Types of schools

Since 1 September 2017, a process has been underway to abolish gradually the model of education referred to as ‘6+3+3’. Lower secondary schools have been replaced with 8-year primary schools which cover two levels: ISCED 1 (primary education) and ISCED 2 (lower secondary education). This is combined with a far-reaching reform of upper secondary education. The current model of education can be briefly described as ‘8+4 (+5)’ (4-year education cycle in general secondary schools; longer, 5-year education cycle in vocational secondary schools). The new system is expected to be fully in place in the school year 2022/2023. See also the chapter ‘Poland: National Reforms in School Education’.

The transformation of the secondary education model in Poland is presented below.

(1) Lower secondary school existing before the reform, education stage III

- Pre-reform 3-year lower secondary schools (gimnazjum), leading to the final exam which gave access to upper secondary education, were phased out to establish the new school system. As part of the phase-out process, no new students were enrolled in lower secondary schools; grade I of the lower secondary school was replaced with grade VII of the new primary school, with students in grade VII of the primary school continuing their education based on a new core curriculum for general education. Pursuant to the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education (Art. 127), grade I of the lower secondary school was abolished on 1 September 2017; grade II on 1 September 2018; and grade III on 1 September 2019. Consequently, the phase-out process was completed at the beginning of the school year 2019/2020.
- In the school year 2018/2019, students in grade III of the lower secondary school continued their education, leading to the lower secondary school exam, based on the pre-reform arrangements.
- The system based on the 8-year primary school will not make a formal distinction between primary and lower secondary education; the 8-year primary school covers two levels: ISCED 1 (primary education) and ISCED 2 (lower secondary education).

(2) Transformation of upper secondary schools existing before the reform, education stage IV, into secondary (post-primary) schools, education stage III in the new school system

- On 1 September 2017, pre-reform 3-year basic vocational schools (zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa) were transformed into a new type of school: stage I sectoral vocational schools (szkoła branżowa I stopnia). Students finishing the new school will receive a diploma upon passing exams confirming vocational qualifications. They can continue education either in a stage II sectoral vocational school training for an occupation which embraces a qualification...
common to the occupation for which students are trained in stage I and stage II schools, or in a
general upper secondary school for adults, starting in grade II. However, stage I sectoral
vocational schools continue to provide training as in the pre-reform basic vocational schools
until the cohorts of students enrolled in the previous school system complete their education.

- On 1 September 2019, **3-year general upper secondary schools** (*liceum ogólnokształcące*),
  where students can obtain a maturity certificate (*świadectwo maturalne*) upon passing the
  maturity exam (*egzamin maturalny*), were transformed into a new type of school: **4-year
  general secondary schools**.
- On 1 September 2019, **4-year technical upper secondary schools** (*technikum*), where
  students can obtain a diploma upon passing exams confirming vocational qualifications and also
  take the maturity exam and obtain a maturity certificate, were transformed into **5-year
  technical secondary schools**.
- On 1 September 2020, **2-year stage II sectoral vocational schools** (*szkoła branżowa II
  stopnia*) will be established. Upon passing an exam confirming vocational qualifications,
  students can obtain a Technician diploma confirming vocational qualifications for an occupation
  which embraces a qualification common to the occupation for which students are trained in
  stage I and stage II schools. They can also obtain a maturity certificate upon passing the
  maturity exam.
- The education system will continue to include **3-year special schools preparing for
  employment** which take students with a moderate or severe intellectual disability and
  students with multiple disabilities, and which award a diploma confirming preparation for
  employment (see also *Educational Support and Guidance* [2]).

(3) Post-secondary schools (providing post-secondary non-tertiary education)

- Post-secondary schools (*szkoła policealna*) for students who have completed upper secondary
  education (or secondary education in the post-reform system), which offer vocational
  programmes lasting from 1 to 2.5 years and award diplomas to those who have passed exams
  confirming vocational qualifications. Currently existing schools were reorganised so as to fit into
  the new school system on 1 September 2017.

Art schools

Art schools in Poland form a separate structure in organisational terms. They are supervised by the
**minister responsible for culture and national heritage**. See also the chapter ‘Organisational
Variations and Alternative Structures’ [3].

Core curriculum for general education, and Polish secondary schools

The **core curriculum for general education** is one of the **key legal instruments** for the
management of school education in Poland. Until 31 August 2018, schools operating within the pre-
reform education system continued to follow the core curriculum established by the Regulation of the
Minister of National Education of 27 August 2012 (last amended on 17 June 2016).

On 1 September 2019, new types of 4-year general secondary and 5-year technical secondary schools
(post-primary schools) were established; thus, new schools were set up or pre-reform upper
secondary schools were formally transformed into the corresponding types of new secondary schools.
However, students who finished pre-reform lower secondary schools continue their education in the
‘old-model’ general and technical secondary schools which operate alongside new secondary schools.
Grade I of the pre-reform 3-year general secondary school and 4-year technical school will be
abolished on 1 September 2020 and the higher grades in the following years.

The **core curriculum for general education in the new types of schools** is laid down by the following regulations based on the Law on School Education:

- for stage I sectoral vocational schools and post-secondary schools established on 1 September 2017: the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education in primary schools, incl. for pupils with a moderate and severe intellectual disability, and for general education in stage I sectoral vocational schools, general education in special schools preparing for employment, and general education in post-secondary schools;
- for general secondary schools, technical secondary schools and stage II sectoral vocational schools: the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 January 2018 on the core curriculum for general education in general secondary schools, technical secondary schools and stage II sectoral vocational schools.

The 2017 Regulation covers the education cycles which were the first ones affected by the school system reform. The 2018 Regulation was issued separately as the impact of legislative changes on post-primary schools was delayed by two years. It can be expected, however, that once the reform process is completed, a consolidated legislative act will be passed to cover core curricula for general education in all types of schools.

The **core curriculum for vocational education in new types of schools** (including sectoral vocational schools, 5-year technical secondary schools and post-secondary schools) is established by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 16 May 2019 on the core curricula for vocational education, arranged by sector, and additional vocational skills for selected occupations identified within vocational education. The corresponding core curriculum for schools operating within the pre-reform system, currently being phased out, is laid down by the Regulation of the Minister of Education of 7 February 2012 on the core curriculum for vocational education.

The core curricula established by the above-mentioned Regulations **define general and specific requirements (learning outcomes) which determine the range of knowledge and skills** to be acquired by students.

The 2012 core curriculum sets common aims for the two stages of secondary education (lower and upper secondary schools): education stages III and IV.

General education at these stages aims to enable students to: (1) acquire a body of knowledge covering facts, rules, theories and practices; (2) acquire the ability to use the knowledge gained in carrying out tasks and solving problems; (3) develop attitudes which are necessary for efficient and responsible functioning in the modern world.

As stated in the 2012 core curriculum for general education, the most important skills to be acquired by students at education stages III and IV include: (1) **reading**: the ability to understand, use and process reflectively texts, including culture texts, leading to the attainment of one's own goals, individual development and active participation in social life; (2) **mathematical thinking**: the ability to use mathematical tools in everyday life and to formulate conclusions based on mathematical thinking; (3) **scientific thinking**: the ability to use scientific knowledge in order to identify and solve problems, and the ability to formulate conclusions based on empirical observation related to nature and society; (4) **communication** in the mother tongue and foreign languages, including both speaking and writing skills; (5) **ICT skills**; (6) the **ability to retrieve, select and analyse information** in a critical way; (7) **learning skills**: the ability to identify one's own educational needs
and to learn; (8) **teamwork skills**.

In the **new core curriculum of 2017**, the aims of general education in stage I sectoral vocational schools include preparing students to acquire vocational qualifications and, as for the other types of schools, for work and life in the contemporary world. General education in a stage I sectoral vocational school initiates the process of lifelong learning. In addition to providing vocational training, a stage I sectoral vocational school should provide students with a body of general knowledge which lays the foundation of education, enabling people to acquire various vocational qualifications during further education and continue education in a stage II sectoral vocational schools and, subsequently, enhance and adapt knowledge. General education in a stage I sectoral vocational school aims to enable students to (1) acquire a body of knowledge covering facts, rules, theories and practices; (2) acquire the ability to use the knowledge gained in carrying out tasks and solving problems; (3) develop attitudes which are necessary for efficient and responsible functioning in the contemporary world.

The new core curriculum for the **4-year general secondary school** (established by the Regulation of 30 January 2018) considers general education in a post-primary school as a coherent whole in curricular terms and a stage which lays foundations for education. Thus, it enables students to acquire various qualifications for future employment and, subsequently, upgrade or modify them; in this way, it initiates the lifelong learning process. General education in a general secondary school and a technical secondary school aims to:

- treat structured and systematic knowledge as the basis for skills development;
- improve thinking and language skills such as reading comprehension; creative writing; formulating questions and problems; using criteria; substantiating judgements; explaining; classifying; reasoning; defining; using examples, etc.;
- develop personal interests and integrate subject-area knowledge gained in various disciplines;
- develop skills to formulate independent and considered judgments, and substantiate one’s own and other people’s judgments in the process of dialogue within a community of enquiry;
- combine critical and logical thinking skills with imagination and creativity skills;
- develop social, moral and aesthetic sensitivity;
- develop thinking tools which enable students to commune with, and understand, culture;
- develop students’ respect for knowledge, arouse their passion for exploring the world, and encourage them to apply in practice the knowledge gained.

The list of skills to be acquired by students in the new secondary (post-primary) schools overlaps, essentially, with the skills listed in the 2012 core curriculum for education stage IV (upper secondary schools). Students are expected to acquire, among other things, ICT skills, including taking care to respect copyrights and staying safe in cyberspace; skills necessary to retrieve, select, combine and judge the value of information, and use sources in a reliable way; and skills for communication in the national language and foreign languages, including both speaking and writing skills.

Based on the arrangements in place since 1 September 2019, the level of competences to be acquired by the end of a given education stage, as set out in the core curriculum, is **assessed** by external examination boards through the **maturity exam**:

- at the end of education stage III for students who finish secondary schools operating in the post-reform system since 1 September 2019;
- at the end of education stage IV for students who finish the pre-reform 3-year general secondary school or 4-year technical upper secondary school, after having finished the pre-reform lower secondary school.
Reformed vocational education and training (VET) system

The previously existing VET model was based on two types of schools: 4-year technical upper secondary schools (technikum) and 3-year basic vocational schools (zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa). They led to qualifications for practising specific occupations, defined in line with labour market needs; technical upper secondary school students could also take the maturity exam and continue education in a higher education institution. Students could also obtain vocational qualifications and a diploma after passing exams confirming vocational qualifications for some occupations at the end of education in post-secondary schools (upper secondary schools).

Significant changes in the VET system in Poland were introduced for the first time in 2011 and 2012. The reform aimed primarily to improve the quality and effectiveness of the VET system and its relevance to labour market needs. The following changes were introduced:

- The classification of occupations was modified; individual qualifications were identified within a given occupation, and the process of acquiring qualifications was spread over the entire duration of education in school (rather than taking place only at its end).
- A new core curriculum for vocational education (training for individual occupations) was developed and implemented.
- The system of exams confirming qualifications was revised to make it more flexible and open to validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, in line with the models promoted in EU legislation.
- Many organisational changes were introduced.

The Acts of 14 December 2016, including the Law on School Education and the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education, changed the structure of VET. The VET reform initiated on 1 September 2017 aims to extend the range of learning paths for young people who have finished the new 8-year primary school by establishing stage I and stage II sectoral vocational schools (2+3 years of education):

- **Stage I sectoral vocational schools** enable students to obtain a diploma confirming vocational qualifications and complete basic education for a given sector / trade. Students finishing the school will be prepared to take up employment.
- **Stage II sectoral vocational school** will enable interested students who have finished a stage I school to continue education, obtain a Technician diploma and take the maturity exam, which was not possible for students who finished the basic vocational school in the pre-reform school system in place before 1 September 2017.

The new school system will keep the key achievements of the previous reform. These include, for example, individual qualifications identified within occupations listed for VET, and the adaptation of the exam confirming vocational qualifications for a given occupation to various, formal and non-formal, paths through which such qualifications may be acquired (see above).

Major amendments to the Law on School Education, adopted on 22 November 2018, introduced further changes in the VET system on 1 September 2019:

- **Separate implementing regulations on the classification of occupations for VET linked up with the core curricula for VET.** This makes the structure of regulations based on the Law more readable and helps to avoid the situation where no up-to-date core curricula are in place for new occupations to be established.
- **Closer collaboration between schools and employers and their organisations.** Schools and employers can conclude agreements and establish so-called patronage or sponsored...
classes (*klasa patronacka*) where students are trained for a given occupation or specialism in response to the needs of a specific employer.

- **Official labour-market demand / employment forecasts, mandatory opinions given by the regional labour-market councils.** Local administration bodies are required to assess the needs related to the training of students in vocational schools; their opinion will be a mandatory element of a feasibility study for the establishment of programmes training for specific occupations.

- **Compulsory vocational exams.** In order to finish school, each student or learner in a vocational school should pass an exam and acquire qualifications for a given occupation.

**Legislation**

The basic legislation for secondary education is the **Act of 14 December 2016, the Law on School Education** (and, during the implementation of the school system reform, the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education, enacted on the same date). It is supplemented by the provisions of the School Education Act of 7 September 1991 (with further amendments) which are still in force.

Detailed arrangements are laid down by the **regulations of the minister responsible for school education.** For the pre-reform lower secondary schools (education stage III), and for schools above the lower secondary level (education stage IV) which are gradually being transformed into post-primary schools (see the information above), the **following key regulations**, based on the School Education Act, are still in force as transitional provisions:

- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 27 August 2012 on the core curricula for pre-school education and general education in individual types of schools (with further amendments; last amended on 17 June 2016)
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 7 February 2012 on the outline timetables in public schools (with further amendments; last amended on 29 December 2014)
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 10 June 2015 on the conditions and rules for pupil assessment, eligibility for assessment and promotion in public schools (with further amendments; last amended on 25 August 2017)
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 1 March 2017 on the approval of textbooks for the use in school
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 April 2013 on the rules for the organisation and provision of psychological and educational support in public schools and educational institutions (with further amendments; last amended on 28 August 2017)

Schools in the new school system, including **8-year primary schools, stage I sectoral vocational schools, schools preparing for employment and post-secondary schools**, and new **4-year general secondary schools** and **5-year technical secondary schools**, which have operated since 1 September 2019, are governed by the Act of 14 December 2016, the Law on School Education, and **regulations covering specific aspects.** These include, for example:

- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education in primary schools, incl. for pupils with a moderate and severe intellectual disability, and for general education in stage I sectoral vocational schools, general education in special schools preparing for employment, and general education in post-secondary schools
- Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 January 2018 on the core curriculum for general education in general secondary schools, technical secondary schools and stage II sectoral vocational schools
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 3 April 2019 on the outline timetables for public schools;
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 22 February 2019 on pupil assessment, eligibility for assessment and promotion in public schools;
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the rules for the organisation and provision of psychological and educational support in public nursery schools, schools and educational institutions.

There are also additional regulations for (upper) secondary vocational schools. The following regulations, in particular, apply to pre-reform schools on a transitional basis, until completion or abolishment of a given education cycle:

Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 13 December 2016 on the classification of occupations for vocational education;
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 7 February 2012 on the core curriculum for vocational education (with further amendments; last amended on 10 July 2015);
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 11 January 2012 on continuing education in non-school settings (for a consolidated text (in Polish only), see Journal of Law of 16 May 2014, item 622).

Vocational schools which are newly established or transformed into those introduced by the new school system (in particular, stage I sectoral vocational school and 5-year technical secondary schools) are governed by regulations based on the Law on School Education. In particular, these include:

Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 13 March 2017 on the classification of occupations for vocational education (last amended on 31 July 2019);
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 15 February 2019 on the general aims and tasks of vocational education arranged by sector and the classification of occupations for sector-based vocational education
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 16 May 2019 on the core curricula for vocational education arranged by sector and additional vocational skills for selected occupations identified within vocational education
Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 18 August 2017 on continuing education in non-school settings

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