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National Report of Latvia

Quality and Students

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INTRODUCTION

National policy on student assessment

Universities in Latvia are autonomous, and there is very little that the state is trying to regulate concerning the student assessment. Institutional policies are much more elaborate in this respect, and they achieve certain level of uniformity by means of regular exchange of opinions, e.g., in discussions organized by the Rectors' Conference.

The Law on HEI[1] (with recent amendments of July, 2011) stipulates that HEIs must define the way how courses are elaborated and included in study programmes in order to reach the learning outcomes of the programme. The course descriptions have to contain the list of learning outcomes for the course and also the defined criteria for assessment of the learning outcomes. Each course description also has to contain the tasks for students' independent work. It must be pointed out that although the approach based on learning outcomes has been enforced by legislation only the last year, most institution have been applying it in practice already before.

Further on, the law stipulates that in academic study programmes there has to be final assessment whose part is carrying out and presenting a graduation work (Bachelor or Master thesis) and professional study programmes are concluded by State exams that should contain graduation work or graduation project as a part. The semester assessment can be done in form of tests (passed or not passed) or exams (with a mark). The law recommends that exams must be mostly in a written form.

The Regulation on accreditation of Study programmes[2] does not define what criteria should apply to evaluation of student assessment, nevertheless student assessment is a regular part in self-evaluation reports submitted to the evaluation committee, and HEIs usually explain here, inter alias, the grading scale which is from 1 to 10, and 4 (almost satisfactory) is usually considered the lowest passing mark.

The Regulation on Scholarships[3] stipulates that the state scholarships are awarded based on academic and scientific achievements of the student.

The centralized exams at graduation of secondary schools, according to regulations so far, have been with marks and ECTS denotations (from A to F) as well as with percentages of the correct solutions. At present there is a discussion going on aiming at dropping the marks and leaving only the percentages.

Research methodology

The 4 institutions have been visited to study the documentation and to carry out interviews with the target groups defined by the lead partner of the WP7. The snowball method has been applied to choose representatives of each target group; in most institutions the central management pointed out the possible representatives of mid-level management and the latter ones named the front-line teachers and

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[1] Augstskolu likums

[2] Ministru kabineta noteikumi Nr.821 Rīgā 2006.gada 3.oktobrī (prot. Nr.50 46.§) Augstskolu, koledžu un augstākās izglītības programmu akreditācijas kārtība

[3] Ministru kabineta noteikumi Nr.740. Rīgā 2004.gada 24.augustā (prot. Nr.50 27.§) Noteikumi par stipendijām

students for the needs of our research. Altogether we interviewed 9 persons from central management, 14 persons from mid-level management, 16 frontline teachers, and 26 students.

Thus there were persons from different policy implementation levels (top management (e.g. rector, vice-rector, administrative director), middle level managers (directors of study programmes, chairs), frontline teaching staff (lecturers, assistants) and students interviewed at all higher education institutions. At higher education institutions that are less specialized and more general in their fields of studies (e.g. University of Latvia and Rezekne Higher School), representatives from different fields of studies at all policy implementation levels were invited to share their point of view on the research questions of WP7. Just to mention an example, at the University of Latvia students of Chemistry, Management and Humanities were interviewed by the research team, at the Rezekne Higher School the represented fields of studies in the target group of students were Pedagogy, Engineering (Mechatronics) and History.

As the answers to many questions were similar, we have tried to give the most repetitive ones in our report, and only in cases where answers contain noteworthy differences we are pointing out the target group or the institution.

ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1a. What is the institutional policy on student assessment?

For the student assessment institutions are using the same marking system as in the Secondary education sector. Therefore the students are easily adapting to the student assessment system at the university.

The institutional policy complies with the national standards of student assessment procedures as defined by the Regulation on the Standards of the Academic Education and other normative acts. The internal regulations (e.g. Regulation on Procedure of Course Assessments at the UL[4]) define in more detail the procedure of both assessment and complaints on it. Internal regulations also require that the intended learning outcomes are described within the course description and that the assessment should be based on them.

At the regulated fields of studies (e.g. Latvian Maritime Academy) there are many external actors and shareholders, both local and international, participating in the defining the policy on student assessment. Thus at the qualification examination the student has to gain at least 7 out of 10 (1-10 being the official grading system in Latvia).

1b. How is the relevant information communicated to students?

Information on the student assessment is available online on institutional information servers, e.g., LUIS in UL, BATIS in BAT, and similar in other surveyed institutions; it contains course descriptions to inform the students about the student assessment specifics in the individual course and in combination with the informative session during the first lecture basically cover the student need for the relevant information. Some faculties also practice the Dean's class at the beginning of the 1st Bachelor year, where the administrative system and also the assessment is explained. Some institutions hand out the basic information for students in hard copies at the beginning of studies. One of the surveyed institutions even noted, that the formulation of learning outcomes has been helpful in conflict situations and is the best way to lead the student to the target objective.

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[4] Studiju kursu pārbaudījumu organizēšanas kārtība Latvijas Universitātē

2. How are student assessment procedures made appropriate for their purpose (diagnostic, formative, summative)?

It is quite common, although not compulsory, that pre-testing of student abilities/skills/competences take place in the beginning of each course, usually in the form of a test. However not all of the lecturers reveal the results of this preliminary testing by giving a feedback to the students, even though the students would have liked to know their standing or at least the correct answers to the questions asked. Based on the results the lecturer can adapt the level of detail that some of the course features are discussed upon, remaining, naturally, in the framework of the course description. Through analysing the results of such course pre-testing in different years, it is possible to observe, that the students each year become more knowing in some issues, and that is taken as a lead to changes in the course. At the specialized institutions (Latvian Maritime Academy) such pretesting often is not necessary, as it is highly unlikely that the students will have any pre-knowledge in the field (e.g. course on diesel equipment and turbines) at all. However in more generally taught disciplines such as mathematics, the lecturer might introduce a pre-testing.

Where necessary, the course description contains also the information on what courses have to be finished before, and it is also taken care by the faculties when allowing the students to register for particular courses. It does not concern basic courses at the beginning of Bachelor studies where the prerequisite is the Certificate of secondary education. Although the prerequisites define the necessary preliminary knowledge and skills of students, pre-testing is not going to be abandoned as a handy tool for lecturers to get feedback.

In most HEIs, depending on the largeness of the student group, commitment and philosophy of each lecturer, there are different strategies chosen for developing student abilities/skills/competences through interaction and feedback. There are cases where the system is strictly defined in the procedures pertaining to quality management system, allowing rather little freedom of choice to lecturers.

There are lecturers that believe, based on their own experience, that the group work contradicts the best practice in formative assessment, these are mainly lecturers in courses where the students shall acquire good calculation skills. In courses which are more into portraying the different point of views on the same issue the interaction and the feedback is more team work based.

Quite often lecturers state that it is easier to commit themselves to formative assessment as this leads to higher level of satisfaction of students apropos the results of the final assessment of the students' performance. Some of the lecturers have created detailed assessment sheets, where the students may observe what their personal summative assessment is made of. These sheets are placed in the institutional information system to be accessed by the students (for their personal data) and by the lecturer himself (to see the picture for the whole group).

Several of the lecturers have created assessment sheets containing some basic assessment indicators that the students have to fill in to assess the performance of fellow-students. The fellow student assessment is done to both - inform the students about what is essential for their own personal assessment in the opinion of the lecturer and – to make sure that the students pay attention and involve in the discussion. Normally the students are asked to evaluate the performance of their fellow students mainly while they are presenting (on Powerpoint presentation) their homework.

The activities of student self-assessment are less wide-spread, as the existing system of funding the studies is often forcing the students to overvaluation of own performance. However some of the lecturers introduce the student self-assessment next to the fellow student assessment and provide the

students later with the feedback on how their opinion on own performance correlates with the fellow-student opinion (some faculties in UL).

The representatives at one of highly specialized and regulated institutions (Latvian Maritime Academy) stated that usually the results of the tests done in between do not have any impact on the final assessment of students' knowledge by the means of examination. On the other hand the participation in lectures (in first year of studies) is obligatory, same as the passing the tests and a prerequisite for gaining access to the examination. The other higher education institutions practice a more voluntary attendance of lectures and seminars, however the activities that are completed by the students during the semester either count towards the final mark with the option not to pass the examination, or make up a part of the final mark the student can get for passing the examination.

At the higher education institutions, where the development of practical skills is part of the studies (e.g. Engineering at Rezekne Higher School), the examination usually contains both theoretical and practical part. However such examinations are usually quite time consuming and can be sometimes replaced by study projects which integrate the testing of acquiring the learning outcomes in a block or module of courses.

3. How are student assessment procedures designed to measure the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives?

The programme objectives are mostly in line with the general cycle descriptors of the national QF. In one of the institutions the phrasing is somewhat different but that is for the reason that the learning outcomes have been introduced already a couple of decades ago due to specifics of the institution (highly regulated professions, supervised in this respect by governmental and professional organizations). The intended learning outcomes of the individual courses form the program objectives and work towards reaching them. However in most institutions an ongoing tuning has to be conducted and the real implementation degree has to be checked as the system is rather young (1-2 years).

One of the programs in UL runs a pilot project in examining the implementation degree of learning outcomes. On basis of program's learning outcomes a detailed set of sub-learning outcomes has been created. Majority of the lecturers involved in teaching at the program were questioned on the implementation of the individual sub-learning outcomes. The cross-checking of the results of lecturers' survey with opinion of some of the graduates showed, that even though all in all the results are similar, there can be some substantial differences between how the students and the lecturers evaluate the degree of attainment of the same learning outcome – some differences in the intended and real (or perceived by the graduates) learning outcomes were detected.

Thus for example, the lecturers believed, that the students are more skilled in team working skills than they actually believed to be by themselves. It was decided to implement several changes in the study process, e.g. the conclusion drawn by the focus group when discussing this result of the survey was that it is necessary to stress the importance of ethics, as the team of lecturers run the danger that this learning outcome and the related competencies and skills are attained at an unsatisfactory level. It was decided that the lecturer of course "Behavior of International Organizations" will allocate additional hours for discussing the subject and will change the learning outcomes of the course correspondingly.

It was concluded that creating a map of detailed sub-learning outcomes to the individual courses can help provoking discussion among lecturers on: the attained cluster of skills and competences of the average graduate of the program based on the activities undertaken in sum by the team of lecturers; the cluster of skills and competences that currently is being attained at an unsatisfactory level; the

conformity of the stated and intended learning outcomes of the program to the content provided and therefore can be applied for future tuning of the program and its learning outcomes.

Similarly at Rezekne Higher School each of the programs has learning outcomes formulated and each of them assigned to the specific courses.

Even though the lecturers are rather autonomous in applying the assessment procedures that should be able to diagnose the level of achieving the learning outcomes, some of the institutions have conducted an audit – through team of lecturers - and detected some inadequacy between the intended learning outcomes and assessment procedures, which has been removed.

The formulation of learning outcomes is especially important at times when there are foreign visiting students taking part in the course in form of a common project week.

It is observed that the Bachelor level students are not even aware of the intended learning outcomes of the course and the program and do not think of them during the study process, whereas the Master level students are often aware of what they expect the intended learning outcomes to be.

At the regulated fields of study (e.g. Latvian Maritime Academy) the concept of learning outcomes has been introduced already in early 70ties. Each qualification has to follow the international standards as described in specifications, e.g. specification of minimum standard of competences for chief engineer.

4a. Are student assessment procedures undertaken in accordance to the officially stated examination rules/regulations by qualified personnel?

Yes. In the interviews with middle level management and frontline lecturers there were no indications to the opposite. The students normally are not very much aware of the letter of internal or external regulations to give a confident opinion, but they also did not suggest any deviations from the rules. This is also subject to the study field of the students. It is more often, that the Law students take opportunity of applying the objection rights through defined internal procedures such as the complaining on the assessment procedure. However the institutions welcome such activities as they help both the student to get the professional skills and the institution to improve the content and formulations in the written regulations. This is also the reason why such institutions practice written examinations- in case of conflict it can be used as document either to prove or to upturn the student's objection. The objection to the assessment results is often due to the student's perspective of losing the scholarship as the result of insufficient performance.

The exams in general are taken by the lecturers that have delivered the particular course. The institutional policy allows the chair of the respective structural unit to delegate another lecturer to assess the learning outcomes of the students, e.g. when parts of the course are delivered by guest lecturer at short stays.

4b. To what extent are the procedures dependent on the judgement of a single examiner?

It depends on the course credits. The less credits one gets for the course, the greater the chance, that the procedures will be dependent on the judgement of a single examiner. This is also partly due to the availability of many very specialized courses, where it would be hard to find another expert. Also, the issue of creating an examination commission involves increased costs to the management.

The internal regulations normally prescribe that it is possible to try passing the examination three times. The assessment of the achieved learning outcomes of the course by the student in the third time of the examination is checked by a commission of lecturers to exclude the possibility of existing personal

conflict between the lecturer and the student. At the student's request the commission is appointed already for the first or second attempt. As a rule the students usually are reluctant to use this right, as they believe that the lecturer that has run the course is more predictable in his/her examination passing requirements and is better acknowledged to the specific student's abilities and performance, as he/her has gotten to know the student during the semester. Some of the higher education institutions offer its students the possibility to request for an examination commission at courses where single examiner is foreseen by the course description.

There are types of assessment where collective opinion is a norm. Thus, course works are defended in a chair or department meeting and all the staff participates in assessment. The graduation works are normally assessed by a body containing external members, and some HEIs have a practice that the supervisor can only give his opinion, but is excluded from voting for the mark. In practically oriented institutions there are so-called state exams, where the commission is chaired by a notable person from the professional field (outside HEI).

5. Do student assessment procedures have clear and published criteria for:

- **marking?**
- **student absence, illness, or other mitigating circumstances?**
- **informing students on the type, method, and criteria of assessment?**
- **student class participation?**
- **exam enrolment?**

The easily accessible online in the Information System course descriptions contain clear criteria on assessment as related to the type, method, and criteria of assessment, student class participation, exam enrolment and the constituents of marking. Some of the lecturers even hand it out during the first lecture. The lecturers have to update the course descriptions regularly. It may happen that the information stated in the course description is changed slightly by the lecturer, due to some internal conditions. However this is not considered a good practice and the lecturer has to inform the students about the changes in the rules very clearly and in the very first lecture. The first lecture is also when the lecturers inform the students on other organisational matters, such as sequence of seminars/lectures, possibility to attend the same course at different times etc.

There are rules defined at the faculty level on the procedure to follow in case of student absence, illness, or other mitigating circumstances.

Information on the type, method and criteria of assessment is contained in course descriptions and also explained to students at the beginning of each course. Some lecturers are very explicit as to what will be assessed in an each single task, making it very easy for the students to work towards a self - satisfying level of assessment e.g. number of literature sources that have to be included into the references, formatting requirements etc.

The schedules of exams are often defined jointly by lecturers and the students (or rather by the student group representative and the lecturer), and then it is put in the information system and is not to be negotiated individually. The possibility to negotiate the examination date is especially of an importance at Latvian Maritime Academy, where the students may be absent because of scheduling the seagoing. Normally a student has to have completed all the intermediate assessment steps before he can attend the exam, but at places it is possible to pass the exam, however the course is not completed as the exam is only between 10 and 50% of the course mark. As already mentioned before, at the specialized and highly regulated fields of studies the course attendance may have an impact on the gaining access to the examination.

The examination dates are set at a central level, without any student consultation, in the larger higher education institutions, where an individual arrangement would not be possible due to the many groups of students, many lecturers and, of course, the necessity of optimized facility planning. However even here it is possible that the student arranges an individual examination date with a lecturer in case of mitigating circumstances such as e.g. being an exchange student and requiring an early leave during the semester due to the differences in academic calendar at the host institution abroad.

6a. Are student assessment procedures subject to administrative verification checks?

Yes, but in practice it is not done often and in some institutions it is limited to cases when the results are disputed by the student. It is more common for the middle level management or senior management to attend the lectures and practical classes and it serves more as a tool for evaluation of lecturers and courses, not assessment procedures.

6b. If so, how are the verification checks made?

To solve the possible issue of incorrect assessment the institutions have well described procedures to claim the assessment results for reconsideration. However, not that many cases can be reported when the students have complained about the assessment they got in separate courses, mainly the-dealt-with-complains consider the assessment the students have achieved during thesis defence (in case e.g. that there are major differences between the assessment of the referee and the assessment by the examination commission).

The students speak of demanding and more easy-going lecturers, however the popularity of such lecturers often depends on the diligence degree of the individual student. The student assessment sheets of selected randomly (or due to the incoming complaints) individual lecturers are sometimes monitored by the faculty administration, to make sure that there are no excessively demanding or easy-going lecturers. In one of the institutions there is a sophisticated software tool to analyze the assessment results in various aspects – by the group, by the subject areas, by the lecturer to see if the results fit into a curve of normal distribution, so that a closer look can be taken in case of exceptional pictures.

There are also some regular verification checks that are known in advance to the student assessors and preparations to it can take place.

Quite often the junior lecturers are taken for a closer consideration during such verification checks. Also the guest lecturers are often inspected, this is due both to the fact that the local lecturer will be taking the final examination (because the guest lecturer might leave earlier than the examination date) and to make sure that the overall quality level of the assessment procedure corresponds to the internal quality culture of the institution.

7. How do student assessment procedures reflect on students' knowledge and skills gained at the secondary education level?

The students are accepted to studies on the basis of results of the Centralized Examinations (knowledge and skills gained at the secondary education level). There is no other individual assessment of these knowledge and skills that would be conducted by the university. The institutions deny any dependence of assessment procedures on the students' knowledge gained in school, even more, usually the student

assessors do not have any idea on the student's previous accomplishments. However analysis of assessment results and comparison of them with the students' previous performance in schools show rather good correlation.

8. What is the role of external actors, including QA agencies, in student assessment procedures?

The student assessment procedures in their very basic principles are defined by the Regulation on the Standards of the Academic Education. There is no rule or practice that QA agency would directly participate in assessment. The QA agency is more into checking the procedures through self-assessment reports during the regular accreditation process. There is a general practice that examination boards for state exams or defence of graduation works include persons from external organizations – those could be employers, cooperation partners, representatives from the Ministry of Education and science, professional associations. Rezekne Higher School even attracts a foreign expert for the participation in the examination commission of its Computer Science program. If the graduation work has been carried out in a partner organization (a common practice for faculties of Natural sciences), the students supervisor always participates, but does not have a voting right. Also it is quite often that a reviewer for the thesis is taken from an external organization.
One of the basic documents the Latvian Maritime Academy has to follow is the international STCW 95 convention and code.

9a. Have there recently been significant changes made in student assessment procedures to improve their effectiveness?

In general the transfer to learning outcomes based teaching and subsequent assessment is aimed at improving the effectiveness of student assessment procedures, and it is a fairly new development, except for some regulated fields of study (e.g. Latvian Maritime Academy), where the learning outcomes have been introduced already in early 70ties and is a common approach of organizing the study process indeed.
One of the programs at the Latvian Maritime Academy has introduced a computerized random question selection for the complex examination.

9b. Can you identify any aspect of student assessment procedures you especially approve of?

It is still early to say about the impact of transfer to learning outcomes based approach, as it has not yet been fully implemented. There are partial tools in each institution designed to make for development of of quality culture, e.g. in some smaller institutions a self assessment template to be filled in once a year to make all the staff accustomed to permanent enhancement of the academic processes.
The representatives of Rezekne Higher School stated introducing a design of a prototype product as the final intended learning outcome at one of its programs. A prototype product is an optimal (not minimal) intended learning outcome, especially the school would cherish having such prototype product as a result of team work by students from different disciplines (e.g. design, environmental engineering, management). However this is a recent innovation in the program's description, so it is hard yet to say anything on the degree of success.

The students at the Latvian Maritime Academy like that the examinations are oral, as quick oral answer giving is one of the skills necessary on the ships.

CONCLUSIONS

For the student assessment institutions are using the same marking system as in the Secondary education sector. Therefore the students are easily adapting to the student assessment system at the university.

Depending on the specialization degree of the course a pre-testing might help in cases of more general fields of study (e.g. mathematics) adapting the level of detail that some of the course features are discussed upon, remaining, naturally, in the framework of the course description, or even changing the course contents in the long run.

At the higher education institutions, where the development of practical skills is part of the studies, the examination usually contains both theoretical and practical part. However such examinations are usually quite time consuming and can be sometimes replaced by study projects which integrate the testing of acquiring the learning outcomes in a block or module of courses.

There are different ways how to check the implementation of intended learning outcomes. Basically the check is done on basis of an internal document, which stipulates a detailed set of sub-learning outcomes that in total compile into the learning outcomes of the programme and indicates the individual courses that are assigned to delivering each set of detailed sub-learning outcomes. The attainment of intended learning outcomes can be then checked by a group of lecturers, or can be cross-checked with the opinion of the graduates. Such checks can show how the students and the lecturers evaluate the degree of attainment of the same learning outcome – and some differences in the intended and real (or perceived by the graduates) learning outcomes can be detected and applied for future tuning of the program and its learning outcomes.

Even though the lecturers are rather autonomous in applying the assessment procedures that should be able to diagnose the level of achieving the learning outcomes, an audit – through, e.g., team of lecturers – can help detecting inadequacies between the intended learning outcomes and existing assessment procedure.

The formulation of learning outcomes is especially important at times when there are foreign visiting students taking part in the course, and it also serves as the primary document to solve the disputes between teaching staff and students.

To make the process of learning more meaningful it is important that the Bachelor level students are familiarized with the concept of learning outcomes as early as possible (Master level students are usually well aware of what they expect the intended learning outcomes of the course and program to be).

Country-specific barriers to ESG on student assessment in HEI:

1. Requirement of local language (Latvian) to be the language of instruction at the state-owned higher education institutions may hamper the assessment procedure in regulated fields of study where other language is the working language (e.g. the working language on ships is English).

2. The activities of student self-assessment are less wide-spread in Latvia, as the existing system of funding the studies is often forcing the students to overvaluation of their own performance. (However some of the lecturers introduce the student self-assessment next to

the fellow student assessment and provide the students later with the feedback on how their opinion on their own performance correlates with the fellow-student opinion.)

Following examples of good practice emerged during the study:

1. It can be useful to learn from the experience of higher education institutions acting in regulated fields of study (e.g. Latvian Maritime Academy), as they share a long time experience with practical application of the concept of learning oucomes.

2. A computerized random question selection for the examination can help providing quality assessment through eliminating the temptation of maltreatment of particular students by giving them tricky questions.

3. It can be useful to think of learning outcomes not only in the form of minimum intended learning outcomes. Setting the level of optimum intending learning outcomes can help increasing the quality of studies by putting a greater challenge to students, as they are sometimes underestimated in their ability.