THE THIRD MISSION OF UNIVERSITIES: ENHANCING SOCIETAL IMPACT THROUGH PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Introduction. The third mission of universities refers to the broader social role and responsibility that universities have beyond traditional teaching and research activities. It encompasses a range of activities aimed at societal change and sustainable development through active collaborations with industry, government, and civil society. Researchers [1; 4; 10] emphasize that the third mission involves universities actively engaging in activities such as knowledge transfer, social impact initiatives, entrepreneurship support, lifelong learning programs, and policy advocacy. By undertaking these efforts, universities contribute to the well-being of society, addressing pressing challenges and striving for sustainable development in specific places, regions, or societal sub-sectors.

Due to rapid technological change and contextual challenges such as armed conflict, migration, and environmental concerns, the modern labor market faces numerous complex issues. Studies [5; 9] suggest that these challenges have led to a qualification gap, vertical and horizontal skills mismatches, requiring new and more demanding professional competences.

To address these challenges, retraining and continuing education programs have been introduced. These programs aim to bridge the skills gap and equip individuals with the necessary competences to meet the evolving demands of the labor market. Additionally, informal lifelong learning has become widespread as a means to adapt to the changing landscape of work and acquire new skills and knowledge.

This paper explores the relationships between universities, their social responsibility towards the professions, and the enhancement of professional qualifications.

Main results. The analysis of academic literature [1; 5-8] and regulations [2; 3; 11] reveals a strong correlation between the third mission of universities and professional qualifications. The findings highlight several key connections between these two domains.

First and foremost, the third mission underscores the significance of universities' engagement with professional communities and industries. This engagement serves as a vital link between universities and the evolving needs and requirements of the professions. By actively collaborating with professional communities, universities gain valuable insights into the latest industry trends and expectations. Armed with this knowledge, universities can adapt their educational programs, curricula, and teaching methods to ensure that graduates possess the necessary knowledge and skills to meet occupational standards and excel in their professional roles. This proactive adaptation effectively bridges the gap between higher education and industry, resulting in enhanced relevance and quality of professional qualifications.

Overall, this collaboration ensures that professional qualifications are responsive to changing industry demands and are recognized as reliable indicators of competence and proficiency in the respective fields.

Secondly, universities have a crucial role to play in actively participating in the development and refinement of occupational standards, working in collaboration with professional bodies and
industry stakeholders. By providing their expertise and insights, universities contribute to the establishment of clear criteria and benchmarks for professional qualifications. They offer valuable input on the required competencies, knowledge areas, and skill sets that are essential for professionals in their respective fields.

Universities’ involvement ensures that professional qualifications are rooted in rigorous academic standards and aligned with the current needs and practices of the professions. Their engagement in the process helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that professional qualifications reflect the dynamic nature of industries and professions. By actively contributing to the refinement of occupational standards, universities promote the relevance and quality of professional qualifications, ultimately benefiting both graduates and the industries they serve.

Furthermore, the third mission of universities goes beyond initial education to include lifelong learning opportunities. Universities often offer professional development programmes (CPD) and workshops for professionals who want to update their skills, acquire new knowledge, or meet requirements for maintaining their professional credentials.

In light of the recent European course on micro-credentials, higher education institutions have the opportunity to introduce short-term courses that offer stackable learning outcomes and can contribute to the advancement of professional qualifications. These programs provide professionals with avenues to stay current with industry trends and advancements, enabling them to continuously update their knowledge and skills.

By offering non-degree programs, universities demonstrate their adaptability in responding to the evolving needs of industries and professions. Rapid technological advances, market trends, and changing regulations pose challenges for universities to keep their lifelong learning offerings up-to-date. However, through the introduction of short-term courses and micro-credentials, universities can bridge the gap between higher education and industry demands, ensuring that professionals have access to relevant and up-to-date learning opportunities.

These flexible, non-degree programs promote agility and enable professionals to acquire new skills and knowledge that align with the ever-changing landscape of their respective fields. Additionally, the stackable nature of learning outcomes allows professionals to build on their existing qualifications and progress toward greater levels of expertise.

Overall, the introduction of short-term courses and micro-credentials in higher education institutions presents an avenue for ongoing development and enhancement of professional qualifications. It not only supports professionals in staying current with industry trends but also showcases universities’ commitment to adaptability and relevance in their lifelong learning offerings.

In addition, universities have the authority to award professional qualifications and collaborate with relevant professional bodies and regulatory institutions. The recognition of professional qualifications by industries enhances the credibility and marketability of graduates, facilitating their career advancement and professional growth.

In Ukraine, the legislation allows for the establishment of qualification centers, which are responsible for validating the outcomes of informal learning and issuing certificates of professional qualification. These centers can be based within universities, leading to improvements in lifelong learning programs and motivating adults to participate in non-degree programs. By housing these centers within higher education institutions, universities can leverage their resources, expertise, and infrastructure to provide high-quality trainings that are aimed at upskilling adults.

The presence of qualification centers within universities supports the establishment of a comprehensive system for awarding and recognizing professional qualifications. Universities, with their academic rigor and adherence to quality standards, bring credibility and integrity to the process. This system ensures that professional qualifications align with national qualification...
The driving force of science and trends in its development

frameworks, meet the necessary criteria, and are recognized both within the country and internationally.

Figure 1 illustrates the active involvement of universities in promoting professionals and enhancing the quality and relevance of professional qualifications. It demonstrates the importance of universities introducing non-degree programs as a means to achieve these objectives.

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**Fig. 1. Relations between universities and strengthening professional qualifications through professional development programmes**

**Conclusions.** Universities and professions are mutually advancing through the realm of professional qualifications. The third mission of universities, encompassing their engagement with society and various stakeholders, plays a pivotal role in shaping and supporting the development and recognition of professional qualifications. Several key connections between universities and professional qualifications have been identified:

1. **Universities actively collaborate with professional communities** to ensure the alignment of knowledge, skills, and qualifications with the needs and expectations of the professions. This collaboration facilitates the preparation of graduates who are well-equipped to excel in their chosen fields.

2. **Universities serve as drivers of lifelong learning**, fostering a supportive ecosystem that encourages professionals to engage in continuous professional development. Universities enable professionals to remain competitive in the ever-evolving landscape of their professions.

3. **Universities are dedicated to modernizing the system of awarding professional qualifications**, striving to make the process transparent, efficient, and in line with high-quality standards. This commitment ensures the credibility and relevance of professional qualifications, further enhancing their value in the eyes of industries and employers.

**References**


