

Discussion paper

Developing synergy between competence descriptions and academic standards

This short paper explores whether there can be a synergy between the kind of generic level statements or assessment standards sometimes used by academic institutions, and 'competence' or 'practising' standards as used by many professional bodies. It is one of several short prompt papers that are being developed from the Erasmus+ project ComProCom (Communicating Professional Competence), which concludes at the end of August 2017.

Going back to the early 1990s, it was fairly clear from both published and 'grey' literature in the UK that there was significant disagreement between proponents of 'competence' as expressed in National Occupational Standards and National Vocational Qualifications, and much of the academic world. 'Competence' was supposed to be about workplace effectiveness and meeting finite performance standards, while higher education emphasised the intellectual and professional development of the individual within academic disciplines or professional fields. Moving forward to the present, there appears to be something approaching a synergy between *some* versions of occupational or professional competence and *some* approaches to academic criteria and standards. So what has made this possible, and can any lessons be drawn from it?

From an academic perspective, a major factor has been the emergence of generic level statements and assessment criteria, particularly where these are designed to accommodate workplace-related learning. Level statements go back at least as far as the former Council for National Academic Awards, but movement into the middle ground between professional competence and academic validity was accelerated when universities – and organisations such as Ufi-Learndirect and SEEC – started to develop generic statements that could be applied to work-based and work-related learning, partly informed by the university work-based learning projects that started in the early 1990s. In most cases this didn't create an immediate bridge between competence specifications and higher education, but it did start to clarify the kinds of work-oriented abilities that institutions would recognise as being valid academically.

The corresponding movement from a professional perspective has been from the detailed, finite criteria used in (particularly early) occupational standards – or, in alternative traditions, prescriptive lists of behaviours – to a more open conception of competence. Many professional bodies recognise that being competent at a professional level involves such things as high levels of judgement, ethical literacy and commitment, critical and independent thinking, analysis and synthesis, and the ability to co-ordinate often quite long and complex sequences of action to produce valid and valued outcomes. The criteria used by professions to award qualified or licensed status are often expressed in 'external' or 'activity-based' terms – i.e. they describe competent practice rather than the knowledge, skills or other attributes of the competent person – but they are increasingly permeated by these more transversal aspects of professionalism and capability, which are generally also valued by academic institutions.

One factor that seems important in enabling this synergy has been acceptance from both perspectives of what Mantz Yorke calls 'relativist' rather than 'realist' assessment criteria. Realist criteria can be used in academic contexts (detailed learning outcomes) and in the workplace (occupational competence standards); they are specific and context-independent, i.e. they refer to specific tasks and they don't allow for the relevance of context in determining what is acceptable and appropriate (perhaps appropriate for physics, less so for managing change). Relativist criteria on the other hand are broader, more universally applicable, and lend themselves to situational interpretation, so that for instance the same set of criteria can be applied to different professional fields, or at least to different roles and contexts within a professional field.

From a practice perspective, a second (and related) factor seems to be the level at which the competence description is applied. Practising descriptions can variously be created at the level of tasks, functions, occupational roles, whole professional or occupational fields, or even globally ('what does a competent professional need to be able to do?'). British occupational standards (and similar models influenced by them) have focused on functions and roles, to the extent that 'occupational competence' is often automatically associated with role-level descriptions. However, many professions have found that these are too detailed, context-specific and clumsy to use for instance as criteria for sign-off as fit to practise, or to provide a structure to aid continuing development. Field-level descriptions are becoming more common in professions, as they allow for different role-types and practice contexts without needing 'core and options' or similar structures, they are more resilient to changes in practice, technology or legislation, and they make it easier to incorporate more general aspects of professionalism.

Stan Lester

Stan Lester Developments, UK

July 2017

References:

Lester, S. (2014) "Professional competence standards and frameworks in the UK", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 39 (1), 38-52.

Lester, S. (2017) "Reconciling activity-based descriptions of competence with professional work", *Higher Education, Skills and Work Based Learning* 7 (4), 381-393.

Yorke, M. (2011) "Work-engaged learning: towards a paradigm shift in assessment", *Quality in Higher Education* 17 (1), 117-130.