

Developments in Vocational Education and Training

Selection of Texts
by the National Team of Experts
for Vocational Education
and Training

Developments in Vocational Education and Training. Volume IV

A Selection of Texts by the National Team of Experts for Vocational Education and Training

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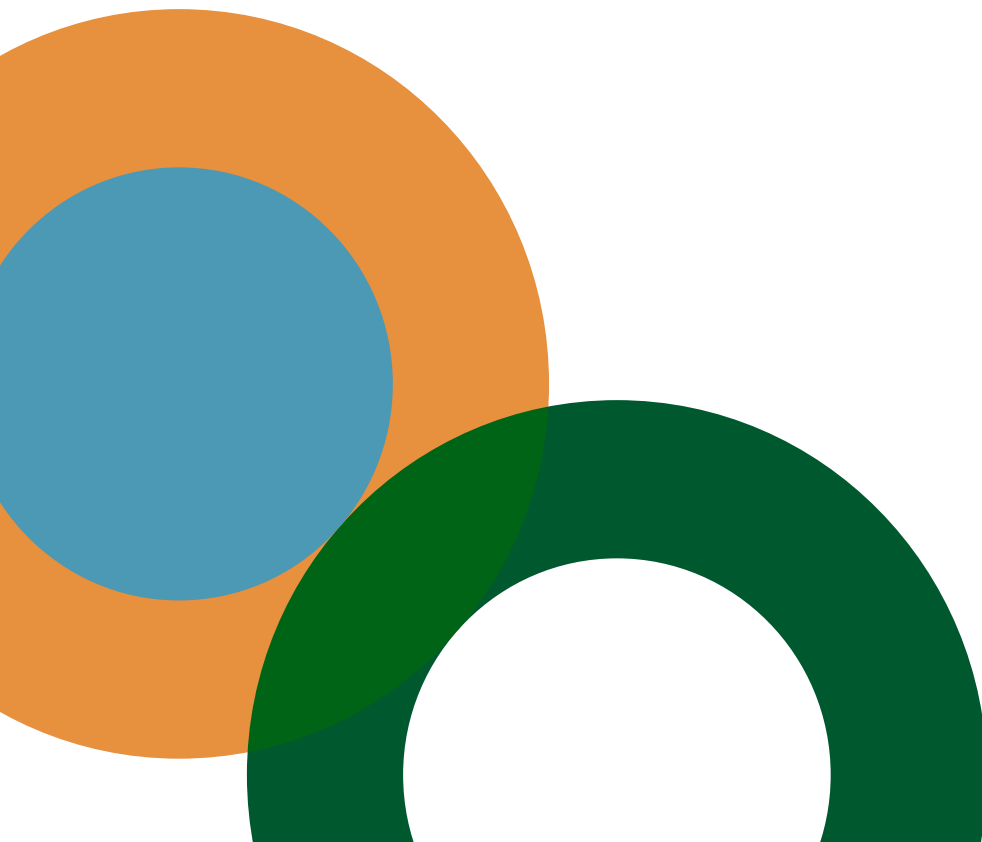
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Introduction

In April 2021, the Foundation for the Development of the Education System – the Polish National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) – launched the Team of Experts for Vocational Education and Training (EVET). Since then, its members have been appointed annually by the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. In 2025, the team consisted of fifteen education experts and six higher education specialists. They were educators, examiners, public officials, researchers, and scientists closely involved in various fields of vocational education, as well as representatives from the business sector.

The tasks of the Team of Experts are an integral part of the *Work Plan* of the National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme and ESC in Poland. The EVET Team works to improve the quality of vocational education and training and to develop cooperation between vocational and technical schools and employers. These objectives are achieved in close collaboration with institutions involved in the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme in the fields of Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education, as well as the Europass, Euroguidance, EPALE, and WorldSkills Poland initiatives.

Experts provide substantive advice to beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ Programme and to entities related to the vocational education system in Poland. They advise on how to effectively apply EU tools that support the learning mobility of vocational learners, ensure the recognition of competences and qualifications, and allow the outcomes of graduates in this field to be monitored. In addition, they participate in thematic events organised by the Polish National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Solidarity Corps: conferences, seminars, workshops, training courses, lectures, debates, study visits, and analytical work.

The results of the EVET experts' work are compiled as publications and information material which can be downloaded at www.ekspercivet.org.pl. This publication presents key articles written by experts in 2025.

Read on to learn more!

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Foundation for the Development of the Education System

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Critical Thinking in Vocational Education in the Era of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transformation

Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Teachers

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Contemporary vocational education is on the verge of fundamental changes resulting from the dynamic development of technology, digitalisation, and the changing needs of the labour market. According to the *Main Directions for the Implementation of the State's Educational Policy for the School Year 2025/2026* (MEN, 2025a) and the assumptions of *Reforma26. Kompas Jutra* [Reform26. Compass of Tomorrow] (MEN, 2025b), the main challenge is to shape the competences of the future. This refers to student agency, the integration of knowledge and skills, mental well-being, and critical thinking – competencies in this area are also included in the *Graduate Profile* (IBE, 2025). At the same time, the *European Union of Skills* strategy (European Commission, 2025) emphasises the importance of educational and professional mobility, the interoperability of qualifications, and the need to respond to socio-economic changes in order to create a flexible labour market throughout the European Union.

In this context, the development of critical thinking skills is not just an addition to the curriculum, but becomes its core – especially in vocational education. The ability to think reflectively and responsibly is a prerequisite for finding one's place in a social, professional, and cultural reality dominated by technology. It also promotes cross-border mobility, enabling graduates to adapt effectively to the European labour market and benefit from international exchanges of experience. With critical thinking skills, graduates are able to assess new situations, adapt to different cultural contexts and, as a result, take advantage of European initiatives supporting educational and professional mobility – such as Erasmus+, Europass, and Euroguidance – and build an international cooperation network.

What Is Critical Thinking Really?

Why is critical, flexible, and responsible thinking so important? Because we live in a world where "knowing" is no longer enough – knowledge becomes outdated faster than textbooks are published. The ability to think is crucial, which poses a unique challenge for vocational education: it must not only prepare students for a specific profession, but also provide them with the skills to navigate the world of technology, information, and constant change. Critical thinking – the ability to analyse, evaluate, reflect, and ask questions – is at the heart of this mission.

Knowledge as the foundation of critical thinking

However, it is not possible to analyse something that is not understood. Critical thinking is based on reliable knowledge – technical, social, professional – which allows students to interpret, compare, and evaluate information. Practical examples clearly confirm this principle:

- an IT technician who does not understand how algorithms work will not spot errors in AI-generated code,

- a chef who is unfamiliar with the fermentation process may trust an incorrect recipe found on the internet,
- a car mechanic who does not know the principles of physics will not question the effectiveness of a device advertised online.

Critical thinking is not scepticism. It is the ability to understand and evaluate, and it always requires knowledge. It is the ability to:

- question the obvious,
- assess the credibility of sources,
- look at a problem from multiple perspectives.

Table 1. Key skills supporting critical thinking in students

The four pillars of critical thinking – skills and outcomes for students		
No.	Skill	Benefits for the student
1	Identifying biases	Recognises stereotypes and false assumptions
2	Research and analysis	Separates facts from opinions, selects relevant data
3	Open-mindedness	Collaborates, listens and tests different ideas
4	Problem-solving	Seeks solutions, makes decisions, takes action

Where did critical thinking come from?

From Socrates to Descartes, the history of critical thinking is a history of questioning. It was questions – often uncomfortable, sometimes provocative – that were the beginning of critical thinking. Socrates in Athens asked, “Do you really know what you are talking about?”, provoking his interlocutors to deconstruct their beliefs. Francis Bacon pointed to empiricism as the source of knowledge. Descartes postulated, “I think, therefore I am” – not as a slogan, but as the foundation of reflective education.

For vocational teachers, this means one thing: critical thinking is not a new method, but a tool that has served explorers and reformers for centuries.

Artificial Intelligence – a Threat or an Opportunity?

Artificial intelligence can significantly change the labour market, replacing people who are unprepared to work with it. Therefore, during vocational education, students should be shown how to use new tools reflectively and responsibly. In the classroom, we can:

- analyse projects generated by AI,
- question the correctness of solutions,
- evaluate data and forecasts,
- compare algorithm suggestions with professional knowledge and experience.

Education understood in this way not only responds to the challenges of the labour market, but also implements the profile assumptions indicated in the *Graduate Profile* (IBE, 2025), developing cognitive independence, agency, and ethical awareness.

Student well-being in the digital environment

Working with digital technologies, especially AI-based tools, has a number of educational benefits, but it can also involve the risk of cognitive overload, reduced concentration, and emotional tension. The excess of information stimuli and the pressure to be constantly available online are becoming a challenge for modern vocational education.

When planning classes using AI, teachers should therefore balance screen activity with analogue tasks such as group discussions or physical prototyping. A good example of this practice is the work of an interior design technician who builds a model of a space using physical materials such as cardboard and fabrics. It is also important to introduce elements of digital hygiene education, such as computer ergonomics, information stress management techniques, and conscious planning of technology breaks. At the same time, healthy habits should be developed, including critical selection of sources, the ability to consciously disconnect from the network, and a reflective approach to information.

Supporting student well-being in this way is in line with both the priorities of the state education policy for the school year 2025/2026 and the concept of the teacher as a guide and mentor, as formulated in the assumptions of *Reforma26. Kompas Jutra*.

Building students' mental resilience in the digital environment not only prevents the effects of technological pressure, but also prepares young people to work in complex and dynamic information ecosystems that require awareness, agency, and reflective competence.

Proposed Exercises and Techniques in Vocational Education

Critical thinking in vocational education does not arise from theory, but from action – from tasks that engage students in observation, questioning, and reflection. In accordance with the assumptions of the *Graduate Profile* as part of *Reforma26. Kompas Jutra*, it is crucial to shape cognitive, social, personal, and communication competences by working on real professional problems.

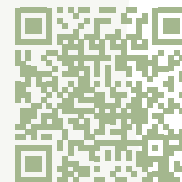
The teaching techniques described below support the development of critical thinking in relation to the priorities of the state's education policy for 2025/2026, particularly in the areas of digital hygiene, resilience to disinformation, and informed use of AI.

The Möbius strip experiment

The use of simple teaching materials, such as a paper Möbius strip, provides an opportunity to experience a seemingly paradoxical geometric phenomenon. After twisting and gluing the paper loop, and then cutting it along the axis of symmetry, contrary to intuition, one larger twisted ribbon is formed, rather than two separate ones. This exercise encourages pupils to question obvious assumptions, reflect on their own cognitive processes, and consider alternative solutions. It is an effective way of working on thinking patterns, which can be integrated into an introduction to logic, analysis, and cause-and-effect thinking.

An example of this experiment can be seen in an educational film available online called "No magic at all: Mobius strip" www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVsIAa2XNKc.

You can also scan the QR code below to go directly to the material:



Meme analysis

Memes are a visual communication tool that is strongly embedded in student culture. Their critical analysis allows us to recognise the sender's intention, the type of message, and the use of stereotypes. Students can create their own memes using **Canva**, addressing issues related to professional ethics, team communication, and work principles. The exercise develops media awareness, identified in IBE analyses (Penszko, Wasilewska, 2024) as a key element of digital hygiene.

Oxford debates

Debate develops the skills of argumentation, listening, and empathetic understanding of different perspectives, which were identified by the *Union of Skills* as fundamental in the labour market. Participants in the classes learn to justify their positions "for" and "against", evaluate

the strength of arguments, think logically, and present their opinions in a constructive manner. To prepare argumentation structures, it is worth using the simple MindMup app (for mind maps) or the debate and counterargument generation module in the Twee environment – a tool described in detail below.

Educational comics

Creating comics develops interpretative, narrative, and visual skills. Using ToonyTool, students can construct scenarios of professional situations – resolving team conflicts, implementing health and safety rules, or communicating with customers and employees. This form of work promotes the assimilation of professional content through images, symbols, and dialogue.

360° visualisations

Skybox AI proves useful in techniques for designing professional space. It can be used to generate three-dimensional images based on a text prompt. Students analyse spaces, improve descriptions (also in English), compare design styles, and evaluate the functionality of projects, developing digital and design skills.

Fake news simulation

Awareness of the risks posed by media manipulation and disinformation is one of the key competences of the 21st century. With ClassTools.net, students can create simulated fake news headlines (for reflection rather than dissemination), which allows them to:

- identify manipulation techniques,
- analyse the language of persuasion,
- recognise the impact of the message on the recipient.

This exercise is worth combining with a discussion on media responsibility and professional ethics.

Twee – questions that stimulate thinking

Twee helps users create open-ended questions and pros and cons lists, as well as explore industry dilemmas. It can be used after screening of an educational film as preparation for a debate or as a starting point for a discussion about professional ethics. The tool develops reflection, decision-making, and argumentative communication, supporting teachers in shaping students' critical thinking.

Table 1. Outline of an example discussion using Twee

Discussion topic: “Electric cars versus ecology: does the balance really add up?”	
	Supporting questions
No.	Question
1	What is your opinion on electric cars?
2	Have you ever driven an electric car? What were your impressions?
3	What do you think about the impact of electric cars on the environment?
4	What advantages do you see in using electric cars compared to traditional ones?
5	Do you think electric cars can replace combustion cars in the future? Why?
6	What challenges associated with electric cars do you see in your country?
7	What are the advantages and disadvantages of owning an electric vehicle?
8	Do you think the development of environmentally friendly vehicle engines will continue?
	Find interesting facts
No.	Fact
1	The production of batteries for electric cars emits a lot of CO ₂ .
2	It is estimated that 77% of energy can come from renewable sources.
3	Electric cars have lower operating costs than combustion engine cars.
4	In Norway, 54% of all cars sold are electric.
5	The main component of batteries is lithium, which is difficult to extract.
6	Electric cars can transport cargo in noisier areas.

	Pros and cons
Type	Argument
Pros	They do not emit exhaust fumes, which improves air quality in cities.
Pros	They are often cheaper to run because they consume less energy.
Pros	They can be cheaper to run because electricity is often cheaper than fuel.
Pros	Many countries offer subsidies for the purchase of electric cars.
Pros	They help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
Cons	The range of electric cars may be limited compared to combustion engine cars.
Cons	Charging the battery takes longer than refuelling.
Cons	The cost of purchasing an electric car can still be high.
Cons	The necessary charging infrastructure is not yet available everywhere.

Summary – Education That Creates Thinkers

Critical thinking is not an add-on but the foundation of vocational education in the 21st century. It is a way of looking at the world that involves the ability to see nuances and ask questions in an age of ready-made answers. Students should not only know their profession, but also understand its context, question existing patterns, analyse decisions, and evaluate information – especially in a digital environment. As teachers, we have a range of teaching tools at our disposal – from the Möbius strip, through debate and comics, to applications using artificial intelligence. It depends on our teaching courage whether students leave school not only as specialists, but also as reflective, proactive citizens ready for professional mobility in Europe and cooperation in international teams.

In the age of AI, it is worth remembering that the most valuable source of student development is the teacher – not because they know all the answers, but because they can ask the right questions, provoking curiosity and creative reflection. Technology can support us, facilitate communication and work organisation, but it cannot replace guides in the world of information. It is we, the teachers, who develop in students the ability to think reflectively and to understand the world rather than merely describe it.

Recommendations for vocational teachers:

- encourage questions – start the lesson by sparking curiosity,
- use real-life contexts – memes, news, visualisations,
- talk about ambiguities – doubts and mistakes are part of learning,
- blend subjects – create space for cross-curricular competences,
- use AI reflectively – as an aid, not a substitute, keeping in mind the mental well-being of the student.

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The Role of the Examiner in Vocational Examinations



Robert Wanic

Regional Examination Board in Jaworzno

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The examination confirming professional qualifications, currently known as the vocational examination, is a key element of the external examination system in Poland. It enables the verification of the knowledge and skills of examinees in the field of one qualification, as specified in the core curriculum for vocational education. A positive exam result is an objective confirmation of the competences necessary to perform a given profession.

The examiner plays a central role in this process – the objectivity, reliability, and credibility of the results of the practical part of the examination (previously – the practical stage) depend on their knowledge, experience, and impartiality. The examiner is therefore not only the executor of procedures but above all the guarantor of the quality of the entire validation process.

The Examiner in the Practical Stage (Practical Part) of the Vocational Examination – Historical Overview

The examination confirming vocational qualifications was organised for the first time in the 2003/2004 school year for graduates of two-year basic vocational schools. To conduct the practical stage in 15 professions, 2,586 examiners were appointed and entered into the registers kept by district boards across the country. Since then, they have been a permanent and integral part of the student achievement verification system.

The results of the written part (previously – the written stage) were determined on the basis of electronic scanning of the answer sheets completed by examinees. Currently, this examination is conducted using a computer. Both in the previous written stage and current written part,

the exam result was determined without the participation of an examiner. During the first vocational exams in the practical stage, task performance was assessed by a team of examiners who observed one to three graduates.

The statements recorded in the *Action Plan* form were also analysed – depending on the task, the examinees performed calculations, drawings, or sketches, wrote down the planned activities, and made a list of the necessary equipment. The examiners also assessed oral presentations (lasting 10 minutes), in which the candidates presented the results of their work. The assessment took into account the method and quality of performance.

The first examinations for technical school graduates changed the work of the examiners. They no longer observed the performance of the task – instead, they assessed the written work. Examiners worked in teams led by a chairperson (as is still the case today), and vocational examinations were conducted after the completion of school education.

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New Examination Formats – 2012 Format, 2017 Format, and 2019 Format

Since the 2012 education reform, professions have been divided into qualifications. The 2012 Format provided for one to three qualifications in a given profession, while in the 2017 and 2019 Formats this range was reduced to one to two.

Currently, the examination is conducted during winter and summer examination sessions, while the student is still studying at school (or at an authorised examination centre), after teaching in a given qualification has been completed. This increases the frequency of exams and, as a result, changes how the school organises its work. Each examination centre must now be adapted to a larger number of examinations, including those organised for candidates who did not achieve the required pass mark on their previous attempt.

The structure of the examination has not changed – it consists of a written and a practical part. The division of the profession into qualifications and the introduction of Vocational Qualification Courses (KKZ) has increased the flexibility of the educational path. A vocational diploma is awarded after passing exams in all qualifications specified in a given profession and attaining an appropriate level of general education. Not all skills can be tested during the practical part of the examination, as some candidates are underage and the lists of work prohibited to minors must therefore be taken into account. In accordance with the amendment to the education law, examiners may conduct examinations in qualifications specified in the profession for which they have been authorised to examine. For example, persons entered in the register of the district examination board in the profession of mechanical technician were authorised to examine in the following qualifications:

- installation and maintenance of machines and devices – in the profession of mechanic/fitter of machines and devices,
- operation of machine tools – in the profession of machine tool operator,
- manufacture and repair of machine parts, equipment, and tools – in the profession of locksmith.

Such authorisation reduced the amount of training required for examiner candidates and quickly increased their availability for centres, particularly in basic vocational school level qualifications. This is important because the practical part cannot be conducted without an examiner. Their presence is also required during oral secondary school leaving examinations and for extramural general education examinations. In the case of the latter, however, this requirement seems excessive.

Assigning examiners the authority to examine qualifications meant that each of them had to make individual decisions about their participation in the examination for a given qualification.

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A vocational diploma is awarded after passing exams in all qualifications specified in a given profession and attaining an appropriate level of general education.

Subsequent reforms – the 2017 and 2019 Formats – reduced the number of qualifications in professions to a maximum of two in a given profession. There were no major changes for examiners in these formats.

Vocational Examination Models – Various Tasks of the Examiner

Checking and assessing the work of candidates

The practical part of the examination is conducted according to one of the following models:

- "d" – where the sole final result of the examination task is documentation,
- "dk" – where the sole final result of the examination task is documentation prepared using a computer,
- "w" – where the final result of the examination task is a product or service,
- "wk" – where the final result of the examination task is a product or service produced using a computer.

In the "d" and "dk" models, the deliverable of the candidates' work is documentation, which is subject to assessment.

The candidates' work is assessed by a team of examiners appointed by the director of the District Examination Board. Their activities are supervised by the chair of the examination team (PZE): before checking the papers, they establish the rules of operation, provide information on the circulation of documents, and conduct training on the application of the approved assessment rules. The examination documentation prepared by the candidate during the practical part is checked and assessed by one examiner, using the assessment rules established and approved by the team of experts of the Central Examination Board. The examiner has no contact with the candidate, only with their work. The examiner is supported by the PZE, who can be consulted in case of any doubts. Control functions, designed to maintain high quality of checking and assessing examination work, are also performed by an examiner-verifier. They check 10% of the work previously analysed by the examiner. In the event of conflicting assessments, the decision on which result to award the candidate is made by the PZE – it is therefore important that this function is performed by an experienced person who has already checked and assessed work on numerous occasions or has served as an examiner-verifier.

Checking and assessing in a team of examiners has the following advantages:

- the examiner is not alone in case of doubts or difficulties in making a decision. Each member of the team has the opportunity to get support from another examiner, the examiner-verifier, and the chair;
- if an examiner makes mistakes, a larger percentage of the papers they have analysed may be sent for verification;

- The PZE may also reduce the number of papers selected for assessment by a given examiner so that, together with the examiner-verifier, they can check all the papers analysed by that examiner.

In the event of gross errors being made by an examiner, the PZE may abstain from providing them with another batch of papers to check and may request the director of the District Examination Board to remove the examiner from the list of team members. The director, after consulting with the profession coordinator, the chair, and the examiner-verifier, takes the appropriate decision. This method of the process of checking and assessing examination papers is intended to provide maximum support to the examiner and to ensure a fair and accurate assessment of the candidates.

Observation and assessment of the work performed by candidates

During the practical part of the examination for the “w” and “wk” models, the examiner’s work is completely different. Their task is to observe and assess the work of the candidates. The deliverable of their examination task or tasks is a product or service. The examiner (unlike in the “d” and “dk” models) has direct contact with the candidates, observes their behaviour, the activities they perform, and the difficulties and emotions they face. The role of an examiner is therefore completely different from that of a person checking examination papers.

The team supervising the practical part of the vocational examination consists of a chairperson and an examiner appointed by the director of the District Examination Board. One examiner observes and assesses up to six candidates. If there are more than six candidates at the venue where the practical part of the vocational examination is conducted, an additional examiner is appointed to observe and assess each subsequent group of six. If fewer than six candidates are taking the practical part at a given moment, they are also observed and assessed by one examiner.

Tasks of the Examiner Participating in the Examination

The examiner assesses:

- the quality of the final result – the product or service and the related documentation,
- the quality of the intermediate result – if its assessment has a direct impact on the assessment of the quality of the final result,
- the course of the examination task or tasks in terms of:
 - compliance with health and safety regulations,
 - compliance with the methods or technologies appropriate for the performance of the examination task or tasks in terms of meeting the requirements specified in the task or tasks, recorded in the form of assessment criteria.

The examiner puts the following grades in the Assessment Rules document:

- Y – if the criterion is met, or
- N – if the criterion is not met.

The room and workstations are prepared by a technical assistant based on the instructions of the Central Examination Board. Before the examination, the examiner receives the Central Examination Board's instructions for the given examination shift (including guidelines, if provided) from PZE and, together with the technical assistant, checks that the room and workstations have been prepared accordingly. This is very important because inadequate preparation of workstations may affect the proper conduct of the examination, the safety of the candidates and other persons present, as well as the feasibility of the task itself.

From the 2025 winter session onwards, examiners will enter their assessments for candidates into their accounts in the IT System for Vocational Examination (SIOEZ). Therefore, before the examination, they check the operation of the computer workstation prepared for this purpose, which must have internet access.

Before the start of the examination, the technical assistant conducts a workstation briefing for the candidates. This part of the examination is very important for safety reasons, as some of the candidates are underage students. In some cases, candidates may visit a given examination centre for the first time, and the briefing is their only opportunity to become familiar with the workstation and the hazards that may occur there.

After the candidates have finished their work and left the examination room, the examiner assesses the quality of the final results of the task – the product or service and the related documentation – in terms of meeting the requirements specified in the examination task or tasks, recorded in the form of assessment criteria. The assessment of the fulfilment of these criteria is entered in the Assessment Sheet. The examiner is required in particular:

- to work independently,
- to refrain from talking to the chair of the supervisory team (PZN) and to examinees, in particular about the task and assessment rules,
- not to disclose the assessment rules and results to other persons,
- not to leave the examination room,
- to report to the PZN any cases of candidates violating health and safety regulations while performing the tasks.

After the examination, the examiner is present when the examination papers, together with the Assessment Rules document, are placed in a secure envelope and sealed. They also sign the Protocol of the practical part of the examination. Together with the chair of the supervisory team, they participate in the transfer of materials from the PZE examination.

Summary

The role of examiners is fundamental to ensuring the quality, credibility, and consistency of the entire vocational education system in Poland. It has evolved significantly over the years, adapting to changes in the structure of examinations and labour market requirements – from team assessment in the “w” model to the full responsibility of a single examiner. In the “d” model, this role has been individual from the outset. Currently, in the practical part of the “d” and “dk” models, the examiner:

- assesses the final result in the form of documentation;
- documents the assessment in accordance with the assessment rules;
- when checking the work, they may consult the opinion of another examiner, examiner-verifier and PZE – they do not have to resolve problems on their own.

Their work is analytical and takes place in a team, which ensures a high level of objectivity and minimises the risk of error.

In the practical part of the “w” and “wk” models, the examiner:

- observes the work of the candidate(s) at the examination station(s),
- assesses both the process of performing the task and the final result,
- documents the assessments in accordance with the criteria,
- resolves all interpretative doubts independently,
- ensures the safety of candidates (by anticipating possible hazards at the examination station),
- interrupts the examination in the event of clear non-compliance with health and safety regulations.

The lack of a team of examiners in the “w” and “wk” models means that the examiner must combine the functions of assessor, process observer, health and safety inspector, and mentor. Their role is much more complex and requires constant concentration, extraordinary diligence and attentiveness, resistance to pressure, and the ability to apply assessment criteria impartially. The examiner has no support in the form of an examiner-verifier, and the examinee cannot appeal against the assessment to either the District Examination Board or the Examination Arbitration Board. All this means that the examiner bears a very heavy responsibility.

All these conditions show that a modern examiner should not only be a highly regarded specialist but also a guardian of the reliability and objectivity of the examination – a guarantor of its credibility and a person jointly responsible for the quality of the entire system.

This requires procedural knowledge and awareness that any error in assessment has a real impact on the candidate's future. Examiners must combine in-depth subject knowledge, familiarity with rigorous procedures, soft skills related to observation and assessment, and an exceptional professional ethos. Their reliability, objectivity, and professionalism determine not only

the result of a single examination but also the future career of the candidate and the prestige of the vocational diploma or the diploma confirming professional qualifications. It is therefore essential to continuously improve the professional skills of examiners, provide them with appropriate substantive and procedural support, and build awareness of the key role they play in the Polish education system.

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A Shared Path, Different Outcomes?

Work-Based and School-Based Learners from Stage I Sectoral Vocational Schools Five Years Later

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About the Monitoring System

Does a sectoral vocational school prepare individuals adequately for the transition into adulthood? Does the acquired profession help in securing stable employment? Or do some graduates disappear from institutional records upon completing their education, taking up undeclared work, migrating abroad, or becoming economically inactive? Answers to these questions are provided by the nationwide career monitoring system for graduates of post-primary and post-lower secondary schools, which enables the tracking of young people's subsequent educational and professional trajectories for several years after completing their education.

Graduate career monitoring is a statutory solution, implemented on the initiative of the Ministry of National Education in collaboration with the Educational Research Institute (IBE) – National Research Institute and the Education IT Centre. It was established in response to the growing need for reliable and up-to-date information on how young people fare after completing school. Monitoring data are utilised by local government units, schools, and central administration in planning educational provisions and local policies, whilst also enabling a better understanding of the real challenges faced by young people on the threshold of adulthood.

The monitoring system is based on data from public registers. These include data from the Educational Information System (SIO), the POL-on system (which covers higher education), examination data from the Regional Examination Boards (OKE), and the register of the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS). By integrating these sources, it is possible to reconstruct the educational and professional trajectories of the entire graduate population, rather than just selected groups or survey respondents. Consequently, the monitoring encompasses all students of a given cohort who have graduated from a school within the Polish education system.

One of the greatest assets of graduate career monitoring is the ability to observe the trajectories of graduates over an extended period. In this article, we utilise data from 2024, which depict the situation of the 2019 graduate cohort – the first to be surveyed for five years post-graduation. This timeframe is sufficient to determine whether young people have managed to acquire professional experience, secure stable employment, continue their education, or whether, conversely, they have remained unemployed or outside the labour market. Such a broad temporal perspective allows not only for the acknowledgement of successes but also for a clearer identification of the barriers that hinder the transition from education to employment.

The fact that registry data cover the entire graduate population, rather than merely a small sample, provides extensive analytical opportunities and eliminates numerous typical problems.

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However, the data have their limitations: for instance, they do not capture undeclared work, employment abroad, or activity in the agricultural sector. Consequently, the monitoring primarily reflects what is visible in official systems. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to identify “data gaps” as well; these may indicate migration, undeclared work, or economic inactivity.

In this article, we examine the situation of a particularly important group: the 2019 cohort of graduates from stage I sectoral vocational schools (BSI). As of 1 September 2017, the existing 3-year basic vocational school was transformed into the 3-year stage I sectoral vocational school, and recruitment to the first grades of basic vocational schools (ZSZ) was discontinued. During the transitional period, in the 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 school years, stage I sectoral vocational schools continued to run the second and third grades of the ZSZ, whose students completed their education under the previous regulations, receiving basic vocational school certificates and diplomas. This means that the 2019 cohort was unique: it was the last to formally complete its education under the system of the former basic vocational schools, while simultaneously being a transitional cohort, as younger students in the same schools were already following the new core curricula appropriate for stage I sectoral vocational schools.

In vocational education, practical vocational training plays a pivotal role. It is this training that enables students to acquire and consolidate the skills required in their future work. It can be organised in various forms, depending on the specific nature of the profession and the local labour market. In our analysis, we take a closer look at how graduates who were **work-based learners** during their studies fared (i.e., those who learned their profession at an employer's premises under an employment contract for the purpose of vocational training as work-based learners), as well as those whose **practical vocational training was organised by the school** (for the sake of simplicity, we shall refer to them as school-based learners). The differences between these groups are pronounced, in terms of both the speed of finding employment and the stability or duration of employment. We present the results from a five-year perspective, when many graduates have already made their first significant decisions regarding work and further education.

In the case of graduates of the former basic vocational schools, and currently stage I sectoral vocational schools, practical vocational training with an employer in the capacity of a work-based learner has predominated for years. In the 2019 cohort, nearly two-thirds of the students (approximately 26,000 graduates of stage I sectoral vocational schools) were trained in this manner. They signed an employment contract with an employer for the purpose of vocational training and carried out their practical vocational training in a real work environment under the employer's supervision. Consequently, they were able to become acquainted with daily tasks and quality standards, as well as develop the social and communicative skills required within a team. This form of vocational learning also provides an opportunity to establish professional contacts, which often prove beneficial in future job searches.

In the case of practical vocational training organised by the school, practical classes can take various forms. They may be conducted in school workshops, in practical training centres, but also at employers' premises, under a practical vocational training agreement concluded between the school principal and the employer accepting the students for practical vocational training. School workshops or practical classes at employers' premises allow for the practice of specific skills under the supervision of a practical vocational training teacher. In turn, practical training centres, which are particularly important in professions requiring specialised, expensive equipment, collaborate with multiple schools, providing students with access to professional learning environments.

The fundamental difference lies in the fact that students referred by the school undertake practical classes or work placements on the basis of an agreement between the school and the employer, whereas work-based learners complete their practical vocational training directly with the employer with whom they have signed an employment contract for the purpose of vocational training. This model means that work-based learners are more strongly integrated into the labour market: they perform tasks in a real professional environment, learn work standards, and experience the company's organisational culture. As a result, they acquire tangible skills, develop social competences, and build professional networks that can facilitate their transition after graduation.

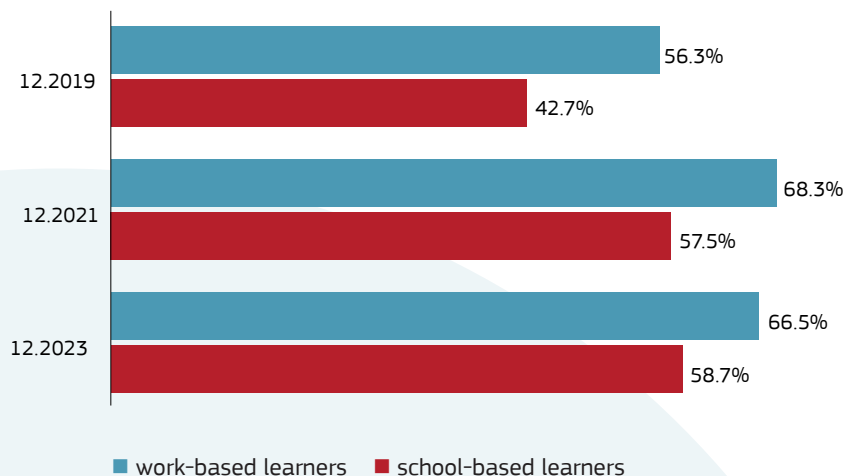
Work-Based Learners on the Labour Market – An Easier Start?

The advantage of work-based learners is corroborated by the data.

The monitoring shows that graduates from the 2019 cohort who learned their profession at an employer's premises as work-based learners entered the labour market more quickly than their other peers. Even in the initial months following graduation, the proportion of employed individuals in this group was over 10 percentage points higher.

These differences persisted at a very similar level two and four years later. Naturally, this situation could have been influenced by a multitude of other factors; nevertheless, there are strong indications that practical vocational training at an employer's premises in the capacity of work-based learners enabled graduates not only to acquire valuable practical skills, but also to navigate the labour market more swiftly. Alongside the acquired experience, professional networks may have also proved beneficial.

Chart 1. Proportion of employed graduates (including those combining work with study) among 2019 stage I sectoral vocational school (BSI) graduates, broken down by work-based learners and school-based learners



Graduates who were work-based learners not only found employment more quickly, but their employment was also more frequently stable. By employment stability, we refer to work registered with the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) under an employment contract or self-employment, lasting continuously for at least 6 months. The average time to commence such work was 18 months (a year and a half) among graduates who were work-based learners, whereas it was as long as 27 months (over two years) for school-based learners.

As many as 27% of work-based learners commenced stable employment immediately after leaving school, an achievement matched by merely 6% of the 2019 BSI graduates who were school-based learners. Within five years of graduating, as many as 82% of work-based learners had secured stable employment, and nearly one-third had worked for a total of at least four years.

Graduates who trained as work-based learners are, by virtue of their professional activity, more visible in public registers than other graduate groups. Nearly one in three of these graduates never disappeared from the registers, meaning their educational and professional status remained known, whereas among school-based learners, this situation applied to only one in six graduates.

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Graduates from the 2019 cohort who learned their profession at an employer's premises as work-based learners, entered the labour market more quickly than their other peers.

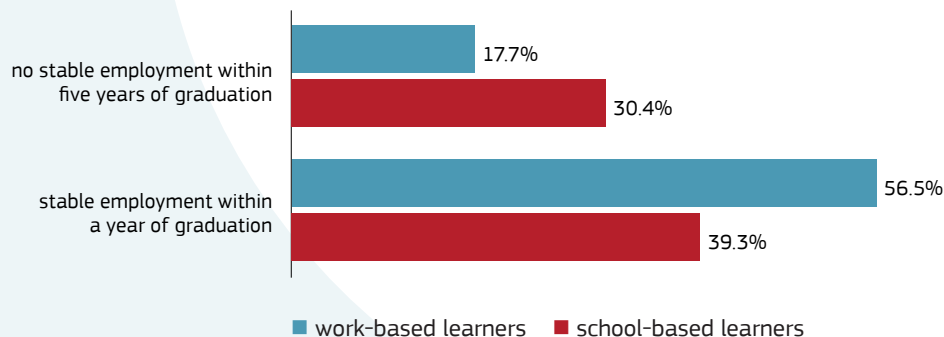
School-Based Learners – More Frequently Lacking Stable Work and Absent from the Registers

For graduates who were school-based learners, i.e., those who did not undertake vocational preparation with an employer, the transition into adulthood was markedly more difficult. As many as 30% of them did not secure stable employment (i.e., employment under an employment contract or self-employment lasting continuously for at least half a year) within five years, and 17% did not experience a single episode of employment under an employment contract or self-employment. For comparison, among work-based learners, these proportions were 18% and 6%, respectively.

School-based learners were more frequently classified under “activity status unknown” category, meaning they were invisible in both educational registers and ZUS. This points to the possibility of working abroad, but also to employment in the shadow economy or long-term economic inactivity. Over 46% of school-based learners remained outside the registers for a total of at least one year, and nearly 30% – for two years or longer. By contrast, among work-based learners, these figures were significantly lower, standing at 33% and 20%, respectively.

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For graduates who were school-based learners, i.e., those who did not undertake vocational preparation with an employer, the transition into adulthood was markedly more difficult.

Chart 2. Proportion of graduates who undertook stable employment within a year of graduation, and those who did not undertake stable employment for five years post-graduation, among 2019 stage I sectoral vocational school (BSI) graduates.



The Same Profession – A Different Mode of Training

When comparing graduates of the same professions who were trained in different formats, interesting differences also emerge. A prime example is motor vehicle mechanics, which was one of the professions most frequently chosen by students of sectoral vocational schools, and formerly basic vocational schools. Within five years of graduating, mechanics who were work-based learners had worked for an average of 34 months, whereas their peers who were school-based learners had worked for four months less. Up to 43% of mechanics who were work-based learners secured stable employment within half a year of leaving school; among school-based learners, this proportion was 12 percentage points lower (31%).

Similar discrepancies are evident in the duration of absence from the registers: mechanics who were school-based learners were invisible for an average of 16 months, while those who were work-based learners were invisible for 13 months. Such outcomes demonstrate that the mode of training can exert a substantial influence on the subsequent professional trajectories of young people.

The Severe Impact of the Pandemic

For the 2019 cohort of stage I sectoral vocational school graduates, the COVID-19 pandemic struck at a particularly sensitive moment, merely a few months after they had completed their education and entered the labour market. Just as these young people were starting their first jobs, attempting to build professional networks and acquire experience, numerous sectors were paralysed by the lockdown and economic restrictions. These circumstances had a particularly profound impact on individuals who failed to find employment swiftly upon leaving school. This could result in the so-called “scarring effect”, where returning to the labour market is hindered after a prolonged period of unemployment or economic inactivity. From the perspective of five-year data, it is evident that the ramifications of this early shock differed for graduates who were work-based learners and school-based learners. Graduates who had learned their profession within the school system disappeared from the registers considerably more often, and this proportion grew over the five years following the completion of their education.

The differences between the situations of work-based and school-based learners are particularly pronounced when examining data for specific professions. Among cooks who were school-based learners, a group exceptionally affected by pandemic restrictions, the average waiting time for stable employment was as long as 32 months. This is 14 months more than in the case of graduates of the same profession who were work-based learners. Similarly, hairdressing was among the professions severely impacted by the onset of the pandemic. Among work-based learners who graduated in this profession, a higher proportion of employed individuals was observed, alongside a lower proportion of registered unemployed persons and individuals

with an unknown educational and professional status, compared to graduates who were school-based learners. The restrictions on the activities of the service sector, which persisted for many months, primarily struck those entering the labour market without prior experience.

Summary

The advantage of graduate career monitoring is that it allows for the observation of the trajectories of entire cohorts of graduates, not only in general terms but also broken down by specific professions. This enables us to see how, for example, motor vehicle mechanics, cooks, or hairdressers fare on the labour market, and how the trajectories of those who learned their profession as work-based learners differ from those of their peers trained exclusively in the school system. The data clearly demonstrate that work-based learners are at an advantage: they take up their first job more quickly, fall off the registers less frequently, and secure stable employment an average of nine months earlier than their peers.

Examples of individual professions illustrate this well. Among mechanics who were work-based learners, up to 43% found stable employment within half a year of graduating, whereas among school-based learners, this proportion was 12 percentage points lower. In turn, in service professions, which were particularly affected by the consequences of the pandemic, the differences were even more pronounced: cooks and hairdressers who were work-based learners found employment more frequently and fell into the “outside the registers” category less often, which suggests that the experience and professional networks acquired earlier helped them survive the difficult period.

Although, naturally, not all differences can be attributed exclusively to the form of vocational training, the monitoring results confirm that the Polish dual model, combining school-based education with vocational preparation at an employer's premises in the capacity of a work-based learner, translates into a more stable position for graduates on the labour market. The experience gained with an employer during the period of study can be significant capital at the start of a career: it provides young people with tangible skills, allows them to experience the work culture, and establishes professional contacts that pay dividends in subsequent years. In an era of growing demand for qualified workers and dynamic economic changes, it is worthwhile investing in solutions that increase young people's chances of a successful transition into adulthood.



Activating Adults in the Course of Lifelong Learning

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The concept of lifelong learning (LLL) emphasises the continuous development of an individual's personal, professional, and social competences, a process that does not end in youth, but spans their entire active working life. It entails fostering a conscious attitude and an openness towards acquiring knowledge. Voluntary commitment and intrinsic motivation constitute its foundation (European Commission, 2001). Academic studies emphasise that the adult learning process differs from the education of children and adolescents. Adults are perceived as autonomous subjects of the educational process who independently identify their needs, goals, and preferred learning styles (Pierścieniak, 2005; Knowles, 1980). Their life experience plays a primary role, serving as a reference point for new content and a resource that enriches the didactic process. Adult education is based on the autonomous selection of educational goals and methods, and its significant distinguishing feature is strong practical motivation. The concept of experiential learning is also gaining increasing importance (Kazimierska, Lachowicz, Piotrowska, 2014). Against this backdrop, promoting active adult learning is becoming a key challenge for educational managers and organisations.

Theoretical Foundations of Adult Learning

Contemporary research and theories on adult learning confirm that the human brain has the capacity to develop at every stage of life, and adults are capable of learning more effectively when they do so at their own pace rather than under time pressure (Gregory, 2024). In the literature on the subject, one can find numerous models describing the specific nature of adult education (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Adult learning models



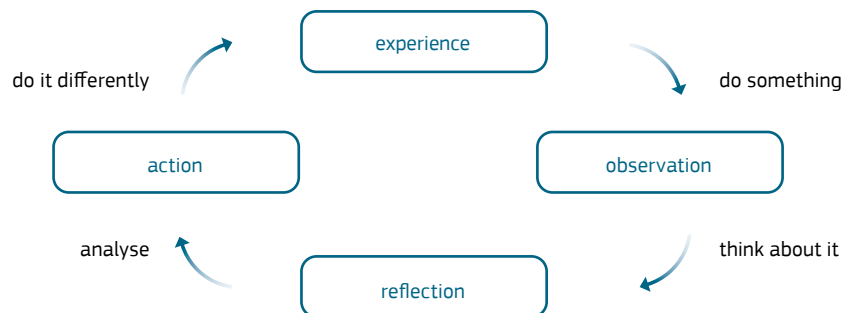
Source: author's own elaboration based on W. Oleszak, Modele pracy edukacyjnej z ludźmi dorosłymi, General and Professional Education 1/2011, pp. 36–39; G. Rusconi, Malcolm Knowles Adult Learning Theory. Principles & Assumptions, cloudassess.com/blog/knowles-adult-learning-theory [accessed 26.08.2025].

One of the leading figures of the 20th century dealing with adult education (andragogy¹), was the renowned American educator and researcher Malcolm S. Knowles, who emphasised the distinctiveness of adult learning compared to that of younger individuals. In his classic model, he primarily accentuates the capacity of adult "learners" to independently define their own educational needs. Adults engage in the learning process when they perceive the meaning and purpose of the knowledge being acquired. The model in which adults themselves establish educational goals, utilise community resources, and develop their competences according to their own individual plan is termed *self-directed learning*.

Alongside the development of the *lifelong learning* concept, the principles of *learning how to learn* have gained popularity. Understanding cognitive mechanisms can significantly benefit adult learners, particularly when they are shown how they can apply this knowledge practically, in a simple and accessible manner, within the process of self-directed learning (Smith, 1982, pp. 33–59). The experiential learning model is a model proposed by David A. Kolb, which posits that adult learning is a continuous and uninterrupted process occurring not only in lecture and training rooms but predominantly in everyday life, where experiences and analysis play the principal role (Laguna, Fortuna, 2009, pp. 33–36).

Kolb enumerates four stages of the learning process: experience, observation, reflection, and action (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Experiential learning cycle



Source: author's own elaboration based on D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1984.

¹ The term andragogy is derived from the Greek words meaning "leading man"; it is a sub-discipline of pedagogy dealing with the issues of adult upbringing and education (Knowles, 1984).

According to Kolb, in order to learn effectively, an adult should progress through all the interconnected stages of the learning cycle. First, one must experience something; next, make observations about what occurred from various perspectives; and then draw conclusions in order to utilise them differently.

Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is equally noteworthy, framing adult learning as a catalyst for profound personal transformation. The author emphasises the role of critical reflection, which is the primary factor initiating the learning process that leads to a change in how one perceives both the world and oneself. This reflection fulfils several crucial functions: it directs actions, ensures a sense of coherence in both novel and familiar situations, and enables the reassessment and reinterpretation of existing knowledge and experiences (Mezirow, 1981, pp. 3–24).

The objective of all the presented models is to enable adult learners to develop their competences and professional mobility in a constantly changing environment.

Initiatives Promoting Adult Education in the European Union and in Poland

In the context of the *lifelong learning* concept, adult education constitutes an element of a continuous developmental process, spanning from early youth through to old age. Comprehending its determinants is of significant importance for various types of educational institutions and units, as well as for employers and the labour market. Such knowledge facilitates the better formulation of policies, strategies, and educational provisions, thereby more effectively supporting individuals in actively developing their competences throughout their lives. Research conducted in the European Union (Cedefop, 2024) indicates a low proportion of adults participating in lifelong learning: it stands at less than 40%, which diverges significantly from the target of 60% set for 2030. Currently, over half of the adult population has not mastered basic digital skills, despite the fact that over 90% of jobs require them. In response to these challenges, the European Commission introduced *The Union of Skills* initiative (European Commission, 2025), which aims to support the development of high-quality, inclusive, and flexible systems of education, training, and skills. These initiatives are intended to ensure a higher level of both basic and advanced skills, establish conditions for the regular updating and acquisition of new skills, and foster the development and retention of the best human resources in Europe.

The Polish education system is also opening up to non-formal education and informal learning. One of the most important steps in this regard was the introduction of a system of external vocational examinations, enabling the acquisition of vocational qualifications by individuals acquiring knowledge and skills outside vocational schools. Subsequently, a crucial development was the implementation of the Integrated Qualifications System (ZSK), encompassing the Polish Qualifications

Framework (PRK) and the Integrated Qualifications Register (ZRK). A significant element of the ZSK is the possibility of validating learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system. Expanding the possibilities for accumulating and transferring learning outcomes fosters greater flexibility in acquiring qualifications and enables alignment with the individual needs and changing lifestyles of adult learners.

Various initiatives supporting adult learning have been implemented in Poland for several years; however, models based on the diagnosis of participants' educational and training needs remain scarce. One of the key programmes is the network of Local Knowledge and Education Centres (LOWE), an initiative of the Ministry of National Education aimed at transforming schools into centres for developing adult competences and supporting social life.

The LOWE network was established in 2017 thanks to support from European funds. In the first stage, 50 LOWEs were created across more than half of the voivodeships². Since 2020, the network has expanded to cover all voivodeships. The majority of the centres were established in small towns, including rural areas and townships. Currently, the LOWE network project is being continued within the framework of regional policy.

LOWE is a concept rooted in the idea of *lifelong learning*, emphasising the significance of diverse forms of education, encompassing not only formal education but also other methods of acquiring the knowledge and skills needed at various stages of life. The results of Eurydice network research indicate (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021, pp. 34–40) that following the completion of traditional education and with the passage of time, adults participate increasingly rarely in formal courses or training. This does not mean they abandon learning; they often learn independently or in less formalised environments. Their educational activity can be effectively supported, provided that the learning process is organised differently from classic school-based solutions. In contrast to traditional educational methods, the content delivered in LOWEs stems primarily from a diagnosis of the needs of adult participants and the specific nature of their local environments. The network's operational mission is to support the development of key competences that are relevant to adults throughout their lives.

The collaboration model within LOWE (see Fig. 3) is based on a partnership for skills within the local community and posits the joint implementation of ideas based in the school, in collaboration with the social and economic environment. The leading entity is the school's governing body, while the partnership members comprise the school where the LOWE is located and invited local entities who declare their participation in the partnership's activities and their support for its operations.

² For more information, visit <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/lowe> [accessed 28.08.2025].

Figure 3. The collaboration model in LOWE based on the partnership concept



Source: J. Grabowska, LOWE w Gminie Elbląg, Seminar *Rozwijanie umiejętności zawodowych w toku uczenia się przez całe życie*, Academy of Applied Sciences in Elbląg, Elbląg 2025.

LOWEs are primarily local centres of non-formal and informal education for adults, addressed especially to individuals with impeded access to high-quality provisions supporting lifelong learning. These units play a particularly vital role in peripheral and disadvantaged communities, distant from main administrative, educational, and economic hubs. In such areas, the local school is often the sole hub of social life and an authoritative source of knowledge regarding the local community's problems. Within the framework of LOWE activities, the school utilises its own resources, collaborates with local institutions and partners, and creates broad educational opportunities for adults. These opportunities arise from diagnosing their needs, i.e., competence deficits, expectations, and potentials that can be developed. The centres offer, inter alia, assertiveness workshops, tailor-made training, individual socio-civic counselling, health-promoting workshops, dance classes, makeup workshops, or yoga classes.

Another significant instrument is the National Training Fund (KFS), which finances the continuing education of employees and employers, where one can obtain funding for courses, postgraduate studies, or various types of examinations. This support fosters the educational activation of adults (employees) in the professional dimension, although its scope primarily covers the employed. The fundamental task of the KFS is to counteract the risk of job loss resulting from a mismatch between employees' qualifications and labour market needs³.

³ Details available on the website of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy: www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/krajowy-fundusz-szkoleniowy-fundusz-pracy [accessed 28.08.2025].

The implementation of the *lifelong learning* idea is also supported by out-of-school institutions: continuing education centres, sectoral skills centres, vocational training centres, and others. Furthermore, numerous projects are implemented with funding from European resources, under the Erasmus+ programme or the European Social Fund. At the local level, municipalities and counties frequently organise language, computer, or vocational courses aimed at the educationally excluded.

A special role in the activation of adult education is also played by Universities of the Third Age⁴, which promote the engagement of older people, support seniors in participating in social and cultural education, and emphasise the use of their experience for the benefit of local communities.

Despite the numerous educational opportunities and provisions for adults, the level of continuing education in Poland remains low. Research demonstrates (Sitek, 2025) that adults in Poland focus primarily on professional goals and training classified as “mandatory”. Many of them believe they “do not need education”. In practice, the adult education system is heavily reliant on motivation, rather than functioning as a universal institution that integrates learning with work and life.

Challenges and Barriers to the Educational Activation of Adults

The educational activation of adults constitutes one of the primary issues in contemporary educational policy and practice; unfortunately, despite numerous initiatives, it encounters multiple problems. Increasing the participation of adults in vocational education and training remains a persistent challenge for the European Union. Data from Cedefop or the Educational Research Institute (Gola, Jaślar, Klatta, Plak-Warecka, Wojciechowska, 2022) confirm that the most serious obstacle is a lack of willingness to learn – many respondents declare that they do not need further education. Others state that they would like to undertake it, but encounter various barriers, e.g., family responsibilities, overly demanding schedules, and the costs of courses or training (Sitek, 2025). This means that for motivated adults, the difficulty lies primarily in balancing learning with work and family life, rather than in a lack of provisions or a lack of desire to develop. The group that participates most actively in continuing education consists predominantly of younger, employed, and better-educated individuals (Gola, Jaślar, Klatta, Plak-Warecka, Wojciechowska, 2022).

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Despite the numerous educational opportunities and provisions for adults, the level of continuing education in Poland remains low.

⁴ For more information, see e.g. the website of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation: pafw.pl/program/inicjatywy-w-zakresie-edukacji/universytety-trzeciego-wieku-utw [accessed 28.08.2025].

Among the barriers to adult education, one can also list: the high costs of postgraduate studies and language courses, insufficient financial support, limited scholarships and funding amounts, inflexible learning formats, and inadequate promotion of educational provisions. Furthermore, an ageing society generates additional challenges regarding supplementary technological support, i.e., digital inclusion programmes (OECD, 2021). Often, one can also observe inadequate equipment in adult education centres or insufficient teaching staff.

A significant challenge is the previously mentioned intrinsic motivation of adults, as they frequently fail to perceive the direct benefits of undertaking educational activity, particularly if it does not correlate with an immediate improvement in their professional situation. Therefore, the creation of programmes based on the practical needs of participants, which has already been successfully achieved in the aforementioned LOWE centres, acquires particular significance.

The scale of challenges associated with the educational activation of adults is also influenced by entrenched (often less than positive) school experiences, low self-assessment of competences, or the fear of failure. Consequently, it becomes imperative to foster the attitude of an “adult learner” and raise awareness of the benefits stemming from competence development. Support in this regard may be provided by the European Commission's *The Union of Skills* initiative, under which the following are planned: broader use of micro-credentials as a flexible form of learning, strengthening of the Pact for Skills⁵ (which is intended to enable a larger number of workers to acquire new qualifications in strategic sectors), as well as the implementation of pilot programmes providing individuals at risk of unemployment with the opportunity to acquire new skills.

Summary and Recommendations

In the face of advancing globalisation, as well as societal expectations, it is crucial to design solutions that foster the inclusion of adults in the process of lifelong learning. In order to overcome the barriers described above, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive operational strategy.

First and foremost, educational provision for adults should be expanded and made more widely available, and its accessibility should be improved by diversifying formats of education, such as e-learning courses, weekend classes, or modular training programmes. Particular attention should be given to developing initiatives embedded within the local environment that foster adult participation in lifelong learning, such as LOWEs or Universities of the Third Age. Their further reinforcement and adaptation to changing educational needs may constitute a significant factor influencing the increase in the number of adults interested in continuing education.

⁵ The Pact for Skills brings together industry, social partners, vocational education and training providers, public authorities, employment services, and other entities from various sectors, thereby contributing to the achievement of EU targets in the field of adult learning. For more information: bit.ly/4nds9RI.

The second significant issue is increasing the financing and availability of scholarships (from employers' funds and the education budget), primarily for low-income individuals who would be willing to participate in courses or training enhancing their vocational qualifications. This support could substantially increase their chances of remaining on the labour market.

Another recommendation is the development of the information and vocational guidance system. It is important to openly promote the benefits derived from *lifelong learning*, such as strengthening one's position on the labour market, improving mental well-being, or increasing civic engagement. Furthermore, systematically promoting knowledge about available courses and educational opportunities remains vital.

The fourth area of recommendation is the development of cross-sectoral collaboration, understood as deepening the partnership between vocational education schools, employers, higher education institutions, and local government units. The objective of this collaboration should be the creation of learning pathways adapted to the specific nature and needs of local labour markets. It is equally important to develop and promote systems for recognising competences acquired in a non-formal manner, through the skills validation process, which allows for the appreciation of the life and professional experiences of adult learners.

All these actions necessitate the inclusion of the *lifelong learning* issue into the national strategy, as well as coordination between the ministries of education, labour, and social policy, in order to more effectively increase the participation of adults in continuing education and strengthen the competitiveness of the Polish economy in the face of dynamic technological and social changes.

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Postgraduate Studies in the Higher Education System and the Integrated Qualifications System



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Poland, following years of rapid socio-economic development, has transitioned into the group of highly developed countries and has reached the limits of its current developmental model. Unfavourable demographic trends (an ageing society) and rapid technological transformations, linked inter alia to the development of artificial intelligence, mean that the high quality of human capital achieved so far may be jeopardised. Consequently, to maintain the economy's competitiveness, the development of a system enabling lifelong learning becomes crucial (Morawski, Chrostowski, 2025). Higher education institutions, among others, must align with new trends by offering not only education for secondary school graduates resulting in diplomas, but also education for adults wishing to enhance or change their competences through various shorter formats. One such form, remaining within the mainstream of formal education, is postgraduate studies. The Integrated Qualifications System (ZSK) is intended to provide a systemic and organisational response to the challenges associated with adult learning by facilitating the undertaking and comparison of the outcomes of various forms of learning within formal and non-formal education. Micro-credentials – a novel format of education increasingly offered by educational institutions – are also worth analysing.

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Enhancing the Competences of Adults

Our country ranks among those with the lowest proportion of adults enhancing their competences. This is demonstrated both by statistics (e.g., Statistics Poland [GUS], 2024a) and by various surveys, such as the PIAAC International Survey of Adult Skills, the Human Capital Study, or the “Learning among Polish adults” project conducted by the Educational Research Institute (IBE) – National Research Institute.

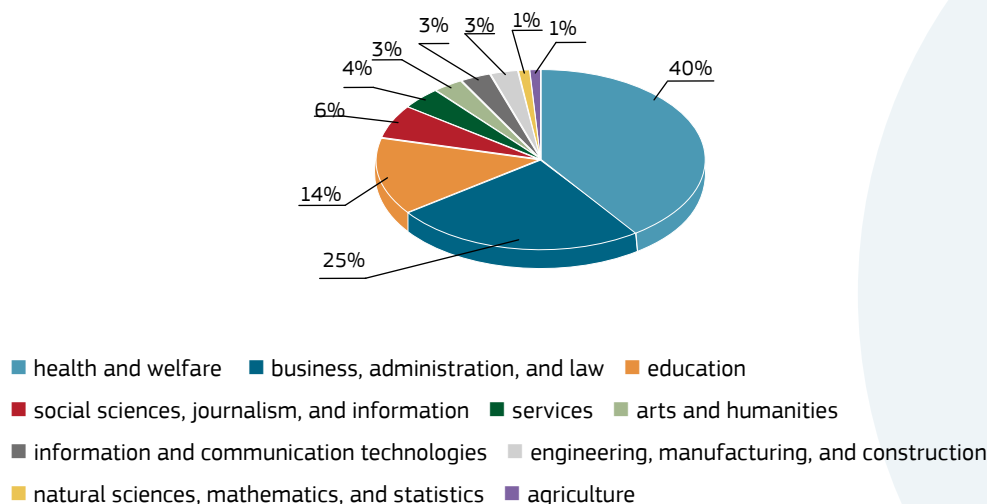
PIAAC is a survey with a uniform methodology that allows for international comparisons. Alongside the level of participation in education, it also tests the actual skills of adults, such as *literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving*. Its latest edition reveals that only approximately 21–24% of Polish men and women aged 25–65 participated in any form of education (against an OECD average of approx. 40%), while merely 2.3% participated in formal education. Furthermore, the number of individuals engaging in formal education declines with age, which happens to be a common phenomenon in other countries as well. Admittedly, among individuals with tertiary education, the data on participation in education, including formal education, are distinctly better than in groups of individuals without a university diploma; nevertheless, they still lag behind the results recorded in other societies (Sitek, 2025).

The international comparison of the scale of participation in formal education offered at universities and other higher education institutions – other than first- and second-cycle studies or long-cycle studies (Levels 6 and 7 of the European Qualifications Framework) – involve numerous methodological challenges. While the English term *undergraduate* refers to first-cycle studies, the terms *graduate* and *postgraduate* denote provisions whose equivalents in Poland encompass second-cycle studies, as well as doctoral and postgraduate studies. Broadly speaking, however, one might assume that *graduate* refers to full qualifications (higher education degrees), whereas *postgraduate* refers to partial (non-degree) qualifications, i.e., courses resulting, for example, in a certificate, diploma, or award, often with a higher education designation. It should be noted that in many countries, detailed solutions can differ not only at the systemic level but even within individual higher education institutions (e.g., in the United Kingdom). Moreover, the nomenclature depends not only on the level but also on the scope of the qualification and the duration of the education, which, when delivered in a part-time format, lasts from several weeks (a semester) to as long as two years. In the case of enhancing professional competences for entrepreneurs and managers, Polish postgraduate studies can also be related to the category of *executive education* (Padró F.F. et al., 2018; Hull Univ., n.d.; Amdam, 2020).

Postgraduate Studies in the Higher Education System

Postgraduate studies constitute a specific (i.e., reserved for higher education institutions; cf. below) format of formal education for individuals holding a higher education degree. At the end of 2023, nearly 179,000 individuals (71% of whom were women) participated in postgraduate studies in Poland. Of this number, 116,000 opted for higher education institutions (predominantly non-public ones – 72,000), while the remainder chose the Medical Centre of Postgraduate Education (60,500) and institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences (approx. 1,000). According to the Statistics Poland (GUS) classification of fields of education, 40% of participants enrolled in postgraduate studies in the “health and welfare” field (nearly all in the medical subfield), nearly 25% in the “business, administration, and law” field, and almost 14% in the “education” field (nearly all in the pedagogical subfield) (GUS, 2024b). This indicates a crucial significance of postgraduate studies in the regulated professions of sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as in the fields of business and management, which are typical of *executive education*. For comparison, postgraduate studies in the “information and communication technologies” field were chosen by 3% of individuals, and in the “engineering, manufacturing, and construction” field by 2.7% (ibid.). The share of postgraduate study participants by field of education is presented in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Postgraduate study participants by broad field of education in 2023



Source: author's own elaboration based on Statistics Poland (GUS) data (2024b).

Legal Regulations

The Law on Higher Education and Science (UPSWN, 2018) stipulates that providing education at postgraduate studies is one of the fundamental tasks of a higher education institution (Article 11, sec. 1, point 2). The right to conduct this format of education is also vested in research institutes, institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)¹, and the Medical Centre of Postgraduate Education (Article 163, sec. 1).

The Law on Higher Education and Science specifies only the general boundary conditions for postgraduate studies:

Article 160.

- 1. Postgraduate studies shall last no less than 2 semesters and enable the obtainment of partial qualifications at level 6, 7 or 8 of the PRK.*
- 2. The curriculum of postgraduate studies shall define the learning outcomes for partial qualifications, taking into account the second stage characteristics of the PRK at level 6, 7 or 8 of the PRK as defined in the provisions issued on the basis of Article 7, secs. 3 and 4 of the Act of 22 December 2015 on the Integrated Qualifications System, and shall enable the obtainment of at least 30 ECTS credits.*

¹ The Act on the Polish Academy of Sciences (UPAN, 2010) identifies the conducting of postgraduate studies as one of the tasks of the Academy and its institutes (Article 2, sec. 2, point 3 and Article 50, sec. 3, point 1 of the UPAN 2010, which delegate to the provisions of the UPSWN 2018).

3. A participant in postgraduate studies may be a person who holds a full qualification at least at level 6, obtained within the system of higher education and science.

4. Individuals who complete postgraduate studies receive a certificate of completion, the template for which is determined by the providing institution.

Postgraduate studies are, therefore, a specific format of education intended for individuals who already possess a higher education degree (i.e., at least following first-cycle studies). Education at postgraduate studies should last a minimum of two semesters, and the curriculum should assume a workload equivalent to at least 30 ECTS credits. The latter requirement appears quite reasonable when considering that postgraduate studies are typically conducted at weekends. The regulations do not define the modes of conducting these studies (full-time/part-time), do not impose the language of instruction, and permit the charging of fees (Article 163, sec. 2). Additionally, in the case of teaching training programmes, the Act stipulates standards for postgraduate studies defined by a separate regulation of the minister responsible for higher education, issued in agreement with the minister responsible for school education (Article 68, sec. 2, point 4).

It is worth noting that individuals participating in postgraduate studies do not possess a specific status within the academic community, such as that held, for example, by students of first- or second-cycle studies. They do not have their own representation in the form

of a student council or within collegiate bodies such as the university senate. Current regulations do not even provide a specific designation for this group of individuals (under the previous legal framework, they were referred to as "postgraduate learners"). In this respect, postgraduate study participants more closely resemble participants in other formats of education, such as courses and training. They could even be described as clients or external stakeholders. Naturally, given a relatively brief format of education that is, effectively, part-time, this is understandable, although a socially responsible and professional institution should endeavour to integrate postgraduate study participants into academic life or provide, for instance, access to the library.

The curricula of postgraduate studies are established by the senate (institute council)² or another body specified in the statute. The learning outcomes are defined by the senate (Article 28, sec. 1, point 11, sec. 5). Similarly, the senate (council) is responsible for:

Article 28, sec. 1

15) performing tasks associated with:

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² Correspondingly, the scientific council of a PAN institute, a research institute, or the Medical Centre of Postgraduate Education (CMKP), hereinafter referred to as the "council".

- a) assigning levels of the Polish Qualifications Framework, hereinafter referred to as the “PRK”, to qualifications awarded upon the completion of postgraduate studies,
- b) the inclusion of qualifications awarded upon the completion of postgraduate studies and other forms of education into the Integrated Qualifications System – in accordance with the Act of 22 December 2015 on the Integrated Qualifications System (Dz.U. /Journal of Laws/ of 2020, item 226, and of 2023, item 2005).

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Legislative measures were an attempt to encourage higher education entities to assimilate the description of postgraduate studies to qualifications offered on and for the labour market.

This creates somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, the postgraduate studies curriculum defines learning outcomes relating to the characteristics at levels 6–8 of the Polish Qualifications Framework (Article 160); on the other hand, in accordance with the Act on the Integrated Qualifications System (UZSK, 2015) and the Regulation concerning postgraduate study certificates³ (Ministry of Science and Higher Education [MNiSW] Reg., 2018/2024), only in the case of postgraduate studies included in the Integrated Qualifications System may a graphic symbol of a partial qualification at a given PRK level and (sic!) the “name of the qualification” be placed on the certificate (§ 2, sec. 2), (MNiSW Reg. 2018/2024). A “regular” certificate of studies not included in the ZSK is required to contain, inter alia, “[...] information concerning the postgraduate studies, including the name [...]” (§ 2, sec. 1, point 6). Additionally, it is worth emphasising that higher education institutions are under no obligation to include postgraduate studies in the ZSK, whereas doctoral studies or diplomas are included in the ZSK almost automatically (cf. below).

Equally interesting is the fact that the aforementioned Regulation *de facto* indirectly specifies the requirements imposed on the postgraduate studies curriculum, as it refers to the content of the certificate, mandating the specification not only of the total number of ECTS credits and the number of classes, but also the separate enumeration of those assigned to: classes developing practical skills (Lewicki, Brdulak, 2024), work placements, and classes conducted using distance learning methods and techniques (§ 2, sec. 1, point 7 as amended on 18 July 2025).

In practice, a postgraduate studies curriculum should primarily describe:

- ➔ the objective of the postgraduate studies and the target group,
- ➔ the learning outcomes aligned with the PRK⁴; and the format(traditional/online/hybrid),

³ Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12 September 2018 on documents issued in connection with the course or completion of postgraduate studies and specialist education. Dz.U. /Journal of Laws/ 2018, item 1791, Dz.U. / Journal of Laws/ 2024, item 1103.

⁴ In practice, a reference to the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 14 November 2018 on the second-cycle characteristics of learning outcomes for the qualification at levels 6–8 of the Polish Qualifications Framework. Dz.U. /Journal of Laws/ 2018, item 2218.

- thematic modules along with hours (including online and practical classes),
- didactic methods and methods of verifying the achievement of learning outcomes,
- workload (min. 30 ECTS), and the number of semesters (min. two),
- as well as any potential requirements regarding work placements.

Additionally, the studies should have regulations specifying the rules for assessments, fees, etc., and a template agreement. Admission criteria must also be defined. If the postgraduate studies are to be included in the ZSK, their description must be adapted to the requirements of the system (cf. below), which in practice may entail partially distinct formats.

MBA as Postgraduate Studies

The Law on Higher Education and Science⁵ does not distinguish studies of the Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Public Administration (MPA), or Executive MBA (EMBA) type, intended for executive and managerial staff in business (MBA), public administration (MPA), or highly-experienced senior-level leaders (EMBA). In Poland, the nature of these programmes diverges significantly from the requirements imposed on master's (second-cycle) studies as a full qualification. Consequently, in the absence of separate regulations, they are implemented on the basis of the provisions for postgraduate studies, whose high degree of generality facilitates the organisation of an MBA in collaboration with a foreign higher education institution or business practitioners. In contrast to the majority of postgraduate studies, MBAs typically last four semesters, and the outcome of the aforementioned collaboration is an additional "diploma" which, however, is neither a joint diploma within the meaning of the UPSWN (such as, for example, a joint master's degree diploma, Article 60) nor, formally speaking, a diploma at all.

Given the specific nature of MBA/MPA programmes, the highly diverse level and scope of programmes offered in Poland and the ensuing abuses, as well as the varying status of such studies in different countries, calls to establish a distinct status for such programmes are increasingly emerging in public discourse (e.g., Sewastianowicz, 2024; Rejer, 2024).

Postgraduate Studies vs the Integrated Qualifications System and its Tools

In accordance with the Act on the Integrated Qualifications System (UZSK, 2015), the ZSK is:

Article 2, point 25

"[...] the part of the National Qualifications System wherein the standards defined

⁵ In Polish law, the term "Master of Business Administration (MBA) postgraduate studies" appeared exclusively in the amended in 2017 Act on the principles of state property management (UZMP, 2016) as one of the qualifications enabling candidates to meet the requirements for members of supervisory and management boards in State Treasury companies. In the face of the weak regulation of postgraduate studies, this became a cause of various abuses, opening the discussion on the status of the MBA.

in the Act for describing qualifications and assigning a Polish Qualifications Framework level to a qualification, the principles for including qualifications in the Integrated Qualifications System and registering them in the Integrated Qualifications Register, as well as the principles and standards for certifying qualifications and assuring the quality of awarding qualifications, are applicable.”

The ZSK is intended to assist individuals interested in acquiring qualifications in making their choices, and to aid employers in more easily recognising employees' qualifications on the basis of their diplomas, certificates, and credentials. While formal qualifications within the fields of school and higher education are well-regulated, qualifications awarded outside these systems are typically not subject to control and quality assurance mechanisms. The ZSK allows for the introduction of such mechanisms.

The primary tools of the ZSK are: the Polish Qualifications Framework (together with level descriptors) and the Integrated Qualifications Register (ZRK). Full qualifications, i.e., first- and second-cycle studies, long-cycle master's studies, and qualifications confirmed by a doctoral diploma, are included in the ZSK by operation of law (Article 12). Concurrently, the UZSK 2015 does not interfere with their description, quality assurance standards, etc., as these are regulated by the Law on Higher Education and Science. This results in the description within the ZRK being highly concise and limited to a few pieces of data regarding the field of study from POL-on⁶.

Postgraduate studies, as previously mentioned, may be included in the ZSK (Article 13), wherein the procedure is simplified in comparison to that for market-based qualifications, as well as free of charge. It is the institution of higher education and science conducting the postgraduate studies that autonomously appoints a team of experts for the purpose of issuing a recommendation concerning the assignment of a PRK level (Article 21, sec. 6). This team should consist of at least three individuals: a minimum of two with experience in performing or teaching the tasks associated with the qualification, and one possessing knowledge of the principles of the ZSK (sec. 2). The scope of the team's work is defined by a separate Regulation (Ministry of Education [ME] Reg., 2025). The aforementioned recommendation is submitted to the Stakeholders Council, which drafts an opinion for the minister coordinating the ZSK (Article 21a, sec. 7)⁷. Upon obtaining a positive opinion regarding the assignment of the PRK level, the senate (council) adopts two resolutions: on the inclusion of the qualification in the ZSK, and on the assignment of the PRK level.

⁶ POL-on is the Integrated System of Information on Higher Education and Science operated by the minister responsible for higher education and science.

⁷ The Stakeholders Council is an advisory body comprising, inter alia, representatives of socio-economic organisations, local government units, the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, the Conference of Rectors of Vocational Schools in Poland, and the Conference of Rectors of Public Vocational Universities.

Subsequently, the postgraduate studies may be reported to the ZRK (Grabowska, 2025).

The description of postgraduate studies in the ZRK is specified in a separate regulation (ME Reg., 2024), which mandates the inclusion of the following data (§ 2):

1. General information (name of the qualification, PRK level, potential reference to sectoral frameworks, International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] code),
2. Basic information encompassing, inter alia:
 - a) examples of activities and tasks that a person holding the qualification is able to perform,
 - b) examples of groups of individuals who may be particularly interested in obtaining the qualification,
 - c) examples of opportunities for utilising the qualification and further personal or professional development, including the possibility of applying for other qualifications and entitlements in a given professional field,
 - d) the duration of the postgraduate studies and the number of ECTS credits,
3. Learning outcomes,
4. Potential validation conditions,
5. Formal information concerning the awarding of the qualification and the entity, e.g., the higher education institution.

The authors of the IBE guidebook edited by Grabowska (2025) point to the differences between the structure of a postgraduate studies curriculum and the description of a qualification awarded upon completion of postgraduate studies: "a study curriculum most frequently consists of a series of subjects (modules) to which learning outcomes are assigned, grouped into three distinct categories: knowledge (knows and understands), skills (is able to) and social competences (is ready to). Conversely, in the case of the description of qualifications awarded upon completion of postgraduate studies, the learning outcomes are specified by verification criteria and grouped into sets [...]" (Grabowska, 2025: 43). It should be noted that the indicated structure of the postgraduate studies curriculum as a format of education organisation stems primarily from practice, rather than from any specific legal requirements (cf. above). When developing this type of curriculum, it is therefore possible to largely amalgamate the requirements of the higher education (sub)systems and the ZSK/ZRK, although naturally this necessitates a greater workload and, in particular, a shift in perspective when defining learning outcomes according to ZRK requirements (learning outcomes grouped into sets and specified by verification criteria; for more detail see Grabowska, 2025).

The description of qualifications included in the ZSK and the detailed requirements of the ZRK diverge from the descriptions of formal education formats in higher education, even though it was the latter paved the way for introducing qualifications frameworks and describing studies in the language of learning outcomes (the "Kudrycka reform" of 2011). The ZSK requirements

were developed with non-formal education and market-based and partial qualifications in mind, offered by highly diverse entities in highly varied formats. In developing the qualifications system for lifelong learning (including the PRK and ZRK), the legislator made the decision to include first- and second-cycle studies, long-cycle studies, and doctorates in the ZSK in their existing form. This results in a limited scope of data in the ZRK, but is justified by the specific nature of higher education, which features its own quality assurance tools, as well as the ECTS system. Simultaneously, a peculiar legal construct for postgraduate studies was introduced into the regulations. On the one hand, the general guidelines of the Law on Higher Education (including the de facto absence of quality assurance) were retained; on the other hand, a portion of the requirements adapting the description to the ZRK was imposed.

It appears that such legislative measures were an attempt to encourage higher education providers to assimilate the description of postgraduate studies to qualifications offered on and for the labour market. If so, the attempt has proven to be entirely unsuccessful. On 25 October 2025, there were merely 38 qualifications following postgraduate studies listed in the Integrated Qualifications Register, including two containing Executive MBA in their name (ZRK, 2025). This is fewer than what is offered independently by any single major higher education institution in Poland.

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Postgraduate studies should have appropriate regulations that ensure greater trust from the environment while maintaining the programmatic flexibility essential for the labour market.

Postgraduate Studies vs Micro-Credentials

Intense discussions are currently underway regarding the introduction of micro-credentials. In accordance with the widely accepted definition (Council of the EU, 2022; Ministry of Education and Science [MEiN], 2023):

Micro-credentials are defined as a record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. The learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills, and competences that respond to societal, personal, and cultural or labour market needs.

When using the term "micro-credential", we predominantly refer to the document confirming its obtainment. European regulations on micro-credentials place emphasis precisely on this area. The Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022, which introduced micro-credentials and defines the standards for their description, is of key importance. The mandatory elements include (Council of the EU, 2022: Annex I):

1. Identification of the learner;
2. Title of the micro-credential;
3. Country/region of the issuer;

4. Awarding body/bodies,
5. Date of issue,
6. Learning outcomes,
7. Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (expressed in ECTS credits wherever possible),
8. Level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA) where appropriate,
9. Type of assessment,
10. Form of participation in the learning experience,
11. Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential.

The optional elements include (ibid.):

1. Prerequisites for enrolling in the learning experience,
2. Supervision and identity verification during assessment (no supervision and no identity verification / supervision and no identity verification / online or on-site supervision with identity verification),
3. Grade obtained,
4. Integration/stacking options (standalone/independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable micro-credential),
5. Additional information.

The term “micro-credential” does not yet function within the Polish legal system. There are discussions concerning the introduction of certain regulations alongside the amendment of the Law on Higher Education and Science; however, at the time of writing this text (October 2025), the ministry has not presented a concrete draft. All discussions are therefore of an informal nature.

Nevertheless, it is worth comparing the aforementioned Council Recommendation with the Regulation of the Minister of Education of 22 January 2024 on the scope of information collected in the Integrated Qualifications Register on partial qualifications awarded upon completion of postgraduate studies (ME Reg., 2024), which has already been presented in this study. A comparison of the provisions contained in § 2 of this Regulation with the provisions contained in the Council Recommendations indicates that, in practice, the majority of the expected descriptions contained in the Integrated Qualifications Register and on a micro-credential overlap. The only area indicated in the Council Recommendations that is not explicitly indicated in the Regulation is the quality assurance method. The Council Recommendation clearly articulates a mandatory expectation here: “Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential”.

Quality Assurance in Education

European expectations regarding quality assurance are growing (as exemplified by the Council of the EU Recommendation of 2022 analysed in this text); meanwhile, over the last 10 years, the development of the Polish quality assurance system has not been significant, and it continues to face a series of challenges. Under the current legal framework, postgraduate studies are *de facto* not covered by external quality assurance in education. The Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA), as part of the evaluation of the quality of education, only conducts programme evaluations of first- and second-cycle studies and long-cycle studies (Article 242), (UPSWN, 2018). Comprehensive evaluation is only just being introduced and, pursuant to Article 243, shall apply exclusively to higher education institutions, while its criteria do not explicitly indicate the inclusion of postgraduate studies (MNiSW Reg., 2025). Concurrently, various international institutional accreditations (such as EQUIS or AACSB in the field of business) take into account whether a higher education institution encompasses various forms of education, including *executive education*, within its internal quality assurance system. The guidelines of *The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) also refer broadly to higher education provision, and not merely to a “formal degree” (ESG, 2015: 7).

Provisions concerning the quality assurance of postgraduate studies by the Polish Accreditation Committee were included in the draft amendment to the Law on Higher Education and Science presented in 2024 by Minister Dariusz Wiecezorek. In the authors' assessment, the ministry's expectation that PKA will evaluate postgraduate study programmes is unfeasible, as PKA lacks the resources to conduct such additional activity. For instance, the SGH Warsaw School of Economics has approximately 30 first- and second-cycle study programmes and approx. 170 postgraduate study programmes. Evaluating them would be an unbearable burden for PKA, especially since PKA has thus far managed to evaluate approximately 50% of study programmes in Poland (PKA, 2024). The PKA evaluation is not obligatory, and the benefits deriving from it for students and graduates are little recognised by higher education institutions and their stakeholders (a PKA evaluation leads to the visibility of a given study programme within the European Higher Education Area, thereby granting the programme credibility). As a result, despite statutory provisions, higher education institutions do not submit applications to PKA for evaluations of their study programmes, and the number of programmes lacking a PKA evaluation is growing (*ibid.*).

Discussions regarding the quality assurance of postgraduate studies should instead focus on creating mechanisms that enable higher education institutions to assure quality independently. These mechanisms will be introduced through PKA's comprehensive evaluation. Comprehensive evaluation, according to PKA's intentions (as of October 2025), is intended to empower higher education institutions to create mechanisms of a “teaching audit”. Thus, based on the European

standards (ESG 2015), a higher education institution should incorporate into its structure an independent unit possessing adequate resources, which will evaluate study programmes. At present, this primarily brings to mind the programmes evaluated by PKA as part of a programme evaluation, namely first- and second-cycle studies; however, a university “teaching audit” could also evaluate other formats of education delivered by higher education institutions, e.g., specialist education (Level 5 of the PRK), education in doctoral schools (independent of the evaluation of doctoral schools conducted by the Science Evaluation Committee⁸), and, notably, postgraduate studies, which could be delivered in a format similar to micro-credentials.

Thus, a solution is emerging within the Polish higher education system that may lead to the quality assurance of postgraduate studies. However, this will not occur rapidly, as according to PKA's declarations, in the 2025/26 academic year, PKA will develop comprehensive evaluation procedures, in the subsequent year it will conduct pilots, and broader access to comprehensive evaluation will only be made available to higher education institutions in approximately two years' time. This evaluation is to be addressed in particular to higher education institutions of an academic nature, meaning those that are not based on a business model in the field of education.

The extent to which PKA will be able to realise these intentions remains to be seen. Given a series of weaknesses faced by the Committee – e.g., lack of legal personality, lack of adequate resources, lack of determined will on the part of political decision-makers to strengthen oversight mechanisms for the higher education sector – it may turn out that these intentions will not translate into genuine solutions capable of effectively assuring the quality of postgraduate study programmes. Unfortunately, this would be to the detriment of the entire system, as the visibility of postgraduate study programmes within the European Higher Education Area and the recognition of competences acquired by graduates of these programmes are at stake. PKA is the only Polish quality assurance agency mandated to publish its evaluations in the European DEQAR database (Database of External Quality Assurance Results) operated by EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) (Uriasz, Brdulak, 2025).

Summary

Postgraduate studies constitute an important tool for both the upskilling and reskilling of adults. This educational provision acquires particular significance in the rapidly evolving world of the economy and technology, and in the face of demographic changes. Postgraduate studies remain especially relevant for regulated professions, as well as in management and broadly understood

⁸ For more detail, see e.g., J. Lewicki (2022). Zapewnianie jakości kształcenia w szkołach doktorskich – wybrane zagadnienia, In: K. Górak-Sosnowska, L. Tomaszewska (eds.), *Administracja uczelni w dobie pandemii*, SGH Publishing House, pp. 257-271. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12182/1271>. [accessed 26.10.2025].

business. This suggests that the role of postgraduate studies, both in the education of human resources and within the programme provisions of higher education institutions, will continue to grow.

The rather general nature of the regulations concerning postgraduate studies, on the one hand, enables higher education entities to respond flexibly (and more swiftly than in the case of higher education degree programmes) to labour market needs; on the other hand, it results in a substantial variance in the quality level of the postgraduate studies offered. The low integration of postgraduate studies with the ZSK, which stems from the legal framework, also fails to positively impact the transparency and comparability of the qualifications themselves, or the widespread awareness of tools such as the Integrated Qualifications Register.

The primary challenge regarding postgraduate studies is quality assurance. A certain opportunity to address this challenge lies in the higher education system's profound understanding of the logic characteristic of the European Higher Education Area, particularly encompassing micro-credentials. These will also require quality assurance mechanisms, which may be similar to those for postgraduate studies. Thanks to these mechanisms, postgraduate studies offered by Polish higher education institutions will gain greater European visibility (which will undoubtedly lead to their heightened competitiveness) and, above all, will offer study participants more (formal) benefits. Simultaneously, the Polish higher education sector will develop in alignment with European trends. In our assessment, a responsible and multifaceted discussion on this subject is imperative.

Postgraduate studies should have appropriate regulations that ensure greater trust from the environment while maintaining the programmatic flexibility essential for the labour market. This is particularly important in the current situation, amidst an ongoing image crisis of this educational format caused by diploma mills.

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Studia podyplomowe powinny mieć odpowiednie regulacje, które zapewnią większe zaufanie otoczenia przy zachowaniu elastyczności programowej niezbędnej dla rynku pracy.

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Employability Skills Expected by Employers

The Case of the Lubuskie Voivodeship

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Vocational education plays a key role in supporting economic development. Not only does it supply the labour market with a well-prepared workforce, but it also builds the social capital of learners. These issues are raised both in academic literature and among vocational education practitioners. The skills that enhance an individual's position on the labour market (often referred to as *employability skills*¹), which are expected by employers and are essential for effective work and functioning within the professional sphere (OECD, 2019), include:

- cognitive skills: analytical thinking, creativity, foreign language skills,
- methodological competences: learning skills, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management, result orientation, digital skills,
- social skills: communication and interpersonal competences, coping with change, conflict management, teamwork, stress management, intercultural competences.

Theory vs Reality

The extent to which the list of employability skills aligns with the actual expectations of employers was investigated during research conducted in 2023 in the Lubuskie Voivodeship². On the basis of an analysis of job advertisements from the Central Database of Job Offers, the needs and requirements of employers from this region were determined³. A total of 377 employment offers of a diverse nature were analysed to ascertain whether companies and institutions seeking employees genuinely expect candidates to possess employability skills.

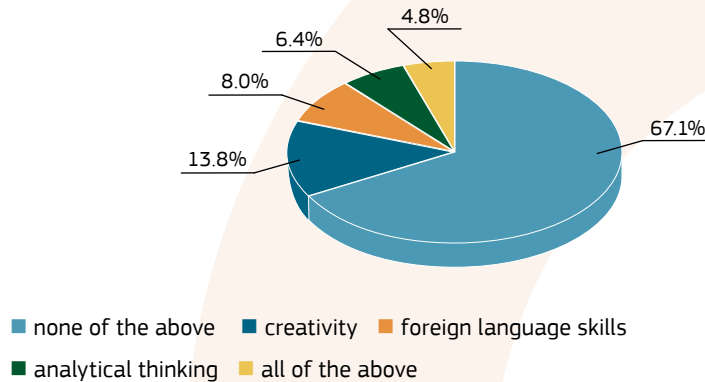
Over 67% of the advertisements did not contain any requirements regarding cognitive skills (Chart 1). Less than 14% of employers expected creativity from their candidates, slightly over 6% expected analytical thinking, and 8% expected knowledge of foreign languages. Merely one in twenty employers listed all of these cognitive traits in their job offers.

¹ The term skills for jobs can also be found in OECD documents, e.g., in the Skills for Jobs Database: www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org/index.php#PL/ [accessed 8.07.2025].

² The article was prepared on the basis of a document drafted within the framework of the project: "Skills create opportunities. Building a system for the coordination and monitoring of regional activities for vocational education, higher education and lifelong learning, including adult learning", Contract KPO/22/LLL/U/003, Institute of Sociology of the University of Zielona Góra, Zielona Góra, April 2024.

³ The local labour market in this region relies predominantly on enterprises employing up to 9 employees (96.8% of all enterprises); all counties are similar in this respect. Between 2018 and 2022, the number of the smallest enterprises increased markedly; however, this was accompanied by negative processes within the group of enterprises employing between 10 and 49 employees and, in the case of some counties, also within the group of companies with between 50 and 249 employees.

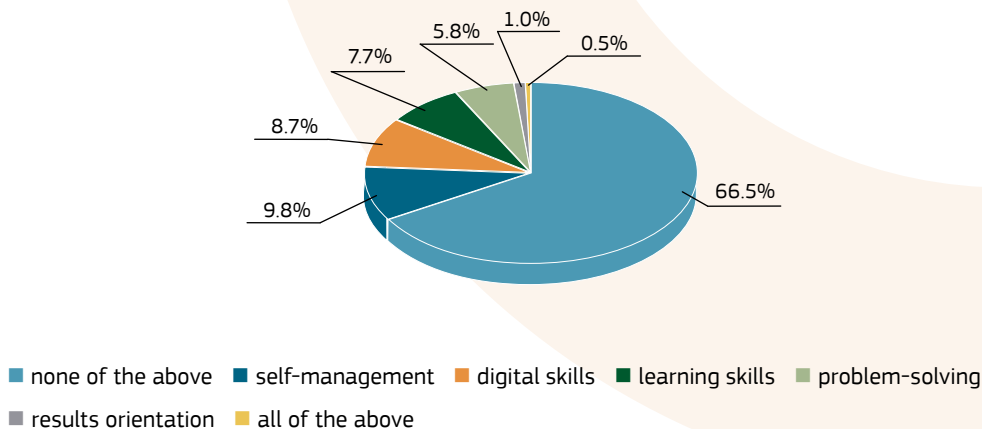
Chart 1. Cognitive competences



Source: author's own elaboration.

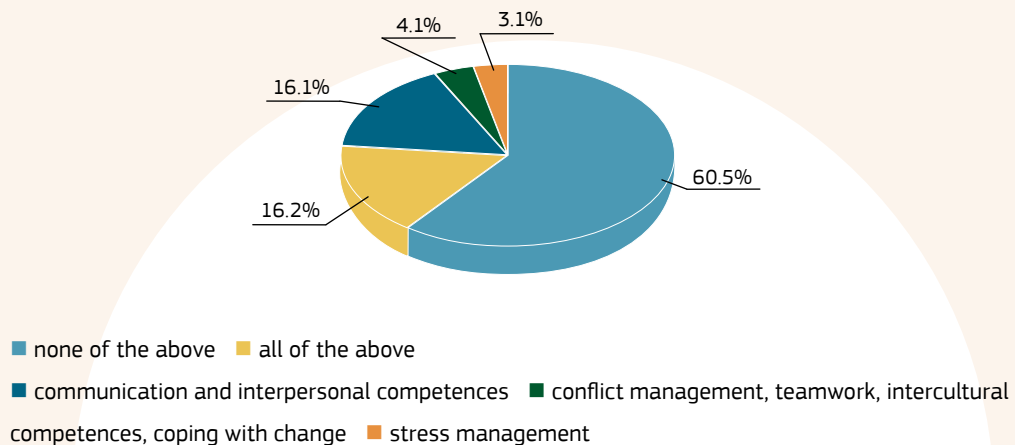
The situation was similar in the case of methodological competences (Chart 2). Over 2/3 of job offers contained no expectations in this regard. The remainder included requirements concerning self-management, problem-solving skills, digital skills, and learning skills (from 5% to 10% of advertisements). Result orientation was mentioned by very few employers.

Chart 2. Methodological competences



Source: author's own elaboration.

Chart 3. Social competences



Source: author's own elaboration.

Expectations regarding social competences appeared most frequently in the advertisements, though still rarely (Chart 3). 16% of employers indicated that they require communication skills and interpersonal competences from their future employees. Only to a limited extent were job candidates expected to possess the ability to manage stress and/or conflict, work in a team, cope with change, or demonstrate intercultural competences.

The study also examined the correlation between the frequency of expressing specific expectations and the sector in which a given employer operates. Creativity is most frequently required by educational institutions, companies operating in the hotel and catering sector, and in fashion-related positions. Expectations regarding analytical thinking appear in offers from companies in the construction sector, and foreign languages skills in the advertisements of specialised enterprises from the mechanical engineering sector (e.g., Chinese in Żagań County).

The analyses also demonstrated that cognitive predictors are significant for employers from the educational sector, result orientation is valuable in the mechatronics sector, problem-solving skills in the mechanical and educational sectors, and digital skills are highly desirable in economic-administrative and IT positions.

Regarding methodological predictors: learning skills are expected primarily by employers in the hotel, catering, and tourism sectors. The expectation of proficient self-management also appears across many positions in various sectors (it would be worthwhile paying attention to this aspect during vocational education). In turn, social competences are most desired in commerce and education, as well as in the hairdressing and beauty sector, and in healthcare and social assistance, which seems justified. Among other social competences, relatively few indications relate to teamwork

skills (the construction, wood and furniture sectors). The lack of expectations regarding coping with change and conflict management is concerning. Perhaps this stems from the context of the study and the fact that the offers essentially concerned routine and standardised tasks.

In summary, the majority of employers (over 60%) did not pay attention to employability skills in their offers. When they did, they highlighted requirements in the area of social competences, mainly communication and interpersonal skills (16%). Meanwhile, in other studies⁴, these same employers draw attention to a glaring lack of methodological competences in newly hired employees (for example, regarding self-management). It may be inferred that at the stage of seeking employees and formulating job offers, attention is primarily focused on professional competences that take the form of formal qualifications, which, unlike most other competences, hold a distinct market value⁵. It is only after employees have been hired that employers perceive the deficit in non-vocational competences.

What Else Emerges from the Analysis of Job Offers

The review of job offers also made it possible to draw numerous other conclusions regarding the situation on the Lubuskie labour market. The analysis showed that:

- entities representing all industries are present in the Lubuskie Voivodeship, although some of them clearly dominate, including wholesale and retail trade, construction, real estate activities, other service activities, households employing workers and households producing goods and providing services for their own use, as well as professional, scientific and technical activities, manufacturing, and transportation and storage;
- certain sectors are concentrated in specific counties. Construction companies operate primarily in Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski, and the Zielona Góra and Nowa Sól counties. The logistics sector is situated predominantly in Zielona Góra and Słubice County; the automotive sector in Żagań and Zielona Góra counties; the commercial sector in Gorzów, Krosno, Międzyrzecz, Słubice, and Strzelce-Drezdenko counties. The structure of job offers mirrors the structure of the dominant sectors in the voivodeship and their geographical diversity;

⁴ The fourth part of the research conducted within the framework of the project in 2025 – from the perspective of employers, who are important stakeholders in vocational education.

⁵ This issue was discussed in detail by Prof. Stefan M. Kwiatkowski during a lecture entitled *Kompetencje przyszłości* [Competences of the Future], delivered at the Congress for the Development of the Education System in Warsaw on 10 September 2018.

- employers in the region are seeking employees primarily from the following sectors: construction, chemical, wood and furniture, economic and administrative, electronic and mechatronic, electrical power engineering, hairdressing and beauty, hotel and catering, logistics, mechanical, automotive, educational, and healthcare;
- job opportunities for individuals in particularly vulnerable situations on the labour market (women over 50 years of age, individuals unemployed for at least 12 months, individuals with low qualifications, individuals with disabilities) are highly restricted. Scarcely 2% of the analysed offers pertained to individuals with disabilities, primarily from the commercial, economic and administrative, and electronic and mechatronic sectors, as well as those associated with healthcare, security, and safety. Within the automotive, food, tourism, and hotel and catering sectors, only single offers for individuals in a difficult situation on the labour market were identified;

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The majority of employers (over 60%) did not pay attention to employability skills in their offers. When they did, they highlighted requirements in the area of social competences, mainly communication

- the vast majority of job offers in the Lubuskie region concern positions that do not require higher education. Advertisements typically mention a minimum of secondary/vocational education and basic vocational/sectoral education. Every fifth offer concerns manual workers and expects them to have primary education. Numerous offers for individuals with primary education (over 20%), namely those with low qualifications or none at all, were also noted.

Vocational Education in the Region

As previously mentioned, the presented empirical results constitute a part of broader research on regional activities for vocational education in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. It is worth citing a few conclusions from the diagnosis (Nyćkowiak, 2024) concerning the shaping of employability skills.

- In the Lubuskie Voivodeship, 1,572 entities were identified as being engaged in vocational education in some capacity. Entities classified within the formal education system outnumber entities from the area of non-formal and informal education (they account for nearly 54%). Schools, higher education institutions, and vocational education institutions constitute 14.4% of all entities. The majority are of a public nature, and their running body is typically the local government.
- Among entities from the area of non-formal and informal education, training companies predominate (approx. 30%), followed by social economy entities (approx. 25%). Vocational education (in a broad sense) is also delivered by cultural institutions, the Voluntary Labour Corps (OHP), occupational therapy workshops, universities of the third age, senior citizens' clubs, and other institutions and organisations not conventionally treated as elements of the system.

- Within the formal vocational education system, in the group of vocational education schools and institutions, stage I sectoral vocational schools and technical upper secondary schools have the largest share (53.6%). The majority of these institutions (72.1%) operate within school complexes.
- Provisions in the area of vocational education are directed primarily at adults and youth (approx. 30% each); seniors (16.2%) and children (12%) also constitute significant categories of recipients.
- Practical vocational training (PNZ) is most frequently conducted at employers' premises within the voivodeship (51%), and in one in three cases, in schools (38.1%). Educational institutions also organise practical vocational training in other forms.
- Full-time vocational counsellors are employed in 12.6% of entities (predominantly in schools, but also in the social economy sector and training companies), while in 0.2% of entities, counsellors are external employees (training companies).
- Post-primary schools in the Lubuskie Voivodeship offer education in at least 129 different professions, yet in many counties, it is not possible to train in all fields. The highest number of professions is offered by schools in Gorzów Wielkopolski (91) and Zielona Góra (68), whereas the fewest professions are offered by schools in the following counties: Zielona Góra (17), Krosno (19), Strzelce-Drezdenko (21), Słubice (22), and Sulęcín (22). The most popular professions are IT technician, cook, motor vehicle mechanic, logistics technician, salesperson, nutrition and catering services technician, hairdresser, medical carer, and motor vehicle technician.
- Juxtaposing the characteristics of professions (deficit, balanced, surplus) with the provision of professions taught, one can speak of a mismatch between the educational provision and the needs of the labour market. This problem occurs on the largest scale in the Gorzów and Sulęcín counties, as well as in the Słubice and Strzelce-Drezdenko counties.
- The opportunities to acquire partial qualifications outside the school education system are diverse. The highest number among the 1,600 analysed training and course offers pertained to sectors associated with transport and storage, education/development, recreation, and other services, among which training for the beauty sector can be distinguished. Qualifications in fields associated with industry, finance, administration and management, or computer operation are offered relatively rarely in the voivodeship.

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The analyses enable the identification of a series of weaknesses in the education system, including a lack of extensive collaboration networks between schools and entrepreneurs, and insufficient emphasis on practical education.

- An analysis was also conducted on the provision of 283 courses and training sessions implemented within the school education system. In every county, it is possible to acquire qualifications within the beauty sector. In almost every county, there is also the opportunity to obtain authorisations to operate machinery and equipment.
- The possibility of acquiring partial qualifications outside the voivodeship capital cities is restricted. In both regional capitals, the scope of available opportunities to obtain qualifications encompasses, inter alia, training in the areas of personal development, technology, IT and computer use, foreign languages, as well as in the scope of healthcare and working in medical care (doctors, nurses, veterinarians, and administrative staff in the medical sector), alongside specialist courses for nurses and midwives.
- Courses and training may also be organised within enterprises. The activities in this area of 176 companies from the Lubuskie region, which were distinguished in the Forbes Diamonds 2022 ranking, were subjected to analysis. Just under one in six companies (17.6%) declares on its website that it conducts training. The majority of the analysed companies (67.7%) implement internal training, and one in three implements training for individuals outside the company.
- Upon analysing the possibility of pursuing a full, complementary educational pathway (from sectoral vocational school to higher education), it was established that in the Lubuskie Voivodeship, full educational articulation applied to three professions. Theoretical educational articulation between stage I and stage II sectoral vocational schools, resulting from a failure to launch the relevant programmes, applied to five professions. In stage II sectoral vocational schools, the opportunity existed to continue education in six professions offered at the level of stage I schools. Additionally, there were four professions in which such an opportunity existed, but they had not been launched at the stage II sectoral school level.
- Vocational school students constitute the majority within the structure of post-primary school students in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. Traditionally, students of technical upper secondary schools constitute the largest proportion; over the last 5 years, an increase in the share of vocational school students within the overall student structure has been perceptible.
- The largest higher education institution in terms of student numbers is the University of Zielona Góra (77.3% of the region's students are educated here). During the analysed period, a decline in the total number of students at higher education institutions in the Lubuskie region can be noted.

- In the 2022/2023 school year, 4,387 teachers (predominantly women) taught in vocational schools. Over half of them worked in technical upper secondary schools, and one in three taught vocational subjects, predominantly catering, IT, and logistics and forwarding. Over the last 5 years, the number of vocational subject teachers has decreased by slightly under 4%.

The analyses enable the identification of a series of weaknesses in the education system, including a lack of extensive collaboration networks between schools and entrepreneurs, insufficient emphasis on practical education, a discrepancy between labour market needs and educational provisions, and staff shortages. Furthermore, strategic documents lack correlations between the market characteristics of the region and the implementation of smart specialisations and educational provisions. The vocational education market in the Lubuskie region has the potential to develop, provided it is adequately staffed, vocational guidance is supported, and collaboration with employers and social partners is bolstered. Local governments must also be incorporated into activities aimed at the development of vocational education. The conclusions drawn from the presented analyses ought to be utilised in practice.

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Since 2021, the National Team of Experts for Vocational Education and Training (EVET) has operated within the Foundation for the Development of the Education System. The team comprises educators, examiners, officials, researchers and academics closely associated with various fields of vocational training at both secondary and higher education levels. Its mission is to enhance the quality of VET by supporting sectoral vocational schools and technical secondary schools in strengthening their cooperation with employers. The experts provide substantive advice to Erasmus+ beneficiaries and to entities active within the Polish VET system. In cooperation with the Polish National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Solidarity Corps, they develop information materials that can be downloaded free of charge from the official website. Continuing the series, this publication presents a selection of articles prepared by the EVET Team of Experts in 2025.

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