International Transparency and Recognition of Vocational Qualifications:
Problems and Promising Approaches

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1. What do we need international transparency and recognition of vocational qualifications for?

To understand the aim of policy issue it is often helpful to reflect on the reason why something is important or on the agenda. Many arguments concerning international transparency and recognition of vocational qualifications (VQs) could be identified, some relevant ones might include:

- to facilitate mobility on the labour market within countries and internationally
- to facilitate national and transnational mobility of individuals and enterprises
- to facilitate the flow of human resources where needed
- to facilitate continuing vocational education and training (CVET) in different institutions or countries
- to avoid time-consuming and cost-intensive assessment procedures
- to improve professional competences
- to improve the quality of production and services
- to strengthen the middle range of competence levels that are far more important for the economy and innovation than is often acknowledged
- the knowledge-based economy and society at international dimensions cannot rely on academic qualifications, only the majority of qualified labour on intermediate levels is based on VET profiles

2. What are the problems concerning the development of transparency and recognition of vocational qualifications (VQs)?

If VET-systems were self-explanatory systems, this issue would not arisedisappear. The problem arises due to the cultural routes of VQs. A great deal of cross-cultural communication as regards VQs or VET-systems is based on considerable misunderstandings. Culturally determined basic terms represent obstacles for the transparency of structures and for outcomes of VET arrangements.
VQs are linguistically based and culturally contextualised: therefore vocational education and training systems are extremely diverse: keywords like “Berufsbildung” are not fully translatable – the term “vocational qualifications”, for instance, covers different meanings from programmes or curricula to outputs of learning processes.

Some countries (e.g. Germany, Switzerland) have institutionalised clear-cut routes of initial VET, others provide non-formal or completely informal routes of on-the-job training that are difficult to distinguish from continuing or adult education and training. In many countries vocational qualifications are acquired non-formally or informally – with or without assessments later on. Therefore these countries stress the need of the recognition of informal learning and acquired knowledge, skills and competences.

Vocational education and training (VOTEC) might be far more culturally diverse than higher education (HE). HE has at least in common that it is “somehow higher” and related to the core of professions with long international pathways.

VET-systems are deeply rooted within institutionalised structures of labour (with their vertical and horizontal differentiations) and only meaningful in the context of national traditions as results of discussions and compromises in the countries’ societies – to produce “transparency” (understanding etc.) we need something that is transnationally understandable and acceptable.

In brief: A VQ consists of culturally contextualised and linguistically mediated information and contains all kinds of semantic ambiguities as a result.

Recognition of VQs (in different institutions or countries) is prepared by transparency work, but it is something quite different in the end: Recognition is a decision or result of decision-making processes – involving different levels and many actors.

Therefore recognition of VQs cannot be based on information merely, recognition of VQs is based on trust, on the mutual trust of involved stakeholders (individual learners, enterprises, public authorities, VET-providers and others).

The key element of recognition of VQs has to be identified as trustworthy information. In international contexts we need fiduciary institutions and common reference frameworks to bridge the diversity of VET-systems – that is the challenge of an open educational area and labour market and leads us to the possible solutions or at least some promising approaches.
3. Which approaches are promising to enhance the transparency and international recognition of vocational qualifications?

First of all we are able to reformulate the question based on the reflections presented above: How can we improve and support mutual trust concerning VQs (VET-programmes, learning outcomes, certificates etc.) as the essential prerequisite for the formal recognition of VQs?

Due to the cultural diversity of VET-systems and labour market structures we need something in common in a cross-cultural perspective. Comparative researchers speak about the "tertium comparationis". In the case of higher education, European educational authorities have agreed to use the “three-tier model” (Bachelor-Master-Ph.D.) as the common reference levels for all Member States in the so-called “Bologna-process”.

We do not have a similar structure of learning outcomes or certificates or any comparable framework as regards VQs. That is the main fact we are faced with. So we need something equivalent. What could that be?

There are different answers which are more or less ambitious and complicated:

Common forms to document learning outcomes: These frameworks for descriptive purposes might be the first step, only with a very basic common terminology.

To elaborate this approach, things get complicated: We need a common terminology based an frameworks of VQ descriptions that are understood and recognised in different enterprises, regions, countries and economic sectors.

To continue we can choose a more top-down or rather a more bottom-up approach, both having the same aims.

Common or transnational qualification frameworks to ensure transparency and mutual trust. What is on hand for these purposes? There are classifications that could help, at least to a certain extent.
First of all ISCED (1997) should be mentioned. ISCED classifies VQs mostly as Level 3, but some countries put VG also to Levels 4 or 5. In general, many VG acquired in continental Europe at Level 3 are placed overseas at Level 5. ISCED is primarily an educational reference, not a labour market oriented one.

Another candidate is ISCO 88 which is an occupational statistical classification systems and defines occupations on a high-level disaggregation of data.

Both mentioned systems are primarily statistical classifications for the purpose of comparative research, but they have some potential with a view to define a first zone of mutual understanding in cross-cultural communications and that is basically what we need.

The European Union has tried to introduce 5 levels of qualifications (in 1985) and in 2002 a new proposal was published to define levels of qualifications with a focus to regulated professions. All these attempts lack final political acceptance mainly because of the existing diversity of VET provision in the 25 Member States. Some countries are afraid of undervaluing their VET-systems, programmes or curricula. Mutual trust is not yet sufficiently developed.

Until 2010 the development of an “open and flexible European qualifications framework (EQF) based on transparency and mutual trust” should be a topical project of the European Commission. This framework is planned to represent a common reference for national labour markets, and thus facilitate the smooth and effective functioning of the European labour market.

The British QCA (London) has produced a proposal of 8 output-oriented vertical levels of VQs (each with 3 sub-levels), which starts with “learning normally acquired during compulsory education” (1) and “induction to work” (2) and ends with “specialist theoretical and practical learning … for work as (senior) professionals and managers” (Level 7) and “leading expert in a highly specialised field dealing with complex situations and having the capacity for long-range strategic and scientific thinking and action” (highest level: 8) (QCA, London, 2004).

The knowledge economy and society with its cosmopolitan structure needs some supra-national VQs to train a broad range of qualified professionals and specialists with VET profiles. We cannot rely on academic qualifications only. VQs play an important role in developing SMEs as
in large enterprises too. VET programmes and their international recognition on the labour market is essential to enhance economic innovation and social cohesion.

What can be done until the common qualifications framework is in force? I see the following approaches above all other possibilities as relevant:

Development of zones of mutual understanding and trust by VET-related co-operations on different institutional levels (VET providers, companies etc.): The transnational exchange of trainees and trainers might be the first step, common curricula the next, common certificates the final one. The beginning may be the co-operation of two VET providers or two training enterprises, but co-operation could be open to include other institutions and countries, thus the “zones of mutual trust in VET and VQs” could grow and become more and more internationally relevant.

One of the main results would be to develop sector-specific standards for knowledge, competences and skills on a clearly defined level for VQ specialists. There could be different consortia: enterprises, VET-providers etc.