

## RATIONALIZATION OF THE ACTIVITY OF THE SECTORAL COMMITTEES FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING AS A FACTOR OF INCREASING THE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the present paper is to elucidate the significance of the activity of the sectoral committees for vocational training in order to make the professional education's offer interact with the labor market's needs as well as of the problems related to the activity of the sectoral committees in the Republic of Moldova. In order to achieve the stated objective, the following research methods were used: synthesizing the theoretical approaches and good international practices in rationalizing the communication between the bidders and beneficiaries of the professional education's offer; investigating the normative framework of the Republic of Moldova regarding the activity of the sectoral committees for vocational training; analyzing the results and problems related to the functioning of the sectoral committees in the Republic of Moldova; conducting an opinion survey of employers; formulating conclusions and reasoning. The authors' conclusions and recommendations refer to the directions for improving the activity of the sectoral committees for vocational training in the Republic of Moldova in order to enhance the effects of the interaction of the professional education system with the business environment.*

**Key words:** professional education, quality, Republic of Moldova, sectoral committees

### INTRODUCTION

Under the present conditions, characterized by the intensification of competition on the market of professional education services, the institutions that represent the system of initial and continuous professional education in the Republic of Moldova are increasingly confronted with the problem of the optimal adaptation of the educational offer to the demands of the labor market. The need for more effective interventions in this regard is also argued by the results of the numerous studies that denote the low degree of employer satisfaction with the quality of the product offered by the professional education system [2, 5, 21]. In this context, we will mention in particular the results of an opinion survey conducted in the period February-March 2019 on a sample of 310 respondents, being targeted three programs of continuous vocational training, ten programs of technical vocational education and ten programs of

higher education. By examining the employers' appreciation of the quality of the specialists in the fields related to the researched programs (phytotechnics, horticulture, pedology and soil protection, agricultural crop production and animal husbandry, animal husbandry and veterinary medicine, technology of plant products) it was found that only one program (Agronomy, level 6 ECTS) obtained an average score of 4.7 points out of 5 maximum points. 13 programs obtained average marks within the limits of 3.6-4.5 points, 4 programs obtained average marks between 2.1-2 points, and two programs were rated with marks between 1.1-2 points. However, being asked their opinion on the skills to be improved, most of the respondents (over 70%) refused to make any proposals, invoking various reasons: from lack of time to lack of motivation for this effort [15]. Thus, based on the findings, we deduce that the problem of poor interaction

between initial and continuous professional education system and the business environment [14] still exists.

The significance of efficient communication with representatives of the business environment is argued by the fact that companies and organizations represent potential beneficiaries of the products offered by professional education institutions [6, 16, 22]. The product offered, which, in the specific case, is represented by the specialists trained in number and of an appropriate quality, will help balance the demand and the supply of skilled labor only if it meets the demands of the labor market, therefore of the concrete beneficiaries (employers). In this sense, it is clear that the objective of optimally adapting the offer of the professional education to the demands of the labor market in terms of quality and volume cannot be achieved without employers as consumers, making their contribution by enunciating these requirements. At the same time, we find out that, if professional education institutions are more active in initiating and maintaining dialogue with employers, being governed by medium-term interest (their image in the educational services market), those in the opposite camp are much more passive.

The lack of initiative and enthusiasm of the employers derives from the reduced awareness of the effects of communication with the institutions for the concrete enterprise, these obviously manifesting themselves not immediately, but in a larger time horizon, and encompassing aspects much larger than those in the area of interests of the concrete enterprise. In the context of the last reasoning, we can refer to the theory of human capital which promotes the idea that the benefits of education and training are ultimately manifested in higher labor productivity and higher wages [4, 12]. Thus it can be confirmed the assertion of Barrio-Garcia and Luque-Martinez that the more universities develop knowledge and learning, the more will be their contribution to collective intelligence and, consequently, the greater will be their success [3]. On the other hand, the "awakening" of employers' interest,

their more active involvement in the dialogue with the educational offer providers represents an action that requires much greater efforts, than those that can be offered by the professional education institutions. In favor of the latter statement is the fact that the effects of education are not limited only to those that will be transposed, sooner or later, into concrete effects obtained by enterprises. The effects of education are much broader, manifesting at the societal level through its role in promoting democracy, sustainable growth, crime reduction, state welfare costs, etc. [11].

From the mentioned above, there are some logical solutions to the identified problems that can be exposed as follows:

- communication with employers must be transformed into a stable process, ensuring a continuous flow of useful information regarding the current and expected quality of professional education;
- communication must be interactive, each party participating equally, with proposals and feedback;
- communication with employers must be made aware of both parties as a tool to enhance their own performance, the key element being the competences offered by the educational institutions (as a performance indicator for the respective institutions) and the employees' productivity (as a performance indicator of the entities that reflects the skills used by employees).

The solutions proposed above can be implemented through conferring an organized character to the communication process between the educational service providers and the employers, through the creation of a legal organizational framework that would "discipline" the respective dialogue and turn it into a tool for synergy of the efforts of educational institutions and employers to optimally meet the demands of the labor market.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research was carried out by using the following methods: synthesizing the theoretical approaches and good international

practices in rationalizing the communication between the bidders and beneficiaries of the professional education; investigating the normative framework of the Republic of Moldova regarding the activity of the sectoral committees for vocational training; analyzing the results and problems related to the functioning of the sectoral committees for vocational training in the Republic of Moldova; conducting an opinion survey on a sample of 310 employers within the activities of the European Union project "Development of the Rural Areas of the Republic of Moldova" implemented by the Austrian Development Cooperation in partnership with the E.C. PRO DIDACTICA and Donau Soja; formulating conclusions and reasoning.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At the international level, the concern for the optimal connection of the employees' competences to the needs of the sectors is a priority, being identified specially created bodies in this sense, which work with the direct and effective involvement of the employers. One of the relevant practices on this subject is that of the United Kingdom, where the Commission for Employment and Skills was created. The latter represented an organization supported by public funds that operated between 2008 and 2016. The basic purpose of the body was to provide guidance on skills issues and employment in the UK [19]. It represented a social partnership led by representatives of employers, unions, as well as volunteers. The strategic objectives of the respective body were:

- maximizing the effect of the policies regarding employment and skills as well as the incentives of the employer to sustain jobs and growth and ensure an internationally competitive skills base;
- developing the best market solutions by working with businesses so that leverage greater investment in skills;
- providing outstanding labor market intelligence in order to help businesses and people make the best choices for them [18].

The activity of the nominated body was a very broad one, involving guiding the elaboration of qualification standards, informing employers on various aspects related to human resources management, conducting and analyzing opinion polls of employers, organizing public consultations on various strategic aspects, etc. An essential aspect of the work of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills is total transparency, evidenced by the accessibility of the results of the activity to the general public through its web page, including by online posting of activity reports [20].

Even though the work of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills was suspended in 2016 (for financial reasons), at present we find that in the United Kingdom 25 Sectoral Competence Councils operate [10]. Among these we will refer in particular to Lantra - the Sector Skills Council responsible for agriculture, forestry, fish farming and veterinary activities. Being led by employers, Lantra has a number of important responsibilities, including:

- elaboration of occupational standards, qualifications and trades;
- skills management as an element of the Rural Development Program for six regions in England (this often involves making strategic decisions regarding training needs in the given branches);
- ensuring a formal mechanism for employment through several existing branch groups, including 24 forestry enterprises, 21 aquaculture enterprises, 17 fish and 13 veterinary units [18]. Having relevant information on the needs of the labor market, Lantra also offers vocational training in various fields with the conferral of related qualifications [8]. The huge contribution made by Lantra to the process of harmonizing vocational training in the fields concerned with the needs of the labor market is evidenced by the products of its activity, among which we can mention in particular the work "Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing: Sector Skills Assessment 2012" [18]. The latter is required not only as a valuable source of information for vocational training

providers, but also as a guide for applying the skills assessment tools in the sectors analyzed. We cannot affirm that in the Republic of Moldova there is no awareness of the need to strengthen the collaboration with the external beneficiaries of the educational offer. National standards for accreditation of initial and continuing professional education programs require active communication with employers, starting from the design stage of each program. Existing quality management systems in professional education institutions provide for the use of communication with employers as a factor in enhancing the quality of activities performed. On the other hand, at national level, actions were taken to create a normative framework that would facilitate the adaptation of the educational offer to the needs of the labor market. Among these we can highlight in particular the adoption of the law on the sectoral committees for vocational training no. 244 of 23.11.2017 [9] which establishes the legal status and the way of organizing and functioning of the sectoral committees. "The mission of the sectoral committees is the development of social partnerships at the level of the economic branches in order to support the technical vocational education and the continuous training, as well as to correlate the vocational training content and quality with the demands of the labor market" [9]. Subsequently, at the request of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection and with the support of the International Labor Organization, the Guide on the establishment and functioning of the sectoral committees for vocational training was elaborated and published [13]. The mentioned document aims to increase the informational support regarding the mission, the attributions of the sectoral committees, as well as the instruments for their accomplishment. By examining the existing normative framework, we find out, however, that the main mission of the sectoral committees refers only to the technical vocational education (together with the continuous training), the higher education being omitted. In this context we can mention that the cooperation with the labor market, the

optimal connection of the professional training to its needs cannot be ensured by emphasizing only on certain levels of professional education. The opinion survey of employers mentioned above [15] pointed out that employers are often reluctant to comment on the specific level of education of the required specialists (secondary, postsecondary or higher), important being the competences of the candidates. The investigation of the labor market and the transfer of its demands in the quality of the professional education's offer should logically be carried out integrally, thus creating premises for rationalizing the entire system of professional education, also by correlating the complex of competences on different levels. In this context we identify the need for inclusion of higher education in the area of the sectoral committees' attributions, thus amplifying positive effects of their activity and ensuring the increase of the quality of the entire initial and continuous professional education system, not only of the technical vocational and continuous education. By investigating the data on the functioning of the sectoral committees for vocational education in the Republic of Moldova, we can see that their number is increasing, being already covered such branches and fields, as transport and road infrastructure, constructions, agriculture and food industry, information and communication technology, light industry, trade, hotels and restaurants, financial intermediation and insurance, real estate transactions, etc. [7]. The tendency to increase the number of sectoral committees is based on the objective set by the Strategy for the development of technical vocational education for the years 2013-2020 [17] which foresees the creation of the sectoral committees in 12 areas of specialization by 2020. At the same time, according to the reflections made public on the quality of the activities carried out, we find out the existence of a series of problems in accomplishing the tasks assumed by the respective structures, such as:

- the absence of a clear vision regarding the connection of the interests of the business

environment with the educational programs at national level;

- the absence of continuous communication between sectoral committees and state institutions;
- the slow rhythm of actions to develop partnerships at local level, of the participation in the elaboration of public policies in the field of work etc. [7].

Deficiencies in the performance of the assumed tasks are acknowledged by the members of the respective committees. Thus, in the activity report of the sectoral committee for vocational education in agriculture and food industry for 2016, a whole series of unrealized objectives is mentioned [1], which denotes the low efficiency of the structure. Unfortunately, the problems in the activity of the sectoral committees continue to persist, this fact being confirmed in the workshop "Identification of constraints in the activity of the sectoral committees" held on 01.10.2019. The participants confirmed the problems mentioned above, but also a number of disruptive factors of the activity, such as:

- "passivity of the representatives of the business environment;
- lack of funding;
- shortcomings of the legal framework"[1].

Another problem identified in the functioning of the sectoral committees in the Republic of Moldova is the reduced transparency of the activities carried out. The last reasoning is argued by the fact that there are still no official web pages of all the created committees, and the existing ones often contain outdated information. In this context, there exists the need to take over the good practices of operating similar structures in the European space, which is imposed not only by the quality of performing tasks, but also by the operative publication of all the outcomes. Making a synthesis of the exposed information, we deduce that there are many factors with a direct and indirect influence on the quality of the functioning of the sectoral committees, these being represented in the tree of the problem (Figure 1). The medium-term and long-term consequences of the reduced functionality of the sectoral committees were also identified.

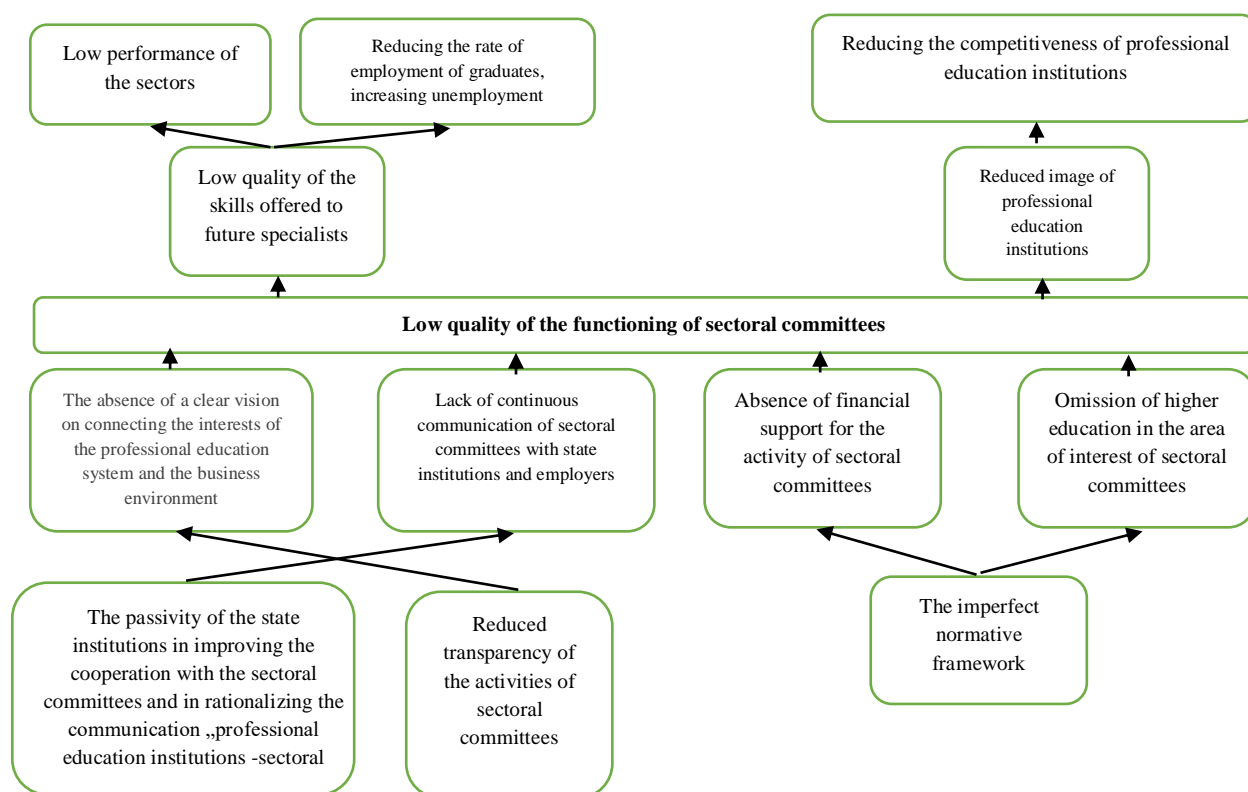


Fig.1. The problem tree of the low quality of the functioning of the sectoral committees for vocational education in the Republic of Moldova  
 Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The data summarized in Fig.1 on the causes and consequences of the functioning problems of the sectoral committees in the Republic of Moldova allow identifying the necessary activities to be undertaken in order to achieve

the general objective of increasing the quality of the sectoral committees functioning, as well as of the expected positive consequences (Fig. 2).

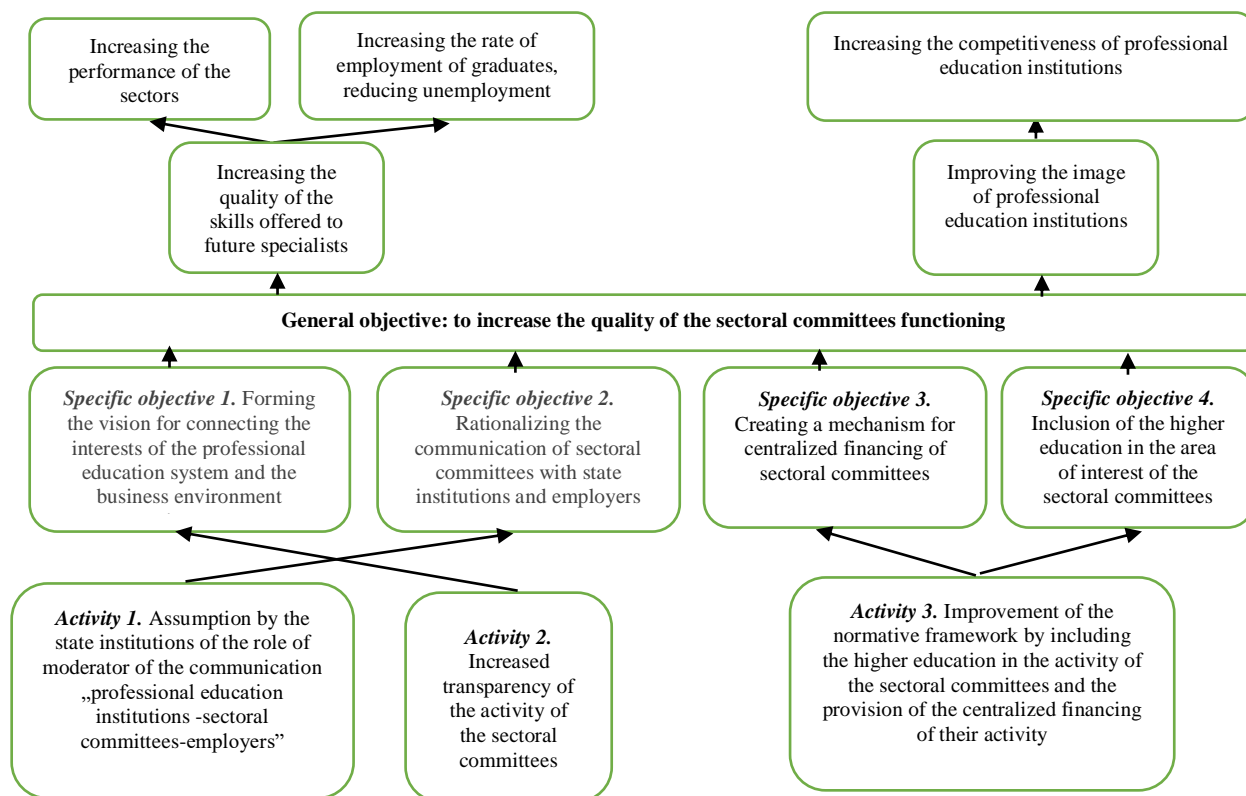


Fig.2. Specific objectives and activities proposed to increase the quality of the functioning of the sectoral committees for vocational education in the Republic of Moldova  
 Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Thus, as shown in Fig. 2, undertaking the recommended activities would bring medium-term advantages (increasing the quality of graduates` skills, improving the image of professional education institutions), and it will also have a positive long-term impact on the performance of sectors, labor market indicators, the sustainability of professional education institutions on the market of educational services.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the Republic of Moldova, communication with employers is recognized as an important instrument in adapting the initial and continuous professional education to the needs of the labor market, being created the normative and organizational framework for its accomplishment. At the same time, we find

deficiencies both in the existing normative framework and in the process of practical achievement of the objectives assumed by the created structures.

Based on the findings made, the following recommendations can be highlighted:

- improving the existing normative framework of the sectoral committees for vocational education by including higher education in their area of activity and creating an adequate financing mechanism;
- rationalizing the process of cooperation between sectoral committees and state institutions, including the assumption by the state institutions of the role of moderator in the communication "professional education institutions-sectoral committees-employers";
- ensuring greater transparency of the activities carried out by the sectoral committees for vocational education, promoting them more

actively in order to disseminate and optimize the results and to raise awareness of the labor market actors.

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