



Cross-national equivalence of vocational skills and qualifications

► The introduction of a European Qualifications Framework is allied with the intention of rendering qualifications comparable and thus increasing the level of transparency and mobility within the European educational and employment system. In terms of specific implementation of the EQF, however, a number of hurdles remain to be overcome. The present paper takes the initial results from comparative case studies as a basis for identifying the barriers and opportunities emerging from the endeavours to establish cross-country equivalence of qualifications and skills. Whereas establishing understanding of joint terminologies has a part to play, general national conditions and sector and occupationally specific regulations are also of significance.



MICHAELA BROCKMANN

Senior Research Fellow, Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, London



LINDA CLARKE

PHD, Professor of European Industrial Relations, Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, London



CHRISTOPHER WINCH

PHD, Professor of Educational Philosophy and Policy, King's College, London

Case studies in four countries and on four occupations

The cross-national equivalence of vocational skills and qualifications project deals with issues which may arise from the stipulation of cross-national equivalence for vocational qualifications and uses four occupations as an example in order to demonstrate various possible solutions. This takes place on the basis of comparative case studies in England, Germany, France and the Netherlands.

European initiatives instigated in the wake of the Lisbon Declaration of 2000 form a major point of reference for the project. These initiatives have led to the development of key policy instruments such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). In light of the differing traditions of the educational and employment systems of the various respective countries, however, the EQF is raising important issues relating to the type and validity of the comparators and this in turn has implications for the feasibility of implementation of such a framework.

The investigation encompassed the evaluation and comparison of case studies extending over four sectors and occupations. These were selected in such a way so as to represent a range of qualifications and educational pathways:

- *the craft trades occupation of bricklayer*: a training occupation within an established sector traditionally mainly practised by men;
- *software technology*: an occupation not clearly defined, not associated with any vocational education and training tradition, and forming part of one of the "newer" sectors in the field of information and communication technology;
- *nursing*: an occupation predominantly practised by women in which qualifications are governed via EU regulations and which extends into the higher education sector and

- *lorry driver in the logistics sector*: in this case primarily investigated as a job (i.e. means of gainful employment) rather than as a training occupation.

Determination of differences and areas of communality took place with the assistance of a differentiated analytical framework. Instead of merely comparing national systems, the project has attempted as far as possible to use alternative analytical categories which are understood in transnational terms, to compare respective understandings of such key designations as *competence* and *skills* and to determine terminology of crucial significance to the individual systems. This terminology encompasses “Beruf” (“occupation”) for the German system, *skills* for the English system, *savoir* for the French system and competence for the Dutch system.

This differentiation enabled the identification of some of the finer distinctions of potential significance to effective implementation of the EQF, both between and within the countries. One typical example of this is the concept of competence, one of the EQF descriptors.

Analysis of the underlying key terminology

Our investigation provides evidence of considerable differences between the four countries. In broad terms, two vocational education and training approaches are discernable in relation to basic structures and functions: the *skills and task-related model* prevalent in England and the *occupationally related model* which is widespread in the Netherlands, France and Germany.

Occupationally related model versus task-related approach

In the occupationally related model, vocational education and training is founded on the principle of fostering individual competence within a broadly based occupational field, a process which involves the development of occupational profiles or skills with the participation of the social partners and according due consideration to economic and branch-specific interests.

In the task related model, on the other hand, vocational education and training is aligned towards the application of certain closely delineated and fragmented skills which are oriented towards the specific requirements of the employer. This approach constitutes an innate part of the System of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ's).

In addition to this, there are further significant differences between all of the countries not describable via this simple dichotomy. Each country has, for example, its own understanding of education, and there are considerable national divergences in respect of the term competence. To a much greater extent than all the other countries, the Dutch system is defined in terms of attitude (*houding*), which relates to the social and personal competences of the

trainees. Although numerous pieces of research work have been carried out with the purpose of identifying the complexity of this term (cf. WEIGEL et al. 2007), its interpretation remains equivocal in the final version of the EQF (cf. European Parliament/EU Council 2008).

As far as the four countries constituting the object of our investigation are concerned, the term competence is used in both input or curricularly based skills approaches and in output or performance based approaches. The task related model as deployed in England and the comprehensive employability skills principle pursued in Germany once again present the two diametrically opposed poles.

Employability related versus functionally related definition of competence

Employability skills denote the ability of a person to integrate knowledge, practical skills and social and personal competences in practising complex and unpredictable activities.

The definition of competence used within the scope of the English NVQ refers to the functional execution of stipulated tasks without the reflected use of knowledge.

Whereas these two approaches may represent irreconcilable opposing positions, the competence based French and Dutch Qualifications Frameworks combine input and output orientation and may be characterised by the inherent conflict they display between the personally related comprehensive definition of competence and the functionally related interpretation of the term. The success of the EQF will depend on the interpretation of the key concepts forming its foundations. These currently encompass both employability and functionally related approaches.

“Learning outcomes” constitute a further key concept. The EQF requires skills to be defined in the form of learning outcomes, although this term is subject to various interpretations, sometimes being accorded an association with structured teaching and learning processes and sometimes being separately defined. The explicit structural principle underlying the EQF unequivocally assigns the term to the second category, although it is by no means certain that this interpretation will enjoy complete acceptance in Europe or which problems may arise as a result of differing interpretations.

Identification of convergence and divergence

The principle of the Zone of Mutual Trust is fundamental to the achieving of cross-national equivalence of skills and qualifications. This formed a component part of the cross-national comparative framework as originally proposed and was accorded detailed treatment in a report by TIM OATES

and MIKE COLES (2004). A Zone of Mutual Trust affords member states the opportunity of using the open coordination method as a means for agreeing formal and informal solutions and enables them to deploy pan-European instruments for the development of cross-national, cross-sectoral and cross-occupational exchange of labour and training markets.

One of the central objectives of our project is to identify areas of potential convergence and divergence of qualifications and skills within the various countries for the purpose of supplying indicators of barriers and opportunities with regard to the establishment of a Zone of Mutual Trust in the EU. Although national vocational education and training systems may display a greater or lesser degree of similarity to one another, there are still patterns of occupational convergence and divergence which may run contrary to this.

Four categories emerged as significant from our comparative investigations:

- *social framework*: strong versus weak state regulation of vocational education and training; social partnership versus employer orientation,
- *labour market regime*: skills/occupation versus competences; work capacity versus current performance,
- *understanding of competences*: occupationally related versus task-related model; employability understanding versus functionally related understanding,
- *educational system*: proportion of general and vocational training or of vocational training and higher education.

Sectorally and occupationally related convergences and divergences

An analysis of occupations in accordance with these categories shows that the craft trades occupation of bricklayer exhibits the most conspicuous degree of divergence (as does the occupation of lorry driver if the latter is referred to as a means of gainful employment rather than as a training occupation). In these areas, training in Germany, France and the Netherlands is characterised by the occupationally related model and by the principles of social partnership and holistic employability skills. Training is broadly based and encompasses elements of both vocational and general education. By way of contrast, vocational education and training in England is characterised by a weak regulatory framework and is oriented towards the interests of employers. It is also task oriented and tends to follow the principles of training for a specific job rather than those of education.

DIVERGENCES IN THE CRAFT TRADES OCCUPATION OF BRICKLAYER

As far as the craft trades occupation of bricklayer is concerned, there is a fundamental difference between the three continental European systems and the English system in the form of the broader scope of the occupational fields, the scope of activities and the much higher level of responsibility displayed by the former. This also has a fundamental impact on the mobility of qualified bricklayers. In France, Germany and the Netherlands, skilled workers are, upon completion of training, in a position to carry out complex tasks (such as concreting work, simple joinery, plastering, screed laying etc.) within a variety of contexts, including organisation, coordination and the business settlement of work processes. In contrast to this, tasks carried out in England are largely restricted to bricklaying and the mixing of mortar.



Source: National Federation of the German Construction Industry

Although qualifications in England, France and the Netherlands are also based on a competence oriented approach and skills are aligned to the tasks required in the workplace, competences in the last two countries named form the foundation of the training programme, the aim of which to develop the competences of the trainees via comprehensively structured teaching. In a similar way to the German system, the programme contains broadly based specialist training (including theory and practice within the further occupational environment) and units which focus on general education. By way of contrast, the National Vocational Qualifications in bricklaying in England are characterised by their narrowness of scope and their separation from educational processes, the consequence of this being that the amount of theoretical knowledge imparted is minimal.

HIGH DEGREE OF CONVERGENCE IN THE FIELDS OF NURSING AND SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY

The convergences identified in the fields of nursing and software technology may constitute a potential basis for the development of Zones of Mutual Trust, these in turn being an important prerequisite for the functionality of the EQF and ECVET. The involvement of the trade unions in training development means that nursing in England bears most resemblance to the social partnership model. Completion of comprehensive and regular training in all countries also fulfils the requirements for cross-national comparability. This is an area in which convergence may be observed due to the pressure exerted by EU regulations and by dint of the fact that a general shift of training into the higher education sector has taken place. The latter also applies to the software technology sector, although the occupation of software technician is based more on the individual acquisition of competences rather than on differentiated initial training. This is particularly true in respect of England whilst also being discernable in the other countries. Convergence in respect of software technology is particularly driven by accelerated technological progress, companies which operate at a multinational level and the identical nature of the expectations in different countries in respect of levels and degrees of scope.

CONVERGENCE IN THE JOB OF LORRY DRIVER

As far as the job of lorry driver is concerned (only very few workers in Germany, France and England have completed initial vocational education and training), EU regulations have also brought about a certain degree of convergence, although England has interpreted the implementation of the Certificate of Professional Competence more narrowly than the other countries.

Various pathways lead to the goal

Our research work has identified that there are various convergence pathways for the exchange of qualifications and skills, the EQF merely being one of several instruments.

EU regulations which considerably restrict separate developments although including flexible provisions such as those relating to driving licences which do not prevent divergence in certain circumstances are, for example, of importance both in the nursing sector and for lorry drivers. In the software technology sector, such regulations create identical requirements by using widespread branch related qualifications and cross-national mobility of labour to establish a certain degree of convergence despite the differing qualifications pathways which apply from country to country.

The EQF operates extremely differently depending on the occupation and sector.

Our research work has revealed both conceptual and real convergences and divergences which indicate that the EQF will function extremely differently in practice depending on the occupation and sector. We are of the view that fundamental sectoral and qualifications related investigations will be required to ensure that Zones of Mutual Trust are not reduced to the status of a paper tiger merely serving the development of a joint terminology. The emphasis needs to be on structuring them in a robust manner so as to enable real practice in the various countries to be reflected and to allow areas of communality to be fostered. Notwithstanding this, the conceptual problems must not be marginalised. These will inevitably continue to arise constantly as exchange at a practical level takes place and will pose questions relating to the prestige and the transnational transferability of various qualifications and skills. ■

Literature

BROCKMANN, M.; CLARKE, L.; WINCH, C.: *Can performance-related learning outcomes have standards? In: Journal of European Industrial Training 32 (2008 a) No. 2/3, pp. 99-113*

BROCKMANN, M.; CLARKE, L.; WINCH, C.: *Knowledge, skills, competence: European divergences in vocational education and training (VET) – the English, German and Dutch cases. In: Oxford Review of Education 34 (2008 b) No. 5 (forthcoming)*

COLES, M.; OATES, T.: *European reference levels for education and training: an important parameter for promoting credit transfer and mutual trust. Luxembourg 2005*

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT/EU COUNCIL: *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (Official Journal of the European Union 2008/C 111/01)*

WEIGEL, T.; MULDER, M.; COLLINS, K.: *The concept of competence in the development of vocational education and training in selected EU member states. In: Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 59 (2007) No. 1, pp. 53-66*