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IMPROVING THE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS OF TEACHERS IN VET AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN POLAND

Abstract. *The article attempts to discuss the problems of training and retraining of VET (vocational education and training) teachers in Poland in the process of implementing important educational reforms. The authors stress the special role of VET in society as compared to other levels of education, which main task is to provide a quality education that meets the needs of the modern labor market. The study used research methods, techniques and tools such as document verification, interview techniques and VET monitoring. The problems described in the article offer solutions that improve the work of teachers as well as the content of vocational disciplines. The results of the monitoring study involving first-level industrial and vocational schools in the Lubusz Voivodeship show the importance of teachers' cooperation with the local labor market in order to improve the curricula according to employers' expectations. The training and retraining of teachers have been found to be an important factor in preparing students for professional tasks. In view of this, the authors proposed a model for the relationship between the educational system and the local labor market. At the same time, it is recommended that individual professional development plans be drawn up for teachers of vocational disciplines. The article presents measures that are the starting point for finding further solutions to support teachers by creating individual professional development plans that enhance professional activity according to the long-term local development programs. There is thus a need to improve the quality of teaching in VET institutions in accordance with the needs of employers and within existing educational programs.*

Keywords: *vocational education and training system in Poland, VET teachers, professional development, individual professional development plan, labor market.*

JEL classification: I29, I38, J23.

DOI: 10.32987/2617-8532-2021-3-113-122.

The 21st century is characterized by rapid global economic development, the emergence of modern digital innovations, advanced information and communication technologies, etc. In other words, this period can be described as a system of interaction of

creative ideas, intellectual property, knowledge and technology, so-called «creative economy». These trends are an important part of all the structural components of the social and economic system of each society and are of particular relevance to education.

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In turn, this leads to changes in the curriculum, content and requirements for educational institutions, which activities are mainly aimed at training highly qualified specialists to meet labor-market needs. In this context, the activities of vocational education and training (hereinafter – VET) aimed at training specialists to satisfy the requirements of the state and local economy as well as the relevant industries are particularly valuable. In this regard, there is a growing demand for the professional qualities of VET teachers, who need to respond more flexibly and in a timely manner to social and economic changes aimed at adapting the skills of workers to the demands and supply of the labor market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on the activities and functioning of VET institutions, resulting in new challenges and the need for early action. In these circumstances, the role of a teacher in the educational system has become crucial, since the efficiency of the educational process is largely determined by the professional qualities of teachers and their organizational abilities.

The peculiarity of VET is that it is closely related to the current labor market situation. Teachers must therefore be flexible in responding to all market fluctuations and in training skilled workers to meet the needs of the country's economy. It should be noted that the improvement of VET in Poland is taking place within the framework of structural educational changes. The adoption of the «Law on School Education» [1] and the «Law on Higher Education and Science» [2] (more detailed information on the main

developments concerning the reform of the educational system in Poland is given in Figure 1) was an important step in the implementation of educational reforms in Poland, which is planned to be completed in the 2022/23 school year.

According to the recommendations of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [3], the development of practical skills in real-life working conditions has become one of the main priorities of the Polish VET. In view of this, the role of the teacher in teaching and learning has grown considerably [4].

As noted above, the systemic changes introduced in the Polish VET system [5] are drawing increasing attention to the importance of teacher training to address the changing needs of the labor market. The changes adopted are primarily aimed at achieving the objectives and content of the VET curriculum in line with current employers' requirements [6, p. 30]. Actually, VET focuses on the area of labor-based educational programs, where the most important challenge is to ensure the link between the content of the teaching and the proposed post. Educational programs in the workplace are highly dependent on the previous work of teachers responsible for implementing the content of the curriculum and shaping the characteristics of students and their professional attitudes [7, p. 6]. Therefore, improving the professional qualities of teachers and their motivation for lifelong learning is so important in the process of educational transformations [6, p. 30].

The professional qualities of teachers should be developed in such a way as to ensure consistency between the objectives and content of

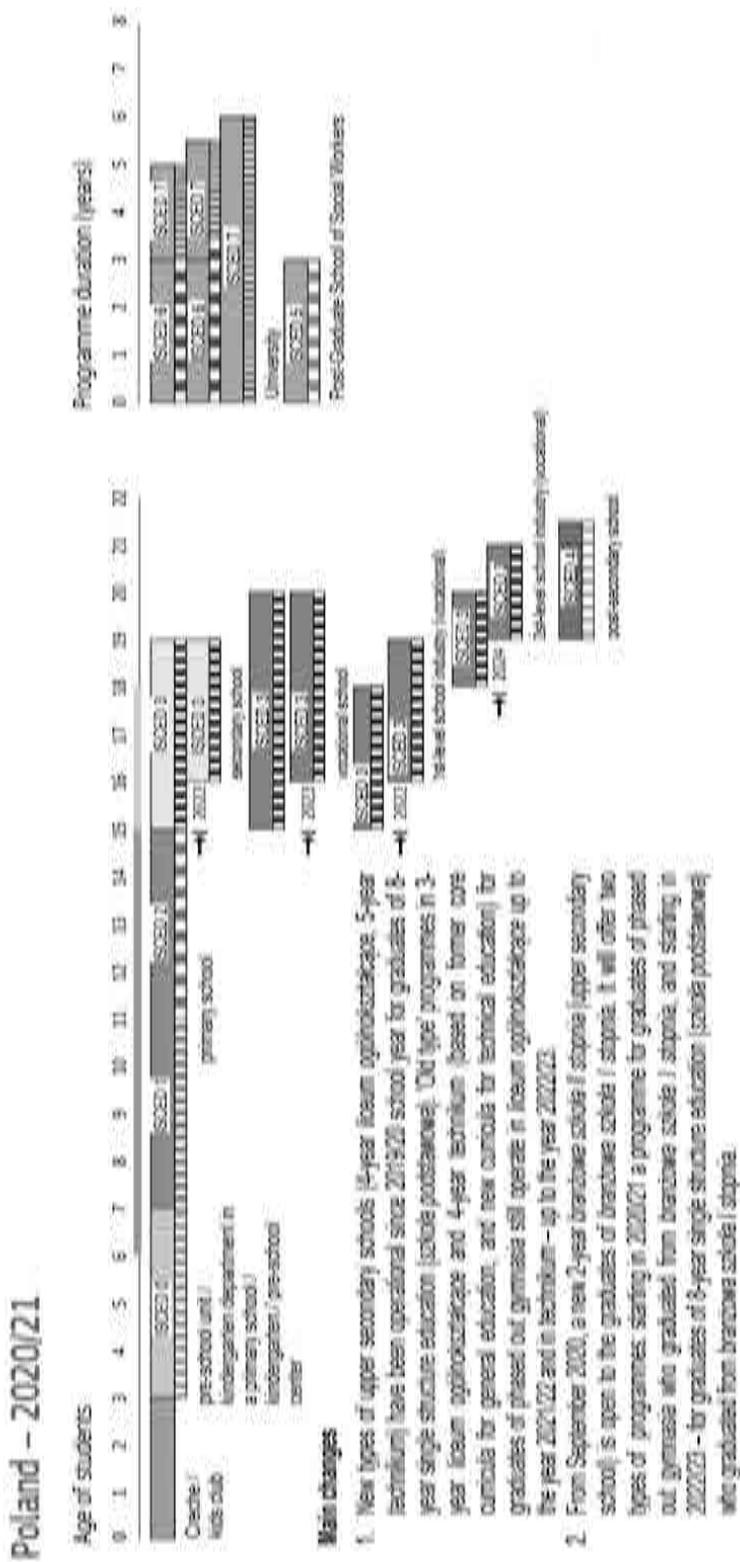


Figure 1. Structure of the National Education System in Poland during the 2020/21 academic year

Source: Eurydice 2020/21. Key features of the Education System. Poland Overview. URL: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/poland_en.

the curriculum and the contemporary requirements of the labor market [8-10]. The objectives adopted and updated through educational programs should make students more competitive and active in the marketplace. Also, through the support and individual counseling that students will receive as part of the expected systemic educational changes, difficulties in accessing education and employment will be reduced, both in the educational institution and in the workplace [11, p. 7]. In view of the above, teachers need to be flexible in responding to changes in social and economic life and then adopt appropriate learning approaches in the pedagogical process [12, p. 8], taking into account the abilities of students and the real needs of employers [12, p. 10]. Thus, the specificity of education in VET institutions often implies additional repetition of training materials and more practical exercises [12, p. 10-11], which can be achieved by reducing the number of tasks performed at the educational institution.

Creating the above-mentioned environment in which a student develops professional qualities, interests and talents in relation to individual abilities requires teachers to develop advanced educational programs in line with employers' expectations [6, p. 30]. It also requires teachers to continuously improve their professional qualifications in accordance with the demands of the labor force. Thus, the issues of improving the professional skills and qualifications of teachers in VET as an important part of the implementation of educational reform in Poland determine the relevance of this study.

Among the researchers who have studied this topic, it is worth mentioning

Aftański A., Bochno I., Pilch E., Koziół E., Malikowski J., Wiatrowski Z. and others. The literature on this subject [14] shows that some teachers in Poland are not always ready to participate in individual professional development programs. They usually take steps to participate in the proposed training programs, taking into account legislative needs [13, p. 53-54]. Low awareness of the importance of enhancing professional skills and qualifications may be the result of a low orientation towards one's own professional development or a lack of solutions to problems arising in the VET system.

The issue of continuing education and development of professional qualities concerns, in particular, teachers who are expected by the education system to acquire new skills in line with employers' expectations [7, p.10]. As a result of the research presented in the literature [14], the professional activities of this group of teachers are concentrated, inter alia, on the achievement of the next level of professional advancement or the results of employers' demands for educational supervision programs. The majority of teachers of vocational subjects are certified teachers [7, p. 8] who have reached the expected level of promotion and therefore do not consider the acquisition or upgrading of professional skills as an important professional task [13, p.143]. The level of professional development further limits their interest in introducing new content in the curriculum of the occupational specialization, which meets the needs and expectations of employers.

The main problems in the training and retraining of teachers are determined by the results of the research we have

carried out in the first-level industrial schools and vocational schools in the Lubusz Voivodeship (western Poland) in the 2018/2019 academic year. The objective of the study was to determine the status of training and education of teachers of vocational and related disciplines in these educational institutions in order to prepare young people for professional life. Thus, a total of 123 VET teachers were interviewed. The study used research methods, techniques and tools such as document verification, interview techniques and monitoring of VET.

Analysis of the survey results shows that more than 90 % of teachers in the Lubusz Voivodeship have officially recognized teaching qualifications. According to the requirements of educational institutions, only 67 % of teachers are qualified as specialists. More than 20 % of teachers complete their pedagogical training that corresponds to the type of secondary school [15]. 20 % of all teachers surveyed in the Lubusz Voivodeship are fully qualified and have appropriate pedagogical training. The results of the study indicate the need for a local support system for teachers that improves their knowledge and skills [16, p. 18].

According to the respondents, who are increasingly improving their professional qualifications, they lack assistance from other teachers in implementing educational content in accordance with the real needs of the labor market. They consider that these pedagogues do not understand the need to adapt the curriculum to employers' expectations, which in turn affects the misidentification of educational needs and inappropriate adaptation of curriculum content [17]. Respondents

stressed the importance of the interrelationship of vocational subjects in the VET system [18, p. 8]. At the same time, they point to the need for long-term local teacher development programs that will influence their motivation for professional development, retraining or self-improvement in the profession.

Based on survey results, more than 45 % of teachers most often participate in compulsory and free forms of professional development, which are required by the needs of pedagogical supervision programs, compulsory training of pedagogical councils or those forms of training that address issues of care, learning and teaching, as well as other problematic aspects in schools.

It should also be pointed out that 42 % of teachers of vocational subjects assess their level of knowledge and skills as sufficient, and about 30 % of teachers feel that they do not need to improve their knowledge and professional skills. About 17 % of teachers state that there is a need to improve the quality of their professional activities, considering that knowledge and skills must be constantly improved and supplemented. In the case of 3 % of the teachers surveyed, it is necessary to upgrade their skills through qualification courses, postgraduate or training programs that will enable them to prepare properly for VET teaching.

With regard to the evaluation of the level of knowledge and professional skills required to implement the content of curricula in vocational subjects, it can be summarized that interviewed teachers consider, that they adequately prepare students to meet the current needs of the labor market.

Acquiring additional knowledge is considered unnecessary in the opinion

of 44 % of secondary school teachers, 21 % teachers of first-level industrial schools and 39 % teachers of technical schools. 60 % of teachers of the first-level industrial schools and 54 % of teachers of technical schools do not plan further professional development, believing that the obtained knowledge and skills acquired through their professional training are sufficient.

The teachers with the greatest interest in updating knowledge through various forms of professional development are, in particular, those who were young, that is, with experience up to 34 years of age. It should be noted that this result was obtained using an integrated index, which was calculated based on the input data (absolute numbers). Therefore, the value of the integral index is 34,4 years¹.

According to this group of respondents, professional knowledge requires constant modernization and adaptation of professional skills to the modern needs of the labor market. It should be expanded and updated as the industry and professions develop [6, p. 9].

Therefore, combining VET with the labor market will increase the professional skills and qualifications of teachers and encourage them to upgrade their skills and thus plan their own professional development. This underlines the need for continuous updating of the apprenticeship process

$$^1 M_x = x_0 + \frac{L}{f_0} \left(\frac{N}{2} - f_1 \right), x_0 = 30, L = 10, f_0 = 42, f_1 = 43, N = 123, M_x = 30 + \frac{10}{42} \left(\frac{123}{2} - 43 \right) = 34,4,$$

where x_0 – lower limit of the median class range, L – midpoint class range size, f_0 – number of units observed in the classes, f_1 – total number of observations in the interval classes, N – total number of observations.

in educational institutions, especially in terms of the curriculum and the content of the profession.

For this reason, the authors have developed a model for VET's relationship with the local labor market, which will ensure the effective functioning of its key components (Figure 2).

The presented approach takes into consideration the needs and opportunities of students and teachers, as well as the requirements of the local labor market. The processes of administration, training, care and education established in the educational institution are harmonized with those of local employers on the basis of jointly developed procedures, instructions and risk analysis. This approach is more important as educational institutions and employers have to cooperate in the local environment. By developing a common quality policy, such cooperation will provide flexible vocational training for students, which, in turn, will increase their professional development. By developing a common quality policy, cooperation will provide adaptable training for students, which, in turn, will increase their professional development. In addition, the proposed modification of the apprenticeship process through a quality management system will combine the objectives of education and the labor market, especially in terms of the curriculum, thus motivating teachers for professional development.

According to the interviewed teachers, professional development based on the model of VET's relationship with the local labor market in the quality management processes improves the quality of work with students and thus increases their chances of success in the

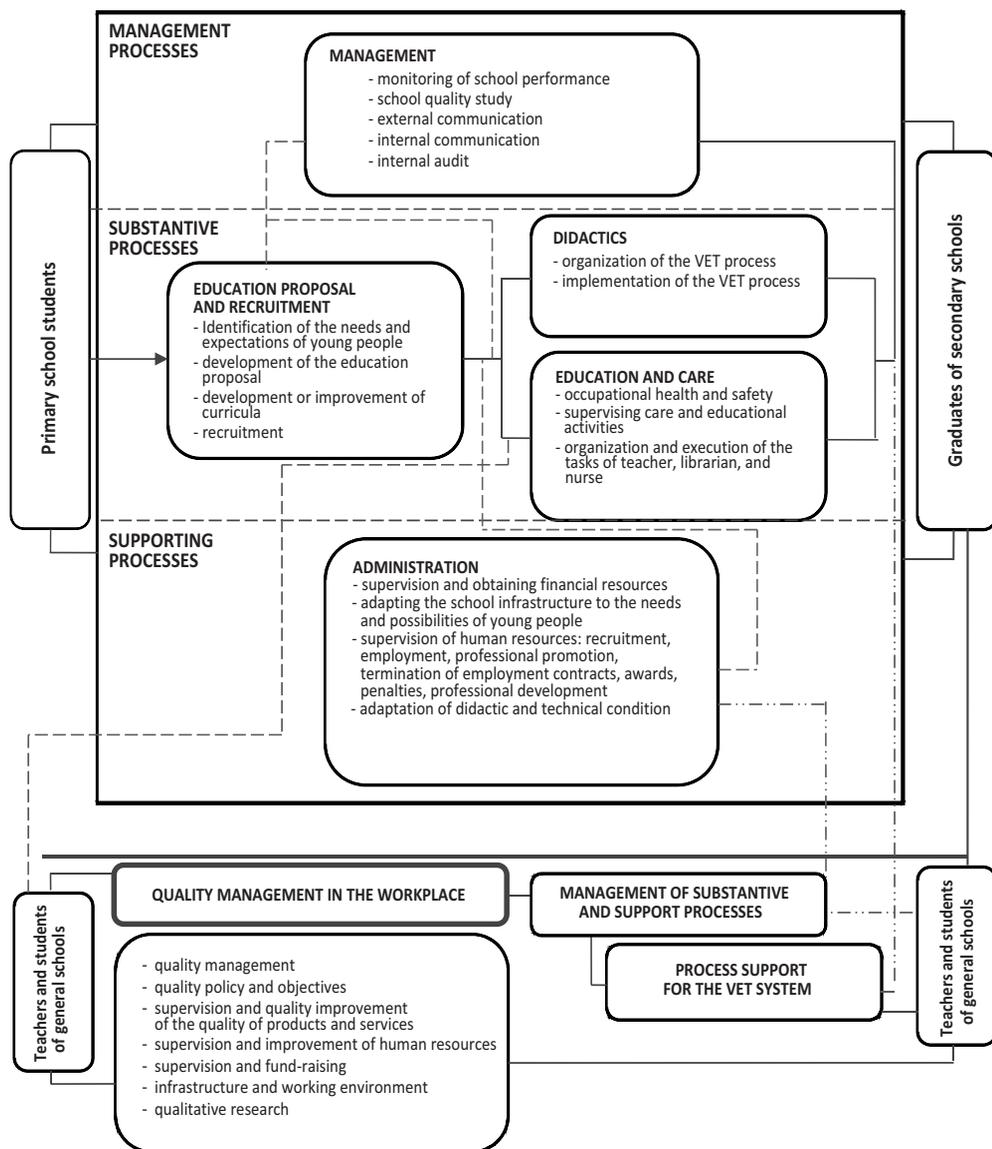


Figure 2. Model of VET's relationship with the local labor market in the quality management process

Compiled by the authors, based on the PN-EN ISO 9001:2015.

local labor market. It should be noted that respondents indicate the need to establish a local planning system for the professional development of teachers. The proposed system of vocational training will encourage teachers to improve their knowledge and

professional skills since teachers believe that the content of the curriculum is not fully adapted to the modern demands of the labor market.

The above results of the study relate to the scientific opinion on this subject, in which the authors stress that:

- teachers' awareness of the duty of professional development is most often associated with personal growth and less often is career-related [6, p. 38];

- the relatively low level of labor market awareness among VET teachers, which makes it difficult to properly prepare students for professional tasks and does not guarantee the proper development of their professional qualities [6, p. 55];

- creating and developing the skills and the formation of teachers' professional skills and qualifications guarantees a high level of education for students [6, p. 132-133];

- among the professional objectives of teachers, further training mainly concerns young teachers as well as in terms of professional experience [6, p. 143];

- professional development of teachers is the result of education, further training and professional advancement and changes in work within or outside school [6, p. 159];

- improvement the performance of the teacher requires the adjustment

and modification of the entire system of training, retraining and further training of the teacher [6, p. 168].

In considering the above measures, it should be emphasized that the training and retraining of teachers is an important factor in preparing students for professional tasks. The professional skills and qualifications of teachers should be updated and improved in accordance with the local teacher development program and individual professional development plans. As part of this process, the development of standards of cooperation is an important challenge in terms of the possibility of improving the training and professional development of teachers. We would like to emphasize that professional competencies should be constantly developed since this is an ongoing process of improving qualification knowledge and skills throughout the professional activity. Thus, there is a need to improve the qualities of teachers in accordance with the requirements of employers and within the framework of existing educational programs.

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УДОСКОНАЛЕННЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНИХ НАВИЧОК ТА ПІДВИЩЕННЯ КВАЛІФІКАЦІЙ ВИКЛАДАЧІВ ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ ОСВІТИ ЯК ВАЖЛИВА СКЛАДОВА ІМПЛЕМЕНТАЦІЇ ОСВІТНЬОЇ РЕФОРМИ В ПОЛЬЩІ

Анотація. Стаття присвячена питанням професійного розвитку викладачів у системі професійної (професійно-технічної) освіти Польщі. Автори акцентують увагу на особливій ролі професійної освіти в суспільстві порівняно з іншими освітніми ланками, основне завдання якої полягає в якісній підготовці кадрів для задоволення потреб сучасного ринку праці. У статті охарактеризовано основні тенденції трансформаційних змін у системі освіти Польщі, зокрема структури системи освіти і тривалості навчання відповідно до міжнародної стандартної класифікації освіти. Результати проведеного моніторингового дослідження, в якому взяли участь викладачі закладів професійної освіти, свідчать про важливість посилення співпраці викладачів із представниками місцевого ринку праці з метою вдосконалення навчальних програм з урахуванням очікувань роботодавців. З огляду на це авторами запропоновано модель взаємовідносин системи освіти з місцевим ринком праці. Крім того, для викладачів професійних дисциплін рекомендовано розробити індивідуальні плани професійного розвитку. Зроблено висновки, що у процесі професійного розвитку викладачів та вдосконалення освітніх програм необхідно враховувати потреби всіх стейкхолдерів відповідно до потреб сучасного ринку праці.

Ключові слова: система професійної освіти Польщі, викладачі закладів професійної освіти, професійний розвиток, індивідуальний план професійного розвитку, ринок праці.