

Summary of answers of 3 focus groups on national policy and good practices

Three focus groups answered the following questionnaire –trade unions, employer organizations and education providers. The focus groups answers and conclusions were introduced and discussed briefly at the conference of PIN project partners in Warsaw – 20th and 21st October 2011.

The summary of the answers provided by the focus groups contains only the main findings and conclusions of the three above-mentioned individual stakeholders

1. Slovene national qualification system

Slovenia has a well-developed system of formal vocational, secondary technical and higher professional (post secondary) education. Formal education enables individuals to acquire vocational education/degree, general secondary education/degree, secondary professional education/degree by means of taking and passing the so-called 'Matura' Exam.

A successfully completed (external) general or vocational Matura Exam enables individuals to enrol into higher professional education which lasts for two years and enables an individual to acquire a vocational title ENGINEER or any other similar/equivalent title at this level. The Matura Exam is also a prerequisite for the enrolment into higher professional education and universities, which enable an acquisition of a 'Diploma' – a B.Sc with a title Engineer or any other suitable academic title. A successfully completed two-year education then further enables individuals to continue their education to acquire a Master's Degree and then Ph.D.

All qualifications have been classified into 8 referential levels at the national level – this has been done within the framework of the current classification systems of education and training called KLASIUS, adopted by the government of the Republic of Slovenia in 2006. Slovenia has two systems of acquisition of qualification: the formal education system and the certificate system for the acquisition of national vocational qualifications (NVQ) that has been in force since 2002.

Once can acquire the NVQ by having confirmed the non-formally acquired knowledge and skills required by an individual vocational standard. NVQs are classified within the national classification system of education and training – KLASIUS - up to level 6.

Ten years ago Slovenia began developing occupational standards which serve as a link between the labour market and education. Occupational standards determine the content of vocational qualifications at a certain level of difficulty for individual tasks and define necessary learning outcomes: knowledge, skills and vocational competences.

All educational programmes for vocational, professional and higher professional education are based on occupational standards. Catalogues for NVQ are also based on occupational standards. These catalogues enable or define procedures of assessment and evaluation and validation of non-formally acquired knowledge.

In 2011 Slovenia prepared its National Qualifications Framework, but it has not been formally validated yet by means of a law or a decree by the Slovene government. The Slovene NQF will enable classification of learning results of formal education as well as national vocational qualifications (NVQs) into 10 levels (of difficulty). The Slovene NQF currently does not predict classification of informally acquired knowledge, skills and competences that are not based on national occupational standards valid for NVQs. Classification of qualifications into different levels of NQF will be put into force in 2012.

It is generally believed that the adoption of the Slovene NQF will provide greater transparency of learning outcomes of the educational system and enable the enforcement of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills, which will in turn increase the opportunities for employment in the labour market.

2. Life-long learning policy

The government of the Republic of Slovenia has adopted the Strategy of Life-long Learning that is based on the EU Memorandum. The legislative standings can be found in the White Paper on Education and in the Resolution on the National Adult Education Programme until 2015. All national strategic documents support the recognition/acknowledgement of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and skills. In practice, however, only the system of the NVQs has been applied. This system allows for an individual to have his non-formally acquired knowledge acknowledged on the basis of an Occupational Standard. This, national, systems allows validation of knowledge, demonstration of knowledge and skills by means of examinations, tests of (job) qualifications, etc.

Implementation of the LLL policy is the responsibility of three different ministries: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education and Technology. In 2010, an interdepartmental work group was established at the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training of adults – this group is responsible for the implementation of adopted statutory acts dealing with the field of LLL: Vocational Education Act, Higher Education Act, and National Vocational Qualifications Act.

All the stakeholders (trade unions, employer organizations, education providers) participating in the implementation of the LLL policy agree that the System of National Vocational Qualifications is good/beneficial. They say that it provides more opportunities (for applicants/candidates) for career advancement – promotion. They system contributes to greater flexibility in acquisition and validation of qualifications. They mention some examples of good practice in companies such as KRKA (pharmaceutical industry), ISKRA AVTOELEKTRIKA (electrical drive systems) and RTV SLOVENIJA (National Broadcasting Company).

3. Role in the learning process

Trade unions participate in the process of LLL (life-long learning) as social partners in negotiations with employers (during the process of concluding collective agreements). Collective agreements contain articles that deal with the rights of individuals to be involved in the process of LLL. In companies, LLL mainly focuses on acquisition of vocational qualifications. We can, therefore, talk about the so-called summative approach towards LLL.

Trade unions and employers (employer organizations) participate in the process of preparation of Occupational Standards and Educational Programmes. Employers have their representatives in Examination Committees that oversee/carry out the Final Exams in vocational education.

Every adult person has the right to vocational counselling. Vocational orientation is done by the National Employment Offices – they have departments that specialize in career orientation. In the last 10 years Slovenia has developed and opened 14 regional centres for providing information and vocational orientation (this was done within the framework of the European Social Fund). Adults have the right to consult with the counselling service when preparing their own individual educational plans or employment plans.

Slovenia is involved in numerous projects dealing with the inclusion of vulnerable groups into the process of LLL; when we talk about the vulnerable groups we mostly refer to the migrants, the unemployed, the Roma people – for these people the public utility provides counselling, help with the choice of education, financial support and financial stimulation. Trade unions do not offer any special programmes except for the migrants and the unemployed (belonging to a trade union).

4. Non-formal and formal education and training

Each adult who wishes to educate him or herself either formally or non-formally is entitled to receive support from the national Employment Offices. In Slovenia we also have a special public fund dedicated to developing human resources and giving out scholarships; one can receive financial help from this fund under certain conditions – for example for shortage occupations, etc. All public educational programmes in Slovenia are awarded a certain number of credit points (in accordance with the ECVET). The credit system enhances flexibility when acquiring qualifications as it enables assessment and validation of non-formal education according to modules. Newer educational profiles come to life on the basis of new occupational standards, which are prepared according to the needs for new qualifications suggested by the employers. There is a special methodology used in the preparation of these standards and they are being prepared by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

Quality assurance in formal education is done by means of examinations (knowledge and skills are assessed and evaluated). The examination is either partially external – external experts are present during final exams, or completely external (vocational 'Matura' exam at the end of a 4-year vocational education). The standards for the examination are prepared by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, using the EQARF recommendations. Most educational institutions also use internal quality assurance standards.

5. Methodological aspect

When assessing and evaluation knowledge and skills in vocational education one uses different methodological instruments or tools: oral exams, written exams, products, demonstrations.

Candidates who have already acquired certain knowledge or qualifications can prove this by means of certificates - formal or from the employers or combination of both.

Recently, everyone who wants to participate in educational programmes has to organize their own portfolio (a folder with all acquired certificates) – this portfolio was developed by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training as a useful tool (help) for all the people who decide to participate in the LLL.

Education providers generally provide mentors and counsellors for individual counselling during the learning process. The assessment/evaluation committee members prepare reports on the success at the Matura Exam or other examinations – these reports serve as feedback for the education providers when preparing educational programmes.

6. SWOT analysis

ADVANTAGES of the educational process are:

- high level of inclusion of young people in general and vocational education
- integration of social partners in the decision-making process on occupational standards and the EQF
- existence of a classification system of learning results – KLASIUS
- inclusion of national vocational qualifications into the NQF
- possibility of acquisition of qualification either formally or non-formally

DISADVANTAGES of the educational process are:

- A great number of qualifications that can be acquired in companies but cannot be validated at the national level (NQF level)
- Impermeability of the system of vocational education – there are no direct transitions into higher education, successful completion of the Matura Exam is required
- Collective agreements do not include the right to education and training and the employer is not bound to acknowledge an acquired qualification

OPPORTUNITIES after the implementation of the EQF:

- greater transparency of acquired qualifications in the European area
- Comparability with other qualifications in EU
- Greater employment opportunities with EU employers
- Higher status of vocational qualifications
- Possibility of acquiring a qualification part by part

RISKS:

- Greater fluctuation of qualified work force into better paid environments
- More pressure on the employees to acquire qualifications that are in the employer's best interest
- Certain qualifications may be placed into lower levels of the EQF in the process of classification

7. Thematic outline

Collective bargaining is vital for a successful implementation of the SQF because it must be accepted by all social partners as the mechanism for ensuring transparency of qualifications. If consensus is not reached the SQF will remain only on paper.

Implementation of learning results into vocational and technical education has been one of the priorities for many years here in Slovenia. A step forward was made when educational programmes were connected to occupational standards, which represent wanted learning results as seen by the employers.

Assuring permeability between programmes of vocational education is also an important issue which is being dealt with in two ways:

- Implementation of the ECVET system and
- Acknowledgement procedures

However, we must admit that we have only at the beginning.

Permeability between general, vocational and tertiary education and training relates to the previous topic. What is important is that we build on creating trust among different levels of educational and this is where the SQF becomes useful.

One way in which we can build trust among different systems of educations is that we ensure quality within vocational education and training (EQARF). However, we must also implement systems for quality assurance in other systems of educational at the national level (general secondary schools – gymnasiums, higher education).

Standards for the development of new skill profiles needed in the future are an important issue which plays a vital part in the development of vocational and technical education. However, we do not believe that SQF will greatly contribute to this particular issue.

Mismatching: current situation at the labour market - we are faced with over qualification for the current available job positions (a large number of unemployed people with university degrees) but on the other hand, there are many older people with very low qualifications.

8. Information and support by PIN

All the stakeholders expect to receive interesting information. They think they will benefit the most from examples of good practice from other EU countries. They also expect to see greater balance of qualifications (qualifications on more comparable levels) after the implementation of the NQFs.

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