



Sustainable cooperation of VET providers and enterprise for improving graduates' employability

Polish good practices in the field of cooperation between VET and companies

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Executive Summary

This report analyses selected mechanisms of cooperation between vocational schools and enterprises in Poland, as well as certain mechanisms supporting this cooperation. In particular, it discusses the not entirely flawless but very valuable system of dual education for juvenile workers, typically carried out in small craft enterprises, as well as the practice of larger companies setting up patronage classes. The mechanisms for involving companies in shaping the structure of occupations, the content of teaching and examination questions are also briefly described. Next, good practices in business cooperation with vocational schools using the above-mentioned tools are discussed. The report also contains a concise introduction to the history and structure of the VET system in Poland and concludes with an analysis of the impact of school-business cooperation on the situation of students and companies, as well as an attempt to assess the transferability of the solutions studied, based primarily on the identification of minimum requirements that must be met by countries wishing to achieve success in this area.

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to identify the most important good practices in the field of cooperation between vocational schools and employers to improve the quality of practical training in Poland. This will be accompanied by a brief description of the functioning of the Polish vocational training system, including its legal and institutional framework. The identified good practices, taking into account the context for a better assessment of transferability and scalability, are intended to be a source of inspiration for vocational education reforms in selected African countries participating in the project “SUCCESS: Sustainable cooperation of VET providers and enterprise for improving graduates’ employability”, implemented under the leadership of the La Salle Foundation.

The state of vocational education in Poland and how this segment of education cooperates with business has been a subject of discussion for years in academic circles, among public policy makers, as well as practitioners associated both with schools and the business community interested in the level of graduates’ skills. It seems that especially in the last decade, this discussion has intensified, covering such a fundamental issue as the place of vocational education in the entire education system. It should be indicated that in Poland, during the political transition that began at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, which consisted of the shift from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, there was a significant depreciation of vocational education. Interest in this educational path declined rapidly among young people, most of whom wanted to pursue tertiary (university) education. As the number of students decreased, so did the quality of VET due to insufficient funding. Another problem was that the curricula were not adapted to the expectations and needs of employers in a rapidly modernising economy, as well as the growing importance of the service sector at the expense of industry. The cooperation between schools and businesses, which is at the heart of this study, was also far from satisfactory. After many former large state-owned companies – undergoing restructuring, privatisation and often liquidation – withdrew from running in-house vocational schools, there was no new cooperation mechanisms to fill this gap. The lack of cooperation exacerbated the existing problems: schools and cooperating vocational training centres were not able to grant students access to up-to-date equipment and technologies currently used in

the economy as part of vocational training, and there was no opportunity to make up for these shortcomings through cooperation with companies.

The VET system in Poland deteriorated particularly severely in the first decade of the 21st century. Between 2001 and 2010, 52% of vocational schools were closed and the number of students decreased by 48% (from 1.5 million to 780,000). Poland became one of the four European Union countries with the lowest proportion of vocational school students in the total number of young people educated at secondary level (Kabaj 2011).

The second decade of the 21st century brought increased awareness among both policy makers and the general public of the importance and usefulness of high-quality vocational education and training. During this period, a number of reforms of the VET system were carried out, aimed, among other things, at improving cooperation between vocational schools and businesses. The core curricula were modernised and made more flexible, ensuring a clear structure using learning outcomes language with accordance with the European Qualifications Framework (CEDEFOP 2025) and providing for the possibility of updating, which can be requested by various stakeholders (including business organisations). They can also request the addition of new occupations to the VET classification. In addition, since 2017, a fundamental reform of the entire national education system has been carried out, fundamentally changing its structure, which has also affected the shape of vocational education¹. The existing basic vocational schools, which, as previously indicated, did not enjoy social recognition, have been replaced by two-stage sectoral schools. Completion of the optional second stage gives graduates a technician's qualification and allows them to take the maturity examination, and thus to participate in tertiary education. The duration of another type of vocational school, the technical secondary school (*technikum*), was also extended from four to five years².

In the current decade, one might get the impression that, perhaps under the influence of various other political problems, but also in view of the very favourable situation on the labour market (record low unemployment), the debate on the quality of VET and the need for it to cooperate with business has lost its significance. Important for further analysis and its purpose (to deliver good practices for African countries) is undoubtedly the fact that the Polish VET system was initially in a significant crisis and underwent a path of reforms, although it should rather be said that it still does not function at the same high level as in Western European countries (e.g. Germany), as shown by some analyses (see, for example, NIK 2024). Below, some additional comments will be made on specific shortcomings to better understand the specific nature of the analysed solutions.

2. Methodology

The content of this report is based on an analysis of secondary sources (desk research). The types of data taken into consideration include legal acts regulating the functioning of the VET system and practical vocational training in Poland, scientific articles, publications of state institutions (e.g. supervisory bodies), as well as other publications available online. The main objective of the analysis is to identify the most important models of cooperation between vocational education and the

¹ The structure of the Polish VET system after the reform is presented in Annex 1.

² A key element of the reform was the removal of lower secondary schools, known as *gimnazjum* (for pupils aged 13-16).

business sector in order to improve the quality of education by providing students with practical vocational training in conditions as close as possible to the real working environment in the profession being taught. Next, examples of good practices addressing these models are analysed. This discussion includes the broader context of the functioning of the VET system, including in particular the regulatory framework (and key changes in its structure), the institutional environment (basic information on the entities regulating the operation of vocational schools, key stakeholders in the system), as well as the most important problems of the functioning of VET in Poland with reference to the broader socio-economic environment (an outline of the national context has already been presented in the introduction to the report). It is crucial to note here that Poland is an example of a country at an intermediate level of development which underwent intensive political and economic transition processes less than 30 years ago, resulting in upheaval in many areas of social life, including vocational education.

3. Type of Cooperation Models

This section identifies five mechanisms that the author considers most important in ensuring/supporting cooperation between vocational schools and business in Poland. They vary in nature and scale, and were introduced at different stages of the VET system development. They have been ranked according to their importance/impact on the quality of practical vocational education, although this is based on the author's subjective assessment.

3.1. Dual education/dual vocational training model

Dual vocational education is understood here – in accordance with the definition commonly accepted in Europe (and probably not only there) – as a model of education that involves the intertwining of theoretical and practical vocational training, with the former taking place in typical educational facilities and the latter in companies that take on students for training in a real working environment (Symela 2016: 10). From a practical point of view, it should be emphasised that we are talking about longer periods of learning (e.g. from one to three years) as opposed to short, several-week internships. The second important aspect is the alternation of both modes of learning at short intervals. Typically in Poland, within the framework of cooperation between first-stage sectoral schools and companies providing practical training, we are talking about two days of learning at school and three days of training at the workplace.

In the Polish context, dual education is a complex issue and not without controversy. At the same time, it is a scheme of education that has been present in the education system for a very long time, based on old traditions of training journeymen in crafts (see: description of good practice 1) and company schools accompanying large state-owned enterprises in the era of a centrally planned economy. On the other hand, during the debate mentioned in the introduction, which took place especially in the last decade, it was pointed out that the shape of this solution was far from satisfactory. In particular, the imperfect legal framework (e.g. with regard to public financial support for employers taking on apprentices) and the relatively low participation of vocational school students in this education scheme were highlighted³. Publications emphasised that this solution

³ In recent years, there has been a lack of publicly available data on the number of juvenile workers (i.e. students participating in dual education) among vocational school students. The latest data for 2018/19 showed a share of 57.4%, while in previous years this figure hovered around 50%. It should be remembered

works better in countries such as Germany, which are cited as examples of good practice for Poland (Kabaj 2016).

Criticism of dual education solutions has led to some rather limited reform measures, which, in the author's assessment, have not brought about a revolutionary improvement in the quality of education or an increase in the number of students benefiting from this education scheme, and will not be analysed in detail here. From the perspective of the objectives of this report, certain detailed rules governing the functioning of this mode of education are important. It is worth mentioning that students participating in this scheme have the status of so-called juvenile workers, whose work is regulated by a number of legal acts, including the Labour Code (a separate section 9 is devoted to them) and a number of lower-level legal acts – regulations of the Minister of Labour (listed in References). The law regulates a number of aspects of the employment of juvenile workers, including its purpose, which should be vocational training if the person concerned has no professional qualifications. They may not be employed in heavy or harmful work, and working time standards are set to ensure that training is aligned with school education. For example, persons under the age of 16 may work a maximum of 6 hours per day. The employer is obliged to grant a number of facilities to employees, such as appropriate equipment or work clothing, as well as to comply with health and safety standards. Young workers are entitled to a modest remuneration amounting to between 8% and 10% of the average monthly wage in the national economy.

Dual education in Poland has certain shortcomings, which should be briefly mentioned here. From the perspective of employers, a potential disadvantage is the nature of students, who statistically still more often than students of general secondary schools represent “difficult youth” with a negative social background and a tendency towards dangerous, unlawful behaviour (e.g. use of psychoactive substances). The situation is not improved by, among other things, extensive administrative procedures (bureaucracy), which particularly affect small craft businesses, and certain unfavourable rules. For instance, part of the reimbursement of education costs from public funds, which is available to companies employing workers, may be lost if the student interrupts their education or fails to take the exam confirming their professional qualifications. From the school's perspective, the attitude of some employers who want to use students as “cheap” labour without intending to provide them with proper vocational training may be a potential problem. Despite these and a number of other drawbacks, the dual scheme of education should be considered particularly valuable for improving the quality of vocational education.

3.2. Sponsored (“patronage”) classes

Large companies, which in Poland are often part of multinational corporations (although there are also cases of large private domestic companies, state-owned companies or even local government companies, such as the tram operator in the Polish capital, Warsaw), may cooperate with selected vocational schools in order to provide their students with a whole package of facilities for practical vocational training. This practice is referred to as patronage classes. The employer concludes an agreement with the school headmaster and provides support to one or more classes training in a

that an important and numerous segment of VET in Poland are students of technical secondary schools, which, in addition to vocational qualifications, provide students with a curriculum corresponding to general secondary education and the possibility of participating in tertiary education. In their case, the dual form of education is used very rarely. This is due to the nature of these schools, among other things, the extensive core curriculum of general education, which strongly ties students to educational facilities.

specific profession. This is a way for the employer to recruit qualified employees living a short distance from the company's headquarters. In this way, the employer can develop available workforce, drawing on local human resources. The form and structure of the core curriculum, which must be implemented by the school in cooperation with companies, allows for some flexibility in shaping the content of teaching. The final curriculum may contain approximately 20-30% of content tailored to the specific needs of the employer and the technologies used, such as equipment and software (Pańków 2021).

Among other things, a patron may offer the school the following: practical vocational training at the company's premises (in the form of dual education or similar), equipping school workshops, financing scholarships or other awards for the best students, offering employment to the best graduates, and in the case of international corporations, e.g. international student exchanges. Well-known and widely analysed example of this type of cooperation will be described as good practice #2.

3.3. Mechanisms of employer influence on the core curriculum and classification of VET occupations

The crisis in VET in Poland mentioned in the introduction manifested itself, among other things, in the mismatch between the content of education and the needs of companies in conditions of rapid technological and market changes. Researchers wrote about a peculiar paradox: the intensive economic development of the past decade revealed significant deficits in well-educated technical staff and skilled workers, while at the same time unemployment among vocational school graduates was higher than among university graduates (Kabaj 2016). Therefore, the reforms of the past decade also involved giving employers a voice in the shape of both the classification of vocational education and training occupations and the core curricula, which constitute a binding set of learning outcomes that students must achieve in order to obtain a given vocational qualification.

At national level, employers' organisations and other business associations may submit requests to the Ministry of Education to add a specific occupation or modify/update the core curriculum of an occupation already included in the VET classification. This can be done through direct relations with the ministry (usually, however, in cooperation with other stakeholders and experts, as will be shown in good practice #3), but an interesting support mechanism has also been introduced in the form of the Sectoral Competence Councils project (which will be briefly described as good practice #4). Other stakeholders relevant to a specific sector, including trade unions, also have a say in the content of teaching, although, as indicated by Pańków's (2022) study, they show less interest in this issue. At the regional level, employers' organisations also have a say by participating in the consultation process on the structure of educational programmes within regional bodies called Provincial Labour Market Councils. These bodies may in turn consult the local body, the County Labour Market Council, responsible for the location of a given school. The basic criterion for evaluation here is the demand for a given profession on the local and regional labour market.

3.4. Student internship

Since 2019, a new variant of dual education called "student internship" has been introduced in Polish education law. Compared to the previously described training of juvenile workers, which in Polish conditions can be described as a "classic" variant of dual VET, there are several organisational and formal differences. This internship can be used not only in first-stage sectoral schools, but also in

technical secondary schools, i.e. schools combining the characteristics of a vocational school (providing education at the level of a technician's qualification) and a general secondary school. The student does not have the status of a juvenile worker and the provisions of the Labour Code do not apply. At the same time, separate provisions regulate certain basic principles for the implementation of this mode of practical vocational training, including working time standards and the principle that it may only be carried out during the student's vocational education, serving to acquire practical skills in the profession being taught. The student is entitled to remuneration up to the statutory minimum wage (in 2025, this is equivalent to approximately EUR 1,090), although it may be agreed that no remuneration will be paid. The remuneration is not reimbursed to the employer, however, it is tax deductible. The internship is carried out on the basis of an agreement concluded between the school headmaster, the employer and the student or his/her parents. The content of the training may extend the school curriculum. Flexibility is granted with regard to the duration of the internship, but this period is included in the person's length of service, which determines subsequent employment rights (e.g. the length of annual leave entitlement).

3.5. Other recently introduced mechanisms for cooperating with vocational schools

Reforms from the past decade have also introduced other mechanisms aimed at encouraging schools to cooperate with business. Among other things, a vocational school headmaster wishing to extend the range of professions taught must establish some form of cooperation with local business by concluding an agreement with a specific company or companies (Pańków 2021). This cooperation may involve, for example, the creation of a patronage class, cooperation with an employer in the implementation of practical vocational training, equipping school workshops by the company, involving it in the organisation of vocational examinations, improving the skills of vocational teachers or providing career guidance.

The new mechanisms also include the possibility of involving business associations in preparing tasks for state examinations confirming professional qualifications. In 2016-2019, the Central Examination Board (CKE) implemented a project entitled "Development of task banks for vocational examinations", which involved the creation of tens of thousands of new examination tasks in cooperation with experts and business/employer organisations. This resulted in nearly 50,000 tasks, which were then evaluated and used in the process of developing vocational education exam papers (NIK 2019).

4. Analysis of Best Practices

This section will discuss the good practices identified during the study addressing the solutions analysed in the previous chapter. First, the activities of an important and historically established actor supporting dual VET in Poland will be discussed, the example of patronage classes organised by a large transnational company in the automotive industry, the example of the reintroduction of a profession important for the transport industry into the VET classification, a project involving sectoral social dialogue bodies dealing with skills and qualification needs, as well as an example of dual VET implementation within a local cluster of companies in the metal industry.

4.1. Dual education in crafts – the case of the Polish Craft Association

A very important, though not the only, group of companies offering dual vocational training in Poland are craft businesses – usually micro, small or medium-sized family enterprises providing various services to the public or running workshops manufacturing or repairing various goods. Many of these companies are members of craft guilds, which in turn are grouped into regional and sectoral chambers. The umbrella organisation for the chambers is the Polish Craft Association (ZRP), which has the status of a representative employer organisation at national level. It is an organisation with a long tradition dating back to before the Second World War, operating in its present form since 1989. One of the tasks entrusted to craft chambers by the state under the Craft Act is the supervision and support of craft companies in the field of practical vocational training. In 2024, 22,420 craft enterprises across the country offered practical vocational training to 74,583 juvenile workers (ZRP 2025), which, in the light of data from previous years, most probably represented the vast majority of young workers trained under the VET system in Poland. Craft chambers not only ensure the quality of practical vocational training, but also run a number of sectoral schools (although public schools run by local authorities still dominate the Polish education system). Importantly, they are also responsible for organising journeyman and master craftsman examinations, creating a parallel vocational examination system to the public one. Holders of diplomas issued by craft chambers are more highly valued on the labour market than those who have passed state vocational examinations.

4.2. Volkswagen Poznań patronage classes

Volkswagen is a transnational automotive manufacturer based in Germany, with a wide range of car brands and models, as well as subsidiaries and production plants in many countries in Europe and beyond. It has had two factories in Poland since 1990, one producing engines and the other mainly assembling commercial vehicles (delivery vans). Both subsidiaries offer students the opportunity to learn a trade in a dual training programme. The second of these, located in the suburbs of Poznań, a large city in western Poland, will be described briefly here. It can be considered a pioneering undertaking of this type – cooperation with a vocational school was established in 2004 on the initiative of the company, with active support from the local authorities, which, among other things, helped to select a school with sufficient capacity (Cedefop 2018). Initially, patronage was granted to one class training mechatronics technicians. Over the years, the scope of support has been extended to three other professions: automotive electrician, automation mechanic, foundry machines and equipment operator, and precision mechanic.

In 2015, another school located in the same region was invited to cooperate, as well as another foreign company from the automotive industry. The incentive for cooperation was the difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified candidates for the highly specialised jobs required by the company. The report (ibid.) indicated certain difficulties encountered at the establishment of the cooperation, such as the lack of adequately trained teaching staff (low salaries in vocational education caused a “brain drain”), limited possibilities to adapt the curriculum to the specific needs of the employer, and the time needed to add new occupations to the VET classification in Poland. Another barrier to entry was the minimum number of students required for a school class. Undoubtedly, most of these problems were mitigated by reforms carried out in the following decade, and the number of students trained by the company increased significantly: the company's promotional materials from 2025, marking the 20th anniversary of cooperation, mention 800 graduates of the patronage classes (Volkswagen Poznań 2025). From the second year of education, students have the opportunity to undergo practical vocational training in partner companies, as well as receive assistance in finding

employment there after graduation. An added value is the support from the Polish-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce, which offers students the opportunity to take an exam that qualifies them to practise their profession in many European Union countries.

4.3. Reinstating a profession that is important for an economically significant industry in the VET classification

The study by Pańków (2022) identified an interesting case of restoring a profession that is important for an industry of great significance to the Polish economy to the VET classification. We are talking about the occupation of driver-mechanic and the transport sector. The Association of International Road Carriers in Poland (ZMPD), a sectoral business organisation, was involved in this initiative, pointing to serious shortages of skilled workers due to the absence of training in this profession within public VET for many years. Shortly after the possibility of applying for the addition of a profession to the classification was introduced, efforts were made in 2012 to achieve this, but met with some resistance from the decision-makers at the time, which may have been the result of lobbying by private training companies. In 2015, following a change of government in Poland, the ministry's attitude improved and the process gained momentum. The public institution Centre for Education Development (ORE) became involved in the work, and its specialists helped to develop the core curriculum in terms of teaching methodology. Other sectoral actors, including the trade union National Section of Road Transport Workers of the Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarność", also lent their support. Ultimately, the profession was reinstated, and in 2022, 5,000 students were already being trained in 120 sectoral schools throughout the country. A representative of the organisation pointed to certain difficulties, including the promotion of the profession and the initially low pass rate for the vocational exam (the core curriculum had to be adapted to the cognitive abilities of the students). However, the entire process should be considered a success story resulting from the determination of sector-related actors who wanted to better align the supply of qualifications on the labour market with the needs of a dynamically developing sector.

4.4. Project of Sectoral Competence Councils

In 2016, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP, a state executive agency subordinate to the minister responsible for economy) launched a project called "Sectoral Councils for Competences". Initially, seventeen such councils were established as social dialogue bodies enabling discussion among sectoral social partners, including employer organisations and other business associations and trade unions. Their responsibilities include submitting proposals to the relevant ministries for the inclusion of a new occupation in the VET classification or for the modification of the core curriculum already included in it. The project is financed by European Union structural funds. At the time of the analysis of this mechanism by Pańków (2022), the first funding period was coming to an end. Respondents involved in the functioning of the councils assessed them as an effective tool for adapting qualifications and occupations to the needs of the labour market, with sufficient influence on decision-makers and well established in a number of legal acts. Currently, the next phase of the project is underway, financed from a different operational programme, with the number of councils increased to 29 (PARP 2025).

4.5. Dual VET in the Radom Metal Cluster

The last example of good practice is an interesting initiative by a geographically concentrated group of companies in a medium-sized town in central Poland, Radom, which can be considered a solution somewhere between the patronage classes of large enterprises and the scattered dual education system in small craft enterprises. The training began in the 2016/17 school year after four years of preparation involving local companies (the cluster comprises around thirty enterprises), the headmasters of two technical schools and local authorities. The profession taught is CNC machine operator, and students spend one or two days a week learning at the premises of high-tech companies. The project is supported by experts from the Institute of Exploitation Technology (ITeE), a state scientific institute located in the same city, whose experts have developed a scheme for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the teaching process. As indicated on the project website (klastermetalowy.radom.pl/ksztalcenie-dualne), all sides cooperating in the project gain significant benefits from this initiative: students gain access to modern equipment and, as a result, the opportunity to verify their knowledge in a real production environment while manufacturing actual products ordered by specific customers. This translates into better pass rates in vocational exams. For schools and the local government that runs them, this means a reduction in costs by limiting the need to equip school workshops with state-of-the-art machinery. Local companies from the metal sector not only gain well-qualified staff with an educational profile optimally suited to their needs, but also improve their image in relation to CSR .

5. Impact on students and entrepreneurs

Analysing the impact of the above-mentioned mechanisms of cooperation between VET and business is not a simple or easy task. First of all, there is often a lack of rigorous and systematic analysis and evaluation of public policies (this is a problem both in the education system and in other areas of life in Poland), although with regard to the benefits that students derive from dual education, some data have recently become available that provide a basis for assessment, which will be discussed shortly.

An overall assessment of changes in vocational education, including those aimed at strengthening cooperation between companies and schools, is contained in the post-audit report of the Supreme Audit Office (2024). The audit paints a complex and, unfortunately, rather negative picture of the effects of the reforms (although it should be borne in mind that this may have been partly motivated by political considerations, given the conflict between the government and the Supreme Audit Office). The overall assessment of the effects of the changes is harsh: in the opinion of this state body, 'there has been no significant improvement in the quality of vocational education or in the saturation of the labour market with specialists' (ibid: 8). Although it is debatable whether this statement is an exaggeration, it is certainly worth referring to certain findings of the auditors as a warning to other countries wishing to reform their VET systems. One of the problems was the continued establishment of cooperation between specific schools and companies. Either such cooperation was lacking or its rules were questionable. For example, there were irregularities in contracts concluded with employers: they did not include a curriculum, health and safety obligations, the form of pedagogical supervision or other required elements. On the other hand, although schools generally fulfilled their obligations under education law, there were cases of teachers not participating in industry training or even teaching students in professions not specified in the school statutes. These conclusions do not mean that the mechanisms introduced are not important for improving the quality of education, but they do indicate the need for their reliable implementation and strict monitoring.

What may be particularly valuable as a source of inspiration for other countries in Poland's research on the effectiveness of VET cooperation with business are certain analyses of the impact of dual education on the employability of graduates and the overall quality of education. There are two main groups of sources here. Firstly, there are the fairly old but undoubtedly still relevant academic analyses by Kabaj (2010, 2016), Stępnikowski (2012, 2016) and Symela (2016). They show that dual education can significantly improve the quality of VET, among other things by shortening the time graduates spend looking for their first job (in the best-case scenario, they can remain employees of the company where they completed their practical training – this also has a positive impact on the company, which does not have to bear additional costs related to finding an employee and training them to meet its specific needs). Stępnikowski (2012) pointed out, based on regional data from chambers of crafts from 2008-2011, that approximately 50% of participants in dual education found employment after completing their education, and a further 40% continued their education. Only 10% remained unemployed. At that time, the overall unemployment rate among people with vocational education in Poland was 24%. According to the same study, between 20% and 30% of participants in dual education found employment at the place where they had completed their practical training. The literature emphasises the important beneficial impact of this scheme of education on local labour markets and on the graduates themselves: they do not have to migrate to larger cities, other regions or abroad to find employment. Mechanisms for adapting the structure of taught professions at the local level (the regional and local labour market councils mentioned above) reinforce this positive effect by limiting the scale of migration to foreign/distant labour markets. This also has a positive impact on family relations and the condition of local communities. A similar positive role is played by patronage classes, which often provide a significant group of graduates with the opportunity to obtain high-quality specialist jobs on the local labour market, although in their case an alternative and still positive scenario is to find an attractive job in a large company with advanced know-how in another part of the country or abroad (sometimes in other plants belonging to the same corporation, if dual education was provided by such an entity of supra-local importance).

The second, new source of data enabling the assessment of the impact of dual education on the employability of vocational school graduates is the nationwide system for tracking graduates, developed in recent years by the Educational Research Institute (IBE), a state research institute. It is based on data from the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) IT system, enabling analysis of the employment situation and wages of graduates from different types of schools. In the report analysing the outcomes of 2021 graduates covering the period up to March 2023 (IBE 2024), data was presented separately for graduates who had the status of juvenile workers during their education (and therefore benefited from the most widespread type of dual education) and the rest. The data shows that the employment situation of the former was indeed better. In October 2021, i.e. three months after leaving school, 37% of former juvenile workers remained unemployed and not in education, 15% continued their education without working, 11% combined further education with work, and 37% were only working. In the case of graduates who had not previously been juvenile workers, 43% were neither working nor continuing their education, 23% were only studying, 7% were combining study and work, and 28% were only working. Apparently, the percentage of those not in employment or education was 6 percentage points lower among former juvenile workers, suggesting significant added value from (typical) dual education. In March 2023, 21 months after leaving school, 30% of former juvenile workers and 35% of other graduates remained outside employment and education. The difference therefore persisted.

Juvenile workers were more likely than those without this status to obtain diplomas certifying vocational qualifications. No such document was obtained by 28% and 36% of representatives of these two groups, respectively. In addition, the authors of the analysis believe that the figure for the former is overestimated, as it was not possible to obtain data from all chambers of crafts. It is worth adding here that a significant proportion of juvenile workers obtained diplomas issued by craft guilds, which are more valued on the labour market (in 42% of cases, these were journeyman's certificates), while among the rest, state vocational diplomas were absolutely dominant (less than 1% obtained a journeyman's certificate). The two groups also differed slightly in their subsequent educational paths: juvenile workers were more likely to continue their education in adult secondary schools, while the others went on to second-stage sectoral schools. Maybe a bit surprising, the average salary was higher for graduates who weren't juvenile workers before. The difference in their favour was 5.7% in Q4 2021 and 3% in Q1 2023. This may be due to the specific nature of the employers: small craft enterprises can often offer lower wages than larger entities⁴.

6. Level of scalability

The issue of scalability or maybe transferability is complex, especially given the lack of knowledge about the national contexts of the African countries participating in the SUCCESS project, as the author of this report admits. However, it seems that certain fairly universal principles governing the functioning of practices and institutions provide a basis for speculation on this issue, which will be attempted in this part of the report. An important circumstance, already indicated in the introduction, is the fact that Poland is a country struggling with certain development challenges and a VET system that is far from perfect, which may help to predict certain potential difficulties in implementing good practices, which are not without shortcomings in our country.

The dual formula of practical vocational training is undoubtedly an important element in improving the quality of education, which, especially in the form implemented by small family craft businesses scattered throughout the country, seems to be genuinely feasible even in countries with limited economic capacity and a business sector that is not highly developed. It is a system that can be adapted to the local capabilities of companies and, at the same time, to the needs of the labour market. At a relatively low cost, it is possible to grant students access to solutions actually used in a given industry and to the real working environment, reducing the expenditure on equipping workshops in vocational schools. It allows for the transfer of knowledge between business and the school sector on a micro scale, with the involvement of a minimum number of people. On the other hand, however, it requires certain minimum standards in terms of reliable business conduct, some form of supervision, as well as coordination of activities. A temptation may appear to use students as cheap labour, performing simple tasks, without providing them with the necessary practical skills resulting from the curriculum.

⁴ In a private conversation with the author of this report, a researcher representing the Institute for Educational Research involved in the project on tracing graduates and broader research on education assessed that the reason for lower wages is a kind of “anchoring” effect, also observed in Germany: some employers “get used” to low wages paid to juvenile workers, who in turn are largely unaware of their rights and subsequently accept lower wages after their shift to permanent employment. This is sometimes accompanied by other irregularities, such as the misuse of youth employment instruments: instead of hiring a graduate – a former juvenile worker – under a typical employment contract, they are offered a publicly subsidised internship.

Therefore, the success of this system will be more likely if there are appropriate business organisations (chambers of crafts, chambers of industry and commerce, other dynamic business associations) ready to take joint responsibility for the proper conduct of education and having the capacity to both support and supervise their members as well as to enforce standards. They could be accompanied by public educational supervision institutions or services controlling employment legality and working conditions. Ideally, entities with certain expert capacities could emerge which, in cooperation with state educational supervision bodies, could become involved in organising examinations and developing examination questions. However, it should be emphasised once again that what is needed above all is a certain level of business ethics, forward thinking on the part of entrepreneurs, trust in public institutions and a willingness to cooperate rather than engage in fierce competition with other entities in the industry. All this must also be accompanied by an appropriate legal framework ensuring stable, clear and predictable rules of the game and a reasonable level of formalisation of procedures.

Where larger companies with sufficient capacity are present – for example, those (co-)owned by the state or belonging to transnational corporations – all initiatives to create patronage classes are worth supporting. Undoubtedly, many large companies may experience shortages of suitably qualified workers in local or regional labour markets, which may result in a desire to enter into this type of cooperation with vocational schools. Such efforts should be supported by local and/or regional authorities (and even initiated by them in some cases). Again, this requires a sufficiently transparent, stable and friendly legal framework, some flexibility, e.g. in terms of the curriculum, so that it can be adapted to the needs of the company, as well as efficient and reliable administration. Local government officials should be ready to play an active role in creating opportunities for cooperation at all stages, starting with enabling/facilitating contact between the parties concerned. It would also be desirable for public authorities to contribute to the costs to a reasonable extent, e.g. in relation to improving the qualifications of teachers and school administrators. In both this model of cooperation and the one analysed above, there should be a willingness at national level to provide certain facilities for employers willing to take on students for practical vocational training. These could include administrative facilitation, advisory support or tax relief. The costs of practical training for students should be tax deductible and, depending on the financial capacity of the state, at least partially reimbursed on the basis of clear criteria.

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Act of the 22nd March 1989 on the craft (Journal of Laws 1989, No. 17, item 92 with further amendments)

Regulation of the Council of Ministers of the 28th May 1996 on the vocational preparation of juveniles (Journal of Laws 1996, No. 60, item 278 with further amendments)

Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of the 25th June 2014 on reimbursement from the Labour Fund for salaries of juvenile workers (Journal of Laws 2014, item 865 with further amendments)

Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the 11th August 2015 amending the Regulation on practical vocational training (Journal of Laws 2015, item 1183)

Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the 24th August 2017 on practical vocational training (Journal of Laws 2017, item 1644)

Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the 28th February 2019 on practical vocational training (Journal of Laws 2019, item 391)

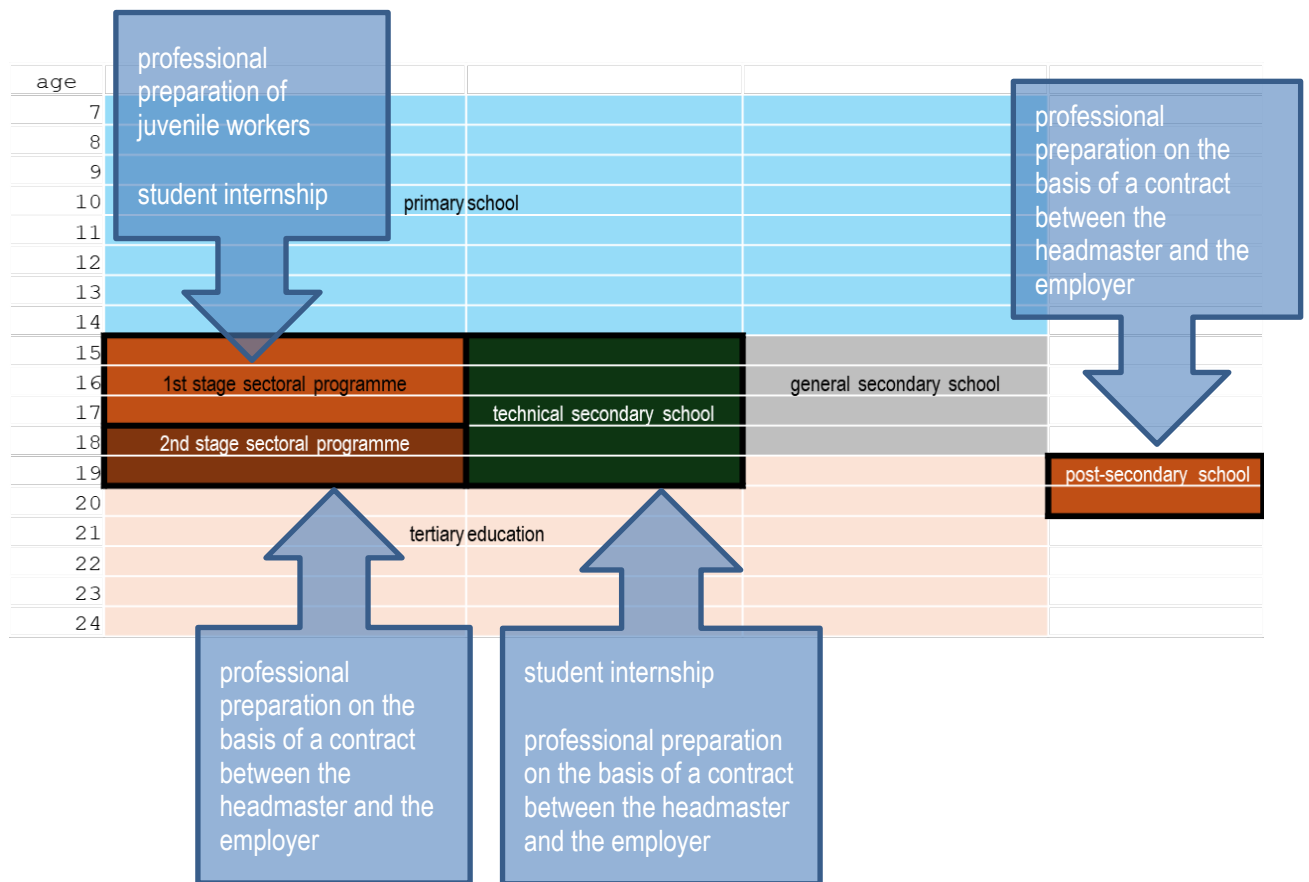
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Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 28th May 1996 on apprenticeship of juvenile workers and their remuneration (Journal of Laws 1996 no. 60 item 278)

Anex 1

1. The structure of the Polish VET system including available schemes of practical training



Source: own elaboration.