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## D. Certification of competencies

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### **How is certification of labour competencies defined?**

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It is a public, registered, formal and temporary recognition of the working ability shown by a worker. It is done based on the assessment of his competencies regarding a standard and without being necessarily subject to completing an educational process.<sup>1</sup>

Certification is the completion of a process of formal recognition of the competencies of workers; it involves the opinion of an authorised institution, the accreditation of the competency of a worker. Certification is usually granted as a recognition of the completion of a training process, based on training and practice as well as the assessed contents. This does not necessarily mean the assessment of competencies.

This broader concept of certification is meant to place it far from an academic notion of a credit obtained after completing certain studies and having correctly worked out a number of tests; the idea is in fact closer to a description of the actual labour abilities of a worker and, in some cases, the way in which he acquired those abilities becomes even less important. It is closer to the idea of recognising knowledge or prior learning, as it is called in some countries.

There exist some experiences in the scope of certification within the region since the 70s. For instance, a project carried

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<sup>1</sup> Irigoín, M.; Vargas, F., *Competencia Laboral. Manual de conceptos, métodos y aplicaciones en el sector salud*, Montevideo, Cinterfor/ILO, 2002.

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out by Cinterfor/ILO in 1975 was oriented to measure and certify the qualification acquired by training courses or labour experience or by the combination of both. Since then, training institutions discovered that it was necessary to recognise labour abilities that workers had obtained during their working experience and to provide labour mediation systems with better tools to offer candidates the most appropriate jobs. Certification was then defined as a “process aiming at the formal recognition of occupational qualification of workers, without taking into account the way in which those qualifications were acquired”.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of certification is recognising workers’ competency: such recognition implies both an assessment and a training process. Certification is a synthesis in the training process of a person but it is not the end; it is a continuous process validated throughout working life. The certificate implies an assessment process of the competencies recognised in it.

A labour competency certificate refers to a particular performance in which a worker has proved to be competent by means of the assessment of competencies. The certificate is based upon a labour competency standard and, as it was stated above, the standard was build up from the necessary competencies to have an effective performance at a particular working situation.

SENAI, Brazil, defines certification as the formal recognition process of the competencies of a person, without considering the way in which they were acquired.<sup>3</sup>

In INEM, Spain, certification is defined as “the issuance of a certificate by labour authorities, training organisations or authorised people who recognise that a worker is capable of applying the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours in order to perform a particular vocational activity.”<sup>4</sup>

According to the Mexican system, certification is defined as a process in which a third party organisation recognises and certifies that an individual has proved to be competent in a specific labour activity, without considering the way in which he has obtained such competency and in accordance with a nationwide recognised standard.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Agudelo, Santiago, *Certificación Ocupacional. Manual didáctico*, Montevideo, Cinterfor/ILO, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> SENAI, *Metodologia de Avaliação e Certificação de Competencias*, Brasilia, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> INEM, *Metodología para la ordenación de la Formación Profesional Ocupacional*, Madrid, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> CONOCER, *Sistemas Normalizado y de Certificación de Competencia Laboral*, Mexico, 1997.

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INA, Costa Rica, defines certification as the “official recognition of vocational qualifications of a person (knowledge, skills and attitudes), without considering the way in which they were acquired, both by means of participating in systematic actions of vocational training or as a result of developing a profession without prior training.”<sup>6</sup>

Many more countries, institutions and training systems are now taking measures for the recognition of competencies developed out of school. In Brazil, SENAI is advancing on a national strategic project which is doing pilot application in several occupational sectors in order to certify competencies acquired throughout experience. In Chile, SENCE, together with Chile Califica programme, which was working with the private sector, deals with another component which articulates training actions with the certification of competencies obtained at work for, initially, nine occupational sectors. In Argentina, the Ministry of Labour, financed by IADB/MIF, has developed a programme in four sectors of the economy which designs and tests mechanisms of certification and training of workers.<sup>7</sup>

The recognition of competencies developed in the exercise of the worker’s profession can become a powerful motivation to acquire new competencies; it creates better signs for the elaboration of training programmes and these become more accurate since they cater for the required training needs in order to reach a particular level of competency.

The certification of competency now attains a value related to the employability of workers as long as certificates refer to competencies in a broad sense and facilitate the transferability among different occupational contexts.

Besides, the term “continuing and life-long training” recognises the restricted validity of a certificate. In fact, the owner of a certificate must update certification within the agreed deadlines. This will guarantee that one has been aware of the changes that may have taken place in the organisation of work and technology within the occupational area.

Other characteristics of the certification of competency are:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Experience carried out by INA within the framework of *Normalización, Formación y Certificación de Competencias Laborales*, INA, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> In Chile, the sectors are: gastronomy, incoming tourism, viticulture, mining industry, gas and electricity, IT, fruit culture, logistics and transportation, and metal-mechanic: see more information at: [www.sence.cl](http://www.sence.cl) [www.chilecalifica.cl](http://www.chilecalifica.cl). In Argentina the following sectors are covered: printing sector, food, motor vehicle and metal-mechanic; more information can be found at [www.cinterfor.org.uy/competencias/observatorio](http://www.cinterfor.org.uy/competencias/observatorio) de experiencias

<sup>8</sup> Vargas, F., *Competencia Laboral en la práctica*, Montevideo, Cinterfor/ILO, 2004.

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- *It is done within a consistent occupational framework* which allows everyone to identify the contents of the occupation which is being certified. This is the way in which the following frameworks work: National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in the United Kingdom, the Qualification Chart (“Matriz de Cualificaciones”) in Mexico or the National Catalogue of Qualifications (“Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones”) in Spain.
  - *It requires a framework of legitimacy and appraisal for the certificate.* This means it has to be appraised by entrepreneurs, workers and the State. The value of a certificate can be compared with that of money. A note will not be worthier because of its design, colour or size; its value will be that given by the society and economy which make use of it.
  - *It must be carried out with a simple mechanism,* without bureaucracy and it has to be less expensive for the user than other alternatives. If we go back to the metaphor of money,<sup>9</sup> people use it because it is a better element of reference to understand each other than, for instance, exchanging apples for cheese or salt for rice.
  - *It should be legitimate and credible.* This means the certification process must be originated from a credible and socially acknowledged institutional mechanism. If there are many types and sources of certificates, the bad ones will soon replace the good ones. Many people will prefer obtaining certificates of lower quality which will surely be cheaper and less strict.
  - *It should foster transparency.* This implies that a worker should know what is stated in the certificate about him and what is expected from his performance. At the same time, the employer should be able to see the type and scope of the competencies of the worker.
  - *It has to allow for the shaping of the concept of lifelong learning.* Because it recognises all knowledge and skills acquired in every circle of life, but also because it is articulated with the offer of training opportunities that may be supplementary to those competencies not yet acquired. The process of competency recognition must offer all educational and training possibilities in order to promote the candidate’s vocational development. The creation of a learning culture implies, among other things, increasing training opportunities.

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### 30. Who certifies labour competencies?

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According to the system involved, the certification of labour competencies can be carried out by:

- The vocational training institution where the worker took the training courses or where the required competencies were assessed for the certificate.
- An independent organisation that works with certification of competencies.

There is often a debate arising from the situation of having two options which is explicit some of the times and not so in some other occasions. In many cases, the fact that there is limited knowledge about how certification systems work results in people favouring one or other alternative, without having analysed much. As it is usually the case with institutional designs, the least successful option is always the one which seeks to transfer, without much consultation, a successful model in a particular situation and context into another environment which is often different.

Experiences about certification in Latin America have shown that the most important aspect is the quality and impartiality in which the process is carried out and not who actually certifies. An assessment process of quality may well be developed by the same institution that was in charge of training. In the same way, this institution must work together with representatives from companies and workers in order to ensure that competency standards and assessment actions are relevant and reliable. The assessment has to guarantee that results are reliable, impartial and valid. But, at the same time, a good assessment needs the appropriate environments, the connection with the labour world and the knowledge on techniques of collection of evidence; and training institutions and centres have great advantages in this sense.

The discussion about the implementation or adaptation of a particular model should take this into account since in many cases, there is a tendency of automatically transferring the structure of the certification of processes or goods to the scope of

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certification and recognition of people's competencies. Training institutions are very much prepared to carry out the training process, and the assessment that leads to the certificate is, above all, a formative assessment.

A research conducted recently by the European Union showed the differences among the national certification models<sup>10</sup> of Germany, Belgium, France and England. Although all countries share the objective of keeping a training model capable of providing answers of quality to the demand of companies and considering the largest amount of youngsters and adults, the institutional arrangements are not the same. In the following chart, distinctive characteristics of several national cases<sup>11</sup> are compared.

The model of the United Kingdom insisted on the separation of the trainer, the assessor and the certifier. Such separation is done as a means of assuring the quality and transparency of the certificate. Certification bodies are, in many cases, institutions which have existed for a long time and which have represented the interests of unions from their initial stages. There is not a tradition of national training institutions or of social dialogue which may arise during the processes of elaborating competencies.

In Great Britain, it was not until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, after the Technical Education Act was officially announced in 1889, that organisations such as the "City and Guilds of London Institute" were allowed to make agreements about technical education and its certification by working with local councils. Certification was left to the initiative of a broad series of examination boards. They considered certification as business but they intended to settle it in all professions.

Source: CEDEFOP, *Certification and legibility of competencies*, 2001.

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<sup>10</sup> Boudier, Annie et al, *Certification and legibility of competencies*, CEDEFOP, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Vargas, F., "Cuatro afirmaciones sobre certificación. Todas falsas", in *Cinterfor/ILO's Bulletin* N° 153, 2002.

## Institutional characteristics of certification in Europe

CHARACTERISTIC	GERMANY	FRANCE	SPAIN	ENGLAND
Main characteristics	Alternate training company-centre (dual training). Companies are in charge of training.	Education and VT are regulated by Ministry of Education. Recognition of prior learning for adults. Several certification programmes in companies.	Three subsystems of training: <i>Initial</i> , within the educational cycle; <i>Occupational</i> , for the unemployed and, <i>Continuous</i> , for workers.	A national framework of levels and areas of competency regulated by the National Authority in charge of educational and labour issues.
Regulating body	Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)	Ministry of Education	National Qualifications Institute (INCUAL)	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
Standards	National, established by BIBB	National references established by the Ministry of Education	Occupational profiles established and regulated by Royal Decree	Established by Entrepreneurial Chambers
Strengths	Labour Practice. Companies in charge of training. National standards under one only authority.	Highly reliable regulation because of being public and national. Integrated education and VT.	National references focused on different clients. VT integrated to educational system.	National comprehensive and integrating framework. Integrated education and VT.
Weaknesses	The dual system's efficiency is questioned since it is focused on only one practice	Employers criticise the system due to the low applicability of diplomas because academic knowledge is still more important.	More coordination among the initial, continuous and occupational training systems is required.	The description of qualifications, though objective, was excessive.
Historical background	First standards of industrial training: 1925. Dual system: 1964.	1 <sup>st</sup> School of Arts and Crafts: 1803. Creation of CAP: 1919.	Technical institutes established in 1925. First certificates in the mid 70's. General Education Law in the late 90's.	Private initiatives for training: 1878 (City and Guilds). Competency standards in the late 80's.

*Sources:* Based on: QCA, *Report of the Independent Review of the UK National Occupational Standards Programme*, 2001. CEDEFOP, *Certification and legibility of competencies*, 2001. Fretwell, David, *A Framework for defining and assessing occupational and training standards in developing countries*, 2001.

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In Latin America, great advances are being done in order to build up models that respond to the needs of countries, instead of replying to an argument based on the success of an experience not yet proved. In Mexico, after more than seven years of work, CONOCER is now concentrated on giving more relevance to its competency standard with respect to the needs and language of enterprises. After a great effort developing standards, certification was actually registered as a bottleneck. It showed that certifications are not demanded for all areas of performance and that it is necessary to narrow the mechanisms related with the costs and limits it may impose on the poorest workers.

In Colombia, SENA has gained, in the last 5 years, a wide experience in making up “sectoral working groups” in which entrepreneurs together with workers, local representatives and people from educational institutions develop processes of sectoral characterisation, competencies identification and elaboration and validation of training programmes.<sup>12</sup>

The programme Chile Califica has advanced in standardisation and certification experiences and promoted the independence between certification and training. Note that in the Chilean model, financing has been separated from implementation; and now, with the introduction of certifying bodies, a quality assurance mechanism is carried out on training bodies. However, a surprising characteristic of this case is the fact that there is no separation between the one who assesses and the one who certifies. After different tests, they noticed that in this context it was less convenient to carry out these two processes in different institutions.

But this is not the only possible arrangement: ISO 17024 standard, which is applicable to certification bodies, states: “a certification body could provide training, if it does so, it should clearly show the way in which it deals with the separation between assessment and training in order to guarantee confidentiality, objectivity and impartiality”.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the answer to this question depends on the institutional design and on what social actors feel it more convenient to obtain a transparent, effective and qualified certification system. Even when analysing the institutional design it is important to consider the perspective of the drives for certification. Alexim and Lopes (2004) describe three trends: the first one is originated in huge companies which are interested in certification as a mechanism associated to insertion policies. The second one is the educational trend which em-

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<sup>12</sup> More information at [www.sena.edu.co](http://www.sena.edu.co) / sistema nacional de formación para el trabajo

<sup>13</sup> ISO 17024 Standard “General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons”.

braces the efforts made in order to create national systems of recognition of competencies associated with the possibilities of both entering or re-entering the educational system and the labour market. Finally, the labour market trend whose hallmark is the recognition of competencies acquired and aggregated throughout the working experience.<sup>14</sup>

There are different actors and drives in each of these trends, as well as different institutional arrangements. Undoubtedly, social dialogue mechanisms are fundamental when defining how a specific system is designed.

### **31. What is labour competencies assessment?**

This issue has been greatly discussed when developing training and competency-based certification models. In fact, assessment is a crucial stage, it is a key aspect of certification and it enables the identification of eventual training needs. The following are some definitions of assessment of competencies:

SENAI<sup>15</sup> defines it as the process of collecting evidence about the vocational performance of a person with the purpose of forming an opinion about his competency with respect to a vocational profile and identify the areas of performance that should be strengthened by training or other actions in order to accomplish the required level of competency.

CONOCER from México<sup>16</sup> has defined assessment of competencies as the process of collecting evidence about labour performance of an individual, with the purpose of determining whether he is competent to do a particular working activity or not yet.

Other aspects of competency-based assessment can be illustrated by the following definitions:

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<sup>14</sup> Alexim, João Carlos; Lopes Evangelio, Carmen Lucia, “A Certificação profissional revisitada”, in *Boletín Técnico SENAC*, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> SENAI, *Metodologia de Avaliação e Certificação de Competencias*, Brasília, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> CONOCER, op. cit.

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The purpose of competency-based assessment is collecting enough evidence to prove that people can perform a particular activity according to specific standards (Fletcher).<sup>17</sup>

Assessments do not depend on the time spent in formal educational institutions (Grant, 1979).

In standardised certification systems of labour competency, the assessment of competencies becomes a process of checking evidence of performance comparing it to what is established by the standard. The verification of evidence can be carried out in different ways and according to different types of evidence, as it is shown in the chart below.

In the United Kingdom, assessment can be carried out directly by the certifying body or by a specialised assessment centre, whose quality is closely supervised by the certifying body, and which should have been recognised in the first place. In Mexico, the assessment centres that have been recognised can be part of training bodies but in this case they assess the candidates that have not been trained in such centres. Thus, it has been recognised that part of the success in the assessment requires an environment and deep knowledge of the training process.

Assessment experiences in Brazil, for certain sectors of the economy such as soldering and industrial maintenance, use assessment centres that may work at SENAI Centres. The emphasis is placed on an adequate definition of profiles and instruments of assessment with the purpose of guaranteeing the effectiveness of the process.

The transparency and reliability of the certification system are always privileged in order to give certificates a high value and credibility which will finally favour their holders. In any case, assessment and certification are based on the technical standard of labour competency.

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<sup>17</sup> Fletcher, Shirley, “Nuevas formas de evaluación y certificación”, in: *Competencia Laboral. Antología de Lecturas*, México, CONOCER, 1997.

### Methods to collect evidence

METHOD	DESCRIPTION
Oral questions	<p>The candidate is interviewed, or observed at his working place, the candidate is usually enquired about causes of work, legal grounds, proceedings, principles, safety, ways of acting in unexpected situations and ways in which the knowledge is applied in the performance of work.</p> <p>A debate technique can also be used with questions like: what if? It is also possible to request the candidate to do a presentation on the characteristics of his work or about a particular issue to be assessed.</p>
Written questions	Tests that include different types of questions oriented to establish the basic knowledge about work, principles, safety issues at work, environmental impact or about technical and safety proceedings.
Observation of performance	It is the most advisable and cheapest source of collection of evidence. It is a good idea to find the evidences that normally occur as a result of work. It should not interfere with the normal development of activities. It is important to be careful to avoid exerting pressure or stress on the worker.
Task distribution mocks	These take place when it is necessary to collect evidence about unusual situations, situations that occur later than expected or situations that do not take place very often. This is the case of safety emergencies in order to check the worker's ability to follow evacuation procedures or to help co-workers.
Products of work	Check the quality of products that are obtained through the performance of the candidate with respect to the standard. It includes elaborating materials, final products and products that may serve as inputs for other co-workers within the labour process.
Portfolio or folder of evidences	Collection of materials that show prior performances and achievements and obtained products; duly authenticated by acknowledged assessors. These would not include only products but also photographic records, video or audiotapes. Written reports that prove their performance, credible evidence about his performance in previous situations such as unexpected cases.

Source: Adapted from: Mc Donald and others (1995); Fletcher (1992)

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**How is traditional assessment different from competency-based assessment?****32. How is traditional assessment different from competency-based assessment?**

Competency-based assessment is not a set of examinations; it is the basis for certification of competency and it is carried out as a process in order to collect evidence about the performance and knowledge of a person with respect to a labour competency standard. Thus it becomes a very valuable diagnostic instrument both for the worker and the employer.

Traditional assessment systems usually have some or all of the following characteristics:

- Assessment associated to a course or programme.
- Parts of the programme are assessed by means of subjects.
- Parts of the programme are included in final examinations.
- Passing criteria are based on marking scales.
- Questions are ignored.
- It is done within limited periods of time.
- Statistical comparisons are used.

On the other hand, labour competency assessment is defined as a process with several large steps:

- Setting of goals.
- Collection of evidence.
- Comparison of evidence with objectives.
- Opinion formation (competent or not yet competent).

Some of the characteristics of competency-based assessment are:

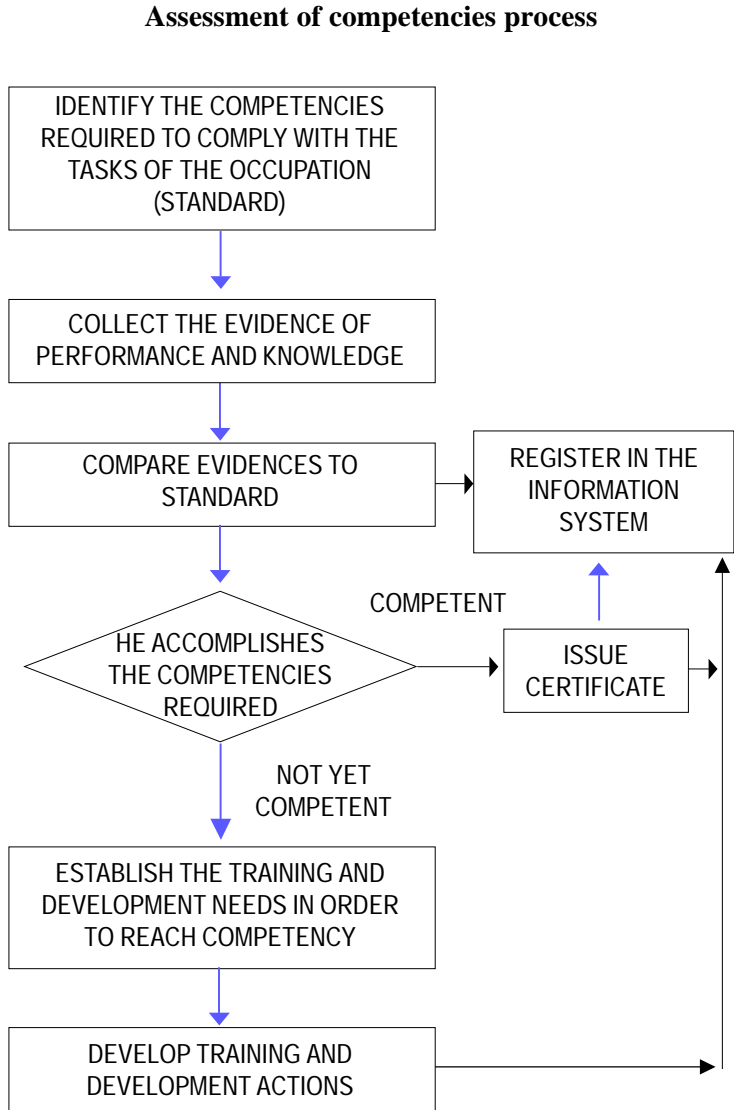
- It is based on standards that describe the expected level of labour competency.
- Standards include criteria that provide details of what they consider a good job.

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- The assessment is individual, there is no comparison among workers.
  - It provides a judgement for the assessed workers: competent or not yet competent.
  - It is done, preferably, in real working situations.
  - It does not take a predetermined period of time, it is a process rather than a particular moment.
  - It is not subject to the completion of a specific training action.
  - It includes the recognition of acquired competencies as a result of labour experience. This characteristic has been developed in some countries as the so-called “recognition of prior learning”.
  - It is a tool for the orientation of subsequent learning of the worker; as such, it plays an important role in the development of skills and abilities of the ones assessed.
  - It is the basis for the certification of labour competency of workers.

**What is the certification process in a standardised system of labour competency?**

**33. What is the certification process in a standardised system of labour competency?**

The assessment and certification process is described in the following chart:



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As an example, the process defined by CONOCER, Mexico,<sup>18</sup> is here described:

- The candidate to be assessed is introduced to the certifying body.
- This body carries out a pre-diagnosis of competencies.
- The candidate is referred to an assessment centre.
- An assessor is appointed.
- An assessment plan is drawn up.
- A portfolio of evidences is applied and integrated.
- An assessment judgement is issued.
- There is a positive verdict regarding certification.
- The certification is issued.

The process begins with the introduction of the candidate to the certifying body. There, apart from filling in the request form, a pre-diagnosis of competency is carried out in order to determine:

- The competency status with respect to the unit or to the qualification to be certified.
- The chances of success of the candidate to obtain a certificate in such competency.

By analysing the obtained results, the candidate may be referred to an assessment process in a recognised assessment centre or, if that fails, he may be encouraged to begin a training process in order to strengthen his competencies in the areas he is not well acquainted with.

After the pre-diagnosis, the certifying body appoints an assessor who agrees on the appropriate assessment plan with the candidate. Here, the assessment strategy is established, thus ensuring the transparency of the process. After that, the assessment plan is executed by applying the corresponding instruments to collect evidence of performance and of knowledge of the competency being assessed.

The candidate may gather registers of evidence of performance in different stages of his experience with respect to a labour qualification and

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<sup>18</sup> CONOCER, *Reforma estructural de la formación profesional y la capacitación*, Powerpoint presentation, 2000. For more information see: [www.conocer.org.mx](http://www.conocer.org.mx)

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present the assessor with such documents included in a “portfolio of evidences”. In this way, the assessor will have a complete collection of verification instruments of the evidences in order to compare them with the details of the competency standard and thus pass his judgement: competent or not yet competent.

In the case of a “not yet competent” result, the units or elements in which the worker was not competent are carefully explained. The assessor must prepare a report for internal verification describing the process and including the results of the assessment.

After that, a group made up by people with enough expertise in the area of competency to be certified, indicates, based on the process, if the candidate will be certified or not. Finally, after the verdict, a labour competency certificate is drawn up and issued.

A “competent” result in the assessment allows the candidate to access certification. But, apart from what is expressed in the certificate, assessment enables individuals to have a comparative profile of their situation with respect to a technical labour competency standard. This information is very useful to decide which training programmes he should attend.

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### 34. How is quality assured in a certification system?

The certification process requires total transparency. Therefore, it is supported by quality assurance mechanisms oriented to ensure that the procedures used for certification are carried out in compliance with administrative and technical-methodological guidelines devised for such purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Both the certifying body and the assessment centre have quality assurance systems. The assessment centre has to guarantee the existence of internal verification mechanisms in order to make sure that the assessment is carried out according to the established procedures and guidelines and therefore obtain impartial, transparent and objective results.

The assessment centre<sup>20</sup> must have an internal verifier in order to check the consistency of the procedures that are being used, give advice to assessors about the assessment process and create the necessary conditions to handle the information related to assessments.

A certifying body is in charge of external verification of the assessment centre. In order to do this, it uses information from internal verification and it also checks the assessment practices used, it provides consultancy to assessors and keeps registers of performed assessments. In this relationship, the feedback that the certifying body gives to the assessment centre is fundamental.

The internal verifier of assessment centres must control:

- Assessment practices.
- Assessment plans.
- Portfolios of evidence.

The external verifier's role involves:

- Producing a diagnosis of the assessment centre.
- Producing and implementing an external verification.

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<sup>19</sup> CONOCER, op. cit

<sup>20</sup> Although we talk about assessment centre, standards also allow the recognition of independent assessors.

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- Producing a report on “non-conformances”.

If non-conformances are found during the verification process, the certifying body will give consultancy services and support to the assessment centre with the purpose of discovering and neutralising the causes of this situation.

In Mexico, people who use this assessment are certified by a technical standard of labour competency, this implies a quality stamp in their performance.