

Discussion paper

Can activity-based descriptions of competence help inform vocational education and training?

This paper discusses whether ‘activity-based’ descriptions of competence or practice are useful for informing the content of vocational education and training (VET) programmes. 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.

An ‘activity-based’ or ‘external’ approach to competence is concerned with what a competent person needs to be able to do, as opposed to the skills, knowledge, behaviours and so forth that underpin the ability to do it. In professional and occupational contexts, competence descriptions of this type are essentially standards of practice; they are not, at least directly, about education or training.

There has been controversy about whether this kind of description is appropriate for underpinning VET. The UK occupational standards system was used as the basis for vocational qualifications and apprenticeships for two decades, but it has been criticised for creating a narrow curriculum focused on immediate job performance, rather than promoting a deeper understanding of the occupational field along with abilities that aid adaptability, development and progression. The use of practising standards directly as assessment criteria in VET also led to a tendency to ‘teach to the test’, and (particularly when combined with financial incentives) to trainees being signed off before they were adequately proficient. Similar criticisms have appeared particularly in Australia and in parts of Europe where parallel models have been introduced.

There are three important points relevant to this. First, a set of practising standards is not a curriculum, and although it can look like a description of skills, it doesn’t set out what is needed – in terms of knowledge, skills and so forth – in order to practise effectively. In the early days of UK occupational standards it was expected that curricula would be developed to underpin the standards, although this was never acted on and the default position was that the standards became treated as a kind of syllabus. Perhaps to accommodate this it became common for VET-oriented competence descriptions to include lists of knowledge, and also sometimes skills, alongside the practising standards. These are however rarely very satisfactory because they treat knowledge as a series of items relating to specific work activities, promoting surface-level, atomistic learning. From an educational viewpoint this ignores the way that concepts build on each other to develop understanding across a field of activity, and from a practice viewpoint it rarely reflects how knowledge is actually used to underpin actions and decisions. A similar point can be made for skills, in that broader abilities that support things such as adapting approaches to context, putting together complex or longer-term sequences of action, and acting professionally and ethically, are often missed out.

Secondly, not all VET courses and training programmes are able to bring learners to a point where they can meet a set of standards geared to ongoing practice in the workplace: work-based training and experience may be needed which is beyond what can be provided on the course, even on a long course with substantial periods in work. This may sound obvious, but differences in interpretations of,

and expectations about, threshold standards are major causes of dissatisfaction with so-called 'competence-based' education and training.

The third point is that many competence standards are too specific to particular jobs or roles to underpin a meaningful vocational curriculum. An exception may be for training courses that are focused on specific, standardised jobs. Field-level descriptions – that reflect whole professions or occupational fields – are likely to be more useful as frameworks around which curricula can be developed. Standards of this type generally aim to focus on central aspects of the profession or field, be capable of application across a broad range of roles and contexts, incorporate transversal factors that underpin the ability to act effectively and professionally, and be resilient in the sense of not needing frequent updating. There is some evidence from professions involved in accrediting university and college courses that field-level standards are effective in translating the profession's requirements in a way that allows the individual institution to develop a relevant and educationally valid curriculum.

To summarise, there is evidence that activity-based descriptions of competence can be useful to inform VET, but with plenty of caveats. The main conditions appear to be:

- The competence description is at the level (of breadth) appropriate to the aims of the course. This will generally mean a field-level rather than a role-level description, with a focus on broader aspects than work functions and tasks. An exception is where the aim is preparation for a closely-defined job role – 'VT' rather than 'VE'.
- The description is used to inform the curriculum or training specification – not to dictate it, or to act as a syllabus. The curriculum will normally be 'fleshed out' considerably more from the practising standards – particularly in terms of developing understanding, techniques, skills and operational capacities – but it may also be more specific in its focus, e.g. electronic engineering rather than engineering in general.
- Any differences between the threshold expectations implicit in the practising standards and those appropriate on completing the course are made clear. This could be illustrated using a novice-to-expert or similar model, a subset of the standards, or a set of learning objectives that can be referenced to them.

Stan Lester

Stan Lester Developments, UK

July 2017