

EMILIA PALANKIEWICZ-MITRUT
KATARZYNA M. STANEK

STRENGTHENING DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND EMPLOYERS IN POLAND'S VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education forms a significant part of the strategy to address unemployment and ensure that young people's skills align with the evolving needs of the labour market. High-quality vocational education and training (VET) is a key determinant of economic competitiveness, enhancing both its effectiveness and attractiveness (Majid et al., 2020; Sitek & Stasiowski, 2022). Today's job market increasingly requires workers who not only have solid educational foundations but also demonstrate flexibility and the ability to adapt swiftly to new professional challenges (Okoye & Arimonu, 2016). Technological advancement, globalization, and demographic shifts make continuous learning essential (Jeruszka, 2017; Zając, 2018). Consequently, modern vocational education should prioritize the development of competencies that enable young people to operate effectively in dynamic environments (Stanek, 2016; Stryukov & Hromtseva, 2019).

The 2017 education reform aimed to improve the quality of VET by emphasizing practical preparation. A key objective was to increase employer engagement in the educational process, enabling curriculum adjustments, industry-sponsored

Dr EMILIA PALANKIEWICZ-MITRUT, Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Institute of Sociological Sciences and Pedagogy; correspondence address: Wydział Socjologii i Pedagogiki SGGW, ul. Nowoursynowska 166 bud. 4, 02-787 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: emilia_palankiewicz-mitrut@sggw.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7586-3562>.

Dr KATARZYNA M. STANEK, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Institute of Pedagogy; correspondence address: Instytut Pedagogiki, ul. Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: kstanek@aps.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9118-7821>.

classes, provision of specialized equipment, and hands-on training in real work environments (Kubiak, 2018). These initiatives reflect the growing need to integrate formal education with workplace experience, as seen in the dual education model, which combines school-based learning with practical training in companies (Koudahl, 2010; Muhambetaliev & Kasymova, 2016; Palankiewicz-Mitrut, 2023; Pogatsnik, 2018). The dual system, also called alternating or practical-focused education, is common in highly productive and competitive countries, including Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the UK, and some Scandinavian countries. This model is particularly effective, as it allows a seamless transition from school to professional life, with over half of students in these countries opting for it (Bielawska, 2012). Its success highlights the importance of combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience to ensure students are well-prepared for employment.

Methods of practical vocational training introduced through such reforms foster professional development, which is a long-term process with internal and external factors at play. They promote goal-setting, acquisition of new experiences, and the ability to respond to emerging challenges (Setiyawami et al., 2020; Plewka, 2015). The work environment is integral to every employee's functioning, and practical training in authentic settings is essential for shaping professional identity and competencies (Jakimiuk, 2016). Collaboration between schools, employers, and other institutions ensures comprehensive preparation for professional life (Zimmermann et al., 2013), grounded in open dialogue and mutual understanding. Educational institutions should consider employer expectations regarding practical competencies, while companies should recognize the foundational role of theory in fostering adaptability and lifelong learning.

Internships and apprenticeships provide students with valuable hands-on experience, exposure to modern technologies, and skills directly transferable to future employment (Hiim, 2023). When based on transparency and sustained cooperation, they bridge theory and practice, aligning education with industry needs (Forma & Łysak, 2018). This integrated approach enhances graduate competitiveness and supports economic growth by delivering well-qualified professionals ready for contemporary labour market demands (Boichevska & Veremiuk, 2020; Sulmicka, 2004; Spöttl & Windelband, 2021).

In this study, dialogue between schools and employers is understood not as occasional contact or formal agreements, but as a structured, ongoing process based on mutual communication, consultation, and shared decision-making. It involves regular exchange of labor market information, participation in curriculum development, joint practical training, employer involvement in educational planning,

and feedback mechanisms assessing student readiness for work. This frames cooperation as an institutionalized and continuous practice rather than incidental interaction.

Therefore, the next section presents the results of a study conducted among vocational school educators, exploring their perspectives on employer collaboration, challenges, and opportunities to improve vocational training quality and relevance.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to present an image of vocational education in terms of cooperation between schools and employers. To achieve this, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed.

The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. How is the cooperation between schools (the school environment) and employers organized?
2. In the opinion of the school environment, how does active employer involvement in post-secondary education contribute to improving vocational preparation aimed at adapting students to the current job market needs?

The use of both research methods allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the complexities of vocational education, considering various perspectives and dimensions of the cooperation process. The choice of methods was guided by the research objectives, the nature of the phenomenon being studied, available data sources, and the capabilities of the researcher. The following section outlines the methodologies used for both qualitative and quantitative research, ensuring clarity and coherence in presenting the study's approach.

1.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1.1.1 Research sample

Participants in the qualitative study were selected according to the following criteria:

- **workplace:** secondary school offering vocational education, technical high school, or vocational school (Level 1 and/or 2);

- **position:** teacher (general or vocational subjects), vocational counselor, vocational subject instructor, or school principal;
- **subjects taught:** vocational or general education subjects;
- **educational background:** higher education with the required pedagogical and professional qualifications (for vocational teachers/instructors);
- **years of experience:** a minimum of five years of teaching experience;
- **sample size:** 15 teachers;
- **sampling method:** purposive (non-random) sampling.

The qualitative study involved 15 teachers of both general and vocational subjects, representing various types of schools, including vocational schools, technical high schools, vocational training centers, and continuing education centers. These teachers were employed across six provinces in Poland, providing a diverse range of perspectives.

1.1.2 Research tools and procedure

The qualitative study was conducted within five years of the educational reform's implementation, using focus group interviews (FGI) that were planned and moderated by the researcher. Three focus group sessions were conducted, with a total of 15 participants. Each session (labeled A, B, and C) lasted approximately 150 minutes and followed a pre-designed script.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in accordance with established standards. Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA 2022 software, and the results were thematically organized, focusing on the key aspects of cooperation between schools and employers.

1.2 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

1.2.1 Research sample

Participants for the quantitative study were selected according to the following criteria:

- **workplace:** secondary school offering vocational education, technical high school, or vocational school (Level 1 and/or 2);
- **position:** teacher (general or vocational subjects), vocational counselor, vocational subject instructor, or school principal;
- **subjects taught:** vocational or general education subjects;
- **educational background:** higher education with the required pedagogical and professional qualifications (for vocational teachers/instructors);

- **years of experience:** a minimum of three years of teaching experience;
- **sample size:** approximately 150 individuals were expected to participate in the survey;
- **sampling method:** purposive (non-random) sampling.

The survey was conducted from October 2023 to January 2024 and included 158 respondents, distributed as follows: 80% (142) were teachers, 14% (24) were vocational subject instructors, and 6% (11) were school principals.

It is important to note that teachers often serve concurrently as vocational instructors, and school principals frequently work as teachers too. Therefore, due to multiple response options, the total responses were not aggregated. The study was nationwide, with institutions employing the respondents across all 16 provinces of Poland.

1.2.2 Research tools and procedure

The quantitative study employed a diagnostic survey method, with participants receiving detailed instructions prior to completing an online questionnaire. The survey, consisting of 47 questions covering both demographic data and core research topics, required approximately 25 minutes to complete. Once collected, the responses were compiled into a report and subjected to statistical analysis using Microsoft Excel 2021 and IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

1.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research adhered to ethical research standards. Approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, and participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study. They were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation, with the option to withdraw at any stage. Information on data storage and processing was provided, and after the study, participants received details on accessing the results, which will be published in a report.

Although the study sample is not representative of all vocational education institutions and teachers in Poland, the results provide a valuable snapshot of vocational education in the country, particularly in terms of cooperation with employers. The findings can serve as a foundation for further research, including studies on a larger scale or comparative studies across different countries, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. These limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings, as they reflect the perspectives of a specific group of participants and may not fully capture the broader landscape of vocational education.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the question regarding cooperation between schools and employers revealed that the respondents expressed positive opinions on the subject. They emphasized that this cooperation offers numerous benefits to students, such as job opportunities, the acquisition of practical skills, and the possibility of receiving compensation for their internships.

We, as a school collaborating with employers, strive to jointly find solutions that will give our potential graduates the opportunity for employment. (Respondent 5, Group C)

Employers engage in school projects and allow students to work seasonally once they come of age. (Respondent, Group A)

Last year, students from our technical school did internships at various companies, and they really appreciated the fact that they gained practical knowledge and skills, and received a compensation that, while not excessive, was not low, either. (Respondent 3, Group B)

However, most respondents point to problems related to the low engagement of employers, stemming from insufficient financial resources:

Employers also expect to gain financial benefits, but our education system does not provide this. (Respondent 4, Group B)

In better times, we had a budget that we used to pay these companies, but that was not a systemic solution (...). I don't know, perhaps we could propose tax exemptions or some other incentives from the government or local authorities to make companies more interested. (Respondent 4, Group C)

There is a lack of funds for cooperation with employers. The government gives us some reform that sounds good in marketing terms and looks appealing, but it doesn't provide real solutions, and I think that's a huge problem. (Respondent 4, Group C)

The respondents claim that schools should establish connections with businesses and institutions in order to better understand the needs of the job market and tailor educational programs to meet these needs. However, many of them point out that employers are not interested in accepting students for practical vocational training, not only for economic reasons but also due to various organizational issues, which generally arise from the lack of experience among interns:

The problem is that students undertake their first internships while still minors, and employers in the IT or advertising sectors handle sensitive data. A minor intern is not fully legally responsible for their actions, so they cannot have access to such data (GDPR). That's why employers are often concerned about the risk of data leaks and only accept adults for internships. (Respondent 3, Group B)

The person supervising the intern in the company is less efficient because part of their work time is spent instructing them. Students struggle to find employers willing to take them on for internships, and the increase in the number of internships has made the situation even worse – students from all technical schools are required to complete two internships, so there are more students seeking internships, but fewer companies willing to accept them. This creates a very stressful situation for students, especially since some of them have to search for an internship placement up to 60 km away from our school. (Respondent 2, Group A)

The results of the quantitative study confirm the main issues in the collaboration between schools and employers. The most frequently identified problems included an insufficient number of employers willing to cooperate (56.96%) and the lack of financial resources (43.67%). The least mentioned issues included other difficulties (6.39%) and the perception of no significant problems (7.59%). Table 1 presents a breakdown of the responses.

Table 1. Perceived problems in vocational education

Question: What practical problems do you see in vocational education?	
Problem	Percentage (%)
Too few employers willing to cooperate	56.96
Lack of students' willingness to learn the profession	39.21
Lack of employers' willingness to implement vocational training programs	37.34
Problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., practical class disruptions)	35.43
Lack of financial resources	43.67
Lack of didactic infrastructure	31.64
I do not see major problems	7.59
Other	6.39

Note. Due to multiple-choice responses, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Next, it was verified whether in the opinion of the surveyed teachers the changes related to the increased involvement of employers in students' vocational training are observed in the respondents' workplaces. The obtained results indicated that the largest proportion of respondents believed that these changes are rather observed (31.43%) or observed (22.86%). Moreover, it is worth noting

that only 5% of respondents stated that the changes are definitely not observed. The breakdown of responses is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Perceived link between increased employer involvement in students' vocational training and respondents' workplaces

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Changes related to the increased involvement of employers in students' vocational training have been observed in my school"?	
Response	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	5.00
Disagree	7.86
Rather Disagree	15.00
Rather Agree	31.43
Agree	22.86
Strongly Agree	10.00

The final stage of the quantitative research involved assessing how the surveyed teachers evaluate the cooperation between schools and employers in the context of preparing students for entering the job market. The analysis revealed that the majority of respondents rated the cooperation between schools and employers as satisfactory (58.9%) in terms of preparing students for their professional paths. It was also found that the smallest percentage of teachers believed the cooperation was unsatisfactory (16.46%). The detailed percentage distribution of the responses is presented in Figure 1.

Table 3. Schools' perceived cooperation with employers

Question: How would you assess your school's cooperation with employers in preparing students to enter the labour market?	
Response	Percentage (%)
Satisfactory	58.90
No opinion	24.60
Unsatisfactory	16.50

CONCLUSIONS

The results clearly highlight the importance of cooperation between schools and employers in vocational training. Respondents pointed to benefits such as improved job prospects after completing vocational education, opportunities to gain practical experience in real work settings, and, in some cases, the possibility of earning income during practical vocational training. Engaging in authentic professional environments allows students to develop essential skills and competencies, increasing their readiness for the labor market. The study also revealed challenges, including limited financial resources, organizational barriers, and insufficient employer involvement. Many employers hesitate to take on students for apprenticeships due to financial or logistical concerns, indicating the need for targeted support and incentives.

Practical implications include providing financial and organizational support for schools to organize hands-on vocational training, workshops, and real workplace lessons. Employers could be encouraged through incentives such as tax reliefs, recognition programs, or subsidized placements. Promoting the dual education model can improve the quality of training and increase motivation among both students and employers, as students gain insight into workplace practices and companies can prepare future employees familiar with job requirements. For the dual model to function effectively, institutional coordination mechanisms are necessary. Schools could designate dedicated coordinators responsible for maintaining employer partnerships, monitoring the quality of training, and aligning curricular content with workplace expectations. At the regional level, advisory platforms involving representatives of education and industry could periodically review programs to ensure alignment with labor market needs.

Other measures include diversifying engagement models – internships, apprenticeships, patronage programs, and teacher training initiatives – and supporting direct student–employer interaction through mentoring, career workshops, or networking events. Introducing structured mentoring systems within companies, combined with short pedagogical training modules for workplace supervisors, could enhance learning quality and student integration. Early exposure initiatives, such as short-term job shadowing or sector-specific study visits prior to formal training periods, may also improve career orientation and reduce educational mismatch.

Sustained dialogue between schools and employers is essential for effectively preparing students for labor market demands (Augustyn, 2020; Nowak, 2017). Open and ongoing communication supports the adaptation of vocational programs

to contemporary challenges (Solka, 2017). Through partnerships, students gain hands-on experience in authentic work settings, refine their skills in line with industry requirements (Kwiatkowski, 2022), and develop adaptability, independent problem-solving, and professional resilience (Alam, 2015; Powell & McGrath, 2019). Both schools and employers benefit from these initiatives, and students are better prepared for the evolving demands of their professional lives.

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SUMMARY

The article explores the significance of vocational education in the context of today's job market and Poland's 2017 educational reform. It highlights the essential role of dialogue between schools and employers, which is important for better preparing young people for professional challenges and aligning their competencies with economic demands. This paper presents partial results from both quantitative and qualitative research conducted as part of the project "Changes in Vocational Education in Secondary Schools Resulting from the 2017 Educational System Reform in the Views of Teachers in Technical and Vocational Schools". The quantitative research involved 158 vocational school teachers, while qualitative insights were gathered through focus groups with 15 educators.

Cooperation between schools and employers takes various forms, such as vocational internships, student apprenticeships, dual education, patronage classes, and training programs for both students and teachers. These initiatives provide students with valuable practical experience and facilitate their transition into the professional careers. However, research highlights several challenges, for example including low employer engagement, limited financial resources, and organizational difficulties related to the implementation of practical vocational training. A particular challenge is securing internship placements for underage students and adapting curricula to the rapidly changing demands of the economy.

The results suggest the need for greater involvement from businesses, improved conditions for collaboration, and the implementation of systemic solutions to support practical training. They also emphasize the importance of ongoing dialogue between the education sector and industry to ensure that curricula meet the real needs of the labour market and better prepare graduates for their professional futures.

Keywords: collaboration with employers; dialogue; vocational education; vocational school teachers; job market

WZMACNIANIE DIALOGU I WSPÓŁPRACY
MIĘDZY SZKOŁAMI A PRACODAWCAMI
W POLSKIM SYSTEMIE EDUKACJI ZAWODOWEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia znaczenie edukacji zawodowej w kontekście dzisiejszego rynku pracy oraz reformy edukacyjnej, która miała miejsce w Polsce w 2017 roku. Podkreślona została istotna rola dialogu między szkołami a pracodawcami, który jest niezbędny do lepszego przygotowania młodych ludzi do wyzwań zawodowych oraz dopasowania ich kompetencji do wymagań gospodarki. W opracowaniu zaprezentowano częściowe wyniki badań ilościowych i jakościowych przeprowadzonych w ramach projektu „Zmiany w edukacji zawodowej w szkołach ponadpodstawowych wynikające z reformy systemu oświaty z 2017 roku w świetle opinii nauczycieli techników i szkół branżowych”. Badania ilościowe przeprowadzono wśród 158 nauczycieli szkół zawodowych, a dane jakościowe uzyskano dzięki zogniskowanym wywiadowi grupowym, w których udział wzięło 15 przedstawicieli kadry pedagogicznej.

Współpraca między szkołami a pracodawcami przybiera różne formy, takie jak praktyki zawodowe, staże uczniowskie, kształcenie dualne, klasy patronackie czy szkolenia skierowane dla uczniów i nauczycieli. Daje to uczniom cenne doświadczenie praktyczne i ułatwia im przejście na rynek pracy. Niemniej jednak badania wskazują na liczne wyzwania, w tym niskie zaangażowanie pracodawców, ograniczone środki finansowe oraz trudności organizacyjne związane z realizacją praktycznej nauki zawodu. Szczególnie problematyczne jest zapewnienie miejsc praktyk dla uczniów niepełnoletnich oraz dostosowanie programów nauczania do szybko zmieniających się warunków na rynku pracy.

Wyniki wskazują na potrzebę większego zaangażowania przedsiębiorców, poprawy warunków współpracy oraz wdrożenia systemowych rozwiązań wspierających praktyczne kształcenie. Należy także podkreślić znaczenie ciągłego dialogu między sektorem edukacyjnym a przemysłem, aby oferta kształcenia i programy nauczania odpowiadały rzeczywistym potrzebom rynku pracy i lepiej przygotowywały absolwentów do przyszłej kariery zawodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: współpraca szkół z pracodawcami; dialog; kształcenie zawodowe; nauczyciele szkół zawodowych; rynek pracy