

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS: A KEY TO IMPROVING MATCH BETWEEN SKILLS AND LABOUR MARKET NEEDS IN LITHUANIA

Daiva Andriušaitienė

*Faculty of Business Management, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius, Lithuania,
daiva.andriusaitiene@vgtu.lt*

Abstract. A country's qualification structure that meets the needs of the labour market and properly skilled professionals at different levels of qualification are the objectives targeted by each country, region and entity. Competencies demanded on the labour market determine the competitiveness of a person, entity and the whole country. In order to train professionals to better meet the labour market needs, solution formulas for the problems are sought in the field of infrastructure improvements, system management and other areas. This article analyses the opportunities for enhancing match of skills safeguarded by the national occupational standards in Lithuania, including the analysis of progress, problems and solutions.

Keywords: Economic development, human resources, labour market, national qualification system

JEL Classification: O10; O15; I25; P46.

Introduction

The efficiency of the education system and the quality of vocational education and training remain on the list of hot issues all the time after Lithuania regained its independence. Criticism by employers for the mismatch between skills supplied and demanded on the labour market, unfitness of graduates for practical work in the field of qualifications they acquire, the unattractiveness of vocational training, problems in the system of higher education and so on. In retrospect, it is the impression that the problems are not decreasing, but only getting worse.

In the search for efficient solutions to reform the whole system of education, infrastructure and organisational reforms usually receive more attention in the public space, while systematic reform of learning content, which has a crucial role in improving the quality of vocational training, has not been sufficiently addressed. Vocational training and study programmes are being continuously improved. Employers are also included in this process. Educational establishments try to take into account critical observations by employers. However, the lack of systematic information on the content of qualifications and their demand on the labour market, that is, what and how much to teach, remains to be the main obstacle to effective changes.

The education system is not able to respond to labour market needs and ensure the efficient process of labour training without reaching a consensus with employers on the content of qualifications in all economic sectors. Lacking such information at all stages, the education system does not have clear milestones that would enable specification of targets in vocational training and better consideration of economic needs in training and study programmes. Both are right in identifying the problems, but the situation in Lithuania does not change because of insufficient dialogue and cooperation between employment and education systems.

The purpose of the article is to assess the role of national qualifications system development and occupational standards in the qualitative content development of the vocational education and training system. The objectives of the article are: to overview the concept and role of the qualifications system

and occupational standards, and their possibilities in anticipating the need for qualifications; to analyse progress made and problems encountered in relation to the developing occupational standards; to assess possibilities to develop stakeholder dialogue through the development of the qualification system and occupational standards.

The role of occupational standards in improving the match between qualifications and labour market needs

There are two challenges permanently confronting the system of vocational education and training: how many skilled workers and what skills are required (i.e., what to teach). Even very high qualification of an individual may be non-demanded on the labour market.

Research studies ('Analysis of the relevance of existing supply and demand for specialists and competencies 2011' and 'A map-study of the need for professionals and competencies 2010') on the needs for qualifications conducted and published to date are unjustifiably obsolete and, in terms of content, however, are confined to identifying the titles of professions (groups of professions) without identifying their contents. Therefore, practical application possibilities of research findings provide only general field-level information on trends in certain areas. This way, we appear caught in a trap of information and realistic situation: we know that we lack engineers, but not all skilled workers with engineering skills work as engineers; there is an oversupply of managers and lawyers in the market, but at the same time, there is a permanent need for (and even a lack of) high-quality managers and lawyers in the labour market.

Such a situation leads to the development of structural unemployment on skills level that may seem to be hidden in terms of qualifications/ professions behind individual's participation in the labour market (employment in other areas and picking up the required competencies on the job). This has become a systematic mass phenomenon which, inter alia, misleads young people at their initial stages of choosing a career. There was a long-dominating approach that it does not matter what to study; all that matters is to obtain a higher-education diploma which guarantees employment. Such practice represents indirect losses for individuals who waste time to acquire competencies useless in their occupational activity and have to re-skill themselves independently. Undertakings also suffer losses from spending time and funds for staff re-skilling. However, the main losses occur on the macro level where the system of education generates uncompetitive and unmarketable 'products' (Gordon 2015; Tütlys & Aarna, 2017; Tütlys, Kaminskienė & Winterton 2016; Tütlys & Spöttl 2017; Reich 2006).

What information does the education system need? It is information on the identified current and future qualifications (a set of competencies necessary for relevant activities) needed in the labour market (Figure 1).

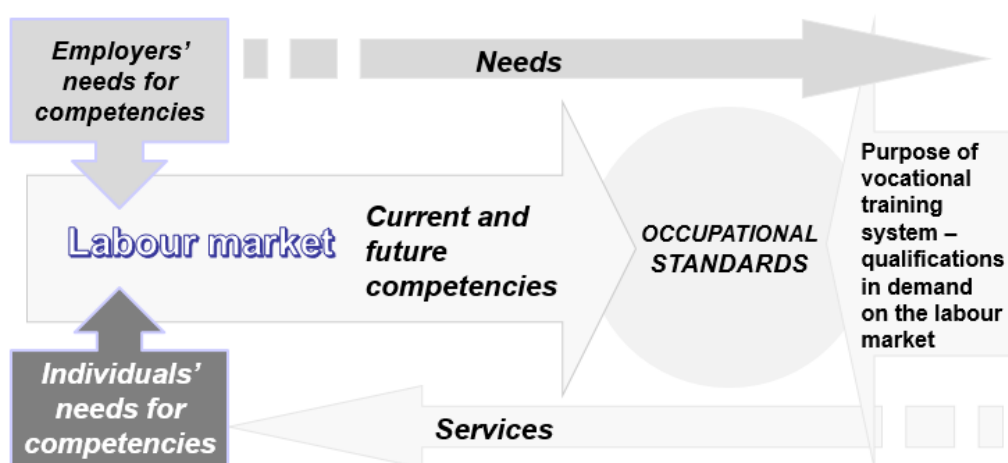


Fig. 1. Stakeholders' interests in the field of qualifications

A qualifications system, having as its axis the occupational standards that are a verified and recognised instrument of dialogue, serves as a mediator facilitating communication between different stakeholders (Coles, Keevy, Bateman, & Keating 2014; European Training Foundation 2014).

Occupational standard means a list of qualifications of all levels required for an economic sector or its part, competencies necessary to acquire these qualifications, and qualification award requirements (Law on vocational education... 1997). With the help of the described content of qualifications (current and future, cognitive, functional and general competencies and their limits in all levels), occupational standards allow the aggregation and coordination of the objectives and needs of all stakeholders (individuals pursuing the acquisition of skills or up-skilling, labour market [employers] and education system) (Brown 2006).

Occupational standards are developed on the basis of the following principles: the interplay between the education and employment systems; priority on the needs of the world of work and consideration of the structure, experience and traditions of the Lithuanian education system; social partnership principle: cooperation of all stakeholders and genuine partnering in the development of qualifications; the principle of methodological soundness: compliance with the consistent theoretical concept of qualifications and qualifications system by ensuring coherence with the developing and improving European Qualifications Framework; transparency, completeness, comprehensibility and regular updates of qualifications.

Benefits of occupational standards:

For employers: the possibility to inform the education system of the existing qualifications that are necessary for ensuring the functioning of the economy and the content of such qualifications; the possibility to expect a better match between labour force and labour market needs through reduction of costs for job adaptation of career-starting graduates (reducing additional costs of additional training of recruited graduates); the possibility to develop a transparent pay system based on the level competencies, their supply and demand on the labour market.

For the education system: the possibility to improve and develop new vocational training and higher education programmes better matched to the labour market needs and thus improving the efficiency of vocational training services; the possibility to improve the assessment and recognition system for competencies acquired through practice, informal learning and self-learning.

For individuals: vocational guidance tool for youth; qualification improvement guide for professional career seekers; re-skilling guide for persons who wish to change their qualification or acquire a new one related to the one they have and/or to pursue recognition of competencies acquired through informal learning and self-learning.

The need to identify and describe in a systematic manner the occupational activities actually existing on the labour market and to shape qualifications on the basis thereof through the summary of information in sector-specific occupational standards determined the concept of the qualification research model (Andriušaitienė et al. 2008a; Šileika, Andriušaitienė, & Tūtlys 2008) and the 'Occupational Standards Development Methodology 2017'.

Shaping the content of qualifications in the development of occupational standards

The Occupational Standards Development Methodology sets out that qualification shaping should follow a two-phase procedure. The first phase involves sectoral analysis from its general description down to the competencies necessary for the functioning of the sector and limits of such competencies; in the second phase, competencies are used as a basis for building general and special qualification units that comprise the qualifications (Figure 2).

The phase of qualifications analysis includes the analysis of the structure of the sector and its subsectors, sector-specific fields of professional activities and occupations, and their content.

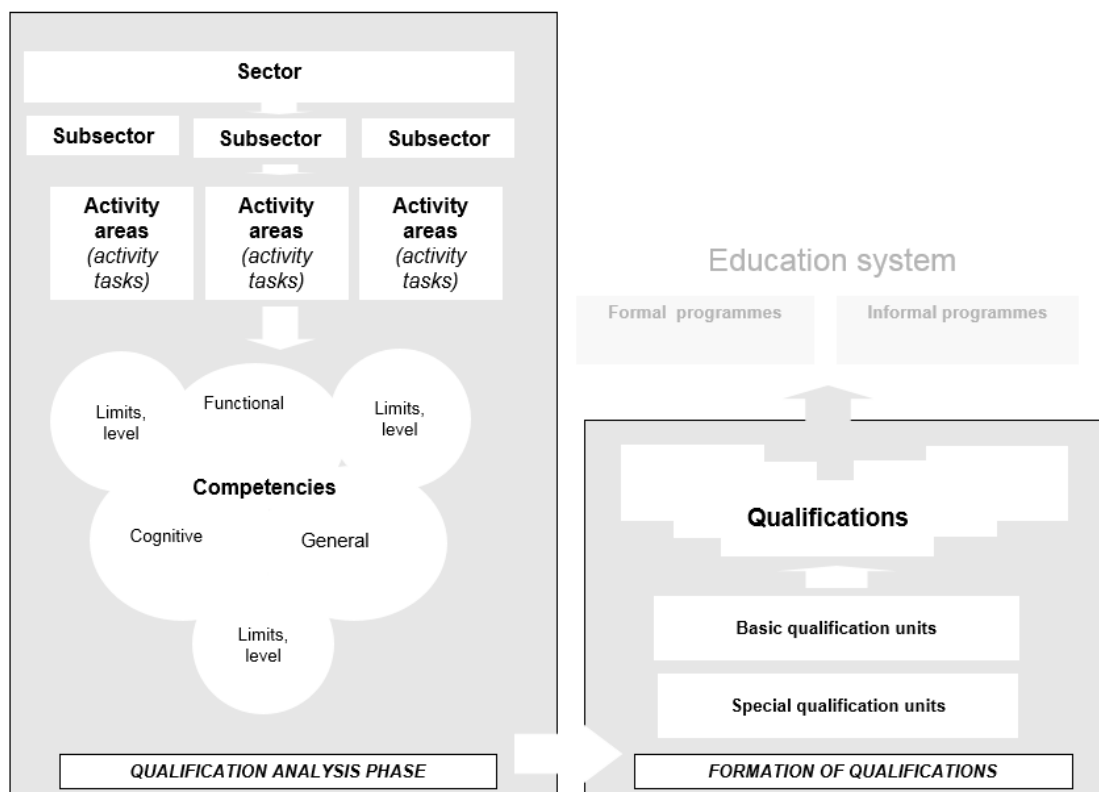


Fig. 2. Phases of occupational standards development

All stakeholders, that is, all interested parties, are involved in the collection of information. Information on the content of professional activities is collected from all possible sources, including job descriptors, occupations and qualifications, vocational training standards and other standards and documents (Figure 3).

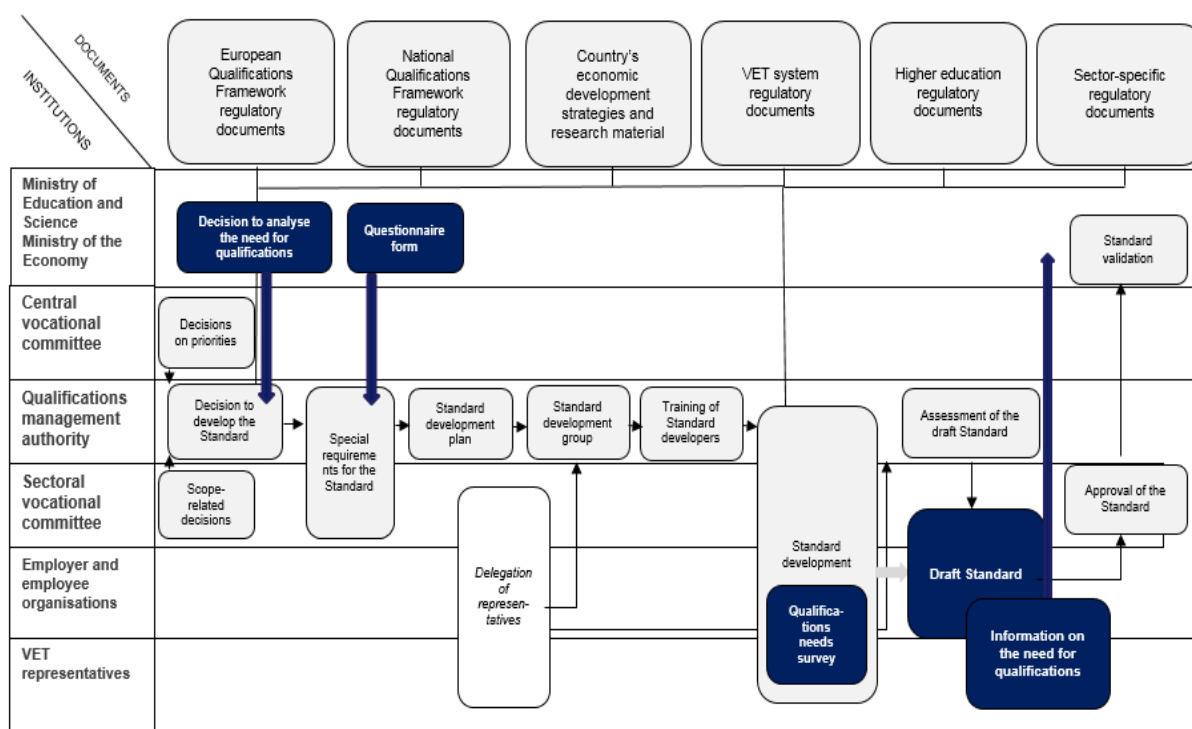


Fig. 3. Analysis of the need for qualifications in the process of development of occupational standards

However, the most important information is provided by employees on the post-related functions, competencies required in the workplace and their limits.

The analysis based on this principle and the qualifications developed on the basis of the relevant results and described in the occupational standards reflect the nomenclature of the qualifications actually existing in the economy (Andriušaitienė et al. 2008a; Šileika et al. 2008). Such information turns into clear and reliable guidelines for the education system to develop vocational training and higher education programmes.

The National Occupational Standard is intended to serve as a regulatory document. Adopted at a national level, occupational standards are consistent countrywide, coordinated with national employer and trade union organisations, approved by the authorised authority and applied by all education establishments and qualification assessment and recognition institutions. Approval of the descriptor of qualifications at a national level will allow codification of the titles and contents of qualifications of all levels in all of the economic sectors. The analysis and description of qualifications of all levels in a systematic manner, based on uniform principles, allows for the identification of the relationship between the qualifications required at different levels and provides a simple, clear and user-friendly system for describing qualifications and providing information on skilling and up-skilling opportunities.

There are even more opportunities. The model for the development of national occupational standards is easy to supplement with questions concerning the quantitative need for qualifications and projected future changes.

Setting up a database for research and publicity of the content dynamics and quantitative needs for qualifications would create opportunities to develop an efficient online qualification monitoring system that would have the capability of reacting quickly to the changing labour market needs in terms of competencies and their contents in any economic sector.

Results and challenges of the development of the National Qualifications System and Occupational Standards

The education system provides vocational training services to the employment system by training skilled workers of all qualification levels. However, so far, the assessments of skilled workers trained both in the VET system and higher education system have emphasised insufficient consideration of employers' needs. One of the main problems is the mismatch between quantitative and qualitative structure of labour force.

The education system is trying to tackle this problem by undertaking commitments on European Union, national and institutional levels. At the European Union level (The Bruges Communiqué... 2010), it is emphasised that responsibility for investing in VET and for shaping VET policy is the shared responsibility of national governments, social partners, VET providers, teachers, trainers and learners, who all have a mutual interest in closer cooperation. National reports on the education system to EU institutions emphasise efforts to improve the match between the education/studies system and societal/economic needs, highlighting that the education system assumes responsibility for the quality of training of skilled workers required in the labour market. One of the implementation measures for this is to develop a system of qualifications and occupational standards.

Despite a long list of objectives and numerous plans in this area, the situation remains complicated in terms of outcomes. In order to attract a large number of students, education and training institutions at all levels are still forced to compete by commercialising their programmes with unusual and attractive titles. Programmes that have different titles but are almost identical in the set of basic qualifications (differing only in specialisation profiles) are described differently. This causes problems not only for experts in the field to assess and compare the descriptors. The lack of certainty of programme outcomes, particularly in higher education, is also mentioned by employers whose judgements and criticism are supposed to serve as a basis for programme improvements.

What is in place and what we can boast of? National Qualifications System Development was a project implemented in 2005–2008, which delivered the following results: development of the concept of the National Qualifications System, methodologies for qualification analysis, pilot occupational standards for the Construction and Hotels & restaurants sectors, collation and summary of global methodological experience and good practices, and methodological and methodical justification of the national qualifications system model taking into account country's experience in this area, traditions and realistic financial possibilities. One of the most promising results was the establishment of an independent institutional mediator between education and employment, the Qualifications Authority, which assumed the functions of qualifications inventory, the standardisation of qualification requirements and the creation, renewal and filing of qualifications. The staff of the Qualifications Authority was specially trained to continue a dialogue between stakeholders, cooperation and work in this field. However, in the environment of the global financial crisis, this work and related problems were found to be insufficiently important. As a result, the Qualifications Authority was abolished, responsibility for the development of the qualifications system was delegated to the Ministry of Education and Sciences and qualifications management functions were delegated to the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre.

After a break, Lithuania, which was one of the leading Member States in creating the national qualifications system, had to start the work from the beginning. The project 'Formation of qualifications and development of the modular vocational education and training system' implemented by the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre in 2010–2015 delivered ten draft sectoral occupational standards for accommodation and food services; energy; information and communication technologies; construction; transportation and storage services; manufacture of wood products and furniture; textile, apparel and leatherwear production; healthcare, beauty and wellness services; agriculture, forestry and fishery, and food production; engineering industry products. The preparation of 14 additional occupational standards intended to cover the remaining economic sectors started in 2016 within the project 'Development of the Lithuanian Qualifications System (phase 1)'. The pace of developing occupational standards and the National Qualifications System aimed at targeting the problems as mentioned above and fulfilling the commitments is encouraging. However, there is less optimism about what and how much is being done when we look at how it is being done.

The main outstanding challenges are:

1. *Insufficient dissemination of information and a lack of constructive attention at the level of national authorities.* Countries, which had already established and developed their qualification system, typically emphasised the importance of the system, allocated impressive funding, developed adequate infrastructure and trained appropriately qualified professionals (European... 2017; CEDEFOP 2017; Coles et al. 2014; European Qualification Framework 2018; Luomi-Messerer & Markowitsch 2006; Méhaut & Winch 2012; Nieuwenhuis & Shapiro 2004). Among the most impressive examples of qualification systems and occupational standards (we need, for example, to dismiss the ones of Australia and New Zealand as incorrect for comparison purposes in terms of funding possibilities) Ireland remains a good example for not only recognising the importance, benefits and potential of the qualifications system at national level, allocating adequate funding and creating infrastructure ensuring the functioning of the system, but also for initiating a national agreement on qualifications. As regards our experience, intermittent return to the started and abandoned activities illustrates the lack of consideration from some authorities in taking strategic decisions.
2. *Rigidity of the valid legislative occupational standards.* A frequent dilemma encountered in the process of improving the methodological basis for the qualifications system is whether to adapt to the existing legal provisions or to offer innovative solutions. The latter often get stuck in bureaucracy impeding the defence of the overall results. On the other hand, adapting the procedure of developing occupational standards to the valid legislative system requires certain trade-offs.
3. *The competence level of occupational standards developers.* Development of occupational standards is a relatively new practice in Lithuania. There are very few representatives from the

education system and the world of work who have appropriate methodological knowledge and competencies. Project-based funding and related fragmentary participation in the projects do not allow for building a pool of professionals required for the effective management of the activities at issue, not to mention competition. Experts face the challenge of shortages of skills at all stages of occupational standards development. This, in turn, results in errors the correction of which is time consuming and leads to reduced chances to obtain better quality. It should be remembered in this context that competition is possible only if there is a sufficient number of potential competitors (experts in this case). Therefore, it must be admitted that the project-based financing procedure involving calls for tenders for the development of occupational standards' development is inherently problematic and cannot be viewed as efficient. Those who have practical experience and demonstrate appropriate competencies may not necessarily win the tender, while inexperienced winning developers face the same challenges, that is, the lack of methodological knowledge and practical methodological skills.

4. *The lag in developing and implementing related IT projects.* National occupational standards for all economic sectors are developed without having in place an interactive database. The portal VET e-Content is in place, but it is intended only for hosting information and has no online functions for expeditious communication and dissemination of information to all stakeholders. The need for an online database has been frequently emphasised by the ETF (European... 2017): the absence of a database at the stage of developing occupational standards reduces the possibility to get more stakeholders involved in the process of development and assessment of the national instrument.
5. *Tender-based funding does not ensure social partnership.* The Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre has been implementing projects for the development of occupational standards since 2010 and purchasing experts to perform project activities in accordance with the requirements for projects financed by the European Social Fund. The best solutions have been sought through international calls for tenders and delegation of functions and responsibilities to social partners (associated employers' organisations) with no call for tenders. The efficient functioning of the qualifications system as a whole is not possible without the active engagement of all stakeholders at all stages and in all processes. This is a fundamental principle at the stage of occupational standards development. Unfortunately, the tender-based funding for developing occupational standards has not only failed to ensure the participation of all social partners of the relevant sector in the development of occupational standards, but even pitted them against each other: organisations and professionals contacted for information or opinion, unfortunately, had reason to abstain ('let those who won and are paid work...'). This is a problem for which solutions in relevant sectors will be fairly laborious even in future periods. Problems with the consistency of occupational standards are in large part due to the tender-based funding procedure for the development of occupational standards, which leads to competition and related indirect confrontation instead of partnership.

However, the above-described organisation of occupational standards' development, although in line with the legal provisions in force in the country, has fallen well below expectations: it has not ensured the quality of occupational standards, has not facilitated the creation of social partners' network and has not created the opportunities to train the required number of professionals able to ensure the continuity of work in accordance with uniform methodological principles.

The network of genuine social partnership as the key to solving the problem of the match between qualifications and economic needs

There are two main parties – employment and education systems – in the development of occupational standards. The mission of the employment system is to be involved in the identification of the existing situation by determining the relevant nomenclature of professional activities, the competencies required for them and future competence needs, as well as basic and specific competencies, and limits thereof, in specific professional activities. Simply put, the employment system should manifest what it needs in terms of qualifications and competencies (Figure 1).

Thus construed, the mission of the world of work means that the role this world plays in the development of occupational standards is not that of an assistant or advisor. Together with the education system, the world of work is one of the main developers and users (European... 2017; CEDEFOP 2012; CEDEFOP 2017; Coles et al. 2014; Andriušaitienė et al. 2008b; Lauder et al. 2006; Winterton 2007).

As mentioned above in the analysis of the challenges faced in developing the qualifications system, country's achievements prompt a mixed appraisal: the first few important steps made are encouraging, but there are concerns that the errors made may reverberate in future work, in particular with regard to perspectives for building a genuine partnership network of all stakeholders based on modern communication and for creating and managing information related to qualifications' content.

How to do this? What is necessary for the social partnership network capable of guaranteeing high-quality results of qualifications system development in reference to occupational standards (Figure 4)?

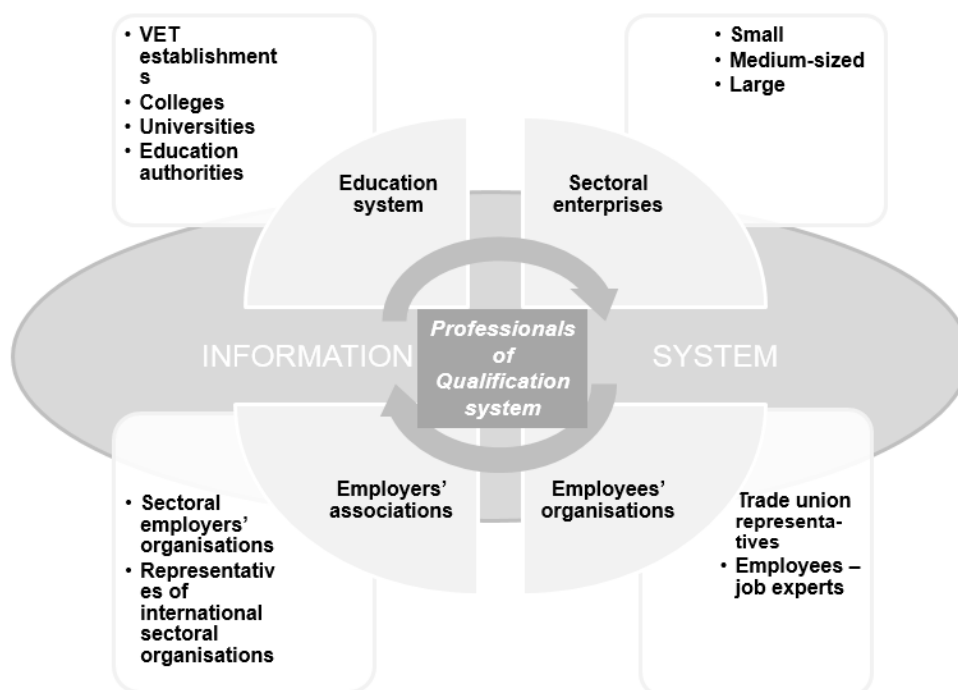


Fig. 4. Social partnership in the development of occupational standards

With a relatively strong methodological basis and methodologies, the creation of a network for a functional, genuine social partnership to address matters related to qualifications requires only three solutions: a more liberal concept, a modern IT instrument and a competent team capable of engaging stakeholders in concerted work and process management.

Methodological axis – more liberal concept of occupational standards. The quality of national occupational standards and their approval in the employment and education are the guarantees of their functionality. It is reasonable to refrain from the provision that occupational standards are subject to approval at a national level (according to the existing regulation, occupational standards require approval by two ministers). A more liberal concept of occupational standards as an information system about sector-specific needs would be more consistent with the essential function of the occupational standards and ensure their functionality and viability.

Worldwide experience shows that countries that first developed the standards as strictly regulatory documents adopted at a national level faced opposition regarding too heavy regulatory embrace and had to change direction by replacing the stringent provisions with the concept of guidance information

(Global..., 2017). This helped to solve two problems: to reduce opposition to stringent requirements and to create conditions for occupational standards to better fulfil their core role of being a dynamic source of information on constantly changing needs of the world of work in the field of competencies. If occupational standards are construed as competence descriptors based on uniform principles in an open, liberal information system accessible by all of the stakeholders, the standards become a product approved by all of the stakeholders. So, this is the most reliable indicator of quality.

Innovative information system based on modern methods of communication. Development of the qualifications system is not an end in itself. The content of qualifications that takes into consideration the needs of the world of work must be as dynamic as is the sector for which the standards are developed. One-off development of high-quality descriptors of qualifications and their entrenchment in an occupational standard can only be, at best, a quality instant print of sector's qualifications. The field of creating the system should not be paper but a modern, adequately functioning IT tool. The development of such a tool, that is, of the information environment based on modern methods and possibilities of communication, would be the easiest way to facilitate the formation of a partnership network. This would give all the stakeholders the opportunity to become information providers, promptly responding to the changing content of qualifications and needs for them.

Qualification management solutions. Occupational standards should be hosted by a sufficiently empowered institutionalised team, subordinate to none of the main stakeholders (employment and education systems), which would manage the flow of information on the content of qualifications and needs for the same. This competent organisational and coordination core could be composed of a group of professionals and researchers with appropriate competence, regularly upgrading their qualifications and acquiring new necessary competencies, and having the expertise to deal with problematic issues. Independence from any of the stakeholders gives the opportunity to shape impartial priorities and relevant strategic decision, whereas the practical experience of the professionals, in particular, the lessons learnt from mistakes, leads to a higher quality of the standards.

The potential solutions mentioned above would allow much better results to be achieved at the lowest cost. The concept of the national qualification system serves as methodological guidance for this.

Conclusions

A country's qualification structure that meets the needs of the labour market is one of the priority objectives of the country. However, the country's education system lacks clear information on the content of the qualifications required by the labour market needs. A better match and efficiency of education services are sought through the development of occupational standards, which describe the contents of qualifications at all levels in a relevant economic sector. The developed occupational standards should be a reliable reference for the education system with regard to the qualifications existing in the country's economy and their contents.

Lithuanian model for the development of occupational standards provides the possibility to supplement it with analysis of quantitative needs for qualifications. The improved model of qualifications research would enable the ongoing monitoring of the quantitative needs for qualifications actually at no extra cost and would guarantee the possibility for the education system to promptly receive information and respond to the changing situation with qualifications in any economic sector.

However, the pace of developing the National Qualifications System is not viewed unambiguously. The optimistic aspect is that ten occupational standards are already in place and fourteen more are on the way. The main challenges preventing the development of qualifications system from reaching the expected pace include insufficient dissemination of information and lack of constructive attention at the level of national authorities; rigidity of the valid legislative system; the competence level of occupational standards developers; the lag in developing and implementing related IT projects; tender-based funding which does not ensure social partnership.

The key to solving the problem of the match between qualifications and economic and labour market needs is a network of genuine social partnership. With a relatively strong methodological basis, the creation of a network of functional, genuine social partnership for addressing matters related to

qualifications requires only three key solutions: a more liberal concept, a modern IT tool and a competent team capable of engaging stakeholders in joint work and process management. Such solutions would allow for the establishment of an online partnership network for qualifications and achievement of better results.

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