The French Vocational Education and Training System: like an unrecognised prototype?

ANNIE BOUDER & JEAN-LOUIS KIRSCH

Introduction

A certain surprise on the part of the authors forms the genesis of this article. Both know the French system of initial and continuing vocational education and training rather well, have been following its evolution for a number of years, and have kept abreast — as far as possible — of the situation in other European countries. Moreover, they have taken part at the national and European level in different reflection groups, meetings, and evaluation consortia that emerged following the adoption of the Lisbon goals to harmonise the European systems of vocational education and training. Surprise therefore tainted by a Gallic tendency for adopting a siege mentality and suggesting that we (the French) are already applying everything that Europe is inviting us to implement without actually making any reference to it.

The fact is that the functioning of our system does show indigenous specificities, though other systems do not seem any simpler. It is also true that certain of the representatives of the system highlight its exceptional nature rather than the similarities with other systems: ‘At present, the European context encourages reflection and initiatives that do not necessarily follow the French concept of individual qualification. Even if we often have the feeling that we, as institutional actors, are not in total agreement, or even are competitors, we share a «Franco-French» qualification culture’ (Charraud, 2002).

The text that follows takes the opposite view. It is based on the premise that, since the early 70s, the French system has been operating on the basis of principles and models that closely resemble those now defended at the European level:

— the creation of a national qualifications framework that integrates general and vocational education and training as well as initial and continuing education and training;
— a description in terms of occupational standards that includes the move to ‘learning outcomes’ and the notion of ‘competence’ (cf the knowledge, skills and competences process proposed in the European Qualifications Framework).

We argue that, because of its history, the French system can be seen as a kind of prototype. We do so in order to evaluate how far it has contributed to the goals of
implementing national and European qualifications frameworks. In relation to this issue of the *Journal*, it constitutes a sort of test ‘despite the absence of any actual evidence’ which makes it possible to assess whether the reasons to develop such frameworks ‘remain [or not] little more than claims’1.

Hence, this article is in two parts. The first describes the process of building a national qualifications framework in France. It does not aim to give a detailed historical analysis but to highlight the main discussions that accompanied it, which provided both elements of rupture and of continuity. It also illustrates aspects of precedence and conformity that anticipate the European proposals to develop national qualifications frameworks which then makes it possible to assess the contribution of this national framework to the objectives outlined in the rationale for this issue of the *Journal*:

— moving from a system that is steered by supply to one that is steered by demand;
— improving the coherence of the national qualifications system;
— encouraging transparency for the users;
— offering a framework that encourages the recognition of individuals’ learning;
— offering a basis for the transfer of credits and supranational recognition.

This is the object of the second part.

**The Development of the French System: an early example of implementing the European principles?**

*The Creation of a National Framework*

It is always difficult to date the beginning of an era. It is however possible to quote ‘key’ dates in the evolution of a system. Concerning the creation of a French national framework, we propose four:

— 1965 and the creation of the technical baccalaureate;
— 1969 and the classification of educational levels;
— 1971 and the creation of the technical accreditation commission;
— 2002 and the creation of the national commission of vocational qualifications.

1965: the integration of general and vocational streams into a single system through the creation of a technical baccalaureate

Antoine PROST (Prost, 1981) gave particular importance to this event: ‘the term, which was chosen on purpose, was an expression of the equality of the general and technical streams’. This technical baccalaureate symbolises what the author qualified as ‘bringing training into the sphere of schooling’. Since the 1950s, vocational education and training (VET) had been mainly carried out in a work context. This reform marked progress in the parity of esteem between vocational and general training and marked a step in a process that opposed two concepts of VET which still exist:
— for some people it subscribes to the general aims of education and training, i.e. the basic democratic ideal where ‘technical training corresponds to a lofty concept of man, the worker and the citizen’ (Troger, 1989);
— for others, it must meet the needs of the economy and the labour market.

In France, the first concept dominated, opening the door for the integration of general education and VET. The award linked the term ‘technician’ to the mythical baccalaureate diploma created in 1808. Bridges were possible between the two streams even though they functioned according to principles that Antoine Prost compared to those of a system of ‘fractioned distillation’. Behind the creation of this diploma we find some of the motivations of the Lisbon goals, such as:

— the idea of creating a Europe of excellence through the training of its citizens reflects the Gaullist objectives of maintaining France amongst the ‘Great Nations’ through education and research;
— the concern for a lifelong pathway, since all vocational diplomas are conceived to allow young people to either enter the labour market or pursue their studies.

This emblematic technical baccalaureate was short-lived and was replaced in 1986 by the technological baccalaureate which has become more and more integrated in the general education and training stream and, at present, over 80 % of students who obtain it pursue their studies. But a vocational baccalaureate, created in 1985, revived the idea of a vocational qualification at (French) level IV (ISCED 3), since it was designed as a progression route following the VET awards at level V (ISCED 2) and includes internships. Current reflection on the possibility of studying for this baccalaureate after the first cycle of general studies demonstrates that this tendency to bring training into the sphere of schooling persists.

1969: Classification of Educational Levels: the skeleton of the framework

In her study on classifications in 1983, Joëlle Affichard (Affichard, 1983) described how the French classification of levels developed as part of the work for the fourth Plan (1962–1965) with the aim of integrating the main economic functions into education and training². Hence the project of a six-level grid that would be divided according to the duration of education corresponding to each of these levels. This grid was taken up in the work of the fifth Plan in order to match young people’s training and recruitment needs. Joëlle Affichard insists on the fact that these needs were defined by experts according to standards that did not correspond to reality. In other words: ‘the observable situation was not the desirable situation — to quote J. Fourastié — i.e. the shortage of qualified workers obliged employers to recruit at a lower level than they would have wanted’. The grid was adopted in 1969 by the Standing Group of Vocational Education and Training and Social Promotion.
Classification of training levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I and II</td>
<td>personnel occupying positions usually requiring a level of training/education equal or superior to the ‘licence’ (degree) or engineering schools (ISCED 5 and higher).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>personnel occupying positions usually requiring the higher technician diploma training level (BTS) or a diploma from the Higher Technological Institutes (IUTs) and end of the first cycle of higher education (ISCED 4).</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>personnel occupying supervisory staff positions or possessing a level of qualification equivalent to a general, technical or vocational Baccalauréat) (ISCED 3).</td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>personnel occupying positions usually requiring a training level equivalent to the BEP and the CAP (ISCED 2).</td>
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<td>Va</td>
<td>personnel occupying positions requiring a short training of a year maximum, leading in particular to the Certificat d’éducation professionnelle (Certificate of vocational education) or any other qualification of the same nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>personnel occupying positions requiring no training beyond the end of compulsory education.</td>
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Three observations can be made:

— The French definition of classifications is deeply embedded in a system that is steered by demand but with a distinction between ‘observable demand’ and ‘desirable demand’. We will come back to this point;
— The grid of levels anticipates the principle of assessment of prior learning and the report of the fifth Plan specifies that ‘training can be acquired outside school’ (Affichard), thus recognising what we now call non-formal and informal training. The ‘definition’ of the training levels also expresses this, since it characterises staff in work situations and places them according to the jobs rather than to the training received’;
— Finally, the circular aspect of these definitions raises issues insofar as the levels of training correspond to jobs that ‘normally require’ training at this level. Yet this clumsy instrument was a pillar of the construction of a national qualifications system that has been working now for nearly 50 years (Dauty, 2006), despite criticisms and the will to remodel it. History will tell if the proposal of a European Qualifications Framework will lead to its being abandoned (Bouder, 2003).
1971: Integration of both initial and continuing education and training in the framework

The grid of levels made it possible to create a national qualifications framework by setting up a unified system of initial training that could compare and create bridges between general, technological and vocational streams.

The next period was characterised by the prevailing role of the initial education and training system. At the same time, however, a new element emerged with the law of 1971 on continuing education and training. This law recognised the right of employees to training and the obligation of employers to finance it on the basis of a percentage of the annual payroll. In parallel, special emphasis was laid on the training of the unemployed. This set the basis for a parallel mode of training whose initiator — Jacques Delors — openly acknowledged the differences and aimed to overhaul the established academic model: ‘Considering the present limits of the educational system, lifelong learning brings obvious elements of a solution: a contribution to the fight against unequal opportunities, a new teacher-student relation, an easier adaptation to the supply and the demands of the labour market... At the end of the evolution, educational institutions should find themselves deeply changed. They would lose their imperative and invading nature and would abandon the single model imposed on everyone, which is one of the roots of social inequality and conservatism’ (Delors, 1991).

On this basis, one could imagine the creation of two parallel, even diverging, systems, but this was not the case and the single framework prevailed. The rules adopted by the Technical Accreditation Commission of Technological Qualifications (Commission technique d’homologation des titres et diplômes de l’enseignement technologique) are a proof of this (Veneau, Maillard & Sulzer, 2006; 2007). If we go back to the situation at the time, there were both a system of initial education and training that was validated by diplomas recognised at national level and a system of continuing education and training with very blurred forms of validation. The will to confer equal value on these two systems meant that their outcomes should be comparable. Hence, the creation in 1972 of the Technical Accreditation Commission of Technological Qualifications (Commission technique d’homologation des titres et diplômes de l’enseignement technologique) which established and updated a list of accredited qualifications and diplomas. Inclusion in this list was automatic for the diplomas delivered by the Ministry of Education. For other ministries or awarding bodies it was subject to the decision of the Commission, following an examination process.

Although they were based on quite antagonistic conceptions, initial education and training and continuing education and training were able to be united in a common national framework based on the levels of training grid.

2002: Creation of the National Commission of Vocational Qualifications

The replacement in 2002 of this Commission by the Commission nationale de certification professionnelle (National Commission of Vocational Qualifications) consolidated this movement by proposing:

— to enhance the assessment of prior learning by making it a mode of access to all the qualifications included in the directory;
— to include vocational qualification certificates (CQP) conferred by the professional branches.
In parallel, we observe that there is now greater emphasis on qualifications, which are no longer considered as a natural end to training but as a relatively autonomous phenomenon that reflects individual competences independently of the way they were acquired. But one should not attribute this shift just to the creation of a national qualifications framework: the introduction of occupational standards has also played an important role.

**Occupational and Competence Standards**

*The Occupational Standards*

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<th>An example of occupational standards</th>
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<td><strong>The vocational Baccalaureate</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Maintenance of industrial equipment</strong></td>
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The occupational standards present the activities for which the qualification prepares, knowing that these activities and their combination can apply to several professions. Each activity is divided into tasks which are also the object of a standard description. The vocational Baccalaureate professionnel ‘Maintenance of industrial equipment’, created in 2005, was taken as an example.

**Five professional activities:**
- carry out the repair maintenance
- carry out the preventive maintenance
- implement improvements, modifications
- integrate new elements
- communicate with the user(s), customer(s) and within a team.

**Detailed in principal tasks:**
The standard lists fourteen main tasks: some activities have five, others two and each task is linked to one single activity.

→ The activity ‘carrying out the repair maintenance’ includes five main tasks:
  - diagnosing the breakdown
  - preparing the repairs
  - carrying out the repairs in the mechanical, electrical, pneumatic, hydraulic fields
  - reporting the intervention
  - updating the technical file of the elements.

→ The ‘integrating new elements’ activity include two:
  - installing new elements
  - putting new elements into service.

For each task, it is specified whether it is carried out in total autonomy or in participation.

**Obeying a standardised description:**
Each main task is presented according to the following items and sub-items:
- description of the task
- situation at the beginning
- conditions of achievement highlighting the means, the links and the references and resources
- expected results
- autonomy, already specified above.

The competences and knowledge that will define the training and qualification standards are defined on the basis of this description.

The vocational baccalaureate created in 1985 marked the beginning of a new approach to developing training through standards. The procedures for developing the vocational baccalaureate stipulated that it was compulsory to define the occupational standards before defining the training content. What may seem today as relatively obvious constituted a great upheaval at the time because previously there was no detailed description of vocational activities. Most discussions focused on the nature and weight of the school disciplines that made up the programme.

One of the justifications for introducing occupational standards was to engage the social partners who had the right to be consulted but who were often put off by the pedagogical nature of the debates. Hence, this reminder by Benoît Bouyx, who took part in the creation of these standards, that a diploma is a contract with social partners that will testify to the competences that a holder of the qualification possesses: the social partners will use the qualification because they know what is behind it. It is basically an occupational standard, i.e. the definition of what one expects of its holder. It is therefore important to consult with experts who are able to see the evolution for the years to come in terms of professional activities and not of knowledge in mathematics or other subjects (Bouyx, 2005). The issue is not to describe the professional activities of a beginner but to identify a wider professional target, taking into account processes of adaptation to the job and professional integration (Bouyx, 1997). The development of standards gradually spread to all vocational qualifications.

Competence as a Way of Describing Occupations

To the concept of ‘occupational standards’ was added that of ‘competence’. The first positions the person in relation to a process of production of goods or services, the second is a reflection of the activities of the person who undertakes this process. There are many definitions of competence but when used in the context of training and qualifications they introduce the contextualised dimension and three constitutive elements, originally called ‘knowledge’, ‘know-how (skills)’ and ‘knowing how to be (attitudes)’:

— for the Ministry of Education, competence is ‘both know-how and knowledge about an activity adapted to the needs of a job situation’, knowledge corresponding to ‘information held by the person about objects and the environment, the characteristics of these objects, the laws on this environment’ and know-how being ‘information held by the person about his/her actions on the environmental, technical and social context. The specific character of this information is that it can only be constituted and stocked through the exercise of the activity (in a real or simulated situation) and can only be re-activated in the course of the activity. Hence, know-how can be apprehended by an external observer only thanks to the visualisation of the activity and its material traces (words, gestures, transformation of objects, etc.)’;

— for the Ministry of Labour, competence corresponds to ‘the implementation of knowledge, know-how, behaviour, procedures, types of reasoning, in a work and/or problem-solving situation. More broadly, it is the capacity to solve a problem in a given context’ (AFPA, 1998);
for the National Commission of Vocational Qualifications, competence ‘is expressed in terms of the ability to act in a given work situation and with observable results’.

The report written for CEDEFOP by J. Winterton, F. Delamare-Le Deist and E. Stringfellow (2005) highlighted the multi-dimensional character of the French approach and used it to propose the typology for the ‘KSC’ — Knowledge, Skills, Competences — used by the European framework of vocational qualifications.

Conclusion

This section has put forward arguments that the French VET system is in line with the proposals at European level to facilitate understanding between the different national systems. It also shows that the beginning of this process goes back to a sufficiently distant past for it to be possible to propose an evaluation of the results and aims. Hence, we propose to consider it as a kind of ‘laboratory’ in order to put forward observations and proposals concerning the conditions for the creation of national qualifications frameworks and the way they help to achieve the objectives one expects of them. We have merged the 5 points quoted above from the rationale for this issue of the Journal into three:

— Moving from a supply- to a demand-led system;
— Improving the coherence of the national qualifications system;
— Encouraging transparency for the users.

Are the European Goals Achieved?

Moving from a System that is Steered by Supply to one that is Steered by Demand: yes, but which demand?

We focus on the ‘demand’ that comes from the economy. VET systems must aim to meet it and then use the internal regulation measures to adjust individuals’ demands to those of the economy. Yet, we are faced with several notions of demand: ‘operational’, ‘adaptable’, ‘professional’ constitute a trilogy of very different models of relations between training and employment, expressing the different interpretations that can be given to ‘demand’.

Operational: meeting immediate needs

It is the principle that inspires all discourses on labour force shortages based on a conception of foreseeing training according to the needs of the labour market, but it has many limitations. For example, for several years, the French labour market has been showing a constant level of demand in the hotel and construction sectors, both of which have relatively autonomous training systems financed by the professions. Despite this, there is still a shortage which seems to be due to dissuasive working conditions. At present, there is a need for workers in the smelting sector, in which many jobs have been lost in recent years. Therefore there has been little renewal of the workforce which is now reaching retirement age and this leads to a shortage even in a context of recession.
These two examples illustrate the complexity of the adjustment of supply and demand which underlines the importance of taking into account the length of training required. In other words, the person who is trained to meet present needs will only be operational tomorrow. But what will be tomorrow’s needs? Will they remain constant, or will they have disappeared? Will they be transformed and how far in relation to changes in markets, organisations and technologies? The debate in France considers that the weight of the institutions and the slowness of reactions were the main causes of the incapacity to adapt. Hence, the creation of National Vocational Qualifications in the UK was followed with great interest, as these qualifications were considered as a way of meeting immediate demand by proposing different levels of learning according to the complexity of the competences to be acquired. This could help to modulate the lengths of training, to be able to meet the need for novices fairly quickly and to use people trained at the first level to meet the needs for more highly trained staff by providing continuing education and training. Yet its evaluations showed that the procedures and the tools that were used to evaluate simple activities were not related to the objective that was sought. Hence, employers quickly abandoned them and came back to less rigorous practices that were just as efficient to identify competences (Wolf, 2002). This suggests that, when possible, the labour market tends to find short term responses to specific problems and when it does not it means that the problem goes deeper. Moreover, one finds here another aspect of the discussion about ‘the observable’ and the ‘desirable’ evoked above: not only is this model mythical and limited, but it is also dangerous, as Hilary Steedman states (Steedman, 1992): ‘the employers can organise their production themselves with patterns of outdated and inefficient divisions of labour and the result of the qualification process can simply consist in helping to prolong this inefficiency. Hence, every country should find a way to solve the problem of the future planning of the qualification of professional skills that would make it possible not to simply meet the immediate needs of the economy, but to foresee future needs, which, by definition, cannot be done with certitude’.

Adaptable: anticipating change

In a perspective of lifelong learning, the present trend encourages the development of transferable competences (key competences) that enhance mobility. Its main justification is the transformation in the forms of industrial production. The Taylor-Ford model with a fairly blurred ‘before’ (whose dates are fixed in relation to the needs of the theory one wishes to prove) is opposed to a ‘modern’ model that is characterised by flexibility, adaptation and change. In this perspective, the rapidity of organisational change is expressed by a permanent flexibility of job contours and contents. What is observed in industrial production is accentuated by the growing evolution towards the services industry where relational dimensions are important in the exercise of the occupation. This confirms the growing gap between prescribed and real work.

The French system of initial VET has always chosen the adaptability model that is included in the broad ideal of training ‘man, the producer and the citizen’. But this entails a projection into the future, so, for example, the creation or updating of diplomas decided today will only apply and be implemented in two
years’ time — the time needed to carry out the legal and administrative procedures, the preparation of the institutions and the training of the teachers. The first award holders will enter the labour market in four or five years’ time, depending on the length of the training. Hence, they will only be ‘fully operational’ in nine or ten years’ time. Obviously, this is an extreme case and tacit regulations make things smoother but we are in a logic of betting on the future where the commitment of the actors weighs as heavily if not more heavily than models for identifying future skills needs.

In parallel, there is a system of adult education in France that was set up at the end of the Second World War to ensure the rapid training of a workforce in the priority sectors for a return to economic prosperity (mechanical engineering) and to decent living conditions (building). Yet, once the urgent needs had been met, the system projected itself into the future in a shorter time span than for initial qualifications, since these qualifications are revised every five years and the length of training is shorter.

Coming back to the issue of the link between a national qualifications framework and rapidity in meeting the demand for qualifications, in the light of the French experience it appears that:

— The creation of a national qualifications framework implies taking account of the long term which encourages anticipating demand, rather than giving a case by case response. But the French system could situate itself in a longer time frame than other models that are more open to modularisation and personalisation of training and qualification pathways.

— Hence, adjustment to immediate or unforeseen needs is not part of this process, which, at best, makes it possible to acquire the ‘key competences’ or ‘generic competences’. Thus, it reduces the learning time for the appropriation of specific competences;

— Generally speaking, meeting these latter needs is something that is done through relatively short training courses that are not taken into account in the national qualifications framework.

Professionnal: (re) constructing jobs

The importance of vocational labour markets (Marsden, 1989) in the movement of workers and the forms of regulation between training, work and employment are no doubt underestimated in France. The prevailing philosophy considers that the labour market obeys identical supply and demand rules or ones that are close to those that govern the exchange of goods; this is rather paradoxical if one considers the number of national, regional and health civil servants in the workforce who benefit from statutory job security with regulated access rules . . . But this is the case and the ‘notion of occupation remained a dead angle in the French sociology of work and organisations for many years. The emergence of a non-qualified workforce in the early days of industrialisation, the spreading of Taylorist principles, the development and improvement of industrial technologies, and the birth of new forms of work organisation signalled the end of the corporations of the Ancien Régime. Sociologists interested in productive sectors slowly moved from researching the dynamic that was specific to occupations to focusing on other
themes of analysis: work, employment, organisations, firms or activities. To this can be added the specificity of the French VET system which is closer to the educational system than to the labour market (Campinos-Dubernet & Grando, 1988). Yet certain elements lead us to believe that there is a growing trend towards the professionalisation of the labour market whereby demand is being structured by professional groups who define their spheres of intervention in the production process and control their renewal through training and qualifications. Three examples are offered:

— the European directives which ensure the mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and other qualifications (article 57 of the Treaty of Rome). These impose on the Member States that results must be obtained within a given time frame, leaving it to the national bodies to choose the form and means. They must be transposed in the various national legal regulations, in conformity with the procedures of each Member State;

— the present discourses on the regulation of immigration tend to favour immigration based on competence which is certified by a qualification that is recognised at the European level;

— the intervention and recognition of sectors as entities that are able to confer qualifications. The French sector qualifications (CQPs) are an example of this and the comparison of the different texts which have led to the European Qualification Framework and European Credit In Vocational Education and Training shows that sectoral qualifications are mentioned more and more frequently and that there is a growing emphasis on the importance of their integration in the national and European frameworks and systems.

Conclusion

We started with a question about whether or not the closeness of the French VET system to the European model made it possible to better meet demand. In conclusion we can say that:

— first, at best it is possible to make ‘supply and demand’ coincide on the basis of comparable descriptions, insofar as they are based on occupational standards;

— second, it highlights the diversity of the demands, which explains the existence of sub-systems, of needs being met outside these systems and of regulation procedures that are jointly constructed between social actors. In a way, it demonstrates that an immediate answer is rarely possible. This leads to the involvement of the actors in the shared management of the risks implied by looking at the medium term;

— hence, it questions the reality and meaning of a model that opposes ‘supply and demand’ in the field of VET since it seems that supply plays a more and more important role in structuring the demand. All current discourses on flexibility, mobility, and change suggest that the signal and filter effects of formal qualifications are being reinforced.

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Improving the Coherence of the National Qualifications System

If one accepts that the French qualifications system is coherent insofar as it offers both a classification of qualifications in a six-level grid and a description of them according to a standards and competence logic, then three observations can be made:

— it is more instrumental than conceptual;
— it is constantly being questioned;
— it is the result of a progressive process over time.

An Instrumental Rather Than a Conceptual Coherence

The grid of levels establishes a link between competences held and competences required by an occupational category. Furthermore, although the principles of the development of standards and the description of competences are recognised, they are not really supported scientifically. They are the result of a formalisation of practice that has been built up progressively and constitutes a methodological basis accepted by the actors. Proof of this is that we find some variations in their definition and implementation, depending on the awarding bodies.

Without wishing to present the situation in a more idyllic or catastrophic light than it is, this type of coherence must always be put into question. This can be illustrated by examining the use of occupational standards as assessed in 2001:

— the descriptions are too abstract. This is linked to associating a qualification to an occupational field rather than to a specific job. It seems that there is an inherent risk in this approach which can, however, be checked since the social partners participate in the decision and are able to avoid the drifting caused by a great wish for administrative simplification. But there is a movement in France to reduce the number of vocational qualifications that could however encourage this trend;
— the limitations on the harmonisation of procedures between the groups that are responsible for the design and writing of the standards. There may be an idealised concept of a kind of transversal engineering of qualifications that is independent of the field concerned by these, which does not hold true in front of reality. However, the method for producing standards offers a methodological framework which facilitates discussion amongst partners, especially in emerging sectors of VET (e.g. services to individuals).

As can be seen, the theoretical base to support these tools is limited, although the same reproach can also be made about the ‘Knowledge, Skills, Competences’ model used to define the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework. Their coherence mainly rests on the value given to them by the users, a value that is constantly subject to debate.

A Construction that is Constantly Subject to Debate

We have already evoked the gradual progression from a ‘levels of training’ grid to a grid of ‘qualifications level’ (Dauty, 2006). This is but one example of the
constant transformations to the system. Two current examples are presented below:

— vocational qualifications that are defined and conferred at the sectoral level are the object of specific procedures for them to be included in the national qualifications directory. These procedures may exempt CQP certificates from the awarding of a level;
— all recognised qualifications should, in principle, be accessible via initial education and training, continuing education and training and the assessment of prior learning. However, there are derogations, especially for regulated professions.

Some qualifications are not registered in the national directory if their inclusion has not been requested. Organisations that are sufficiently well-known can confer private certificates that are recognised by the labour market. Nothing obliges them to subject them to the national Commission. On the other hand, when the State decides to subsidise training that leads to qualifications it requests that these be included in the national directory.

We are witnessing constant changes in the space concerned by the national qualifications framework, and constant tensions on the borders of this space. This poses the question of the evaluation of the efficiency of public action:

— should one aim at a uniform model based on the Weberian principles of bureaucratic functioning?
— must one admit that in the case that interests us and more generally in the social field, coherence can only exist if it is accompanied by spaces of freedom, unclear zones that allow one to absorb the unforeseen and construct meaning?

This brings us into the debate between equality and equity. The never satisfying equilibrium rests on a tension which changes over time.

An Approach in a long-term Frame

A national qualifications framework cannot be implemented in a day and the French case is a perfect illustration of this. Some further illustrations are presented below:

On the basis of the answers to the ‘Questionnaire for the European Directors for Vocational Training’ that was used for the report that prepared the conference in Maastricht in 2004, ‘Achieving the Lisbon goal: The contribution of VET’ report (Leney, 2005), J.L. Kirsch proposed the outline of a typical chronology that goes through very similar stages, irrespective of the countries concerned:

- it begins by establishing national structures, and more especially developing standards and forms of evaluation, as well as building partnership models;
- then comes a phase of ‘permeability’ which seeks to create streams, to diversify paths and create bridges. To this are added debates on the degree of generalisation and specialisation of VET and their modularisation;
specific debates about qualifications then appear with the creation of national directories and reflections on the assessment of prior learning.

He also defines two tensions in this process:

- the tension between fixing and adapting that makes very diversified application procedures follow a rigorous definition of standards;
- the tension of a ‘spiralling’ progression that expresses itself in issues that are coming back on the agenda but in a different form . . . One can evoke the case of certain States that have just prolonged compulsory schooling compared to others that reason in terms of institutionalisation and individualisation of training paths. The same is true when ‘lifelong learning’ replaces ‘continuing education’ . . . and ‘qualification’ replaces ‘examinations’ (Kirsch, 2006).

This rather descriptive approach is supported by Michael Young’s analyses of the establishment of national qualifications frameworks (Young, 2005). Observing that some countries have had to backtrack after having wanted to abruptly enforce a national qualifications framework, he puts forward certain proposals. The following are clearly illustrated in the implementation of the French system:

— the adoption of an incremental process in relation to which European deadlines can resemble what Pierre Bourdieu would have called the exercise of a ‘symbolic violence’;
— the respect of ‘path dependencies’, in the sense that these qualifications frameworks must be appropriated by the social actors and find meaning in relation to a context and projects that are embedded in their history.

Michael Young also suggests taking the small countries as indicators, since they are likely to react more rapidly than the others.

Conclusion: the dialectic of the methodologies and tools

When the text concerning the European Qualifications Framework was proposed, its presentation as a ‘neutral tool’ gave rise to many objections. In the light of what preceded, the distinction between tool and method in the fields that concern us needs to be re-examined. Indeed, the tools are constantly changed and they appear at given moments in the evolution of the systems. Their adoption expresses the fact that the partners involved saw their appropriation as a good thing, given the nature of the negotiations and debates in which they were taking part. In relation to this, the open method of coordination seems to have chosen a very reifying conception of social construction and indicators to evaluate it. Maybe one should suggest taking into account the despair of the technocrat as an indicator whose value is directly proportional to social creativity?

Encouraging Transparency for the Users

On first analysis, training or qualifications levels — since this distinction is not always very clear in the common vocabulary — are indeed a system of collective
reference in France, even if this remains closely tied to the number of years of training and the names of the diplomas conferred by the Ministry of Education. Once this observation has been made, it is useful to classify their possible uses in order to highlight the transparency provided by a qualifications framework. We distinguish two:

— the qualification–labour market relation;
— the internal legibility of the training/qualification system.

The Qualification-Labour Market Relation

The French context encourages a distinction between:

— The personalised relation of recruitment and job search processes;
— The collective relation at the level of the professional branch that fixes — or does not fix — conventions as the way of linking the classification (and hence the wages) and the qualification held.

To our knowledge, the observations in these fields are not widespread and it seems that the actors prefer to invoke the value of the principle rather than the diversity of the observable situations. One can understand this position in relation to the social partners who are in a situation of generally conflicting negotiations and who prefer to keep the benefit of mutually agreed standards rather than question balances that have sometimes been acquired with difficulty. It is more problematic to observe that researchers do not often analyse this field. The following developments therefore need to be understood as first thoughts or statements that are not backed by theoretical or methodological references.

Concerning French employers, it was usual in the 1970s to say that they only knew the training system through the experience of their own studies and that of their children’s. The situation has evolved substantially since then and the employment crisis for young people since the 1980s has contributed to this by making diplomas a more and more selective criterion: although their possession is less and less sufficient, it is more and more necessary. The creation of a framework and a system of qualifications contributed to their legibility, especially in relation to the youth labour market. But it must be pointed out that this was part of a much broader evolution in school-enterprise relations and it is therefore difficult to estimate its specific contribution.

Concerning the contractual links, there has always been a ‘cult of the diploma’ in the French system. This is illustrated by the obligation to sit for competitive examinations (concours) to enter the civil service, as well as by the references that have been established between the level and speciality of the diploma and professional classification in the collective agreements of branches that are co-signed by the social partners (Jobert & Tallard, 1995). Unfortunately, there are few recent studies on this aspect of the training-employment relation. On the one hand some state that this link constitutes a basic agreement for social dialogue, whereas others emphasise the personalisation of the wage relation through the creation of a ‘competence logic’. Present research is carried out at a more global level and concerns the total working population, regardless of the regulation by the branches. It is interesting to note that where French researchers talk about...
‘declassing’, the Anglo-Saxons evoke ‘over-education’. Whatever the case, the legibility of the qualifications system constitutes a basis to ease the dialogue between social partners. The question is whether it tends to become eroded or undergoes normal changes over time.

**Internal Legibility of the Training/qualification System**

Here again, we must make a distinction between two levels of legibility:

— that of the users of the system in view of defining training/qualifications pathways in the framework of lifelong learning,
— that of the planners who seek to optimise the efficiency of the system to avoid redundancies and make the collective interest and individual aspirations meet.

Concerning the first, it is clear that the existence of a qualifications framework enables individuals to structure how they seek information and define pathways in a continuing perspective. In this sense, it provides a tool that is accessible to all to obtain information on the *Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* and on the procedures that accompany the assessment of prior experience.

Three questions can be asked:

— the first is linked to the French tradition of egalitarianism. Reality shows, however, that there are privileged pathways. Hence the importance of having a balanced information system which is both universal and gives answers to frequently posed questions;
— the second is linked to the rather separated character of the sub-systems of qualifications in France (diplomas, certificates and amongst the latter the specific status of sectoral qualifications). Principles of equivalence are regularly evoked, but their application is very rare;
— last, there is a question of principle that concerns social cohesion: must one keep to a global concept of qualification or imagine a construction that evolves according to the evolution of individuals and the economy? This second approach, often described as a ‘patchwork’, does not seem to keep the promises that some people saw in it (e.g. the NVQ experience). Yet the first could be made more flexible: in this respect, the innovations in the German system deserve to be followed closely.

On the part of the planners, legibility is associated with a reduction in the supply of qualifications. Reference is usually made to the 10,000 qualifications that may be included in the national register in order to denounce the plethora, evoke its opacity and prone a drastic reduction. It is difficult to be entirely opposed to this position, but it may deserve a little more nuance. Again, in a logic of perfect equality, one supposes that all persons seeking a qualification will find themselves confronted with a list of 10,000 possibilities. This is far from being the case. Moreover, if it is recognised that qualifications play a signal role in relation to available jobs on the labour market, one cannot blame the will to fine tune it. To these arguments must be added that the early preparatory texts concerning
the CNCP gave it a function of control and signalling of redundancy that later disappeared. Moreover, in examining the evolution of the supply, it seems that the Ministry of Education has made a great effort to reduce the number of its diplomas, but subsequently there has been a growing demand for accredited qualifications in the fields concerned. It is as if there was an implicit system of connected vessels. Beyond these anecdotes, the question posed is that of the specialised or transversal nature of vocational qualifications: can it be decided by the planner or does it express a momentary situation that evolves according to changes in the work systems?

**Conclusion**

Based on the French experience, this article has provided comments on and replies to the three initial issues raised in this special issue on national qualifications frameworks: supply- vs. demand-led systems; coherence of systems; transparency for the users. These comments do not always allow for straightforward answers. However, they confirm that the setting up of a national framework does support coherence and legibility. The issue of a better orientation towards demand is less clear, since the time-span of the benefits is not the same as for supply-led systems and the framework as such does not provide for that. There, the methodology for the construction and the content design of qualifications, the circumstances in which it takes place, are more important.

However, these latter debates have led us to discuss the notion of ‘rapid response to demand’, since demand is not a stable reference and, when one looks into it, there is a quite unstable and uncertain notion of needs lying behind it.

Also, discussing these issues around qualifications frameworks led to a discussion on their role in the functioning of labour markets. Recent European developments call on the concept of qualifications framework, referring it to an existing European labour market. The EQF is not the first attempt to bring training and labour market (supply and demand) closer together, referring implicitly to different functioning of labour markets:

- The Europe of the directives, the forerunner, which establishes a relation of obligation between occupation and qualification (diploma) and classifies the latter in a 5-level grid;
- The Europe of harmonised occupations which rests on the idea that a European directory of occupations would naturally foster the emergence of joint training and qualifications activities. It resulted in the attempt to construct a kind of European Trades Directory in the 1980s. This programme was abandoned, but the Eurooccupations project could be seen as a form of its resurgence;
- The Europe of harmonised qualifications, taking various routes: harmonisation of classification systems through EQF, or construction of reference frames (occupational standards) that are common to several countries;
- The Europe of supply and demand mapping, through the EUROPASS system, which is close to the portfolio approach, to support the legibility of the acquired competences to be compared to the necessary ones.
This tells us that we should not mix up the ‘end product’ (a framework) and the process leading to its inception. A framework is a device, a mechanism, not a simple ‘neutral’ tool. It is an ongoing negotiation issue between its users and developers, which is sensitive to the analysis of the labour markets around which it is designed. There is no one single labour market in Europe.

NOTES
1. The extracts in brackets are taken from the presentation by Michael Young and Jean Gordon in this issue of the European Journal of Education.

REFERENCES


