The Development of Skills Internationally: A Question of Qualifications

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Introduction and Overview of Current Activities

Members of SIOP’s team of representatives to the United Nations (UN) recently participated in a meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris. According to their website, UNESCO is known as the “educational” agency of the UN. Among its many priorities, UNESCO attempts to improve and mobilize support for education, build intercultural understanding between nations, support global scientific cooperation, and protect freedom of expression (UNESCO, n.d.). UNESCO also has an important role in supporting work on an issue that is both near and dear to industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology and critical for continued social and economic development around the world, namely, the facilitation of learning and skills development.

The UNESCO meeting was important to our team because we have as one our goals the creation of high-quality solutions that help the UN address major humanitarian and development challenges. One of the most important issues in international development is skills development. Indeed, the development of skills is both the engine of individual capabilities and of broader socioeconomic development (UNDP, 2014). Moreover, arguably there are few issues at the UN that I-O psychology is more knowledgeable about or is better positioned to make meaningful contributions to ongoing global discussions on the issue. From expert approaches to the conceptualization and measurement of work-related individual differences and the determination of worker-related job requirements, to a deep understanding of the most effective methods of training, career development, and teamwork, I-O psychologists engage with the issue of skills development in a number of unique and effective ways.

The UNESCO meeting mentioned above was specifically focused on the issue of
qualifications and their international recognition and comparison. Qualifications are formal recognitions of work capabilities and include everything from a university degree to a professional certification (CEDEFOP, 2009). Qualifications are a crucial component within the broader realm of skills development because they are an important way to track, recognize, and incentivize the development of work skills. However, qualifications from different sectors and countries are sometimes difficult to compare because they are often specific to an economic sector or to the unique legal, political, and cultural realities of a country or region.

Two important innovations have recently emerged globally that will serve to enhance a more universal understanding of qualifications and their skills content. Both of these innovations are found in the European Qualifications Framework (European Commission, n.d.). First, qualifications are being tied to measurable “learning outcomes” that are framed as behavioral statements and clustered into knowledge, skill, and competence categories. In this context, a “competence” refers to a situation-specific application of knowledge and skill. Second, qualifications have been mapped against different learning “levels,” resulting in an organizational framework that facilitates comparison and definition in terms of learning outcomes. The European Qualifications Framework provides an example of a regional framework that connects qualifications across countries in the European Union. On the first level of the framework, the knowledge components of various professional qualifications are defined as “basic general knowledge” whereas on the 8th level, they are defined as “knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study” (European Commission, n.d.).

National and/or regional qualifications frameworks have been adopted in many places around the world from the European Union to Southern Africa. Where they are in place, qualifications frameworks have helped countries and multicountry regions to conceptualize, measure, and track changes in a population’s work-related capabilities and to compare and contrast different qualifications. Interestingly, qualifications frameworks have not been officially adopted and promoted by the United States’ federal government.

A lack of clarity regarding the knowledge and skills that people’s qualifications represent can prevent in-demand skills, like those of doctors and engineers, from being used. For example, without knowing whether the skills of a doctor with a qualification from a foreign country match the standards of the country evaluating a qualification, a qualification might not be recognized and the doctor might not be allowed to work. In addition, people who hold qualifications that are not accepted when they move to a new country or region often stay unemployed or stuck in low-skilled jobs (World Bank, 2012). Even where qualifications frameworks exist, major barriers to skills development often still exist in places where formal education and training are limited and there is a large “informal” economy that operates outside of regulations and laws. In such situations,
significant learning and skills development might take place, but it is often stunted and not optimally transferred into important social and economic outcomes (e.g., a reliable salary) because those skills are not formally recognized (World Bank, 2012).

Efforts to recognize skills developed outside of the formal economy are known as “recognition of prior learning,” an initiative in which UNESCO has led the way to promote worldwide (UNESCO, n.d.). Important innovations in the recognition of prior learning have occurred in many countries around the world. One of the most interesting developments is in South Africa, where that country’s national human-resources development community, including the South African Qualifications Authority, has worked to ensure that South Africans who are socioeconomically disadvantaged (and who were often blocked from earning formal qualifications for their skills under apartheid) can earn degrees that recognize their prior learning (www.saqa.org.za). By taking a series of examinations, South Africans can prove their expertise in a given subject and earn an appropriate degree, from a professional certification to a PhD.

One additional emerging trend related to prior learning and qualifications is establishment of international comparability and recognition of qualifications. Although there are many issues that need to be addressed before this becomes a reality, the potential for people to have their skills recognized around the world has an obvious appeal for the purposes of social justice, economic efficiency, and personal freedom. What became clear from the meetings at UNESCO’s headquarters is that I-O psychology as a professional discipline and as a repository for many empirically tested theories and methods has a great deal to add in the ongoing conversation about qualifications and the recognition of prior learning. Below, we briefly provide an overview of some important areas of overlap and relevance. As we hope will become obvious, I-O psychology has already begun engaging with many of these global issues, albeit often under a different conceptual or disciplinary “banner.”

Work analysis: In many ways qualifications are simply meant to be standards that usefully define what work activities constitute best practice for a given occupation or job and/or what personal characteristics are necessary for success in those work activities. In this way, and as observed by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), “the use of work analysis methods” is crucial to ensuring the relevance of qualification standards to employers and other users (CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 8). Important outstanding issues for qualifications frameworks include the extent to which person- and activity-oriented information tied to qualifications in one country setting are generalizable to qualifications in another country setting (see Taylor, Shi, & Borman, 2008). Moreover, the theoretical and practical relationships between information from sources of occupational information—like O*NET—and qualifications frameworks remains unclear.

Performance appraisal: As mentioned above, a dominant trend within many
countries’ and regions’ qualifications frameworks has been their reference to specific “learning outcomes”—that is, what it is that a jobseeker or jobholder should know and be able to do on the job. Thus, best practices in performance appraisal and/or criterion development are of particular importance to ensuring that qualification standards are closely and appropriately tied to performance and, importantly, to the right level and conceptualization of performance in the job or occupation in question. Based upon the priorities articulated by UNESCO, facilitating a better understanding and measurement of performance outcomes relevant to the knowledge economy (e.g., creative thinking) seems to be a particularly promising way that I-O psychology can help advance qualifications frameworks. Proper criterion development is especially important with qualifications because it can help to rule out “arbitrary” hurdles or social artifacts tied to a qualification that are not necessary for successful performance on the job.

Training and leadership: One of UNESCO’s biggest priorities has been promoting a greater understanding, and enhancement, of “lifelong learning.” This emphasis has come, in part, because of the large share of learning and skills development that takes place outside of the formal education systems within lower-income societies, especially with those countries’ often large informal economies. As mentioned by the United Nation Development Programme’s (UNDP, 2014), recent report on the private sector’s role in poverty reduction, on-the-job training, and mentorship are main ways in which people in lower-income societies can learn and gain skills. Continuing to understand how qualifications frameworks can be designed to support not only formal education and training but also skills development enacted through on-the-job training programs and leaders’ day-to-day behaviors will be key to the continued relevance of qualifications frameworks to the vast majority of the world’s population.

In general, with insights from I-O psychology, it seems likely that well-established qualifications frameworks can increase people’s motivation to pursue skills development opportunities by limiting and honing qualifications requirements to what is needed on the job and by clarifying how those qualifications can be obtained through various sorts of both formal and informal training/education.

**Conclusion**

This article has attempted to highlight how the issue of skills development is being engaged with at the United Nations. We have seen that UNESCO and actors around the world have worked to promote lifelong learning and skills development in a number of ways, and in particular by facilitating a more accurate understanding of the relationship between skills and qualifications, by better coordinating different qualifications to one another, and by helping people to have their skills recognized by qualifications regardless as to how those skills were developed. From a somewhat different perspective, it is worth observing that especially outside of the United States, qualifications frame-
works are major ways in which skills and the world of work are understood. Based upon the SIOP UN team’s interactions with leading policymakers on an international level, it appears that there is much that I-O psychology can do to further assist the development of qualifications frameworks internationally.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to James Keevy of JET Educational Services, Borhene Chakroun of UNESCO, and John E. S. Lawrence of Columbia University for conversations and insights that helped to facilitate this article.

References


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