



Discussion paper

Practising standards and competence frameworks in professions

This short paper discusses how the ComProCom approach might be used in professions. It has been written thinking particularly of the UK and Irish contexts, where professional standards are generally set by professional associations and regulatory 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.

Many professions use some form of practising standards or competence framework, varying from a few sentences describing what practitioners are expected to be able to do, through (very occasionally) to manuals totalling several hundred pages of detailed specifications. There does however appear to be an emerging consensus about the kinds of frameworks or standards that are best suited to different purposes.

First, some basic concepts. A widely-used definition of competence is 'the ability to do something successfully or effectively' (Oxford English Dictionary), that captures quite neatly that competence is about ability rather than either potential or performance over time, and it is also about doing something to an acceptable standard, rather than having a collection of attributes. This suggests that a description of competence needs to focus on practice, not (at least at first) on knowledge, skills, behaviours or so forth (sometimes referred to as 'competencies'). This can be termed an 'external', 'activity-based' or 'social expectation' description of competence, and it describes what it is that the competent person should be able to do. This kind of description is particularly suited to various assessment purposes, and it avoids making assumptions about the practitioner as a person or the route that they take to becoming competent.

There is also a question about the level (of abstraction) that competence needs to be described at. ComProCom distinguished descriptions at the level of tasks, roles and functions, entire professions or occupational fields, and practice at a more general level. Task-based descriptions focus on what is needed to perform a task effectively, and tend to provide little room for interpretation and discretion; they may be appropriate for highly critical procedures, but not for describing whole work roles or functions. Role-based descriptions, familiar in Britain and some other countries from national occupational standards and profiles, focus on job roles; in professions, they are often too detailed and context-specific to work well. Field-level descriptions apply a common set of standards across the whole of the profession, and if written carefully can be both concise and robust, and capable of being interpreted into different roles, specialisms and contexts. Global or generic descriptions focus on what a capable professional needs to be able to do; for individual professions they are likely to be too broad, although they can be used to describe more generic aspects of professionalism. Recent research suggests that for most purposes an activity-based, field-level description is most effective in meeting the needs of professions, particularly for the purposes of assessment, sign-off, and providing ongoing standards of practice. It also provides a coherent description of the profession, as opposed to viewing it as a set of roles or functions, and makes it easier to incorporate the profession's ethos

and ethics. Some good UK examples include the standards for heritage conservation, engineering (the UK-Spec) (both of these now well tested), and landscape architecture.

A further consideration concerns level of work and level of competence. In some professions there is more than one level that it might be required for qualifying purposes, such as the technician, incorporated and chartered level in engineering, or associate and full membership. In these cases 'subset' frameworks – with the same structure, but differences in detail reflecting the different levels of work – can be appropriate. Note however that having too many levels – such as trying to reflect an organisational hierarchy or a national qualifications framework – can result in excessively fine distinctions and undermine the benefits of a field-level framework. The level of competence needed for sign-off or similar purposes is a different dimension of level, and it can either be described as a single threshold or by reference to a scale such as novice to expert, which can also be used to define steps on the path to reaching (and going beyond) qualified level.

Two caveats about field-level, external frameworks. The first is that an external competence framework is effectively a set of practising standards, not a curriculum or training specification; it leaves what's needed to become competent as something of a black box. For development applications, it can sometimes be useful to develop a supplementary document that focuses on the development of knowledge, skills and broader abilities that underpin practice, or on effective behaviours. The second is that a field-level framework looks for commonality between roles and contexts, whereas for some applications – such as career development – it can be useful to draw out differences between them. This is not generally a reason for using role-level descriptions, but it does suggest that further resources can be useful to illustrate how different aspects of the framework apply in different roles or contexts.

Finally, a point about research. Adequate research into the professional field is vital for developing robust, usable standards. This will typically include the ethos and values of the profession, how it is structured, the main role-types and working contexts and how they are evolving, different practising situations, and how work activities map out across roles and contexts. The purpose in a field-level framework is not to distinguish between different roles but to make sure that the framework doesn't *assume* particular roles and contexts, limiting its relevance. At a detailed level, factors that are critical to effective action need to be distinguished from ones that are trivial or less important. Consultation with practitioners, and if possible trialling in a contained version of what the framework will be used for in practice, is also important before the framework goes 'live' in order to iron out the more obvious problems.

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