

Evaluation of the System of National Professional Qualifications

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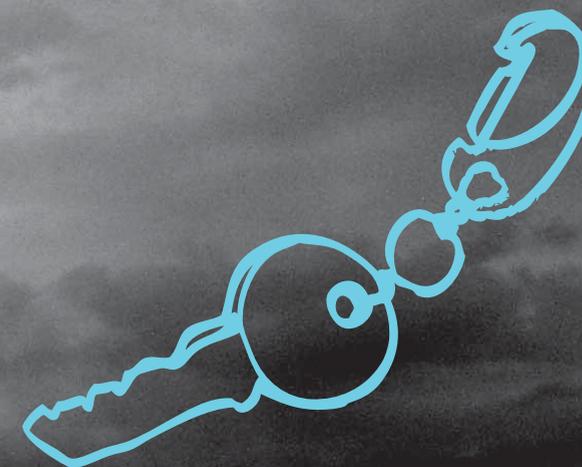
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Who and what is the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training

The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training is the central development and advisory institution for VET in Slovenia. The basic tasks of the Institute include creation of professional bases and methodology platforms, competence-based occupational standards, development of contemporary modular educational programmes and other activities leading to increased quality of VET and integration of education and work sphere.

Introduction

Metka Zevnik

Director of National Institute for Vocational Education and Training

The validation of prior learning is a process giving people of all ages and from different social backgrounds the possibility to receive acknowledgment of their learning outcomes acquired outside school courses. The shift towards the validation of experience-based learning stems from the belief that everyone can or even should keep learning all his or her life, in various professional and personal contexts. Through validation, the value of life experience including family life, volunteering, activities within various associations and leisure activities, is finally being recognized and accepted, as the process is based on the awareness that different environments and learning situations give people the opportunity to develop a rich variety of skills.

In Slovenia, the validation of on-the-job training and gaining experience in practice was enabled by the National Professional Qualifications Act of 2000. This act has offered people with work experience but without any publicly valid certificates the chance to use the assessment and recognition procedures to obtain a publicly valid certificate attesting their competence to practice a certain profession.

After seven years of applying the certification system, more than 24,578 (01.01.2008) NPQ cer-

tificates were issued, 106 certifying catalogues were compiled and 73 institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs were included in the national register. At that point, it was of essential importance to carry out an evaluation of the system. Within the activities of the OECD in 2007, a national report was drawn up to determine the situation in the field of validation of non-formally and informally (occasionally) acquired knowledge and skills, together with a joint analysis of policies that was prepared by OECD experts. In the same year, a certification system monitoring took place, which was co-financed by the Slovenian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs.

As a result, this publication offers a comprehensive overview of procedures, documents, institutions, and subjects involved in the certification system each with its specific role, and endeavours to bring forward all the critical points in the system. The monitoring results obtained oblige us to continue with our work and strive to eliminate the perceived system faults, since we are aware that the certification system will gain public trust and credibility only by constant monitoring and ensuring high quality processes.

Slavica Černoša, PhD

Acting Director of Slovenian Institute for Adult Education

With the establishment of lifelong learning during the last decades, the development of vocational education and education in general strongly emphasized the assessment and validation of prior knowledge and learning, regardless of the educational and learning paths or methods. In a direct or indirect way, this concept figures in all major international documents in the field of education but also within the policies and strategies of the labour market. In Slovenia, the first steps towards the development of a model for assessing and verifying informal learning were made in the 1990s. The encouragement came from the structural changes on the labour market, changes in the qualification structure and a rapidly rising unemployment, to which the formal vocational education could not provide an adequate nor timely response. For this reason, a project was launched under the Slovenian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs for the development of a certification system which was also given a legal basis in 2000, with the adoption of the National Professional Qualifications Act. The act stipulates the authorities, key operating subjects and how they act within the system of acquiring professional qualifications and also the use of principal verification procedures enabling adults to have the knowledge, skills and experience they gathered through work or non-formal learning assessed and validated. Today, after nearly ten years of practice, we can affirm that the certification system is the most established way of evaluating the outcome of non-formal learning, providing a framework (basis) for further activities aimed at developing comprehensive concepts for the verification of non-formal and informal learning.

This publication is the fruit of collaboration between the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training and the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education. These Slovenian public institutions are competent to carry out all the principal tasks in the system of examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications, and to ensure its future development. The papers included in the publication bring forward various observations and information on how the most important assessment and recognition institutions act in practice and how successful they are at it, as well as on the implementation of procedures stipulated by the acts and implementing regulations. Conclusions place a particular emphasis on the need for constant, in-depth and systematic monitoring of activities and results of the certification system in the future.

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1. Why monitor the certification system?

Andraž Zgonc, MSc

Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs

Evaluation of the System of National Professional Qualifications is the first comprehensive work that endeavours to assess the certification system in Slovenia. In the past, there have been various attempts to summarise the situation in this field through reports, publications and other printed material (e.g. the National Report included in the publication *Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*, a project carried out within the OECD); however, this publication is a unique and significant contribution to the development of the Slovene validation system of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge since it is not a mere description of the current situation but also a response to it – in the form of recommendations and solutions – that enables a critical evaluation of the system, its development and potentials. The monitoring has included all the key participants, parts and procedures of the certification system, creating a comprehensive review with a critical analysis of the relationships among the participants. The established monitoring project is certainly not flawless but it represents an appropriate basis for further improvement and may be considered a useful development tool.

The review of the catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills according to sectors shows that the national professional qualifications are applied and developed in those areas of the labour market that lack or are expected to lack human resources. This leads us to the conclusion that the labour market acknowledges the certification system as an appropriate tool to deal with various personnel issues (retraining, limitations due to lack of publicly valid documents, additional qualifications, rapid response in comparison with the formal education system).

The result regarding the connection between the education of the members of the commissions for examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications, and the demand on the labour market is encouraging since the majority of members have a degree in natural or engineering science, and only three of the 70 members surveyed have a degree in economy or social science. However, there is a strong need to critically evaluate the fact that as much as 31 of the 70 members surveyed has only up to five years of work experience. This is not a problematic fact by itself but it should be considered in relation to individual national professional qualifications and their levels of difficulty, type and even to the fact that national professional qualifications are a completely new solution. A positive finding shows that only 14% of the members surveyed were also teachers in the programmes for the acquisition of national professional qualifications. This is in complete contrast with our predictions about a close relationship between the members of the commissions for examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications, and the people performing the programmes for the acquisition of qualifications, which indicates the basic need to monitor the system in order to avoid generalisations and changes introduced on the basis of the latter. Some answers by commission members (e.g. that members of the commissions can only be those “who are related to the teaching institution”) are worrying but, at the same time, it has to be taken into consideration that the competence to appoint the members of the commission for examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications has already been transferred from the institutions performing examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications to the National Examinations Centre, reducing the possibility of such relations to a minimum.

The holders of national professional qualification certificates included in the survey stated that they had learned about the possibility to acquire a national professional qualification from their employer, friends or the media. Only 7% of them learned this information from the Employment Service of Slovenia. This confirms the fact that the promotion of the certification system is absolutely necessary; this is why it has become a legal responsibility and part of the annual work programme of the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training. Another result worth discussion was about the reasons why the people surveyed decided to take part in a training programme prior to the assessment and recognition procedures for national professional qualifications. As much as 38% of them answered that it is because they did not have the certificates to prove the knowledge they already had. This is a contradictory answer since the national professional qualifications system is designed to prove knowledge and not necessarily to issue certificates, except for compulsory training. Special attention should be paid to this fact as well as to counselling: Is the information and advice given to candidates appropriate? Are the candidates referred to a training programme although they already have the required knowledge? Upon acquiring the national professional qualification certificate, 43% of the people surveyed did not notice any change in relation to their job, promotion, higher salary, or better self-esteem, reputation or personal satisfaction. This fact is certainly alarming and

emphasizes the need to go a step further in the valuation of national professional qualification certificates, which falls within the competence of trade unions that have to ensure the appropriate valuation of national professional qualification certificates.

Among all the institutions performing examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications as well as education programmes there was only one case in which a previously acquired national professional qualification was recognised as one of the fulfilled obligations of this education programme. The evaluation of the certification system confirmed the finding from the OECD report about the urgent need to increase the transferability of qualifications between non-formal and formal education.

Careful consideration should also be given to the findings concerning the institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures for national professional qualifications. On the one hand, a strong emphasis is given to their role in promoting the national professional qualifications system at the local level; but on the other hand, proper consideration should also be given to the regional or activity-based merging of these institutions (or a combination of both). This leads us to the conclusion that a larger number of institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures for national professional qualifications on the regional level would represent an important contribution to the development of the system, although this would cause certain supervisory, logistical and operative problems.

The monitoring evaluation project was entrusted to the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training with great expectations, which were, in my opinion, fulfilled. The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training is strengthening its position as the central institution for the development of non-formal and informal learning in Slovenia. The validation of non-formal and informal learning has numerous possibilities for further development and may be extended to all fields of education, even those where until recently such a concept was inconceivable. The findings of the certification system monitoring will also be used to apply the best practices and strive not to repeat the past mistakes. The certification system has its basic functions established: it has an appropriate legal framework, the majority of the partners is relatively competent, counselling as an important element of the development of lifelong learning is ensured, and IT support has been developed. As with other social systems, it is now time to improve the methodology, the techniques, and the performance of individual functions and participants. To do this, all the participants involved in the system will have to enhance significantly their mutual cooperation and exchange of information.

The findings emerged from the certification system monitoring evaluation, represent an excellent starting point for the reflection on further steps that need to be taken. The European documents such as the Lisbon Strategy, the European Qualification Framework, the Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, etc. confirm that the path and the direction taken are right but that the ultimate goal will only be achieved with extra effort.



2. National professional qualifications system

Bojana Sever

National Institute for Vocational Education and Training

The national professional qualifications system paves a new way for the acquisition of professional qualifications and publicly valid documents – certificates – in accordance with European processes and measures adopted for the assessment and recognition procedures for non-formal and informal knowledge and skills. It is an opportunity to attest knowledge and skills gained from work experience, voluntary work, leisure activities, participation in non-formal education or training programmes, self-teaching, etc. and necessary for the exercise of a profession. It is intended primarily for adults over the age of 18. The system is a result of the realisation that lifelong learning is essential for a successful and active participation in the world of work and society in general, and of the fact that we “unconsciously” learn all our lives in different environments and situations, not only in organised educational processes.

The primary purpose of this kind of formal verification is a complete review of an individual's knowledge, skills and experience confirmed in accordance with prescribed procedures (including counselling and assistance). In this way, the quality and fairness of the system, the participation of all relevant partners, and the transparency and comparability of an individual's knowledge and skills are ensured.

Another advantage of the NPQs system is flexibility, which enables immediate reaction to the needs of the labour market. The possibility to verify previously acquired knowledge and to form shorter training programmes to compensate the lacking knowledge and skills, which eventually leads to the formal acquisition of a profession, helps to diminish the differences between the supply and the demand on the labour market. Initiatives for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues proposed by the employers are a valuable contribution to the development and the applicability of the qualifications system and structures.

The NPQs system represents an added value for individuals, employers, the sector and the economy as a whole since immediate reactions to the needs of the labour market are of crucial importance for competitiveness.

Public and accessible information is another important element ensured by a public database accessible to all categories of users on the website <http://www.nrpslo.org/>. The NRP (National Reference Point) enables access to information on vocational education and training, and on examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications, including occupational standards and catalogues, data on institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures, commissions, forms for the performance of examinations and the verification of NPQs, regulations, etc.

Although these procedures are formalised, the decision to participate in examinations and the verification of knowledge and skills is voluntary and individual. However, it is undoubtedly an opportunity supporting lifelong learning and active citizenship, enhanced employability and mobility of individuals.

The national professional qualifications system is determined by the following legal acts regulating holders, procedures and bases that enable the acquisition of a certificate:

The **National Professional Qualifications Act – ZNPK** (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 1/5. 1. 2007) is the legal basis for the introduction of the national professional qualifications system in Slovenia. This act regulates:

- > >> procedures and bodies or institutions and organisations competent for the preparation and adoption of occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills, and
- > >> conditions and procedures for the acquisition of national professional qualifications.

The **Rules on the Standard Classification of Occupations** (Official Gazette of RS, No. 77/6. 8. 2003 with amendments) determine the procedure for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills, as well as the occupational standards and catalogues sorted into the standard classification of occupations.

Implementing regulations issued on the basis of the National Professional Qualifications Act (ZNPK) are the following:

- > >> Rules on Composition of the Commissions for the Assessment and Verification of National Professional Qualifications and on Method and Procedure to Grant and Withdraw the Licence (Official Gazette of RS, Nos. 13/28. 2. 2001, 97/10. 10. 2003, 18/25. 2. 2005, and 57/29. 06. 2007),
- > >> Rules on Permanent Expert Training of Members of Commission for Verification and Certification of National Vocational Qualifications (Official Gazette of RS, No. 65/20. 7. 2007),
- > >> Rules on Method and Procedure for the Assessment and Award of National Professional Qualifications (Official Gazette of RS, Nos. 13/2001, 97/2003, 108/2004, 117/2005, and 57/2007),
- > >> Rules on Keeping the Register of Providers of Procedure for Assessment and Awarding of National Professional Qualifications (Official Gazette of RS, No. 26/01 and 77/03, 107/05, and 40/07),
- > >> Order on the Public Document Form Concerning National Vocational Qualification – Certificate (Official Gazette, No. 97/10. 10. 2003),
- > >> Rules on the Certification Examination for Inspectors of National Vocational Qualifications (Official Gazette of RS, No. 16/22. 2. 2002)

The ZNPK is compiled in a way that ensures and provides opportunities for interconnecting the national professional qualifications system with vocational education and training. The Article 3 of the ZNPK states that an individual may acquire a professional qualification:

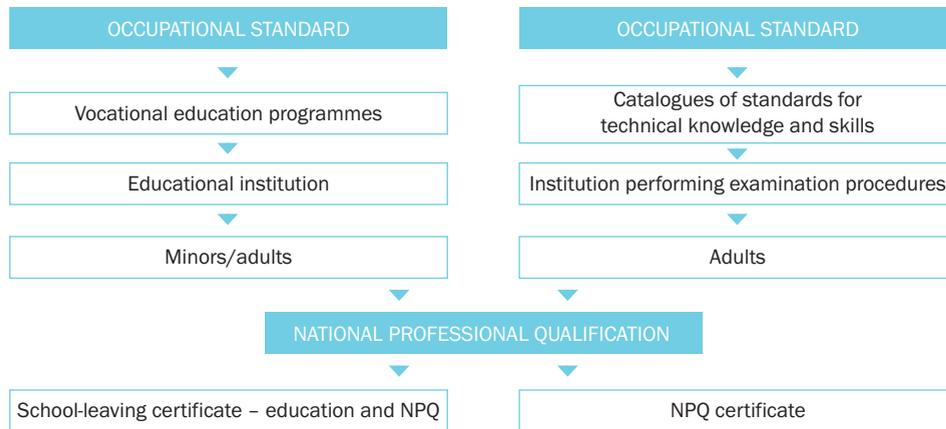
- > >> by acquiring a vocational or professional education,
- > >> from parts of education programmes,
- > >> under programmes for vocational training,
- > >> under parts of study programmes for the acquisition of higher education or under advanced study programmes, and
- > >> by achieving standards of technical knowledge and skills in accordance with the National Professional Qualifications Act.

When completing a programme, individuals who have not fulfilled all the obligations necessary for the acquisition of education are issued a certificate by schools attesting the qualification for which they did fulfil the requirements in accordance with the ZNPK.

Individuals who have not fulfilled all obligations for the acquisition of education and have not fulfilled the conditions for the acquisition of a certificate for NPQ are issued a certificate for the requirements they have fulfilled.

However, it should be stressed that within the national professional qualifications system, candidates do not acquire an education degree but a professional qualification at a particular level of difficulty which attests their ability to work effectively in a particular profession.

Picture 1: Ways to NVQ



Individuals who have acquired a certificate in accordance with the ZNPK can prove to possess certain knowledge and skills and thus increase their employment opportunities, and opportunities for vertical and horizontal mobility not only in the labour market but also in the education system.

The **basic institutions** in the national professional qualifications system are the following:

- > >> Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs as the umbrella body in the NPQs system,
- > >> National Institute for Vocational Education and Training (CPI) – prepares occupational standards and catalogues, develops methodologies, monitors the certification system;
- > >> sector committees for occupational standards – discuss initiatives, propose the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues with priorities, propose experts to prepare occupational profiles, occupational standards and catalogues, propose the structure of qualifications, coordinate the content of occupational standards and catalogues, propose occupational standards and catalogues to the competent expert council, propose revisions of occupational standards and catalogues;
- > >> Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education – submits proposals for adoption and publication to the minister responsible for labour, adopts the methodology for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues, adopts priorities for the compilation of occupational standards and catalogues, proposes training programmes for members of commissions to obtain licences;
- > >> The National Examinations Centre (RIC) – examinations and verification, commissions for examinations and verification, network and register of institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs;
- > >> institutions performing examinations and the verification of professional qualifications.

2.1 Occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills

Occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills (catalogues) are the basic documents for the performance of examinations and the verification of professional qualifications.

It is important for both documents to be clearly, intelligibly and unambiguously written in order to prevent different or wrong interpretations. Therefore, two methodologies for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues are prescribed, which ensures the transparency and comparability of occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills.

Occupational standards and catalogues are prepared for individual professions which are recognised by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia and classified into the Standard Classification of Occupations. It is important that occupational standards are prepared in cooperation with experts who are familiar with the profession, work organisation, technology and, last but not least, trends in the development of the profession and the sector itself.

Although the occupational standards and catalogues are closely related to a particular sector and profession, general competences necessary to work effectively in a profession should also be included. For example: quality assurance of work, ICT skills, communication skills, work planning and organisation, health and environmental protection, etc. Unfortunately, this means that at the moment the national professional qualifications system is not able to verify general competences, which, on the other hand, undoubtedly increase the horizontal as well as vertical mobility.

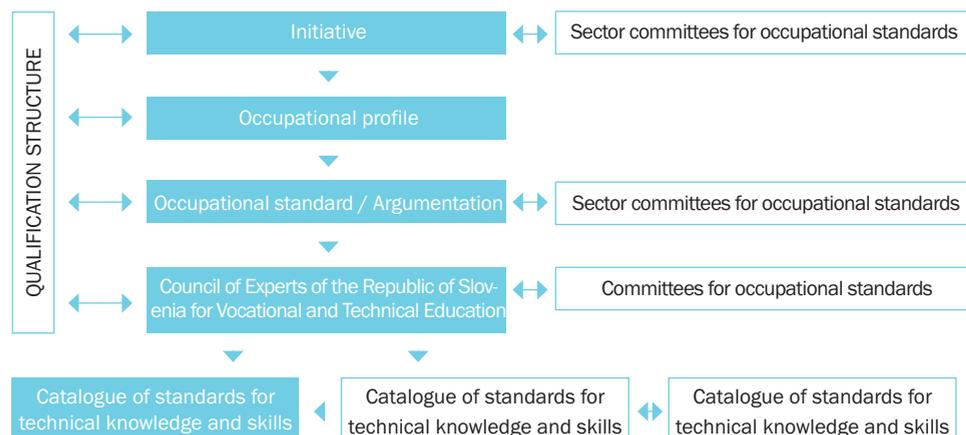
The preparation of occupational standards and catalogues is done through social dialogue. It is important for the employers to explain what kind of personnel with what kind of knowledge and skills they need now and in future. After all, occupational standards are not just a record of the current situation but also of the trends in the development, which is of considerable importance for the changing labour market not just from the point of view of the employer but especially from the point of view of the certificate holder.

The procedure for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills is determined in the Rules on the Standard Classification of Occupations:

- > >> The procedure begins with an **initiative** submitted on a specific form to the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, which records it, provides an expert assessment and submits it for discussion to the sector committee for occupational standards. When discussing the initiative, information on the needs of the labour market, on the comparability of standards for a specific qualification among EU member states, and, if necessary, on compliance with regulations and norms at EU level are especially important.
- > >> If the sector committee for occupational standards considers the initiative to be well-founded, experts proposed by the competent sector committee for occupational standards, with methodological support from the CPI, prepare a proposal for an occupational profile.

- > >> Based on the occupational profile, experts proposed by the competent sector committee for occupational standards, with support from the CPI, prepare a proposal for an occupational standard which defines professional competences, knowledge and skills necessary for a particular profession or set of responsibilities. The occupational standard is coordinated within the competent sector committee for occupational standards, which proposes it for discussion to the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education. An expert committee for occupational standards operating within the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education discusses the occupational standard and proposes its adoption or rejection. The final decision is taken by the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education, which thereupon proposes the occupational standard for adoption and publication in the Official Gazette to the minister responsible for labour.
- > >> The occupational standard and catalogue must be compiled in accordance with the methodology determined by the competent expert council on a proposal from sector committees for occupational standards. The national methodology represents a uniform basis for all occupational standards and catalogues, and thus ensures transparency and comparability of documents at national level. The methodological support for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues is provided by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training.
- > >> On the basis of the occupational standard, a working group prepares a proposal for a catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills which is finally coordinated by the sector committee for occupational standards. Once the coordination is completed, the sector committee proposes the catalogue for discussion to the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education. The expert committee for occupational standards and the commission for educational programmes, operating within the Council of Experts, propose to the Council the adoption or rejection of the catalogue, and thereupon the Council proposes it for adoption to the Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs .

Picture 2: Procedures and institutions of preparation and recognition of occupational standards and Catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills.



2.2 Examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications

In the assessment and recognition procedure for professional qualifications, the candidates attest their ability and knowledge to effectively perform certain tasks. Examinations and the verification of professional qualifications are therefore methods of determining an individual's knowledge and skills with regard to a particular occupational standard and catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills.

The examination method and procedure are precisely determined in the Rules, which ensures the uniformity and transparency of documents and certificates.

The assessment and recognition procedures for professional qualifications are performed by selected **institutions** (institutions performing examinations and the verification of professional qualifications) included in the register at the National Examinations Centre.

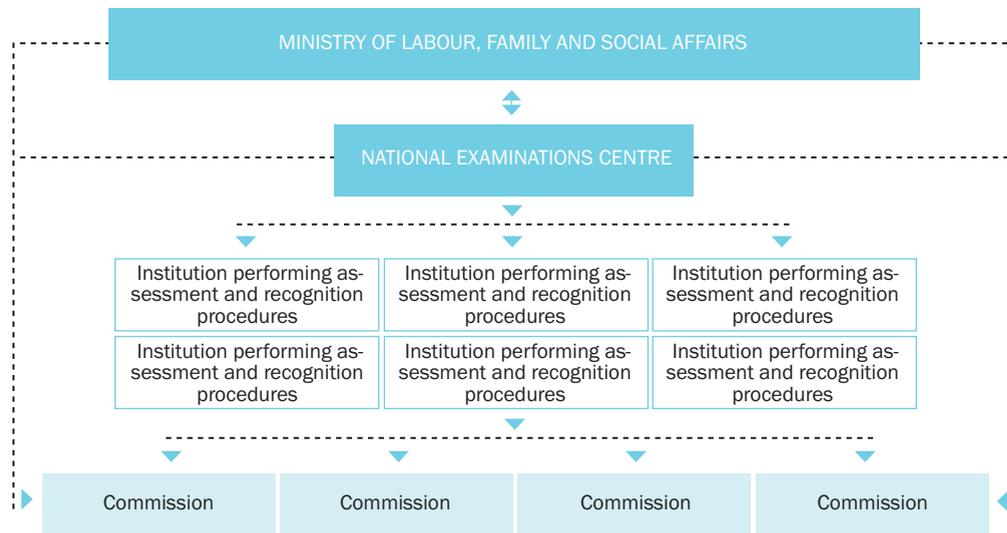
Examinations and the verification of professional qualifications are performed in front of a three-member commission, except in cases when individuals exit from programmes and are issued a certificate by schools for the qualification for which they fulfilled the requirements in accordance the ZNPK.

Members of commissions for examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications are experts in their area of work and possess the required knowledge, education and work experience. After completing the training programme, the commission members are awarded a 4-year **licence** by the National Examinations Centre. Until the expiry of the licence, the members of the commissions must submit proofs of their permanent expert training on the basis of which the validity of the licence is renewed. In addition to the licence, a member of the commission must meet the following conditions with regard to the candidate:

- > >> he/she is not the candidate's employer,
- > >> he/she is not a co-owner of a company, workshop, shop or bar,
- > >> he/she is not a candidate's colleague,
- > >> he/she is not a direct or in-law relative of the candidate,
- > >> he/she is not the candidate's spouse or extra-marital partner.

Within the fulfillment of these conditions, the commissions for examinations and the verification of NPQs are considered qualified, fair and professional.

Picture 2: Institutional structure of examinations and the verification of professional qualifications



Methods of professional qualification assessment are the following:

- > >> direct (“live”) assessment of knowledge and skills (examination),
- > >> assessment based on documents acquired through vocational education or training programmes, or otherwise – portfolio (verification), and
- > >> a combination of the verification of documents in the portfolio and “live” examination.

Portfolio is a “folder” with proofs of knowledge and skills, and information relating to the candidate and the professional qualification he/she wants to acquire. **Adequate documents** in the portfolio prove that the candidate possesses knowledge and skills from the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills.

These documents may be:

- > >> a certificate of work experience,
- > >> a degree certificate,
- > >> certificates of participation in non-formal education and training programmes,
- > >> manuals (authorship or co-authorship),
- > >> letters of reference,
- > >> articles,
- > >> acknowledgements,
- > >> products,
- > >> video recordings,
- > >> photographs, etc.

Candidates in the assessment and recognition procedures for professional qualifications are individuals of at least 18 years of age. If under 18 years of age, they must be without a student or apprentice status and possess adequate work experience.

2.2.1 Before assessment and recognition procedures

Candidates may avail themselves of the **opportunity for counselling**.

A counsellor:

- > >> provides candidates with information on the assessment and recognition procedures for NPQs,
- > >> suggests a (more) adequate qualification,
- > >> helps to compile the portfolio,
- > >> suggests the participation in an adequate education or training programme.

The compilation of a portfolio is appropriate if the candidate and the counsellor determine that the candidate has already non-formally acquired knowledge and skills necessary for the acquisition of a particular professional qualification and can prove them with adequate documents.

The **pricing methodology** for the acquisition of a national professional qualification certificate is determined in the Rules on Method and Procedure for the Assessment and Award of National Professional Qualifications. In accordance with the methodology, the candidate settles the costs of assessment and recognition procedures. The costs depend on the assessment method, i.e. direct examinations or the verification of documents provided in the portfolio. In the latter case, the candidate does not need to cover the costs of direct examinations which represent more than a third of the total service costs.

The minister responsible for labour determines the **list of members of commissions** for each catalogue separately on the basis of a public tender from the National Examinations Centre, or for military professions, on a proposal from the minister responsible for defence. From these members, the National Examinations Centre appoints a **three-member commission** for each assessment and recognition, while the institution performing examinations and the verification of professional qualifications must provide material and space requirements, and the equipment for the performance of examinations and the verification of professional qualifications in accordance with the catalogue.

The commission must not include more than one member who has performed the training programme or prepared the candidate for the NPQ examination.

2.2.2 Verification procedure

If the candidate collects certificates and compiles a portfolio, the commission for examinations and the verification of professional qualifications in accordance with the adopted standard for technical knowledge and skills, and the adopted criteria assesses each certificate in the

portfolio and then compares the portfolio as a whole with standards for technical knowledge and skills, written in the catalogue. General **assessment criteria for the verification of certificates** are: authenticity (are the certificates authentic and do they refer to the candidate), relevance (do the certificates refer to the knowledge and skills defined in the catalogue), and the expiry of the certificates.

The commission may:

1. conclude that the conditions determined in the catalogue are fulfilled (direct examinations are not necessary) and confirm the professional qualification, or
2. refer the candidate to take direct examinations if the conditions determined in the catalogue are not fulfilled (which is not a reason to reject the candidate) or fulfilled only partially. In this case, the commission also determines the content of the examinations and detailed instructions on them on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the catalogue.

2.2.3 Examination procedure

During an examination, the candidate **directly** proves his knowledge and skills in front of a commission. The examination may be written, practical or oral; however, in most cases, a combination of the three is performed. The examination method as well as the tasks with which the commission examines the candidate's knowledge and skills are determined in the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills.

The candidate should prove the knowledge and skills required by the occupational standard and the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills completely or partially:

- > >> completely, if the candidate has not submitted a portfolio or if the commission has rejected the portfolio as inadequate,
- > >> partially, if the candidate has proved part of the knowledge and skills with the portfolio.

In all, the examinations **must not exceed 180 minutes**.

2.2.4 End of the procedure

Within eight days following the conclusion of the procedure, a successful candidate is issued a **certificate** proving his professional qualification on the basis of the documentation produced during the entire assessment and recognition procedure.

Unsuccessful candidates are issued a **decision on the failure to fulfil all the conditions** for the acquisition of a national professional qualification. The documentation is kept by the institution

performing the procedures, while the certificate is owned by the candidate.

The candidate may lodge an **appeal** with the appeal commission appointed by the minister responsible for labour within three days after receiving the notification of the rejection to issue a certificate.

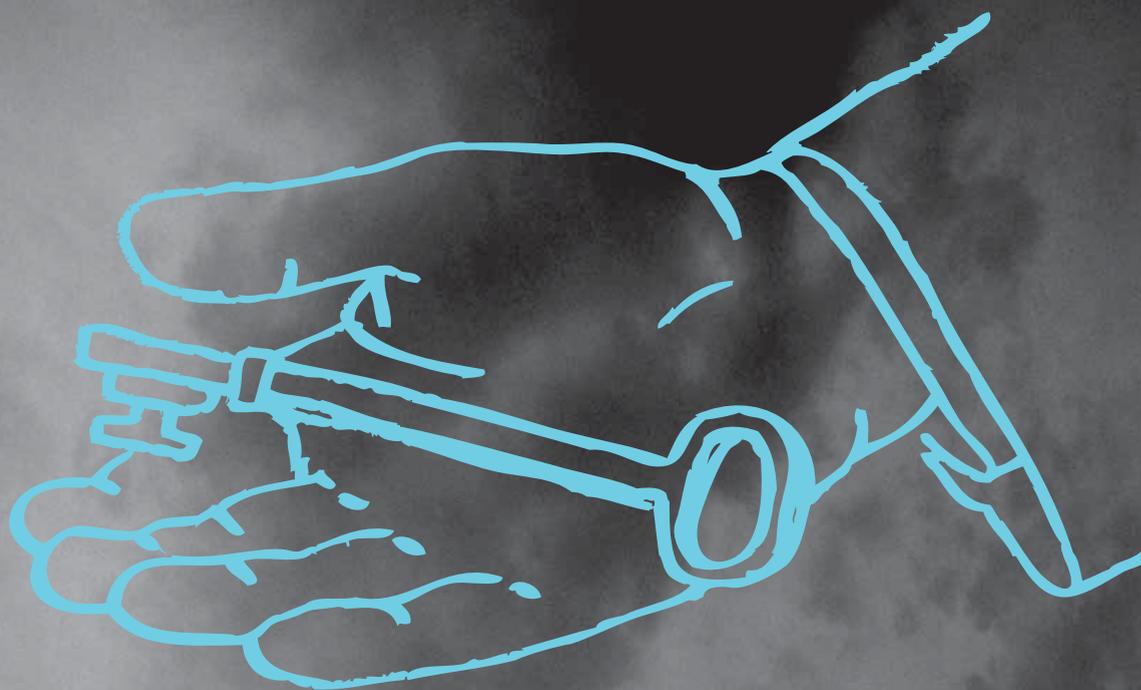
2.3 Registers

In accordance with the ZNPK, the following registers are kept in the national professional qualifications system:

- > >> register of certificates issued (institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs),
- > >> register of occupational standards (National Institute for Vocational Education and Training),
- > >> register of catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills (National Institute for Vocational Education and Training),
- > >> register of licence holders (National Examinations Centre), and
- > >> register of institutions performing examinations and the verification of professional qualifications (National Examinations Centre).

Sources

National Professional Qualifications Act,
 Rules on the Standard Classification of Occupations,
 Rules on Composition of the Commissions for the Assessment and Verification of National Professional Qualifications and on Method and Procedure to Grant and Withdraw the Licence,
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 Order on the Public Document Form Concerning National Vocational Qualification – Certificate,
 Methodological Basis for the Preparation of Occupational Standards (Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education, 15 March 2002),
 Methodology for the Preparation of the Catalogue of Standards for Technical Knowledge and Skills for the Acquisition of a National Professional Qualification (Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education, 17 December 2002)
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 Training Manual for Consultants and Assessors of Previously Acquired Knowledge and Skills, Phare, Ljubljana, October 2000.



3. Monitoring of the certification system

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3.1 Methodological introduction

The analysis of the certification system monitoring is structured as a national pilot study aimed at examining the system's procedures and contents. It focused principally on the system and legislative viewpoints and included a survey among the following target groups: certificate holders, counsellors, performing institutions, and professional members of commissions for the verification of national professional qualifications.

The monitoring procedure comprised the following working methods: descriptive and empirical analyses, a survey, guided interviews, case studies, and comparative studies on the international level.

The purpose of the study was to monitor the launching of the certification system in view of proposing and taking further measures:

- > >> From a system point of view: organizational and procedural characteristics (complexity, duration) of the development and implementation of fundamental certification system elements.
- > >> From a content point of view: development of occupational standards; content and intelligibility of the catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills for national professional qualifications; application of the principle "two roads towards one goal", i.e. education and training;
- > >> From a performance point of view: monitoring the procedures and methods of implementation; qualitative and quantitative analyses of individual subjects in the procedure of assessment and recognition of NPQs.

Pursued aims:

- > >> Determine the effectiveness of unified solutions (occupational standards) for connecting national professional qualifications and educational programmes.
- > >> Assess the suitability of procedures, forms, data bases, and informational solutions supporting the certification system, its users, and performing subjects.
- > >> Evaluate the effectiveness of the partner roles within the system – analysis of social partnerships in the following processes: encouraging the certification system introduction, proposing initiatives, establishing occupational standards and catalogues, appointing commissions, examining and verifying NPQs, proposing candidates for the acquisition of licences, and entering the institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs in the appropriate register.

Expected results:

- > >> Information on the effectiveness of the current system solutions and enhancement proposals to boost the efficiency.
- > >> Suggestions concerning possible effective and long-term system changes.

3.2 Survey's goals and objectives

The main objective of the survey entitled Monitoring of the certification system was to discover which factors influence the readiness to perform the assessment and recognition of national professional qualifications and the obtained success at it. For this reason, the survey covered all subjects, participating in this process: commission members, counsellors, certificate holders, and institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs.

The project aims at creating a comprehensive picture of procedures, documents, and people involved in this system with various roles, to bring forward any possible critical points in this system.

Following are the results gathered with questionnaires we distributed among the chosen target groups.

3.3 Commission members

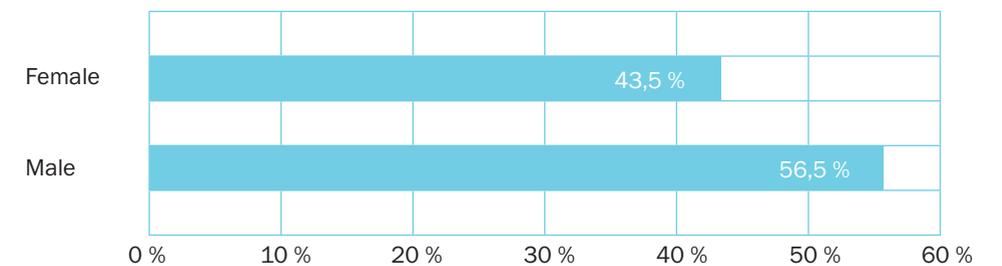
As the commissions for examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications represent an important subject in the process of performing and developing the system, it was of our particular interest to gather their opinions. The commissions are usually formed by individuals with an appropriate professional education and minimum five years work experience in the field in question for the verification of NPQ. For an adequate performance of their job, they follow a special training programme which also helps them to acquire specific proficiency to control, examine, and verify the candidates' knowledge, regardless of the means of its acquisition.

The questionnaires were distributed by mail and e-mail. Each comprised of 37 questions, among which 9 in the additional part which helped us gather demographic data from the involved commission members.

3.3.1 Demographic data analysis

Among the commission members participating in the survey (69), 39 (56.5%) were men and 30 (43.3%) women.

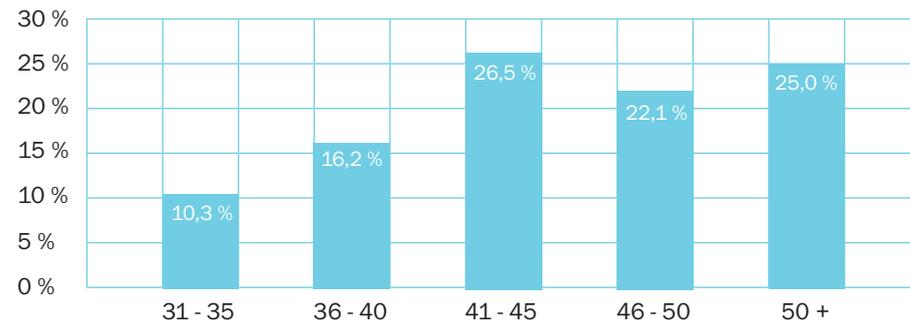
Picture 1: Gender of survey participants (commission members) N=69



They survey participants (68) were also asked to report their age. The majority of them, 18 (26.5%) belonged to the age group 41-50 years. 17 (25.0%) were older than 50, while 15 (22.1%) were aged 46-50. 11 survey participants (16.2%) were aged 36-40 and 7 (9.7%) belonged to the age group 31-35.

Picture 2: Age of survey participants (commission members)

N=68



Regarding the education, among the 70 survey participants, 48 (68.8%) graduated from a professional higher education institution or university (4-5 years), while 9 (12.9%) got a degree from a higher education institution with a 3-year study course. 7 (10.0%) participants finished high school and 6 (8.3%) had a masters or doctorate degree.

Commission members were also asked for the field of their education and their answers were: agriculture (5), architecture (2), civil engineering (1), traffic (3), social sciences (1), economy (2), electrical engineering (8), pharmacy (3), physiotherapy (1), hairdressing (2), geography (1), grammar school (1), catering (2), traffic (2), chemistry (1), wood technology (1), natural sciences (1), education (1), law (2), professor (2), mechanical engineering (1), tourism (2), practice teacher (1), security (2), veterinary medicine (2), medicine (2) and food technology (2).

In the demographic part, the survey also covered the participants' employment status. Among the 68 participating commission members, 59 (86.5%) were employed, 5 (7.4%) chose the category Self-employed, and 4 (6.9%) were retired.

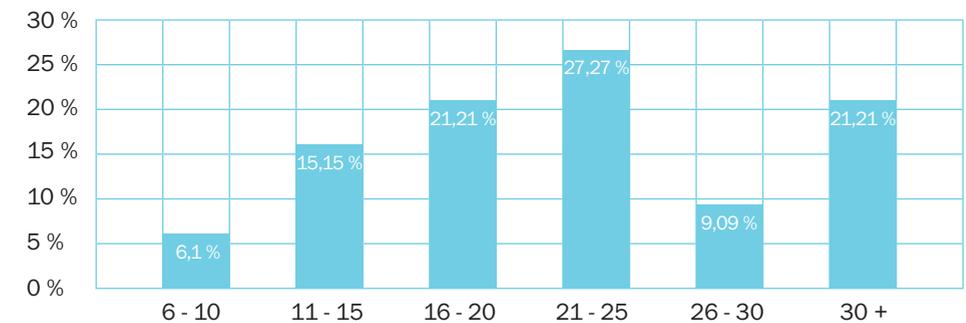
The survey participants were asked to state their current occupation; the results were as follows: 17 (25.8%) were employed professionals, 10 (15.2%) worked in the field of middle management, 9 (13.6%) were professors or teachers, 8 (12.1%) were managers, managing workers or company owners, 5 (7.6%) worked in other fields of social science or as work managers, while 2 (3.0%) were self-employed professionals and 2 (3.0%) were sole traders or craftsmen. 8 (12.1%) survey participants listed their current occupation under the field Other; their answers were as follows: cooking trainer, public servant, agricultural counsellor, company owner, gambling supervisor, work manager and technologist, professional management worker, professional assistant, counsellor, graduated sociologist, pensioner.

The participating commission members (66) were also asked to report on their employment period:

- > >> 6-10 years: 4 survey participants,
- > >> 11-15 years: 10 survey participants,
- > >> 16-20 years: 14 survey participants,
- > >> 21-25 years: 18 survey participants,
- > >> 26-30 years: 6 survey participants,
- > >> more than 30 years: 14 survey participants.

Picture 3: Full employment period

N=66

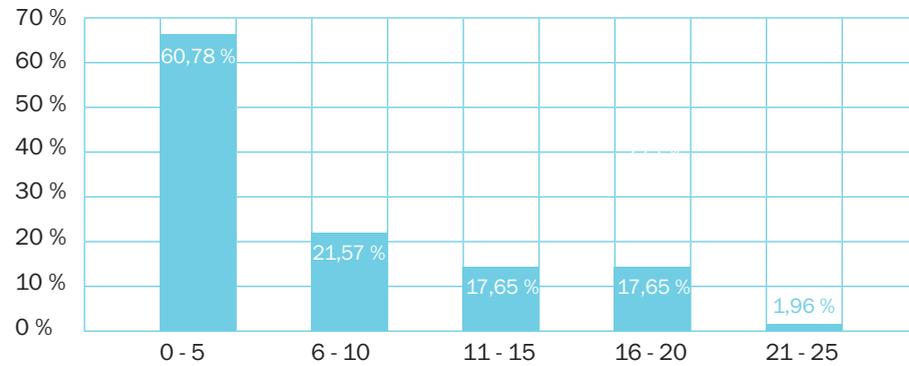


Survey participants were asked a similar question on the number of years of work experience in the field of professional qualification they verify; the results were as follows:

- > >> 0-5 years of work experience: 31 survey participants,
- > >> 6-10 years of work experience: 11 survey participants,
- > >> 11-15 years of work experience: 9 survey participants,
- > >> 16-20 years of work experience: 9 survey participants,
- > >> 21-25 years of work experience: 1 survey participant.

Picture 4: Work experience in the field of NPQe

N=61

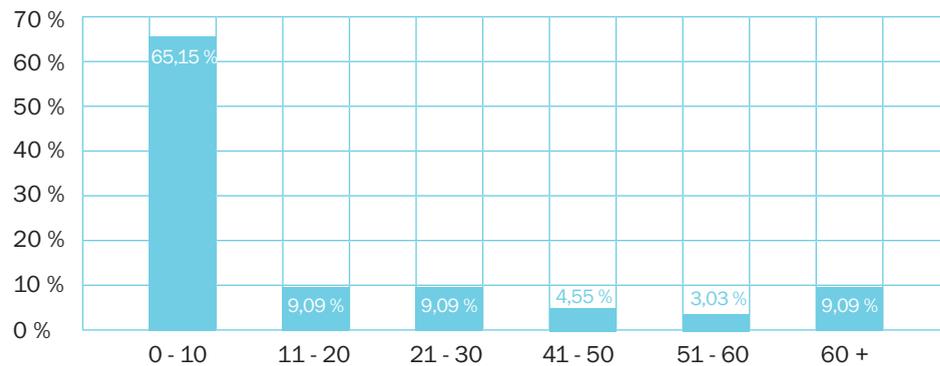


The commission members participating in the survey were also asked to report on the number of times they performed the assessment and recognition of NPQ. The results were as follows:

- > >> 0-10 instances of assessment and recognition: 43 survey participants,
- > >> 11-20 instances of assessment and recognition: 6 survey participants,
- > >> 21-30 instances of assessment and recognition: 6 survey participants,
- > >> 41-50 instances of assessment and recognition: 3 survey participants,
- > >> 51-60 instances of assessment and recognition: 2 survey participants,
- > >> More than 60 instances of assessment and recognition: 6 survey participants.

Picture 5: Performed procedures of assessment and recognition of NPQ

N=66



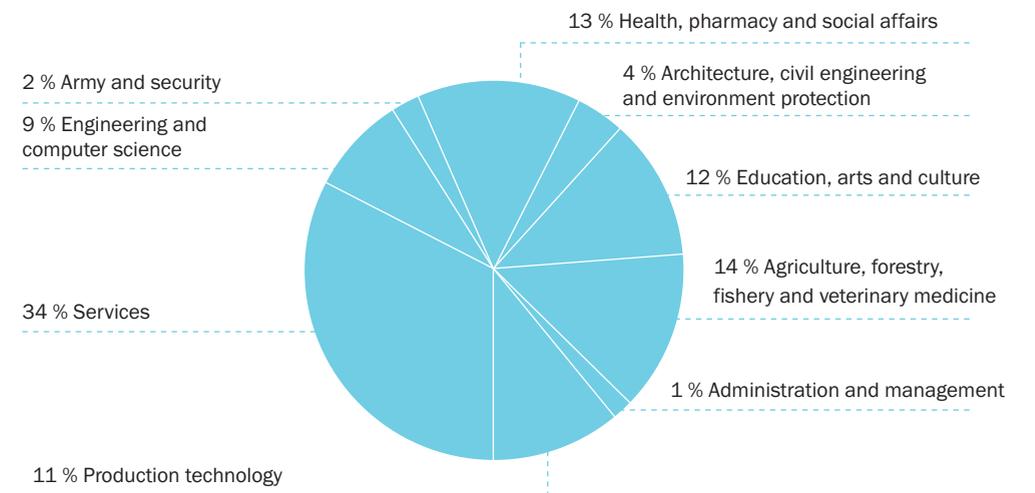
The commission members participating in the survey with more than 60 performed procedures of assessment and recognition listed the following information: 86 instances of assessment and recognition, 99 instances of assessment and recognition, 100 instances of assessment and recognition, 140 instances of assessment and recognition, 700 instances of assessment and recognition.

3.3.2 Interpretation of survey results

The majority of the participating commission members (90) were professionals in the field of employment services (30 or 33.3%), while only one commission member (1.1%) worked in the field of work administration and management. Other survey participants covered the following fields: architecture, civil engineering and environment protection; education, arts and culture; agriculture, forestry, fishery and veterinary medicine; production technology; engineering and computer science; army and security; health, pharmacy and social affairs.

Picture 6: Occupational fields of survey participants (commission members)

N=90



Within the system of assessment and recognition of NPQ, individual subjects are enabled to take on several different roles, and this applies also to the members of assessment and recognition commissions. The majority of commission members reported to participate in the evaluation of the so called collection folder or portfolio (57 members of 38.3%), while 53 members (35.6%) performed the procedure of direct examination. Such distribution of results matched our expectations, since the main task of commission members is awarding national professional qualifications, and the procedure allows the awarding either through the validation of knowledge and skills in the collection folder or via procedures of direct examination.

Since the assessment and recognition system is consolidated with corresponding preparatory programmes, it was also expected that the commission members would be involved in this process as lecturers, too. But, this supposition revealed to be incorrect as only 21 (14.1%) participating commission members declared to give lectures in the preparatory programmes

for the same NPQ they also examine and verify. It is worth noticing that the participating commission members had various answers at their disposition for this question, so the survey gave 149 different answers.

Further on, one of the most important subjects in the process of assessment and recognition of NPQs is also the performing organization, closely collaborating with the commission members during the entire procedure. This is why a part of the survey also included an evaluation of this co-operation. Among the 66 commission members who answered this question, the majority, i.e. 39 (54.4%) thought the co-operation between them and the performing organizations was very good. We were pleased by the fact that only a relatively small number of commission members (3 or 4.2%) thought this co-operation was bad or very bad (only one survey participant). Although the gathered results are encouraging, it is necessary to mention also some of the answers provided under the category Other, which are quite concerning. Here are some of the given opinions:

- > >> "...the cooperation was largely dependent on the performing institution – also very bad”;
- > >> "...I have cooperated with several performing institutions and experienced very different co-operations, from very good to very bad, so I cannot give you only one answer”;
- > >> "...wilful and one-sided interpretation and performance of NPQ (with the majority of performing organizations)”;
- > >> "...participation is possible only if you have a connection inside the performing organization”.

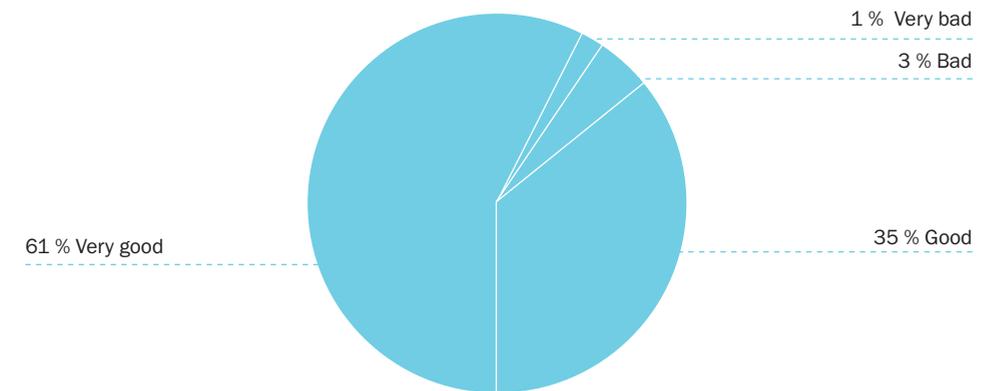
The commission members' claim that the majority of performing organizations adopt a wilful and one-sided explanation and application of the NPQ system, is in a way supported also by the opinion of a Slovenian trade union representative. She told: "The system failed to reach the desired goal as it does not enable individuals without any formal education to acquire a generally acceptable certificate. I believe the system was set up exclusively for the profit of performing institutions, namely for occupations which require a certificate already by law. In this way, employees are left with no choice but to acquire a certificate, if they wish to keep their current positions. This is why I can openly claim that the system missed the set objective." According to her, the problem with the NPQ system is not its conceptual base, but the passage from the idea to its realization, which revealed extremely anomalous.

Since the work of assessment and recognition commissions and performing organizations is closely linked to the National Examination Centre of Slovenia, the survey also included the commission members' evaluation of the co-operation with the latter. A strong majority of survey participants found the collaboration with the Centre satisfying; however one commission member (1.4 %) evaluated it as very bad. Despite the general satisfaction, it would be wise to reconsider some key elements of this kind of co-operation, namely the improvement of direct co-operation. Some commission members in fact emphasized that "when necessary, the co-operation with the Centre was good, but infrequent. The contact is mainly established through the performing worker, while the Centre itself has not yet responded to this question, although I had already mentioned it in previous surveys and meeting. Things are not progressing." There was another commentary regarding the Centre's lack of respect for the commission members' opinion. A survey participant indicated that any comments, opinions or suggestions from the professional

members of the commissions are disregarded, and that certain performing organizations have a completely free choice in the process of appointing commission members. Until recently, the performing institutions were indeed granted such authority, but with modification in the Slovenian law (National Professional Qualifications Act) this has changed.

Normally, the assessment and recognition procedure is accompanied by all the necessary documentation providing the candidates with both an adequate record of all the included activities, and appropriate information about the progress of their assessment and recognition procedure. During the course of our survey, we were interested in the commission members' opinion on the record of counselling procedure, the evaluation instrument for special certificates in the collection folder/portfolio, the evaluation instrument for the entire portfolio and the record of professional qualification examination. We were pleased to learn that the commission members assessed all the listed documents as good or even very good, but even more delighted that only three survey participants evaluated these documents as bad or very bad. The only exception among the documents was the record of professional qualification examination, which was evaluated as bad or very bad by 8 participating commission members. In the meantime and probably due to the feedback from direct users, however, this record has already been modified and as such published in the Official gazette of the Republic of Slovenia.

Picture 7: Suitability of the record of counselling procedure



The documentation evaluation is strongly connected also with the assessment of criteria for individual certificates in the collection folder, portfolio, and for the evaluation of the entire portfolio since the established criteria apply to the evaluation instrument for both, individual certificates in the portfolio and the portfolio in its integrity. For this reason, the participating commission members were asked to state the usefulness of the following criteria: genuineness, validity, usefulness, reliance, diversity, adequacy, and complexity. The two questions were answered by 72 participating commission members, among which the majority (more than 70%) found the evaluation criteria for individual certificates very good or good. The evaluation criteria for the entire portfolio received a similar assessment, but the results showed also a strong need to perform an additional professional examination of the criterion complexity, as

it was perceived as bad or very bad by most participating commission members (6 or 8.3%).

In the assessment and recognition procedure, the portfolio represents a key element to assess and certify a candidate's acquired knowledge and skills regardless of the acquisition method, so the survey placed a particular interest also in the commission members' evaluation of the adequacy of portfolio components. The question was answered by 72 survey participants who evaluated the suitability of the following components: curriculum vitae, formal certificates, work experience evidence and the component including letters of reference, articles, photographs, products, etc. Most participants found all the listed components important but it was interesting to discover that formal certificates were seen as an important portfolio component by as much as 60 (83.3%) participants, compared to the component including letters of reference, articles, photographs, products, etc., which was seen as important by only a good half of the participants (42 or 58.3%). From these results, two important conclusions can be made:

- > >> Formal certificates are seen as important because they attest professional qualifications, the acquisition of which requires a certain level of formal education, or
- > >> We can assume there is still a considerably low level of confidence towards the skills acquired through different paths and documents attesting them, regardless of the certificate type or issuing institution (even a letter of reference from the employer attesting extended work experience of the candidate).

The representative of the Association of Slovenian Trade Unions supported this conclusion in her opinion about the application of the assessment and recognition system for NPQs, where she said: "Besides, it is very difficult to implement this system due to a very low level of confidence."

In connection with the previous question, we were interested to know whether commission members believe it appropriate to complement the portfolio with some additional elements. This question was answered by 65 commission members; the majority of them (58 or 80.6%) thought the portfolio needs no additional component, and an approximately one tenth of them thought the opposite. Following are their proposals on the additional elements:

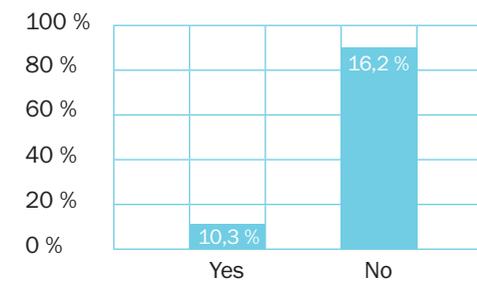
- > >> "Final exams certificates at the end of education courses need to include a grade from 1 to 5"
- > >> "Participants should complete the certificates with personal improvements, measures for fault elimination"
- > >> "Counsellor's opinion"
- > >> "Practical skills verification".

All this leaves us to conclude that there is a certain tendency to apply the rules from formal or "school" education also to the field of assessment and recognition of knowledge acquired in different ways. Some commission members would like to introduce a five-level numeral evaluation, even though the NPQ system only requires that the commission members assess whether the candidates possess the necessary knowledge and skills to practice a profession independently.

It was also interesting that the commission members proposed to complement the portfolio

with a counsellor's opinion, although the record of counselling procedure including a counsellor's opinion, already constitutes a part of the portfolio.

Picture 8: Necessity to complement the portfolio with additional elements N=65



Since the work of counsellors is very important in the NPQ system and represents a predisposition for successful work of the commission members, the latter were asked to evaluate also the work of counsellors. We were pleased by the results, since more than half of survey participants (44 or 61.1%) evaluated their work as very good, and a little more than a third (26 or 31.9%) of participants as good. Although only three commission members assessed the counsellors' work as bad, their justification can be found worrying. They reported a case in which a counsellor helped a candidate in completing his portfolio with mobile text messages or via telephone. The collection folders were insufficiently prepared. It is fair to argue such behaviour is contrary to the basic role of the counsellor during the procedure of NPQ which is to motivate the candidate, help him in preparing the collection folder, which means help in gathering the necessary certificates but also help in the actual preparation of the folder, if possible. Most importantly, counsellors can fulfil their principal mission only through personal interaction with the candidate.

Further on, commission members noted that the portfolio is not compiled in such way to enable the members to verify the knowledge they know the candidate possesses. The arguments listed were surprising: certificates often lack dates, seals, etc. This comes as a great surprise because in the process of creating the collection folder, counsellors are to use specific criteria to assess individual certificates in the portfolio which ensure that the latter are equipped with all the necessary information, seals and signatures. If in such cases commission members fail to contact the counsellor and demand to complement the certificates, the candidate can be quickly put through under re-examination for the same knowledge he already possesses and uses in accomplishing a certain work or practicing a certain profession. Some commission members participating in the survey expressed a similar concern when stating that there is no co-operation between them and counsellors, which can furthermore hinder the candidates in the process of acquiring a NPQ. A good co-operation between counsellors and commission members in fact enables the candidate to eliminate the before mentioned faults and imperfections in the portfolio (lack of seals, signatures, dates, etc.) and in this way, increase the possibilities of knowledge and skill recognition on the basis of certificates. According to the commission members, certificates are very important, as additional exams mean an additional cost and stress for the candidate, and these can easily be avoided if the certificates are well prepared.

Considering the fact that commission members need to fulfil certain conditions to acquire a licence – required degree and type of education, work experience in the field of the examined NPQ and a successfully accomplished training programme – and that the acquisition of licence follows a specific procedure, the commission members participating in the survey were also asked on their opinion on that. This question was answered by 72 members; they evaluated: the nomination procedure for commission members – from the nomination to the acquisition of licence, the procedure information, the price and the length of the procedure, the training programme and the conditions for nomination.

In the evaluation of the nomination procedure, the majority of survey participants (39 or 54.2%) found the procedure inappropriate. It is necessary to emphasize that the commission members were evaluating the nomination from the part of the chamber or trade union, which has recently changed. With the adoption of a new law on NPQ, there is an ongoing tender for members of the assessment and recognition commissions for NPQ at the National Examination Centre, to which all interested subjects can respond all-year-round.

Regarding the information on the procedure, the evaluation of the commission members did not substantially differ from the previous one, since the majority of survey participants (35 or 48.6%) evaluated it as inappropriate. However, they were slightly less critical in their evaluation of the price for the nomination procedure, as a little more than half of the survey participants estimated the price to be appropriate.

With respect to the procedure length, one half of the participating commission members estimated it as inappropriate, and similarly, 65.3% of participants estimated the training programme to be inappropriate. Moreover, more than half of the participants were critical to the nomination conditions: 54.2% claimed they were inappropriate.

The number of certificate holders, who had acquired their certificate solely by the verification of knowledge and skills documented in the portfolio, is relatively small, so we were interested in the commission members' opinion on the reasons for this. As the examination of the portfolio is one of the principal tasks of the commission members, they are perfectly suited to provide explicit and relevant answers to this question. Following are their results:

- > >> Badly prepared portfolios
- > >> Lack of contacts with the candidate in the portfolio examination
- > >> Commission members' lack of confidence in the portfolio certificates
- > >> Missing portfolios
- > >> Encouraging candidates to follow the preparatory programmes at the expense of the portfolio creation
- > >> Too small emphasis on the portfolio as an important mechanism in acquiring the NPQ in the process of information and counselling
- > >> Lack of uniformity among the commission members
- > >> Impossible evaluation of skills exclusively on the basis of a portfolio
- > >> Not enough interest
- > >> Political interests among the commission members and performing institutions
- > >> Counsellors failed to do their work
- > >> Regulations stipulate also an examination.

3.4 Counsellors in the assessment and recognition procedure of NPQ

Another important subject participating in the survey Monitoring of the certification system, are counsellors in the process of assessment and recognition of NPQ. By mail or e-mail they were send questionnaires with a total of 32 questions, 10 of which represented an additional part for gathering demographic data.

The counsellor's role in the assessment and recognition procedure of NPQ is determined by Article 3 of Rules on Method and Procedure for the Assessment and Award of National Professional Qualifications, which stipulates that all institutions performing procedures must ensure appropriate information on the possibilities and conditions for the acquisition of a professional qualification, and counselling help for the creation of the collection folder, portfolio. However, it is important to stress that the Rules only define the counsellor's tasks and not its profile – there are no stipulations regarding the necessary type or level of education that must be ensured for the performance of this role. Probably due to all afore mentioned reasons, there is still an ongoing debate in the professional spheres, whether it is necessary for the counsellor to be a professional in the field of the NPQ in question or not.

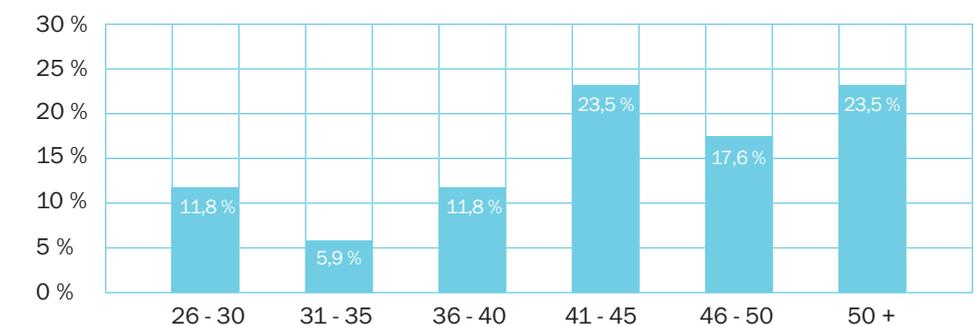
3.4.1 Demographic data analysis

Among all counsellors participating in the survey (34), the number of women was three times higher (24 or 70.6%) than the number of men (8 or 23.5%).

The counsellors participating in the survey were also asked to report their age. The majority of survey participants, 8 (23.5%) belonged to the age group 41-45 and older than 50, 6 (17.6%) belonged to the age group 46-50, and 4 (11.8%) to the age group 36-40. The same number of participants, 4 (11.8%) belonged to the age group 26-30, while 2 (5.9%) were aged 31-35.

Picture 9: Age of survey participants (counsellors)

N=34



Regarding education, 21 out of 34 participating counsellors (61.8%) had a degree from a higher education institution or university (4-5 years), while 9 (26.5%) had a degree from a higher education institution with a 3-year study course. One counsellor (2.9%) finished high school, and one had a masters or doctorate degree.

Counsellors were also asked for the type of their education; following are their answers: agriculture (6), university degree in economy (1), economist-commercialist (1), mechanical engineering (2), natural sciences and engineering (3), education (2), physical education professor (1), social work (2), health (1), food technology (1).

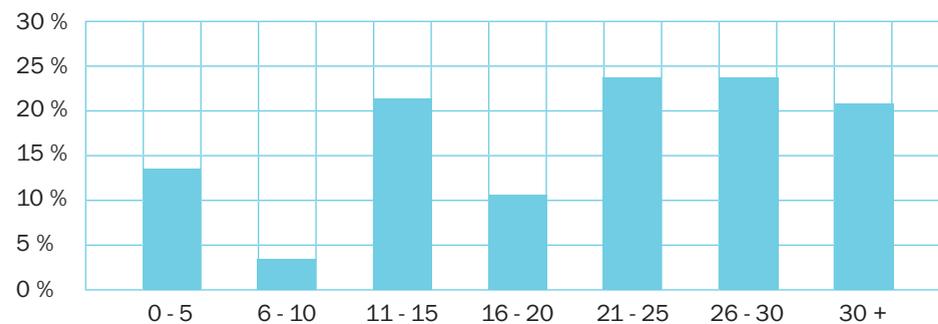
Within the demographic part of the survey, the participating counsellors (34) were also asked about their employment status; 31 (91.2%) answered they were employed, one participant (2.9%) chose the category Self-employed.

The participating counsellors were also asked about their employment period; following are their answers:

- > >> 0-5 years: 4 counsellors
- > >> 6-10 years: 1 counsellor
- > >> 11-15 years: 6 counsellors
- > >> 16-20 years: 3 counsellors
- > >> 21-25 years: 7 counsellors
- > >> 26-30 years: 2 counsellors
- > >> More than 30 years: 6 counsellors

Picture 10: Full employment period

N=31



Similarly, the counsellors were asked to report on the years of their work experience in the counselling field; following are the results:

- > >> 0-5 years of work experience: 23 participating counsellors
- > >> 6-10 years of work experience: 2 participating counsellors
- > >> 16-20 years of work experience: 3 counsellors

We were also interested in the number of times the participating counsellors provided counselling for the candidates; following are their answers:

- > >> 0-10 times: 6 participating counsellors
- > >> 11-20 times: 2 participating counsellors
- > >> 21-30 times: 4 participating counsellors
- > >> 31-40 times: 2 participating counsellors
- > >> 41-50 times: 1 participating counsellor
- > >> 51-60 times: 2 participating counsellors
- > >> More than 60 times: 9 participating counsellors

The participating counsellors who provided counselling more 60 times further specified the exact numbers as follows: 67, 90, 94, 95, 99, 100, 300, and 600.

Similarly, counsellors were asked on the number of portfolios they helped to create. The question was answered by 34 counsellors who gave the following answers:

- > >> 0-10 portfolios: 9 counsellors
- > >> 11-20 portfolios: 2 counsellors
- > >> 21-30 portfolios: 4 counsellors
- > >> 31-40 portfolios: 1 counsellor
- > >> 41-50 portfolios: 3 counsellors
- > >> 51-60 portfolios: 2 counsellors
- > >> More than 60 portfolios: 7 counsellors

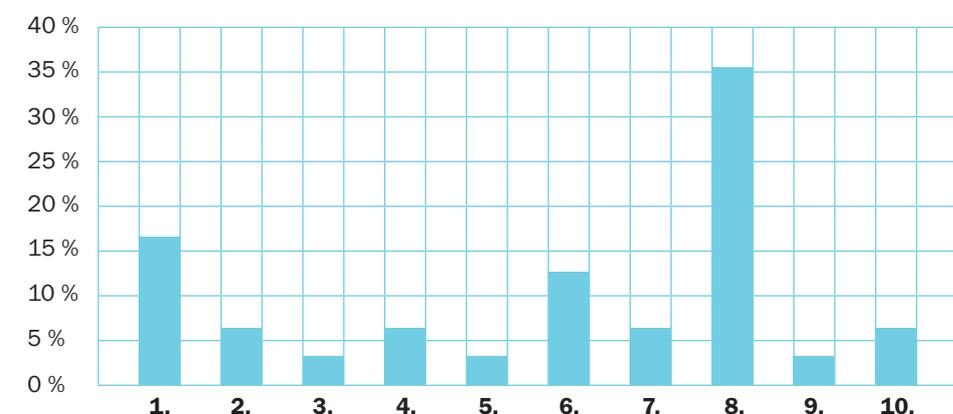
The participating counsellors with more than 60 portfolios further specified the exact numbers as follows: 1000 portfolios, 180 portfolios, 200 portfolios, 300 portfolios, 91 portfolios, and 99 portfolios.

3.4.2 Interpretation of survey results

Among the participating counsellors (31), 5 (16.1%) were professional and theoretical subjects teachers (PTS teacher), 1 counsellor (3.2%) worked in middle management, 1 (3.2%) practiced another profession in the field of social science, and 1 (3.2%) was an educator. Following are other listed occupations, held by the participating counsellors: expert in adult education, manager, managing worker, company owner; work manager, professor and practical class teacher.

Picture 11: Participating counsellors and their occupations

N=31



1. PTS teacher - 16.10 % 2. Teacher - 6.50 % 3. Middle manager - 3.20 %
 4. Professor - 6.50 % 5. Education worker - 3.20 % 6. Work manager - 12.90 %
 7. Manager - 6.50 % 8. Other - 35.50 % 10. Expert in adult education - 6.50 %
 9. Other profession in the field of social science - 3.20 %

Some of the participating counsellors could not decide about any of the offered categories, so they listed their current occupations under the category Other; following are their answers:

- > >> "Occupation in the field of agriculture (8)"
- > >> "Social worker (2)"
- > >> "Education organizer (1)"
- > >> "Trainer for gambling (1)"
- > >> "Professional project secretary (1)"

Considering the fact that a trained counsellor is one of the conditions that must be fulfilled by the institution wishing to perform the procedure of NPQ assessment and recognition, the survey also included a question about the counsellors' training to perform their tasks, whether at the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) or at the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training (NIVET). The question was answered by 34 participating counsellors and a strong majority (32 or 94.1%) reported to have followed a training programme. But it was surprising to learn that 2 participating counsellors (5.9%) did not undergo any kind of training, despite this being a condition that must be met by the performing institution (counsellor trained according to the programme of SIAE or NIVET).

Counsellors play an important role especially during the two principal stages of assessment and recognition procedure: providing information and counselling in the NPQ procedure. This is why we were interested to learn, whether these two stages are actually entered. The question was answered by 33 participating counsellors and they all confirmed that they provided all the

necessary information on possibilities and conditions for acquiring a NPQ and counselling about the procedure. Following are the tasks they usually performed during the NPQ procedure:

- > >> Helping candidates to create their collection folder, portfolio (32 participating counsellors or 20.3%)
- > >> Helping candidates to document the knowledge, skills and competence acquired in different ways (26 participating counsellors or 16.5%)
- > >> Helping candidates to gather and form individual certificates for knowledge and skills acquired in different ways (25 participating counsellors or 15.8%)
- > >> Monitoring candidates throughout the entire process of acquiring a NPQ (24 participating counsellors or 15.2%)
- > >> Helping candidates in their decision concerning education (17 participating counsellors or 10.8%)
- > >> Helping candidates in their decision on which professional qualification they wish to start the recognition procedure (12 participating counsellors or 7.6%).

The participating counsellors were also offered the category Other, where they were given the following options:

- > >> Setting dates for examinations and the verification (11 counsellors or 25%)
- > >> Nominating examinations and verification commissions (4 counsellors or 9.1%)
- > >> Publishing certificates (9 counsellors or 20.5%)
- > >> Organizing preparatory programmes for examinations and the verification (5 counsellors or 11.4%),
- > >> Lecturing in preparatory programmes (5 counsellors or 11.4%),
- > >> Storing assessment and recognition documentation – portfolios, records (10 counsellors or 22.7%).

Some of the participating counsellors provided also additional answers, not included in the given options; following are their tasks:

- > >> "Revision of catalogues" (1)
- > >> "Providing motivation and support to candidates" (1)
- > >> "Preparative for examinations" (1)

Altogether, we were given 158 answers, since the participating counsellors had the possibility to choose multiple given answers.

During the assessment and recognition procedure for NPQ, the same documentation used by commission members is also used by counsellors, the only difference being the purpose of their use. While commission members use it to examine and verify knowledge and skills acquired in different ways, counsellors use it in the process of providing the candidate with basic information and counselling about the NPQ system as well as creating the collection folder, portfolio. This is why counsellors, too, were asked to evaluate the following documents: the record of counselling procedure, the evaluation instrument for individual certificates in the portfolio and the evaluation instrument for the entire portfolio. The majority of counsellors

participating in the survey assessed this documentation as very good or good, but there were some who thought the opposite and also wrote that they in fact never use this documentation during the procedure. Although the negative opinions were not frequent (at most 10%), some of the arguments provided are quite worrying and demand a serious re-consideration. For instance, one of the participating counsellors wrote: *“Considering the fact that some of us have other work beside NPQ, some records and forms required to be filled out for every candidate represent an additional burden. At the end, it only matters whether we helped the candidate acquire the necessary certificate, and not for instance, what we talked about in the meetings, how many times and when.”* Such claim strongly supports the commission members’ comment about the insufficiently prepared portfolio which lacked a record on counselling procedure or the counsellor’s opinion of the candidate; this type of information from the counsellor can in fact be very helpful for commission members.

Regarding the assessment on the suitability of the documentation in the assessment and recognition procedure, we were interested whether and to what extent the counsellors use this documentation. The counsellors were asked whether they use the criteria to evaluate the certificate in the preparation of the candidates’ portfolios. The question was answered by 32 counsellors, 31 (96.6%) of which answered affirmatively, and one counsellor (3.1%) negatively. The latter additionally supports our hypothesis that the reason for the insufficient preparation of portfolios cannot be in the disrespect of evaluation criteria for certificates.

Considering that the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills represents the foundation for the assessment and recognition process, it is consequently equally important for the commission members as for the counsellors in the process of providing information and counselling. This is the reason we were interested in the counsellors’ evaluation of the usefulness of the catalogue separately for each element of this document. Surprisingly, the majority of included counsellors (34) evaluated the catalogue elements as very good or good, and only a handful of them thought the opposite. But most strikingly, counsellors evaluated the professional literature determined in the catalogue in the same way as commission members: as inappropriate and outdated.

Another interesting question was whether counsellors use the literature determined in the catalogue for counselling candidates in the process of acquiring NPQ. The question was answered by 33 counsellors, among which the majority (29 or 87.9%) answered affirmatively, and 4 (12%) answered negatively, which in fact corresponds with the previous finding that the literature is considered inappropriate and outdated.

Since the counsellor plays a very important role in the assessment and recognition procedure and can essentially influence the course of assessing the candidate’s competence – i.e. compiling the portfolio – we wanted to know whether counsellors actually helped candidates to compile their portfolio. The question was answered by 33 counsellors. The results were reassuring, as 32 (97%) of them answered affirmatively and only one counsellor (3.0%) gave a negative answer, but his reason for such answer was that he had not yet followed a candidate throughout the entire process.

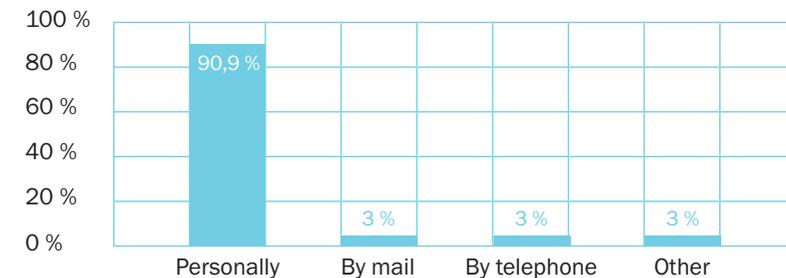
Another question related to the portfolio was on the way the portfolio was compiled, and it was

answered by 33 counsellors. The majority of them (30 or 90.9%) reported to have compiled the candidates’ portfolio personally. One counsellor (3.0%) reported to have helped in the compilation by mail, and one that he had helped by telephone. Some answers were given under the category Other, namely:

- > >> “on all the possible ways” (3x)
- > >> “also by mail or e-mail, because of corrections and to encourage the candidate to include additional elements prior to the preparation of the final version ...”

Picture 12: Preparation of the portfolio

N=33



The explanation for badly prepared portfolios, reported by commission members, can probably also be found in these results. A good portfolio is always the result of a systematic approach to the counselling process in which the counsellor and the candidate search for appropriate solutions to document differently acquired knowledge and skills together and in such way that enables the commission members to verify the candidates knowledge already on the basis of the awarded certificates and documents. And this can only be achieved through a personal relation between the counsellor and the candidate, not by telephone or mail.

As the counsellors perform various tasks in the process of examinations and the verification of NPQ, we were also interested in the type of help counsellors provided to the candidate in the compilation of the portfolio. From the possible given answers, 31 or 23% of participating counsellors chose the answer “I look through the certificates and notify the candidate of the possible imperfections”, and the same number of counsellors reported to have explained the importance and the use of the portfolio. 24 or 17.8% of counsellors help the candidates to collect the certificates, and the same number helps the candidates to document differently acquired knowledge and skills, which is an encouraging result. These results imply that some counsellors understand their role in a broader sense, not only as providers of basic information about the assessment and recognition procedure and help in collecting documents and the organization according to the structure of the portfolio.

In the survey, we were interested not only in the counselling procedure and its various phases but also in the content of the counselling conversation. Among the given answers, almost a quarter of participating counsellors (23.3%) chose the following options: provision of information about the process of the qualification acquisition, help in the preparation of the portfolio, introduction to the catalogue of professional knowledge and skills. Approximately one fifth of the participating counsellors (19.5%) told that they discussed additional education, while 8 counsellors (6.0%) reported to have counselled the candidate about acquiring a second professional qualification, so we can assume that in the process of counselling, candidates were given a comprehensive treatment – which included their differently acquired knowledge, skills and competences on one hand, and their interests, wishes and expectations on the other.

In the assessment procedure, the work of counsellors and commission members is closely connected, so we wanted to learn how counsellors perceived their cooperation. A little less than a third of participating counsellors (28.4%) reported that commission members consult counsellors about individual certificates in the portfolio, so it can be assumed that commission members do not discard documents which require additional explanation or information, but try to get additional information and include these documents in the examination procedure. As a little more than one fifth of participating counsellors (20.9%) reported that commission members asked them to complement certain certificates, we can presume that they follow the guidelines given in the training programme about contacting counsellors in case of insufficient certificates. Pleasing news is also that one quarter of participating counsellors (25.4%) reported that commission members give counsellors a feedback on certificates and the entire portfolio, so the counsellors get a concrete evaluation of their work directly from the users of their services. Besides, this way of work also enables to discard eventual faults simultaneously and in this way directly improve the counselling procedure – and indirectly improve the entire procedure of examinations and the verification of NPQ. Although only 6 (9.0%) participating counsellors reported that they do not cooperate with commission members, this information deserves careful consideration, especially if we look at all the afore mentioned advantages of such cooperation.

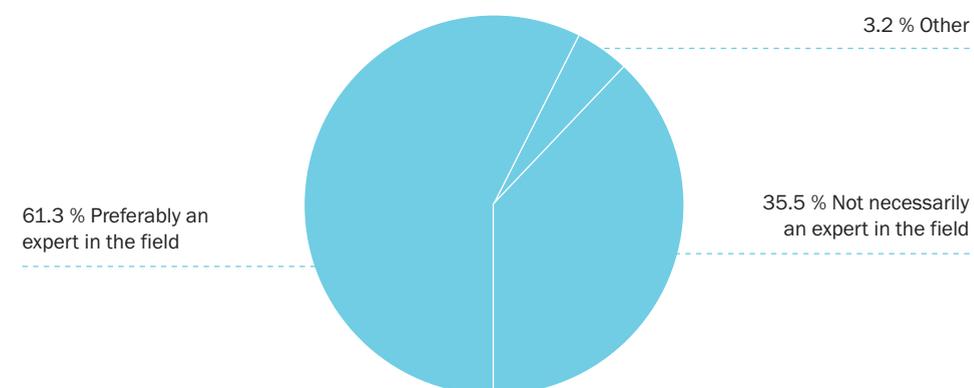
Since the counsellors compile the candidates' portfolio following detailed guidelines and considering the portfolio elements determined by each profession separately, we also wished to verify how counsellors evaluate these determined components of the portfolio. We were especially interested in the evaluation of the following components: curriculum vitae, certificates, work experience and documents attesting differently acquired knowledge. The majority of participating counsellors assessed these components as very suitable. Interestingly, 91.2% found certificates very suitable, but almost 15% less thought the same of the documents attesting differently acquired knowledge – similar results as with the commission members. There are two possible conclusions that can be made: these results represent an evaluation of certificates which for the acquisition of professional qualification require a certain prior education; or they simply mirror mistrust in the value of knowledge and skills acquired outside formal education, and consequently mistrust in the documents which attest this knowledge. Almost all participating counsellors (30 out of 31) stated that the portfolio needs no additional element.

Despite the fact that counsellors perform very different tasks in the process of providing infor-

mation and counselling, their profile is not precisely defined – there is no set level or type of education the counsellors should have. For this reason, professionals still argue on whether counsellors should be experts from the field in which they provide counselling or not. We were interested to learn, how counsellors saw this question and what their opinion on the matter was. The question was answered by 31 counsellors, and the majority of them (19 or 61.3%) thought that counsellors should be experts from the field of the NPQ for which they provide counselling, while 11 or 35.5% did not think this is necessary. One counsellor (3.2%) said that counsellors should above all be very humane and expert educators with many positive and encouraging thoughts for the candidate.

Picture 13: Profile of the counsellor

N=31



3.5 Institutions performing the procedures of assessment and recognition of national professional qualifications

The procedure of examinations and the verification of professional qualification can be performed by inter-companies education centres, schools, adult education organizations and various chambers, providing publicly valid education programmes and fulfilling the conditions regarding the material and the personnel, determined in the catalogue of standards for professional knowledge and skills and other regulations (hereinafter called “institutions performing examinations and the verification”) if this is set in accordance with the National Professional Qualifications Act (OJ, No. 118/2006).

A similarly compiled questionnaire with 33 questions altogether was answered by 24 representatives of institutions performing examinations and the verification occupying different positions within their institutions: director for adult education (6), director, headmaster, assistant headmaster (6), counsellor for NPQ, professional assistant for human resources, quality manager, marketing director...

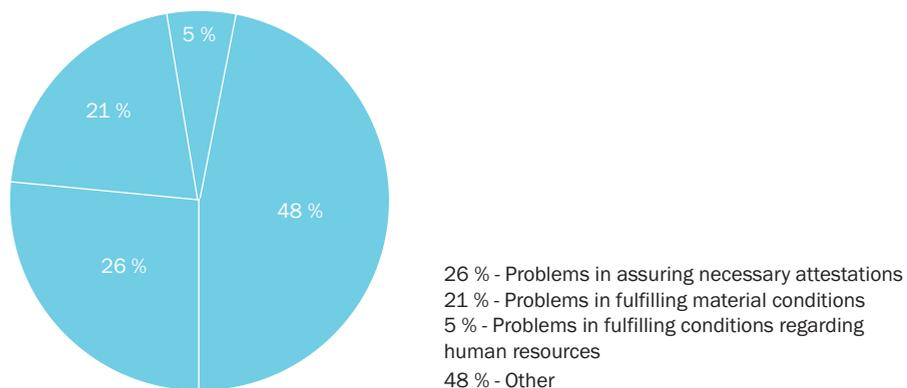
The participating representatives identified some advantages and disadvantages in the status of the institution performing the procedures, both from the point of view of the organization and from the point of view of the individual.

According to them, a clear advantage for the institution is the consequent increased visibility and the enlargement of its activity, while the individual acquires new knowledge, his employability rises and the fulfilment of needs on the labour market and in the economy is more flexible.

The disadvantage is especially in the additional work, increased administrative work and bureaucratic procedures, and a low price of this type of services.

During the procedure of entering the register, the institutions encountered various obstacles. From the given answers, the representatives especially pointed out problems in assuring necessary attestations (26%) and problems regarding the fulfilment of conditions related to material conditions (21%). 3 participating representatives opted for the option Other and added that the duration of the procedure is excessive, while others did not report of any particular troubles or obstacles.

Picture 14: Obstacles in the procedure of entering the register N=24



The representatives were also asked whether they think their status is connected to the function of preparation of candidates for examinations and the verification of NPQ. More than half

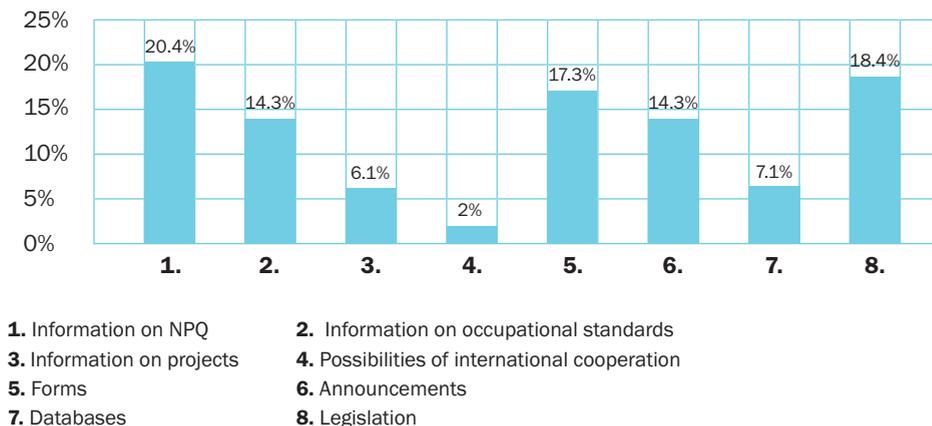
responded that it is good that the functions are connected, 21% thought that the connection between the two functions is necessary and the same percentage of participating representatives reported that there is no need to connect these two functions. None believed these functions could not be connected.

Institutions can facilitate their work using various forms available on the web page of the National Information Centre. Two thirds of participating representatives reported to use only the offered forms, while one third reported to have developed their own forms.

We were also interested in how many times the representatives visit the web page of the NRP and which content receives the majority of visits. One half of participating representatives uses the web page regularly while one third uses it seldom. The percentage of the representatives, which always use the web page, was 12.5%. According to the results, all representatives use the web page at a certain degree, as no one reported not use it at all.

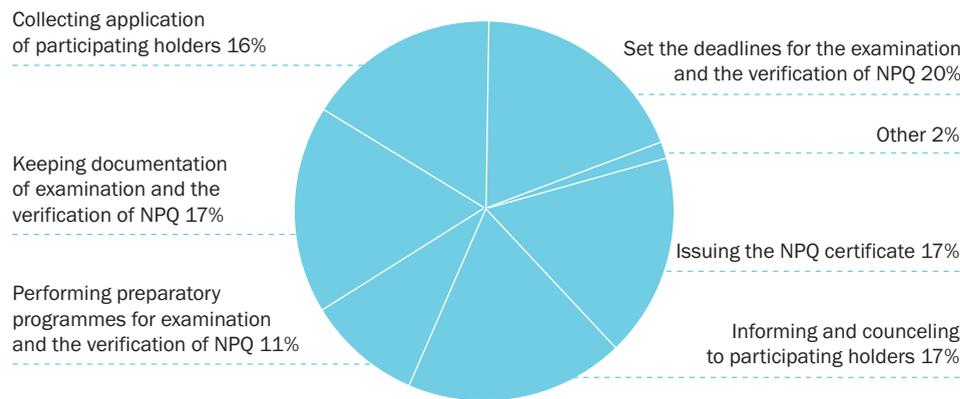
Following is the content they most frequently search for: information on NPQ (20%), legislation (18%), forms (17%), information on occupational standards (14%) and announcements (14%).

Picture 15: Majority of the visited contents on the web page NRP



The graph displaying the role of institutions shows equal proportions for all the offered answers; the only answer that received a smaller proportion (11%) was “performing preparatory programmes for examinations and the verification”, but this result was expected as it implies two completely different functions of each institution. The survey also showed that the majority of representatives (18) perform both roles.

Picture 16: Role of performing institution in the procedure of assessment and recognition of professional qualifications N=24



One of the functions of the institution performing examinations and the verification, stipulated by the National Professional Qualifications Act, is also keeping a record of all certificate holders. According to the representatives, the record is usually kept in an electronic form (59%), almost a quarter have a paper record, and some institutions developed a special programme for this database.

In carrying out their functions, the performing organizations cooperate also with commission members and counsellors. The representatives evaluated this cooperation as very good (two thirds of participating representatives) or good (one third of the participating representatives).

Counsellors usually work full-time at the institution and perform other working tasks. The majority of them are not paid according to the set Methodology, as they perform these tasks within their working assignments determined in their work contracts.

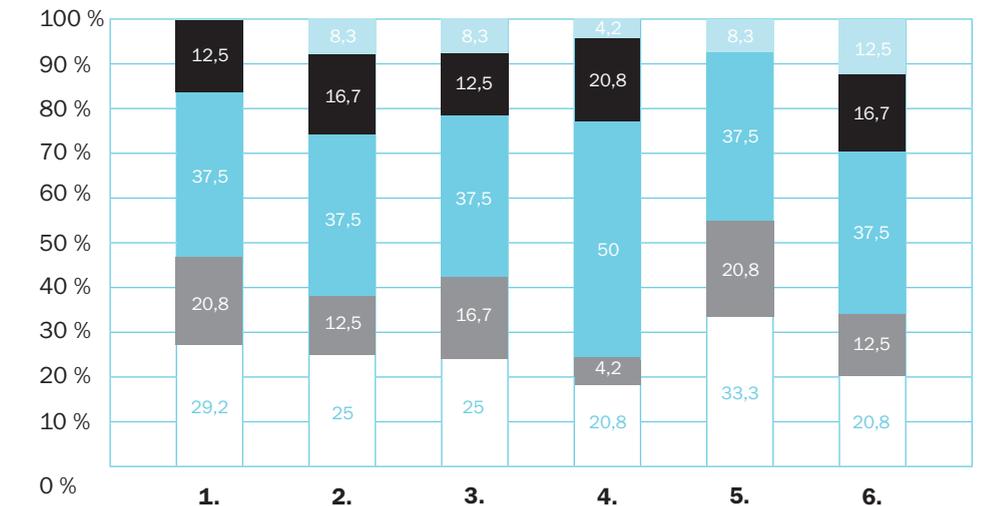
The work of commission members is usually evaluated according to the Methodology, which is also valid for the procedure of assessment and recognition for each candidate. The participating representatives of the institutions (41% of them) expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the manner of payment determined in a particular Methodology.

The survey also examined whether the representatives of the performing institutions are trained to work as counsellors in the system of NPQs. 62% of the participating representatives attended special training, and a little more than half of them also perform the counselling. A quarter of all participants also lecture in the training programmes.

Following you can find an interesting graph displaying which additional knowledge and in what

proportion the performing institutions should possess according to the participating representatives.

Picture 17: Requirements for additional knowledge in the performing institution N=24



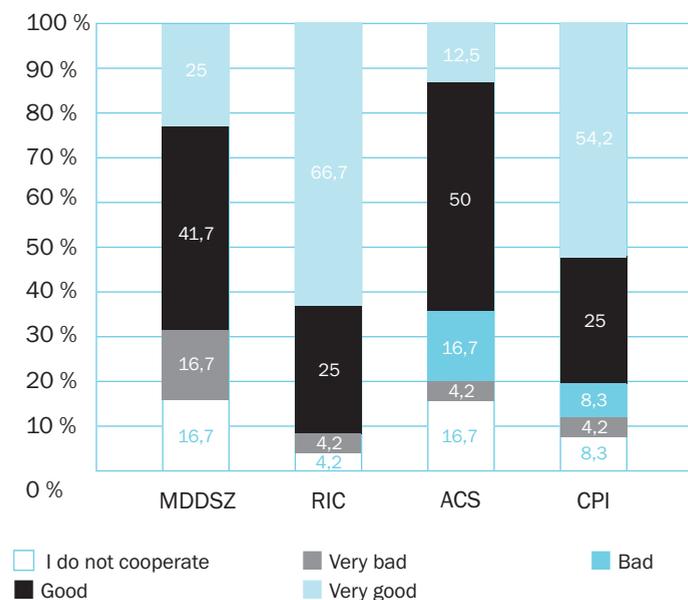
- 1. Ways for composing a good report
- 2. Communication
- 3. Providing information to candidates in the procedure of NPQs
- 4. Familiarization with directives and regulations
- 5. Additional knowledge on education and adult education
- 6. Knowledge on examination and assesment

Not at all Very little Little A lot Very much

The possibilities of additional knowledge were ranked numerically from 1 (not at all) to 5 (I would really need this type of knowledge), and the majority of values were from 1 to 3. According to the results, there is a strong need for knowledge on examination and assessment, communication, and on the provision of information on the procedure of NPQs, followed by the knowledge on directives and regulations. A slightly smaller need was expressed regarding additional knowledge on education and adult education, and on the ways to compose a good report.

The institutions performing examinations and the verification cooperate closely also with other institutions, with the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, the National Examinations Centre, the National Institute for Adult Education, the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training etc., so we were interested in whether the representatives are satisfied with this cooperation.

Picture 18: Cooperation between institutions performing examinations and other institutions N=24



MDDSZ – Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs;
RIC – National Examinations Centre,
ACS – National Institute for Adult Education;
CPI – National Institute for Vocational Education and Training

The representatives gave the highest mark to the cooperation with the National Examinations Centre, followed by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training; they express a slightly lower level of satisfaction for the cooperation with the National Institute for Adult Education and the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs.

The cooperation with the National Examinations Centre (RIC) is “prescribed by law”, since the institutions are obliged to give an annual report about their work in a determined form; the majority of participating representatives reported that the form is easily understandable. Additionally, the representatives were asked to describe the role of the National Examinations Centre (RIC) in their cooperation.

Picture 19: Cooperation between performing examiners and the National Examinations Centre (RIC) N=24



1. RIC requires a report on the work
2. RIC sets the dates for examinations and the verification
3. RIC sets the examinations dates with commission members
4. RIC informs on the dates of examinations and the verification
5. RIC nominates commission members

In the cooperation with the institutions, RIC is most frequently viewed as the institution that requires annual reporting on the work (27%) and nominates commission members (25%). A little less frequent was their function of setting the dates for examinations and the verification (19%) and of informing on the dates of examinations and the verification (18%). The least frequent function was setting the dates for examinations with commission members (10%).

3.6 Holders of the national vocational qualification certificate

To get as much comprehensive picture as possible for the process of the acquisition of national professional qualifications, the survey also included the holders of certificates for professional qualifications.

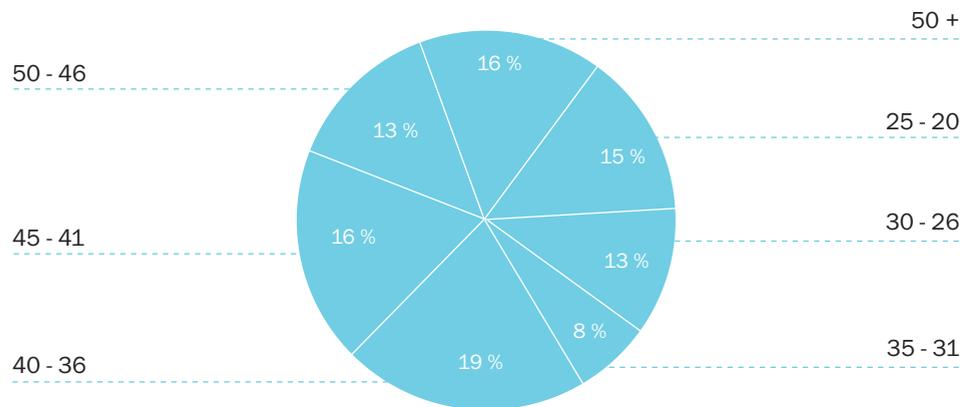
3.6.1. Demographic data

The questionnaire was composed of 34 questions, 8 of which referred to general demographic data.

The survey included 174 people; their information were forwarded by 25 performing institutions for 29 different national professional qualifications.

Among all the participating holders, 71% were men and 29% were women from different age groups.

Picture 20: Participating holders according their age group N=174



Regarding education, the majority of participants had completed a general high school or a professional high school lasting 4 years (31%), followed by those who completed a 3-year professional school (26%) and finished elementary school (15.5%). Among all the participating holders of NPQ, 18 (10%) finished a higher education institute or faculty (5 years or more).

Picture 21: Level of formal education of participating holders N=174

Elementary school	27	15.5%
Lower professional school (2 years)	14	8%
Professional school (3 years)	45	25.9%
General high school or professional high school (4 years)	54	31%
Higher education institute (3 years)	13	7.5%
Higher education institute/faculty (5 years)	18	10.3%

We were also interested in their employment status. The majority were employed (70%), only 10% were unemployed.

Before acquiring the NPQ, their employment status did not differ substantially: 68% were employed, 13.5% were unemployed.

3.6.2. Interpretation of survey results

We were interested in where the certificate holders received information on NPQs. The results showed that in a majority of cases (36%) the source of information were their employers, followed by friends and the media. Only 7% of the participating holders (one half of the unemployed participants) were given information on NPQs by the Employment Office of Slovenia.

The most important reasons that led the certificate holders to the decision to acquire a NPQ were employment reasons, personal reasons and reasons regarding their education. Concerning the latter, the participants stated that the acquired NPQ encourages them a little (31%) or substantially (31%) to continue with their education, 25% stated that the NPQ is an enormous encouragement to continue with their education, while 14% responded that the NPQ did not encourage them to pursue their education.

In the process of acquiring the NPQ, the role of the employer also turned out to be a very important one. The majority of employers (20%) are pleased when their employees wish to acquire a NPQ, and approximately the same percentage of employers (21%) ensures the necessary conditions for the inclusion, provides employees with information about the NPQs (16%) and monitors the certification process of their employees (16%). Approximately 10% of the employers did not know about the acquisition of NPQ of their employee.

We were interested also in the role played by the Employment Office of Slovenia. Three quarters of participants had no contact with the Office; it can be assumed this was the group of the employed certificate holders. Others referred to the Office to get information on the possibilities of acquiring a NPQ, to obtain counselling or to be directed towards suitable preparatory programmes for the acquisition of NPQs.

In 50% of cases, the certificate holders financed the procedure of acquiring the NPQ by themselves, in 34% of cases the procedure was paid by the employer, and in 10% by the Employment Office of Slovenia.

The next group of questions was related to the process of assessment and recognition of NPQs, to the work of counsellors and commission members.

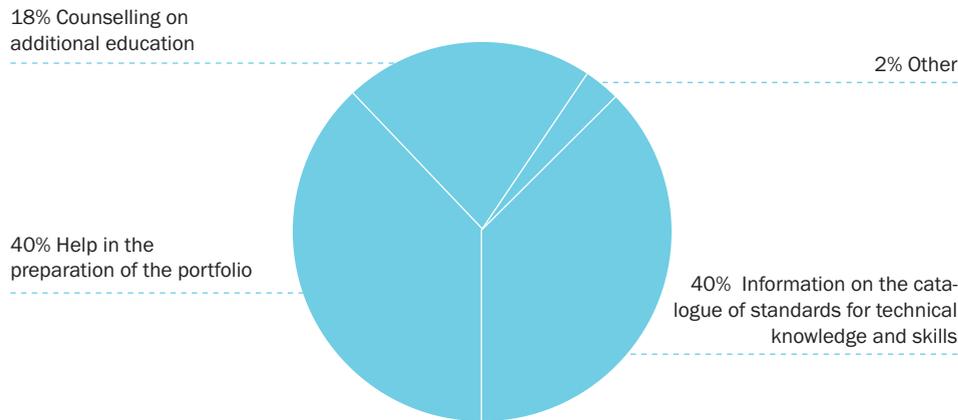
The certificate of professional qualification can be obtained on 3 different ways: by collecting certificates, creating and verifying the portfolio, by attesting the qualification in front of a commission (examination), and by a combination of the both. The latter method was used by 45% of participating certificate holders; 30% of participants acquired the certificate by attesting their qualification in front of a commission; and 25% of participants acquired the certificate on the basis of a verified portfolio.

The participating certificate holders were asked which information they were provided with when they started the process of acquiring the NPQ. With this question we wanted to verify whether the future certificate holders were ensured sufficient information regarding the possibilities and conditions of acquisition of NPQs, and counselling. We were also interested in the subjects of the provided counselling.

Sufficient information was provided to 99% of candidates; only two candidates stated that they were not given any information on the process. On the other hand, counselling was provided to a smaller proportion of candidates, 88%. The subjects discussed were: information about the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills, help in the preparation of portfolio, counselling on additional education, and others.

Picture 22: The contents of counselling

N=174



If we compare these results with the rest, it can be assumed that the actual proportion of persons that were provided counselling is considerably smaller.

Regarding the question on the duration of counselling, as much as 23% of certificate holders stated not to have met the counsellor at all. Also regarding the following question on whether the counsellor informed them of professional literature, 21% of certificate holders answered not to have met the counsellors. They reported that the counselling was carried out by telephone or e-mail.

Others have reported to have met the counsellor twice (26%), once (23%), or three times (18%). For 33% of candidates, the counselling took less than one hour; for 22% of candidates one hour; for 16% of candidates two hours; for 10% of candidates three hours; 14% of candidates were provided with counselling that exceeded 5 hours.

The candidate for the acquisition of NPQ prepares a portfolio. 84% of participating holders decided to prepare the portfolio because they had already undergone several educational courses concerning the professional qualification in question. The holders who did not prepare any portfolio stated that a portfolio was prepared for them by their employer or counsellor (16%). Some holders were not familiar with this option or needed not to prepare the portfolio.

The majority of certificate holders also stated that they had not encountered any major difficulties in the preparation of the portfolio; these only occurred regarding the acquisition of the necessary attestations and their arrangement, a frequent reason for this, at least according the certificate holders, was inadequate help from the counsellor.

Candidates can also join special training classes. The majority of certificate holders participating in the survey decided to join these classes to acquire necessary knowledge and skills (42%),

while almost one third of them reported to have joined only because of their own interest.

In the preparatory programme, the certificate holders were given the following types of knowledge:

- > >> Professional knowledge I previously lacked (32%)
- > >> Knowledge I already possess, but do not have any necessary certificate for it (38%)
- > >> Professional knowledge and skills from various fields (26%)

The majority of training classes (52%) took 50 hours; 16% of training classes took between 51 and 100 hours; and 17% of training classes took up to 150 hours.

In most cases, the process of verification in front of a commission takes up to one hour (36%), for 19% of certificate holders it took two hours, and for 14% of certificate holders three hours. Many participants also stated that the process took less than one hour (15 minutes, 20 minutes or 30 minutes).

According to the participating certificate holders, the members of the commission were usually not the same as lecturers in the preparatory programmes (37%); in 32% of cases, some members were also lecturers. In 17% of cases, commission members were not involved in the procedure as counsellors; in 10% of cases, commission members also performed the role of counsellors.

Under the category Other, the participating certificate holders reported not to have the exact information on this matter or that they saw the commission members for the first time during the verification procedure.

On average, the entire process of acquisition of NPQ took up to two months (30%) or more than three months (29%); for 14% of candidates the process took less than three months, and for 27% of candidates it took less than one month.

picture 23: Duration of the entire process of acquisition of NPQ

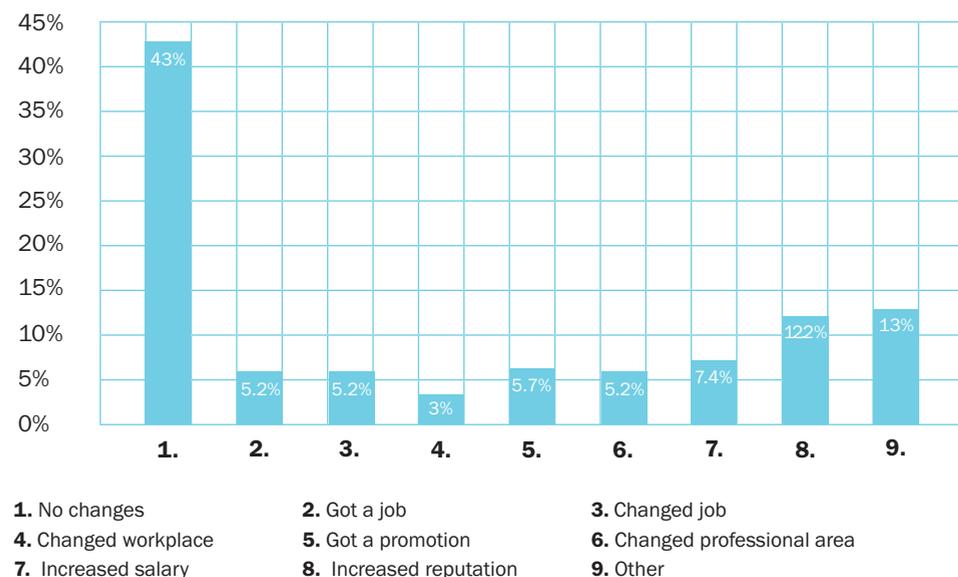
N=174



Concerning the duration of the procedure, the majority of certificate holders believe it was suitable, and 10% think the procedure was too long.

Picture 24: Changes for certificate holders after they had acquired the certificate

N=174



At the end, we were interested to learn whether their situation changed after they had acquired the certificate.

They reported changes in their employment (new job, promotion, increased salary...) and in their personal life (better self-image, increased reputation, personal satisfaction...).

Certificate holders also stressed that they acquired additional knowledge or confirmed the knowledge they already had (9). They believe it will be easier for them to get a job and that they will have more possibilities in choosing their employer.

The certificate enabled them to acquire an additional employment or to register an additional activity, i.e. on the farm, and it also gives additional value to their agricultural products.

However, we were negatively surprised by the fact that as much as 43% of certificate holders participating in the survey stated that the acquisition of certificate did not bring about any changes for them.

3.7 Analysis of the catalogue of standards for professional knowledge and skills

The analysis of the Catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills was performed by mag. Marija Tome (Analysis of catalogues of technical knowledge and skills for the acquisition of a professional qualification, november 2006). She analysed 11 catalogues chosen according to previously set criteria of conformity with occupational standards and of compliance with methodological and professional grounds.

The second part of the analysis was comprised of an analysis of usefulness, clarity and efficiency of catalogues from the point of view of their users, e.g. commission members, counselors in the process of assessment and recognition, and individuals who acquired a certificate of national professional qualification.

3.7.1 Analysis of catalogues of technical knowledge and skills for the acquisition of a professional qualification

The purpose of the analysis by mag. Marija Tome (nov. 2006) was to determine in what way the composers of the catalogues took into account the occupational standard (hereinafter referred to as standard) and the methodological and professional grounds.

“The analysis of catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills (hereinafter referred to as catalogues) was encouraged by various comments from the catalogues’ users (commission members, candidates and institutions performing the assessment and recognition procedures); they reported that the catalogues should be more simple and clear in some points, and that some parts are inconsistent and unclear, which makes them difficult to use in practice” (Tome M., p.1, nov. 2006).

Marija Tome (nov. 2006) wrote that the analysis was foremost performed because there was no previous rational evaluation in terms of conceptual and theoretical analysis and assessment that would lead to the elimination of vague points and certain deficiencies from the catalogues. This kind of analysis should already be carried out before the catalogues were actually introduced into practice. Its purpose is to create a comprehensive image of each catalogue to get a full picture on how the catalogue complies with its intent. Such evaluation of each individual catalogue also enables to fully take advantage of the empirical results and implement the necessary changes. In fact, changes cannot be introduced wisely without a clear overview of the whole picture of catalogues. This also implies the need for an empirical evaluation of the catalogues.

The catalogues for the analysis were chosen according the following criteria:

- > >> The basic criterion was to cover all the fields which amounts to 11 catalogues;
- > >> Catalogues that enable to acquire a professional qualification on the 5th level of com-

plexity of work which amounts to 9 catalogues;

- > >> Two of the analysed catalogues enable to acquire a professional qualification on the 4th level of complexity of work but were included because of the compliance with the basic criterion.

3.7.2 Empirical analysis of the usefulness of the catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills from the point of view of their users

Commission members were asked to evaluate particular elements of the catalogue of standards for professional knowledge and skills, the intelligibility of the catalogue, the level to which it corresponds to the grounds for the assessment of candidates, which documents they use in the assessment and recognition procedure and which elements of the occupational standards they use.

Counsellors in the process of examinations and the verification of NPQs were given a similar set of questions as the commission members. We were interested in their assessment of the usefulness of individual elements of the catalogue in their counselling and the usefulness of individual elements of occupational standards.

With counsellors we were particularly interested in their evaluation of the intelligibility of the catalogue element concerning the connection between the catalogue's content and the existent education programmes, and of the usefulness of the listed literature.

Certificate holders were asked about the purposes for which they used the catalogue, the clarity and intelligibility of the catalogue elements, and of its deficiencies.

We also included the performing subjects, i.e. institutions performing the examination procedures and ensuring the conditions for the work of commissions and counsellors. The responsible persons evaluated the usefulness of the catalogue elements and the intelligibility of individual elements and their possible deficiencies.

3.7.3 Interpretation of survey results

In the evaluation of the usefulness of particular catalogue elements, the answers by commission members and counsellors did not differ much. They both stated the elements were from very good to good, in view of their usefulness.

However, the answers provided by the institutions performing the assessment and recognition procedures, were more differentiated. According to them, the most useful are the standards for technical knowledge and skills. Highly useful are also special professional knowledge and skills and special conditions that need to be fulfilled if a person wishes to acquire a NPQ, as well as the methods and criteria for the examination of professional knowledge and skills. The component of connection with the programmes of the acquisition of educations and the component of

adaptability for people with special needs were in most cases evaluated as bad and very bad.

The commission members believe the general intelligibility of the catalogue is good. Also the certificate holders share their opinion and stated that the most intelligible are the conditions for entrance or special conditions for the acquisition of NPQs, followed by the methods of examinations and the required knowledge and skills. According to them, the least intelligible are the definitions of the examinations tasks.

Since in the process of assessment and recognition, occupational standards are used in combination with catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills, we were interested to find out which elements of occupational standards are used by commission members and which by the counsellors, as well as for what purpose.

Both, the commission members and the counsellors reported to use the descriptions of professional competences, the field of work, key tasks, and knowledge and skills. Considering the usefulness of individual elements of occupational standards listed by commission members and counsellors, it can be assumed that they are well familiar with their role in the assessment and recognition procedure as well as individual elements of occupational standards.

Beside the catalogue and occupational standard, commission members also use additional materials, e.g. legislative acts, regulations, additional professional literature, operative criteria for the assessment and special material linked to the profession in question.

According to the results, the certificate holders use the catalogue mostly in the preparatory programmes and when preparing for the examination; one third of certificate holders used it in the preparation of their portfolio; alarmingly, as much as 13% of interviewed certificate holders were not informed of the catalogue during the process of acquiring the certificate.

Picture 24: The reasons of certificate holders for using the Catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills
N=174

Use of Catalogue	Number	Percentage
In the preparatory programme (training)	88	35.80%
When preparing for the verification (examination)	88	35.80%
As a help in creating the portfolio	33	13.40%
I am not familiar with the catalogue	31	12.60%
Other:	6	2.40%
Total number of answers:	246	100%

Concerning the performing institutions, we wanted to learn whether they know what their role is in the process of verification and the examinations of NPQs, so we asked them for what purposes they use the catalogue. More than half of participating persons use it to choose the members for commission, when issuing certificates, in the process of application of candidates and in the process of preparations for the verification.

The institutions that perform also the education programmes of middle vocational and technical education were also asked about the connection between the content of the catalogue and the education programmes. 60% of the organizations participating in the survey believed that there was a clear connection, but only one of them validated a candidate's NPQ as a part of the required conditions for entering the education programme.

3.8 Common conclusions and suggestions regarding the certification system

A) Increase the quality of the information and counselling procedure encouraging a close cooperation between commission members and counsellors

Members of the commission for examinations and the verification reported that the portfolio is not composed in a way that would enable the verification of the candidate's knowledge although he possess it, because the certificates lack seals, dates etc. They also mentioned that there is no cooperation between the counsellors and themselves so it is possible for commission members to verificate the knowledge and skills that candidates acquired and used for a long time. According to the commission members all the attestations play a very important part in the process of examination and the verification of the candidate's competence, since direct examination represents additional costs and additional stress for the candidate. The latter can all be avoided if the attestations are well prepared.

Taking all these arguments into account it would be necessary to start considering certain activities to promote cooperation between commission members and counsellors in the process of examinations and the verification. In this way, the work of commission members and counsellors would gain more trust and the documents that compose the candidates' portfolio would be of better quality.

It is also necessary to think about including the candidate in the work of the commission, especially in the part where the latter evaluates his portfolio. According to the results of the analysis and other related projects, commission members have more trust in personal contacts with candidates which enable them to verify the documents from the portfolio in a direct conversation with the candidate. In this way, the number of direct examinations would be decreased and the actual costs of the procedure for the candidate would be lowered.

B) Encourage an adequate use of tools in the process of examinations and the verification

During the process of examinations and the verification of NPQ, various tools are available, e.g. the record of the counselling procedures, criteria for the evaluation of individual attestations in the portfolio, a tool to evaluate the entire portfolio, the record of the procedure of indirect verification etc. Some commission members participating in the survey stated that portfolios

are inadequately prepared, as there are often dates and seals missing, etc. Considering the fact that during the process of creating a candidate's portfolio, counsellors use the set criteria to evaluate each attestation and the criteria for the evaluation of the entire portfolio, the deficiencies mentioned above come as a great surprise. Commission members also stated that they would appreciate the counsellors' opinion on the candidate, which is in fact also one of the components of the record on counselling procedure, but is often missing.

For all these reasons, it would be necessary to encourage the counsellors even more to use to listed tools as they represent an important factor for the quality of the procedure of examinations and the verification of NPQ.

C) Encourage the creation of portfolio through a personal contact with all the candidates

Among the counsellors and commission members participating in the survey there was a relatively small number of those who opted for other methods in the preparation of the portfolio, namely by mail, telephone or mobile messages. This probably explains why some portfolios are inadequately prepared, as was reported by commission members. A good portfolio can only be the result of a systematic counselling procedure in which the counsellor cooperates with the candidate to find suitable solutions for the documentation of differently acquired knowledge and skills. The methods mentioned before are also contrary to the basic role of the counsellor in the process of NPQ, namely to motivate the candidate, help him in collecting the attestations, and also creating them, if this may be possible.

This can only be achieved through a personal contact between the counsellor and the candidate which needs to be encouraged even more.

D) Achieve the basic purpose of the certification system, i.e. to verificate differently acquired knowledge

In the evaluation of the suitability of individual portfolio components, both counsellors and commission members emphasised more the component including formal attestations than the component including attestations of differently acquired knowledge, i.e. outside formal education and training. As the basic purpose of the assessment and recognition procedure for the NPQ is to help candidates to verificate the knowledge they already possess and actively use but have no formal attestation of it, regardless of the method and conditions of achieving this knowledge, this result came as a big surprise.

It should therefore be necessary to think about suitable activities that would enable the accomplishment of this purpose to the fullest extent. But it is even more important to consider seriously which activities can increase public trust in the value of knowledge acquired outside the formal school system and the system of organized education, and in a system that enables the verification of this knowledge.

E) Refresh the training programmes for commission members

The analysis also showed that commission members are generally dissatisfied with the training programme which is among other criteria also one of the conditions to get a licence for this role. The training programme is intended to provide specific knowledge for documenting differently acquired knowledge and its assessment and verification. All the deficiencies revealed in the analysis should be eliminated in a new and refreshed training programme.

F) Increase the cooperation among institutions performing the assessment and recognition procedure for NPQs, employers and other partners in view of a systematic promotion of the certification system

Performing institutions and employers play an important part in the process of informing individuals of the possibilities of NPQs. It would be well advised that their role of promoters would be reinforced also in the local environment. Besides, it would be beneficial if also the Employment Office of Slovenia and other social partners contributed more intensively to the system of promotion, making it more systematic and planned, which would make the certification system more recognizable in public.

G) Encourage a better organized and systematic approach for the entrance of performing institutions into the register, and a continuous monitoring of their work

One of the important subjects in the process of examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications are definitely the performing institutions. Commission members reported that the majority of these institutions adopt a narrow-minded and one-sided view of the NPQ system and perform the process in a way that suits them best. On the other side, however, the professional workers from these institutions claim that despite the importance of their role in the NPQ system, they are still not given proper consideration and are often treated with disdain.

It would be well advised to start considering a special information system also for the performing institutions, as in most cases they are not acquainted with the system until they send their counsellors to training programmes.

H) Renewal of methodological grounds for the development of catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills

Considering the results of both analyses, the suggestions provided in the questionnaires, and the findings by professional workers who are constantly in touch with catalogue users, it is possible to give some general guidelines for the renewal of methodological grounds for the development of catalogues:

> >> Definitions of individual catalogue elements need to be reformulated and more concretely determined. We would especially like to draw the attention to the following points:

The definitions of special conditions and connections with the programmes for the acquisition of a professional qualification are inconsistent which creates confusion in interpreting. This is why the methodology should bring a more detailed description of the ways for documenting these points.

The catalogue only mentions the examination methods and criteria and not the possibility of verifying the candidate's knowledge and skills with the help of his portfolio. This is why some commission members come to the conclusion that the verification of knowledge and skills is in no way possible. The catalogue should therefore include also the procedures for the verification of knowledge.

We would like to emphasise two of the findings from the analysis by M. Tome:

The first one was not evident in the empirical analysis but according to M. Tome and the professional group developing the catalogues it is a very important one: adaptation of the system for people with special needs. These are included only in the catalogue Reflexotherapist, namely for blind and partially sighted. We believe that people with special needs should be given the opportunity to acquire a professional qualification, so they need to be taken into account already in the preparation of occupational standards and especially catalogues.

Following is the second finding by M. Tome:

"In all catalogues, the amount of literature and professional material varies substantially (from 3 to 50), mostly in Slovenian or in English or partly in Slovenian and in English. In some catalogues, the information provided is incomplete, most of the time without the year of publication.

Concerning literature and material for candidates we suggest to establish clear criteria for obligatory literature and professional material. Where the catalogue only lists literature in a foreign language, we suggest that this material be prepared also in Slovenian" (Tome M., p.20, nov. 2006, CPI).

The commission members also commented that the list is outdated, so we need to consider finding ways to provide a more updated list of individual catalogue elements.

> >> For some target groups, the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills is unintelligible and difficult to access, for others, the information provided is not sufficient for their work:

For the use of candidates, the catalogue will need to be prepared in a more simple way, with special emphasis on the parts that are important for the candidate.

On the other hand, commission members need more professional work, which was evident also from the results of the questionnaires where commission members expressed the need for a constant cooperation with the National examination centre.

Finally, Tome M. (p. 20, 2006) suggest that all further catalogues be prepared on the basis of a rational evaluation so that all deficiencies and vague points from the catalogues be eliminated before their actual use in practice.

Sources:

Tome, Marija (2006): Analysis of the Catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills, CPI, Ljubljana.



4. Interviews with stakeholders about the certification system

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An important part of the certification system monitoring was to gather opinions from its various participants about the actual implementation of the system and the achievement of goals set upon the launching of the certification system as well as the fulfilment of their expectations. Therefore, we interviewed social partners, policy-implementing bodies and institutions performing examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications. Representatives of these organisations were asked to answer five elementary questions on the basis of their experience and the results achieved so far, namely:

1. What is the role of non-formal knowledge validation in Slovenia?
2. How do you define the role of the certification system within the education system (pros and cons)?

3. How do you assess the effects the launching of the certification system has had in your field?
4. Define your role within the system.
5. How do you assess the competences and responsibilities within the certification system?

The main thoughts and opinions are summarised below.

4.1 What is the role of non-formal knowledge validation in Slovenia?

- > >> The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs supports everything that enhances employability. An individual's knowledge, skills and competences should become more relevant, and the deregulation of professions should be encouraged since as a rule, a profession can only be obtained via formal education for now.
- > >> The certification system is just a small part of the validation system of non-formally acquired knowledge, skills and competences.
- > >> More attention should be given to the promotion of the NPQs system, especially among employers, in order to increase the value of NPQs on the labour market.
- > >> The acknowledgement of any non-formally or informally acquired knowledge and skills is of great importance for the functioning of the labour market; however, it is also important to develop a more systematic approach to the validation of knowledge and skills.
- > >> An individual who wants to acquire an NPQ and the evaluation of his/her knowledge and skills should be the centre of attention; therefore, the acquisition of NPQs should be an individualised process.
- > >> The commissions for examinations and the verification of NPQs or parts of NPQs may evaluate the certificates in the portfolio but in the majority of cases the candidates take an examination because their certificates are frequently inappropriate. The evaluation of the portfolio is problematic due to a lack of consistent criteria: more detailed instructions on the evaluation of certificates are needed. In order to raise the level of qualifications in Slovenia, the entrance requirements should be clearly defined.
- > >> Some employers unofficially recognise the non-formal knowledge and skills ("soft" as well as professional competences) within the framework of systematisation and internal promotion.
- > >> The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology has removed the obstacles in the system to validate the non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and skills within higher education.
- > >> The verification of national professional qualifications in higher education cannot be applied in the same way as among professions requiring a lower education level. However, there is the possibility for employers to cooperate with faculties, especially in the field of professional specialization. Faculties may also incorporate the validation procedures in their programmes.

4.2 How do you define the role of the certification system within the education system (pros and cons)?

- > >> New education programmes comprise modules covering competences; furthermore, the connection among theory, practice and key competences has to be clear. The certificate creates new opportunities on the labour market and is an important element when entering an education programme to achieve a higher level of education.
- > >> The incorporation of catalogues into the credit system, in the same way as the vocational and professional education programmes and the structure of qualifications, will represent a major step forward. Consequently, the connection between the certification system and formal education will become even stronger.
- > >> In relation to the education system, the certification system is often criticised in practice for representing negative competition and lowering the level of technical knowledge.
- > >> In some cases, the certification system resembled a school. Most of the candidates were referred to training programmes, while some of them could have had their knowledge and skills recognised and consequently acquire the qualification more quickly.
- > >> The labour market is always a step ahead of the solutions introduced by NPQs. There is a growing demand for combinations of qualifications and services that encompass particular elements of different qualifications.
- > >> Schools issuing certificates should follow the procedure defined in the NPQs Act in front of a commission appointed by RIC and in accordance with the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills. High school trainers taking part in the commissions should become properly acquainted with the NPQs system and the possibilities and ways of assessment and recognition procedures for NPQs; they should obtain a licence to be a member of a commission.

4.3 How do you assess the effects the launching of the certification system has had in your field?

- > >> The certification system was most effective in cases of large-scale promotion of the system or in sectors where NPQs are required to perform a profession or an activity. However, the stress is always put on the ability to react to the needs of the labour market.
- > >> Employers as well as employees do not have enough information about the system. A systematic promotion is necessary since it is always followed by an increased demand for NPQs.
- > >> The certification system would also be more effective if NPQs were included in collective agreements.
- > >> The verification procedure should be based on the demonstration of knowledge and skills, not on interrogation or the pursuit of lack of knowledge.
- > >> The crux of the system is trust. A consistent training and cooperation of all those involved in examinations and the verification of knowledge, skills and competences in the

formal as well as certification system is indispensable.

- > >> Positive effects can be noticed in new sectors and sectors in which NPQs were not present until recently. However, it has to be said that the quality does depend on knowledge and skills of the employees but also on good working conditions, especially on the salary.
- > >> Institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs develop their offer also in accordance with interests expressed by candidates or employers. Examinations are performed especially for the certificates that are somewhat marketed.
- > >> Employers also need qualifications at higher levels of difficulty (Level VII and above); therefore, it is necessary to include them in the vertical preparation of the structure of qualifications.

4.4 Define your role within the system.

- > >> With regard to the trend in the development of the validation system of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge, it is necessary to increase the collaboration among the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Sport, and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology.
- > >> Within the certification system, a direct relationship between experts and the economy is essential; therefore, employers and the institutions representing the system should become close partners.
- > >> Trade unions should become actively involved in the certification system.
- > >> The awareness about the importance and different possibilities of non-formal and informal learning is gradually raising among counsellors.

4.5 How do you assess the competences and responsibilities within the certification system?

- > >> A quality assurance system should be introduced.
- > >> The National Examinations Centre has numerous responsibilities and solutions should be obtained to strengthen its role as a control body. The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training occupies an important role in expert advice and development, and it aims to be recognised as the central institution within the validation system of non-formal and informal learning as well as the central certification system developer.
- > >> The cooperation among ministries responsible for labour and education as well as their common issues still remain unclear.
- > >> The cooperation with the National Examinations Centre as to the (further) training, appointment and control of commissions for the examinations and the verification of NPQs and with the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training as to the initial stages of work has proved to be highly significant.
- > >> The development has been so far unsystematic and left to individual initiators and institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures. Now, the system has to be revised and, in cooperation with all partners, re-established. Furthermore, competences and responsibilities have to be redefined, and the procedures clearly specified.

- > >> Applicable legislation should devolve responsibilities among institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures, counsellors and commissions. Counsellors should remain neutral, although the source of their financing still remains a major problem.
- > >> The question on the responsibilities of the institutions performing assessment and recognition procedures is related to the development of their network as well as to the connection between the formal education and the certification system. Furthermore, the issue of local or activity-based centres offering assessment and recognition procedures should be solved.

To summarise: in the opinion of different stakeholders the social value of the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning depends on many factors and among them the most important factor is its value on the labour market.

Comparing the importance of formal education system and the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning in society we can establish that the latter has a rather marginal role. Nevertheless the validation system is slowly getting its recognition but it is crucial to establish the relation of trust among both systems.

Credit transfer system for validation of non-formal learning could also contribute to transferability of results between the validation system and formal education system. In addition to that national qualification framework will connect both systems and make the results more transparent and comparable. In the opinion of the stakeholders there need to be a better cooperation between the responsible ministries i.e. Ministry of Education and Sport, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. In the future more work has to be done in promoting the system and raising public awareness and also in establishing a quality control system.



5. Conclusion

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In the 1990s, proposals to develop a system that would enable the acquisition of national professional qualifications outside the formal education system were getting increasingly detailed in Slovenia. They were justified by the following arguments:

- > >> A high percentage of unemployed people and nearly 50% of job seekers without any education, and consequently no formally accepted qualification
- > >> The need to link the vocational education of young people and adults into a unified system of lifelong learning

- > >> A relatively high rate of school dropout, the possibility to acquire a partial or narrow professional qualification in view of employability or entering the labour market, and the possibility to rejoin the education system and acquire a certain level of education.
- > >> The need for a constant and direct connection with the labour market and employers.
- > >> The need for a higher level of transparency and comparability of professional qualifications and certificates in Slovenia and in Europe.
- > >> The need to reduce the education and training costs for employees and to recognize incomplete education.

The foundation for NPQs was laid together with the school system renewal in 1996 on the grounds of new legislative documents. The White Paper describes the main arguments in favour of changes in the vocational adult education. The concept of vocational and professional education was defined as an obligatory component of lifelong learning, but it was necessary to determine the connection between formal and non-formal education. Besides, the act conferred social partners an increased authority and responsibility to develop and implement a policy of vocational and professional education.

The implementation of the system of national professional qualifications acquisition started in 1999, yet there was no independent legal act regulating this area. Therefore, the first steps were based on the Employment and Insurance Against Unemployment Act (OG RS, No. 80/1997) and Rules on Procedure of Acquiring Professional Qualifications, with which the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs wished to enable unemployed people to certify their non-formal knowledge and skills or knowledge acquired through training for the labour market. The Rules set the procedure for the acquisition of national professional qualifications until a new act was passed in 2000, the National Professional Qualifications Act. In the afore-mentioned Rules, a clear distinction was drawn between qualifications acquired within the school system and qualifications acquired through certification (Svetlik 2000 in: Phare Mocca2000).

The creators of system solutions in the preparation of the certification system for professional qualifications received important professional support through their co-operation in the Phare Mocca project. They carried out in-depth studies of theoretical backgrounds and international comparative studies on the basis of which an “umbrella” act was passed (Phare Mocca 2000).

The system of examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications was formally introduced in Slovenia by the National Professional Qualifications Act (OG RS, Nos. 81/2000 and 83/2003). The act stipulates the preparatory procedure for standards of professional knowledge and skills, as well as the assessment and recognition procedures. In the same year, the Lisbon Declaration was adopted, which among other things requires that the offer of education and training is based on the principle of lifelong learning, and gives several concrete examples in which the demanded knowledge and skills on the labour market and the existing ones differ substantially. The National Professional Qualifications Acts represented a step towards resolving this difference. The Act was amended in 2003 and 2006.

In November 2006, a new National Professional Qualifications Act was adopted (OG RS, No.118/2006). It features several modifications and amendments which set the legal frame-

work to realize the European guidelines, and above all to boost further development of the system based on national experience.

After seven years from the adoption of the certification system, 24,578 (01.01.2008) NPQ certificates were issued, 106 certification catalogues were compiled and 73 institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQ were entered into the appropriate register.

The certification system had developed up to a point at which it was necessary to seriously consider how the system was placed within a wider framework of assessing and validating non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and within the vocational education and training system itself; but above all it was of essential importance to establish how the system ensured the quality of processes and results, and by them public trust and the credibility of the awarded certificates.

Within the activities of the OECD in 2007 – and with financial support from the Ministry of Education and Sport, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology – two important projects were carried out: a national report was drawn up on the conditions in the field of verification of non-formally and informally (occasionally) acquired knowledge and skills; and a joint analysis of policies was performed by the experts from the OECD. In the same year, a monitoring of the certification system took place, co-financed by the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs.

The conclusions provided by OECD experts mirrored the situation and practices in the field of validation of non-formally acquired knowledge, and were intended to open a discussion among the responsible authorities about the necessity of changes.

We can try to summarize shortly their findings (CPI, 2007):

1. The Analysis shows that the majority of activities in the development of the validation of non-formal knowledge are connected to the National professional qualifications (NPQs), so the latter can be considered as a major pillar for the verification of non-formally acquired education in Slovenia. However, a question arises, namely to what extent the certificates are transferable especially to the formal education system – here lies the majority of flaws.
2. The processes of validation of non-formal knowledge are relatively new in the Slovenian education system. Their structures, programmes and features bear typical signs of a developmental phase. On the one hand, individuals and institutions operate as pioneers, respect the system and are keen on innovations and searching for new solutions. But on the other hand, they do not act as part of a coherent procedure of development.
3. From the point of view of politics, the idea of the validation of non-formal knowledge is good and valuable, but not important enough to become a priority. Although the legislation on various levels of education enables the validation of non-formal knowledge, the promotion and the establishment of conditions that would favour its development are not properly

taken care of. It has not been decided yet what kind of organization should coordinate the development of the validation of non-formal knowledge or lifelong learning, although this is an essential condition for the development.

4. Due to the current financial arrangement, a certain sense of concern can be felt in the National Report on whether the existing activities of the validation of non-formal knowledge can be considered long-term or not. In fact, the procedures depend on additional work by commission members and participating individuals who work elsewhere. And while it is not surprising that in the early stages of these activities expert opinions must be shared or borrowed, it is still unclear what the plans are for the enlargement of the activities and the development of a special expert group.

In the second project, the certification system monitoring, we wanted to draw the whole picture of procedures, individuals and institution operating within the system, and to bring forward any critical points in the system which would help us in our future work and further development of the system.

Firstly, we proved to have laid strong foundations of the system, developed performance documents, established a network of institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs, and trained commission members and counsellors. This was the point we managed to reach. In order to guarantee equal and quality procedures for all candidates and gain credibility of the awarded certificates, it will be necessary to establish a more systematic and constant cooperation with the commission members, counsellors and performing institutions. Moreover, enhancements are required regarding the quality of the counselling procedure and the development of modern ways and methods of definition, validation and verification of knowledge, skills and competences, which should be orientated towards the specific learning process of individual candidates, the preparation of personal portfolios, and to the supervision of the work of institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs, as well as the work of commission members.

If the primary goal of the certification system, based on national professional qualifications, was to respond to the transitional economic demands for a fast retraining of the labour force, the future of the certification system or the system of validation of non-formal knowledge, skills and competences must bring a new dimension, namely in connecting professional competence with the possibility of upgrading education or returning into the educational vertical system, and place an increased emphasis in the continued education providing the professional specialization of knowledge.

The major weakness of the current certification system model has proved to be an excessive formalization, firstly in the construction of a system seemingly parallel to the school one; secondly in the tendency to regulate the programmes' content; and lastly in the not sufficiently effective system of the validation of non-formal knowledge, skills and competences.

Although the advantages of the certification system or the process of validation of knowledge acquired informally on various levels and to various extents, are known, i.e. fast responsiveness, mobility, flexibility, autonomy, system deregulation etc. – in Slovenia, the implementation of the certification system has not so far produced any concrete results.

Among the disadvantages of the validation procedure are the rigidity and the over-standardization of the certification system which make NPQs unappealing for companies as they are not adapted to their specific needs and do not show any flexibility concerning the demands of individual companies and regions.

In some sectors, the role of individual social partners is not recognizable enough nor appreciated. A qualitative shift in the processes of identification and verification of non-formal knowledge will only occur through arrangements with social partners, which carry more weight as they are included in the employment contracts. It would also be necessary to place professional qualifications in the appropriate tariff classifications in the collective contracts, and this is where employers and trade unions must step in and act. Otherwise, professional qualifications cannot serve their true purpose on the labour market.

Furthermore, it will be necessary to decentralize and pluralize the contents of non-formal assessment and validation of knowledge, skills and competences, in order to approach the demands and needs of both individuals and employers.

Another important area demanding a more systematic approach is the promotion of the system. The subjects/institutions performing the procedure and employers play an important role when providing candidates with information on the possibilities of NPQs. It may be wise to reinforce their role of NPQ promoters also in the local environment. A more intense cooperation needs to be established with the Employment Service of Slovenia and other social partners, in order to assure a more systematic and thought-out promotion that would guarantee that the system to become more recognizable.

Among the major critical points in the system are also databases and the ability of systematic reporting on the certification system results. The principal databases of the NPQs system have been established, but users find them unclear and difficult to access. For personal information safety, the information on the structure and characteristics of participants is not accessible, although it is visible in the application form of the subject performing examination and the verification of NPQs. An agreement needs to be reached about the control of databases and the content which is managed by different ministries, statistics, professional or performing institutions. At the same time, we need to develop a monitoring system to supervise the certification system results from the point of view of the individual and the institution where he or she works in a specific sector.

We hold high expectations from the National Qualification Framework, which will connect the certification system to the educational system. The system of mutual acknowledgment of professional qualifications between the two systems has already been established by law and through the development of occupational standards as unified professional bases for both systems. With the introduction of modular education programmes, we can expect a rapid progress

in the validation of NPQs also in the process of acquiring education. Although its content is yet to be determined, the Slovenian qualifications framework (SQF) will represent appropriate grounds for connecting the education system and the system of validation of non-formally acquired education. The SQF will need to adopt clear criteria for the development of individual systems and define the type and method of connection between the qualifications.

Last but not least, special attention should be given to stimulating social partners to actively cooperate in these processes, as the qualifications need to suit the labour market needs, the changes in the world of labour and the development of economy, which can only be achieved through the application of the principle of social partnerships. If not, only one social partner may prevail, causing negative long-term effects also on the economy, for which the qualifications are originally intended.

At the same time, the OECD expert group offered us some recommendations and proposals for the discussion on the development of policies and processes of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It is important to change the manner of communication and information exchange between institutions, and encourage discussions about the verification of non-formally acquired education within the field of education and among the principal authorities. A coordinated and organized plan for the implementation of the verification of NAE needs to be established and a leading organization with appropriate authority for the introduction of the verification of NAE and the evaluation of the existing practice among the subjects performing assessment and recognition procedures should be determined. Further evaluations can help us to identify the most effective models that we could expand through planned actions and in this way build the system based on examples of good practice.

Sources:

OECD Activity (2007). Ljubljana: National Institute for Vocational Education and Training.
Phare MOCCA Report (2000). Ljubljana: National Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

6. Principal terms and their definitions

A **certificate** is a public document attesting a professional qualification. If acquired in accordance with the National Professional Qualifications Act, it does not attest the degree of education. In future, considering the regulations on education and in accordance with the previously determined comparability of knowledge and skill standards for the acquisition of a professional qualification and those in the formal education system, certificates may also be taken into consideration in the acquisition of formal education.

Formal learning

A learning process taking place in an organized and structured environment (school, education centre or workplace) and is specifically defined as learning (based on the goals, time or sources). From the point of view of the student, formal learning is planned and normally leads towards certification.

Informal / occasional learning

Everyday learning we are subjected to at work, within our families or during leisure activities. It is not performed in an organized nor structured way (without learning goals, time or support). From the point of view of the student, it is normally unplanned and does not lead to certification.

Institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs are inter-company education centres, schools, organisations for adult education, chambers, etc. which fulfil the conditions determined by the catalogue of standards for technical knowledge and skills, and are included in the register of institutions performing examinations and the verification of national professional qualifications.

Catalogues of standards for professional knowledge and skills determine the knowledge and skills necessary to obtain a professional qualification. They represent the basis for the organisation and performance of assessment and recognition procedures for professional qualifications, and as such determine the methods and criteria for examinations and the verification of technical knowledge and skills; they also precisely define tasks in the examination procedure for a particular standard.

The **commission for examinations and the verification of NPQs** is a three-member body which performs the assessment and recognition procedure for NPQs and decides upon the issue of professional qualifications, i.e. it certifies the candidates, at institutions performing examinations and the verification of NPQs.

Credit transfer system (in VET)

A system for measuring and comparing learning attainments (within a school unit, during training or practice) and their transferring between two institutions by means of credits which rate learning attainments in education programmes.

The **qualification structure** is a list of all nationally recognised occupational standards and catalogues classified into sectors according to the standard classification of activities and the level of difficulty.

Modules were defined as programme units in lower and secondary VET educational programmes. The module represents a complete unit of objectives and contents bringing together professional, theoretical, practical and general knowledge. Individual modules (or several modules) lead to the acquisition of a national vocational qualification on the basis of occupational standards which serve as a basis for educational programmes and conform to the provisions governing the field.

National professional qualification is formally recognized on the basis of national professional standards and acquired on the basis of verified education programmes or through the procedure for assessment and recognition of national professional qualifications.

Non-formal learning

Learning as part of a planned activity not explicitly defined as learning (in terms of defined learning goals, time or support), but including an important element of learning. From the point of view of the student, non-formal learning is structured. It can lead to certification or not.

A **profession** is a work placement or several related work placements comprising different interconnected tasks or responsibilities.

A **professional qualification** is a professional or vocational competence necessary for the exercise of a profession or individual sets of responsibilities within a profession at a specified level of difficulty. If acquired in accordance with the National Professional Qualifications Act, it is recognised as a national professional qualification (NPQ).

An **occupational profile** is a detailed description of responsibilities within a profession and of other characteristics of the profession (level of difficulty, working conditions, necessary means, services and products, psychophysical and personal traits, and areas of employment).

An **occupational standard** determines professional competences, knowledge and skills within a certain profession. It is the basis for the preparation of educational programmes and catalogues of standards for technical knowledge and skills. It must be founded upon an occupational profile.

A **professional competence** is part of a professional qualification and demonstrates the ability of an individual to creatively, effectively and ethically apply knowledge, skills and abilities to complex, unexpected and changing circumstances within his/her profession and within society. Professional competences can be divided into **profession-specific** ones, typical of a particular responsibility or set of responsibilities or a profession, and into **generic competences**, common to certain professions.

Sector committees are partnership bodies on the sector or activity level. They decide upon the initiatives for the preparation of occupational standards and coordinate occupational standards and catalogues on the sector level.

Assessment and recognition of NPQs comprise all methods and procedures for the formal assessment of knowledge, skills and experience leading to the issue of a certificate. **Assess-**

ment is a procedure in which a candidate directly proves his/her knowledge and skills in front of a commission. On the other hand, recognition is a procedure in which the commission at-tests the candidate's knowledge and skills on the basis of the documentation submitted in the candidate's portfolio.

A **portfolio** is a set of documents or certificates with which a candidate proves his knowledge and skills for a particular professional qualification.

Counselling is help offered to an individual by an institution performing examinations and the verification of NPQs when deciding on the acquisition of national professional qualifications and when preparing his/her portfolio.

The **Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education** is a partnership body which determines the methodology for the preparation of occupational standards and catalogues, confirms occupational standards and catalogues on the national level, and proposes them for publication to the minister responsible for labour. The **committee for occupational standards** and the **commission for educational programmes** are advisory bodies of the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Technical Education.

