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**On the road to national professional
qualification standards**

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ON THE ROAD TO NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

Introduction

The knowledge-based economy and the contemporary labor market need instruments that support the development of human resources. With relation to this, high hopes are associated with the establishment of qualification norms. Such norms would allow to, on one hand, increase the transparency of professional qualifications needed in the economy; and on the other hand, they could be used to assure the quality of vocational training and development, in both school and extra-school systems.

The possibilities for official sanctioning of the learning and acquisition of informal professional skills are also being sought. This process occurs in the course of work, as professional experience is being acquired, and also in various situations during one's life, usually outside the organized forms of vocational training and development. Some countries have undertaken successful attempts to legally recognize qualifications acquired in an informal manner, on the basis of qualifications standards, which are known as professional qualifications standards.

In the countries of the European Union, a significant problem is the variety of vocational training and development systems, which results from historical conditions. It causes problems with the comparability of certificates, diplomas and qualifications of migrating employees. This leads to appearance of barriers in the free flow of employees in the internal market of the European Union, and in the access to foreign labor markets. The national professional qualifications standards are useful also in this respect, as they facilitate the

comparison of certificates and diplomas obtained under various systems of vocational training and development. In addition, the introduction of the European Qualification Framework is planned, that would be helpful in the comparison of national professional qualifications structures.

The problem which is solved by the individual countries in various ways, is the participation of social partners in the construction, dissemination and application of the national professional qualifications standards. Usually, the main goal is to decentralize the system of qualifications' management. After the initial period of support for the process of qualifications' standardization, provided by central institutions – usually the ministries responsible for labor, education or economy – the initiative regarding the development and dissemination of the professional qualifications standards is passed to professional associations and organizations. It should be stressed that the process of qualifications' standardization requires the participation of competent scientific and research entities. For this purpose, the individual countries either commission research of professions and supervision over the qualifications standards to a selected institution or a consortium of institutions, or appoint a central institution for this purpose.

Professional qualifications standards in the European Union

In the countries of the European Union, standardization of professions and vocational education assumes various forms¹:

- Austria: strictly regulated system of national qualifications provides the formal education system – school and extra-school – with standards known as „profiles”.
- Belgium: the standards exist, but vary depending on the system of education and training. Currently a debate is ongoing on the establishment of „common references” which shall have the character of standards. Within the sectors of economy, and in individual enterprises, the competencies of personnel are confirmed on the basis of the international standard ISO/IEC 17024 (formerly the EN 45013). On the federal level, „common references” have been developed in the telecommunications sector.
- Denmark: all the public education and training (of young people and of adults) are subject to the competencies of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labor, which develop the education and vocational standards in cooperation with their social partners.

¹ D. Colardyn, J. Bjornavold: „Validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning: policy and practices in EU member states”. *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2004.

- Finland: the standards exist as various types of basic qualifications/ competencies. They are developed locally by schools and social partners, and next reviewed and approved by the Ministry of National Education.
- France: the standards are developed under the control of responsible ministries (in charge of education, employment, agriculture etc.), in cooperation with social partners. Standards developed in this manner are used for the purpose of education and training. The ROME - *Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois* (Operational List of Professions and Positions) provides another set of standards, used for the purpose of employment services, as well as for the evaluation of qualifications by employment agencies and the ministry in charge of employment.
- Germany: national standards exist, known as "profiles". The state authorities (on the federal level and in individual lands) are involved in their development, together with social partners.
- Ireland: national standards are the key element of National Qualifications Framework, developed on the basis of legislation of 1999, and implemented in 2003. Learning in various systems is evaluated in various manners, but always under close control of national standards, designed and/or approved by the Further Education and Training Awards Council – FETAC, and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council – HETAC.
- Italy: Regulation of the Minister of Labor of 2001 introduced the requirement that confirmation of qualifications under the vocational training system requires the introduction of national professional qualifications standards.
- Netherlands: the national standards are established by COLO (*Centraal organ van de Landelijke Opleidingsorganen van het Bedrijfsleven*) – an organization where independent bodies establishing standards are represented, being appointed by all the interested parties.
- Norway: so far the confirmation of formal, informal and incidental learning was confirmed by national standards in the form of school teaching syllabuses. The issue of “extra-educational standards” (other than school syllabuses) arose with relation to the issue of granting credits for completing vocational internship.
- Portugal: the main goal of the state’s policy is to reduce the "qualification gap" in the society. Each type of learning is recognized, provided that it is correlated to a school program, equal to national educational and training standards.

- Sweden: various experiments tied to the confirmation of informal and incidental education are largely based on the training syllabuses of upper secondary schools (Gymnasieskolan) which are recognized as standards in that area.
- The United Kingdom: National Occupational Standards – NOS are the basis to design the National Vocational Qualifications – NVQs and the General National Vocational Qualifications – GNVQs.

The above examples allow to notice the dominant rules for standardization of professional qualifications and vocational education:

- professional qualifications standards are of national rank;
- responsibility for the creation and recognition of professional qualifications standards lies with the state bodies (usually the ministries of education and labor);
- state bodies are supported by social partners, whose composition goes beyond the traditional, tri-lateral system of representatives of government, organizations of employers and employees;
- recognition of learning results under informal and incidental education requires the existence of national professional qualifications standards, and the common "reference framework", necessary to compare the results of vocational training occurring in various paths and forms for gaining skills, competencies and professional qualifications;
- the basis for actions tied to confirmation of the results of informal and incidental education is the approval of social partners and other stakeholders for legal and procedural solutions, and for the contents of national professional qualifications standards².

The road to Polish standards

The first seminar dedicated to professional qualifications standards in Poland was held in 1993, in Miedzeszyn. However, the first eight standards were not developed until 1998-2000, under the PHARE'98 project "Training needs analysis". This project was carried out at the initiative of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of National Education, and with the support of the European Training Foundation from Torino.

² S.M. Kwiatkowski, I. Woźniak *Krajowe standardy kwalifikacji zawodowych – nowy wymiar przygotowania pracowników dla nowoczesnej gospodarki. (National professional qualifications standards – new dimension of preparing employees for the modern economy)* [IN:] *Polish Journal of Continuing Education*, no. 3/2005.

Further work, resulting in the development of 40 national professional qualifications standards, were carried out in the years 2002-2004 under the PHARE 2000 project “National Vocational Education System”, supervised by the Ministry of Economy and Labor.

Under the next project managed by the Ministry of Economy and Labor, PHARE 2002 “Development of the skills of public employment services in the area of implementing the European Employment Strategy and participation in the EURES system”, 7 standards were prepared for the professions and job descriptions found in labor offices.

The successively enlarged set of national professional qualification standards is made available in the Internet database, set up on the server of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy³.

The project that is currently developed by the Labor Market Department is called „Development and popularization of national professional qualifications standards”. This procurement is executed with the funds of the European Social Fund, under the Sectoral Operational Program – Development of Human Resources 2004-2006, Action 1.1., Development and modernization of the labor market instruments and institutions, Scheme a) “Strengthening the potential of public employment services”.

The project covers:

- 1) determination of qualifications required by employers to perform professions/specializations;
- 2) development, on the basis of established requirements, descriptions of 200 national professional qualifications standards (in consultation with sectoral organizations and other interested institutions);
- 3) dissemination of information on the national qualification standards, and conducting research on the use of standards by various groups of users.

The project is carried out by a consortium consisting of:

- the company Doradca Consultants Ltd. from Gdynia (Leader of the Consortium);
- the Institute for Terotechnology - National Research Institute in Radom;
- Demos Polska Sp. z o.o. w Warszawie;
- Łódzkie Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli i Kształcenia praktycznego (the Łódź Center for Development of Teachers and Practical Training).

The contractor was selected through an open, unlimited tender. The following institutions participate in the project as subcontractors: the Institute for Educational Research from

³ Website of database which contains national professional qualifications standards: <http://www.standardyiszkolenia.praca.gov.pl>

Warsaw, the Institute of Labor and Social Studies in Warsaw, Pracownia Badań Społecznych (the Social Research Institute) in Sopot.

The project is being carried out from February 2006, its completion is planned for December 2007.

Standard's model

The National Professional Qualifications Standards are developed for professions and specializations included in the Classification of Professions and Specialties; they organize the qualifications associated with work according to **groups of qualifications and levels of qualifications**.

Four groups of professional qualifications are isolated:

extra-professional, general professional, occupational and specialist.

The extra-professional qualifications are described with the sets of skills, knowledge and psychophysical features common for the sector in which the given profession functions. We can also speak of the "family of professions" concept, or of the common "profession core", for which the extra-professional qualifications were isolated. The extra-professional qualifications are very close to the concept of "key qualifications" - the latter ones are understood rather as common for all professions, and not only for a given sector.

General professional qualifications are in turn common for the so-called "constituents of professional qualifications", isolated under the National Professional Qualification Standard. The concept of "constituents of professional qualifications" is a new element of the Polish system of professions, and requires a few words of explanations. This concept was introduced under the implementation of the concept to break down the broad-profile professions - typical for school-taught professions - into smaller elements. Those smaller areas of professions are described by the "constituents of professional qualifications" – constituents, because their sum constitutes the whole profession. One constituent of professional qualifications is developed by linking several related professional tasks. The linking of professional tasks is subordinated to the main idea – the group of tasks known as the "constituent of professional qualifications" is to give a person the opportunity of employment in a position found in the economy. This means that after the change of educational legislation, it will be possible to offer training in "professional skills modules". This means that training will not have to apply to the whole profession, as it is under the

current system of professional education, but it could be broken down into parts known as modules. As a result of "modular training", the vocational education – both school-based and occurring outside schools - would become more flexible. The modules could be delivered both under the scholar system, and in courses offered outside schools.

The next group of professional qualifications, isolated under the National Professional Qualifications Standard, are the **occupational qualifications**. They are characteristic for one or several (but not for all) constituents of professional qualifications.

The last, fourth group are **specialist qualifications**. They are defined as the less frequently found skills, knowledge and psychophysical features, associated with less typical professional tasks performed by a relatively small population employed in the given profession, specializing in a rather narrow field. Nevertheless, this specialization is necessary to properly perform specific work.

The organization of qualifications according to **qualifications levels** is meant to illustrate: the complexity of work, degree of difficulty and assumed responsibility. The main rule was not to mix two issues: education associated with the acquisition of professional qualifications in the school system, confirmed with diplomas and certificates, and the skills required to perform work at typical and real positions found at workplaces. It was decided that requirements posed to employees at workstations in enterprises would be superior to the requirements defined in the program core of vocational education, and to the resulting requirements of education programs, as well as to the external exams which confirm the professional qualifications acquired at school.

Under the National Professional Qualification Standard, five levels of qualifications are defined.

The **first level** contains skills associated with works which are simple, routine, performed under the guidance and control of supervisor. Most often, this work is performed individually. On-the-job training is sufficient to perform work on the first level, and the person who performs the work is not held personally responsible for it.

Second level requires self-reliance and self-control to perform typical vocational tasks. The employee is personally responsible for the outcomes of his/her actions. He/she must also be able to work in a team supervised by a manager.

Third level of professional qualifications involves the performance of complex professional tasks. Complexity of these tasks causes the need to possess the ability to solve non-typical problems, associated with work. An employee with the third level of qualifications must be able to lead a small team of employees, consisting of a few persons. He

or she is responsible both for the outcomes of own actions, and for the actions of the supervised team.

Level four requires the employee to be able to perform numerous varied, often complex and usually problem-based professional tasks. Those tasks are of technical, organizational and specialist nature; they require the employee to be self-reliant and to accept high personal responsibility. The employee must also be able to lead medium-sized and large teams – from several to several dozens persons, broken down into sub-teams.

Level five is designated for employees who are fully self-reliant and independent, who bear full personal responsibility for undertaken actions and who act solely in problem-based situations. Employees from level five lead organizations and make decisions which are of strategic importance for the whole organization. They are responsible for the safety and professional development of their subordinates. They are able to diagnose, analyze and forecast the complex economic situation, and implement their ideas into the organizational and economic practice.

Aside from organizing the professional qualifications, the standard contains a list of the fundamental legislation regulating work in the give profession, a synthetic description of the profession and a list of typical work positions, broken down per the five levels of vocational qualifications.

Figure 1 presents the standard's model.

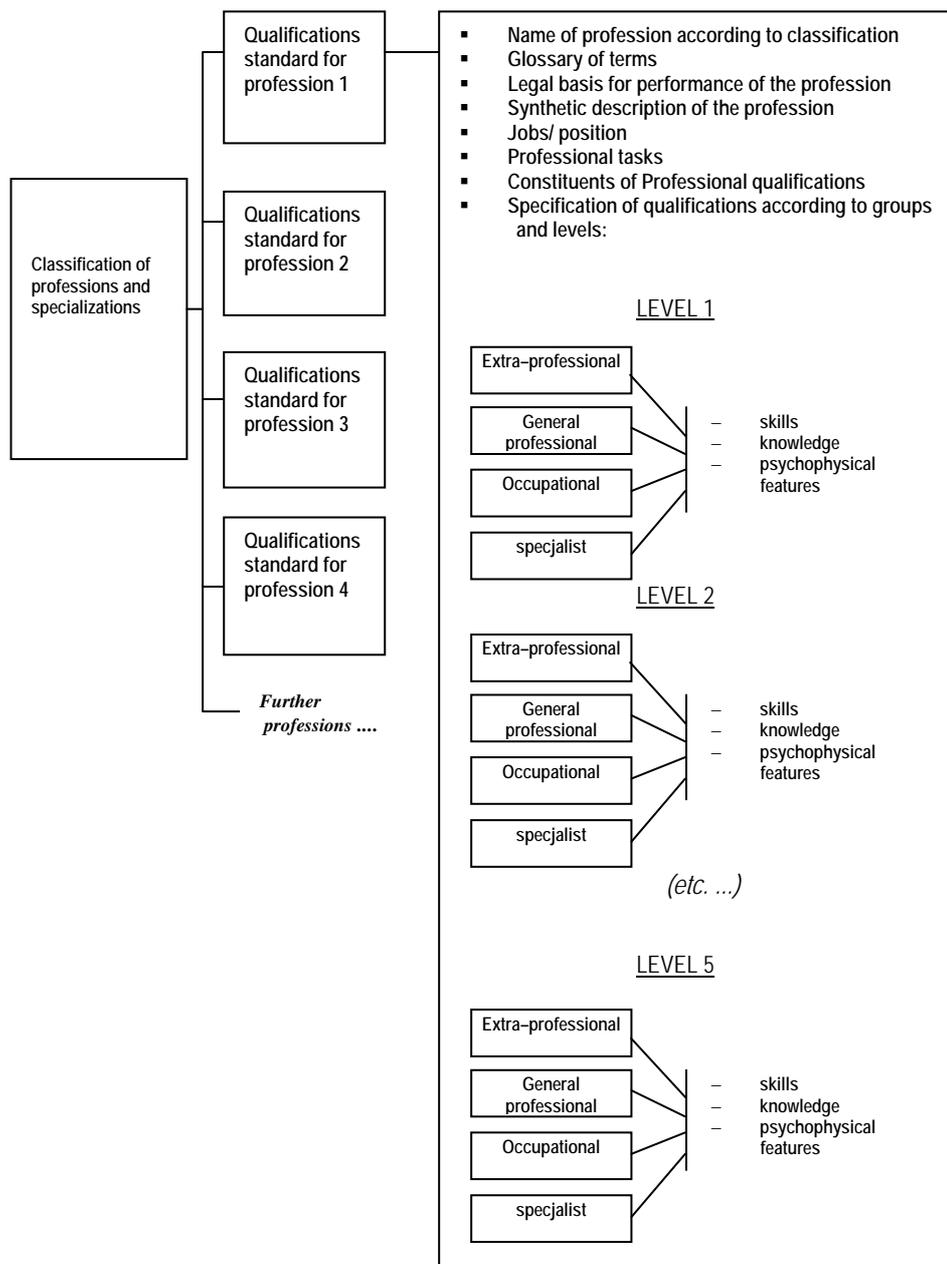


Figure 1. Model of Polish professional qualification standards.

It is expected that the development and dissemination of national professional qualifications standards would become the basis for an effectively functioning system of lifelong vocational education for adults, would bind the school-based system of vocational education more strongly with the labor market, and would also increase the effectiveness of employment policy.

Applications

Great Britain has rich experience in the application of professional qualifications standards. The development of National Occupational Standards was commenced in 1986. For this purpose, a central institution was established, called the Learning and Skills Council and a National Standards Program was commenced, led by the Ministry of Labor. It mobilized the employers to establish committees managing the standards.

The British government invested in the development of national professional qualifications standards in all sectors of the labor market and at all levels of professional hierarchy. It believed that the standards would become the basis to develop new, state professional certificates, based on labor effectiveness. Qualifications standards are used not only for the system of granting professional certificates. They have a number of other important applications, for example⁴:

- creation of a system for qualifications management, corresponding to the requirements of a given organization and training of its employees, supporting the proper development of employees and their competencies based on professional norms;
- creation of a job description, which is the objective basis for employee assessment, for determination of training needs and self-assessment, as well as for the creation and restructuring of positions and identification of skills that can be transferred among various positions;
- development of a system for work evaluation, allowing to assess work quality with objective criteria that are the basis for checking the qualifications, verifying achievements, defining the potential, determining goals, acquiring opinions and motivating employees;
- enabling the identification of priorities for training and professional development, as well as guaranteeing that the investments in human resources, made by the given organization, focus on increasing work quality;
- creation of a system for internal assessment of employees, assuring that the assessment is performed on the basis of high quality standards, and that the persons responsible for performing such assessment have the relevant competencies;

⁴ S.M. Kwiatkowski, I. Woźniak (editors.): *Standardy kwalifikacji zawodowych i standardy edukacyjne. Relacje – Modele – Aplikacje (Professional qualifications standard and educational standards. Relations – Models – Applications)*. , Program COST A11, Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, Warszawa 2002.

- offering individuals the opportunity to prove their skills, through the collection of documents confirming their achievements and corresponding to qualification standards' requirements, as well as supporting the constant professional development of employees and improving their chances for promotion or changing work;
- helping individuals in the systematic professional development, while satisfying their personal aspirations and achieving the priorities of their employer in the area of human resources development;
- supporting self-assessment, by enabling individuals to examine objectively their own skills, experience, motivation and learning ability;
- facilitating employees achieving higher labor productivity, and increasing the benefits resulting from the opportunity to work and learn.

A total of 88 applications for professional qualifications standards were determined, for 11 areas, which are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Application of professional qualifications standards in Great Britain

I. RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF EMPLOYEES
1. Preparing specifications for recruitment of employees. 2. Developing details for advertisements of job vacancies. 3. Framework guidelines for acquiring information from job-seekers. 4. Determining requirements for jobs and positions. 5. Determination of occupational tasks in individual positions. 6. Preparing a set of guidelines for persons performing employee selection. 7. Preliminary information for work candidates. 8. Determining the scope of training for new hires.
II. WORK DESCRIPTION AND ASSESSMENT
9. Defining specifications of the job. 10. Regular update of job description (scope of duties). 11. Monitoring the structure of duties associated with the given work within the organization. 12. Creation and restructuring of positions. 13. Criteria for evaluation of work. 14. Criteria for employee assessment. 15. Criteria for salary, rewards and benefits regulations.
III. GUARANTEE OF GOOD QUALITY OF PRODUCTS AND SERVICES
16. Guidelines regarding the quality of processes and results of work. 17. Creating production systems. 18. Monitoring progress of work. 19. Assuring appropriate customer service quality, through caring for employee entitlements. 20. Conditions for negotiation of contracts. 21. Monitoring the performance and compliance of contracts. 22. Confirming the competencies, according to international standards ISO 9000. 23. Monitoring, analyzing and calculating the availability or shortage of qualified employees in the local and national labor market. 24. Assessment of competencies of contractors and sub-contractors. 25. Creation of guarantees in the area of vocational development.

IV. DEFINING THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE AREA OF VOCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26. Determining needs of organizations pertaining to professional qualifications and competencies. 27. Determining requirements regarding individual learning and vocational development. 28. Framework guidelines for planning individual development within an enterprise. 29. Determining the needs of group/ organization in the field of vocational development. 30. Determining qualification and competence requirements at the “entry level” of the vocational development process. 31. Developing a strategic plan in the area of vocational development. 32. Coordination of various processes in the area of human resources development.
V. DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 33. Linking training to economic requirements of the country. 34. Linking training to professional and personal goals of employee. 35. Increasing the adequacy and credibility of training programs. 36. Illustrating for the learners the overall picture of professional development, in a clear form. 37. Making the learners realize the reason for and usefulness of training delivered outside working hours. 38. Broadening the scope and usefulness of skills-based training. 39. Determining the opportunity for undertaking learning in the work environment. 40. Coordination of training delivered during and outside of working hours. 41. Preparing training contracts with employees. 42. Preparing specific training goals. 43. Determining the scope of knowledge and skills within the individual training programs. 44. Determining the program of training delivered outside working hours. 45. Determining the goals and desired outcomes of learning for the external institutions delivering training. 46. Monitoring the actions of external institutions delivering training. 47. Determining the needs and selecting learning materials, depending on the requirements of the given organization.
VI. DELIVERY AND EVALUATION OF TRAINING PROGRAMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 48. Framework guidelines for learning in work environment and for development of training programs. 49. Setting directions of professional development for persons undertaking education. 50. Clear definition of training goals. 51. Stressing the opportunity for transfer of qualifications and competencies within jobs and professions. 52. Evaluation of individual and group training programs.
VII. VOCATIONAL CONSULTING.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 53. Providing information and advice to persons commencing professional work. 54. Providing information and advice to persons changing jobs. 55. Evaluation of the usefulness and potential of a person in a specific professional area. 56. Determining skills common for various professions and jobs. 57. Analysis of local and national employment opportunities on the basis of acquired qualifications and professional experience.
VIII. ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYEE ACHIEVEMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 58. Determining the opportunities of the employee evaluation system. 59. Determining methods and processes for evaluation of employees. 60. Assumptions for an evaluation system that promotes development and motivates employees. 61. Framework guidelines for recording professional achievements under NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications). 62. Assumptions for summary evaluation under state licenses. 63. Assumptions for international evaluation. 64. General (framework) guidelines of the verification system for achievements in learning and skills. 65. General (framework) guidelines of the verification system for achievements in learning and skills. 66. Criteria for registering achievements in learning and skills. 67. Assumptions for self-assessment. 68. Assumptions for group assessment.

IX. DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS WITH PUBLIC FUNDS
69. Evaluation of requirements under state and local training programs. 70. Evaluation of investment requirements of the state training programs. 71. Allocating funds for the state training programs. 72. Monitoring the success of programs financed with public funds. 73. Assuring the cohesion of state training programs. 74. Development of formal evaluation systems. 75. Monitoring and setting of priorities for introducing new entitlements. 76. Design of new National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). 77. Updating the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). 78. Determining the criteria for unifying state and international entitlements tied to qualifications. 79. Determining the measurable results for implementation of state goals in the development of human resources.
X. ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS, BUDGET/ DOCUMENTATION
80. Managing a database regarding the qualifications of the organization's employees. 81. Performing an annual assessment of qualifications profile within the organization. 82. Evaluation of the influence of the potential merger or acquisition on the profile of qualifications within the organization. 83. Assessment of the organization's budget designated for training.
XI. UNIFORMITY OF INSTITUTIONS AND PROFESSIONAL ENTITLEMENTS
84. Determining requirements for institutions of vocational education. 85. Defining conditions for professional development in vocational education institutions. 86. Comparison, evaluation and harmonization of requirements for the individual vocational education institutions with the requirements of other domestic and foreign institutions. 87. Mutual recognition of vocational certificates on the national and international level. 88. Determining and defining the new professions that appear.

Source: The list was developed on the basis of article of Bob Mansfield and Lindsay Mitchell, published by Gower in the *Towards a Competent Workforce* publication. [In:] *Using Standards to Raise Performance – A User's Guide*, edited by: Nigel Lloyd, Cambridge Professional Development, issued: CISC, 1996. The Polish translation was published in: *Professional qualifications standards and educational standards. Relations – Models – Applications*. Edited by: S.M. Kwiatkowski, I. Woźniak, Program COST A11, Institute for Educational Research, Warsaw 2002.

In Poland, professional qualifications standards can be useful in the following areas:

- EMPLOYMENT POLICY
 - employment agency services,
 - vocational consulting,
 - personnel consulting,
 - vocational activation programs,
 - professional mobility,
 - classification of professions and specializations for the labor market,
 - regulated professions,
 - crafts professions.
- VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
 - national qualifications framework,
 - examination standards,

- teaching syllabuses,
- educational standards and quality of vocational training,
- comparability and recognition of qualifications,
- educational mobility,
- classification of professions for vocational training.
- PERSONNEL POLICY OF ENTERPRISES
 - job descriptions and profiles of competencies,
 - selection, recruitment and assessment of employees,
 - professional development of employees,
 - job valuation and remuneration system,
 - protection of labor.
- SOCIAL INSURANCE
 - assessment of occupational risk,
 - work of disabled persons,
 - rulings.

The professional qualification standards can have the following scope:

- nationwide (e.g. France, England, Ireland, Spain, Poland),
- regional (in countries of large territories, where the structure of regions is strongly varied, such as Germany or the Russian Federation),
- limited to individual sectors (e.g. the Netherlands, France),
- institutional - regulated by various chambers, associations and unions. In that case, the standards apply only to the given organization's influence area (in Poland, standards of that type have been developed by: the Polish Bank Association, Office of the Civil Service and the Main Chamber of Nurses and Midwives).

In Poland, the professional qualifications standards of national rank are developed by the Labor Market Department of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. They would be updated periodically, depending on the needs and changes in performance of the profession. Nothing stops the sectoral or regional organizations from developing, on the basis of tested and proven methods and models, their own local standards, on a voluntary basis, as part of building the civic society.

Partnership

Professional qualifications standards, in order to fulfill the hopes for increasing professional and educational mobility, should be adopted universally. This means they should be recognized and approved by the competent decision-making bodies of social partners on the national level, and that they must have national character. That's why it is justified to establish institutions or bodies to coordinate the work of social partners. These institutions would fulfill specific functions in the area of design and approval of professional qualification standards.

Thus, in Poland the cooperation among various social partners (business chambers, trade unions and associations of employees and employers, institutions and sectoral teams), who want to participate in the design and updating of professional qualification standards for their respective sectors or groups, should be intensely developed. Those partners should cooperate with the Central Examination Board on the development of proposed standards and exam requirements which would confirm professional qualifications. They should also cooperate with vocational advisors at labor offices, with the EURES network, with the European network of information centers of education system and the recognition of certificates, diplomas and professional qualifications ENIC/NARIC.

Closing remarks

The development and dissemination of the National Professional Qualifications Standards, linked to the National Qualifications Frameworks planned for introduction in the near future, should form the basis for:

- improvement of the decision-making process in the area of employment and educational policy;
- assuring high quality of vocational development offered as part of lifelong education, in particular in the extra-school forms,
- increase of the vocational and educational mobility of adults, by improving the transparency of qualifications, and their flexible adaptation to the demands of the labor market.

The large expectations towards the National Professional Qualifications Standard are tied to the recognition by the state of the results of education occurring in informal and incidental training. Such training is tied primarily to the development of vocational skills through experience and practice associated with the performed work, not necessarily in the taught profession.

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