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Report of the Debate

**“The development of terms of reference for the
implementation of the National Qualifications
Framework and the National Qualifications
Register for lifelong learning”**

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The authors, the project team

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INTRODUCTION

Establishing the qualifications system in Poland requires ongoing cooperation with social partners. For this reason, the Educational Research Institute, which is implementing a systemic project entitled “The development of terms of reference for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Register for lifelong learning” invited representatives of various stakeholder groups of the future qualifications system to a debate on the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) in February of 2011. The organisers of the debate did not want the PQF, as an integral part of the national qualifications system being developed in Poland, to only be the result of the work of experts, but wanted to confront it with the expectations of practitioners. The series of meetings that ended in June 2011 allowed social partners to participate in the process of developing systemic solutions. In addition to discussing the project of the PQF, the following activities were also accomplished as a result of the meetings:

- existing solutions in Poland in the area of awarding qualifications (elements of the future national qualifications system) were reviewed,
- new elements proposed in the future system were reviewed,
- missing elements of our country’s future qualifications system were identified.

During the meetings, participants discussed the need to develop a new qualifications system and the threats associated with this. Solutions were sought together.

This report presents the specific objectives of the debate, its course, topics of specific meetings, reports of the discussions, and the effects of the joint work. We also describe the conclusions of the debate and the resulting changes introduced to the expert project of the Polish Qualifications Framework.

The debate began with a conference held February 16, 2011, opened by Lilla Jaroń, the Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of National Education. Ms. Jaroń presented the project document “Perspectives for lifelong learning” prepared by the Interministerial Team on lifelong learning, inclusive of the national qualifications framework. The Vice-President of Warsaw, Włodzimierz Paszyński, followed with a presentation about the city’s experiences in modernising its vocational education system. During the next part of the meeting, representatives of ERI (implementing the NQS project) discussed the aims of the debate and proposed the scope of work for specific thematic groups. The second half of the conference consisted of the first meetings of these groups:

- The first group discussed the Polish Qualifications Framework project,
- The second group discussed whether and how the future qualifications system and PQF could help reduce barriers to lifelong learning,
- The third group discussed the validation system for learning outcomes and quality assurance mechanisms for qualifications.

Each thematic group met five times. During the groups' work, debate participants exchanged opinions, expressed reservations about the structural elements of the frameworks under development and suggested new ideas. They also pointed attention to various problems in the Polish labour market and in education, as well as relaying their experiences about the topics under discussion.

Participants of the debate included representatives of:

- ministries
- employment offices
- employers' organizations (including trade representatives) and trade unions
- public educational institutions
- commercial training firms
- national institutions working in the educational system
- associations and non-governmental organisations
- academic research and consulting institutions

About 200 persons representing 101 institutions participated in the meetings.

A plenary conference summarising the work of the groups was held on June 15, 2011 in Warsaw. During this event, the course of the discussions that had taken place during the previous four months and the achieved effects were presented. Both representatives of ERI as well as the social partners presented their assessment of the debate.

PART I

1. DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT OF THE POLISH QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Meetings of this thematic group were led by Dr. Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak. The group expert was Dr. Stanisław Sławiński. Dr. Zbigniew Czwartosz facilitated the discussion.

During the first two meetings, discussions focused on general issues regarding the terminology used and linguistic inconsistencies found in descriptions of specific elements of the new qualifications system, as well as matters related to the structure of the NQF. Experiences from the process of developing banking sector qualifications were presented.

The next three meetings were devoted to presenting how the qualifications are described by using levels descriptors and discussions about the description of the descriptors developed in the experts' proposal of the PQF.

1.1. Information about the Polish Qualifications Framework presented to group participants

The national qualifications system (NQS) is the entirety of activities carried out in a country that is related to recognising learning outcomes for the needs of the labour market, civil society and the personal development of learners, based on the national qualifications framework. It especially includes the process of awarding and recognising qualifications, as well as ensuring qualifications quality assurance.¹ The NQS aims to increase the ability to consider and formally document new competences acquired in very different ways throughout life. The key element of this system will be the Polish Qualifications Framework, which will serve as the common frame of reference for all qualifications.

Developing a modern NQS, which not only will enable Polish society to take on new civilizational challenges but also will be appropriately linked to qualifications systems in other European countries, requires that suitable terminology be determined. It must be unequivocal, but also more distinct than the commonly used ways of describing qualifications or the traditional nomenclature of the Polish language.

The key element of the qualifications system will be the Polish Qualifications Framework. The PQF will describe the mutual relations between qualifications and integrate the various qualifications subsystems in the country. The PQF will also describe the hierarchy of qualifications levels.

Eight levels of qualifications are distinguished in the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF). Learning outcomes that must be achieved are described for each level. These descriptions, known as

¹ Definition proposed in the „Glossary of key concepts related to the national qualifications system”.

descriptors, define the full spectrum of learning outcomes regardless of whether they were achieved in school/institution of higher education, or in later stages (after completing education in school/institution of higher education, for example, during professional work). The PQF takes into consideration learning outcomes achieved through the formal and non-formal educational systems, as well as resulting from informal learning.

As in the EQF, learning outcomes are divided into three groups in the PQF as follows:

- Knowledge – a set of substantiated judgments (a body of facts, theories and principles of conduct) resulting from the cognitive activity of a human being. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.
- Skills – the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).
- Social competence – the proven ability (in work, study situations and personal development) to use knowledge and skills within the context of an internalised system of values. The EQF describes social competence in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

Descriptors of each successive PQF level differ from those of the preceding (lower) levels. These differences are significant and relate to the amount and depth of knowledge, degree of complexity/difficulty of required skills and the level of independence and ability to assume responsibility for work, activities or study (one's own and at higher levels, also that of other persons).

In accordance with the approved concept of qualifications frameworks in Europe, level descriptors in the Polish Qualifications Framework are generic, that is, they are generally formulated, and as such can refer to various fields. Descriptors in the European Qualifications Framework serve as the reference for the structure of the Polish Qualifications Framework. This enables the proposed Polish qualification levels to be clearly referenced to the eight levels distinguished in the EQF.

Systematising qualifications through the PQF will enable the achievement of greater transparency, availability and quality of the qualifications that learners will be able to acquire through various paths including participation in formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning.

An initial, expert proposal for the Polish Qualifications Framework was prepared by a team of experts working on the project "Establishing a balance sheet of qualifications and competences available in Poland's labour market and developing a model of the National Qualifications Framework". This was the first stage of work on the Polish Qualifications Framework, completed in January 2010. It proposed distinguishing seven qualifications levels in Poland. In August 2010, the Steering Committee for the National Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, whose members include representatives of the appropriate ministries, decided to increase the framework to eight levels.

1.2. About problems with terminology

After familiarising themselves with the proposals in the model of the Polish Qualifications Framework, debate participants discussed the terminology used for the qualifications system. The need to use

uniform terminology for various types of initiatives related to establishing the qualifications system and its elements was emphasised. Participants also raised the need to reconcile the terminology used in the Polish Qualifications Framework with that related to already existing descriptions of professional qualifications and requirements. Participants recommended greater use of the language employed by recruitment services (HR, personnel, etc.) and employers.

It was underscored that the language used in official documents, often resulting from poor translations, is incomprehensible and hermetic. Debate participants concluded that there needs to be separate, solid and joint work conducted on the definitions and terminology used in the qualifications system. Many participants of the discussion declared interest in working on the development of a coherent and clear terminology.

In response to the issues raised during discussions, Dr. Stanisław Sławiński informed about work underway in the project on a glossary of terms related to the qualifications system. This glossary will unify the terminology used in projects and informational materials about the PQF, as well as in broader discussions about establishing a new qualifications system in Poland. The glossary will include an expanded description of the most important terms, specifying the definition of the term, the context of the definition, references to legal acts and European documents, examples of use and its relationship to other terms. An initial list of terms proposed for the glossary was also presented.

During the discussion, participants talked about the list of presented terms. They proposed expanding the glossary with several concepts related to education: for example, lifelong learning, competences (including knowledge, skills). They pointed to the need to search for uniform words, to look for one term for the process of learning and to resign from defining terms that are related to organising this process (coaching, for example).

In summarising the theme of this discussion, participants agreed that the presented scope of terms exceeded their expectations. The choice of terms should take into consideration the utilitarian objectives of the glossary (terms essential to establishing the qualifications system).

During the meeting in May, participants were informed of the status of work on the glossary project. Dr. Stanisław Sławiński, editor of the glossary, presented the premises of the publication, among others, the framework for describing the terms.

1.3. About the expert project of the Polish Qualifications Framework

Debate on the PQF project was divided into two parts. The first part concerned the general structure of the PQF and the accepted manner of describing the levels with the use of descriptors. The second part of the discussion focused on specific proposals of describing the descriptors at all levels of the PQF.

Dr. S. Sławiński introduced the discussion about the structure of descriptors with his presentation „A new system of defining qualifications through the use of levels descriptors”. He provided basic information about the proposals prepared by the experts.

The descriptors defining the levels of the European Qualifications Framework serve as the external (meta-generic) point of reference for the Polish Qualifications Framework descriptors. Despite the fact

that all the descriptors in the PQF are a general description of learning outcomes, they differ by the level of specificity and the area to which they refer.

Three categories of descriptors are distinguished in the PQF.

The most general are universal descriptors (first degree of genericness descriptors), which describe the learning outcomes that should be achieved at a given level common to all educational paths. It is not important if one is learning in the general, higher or vocational education system.

Descriptors of the second level of genericness distinguish differences in the educational sectors: general, vocational and higher. These include:

- learning outcome descriptors for general education. These descriptors may be applied to other sectors, but they are not universal. They describe the learning effects at levels 1-4,
- learning outcome descriptors for vocational education. These descriptors may be applied to other sectors, but they are not universal. They describe the learning outcomes for levels 1-8.
- learning outcome descriptors for higher education. These descriptors may be applied to other sectors, but they are not universal. They describe the learning outcomes for levels 5-8.

Descriptors of the third degree of genericness will be those developed for eight fields of higher education and most likely descriptors for the sectoral qualifications frameworks (already being developed in some of the fields). Third degree of genericness descriptors in general education will most likely consist of some learning outcome descriptions in the core curricula of elementary school, lower and upper secondary schools.

The division of PQF descriptors into universal ones and those appropriate to general, higher and vocational education evoked many reservations among the debate participants. Questions were asked about the role of the universal descriptors in the context of appropriate descriptors for the various educational sectors.

A number of doubts were especially raised by the division of the descriptors into three separate groups (for general, higher and vocational education). Participants expressed a fear that this will maintain their existing, excessive separation from each other, which will limit their ability to develop and integrate within the framework of one qualifications system in Poland. They were also afraid that this may result in an added risk of greater inconsistency in the requirements to achieve qualifications of the same level but through the different educational sectors – general, higher and vocational.

Opinions were raised that this division could be modified in the future, and significantly simplified. Dr. Stanisław Sławiński explained that the division of descriptors is based on the actual organisational division of the Polish educational system, and this is the result of historical factors. Additionally, the requirements of vocational knowledge are somewhat different than those for general educations, and this specificity should be respected. He also pointed out that the intent of the experts preparing the proposed PQF was to reflect the realities of the existing educational system in Poland, while at the same time indicating the direction of change so that in the future, qualifications would reflect learning outcomes achieved through various paths. He emphasised the significance of maintaining a balance in the descriptions of requirements for the levels in the entire Polish Qualifications Framework.

Also discussed were: the manner of describing competences at each level, the role of universal descriptors, and finally, developing the content for successive framework levels adapted to specific occupations. A question was raised as to the genesis of the proposed detailed descriptors.

The participants postulated that the PQF descriptor entries be as transparent as possible. It should clearly follow from their descriptions that a person going on to a higher level has had to previously achieve all the competences of the lower level. A proposal was made to divide descriptors not by the factual state of education, but according to the expected model that is aimed for, which will ensure greater flexibility of the system and facilitate transfers between general and vocational education.

Participants also expressed doubt about the coherence of first having universal descriptors, then specifying their requirements in a division of the three educational categories, and afterwards detailing them at the level of trades. They also pointed out the need to connect the core curricula of general education with the PQF. Some expressed the opinion that a significant added value of the universal descriptors is lacking in relation to the descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework. Dr. Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak explained that the European descriptors are not part of the Polish Qualifications Framework, which will be independent. Their inclusion into the description at this stage serves solely as a reference point due to the necessity of preparing the referencing report.

In reference to vocational education, the introductory presentation showed how the requirements could be specified going from the Polish Qualifications Framework, which includes the general requirements for each level, to the sectoral qualifications frameworks. Participants expressed doubt as to whether it will be possible to create sectoral frameworks for many of the trades during the term of the project. These proposals, according to the participants, should also be the subject of consultations with representatives of the trades.

Dr. Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak explained that initial designs of several sectoral frameworks will be prepared as part of the project to provide examples of how to move from the general to the more specific, taking into consideration the specificity of the selected trades. Sectoral frameworks will not be an obligatory element of the qualifications system, but they may be helpful in developing descriptions of qualifications in the vocational sector. These proposals should emerge in about 1 ½ years. The involvement is planned of trade representatives and experts in preparing the entries of the sectoral frameworks.

During discussions on the structure of the PQF project, the issue was raised of the place and role of vocational education and its various forms, including also higher schools of vocational education, in the qualifications system. This issue was not discussed in detail during the debate, however participants signalled the problem, related as well to assigning qualifications achieved through vocational education to specific levels. A representative of the Polish Craft Association noted the need to refer to the Copenhagen Process while working on the qualifications system design, and to also include existing and already applied solutions, for example, in verifying the quality of vocational education.

Another issue raised was ensuring the appropriate links, especially between general and vocational education, as well as in classifying occupations and specialisations. The PQF should also refer to what is happening in the economy to the greatest extent possible. Participants emphasised that the PQF should also be appropriately connected to legal regulations, especially the Law on the educational system and its planned amendments.

In response, Dr. Sławiński noted that the intent of the project's authors was to ground the PQF within the context of the actual processes occurring in Poland in the various „sectors” of education. In referring to the postulated simplification of the text that will facilitate understanding of the development of qualifications frameworks, he stated that an essential function of the PQF is to enable qualifications to be assigned to levels, as well as to define the qualifications. The PQF model can thus be treated as an “external” instrument in the qualifications system, and as such could be made more complicated. As with users of televisions or computers, the ordinary user of the qualifications system will not be “looking inside” this tool – to be known as the PQF – they will rather be looking for information needed on acquiring qualifications in Poland. It should also be remembered that the PQF does not refer to cycles of education, but that it is a referencing framework for various types of qualifications that are also acquired outside of the school system.

1.4. About the descriptors in the PQF

The discussion about the descriptors for specific levels took place within the context of some basic questions related to this issue:

- Is coherence maintained between „horizontal” and „vertical” descriptors?
- Are the entries suitably entered into the columns (in other words, should the given requirement be required of, for example, a competence or a skill)?
- Is the terminology used appropriate and are linguistic norms maintained?
- Is the proposed description complete?

Meetings on this issue began with work on the PQF design and descriptor tables presented for the debate, in other words, from an analysis of the entries in the PQF level by level. Formulations that raised doubts and suggested modifications were noted in draft versions of the tables. These will be used in work on formulating the final entries of the Polish Qualifications Framework project.

During discussions about the descriptor entries, participants again emphasised the importance of wording the entries as simply as possible and using uncomplicated words. It is also important to avoid nuances, as well as unnecessary wording (including adjectives) which do not add to the substantive content. International experiences can be used during the work on the entries, including those of countries outside of the European Union (an interesting inspiration may be, for example, the qualifications frameworks of Russia).

Participants stated that ensuring consistency in the terminology used is essential. Also, the requirements at specific levels must be defined in such a way to make the differences between levels and the increased expectations of a person in the process of achieving a given qualification understandable. It was proposed that a table be built showing the gradation of requirements related to selected competences through successive PQF levels.

The next significant issue raised in the debate was maintaining coherence between the PQF and the EQF so that the requirements defined in the PQF were not greater than those of the EQF at the same level. Too rigorous requirements in the PQF may make the mobility of Polish workers in European markets more difficult. Debate participants also proposed that entries' transparency and coherence be

ensured in the links between descriptions of competences (social and personal) found in the PQF and EQF.

Attention was also turned to the inconsistencies found in the PQF project among the descriptor entries for vocational education. The debate participants believed that the requirements defined by the descriptors for vocational education were in some cases higher than the remaining groups of descriptors (for example, the requirements for directing a team and leadership at level 5). Additionally, entries from specific columns (knowledge, skills and social and personal competences) were inappropriately categorised. Debate participants emphasised that in the case of vocational education descriptors, terminology found in the labour market should be used, e.g. those used to develop employee competency models.

Participants also commented on specific entries and proposed the following:

- to give thought to the level at which entries related to ethics should be introduced,
- to consider adding requirements related to entrepreneurship (especially in the case of vocational education),
- to add requirements on knowledge of a foreign language to descriptors for higher education,
- to consider adding descriptors related to innovativeness at level 6;
- to consider adding such elements as: managing processes, planning, management, creating new products and services, responsibility for the development of other persons at levels 7 and 8 in the PQF.

Based on the first discussion, corrections were made to the universal descriptor entries. As a result of the debate, and also consultations held with the academic community, corrections were additionally developed to proposed descriptor entries for higher education (levels 6-8). These proposals were also discussed during the debate.

The amended proposal of universal descriptors included over 20 corrections that resulted from earlier discussions. Debate participants positively reacted to most of the proposed changes during the discussion. They also provided a number of additional proposals and opinions for better organisation, among others related to the adequacy of the required competence to the assigned level. The need to maintain an appropriate gradient of requirements at specific levels continued to be emphasised. Participants also pointed out the need to appropriately word requirements at the higher levels of the qualifications about working in teams in the proposed entries, as well as strategic management, assuming responsibility for the development of teams or subordinates, as well as developing lifelong learning attitudes.

Debate participants also discussed the amended proposals of entries for higher education descriptors at levels 6, 7 and 8. The proposal presented did not take into account level 5 descriptors because the group of experts developing the descriptors based their work on the tri-level Bologna descriptors for higher education in Europe, which does not include a fifth level. A group of specialists representing various fields is working on level 5 as part of the NQF project.

Based on the documents presented, participants pointed out that the differences increased between the way learning outcomes are formulated and presented for general, vocational and higher education.

The meeting's chairperson, Dr. Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak, explained that these differences result from changes introduced as a result of discussions held during the debate. Because of various stages of advancement in the work on modifying the descriptors, such differences may be visible. However, they should be reduced as the missing elements are developed.

During one of the meetings, a new way of defining descriptors for vocational education was proposed that incorporated the discussion and opinions of debate participants. Invited experts, Dr. Krystyna Lelińska and Maciej Gruza, presented the proposals. They proposed that competences defined at specific levels be grouped by different types of tasks.

During the discussion, participants acknowledged the great amount of work produced to develop this new way of describing vocational education descriptors. The experts' proposals presented the concept of dividing the descriptors into four categories. This division systematised the descriptors at specific levels in the PQF and also better reflected the gradient of required competences from one level to another. Participants suggested that in the final version of the PQF, these categories should accumulate within the framework of specific levels; in other words, if someone must fulfil a criterion from a lower level, then s/he also must possess it at a higher level.

Meeting participants pointed attention to the fact that developing the descriptors presented only on the basis of the Classification of Occupations and Specialisations could narrow the described field. They proposed to also take into account the Polish Classification of Activity (PCA). Attention should also be paid to the terminology used in the descriptions, which is not consistent with the language used in the universal descriptors (for example, theoretical and practical knowledge).

Participants also proposed highlighting elements that are part of the work process in the descriptor definitions, such as planning, organising, implementing and verifying.

The need to enforce the principles accepted during the process of developing the framework model was emphasised, as the higher level includes the lower level. In other words, someone who has a qualification at level four must have the sum of knowledge, skills and competences from levels 1-4. Meeting participants also noted the need to analyse the distribution of requirements in specific columns – knowledge, skills, competences.

In response to participants' comments, Mr. Maciej Gruza explained that the PCA was deliberately not considered in the process of developing the descriptors, as this would introduce a division by trade. They intentionally resigned from describing the process of work in the classical manner because it contained too many elements of a technical nature. The formula presented is based on psychological and sociological theory, which facilitates providing the descriptors with tools to study the intensity of the defined features.

Participants pointed out that in the case of some of the qualifications, one of the four categories could become dominant, with the others less significant. The category that will dominate depends on the type of qualification and the occupation it is connected to. This should be resolved during the process of developing the principles of assigning qualifications to levels. It was also noted that using the wording in the *competence* column "Is able to..." refers more to a description of skills, and not competences.

Dr. Stanisław Sławiński stated that often qualifications found at the highest level do not have their equivalent at lower levels. In highly qualified occupations, competences can develop in two different directions: either in the direction of skills required to manage ever larger structures in a given

occupation, or “deeper” into a given specialisation. This needs to be considered in the descriptions of requirements.

The proposed descriptors presented for vocational education are a starting point from which their final version will be developed. The presentation during the debate was aimed at depicting the approach used in developing the qualifications framework for vocational education. The next stage of work will be developing more generic descriptions based on these entries.

A proposal for the sectoral qualifications framework for financial institutions was also presented during the debate by a representative of the Warsaw Institute of Banking (WIB). WIB is a partner in the *FIRST* project implemented by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme, whose aim was to develop the European Qualifications Framework for the financial services sector (sectoral frameworks). In our country, sectoral frameworks will use descriptors of the third degree of genericness.

1.5. Summary of the discussions in the group

Participants already pointed out several significant issues requiring discussion and analysis in this group in the course of the meeting that began the debate. During the meetings of the first thematic group, issues related to the terminology used in the debate and to develop the qualifications system were discussed, as was the proposed Polish Qualifications Framework project consisting of both the table with the universal descriptors, as well as those for general, higher and vocational education.

Moreover, the participants asked about implementation of the qualifications system connected to the Polish Qualifications Framework. Among others, the following questions were raised:

- Who will describe the qualifications and occupations in accordance with the PQF?
- It is necessary to redefine those qualifications and occupations that are already described?
- Will there be enough time to define full and partial qualifications before legal regulations are enacted that enable information to be included about levels in the PQF?

During the debate, participants declared their willingness to work together within their fields on activities related to describing the qualifications, including the qualifications in those professions with which they are affiliated.

In terms of the acquisition of qualifications by learners, it was pointed out that accumulating qualifications should not only be related to achieving full qualifications at successive levels, but also to broadening the resources of a possessed qualification within a level.

Debaters agreed that work on the qualifications system and the Polish Qualifications Framework is not the fulfilment of a European Union bureaucratic requirement, but a significant process for education and the labour market that verifies the quality of education and expectations of employers. As such, it requires a very solid approach and the development of a shared vision of this new system by many stakeholders.

Participants emphasised that the needs of learners should be most important in developing the qualifications system, which also means that the Polish Qualifications Framework must be kept

simple. In the opinion of those participating in the discussions, the PQF is a tool of the future for Polish education, because it will be evolving in the direction indicated by the requirements described in the framework. According to the debaters, implementing the qualifications system, of which the PQF is an element, provides the opportunity to limit deception and fiction in awarding qualifications.

The effect of the first group's work was mutual agreement about the need for a qualifications system glossary. Participants accepted the concept of the *Glossary of most important terms in the qualifications system* presented to them.²

After explanations and discussions, debate participants in this group acknowledged the proposed structure of the Polish Qualifications Framework, with the provision that coherence must be maintained in the entries relating to each level and each educational sector included in this framework. During the discussion on the PQF project, corrections to the proposed universal descriptors were developed and discussed. The new approach to formulating descriptors for vocational education was also accepted. A number of valuable proposals were made to correct the proposed descriptors for higher education (proposed changes are also the results of consultations conducted in the academic community). An assessment of the descriptors with regard to their specificity was made. The practical experiences of various communities presented allowed us to confront the PQF project with the effects of formal education and informal learning related to the work environment.

² The glossary was prepared and presented for approval to the Steering Committee for the National Qualifications Framework and the Interministerial Team for Lifelong Learning, inclusive of the National Qualifications Framework. The first edition of the glossary is scheduled to be published in the autumn of 2011.

PART II

2. THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF ESTABLISHING THE SYSTEM OF QUALIFICATIONS, INCLUDING THE PQF, ON REDUCING BARRIERS TO LIFELONG LEARNING

Meetings of the second thematic group were led by Horacy Dębowski and Henryk Michałowicz of the Educational Research Institute. Discussions were facilitated by Dr. Agata Gójska and Paweł Luft.

All of the opinions and conclusions presented in this part of the report were formulated by the participants; no change in the content was made by the discussion leaders. The task of the leaders was to initiate discussion, set the schedule and clarify the goals of the meetings, create favourable conditions for discussions and group work; oversee the agenda and document – systematise and classify the formulated conclusions.

The discussion was divided into two parts:

- Developing a catalogue of barriers to learning,
- Creating a package of proposed activities to reduce the recognised barriers and indicate which activities can be implemented as a result of introducing the national qualifications system based on the PQF. This topic was discussed in four working sub-groups. The effects of the discussions of each sub-group were later presented and discussed in a meeting of the entire group.

The discussion allowed for a comprehensive review of the barriers existing in Poland that make lifelong learning difficult. Various activities were also discussed that, according to the participants, could lead to the creation of more favourable conditions for lifelong learning. Many persons expressed the hope that the Polish Qualifications Framework now being prepared will increase the effectiveness of various activities directed towards the development of lifelong learning. Group members declared their readiness to work further on establishing a modern qualifications system in our country.

2.1. Information presented to group participants

For years, Poland has been characterised by one of the lowest rates of participation in lifelong learning in Europe.³ Few persons after age 25 decide to supplement their competences or acquire

³ See e.g. H. Dębowski, M. Lis, K. Pogorzelski, *Kształcenie ustawiczne w czasie zmian w: Zatrudnienie w Polsce 2008. Praca w cyklu życia*, M. Bukowski, ed. Warszawa 2008; OECD, *Highlights from Education at glance 2010*, pp. 28–29; Eurostat, *Key figures on Europe 2011 edition*, p. 67.

new ones. The low educational activity of adults in recent years has not even been changed by the several fold increase in resources devoted to adult education, attained in large part thanks to financing from the European Social Fund.⁴

The literature emphasises the need to change attitudes about the learning process and acquiring competences, not only among learners but also among employers, as well as educational (institutions of higher education, schools) and training (e.g. training firms) institutions.⁵ In the documents of international⁶ and national institutions (e.g. the document „Perspectives for lifelong learning”) attention is given, moreover, to the significant impact of the qualifications system in a given country, not only on the way the above mentioned entities act, but also on motivations for raising or extending qualifications or investing in employee training. Many authors believe that national qualifications systems can promote the acquisition of additional competencies or – which happens often – discourage such activities. This is why qualifications frameworks play such a significant role as one of a country’s most important policy tools in establishing a modern qualifications system which completely supports the concept of lifelong learning.

For this very reason the Team for the NQF at the Educational Research Institute (ERI) acknowledged that the issue of the role of qualifications frameworks in lifelong learning policy should be a topic of discussion in this debate. The meeting schedule of the second thematic group was designed so that the discussions initiated on identifying barriers to lifelong learning and defining possible ways to reduce them also enabled the achievement of the following aims:

- to ascertain the opinions of various stakeholder representatives about the proposed strategies in the policy of lifelong learning in Poland (in relation to formal and non-formal education and informal learning),
- to identify which areas of lifelong learning policies could be served by the PQF as an effective “repair mechanism”, and which areas require additional solutions or modifications of existing ones,
- to promote knowledge about the PQF,
- to identify issues related to this problem that should be the subject of study conducted by the Educational Research Institute (ERI).

2.2. Categories of barriers to lifelong learning that were discussed

During the first two meetings, existing barriers to lifelong learning in Poland were discussed. They were classified to six categories:

⁴ This information originates from a strategic project document entitled „Perspectives for lifelong learning” produced by the Interministerial Team for lifelong learning, inclusive of the National Qualifications Framework.

⁵ OECD, *Qualifications systems – Bridges to lifelong learning*, Paris 2007; ILO, *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Systems Frameworks, Report of a study in 16 countries*, Geneva 2009; *Developing Qualifications Frameworks in EU Partner Countries, Modernising Education and Training*, J.M. Castejon, B. Chakroun, M. Coles, A. Deij, V. McBride, eds., London 2011.

⁶ See, among others, the reports of OECD, International Labor Organization (ILO), CEDEFOP (*European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training*) and the European Commission.

- barriers related to the motivations of persons,
- barriers related to the functioning of the educational and higher educational systems,⁷
- barriers related to the training market (that is, workshops, courses, etc. provided outside of the educational system and higher education),
- institutional and legal barriers,
- financial barriers,
- other factors influencing the decision not to embark on learning.

The discussion participants acknowledged that the categories chosen are not exclusive and serve more to organise the work, as many of them are interrelated.

2.3. Barriers related to the motivation of people

A number of barriers related to the motivation of people to embark on learning were indicated, among them internal barriers (directly related to the learner) and external barriers (resulting from social conditions).

Internal barriers:

- Lack of skills in establishing educational goals and consistently implementing them: participants of this group believe that the skill of establishing goals is critical to professional and personal development. Setting out a goal, which one wants to achieve, as well as a path leading to that goal and keeping to it, are factors contributing to the success of an individual. According to the participants, such skills should be taught from the earliest years in school,
- Learners are often unaware of their own needs, capabilities and limitations; for this reason, they do not feel that they are learning for themselves. They don't realize that learning may be an answer to at least some of their needs. In such a situation, the willingness to learn does not come "from within the person", and the necessity to learn becomes something that is forced upon them and therefore accepted either with ambivalence or unwillingly,
- Lack of an attitude promoting professional and personal development,
- Lack of faith in one's own strengths: as the learner ages, s/he begins to doubt in the ability to absorb new knowledge and skills,
- Lack of awareness that learning can be a tool for improvement or even to maintain one's position in the labour market,
- Low awareness of the need for training: workers often do not know that their skills have become outdated. On the other hand, employers are not always aware that their employees would like to be trained or that training could lead to improved work performance.
- Lack of certainty that the acquired competences will ensure improvement in one's status in the labour market: often attending training does not result in increased wages or improved chances of securing employment. In treating training as an investment, participants primarily

⁷ During the public debates, the term "formal education" was used to mean „school and higher education”.

ask about the reward. If the reward is not a certainty or deferred to some future time, the willingness to participate in training decreases.

External barriers:

- Poor modelling for learning is passed down in the home (inherited social status): debate participants indicated that the parent is a child's first educator – the parent motivates and forms attitudes about learning. If the parent does not perceive the benefits of learning and does not encourage it, the child lacks a positive model.
- Learning is not perceived as trendy: debate participants indicated that leisure time is treated in Poland (mainly) as a time to relax from any intellectual effort. The awareness that this time can be used to acquire new knowledge and skills is rarely encountered.
- An unfavourable stereotype exists that learning should occur only during youth. Older people have doubts whether it is still "suitable" for them to be educated. Persons in middle age who decide to pursue a higher degree feel unsure and foreign in the company of 20-year olds (during the discussions, the term "social embarrassment" was used).
- An inadequate educational offer for the needs and predispositions of learners: teachers (trainers) often are convinced that "everyone can learn everything" without taking into account personal preferences and intellectual capabilities of the attendants. This results in an ineffective use of time and weakens motivation to learn.
- Limited number of vocational counsellors: the discussion participants believed that the number of advisers is far too few in relation to the needs. In addition, the system of using counsellors is ineffective, as they are only employed in public institutions – employment offices or schools. This means that persons who are either not students or clients of county employment offices have difficult access to this type of counselling service. During the meetings, the role of school career counsellors was extensively discussed. It was mentioned that the *Regulation of the minister of national education of 17 November 2010, on detailed rules for the operation of public psychological/pedagogical counselling centres, including the public specialised counselling centres* is not being generally implemented because of the lack of financial resources at the local government level. There are 2,479 townships in Poland, whereas only 1,100 counsellors. For this reason, the essential assistance that such counsellors can provide is significantly limited to young people.
- Absence of a "mentor" in companies: participants perceive the disappearing tradition of taking younger employers "under the wing" by a more experienced person as one of the barriers to learning.

2.4. Barriers related to the way the school and higher education systems function

Participants pointed to the following issues:

- Negative experiences of attending school: participants strongly emphasised this issue. It was argued that if learning at school was neither pleasant nor promoted development, it acquires a negative connotation. Later in life, such adverse associations may result in a subconscious reluctance to enrich and broaden knowledge, skills and competences.
- Too much emphasis on assessment: pupils in the Polish schools are motivated by assessments – they are not learning for themselves and their development. It is possible that a pupil who frequently receives poor evaluations becomes convinced that in his/her case, further learning is pointless. Participants pointed to the example of the Waldorf schools, where the lack of grades favours the development of other motivations for learning.
- Schematic didactic approach (focus on recreating): lecturing is the preferred mode of teaching classroom lessons without the active participation of the pupil. What is required of the pupil is not understanding but, above all, remembering the lesson. As a result, the pupil is dependent and not very resourceful. The pupil has encyclopaedic knowledge, but has problems using this knowledge in practice. In effect, the pupil is unable to broaden knowledge and learn new skills in the absence of a teacher. In later periods of life, this may translate into a permanent reluctance to further learning and significantly decrease its effectiveness.
- Lack of developing social competences, including the skills of cooperating: pupils of Polish schools are often shy and embarrassed, afraid to admit ignorance. They do not participate in a group forum and have difficulties working together with others.
- Insufficient competency of teachers: Schools cannot cultivate social competences of pupils if they are not sufficiently developed in teachers. Teachers are often not equipped with the skills for effective communication and teamwork. As debate participants indicated, this is the result of a poor model of teacher training and the so-called negative selection for the profession, among other things.
- The low relevance of the curriculum in schools and higher institutions of learning from the perspective of career development. Participants in the debate stated that graduates of schools and institutions of higher learning are often unprepared to meet the needs of the modern labour market. This is due, among others, to the low requirements of educational institutions and too little practice of what was learned – both in terms of the number of hours, as well as the proportion in the curriculum. According to the discussion participants, these deficiencies are partially due to an insufficient analysis of the needs of learners as future employees.

2.5. Barriers related to the training market

Participants in the discussion gave much attention to an assessment of the training market and pointed out its many deficiencies:

- Low quality of the training offered: in the opinion of participants, too great an emphasis is placed on theory and not enough on developing practical skills.
- Topics of training programs are not designed for the needs of people who are socially excluded or at risk of becoming excluded: many unemployed persons and persons considered long-term unemployed participate in many training courses without experiencing an effect on

their status in the labour market. The program of offered training does not provide the opportunity to acquire the specific competences anticipated by an employer. The problem of persons not being mentally ready to take on a job after having been out of the labour market for such a long period was also discussed.

- Social skills training is not popularised enough, and the training that is provided is mostly addressed to only a narrow audience, for example, managers. Some of the participants indicated that a significant number of employers in Poland (in particular from small and medium-sized firms) do not value the social skills of their employees. While it is true that only as of recently, training financed from the European Social Fund generally includes a module on the so-called soft skills, Polish companies often do not appreciate the importance of such topics and do not participate in such training.
- Unequal treatment by government of entities offering training: according to the debate participants, institutions functioning within the school and higher education systems are preferred both in the legal framework as well as in being financed (also including financing from the budget). Meanwhile, some participants are of the opinion that this results in inequalities experienced by non-formal education in the field of adult learning, which does not benefit from such support. The issue of socialising adults through non-formal education was also raised – according to some participants, a behavioural development function is also fulfilled by training.
- Lack of training needs analyses, resulting in a training offer that is not aligned with the requirements of the labour market and the individual needs of employers.
- Perceiving training courses as ineffective.
- Insufficient information about the training courses: Some participants feel that it is difficult for potential training participants to assess the training offer (to obtain reliable information) prior to commencing a particular course.

2.6. Institutional and legal barriers

During the discussion, debate participants pointed attention to the existence of the following barriers:

- The lack of reliable tools for assessing the quality of the qualifications obtained in the non-formal education system and through informal learning,
- The lack of a uniform system of educational and vocational counselling: currently, separate laws regulate the guidance counselling systems of schools and higher education, while another set governs the system of career counselling. As a result, different counselling systems are functioning simultaneously.
- Imprecise VAT regulations for services provided by training companies: as of 1 January 2011, a 23% uniform VAT was introduced for training services. At the same time, exemption from this tax was maintained for certain services provided by educational institutions. According to several debate participants, as a result of the lack of transparency in the regulations, there is no certainty about which training is subject to VAT and which should be exempt. This situation

not only disrupts sales turnover and competition, but also adversely affects access to raising qualifications in Poland.

- Ambiguous regulations concerning the activities of private educational institutions, leading to divergent interpretations (also among officials) and seriously restricting access of adults to education. For example, there is no uniform interpretation of article 82, paragraph 2, item 3 of the Law on the system of education concerning the requirement to enter the address of a given facility into public records. In interpreting this provision, some local government units believe that an institution can carry out its services throughout township, while others state that the activities can take place only at the address submitted to the records office.

- Standards of requirements for a qualification very often lack the requirement to update knowledge and skills: as an example, participants cited the energy industry, where professional qualifications are often acquired “once for a lifetime”.

- The requirement to use the Polish language in examinations: it was indicated that it is often not possible to take an exam with the assistance of an interpreter in the technical occupations. This limits access to the market of foreign specialists, and thereby reduces competition (which in turn affects the acquisition of new qualifications by native specialists) and inhibits the flow of knowledge and professional experience.
 - Lack of harmonisation of the regulations on the classification of occupations: currently in Poland, there are three different sets:
 - the classification of occupations in vocational education (208 occupations),
 - the classification of occupations and specialisations for the needs of the labour market (about 2,300 occupations),
 - the classification of regulated professions (about 300).

The requirements for qualifications described within each classification are not comparable to each other. According to debate participants, the lack of coherence between these systems further exacerbates the gap between what the school teaches and labour market needs. According to debate participants, classifying qualifications according to uniform criteria (e.g. learning outcomes) would address this problem.

- The lack of a uniform system of accreditation: currently in Poland there are no uniform and consistent procedures for ensuring and monitoring the quality of training institutions.

- The lack of renewing accreditation for training institutions: according to participants of the debate, accreditation is granted on a permanent basis in most cases, which does not allow for ensuring and maintaining the quality of the training conducted.

2.7. Financial barriers

Discussion participants also differentiated several financial barriers:

- Lack of resources: persons who wish to raise their qualifications often do not have sufficient financial resources to do so.
- "Narrow" criteria for awarding funds from the European Social Fund: the first projects financed by the ESF had much more liberal strategic criteria (projects aimed at small, medium and large companies, beneficiaries from age 25 to 64 years). Currently, the strategic criteria are narrower, for example, over 45 years of age, only the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, etc.
- Limited funding for workers' training by employers: according to some debate participants, this situation stems on one hand from the low awareness of employers, and on the other hand – from the limited systemic support provided to entrepreneurs. An example of a desired solution was cited: to create a mechanism enabling the "valuation" of qualifications held by workers, and then allowing these qualifications to be "depreciated", thereby encouraging entrepreneurs to invest in human capital. In the opinion of participants, determining objective criteria that permit employees' qualifications to be measured could be a tool for pricing the human capital of the company, which in turn should translate into its value.

2.8. Other factors influencing the decision to not embark on learning

During the discussion, debate participants pointed to other negative factors:

- A lax system of granting disability status: according to debate participants, people who do not wish to be active in the labour market can quite easily obtain a judgment declaring them disabled. This ensures them with a certain income, but obviously discourages professional and educational activity.
- A lack of good quality research on the labour market, particularly at the regional level: there are currently no uniform and systematically performed analyses of the labour market at the regional level, including forecasts of the demand for labour and supply of work. As a result, a sound diagnosis of the labour market situation is unavailable, making assessments of the actual demand for qualifications difficult. Thus, there are no positive incentives compelling people to acquire new skills.

2.9. Possible methods of reducing the factors negatively influencing the decision to embark on learning by adults when they are economically active or upon retirement

After reviewing the barriers to lifelong learning existing in Poland, participants proposed a variety of remedial actions. Three meetings were devoted to these issues.

Various sub-groups worked on proposals for solutions with regard to:

- developing awareness of the needs and motivations for learning.

- institutional, legal and financial determinants,
- the functioning of school education and higher education,
- the functioning of non-formal education (including training workshops, courses, etc. organised outside of the school education and higher education systems),

This enabled all of the previously discussed categories of barriers to be addressed. The results of the sub-groups' work were presented in a forum and discussed by all participants.

Proposed solutions often touched more than one area, with the boundaries between them overlapping. The results of this phase of work are as follows:

2.10. Proposals of activities related to changing awareness about the needs and motivations to learn

Participants proposed the preparation of a "strategy for social development" which would consist of:

- Building a uniform system of counselling. The need was noted for coordination between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Higher Education.
- Developing attitudes among pupils aimed at making a conscious choice of a career path: in the opinion of participants, young people are not prepared to make such choices, which negatively affects their motivation for learning.
- Strengthening the motivation for learning, among others by: working in groups; building pupils' positive self-assessment and strengthening their faith in their strengths; promoting attitudes that accept readiness for change; focusing on the objective, as well as on the development of and work with values; training from the first grades of primary schools in so-called soft skills.
- Strengthening the cooperation of schools with employers, organising job fairs and meetings between pupils and experts from the labour market, etc.
- Better preparation of teachers to work with a pupil: the teacher should support the individual development of the pupil. Participants of the debate stressed the necessity to have the teacher use the knowledge of such fields as sociology and psychology (it was proposed that the pedagogue and psychologist be involved in training the school staff) and the importance of a well operating systemic mechanism supporting teachers.
- Social and professional activation that would be consistent with the needs of the labour market, as well as with the skills and preferences of individuals. Attention was given to the role of these activities in integrating education with the labour market.
- Promoting "a trend for learning" in order to overcome the reluctance of adults and to put an end to the negative image of the professional education of adults. The portrayal of certain social groups must be changed and a media campaign should be carried out to popularise "the trend for learning".

Additionally, the following proposals were formulated in the course of the discussions:

- Change from a negative assessment system of pupils (this assessment system is obligatory from the 4th grade of primary school) to a positive assessment system (descriptive).
- Introduce solutions conducive to increasing the motivation of teachers (one of these would be a change in working conditions – to reduce class size, which, however, would be linked to increasing the requirements related to the quality of teaching).

During the debate, the belief was expressed that the Polish Qualifications Framework will positively impact the motivation for learning.

2.11. Proposals related to institutional, legal and financial issues

- A universally accepted and applied system of renewing the accreditation of training institutions should be introduced. Participants argued that although an accreditation system already exists, information about it is not sufficiently known. It was also noted that although a rigorous selection of criteria required to attain accreditation is desirable, it should not lead to an overly bureaucratized legal framework impacting opportunities for learning. Participants came to the conclusion that the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) can be a tool for improving the delivery of training as a result of having adopted premises that institute mechanisms for the validation of learning outcomes and quality control (both of the qualifications themselves and the process of obtaining them).
- In order to improve the quality of training services, external examinations should be introduced that confirm the competence acquired through the non-formal education system: participants in the discussion stated that learning outcomes should be confirmed by one examination carried out in a suitably equipped centres. An external evaluation would permit an objective assessment to be made of the quality of the courses offered by a training company.
- Uniform and clear rules for cooperation in the field of vocational education between the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of the Economy need to be developed, existing cooperation in this field must be strengthened and funding for this area of education should be increased from the budget of the Ministry of the Economy: according to debate participants, the Ministry of the Economy should have a greater impact on vocational training, because education in this field has a direct bearing on the functioning of the labour market and the economy. A way of achieving this aim would be to develop transparent and coherent principles of cooperation and boundaries of responsibilities between the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of the Economy. At the same time, participants stressed that creating a modern vocational education system requires greater funding. At the next meeting, it was proposed that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy should also be involved in this cooperation, as it is responsible for administering the Labour Fund that finances, among other things, the wages of working youths (most of them are employed in small craft industries) and vocational preparation programs for adults. Furthermore, attention was brought to an alternative method of practical training of juveniles, an alternating system where part of the training takes place at school, and part in the workplace.

- Introduce the principle of renewing qualifications: participants in the debate from the first meeting emphasised that the law in Poland is quickly changing. In the meantime, once a qualification is awarded, its subsequent verification is not required. This leads to a situation in which holders of the same qualification can vary in the knowledge and skills they possess. The participants proposed a solution of introducing requirements to upgrade knowledge and skills by persons having a qualification. The role of the PQF was pointed out as a tool forcing curricula to be adapted to the needs of a changing economy.
- Expand ongoing monitoring of the labour market: currently, there are few institutions conducting successive analyses and prognoses of the situation in the labour market. In the opinion of the debate participants, observatories of the labour market would function more effectively if they strengthened their cooperation with employers in collecting information, rather than basing their work mainly on officially registered data, for example. It was acknowledged that with the PQF, the accuracy of the currently existing forecasting tools could be increased (if according to the accepted premise, the qualifications to be submitted to the qualifications register will be those of an already existing demand or those that will be in demand in the future).

Additionally the following proposals were made during the discussions:

- Ensure greater stability of the law: changes in laws occurring too frequently prevent the development of effective ways to promote lifelong learning.
- Give greater importance to existing certifications and quality standards of training entities. Participants in the debate noted that the present accreditation process is an imperfect instrument and is not applicable in areas where knowledge quickly becomes obsolete. According to the participants, the quality of training centres in the field of new technologies is guaranteed not by accreditation, but by having the appropriate certification (e.g. ISO).
- Use alternative ways of organising teaching in vocational training in order to eliminate the problems associated with the inadequate number of practice sessions and lack of access to new and expensive technologies. Some examples provided: have the schools contract with manufacturers of the devices to be used in the training; create schools at workplaces that would prepare their future personnel; the planned sectoral centres of vocational education were also mentioned. The French experience in education was referred to, where practical sessions for various courses (not just vocational) are held in external centres adapted to provide these types of experiences. All of these solutions would help eliminate the problem of inadequate facilities and equipment, which vocational education and training is now experiencing.

2.12. Proposals related to the functioning of the educational system and higher education

- Change to a model where the school teaches “how to construct knowledge”: this is a departure from the school model of only transmitting knowledge. Under the guidance of the teacher, pupils should actively participate in the process of acquiring knowledge and derive information from many sources and with the help of various methods. Only in this way will they be able to acquire the skill of independent learning.

- Individualise teaching: the participants of the working group were aware that implementing this proposal will encounter many difficulties. Hence the proposed solution of implementing individual pupil portfolios to show them the best way of mastering the required content; use the project method; introduce one day of work at home into the weekly plan of the pupil.
- Change the criteria for evaluating the work of the school, increase pressure for internal evaluations and depart from the practice of external examinations (or change their format): discussion participants emphasised that external examination results currently influence the position of a school in rankings, often leading to the “training” of pupils to perform well on exams and not to develop knowledge and skills.
- Change the way teachers are trained and school directors are chosen: according to most debate participants, this change is a necessary step towards improving the quality of education, because the skills expected in the work of the teacher differ from those anticipated in the work of a school director.
- In addition to the achievements gained at school, include skills acquired through the non-formal education system and informal learning into a pupil’s portfolio: applying such a solution not only would allow the mutual complementarity of formal, non-formal education and informal learning in the life of a pupil. It would also promote attitudes of learning outside of school, and in the longer term, of lifelong learning.

Additionally, the following were proposed during the discussions:

- Strengthen cooperation between the educational system and entrepreneurs in order to facilitate the entry of graduates into the labour market.
- Train teachers on the use of new teaching techniques and available information technologies.
- Introduce new standards of communication with parents, teachers and pupils. Participants stressed the need to improve information sharing in school. The absence of effective solutions in this area negatively affects student motivation and the effectiveness of learning. Parents do not have full information about their children’s situation in school, teachers are not aware of the pupil’s environment. This makes it difficult to provide eventual assistance.

2.13. Proposals related to the functioning of non-formal education

Participants proposed:

- Unifying training programs,
- Introducing a universal and coherent system of accreditation,
- Introducing internal and external examinations at the end of each training program to verify the knowledge and skills acquired by the participant.

- According to the participants in the discussions, training workshops on the same subject often differ in the number of hours and scope of the content. Their quality could be ensured by accreditation and external evaluation.
- Using an individualised approach in working with unemployed persons by cooperating with a career counsellor who would direct the client to appropriate training; have experienced workers of pre-retirement age train newly hired persons (an example of this was presented that was very well assessed by the discussion participants, with the provision, however, that implementing such an idea is largely dependent on the employer).
- The necessity of introducing solutions to ensure that learning outcomes of soft skills are measurable.
- Raising awareness among employers about the value of “soft skills” training – carry out a public campaign to increase understanding of the need to raise employees’ soft competences and to promote the practical use of these skills in their work.
- Providing the means to recognise competences regardless of the form of learning.
- Introducing tax relief for employers who organise training for their employees.
- Making the VAT tax consistent within the training market.
- Increasing the cooperation of employers with local authorities to invest in human capital.
- Broaden the use of labour market analyses when developing training offers. Debate participants provided examples from Gdynia and Koszalin, where the most complete as possible information about the training market is made available at the employment offices and units of local self-government.

2.14. Other proposals

- Study the fate of graduates, which would answer the question of the extent to which the completed school (or course) has provided young people with the chance to find work and their effectiveness as employees (currently, the average vocational school graduate spends approximately two years looking for work in his/her field).
- Open up the public service sector to working with the private sector.
- Disseminate knowledge of good practices.
- Create a working team that would analyse curricula and the system of teacher training from the perspective of developing attitudes conducive to lifelong learning. It is likely that training geared to the needs of the labour market will be increasingly difficult due to the pace of change in the economy.
- During the debate, participants pointed to the very important systemic role of the PQF from the point of view of employers’ interests, as a tool to “measure and value” the qualifications of

workers. It was noted that the framework could be one of the tools that enable an estimation to be made of the value of an enterprise inclusive of its human capital. This is of particular importance for companies listed in the stock markets. This issue, in the opinion of debate participants, may impact the attitudes of employers in their approach to training employees and significantly influence changes in these attitudes, because this will impact their business in an obvious way. (During the discussion, it was emphasised that the global economy is governed by its own rules. The variability in the portfolio of orders forces entrepreneurs to adopt appropriate strategies of human resource management. Employers require ever greater freedom to develop their relations with employees on one hand, but also, improving worker competences takes on greater significance.)

- It was also noted that learning should not only be perceived as a way to adapt to the labour market. Lifelong learning is to serve the most broadly understood concept of personal development, and not just an individual's professional competences.

PART III

3. THE SYSTEM FOR VALIDATING LEARNING OUTCOMES AND QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS FOR QUALIFICATIONS

Meetings of the third group were led by Elżbieta Lechowicz and Katarzyna Trawińska-Konador of the Educational Research Institute. Dr. Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski was the expert for this thematic area. The discussions were facilitated by Robert Boch, with the assistance of Magdalena Formanowicz.

The third thematic group meetings worked on issues related to the systems of validating learning outcomes and mechanisms of qualifications quality assurance.

The discussions were divided into two parts:

- The first part was an attempt to identify various known existing practices of validating learning outcomes in Poland.⁸ Methods used and desired solutions were also discussed.
- In the second part, proposals were formulated that enable a comprehensive system of validation to be established, as well as principles ensuring the quality of qualifications.

In the course of all of the meetings, there was broad consensus that transparency and the recognition of qualifications in the labour market require the reliable validation of learning outcomes. The

⁸ During the public debate, the term „confirming learning outcomes” was used as the proposed Polish translation of the English word „validation”. During work on the “Glossary of key concepts related to the national qualifications system” the term *validacja* [validation] was ultimately accepted.

importance and relevance of solutions for ensuring the quality of qualifications and the need to strive for the development of those solutions that become an integral element of the national qualification system were particularly stressed in the discussions.

4.1. Information presented to the group

Establishing the national qualifications system is aimed at providing opportunities for the broader consideration and the formal documentation of new competences acquired in very different ways throughout life. To achieve this, it is essential to expand the system of validating learning outcomes achieved outside of the formal education system.

The current status of validation in Poland was depicted together with its strengths and shortcomings. With regard to formal education, its legal regulations and functioning procedures of validation, both in the educational system (internal and external assessments) and in higher education (internal evaluation) were presented. Special attention was given to the educational reform of the late 1990s, where responsibility for the higher secondary school completion exams (*matura*) and exams certifying occupational qualifications were transferred to external assessment institutions and external tests were also introduced at the completion of elementary school and lower secondary school.

With regard to non-formal education and informal learning, single regulations related to validation were cited; participants stressed their dispersed character and the lack of comprehensive regulations governing all of these types of activities in Poland. Initiatives were mentioned that emerged as grassroots responses to the needs of the labour market in this area. These include, among others, numerous projects of validating learning outcomes acquired as a result of informal learning and non-formal education, corporate and sectoral practices, and various options for obtaining certificates issued by different entities. At the moment, there is no national standard of quality assurance for these types of activities in Poland. These shortcomings are clearly visible against the background of the already existing or developing regulations in this area in other European Union countries.

The principles of validations and quality assurance mechanisms were discussed in the broader context of policy development promoting lifelong learning. Also indicated were European documents on lifelong learning strategies that constitute the basis for establishing the European field of lifelong learning.

In Poland, the principles of acting on behalf of lifelong learning are presented in the strategic document entitled "Perspectives for lifelong learning". The most important include:

- The acknowledgement that for LLL policy, the person is most important – a person who is learning, and not an institution or system, is the main point of interest; education and training is adjusted to the individual needs of learners,
- An open approach to qualifications – this approach relies on recognising qualifications, irrespective of the place, manner and time in which the competence was acquired as a requirement for a given qualification,
- Learning applies to everyone – learning as an important component of being active in life concerns not only pupils, students and attendees of courses; it also applies to persons who

have not been at the centre of interest of traditional education policies, that is, working persons, economically inactive persons, seniors, and also small children

- A broad approach to learning – this is based on valuing various forms of learning – not only in the formal education system, but also on the path of informal learning. The best effects are achieved by combining the possibilities afforded by the various forms of learning.

To achieve these objectives, the European Union recommended to Member States the use of a variety of tools it developed, among the most important are the European Qualifications Framework and the national qualifications frameworks created in individual member states.

4.2. Existing practices of validating learning outcomes in Poland

Participants representing various trades, organizations and educational sectors shared their various experiences in validating learning outcomes and ensuring the quality of qualifications in their fields of activity. These were presented in the form of presentations during the meetings and specially prepared materials. Such an approach allowed participants to become acquainted with the many ways of carrying out validation and quality assurance. Detailed analyses were made of four specific examples used in Poland, whose descriptions are included in the Annexes:

- The Vocational Training Centre [Zakład Doskonalenia Zawodowego] from Bydgoszcz presented its Trans-VAE project on the validation of competences acquired in the education system, non-formal education and informal learning in the area of personal care. (Annex)
- The Polish Information Processing Society on the certification system for computer science skills compatible with the European system, based on the CEPIS license. (Annex)
- Confederation of Construction and Real Estate [Konfederacja Budownictwa i Nieruchomości] discussed the recognition of occupational qualifications acquired in the non-formal education system and through informal learning using the example of their construction unit. (Annex)
- The Polish Craft Association shared their experiences with validations in their field. (Annex)

4.3. Presentation of proposed solutions enabling the establishment of a comprehensive validation and quality assurance system

A proposed plan of the validation process was discussed the proposal. It was stressed that the aim of creating a national qualifications system in Poland is to facilitate and support lifelong learning. This requires the equal treatment of the same learning outcomes regardless of how they were achieved (learning in the formal education system, the non-formal education system, informal learning). The accuracy of the English word *validator* (in Polish – *kasownik*) was pointed out – a device that makes a ticket valid. In reference to competences, they become really important when they are “made valid”, or confirmed in a formal way – in other words, when they become a “qualification” (an examination

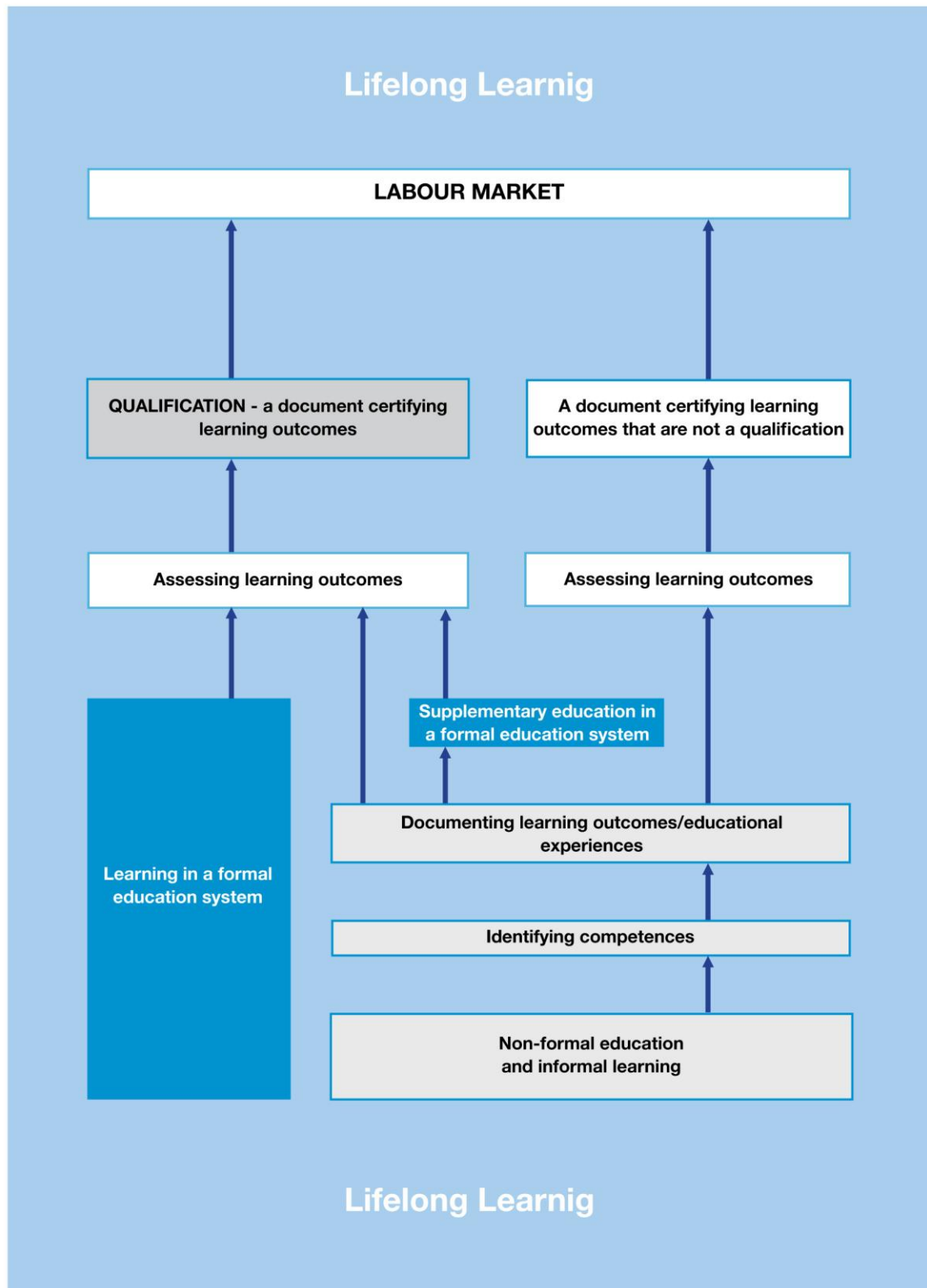
certifying occupational competence, whose positive outcome results in a technician's diploma in this field).

Participants agreed that the process of validation is comprised of stages:

- identify the learning outcomes,
- document the identified effects,
- assess the achieved learning outcomes,
- compare the assessed learning outcomes with the qualifications standards (requirements),
- issue a document certifying the qualification.

The validation process occurs in abbreviated form in the case of learning in the formal education system because there is no need to identify the learning outcomes as they have been defined by the curriculum or required procedures.

The general scheme of validation



An important conclusion of the discussions is the acknowledgement that a validation system which encompasses all the learning outcomes needed in the labour market will only function effectively when the remaining elements of the national qualifications system have been implemented (including the national qualifications register – a fundamental part of this system).

Additionally, during the discussion:

- Participants considered different variants of financing validation. Most liked the proposal of making it a self-financing system (getting a driver's license was invoked as an example) Such a system would have to take into account solutions supporting specific groups of persons, for example, the unemployed (in this case, the possibility of financial support from funds earmarked for activating unemployed persons).
- The fundamental meaning of individuals becoming aware of their own real competences, understanding the purpose of learning and the importance of the role of a career counsellor were emphasised.
- It was noted that there are and will continue to appear (in response to the needs of the labour market) new learning outcomes, which at this stage are not yet used as the basis to award qualifications, but which should not be "ignored" by the system for the good of the economy and the development of society. For this reason, one should envisage the possibility of issuing documents that would validate such learning outcomes (while maintaining the universally required principles of quality assurance).

According to the participants of the discussion, establishing a comprehensive validation system requires institutionalised coordination. In the introductory presentation opening this part of the discussion, the following diagram was presented:



national qualifications register

(operated by the institution for the national qualifications system)

institutions ensuring quality assurance in the school system

institutions ensuring quality assurance in higher education

institution for the national qualifications system

institutions awarding qualifications achieved as the result of learning in the formal education system X

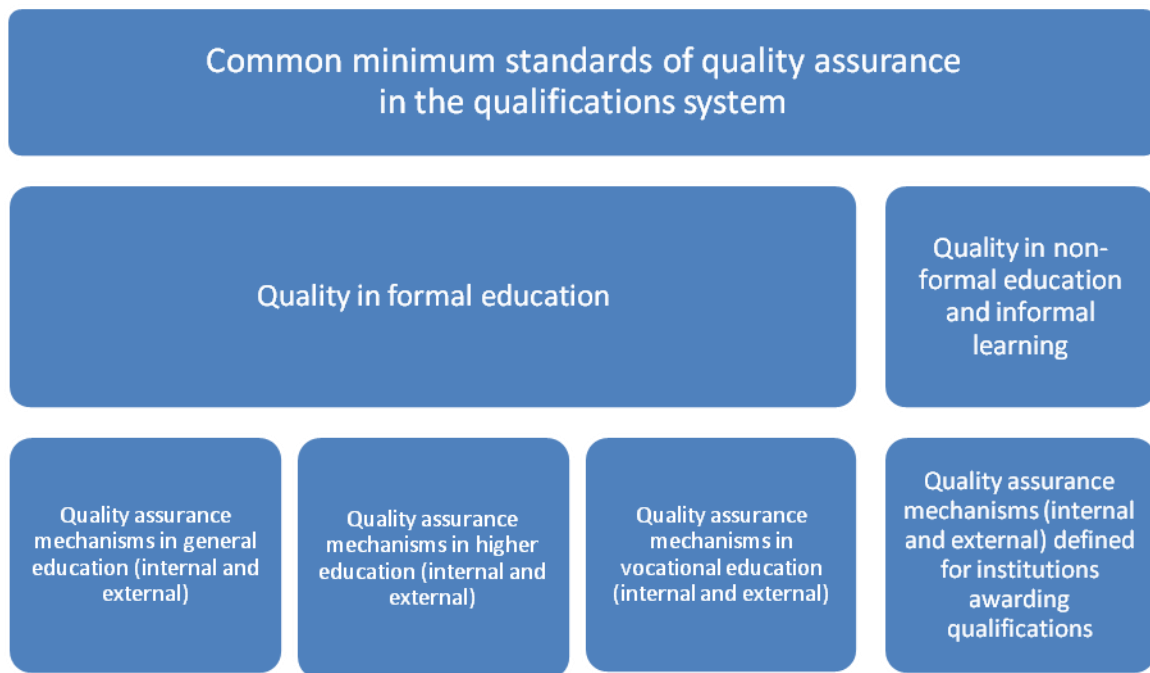
institutions awarding qualifications achieved as the result of the non-formal education system Y

Currently, we are missing the national qualifications register and institutions responsible for ensuring quality in non-formal education and informal learning. The debate participants were informed that this gap will be filled by an institution, whose concept is currently being prepared within the project "Developing the programmatic and institutional premises of implementing the PQF and the National Qualifications Register".

The main tasks planned for this institution in the area of validation include:

- Operating the national register of qualifications,
- Monitoring and also supervising, within an established scope, quality assurance procedures for the qualifications awarded in Poland.

The general scheme of qualifications quality assurance is illustrated as follows:



Common minimum standards of quality assurance in the qualifications system

Quality in formal education

Quality in non-formal education and informal learning

Quality assurance mechanisms in general education (internal and external)

Quality assurance mechanisms in higher education (internal and external)

Quality assurance mechanisms in vocational education (internal and external)

Quality assurance mechanisms (internal and external) defined for institutions awarding qualifications

The future law on the national qualifications system should define the most important principles of qualifications quality assurance common to all institutions. Solutions of ensuring quality should be

designed in such a way as to guarantee the acquisition of learning outcomes required for a given qualification. It will be necessary to develop and implement solutions in quality assurance, which will also assist the process of entering a given qualification into the national qualifications register.

The national qualifications register will contain all qualifications awarded in Poland and included in the qualifications system (i.e. assigned to an appropriate qualification level), regardless of already existing and newly created registers within the trades, professional communities and others. The registry will use other databases containing information about qualifications. The register will be required to include full qualifications, as well as selected partial qualifications (e.g. a single qualification that is part of the standard for a given profession). It is also expected that some of the partial qualifications will also be required to be entered into the register. This relates to qualifications that are especially significant from the perspective of ensuring the safety of persons, for example, pilot, driver, electrician and qualifications in regulated professions.

The inventory of qualifications having special significance for safety will be determined in advance (taking into account the viewpoints of social partners) and included in regulations of the law on the qualifications system. These regulations will also define the maximum period required to enter the qualification into the registry.

In the case of the remaining partial qualifications, registration will be conducted at the request of the entity/group of entities interested in awarding a given qualification based on the procedure set forth in the law. The decision to enter a given qualification into the register will be made by the institution for the national qualifications system; the criterion will be an assessment of the documentation presented by the applicant, based on the provisions included in the law. The applicant will have the right to appeal the decision of the institution according to the provisions of administrative law. The appropriate body of the national administration will serve as the second instance.

The information presented on the quality assurance system and the qualifications register were not widely discussed.

4.4. CONCLUSIONS

The public debate allowed a number of key elements significant for the Polish Qualifications Framework to be discussed by the group of stakeholders of the qualifications system, including:

- terminology,
- how elements of the system are described,
- coherence of the PQF,

- all pathways of learning within the frameworks of formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning,
- basic barriers to lifelong learning and the potential role of the PQF in reducing them,
- proposed scheme of validating competences,
- qualifications quality assurance.

An important result of the debate was also developing a method of building the qualifications system and Polish Qualifications Framework with the participation of stakeholders. By participating in discussions and presenting their actual experiences, participants made a significant contribution to adapting the proposed systemic solutions to needs on the one hand and, on the other hand, to already existing solutions.

An additional result of the debate is the development of a common language of communication on issues related to the new qualifications system.

This report summarises the achievements of this debate, but dialogue on building the new qualifications system and work on the project of Polish Qualifications Framework will continue. As the next proposals for solutions are developed, successive consultation meetings with stakeholders are planned. Debate participants will also be receiving information about activities and their effects occurring within the framework of the project. This will allow on-going verification to be conducted of the developed solutions from the viewpoint of stakeholders' needs and capacities.

ANNEXES

Appendix 1. Results of the evaluation questionnaire completed by the participants of the public debates

A questionnaire was prepared for the summary meeting of the first part of the public debates to assess the process and effectiveness of the consultations. It was filled out by 86 participants.

53 persons responded that the debates were very much needed (62.4% of responses), 31 persons (36.5%) acknowledged that the debates were needed, while one person stated that the debate was “neither needed nor not needed”.

50 persons acknowledged that they had asked questions during the debates (58.8% of responses) and 35 persons stated that they had not asked a question. 56 persons believed that they were able to express their opinions (65.1%), 7 persons responded that they were not able to express their opinions (8.1%), and 23 persons stated that they did not express their opinions (26.7%).

During the debates, 64 persons – 74.4% of responses - looked for information on the website www.kwalifikacje.org.pl, whereas the remaining respondents did not visit the website during the debates. 77 persons felt well-informed about the debates (93.9% of responses), while 5 persons (6.1%) did not feel well-informed. The remaining few persons did not respond to this question.

In response to the question: “How do you assess the readiness of persons leading the debates to search for solutions”, 59 persons (73.8%) responded “high”, 20 persons (25%) „average” and 1 person answered “low”.

77 persons (91.7%) responded that they „feel better informed about the PQF after the public debates”, whereas 7 persons (8.3%) stated that this isn't the case.

When asked “Did the debates influence the final design of the PQF”, 71 persons (88.1) responded in the affirmative, and 9 persons, or 11.3%, stated that the debates will not have an influence on the final design of the PQF. The remaining participants did not answer this question.

The next question, asking if the public debates were necessary, was a control with only two choices of response, and not three as in the earlier question. 78 persons (94%) answered “yes” and 5 persons (6%) “no”. The remaining three persons did not respond to this question.

When asked „why the debates were necessary?”, the respondents replied:

- The public debates allowed for the presentation of various opinions from different communities, who spoke using differing terminology and concepts about qualifications. This allowed confrontations to occur of these opinions and for doubts to be raised.
- The debates enabled deeper knowledge to be gained about the PQF and engaged professional communities that will be using the frameworks in the future.
- „The public consultations allowed earlier entries to be analysed and modified to the benefit of the PQF”.

- The debate was an opportunity to confront the assumed premises with the labour market, „it allowed for a practical viewpoint”, it also pointed out the role of career counselling.
- The debate “provided an opportunity for all stakeholders to express their views in a public forum, it awakened interest in the process of developing the NQF”.

Some respondents pointed out how great the need was for the debate: according to one respondent, the debate „revealed the imperfections of the project and the enormous gaps in knowledge about specific areas of the project”. According to another respondent, the debate showed “how little awareness continues to exist, how many issues are not yet understood, the need to explain the PQF”.

Another respondent expressed the hope that “the debate would be the basis to develop a program of ongoing contacts and information checking” (regarding the PQF – ed.)

When asked if the respondents „will be submitting a dissenting opinion to the report”, 11 persons (14.3%) stated “yes” and 66 (85.7%) responded “no”.

The respondents asked organisers the following questions:

- When will the PQF become an element of compulsory law and how long will work be carried out on developing it? Will we introduce the frameworks in time?
- What will be the costs of introducing the NQF, what will be the sources of funding for certifying the population, for the certifying entities?
- How will the NQF impact the level of vocational qualifications of the population? Does the NQF include regulated professions?
- On respondent “would like to define the role of career counselling in the NQF”. Another asked „what is the essence of the PQF from the perspective of „vocational freedom” – qualifications and creativity, innovation, a firm’s success?
- One respondent asked that different terms be found for such concepts as descriptors, genericness and other terms related to certification.

Participants took part in various numbers of debate meetings. The public debates took place in three thematic groups, each group met five times. 20 persons declared that they had taken part in one meeting, the same number of persons stated that they had participated in four meetings. 11 persons participated in two meetings, 17 in three and 16 persons in five meetings. The remaining respondents did not respond to this question. The highest number of respondents participated in the meetings of Group III (29 persons), 22 declared participation in Group I, while 15 persons indicated that they had participated in Group II. Some respondents attended the meetings of two, or even three groups. Several respondents did not provide an answer to this question.