

Document registration and management	
Project name	Research into the transferability of the labor market demand for competences into curricula
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Status	Approved
Version	Final
Document name	Transferability of the labor market demand into curricula.doc
Document date	02-07-1999

Educational Technology Expertise Center Open University of the Netherlands

Research project proposal

This project falls in the following research topic(s):

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Design | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Competence analysis / domain modeling |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning tasks & learner support |
| Delivery | <input type="checkbox"/> Composing instructional messages |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Computer-mediated communication |
| Diagnosis | <input type="checkbox"/> Performance-based assessment |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality control & assurance |

1 Project chair	Name: Dr. J. Boon Function: Senior Educational Technologist Department: Educational Technology Expertise Center Telephone: 045-5762510 Email: JO.BOON@OUH.NL
2 Project name	English: Research into the transferability of the labor market demand for competences into curricula: Potentialities of competence based education (cbe) to enhance its flexibility towards labor market developments. Dutch: Onderzoek naar de vertaling van door de arbeidsmarkt gevraagde competenties in curricula: De mogelijkheden van competentiegericht onderwijs om flexibeler in te spelen op arbeidsmarktontwikkelingen.
3 Place in organization	Design theme of the OTEC research program
4 Synopsis of the research problem	<u>English</u> One of the goals of the development of cbe is to ameliorate the fit between education and the labor market by preventing or to reducing qualitative discrepancies. In curriculum reform towards competence based education, validation of the curriculum is perceived as necessary. Validation can be described as the investigation and determination of the relevancy of curricula from the viewpoint of labor market demands. This project is a feasibility study to investigate possibilities to improve the validation methods in use. For this purpose an exploratory investigation of organizational and educational practices is perceived as most adequate. The project is oriented towards three issues: 1. The actual use of the concept of competencies. Though the interest in competencies is booming, it is not clear how different stakeholders (labor market organizations and higher education) define competencies. Further it is unclear to what extent the concept is actually implemented in curricula and in hrn-policies of labor organizations. In-depth study of the viewpoints and actual application of the competence concept is therefore required.

Questions are:

- 1a. *For what purposes do labor organizations and educational institutes apply the concept of competencies?*
- 1b. *What kind of (implicit) conceptual frameworks do labor organizations and educational institutes use for the description and classification of competencies?*

2. The validation of competencies in curricula.

In the educational practice of most institutions applying cbe, the main focus is on the didactical aspects of competences. Although validation is seen as an important element in the process of curriculum reform, the methods in use and the moment to validate are different and heterogeneous. In general, educational institutes use two strategies: a pro-active strategy or a re-active strategy. In most cases a re-active strategy is applied: validation comes at the end of the development of curricula (see for example Bos, 1998a, 1998b). Relevant questions for the research project are:

- 2a. *What methods/procedures do educational institutes use to validate the labor market relevancy of their competence based curricula?*
- 2b. *How can validation methods/procedures used by educational institutes, for the translation of labor market demands into competence based curricula, be optimized?*

3. Supporting the validation process.

One of the goals of the project is to ameliorate the base for educational decisions in this field and to support educational institutes to adopt a more active strategy regarding the validation of their curricula. At the end of the project the feasibility of the development of a monitoring system will be assessed (go/no go decision). This system would consist of a web-based monitoring system aiming to contribute to the quality of the validation process. The section 'further elaboration' of this proposal provides more information regarding the monitoring system. In the project this is defined as:

3. *Is it possible to develop a monitoring system to inform educational institutes and labor organizations on actual developments in the demand for competences and in the supply of competences?*

Dutch

Een van de doelstellingen van competentiegericht onderwijs (c.g.o.) is de reductie van kwalitatieve aansluitingsproblemen tussen onderwijs en arbeidsmarkt. Het valideren van het curriculum is een essentieel element in de constructie van c.g.o. Validatie wordt hierbij omschreven als het onderzoeken en vaststellen van de arbeidsmarktrelevantie van curricula.

Dit project betreft een haalbaarheidsstudie inzake de mogelijke verbetering van de gebruikte methoden voor de validatie van curricula. Voor dit doel wordt een exploratieve studie onder opleidingsinstellingen en arbeidsorganisaties het meest adequaat geacht.

In het project komen drie thema's aan de orde:

1. De huidige toepassing van het concept van competenties

Hoewel de aandacht voor competenties sterk groeit, is onduidelijk hoe stakeholders (arbeidsorganisaties en instellingen voor hoger onderwijs) competenties definiëren. Voorts is onduidelijk in welke mate het concept competenties daadwerkelijk wordt toegepast in onderwijs en arbeidsorganisaties. Onderzoek naar de opvattingen en naar het daadwerkelijk gebruik is derhalve noodzakelijk. Vragen in dit verband zijn:

- 1a. *Voor welke doeleinden wordt het concept competenties toegepast in arbeidsorganisaties en onderwijsinstellingen?*
- 1b. *Welke (impliciete) conceptuele noties worden door arbeidsorganisaties en onderwijsinstellingen gebruikt ten behoeve van de beschrijving en classificering van competenties?*

2. De validatie van c.g.o

Bij de toepassing van c.g.o. leggen onderwijsinstellingen het accent op de didactische uitwerking van competenties. Hoewel validatie beschouwd wordt als een belangrijk onderdeel van de curriculumherziening, treedt er een grote variatie op in gebruik van methoden en het tijdstip van validatie. Globaal kunnen er twee strategieën worden onderscheiden: een pro-actieve en een reactieve strategie. In de meeste situaties wordt een reactieve strategie gehanteerd: de validatie wordt uitgevoerd aan het einde van het proces van curriculumherziening (zie bijvoorbeeld Bos,

1998). Relevante vragen in dit verband zijn:

2a. *Welke methoden/procedures gebruiken onderwijsinstellingen om de arbeidsmarktrelevantie van hun c.g.o te valideren?*

2b. *Hoe kunnen de methoden/procedures voor validatie worden verbeterd?*

3. *Ondersteuning van het validatieproces*

Het uiteindelijke doel van dit project is om onderwijsinstellingen te ondersteunen bij hun inspanningen inzake de responsiviteit van curricula. Voor alle duidelijkheid: het is geenszins de intentie van dit project te suggereren dat arbeidsorganisaties een voorschrijvende rol dienen te vervullen inzake de curriculumherziening. Wel is het de intentie om de basis voor curriculumherziening te verbeteren en onderwijsinstellingen te ondersteunen bij de adoptie van een meer pro-actieve strategie met betrekking tot validatie van curricula.

Het faciliteren van het validatieproces van curricula door middel van het gebruik van een web-based monitoring systeem wordt beschouwd als een veelbelovende en haalbare bijdrage aan de verbetering van de kwaliteit van het validatieproces. In de laatste fase van het project vindt een beoordeling plaats van de haalbaarheid van zo'n monitoring systeem. Onder het kopje 'further elaboration' wordt nadere informatie over het monitoring systeem verschaft.

In het onderzoeksproject wordt dit gedefinieerd als:

3. *Is het mogelijk een monitoring systeem te ontwikkelen om onderwijsinstellingen en arbeidsorganisaties te informeren over actuele ontwikkelingen in aanbod van en vraag naar competenties*

5	Research team	<u>Name and titles</u>	<u>Expertise/function</u>	<u>Department</u>
a	Project chair	Dr. Jo Boon	Senior Educational Technologist	OTEC
b	Project team	Dr. Marcel van der Klink Drs. Evelijn Bos	Educational Technologist Research assistant	OTEC OTEC
c	Consultants	Dr. K. Schlusmans Dr. J. Onstenk Prof. Dr. Van Hoof	Senior Educational Technologist Competence based education Relationship labor market - education	OTEC UvA OUNL/RUL
6	Length of the project	Start date: 1/5/1999 End date: 1/7/2001 Total length: 26 months		
7	Intended output	a Publications and conference presentations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of literature review in combination with the outcomes of the interviews with 20 (international) experts will serve as input for an article in an international journal and a presentation at the ORD in 2000 • Results of in-depth study of the two business branches will serve as input for two articles in international journals, a national journal and a presentation at the ECER conference in 2001 • The findings will serve as input for two articles in international journals and a presentation at the AACCE in 2002. Further, the overall conclusions of the project will be used for an internal research report and possibly for the submission of a follow-up project for the actual construction and evaluation of the monitoring system. • Further, the overall conclusions of the project will be used for an OTEC-report and possibly for the submission of a follow-up project for the actual construction and evaluation of the monitoring system b Instruments and procedures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview protocols • (design of a) monitoring system 		
8	Further elaboration	a Further elaboration of the problem and aims of the research project, including scientific framework		

In this section the diversity of definitions according to societal and scientific points of view is shown. The reader will first find a short overview of different definitions of competence. It is clear that the several definitions emanate from fundamental differences in theoretical frameworks concerning the relationship between education or learning and the labor market. The clarification of these differences will be one of the results of the project.

In the second place attention will be paid to a description of the actual, often unsystematic educational practice concerning validation of competences in institutions for higher education. A competence -relevant typology of labor market segments will be used as a framework for the selection of business branches to be studied in depth.

1. definitions of competence

The development of cbe in professional and academic institutes for higher education, the use of the method in initial and in post-initial education, the application of the concept of competence in organizational hrn-policies leads to various views on the concept of competence. According to recent literature reviews competences refer to three different meanings (Bos, 1998; Mulder, 1998; Thijssen, 1998).

Minimum performance

The minimum performance approach is based on views of optimal individual, trainable and alterable performance. Erraut (1994) defines *competence* as being certified to fulfill certain activities and tasks. In his view competence is an intermediate stage between novice and expert and contains, skills, knowledge and attitudes which are necessary to perform in a certain domain according to minimum standards (certification). Within this approach discussion is going on about the scope of the competences. The question is whether they should be defined in a narrow way, e.g. as in the National Council for Vocational Qualifications in the British Kingdom, or more broadly defined as Nijhof and Streumer (1994) and Van Zolingen (1995) advocate. In the latter view competences are defined in such a way that competences promote transfer to other jobs or provide possibilities for long term career development.

Outstanding performance

In the second place, the excellent performance approach can be discerned. Mostly the term competency used in this context. Competency is perceived as extraordinary individual characteristics which are relatively stable, correlate with excellent job performance and which are extremely difficult to observe, to train or to alter. In this approach competencies are pictured as icebergs which are mainly under sea level. Above sea level and thus relatively observable are skills and knowledge. Under sea level are self-image, beliefs and motives. For the explanation of excellent job performance the latter contribute more to this than what is above sea level (Lap & Reijn, 1998).

Organizational performance

The third is the organizational approach. In this approach the focus is on the investigation and determination of *core competencies* (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Core competencies refers to the unique organizational characteristics. Typical for these unique organizational characteristics are that they are difficult to copy by other competitors, these are thus relatively stable and form the basis for realizing the organizational added value. In this concept competencies are the result of human resources (skills and knowledge of employees) in combination with organizational systems such as knowledge systems and tools in use by the organization.

The current debate about competence and competency is rather nontransparent due to the different meanings - and the different scientific approaches making use of this concept. It is of paramount importance to point to the effect of various stakeholders positions on the definitions used. Obviously one should be aware of these large differences during the interviews that are planned with experts (Table 2, stage 2) and representatives of business branches and educational institutes (Table 2, stage 3 and 4; one can find this table in the appendices).

2. Description of the current educational practice with regard to validation of curricula

This research will analyze the question whether, according to the complexity of the structure of the labor market and the heterogeneity of the demand, competences can be formulated in

sufficient concrete and operational terms, allowing a translation into curricula. In this process of translation of labor market demands into curricula the validation is crucial. Validation is defined as the investigation and assessment of the labor market relevancy of curricula.

The validation methods used by educational institutes differ. Further, the choice of the moments of validation differ strongly among institutes. In general two strategies are in use: a pro-active strategy wherein in an early phase of curriculum reform stakeholders are invited to express their views on labor market demands versus the re-active strategy where stakeholders are consulted after the educational institute already made a blueprint for curriculum reform.

Further, examples show that the validation is often not elaborated in a systematic way. Questions as: who are relevant informants for validation (e.g. unions, graduated students, educational staff, individual employers, employer associations, professional associations, trend watchers) how to handle contradictory information, how and on which term to react on changes in competence requirements are left unanswered. Nevertheless it is clear - for example from the experience of the OUNL- that the validation question is crucial in the further development of cbe.

3. The labor market: segments and competences

It is clear that the relationship between education and the labor market is not linear. The naive interpretation of demand for labor that can be translated in educational curricula, or educational sectors preparing for clearly defined professional careers is abandoned (Boon, 1981, 1982). The labor market consists of several market segments. In these different segments the demand for qualifications strongly differ (Boon, 1997). Hövels' (1993) elaboration on this theme resulted into a scheme containing four different segments. For his scheme Hövels applied two dimensions: the level of competences and the bond with the labor organization. See for Table 1 the corresponding appendix.

With regard to the scope of our research proposal we restrict ourselves to the two latter segments. For the professional segment an educational degree is required to enter this part of the labor market (e.g. public notary, physician, school teachers). There exist very clear (legal) rules about who is allowed to enter the profession. The profession itself (professional associations) plays an important role in monitoring the entrance into the profession and in guiding the debate about new developments. For professionals it is rather easy to switch via the external labor market into other organizations. Professionals are not restricted to certain organizations for their careers, their mobility on the labor market is based on their professional and juridical status. This status allows for changes without sanction on the level of payment or career possibilities.

This pattern is different for the 'complex' segment of the labor market. A high educational level is required but further professional training is needed. The level and the content of credentials are not secured as in the professional segment. Although employees have the possibility to switch from one organization to another, their competences are mostly organization-specific. Their careers gain most by intra-organizational mobility. Examples of professions/branches in the complex segment of the labor market are the consultancy branch and the IT branch.

Organizations in the complex and the professional segments use distinguished HRM strategies for selection, compensation, training, and mobility of their employees. It is therefore likely they apply different concepts of competences and/or they emphasize different aspects of competences in their HRM-policy. Organizations in the complex segment will probably stress aspects as trainability, flexibility and loyalty to the organization, while organizations in the professional segment stress aspects as professional knowledge and possession of required certifications.

Further it is expected that complex and professional segments will differ in the number and position of stakeholders in the debate about curriculum reform. For example, in professional segments the professional associations heavily influence the debate on required competences. Thus educational institutes that are active in professional domains can in fact not reform their curricula without consultation and approval of professional associations.

Above mentioned differences make it interesting to select a branch in both segments for in-

depth study (see Table 2 (in the appendices), stage 3 and further).

4. monitoring system

This research project is eventually the predecessor of a project to develop an information system to inform institutes of higher education on developments in the demand for competences, to allow them for a sound base for curriculum decisions (a short description of this follow-up project can be found in Table 4 of the appendices). One of the challenges in such a project would be the development of an information system for more shareholders. Not only for the supply side (the educational field) but on the same time for the demand side (the labor market). It is expected that no overall system can be constructed but that branch-specific information systems are more suitable.

Monitoring systems providing information about the demand and supply of competences are a novelty. Existing systems are for example the national university education monitor. This instrument is in the phase of development and consists of an uniformization of the format of the alumni-surveys of different Dutch universities. The coordination of the monitor is attributed to the Research Center for education and the Labor Market of the University of Maastricht (ROA). The ROA system provides detailed information, although its use for curriculum reform is questioned (Onstenk, 1998). Another example is the web based monitoring system for the Dutch metal industry, which is still (partly) under construction. This system provides various types of information for and stemming from the stakeholders.

Besides information about the demand and supply of competences the idea is to include hints, methods and instruments for the validation of curricula.

b Importance for the Open University of the Netherlands and the place of the research in the Otec Research Program

This project falls under the research topic 'Design' of the research programme. Competence based education is an emerging educational approach in higher education. In several sectors of higher professional education and academic education curricula are revised from the point of view of competences. One of these institutions is the Open University. Although the empirical focus of this project will not be directed to the Open University, the experience developed on competence based education will be used in the project as soundboard.

In the discussion about competence based education hardly no attention is paid to the validation of the labor market relevancy of curricula. Questions as what are in fact competences, and how to assist educational institutes in their efforts to investigate and determine the labor market relevancy are overlooked quickly. This research project investigates these bottom line questions in order to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the knowledge base of the responsiveness of curricula.

The project is linked with the AIO-project 'The identification, representation and validation of competences in higher education'. Especially the first phase of both projects (analysis of literature) are interrelated.

c Design & Methods

Table 2 (in the appendices) provides an overview of the project stages, instruments, research methods and output. For every stage an estimation of time is included. The whole project consists of five stages. The project as proposed here will be mainly qualitative research and will have an exploratory nature. The research methods applied in this project are literature study (stage 1), interviews (stage 2,3,4) and work conference (stage 5). Data collection for answering questions 1a and 1b will take place during stage 1 to stage 4. Stage 3 and 4 will provide data for answering questions 2a and 2b.

Question 3 will be answered through data collection in stage 3,4 and 5.

d Literature

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9	Work program and planning	See Table 2 in the appendices
10	External partners	None
11	Motivation for external partners	Not applicable
12	External financial support	None

17 Appendices attached	Table 1: The division of the labor market (Hövels, 1993) Table 2: Overview of the research project Table 3: Work plan May 1999 - June 2001
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Appendices:

Table 1: The division of the labor market (Hövels, 1993)

Table 2: Overview of the research project

Table 3: Work plan May 1999 - June 2001

Table 1: The division of the labor market (Hövels, 1993)

Type of segment	level of required competences	bond with labor organization
non specific	low	low
company specific	low	high
professional	high	low
complex	high	high

Table 2: Overview of the research project

Stage	Description	Instruments	Research methods	Output	Length
1	Analysis of literature to define prominent theoretical frameworks, concepts and methods concerning the definition of competences, labor market gaps, use of competences in organizations and educational institutes.	Framework to analyze literature	international review of literature	-References of literature made available for Otec. (for example in Huisnet) -Review of literature -Criteria for selection of experts in phase 2	4 months
2	Consulting 20 (international) experts in the field (opinion leaders in the academic domain, corporate HRM officers and consulting agencies) on their opinions, operationalizations and frameworks on competences, the utilisation or non-utilization of competences in organizations, the ways competencies are used in organizations. The use of competencies in curriculum reform. Experts will advise on interesting branches for in-depth study, feasibility of monitoring systems etc.	Schemes for interviews and/or surveys and/or scenario for conference. Pilot	Selection of experts according to criteria developed in phase 1, complemented by snowball or network sampling. Interviews, (eventually followed by additional information gathering through telephone conversations and/or written requests and/or video conferencing) Data to be analyzed using the format for qualitative data-analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984)	Results of literature review in combination with the outcomes of the interviews with 20 (international) experts will serve as input for an article in an international journal and a presentation at the ORD in 2000 Indications on the two business branches (and representants) to be analyzed in phase 3	5 months
3a	Selection of two business branches for in-depth study.	Data from the information of stage 1 en 2.		Documentation on the branches.	1 month
3b	In this stage stakeholders in the labor market domain will be interviewed (like consultation leading companies, employee and employers associations) about concept and methods in use (HRM policy) to manage competences, qualitative labor market tensions, stakeholders actual and desired role in the validation of curricula, feasibility of a monitoring system.	Schemes for interviews and/or surveys and/or scenario for conference. Pilot	Interviews with HRM officers and other relevant stakeholders (eventually followed by additional information gathering through telephone conversations and/or written requests and/or video conferencing.) Data to be analyzed within case analysis (Yin, 1984)	Documentation on methods used to define and manage competences in the branches (eventually in Huisnet)	4 months
3c	Comparison of the two branches	Documentation from phase 3a and 3b.	Data to be analyzed between case analysis (Yin, 1984)	Indications on the selection of the sectors/institutes in higher education	2 months

(Follow up of Table 2: Overview of the research project)

4a	Consultation of higher education institutes to analyze their concepts of competences, their methods to validate competences and the feasibility of a monitoring system.	Schemes for interviews and/or surveys and/or scenario for conference. Pilot	Interviews with staff members, (eventually followed by additional information gathering through telephone conversations and/or written requests and/or video conferencing.) Data to be analyzed within case analysis (Yin, 1984)	Results of in-depth study of the two business branches will serve as input for two articles in international journals, a national journal and a presentation at the ECER conference in 2001	5 months
4b	Comparison of the institutes of both educational sectors		Data to be analyzed between case analysis (Yin, 1984)		2 months
5	Conference for stakeholders and staff members of educational institutes analyses in see stage 3 and 4 in this table, and eventually other interested institutes. The purpose is to present results, exchange ideas and to develop commitment for the follow up of the research project (see Table 4)	Agenda, announcement,	Presentations followed by guided small group discussions	The findings will serve as input for two articles in international journals and a presentation at the AACE in 2002. Summative decision regarding the monitoring system.	3 months

Table 3: Work Plan May 1999 - June 2001

1999			
Month	Weeks	Activities	Products
May-August	18-34	Analysis of literature	
September-December	35-52	Consultation of experts	
2000			
January	1-4	Consultation of experts	Article I (theoretical background combined with outcomes of the interviews); ORD presentation
February	5-8	Selection of business branches for in-depth study	
March-June	9-26	Interviews with stakeholders in the labor market domain	
July-August	27-35	Comparison of the two branches	
September-December	36-52	Consultation of higher education institutes	
2001			
January	1-4	Consultation of higher education institutes	Article II, III & IV (results of in-depth study); ECER presentation
February-March	5-12	Comparison of the institutes of both branches	
April-June	13-26	Conference for stakeholders and staff members of educational institutes	Article V & VI (conclusions); AACE presentation