

Competence

a definition and a model



Drawing on the Erasmus+ project ComProCom, this discussion paper proposes a concise definition of 'competence', as well as a model for describing competent practice in an occupational or professional context. It distinguishes the need for a common understanding of 'competence' from the promotion of any particular approach to vocational education and training or professional formation.

Examination of the literature on 'competence' in relation to education, training and the labour market indicates that there is a range of understandings of what the term means, different interpretations of how it should be described, and a certain amount of category confusion between the definition of competence, its articulation for particular purposes, and the way it is embodied in VET systems. This paper discusses the first two matters, while being clear that the use of competence descriptions (or of any particular competence model) should not be taken to imply that VET systems or professional formation and accreditation processes should be organised in a specific way.

Definition

The lack of a common definition of competence in Europe appears to proceed from three difficulties. These are that the English word 'competence' has more than one meaning; cognates in different languages do not mean precisely the same as each other; and unnecessary complications are created by basing definitions on usage in specific contexts.

In origin, the English word 'competence' has a similar meaning to 'sufficiency'. Nowadays this has split into three distinct uses. One, the least common and least relevant to the discussion here, is the sufficiency of an income from a pension, endowment or estate. The second, widely used in occupational and educational contexts, refers to sufficiency of ability. The third use is more legalistic and relates to jurisdiction or remit, as in 'within the competence of the court' or 'the competent authority'. A version of this is present in the phrase 'a competent adult'; this does not mean competent to do anything in particular, only that the person has reached the age of majority and is not debarred from certain decisions or responsibilities on grounds such as mental infirmity or criminal conviction. A lack of appreciation of these *distinct* meanings has led on occasion to conflated usage that doesn't make sense in English: the 'competence' column in the European Qualifications Framework, that refers to autonomy and responsibility rather than the ability to do anything, is a symptom of this.

A further complication is introduced by differences in usage between 'competence' and 'competency' (regarded as synonyms in most dictionaries), and more so between their plurals. In strict English

usage 'competence' does not have a plural (unless perhaps to refer to fundamentally different kinds of competence, similar to Howard Gardner's 'multiple intelligences'), but 'competences' has become used as a sort of technical slang to refer to components of competence standards or descriptions (so for instance the former UK Management Charter Initiative standards contained nine or ten 'competences' such as implementing change, recruitment and selection, managing finance, and so on). 'Competencies' on the other hand tends to be used to mean skills or abilities.

The problem of cognates is one that is familiar to anyone trying to agree definitions across several languages. 'Competence' and its cognates are less problematic than (for instance) some professional titles, but there are still differences of interpretation that lead to slightly different meanings being conveyed by the closest equivalent words. To take one example the German word *Kompetenz* is generally understood to have a broader connotation than 'competence' in English, and 'capability' may be a better translation. On the other hand *berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit*, literally occupational action capability or ability to act, is often translated as occupational competence. There is no easy solution to this other than to appreciate that what may be a precise concept in one language does not translate to another in exactly the same way, to avoid using cognates simplistically as if they have exactly the same meanings, and to state which language any particular definition is based in.

The third difficulty arises when competence is considered in relation to particular applications or perspectives, and definitions are adopted that are related to the application or perspective concerned. This has led to disagreement about, for instance, whether competence is concerned with knowledge, skills, behaviours and so forth, whether it should include 'personal competence', or whether it is essentially about practice. This is valid in the context of how competence needs to be articulated in different applications, but it is a subsidiary discussion to that concerned with defining the concept itself, which should come first and be independent of application.

Taking these points into consideration, it is apparent that a straightforward and widely-understandable definition of competence is needed that is independent of its use in, for instance, particular educational, professional or organisational contexts. Several definitions were explored in the project including those from the International Standards Organization, the European Qualifications Framework, and the German Kultusministerkonferenz, but the one that had greatest resonance came from the Oxford English Dictionary, **the ability to do something successfully or efficiently**. This emphasises neatly that competence is concerned with ability rather than habitual behaviour or ongoing performance; it concerns the ability to do, not just the possession of the relevant knowledge, skills and so forth; actions need to be performed to a standard (successfully or efficiently); and the 'something' is left open, so that it could refer to activity that is valued for instance in education, in work, or in social situations. Adoption of this simple definition for the English-language word 'competence' would go a long way to improving conceptual clarity in Europe.

Model

If the idea of competence is not fully clear across Europe, how it is articulated is even more variable. This is neither surprising nor improper, as 'competence' is used across a variety of applications located in different traditions, perspectives and policy contexts. However, the lack of what might be called a common base model for describing competence means that there can be very different starting-points, even when discussing the same application (for instance occupational competence in

the context of vocational education and training). This is readily apparent from any examination of either the academic literature or actual descriptions of competence. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but very crudely discussions tend to favour a curricular approach, where competence is described in terms of the knowledge, skills and so on needing to be acquired to become competent; a behavioural one concerned with the attributes of the competent person; or a practice-oriented one concerned with what it is that the person needs to be able to do. Actual descriptions can be based on any one of these, or they can combine more than one in ways that range from clear to muddled. It is notable that neither the historic promotion of a British-influenced model by Cedefop and the European Training Foundation nor the articulation in the European Qualifications Framework have done anything to aid this situation, as the first is based in particular assumptions about occupational roles and how they are organised (and at least in some forms promotes a simplistic view of the way knowledge and skill relate to occupational ability), and the second is conceptually confused and is often interpreted as implying a tabular arrangement of tasks, knowledge and skills.

If a base model can be developed, it needs to relate to the agreed definition of competence. Taking the one proposed above – ‘the ability to do something successfully or efficiently’ – this indicates that it needs to define what it is that needs to be done, and what is essential to doing it ‘successfully or efficiently’. In occupational or professional terms this points to a description of (good) practice, which is what the project has aimed to develop.

A short digression is needed here in that this is what the British occupational standards model also attempted to do, and it has now been rejected (at least as an instrument of policy) in its home country, it is often criticised as leading to a narrow and over-specialised approach to VET and for an inability to represent (particularly higher-level) work adequately, and ongoing problems are reported with adapted versions that have been developed in other countries. These problems are however a result of particular characteristics that have become ingrained in the British model and its variants, including a focus on defined occupational roles and functions rather than broader fields of activity; restrictive assumptions about the contexts in which practice takes place; often too high a level of detail, compounding the above problems and leading to a need for frequent revision; and unrealistic claims about what the model can be used for in its raw form, which has led to unsatisfactory ‘patches’ such as the inclusion of lists of knowledge alongside the practice standards.

Taking these matters into account, some basic principles are suggested in developing the base model, as follows:

- It needs to be a description of necessary practice, not a curriculum or a description of a competent person: it is inappropriate therefore to include descriptions of knowledge and skills (these can be added for instance in a curriculum as discussed later). Although it should be capable of use directly for some applications it should be seen as informing VET curricula and development frameworks, rather than substituting for or dictating them.
- Once the field to which it applies has been defined, it needs to reflect practice across the field in a way that does not discriminate according to the contexts in which practice takes place or the way that roles are organised in different contexts; in principle it might also be capable of interpretation into different specialisms, i.e. it is a universal description for the entire field.

- The level of detail needs to be sufficient to clarify what is meant by good practice, but not so much as to become context-limiting or unwieldy.
- The way that practice is described needs to be reasonably future-proof, so that insofar as possible it will not be invalidated by foreseeable changes in technology, legislation, or preferred methods and techniques.

The model that has emerged through the project (itself informed by work carried out by some self-governing professions) can be summarised as practice-based; unitary, i.e. reflecting practice across the field without using different options or pathways; concise, focusing on essential standards rather than everything a practitioner might do; and including the ethos and ethics of the field. It also takes a 'centre-outwards' perspective, meaning that the field is conceptualised as a community of practice with a reasonably common rationale and ethos rather than as a set of definable occupational roles within a distinct boundary.

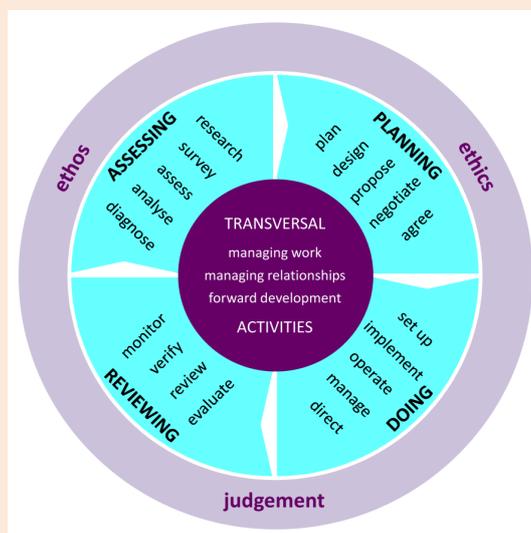
The more specific principles for describing competence within this model are as follows:

A top-level structure consisting of:

- (1) A small number of main areas (typically three to six) describing the work of the field, which in many fields can be arranged as a project cycle (e.g. investigation/ assessment, planning/decision-making, implementation/management, and review/evaluation) with potentially different balances between each stage of the cycle; in others a more thematic approach based on major areas of practice is likely to be more appropriate.
- (2) Key transversal activities such as managing work, managing relationships, and ongoing development.
- (3) A section that conveys the ethos of the field and what is expected in terms of professional judgement and ethical practice.

A representation of a cyclic model of this type is provided below.

The top-level structure, cyclic version



from Lester, Koniotaki and Religa 2018, p293

Within each of the field-specific and transversal areas, a small number (generally between two and five, though one is permissible) of key activities that represent what is essential for carrying out the work of the occupation.

For each of the key activities, further explanation generally in the form of a small number of factors that are critical to carrying them out, or a brief summary of where and how the activity might apply (and what it needs to be adequate for), or both.

The overall description for a fairly diverse, high-level occupational field is likely to total to no more than twelve pages or so; more uniform fields will typically have shorter descriptions.

An advantage of this approach is that it is capable of application to underpin different purposes and in different professional and VET traditions, so that it could be used for instance to produce an occupational description as part of a training specification, for separate occupational standards to communicate job requirements, or as a high-level set of assessment standards for licensing or accreditation. For many of these purposes it will need to be developed further for the particular application. As an example, a vocational curriculum would also need to include a description of the knowledge-structure of the field and information about the various skills and abilities that need to be developed to arrive at a level of overall competence or proficiency, while for a practising assessment the standards would require further guidance on what needs to be demonstrated, how, and to what degree of sufficiency.

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For more detailed information on the model see the ComProCom methodological guide, *Professional competence standards: guide to concepts and development* (2017), available from <http://www.comprocom.eu/products/43-methodological-manual>, or contact Stan Lester at s.lester@devmts.co.uk.