

## **School Autonomy and Responsibility in New Secondary VET Programmes**

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The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training represents the central institution for development and counselling in vocational education and training (VET) in Slovenia. The fundamental tasks of the Institute also centre on the design of modern and competence based educational programmes drawn up in line with the new Vocational Education and Training Act (Official Gazette, No. 70/2006) and the Platform for Setting up Educational Programmes in Lower and Secondary Vocational and Secondary Professional Education (2001). The aforementioned documents have enabled the transition from centrally set programmes to conceptually new and modern modular educational programmes.

Following the adoption of the new school legislation in 1996, the principle of autonomy has been heralded as one of the central principles of the new system arrangement. A decentralised school system is founded on the right of co-decision; hence the responsibility at state level has been partly transferred to the local community, school and teacher. As to the school and teacher, autonomy also implies greater responsibility for the quality and professionalism of work.

The autonomy, which is nowadays also been enjoyed by Slovene secondary vocational and professional schools, has been translated into the **school curriculum** and **assessment plan** in line with more open assessment rules.

### **School Curriculum**

The school curriculum is a process and development document of the school designed in line with the legislation and national educational programme. New educational programmes were first implemented by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training on a trial basis at four schools in the school year 2004/05. The programmes are openly structured, competence based and modularly conceptualized. The programmes define standards for learning achievements leading to the acquisition of key and occupational competencies.

**The school curriculum** is designed by the teacher programme assembly based on the **national curriculum**. The schools are also obliged to attract employers from the local environment to cooperate as they jointly put into practice the objectives laid down in the national curriculum. The teacher programmes assembly autonomously allocates hours to individual programme units.

The school curriculum is designed and discussed by the teacher programme assembly, and it is approved by the school council. The implementation of the school curriculum is subject to monitoring at regular weekly meetings and to annual amendments taking into account monitoring results.

The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training drafted the Reminder for Teacher Programme Assemblies and the Guidelines for Designing the School Curriculum serving as the basis for the school to elaborate its school curriculum.

The activities which the schools have to consider when designing the school curriculum:

- analysing school conditions,
- analysing content fields and modules,
- formulating the open curriculum,
- designing the school curriculum,
- annual teaching preparations consisting of time allocation and reconciling the attainment of educational objectives and at the same time methodical and didactic planning,
- planning the implementation of practical training in the work process,
- providing material conditions (school facilities and equipment),
- organization of education (timetable),
- preparing teachers or teacher programme assemblies,
- preparing learning materials, and
- determining additional educational needs of the teaching work.

The open curriculum is a document designed by the school in cooperation with local companies. It has a 20 % share of hours in the curriculum, and the school autonomously specifies additional occupational competencies offered to students. Concrete objectives are set out in a special catalogue of knowledge.

The open curriculum creates development opportunities for the school in many respects:

- cooperation with employers,
- continuous cooperation in curriculum design,
- possibilities for the introduction of new teaching modes and methods,
- chance to carry out individualized instruction,
- integrating different educational programmes, and
- rapid responses to labour market needs.

The school is free to determine the following sections in the open curriculum:

- additional scope of contents aimed at the acquisition of occupational competencies, or
- additional hours allocated to the existing programme units, or
- additional hours for filling the gaps in general key qualifications.

As the school designs and offers the open curriculum, it also autonomously establishes assessment and monitoring modes and methods laid down in the assessment plan.

### **Assessment**

The new concept of educational programmes was accompanied by a different assessment strategy. It adopts a student-centred approach and his/her appropriate occupational competence. Conceptual solutions for assessment found their place in the new Assessment Rules applying to new secondary vocational and professional education programmes (Official Gazette Nos. 103/2005 and 111/2006). The Rules increase the school autonomy as assessment rules have become more open. The new rules make it possible for the schools to define their assessment rules in the in-house document.

A new assessment concept rests on assessment of competencies, skills and capabilities (hereinafter referred to as “knowledge”), or on reaching the objectives set, whereby students

have to demonstrate knowledge at all taxonomic levels (knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and knowledge evaluation capabilities). The teacher promotes and guides students towards critical self-evaluation.

The concept will be successfully put into force only if teachers are qualified to take on board the new assessment approach, bear in mind modern teaching and psychological findings, and find an appropriate way for students to demonstrate knowledge in the best possible manner. The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training has been entrusted with the task of management and implementation of teacher competence in new programmes within the development project at national level.

The open curriculum foresees that the teacher programme assembly is in charge of the **assessment plan** in which school professional staff and teachers plan the activities pertaining to achieving the learning objectives set and to the assessment of demonstrated knowledge. When passing a professional judgement, teacher responsibly decide about how and in what way are they to measure, i.e. assess the attainment of competencies, or determine student progress.

Prior to the assessment, teachers conduct the knowledge examination to see if, how and at what taxonomic levels did the students reach the objectives set. The emphasis is put on understanding and application of the objectives set. Both examination and assessment proceed in real situations and take various forms. It is important to note that the process concerns the student's progress both in substantive knowledge (final product) and process (planning, taking decision, communication...). Both parts are being assessed collectively.

The assessment plan is adopted by every school and is given a public notice. It consists of the following elements:

- written record of competencies or objectives and knowledge standards for programme units the student has to acquire,
- assessment modes and methods,
- assessment rules,
- allowed aids, and
- descriptive assessment criteria (grading scale and point value assigned to individual tasks in written assessment).

The programme unit or module teacher is obliged to inform the students about the assessment plan at the beginning of the school year, and no later than prior to assessment. An indicative plan of assessment has to be drawn up by teachers, hence it is of utmost importance that the assessment plan amends and adapts to student needs throughout the school year.

New educational programmes consist of the following programme units:

- subjects leading to the acquisition of key qualifications (mother tongue, mathematics, foreign language, social sciences, natural sciences, physical education...);
- professional content fields or modules with the intertwinement of theoretical and practical part;
- practical training involving work with employers;
- extracurricular activities; and
- contents or subjects within the open curriculum.

Numerical grades from 2 to 5 are employed for the assessment of the student's knowledge in subjects leading to key qualifications and for professional content fields. In order for the student to be awarded a grade, he/she has to demonstrate at least a minimum knowledge standard. If he/she fails to do this, the teacher or the teacher team notes down the observation FMS (stands for "failed to reach a minimum standard") in special records instead of awarding a numerical grade to a student.

Another new feature is the assessment of professional content fields or modules involving a minimum of two teachers. Such assessment method calls for intense mutual cooperation and coordination, which is currently still regarded as a problem.

Theoretical and practical instruction of professional content fields or modules is normally performed separately. A theoretical part is implemented in dedicated school classrooms, while practical training takes place in workshops located at the school, inter-company centre or employer premises, depending on the type of the concluded contract (individual, collective). The instruction is given by different teachers as the regulatory basis for theoretical instruction is different when compared to practical instruction teachers. Professional content field teachers assess as a team because they make out a common numerical grade consisting of both parts.

Practical training involving work is performed in the real work environment, regardless of the type of the learning contract. It is assessed descriptively with a single word (passed, failed). Extracurricular activities are assessed in this way as well.

Integrated key qualification (learning to learn, social skills, entrepreneurship, health and safety at work, ICT literacy, career building) within individual programme units represent a new feature in new educational programmes. They are being monitored, whereby the mode and method of this process are set by the teacher programme assembly. Trial programmes record the student's progress in the integrated key qualifications by way of the folder of the student's achievements (portfolio).

### **Organizational Structure Supporting the Autonomy**

The teacher programme assembly represents the central organisational structure providing for and developing school autonomy. Regulatory arrangements for implementation of new programmes require the school to appoint one or more teacher programme assemblies. The teacher programme assembly is managed by the principal, and it comprises all teachers in the educational programme (teachers, mentors) and other professional staff (practical training organiser, librarian, counsellor, laboratory technician...). The teacher programme assembly works as a team.

Tasks of the teacher programme assembly include:

- designing the school curriculum in line with the educational programme,
- formulating the assessment plan in accordance with the school curriculum,
- deciding on the student's progress,
- taking decisions about the repeating of a year following a prior opinion by parents,
- determining an individualized education plan,
- determining the acquired competencies in case of students who drop out of school and do not complete education (obtaining partial qualifications), and

- setting the number of examinations, scope and method for taking examinations in case of individual students.

### Evaluating Learning Results

As the instruction concludes, the teacher or the team of teachers determine the **final grade** or the **observation** for individual programme unit. The class teacher determines the overall achievement on the basis of final grades and observations.

The student receiving a positive grade in all programme units and fulfilling all obligations from the educational programme is deemed to have finished a year and he/she proceeds to the next year. Such student is awarded the annual certificate. If the student successfully ends the last year of the educational programme, he/she meets the conditions for taking the final examination or vocational school-leaving examination (*matura*).

A new measure taken with the view to limit the immense drop-out is a possibility to proceed to the next year despite the fact that the student did not get a positive grade in all programme units, or did not discharge all obligations laid down in the programme.

Three-year programmes enable the student to proceed to the next year although his/her learning results in **one or more programme units** do not comply with minimum knowledge standards if the teacher programme assembly passes such well founded opinion.

Four-year programmes provide for the autonomous decision on the students' progression to the next year by the teacher programme assembly in cases where student did not meet a minimum standard in **one programme unit** which is not tested as the subject at the vocational school-leaving examination (*matura*).

The student proceeding to the next year and not reaching a minimum knowledge standard has to have his/her **individualized education plan** drawn up in order to set out conditions, modes and deadlines for fulfilling the missing obligations. Subject to aforementioned conditions, the student can proceed to the next year in case of the same programme unit in the same educational programme only once.

The student failing to comply with conditions for proceeding to the next year by the end of the school year can opt for these options together with the parents:

- single repeating of the year in the same educational programme. If so, he/she has to repeatedly fulfil all obligations in the matriculated year, or
- he/she can sit examinations in the programme units where he/she failed to demonstrate a minimum knowledge standard.

Students have a possibility to demonstrate knowledge by way of examinations. Their organisation falls within the remit of the school. In accordance with the school calendar fixed by the minister of education and the assessment plan, the school sets examination deadlines, duration and examination regulations specifying in detail the rules for taking examinations. Students have to take note of the school examination regulations.

The teacher programme assembly determines programme units for which the students need to pass examinations. The assembly establishes the number, scope and duration of examinations. The assembly is autonomous in its decision making, with students being treated on an individual basis.

## **Results of the Increased School Autonomy in Trial Educational Programmes**

The introduction of the trial phase in the new educational programme car mechatronic has been monitored by the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training. The results of this year's monitoring pertaining to the school curriculum and assessment give grounds for optimism, however, they also point to certain deficiencies which will still have to be remedied.

Visible progress can be observed at the schools initiating new programmes. The school curriculum has been favourably received by teachers. They think that it helps them reinforce teamwork, put into effect intersubject integration and flexible learning process. Teachers continuously improve their work planning. Certain problems have emerged in the planning of school curricula, but additional teacher training will successfully tackle these difficulties.

These elements are still insufficiently asserted:

- transparency of practical training documents in the work environment,
- planning and implementing integrated key qualifications,
- creating learning situations which currently lack in complexity,
- learning process flexibility, and
- planning the open curriculum (still no catalogues of knowledge for the open curriculum).

As to the assessment, the monitoring centred on determining the implementation of certain conceptual new features. Despite being under time pressure to embrace novelties, it can be concluded that teachers introduced into their teaching these novelties, which can be positively evaluated.

Teachers commend the assessment plan used for assessment. Positive assessment of the plan has also been given by students who report that teachers almost always observe the foreseen dates in the plan. The plan contributes to increased quality of assessment and to the autonomy of the teacher programme assembly, while it makes it easier for two thirds of students to be better prepared for assessment. Most teachers use catalogues of knowledge when establishing minimum knowledge standards, and this is in line with the concept and provisions of the new Rules. The plan directs teachers to plan carefully and to exercise self-control, while its function in drawing up learning-objective and competence based examinations has been exploited to a lesser extent. In order to do this, teachers require additional teaching knowledge also based on the taxonomic analysis of learning objectives which serves as the basis for knowledge examinations.

To conclude, it is sensible to formulate the assessment plan as it achieves its purposes.

We came to the conclusion that some teachers are more negatively disposed towards the observation FMS (failed to reach a minimum standard), which also affects the acceptance and understanding of the observation role with students. This only proves that the introduction of such complex shift requires time, adequate professional support of teachers at school and good cooperation of all partners in the trial (pilot school management, teacher programme assemblies, public institutions, social partners and ministries).

We found that schools are characterised by important shifts directed towards the objectives set. In order for the final results to reflect our wishes and plans, the support afforded to schools in acquisition of new, predominantly methodical and didactic knowledge, is to be strengthened, normative bases need to be drafted in time, material conditions at schools have to be improved so that they would be in a position to proactively reinforce a development stance. Monitoring results also indicate that it is necessary to consolidate the integrated approach and the introduction of changes at all aforementioned levels, which calls for time and human resources.

## **Conclusions**

Slovenia is preparing and launching a sweeping reform of vocational education, and its endeavours are also supported through projects and funds from the European Social Fund. The reform is accompanied by big shifts leading to the increased school autonomy. Harmonised actions of all entities responsible for the quality of vocational education are needed if the project is to be implemented successfully:

- state drafts new normative bases,
- National Institute for Vocational Education and Training is responsible for the development of appropriate professional bases underlying modern competence based educational programmes,
- national institutions render assistance to schools in human resource development and in establishing autonomy,
- school management and teachers favour the changes set and take on a path of a modern vocational school, and
- social partners are aware they have to provide for their future employees.

We are of the view that positive shifts have been made, and this is also visible in altered attitude of schools, teachers and students. The latter attach greater value to education, which is being reflected in better achievements and lower drop-out rates.

## **Sources:**

- Assessment Rules in New Secondary Vocational Programmes
- Platform for Designing Educational Programmes in Lower and Secondary Vocational and Secondary Professional Education, National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2001
- National Institute for Vocational Education and Training (2006), VET Curriculum at National and School Level