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BOOSTING OCCUPATIONAL STANDARD ELABORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

Occupational standards play an important role in promoting productivity and quality in the labor market by defining the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform a particular job or profession effectively. Such standards are used to assess professional qualifications and, if available, to develop VET qualifications and higher education qualifications. Once the occupational standards have been validated or/and adopted, they can be implemented through various means, such as training programs, certification processes, or job descriptions [1]. The standards may also be incorporated into industry regulations or licensing requirements. Standards support transparency of qualifications in EU countries and serve for the mutual recognition of professional and academic qualifications [2].

This paper exposes the current understanding of an occupational standard, reviews the accountabilities of National Qualifications Agency with regard to occupational standards' elaboration, and discusses the accomplishments in the field of such elaboration.

Researchers [3; 4] demonstrate that occupational standards can be related to economic reforms in several ways. Firstly, economic reforms seek to encourage innovations and entrepreneurship, and occupational standards can support this goal by providing a basis for developing new professions and industries. By defining the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for these new professions, occupational standards can foster innovation and support the growth of new industries. Secondly, economic reforms aim to give the competitive edge to the economy in international markets, and occupational standards may provide a basis for developing internationally recognized qualifications and certifications. This facilitates the transborder mobility of skilled workers and helps to enhance the international competitiveness of the economy.

Occupational standards bestow a common language for discussing job performance and career development. To promote transparency and accountability in the labor market, workers and employers have a shared understanding of the expectations for a particular job or profession.

In 2017, the Law of Ukraine *On Education* defined ‘an occupational standard’ as a set of requirements for the employees’ competences that were approved in due course, which serve as the basis for the formation of professional qualifications. An occupational standard is considered to be in force when it is added to the Register of Qualifications.

In the same year, the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine *On Approval of the Procedure for the Development, Implementation and Review of Professional Standards* was adopted, and then the formal guidelines for standards development. The overall procedure was quite bureaucratic.

When National Qualifications Agency started to operate in November 2020, only a few adopted occupational standards existed.

Initially, the Agency bore a coordination function and was only responsible for the registration of applications for standards elaboration and entering standards (adopted by the Ministry of Social Policy, and then – the Ministry of Economic Development) into the Register of Qualifications.

Gradually, the Agency acquired a few new functions. It became one of the two institutions responsible for verification of occupational standards’ compliance with the requirements established by the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The Agency also provides information, analytical, and methodological support for the development of occupational standards.

An important change in the legal regulation took place in 2022. On June 17, 2022, the Law of Ukraine No. 2179-IX *On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine Regarding the Functioning of the National Qualifications System* came into force. It amends the *Labor Code of Ukraine*, the Law of Ukraine *On Remuneration*, the Law of Ukraine *On Education* and the Law of Ukraine *On Employment of the Population*.

The Law introduced the term ‘occupational standard’ into the *Labor Code of Ukraine* (Article 42). In accordance with this Law, the adoption of such standards is carried out by developers (Article 42 of the *Labor Code of Ukraine*), which significantly speeds up this process.

To guarantee the relevance of qualifications, the legislative innovations include the mandatory mentioning of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) level into a standard, as well as the usage of NQF descriptors for defining the competences of workers. The Agency has approved a methodology for levelling occupational standards through the assessment of learning

outcomes (based on the standard as a whole) in each of the four domains (Knowledge, Skills, Communication, Autonomy and Responsibility); and the assessment of learning outcomes for each group of labor functions (for each partial qualification) in each of the four domains.

The dynamics of adopted occupational standards for 2018–2022 is presented in fig. 1. It is worth mentioning that the number of standards has doubled over the past two years (from 124 as of 1st January 2021 to 245 as of 1st January 2023).

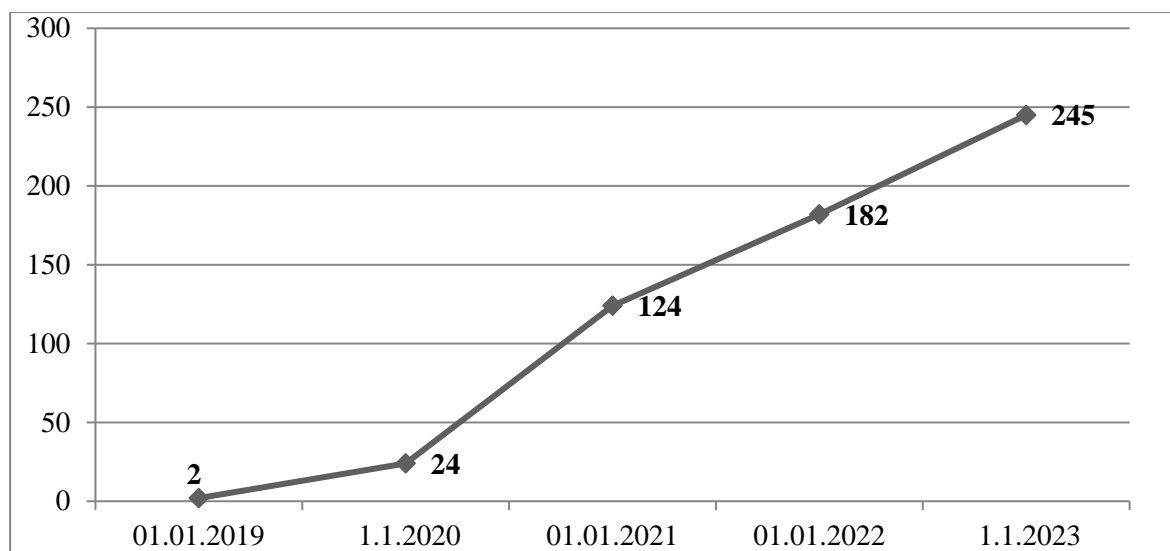


Fig. 1. Number of adopted occupational standards 2018–2022 (cumulative data)

According to our analysis of the Agency’s data, 245 adopted occupational standards were elaborated by 37 different organizations. The authors of standards include enterprises, ministries, academic institutions, professional organizations, etc. Around a quarter of all adopted standards have been authored by so-called sectoral councils (such institutions are envisioned by the Ukrainian legislations, but the mechanism for their establishment is – with all due respect – informal, and any public structure coordinates their activities).

In 2022, the Agency verified 40 occupational standards for compliance with governmental requirements (31 cases were positive, and 9 received conclusions about the need to refine the draft of a standard).

In the last two years, the cumulative number of applications for the elaboration of occupational standards entered the Register of Qualifications has doubled (from 250 applications as of 1 January 2021 to 489 as of 1 January 2023).

Only in 2022, the Agency received 339 applications for the elaboration of occupational standards. These applications were processed to determine their compliance with the requirements established by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the absence of a similar occupational standard or a previously registered application for the corresponding occupational standard. Out of these 339 applications, only 197 were entered in the Register of Qualifications: 160 applications for the development of a draft of an occupational standard; 37 applications to amend the existing occupational standard. Other applications were returned to the developers.

National Qualifications Agency is undertaking its activities with regard to the fact that while occupational standards have the potential to be a valuable tool for promoting quality in the labor market, their usage may be limited by issues related to flexibility, industry representation, cost and time, and outcome measurement. Even if occupational standards are developed, there may be limited awareness of the standards by employers, workers, or training providers. Occupational standards should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that they remain current and relevant. This may involve conducting periodic job analyses, consulting with industry experts, and monitoring changes in industry trends and technology.

These challenges should be carefully considered when developing and implementing occupational standards to ensure their effectiveness and relevance to target groups and stakeholders.

The Agency arranged different type of trainings and meetings to support industry experts, employers, and professional associations in the process of developing occupational standards, as well as to promote the added value of such standards. Therefore, it is not surprising that the occupational standards elaboration has boosted in recent years.

The process of developing occupational standards is regarded as a collaborative effort that involves input from industry experts, employers, and professional associations. Thus, setting procedures for occupational standards elaboration and supporting the activities of standards' developers could be viewed as a part of economic reforms aimed at strengthening human capital. The establishment of National Qualifications Agency in Ukraine in 2019 was undoubtedly related to the development and popularization of occupational standards in the context of European integration processes.

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