

СЕКЦІЯ V. МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ, ПУБЛІЧНЕ УПРАВЛІННЯ ТА АДМІНІСТРУВАННЯ

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION AWARDING: INSIGHTS ON UKRAINE'S QUALIFICATION CENTERS

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Introduction. European Commission (2022) states that the rapid pace of technological development and the challenges posed by accelerating innovation are rendering traditional business practices outdated [3]. This expeditious modernization contributes to the automation of tasks, leading to job replacement and the emergence of new roles. On one hand, this necessitates advanced skills to address skill shortages, while on the other hand, it raises concerns about the potential obsolescence of certain skills, particularly in low- and medium-skilled occupations.

These trends highlight the prevalence of skills mismatches and the growing demand for upskilling and reskilling the workforce. Effectively addressing these mismatches requires comprehensive solutions that ensure the permeability of qualification systems. In line with this, the European Commission introduced the European Skills Agenda in June 2020 [2], which outlines essential measures for collective action, lifelong learning support, and skills investment. The agenda aims to establish collaborative models involving diverse stakeholders to facilitate effective upskilling and reskilling initiatives within the 14 identified ecosystems as part of the Industrial Development Strategy.

Research (Renold et al., 2016 [6]; Semigina & Balanyuk, 2021 [7]; Tan, Laswad. & Chua, 2022 [10]) underscore the importance of establishing strong linkages between education and employment, sharing power between relevant stakeholders, developing short-term courses (micro-credentials), and recognizing informal learning outcomes, making qualifications system transparent and adaptive.

In Ukraine, the Law "On Education" (adopted in 2017 with subsequent

amendments) [11] defines the term 'professional qualification' as 'a standardized set of competences and/or learning outcomes acquired by an individual, recognized or awarded/confirmed by the entity authorized by law and certified by the respective document. It enables the individual to perform all job functions defined by the corresponding occupational standard.' Additionally, the Law grants the innovative institutions in Ukraine, known as qualification centers, the right to award professional qualifications.

Objectives. This paper presents the Ukrainian experience of implementing new procedures for validating informal learning outcomes and awarding professional qualifications within recently established qualification centers. The analysis primarily focuses on the key steps involved in the awarding process. Furthermore, the paper discusses the challenges and potential areas for improvement in the procedures of awarding qualifications in relation to the ongoing Eurointegration processes.

Key results. As of June 6, 2023, Ukraine boasts 27 operational qualification centers spanning 11 regions, collectively issuing 1218 certificates that attest to professional qualifications. These centers have been established by various entities, including 16 by vocational education and training institutions, 1 by a research institute, and 10 by commercial enterprises or for-profit organizations.

The presence of qualification centers in Ukraine holds immense significance as they play a pivotal role in the recognition and validation of professional qualifications. These qualifications are crucial for individuals seeking career advancement opportunities and contribute to the overall growth and enhancement of the labor market.

Procedures of awarding professional qualifications in qualification centres are legally defined by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 956 on 15th September, 2021 [5]. The regulation outlines the specific steps, criteria, and requirements that qualification centers must follow when granting professional qualifications to individuals.

According to the legal regulations, the procedure for awarding/confirming professional qualifications consists of the following stages:

1. *Application Submission.* The candidate submits an application to the qualification center expressing their interest in having their professional qualification awarded or confirmed. The application is accompanied by relevant supporting documents, such as educational certificates, work experience records, or other evidence of acquired competencies.

2. *Review and Verification.* The qualification center reviews the application and supporting documents to assess the candidate's eligibility and the alignment of their qualifications with the occupational standards. An interview is conducted with the candidate regarding their acquired competencies and/or learning outcomes, as well as their knowledge of occupational safety, taking into account the profession and qualification.

3. *Decision on Assessment.* A decision is made regarding the feasibility of conducting the assessment procedure.

4. *Assessment.* The assessment procedure may involve reviewing the submitted documents, conducting interviews assessments, and assessing the alignment of skills and knowledge defined by the relevant occupational standard. The assessment procedure is performed using tools, equipment, instruments, and evaluation materials that align with the requirements of the standard and the awarding/confirmation procedure. The learning outcomes and/or acquired competencies are evaluated in accordance with the established procedures at certified workplaces, as regulated by the legislation, in training and production areas, educational simulators, or designated premises.

5. *Decision and Certification.* A decision is made based on the results of the

assignment/confirmation procedure. If the individual meets the required standards, they are issued a certificate of their qualifications. This certification serves as official validation of their competencies and qualifications within their respective fields.

The regulation does not specify the methods and tools of assessment but establishes a requirement that the entire awarding/confirmation procedure should be completed within a maximum of 25 working days.

To facilitate the assessment procedure, the qualification center establishes an *evaluation committee* comprising evaluators. It is crucial that the qualification level of committee members matches or exceeds the level of the professional qualification being sought by the candidate for awarding or confirmation. Additionally, each committee member is required to have a minimum of three years of work experience in the specific occupation or profession associated with the evaluated professional qualification. This ensures that the committee consists of qualified individuals with relevant practical knowledge and expertise [5].

To issue valid certificates, a qualification center must obtain accreditation from the National Qualifications Agency. According to the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2021) regarding the accreditation process of qualification centers, it is mandatory for the award/validation procedure to be publicly accessible on the center's website [4].

The **Figure 1** presents a schematic representation of the prerequisites for the qualification centre functioning, its accreditation process, and stages involved in the awarding of professional qualifications as outlined in Ukrainian legislation [4; 5; 11].

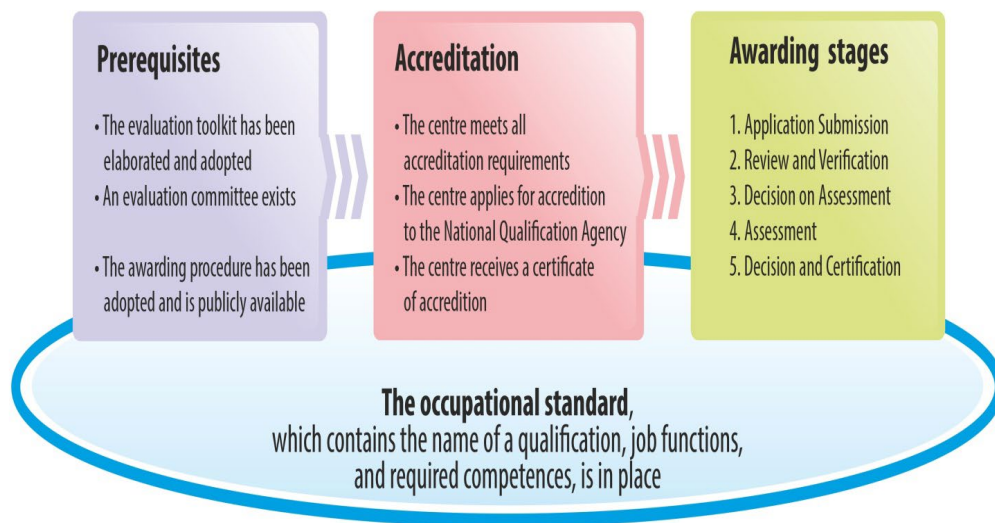


Fig. 1. The prerequisites, accreditation process, and stages involved in the awarding of professional qualifications by the qualifications centres in Ukraine

Source: Authors' generalization of Ukrainian legislation

The comparison between the newly introduced procedures in Ukrainian qualification centers [4; 5] and the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning [1] as well as European horizontal practices [2; 8] reveals a significant level of conformity between the Ukrainian and EU approaches. Both the Ukrainian procedures and the European guidelines share a common objective, which is to recognize and validate the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning. This recognition aims to bridge the gap between formal education and the labor market, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing individuals' employability.

One more area of conformity lies in the recognition of learning outcomes. Both the

Ukrainian procedures and the European guidelines emphasize the importance of assessing and validating the actual competencies and skills gained by individuals, rather than focusing solely on formal qualifications. This shift towards outcome-based assessment allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to recognizing individuals' abilities and qualifications.

Additionally, both the Ukrainian and European frameworks emphasize the importance of quality assurance in the validation procedures. Ensuring the reliability and consistency of the assessment process is vital to maintain the credibility of the qualifications awarded. Regular monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms are crucial elements in both approaches to ensure the ongoing effectiveness and quality of the validation procedures.

The rapid appraisal of the gained experience in operating qualification centers in Ukraine highlights several challenges and areas for improvement that need to be addressed at various levels of the qualification system. These challenges and areas for improvement encompass both operational aspects within individual qualification centers and broader systemic issues within the national qualification framework.

At the operational level, one of the key challenges is ensuring consistent quality assurance across all qualification centers. This involves establishing robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the assessment processes, ensuring standardization of assessment criteria, and maintaining the credibility and reliability of the qualifications awarded. Strengthening the quality assurance mechanisms can enhance the trust and confidence in the qualifications issued by the centers.

Another area for improvement is the digitalization of processes within qualification centers. Embracing digital technologies can streamline administrative tasks, facilitate online applications and assessments, and improve the accessibility and efficiency of the qualification procedures. Implementing digital platforms and tools can enhance the user experience for both candidates seeking qualification awards and the evaluation committees responsible for conducting assessments.

Introducing online testing options, especially for theoretical assessments, can offer flexibility and convenience to candidates. Conducting tests online enables individuals to take exams remotely, reducing the need for physical attendance and optimizing the assessment process. Online testing systems also ensure secure and standardized evaluations while providing immediate feedback to applicants. Additionally, the further digitalization of qualification center services aligns with the European green policy and contributes to enhancing digital skills [3; 9]. It may also provide a basis for integrating the Ukrainian database on professional qualifications with the ESCO database and the European Learning Model 3.0, facilitating data exchange and the recognition of credentials across various EU countries.

Transparency and public accessibility of information is another critical aspect that requires attention. Ensuring that the procedures, criteria, and outcomes of qualification awards are publicly available on the qualification centers' websites can promote transparency and foster trust among stakeholders, including individuals, employers, and educational institutions. Clear and accessible information about the qualification processes can help candidates make informed decisions and facilitate the recognition of qualifications by employers and other relevant bodies.

One more area of organizational improvement is related to the continuous professional development and capacity building for the evaluators involved in the awarding qualification processes. Providing training opportunities and sharing best practices, as suggested by CEDEFOP regulations [1], can enhance their expertise, ensure consistency in assessment practices, and keep them updated on evolving industry trends and demands.

Frequent knowledge exchange and collaboration among evaluators contribute to the improvement of assessment practices and the overall quality of qualification procedures.

At the systemic level, there is a need for ongoing collaboration and coordination between qualification centers, educational institutions, employers, and relevant government agencies. Strengthening these partnerships can help align the qualification processes with labor market needs, ensure the relevance of the awarded qualifications, and facilitate the smooth transition of individuals from education to employment.

From the National Qualifications Agency perspective, another crucial area for improvement is the legal alignment of procedures for awarding professional qualifications between qualification centers and educational institutions. Ensuring coherence and consistency in the assessment and recognition of qualifications across different entities is essential for promoting a seamless and integrated qualification system.

Additionally, continuous evaluation and feedback mechanisms should be established by the national-wide regulations to monitor the effectiveness and impact of the qualification system. Regular reviews and assessments can identify areas for improvement, address emerging challenges, and adapt the qualification processes to evolving skill demands and technological advancements.

Conclusions. The procedures of awarding qualifications in qualification centers in Ukraine are fundamental for ensuring the recognition and validation of professional competencies. These centers, through their application, assessment, verification, and certification processes, contribute significantly to individuals' career development and meeting the demands of the labor market. The establishment of new regulations and practices for awarding professional qualifications reflects the adaptive modernization of qualification systems, demonstrating a commitment to staying relevant in a changing landscape.

However, there is still room for refinement in streamlining procedures, enhancing standardization, embracing digitalization, and providing support for continuous professional development opportunities for evaluators. Addressing these areas of optimization will further strengthen the effectiveness and credibility of qualification centers in Ukraine.

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