

Note on activity, skills and assessment standards

27 June 2019

This memo, without aiming to be exhaustive or prescriptive, proposes to contribute to the definition and examination of activities, skills and assessment standards.

Its principles aim to ensure that the professional qualification project can be:

- implemented in response to an existing and prospective need for skills expressed by the professional participants from each sector or identified on the employment market;
- based on a skills development engineering approach (rather than from a training or educational content engineering perspective);
- the result of a qualification engineering approach that begins with a socio-economic analysis that is both concrete and plans for future employment market needs, resulting in a methodological analysis of the professional activity and a detailed description of one or more given job types;
- represented by standards describing all the skills required to exercise identified professional activities which present assessment situations using appropriate criteria to measure or assess the achievement of previously defined skills.

1. The legislative framework.

1.1. The legislative framework of the RNCP.

A description of the compulsory standards for professional qualification is provided in Article L. 6113-1 of the French Labour Code created by law no. 2018-71 of 5 September 2018: "Professional qualifications registered in the national directory of professional qualifications validate acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary to exercise professional activities. They are particularly defined by an activity standard defining the work situations and activities carried out, the trades or jobs covered, a skills standard identifying the corresponding knowledge and skills, including interdisciplinary ones, and an assessment standard setting out the criteria and methods for assessing prior learning."

Furthermore, that same article specifies that "professional qualifications are made up of skills blocks – homogeneous and coherent sets of skills contributing to the autonomous exercise of a professional activity, which can be assessed and validated".

1.2. The legislative framework of the specific directory.

Regarding requests for registration in the specific directory, it should be recalled that Article R. 6113-11 does not impose a formal standard of activities.

Nevertheless, since the development of a qualification project requires prior identification of skills needs (based on an analysis of work situations), a qualification contained in the specific directory – insofar as it formalises the interdisciplinary or complementary skills associated with a profession – must necessarily identify its connection with the activity or activities relating to that profession.

2. The activity standard and the skills standard.

2.1. Terminological framework.

When it is built on robust engineering, professional qualification – understood here as the process of verifying a person’s mastery of professional skills as formalised in a standard – constitutes a fundamental social benchmark for:

- workers, since qualification guarantees them in terms of:
 - securing their career by providing a visible indicator of their level of qualification;
 - professional integration, since the skills acquired are in line with the needs of the employment market;
 - recognition of their professional skills;
 - potential for professional mobility;
- funding, since qualification is essential to accessing certain funds (personal training account, personal training account for professional transition, etc.);
- employers, by providing a reliable benchmark in terms of recruitment and making it possible to meet skills needs in the employment market;
- training organisations, in terms of:
 - adaptation of their training content to the skills sought;
 - readability and suitability of their range of training to the needs of buyers and financial backers;
- the whole of society: a stable and reliable qualification system is a tool for recognising prior learning, a guarantee of the suitability of skills development mechanisms to socio-economic needs and therefore a means of lowering the level of structural unemployment and improving the competitiveness of the national economy. Furthermore, effective links between vocational qualifications and sectoral needs and are an indicator of the quality of the vocational training system.

In view of these issues and the diversity of participants involved, the activity and skill standards must result from a rational process of identifying needs and analysing work, necessarily incorporating forward-planning. They must also offer a harmonised vocabulary to describe their various components:

- profession is understood here as a group of jobs;
- employment is understood here as a group of activities that the individual must accomplish in a broad professional context (the “standard job” is a concept common to several companies);
- professional activity is understood here as a coherent, logical and/or chronological whole, work sequences finalised, identified and organised according to a process which can be observed as such.

2.2. The concept of professional competence.

There are currently many different ways of defining competence¹. The elements presented below focus on the notion of professional competence, linked to the issue of professional qualifications.

Competence can be seen as the relevant use of your resources (e.g. knowledge, technical know-how, interpersonal skills) and the resources of your environment in various situations, in order to carry out an activity according to the professional objectives to be achieved.

¹ For example, AFNOR X50-750 definition: “use of skills in a professional situation, making it possible to exercise a function or an activity in the right way.

The results of its implementation can be assessed in a given context (taking into account autonomy, available resources and the situation) although competence must be transferable from one context to another.

In other words, competence – combined “knowledge” in action, used in order to carry out a professional activity – is assessed, as a learning outcome, according to methods designed to certify its possession in view of the achievement of a result for a predetermined level of requirement.

Finally, since competence contributes to carrying out an activity, it should be remembered that consistency of the activity standard is the cornerstone of the skills standard. Constructing a skills standard without prior formalisation of an activity standard and transcribing the aims of a training programme into “skills” language, is like building on sand.

2.3. Methodology to help write up skills.

How to write about skills is not standardised. It can be described in various ways once it features a contextualised and finalised combination of knowledge in action consistent with the expected level of mastery of the skill.

Writing about skills can therefore be structured using:

- an **action verb** in the infinitive, since the skill takes its meaning from the action;
- the **“what”**: the subject of the action;
- the **“why”** or the **“purpose”**, the competence expressed in relation to an objective or a result to be achieved (for, in order to, in view of, for the attention of);
- possibly, the **“how”**, since implementation of the skill depends on the resources provided (the object of the action, the operating procedure or the resources).

For example: Clean (the action verb) the premises and the kitchen equipment (the what) in order to keep them available (the why) while applying food hygiene regulations (the how).

2.4. Skills blocks.

The concept of block refers to an aggregate of identifiable, interdependent and non-detachable elements. Like bricks, these therefore allow gradual career construction and development.

It should therefore be recalled here, in addition to the specific memo dedicated to blocks, that a precise identification of skills blocks is a prerequisite for the success of the work of building gateways and equivalence between professional qualifications.

In this sense, structuring into skill blocks:

- is a step in the organisation of qualification engineering that takes place at the end of a sustained approach to analyse qualifications comparable at the same level;
- may be different from the organisation into activities and skills previously established within the framework of the standards.

This last choice falls under the responsibility of the certification provider which, depending on the engineering implemented, may relate the skill blocks to one or more activities in the standard while allowing an assessment of

its interdisciplinary nature where relevant (if it contains interdisciplinary skills) or its complementary or even optional nature (if it allows specialisation based on qualification).

Despite these reorganisation options, an effective construction of skill blocks can only be achieved if:

- the activity standard is built on a robust analysis of work identifying the activities that can be carried out in a coherent and autonomous manner;
- the activities and skills standards are constructed coherently, with a clear link between professional activities and the associated skills;
- and finally, that the methods for evaluating the blocks are consistent with the professional dimension of the comprehensive qualification assessments.

The quality of the skills block is therefore completely dependent on the quality of the professional qualification standards.

3. The assessment standard.

3.1. Description of the assessment standard.

A lacklustre write-up of the skills standard naturally impacts the relevance, consistency and readability of the assessment standard.

In the framework of a professional qualification procedure, the assessment standard lists what is assessed and how:

- it indicates the situations in which the skills and potentially the associated knowledge can be assessed: the assessment methods;
- it indicates the success criteria or the levels to be reached in order to locate the candidate's performance: the observable expectations.

A relevant, adapted and readable assessment standard can be used to guide and harmonise examination boards, improve candidates' preparation for assessments, while enabling the certification body to provide an assurance that the skills have been acquired by the holder of the qualification.

3.2. Assessment methods.

Assessment methods can be many and varied but must match the work actions and situation as closely as possible. They must also be consistent with the expected level of mastery of the skill, thereby promoting a connection to the concept of standard job (which generally includes different grades of mastery of the skill).

To do this, the skills assessment may particularly be carried out in professional situations (in a real or simulated work situation) or based on resources (to check that the candidate has the required knowledge, reasoning methods, physical aptitude, etc.). A well prepared role-playing scenario (educational engineering) will require the candidate to draw on his/her knowledge to successfully complete it.

3.1 “Criteria” – observable expectations.

It is necessary to define the “criteria” to be used by the evaluators to measure the learner's degree of appropriation of the various skills.

In principle, these criteria comprise two elements:

- the general level of quality expected (not directly observable);
- one or more indicators (observable).

For example: “Relevance of the specifications (non-observable quality): the specifications identify the need expressed by the customer; the structure of the intervention is proposed; the provisional timetable is realistic; the financial proposal is complete (observable indicators).”

The definition of these “criteria” must explicitly contain the type of information, actions and behaviours to be demonstrated by the learner during his/her assessment.