

## **CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS**

### **Conclusions of the Strasbourg European Symposium - September 30/October 1st, 2004 -**

The construction and recognition of a European qualifications system constitute major elements of the challenges with which Europe is faced at the beginning of the 21st century, from both the economic, social and cultural points of view. Such construction and recognition form part of the strategic objectives fixed by the European Council meeting held in Lisbon in March, 2000, aimed at ensuring the competitiveness of the European Union in both economic and academic terms. Long considered as a prerequisite for the (geographical) mobility of those working throughout Europe, they are increasingly looked upon as a requirement for professional mobility and to ensure access throughout Europe to the most advanced technologies. Furthermore, they appear to constitute a major factor in favour of voluntarily aligning the content of both initial and continuing professional training.

Although the question of European qualifications has taken on new dimensions and new importance in recent years, it already has a long history and the problems raised have been dealt with differently, depending on the period considered. The tools implemented at different times aimed to comply successively with the principles of equivalence, correspondence, transparency and, more recently, the pooling of professional references. Over the years, the initial objective of harmonisation was abandoned in favour of voluntary cooperation between Member States, or "open coordination"; "social dialogue" between all sides was recognised as a necessary component in any attempt to construct and recognise a European qualifications system. Finally, following the Declaration of Copenhagen in June 2002, lifelong learning was promoted to being a priority objective of the European Union.

These successive approaches were also motivated by the need to reconcile several demands, some of which have moved to the forefront in recent years: application of the principle of subsidiarity with respect to training systems, the need for visibility, which was "necessary to identify and compare the value and content of qualifications at a level which is not only sectorial but regional, national or international", the alignment of higher education systems in the context of the Sorbonne/Bologna process, and also the implementation of European standards, whether these concern safety, protection of the environment, the organisation of a profession or even standards for quality that companies wish to promote at a European market level, etc.

For forty years now, the European qualifications system has been growing, but this growth has proved somewhat chaotic. The certainties have been as numerous as the changes in direction, causing the abrupt abandonment of work which may have been ongoing for several years. The objective of mobility, which from the start underpinned successive efforts, no longer seems as important as yesterday, nor as relevant. Training which previously enabled the certification of qualifications is no longer the only means of access to them, nor is it deemed the most appropriate way of providing a response to the needs of companies or individuals. Unquestionably, however, progress has been achieved through all these different efforts. But not all questions have yet been asked nor all answers given, and both social partners and all European citizens have a right to expect that this is done. In a world where

competition demands constant adaptation, regular scrutiny of the objectives pursued and the tools which have been introduced to attain them constitutes a central requirement to achieving the strategic objectives laid down in Lisbon. The Symposium which was held in Strasbourg on September 30 and October 1<sup>st</sup> 2004 have attended 200 participants from 24 European countries and 20 from the Union. Participation of many social partners is a sign of high level of interest in this topic. The Symposium sought to provide answers to two questions: what have we learnt from national and European attempts at implementing a qualifications system, and what should we think of the tools currently being developed?

### **The consequences of "moving the goalposts"**

Until recently, European decisions and actions aimed at recognising professional qualifications within the European area obeyed a central objective, that of ensuring the free circulation of individuals and their liberty to live anywhere in Europe, in accordance with Article 57 of the Treaty of Rome. They tended to target the areas of training and certification rather than those of skills and the labour market. Thus the first decision by the EEC Council, which goes back to 1963, concerned the "general principles of professional training". The principle of "equivalence" between qualifications, formulated at the time by the Commission, applied in the first instance to the certifications necessary to exercise independent professions, and particularly the regulated professions, and to the employment of cross-frontier workers. As an extension to these early (and rare) achievements (six in the healthcare professions and one for professional architects), in 1992 a Directive introduced a general system for the mutual recognition of qualifications.

In parallel, in 1985, based on the preparatory work carried out by the Cedefop (which had been set up in 1975), the Council adopted a decision affirming the principle of "corresponding vocational training qualifications between Member States", the first step towards recognition of the qualifications and certificates obtained by manual workers and office employees. Without directly targeting an alignment of vocational training systems, implementation of this principle encouraged the comparison of vocational training opportunities in terms of their duration and content. The Maastricht Treaty, while including education in the scope of European policies, affirmed that the EU should only act to supplement and support the development of European policies and only intervene to align regulations affecting the free circulation of individuals and social standards. This led to abandonment of the principle of "correspondence" to the benefit of that of "transparency". Comparisons between certifications would now result from their clarity rather than their alignment.

This principle of transparency provided a new context for the work of the Commission. As from 1995, it launched an action programme, Leonardo da Vinci, to encourage the development of transparency experiments. In 1996, a decision invited Member States to adopt a common framework for the presentation of certificates (indication of the certifying agency, duration and content of training, description of the qualifications obtained, etc.). In November, 1998, following a joint initiative by the European Commission and the Cedefop, a European forum was organised for Member States and the social partners in order to clarify the conditions for implementing this framework. This resulted in two proposals: the organisation of "national reference points" and the creation of "complement certificates". These two proposals were intended to facilitate the "legibility" of certificates, to cover different areas of skills and detect the differences characterising professions from one country to another.

Both the "Education and Training 2010" programme resulting from the Lisbon discussions and adopted by the European Council in Barcelona in March 2002, the Declaration of Copenhagen relative to lifelong learning made in November 2002, and the Bologna Declaration before them in June 1999 relative to the organisation of higher education, have supported and strengthened the Commission's approach which aims to encourage training and the search for mobility. This approach was preferred over identification of the skills required to ensure the career development of individuals and their adaptation to the needs of companies. Thus the Declaration of Copenhagen considered that "strengthening of the European dimension of education and professional training aims to improve cooperation and thus facilitate and encourage mobility and the development of inter-institutional cooperation". Similarly, it provided foundations for actions intended to "promote the transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of skills and/or qualifications between countries and at different levels (in) the development of reference standards, common principles for certification and common criteria, including a system of credit transfer for education and professional training".

At the same time, a very different approach was being adopted at the beginning of the new millennium, aimed at directly constructing a European qualifications system. Such qualifications would comply with three criteria: they would be adapted to the professional sector, be clear and finally, be attractive to young people. Their construction has been based on three stages: identification of a professional profile based on key tasks, detection of the skills required to accomplish these tasks in terms of the technical resources required by the company and the professional expectations of the individual, and finally, definition of the objectives of certification. This approach, conceived as being complementary to that promoted by the Commission, was initiated by Ministers of Education on a voluntary basis, working in liaison with professional organisations. Experimented in two professions (accommodation manager in the hotel business and a logistics technician), it is currently being extended to other professional profiles in sectors such as tourism, the construction industry, vehicle repairs, plastics engineering and international marketing.

In fact, this approach is an extension of the developments observed at a national level with respect to the construction of professional qualifications. These are currently at a crossroads between two areas: that of training and that of professional requirements as they are perceived through functioning of the job market. All "qualification" systems seek to link these two areas by comparing levels of training with the levels of qualification, on a single scale. For many years, qualifications were constructed from certificates which identified the skills obtained in terms of the content and duration of training. Over the past twenty years, several countries have reversed this approach and defined qualifications as a function of professional references, identifying what is necessary to achieve all the tasks characterising the professional considered, which are then used to develop the relevant training programme. However, qualifications nonetheless continued to attest to the ability of their holder to implement the know-how acquired through training.

A further step was taken more recently with the validation of acquired experience. Even if it is defined on the basis of a professional reference, a qualification no longer validates the knowledge acquired during the training process but the person's ability to hold a job and implement the skills necessary to carry it out. Under this system, qualifications become independent of how they were obtained, whether by training (which often characterises the access of a young person to a qualification) or by an ability to achieve (which is a mark of experience). A European qualification sits well in this framework, insofar as it attests to the

skills required to exercise a given profession. However, some of the tools constructed to comply with the principle of transparency may also be relevant. This is particularly the case of the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education (ECVET). This indeed identifies blocks of knowledge and skills which can be isolated and acquired either by experience (possibly in the context of a job different to that targeted) or through completion of a training module.

This approach has two advantages. Firstly, the qualification is no longer attested (as previously) in terms of completing a full training course. It can be acquired at completion of a training module of short duration, which should encourage greater access to continuing training. In addition, the qualification no longer results exclusively from training. All forms of apprenticeship can now be taken into account. The principle of subsidiarity thus takes on its entire sense as it separates certification from qualification and its mode of acquisition. Secondly, emphasis is laid upon the skills required by companies and not just on training opportunities. The construction of qualifications thus becomes more closely linked to the functioning of the labour market. A common system of qualifications can be set up without it being necessary to align training systems. Finally, the problem of transparency finds a simple solution, because it is solved entirely by a qualification which has a clearly defined content.

Unlike a general principle which aims to reclassify all qualifications in Member States within a common framework of reference levels, the European qualification proposes a sector approach, based on identifying professions for which a common qualification constitutes a requirement of economic competition. But not all professions can be covered by such an approach. Despite the alignment of qualifications which is taking place under the impetus of the spread of technologies and the organisation of companies, many professions, in practically all sectors of activity, retain more or less marked national specificities. Industry representatives estimate that, on average, for the same profession, 80% of skills are common to the different European countries, and only 20% are not. The reasons are numerous. They may be linked to professional areas which are sectorised by industrial conventions and find their foundations in the area of industrial relations which, at present, remain within a national context. They may also result from national regulations and/or cultural traditions, particularly in the area of relations with the public. It is these 20% which make it impossible to directly compare qualifications when they attest to the entire area of skills which are required in a given country to carry out a job.

However, there are some professions for which an identical qualifications are desired by companies throughout Europe. This demand may arise for a variety of reasons: technological (for example, in the area of vehicle repair because of the electronic test benches used to detect faults), quality (aimed at ensuring the same quality of service to the consumer in all parts of the European Union, such as reception staff in hotels belonging to the same chain) or safety (e.g. aeronautical maintenance). The professions concerned are highly specific and may coexist within the same company alongside jobs for which the a European qualification does not appear necessary. However, companies may not express a demand for transparency with respect to European qualifications. Companies may indeed prefer to organise an internal market on a European scale rather than seeking to define European qualifications at the level of a branch or group of companies. Thus a European qualification should be placed in the context of a sector approach to transparency which will enable better fluidity of the labour market within the industry considered.

## **Recommendations for the lifelong development of qualifications and skills**

In the context of their full support for the Lisbon strategy, the European social partners (CES, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP) issued a joint declaration in March 2002 concerning the "lifelong development of skills and qualifications". Training throughout life is not central to this, but is mentioned in the text as one of the means for developing skills and not as the final objective of a system for the transparency of qualifications. According to the social partners, "the ability of organisations to identify strategic skills, mobilise them rapidly, recognise them and encourage their acquisition by all employees, constitutes a basis for new competitive strategies. It will allow companies to meet the needs of consumers and their employees in terms of improving their employability and their career projects".

The Symposium proposed orientations, which are more closely based on the labour market and are in many ways distinct from current initiatives in ECVET. To be implemented, it requires a repositioning of the objectives and tools developed in recent years by the European Commission and the Cedefop. The competitive challenge which confronts the European economy today must be placed at the heart of the debate. More than geographical mobility, which even if it increases in the future will always remain limited, the lifelong development of skills constitutes a better response to the need for *professional mobility* that advances in technology and international competition impose upon workers throughout Europe, whatever their level of qualification. During the European Council to be held in December 2004 under the chairmanship of the Netherlands, this objective needs to be clearly confirmed.

### ***People start gaining their qualifications at school***

*The learning of a foreign language and knowledge of new technologies are complementary to basic education*

On this occasion, it would be opportune if the European Council could recall that European workers are also citizens and that their qualifications are built up not only as a result of basic education but also during its earliest years and throughout school attendance. *The learning of a language other the mother tongue, or knowledge of new communication tools* constitute essential elements of the foundation skills that each individual can acquire and subsequently develop. Instruments already exist, with the ICT (information and communication technology) skills passport. The Council should invite Member States to develop such learning programmes. *Indicators* enabling the monitoring of the progress achieved in these areas would usefully supplement the thirteen indicators already retained to follow the "Education and Training 2010" programme.

### ***Defining foundation knowledge for each level of qualification***

In a broader context, the European Commission and Member States could, in liaison with industry and the world of education, initiate *debate on the foundation knowledge necessary for each level of qualification, so as to attain major skill areas*. Although the Bologna process may not appear to be directly transposable to vocational qualifications (firstly, the aim is to certify professional requirements and not training curricula, and secondly, despite the consistent rise in levels of qualification, the great majority of vocational certifications are situated below the first Bologna level), the approach underlying it could be applied to identifying these major blocks of knowledge which are essential to the construction of qualifications and to the development of lifelong skills.

## ***Constructing a European area for qualifications***

### *A European qualification constructed "from the bottom up" with professional partners*

Identifying the needs for European qualifications should constitute the focal point for European policy in this field. A *European qualification* constitutes a good instrument and its development should be encouraged and supported. However, its efficacy will be enhanced if it remains focused on certifying qualifications for which the same skills are required in all EU countries. Identifying the job profiles targeted by this approach requires the close involvement of all professional actors in companies or industrial sectors. In this respect, a "bottom up" approach is the only one which can be adopted. Construction of European reference levels are intended to offer an independent point of reference for national and sectoral qualifications and therefore fully respect national systems and the principle of subsidiarity. The reference levels are a building block of an European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and offer advantages beyond sector specific "European qualifications" to people who want to move around Europe.

Although the general methodology is now documented at a European level, its implementation supposes that *the criteria of transparency, quality and mutual trust will be respected*. Agreements must not solely concern the methods for identifying the abilities which should be the subject of a European qualification, but also the certification methods implemented in each country. Without mutual trust in this respect, the certifications delivered may not be recognised by all countries and will then not be endowed with the European dimension desired: this is the necessary counterpart to the principle of subsidiarity.

A special case when constructing European qualifications is that of the skills linked to the development by European Directives of standards (e.g. with respect to safety) or the licences which are obligatory to exercising a profession (as is the case of the Directives currently under discussion concerning the area of transport). Because these are imposed on all States, their transcription into national law has mechanical consequences upon the skills required in order to ensure that they are complied with by all those affected. *The European Council could thus adhere to the principle that any adoption of European standards should be accompanied by an identification of the skills which need to be developed at a national level to ensure their implementation and control.*

### *Identification of needs through prospective studies*

Identification of the needs for European qualifications must be based on the conduct of *prospective studies*. The work already initiated in this respect and reported to the Symposium, should be encouraged. These studies are of two types: firstly, macro-economic or macro-sectoral, seeking to forecast labour movements by level of qualification, and secondly, micro-sectoral, based on an analysis of activities, technologies, organisational methods, commercial policies, etc., in order to predict changes in the needs for skills in a given sector of activity. The former are of a medium or long-term nature, while the latter provide more short-term data. In both cases, comparisons of the hypotheses and analyses are a prerequisite to the relevance of the results. *Carried out in most cases in a national context, more of these studies should be organised and compared at a European level.* It is the European Union's responsibility to ensure this, by backing the organisation of an active *network of prospective studies on qualifications and skills* and, if necessary, by initiating regular European meetings between forecasting centres, every two or three years.

## ***Organising subsidiarity on the basis of common principles***

If Europe wishes to reconcile the principle of subsidiarity which prevails in terms of certification with the demands of a competitive economy within the single market, *Member States must endeavour to better integrate the European dimension into their own approach whenever this proves necessary*. However, this national approach could be based on common principles which might be defined in the context of the so-called "open coordination" method, which prevails in this area and which the Commission could promote.

### *Identifying national specificities in complement certificates*

For professions which retain a proportion of national specificity, *complement certificates* and *credit transfers* (ECVET) constitute valuable tools that the European Union must encourage and render systematic. As a priority they should target *national specificities which constitute the special skills required to exercise a given profession in a given country*. These are skills which, in some way, are additional to those that a professional must have acquired in his country. Their identification thus constitutes a condition for the transparency of qualifications. *The Cedefop could play an important role in this respect by helping to identify these national specificities, and the European Union could encourage Member States to mention them in their national registers of qualifications, in the form of a complement certificate required in one country or another.*

### *Backing for a translation programme when this is necessary*

As for the block of fundamental knowledge which is common to most Member States regarding the exercise of a given profession, it should be possible to identify it easily from a reading of national certificates. For this to be possible, they must be *legible and understandable* to all professionals. It is the responsibility of Member States to address this problem. If national certificates are easily understandable, their translation into other European Union languages does not need to be systematic. It should only be envisaged when *the use of terminology in the language of a country raises problems of interpretation in another language*, because there are no equivalent words or a misinterpretation is possible. The enormous translation resources available to different European institutions should be exploited to help each of the Member States to accomplish this work. *The European Commission could provide backing for a European programme in this respect.*

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The development of professional mobility, the multiplication of European standards in an increasing number of professions and the need for the same level of service to be ensured throughout the European Union are, together with organisation of the freedom of movement within the European Economic Area, the factors which provide impetus for the creation of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF). However, to be relevant, this system must be

constructed pragmatically, and if necessary combine several approaches and remain focused on identifying professional requirements so as to facilitate access for all to these qualifications. Furthermore, this access must be open to all forms of recognition: initial or continuing training, acquired experience, etc. However, the European Union will only facilitate access to qualifications if it is easy to understand the requirements: the legibility and clarity of the descriptions must therefore be the two rules governing their implementation. This is a prerequisite if transparency is to be not only a principle but also a reality.

The European Union has long been engaged in constructing a European framework for qualifications. Whatever are the tools, it is necessary to associate tightly the social partners at the national and European levels in tripartite framework. We must not lose sight of the fact that this is not the aim of the Union, but above all a service offered to all workers and employers to enable the development of lifelong skills, to raise the level of productivity and competitiveness of the European economy and ultimately to help it find the path towards full employment.

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