



12th European Quality Assurance Forum

Responsible QA – committing to impact

Hosted by the University of Latvia
Riga, Latvia

23-25 November 2017

Paper proposal form

Deadline 24 July 2017

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

Author(s)

Name: Anita Līce

Position: Education and Employment field manager

Organisation: Employers' Confederation of Latvia

Country: Latvia

E-mail address: anita.lice@gmail.com

Short bio: Anita Līce is a Manager of the Education and Employment Field at the Employers' Confederation of Latvia (LDDK) where she has been working since 2010, representing interests of employers on the national level. Anita Līce has been an adviser to the Minister of Education (2014-2016), Register Committee member of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (as of 2014) and a vice-chairperson of the European Students' Union (ESU) (2008-2009). She is a PhD student at Education Management programme of the University of Latvia.

Position: Professor

Organisation: BA School of Business and Finance

Country: Latvia

E-mail address: tatjana.volkova@ba.lv

Short bio: Tatjana Volkova is a professor of Strategic Management and Innovation Management at BA School of Business and Finance, Latvia. She is an author of many research articles and books published nationally and internationally. Tatjana Volkova has been invited as a moderator and a speaker for national and international conferences and has carried out evaluations of higher education institutions as well study programmes on behalf of different international organizations in Europe, Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. Her professional experience is related to higher education policy development, quality management and assurance, strategic management, etc. Tatjana Volkova has delivered training seminars on Performance management, Benchmarking, Diversification of income streams to higher education institutions in Middle East and Europe.



Name: Arkādijs Zvaigzne

Position: Head of Academic Affairs

Organisation: Student Union of Latvia

Country: Latvia

E-mail address: arkadijs.zvaigzne@lsa.lv

Short bio: Arkādijs Zvaigzne is an MBA student at Riga Business School, Latvia. Arkādijs is an experienced student representative in the field of quality assurance of higher education and is currently responsible for coordinating the work of Latvian student experts in the external quality assurance of higher education as well as representing the interests of students on the national level in policymaking related to the quality assurance of higher education. Furthermore, he is a member of the Higher Education Council (Latvia) and a project expert for the Higher Education Quality Agency (Latvia) and has participated in multiple Latvian accreditations as an expert.

Proposal

Title: Meeting employers' expectations on employability competencies of higher education graduates

Abstract:

Employers can give a valuable insight into the employability competencies and desired improvements in the higher education quality assurance system.

The main aim of the paper is to find what kind of employability competencies are highly valued by employers, how employers see their involvement in higher education and what further quality assurance activities should be performed by HEIs to better meet employers' expectations.

The survey of employers who participated in the evaluation of higher education as the members of experts' pool in Latvia was conducted based on the Importance-Performance Analysis.

According to the results obtained it was concluded that for ensuring sustainable employability of graduates they should take responsibility for their own decisions, show positive attitude towards work and colleagues, be adaptable and motivated to work. The research results confirmed that employers are much keener on participating in activities, which provide a direct and immediate benefit to their enterprise.

Keywords: higher education, employers, quality assurance, employability

The paper is based on: research

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No, it was prepared exclusively for EQAF.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Due to the rapid changes in the labour market which in the context of future skills needs are studied by many researchers and international organisations (for example, A. De Grip et al., 2004; Humburg et al., 2013; WEF, 2015), graduates can no longer count on the work in the same occupation and a small number of job changes throughout life: graduates should become more flexible and better prepared for lifelong learning. Lee Harvey even defines individual's employability as lifelong-learning: employability "is about developing attributes, techniques, or experience for life. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on "employ" and more on "ability." In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner." (Harvey, 2005).



Despite the fact that the employability is a contentious concept with many interpretations (Sumanasiri et.al., 2015), it has become important in higher education research and policy making. Methods used to facilitate graduate employability are analysed in several international comparative reports (for example, Commission et.al., 2015; European Commission et.al., 2014). According to them, involving employers in different processes of planning, implementing and evaluating education, as well as integrating skills demanded in the labour market into curriculum are common methods used in different countries to facilitate graduate employability. Employability researchers have developed models that help to explain the factors facilitating employability. One of the most well-known is the CareerEDGE model which was developed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007). The model explains the way in which five factors, namely, career development learning, experience, degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills, generic skills, and emotional intelligence can lead towards employability through a complex interaction with self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence. Indeed, the employer surveys in Latvia confirm that there is a rising demand that students should develop transferable or generic competencies in addition to subject-specific qualifications. (SIA "Projektu un kvalitātes vadība," 2014, Līce, 2017). The CareerEDGE model was also operationalised by introducing and exploring its factor structure (Pool et.al., 2014).

As higher education is facing new demands to account for its contributions, employer involvement in quality assurance of higher education becomes more important. Employers represent the higher education stakeholder that encounters learning outcomes in the process of their application. Employers can contribute to the development of higher education by giving a valuable insight into the competencies needed on the labour market, as well as future competencies for sustainable employability. They can also contribute by participating in designing, implementing and evaluating higher education, including, by giving valuable external perspective on desired improvements in the quality assurance system of higher education.

The main aim of the paper is to investigate, how higher education institutions (HEIs) of Latvia could facilitate reaching employers' expectations regarding ensuring employability competencies for higher education graduates, their involvement in higher education activities and further developments in the quality assurance system, based on the data from employers' survey. The main research questions are as follows:

- What expectations do employers have of higher education in Latvia?
- What are the activities employers are willing to be involved to enhance the employability of graduates?
- What activities should be performed by HEIs for better achievement of employers' expectations?
- How to improve higher education quality assurance system for better achievement of employers' expectations?

Methodology

The study was carried out by sending an electronic questionnaire to 87 employer representatives which were included in the database of quality assurance experts of the Employers' Confederation of Latvia. All of them have been quality assurance experts in Latvia.

The authors used the Importance – Performance analysis (IPA) approach for assessing employers' expectations of higher education in Latvia. The questions on employer perception of the importance of certain competencies for employment in their companies (Q5) and on the extent to which these competencies could be developed in higher education in Latvia (Q6) were included in the questionnaire.

The framework of employability competencies of CareerEDGE model was used (Pool et al., 2014) to select the determinants. The list of competencies was shortened and translated into Latvian to ensure they could be evaluated by the Latvian employers. To measure employers' role in higher education, a question on the extent to which the employers would be ready to get involved in certain higher education activities (Q8) was included. Q5, Q6 and Q8 were developed as Likert-type questions with bi-directional scale of 5 possible answers. Additionally, open questions on the future competencies, support needed from HEIs to employers to get involved, the role of professional and employer organisations in improving the quality of higher education and suggestions for the development of the higher education quality assurance system were included.

The methods used to analyse data included quantitative research methods and qualitative research methods. IPA is a method developed by Martilla & James (1977), widely used in marketing and management research. It combines measures of customers' perceived importance and performance into a two-dimensional plot to facilitate data interpretation (Figure 1). The cross of the axes is determined by the median values of the data as suggested for situations when a true interval scale could not be assumed (Sever, 2014). An upward sloping 45° diagonal line is inserted in the graph to separate regions of different priorities. The points above the line depict an area of high priority for improvement and opportunity ($I > P$), while the region below suggests low priorities (Bacon, 2003).

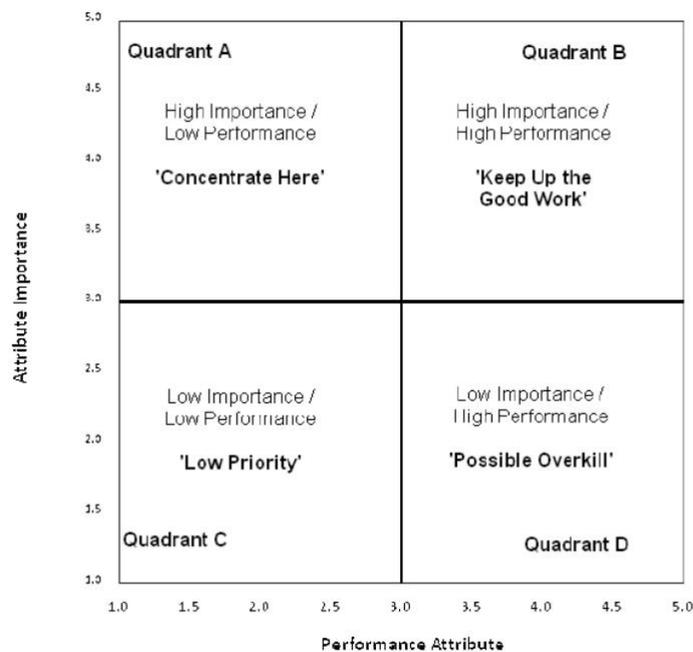


Figure 1. The original IPA framework. Source: Martilla & James 1977

Results and discussion

In total, 35 answers were collected, reaching 40% response rate. 83% of respondents were managers, 17% – specialists at their companies. Only 1 respondent had a secondary vocational education degree, all others had a higher education degree. The companies represented 15 different fields of economic activity according to NACE classification. Cronbach's alpha for Q5, Q6 and Q8 exceeded 0.8, which suggests good internal consistency of data.

The respondents confirmed that the employability competences were important in their companies (total median – 4.45). According to Table 1, the competencies that employers mentioned as the most important were (in decreasing order): ability to take responsibility for one's own decisions, ability to work independently, communication skills, work motivation, ability to work in a team, attitude towards work and colleagues, ability to adapt to new situations and computer skills. The performance of higher education in development of employability competencies received comparatively lower evaluation (median - 2.92). The following competencies received the best evaluation: computer skills, presentation skills, achievements in education (Table 2).

Table 1

Importance of competencies in the corporate recruitment process (relative frequencies in %)

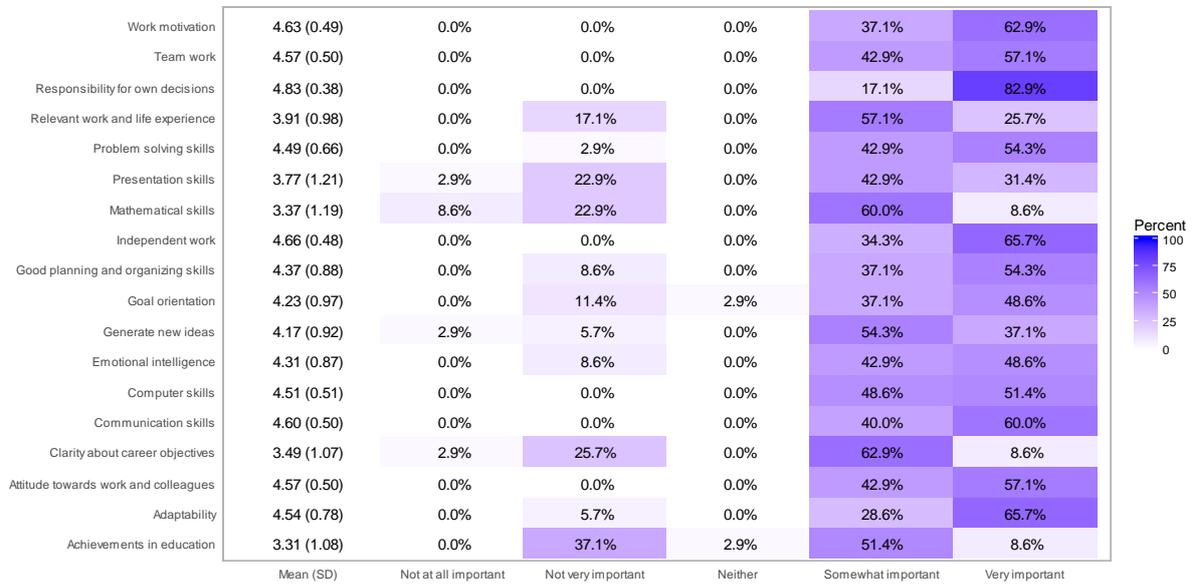
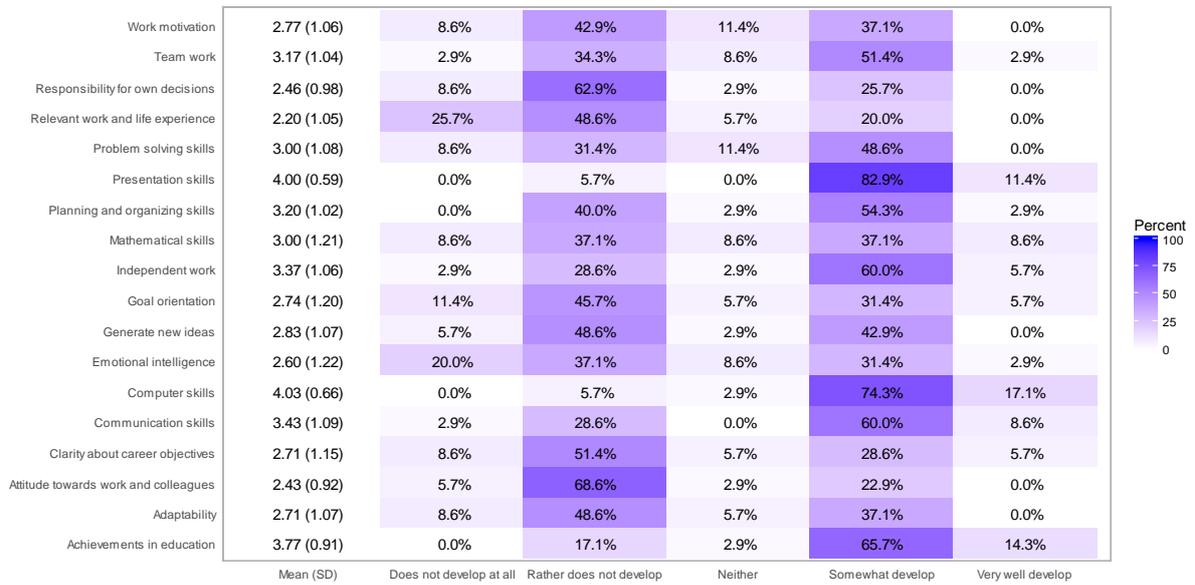
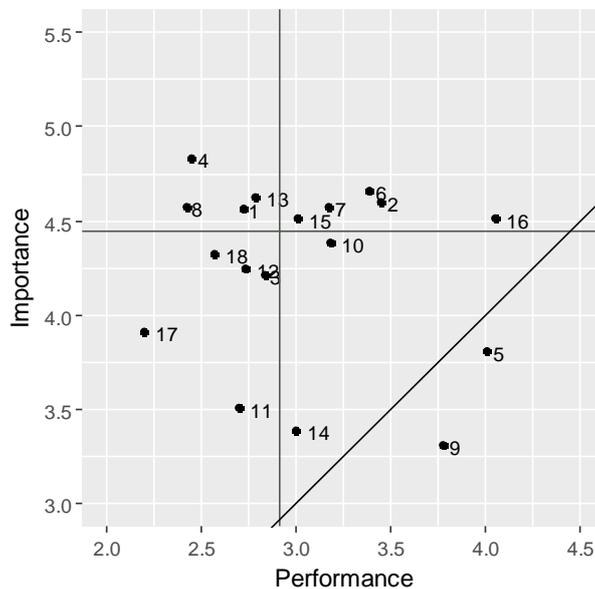


Table 2

Performance of higher education in development of competencies (relative frequencies in %)



IPA matrix is represented in Figure 2.



- 1 - Adaptability
- 2 - Communication skills
- 3 - Generate new ideas
- 4 - Responsibility for own decisions
- 5 - Presentation skills
- 6 - Independent work
- 7 - Team work
- 8 - Attitude towards work and colleagues
- 9 - Achievements in education
- 10 - Good planning and organizing skills
- 11 - Clarity about career objectives
- 12 - Goal orientation
- 13 - Work motivation
- 14 - Mathematical skills
- 15 - Problem solving skills
- 16 - Computer skills
- 17 - Relevant work and life experience
- 18 - Emotional intelligence

Figure 2. IPA matrix

The results of IPA matrix are spread over four quadrants. According to Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon Test, there is a statistically significant difference between importance and performance ($p < 0.05$) for all determinants except determinants number 14, 9 and 5, suggesting high priority for improvement and opportunity ($I > P$) for all determinants except these.

The largest absolute mean gaps were detected for the responsibility for one's own decisions (2.4), attitude towards work and colleagues (2.1), work motivation (1.9) and adaptability (1.8), all falling into quadrant A. All of these competencies are included in the Goleman's Framework of Emotional Competence (Goleman, 1998, 32). This means that HEIs should pay closer attention to the development of emotional intelligence during the teaching and learning process and the learning outcomes should be tailored towards these competencies. Some of these competencies, e.g. work motivation, attitude towards work and colleagues, depend not only on graduates' abilities, but, also the organizational culture of companies. Therefore, the employers should also pay more attention to the expectations of graduates in the work environment to ensure smooth professional career development.

The most frequently mentioned competences, the importance of which will increase over the next decade, were the ability to adapt/ flexibility and ability to learn continuously (10 mentions), digital competence (8), work in a team/ cooperation skills, including with people of all ages (7), emotional intelligence (6), problem solving skills (5), ability to take responsibility, foreign languages and creativity/ ability to apply an interdisciplinary approach, ability to distinguish true information and to use it creatively (4 mentions each). Other competencies mentioned were: presentation skills, specialization / professionalism in the relevant fields, work and life experience, critical thinking, ability to work independently, ability to create new ideas, knowledge and technologies, incl. using programming for automation of various works, data analysis skills, intercultural competence, ability to be different, attitude

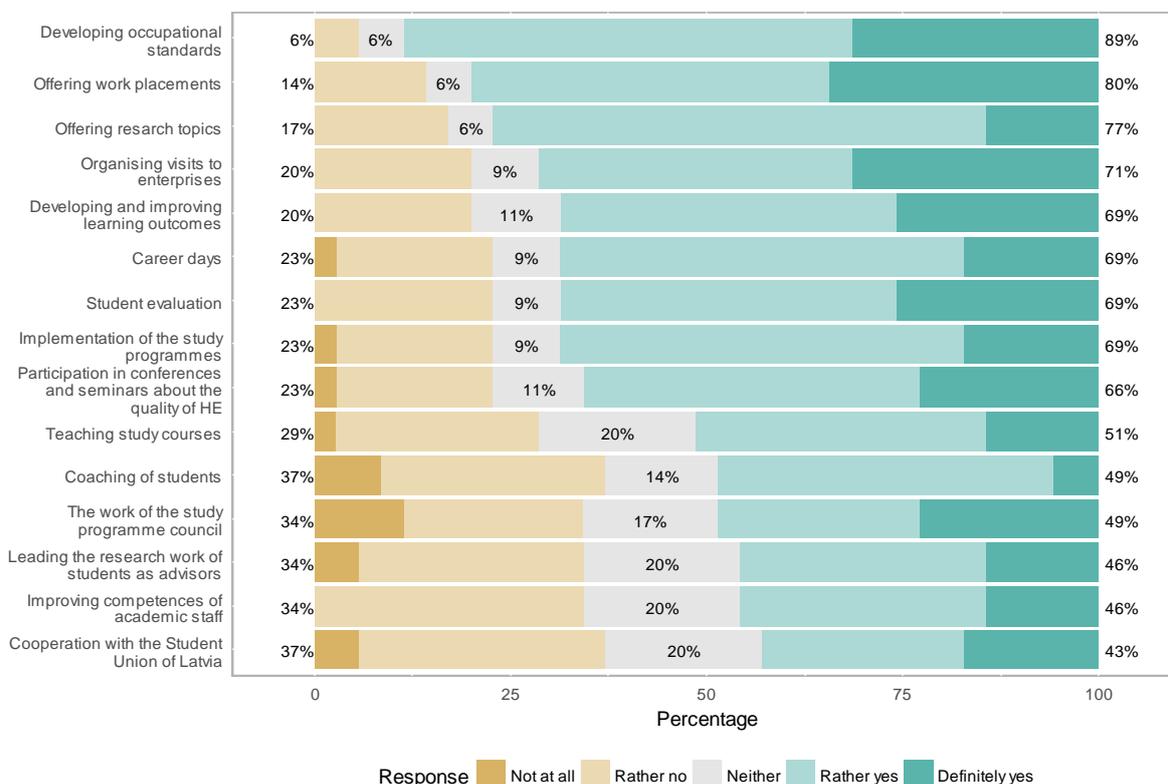
to work and colleagues, cognitive skills, human resource management, change management and openness to change, ability to evaluate the quality of work, ability to keep up with trends in the industry, ability to promote the growth of the company's turnover and social competences.

Considering future competencies and performance of HEIs, it would be particularly important to pay attention to better development of flexibility and learning to learn, as well as emotional intelligence to ensure sustainable employability of graduates.

According to Table 3, the employers are more willing rather than unwilling to participate in higher education activities. The highest willingness to participate was in the development of the nationally regulated occupational standards which are binding to all HEIs (88% willing, 6% unwilling) and the lowest was in the cooperation with the Student Union of Latvia (41% willing, 38% unwilling). This leads to the possible conclusion that the employers prefer cost-effective activities with a clear aim.

Table 3

Higher education activities employers would be ready to get involved in (%)



The next most preferred activities are those which could provide talent and benefits for their enterprises, such as offering work placements. During work placements, students not just learn, but also work, and only 25 % of all work placements in Latvia are paid (Klāsons & Spuriņš, 2015). Therefore, work placements can be beneficial for the employers both in a long term by preparing qualified workers, and in a short term. It is worth noting that student coaching is considerably less preferred than other activities. Based on the assumptions that the time of employers is limited and they aim to rationalise its use, it can be concluded that coaching is not cost-effective in the eyes of employers.

Similarly, the employers are not as interested in direct participation in academia as in other fields to foster development of employability competencies. This means that, even though HEIs tend to be interested in inviting employers to participate in academia, employers are much keener on participating in activities, which give them either a say on the national regulation of higher education, or in activities



which provide a direct and immediate benefit to their enterprise. Therefore, the short-term thinking prevails among employers leading to insufficient involvement in developing the necessary graduate competencies. Stronger partnerships among higher education providers, employers as a key stakeholders and students aiming at creating shared value should become a priority for developing employability competencies of graduates. The employability competencies are dynamic and through closer partnerships it would be possible to trace those changes and to adjust higher education content and structure accordingly. Employers are looking at employment competencies, but, for the benefit of society the entrepreneurship skills are utmost important as well.

Almost a third of the employers responded that they expect openness and willingness to cooperate, as well as clear and concise communication from HEIs. Some mentioned that HEIs should participate as a coordinator and facilitator for cooperation between students and employers, as well as that HEIs should provide a compilation of all activities employers could participate in and very precise information regarding what the HEI wants from the employer, as well as clear division of responsibilities. Almost one fifth of the employers expected the HEI to consider employer feedback. One employer stated that he felt that the study courses were more tailored towards what academic staff were working on for the HEI rather than what was needed in the labour market. This means that HEIs should work out procedures how employers are communicated with, how their feedback is gained and used and how responsibilities are divided. Cooperation implies a two-way communication and the employers could as well take the leading role in facilitating the involvement of faculty and students in different activities performed by companies. The engagement platforms for instant communication among HEIs and stakeholders could be developed to open new opportunities for better communication and getting regular feedback on suggestions.

The employers were also asked, what employers and employer organisations should do to improve the quality of higher education. Most of the answers were that employers should provide work placements, define learning outcomes based on their professional experience, participate in planning study programmes and provide valuable experience from their industry to academia. Thus, even though the participation in the planning of study programmes and learning outcomes might not be the most preferred, it is still nonetheless perceived as being extremely important. It is also important to note that the most of employers simply do not have the time to participate in higher education activities. The employer organisations, however, primarily should act as a communicator between the private sector and the higher education sector, ensuring that the labour market demands, and the future competence needs were considered in higher education.

The most of employers' suggestions for the improvement of the higher education quality assurance system were related to part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). The most suggestions were devoted to ensuring better work of peer-review experts (linked to ESG 2.4. standard): to provide for carefully selected experts to ensure a professional attitude; to ensure proper training of experts and demand high-quality work; to continue involving international experts; to provide for higher involvement of employers and to avoid conflict of interest when involving experts linked to HEI. Some suggestions were linked to the way the accreditation process is designed, the aims set, and methodologies are chosen to fit the purpose (ESG 2.2. standard): to ensure stronger demand for quality from all stakeholders (students, employers, state), stronger requirements and control to ensure that "striving to attract more students and funding doesn't override the quality of education"; to consider international experience, as well as to decrease bureaucracy, especially regarding too large documentation prepared by HEIs for the accreditation procedure. Even though the system of study field accreditation was implemented in Latvia in 2013 with the goal in mind to reduce the administrative burden, it was pointed out that accrediting of all programmes in a field of all levels at once might increase the administrative burden because of deficiencies in, for example, only undergraduate level programmes. It was also suggested that more attention should be paid to the internal quality assurance system of HEIs and its results, to evaluate the quality, not just the compliance with formal criteria (ESG 2.1.), to ensure regular monitoring of higher education quality and consistent follow-up process ensuring implementation of recommendations (ESG 2.3.), as well as to add criteria on quality of work-placements – whether they are linked to the study programme and learning outcomes (ESG 2.5.).



Some suggestions were also made related to part 1 of the ESG (to ensure the evaluation of academic staff based on student and alumni assessments and to ensure regular programme evaluations by HEIs) and part 3 of the ESG (to implement properly all existing procedures for quality assurance and to promote partnerships with stakeholders on daily basis). A comment was made also on the improvements already made in the quality assurance process in recent years.

Considering the results of the study, the involvement of employers in the development of employability competencies of higher education graduates is not sufficient itself. A better understanding of the driving forces of future socio-economic development, as well their impact on the development of new industries, public policies, on private business and HEIs requires think-tank initiatives supported by all stakeholders. The long-term thinking, e.g. practising strategic foresight and discussing its outcomes with communities could foster better understanding of future challenges and increase the awareness about the necessary amendments in the content and structure of study programmes. The current practise of understanding that the responsibility for the development of graduates' employability competencies lies with HEIs should be reconsidered and sharing this responsibility among stakeholders for the benefit of future generations should take place.

The further research on international practise of employers' involvement in ensuring employability of higher education graduates could be carried out to ensure learning and improvement of activities of HEIs. The role of alumni associations as liaison organisations between business and HEIs in increasing the awareness of HEIs about future competencies should be explored. The participation of employer organizations in developing curricula could become a good practice. The expectations of employers on employability competencies should be communicated to HEIs and student organizations, in particular.

Conclusions

According to the employers who are higher education quality assurance experts, the resources of HEIs should be concentrated on developing the competencies related to emotional intelligence such as responsibility for one's own decisions, attitude towards work and colleagues, work motivation and ability to adapt to new situations during the teaching and learning process. In the future, the importance of flexibility and ability to learn continuously, digital competence and cooperation skills will increase.

Employers are willing to participate the most in the development of occupational standards, provision of work placements, offering research topics and organising visits to enterprises. To enhance employer participation in higher education, HEIs should be more open and willing to cooperate, as well as ensure clear and concise communication. Employer organisations should act as the communicator between the private sector and the higher education sector, ensuring that the labour market demands, and the future competence needs are closely monitored and considered in higher education.

For better meeting employers' expectations, the quality assurance system of HEIs should ensure better work of peer-review experts, pay more attention to the development of the internal quality assurance system and consider application of the best international practice.

References

- Bacon, D.R. (2003). A comparison of approaches to importance – performance analysis. *International Journal of Market Research*, 45(1), 55-77.
- Cedefop. (2012). *Future skills supply and demand in Europe. Forecast 2012*.
- Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2015). *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Dacre Pool, L., & Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 49(4), 277–289.



De Grip, A., Van Loo, J., & Sanders, J. (2004). The Industry Employability Index: Taking account of supply and demand characteristics. *International Labour Review*, 3(3).

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2014). *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014*. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Goleman, D. (1998), *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, London.

Harvey, L. (2005). Embedding and integrating employability. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2005(128), 13–28.

Humburg, M., Van der Velden, R., & Verhagen, A. (2013). *Final report The Employability of Higher Education Graduates: The Employers' Perspective*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Klāsons, G., & Spuriņš, U. (2015). *Pētījums par prakšu pieejamību un kvalitāti Latvijā. Noslēguma ziņojums*. Rīga: Latvijas Darba devēju konfederācija (LDDK).

Līce, A. (2017). *Involvement of employers in educating employees as a solution to the problem of skilled workforce shortage in Latvia*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Martilla, J. A., & James, J. C. (1977). Importance – performance analysis. *Journal of Marketing*, 41(1), 77-79.

Pool, L. D., Qualter, P., & Sewell, P. J. (2014). Exploring the factor structure of the CareerEDGE employability development profile. *Education + Training*, 56(3), 303–313.

Sever, I. (2014). Importance – performance analysis: A valid management tool? *Tourism Management* 48, 43-53.

SIA "Projektu un kvalitātes vadība." (2014). *Pētījuma atskaite. Darba tirgus specifisko reģionālo problēmu identificēšana un pasākumu izstrādāšana reģionālā darba tirgus konkurētspējas stiprināšanai, pētījuma atskaite*. Rīga.

Sumanasiri, E. G. T., Yajid, M. S. A., & Khatibi, A. (2015). Review of literature on Graduate Employability. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 5(3), 75.

WEF. (2015). *New Vision for Education Unlocking the Potential of Technology*. *New Vision for Education: Unlocking the Potential of Technology*, 1–32.

Discussion questions:

- What role should alumni associations play as a facilitator of communication between employers and higher education institutions?
- What procedures do higher education institutions in other countries have for involving employers in quality assurance?
- How much of the curricula should be controlled by employers?
- What are the expectations of other stakeholders in quality assurance?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. *Smith_Jones.doc*. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.