

RAPORT ON REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES CONCERNING CERTIFICATION OF COMPETENCES IN POLAND

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Introduction

For modern man it is no longer enough to study once for qualifications or competences in a specific area. Sustainable development and multi-area synergy are currently the main features desired not only by employees, but by all European citizens. Together with these processes, it is necessary to create and develop a legislative framework that organises the areas of acquisition and certification of qualifications and competences, so that they are universally recognised. In Poland, an attempt to organise the area of life long education was made in a document from 2013 “The perspective of life long learning”, which set the main objectives and directions of strategic interventions for the coming years in the area of adult education in Poland. In subsequent stages, measures were taken to achieve the objectives set.

Certification of qualifications – the path of development of regulation

In the 2013 document titled “The perspective of life long learning” (annex to resolution No 160/2013 of the Council of Ministers of 10 September 2013), which was designed to ensure the coherence of the life long learning activities set out in development strategies, including actions for the coherence of the national qualifications system, taking into account the context of European and national specificities, one of the seven horizontal principles was identified as an “open approach to qualifications – assessment and certification of learning outcomes regardless of where and when it took place”¹. On the other hand, among the operational objectives and directions of intervention indicated for implementation of “Objective 2: Transparent and coherent national qualification system”². In the justification for the choice of such a goal, the diagnosis of the situation at the time was indicated, i.e. it was noted that “the acquisition and awarding of qualifications is carried out in three different areas:

- 1) in the education system, including the adult education system in institutions operating under this system, i.e. schools for adults and continuing education institutions, practical education institutions, vocational education and training centres,
- 2) in the higher education system,
- 3) on the labour market – in various institutions with the power to award qualifications (where there are competences that do not have formal status on the labour market, but are recognised by employers – on the basis of their own understanding of their usefulness)³”, while “until now there has been no uniform description of qualifications and common, cross-sectoral measurement of the value (level) of qualifications”⁴. It was pointed out that the measurements of qualification levels were established in the system of education and higher education, while there were no solutions developed – the so-called *common reference system* for qualifications acquired on the labour market and other qualifications⁵.

On the basis of the diagnosis of the current situation, seven strategic directions of intervention have been identified, which are⁶:

¹ The perspective of lifelong learning.” Annex to resolution No 160/2013 of the Council of Ministers of 10 September 2013 p. 30.

² Ibid., p. 31.

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

2.1 Development and implementation of a new instrument to systematise qualifications from different sectors in Poland and compare them with qualifications in EU countries (National Qualifications Frameworks) in line with the principles of the European Qualifications Framework.

2.2. Creation of education and training programs at all levels in terms of the requirements expected in the economy and civil society:

- ☐ development of systemic cooperation with social partners and organisations in defining the requirements to which the content of education and training will be subject,
- ☐ development of professional information resources for the design of the content of vocational education and training,
- ☐ promotion of combining study with professional, social and civic activities.

2.3. Implementation of procedures for assessing and certifying the achievements of learners, i.e. regardless of place, mode and time of learning, education and training (application of an open approach to awarding qualifications):

- ☐ creation of a system for certifying competences acquired outside formal learning,
- ☐ involvement of representatives of the social partners and social organisations in monitoring the compliance of systems for examination and awarding of qualifications with a learning-based approach.

2.4. Standardisation of the description of qualifications in the national qualifications system as learning outcomes, including, above all, the creation of a national register of qualifications.

2.5. Implementation of the principles for quality of qualifications, taking into account the principles of the European Qualifications Framework and the findings of the Copenhagen Process and Bologna Process.

2.6. Implementation of changes enabling students to collect and transfer achievements in vocational education and training consistent with the objectives of the European System for the Collection and transfer of achievements in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).

2.7. Increasing knowledge of National Qualifications and training Frameworks based on learning outcomes among:

- ☐ educational and training institutions,
- ☐ labour market institutions and professional advisers,
- ☐ labour market participants (employees, employers).

Of the above-mentioned, special attention should be paid to the directions of interventions 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4, as they extend the existing scope of understanding of certification of qualifications in Poland. In particular, the direction of intervention 2.3 is an expression of a somewhat revolutionary change in thinking about the process of acquiring qualifications and competences. It introduces a category of *learning outcomes*, understood broadly, also as a resource of knowledge and skills obtained outside formal education, and thus indicates that the process of human learning also takes place outside the so-called traditional education system. This provision fits into the model of non-linear education. It legitimises an open approach to education, i.e. that it can take place *regardless of the place, mode and time of learning, education and training*.

The authors of the document, setting Objective 2, stressed the need for its strong correlation with Objective 1, which was defined as “Creativity and innovation”. This goal refers to people, creating human capital, including in terms of the Polish economy. It was emphasised that “creativity and innovation are crucial for the development of enterprises and for the competitiveness of Poland

in Europe and the world⁷". Therefore, it is necessary to stimulate creativity and innovation in society. The justification for the choice of Objective 1 indicates that "in a context of rapid economic development, in particular, the value of non-formal learning, i.e. learning in the working environment, accompanying the production of increasingly complex products and services and their environmental impact, is increasing⁸". Thus, the need to broaden the view on the value of non-formal education was emphasised. At the same time, attention was also drawn to the need to certify the acquired competences, which was articulated in the strategic directions of intervention concerning Objective 1. Among the six mentioned, two relate to the area of verification of acquired competences, which are:

1.3. Adapting systems for assessing people's competence to promote creativity and innovation:

□ broadening the use of formative assessment (by tracking people's learning process, adapting to their course of study and giving them feedback to help them learn), combined with limiting the dominance of summative assessment,

□ reorientation of the assessment of learners' achievements from the focus on superficial checking of the degree of assimilation of given educational content in favour of a deeper assessment of problem-solving abilities, including in a team, and the degree of preparation for life long learning.

1.6. Creating a new evidence-based policy:

□ creating a tradition of continuous assessment of the development of education and training using representative competence studies in the most important areas (the national equivalent of the PISA study), based on a partnership cooperation between representatives of scientific circles, employers, employees, learners and civil society,

□ strengthening the system of analysis and forecasting of the need for qualifications in the economy, including forecasting the demand for qualifications taking into account forecasts in the EU area,

□ developing research facilities for LLL policy, especially in the context of the needs of the economy and the labour market,

□ developing a system of communication and dissemination of information in the field of education and training and their links with the economy and the labour market.

The cited document has set a new path for life long learning perspectives. Due to the dynamically developing economy and changes taking place at every level of socio-economic life (from interpersonal communication to the organisation of complex production processes), the constant and continuous development of a human being is necessary.

Integrated Qualifications System—a new way of Polish certification

In response to the needs of the changing world and in order to implement the postulates contained in the 2013 document "The perspective of life long learning". In Poland, actions were taken to organise the area of awarding and certifying qualifications and competences acquired in the process of life long education. The diagnosis that was carried out up to 2015 in the area of

⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

recognition of qualifications and competences was not optimistic. It pointed out that “outside of higher education and education, the awarding of qualifications in Poland is characterised by a huge variety of regulatory solutions (legal and organisational) and a different degree of intervention of legal norms in particular areas in which qualifications function. There are no basic standards in place to guarantee the credibility of qualifications (...) and no links between qualifications awarded in different fields and qualifications systems⁹.” Moreover, it was noted that, compared to EU countries, in Poland there is a low level of competences of adults, as well as a relatively low involvement of adult Poles and enterprises in investing in human capital. On this occasion, a number of barriers to investment in human capital were listed, including¹⁰:

- the lack of a general system for validating learning outcomes obtained through non-formal and informal learning (i.e. recognition and certification of competences acquired by employees, e.g. in the course of acquiring work experience), which extends the time and costs of obtaining qualifications;
- certificates awarded outside the system of education and higher education are very often not credible for employers, so obtaining them does not always translate into an improvement of the situation on the labour market, employers are also not willing to engage their resources and employees in training, especially during working hours;
- the lack of an easily accessible, transparent source of information about qualifications awarded in Poland, about the quality of these qualifications and the conditions that the learner must meet in order to obtain a specific qualification;
- employers do not have the tools to support them in identifying deficits in their employees’ skills and qualifications and for communicating their needs to education and training institutions;
- in many cases, the quality and scope of the educational and training offer are not sufficiently linked to the needs of the labour market and learners;
- apart from the mechanism of accreditation of the school superintendent for entities providing continuing education in non-school forms and examples of good practices in some sectors of the economy, there is no accreditation system for training and certification institutions of the non-formal sector - as a result, learners and employers are unable to assess the quality of a proposed training service.

From this diagnosis emerged a very difficult picture of, first of all, the acquisition, and secondly the recognition, of the qualifications and competences of adults, outside the education system. In order to counteract the existing problems and to implement the postulates and obligations arising from EU membership, including those set out in Polish programming documents, the creation of an *Integrated Qualifications System* (IQS) was launched. This system operates on the basis of the provisions of the “Act on Integrated Qualifications System of 22 December 2015 (Journal of Laws 2016 item 64 as amended)”, which entered into force on 15 January 2016. In accordance with the provisions of the Act, the IQS provides¹¹:

- 1) the quality of the qualifications awarded;
- 2) the possibility of recognition of learning outcomes obtained in non-formal education and through informal learning;

⁹ Explanatory statement to the draft law on the Integrated Qualifications System of 8 December 2015, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2-3.

¹¹ Art. 4. The Act on Integrated Qualifications System of 22 December 2015 (Journal of laws 2016 item 64 as amended).

3) the possibility of the gradual accumulation of achievements and recognition of achievements;

4) access to information about qualifications that can be obtained on the territory of the Republic of Poland;

5) the possibility of comparing qualifications obtained in the territory of the Republic of Poland with qualifications awarded in other Member States of the European Union.

According to the intention of the authors, the aim of the IQS is to “increase the availability and quality of qualifications that can be obtained in Poland and, by assigning the qualifications covered by the Polish Qualifications Framework, mutual reference of these qualifications and their reference to the European Qualifications Framework”¹².

An important issue to be addressed is the organisation and unification by *Legal act* of terminology relating to the area of acquiring and certifying qualifications and competences. The definitions contained in the *Act* significantly facilitate communication in this area. These include, but are not limited to, a more precise definition of certification which has been defined as: ‘the process by which an applicant for a specific qualification, after having obtained a positive validation result, receives a document from an authorised certifying body certifying the qualification concerned’¹³.

Very ambitious goals have been set for the IQS, divided into different stakeholders, i.e.¹⁴

a) for citizens:

- ☐ enabling comparison and assessment from a personal perspective of possible certificates and diplomas, thereby better planning of upgrading their qualifications and career development;
- ☐ facilitating the rational choice of school and university, search for appropriate training and information on the possibility of obtaining diplomas certifying knowledge and skills;
- ☐ simplifying the recognition of competences acquired in non-formal education and through informal learning (e.g. in the course of work);
- ☐ increasing the opportunities for learning in different ways and for obtaining qualifications;
- ☐ facilitating the acquisition of new professions and the transition between different industries;
- ☐ enabling the presentation of their qualifications in a more communicative way for employers in the Polish and European labour market (the implementation of the Act on the IQS will enable mutual referencing of qualifications awarded in Poland and referencing them to qualifications awarded in other countries),

b) for employers:

- ☐ enabling better identification of qualifications that are important from the point of view of the business;
- ☐ facilitating the proper selection of qualified staff and helping to assess the actual competence of candidates for work, thereby reducing recruitment errors;
- ☐ facilitating the promotion of the professional development of workers, reducing the number of incorrect decisions in this field (by providing detailed information on the competences involved in the employee obtaining a new qualification);

¹² Justification..., p. 1.

¹³ Art. 2. The Act on Integrated Qualifications System of 22 December 2015 (Journal of laws 2016 item 64 as amended)

¹⁴ Justification..., p. 4-5.

- increasing the chances of winning contracts on the European market by demonstrating the real value of the qualifications held by the company's staff;
- c) for public authorities:
 - making it possible to increase the effectiveness of expenditures of public funds on the development of competences and retraining (by defining quality requirements for qualifications and implementing control mechanisms in this respect);
 - facilitating the implementation of tasks and projects defined in the Regional Operational Programs in the field of adult learning (in accordance with the requirements of the European Commission, one of the obligatory monitoring indicators is the participation of funds intended for obtaining qualifications in accordance with the assumptions of the Polish Qualifications Framework);
 - providing new instruments for the activities of professional and educational advisors and teachers (by providing easy access to full information on the qualifications available to them, including the required learning outcomes for each qualification and the possible paths to access them).

The entry into force of the Act on the IQS initiated the process of its creation, expansion and dissemination. This is a very demanding undertaking, in which various entities at all levels are involved - from ministries, through educational institutions, to entities operating in various areas of the economy and individual experts. The institution that is responsible for coordinating work and substantive support in the field of the IQS is the *Institute of Educational Research* based in Warsaw – this is a research institute, conducting interdisciplinary research on the functioning and effectiveness of the education system in Poland.

Currently, the IQS consists of four main elements, which are¹⁵:

- a) Integrated Register of Qualifications – a public register gathering all of the qualifications functioning in the IQS. The register is intended to provide information on, among others, a full list of qualifications included in the system, their detailed descriptions, as well as requirements for candidates who want to certify possession of a given qualification.
- b) Validation – this is a process of formal certification of what a person knows or is able to do, regardless of the place/circumstances in which they have learned it – e.g. at school, in a course, at work or at home. A successful validation is completed by confirming possession of a professional certificate. Certifying authorities shall be responsible for the organisation of validation. What is important and worth emphasising is that a very large amount of work is aimed at disseminating a proper understanding of validation. A large part of society associates this primarily with examinations and testing. This approach is rooted in the so-called traditional model of education. However, validation within the meaning of an open approach to learning is, in addition to checking knowledge and skills, also the recognition of potential – what a person already knows and is able to do, but also an indication of what else they can strengthen in themselves¹⁶. Validation consists of three steps¹⁷:
 - identification – a stage in which one determines what a person already knows and is able to do, and what else they have to learn to gain a qualification or plan their

¹⁵ <https://kwalifikacje.edu.pl/najwazniejsze-elementy-systemu/> (accessed: March 2023)

¹⁶ <https://kwalifikacje.edu.pl/baza-wiedzy/skorzystaj-z-zintegrowanego-systemu-kwalifikacji-zsk/walidacja/> (accessed: March 2023)

¹⁷ Ibid.

development in a different way. The stage may be conducted with the assistance of a validation advisor,

- documentation – the stage of collecting evidence (documents) that a person knows and is able to do what is necessary to obtain a certificate – and thus certification of the required learning outcomes,
- verification – the stage in which assessors (specialists in a given area) check whether the person has all the required learning outcomes. If the assessors confirm that they do, the certifying authority will award the qualification and issue the certificate.

In the validation process, *feedback* plays an important role - feedback that describes the person's potential and areas of strengthening and development. Validation is a fee-based service and the amount of fees depends on the certifying authorities conducting the process.

- c) Certification bodies – institutions with the power to award specific market qualifications included in the IQS, that is, to issue professional certificates confirming the possession of qualifications. The database of institutions is open, and entities interested in acquiring the power to award qualifications can apply (submit applications).
- d) The Polish Qualifications Framework – all qualifications included in the IQS have a given level in the Polish Qualifications Framework, which describes the complexity of skills acquired within a given qualification. The PQF label is on each certificate issued within the framework of the IQS – both a professional certificate and, for example, a matriculation certificate. Polish Qualifications Framework – this is an eight-level framework structure that indicates how qualifications should be described. Each level is defined by general statements characterising the requirements of knowledge, skills and social competence that must be met by persons possessing a qualification of a given level. A unique solution used in Poland is the introduction, in addition to first degree characteristics (universal), of second degree characteristics (detailed). Universal and detailed characteristics constitute a coherent whole¹⁸.

Currently, in Poland, the IQS is the most comprehensive system in the field of certification of qualifications and competences acquired in the process of life long learning. This project is still under development. A very large amount of work is put into dissemination of knowledge about the IQS in Poland, because due to the novelty and innovativeness of this initiative in the Polish education system, it requires introduction and strengthening of its recognition among Polish society and awareness of the usefulness of issued certificates of skills – certificates among employers. In order to find out about the offer of the IQS, regional Partner Networks are created, gathering representatives of various entities – starting with authorities and institutions that take care of the development of the region. In addition to the promotion and information activities, these networks carry out activities for the implementation of the IQS in the regions. In this way, this initiative is growing across Poland, engaging and reaching further stakeholders.

Summary

Certification of qualifications and competences in Poland is a relatively new field, which has dynamically developed over the last few years. The creation of a framework for a certification system that goes beyond traditional formal education began with the provisions of the document setting out

¹⁸ <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/o-zsk/polska-rama-kwalifikacji> (accessed: March 2023)



the prospects for adult learning in connection with Poland's presence in the EU and common directions of development.

The Integrated Qualifications System, established in 2016, is currently being developed, collecting, describing and certifying qualifications and competences acquired in the process of life long learning.

References

1. The Act on Integrated Qualifications System of 22 December 2015 (Journal of laws 2016 item 64 as amended).
2. Explanatory statement to the draft law on the Integrated Qualifications System of 8 December 2015.
3. "The perspective of life long learning." Annex to resolution No 160/2013 of the Council of Ministers of 10 September 2013 p.

Websites:

<https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl>