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Qualifications: expanding their power, overcoming their limitations

Qualifications largely determine our chances at employment, our ability to access further education and our social status. But they also have limitations: much of the knowledge and competence we acquire through life is left out of our diplomas, certificates and titles. To close this gap, both the education and employment worlds need to engage in redesigning and updating qualifications. This was the main theme of Cedefop's Agora Conference, Qualifications for lifelong learning and employability (Thessaloniki 5-6 October), which examined how qualifications are used in today's economy.

Qualifications – the bridge between education and the labour market – are diplomas, certificates and titles allowing holders access to professional activity and further education and training. Their purpose is to cover the needs of individuals for employment and of the economy for skilled personnel. To do so, they must accurately reflect the individual's knowledge and skills, they must prove that these skills correspond to the standards required by the labour market, and they must be clearly understood by all users – individuals, employers and education systems – across the single labour market of the EU.

In response to rapid changes in skill requirements, we now see certificates and diplomas awarded by enterprises, sectoral bodies and even multinational companies. But this raises the issue of trust. What knowledge do such qualifications really represent? Are they compatible with other qualifications, such as initial training acquired in the public education and training system? Do they have any value outside the company or sector where they were acquired? How can this value be assessed? Such questions cannot be resolved unless all players, from both the education and employment sides, take an active part in setting and updating the standards that underpin the certification process.

This is where the European and national qualification frameworks come in. Their role is to show the relationships between all qualifications, however they may be acquired. The principle of such frameworks has become widely accepted throughout Europe: using the learning outcomes approach, as enshrined in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This in turn makes it possible for individuals, as well as employers, to understand the content of each qualification, no matter the national or sectoral provenance. Some countries have made considerable progress. France and Ireland have introduced systems that include all qualifications, and involve all stakeholders in the process. Germany, Finland and Denmark are now introducing similarly inclusive frameworks, while Portugal is an example of how recognising prior experience and non-formal knowledge can motivate people to pursue further education – thus upskilling the country's workforce.

The next step for the various tools and initiatives of European policy – the EQF, the European credit systems, the quality assurance system for vocational training, lifelong guidance and counselling, and skills forecasting – is for policy-makers to treat them as an integrated policy, rather than as a series of separate instruments. Seen together, these initiatives can make qualifications understandable, relevant and truly useful for all citizens.

What next

Cedefop has been at the forefront of research and policy development regarding qualifications, publishing comparative reports and research papers on the learning outcomes approach, validation of non-formal learning, quality assurance etc. In the next year the Centre shall be further exploring qualifications by examining:

- How curricula based on the ‘learning outcomes’ approach affect teaching and learning (report due in 2010)
- How qualifications can best link education and the labour market: the quest for a common language
- The relationship between the Directive on professional qualifications (2005/36/EC) and the EQF
- How companies use validation methods for skills development
- The continued development of skills forecasting
- Coherence between the various European tools (EQF; the European Credit System for vocational training – ECVET; Europass; validation; guidance and counselling)
- The need to reduce barriers between higher education and vocational education and training (links between Copenhagen and Bologna processes).

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About Cedefop

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), an agency of the European Union based in Thessaloniki, Greece, supports European policy-making in the field of vocational education and training, www.cedefop.europa.eu