



By
Catherine GALLI
Josiane PADDEU
(Céreq)

What certification for transversal competences in France?

Since the Act of 23 April 2005 came into force, curricula in the compulsory stages of education have been drawn up on the basis of a “common core of knowledge and competences”. Updated and extended by the 2013 Act, this common core is the French version of the European recommendations on transversal competences. In the course of the European Track-Vet project, a team from Céreq investigated the way in which these competences are specified and validated in the French vocational education and training system.



SKILL

TRANSFERABILITY OF COMPETENCES

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

EVALUATION

VALIDATION OF ACQUIRED SKILLS

CERTIFICATION

Since the mid-1990s or thereabouts, studies have been circulating at the European level highlighting the role of transversal competences in the education-to-work transition, keeping workers in employment and, more widely, in the construction of citizenship. Published by international organisations (notably the OECD), they are based on the European recommendations issued in 2006 and 2018 (cf. Box 2) that define transversal competences as “those necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability”. National training systems were invited to develop, formalise, assess and validate them in order that they might be recognised within the European space and thereby promote access for all to “life-long learning”.

In the course of its involvement in the Track-Vet project (Key transversal competences - Vocational education and training - Cf. Box 1), Céreq investigated the certification in the French initial and continuing vocational training system (higher education not included) of four of the eight transversal key competences defined in the European recommendation (cf. Box 2). To certify a competence means, in the first instance, to set it out in the form of the results to be achieved (known at the European level as “learning outcomes”). The approach adopted for the Track-Vet project focused more on the formulation, in standards frameworks and curricula, of the competences to be acquired, as well as on the conditions under which they are assessed and validated, than on the content actually taught.

In this edition of *Céreq's Bref*, a distinction will be made between general education,

vocational education and specific initiatives and qualifications, since the transversal key competences are formulated differently in each of these spheres. In the general subjects or those that are common to the various vocational pathways *, the curricula are not yet fully formulated in terms of competences, which tend rather to be referred to within a framework based on disciplinary knowledge. In the vocational sphere, the standards frameworks clearly formulate these competences but their position is defined in terms of their links to the technical competences. On the other hand, certain qualifications listed in the specific register, together with certain cross-disciplinary experiments and teaching initiatives put into practice in secondary education (Cf. Box 4), are dedicated exclusively to transversal key competences.

Transversal competences integrated with disciplinary knowledge

Since the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, all pupils who have completed their compulsory education are supposed to have acquired the transversal competences listed in the common core of knowledge and competences (cf. Box). The curriculum for each discipline is now drawn up on the basis of this common core [1], which constitutes the most obvious way in which the transversal competences are taken into account in France.

Thus, the competences set out in the common core are referenced virtually in their entirety in the preambles to curricula for the common-core disciplines in France's vocational high schools.



1 The European TRACK-VET project and the survey

The partner institutions in the European Track-Vet project (2017-2020) were the Warsaw School of Economics (Poland), the Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational Training, the Institute for Labour and Social Research (Norway), the Centre d'études et de Recherche sur les Qualifications (France), the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements (Slovakia), the Matej Bel University Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) and the National Centre for Education (Latvia). Its objective was to describe the way in which, in various national contexts, transversal competences (also known at the European level as key competences) are formalised, assessed and validated in secondary and continuing vocational training. In the case of France, the analysis focused on a very diverse range of qualifications representative of those recognised by the state (vocational qualifications and those listed in the specific register, including CléA [3]) as well as on multidisciplinary pedagogical initiatives developed on the margins of the school-based programmes. Within this framework, the teaching initiatives, courses, curricula and standards frameworks in secondary vocational education that make reference to these competences were investigated and analysed. In addition, 25 interviews were conducted with actors in the field, including representatives of educational institutions, researchers, teachers, trainers and the social partners. Source: <http://www.track-vet.eu/>

In the curriculum content, they are formulated in a different and, in some cases, redundant way for each discipline. However, they can be difficult to locate since they seem to be linked to each other and appear under different categories: skills, attitudes, competences or knowledge. Just from reading the curriculum specification, it is difficult to determine the transversal competences that are to be taught in any one course. The general inspectors involved in compiling these curricula also note how difficult it is to formulate these competences as such because of the importance attached to discipline-based knowledge in the French education system. Thus, one competence may be taught in one course only, which casts doubt on its transversality. This applies to the “entrepreneurial spirit” strictly defined, which is completely integrated into the economics and management and economics and law curricula. Nevertheless, the more or less explicit formulation of these competences in the curricula does not necessarily tell us everything about the way in which efforts are made to develop them in the school context. Project work, presentations, group

work, productions and work based on actual situations encountered in social and professional life (as part of the Health, Safety and the Environment curriculum, for example) are, after all, so many specific teaching methods devised precisely in order to develop them (Box 4).

The assessment of the four transversal competences listed here in the general courses taken by pupils studying for vocational qualifications also raises questions. These courses (eco-management, history, geography and civic and moral education) are, after all, usually assessed by means of written examinations which, while they lend themselves to the assessment of academic subjects or the written form of a language, seem less well-suited to this type of competence. As for the oral examination of these courses, the criteria listed generally relate to oral expression in a given subject area, whose specific knowledge and vocabulary have to be mastered by pupils. The oral examinations in history, geography and civic and moral education are defined in an information sheet that lists the following criteria: “using an historical or geographical vocabulary”, “drawing on subject knowledge”, “demonstrating understanding of the historical situation”. Thus, there are few evident references to civic competences, as a history and geography inspector has pointed out. It is true that the 2015 version of the moral and civic education curriculum formalises these competences to a greater extent. Nevertheless, there is a step from education in citizenship to the development and assessment of “civic competences” that has not necessarily been taken.

Transversal competences at the service of “occupational” competences

“Entrepreneurial competences” and “personal and social competences are frequently listed in the reference frameworks for vocational programmes. Entrepreneurial competences, broadly defined in terms of ability to take the initiative, are

2 The transversal competences and their European definitions

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation that “constituted a reference document for the development of a competence-based education, training and lifelong learning system”. Revised in 2018, it defines eight transversal key competences required for life-long education and training: competences in reading and writing, multilingual competences, competences in mathematics and science, technology and engineering, digital competences, personal, social and learning to learn competences, citizenship competences, entrepreneurial competences and competences relating to cultural awareness and expression. The Track VET project focused solely on the last four competences, which are defined thus in the recommendation:

- **Personal, social and learning to learn competences:** “the ability to reflect upon oneself, effectively manage time, work with others in a constructive way, remain resilient and manage one’s own learning and career”.
- **Citizenship competences:** “the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability”.
- **Entrepreneurial competences:** “the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects that are of cultural, social or financial value”.
- **Cultural awareness and expression competences:** “Competence in cultural awareness and expression involves having an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms”.

Source : [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN)

3 The common core

formulated differently in France depending on the level of qualification. Indeed, the importance attached to responsibility and initiative increases as the level of qualification rises. Thus, holders of the CAP (a level 3 qualification) are mere “underlings”: they apply and abide by instructions, operate under the responsibility of...” and may, at best, propose solutions or help in decision-making. This competence is mentioned more frequently in level 4 qualifications (*brevet professionnel* and vocational *baccalauréat*). In its strictest sense of the ability to start up and manage a business, it also features in the qualifications aimed at those seeking to take up or return to a craft occupation (*brevet professionnel* for bakers, hairdressers etc.) or to manage a production unit. In these instances, it remains closely linked to the nature of the activity to be taken up on completion of the course. Moreover, the written examination in applied management, which is supposed to enable this competence to be assessed, is concerned essentially with knowledge about the economic and legal environment and with management notions.

The so-called social competences, “communicating with the work group” and “communicating with clients and users”, are mentioned more frequently. In the qualifications for “relational occupations”, they feature in modules that also include the technical skills associated with hairdressing or domiciliary care, for example. Often associated with more technical competences, they are intended to be assessed in a contextualised way (sometimes at the end of periods of training in a work environment) and in examinations focusing largely on technical competences. Some manufacturing specialities offer a different scenario: these social competences are listed separately, under the heading “professional attitudes”, and are not intended to be assessed, even though it is acknowledged that they will necessarily be called on in the course of the examination. More generally, these competences are formalised differently in the standards frameworks depending on the specialism in question (and sometimes the level of the qualification) but seldom independently and, moreover, are not subject to much in the way of assessment. Indeed, they are fully integrated with more technical and specialised competences related to the occupations and jobs targeted by the qualification and consequently fall more within the scope of “professional attitudes” [5].

Transdisciplinary pedagogical initiatives and qualifications specifically devoted to transversal competences

Just like the interdisciplinary initiatives developed on the margins of the school-based curricula (cf. Box 4), some of the qualifications listed in the specific register are aimed explicitly – and virtually exclusively – at the acquisition and utilisation of the transversal competences that are the focus of the present study.

Guidance and Curriculum Planning Act no. 2005-380 of 23 April 2005 for the future of schools stipulated that “compulsory schooling must at least provide each pupil with the means required to acquire a common core made up of a range of knowledge and competences that have to be mastered in order to complete their education successfully, pursue their training, construct their personal and professional future and succeed in school”. This common core, which every pupil had to acquire during their time in compulsory education, was based directly on research carried out by international organisations and European institutions, the OECD and the European Commission among them. It was intended to facilitate “the construction of a common educational culture”. This first common core consisted of 7 competences, also known as “pillars”, which also informed the discipline-based curriculum. The Higher Council on the Curriculum, which was established by Guidance and Curriculum Planning Act no. 2013-595 of 8 July 2013 for the reform of schools in the French Republic, updated the 2005 common core, known from then on as the “common core of knowledge, competences and culture”, which now comprised the 5 transversal domains set out below.

Common core of knowledge, competences and culture (2013)

Languages in which to think and communicate:

- understanding and expressing oneself by using the French language in both its written and oral forms
- understanding and expressing oneself by using a foreign language and, where appropriate, a regional language (or a second foreign language)
- understanding and expressing oneself by using the languages of mathematics, science and IT.
- understanding and expressing oneself by using the languages of the arts and body language.

Methods and tools for learning

Personal and citizenship education

Natural and technical systems

Representations of the world and of human activity

The social partners drew on the various existing guidelines (common core, first European recommendation on the key competences etc.) in compiling the set of vocational competences and knowledge known as the *CléA* qualification. This qualification is intended more for those seeking to acquire the competences regarded as most useful in individuals’ working lives, foremost among which is “learning to learn”, except for those regarded as being the responsibility of the education system (cultural awareness and civic competences, for example). Thus, the transversal competences defined here are specified without equivocation, explicitly and without any connection to a list of technical knowledge or competences. Like the common core in the school system, the *CléA* standards framework allocates these competences to a number of different domains, four of which are linked to the competences targeted by the study: working in accordance with the rules drawn up by a work group; working independently and reaching one’s individual target; learning to learn throughout one’s life; working ergonomically and adhering to health, safety and environmental rules.

However, it is difficult to ascertain how the *CléA*, which is both a training and an assessment scheme, is put into practice. After all, both the training and the assessment depend on each accredited organisation and they can be reluctant to disclose either their teaching or their assessment methods. In some organisations, the assessment seems to involve the compilation of a portfolio of evidence followed by an interview, together with scenarios. These scenarios are regarded as typical of daily

4 Interdisciplinary schemes dedicated to the transversal competences developed on the margins of the school-based curricula

- **Mini-enterprises:** these are experiments conducted in upper and lower secondary schools in partnership with the national association *Entreprendre pour Apprendre* (Learning through Enterprise). In these experiments, groups of pupils are given the task of developing a business plan, starting with the creation of a product or service and ending with its marketing. The aim is to develop pupils' entrepreneurial spirit in its broadest sense, that is to improve their ability to work autonomously or as part of a team and to take the initiative, as much as in its more restricted sense of "undertaking an (economic) activity".
- **"Learning to learn":** based on developments in neuroscience, in which effective learning is determined by the desire to learn and by self-esteem, in the school context this type of experiment can take the form of "talking circles" that are designed to foster kindness in classes and to encourage pupils to express their emotions. They may also consist of a period at the beginning of the school year given over to welcoming pupils and organising debates around what it means to be a pupil.
- **The educational pathways:** introduced at the beginning of the academic year 2015-2016, from the first to the final year of high school, they are based on transversal competences and are divided into four pathways: health, citizenship, the future and artistic and cultural education. They are more institutionalised than the experimental schemes and are national in scope. They were introduced in order to enable pupils to develop their awareness of what they have acquired throughout their school careers in domains that cut across subject boundaries in matters of health, guidance for the future, artistic culture and citizenship. The benefits of these pathways can be enhanced by use of the FOLIOS app, which enables pupils to keep track of their learning processes.
- **The initiatives undertaken by the Campaign against early school-leaving (la Mission de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire/MLDS):** the MLDS undertakes a range of different measures with the aim of averting or finding a solution for early-school leaving. These measures generally involve an unscored assessment of a pupil's so-called psycho-social competences, which is recorded for the pupil in a booklet, alongside their experiences during a work placement, for example. The main purpose of this booklet is to increase the benefit obtained from these experiences.

life or of life at work (arranging a celebratory event for a work colleague, for example, or organising a trip in order to assess group working in particular). As for the standards framework, it never specifies the situations in which these competences can be deployed or assessed and remains focused on how to behave at work. This is clearly reflected in the listed assessment criteria, which are either normative (the rules of politeness are to be observed, working/office hours are to be kept, etc.) or concerned with performance and efficiency (problems are to be identified and resolved, improvements are to be introduced, and so on).

Thus, the *CléA* qualification puts forward a concept of transversal competence that has no basis in individual disciplines or occupations. Nevertheless, the descriptions in the reference frameworks of the situations conducive to the development of the competences in question seem to be inescapable. After all, the scenarios are sometimes "so constraining that they absolutely have to be taken into account in learning situations as much as in assessment situations" [5]. For some researchers, this constraint actually invalidates the reality and plausibility of the transversal competences [4]. Others have sought to define groups of situations to which they can be referred. For example, the actors in adult vocational training involved in the "Recognising transversal competences in the work situation" project, which was funded as one of the Erasmus + programmes, have defined classes of situations and levels of expertise for each of the 12 transversal competences identified. They have also put forward their thinking on the most appropriate assessment methods, which include self-evaluation, for example [2].

the general subject syllabuses (curricula) in vocational education and training. Thus, they do not always feature as such, as objects to be explicitly acquired, developed and assessed. This is what sets France apart from other European countries, such as Poland for example, where these competences are sometimes dissociated from knowledge. In France, they are given their most discrete formalisation in the common core, where they define above all a minimum required in order to construct an individual pathway, whether in education, training or employment, independently of the individual disciplines or more technical competences. Consequently, there is a great risk that the situations necessary to the development and assessment of these competences will simply go unidentified. The actors questioned also highlighted the complexity of putting in place arrangements for assessing these transversal competences, whether or not they are formulated independently in the curricula and standards frameworks. Similar difficulties in this regard were noted by all the European partners in the project, who did not reach a conclusion on the need to mark these competences as part of the process of awarding qualifications. Nevertheless, we have to point to the experiments with new methods of assessment being conducted in some places, which seem better suited to these competences. This is the case in France with self-assessment methods based on record books, personal dossiers and portfolios compiled by candidates, all of which help to make them aware of what they have learnt and to make it visible. Mention can also be made of the introduction in France and Austria of project-based learning. Sometimes carried out in a work environment, projects are indeed a rich source of material for the assessment of various competences. —●

→ Learn more

[1] Les programmes de français et l'enseignement de la littérature : ruptures et continuité depuis 1995, P. Clément, *Le français aujourd'hui*, n° 3, 2018.

[2] *Compétences transversales en contexte professionnel : objectif, graduer, évaluer*, M. De Ferrari, Rapport de synthèse du comité opérationnel 4, AEFA, Agence Erasmus+, 2014.

[3] *Developing, assessing and validating transversal key competences in the formal initial and continuing VET (Track-vet)*, French country report, Céreq, C. Galli, J. Paddeu, P. Veneau, 2019.

[4] *Les compétences transversales en question*, B. REY, Paris, ESF Editeur, 1996.

[5] De la nature des compétences transversales jusqu'à leur évaluation : une course à obstacles souvent infranchissables, J. Tardif, B. Dubois, *Revue française de linguistique appliquée*, n°1, 2013.

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Publications manager:

Florence Lefresne

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Andrew Wilson

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Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications
10, place de la Joliette CS 21321 - 13567 Marseille Cedex 02 / T. +33 (0)4 91 13 28 28
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