



Designing a Programme Profile: An Example of a Bachelor Business Study Programme

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In this paper, we address the issue of developing a study programme profile, by which the competencies and learning outcomes at the level of a study programme are systematically related to the competencies and learning outcomes at the level of a course. We describe a model of designing a programme profile for a particular bachelor's study programme in the field of business. Our approach adopts concepts of general and specific competencies designated from the Tuning project to link learning outcomes at the course level with the learning outcomes at the programme level with involvement of all the relevant stakeholders by using a triangulation technique (involving the students, employers and teachers). The results elaborate a clearer picture of programme characteristics with precisely defined key competencies and learning outcomes linked with the study courses, as well as a clearer description of the employment potential.

Keywords: programme profile, competency, learning outcomes, Slovenia, syllabi

Introduction

The European higher education area (EHEA) comprises countries with different academic traditions, cultural and political backgrounds that have agreed to cooperation and shared commitments (*Yerevan Communiqué*, 2015). Teaching and learning have gained considerable attention in the policy discourse of the Bologna process ever since the key policy-makers (such as European Commission (EC) and OECD) began to perceive higher education in the utilitarian and economic view, driven by globalisation (Sin, 2015). A new pedagogical model of student-centred learning and teaching plays a significant role in the design and delivery of the study programmes. In many cases, it is at the core of higher education institutions' (HEIs) teaching missions (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015, p. 11–12). The primary challenge for HEIs is to revise the existing study programmes and align them with the Bologna 'action lines' (*Bologna Declaration*, 1999, p. 3–4; Eurydice, 2012, p. 16)

by (a) adopting common and comparable degree systems, (b) utilizing a cycle structure, (c) establishing European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), (d) promoting mobility, (e) fostering cooperation in quality assurance, (f) developing national qualification frameworks, (g) encouraging lifelong learning, (h) employability and (i) social dimension to meet the changing needs of the economy and society.

The implementation of the three-cycle structure has set the challenge for HEIs to redesign the 'old' study programmes in accordance with the Bologna requirements. The most important aspect of the implementation of ECTS credits presents a link between the student workload and the expected learning outcomes (*ECTS User's Guide*, 2015). While the ECTS has been used as a transfer and accumulation system, the Bologna process implementation report stated that the 'most difficult issue was to link all the programme (educational) components with learning outcomes' (Eurydice, 2012, p. 47). Until 2012, there were only 19 higher education systems that had linked all the programme components with the learning outcomes. The 2015 Bologna report, however, stated that HEIs in 22 European higher education systems had connected all the study programmes' components with the learning outcomes (Eurydice, 2015, p. 71).

In this paper, we are addressing the question of how to develop a programme Profile in the case in which competencies and learning outcomes at the level of the programme are systematically linked to competencies and learning outcomes at the level of a course. We describe the development of a model connecting the programme components on the example of a bachelor's degree programme in the field of business studies (ISCED 34) Business in Contemporary Society. The first cycle programme aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills to make them employable. Therefore, we followed the *ECTS User's Guide's* (2015) recommendations by involving all the relevant stakeholders in designing a programme profile for the particular study programme. Our proposed model is drawn from the findings of the Tuning project (see <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/home.html>) and adjusted to the Slovenian context and the study programme specifics.

In the paper, we firstly present literature review focusing on the components of the programme profile namely the learning outcomes and competencies as the major building blocks of the programme. Secondly, the proposed methodology for developing a programme profile and an example of a programme profile is presented. Finally, in the concluding remarks, implications for practice and theory are summarised.

Literature Review

The introduction of the EHEA has brought upon a rationale to restructure the description of the degree programmes especially regarding learning out-

comes (Gibbs, Kennedy, & Vickers, 2012). The *ECTS User's Guide* (2015) defines an educational programme as 'a set of educational components – based on learning outcomes – that are recognised for the award of a qualification.' *Educational components* may be course units, modules, other types of course units, work and clinical placements, research work, laboratory work, and other learning activities (such as tutoring or mentoring) that carry ECTS credits.

There are many different names of the programme characteristics that provide core information about the programme; for instance, programme profile (*ECTS User's Guide*, 2015), degree programme profile (Gibbs et al., 2012; Lockhoff et al., 2010), curriculum profile (Mesquita, Lima, Flores, Marinho-Araujo, & Rabelo, 2015), competency profile (Uhlenbrook & de Jong, 2012), etc. The programme profile provides the most relevant results of teaching and learning and represents an 'essential tool for communication, transparency and recognition' (Lockhoff et al., 2010, p. 20). The main elements of the programme profile should be learning outcomes, generic and specific competencies and the information about the employability potential (Lockhoff et al., 2010, p. 20). Following this guidelines, we have developed a model to design a graduate programme profile aiming to support clear information on the study programme with programme learning outcomes, key competencies and information of the career path. Some similar exemplars were also presented in the *ECTS User's Guide* (2015, p. 92) describing programme profiles or a single course unit using the learning outcomes technique.

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are a highly debated concept in the EHEA. The common focus on the learning outcomes is present since the very beginning of the Bologna process. Even though *Bologna Declaration* (1999) and *Prague Communiqué* (2001) do not even mention the learning outcomes (Adams, 2008, p. 4), the concept of learning outcomes has gained an increased attention ever since the Berlin communiqué in 2003. Since then, a considerable importance was given to properly understanding, implementing and promoting the learning outcomes throughout the structural reforms. Adams (2008, p. 5) identified a substantial shift in European higher education from input factors (such as study duration, location, pedagogical content) towards the concept of learning outcomes, as well as the abilities (i.e. competencies), a graduate achieves by the end of the study. More recently, the 2015 Ministerial Conference and Fourth Bologna Policy Forum in Yerevan (2015) once again highlighted the importance of 'transparent descriptions of learning outcomes' (*Yerevan Communiqué*, 2015, p. 2). In the accompanying document the Structural Reforms Working Group (2014, p. 4) stated that

much attention should be given to the quality and relevance of learning, because:

[...] the ultimate aim is to equip graduates with the knowledge and understanding and the essential skills and competencies for personal, societal, and professional success in today's world. Therefore the curriculum and learning outcomes are at the center of structural reforms.

On the other hand, European Guidelines and Standards (2015) have set the priority to implement the *intended* learning outcomes to design quality study programmes. For example, the 1.2 standard of internal quality assurance focusses on the development and approval of programmes that should 'meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes' (EGS, 2015, p. 11).

Also, clearly defined learning outcomes are at the core of developing a student-centred learning¹ (see Standard 1.3) with emphasis on the outcome-based approach. Among EHEA countries, 40 countries in which steering documents are addressing the student-centred learning scored the learning outcomes and the assessment based on learning outcomes to be the most important element (Eurydice, 2015, p. 73). Although the understanding of the learning outcomes varies from country to country, several Bologna actions depend on successful implementation of learning outcomes (qualification frameworks, credit transfer, lifelong learning, provision of a precise information about the programme, strengthening of the links to the labour market and employment, advancement of recognition of prior learning, introducing student-centred learning, internal quality assurance, etc.) (Eurydice, 2012; Adams, 2008, p. 6).

The ongoing curricular reform, including the implementation of ECTS as another Bologna tool, assigned the learning outcomes a central role (Adams, 2008, p. 8). The ECTS system was introduced as a link between student's workload and learning outcomes to help to develop or restructure a study programme and its components (*ECTS Users' Guide*, 2015, p. 24–25). The learning outcome approach has been successfully implemented in the European Qualifications Framework, as well as in national qualification frameworks, but its implementation in the area of learning and teaching still lags behind (European Commission, 2013, p. 35). Similar findings were reported in the 2015 Bologna implementation report (Eurydice, 2015).

Several reports and practical guidelines have addressed the issue on how to write learning outcomes, as well as how to implement the intended (or desired) learning outcomes at programme and study course level. Among them, Kennedy (2007) has addressed this issue in a practical handbook *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes*. Bologna expert Adams (2008) identified good and bad practices in creating and implementing learning outcomes

in the report *Learning Outcomes Current Developments in Europe*. Moreover, the Tuning project and its report *A Tuning Guide to Formulating Degree Programme Profiles: Including Programme Competencies and Programme Learning Outcomes* (Lockhoff et al., 2010) also highlighted the link between competencies and learning outcomes.

Relation between Learning Outcomes and Competencies

Competencies and learning outcomes of a study programme or programme component (e.g., course unit, module, work placement) are very differently understood in EHEA countries leading to confusion and misuse of both terms. The fuzzy relationship between competencies and learning outcomes makes it even harder to distinguish between these two concepts. Learning outcomes are most frequently defined as ‘statements of what the individual knows, understands and can do on completion of a learning process’ (*ECTS Users’ Guide*, 2015, p. 10). A similar definition was also used by other authors (see Kennedy, 2007) as well as in the Tuning project. The Tuning definition also includes the argument that ‘learning outcomes specify the requirements for the award of credits’ (see <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/competences.html>). The conclusions stemming from the various definitions are the same: (a) learning outcomes are student-centred, and (b) learning outcomes focus on the result of teaching and learning activity (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, a learning outcome has to be a measurable achievement arising out of a learning experience. Therefore the ‘active verbs’ are a necessary element to include in the learning outcome statements.

While a competency on the other hand ‘is a quality, ability, capacity or skill that is developed by and that belongs to the student’ (Lokhoff et al., 2010, p. 21). In the *ECTS User’s Guide* (2015), a competency was defined as ‘the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and professional and personal development.’ Furthermore, in the Tuning project (see <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/competences.html>) the competencies:

[...] represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. Fostering competencies are the object of educational programmes. Competencies will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages [...]

In some contexts, the term key competencies is used. In the EC report *Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-Economic Outcomes* key competencies are defined as ‘a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to a specific context’ (European Commission, 2012, p. 6). Due to several definitions of competencies, Kennedy, Hyland, and Ryan

(2009) and Gibbs et al. (2012) pointed out the fuzziness of this concept and urged for a careful use. They recommended defining a clearer meaning of the term competencies, apparently to avoid the confounding effect.

In the Slovenian Higher Education Act (*Zakon o spremembah in dopolnitvah Zakona o visokem šolstvu (ZViS-J)*, 2014), study programmes are described with objectives or generic and subject-specific competencies (Article 35a). Therefore, the Slovenian Agency for Quality Assurance prescribed a concrete form for planning a course unit with not just clearly stated learning outcomes, but also generic and subject-specific competencies that need to be achieved by the end of the course unit. The Slovenian Qualification Framework adopted the European Qualification Framework definition of competency as 'the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological abilities in the educational, professional and personal situations.' Competencies are further divided into generic and subject-specific (occupational) ones.

The Tuning project that was launched in 2000 to help universities to implement Bologna requirements focused on the 'tuning' of the educational structures and programmes in EHEA. In this project, an attempt was made to link learning outcomes to the competencies (Lockhoff et al., 2010). Gibbs et al. (2012) provided several arguments why they disagree with Tuning definitions and with linking the learning outcomes to the competencies. Firstly, the blurriness of the term competency makes it impossible to 'define learning outcomes in terms of competency' (p. 79). Secondly, the competency cannot be assessed in the same way as learning outcomes and, lastly, the learning outcomes are an entirely independent concept from the competency concept (Gibbs et al., 2012, p. 80). Despite this critique, we have adopted the Tuning project definition of the learning outcome as 'the level of competency attained by the student and verified by assessment' (Lockhoff et al., 2010, p. 55; *ECTS User's Guide*, 2015, p. 22). The latter means that a student can achieve a competency to a certain level or extent through achievement of a measurable learning outcome. This kind of a link between learning outcomes and competencies enables HEIs to assess the students' progress whether they have developed the required competencies of the programme or not (Lockhoff et al., 2010, p. 21). In our paper, we adopt the described definition of learning outcomes. By doing so, we can clearly link them with the competencies.

Moreover, the outcome-based approach needs to be supported by the collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders. The Modernisation of Higher Education Report (European Commission, 2013, p. 42) also calls upon a constant dialogue among all involving stakeholders to improve the study programmes. Therefore, our approach included all the key stakeholders – students, employers and higher education teachers.

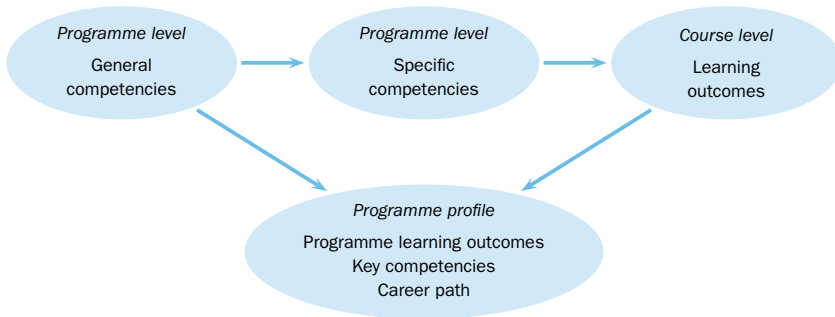


Figure 1 Steps to Design a Programme Profile

A Model to Design a Programme Profile

Based on the literature review, we created a model to design a programme profile. In the model, we include several steps by which the study programme might be improved. The steps can be summarised as follows (see Figure 1):

1. Adopting a proposed list of generic and subject-specific competencies for business studies.
2. Revising the competencies of the study programme.
3. Adding the competencies that are unique to the study programme.
4. Linking the competencies at the programme level with the competencies and learning outcomes at the course level.
5. Establishing a programme profile with aligned competencies and learning outcomes at a course level as well as a programme level.

A similar attempt to develop a programme profile step by step was made for the Industrial Engineering and Management programme, applying competencies and knowledge areas (Mesquita et al., 2015). They proposed a framework of competencies with the characterisation of programme's knowledge areas, defining competencies based on 'mobilisation' of resources in specific contexts, validating the competencies and applying the framework in the programme's curriculum. However, in their paper, they do not distinguish between learning outcomes and competencies. Our proposed model, on the other hand, focuses directly on the relations between learning outcomes and competencies.

Methodology to Develop a Programme Profile

We started the revision of the study programme Business in Contemporary Society with a profound desk research focussing on relevant literature on competencies and learning outcomes. The aim was to renew and improve

Table 1 List of Generic Competencies

GEN1: Working with data and information
GEN2: Basic computer skills
GEN3: Interpersonal, social skills
GEN4: Cooperation, teamwork, group work
GEN5: Leadership skills
GEN6: Ethics
GEN7: Diversity and multi-cultural skills
GEN8: Critical thinking
GEN9: Creativity
GEN10: Initiative and entrepreneurial skills
GEN11: Organising and planning skills
GEN12: Verbal communication skills
GEN13: Written communication skills
GEN14: Communication in a foreign language

the competencies at the programme level. The result of the desk research was the adoption of competencies for students studying business developed in the context of the Tuning project.

Altogether 12 general competencies and 15 specific competencies were selected appropriately to describe the study programme Business in Contemporary Society. Next, we tested the chosen competencies by involving all the relevant stakeholders in discussion with the use of triangulation technique:

- Students with an on-line questionnaire and a focus group of 5 students.
- Employers with an on-line questionnaire and group discussion on the survey result with seven representatives of employers.
- Teachers with a workshop discussing the results of the surveys among students and employers.

As indicated, the on-line questionnaire survey was conducted among students and employers. Students were asked to rate (using a Likert scale from 1 – very low to 5 – very high) to what extent they had acquired general and specific competencies during their studies. On the other hand, the employers were asked to rate to what extent the competencies were required for work performance. After the survey, two meetings (focus groups and group interview) were organised, one with students and one with employers. At the meetings, the survey results were explained to the participants and discussed. The aim of the meetings was to assess the extent the survey results were adequate for the study programme Business in Contemporary Society and to obtain additional thoughts or recommendations. The final

Table 2 List of Specific Competencies

SPEC1: Organisations' characteristics, functional areas and the relationships between them
SPEC2: Organisational audit, problems and challenges in business, problem-solving, consultancy plans
SPEC3: Macro- and microeconomic elements and their impact on an organisation
SPEC4: Methods and tools for analysis of an organisation and its environment to identify perspectives
SPEC5: Managing a company by planning and controlling by use concepts, methods and tools
SPEC6: Accounting and finance systems
SPEC7: Change management
SPEC8: Culture and its influence in the field of the course
SPEC9: Principles of ethics
SPEC10: Law in the field of the course
SPEC11: Psychology in the field of the course
SPEC12: Information systems and software in the field of the course
SPEC13: Engineering and technology in the field of the course
SPEC14: Foreign language in the field of the course
SPEC15: Social and environmental responsibility in the field of the course
SPEC16: Research methodology in the field of the course
SPEC17: Mathematics and statistics in the field of the course
SPEC18: General overview of the course content area

list of competencies was then formulated with altogether 14 generic and 18 specific competencies (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Having the collected data in mind, we held a workshop for teachers on the topic of 'How to Revise a Study Course Syllabi.' Teachers were asked to align the content of their courses with the competencies of the study programme. The workshop started with the conceptualisation and presentation of the competencies and learning outcomes definitions, followed by a presentation of the findings stemming from the students' and employers' surveys. In the second part of the workshop, teachers were asked to revise the syllabus of one course in accordance with the general and specific competencies. In the next step, they had to write the intended learning outcomes of the course unit in relation to a specific competency. Each identified specific competency was linked to up to three learning outcomes, expressed with the use of active verbs based on the Bloom's taxonomy. After the workshop, the teachers were invited to revise the existing course syllabuses supported by e-forms and in accordance with the exercise delivered at the workshop. In Table 3, there is an example of a course syllabus for the course unit Business Creation and Growth of Enterprises.

After all course syllabi had been updated and revised, a synthesis of

Table 3 Example of the Course Syllabus content: Business Creation and Growth of Enterprises

General competencies	Specific competencies	Learning outcomes
GEN4: Cooperation, teamwork, group work; GEN8: Critical thinking; GEN9: Creativity; GEN11: Organizing and planning skills; GEN12: Verbal communication skills (e.g. rhetorics, presentation skills); GEN13: Written communication skills	SPEC1: Organizations' characteristics, functional areas and the relationships between them	(1) Knows operation of small businesses in terms of the relationships between the different functional areas and processes that take place within the company and between the company and the external environment.
	SPEC2: Organizational audit, problems and challenges in business, problem-solving, consultancy plans	(2) Knows and understands the business operation in different business contexts. (3) Knows the areas of entrepreneurial consultancy and the need for it. Knows how to approach the creation and planning of entrepreneurial ideas.
	SPEC4: Methods and tools for analysis of an organization and its environment to identify perspectives	(4) Knows operation of entrepreneurial and innovative supportive environment in Slovenia. (5) Uses the selected tool to analyse the internal and external environment of a company in case of smaller firms (PEST, SWOT, Porter's value chain, etc.).
	SPEC5: Managing a company by planning and controlling by use concepts, methods and tools	(6) Knows the content related to the creation of companies, business planning and management of a company and the human resource management. (7) Evaluates leadership styles in a smaller company and their impact on interpersonal relationships and the success of small businesses.
	SPEC11: Psychology in the field of the course	(8) Analyzes the personal characteristics of an entrepreneur and their impact on business activities.

the general and specific competencies (see Figure 2), as well as learning outcomes at a course level, was carried out. The result of this synthesis was the identification of the programme key competencies and accompanied learning outcomes of the study programme that constituted a programme profile for Business in Contemporary Society (see Table 4).

From Figure 2, it is clear that most course units are focused on critical thinking (GEN8), followed by Creativity (GEN9), Organizing and Planning (GEN11), Working with data and information (GEN1). Moreover, the prevailing specific competencies were General overview (SPEC 18), Organisational audit, problems and challenges in business, problem-solving, and consultancy plans (SPEC2) and Methods and tools for analysis of an organisation and its environment to identify perspectives (SPEC4).

The programme profile was then constructed based on learning outcomes identified with specific competencies (Table 4).

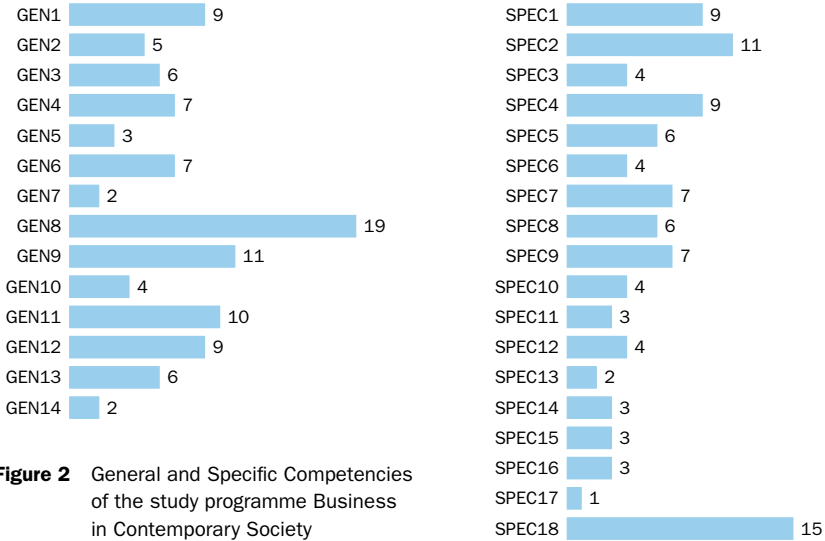


Figure 2 General and Specific Competencies of the study programme Business in Contemporary Society

Table 4 Programme Profile for Study Programme Business in Contemporary Society

Programme learning outcomes	A graduate is capable of planning, organizing, implementing and monitoring activities in all areas of business. They know how to find solutions to business problems by using data and IT tools, as well as simpler methods of analysis, e.g., accounting analysis, analysis of business finances and financial markets, marketing mix, international trade and international legislation. They are familiar with accounting reporting and the basics of financial and cash flow. They identify possible options for entering new markets, understand marketing problems and recognise how a trademark can influence the success of a company. They are also familiar with methods of assessing the competencies of employees and understand the ethical approaches to resolving conflicts between employees.
Key competencies	<p><i>Critical thinking.</i> A graduate can critically think and analyze activities within an organization, the economy or in general. With this, they can put themselves in the role of company management, employees and consumer.</p> <p><i>Creating new ideas.</i> A BCS graduate can create solutions to business problems by using critical thinking. They can also independently design graphic and multimedia content.</p> <p><i>Organizing and planning.</i> Knows how to build a business plan.</p> <p><i>Working with data and information.</i> Independently finds suitable sources of data, information and knowledge. Can recognise IT tools and programmes to implement business research and analysis.</p>
Career path	A graduate can fulfil a job position that demands business, as well as economic and other knowledge that requires an understanding of the business environment and management of business processes or functions such as HR, finance, purchasing, sales, marketing, accounting, etc. The professional knowledge received enables them employment in economic and non-economic sectors, state management or different non-profit organisations in the public sector.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper addresses the issue of how to establish a programme profile for a business study programme with the focus on linking programme competencies and learning outcomes with those at the course level. The proposed model to design a programme profile reflects a output-based approach, which is at the core of the European higher education policy, with considerable emphasis on the learning outcomes. The proposed programme profile enables precise information to student candidates and employers leading to a stronger and responsive link between the study programme and market. It is also in line with the Bologna recommendations.

Our approach adopts general and specific competencies from the Tuning project to link learning outcomes at the course level with the intended learning outcomes at the programme level involving all relevant stakeholders with a triangulation technique (students, employers and higher education teachers). The outcome of this systematic approach is the renewal of the course units' contents for the whole study programme Business in Contemporary Society, focussed on student-centred learning. The Bologna Implementation Report (Eurydice, 2015, p. 72) stated that more time is needed to implement the learning outcomes successfully, and it includes a change in the paradigm from a teacher- to a student-centred teaching. With our approach, the teachers are forced to make a change in their attitudes towards teaching and especially in the first phase of the teaching and learning process – the planning of a course unit. The result should be a clear overview of the study programme's main 'strengths' and 'weaknesses,' as well as clearly defined programme key competencies and learning outcomes that are linked to the course units signalling valuable information to both, students and employers.

Notes

1. Student-centred learning (SCL) is defined as 'a process of qualitative transformation for students and other learners in a learning environment, aimed at enhancing their autonomy and critical ability' with the following elements: (a) reliance on active learning; (b) emphasis on critical and analytical learning; (c) increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student; (d) increased autonomy of the student; (e) reflective approach (*ECTS User's Guide*, 2015, p. 15).

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