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Developed communication in native language as a prerequisite for the quality of lifelong learning

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Abstract

The concept of lifelong learning is the acquisition of key competencies which represent a portable, multifunctional set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to each individual for his personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion and employment. Communication in the mother tongue is the primary key competence and a prerequisite for the development of all other key competences. In order for an individual to be communicatively and linguistically competent, he must be able to use a dictionary of a language in various social areas of life, i.e. he must be capable of correct and creative oral and written expression and interpretation of concepts, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and facts, as well as for linguistic interaction in a series of various social and cultural situations. The analysis focuses on factors necessary for the realization of the mentioned goals and for indicating the importance of design and development of new concepts of teaching programmes/curricula, and thus new methodical approaches to teaching and learning.

Keywords: Communication tools, communication in the mother tongue, lifelong learning, the Croatian Qualifications Framework, programmes/curricula for adult education.

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1. Introduction

Lifelong learning concept is founded on acquiring key competencies which represent a portable, multifunctional set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to each individual for his personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion and employment. Key competencies are also a prerequisite for lifelong learning because they are acquired, expanded and perfected during our life.

In order to meet the challenge of the society based on knowledge, fast technological growth and dynamic labour market, the European Union has developed a framework of eight key competencies (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2006/962/EC). The key competencies contained in this framework are the following: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competencies in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competence, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. The said framework of eight competencies should develop human, cultural and social capital.

Expanding the possibilities of gaining key competencies in all segments of the educational system is one of the most important instruments of reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training, 2010). The strategic document of the European Union for the area of adult education for the period 2012 – 2014 (European Agenda for Adult Learning, 2011) emphasizes as one of the priorities the improvement of gaining transversal key competencies, first and foremost, the application of the European framework of key competencies within the adult education sector. It should be noted that OECD activities are related to the increasingly prominent role of key competencies. PISA projects (testing, reading, mathematical and science literacy in 15-year-olds) and PIAAC projects (testing, linguistic and mathematical literacy and the ability to solve adult problems) have an important role in the evaluation of key competencies.

The Republic of Croatia has adopted the European framework of key competencies and integrated it into valid education policy documents: National Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary Education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sport, 2011), Croatian Qualification Framework (Ministry of Science, Education and Sport, 2013) and the Strategy of Science, Education and Technology (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014).

The Strategy of Science, Education and Technology (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014) states that programmes/curricula, processes and educational outcomes will be elaborated for every level of education for acquiring and development of key competencies. The Strategy emphasizes that good and motivated teachers and andragogical workers, including professional associates and managers, are the basis of the entire lifelong learning system, therefore structural prerequisites have to be established for them so they become aware and face the need of constant pedagogical, didactic, methodical, psychological and andragogical education, so they will be provided with good professional improvement programmes.

2. Key Competencies as Prerequisites of Educational System Quality

In the year 2000, the European Council in Lisbon predicted the need for a more flexible education which may respond to the challenges of the society based on a knowledge and dynamic labour market. By recognizing this need, the European Council invited the EU member countries and the European Commission to create a framework of “new basic skills”, which will develop through lifelong learning. The joint report, which ensued from this, talks about the progress of the European Council and Commission and about the advocacy of introducing a joint European framework and principles of national education policy, which would support the adoption of joint goals. One of these goals refers to the key competencies which every person should develop in order to learn successfully throughout their life (The Report by the Working Group on Key Competencies Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning - Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December for lifelong learning, 2006/962/EC).

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The competencies which are extremely important for the successful activity of an individual in the society were entitled as key or basic competencies. In order to select the key competencies, the following criteria have been stipulated:

- Competencies which should be ensured for all individuals for their personal benefit, but also for the benefit of the entire society;
- Transversal nature of competencies: enables the individual and the group to act successfully in various areas of life;
- Implication of the higher level of mental complexity: ensure an active and reflexive relation towards life situations;
- Mutual relation among competencies: a combination or a series of mutually related competencies – constellation;
- Imply the need to learn throughout our life (Baranovic, 2006).

Thus, the development of key competencies becomes a goal of primary and obligatory education, but also of lifelong learning and education.

European Commission Working Group suggested the application of the framework of key competencies for the development of key competencies in the context of the entire series of educational situations throughout lifelong learning in accordance with national programmes of education and training, through: general compulsory education is increasingly marked with a different accent – a shift from codified or explicit knowledge towards unconscious knowledge integrated within personal and social competencies of each individual student; adult education and training – from compensation education (including basic skills of literacy and calculation) to further higher education and permanent professional training; concrete educational programmes for the groups threatened by social exclusion – e.g. migrants, national minorities, the young and the adult with a low level of initial education and those who live in distant and isolated areas, etc.; educational programmes for the students with special educational needs – as it was confirmed that all students with special educational needs will not be able to gain all the competencies, therefore they have the right of access to educational possibilities for the full potential to achieve goals on the way to the key competencies. This means that suitable adjusted and individualized educational programmes based on competencies framework have to be available to the students with special educational needs.

Based on the above mentioned reasons, the European Commission Working Group described eight key competences according to the European Framework of Reference: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competencies in science and technology, digital competence, the competence of learning to learn, social and civic competencies, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression, through elements of appertaining knowledge, skills and attitudes measured in a certain context. They pointed out that all key competencies were equally important because each of them may contribute to the successful life in a society of knowledge. Many competencies overlap and intertwine; the aspects necessary in one area support the competence in some other area, e.g. competence in basic language skills, reading and writing, calculating and in information and communication technologies (ICT) are a necessary foundation for learning, while the competence of learning to learn supports every activity in learning. In the entire Framework of Reference there is a series of notions which have a role in all eight key competencies: critical opinion, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision-making and constructive management of feelings.

The Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2013) defined key competencies for lifelong learning as competencies of a suitable level necessary for an individual to be included in the life of a community. They are the basis for gaining competencies throughout one's life for all personal, social and professional needs and they encompass all eight competencies set out in the European Framework of Reference.

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The key competencies for lifelong learning are implicitly included in all qualifications and thus they represent an extremely important element of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, which is particularly elaborated through the development of the National Curriculum. Each group of key competencies should additionally be defined in its level and volume, the allowed ways of gaining them and whether they belong to the required competencies (and from which group) or recommended competencies. These competencies would be further developed, maintained and updated as a part of lifelong learning, defined as one of the basic guidelines of the Strategy of Science, Education and Technology (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014).

3. Knowledge of the Mother Tongue as a Precondition for Good Linguistic and Communication Competence

It was already in the 17th century when J. A. Komensky spoke about knowledge and skill in one's mother tongue as being the basis of the entire education.

Communication in the mother tongue as the first key competence, implies lifelong learning in writing and communication, and the National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and High School Education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2011) defines it as competence for correct and creative, oral and written expression and interpretation of concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions and linguistic interaction in a full range of societal and cultural contexts: education, work, free time and everyday life. It also includes developing awareness of the influence of language on others and the necessity to use language in a positive and socially responsible way. Communication in the mother tongue is defined as the ability to express concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts, in education, work, at home and in free time. The linguistic communication competence results from acquiring one's mother tongue, which is closely connected with the development of cognitive ability to interpret the world and establish a relationship of each individual with other people.

Communication in the mother tongue demands for each individual to know the vocabulary, the functional grammar and linguistic functions. This includes the awareness about the main types of verbal interactions, about various types of literary and non-literary texts, main characteristics of various styles and linguistic registers and about the variability of language and communication in different contexts. Each individual needs to manage the skill of communicating in oral and written form in various communication situations and to control and adjust his own communication to the needs of the situation. This competence also includes the ability to differ and use various texts, to seek, collect and process information, to use certain tools and formulate and express one's own arguments in a convincing way, in oral and written form, in accordance with the context. Positive attitude towards communication in the mother tongue includes a disposition for a critical and constructive dialogue, appreciating aesthetic qualities and the will to achieve them, as well as interest in interacting with other people. This includes the awareness of the influence language has on other people and the need for understanding and using language in a positive and socially responsible way.

The importance of the development of linguistic communication competence in the mother tongue is emphasized by the European Commission, which pointed out the communication in the mother tongue as the first key competence among eight competencies for lifelong learning in 2005 (Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the council on Key competencies for lifelong learning – a European reference framework). Good knowledge of the mother tongue is supposed to enable a quicker and easier learning of other (foreign) languages, but also other contents.

Research on the framework of the Croatian education system indicates that students master the theory of language and orthography very well, but they have problems with their application (Braš Roth et al, 2010) . In 2011, Croatia took part in the international quality research of the first degree elementary education (primary education) entitled PIRLS 2011 (Progress in International Reading

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Literacy Study), which also studied the achievements of fourth grade students in reading. Croatian students showed excellent results in this research. They won eighth place in the group of 45 countries, where the study was carried out at the end of the fourth grade. This success was related to the positive school atmosphere, i.e. the quality of teachers and headmasters, as well as parental support. However, during further education, Croatian students show a tendency to regress and to have extremely weak achievements in competences of communication in the mother tongue. This is influenced by many factors, overburdened teaching plans and programmes, but also the way of teaching, Croatian language textbooks and media, i.e. the surroundings. Difficulties in mastering the rules of grammar and spelling of the Croatian language very often lead to a negative attitude in students towards the subject, and thus Croatian language in general. The consequence of all of the above is a weaker literacy of Croatian language speakers. Therefore, the National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and High School Education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2011), bases the entire Croatian language teaching on linguistic activities as basic structures in the process of language learning.

Stimulating linguistic activities in teaching Croatian language is also emphasized by many linguists and methodologists, regarding them as the basic tasks of teaching Croatian language in education and training (e.g. Pavlicevic-Franic, 2005; Pavlicevic-Franic, 2011; Bezen, 2009). Linguistic activities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are different activities whose systematic implementation considerably facilitates the acquiring of linguistic content (Pavlicevic-Franic, 2005). The first two linguistic activities: listening and speaking are mastered spontaneously, while the second two activities: reading and writing, are mastered with the assistance of a specific way of teaching. As writing is a very demanding linguistic activity, which implies a good knowledge of grammar and spelling, as well as functional styles of the Croatian language, a lot of time should be dedicated to it in Croatian language teaching. Writing can also be defined as a complex productive activity that requires a high degree of knowledge about the language (grammar, textual and pragmatic). All of that requires some innovations in the Croatian education system precisely through the concept of lifelong learning which will enable every individual, from any age group, a constant access to education and acknowledging various forms of learning. This is precisely what the Strategy of Science, Education and Technology (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014) suggests, through the creation of improved programmes of elementary and high school adult education with content adjusted to adult learners and abridged on the basis of estimating the necessary key competencies and time necessary for gaining them, so that the learners would be competent at the same time to step out into the labour market, but also to continue their education. In order to have a good implementation of the programme, it is necessary to develop the qualification standard for andragogical workers, which is also stipulated in the Strategy.

There is a series of questions posed before the didactic and methodical practice, individuals and education system as a whole. It is necessary for the education outcome to be a specific competence and qualification that would satisfy personal and professional needs of an individual, but indirectly of the society as a whole.

4. Competence Model of Adult Education Based on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning

Competence approach to adult education emphasizes the need for development and alteration of knowledge, skills, but also attitudes and beliefs of education programme learners, while the development of key competencies should be one of the goals in adult education programmes in the Republic of Croatia, so that the learners could gain new competencies and maintain the already achieved competencies on the necessary level. Owing to the above said, it is necessary to widen the offer and develop programmes for strengthening key competencies in adults, through the application of the European Framework of Key Competencies within adult education. The *Strategy of Science, Education and Technology* (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014) emphasizes the development of quality and relevance in the offer of adult education programme. One of the

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measures refers to the creation of the developed programmes of elementary (and high school) adult education, with content adjusted to adult learners, which are abridged on the basis of the estimate of necessary key competencies and time necessary for gaining them, so that the learners are prepared for the labour market at the same time, but also for continuing their education.

In the period from 2012 until 2014, the members of the Department for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports conducted a project entitled *The Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning*, which is a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme Grundtvig Education, Culture and Audiovisual Executive Agency (EACEA). The project implemented and promoted the new Resolution by the Council of Europe about the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (2011/C 372/01), as well as the Recommendation by the European Parliament and Council about the key competencies for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC). One of the goals of the mentioned project is precisely the active implementation of key competence for lifelong learning as the basis of every adult education programme/curriculum.

The experts who worked on the implementation of the project of the *Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning** also made the *Recommendations for the Development of the Quality Assurance System for Adult and Lifelong Learning in the Republic of Croatia* (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014). The recommendations related to the development of education policies on the local level are the following: renew and strengthen partnerships for the development of human potential and/or local development, include adult education into the local strategy as one of the priorities, improve the process of education programme development, strengthen education service providers and promote adult education as a local community initiative with special direction towards raising the consciousness of employers. Also, the recommendations related to the adult education system on the national level have been emphasized, such as: standardize the adult education programmes, establish a system of external assessment of institutions and programmes (quality control), develop a model of following the labour market on the local and national level, develop measures for promoting the development of human potential within a company and for the inclusion of employers into education at work. The recommendations emphasized the need for making improved standardized programmes of formal adult education which would include the basic lifelong learning competencies and insist on the inclusion of all other key competencies (if necessary) into formal and informal adult education programmes. The improvement of adult education programmes, with included competencies, should be one of the accrediting elements of an institution, as well as stimulating the need for distance learning by creating new learning platforms (e-learning), improving the quality of andragogical workers by defining the competence profile, good improvement and stimulating their mobility, as well as developing the qualification standards for andragogical workers. The quality of the current system is being developed through the programme of supplementary pedagogical-psychological and didactic-methodical education organized by the faculties with teaching departments[†] and the improvement of teachers who work in adult education institutions, conducted by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education. This

* One of the authors of this paper, Jadranka Herceg PhD, worked as an expert on the implementation of the project *Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning*.

† Since 2014, instead of a short-term course, a study has been established in Croatia, with a programme lasting for one academic year (the attendees gain 60 ECTS). Students graduating from non-teaching faculties and non-teaching departments (studies) at teaching faculties who have already got or want to get a job as teachers of specialized subjects in elementary or secondary school should gain competencies as well as all persons who organize the educational process or participate in its realization.

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is too little for the current demands of the system and there are also inconsistencies on the national level, i.e. the level of different universities in Croatia.

The institutions which deal with adult education (ministries, agencies, centres, institutes, universities) should actively participate in research and studies. It is also necessary for adult education institutions to be better connected.

The Recommendations for the Development of the Quality Assurance System for Adult and Lifelong Learning in the Republic of Croatia (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2014)* emphasize the priorities for the development of adult education system on the national level[†]. The research showed there are five obvious problems in the adult education system in Croatia. At 60% of forums, the conclusion was that the biggest issue of adult education system in Croatia was the lack of standardized programmes, as well as the way of implementing the same. Specifically, there are a large number of the same programmes/curricula (in various institutions) which differ in the number of lessons, the way of carrying out the programme and the outcomes. The problem is that each institution has a mandate for creating the programme, which brings about the mentioned differences in certain, similar or identical programmes. The lack of standards results in the lack of quality of the programmes. Standardizing the programmes, especially those of particular importance for the strategic priorities of the country, would result in the quality of adult education system.

Another important issue defined as a priority for the development of adult education system on the national level is the need for introducing external evaluation. Specifically, the current system allows the institutions, which make and implement programmes/curricula, to evaluate the outcomes of learning, which may result in a subjective attitude and questionable criteria for evaluation. It should be mentioned that the quality of programme implementation, which according to the participants' opinions is often questionable because of inadequate competences of the teachers in the adult education and the lack of control and monitoring of the adult education and learning. The research by the scientists who deal with adult education, conducted in 2010, emphasized the same problems[‡]. To be more specific, investigating the adult education system at the institutions which conduct the adult education programmes, they came with similar results. Two basic problems which have to be solved in order to start constructing a quality system in adult education are: programme standardization, because the research has shown that four different adult education institutions have a different number of lessons and different content of the same programme (Herceg, 2010), and making the qualification standard for andragogical workers, which has not been made so far.

The importance of the motivation of the learners for lifelong learning should be pointed out here, including entrepreneurs for the development of human potential, as well as legal regulations which is often the reason why some examples of good practice cannot be realized. Still, if we do realize these three priorities, they can only be a good base for the upgrade which should follow afterwards, and that would be the research for the needs for programmes/curricula, which are particularly important for the strategic priorities of the country, good creation of the programme itself and a good andragogical worker who would implement it. At the same time, it should be beared in mind that the competencies of andragogical workers, related to quality teaching, are gained through studies and

* The Government of the Republic of Croatia: Strategy of Education, Science and Technology, Zagreb, 2014.

[†] Information was obtained during the execution of forums/panel discussions in 25 cities of the Republic of Croatia; 18 counties and the City of Zagreb.

[‡] Herceg, J.: *Nastavne osnove hrvatskoga jezika u programima obrazovanja odraslih*, self-published, 2010.

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developed within the experiential professional field (Korthagen, 2004; Boschhuizen et al., 2005, Tot, 2013).

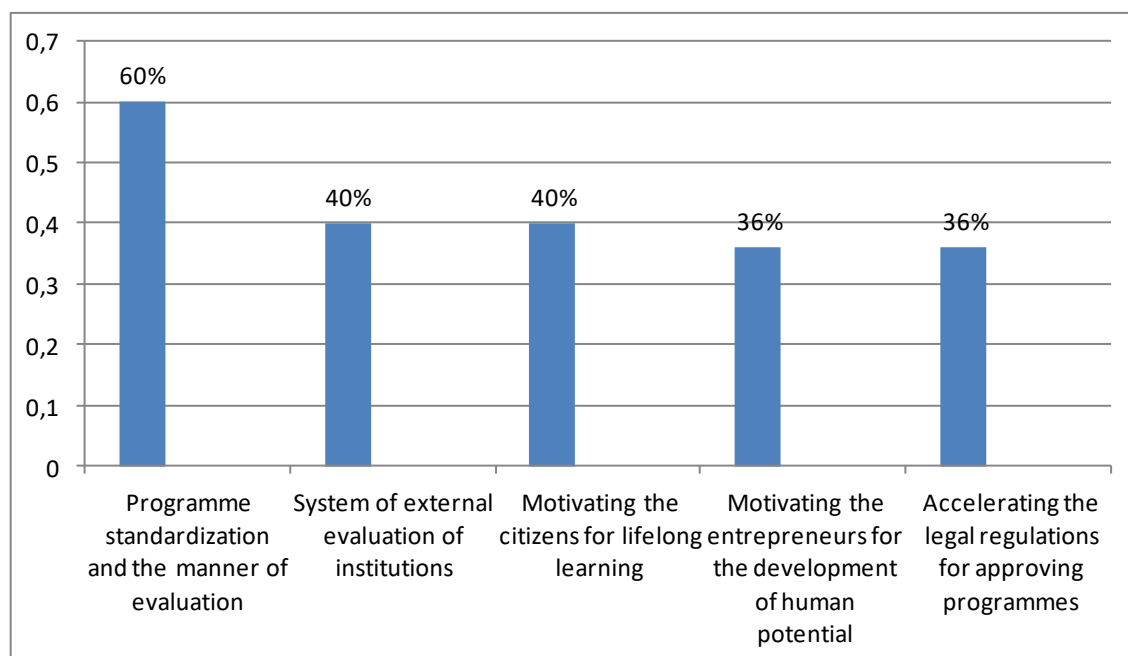


Figure 1. Priorities for the development of adult education system on the national level

5. Communication in the Mother Tongue as the Key Competence of Adult Education Programme

The experts who worked on the implementation of the project Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning suggested a new model of elementary education which is based on the following competencies:

- Communication in the mother tongue (Croatian);
- Mathematical competence and basic competencies in science and technology;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn.

The singled out competencies do not assume that other key competencies are less important and that they need not be developed, but these four competencies were chosen because they satisfy specific needs of possible users which will be included in the lifelong learning process and adult education programmes.

In the framework of the development of competence model for elementary adult education, it is intended to make a general framework of the curriculum defining competence objectives in sub-areas of certain competence and in individual modules. This general framework provides guidelines for andragogical workers and learners about how to plan and carry out a programme, but it does not specify the content and tasks in the process of teaching and learning. Operative programmes/curricula should be developed on the level of individual institutions and groups of learners so they are adjusted to the age, interests, abilities, previously gained knowledge and skills, existing life and work situation

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and learners' expectations. Thus, the adjustment of programmes/curricula is enabled, as well as processes of teaching and learning, to the needs and objectives of learning of certain individuals and groups of individuals. It is necessary to define competence goals for each key competence, i.e. wider objectives of learning. This refers to the description of what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do within a certain key competence after the end of the programme.

The above-mentioned research emphasized the need for implementing communication in the mother tongue as the key competence in elementary adult education programmes, which was proved in other research (Herceg, 2010) that emphasized the same requirement for secondary adult education.

A lifelong learning system requires a quality andragogical worker who will have a developed communication in the mother tongue so they could express their internal world, communicate and create mutual relations. Only such an andragogical worker may build a quality system of adult education (Pastuovic, 1999; Klapan & Herceg, 2013). It is necessary to implement a permanent professional guidance and improvement of teachers who participate in adult education and training, developing quality management system of the process of education and stimulating the use of communication of the mother tongue as the key competence during learning.

Adult education process must be designed so as to adjust to the individual needs of the learners who have justified demands, not only regarding the content and the way of implementing the programme, but also the competence of professional associates and concrete benefits which result from education. All of these are preconditions for a new competence model of adult education based on key competencies for lifelong learning.

6. Conclusion

Key competencies are a precondition for lifelong learning as they are gained, upgraded and improved throughout our life, and the communication in the mother tongue, as the first key competence, is the prerequisite for the development of all other competencies.

Learners with communication and linguistic competence must be capable to use the mother tongue vocabulary in various social areas, i.e. must be competent for correct and creative oral and written expression. Developed communication in the mother tongue is also a precondition for quality implementation of the adult education programme; therefore, it is conditioned by lifelong training of andragogical workers.

Different research indicates the need for systematizing the communication in the mother tongue into each adult education programme/curriculum, as well as the need for new methodical approaches to teaching and learning. This forms the basis for defining a legal framework to regulate the systematization of the mentioned competence into every adult education programme/curriculum, as well as into the qualification standard of andragogical workers who are yet to be brought into the Republic of Croatia.

In accordance with the thesis, it is stated that the Croatian Qualifications Framework should be established into the system of overall education as a "condicio sine qua non". The key competencies of lifelong learning should be implicitly included into all qualifications because it has been proved that they represent an extremely important element of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, and after the creation and confirmation of the qualification standard for andragogical workers, standards of control and monitoring, i.e. external quality evaluation, should also be prescribed.

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