and a unified research

approach based on the implementation of quantitative and qualitative (mixed methods) for conducting research targeted at pedagogical practice activities in schools and higher education institutions on macro, mezo and micro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), was adapted and approbated in the research projects of the University of Latvia. The goal of the scientific research at the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, the University of Latvia has been to improve the methodological basis for Doctoral studies, to organize doctoral students, researchers of the Institute and academic staff of the University in inter-disciplinary research groups, thus integrating research activity and academic studies.

Conclusion

In the lifelong learning context it is necessary to start a research for securing the investigation of the situation in young generation learning quality in preschool and in adult education as well as to elaborate suggestions for the inclusion of lifelong learning quality to improve the current state of education. It should be marked that by adult in Latvia is understood a person who is 15 and over. The goals of the research should be formulated in accordance with the changes in the concept of lifelong learning which are fostered by the link between the demands of labour market and lifelong learning (More, 2001; Young, 2003; Bjornavold, 2005; Katz, 2000), the implementation of competence-oriented, learner/student-focussed education programmes as one of the major issues in lifelong learning.

When studying lifelong learning concepts it is important to emphasise human contribution in the investigation of their own learning, not the differences of outer factors of learning. The research should be targeted at problems of institutional pre-school, school, higher educational institutions and adult education lifelong learning quality inclusion. This is especially important in the present socio-economic situation. We should compare understanding of lifelong learning policy across countries, learning from the best practice and offering the best practice of our country in the field. The research project under discussion should deal with learning for employability in order to secure economic growth, social

cohesion and personal development which, as ASEM chairman Arne Carlsen stressed in his speech, is of utmost importance for lifelong learning at present.

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