

Professional competence standards and frameworks in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Competence frameworks and standards are increasingly used by professions in the UK, driven by pressures for professional accountability and particularly by the trend towards assessing practice before fully-qualified status is granted. A review of forty UK frameworks indicated that most are concerned primarily with the ability to undertake work activities and roles to an appropriate standard, i.e. they reflect a predominantly external or activity-based approach to competence. The better frameworks recognise that competence standards cannot provide prescriptions for practice, reflecting the need for practitioners to act intelligently and ethically and to make judgements in complex and unpredictable situations; they also support valid, robust and consistent assessment, and are capable of being adapted into different practice contexts while remaining sufficiently precise. The overall standard of competence frameworks is however variable, with some being little more than adapted course curricula or simple lists of activities that rely on a high level of tacit agreement about what is needed in practice. The 'project' of developing professional competence frameworks is a work-in-progress, with much to be learned from the best examples of the type.

Key words

Professions; competence; professional standards; work-based assessment.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom the term 'profession' is frequently used in a specific way to refer to occupations that, drawing on Hoyle and John (1995) and Freidson (2001), are based on autonomous thought and judgement, the impartial application of specialist knowledge and expertise, and responsibility to clients and wider society through commitment to a set of values and principles that go deeper than any employment or contractual relationship. With a few exceptions, formal professions also have governing bodies of some form that take responsibility to a greater or lesser degree for ensuring that practitioners embody these principles of professionalism and act in a competent and ethical manner (Friedman, Phillips and Chan 2002). Trends that can be traced back to the nineteenth century and earlier, but that have become particularly prevalent in the last thirty years, have placed increasing emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of professionals to clients and to society generally, sharpening the focus not only on the practices of individuals but on professional governance, education and accreditation (Curry and Wergin 1993, Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts 1997). One of

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the results of these trends is for professional bodies to become more explicit about what they expect of practitioners, generally through the use of professional standards and codes.

The use, style and coverage of standards and codes vary between professions, but broadly speaking a distinction can be drawn between codes that describe how the practitioner should act, consistently and across practice situations, and standards that describe the level of ability needed to work in the profession – whether this is geared to the point immediately after finishing formal training, or sometime later when the practitioner is deemed ready to practise independently. The celebrated Hippocratic oath in medicine can be considered an archetype of the former. This type of code forms as a guide for practitioners and clients, as well as a line beyond which complaints can be upheld and disciplinary action instituted. Most professions have codes of this kind, even if expressed only as a general set of expectations; some have extensive codes of practice designed to cover specific situations in detail. The other type can be termed a competence standard, and its main function is usually to define what needs to be achieved at a point of accreditation or licensing, although it may have secondary roles as a standard of practice or development framework. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) draws a neat distinction between the purposes of the two types of standard in defining the first as concerned with *performance*, i.e. what the practitioner actually does on a continuing basis and therefore part of the profession's regulatory activities, and the second with *competence*, i.e. what the practitioner is able to do, and thus linked to the profession's role in education, training and initial licensing (RCVS 2008). This paper is concerned with the latter kind of standard.

The idea of competence

Drawing on Mansfield (1989) and Eraut (1998), competence can be approached from two broad perspectives. An individual, internal, attributes-based perspective is concerned with the properties or competencies (skills, knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, motivations and so forth) that a person has which enable him or her to act competently in various situations. Competency of this kind can be regarded as belonging to the person, and represented as a profile or set of attributes that tends to change over time as the person develops in one area and loses currency in another. A social, external, activity- or outcomes-based perspective considers what it is that the person does to produce a result that can be considered to be competent, whether in a study context, social situation, or more commonly at work. Competence in this sense belongs to the context, describing competent actions (sometimes termed 'competences' as opposed to 'competencies') rather than the skills or attributes that contribute to being able to carry them out.

The internal or attributes-based approach has become widely used in North America as a means of developing content for professional education programmes, as well as internationally to form the basis of many organisations' competency or development frameworks. Descriptions of competence are generally derived from studies of actual events and people, typically using behavioural event interviewing (Spencer and Spencer 1993, McClelland 1998) or sometimes repertory grid technique (Fransella and Bannister 1977) to identify attributes that contribute to competent performance or that are present in effective job performers. Competency frameworks in this mould have been developed for specific job roles, through broad occupational areas or organisational contexts (e.g. Boyatzis 1982, Hay-McBer 1996), to generic attributes for success (Klemp 1977). The external or activity-based approach has found more favour in the UK and to an extent Europe, where it is used to support

'outcome-based' models of training and assessment. In the UK it is familiar from national occupational standards and the associated National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (here abbreviated to NVQs), a type of qualification designed to reflect workplace competence which was introduced in the late 1980s and has been influential in sub-degree vocational education and training. In this latter context a particular version of the activity-based approach – the job competence model based on functional analysis, a deductive approach to dividing up occupational roles into increasingly detailed descriptions of activity – was widely used to derive occupationally-based competence frameworks (see Training Agency 1988a, 1988b). Up to a point it is also reflected in the definitions of competence used in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the industrial and technical certification standard ISO17024, though these both refer to the application of knowledge and skills (something that is inevitable if not always explicit) to produce competent results. Reflecting common understanding in the UK, Eraut and du Boulay (2000) define working competence as “the ability to perform the tasks and roles required to the expected standard” (p13).

Both broad approaches to competence have advantages and drawbacks, and therefore situations where they are more and less appropriate. The individual or internal approach, by identifying skills, knowledge and attributes required in particular situations, tends to be an effective tool for developing programmes to prepare people for practice as well as for assessing potential (for instance at the end of a full-time course), the latter particularly where it is not possible to assess application. In the UK the further development of the approach through the Royal Society for Arts' capability initiative (Stephenson 1998), which defines capability at a broad level to include such aspects as self-efficacy, intelligent judgement and ethics, suggests that if applied appropriately it can do considerably more than prepare people to be effective role incumbents. Its usefulness for judging ability to practise is more limited, as it doesn't indicate whether the person is able to draw together the various attributes and use them intelligently to produce competent performance; it is however potentially useful to aid people's development into new areas or to change ways of working, hence its popularity for organisational competency frameworks. On the other hand the situated nature of some of these frameworks – and their tendency to be based on research into small populations over short timescales – means that they are prone to reflecting factors that happen to be present in the reference population rather than being essential to competent action.

The activity-based approach has almost opposite characteristics to the internal one in that it is concerned with outputs and standards of action rather than the abilities needed to achieve them; it is therefore more suitable for assessing application and practice, while providing little guidance about the characteristics that will contribute to reaching the required standard. Much of the criticism of this approach has been directed towards the UK occupational competence model, and focuses on its narrowness and rigidity, poor ability to reflect complex professional work, and its being based on deductive processes led by small groups of experts rather than on research into what people actually do (Elliott 1991, Hodkinson 1995, Grugulis 2000, Eraut 2004). Activity-based competence frameworks have however evolved substantially beyond the narrowness of early occupational standards, particularly through application in higher education and in professions (e.g. Winter and Maisch 1996, Lester 2001), as well as in some of the more recent examples of occupational standards. These later versions of the activity-based model appear to have met some of the earlier criticisms at least to the point where they are able to act as workable standards for assessing ability to practise.

In practice a certain amount of hybridisation can take place between the two basic approaches, particularly to include soft skills, values and knowledge alongside activity-based descriptions of competence. UK occupational standards have often included a list of associated knowledge alongside the competence statements, and a few frameworks included in addition a set of desirable behaviours (the 'personal competence model' in the former Management Charter Initiative standards is a good example) or a unit or section on values. In Europe, the (unintended) use of the EQF level statements to structure competence profiles has led to a number of frameworks emerging that include knowledge, skills and (activity-based) competence, roughly corresponding to the way that the levels are described; this reflects the EQF definition of competence as "proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and in professional and personal development" (European Commission 2008, p11). The success of hybrid models is variable; they can support the design of developmental programmes as well as assessment of practice, but poorer examples are confusing, repetitive and can encourage assessment to focus on attributes rather than actions.

A matter that is rarely given sufficient attention in competence frameworks designed for certification is that of the level of competence (in the sense of poor to excellent) at which the 'pass' point should be set. In the internal version of competence this can sometimes be aided by the way in which the skills and attributes are defined, although even here the threshold level can be ambiguous. In the activity-based version it can be particularly difficult to identify what an acceptable level of competence involves. An early and enduring mantra of the British NVQ system was that candidates are to be deemed 'competent' or 'not yet competent,' with the bar being set at 'the standard required in employment' (e.g. QCA 1998). In reality the expectations of 'employment' of course differ from employer to employer, and more importantly the customary expectations for a newly-qualified entrant in one occupation or role can be markedly different from that in another; added to this the interpretation of the minimum standard by training establishments or qualification awarding bodies is not necessarily the same as that of employers. The more critical nature of accreditation and licensing in professions suggests that an explicit definition of the threshold level may be needed, either through a simple description of what forms an acceptable standard, or through using a progressive scale such as that provided by Dreyfus' skill acquisition model (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986).

How professions describe competence

My earlier study into professional entry-routes and qualifying requirements (Lester 2008, 2009) identified the use of some form of competence framework by professions as a rising trend, primarily if not always associated with assessing practice before signing practitioners off as fully qualified. The study described here forms an extension of this earlier one, and was carried out during 2012 to examine the competence frameworks and standards used by a sample of UK professions. Standards for 40 professions were examined, principally from self-governing professional bodies and professional regulators; four frameworks (10%) were newly developed in the last five years, and 45% had been revised during the same period. Occupations were chosen to give a selection of different sectors and sizes, as well as a representation from a mix of state regulated, chartered and non-chartered professions (see table 1). Eligibility for inclusion depended on the profession having some form of description of what practitioners *need to be able to do* or the *skills, knowledge and other attributes that they need to master in order to practise* – regardless of level of detail, whether or not it is used for assessment, or whether it is contained in an independent document or part of something

else such as an examination specification or training manual. Documents were examined to determine the way in which they describe competence or practice; the way that competence statements are structured; the level of detail used; the content, including the balance between generic and profession-specific aspects; what they are used for; and any other salient characteristics such as the use of a threshold measure or scale, or linkage to occupational or other external standards. Reference was also made to notes from the earlier study for the 19 professions that featured in both, and discussions (generally serendipitous rather than specifically planned) were held with representatives from seven bodies.

Table 1. Professions examined in the study

Sector	Chartered bodies	State regulated	Other	Total
Business and finance	5	1	3	9
Built environment	5		1	6
Science and engineering	7		1	8
Health and social services	1	7	1	9
Education and information	1	2	2	5
Culture and leisure	1		2	3
Total	20	10	10	40

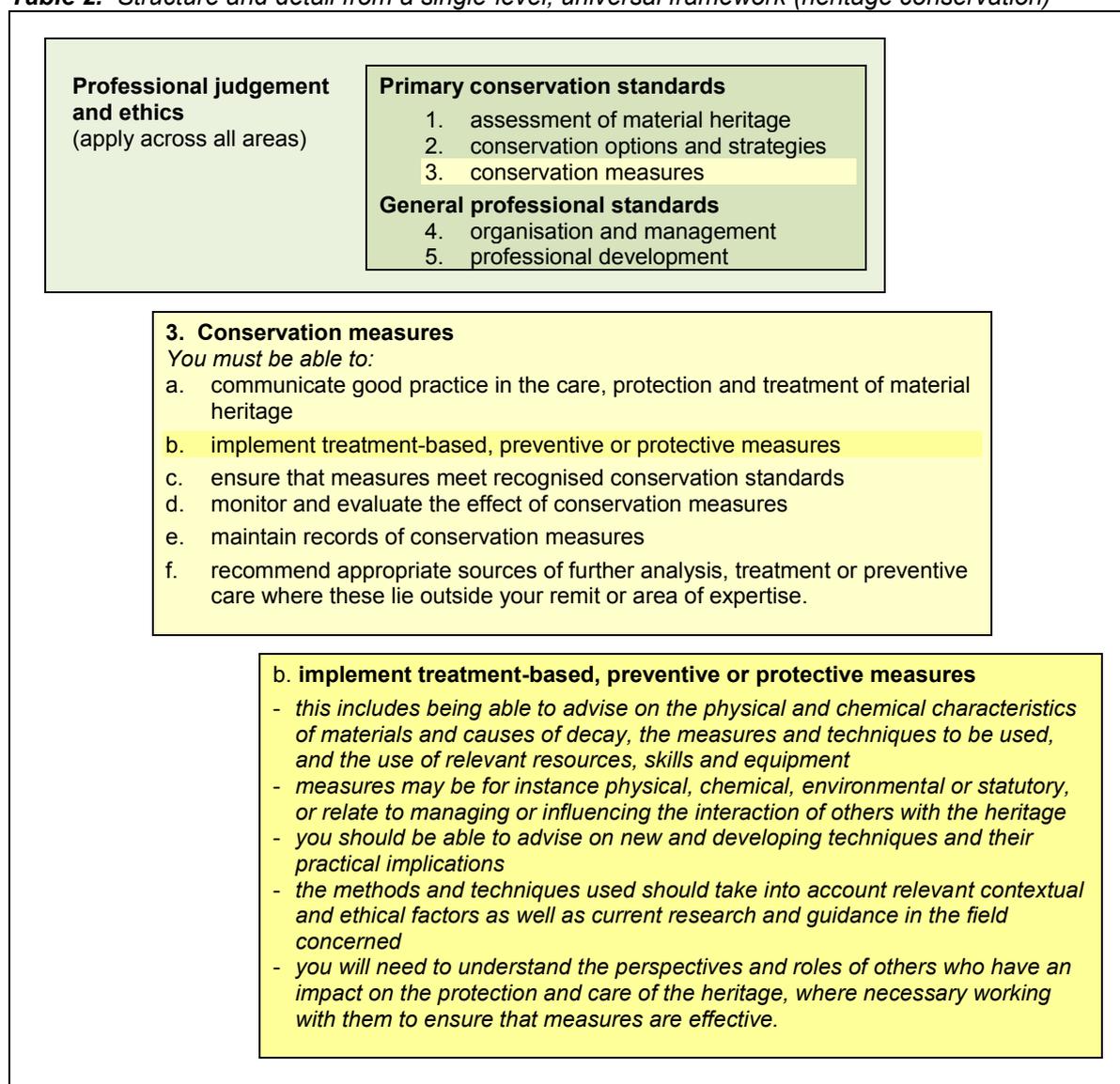
As anticipated from the earlier study, the main use of the frameworks (and reason given for developing them) was assessment, generally at the point of admission to qualified or licensed status; 88% (35 frameworks) were used for this purpose. A further three were related to examinations or free-standing qualifications. Two had been developed without reference to qualifications or licensing, although for one of these there was a long-term aim to develop a qualified status. Of the frameworks used for assessment, ten were also explicitly promoted as tools for supporting ongoing practice and continuing professional development, and two were used in adapted form to guide the professional body in accrediting higher education courses.

Models of competence

Almost all the frameworks examined (88%) used primarily an activity-based approach to competence. Of the remainder, three were expressed principally in terms of understanding and application of knowledge, having been developed from examination syllabi; one took the form of a table of skills, knowledge and attitudes; and one, a fairly rudimentary framework, was written in terms of broad-level, generic skills. Returning to what could be considered the 'mainstream' frameworks, just under half (38% of the total) used activity-based statements alone (including for generic areas of activity such as self-development, management and general professional practice), while the others included some behaviours and/or knowledge statements. Three professional bodies used separate behavioural frameworks, one in a matrix relationship with its activity-based standards, one as a supplementary set of benchmarks and one as a separate framework for ongoing development. Most of the others that used both approaches employed these in different sections of the framework: for instance a set of generic skills, values or behaviours, a knowledge section, followed by activity-based practice statements. Other ways of combining different types of statements were occasionally present, such as the further education teaching standards developed by the occupational standards body Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK, now the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, LSIS), where each area of the standards was structured in the form of a section on values and commitments followed by a list of

activities each with a corresponding knowledge statement. Three frameworks were inconsistent in terms of the approaches followed, with a somewhat muddled use of skills, activities and understanding.

Table 2. Structure and detail from a single-level, universal framework (heritage conservation)



Source: Institute of Conservation (2007).

Very few frameworks reflected the heavily prescriptive (and widely criticised) approach used in early occupational standards and NVQs. In perhaps two-thirds of the frameworks, a more mature approach was apparent that balanced the need for precision and assessability with enough room to allow interpretation in context and, to a degree, evolution of practice. Only two frameworks could be described as prescriptive or excessively detailed, both of these amounting to around a hundred pages of text and reading more as extended codes of practice than competence frameworks. At the opposite end of the spectrum some frameworks were quite skeletal, with only a few key statements giving a feel for the level of understanding and practice expected, allowing a large amount of leeway for interpretation into different contexts (thus necessitating a high level of tacit agreement across the profession to provide consistency of interpretation). Broadly speaking, the more developed

frameworks could be described as looking beyond the kind of closed competence of the early NVQ model, requiring a high level of decision-making and ability to act effectively and perhaps innovatively in complex contexts, as well as often to make balanced judgements in ethically ambiguous situations.

The style and structure of professional competence frameworks

The majority of the frameworks in the sample followed a straightforward hierarchical structure (e.g. main areas of activity, sometimes sub-areas, and competence statements as short sentences or occasionally short paragraphs, as illustrated in table 2). Exceptions included the LLUK/LSIS standards already referred to, and three frameworks where the detailed statements were each described at more than one level of proficiency (such as borderline, acceptable and exceeding requirements). Typically the frameworks contained two or three levels of detail, and spanned (across the quartiles) between three and 14 pages of text. A few (15%) took the form of a single set of statements, either a few attributes described in depth or a simple list of activities over a page or two, or exceptionally more; as might be expected these were on the whole the more skeletal frameworks, though they tended to be used in fairly controlled conditions (such as assessment at the end of a standard training programme) where other means of achieving consistency were present. An exception was provided by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) standards, which listed 98 areas of competence each described at three levels of proficiency.

The clarity and precision of language used in the frameworks was variable, although on balance it was reasonably fit for purpose. Three kinds of issues were apparent, affecting just over a third of the frameworks. One was the occasional use of attitudinal statements in frameworks designed to be assessed, with no further translation into assessable activities: for instance, a statement such as 'has a positive attitude towards social and cultural diversity' is extremely difficult to use as an assessment criterion without details of how such an attitude needs to be reflected into practice. Similarly, some frameworks included the occasional statement that was simply too vague to provide useful guidance for development or assessment, or lacked any indication about the level of complexity at which it needed to be performed. Thirdly, many frameworks were written in a third-person tense, either as if prefaced by 'the practitioner must be able to...', or less commonly for example '(the practitioner) *establishes* performance management processes...'. In most cases this presented no problems, although the latter style could appear distant and unengaging as if always referring to an anonymous candidate or practitioner rather than to the reader. However, a few statements were found where use of the singular 'their' caused confusion, as in 'ensure that individuals... providing assistance to clients and working under their supervision...', where it is unclear whether it is the clients' or the practitioner's supervision that is intended. The passive-tense statements used in early occupational standards and that were the subject of widespread confusion and criticism now appear to be a thing of the past.

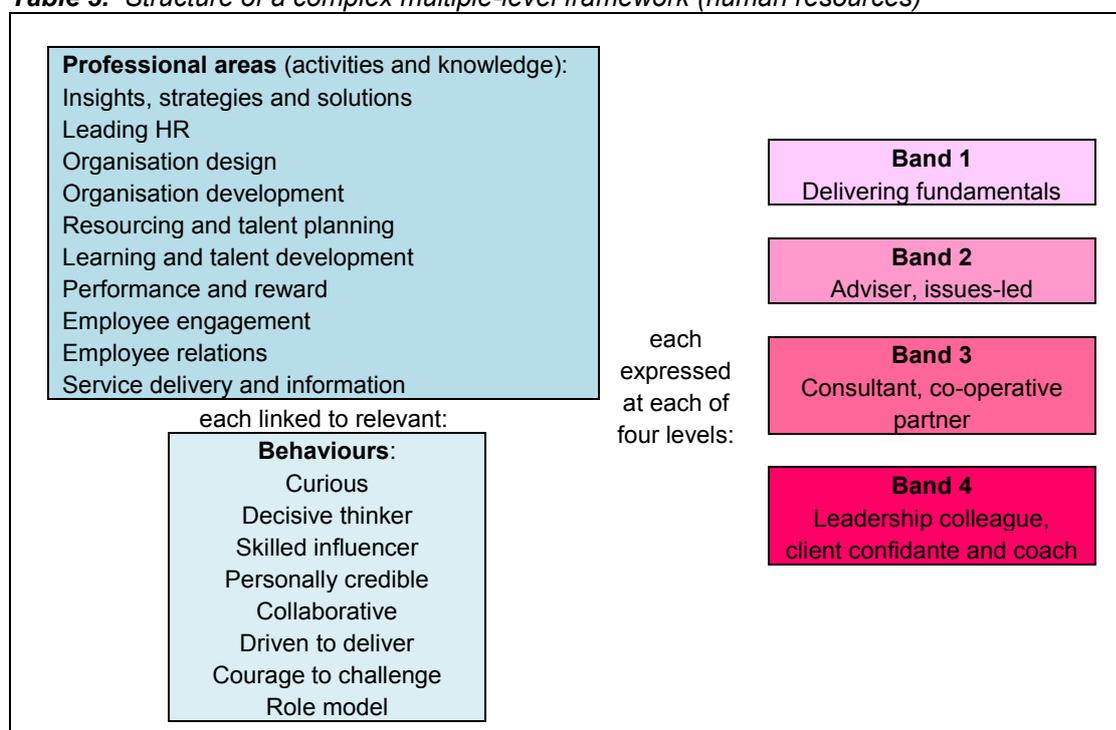
Returning to the structure of the frameworks, nearly three-quarters (74%) included a section or set of statements on general professional principles, typically titled professional practice, values and ethics, or ethics and judgement. In most these simply formed one of the several areas of competence making up the framework, without further guidance. In five frameworks a more sophisticated approach was taken to this part of the specification, in one of two ways. The more common way of doing this was exemplified by the Icon (heritage conservation) standards (table 2), which indicated that the judgement and ethics section was to be applied to the activities in the other part of the framework wherever relevant; this means that not only is there a requirement to demonstrate the

ability to apply it, but also to ensure that all other activities comply with it. The LUK/LSIS standards included a separate section on professional values and practice, while also prefacing each activity-based section with relevant values and commitments. A third approach used by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (table 3) was to cross-reference a separate set of behavioural competencies to the relevant areas of activity in the main framework.

Levels and roles

The majority – 83% - of the frameworks examined referred to a single professional level, such as social worker, chartered chemist, accredited conservator, or fully qualified member of the relevant institute. The remainder accommodated more than one level, in all cases by specifying separate standards for each level or grade. In some instances this was used to denote progression towards fully qualified or licensed level, so that for instance the nursing framework included criteria for use at the point of progression from general to specialist training as well as those for final registration, and the RCVS (veterinary) framework included a set of ‘day 1’ standards relating to the end of the university course and ‘year 1’ standards for a point one year into practice. The other multi-level frameworks accommodated different grades, for instance the Engineering Council framework’s descriptors for technician, incorporated and chartered engineer, and the CIPD’s framework of four levels relating to assistant, officer, manager and director roles (table 3). One framework, the British Computer Society’s Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA), spanned seven levels from basic user to advanced professional, with the possibility of mapping roles across more than one level.

Table 3. Structure of a complex multiple-level framework (human resources)



Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2012).

A second major difference noted between frameworks was whether they were designed to be universal, i.e. all the statements designed to apply across the profession, or whether a ‘core-and-options’ or similar approach was used to reflect different specialisms or sets of activities. Universal

frameworks were in the majority (65%); in most cases these were intended to be applied early in the practitioner's development when the scope of practice would be fairly restricted, as for instance in the initial sign-off of medical general practitioners, veterinary surgeons or architects. In other professions the framework was designed to apply across a range of roles or specialisms, while also needing to be precise enough to support assessment. The Icon and Landscape Institute frameworks were of this type, with the former applying to a broad range of specialisms and roles and used for assessment a few years into practitioners' careers, and the latter across the five branches of the profession recognised by the Institute; experience from implementation suggests that the former in particular has been highly successful in distilling the work of the profession into a concise set of assessable standards. Finally, three frameworks produced by umbrella organisations – those for Chartered Engineer, Chartered Scientist, and Chartered Environmentalist – reflected a general level of practice for interpretation into more specific contexts by the professions subscribing to them, although in some cases they were also used directly for assessment.

In a quarter of the professions studied some parts of the framework were regarded as applying to all practitioners while others could be selected according to pathway or specialism. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants' standards typified this approach, with a common set of standards covering professionalism, ethics, governance, management and personal effectiveness, plus eleven technical accountancy areas from which candidates for the chartered title choose four. A slightly different version was found in nursing, where common training is followed by specialisation in a branch of the profession; the intermediate standards apply to the common core, while the registration standards cover both the core and the chosen branch. The remaining three frameworks – RICS, CIPD and the SFIA – used what could broadly be described as a 'mapping' approach, where specialisms or roles are mapped to the standards. The RICS version of this was unique, in that each of the many surveying specialisms has its own core-and-options requirement which was referenced to the wide range of competence statements previously referred to, additionally specifying the level of proficiency at which each is to be achieved. On balance the core-and-options models appeared to work better for early-career assessment or where roles were reasonably well-defined, as it was apparent that in some professions practitioners worked in a very large number of roles, suggesting either the need for generic standards or potentially a mapping approach with wide scope for negotiation to reflect the relevant role.

Finally, the identification of threshold standards within competence frameworks appeared to be an exception; only 30% had an explicit statement of the standard required for assessment, with 10% having a simple threshold and 20% some form of scale. The more common approach was the use of a general scale sitting alongside the standards, such as a Dreyfus-based novice-to-expert model as used in heritage conservation and medical general practice, or the Chartered Institute of Taxation's three-point scale (awareness and application in a simple scenario, detailed application to practice, and advanced exposition, analysis and application in novel situations). In some instances assessors were instructed to grade according to these scales, either with a minimum threshold applicable to all areas of the framework or a certain amount of allowable compensation. An alternative, encountered in three instances as already described for the RICS, involved using a similar type of scale but defining each competence statement at each of the relevant levels.

Trends

Although the study did not specifically explore trends, the opportunity to compare current and earlier frameworks in seven instances, as well as a draft revised framework with its current version, allowed some indication of how professional standards frameworks are evolving; in addition, reference was made to two earlier studies (Eraut and Cole 1993 and Lester 2008) which while not primarily about frameworks contained enough information to enable limited comparisons to be made. Immediately noticeable is a continuing movement from internal or behavioural frameworks to predominantly external or activity-based ones, and (in the best frameworks) the increasing sophistication and clarity of language to be able to describe competence precisely enough without becoming over-prescriptive or resorting to large amounts of detail. The influence of the early occupational standards model (which was never very extensive at professional level, but was at least partly evident in the Eraut and Cole study) has also almost entirely disappeared, and surprisingly little cross-referencing was encountered in any case between professional and occupational standards. Along with improved clarity, newer standards appear to be better future-proofed (e.g. less reference to specific regulations or other time-limited documents, specific procedures or current fads) and where relevant also take account of a wider range of contexts of practice. A gradual movement towards what might be called 'precise and concise' standards documents is also apparent, with discussions indicating that as assessors become more familiar with using competence standards the need for large amounts of detail decreases.

Things that have been slower to materialise include the use of explicit threshold standards and the development of some of the more rudimentary frameworks to move beyond reliance on a high level of tacit agreement about what constitutes competent practice. However, frameworks need to be considered in relation to the purposes that they are used for, and increasing sophistication has tended to be associated with use in situations that are more open to interpretation and challenge. Some of the professions in the study use their frameworks in relatively controlled conditions, for instance to assess trainees or students at the end of a well-defined programme, where the need for detailed assessment criteria and standards may (arguably) be less.

The content of professional competence frameworks

Comparing the coverage of frameworks is made difficult by the different ways that professions package content, with some for instance focusing on processes such as analysis, planning, and implementation and embedding generic factors within the standards relating to each process, some separating out general areas (such as ethics, self-development and generic management) from profession-specific content, and others structuring their standards around different technical areas or topics. Detailed analysis does however suggest that a number of common factors can be identified across the majority of frameworks, accounting for most of the areas covered.

In the initial analysis it was relatively simple to tease out statements that referred to generic aspects of being a professional. These included ethics, values, conduct, scope of practice, and judgement; self-development and development of colleagues (and in some cases contributing to developing the profession); and management of self, work processes, colleagues, and sometimes the business or organisation. In most cases these were fairly easy to distinguish from profession-specific areas even if they were couched in specific terms. A further broad area of competence that appeared in many

frameworks was concerned with communication and with relationships with clients and the public; while in some professions this could be worded in a profession-specific way, overall it could be considered a fourth generic area. Several frameworks also contained a significant amount of material on the context of professional activity. Although this could form an important area of knowledge, the areas of competence associated with it related to ethics and scope of practice, to assessment, analysis and decision-making, and to a lesser extent evaluation; in an activity-based framework it would be difficult to separate out as an area of competence in its own right.

The other, and for most frameworks larger, area of coverage was the technical or profession-specific domain. Initially this proved less tractable both because of the wide variety of areas and topics addressed, and the different ways used by professions to approach it: principally, a sequential approach where the competence statements refer to different parts of a process (as in a project cycle) that apply across the profession's work, or a technical or topic-based approach where actions and procedures associated with each activity were described under the relevant topic heading (so for instance in an accountancy framework sections were included on accounting, audit, and financial management). The sequential approach provided a better model for generic description of professional activity, and overlaying it on the topic-based one indicated that areas of activity could often be unpicked into the different stages of the sequence or cycle. A 'best-fit' cyclic model was developed using four stages: investigation, analysis and assessment; problem-solving, planning and decisions; action or implementation; and review and evaluation. While it was difficult to divide up every set of technical competence statements into these stages (some topic-based versions in particular appeared focused principally on implementation and the related technical knowledge, with brief if any reference to the other stages), they did appear to provide a workable way of organising the content of professional competence frameworks.

Table 4. *Distribution of content in professional competence frameworks*

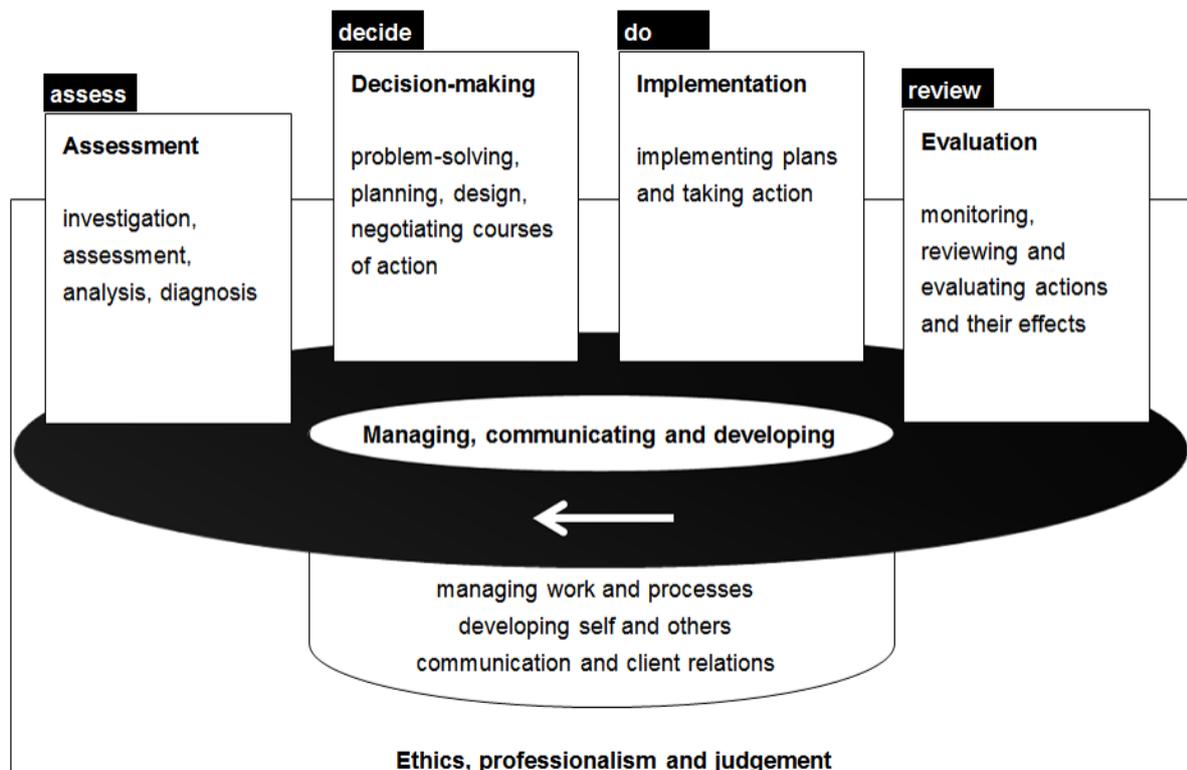
Area	Percentage of frameworks including (n = 35)	Relative emphasis (%)
Generic areas		
Ethics and professionalism	74.3	14.6
Developing self, others and profession	60.0	8.2
Managing self, work and others	80.0	11.5
Communication, client and public relations	62.9	7.1
	97.1	41.4
Profession-specific areas		
Investigation, analysis and assessment	77.1	12.0
Problem-solving, planning and decisions	62.9	9.5
Action and implementation	94.3	30.6
Review and evaluation	51.4	6.4
	100.0	58.6

Table 4 identifies the occurrence of each of the specific and generic areas in the 35 activity-based frameworks. The first column shows the percentage of frameworks in which the relevant area features, so that for instance while only 60% of frameworks made reference to development of self,

others or the profession, all but one (97%) included some coverage of at least one of the four generic areas. The second column indicates the relative emphasis given to each area averaged across all 35 frameworks. This figure was obtained by taking the number of areas or statements in the framework referring to each of the eight areas in the table, and dividing them by the total number of areas or statements in the framework, thus giving each framework an equal weighting. At this summary level, three factors stand out: first, the relatively high emphasis given to the generic factors; secondly the strong emphasis on implementation; and thirdly the low emphasis given to review and evaluation, suggesting that this is not a high priority for many professions (or has simply not been made explicit). However, the balance between the specific areas should be treated with caution, because of the issues described previously in ‘unpacking’ topic-based frameworks into different parts of the sequence.

Building on the above analysis, the model in figure 1 offers a generic structure for a professional competence framework based on a cyclic process backed by general aspects of professional activity. The purpose is not to suggest that all frameworks should follow this approach or place equal emphasis on each area of the cycle, but to offer key areas for consideration as well as a conceptual model for organising the framework. The topic-based or technical approach will be more appropriate for some professions than a generic sequential one, but the cyclic sequence is still relevant in considering where each stage of the cycle takes place in relation to the topics. For instance, the whole cycle could take place within each area of activity, or a general stage of analysis, diagnosis and decision-making might lead into different types of interventions at the action and implementation phase each of which is represented by a parallel set of competence statements.

Figure 1. A cyclic model for structuring professional competence standards.



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Conclusions

The study indicates that the use of competence standards by professional bodies is an ongoing phenomenon, with new frameworks emerging and existing ones gradually becoming more refined. The principal reason for this appears to be the increasing trend to make some form of assessment of practice before signing practitioners off as fully qualified, either generally or for particular routes to qualified status, combined with growing concerns to ensure that assessment is valid, robust and consistent (Lester 2009). The extent to which current frameworks are fully fit for this purpose, and other uses to which they are put, is however variable. Of the 40 frameworks examined, only around a third can be regarded as exemplars in terms of their ability to support high-quality assessment, with perhaps another 40% as adequate if the assessors have sufficient induction into what is intended and there is a reasonable level of agreement about interpretation. Given a tendency for professional communities of practice to overestimate consistency of interpretation (cf Eraut and Cole 1993), this suggests that there is substantial room for improvement.

The main issues encountered among the professional competence frameworks studied were insufficient detail and precision to support robust and consistent assessment, and a tendency for some frameworks to be essentially a knowledge syllabus expressed in competence terms, creating issues for validity if the objective is to assess or guide practice. A minority of frameworks suffer from the opposite vice of an excess of detail; there is at least anecdotal evidence both from NVQ implementation and from professional contexts that apart from making assessment time-consuming, too much detail undermines consistency as assessors reassert their own interpretations to avoid becoming overwhelmed by trivia. A further issue apparent particularly in some of the core-and-options frameworks is lack of flexibility to reflect a sufficient range of roles in the profession; as noted previously this is not problematic if the framework is used principally to assess practice at the end of a defined period of training, but less appropriate when used for experienced practitioner and mature entry, when mismatches between the framework coverage and real-world practitioner roles become significant barriers to access.

On the other hand the study included several examples that can be described as eminently fit for purpose and representative of leading-edge thinking. The better frameworks are reasonably concise, use precise language that is capable of interpretation across the relevant contexts, and where necessary are supported by plain-English guidance rather than additional layers of detail. There is also sophistication in how high-level professional capability is reflected, acknowledging that competence standards need to support the ability of practitioners to act intelligently and with ethical literacy (Lunt 2008) as well as to make decisions that are appropriate in context, rather than the frameworks attempting to provide universal prescriptions for practice. In terms of function, some of the more developed frameworks are taking on a wider role in the relevant professions, so that for instance the CIPD's professional standards map is promoted as part of the profession's identity as well as a self-development tool; the conservation framework was used to help disparate practitioner communities come together to form a single institute; and the Landscape Institute is using its recently-developed standards as a basis for course accreditation, final assessment, and as a generic statement of what the profession's work involves.

To conclude, the 'project' represented by professional competence frameworks is moving forward at different speeds in different professions. The best examples are sophisticated but straightforward and

clearly expressed, take into account the breadth of roles within the profession, and are fit for a variety of purposes including but not limited to assessment for qualified status. The poorer ones can be imprecise, informed more by educational curricula rather than by what practitioners need to do, and represent muddled thinking in terms of the way competence is conceptualised and expressed. While the restricted contexts in which some of these less developed frameworks are used means that they can still be workable, continuing pressures for professional accountability (as well as for more explicit guidelines from students and practitioners) suggest that there will be continuing evolution of professional competence frameworks towards and beyond the best current examples.

Author

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