Limits to mobility: competence and qualifications in Europe

Françoise Le Deist

Vidmantas Tūtlys
Head of Centre for Vocational Education and Research, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

Abstract

This paper examines structural and systemic influences of the processes of development of varieties of competence and qualifications on inter-country comparability of qualifications and explores the potential of the NQFs and the EQF to facilitate such comparability. It explains the development of varieties of competence and qualifications at sector and national levels by exploring the influences of diverse socioeconomic models of skills development on the processes of design and provision of qualifications. The paper also discloses the main methodological and practical challenges posed by varieties of competence and qualifications to inter-country comparability of qualifications and analyses the potential of NQFs and the EQF to overcome these.

Keywords

competence, European Qualifications Framework, National Qualifications Frameworks

The rationale for this paper derives from the paucity of research and analysis on how the development of varieties of competence and qualifications at sector and national levels influence inter-country comparability of qualifications, a prerequisite for the labour mobility central to European labour market policy. The main goal of this paper is to disclose the structural and systemic influences of the processes of development of varieties of competence and qualifications to the inter-country comparability of qualifications and to the potential of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to facilitate the comparability of qualifications. The paper draws upon ongoing research on European varieties of competence and the results of Leonardo da Vinci project SECCOMPAT concerned with testing the compatibility of qualifications in selected sectors.

Research into varieties of competence undertaken by the EUCLID network was presented in a Symposium at the 2008 UFHRD Conference and subsequently in a Special Double Issue of the Journal of European Industrial Training in November 2009. This work has demonstrated that differences in concepts of competence reflect European diversity in perceptions of occupations, structures of qualifications, systems of skill formation, labour markets and work organisation, creating problems for establishing comparability of national qualifications at the European level (Brockman et al., 2009; Winterton, 2009). The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament on 23 April 2008, but remains no more than a facilitating framework and still lacks a clearly defined conceptual framework for competence, even though NQFs must be referenced to, and aligned with, the EQF. Evidence from the EQF implementation and testing pilots confirm that the EQF descriptors are inadequate to capture task variety and complexity, while the use of ‘responsibility and autonomy’ as a proxy also
leads to neglect of the social competences that were present in the competence model proposed for ECVET, the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (Winterton et al, 2006). Experts involved in developing the EQF concluded that ‘a convincing transparency of vocational competences has yet to be developed’ (Markowitsch et al, 2008: 171). Blings and Spöttl (2008) argued that the difficulties are best overcome with a bottom-up approach developing European occupational profiles from empirical analysis of work processes, whereas Markowitsch and Plaimauer (2009) suggest that what is required is an international standard classification for skills and competences.

In an effort towards developing a solution to these difficulties, Leonardo da Vinci project SECCOMPAT compared qualifications in the construction and hospitality sectors between Lithuania, Austria, Czech Republic, France and Ireland to establish the degree of compatibility and the potential of NQFs and the EQF to assist this process.

**Concepts**
Different socio-economic models of skills formation are reflected in differences in training regimes, qualifications and competence models. Space precludes a detailed consideration of the various typologies of training systems that have been proposed, but key dimensions include the extent to which training is focussed on the workplace or educational institutions and the respective regulatory roles of the state and the market (see Le Deist and Winterton, 2009).

Partner countries in the SECCOMPAT project were chosen to represent European variety in socio-economic models and training regimes, as well as different experience in designing and implementing qualifications frameworks. These differences are summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Characteristics of compared countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic model</th>
<th>Liberal market</th>
<th>Neocorporatist stakeholder</th>
<th>State regulated stakeholder</th>
<th>Transition economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training regime</td>
<td>Employer-led</td>
<td>Dual system</td>
<td>School based</td>
<td>School based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF established</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing NQF</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing NQF</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considerable variety is also apparent concerning social dialogue over training (Winterton, 2007) and equally in the process of designing and implementing NQFs in these countries.

Austria can be characterised as having systematic, institutionally developed social dialogue in a training system based on shared rights and obligations of stakeholders in these fields and agreements between the social partners at sectoral and national levels. There is active involvement of all stakeholders in the process of designing and implementing qualifications based on extensive social dialogue. Stakeholders play crucial role in setting and approval of the NQF descriptors and its integration with practice in education and training.

In France social dialogue over training is initiated and strongly supported by the state; the involvement of social partners is very strong in establishing legislation but more fragmented
in everyday practices of cooperation. The involvement of the stakeholders in the process of development of the NQF is quite formal and depends on the initiatives of the state.

In Ireland dialogue over training is most developed at the local level between enterprises and providers. This dialogue is very dependent on the market situation and the short-term interests of stakeholders. Nevertheless, in Ireland different stakeholders were involved in the process of design and implementation of the NQF, even if this led to some conflict between the social partners.

Social dialogue in the Czech Republic and Lithuania is in the process of development, where employers’ organisations, trade unions and state institutions are still establishing the culture and norms of cooperation. Although in the Czech Republic this process is more advanced, in both countries there is a lack of trust, reciprocity and effective coordination between the social partners. The involvement of stakeholders in the design and implementation of the NQF is very often limited to the provision of information and dissemination of measures and instruments.

The skills formation model of Austria conforms closely with the industrial high skills model associated with Germany by Green and Sakamoto (Brown et al, 2001). The dominant competition strategy is based on quality and innovation supported by social partnership. Highly developed dual vocational training leads to a wide distribution of general and specific workforce skills, promoting high productivity and relative income equality. By contrast, the skills development model of Ireland is comparable to the UK model, characterised by a high influence of free market relationships, poor and uneven distribution of general education and technical skills at intermediate level and quite narrow concentration of high skilled elites in certain sectors of economy.

France can be characterised as a state supported and regulated skills formation model in which skills development is strongly supported by state policy initiatives and legislative instruments. Governments initiate skills development measures which are further elaborated in negotiations between the main stakeholders: employers, trade unions and training providers. Institutional infrastructure of skills development is particularly important at national and regional levels, and rather less developed at sector level. A strict hierarchy of occupations is evident and correlates closely with qualifications (Le Deist, 2009).

Skills development in the Czech Republic and Lithuania represents a transitional model with the following characteristics. The workforce has a generally high level of education and skills because the inherited pool of human resources was shaped by the centrally planned economy and education system. The transition to market economy and democratic society brought new challenges and needs for skills formation, some representing continuity with the past (such as middle level technical skills in production) and some involving radical reshaping of former skills patterns (typically service and high skills sectors). Low-wage competition strategies associated with economic transition difficulties have created obstacles for stronger economic development, increased social polarization and led to loss of key skills through labour migration. Education and training is undergoing a major transformation in association with the development of a liberal market economy. Institutional arrangements for involving the social partners are under-developed with increasing emphasis on short-term continuing training in enterprises, especially for enterprises oriented to domestic markets.
In identifying ‘typical’ skills formation models and their influence on comparability of qualifications, several caveats are appropriate. First, it should be acknowledged that these models are subject to changes that can significantly influence the characteristics of qualifications developed. Secondly, these models are not insulated but interrelate with one another in various ways from international training and outsourcing of production to workforce mobility. Marin (2004), for example, has noted that ‘German and Austrian multinationals tend to outsource the most skill and R&D intensive activities to Eastern Europe’ due to domestic shortages of skilled workers, retaining labour-intensive stages of production in the home country.

Such exchanges might be expected to influence the comparability of qualifications, while outsourcing of production may equally promote transfer of practices of skills development and change the content and structure of existing qualifications in the host country. Such ‘import’ of qualifications increase the variety of qualifications in the receiving country and, in case of successful integration of ‘imported’ qualifications it tends to increase comparability of the structure of sectors in terms of qualifications between the ‘exporting’ and ‘importing’ countries.

**Methodology**

It has been established above that different socio-economic contexts of skills formation and processes of design and provision of qualifications create diversity with respect to competences and qualifications. This diversity, evident in the content, function and application of qualifications, creates challenges for their comparability between countries. The EQF was established as an instrument to ensure such comparability and NQFs developed and introduced by many countries should be mapped against this. Questions remain, however, over the extent to which these instruments (NQFs and EQF) can facilitate comparability of qualifications and how this can is best undertaken.

In the Leonardo da Vinci SECCOMPAT project four alternative approaches to referencing qualifications for inter-country comparability were explored:

- Direct comparison of sectoral qualifications between the different countries without referencing to the NQFs and the EQF. For such comparison the most important factors are the characteristics of work typical for the sector and the specificities of the sector in terms of size of enterprises, market niches, work organization and applied technologies, business organisation and human resource management.

- Referencing sectoral qualifications from one country to the NQF levels of another country. The most important factors for this type of comparison are models of supply and awarding of qualifications in national education and training systems and related hierarchical structuring of qualifications, as well as the compatibility of the structure of compared sectoral qualifications with NQF criteria for structuring qualifications into levels.

- Referencing sectoral qualifications to EQF levels without intermediate referencing to NQF levels of the origin country. The most important issue here is the compatibility of the structure of compared sectoral qualifications with the criteria for referencing levels of qualifications to the EQF.

- Compatibility and comparison of sectoral qualifications between the countries with the intermediation of both the NQFs and the EQF. The quality and validity of such comparison of sectoral qualifications is largely dependent upon the complex compatibilities of criteria for structuring qualifications into levels in the NQFs and the EQF.
The project set out to establish which of these approaches of referencing was most effective and relevant considering the variety of qualifications. Vidmantas Tūtlys designed and coordinated the work undertaken by a network of experts in the different countries and Françoise Le Deist was one of two external evaluators. The findings, summarised briefly below, explore in each country the influence of skills formation models on the processes of design and provision of qualifications. In the final section, conclusions are offered as to the relative merits of the different ways of comparing qualifications.

**Findings**

*Industrial high skills development model (Austria)*

Developed mechanisms of social partnership and agreements on skills development between employers and trade unions at sector level facilitate active involvement of stakeholders in the design of qualifications. Sectoral qualifications in construction are based on collective agreements (*Kollektivvertrag*) negotiated in every sector between the Chamber of Commerce (*Wirtschaftskammer Österreich*) and trade union (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund*). Qualifications are designed in relation to existing and future skills needs of enterprises (technology and work organization) and of employees (professional development and career upgrading). Such an approach leads to occupational-hierarchical structuring of qualifications enhancing professional occupational careers. Qualifications are regarded as essential prerequisites for high quality and productivity, while competences and learning outcomes are described and understood as integral elements of work derived from work tasks. The approach to the structure and contents of qualifications is holistic, where learning is ‘intended to enhance the value of the labour itself, unattached to a specific output’ (Brockmann *et al*, 2008).

One of the specificities of this skills model is the equal treatment of academic and vocational pathways to the acquisition of qualifications. Discussions of sector stakeholders reveal strong support for parity of esteem of vocational and higher qualifications. Experts from the construction sector propose the qualification of civil engineer at level 8 (equivalent to PhD) in the NQF because the qualification is achieved by university graduates only after long practice and difficult examinations. Sector stakeholders argue that the NQF should treat learning outcomes acquired in work experience and formal training on an equal basis. This raises questions of comparability between sectors and countries in relation to the value attached to practical experience and parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications.

*Market model of skills development (Ireland)*

One of the typical characteristics of the market model of skills development is the strong orientation of qualifications towards performance. This approach is associated with the ‘market model’ of training and liberal market economies precisely because of the focus on current workplace needs and flexible routes to acquisition of narrow task-related skills. Fragmented and episodic cooperation between enterprises, trade unions and training institutions in the sectors necessitates state involvement and initiatives in the design of qualifications. Standardization of qualifications depends upon implementing and exploiting the NQF. Variations in enterprise competition strategies create major challenges for uniform qualifications standards, hence many qualifications standards at the lower levels reflect the current situation of skills needs of workplaces. The flexibility of workforce skills in these qualifications is enhanced by stressing the importance of key skills.
Since qualifications are designed by a wide range of awarding bodies, diversity in the contents of awards is managed with such instruments as the NQF. Standards of awards are increasingly expressed in terms of framework learning outcomes and providers are increasingly describing the learning associated with their programmes in terms of the standards to be achieved rather than in terms of inputs and processes associated with learning. The learning outcomes or competences associated with qualifications are described in considerable detail, combining theoretical knowledge, practical skills and general abilities. The number of learning outcomes depends on the width and complexity of the units of qualification: the more complex and wide is the contents of the unit, the more learning outcomes involved. It is difficult to compare such qualifications with those of countries where descriptors are of a more generic and implicit character, as in Austria.

**State supported and regulated skills formation model (France)**

Despite a wide range of qualifications, the system is largely dominated by the diploma issued by the national system of education, regarded as the hard currency against which other qualifications are benchmarked. Qualifications are still largely determined by theoretical knowledge although a method of designing qualifications based on work activity (rédérentiels d’activité) was introduced in 1985 with the creation of the vocational baccalaureate (Baccalauréat Professionnel) (Bouder, 2008). The Operational Repertory for Occupations and Employment (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois) developed by the National Agency for Employment (Agence National pour l’Emploi) describe work specifications and requirements of qualifications. The National Repertory for Vocational Qualifications RNCP (Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles) developed by the National Commission for Vocational Qualifications (Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle) describe the competences typical for the qualifications.

A formal mechanism for validation of experiential learning (validation des acquis de l’expérience) was introduced in 2002 and the introduction of the corresponding instruments facilitating individual rights in training expanded the notion of ‘certification’ and made it less dependent on formal training. Qualification in terms of certification acquired the functions of a measure and an instrument of individual social advancement. The concept of ‘certification’ encompasses and subsumes all existing pathways to occupations including all existing titles of qualifications besides the diploma elaborated by the ministries (Maillard and Rose, 2007). Nevertheless, the hierarchy of qualifications follows that of formal initial education so training attainments are a function of training institutions and the duration of training. In this context, the educational framework needs some translation tool to relate to competence-based qualifications.

**Transitional model of skills development (Czech Republic and Lithuania)**

The two transition model countries share a number of characteristics in relation to the design of NQFs. There is a widespread assumption that employers must play a key role in qualifications design and attempts to increase the role of sector stakeholders in the design of qualifications. Attempts to increase the flexibility of quite robust qualifications provided by the school-based vocational training system and traditional higher education institutions aim to make the system more flexible and better adapted to the changing requirements of labour market. Reform of qualifications often includes elements of policy borrowing and drawing on experience from other countries, demanding significant efforts to persuade stakeholders (especially employers and learners) about the benefits of these innovations. The approaches to classification of competences in the design of qualifications suggest a desire to reach a
compromise between the requirements of a scientific-systemic approach and the needs of activities performed in the work context (Laužackas et al, 2009; Tūtlys and Winterton, 2006).

The reform of vocational education and training seeks to increase its flexibility and responsiveness to market needs and at the same time to sustain the benefits of the school-based system: width and versatility of qualifications and provision of a sound knowledge base for continuing skills upgrading. In Lithuania these attempts include the introduction and promotion of apprenticeship and modular training, strengthening sectoral approaches in the organization of practical training, integrating initial and continuing vocational training, and introducing new forms of vocational training institutions with the involvement of employers. In Lithuania and the Czech Republic the orientation towards learning outcomes and competences is integrated in state-led curricular reform in initial vocational education at the upper secondary level. The curriculum is based on learning outcomes and competences which systematically supports the complementarity and equivalence of all acquired skills, independently of how they were acquired. Nevertheless, it can be noticed that curriculum design in VET to some extent integrates the learning outcomes or competence-based approach with a subject or discipline based approach.

Conclusions
In assessing the potential of NQFs and the EQF to overcome problems of comparability of qualifications, it was apparent that each of the approaches to referencing qualifications has its own specific advantages and shortcomings.

Direct comparison of sector qualifications between different countries without referencing to the NQFs and the EQF can probably ensure most relevant and comprehensive comparison but it requires very thorough, time consuming and comprehensive research with the consideration of differences of organizational and sector factors of diversity of qualifications and demanding the involvement of a wide range of experts from business and education. Referencing sector qualifications from one country to the NQF levels of another country can encounter the obstacles and problems related to the lack of compatibility and coherence between the structure and contents of qualifications of one country to the logic of the referencing and adherence of qualifications to the levels of the NQF in the other country. Similar problems can be encountered in the case of direct referencing of sector qualifications to the EQF. Referencing sector qualifications to levels of NQF and EQF can entail a loss of detail as only characteristics that map against the logic and criteria of these qualifications frameworks can be used, thereby limiting the scope of what is considered important in the sector. While the sector and enterprises tend to focus on work organisation, job design, training and the labour market, NQFs are more oriented towards training policies and educational objectives. This is the classic schism between the focus of the worlds of work and education, irrespective of the locus of learning. As a result, there is a tension between the policy objective of making vocational training and higher education more responsive to labour market needs and the structures and processes associated with the development of NQFs.

The country-by-country accounts of this approach are interesting for what they reveal of profound differences in the provenance and logic of NQFs. Austria shows another classic divide: between vocational training and higher education, making permeability of major concern here. Difficulties encountered with high level technical qualifications in Austria are symptomatic of resistance by strong stakeholder groups to a more rational alignment with the EQF. France, also in the process of developing a NQF, has to contend with an existing
framework based on a formal educational hierarchy of qualifications related to duration of study rather than achievement of competence. In the French labour market, qualifications are everything (Le Deist, 2009) and it matters where the qualification is gained. The Czech Republic and Lithuania are both implementing NQFs that have been designed to align with the EQF although taking into account existing arrangements. Hence the Czech NQF appears to reflect more the world of work and the Lithuanian NQF more the world of education. Ireland is the only country in the project partnership that had already established its NQF before the decision to develop the EQF and the Irish NQF had a determining influence on the shape of the EQF. However, even in this case there was raised dilemma between mapping sectoral qualifications to the NQF first or directly to the EQF and then back referencing to the NQF. This issue has important implications for the development of European-wide sector qualifications since if these are mapped to the EQF, how can we ensure that the criteria of NQFs are satisfied? (And does it matter if we cannot?). What could be the possible solutions to overcome these problems and obstacles of referencing?

The referencing of sector qualifications to the EQF via NQFs still provides the best possibilities to achieve comprehensive information about inter-country comparability of qualifications. NQF’s permits to consider the hierarchy of qualifications which is structured in the countries by the systems of education and training and in this way it helps to consider in the comparison the specificities of the provision of qualifications in the different countries. In order to avoid the loss and neglect of different specific characteristics and specifications of qualifications in the process of referencing to the NQF and to the EQF sector stakeholders and training providers must be actively involved in referencing process. One of their most important roles in this process should be to ensure that the requisite knowledge and skills (including those of a tacit nature) are incorporated and considered in the referencing process. In other words, this process cannot be left to the very narrow circle of experts and bureaucrats of qualifications frameworks. Among the stakeholders mentioned are social partner organisations (employers’ associations and trade unions) and professional associations; they are likely to have a common understanding of sector requirements across countries and will ensure these are respected. It can be reiterated that their involvement is a powerful mechanism for ensuring the alignment of qualifications with the labour market.

The establishment of trust between sector bodies and the authorities responsible for developing and maintaining the NQFs is an essential prerequisite for making an NQF work. The project team hypothesised that such trust would be more readily developed in dual vocational training systems and in coordinated market economies than in market based training systems and liberal market economies. While this seems a logical proposition, it requires further investigation since other research has demonstrated that the focus (work or education) of vocational training is a more significant determinant of alignment of qualifications with the labour market than the nature of regulation of the training system (Winterton, 2000). In any case it is necessary to facilitate and enhance the trust building institutional environments in the systems of education and training in those countries and socioeconomic systems which experience the problems of shortage of such trust.

Independently from the level of methodological development and quality the NQFs and the EQF remain political instruments which are based on the outcomes of negotiations and agreements of the different stakeholders (Markowitsch and Plaimauer, 2009). Therefore in interpreting these instruments and their usage for the comparison and referencing of qualifications it is necessary to consider the importance of context: geography matters (and
so does history) so context must always be considered when shaping policies related to the comparison and referencing of qualifications across the EU and above all when implementing European policy in member states.

Whilst these conclusions are necessarily limited by the countries and sectors chosen for comparison, we are confident that the principles established have wider applicability to other countries in Europe (and beyond) as well as to a broader range of sectors. Such applicability can only be tested through practice and we encourage others to take this up with further work.

References


