

Classification of the pilot course within the European Qualifications Framework

1. Criteria

Courses of education are assigned to one of the eight levels defined by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) on the basis of three criteria¹:

- 1.) **Knowledge.** This encompasses theoretical and factual knowledge. The knowledge level ranges from level 1 – "basic general knowledge" – to "knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields" (level 8).²
- 2.) **Skills.** This encompasses cognitive and practical skills.
This therefore includes logical, intuitive and creative thinking, as well as the application of methods and the more or less skilled use of tools and instruments. Level 8 is achieved by people who have mastered "the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques (...) in research and/or innovation (...)". At the other end of the scale are "basic skills required to carry out simple tasks."³
- 3.) **Competence.** In contrast to general usage, where competence is frequently understood as the sum of knowledge and skills, the EQF defines competence as "responsibility and autonomy". In this case, the spectrum ranges from "work or study under direct supervision in a structured context," to "demonstrate substantial authority" characterised by "innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes (...)".⁴

2. Classification of the pilot course "Female manager in a family business"⁵

2.1 Knowledge

The knowledge to be imparted by the course is summarised in the framework teaching plan and specified in the module descriptions. According to these documents, graduates from the course should be familiar with and understand a balance sheet. They should know how a business plan is structured and be aware of regulations protecting their staff from unfair dismissal.

This knowledge (extracts of which only are given here) clearly exceeds the level of "basic general knowledge" (level 1). Neither is it basic factual knowledge (level 2), since general terms or techniques are also taught. In view of the brevity of the course, however, it can be assumed that it will not be capable of imparting a "comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge" (level 5). It must therefore be classified as either level 3 or level 4. The two levels are distinguished by the breadth of knowledge imparted. Since the pilot course focuses on a narrow curriculum – in contrast, for example, to the French BCCEA and the 'Fachwirtin' (non-degree level business administration) course also offered in Münster – the course should be classified as **level 3**.

2.2 Skills

¹ For further detail, see European Commission: The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) (2008), p. 12-13.

² Ibid, p. 12.

³ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ All quotes in section 2 are taken from the descriptors in the EQF, Ibid, p. 12-13.

During the course, participants learn skills which unequivocally extend beyond solving routine problems. Producing a budget or actively devising a resolution to a conflict require more than just “basic cognitive and practical skills” (level 2). Some students on the course will, in practicing their business, certainly find “creative solutions to abstract problems” (level 5) or even possess skills enabling them to “solve complex and unpredictable problems” (level 6). The objective of the course itself should, however, be classified somewhat lower than this. The course concerns itself with, for example, applying “basic social security law” or “basic communication skills”. These formulations suggest that the skills taught in the pilot course can be consolidated through further educational measures over a number of levels. For this reason, we again propose classification as **level 3**, according to which “basic methods, tools, materials and information” are “selected and applied” and “a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems” are used. Level 4 requires skills which enable those possessing them to solve specific problems in a field of work. This level could be attained in Münster, for example, through further courses to attain the qualification ‘Fachwirtin’ (non-degree level business administrator).

2.3 Competence

Participants should, as the course title clearly states, be trained to be able to manage a family business. Having classified the course as level 3 in the first two categories, it seems natural to examine level 3 for this category. According to this, at the end of the course, participants are able to “take responsibility for completion of tasks in work” and “adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems.”

This formulation may reasonably be applied to inexperienced students who are using the course to prepare themselves to work in the family business. Even this group of students will, however, generally attain a higher level of competence. The skills and knowledge imparted create the conditions for responsible and in particular autonomous practice within a family business. Supervision of the routine work of others – a further criterion for **level 4** – is both expected and performed by newcomers to the profession by the end of the course. For students who have been managing a business with their husbands for a number of years, significantly higher levels may plausibly be attained. At level 5, management activities extend to contexts of work where there is unpredictable change; level 6 includes the addition of taking responsibility for decision-making; level 7 requires the development of new strategic approaches.

3. Summary

Most of these points support classification of the pilot course as **level 3**. Precise analysis, however, uncovers two difficulties which remain unresolved within the EQF.

- 1.) It is not clear how a course should be classified where the course is assigned different levels in the three categories. In this case, knowledge and skills correspond to a lower level than the level of competence imparted. Should a mean be calculated? 2.) It is also unclear how capabilities acquired in practice are to be taken into account in categorising a course. The EQF originally incorporated the intention of validating and documenting informal, as well as formal, learning.⁶ If, however, a course which can be consumed by a heterogeneous group of students must be unambiguously assigned to a *single* level, this makes an absurdity of this intention. The comments for the second and third categories in particular show that it is not actually possible to assign a course to a level unequivocally where you have a heterogeneous student population. Should the classification be based on the weakest or the most advanced students? Or should a mean again be calculated?

As a consequence of these findings, two requirements for the further development of the EQF can be formulated:

1.) Aggregation of the three categories into a single level should be dispensed with. It is precisely the identification of these three aspects which increases transparency. 2.) Instead of classifying courses, there should be individual documentation of the relevant level for individual participants broken down by these three categories.

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