

Comments on the **Ecco 2011 'Competences' document**

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I think much of this is very sensible, even if it does require some unpicking. I won't try to comment in detail on the coverage of the conceptual map of conservation practice, but it looks eminently useful and probably at a broad enough level that it could be applied across a wide range of contexts. To what extent has it been tested against different conservation specialisms, contexts and courses – e.g. will it work equally well for a collections care specialist in a museum and a paintings conservator in private practice? Taking the diagram on pp26-27 this might be expected to be represented as different levels of emphasis on the various components. An issue that I think will be raised is that 'conservation-restoration actions' appear to be a small part of the model when they form the major part of the work of many conservators; other areas are disaggregated in more depth while conservation actions are not. Secondly while ethics are mentioned, they are not present in the sense of running through the whole spectrum of conservation actions as has been emphasised for instance in Icon's framework.

The discussion of levels of knowledge and skill (pp22-25) draws on the Bloom *et al* taxonomy and on an unreferenced model of skill development that has some resemblance to the widely-used Dreyfus model¹. I think the logic works at a pragmatic level, but it maybe understates the point that it's possible to develop in the direction of expertise (in the Dreyfus sense) without moving to a higher level in EQF terms. Without getting too much into conceptual matters, there are two implications that may be worth noting:

In the early stages of his or her career, a new entrant to a profession may start with a high level (say 7, attested through a master's degree) of discipline-based and technical-rational knowledge as well as perhaps a range of discrete skills, but as intimated in the text have limited working knowledge and practical competence (by 'practical' I am referring to all the abilities to work effectively in a real-world environment, not only hands-on skills). *Assessed on these latter dimensions alone* the beginning practitioner would be far off level 7. Through exposure to practice s/he will develop knowledge-in-use and contextual competence, potentially bringing him or her up to level 7 in these areas also (and therefore to a position to gain qualified status where it exists).

As the practitioner develops, s/he will typically develop a 'spiky profile' in terms of level – i.e. moving out of some areas, developing greater proficiency and expertise in others, taking on new responsibilities. S/he may develop to the point of advancing practice in the profession – which can be equated to level 8 – but equally may prefer simply to keep up-to-date at a basic level and perhaps develop tacit expertise in a narrow area related to 'doing the work,' or alternatively move away from the profession's primary activity to focus on a related role. Some research on later career-paths and achievements of conservators might be useful before promoting level 8 as what could appear to be an expectation for experienced practitioners. (My research on advanced professional designations such as fellowships indicated that even in professions with a basic qualifying requirement at level 7, only

one – the veterinary profession – had an advanced grade that could be mapped to level 8, and that was held by less than 3% of practitionersⁱⁱ).

Comments on two specific areas follow: first qualified status, which doesn't seem to be very well represented in the document, and secondly the EQF, which is misconstrued in several places.

Qualified status

I appreciate that the document is not principally concerned with qualified status (i.e. 'accreditation' in UK and Irish conservation), but where this is mentioned it could be represented more accurately. The discussion on p11 appears to confuse accreditation with non-HE entry routes – qualified status is about reaching a standard where the profession has confidence in a person's ability to practise, something that can often be achieved by a variety of routesⁱⁱⁱ. Where present it is required *in addition* to the higher education qualification. For example an MEng doesn't allow someone to use the title 'chartered engineer,' but the two things are complementary – the chartered engineer will normally gain an MEng first and qualify for chartership some time later. This relates to my point above about reaching level 7 in the context of a learning environment and some time later reaching it in the context of practice.

Incidentally one of the reasons that qualified status isn't normally mapped against national qualification frameworks (and thus to the EQF or EHEA framework) is that it isn't 'a qualification' in the sense that can be accredited by a qualifications authority. Having said that, some professional bodies do have their qualified status mapped to the university credit system to facilitate progression and recognition of prior learning for instance for practitioners who come in without master's-level qualifications.

The EQF

The document contains some basic misconceptions about the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, in places appearing to confuse it with the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The EQF is a translation device for countries to map their national qualifications frameworks to, rather than a framework into which individual qualifications are placed. The level descriptors are sometimes used to map to individual awards, but they aren't designed to do this (and are actually quite vague as far as level descriptors go) – hence the difficulties described on p14 and the eminently sensible approach taken as a result.

School and equivalent-level vocational qualifications are appearing at levels 1-4. Levels 5-8 parallel the short cycle, first, second and third cycle qualifications of the EHEA ('Bologna') system – but they are not the same and are described in terms of achievement rather than stage of progression (broadly speaking, a qualification that can be deemed to fit with one of the EHEA cycles will also fit with the corresponding EQF level, but because the EQF is broader in scope this doesn't apply in reverse). There is no assumption about length of study or practice, or stage of education, in the EQF – it purely concerns the level of achievement required in the qualification. It is incorrect to describe any EQF levels as equating to a '2 or 3-year' programme.

The statement at the top of p11 is false and misleading – there is no assumption that qualifications at any EQF level are provided through or by any particular type of institution. The UK and Irish national frameworks both have non-HE qualifications recognised at EQF 7, and there is now a UK qualification in the non-HE, EQF-linked Qualifications and Credit Framework at level 8^{iv}. That some countries have no means of recognising non-university qualifications above level 6 is a feature of their national systems, not of any requirement in the EQF.

Incidentally (p12) the mutual recognition directives are currently being reviewed, and one of the issues being considered is current lack of correspondence with the EQF in terms of both levels and philosophy.

ⁱ See Dreyfus, H L and Dreyfus, SE (1986) *Mind over Machine: the power of human intuition and expertise in the age of the computer*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell; summary here <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/dreyfus.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Lester, S (2009) *Professional bodies' advanced designations and awards* Bristol: Professional Associations Research Network <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/ada.pdf> - and summarised in iv. below

ⁱⁱⁱ Lester, S (2009) "Routes to qualified status: practices and trends among UK professional bodies," *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (2), 223-236 <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/pgroutes.pdf>

^{iv} The Chartered Institute of Management Diploma in Strategic Leadership: for a discussion of this and other qualifications at level 8 see Lester, S (2010) "Doctoral-level qualifications outside of universities: a comparison of forms and practices," *Work Based Learning* 1 (2), 1010rtb <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/docequivs.pdf>