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Model of organization of VET teachers' technological competences development – the lesson of social partnership

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Abstract

Labor force qualification structure that meets labor market demands and in particular – professionals with technological competences of varying levels of qualification are the important factor in determining business competitiveness in the global market. What of the technological competences do young professionals need? Do VET teachers have these competencies? This is the main problem tackled by the implementation of the EU-funded project "Creation and implementation of the model of VET teachers technological competences development". The model of organization of teachers training allows to deal with these problems: socially responsible business participating in the project as the main organizer of VET teachers training. Experience gained while implementing the project was the serious lesson learnt in social partnership between the system of education and the business world.

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1. Introduction

Exploring the effects of business on the environment – the economic and social development of a society – is not limited to the formation of new attitudes towards a 21st century business formula that would determine the growth of country's well-being. In the business world, there is a growing understanding and recognition of the linkage between the right to profit and profiting opportunities, and direct duties to the society, i.e., the duty to participate in social projects which successful implementation is important for ensuring sustainable development of the whole country.

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In turn, the trends of social development to a great extent determine success of business itself both on macro and micro (company) levels. Long-term business success is determined by the development of society and the welfare of its members, growth of education and vocational skills, social moods, environment, safety and security, and many other external factors. Business increasingly understands that it is necessary to contribute to ensuring long-term and balanced economic and social development instead of considering this to be a task for the government only. It is the social responsibility of business which penetrates into more and more areas of economic and social development.

One of such areas is represented by human resources. The article discusses the importance of social responsibility, social dialogue and social partnership in the area of vocational education and training (VET), and the results of a social partnership between business and education systems in the implementation of project “Creation and implementation of the model of VET teachers technological competences development”. This project created a social partnership network to facilitate improvement of vocational education and training, and to contribute to better matching between labor skills structure and labor market needs.

2. Corporate social responsibility and development of human resources

The concept of corporate social responsibility, also known as responsible business, is a wide-range process encompassing the entire cycle of product/service manufacturing/development and environmental, social, financial and ethical aspects related thereto. The primary economic and social effects of corporate social responsibility are macro-level benefits. However, business investments into various fields of “social responsibility” (both on macro and micro levels) are not only necessary but also beneficial for business itself. Such investments are not limited to creating long-term business-friendly perspectives (business enjoys better conditions in a socially successful society). Although it may seem unprofitable in the short-term, investments related to social activities increase corporate profits in the long-term perspective. Business disposes of large human and financial resources. Some funds (profit generated by business corporations) received in taxes are discretionary reallocated by governments to satisfy various social needs. However, social responsibility increasingly dictates steps for business to be made to voluntarily commit to invest into the sources of its power – health, education, vocational training of individuals, etc. (Laužackas, 2002; Maurušaitienė, 2007; Mickienė, 2007; Pundzienė & Dienys, 2003; Putnam, 2003). Why? Realizing its opportunities and interests in the long run, business assumes the obligation to carry out socially responsible activities in the areas where the recognized national-level problems simply cannot be solved without business involvement.

One of the areas of the corporate social responsibility is human resource development (Douglas, 2008; Kvieskienė & Kvieska, 2012; Ruškus, Juozaitienė, & Tiškutė, 2005; Seitanidi & Crane, 2013; Siegel, 2010). Bearing in mind that around 80 per cent of the value of many businesses is represented by their intellectual capital which retention and development are a growing challenge and task for business, recognition of corporate social responsibility in the area of human capital accumulation is important primarily for business itself.

What are the main areas of corporate civil responsibility?

The most important areas are information on the needs of the business world in the field of human resource development (skills (qualifications) really existing in the economy and the content thereof) and practice (Fig. 1). The problem of insufficient practical skills of graduates has been always emphasized as the main criticism to the vocation education and training system. In response to the criticism and the needs of the business world, the VET system is improving vocational training programs and increasing the length of practical training, while business is more willing to “let students in”.

All policies aimed at the development of human resources at the macro level should be understood by the business world as the commitment of every company to seek this development and contribute with investments not only into the human resource development within the company, but also in human resource development programs implemented at the national level. However, it is only the pooled result of voluntary and active participation of individual companies that can ensure the functionality of the technological competences improvement system, which is created during the project, and contribute to the improvement of the system of human resource development as a whole (namely, balancing education and economic needs), and, eventually, serve the development of businesses themselves. What are the costs and the benefits of corporate social responsibility in this case?

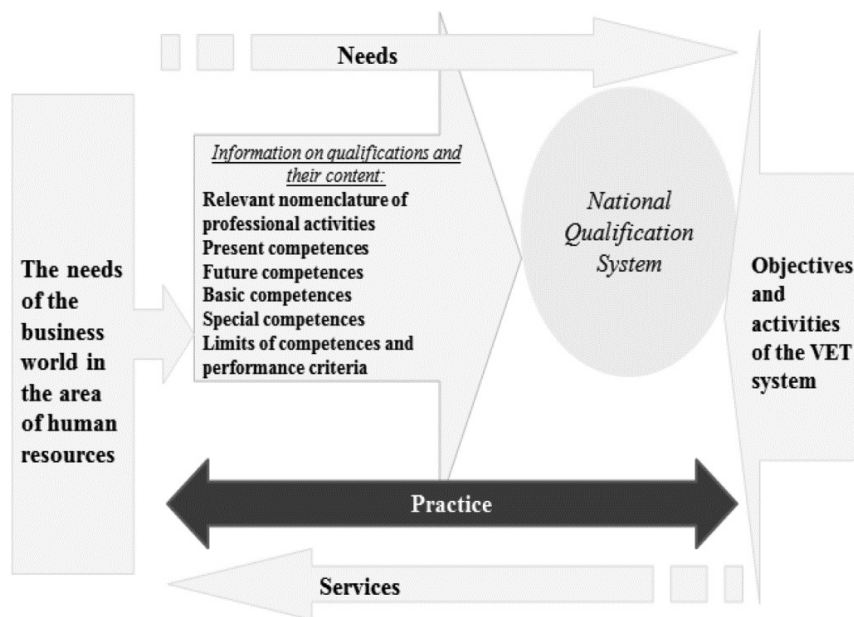


Fig. 1. The needs and responsibilities of the business world in the area of human resources

Benefits: vocational training matching labor market needs; higher labor efficiency as a result of matching labor force competences to the needs of business; decreasing corporate costs in relation to additional training of new employees at the workplace; decreasing corporate costs in relation to searches for employees with required qualifications and competences.

Costs: time costs related to training and consulting of trainees provided by the company's employees; materials and resources required for practical training.

A totality of micro problems amounts to macro problems. Therefore, solution of any problems at the macro level is not oriented to the benefits of the macro level alone. Yet, in order to be well-targeted and beneficial for a specific business, macro-level solutions require involvement of business as an element of the macro system. The mission of the business world, as seen in this light, inspires an emphasis on one very important observation: participation of the business world is not as that of an assistant or advisor. Together with the education system, business is involved as the user with the greatest interest in results.

Accordingly, the objectives and mission of corporate social responsibility in terms of human resource development and qualifications are not limited to the commitment to answer questions about corporate needs for relevant competences (what are priority areas and what is the content of competences), but also extend to creating possibilities to acquire experiences during practical training in real working environment through performance of various tasks related to actual production/manufacturing processes for which specific technologies are used.

In the course of vocational education and training in education establishments, future professionals are provided with necessary theoretical knowledge and trained practical skills. But do vocational teachers and trainers always teach students the skills they will need upon being employed in accordance with their qualifications? Rapid technological development necessitates national business to buy and implement state-of-the-art technologies in order to maintain competitiveness in global markets. In this marathon of growing competition, information and knowledge are changing at an analogue pace. Vocational teachers educating and training students who represent tomorrow's labor force should teach them skills and competences to be needed by businesses several years later. However, it is actually impracticable for the education system alone due to several reasons. Firstly, even the richest countries cannot afford providing the VET system with state-of-the-art technologies. Secondly, vocational teachers who know latest technologies only from the Internet and publications without having even seen them in reality cannot provide

future professionals with such a level of training that is sufficient to recognize VET graduates as ready for immediate entering the labor market. The teachers themselves lack necessary competences. It means that VET teachers should be trained as well, doesn't it?

3. Development of social partnership in the area of vocational education and training

Problems related to systematic provision of information on relevant qualifications, their content, practical experience and competences in connection with the latest technologies cannot be solved without a dialogue between the social partners (education system and business world) that would crystallize approaches to and methods of problem solving, and without cooperation, i.e., social partnering in the implementation of the goals set.

Social dialogue is understood not only as a debate between national authorities and social partners about relevant issues and problems of social and economic development. In a broad sense, the social dialogue framework is understood as a continuous process of negotiations, balance of interests and networking in pursuit of common social goals, assumption of social responsibility, joint decisions and approved agreements on joint actions aimed at tackling current problems or creating partnership networks oriented towards long-term cooperation and concerted efforts to ensure sustainable economic development.

Social partnership as a cooperation of stakeholders, continuation of the cooperation and responsibility is the anticipated result of social dialogue which is emphasized by all researchers analyzing social dialogue issues (Dambrauskienė, 2005; Kaminskienė, 2008; Kaminskienė & Laužackas, 2004, Kviessienė & Kviesska, 2012; Laužackas, 2002; Mickienė, 2007; Rooij, 2002; Siegel, 2010).

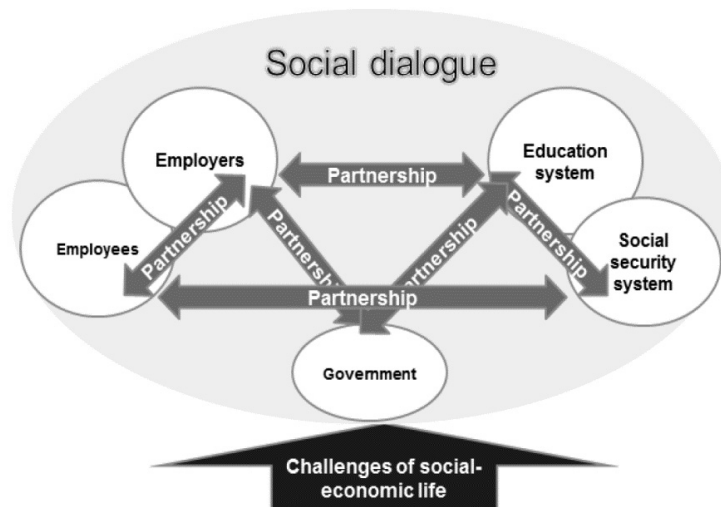


Fig. 2. Main parties to social dialogue

Hence, the concept of social dialogue in its broad sense encompasses, inter alia, social partnership inspired by social responsibility of the stakeholders. Looking at social partnership as targeted and mutually beneficial collaboration on institutional, interdepartmental, regional, national and global levels geared towards common goals and new quality of activities (Kaminskienė, 2008), it can be stated that this need for social partnership has already been recognized in the VET system by both parties. After long years of fragmentary social dialogue on these issues, the education system and the business world are now more and more often meeting in joint projects. Social partnership in the area of vocational education and training is broadening. It means the collaboration between the business world and the education system in the development of national qualification system, the growing number of host companies for trainees, the participation of business representatives in the assessment of qualifications, etc.

Practical training, however, remains to be one of the crucial areas of such social partnership. It is the area for the development of social partnership networks important throughout the VET system, i.e., the accumulation of social capital which could be expected to bring not only fundamental qualitative leaps in the VET system, but also significant changes in terms of qualification (skills) structure of national labor force and conformity to the labor market needs.

4. Organization of improvement of technological competences for VET teachers – a new area of social partnership

In view of importance of practical training, the VET system is looking for effective solutions ensuring that students are provided not only with knowledge, but also with competences required on the labor market. However, preparedness of students for labor market needs is first of all determined by the competences and knowledge of vocational teachers of the specific features of organizing and implementing technological processes in business entities. Therefore, it is necessary to have a qualification development system that would enable vocational teachers to acquire sector-specific technological competences, get familiar with the organization of technological processes in business entities, and have knowledge of the latest technological developments. In order to create such system, the project “Creation and implementation of the model of VET teachers technological competences development”, financed by the ESF, was launched in 2010.

What are *technological competences*? (Fig. 3) A qualification consists of functional, cognitive and generic competences which groups are the structural elements (units) of the qualification. When a group of competences has a common characteristic – relation to a specific technology – the groups of competences can be joined into separate modules – units of qualification. Competences the units of qualification consist of are known as technological competences (Andriušaitienė, 2013; Andriušaitienė and others, 2008; Laužackas, 2005).

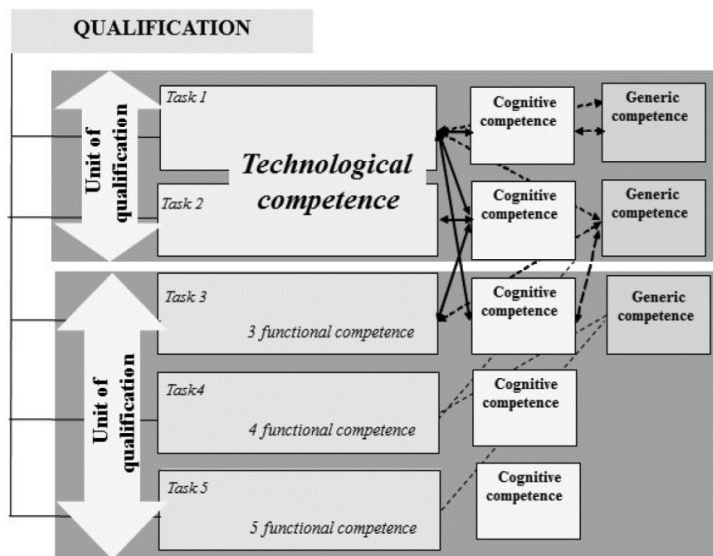


Fig. 3. The structure of qualification

The project idea and logic were based on:

- The provision that only a business and education networking, i.e., social partnership, is capable of ensuring the implementation of the common goal – seeking that the vocational education and training system would train skilled workers matching the needs of the labor market/businesses;

- Understanding that only the business world is able to provide information on specific technological competences which improvement is important for business;
- Selection of the most effective dissemination model: the shortest way to supply professionals with adequate technological competences to business is to organize training for vocational teachers and lecturers;
- Awareness that social dialogue in Lithuania is developed not only in a verbal form, that social partnering is getting stronger and socially responsible business ready for joint projects is already in place.

In accordance with the model for creating and implementing VET teachers technological competences development, the following stakeholders participate in project activities: Education Development Centre (EDC) and social partners (employer organizations, companies, schools and teachers). Improvement of the technological competences of vocational teachers and lecturers is organized and carried out by the EDC and service provider. To implement the project, a public tender was called to select a training organizer (service provider). Contracts were awarded to two organizations: Public Institution Nacionalinė regionų plėtros agentūra (National Agency of Regional Development) was awarded a contract to provide training for teachers in the sector of Wood Industry and the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists assumed responsibility for the organization of technological competence improvement for vocational teachers and lecturers in companies operating in the sectors of Energy, Engineering Industry, Construction, Transport and Storage, Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motor Cycles, Textiles and Wearing Apparel, Manufacture of Food Products and Beverage, Hotels and Restaurants, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, Other Community, Social and Personal Services, and Wholesale and Retail Trade. These two service providers assumed complex responsibility for the administration of training provision in accordance with procedure, under the conditions and by the time limits sets. Organization as a coordination activity covers all areas and stages of training services provision: from the planning and organization of training processes up to the control of service provision and quality assurance. Figure 4 below shows the following key stages in the organization of technological competence development for VET teachers: preparatory stage, program designing, preparation of teaching material, getting ready for training, training.

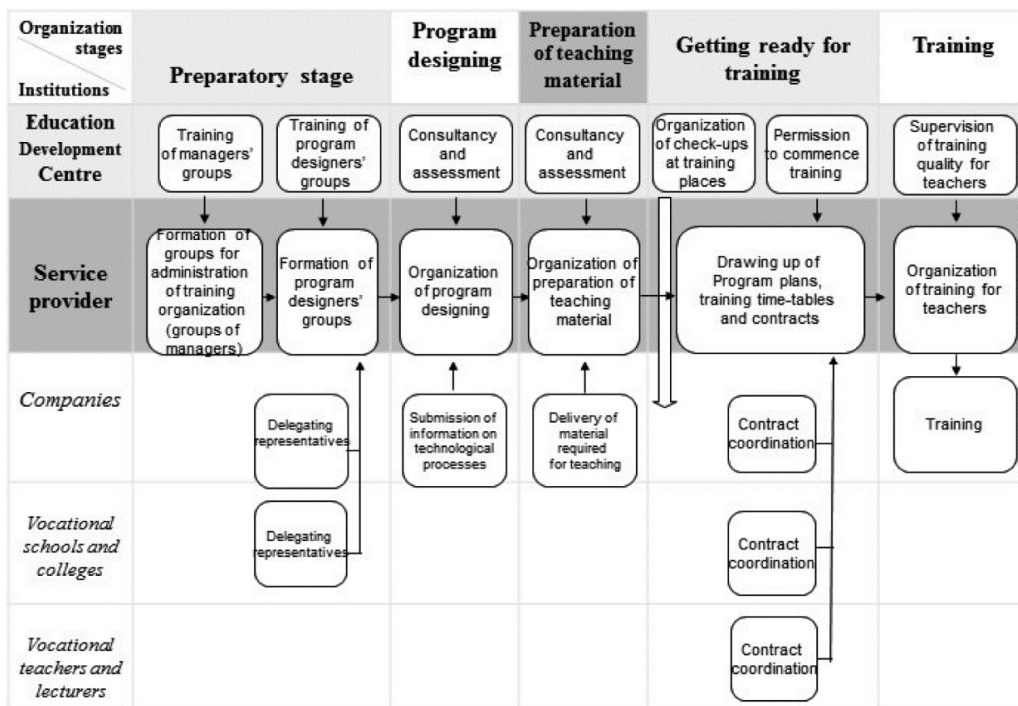


Fig. 4. Scheme of organization of technological competence development for VET teachers and lecturers

As we can see from the diagram above, the project implementation model provides business entities not only with the opportunity to express their opinion about the needed competences (employers were consulted about the relevance and reasonability of improving the competences requested by teachers), but also to participate directly in the development of the content of technological competences, i.e., to participate in the program designing process, namely, development of modules and training elements, description of jobs, equipment and tools, deciding on the duration of training required for the acquisition of relevant competences and necessary teaching material. However, the commitment to “let teachers in the business” seems to be even more important as it provides the opportunity for teachers to acquire demanded technological competences through practical training and participation in manufacturing processes (in real workplaces) instead of theory and observations. In turn, with relevantly revised VET curricula, teachers will be able to provide their students with skills needed by business (future employers).

5. Cooperation in carrying out project activities – social partnership challenges to business and education

Employer organizations are traditionally understood as associations of smaller organizations and companies sharing common interests, enabling the member organizations to achieve the set objectives and have their interests represented. Participation of companies in the activities of such organizations is relatively passive: they grant powers to third parties and withdraw from direct participation, preferring authorized representatives to represent them. This project was a bottom-up initiative. Employer organizations invited companies to take part in the project and become the principal organizers and providers of training to vocational teachers (trainers of teachers) on whom final project results depend. Therefore, the project enabled the business world to test the partnership relations both vertically between the organization and companies, and horizontally among companies from different sectors which would usually meet only as competitors in real business (Fig. 5).

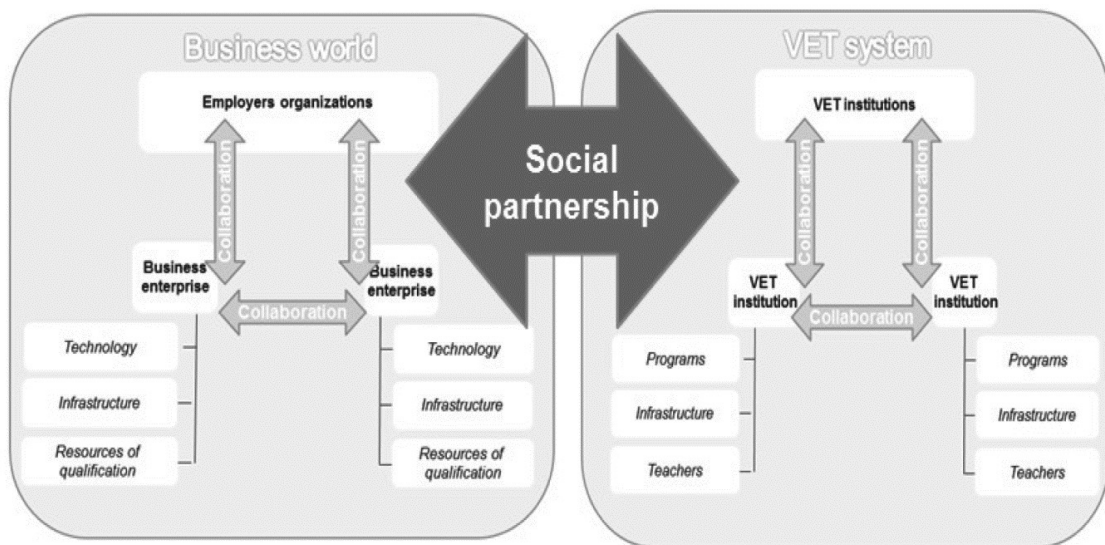


Fig. 5. The aspects of business-education partnership and collaboration during the project

This project enabled employer organizations to check whether companies are ready for the implementation of social dialogue, partnership and social responsibility ideas in practice. Competitors had to cooperate as partners in designing programs and teaching material, to combine their technological, infrastructure and qualification resources in pursuit of the best possible training outcomes.

Practical lessons of social partnership learnt by the education institutions participating in the project include cooperation with representatives of VET institutions in elaborating the model of technological competence development for VET teachers and lecturers (vertical level) and discussions with professionals representing different

sectors striving for balance of attitudes and interests, looking for optimal solutions, and developing curricula and teaching material in joint working groups (horizontal level) (Fig. 5).

However, the greatest challenge was the partnership between business and education systems, and joint responsibility for final outcomes. The project implementation experience revealed the need for improvement of social partnering skills both by business and education representatives: in the process of balancing different attitudes and interests, the common goal is not always understood in the same way and it is not always easy to reach an agreement as to the ways and forms of tackling the existing problems.

6. Post-project results of social partnership – a new far-reaching social partnership network

The created *model of technological competence development of vocational teachers and lecturers* and the project can be seen as the lesson of practical social partnership and of social partnership network development on all levels (Fig. 6):

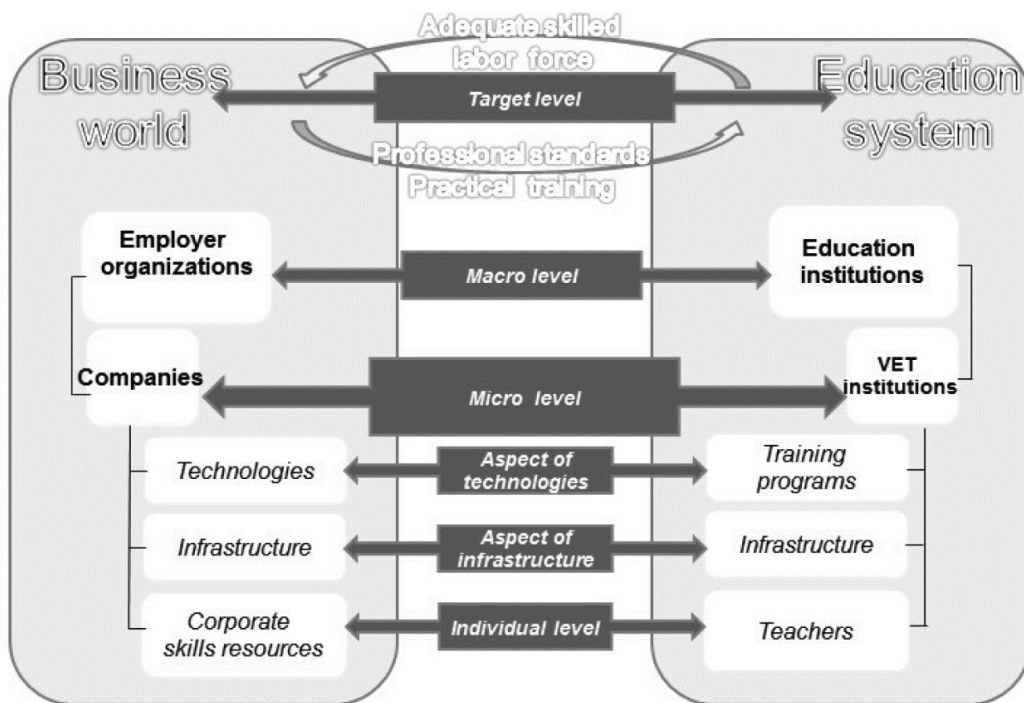


Fig. 6. Levels of social partnership between the business world and education system during the project

Target level – the common goal shared by the education system and business world to have labor force that would better match labor market needs in terms of competences, enhance business competitiveness, economic development and more rapid country's social and economic development;

Macro level – the challenge to verbal social dialogue lasting for more than a decade, testing preparedness of the business world (employers and employer organizations) and the education system (EDC in the given case) to participate (assume responsibility) in joint projects and to take real actions towards achievement of results important to both stakeholders;

Micro level – development of social partnership between the business world (companies) and the education system (VET institutions): practical training of teachers representing cooperation of a new type. Up to now, the tasks set forth in practical training programs for students undergoing traineeships in companies only partially met activities carried out by the companies. During this project, the companies directly participate in program designing,

develop program contents in accordance with the technologies used by the companies (“technological aspect” of partnership), and create conditions to improve competences at workplaces (“infrastructure aspects” of partnership);

Individual level – the opportunity to learn from business professionals, whose competences in a relevant area ensure the best possible results (partnership on individual level), to make contacts that could mature into long-term cooperation which benefits extend beyond the two cooperating parties. Initiatives of individual cooperation in one or another occupational area are usually viewed as beneficial in institutional terms, i.e., information exchange often becomes the beginning of new projects.

Within the project framework, a total of 100 programs for the development of technological competences in 12 economic sectors were developed. After completion of the training, 580 vocational teachers and 70 college lecturers will have improved their qualifications (technological competences) in 84 Lithuanian companies in accordance with individualized practical training programs (Fig. 7).

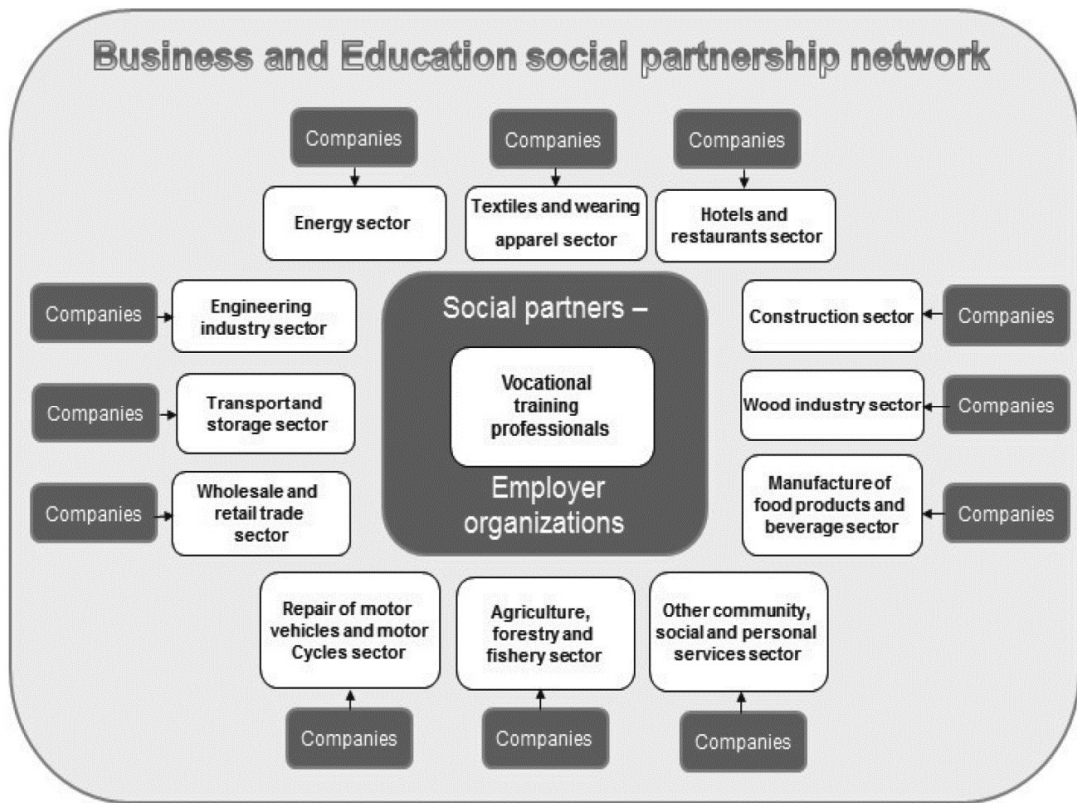


Fig. 7. Business and education social partnership network built during the project

All VET professionals and teachers participating in the project, as well as business represented by employer organizations, business professionals, companies and their employees who provided training to vocational teachers and lecturers constitute a new network of social partnership in the area of vocational education and training. It is a social capital that was not easy to build up and that must be preserved and further developed. However, even if the model of technological competence development for VET teachers and lecturers is validated and the system starts functioning, and adequate funding is allocated, some results of the project are put at risk due to application of project funding principle.

As it was mentioned above, the project participants were VET and business representatives. However, the peculiarities of the VET system, the finer points of program design and adult training programs were not easy for the

representatives of the business world to understand. During participation in the project, business professionals acquired valuable knowledge and experience guaranteeing the broader understanding of specific requirements, problems and likely solutions. In terms of service procurement in tender procedures, these things are difficult to formalize as researcher qualification requirements. However, they often become the key precondition for quality maximization enabling elimination of one of major risk factors for the quality of services in this area. It means that in the next stage, as a result of another public procurement tender, there can be other service providers who will not have experience acquired during this project. One more very important aspect is the relation between the experience of work in one or another area and the loyalty of relevant professionals to the subject area. Professionals and researchers constantly working in one or another subject area become, to a certain extent, enthusiasts of the problem domain. This loyalty to the subject area is related (we can say, absolutely related) to the possibilities, guarantees and perspectives of researchers to work in the preferred domain.

Problems encountered in implementing the project confirmed the system institutionalization idea foreseen in the model of technological competence development system for vocational teachers and lecturers. It is necessary to have an institutional unit to carry out functions of the organization of technological competence development of VET teachers. Why? Only regular professionals with sound knowledge of domain problems and activity shades are capable of ensuring effective functioning of the system at the lowest cost. How? Using a model of molecular organizational structure. This model would allow a permanent nucleus to be established (from researchers making decisions on methodical and methodological issues and professionals planning, organizing and coordinating trainings in relevant sectors), around which the crop of necessary VET professionals and companies with relevant technologies could be built on a flexible basis (in accordance with changing needs). The permanent nucleus of highly-skilled researchers and professionals experienced in the relevant area would serve as a precondition for the effective functioning of the system and the quality of training. In addition, the establishment of the “permanent nucleus” would create preconditions for building long-term social relations and targeted development thereof in view of changes in business, needs of VET teachers and novelties. However, it is of the utmost importance that the social capital already built is further maintained and developed.

7. Conclusions

In the light of growing development of social dialogue in the country, there is a growing understanding in the business world that social partnership inspired by social responsibility is an effective tool to tackle problems of social and economic development, whereas business is one of the key beneficiaries. Business representatives are realizing that investments into social activities and implementation of macro-level social projects are unprofitable in the short-term, while in the long-term perspective these investments not only contribute to better economic situation and social environment of the country, but also increase corporate profits.

After long years of fragmentary social dialogue on the issues of skills structure and balancing labor market needs, the social partners – education system and business world – are now more and more often meeting in joint projects with broadening cooperation areas. Practical training is one of the crucial areas of social partnership. Being aware that preparedness of future professionals for labor market needs is mainly determined by the competences of vocational teachers, in 2010 ESF-funded project “Creation and implementation of the model of VET teachers technological competences development” was launched with the aim to create a system that would enable vocational teachers to acquire necessary technological competences, get familiar with the organization of technological processes in business entities, and have knowledge of the latest technological developments. Business representatives, who are the stakeholders in this project, act not as advisors or consultants, but rather as the organizers (providers) of training to VET teachers, program co-designers contributing to the content of training.

The implemented project can be seen as the lesson of practical social partnership on all levels: on *target level* – as the common goal shared by the education system and business world, on *macro level* – as preparedness to implement joint projects, on *micro level* – as cooperation in the new area of VET teachers’ training, and on *individual level* – as inter-sectoral cooperation of professionals representing different systems. All VET professionals and teachers participating in the project, as well as business represented by employer organizations, business professionals, companies and their employees who provided training to vocational teachers and lecturers constitute a new network of social partnership in the area of vocational education and training. It is a social capital

that was not easy to build up and that must be therefore preserved and further developed. In order to preserve the accumulated capital in reality, it is necessary to institutionalize the system of development of VET teachers' technological competences, thus ensuring the possibility to maintain the acquired competences and experience, while creating a medium for building long-term social relations and conditions to develop such relations taking into account changes in the business world, VET teachers' needs and novelties.

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