

Reconciling activity-based descriptions of competence with professional work

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Abstract

The applicability of competence standards or descriptions to professional-level work remains contested, and research into what professionals actually do indicates among other things the importance of recognising the situated nature of practice and the relevance of context to what can be deemed to be appropriate and competent action; these are both things that can be largely ignored in formal descriptions of competence. Some British professions have however developed competence or practising standards that appear to have a certain amount of validity for work that is complex, context-dependent and not easily packaged into predetermined roles. Building on this, a recent European Erasmus+ project applied a similar approach to describing high-level work in five different fields, not all formal professions. A key to doing this successfully appears to be avoiding unsustainable assumptions about contexts, roles and functions, incorporating an underlying ethos and ethical dimension, and using descriptions that are at the right logical level for the breadth and complexity of the field that they are attempting to cover.

Key words

Competence; practising standards; professions; practice; higher vocational education and training.

Introduction

A way of attempting to describe professional work that has become common over the last three decades or so in Anglophone and some European countries is the use of a competence framework or set of practising standards that sets out what it is that a competent practitioner is expected to be able to do. These kinds of framework can be described as activity-based or external in nature, as opposed to an 'internal' competence (or competency) description that typically describes the skills, knowledge or expected behaviours of the competent person (Mansfield 1989). They can be used as a means of conveying industry or professional requirements to developers of curricula and training programmes (e.g. Fretwell, Lewis and Deij 2001), they can provide guidance for continuing development, and they can provide criteria for sign-off as a licensed or accredited practitioner. This last use has become particularly prominent in organised professions where there is an increasing emphasis on assuring fitness to practise, reinforced by the development of the 'risk society' (Beck 1992) and in particular responses to it based on audit and assessment (e.g. Strathern 2000). It has also been driven by the trend towards more diverse entry-routes into professional-level work, which has necessitated some means of ensuring that they lead to a common entry-gate (Lester 2009).

Critiques of competence descriptions of this type are well-established, with for instance a significant critical literature appearing in the UK as a response to the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Winter 1995 for a summary). While some of this takes issue with specifics or is more purely reactionary, important questions persist both about the value of 'competence-based' approaches for underpinning professional and vocational education and training (VET) (e.g. Wolf 2011; Brockmann, Clarke and Winch 2011), and more fundamentally (and the focus of this paper) their ability to represent professional work in a way that is both valid and adequate for purposes such as those mentioned above. In particular, the situated and emergent nature of much higher-level work suggests that detailed, normative descriptions either of practice or of the attributes assumed to be needed for it can be inadequate and misleading (e.g. Carroll, Levy and Richmond 2008; Sandberg 2009). This presents a particular challenge for organised professions that are responsible for granting qualified status or a licence-to-practise, where there is arguably a need for concrete assessment standards, but it is also relevant to higher education and higher VET in contexts where professional or industry bodies expect programmes to prepare students to meet the standards that they have set.

Some professional bodies particularly in the United Kingdom and to some extent Ireland have sought to develop activity-based descriptions of competence that are more adequate for complex work, and these have been reported as reasonably successful at least for the purposes of assessment leading to qualified status (Lester 2014a). To explore whether they can have a wider application, both beyond the UK and in contexts other than qualifying procedures, a two-year European Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project was initiated in 2015 involving partners from five European countries each working in a different occupational sector, with methodological input from the UK. The project concluded in August 2017, and while the frameworks developed in it are relatively untried compared with some of those used in professions, some evidence is emerging both to support the findings from the UK professional context and to indicate where activity-based models of competence on their own are insufficient.

Professional work

A problem in considering what professional work consists of is that neither the idea of 'a profession', nor that of 'a professional', is strongly differentiated from those of occupations and workers more generally. Various rationales have been put forward for the distinctiveness of professions and professionals (e.g. Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933; Brante 2011), but equally there are arguments that neither can be defined precisely enough to make them special categories (e.g. Crook 2008). A pragmatic interpretation suggests that while the terms are useful ones, they are better considered as representing part of a continuum rather than discrete occupational types that invariably share particular characteristics. Beyond this, it can be argued that not only is it not necessary to be a member of a recognisable profession in order to be 'a professional', but that 'professional work' is concerned with working professionally – employing among other things independent, critical judgement and ethical awareness – rather than acting as a professional in a formal sense (Macklin 2009; Lester 2014b; Zheltoukhova and Baczor 2016). Studies of work that can be regarded as having 'professional' characteristics tend not to make a strong distinction between types of occupations, and senior practitioners (i.e. those with advanced skills who carry substantial responsibility or are in business on their own account) in craft, trade or administrative occupations are included by some authors in their discussions of professional work (e.g. Sandberg 2000; Bound *et al* 2013).

Recent studies concerned with the nature of practices, as opposed to the attributes of the people carrying them out, the structure of professions or occupations, or the education or training of practitioners (after Schatzki 2001), suggest a number of characteristics and trends that are commonly found in professional work. Of these, four have particular relevance to the discussion of competence that follows:

- Practice is situated, i.e. it cannot be divorced from the context in which it takes place (Wenger 1998; Sandberg 2000; Saltmarsh 2009; Evans *et al* 2010; and Hager, Lee and Reich 2012). Contexts can be both large-scale and long-term (for instance national cultures, economic, social and legal environments, and modes of organising in the relevant industry or occupation) as well as local and ephemeral (for instance relating to specific practice situations and how they are constructed and interpreted by the actors in, and influencing, them).
- Professional work has discretionary qualities (Billett 2009), i.e. there is a need for practitioners to decide how and often to what standard the work is done. This will involve reflection in and on action (Schön 1983); ethical judgement (Lunt 2008); co-construction of both objectives and methods (Reeves and Knell 2006); and what Billett (2009) terms the judicious use of skills, i.e. deciding on what abilities and approaches to use in different situations.
- Professional work is increasingly complex, including in the sense of “the number of compounding factors that need or potentially need to be taken into consideration when enacting work tasks” (Billett 2009, p46) and the need to engage with ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber 1973) that do not have finite solutions. Added to this, practice can have an emergent nature (Hager, Lee and Reich 2012) where the actions that need to be taken are not knowable far enough in advance to be able to specify or rehearse in any detail.
- Practice has an increasingly conceptual nature that is partly driven by the ‘informating’ use of technology (Zuboff 1988), but also by the need for responsive judgement in the face of complexity and unpredictability (Evans 2015). This does not only require practitioners to have a good understanding of the principles and practices underpinning their work, but to be able to approach it reflectively and from what might be termed a transdisciplinary standpoint (Gibbs 2015), i.e. from the perspective of deep immersion in and awareness of the practice context rather than only from that of applying principles and techniques.

In the past, a distinction has sometimes been made between basic or restricted modes of practice, associated with a technical perspective that involves relatively straightforward knowledge-application, diagnosis and problem-solving, and extended or expanded ones that are more in keeping with the characteristics above (e.g. Schön 1987; Lester 1995). Restricted or technical-rational modes are typified by the application of formally-acquired knowledge to solve problems within a relatively predictable environment, while expanded or creative-interpretive ones emphasise the role of the practitioner in generating knowledge and creating ways forward in indeterminate and unpredictable situations. These conceptions have been used both as perspectives or models from which to view the entire arena of professional practice, and as modes of practice that respond to different contexts and demands (generally with an assumption of new practitioners working primarily in restricted mode). However, while these distinctions have some utility, the reality in many fields is that even new

practitioners now need to be able to operate in an expanded mode relatively quickly (e.g. Eraut 2008; Allen *et al* 2015); in conjunction with the four points above, this suggests that professional work needs to be considered as including creative-interpretive practice as a matter of course. As an aside, in the future it is also likely to be the more routine kinds of professional activity associated with analysis, diagnosis and technical prescription that are more vulnerable to substitution by technology (Willcocks and Lacity 2015; Susskind 2016).

Activity-based approaches to competence: varieties, limitations and developments

The idea of 'competence' is at one level extremely simple (the Oxford English Dictionary definition, as used in the Erasmus+ project discussed later, is 'the ability to do something effectively or successfully'), but simultaneously it is complicated by different traditions, conceptualisations, interpretations, and applications. As previously mentioned one major distinction that has been made is between activity-based or 'external' models, which focus on what it is the competent person needs to be able to do to meet a social expectation, for instance to perform a work role or task or be effective in a field of practice, and 'internal' (or 'competency') models, that describe the skills, knowledge, behaviours and sometimes other attributes that underpin competent action (Mansfield 1989; Eraut 1998; Lester 2014c). In brief, external models tend to be more relevant when it is required to focus on a person's practice, finding favour in workplace applications and in assessment for sign-off and licensing; for assessment and evaluative purposes they have the advantage of being concerned with what is done and to what standard, rather than with anything about the qualities or attributes of the person doing it (Mansfield 1989). On the other hand they leave open what is needed to develop to a point of competence and they do not translate directly into curricula or training specifications (Gonczi and Hager 2010). Internal models are more easily usable to support development (and as such may be more readily understood by educators, trainers, and novice practitioners), while offering less confidence in the ability to pull together the relevant attributes to act competently in practice situations, particularly in complex contexts requiring high levels of judgement (Lester 2014c).

Activity-based models of competence can be traced back at least as far as the work of Taylor (1911) and Gilbreth and Gilbreth (1917) on the tasks that need to be carried out in order to perform work processes effectively. Work study or task analysis in this tradition was used as a means of improving workplace efficiency throughout much of the twentieth century (part of Taylor's 'scientific management'), and task-level descriptions are still used to support training in specific skills and to define critical procedures in some professions (e.g. Jonassen, Tessmer and Hannum 1999). A significant drawback of task analysis is that it assumes standardisation of procedures and limited discretion on the part of the practitioner, and in anything other than the most limited or procedural of jobs it will only succeed in describing very specific facets of what is needed to act competently. These limitations were one of the factors leading to the development in the UK of functional analysis, underpinning an approach to competence that aims to encapsulate work functions and roles without specifying the details of task processes (see Mitchell and Mansfield 1996). This became the official basis of British occupational standards and National Vocational Qualifications, and it was also exported to several Anglophone and Commonwealth countries and, particularly via the hybrid Mansfield-Schmidt model (Mansfield and Schmidt 2001), within the European Union. The aim of a functionally-based competence model should be to describe something akin to what in the German VET system is referred to as *berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit* or 'occupational action capability', i.e. the

ability to perform the work of an occupation effectively and ethically, although its success in doing so is debatable.

Functional approaches to competence have been criticised from their inception both from the perspective of undermining VET curricula by focusing on immediate job requirements, and (more relevant to the discussion here) for their inability to represent professional work adequately. The latter is well-documented particularly in the UK and Australia; criticisms include a tendency to be over-detailed, making limiting assumptions about the contexts and roles in which the work can take place, and downplaying both the softer and the more intellectual aspects of competence (e.g. Burgoyne 1993; Barnett 1994; Hodgkinson 1995; Grugulis 2000; Billett 2009; Boud 2016). A more fundamental objection is put forward by Sandberg (2009) and Carroll, Levy and Richmond (2008). Sandberg notes that what he terms rationalistic descriptions of competence are oversimplified and do not adequately account for effective performance, something that is particularly apparent when they are compared with interpretive or relational analyses of how practitioners actually go about their work (e.g. Schön 1983; Wenger 1998; Sandberg 2000; and Sennett 2008). Carroll and colleagues make a similar point in contrasting the predominantly objectivist logic that underpins competence descriptions with the more constructivist logic of practice itself; their distinctions between competency and practice (Carroll *et al* 2008, p366) are very similar to those made by Lester (1995) in contrasting technical-rational and post-industrial practice, suggesting particularly that competence models lack adequacy for the latter. Following Schatzki (1997) and drawing on Bourdieu (1990), a particular problem is that these descriptions can attempt to impose an apparently objective 'representational' logic on top of the richer, messier and sometimes contradictory logic of practice, and as a result obscure what actually makes for effective action in context.

Nevertheless, over the last decade and a half some examples and principles have started to appear that suggest how the idea of (activity-oriented) competence might be reconciled with more advanced understandings of the nature of professional work. Many professions have traditionally taken a more holistic view of competence than that implied by the performance of definable roles and functions, but with a few exceptions this has generally been articulated more in the context of education, entry-routes and continuing development rather than through descriptions of practice itself. Two notable examples that attempt to describe competence in a way that is capable of interpretation into different practice contexts are the generic engineering standards developed by the Engineering Council (the 'UK-Spec'), and the professional standards for heritage conservation used by the Institute of Conservation (Icon). The UK-Spec (Engineering Council 2013) describes in a concise way what is needed at each of three levels (technician, incorporated and chartered engineer), and provides a common standard for award of these designations across the 37 or so engineering bodies that subscribe to the Council. The descriptions can be contextualised for the various engineering specialisms, but they have also been used directly as assessment criteria. The conservation standards (Icon 2007), which act both as general standards of practice and as criteria for awarding qualified status, were first developed in 1998 by drawing on functionally-based British occupational standards as well as a European project (Foley and Scholten 1998) that articulated less tangible aspects of competence such as intellectual and ethical judgement. The engineering model informed the development of similar generic standards in scientific and environmental fields, while principles behind the conservation standards have been drawn on in professions as diverse as law, landscape architecture and vocational rehabilitation.

Some general principles can be identified from these and other more recent practising standards (Lester 2014b). These are that they are relatively concise, in crude terms normally taking up no more than a dozen pages of text; they focus on core activities and common standards critical to practice in a profession or occupational field, rather than the detail of occupational roles and functions; they are normally designed to be applicable across the profession without resorting to a 'core and options' structure; they are written to be resilient to change, within reason accommodating developments in practice, technology and legislation; and while they are written in external, activity-based terms, they include general aspects of acting professionally, such as ethical conduct, professional judgement, managing work, managing relationships, and ongoing development. These characteristics largely correlate with what, in the context of higher education, Yorke (2011) calls 'relativist' as opposed to 'realist' assessment criteria. Criteria of this type respect the situated nature of practice and lend themselves to interpretation in context; they can be applied to real-life situations without leading to distortion to meet the criteria; they require the integration of knowledge and skills into larger sequences of action; and they generally require deep understanding of the practice situation as a basis for competent action.

ComProCom: Communicating Professional Competence

Discussions between the author of this paper and colleagues in Greece and Poland indicated that the principles behind this 'second-generation' British model might be of interest to inform developments in countries other than the UK, particularly as an alternative to or refinement of models that had been informed by UK occupational standards. Further exploration resulted in interest from organisations in Germany and Austria, where within the official VET system (including for the Meister qualification, on a level with a bachelor's degree) the equivalent of competence standards are embedded in occupational training specifications, and in Ireland, where a similar tradition of independently-governed professions exists as in Britain, but without there being a history in the VET system of occupational standards detached from qualification specifications (Religa and Lester 2016). While it referred to relevant literature, in order to avoid dictating a specific approach in advance the proposal for ComProCom simply stated that:

"The project aims to improve the way that descriptions of competence match how professions and occupations work in practice, in particular in moving away from descriptions of tasks and responsibilities to considering core capabilities that have wide application within each field, are not limited by assumptions about the organization and context of individual jobs, and are resilient to changes in practice and technologies."

(ComProCom Partnership 2015, p3).

Further detail was agreed following a presentation of general approaches and concepts in the first project meeting, where a discussion with partners agreed three basic principles that would inform the development of their competence frameworks. These were:

- A professional or occupational rather than educational or organisational focus. This means that the aim would be to describe what is needed as a set of practising standards rather than to develop a curriculum or training specification, or a competency framework for an organisation. Partners could develop any of the latter as supplementary materials to the main framework, but they would not form a necessary part of the project output.

- An external perspective on competence, as previously discussed. Again this was taken as not excluding partners from developing internal descriptions where they deemed them useful, but as additions or extensions to the primary framework or set of standards.
- A field-level rather than a role-level approach. In most cases this was agreed as a being applied as a single framework applicable to all practitioners rather than a core-and-options or similar structure, although some doubts were expressed about how this would work in fields that were commonly defined by reference to organisational functions or occupational roles.

There was some debate about the position of knowledge in relation to external competence standards; British occupational standards for instance, and more so those based on the Mansfield-Schmidt model, generally included some sort of knowledge specification, though beyond occasional reference to key principles in a 'judgement and ethics' section this was normally not a feature of the professional standards that had informed ComProCom. It was recognised that simply appending propositional knowledge and know-how at the level of discrete activities was neither adequate for informing curricula, where attention is needed to the knowledge-structure of the entire field, nor for assessing practitioners, where it is normally more appropriate to explore the knowledge-in-use actually employed in framing and making practice decisions. On balance it was agreed that the standards developed within the project would describe practice alone, while some guidance was retained about using practising standards to inform the development of knowledge structures.

Table 1. ComProCom partners and fields of activity

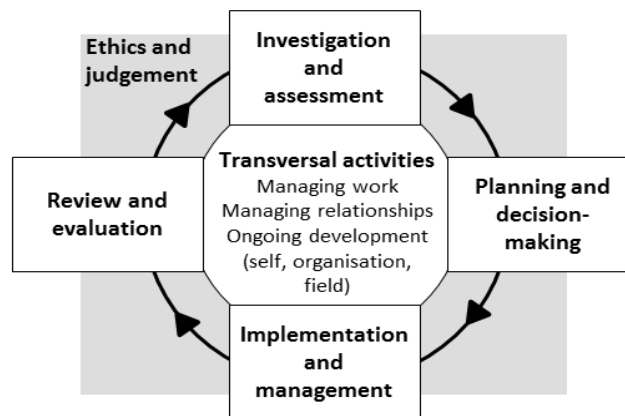
<i>Field</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Organisation type</i>	<i>Focus</i>
Business management	Austria	Training organisation	Start-up and management of small enterprises
Chemical engineering	Germany	Training organisation	Certified <i>Industriemeister</i> in chemical engineering
Social entrepreneurship	Greece	Public body	Management of social enterprises
Training and development	Ireland	Professional association	The training and development function in organisations
Managing innovation	Poland	Research institute	Managing innovation in commercial and research organisations

The project focussed on 'higher-level' occupations, for convenience defined as those that could be considered as having features equating with European Qualifications Framework level 5 and above. It involved each of five partners developing a framework in a different field (table 1), plus a sixth partner represented by the author as 'scientific co-ordinator' (i.e. intellectual lead and, effectively, project consultant). During the first few months of the project, the essential principles of the model were established as above, and a knowledge transfer session was held at the second project meeting to provide guidance on framework development, supported by a draft manual and set of examples. A structure that had emerged from British professions, similar to that shown in figure 1, based on a project cycle supported by more general or transversal aspects of professionalism, was offered as a template with the caveat that it may not be suitable in all areas; examples were provided including some based around this model and others that followed a more thematic approach. Several rules-of-thumb were also agreed including three levels of detail (main headings, key activities, and critical

factors and explanations), a guide length of no more than 12 pages, and the use of active, second-person verbs; partners were also made aware of the possibility of using ‘subsets’ of the framework with different detail to represent for instance different levels of work (as with the three-level engineering standards referred to earlier), and of the potential for using a novice-to-expert or similar scale to aid self-, peer or formal assessment for various purposes. This guidance is summarised in the final version of the manual (Lester 2017).

Early in the project, partners also reported on how ‘competence’ was conceptualised and put into operation in their countries, with the findings summarised and discussed in Religa and Lester (2016) and Lester and Religa (2017). A meeting close to the halfway stage enabled general discussion of the developing frameworks and incorporated one-to-one sessions between the author and each partner; support was also provided via email and remote individual and group discussions. By the end of the first year each partner had assembled a working group from their respective field, researched key activities undertaken in the field, and developed a tidy draft of their framework ready to undergo consultation and testing. In the second year, consultation took place with representatives of the relevant practitioner and wider stakeholder communities, and a small-scale trial – in most cases using the framework as a self-assessment tool – was also carried out. Following finalisation of the frameworks and associated resources including a developer training course and the methodological manual, the project reported in August 2017. The project outputs can be found at <http://www.comprocom.eu/products/>, and a summary of the project process and matters raised is provided in Lester *et al* (2017).

Figure 1. A cyclic structure for describing the work of a profession or occupational field.



From Lester *et al* (2017), drawing on Lester (2014) and Koniotaki (2017).

In terms of structure, all drafts followed the first two principles outlined above, i.e. a professional or occupational focus and an external perspective on competence. The main differences concerned the extent to which a universal, field-level approach was followed, along with their breadth of coverage. Four of the five frameworks used a cyclic model, with between four and seven stages plus transversal professional areas. An example of the basic structure is shown in figure 1. In principle, these frameworks can be described as field-level and universal in that most accommodate multiple roles or contexts within a single structure; however, for some the field of application is envisaged as fairly narrow, so that they also have a sense of covering a single role or set of closely-related roles, rather than the breadth of roles and specialisms discussed previously for engineering and conservation.

The training and development draft followed a slightly different approach, in taking nine broad functional areas some of which form an activity cycle (identifying needs, planning, design, delivery, and evaluation) and some are involved with management and administration (strategy, leadership, financial management, and quality assurance). These were mapped on to four major role-types within the training and development function. One of the aims of this framework was to support career planning and continuing development, and there was a concern that while the framework should represent the work of the profession as a whole, it should also draw out the differences between the role-types to support progression between them.

While the frameworks have not yet undergone any significant use in practical conditions, some observations can be made from examining the outputs themselves and from the experiences of the partners particularly in engaging with practitioners during the development, consultation and trialling phases. One observation that can be made by comparing the ComProCom frameworks with each other and with some of the British exemplars mentioned above is the variable extent to which the frameworks reflect both a specific ethos and a sense of underlying professionalism and ethics. In principle this seems to be strongest when the dominant view from within the field is of a coherent community of practice with a widely-understood *raison d'être*; so for instance heritage conservation and landscape architecture (among the British professions) are particularly strong in this respect, as is to some degree social entrepreneurship among the ComProCom examples. On the other hand some of the business-based fields in ComProCom are more dominated by concerns with compliance. A second point relating to this is more pragmatic, and concerns the relative ease of developing descriptions of tangible activities compared with those that aim to reflect underlying principles. This is more of a learning-point for the mechanics of the project, but it is relevant more generally to developing competence descriptions in fields that lack the sense of ethos that is present in some professions.

The matter of field-level versus role-level descriptions has already been mentioned, but a further point for consideration is how 'fields' become defined in different contexts and for different purposes. Even in formalised professions there can be debate about whether the field should be described at the level of, for example, law in general or separately for solicitors, barristers and legal executives, or engineering, chemical engineering, or (as in ComProCom) for more specifically for operations managers in the chemical industry (a formal occupation or *Beruf* in the German VET system). In practice, the starting-point for defining fields may be best identified where clear communities of practice have grown up (as in British and Irish professions or German and Austrian *Berufe*, as well as in more transversal areas such as innovation management) rather than through an attempt to impose standardisation through occupational classifications and policy-level sector bodies (Lester and Religa 2017). This inevitably leads to functional overlap (as for instance with social entrepreneurs and owner-managers of start-up businesses, or architects and surveyors) as well as differences in scale, span and level of detail (e.g. family mediators compared with solicitors), but it is more likely to lead to standards that are meaningful and usable for practitioners, employers and other stakeholders in the relevant field. The idea of a professional or 'centre-outwards' as opposed to an occupational or 'bounded-occupation' perspective (Lester 2014b) is relevant here; it involves viewing occupational fields as communities of practice that coalesce around a particular ethos and set of core capabilities (and therefore may well overlap with different perspectives rather than common 'competences'), as opposed to them being defined by functional and role boundaries.

Immediate feedback from practitioners has generally been positive across all five fields addressed in the project, suggesting that the descriptions that were produced are reasonably adequate representations of their fields, all of which involve higher-level or 'professional' work. There has not been any sense of them being too limiting in terms of presuming specific contexts or roles, although this is of course subject to how well consultees and trial participants both represented the breadth of the intended field and engaged with the framework in depth, and it is subject to further testing through practical application. To put this in context, the UK conservation framework was trialled and consulted on extensively, but it took revisions after two and a further five years of use to arrive at a representation that was agreed as reflecting the profession accurately (and which has since proved resilient for over a decade).

Conclusions

Drawing on the experience both in UK professions and in the project ComProCom, there appear to be two major factors that aid activity-based descriptions of competence to have adequacy for professional work. The first of these is starting from a meaningful field of activity and working at the appropriate logical level for what is being described. For professions or occupational fields, this means developing standards that apply holistically throughout the field, rather than considering functions that apply to particular specialisms, work roles and contexts. The main benefits of this are that it avoids – or at least enables the avoidance of – assumptions that practitioners work only in specific contexts and bounded work roles, while allowing and potentially necessitating interpretations that reflect the situated nature of practice, the need for practitioners to exercise judgement according to context, and the possibility of working outside, between or across any envisaged roles. Standards of this type also tend to be able to accommodate changes in practice, technology, regulations and so forth because they avoid framing activities around specific technologies, laws or customary practices, as well as at the detailed level focusing on critical factors rather than on how activities are carried out; typically, supporting guidance might need to be updated but less so the standards themselves.

The second factor is being able to imbue the description with a professional ethos or sense of responsibility and good practice at a level appropriate to the application. In professional communities where there is a strong sense of coherence and purpose, practising standards where this aspect is weak are likely to be perceived as being of poor quality and not reflective of professional work, however applicable they are otherwise. This is also partly bound up with the first point; once the idea is accepted that professional work cannot be defined adequately at the level of roles, functions and tasks, the underlying principles and ethics become more central and are in a sense part of the 'glue' that holds the standards together. On the other hand there will be fields where there is much less of a sense of professing to a field in common, and here it may be more challenging – though still necessary – to develop a central sense of ethos and ethics that is sufficiently meaningful to practitioners. A second part of this 'glue' involves general or transversal aspects of working professionally. These include things such as managing work and processes, managing relationships, and ongoing development. They are not necessarily generic, as they will differ according to the field of work and the level that the practitioner is operating at; managing work will look quite different, for instance, in the context of chemical engineering compared with training and development, while ongoing development could apply at an individual level, involve organisational or team development, or include contributing to advances in the field of work itself. However, transversal activities do

appear to be capable of being described in fairly common terms, suggesting parallels with generic criteria reflecting attributes that are valued in higher education (see for instance Bravenboer and Lester 2016).

To conclude, returning to the points made by Carroll *et al* (2008) and Sandberg (2009), it is perhaps inevitable that any statement pertaining to professional competence that aims to make generalisations about practice will be sanitised and partial. However, through using appropriate levels of description that set essential standards while leaving room for contextual interpretation, it is possible to recognise that practice is situated, individual, and sometimes messy and contradictory, while also identifying the social expectations that it sets out to meet.

Author

Dr Stan Lester has been a consultant, researcher and developer in professional and work-related education since 1993. He works with professional bodies on professional standards and self-regulatory matters, as well as with universities, VET agencies and other organisations in the UK and more widely in Europe. His firm was the UK partner for the project ComProCom.

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