

### III. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AND CERTIFICATION OF LABOUR COMPETENCIES

*Measures should be adopted, in consultation with the social partners and using a national qualifications framework, to promote the development, implementation and financing of a transparent mechanism for the assessment, certification and recognition of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally.*

ILO Recommendation 195 concerning human resources development, 2004

#### **Introduction**

In this section we will analyse some experiences in Latin America that involve the recognition of prior learning. We begin with a concept which, in the region, is usually called “the certification of labour competencies”, and then we present a summary of various experiences that have to do with the recognition of competencies. The aim is not to make an exhaustive list of experiences but rather to try to point out the most significant characteristics, and also to show that there is no one best model. Lastly, we will show how the certification of competencies should be included in national policies for developing human capital in a country.

#### **1. CERTIFICATION: CONCEPT, IMPORTANCE<sup>1</sup>**

In Latin America, interest in competency-based training and certification<sup>2</sup> has been growing for a number of years. In fact, even before the advent of the labour competencies model, Cinterfor/ILO ran a regional project on occupational certification that was oriented to the formal recognition of occupational qualifications irrespective of how they were acquired.

1 Mainly taken from: “Cuatro afirmaciones sobre Certificación. Todas falsas”, *Boletín de Formación Profesional* No. 153, Cinterfor/ILO, 2002.

2 In the European literature on this subject the term ‘recognition of prior learning’ is more commonly used.

In a work project carried out by Cinterfor/ILO in 1979,<sup>3</sup> certification was defined as “formal recognition of workers’ occupational qualifications regardless of how they were acquired.”

The importance of mechanisms for “recognising prior learning” was emphasised during the International Labour Conference (June 2004). The member states approved a new recommendation concerning human resources development, and in the discussion special attention was paid to the certification of skills acquired in work as a means for promoting lifelong learning and employability.

In the text of the new recommendation about human resources, in the section on the recognition and certification of vocational aptitudes, it says: *Measures should be adopted, in consultation with the social partners and using a national qualifications framework, to promote the development, implementation and financing of a transparent mechanism for the assessment, certification and recognition of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally.*

*Such an assessment methodology should be objective, non-discriminatory and linked to standards.*

*The national framework should include a credible system of certification which will ensure that skills are portable and recognized across sectors, industries, enterprises and educational institutions.*

*Special provisions should be designed to ensure recognition and certification of skills and qualifications for migrant workers.*

Today we can identify a number of experiences in the discussion, design and implementation of labour competency certification systems which have originated basically in training institutions, ministries of labour and ministries of education, or from human resources management in enterprises.

In this section we will analyse these groups of experiences and how they represent not only the institutional level involved but also the intentions and objectives sought through certification.

| 3 The project DOCREP/SEM 128/1, Cinterfor/ILO, 1979.

The concept of competency certification in training has to do with the formal recognition, which is valid for a specific time period, of the capacities demonstrated by people in labour performance in a determinate occupation, irrespective of where these capacities were acquired.

The vocational training intuitions in Latin America and the Caribbean have sought to modernise their programmes by implementing the competencies approach. This has allowed them to accede to new ways of analysing work processes and procedures for identifying the knowledge, skills, dexterities and know-how mobilized by workers.

The new capacities developed in this way constitute a unique opportunity to update knowledge about training in order to modernise the didactic strategies needed to stimulate the competencies considered to be “key”, like working in a team, initiative, working in safe conditions, etc.

Normally the certificate is awarded at the end of the teaching or learning process, when the candidate has successfully passed all the evaluation tests and examinations. This conception is very similar to the idea of training which held sway when the mass production model prevailed and, unlike today, when work experience was not considered as a source of learning.

The first attempts to set up a system for recognising prior learning came about in processes called “validation” which concentrated on evaluating labour capacities. In this way the concept of diagnostic evaluation developed. This is done with the aim not of recognising demonstrated capacities but of identifying the needs for developing new capacities. Many national vocational training institutions carried out validation experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, and most still run systems of this kind.

In addition, various ministries of labour and education in different countries in the region

**Some outstanding events  
in the recognition of prior learning:**

In Costa Rica, INA has a work unit specialised in providing a certification service through which that institution recognises competencies demonstrated by an individual, regardless of the way they have been acquired.

In Colombia, since the 1970s, SENA has been carrying out experiences of “occupational validation” using test banks to identify the candidates’ capacities measured against a standard, which was the organisation’s training programme. The institution awarded a certificate of occupational aptitude to those who passed the tests, and provided complementation courses for the skills that were lacking.

have promoted the public recognition for labour capacities which would facilitate the connection of supply to labour demand and which would give greater transparency to work relations. The government sector wants to play a key role in regulating training and certification, and very often this has been reflected in its active participation in promoting debate and national projects in the area of training and certification.

The motivation behind this attitude on the part of the public sector is the need to increase the quality and pertinence of training so as to make the industrial base of the country more competitive. There is also a need for greater transparency because there are so many training offers and so many different kinds of training certification that it is difficult to be sure what the competencies that trained workers have really consist of. Another line of action is to improve access to training and the recognition of labour capacities acquired in working life.

A nationally accepted certificate of labour competency would be useful because it would be reliable and would represent real capacities that are very significant for work performance. It would show that the worker has demonstrated these competencies, regardless of how he had acquired them, and this would allow possible employers to clearly understand the competencies in question.

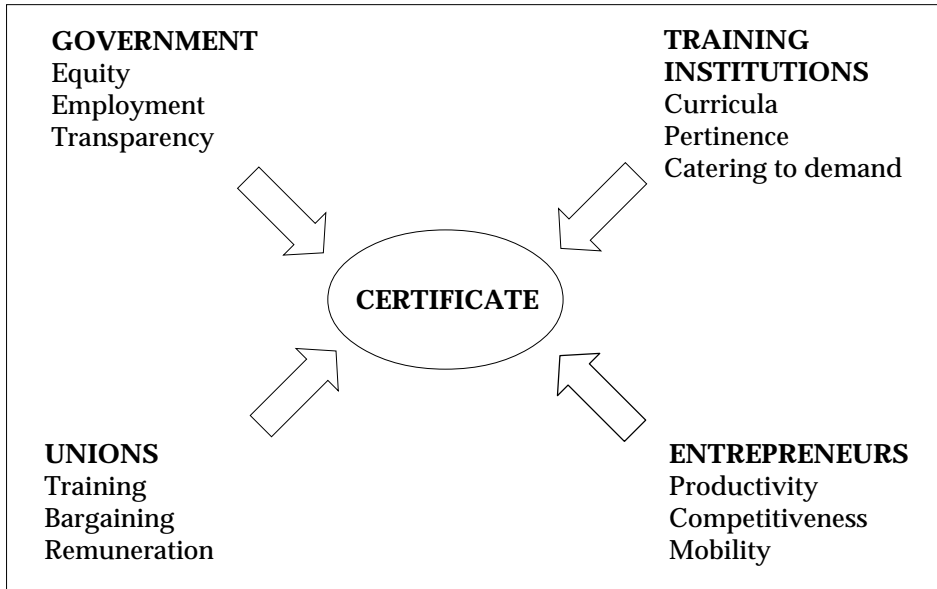
We will give two examples of experiences promoted by ministries of labour or of education: the experience in Mexico with the Technical Education and Training Modernisation Project (PMETyC) and CONOCER, and the fledgling experience in Chile, the “Chile Califica” project.

Lastly, there are number of **enterprises or groups of enterprises** carrying forward processes of training and the certification of labour competencies to improve their own productivity or to meet the international standards usually associated with people’s safety.

On the first point, enterprises in certain economic sectors have developed labour competency models for managing their human resources. To this end they have defined profiles whereby their workers can obtain certification and thus improve their possibilities of labour mobility, and here the certification of competency is associated with executing training programmes and with the occupational mobility of workers. On the second point, there are sectors in which work certification normally takes place, for example precision welding or gas installations in domestic housing or in industrial premises. The great challenge in these situations is how to include them in a system of standards that has nation-wide scope, and, even more difficult, how to integrate them into the concept of a national framework or reference for qualifications.

The diagram below shows the different expectations which are converging towards certification.

### Different expectations for certification



In addition to the interest that employers have traditionally shown in having competencies certified as a good indicator of the labour competencies of candidates for a certain job, the unions in the region are more and more coming to favour the development of mechanisms for recognising acquired competencies. The VTIs, which have a long tradition in the region, have managed to position their respective competency certificates in line with the legitimacy and prestige which these usually confer on the holder.

This varied range of different interests requires a good institutional structure to allow the development of different roles that are coordinated in such a way as to cover the criteria of quality, coverage and pertinence. In general, the discussion about training and certification systems in the region begins with an analysis of the need for institutional organisation which will give legitimacy and validity to the certification of competencies.

## **2. CERTIFICATION IN LATIN AMERICA. SUMMARY OF SOME EXPERIENCES**

To facilitate the analysis of the labour competency certification experiences in the region we have classified them into two broad categories. The first is the group for which the initiative to organise certification processes comes from the public sector, usually from the ministry of education, the ministry of labour or the country's national vocational training institution. These kinds of experiences normally have national coverage, and they are set up with a scope of action which tends to cover a number of occupational sectors in the labour market. The public interest tends to dominate in these experiences, factors such as equity and access in an inclusive perspective carry a lot of weight. We will describe the most developed experience in the region, which is CONOCER in Mexico, and also experiences in Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica.

The other broad group is made up of experiences for which the initiative in the certification process comes from the private sector, almost always limited to a specific occupational sector. Normally, in these cases, evaluation and certification are linked to selection and development in human resources management. Although the models tend to be voluntary, for a worker not to have certification can become a barrier to obtaining a particular job.

### **2.1. Certification experiences oriented by ministries of education and national training institutions**

In this section we outline the experience of the Brazilian Ministry of Education with the Law of Basic Guidelines for Education and its implications for certification, the progress of the SENAI in Brazil, the "Chile Califica" programme which involves the Ministries of Education and Labour, the SENA in Colombia, the INA in Costa Rica and the CONOCER in Mexico, which is oriented by the Secretary of Public Education.

#### **2.1.1. Certification in the ambit of education for work: the case of Brazil**

In Brazil, the Law of Basic Guidelines (LDB in Portuguese) for National Education (Law 9.394) was promulgated in 1996. This set up a new framework for vocational education in the country. The LDB stipulates that vocational education must promote the transition between school and the world of work, and train young people and adults with knowledge and general and specific skills for the exercise of citizenship and for productive activities.

The LDB establishes three levels for vocational education, which are basic, technical and technological. The basic level deals with the training and re-training of workers regardless of their level of schooling. The technical level is aimed at students who have completed secondary education (after some 11 years of education), and the technological level involves higher level courses geared to students who have completed the secondary technical level. The LDB, and a subsequent ruling (Decree No. 2.208 of 1997) establish the possibility of recognising competencies acquired in work so as to allow the continuation of studies. Without doubt this ruling is a great step forward in that it accords value to work experience. It accepts that vocational competencies can be acquired outside the formal education system, and so represents progress in valuing work as a generator of capacities and knowledge.

At the moment, the regulation of the different phases and institutions is in the process of being set up. There is a high level of participation on the part of different public and private actors in the debate about the structure and functions of the bodies in charge of carrying out the recognition of competencies. There is a clear differentiation between the LDB certification to be able to continue studying, and the certification of competencies which are valued only to be able to perform in a labour ambit.

For the former, certification for continuing studies, it is the federal and state systems which will set examinations and establish the recognition of competencies which allow disciplines or modules in the training courses to be revalidated. In the latter, that oriented to labour performance, progress is being made in the discussion and dialogue between public and private actors. In this, the National Education Council is in charge of organising a “national system of competency-based certification and also of the different bodies which will contribute to this process. Employers and workers are taking part in this process.

### ***2.1.2. The SENAI Training and Competency Certification national strategic project in Brazil***

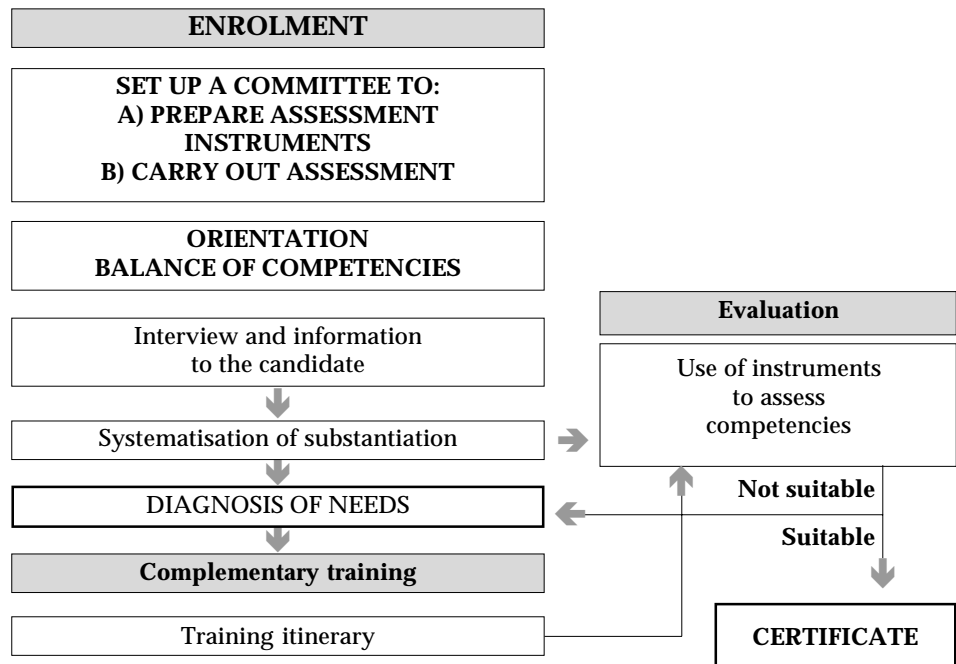
The National Industrial Training Service (SENAI), which is the national service for training in the industrial sector in Brazil, has formulated a strategic project oriented to designing and setting in motion the SENAI Certification System. This project is based on consideration of the fact that, in practice, workers acquire competencies that are amenable to being recognized. The best opportunities for employment always go to those who can show that they have studied.

So as to facilitate the recognition of these competencies, the SENAI is working on a project geared to developing mechanisms to allow workers to obtain a labour competency certificate which is recognised and valid.

This “vocational certification” project is supported by a number of pilot schemes that are under way in different states and training schools. In these, the process of identifying competencies and preparing training programmes is being built up. On this foundation, a procedure has been set in motion which allows people who voluntarily come forward as candidates to obtain a certificate of labour competency.

The diagram below shows the process of certification in the system. The SENAI proposal is that the evaluation that takes place during the educational process should be different to that which is applied in the recognition of competencies.

**THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS**  
**Candidates with previous occupational experience**  
**or training connected to the occupation**



Source: Methodological Document. Evaluation and Certification, SENAI.

The SENAI experience has been enriched by the pedagogic and educational experience of the institution. A team of technicians from at least nine regional departments have developed a methodology manual which covers the process of constructing profiles through setting up sectoral technical committees, curricular design and evaluation, and competency certification.

The SENAI certification system is being designed so as to actively involve enterprises, and to promote human resources policies which favour the recognition of competencies for developing a career. The system is conceived as open and inclusive, and it will take as a reference the occupational profiles prepared jointly with representatives of enterprises and workers in the sectoral technical committees.

The SENAI experience shows the great educational value which the evaluation of competencies has when it comes to certification. Consequently, a complete guide for preparing evaluation instruments has been written. Among other things, this guide proposes that a committee be set up to prepare evaluation instruments, and that it should be made up of a specialist in evaluation and a specialist in the content of the job to be evaluated. There is also a committee which applies the evaluation instruments, and which is made up of SENAI teachers who have not taken part in the training of the candidates (if there has been any) and an outside specialist.

Competency evaluation and certification that is carried out by training institutions like the SENAI have the great advantage of appreciating the training capacity of evaluation since they consider it as a means towards qualification and not as an end in itself. This facilitates the presentation of training plans for the candidates which leads them to develop their competencies beyond what is required for merely measuring those competencies.

### **2.1.3. An experience in full expansion: “the SENA in Colombia”**

The SENA is responsible for designing and constructing a system which coordinates the whole public and private technical education supply. This is in line with what is laid down in Decree 1.120 of 1996, which makes the National Training System the leader of this undertaking in the country. One of the bases of this work is to organise dialogue with a view to preparing the competency standards. These spaces are called “sectoral committees”, and they are made up entrepreneurs and representatives from workers’ organizations, the public sector, research centres and educational institutions.

The first committees were set up in 1997 for sectors that were considered to be strategically important for the country and for sectors with which the national government had agreements about exporting competitiveness.

Colombia now has 31 sectoral committees with representatives from unions, employers, educational bodies, government bodies, workers' organizations and research centres, and along with the SENA training centres they have contributed to drawing up characterisations, functional maps and labour competency standards and titles. In line with Resolution 8.728 of March 2001, national and international bodies are empowered to apply for accreditation to the Superintendent of Industry and Commerce to become personnel certification bodies.

Decree 933 of April 2003 gives the SENA the power to regulate, design, standardise and certify labour competencies. This meant that SENA was chosen rather than any of the other organizations that had been pressing for the role of setting up new certification bodies.

### **The National System of Training for Work<sup>4</sup>**

In order to coordinate social actors in the country, this system connects up a group of organizations which offer technical, technological and vocational training. The aim is to structure the training response through identifying and defining national labour competency standards. It acts systematically to make the training supply of the bodies in the system congruent, to systematically and efficaciously match the training supply with the needs of the world of work, and to coordinate with the formal educational system by setting up transparent mechanisms of equivalences and homologation.

The System of Training for Work is made up of a number of sub-systems.

- **The Standardization of Labour Competencies sub-system**

The aim of this sub-system is to organise, structure and run processes which will, in cooperation with the productive and educational sectors and the government, establish national labour competency standards to facilitate the operation of evaluation, certification, training, and human resources management. In the National Development Plan, the government established that SENA would be the national labour competencies standardization body for Colombia.

| 4 Taken from [www.sena.edu.co](http://www.sena.edu.co)

- **The Labour Competency Evaluation and Certification sub-system**

The objective here is to set up and operate a system to evaluate and certify people's labour competencies in line with national standards. This evaluation and certification makes it possible for people's labour competencies to be recognised in society regardless of how they were acquired, and it thus facilitates people's possibilities for promotion and work.

- **The Modernisation of the Training Supply sub-system**

This sub-system is geared to coordinating the supply of technical and technological education and vocational training bodies in the country so as to modernise and improve their curricula in line with the needs and demands of the productive sector, thus guaranteeing greater coverage and quality services which will contribute to national competitiveness. It will also design tools and mechanisms for homologation, equivalences and revalidation among the different levels of competency-based training and the levels of study in the formal educational system. This will facilitate the transfer and mobility of people between the two systems so that there will be continual improvement.

The "SENA vision towards 2006" is a medium term strategic plan to work on the "Standardization and Certification of Labour Performance" along the following lines:

- To propose state policies for the standardization and certification of labour performance.
- To establish the Standardization and Certification of Labour Competencies System in association with other actors who are involved. The SENA will be the national body in charge of standardising and certifying workers' labour competencies.
- To guarantee the operation of the Accreditation and Standardization of Labour Competencies System through consultation, follow up and control of the organizations which make it up.
- To consolidate the sectoral committees.
- To lead, and to position the Colombian standardization model in the Andean Community of Nations (CAN).
- To lead the coordination between the different levels and modalities of education and training for work in the training chain (secondary technical level, technological and university).
- To evaluate the quality of the national offer of technical education and of integral vocational training based on national labour competency standards.

- To train evaluators and auditors for the certification of workers' performance.

The SENA has produced a *Manual for Preparing Competency Standards* and a *Manual for Curricular Design for Competency-based Training*. In the 31 sectoral committees (see table below) 1,234 competency standards have already been drawn up in the framework of 174 curricular structures, which are shown in another table.

### SENA Colombia Curricular Structures by sectoral committees

SERVICES	N° est.	PRIMARY	N° est.	INDUSTRIAL	N° est.	PRODUCTIVE CHAINS	N° est.	PORTABLE	N° est.
POTABLE WATER	8	POULTRY	3	CONSTRUCTION	17	LEATHER FOOTWEAR ACCESSORIES	6	LOGISTICS	9
GAS	10	OIL PALM OILSEED	3	METAL-WORKING	5	FIBRES - TEXTILES GARMENTS	13	MAINTENANCE	1
ELECTRICITY	7	COFFEE	2	HANDICRAFT	2	PETROCHEMICALS PLASTICS RUBBER	4	COMMERCE	8
EDUCATION	1	FRUIT AND VEGETABLES	9	WELDING	2	PULP - PAPER GRAPHICS INDUSTRY	9	HUMAN RESOURCES	2
HEALTH	2	BANANA AGRO-INDUSTRY	2	SUGAR INDUSTRY		FISH PRODUCTION	2	TELE-INFORMATION	5
TELECOMMUNICATIONS	3	MINING	3			FOREST - WOOD FURNITURE AND WOOD PRODUCTS	2	FINANCIAL SERVICES	7
TRANSPORT	2	ECOLOGICAL AGRO-PRODUCTION	1						
RURAL DEVELOPMENT	1	FLOWERS	1						
TOURISM	14	IRRIGATION	1						
TOTALS	48		25		33		36		32

The tendency in the Nation Training System is now towards organising a national network of institutions of training for work. The idea is to facilitate access to the labour competency standards for public and private institutions outside SENA. These standards will be made available by SENA free of charge to institutions of secondary technical education, non-formal education, ongoing train-

ing programmes in universities, and training centres in enterprises or associations.

The network will have 1,234 labour competency standards in 31 occupational sectors developed by SENA. This will allow the institutions to design competency-based training programmes which meet the standards set by the entrepreneurs in the 31 sectoral committees, a space where social dialogue applied to improving the quality of training is becoming a reality.

**SENA Colombia**  
**Distribution of the sectoral committees**

SERVICES	PRIMARY	INDUSTRIAL	PRODUCTIVE CHAINS	PORTABLE
POTABLE WATER	POULTRY	CONSTRUCTION	LEATHER FOOTWEAR ACCESSORIES	LOGISTICS
GAS	OIL PALM OILSEED	METAL WORKING	FIBRES TEXTILES GARMENT MAKING	MAINTENANCE
ELECTRICITY	COFFEE	HANDICRAFTS	PETROCHEMICAL PLASTICS RUBBER	COMMERCE
EDUCATION	FRUIT AND VEGETABLES	WELDING	PULP PAPER GRAPHICS INDUSTRY	HUMAN RESOURCES
SHEALTH	BANANA AGRO-INDUSTRY	SUGAR INDUSTRY	LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION	TELE-INFORMATION
TELECOMMUNICATIONS	MINING		FORESTRY WOOD FURNITURE AND WOOD PRODS.	FINANCE
TRANSPORT				
TOURISM				
8	6	5	6	6

The SENA also plans to offer pedagogic training and labour competency certification to the teachers from these institutions.

#### **2.1.4. The “Chile Califica” experience constructing the concept of lifelong learning**

The “Chile Califica” programme aims to contribute to the development of production in Chile, and to improving people’s opportunities for progress by setting up a system of lifelong learning.

In Chile the system of training for work is centred on a strategy whereby the Ministry of Labour, through the SENCE, runs a tax exemption scheme. This is fiscal incentive that allows enterprises to recover the investment they make in

##### **The National Training and Employment Service (SENCE)**

is a decentralised technical state body connected to the government through the Ministry of Labour.

Its mission is to contribute to raising national productivity and promoting occupational training both in enterprises and for lower income people in the country.

SENCE does this through a tax incentive which the state offers to enterprises for training their staff, and with a subsidy through a programme of grants for training, financed with public resources.

[www.sence.cl](http://www.sence.cl)

worker training by deducting that amount from the annual tax payable on profits, so long as the amounts deducted do not exceed the equivalent of 1% of the monthly payroll. The enterprises can choose their own training providers from technical training organizations that are accredited by the SENCE, and thus benefit from the tax exemption for the training costs incurred.

SENCE also controls the funds used for contracting training services with a wide range of technical training bodies. Usually the national funds used for training are distributed on “social programmes” focalised on population sectors that are vulnerable to unem-

ployment, or redundant workers or ones who have only had one job, who generally have low educational levels.

There is an extraordinary range of differences in offers of training, so SENCE gives priority to measures which help to improve quality. Besides making progress in the design and utilisation of a quality standard for the technical training organizations, SENCE also considers that a national competencies framework would be very pertinent.

“Chile Califica” aims to create a system of lifelong learning which will contribute to developing the country and improving opportunities for people to

progress. This is a joint initiative on the part of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security through the National Training and Employment Service (SENCE). It is also supported by the Ministries of Economy and of Agriculture, and by the Chile Foundation.

The objectives of this project include setting up a “National System of Labour Competencies” which will provide a certification service for competencies regardless of the ways or places in which those competencies were acquired. This went into operation in 2002, and is financed by the World Bank and the Chilean government.<sup>5</sup>

The project will orient considerable increases in investment in human resources which will raise literacy levels, particularly in the active population, in an attempt to remedy the deficiencies of the educational and training systems in meeting the development needs of the country. It is focused on improving technical training to make it more effective for the country’s development needs, by tackling the problems of coverage, quality and curricular coordination among the different training levels. It also covers the ambit of the recognition of competencies, developing assessment and certification mechanisms in a national system to facilitate training so that this will in turn be able to generate mechanisms to meet identified needs. Assessment and certification can reinforce the improvement in the quality of the training offer.

The project’s target is that sector of the active population which needs to improve its competencies, its literacy and schooling, but it also includes young people and workers at the level of technical education and higher level technicians.

The components in the design of the project include developing new possibilities in lifelong learning which cover the adult population with open and flexible educational modalities, and which use financing mechanisms which will foster the levelling of studies and the utilisation of public financing schemes such as the tax exemption scheme in Chile.

Another component is oriented to improving the quality and coordination of technical training by widening and improving the quality of the offer at this level. In this way, decentralised technical training projects in the regions of the country will be promoted, and to this end there are funds to be awarded for increasing the offer and promoting networks or associations which connect up technical training institutions with the productive sector and regional governments.

<sup>5</sup> The total amount is USD 150.75 million, and the Bank’s contribution is USD 75.75 million.

The plan is to develop a national system of competency standards and technical training itineraries which will include setting up a national framework of labour competencies and of competency assessment and certification components, ensuring the quality of the training offered, and improving and adjusting the training supply and technical training programmes that are connected, open and sequential.

**Four areas in which “Chile Califica” operates**

1. Levelling studies
2. Vocational training
3. Improving technical training
4. Certifying labour competencies

[www.sence.cl](http://www.sence.cl)  
[www.chilecalifica.cl](http://www.chilecalifica.cl)

The project also caters to the need to train teachers, and to set up an information system about education and training.

The management of the programme has a national level made up of the Ministers of Education, Labour and the Economy, and the National Coordination of

the Programme. On the regional level, through the regional director of the programme, needs will be detected and local training agents will participate in the execution of the training in a decentralized way.

In order to have their labour competencies certified, workers have to undergo a rigorous assessment process that is implemented by specialised bodies. They can do this on their own account or through their enterprises.

The assessment process involves an exhaustive review of the candidate's previous labour experience, and there are also knowledge tests, interviews, and direct observation in the work place.

Instruments that have been specially designed for the process and validated by the sectors in question are used.

There is indirect as well as direct assessment, and in this way the maximum amount of concrete evidence about the labour capacities of the person is gathered.

[www.competencialaboral.cl](http://www.competencialaboral.cl)

In the early stages, advantage will be taken of the experience that has been acquired since 1999 from a labour competency, standardization and certification project that was funded by the IDB, and worked in the construction, mining, tourism and computer sectors.

By the end of 2002 around 7,000 people from the mining, gas, electricity and hotels and catering sectors, most of them trained workers, had participated in the process of competency assessment.

The coverage of the competency assessment and certification component could be extended to other occupational areas, thanks to the resources and activities involved in the “Chile Califica” project.

### **Certification and lifelong learning**

In this project, certification is considered as a means and not as an end. It is a means to identify the training and development needs that could be provided through the network of vocational training institutions. In fact, certification is not limited to competencies that are strictly technical in nature, it will also be used in the levelling of studies for adults whose education lapsed. A mix of activities to recognize competencies derived from experience will be used, and this will generate certificates that have value in the formal educational itinerary.

#### **Strategies to be implemented in the project**

Identify the productive sectors and occupational areas which will participate in the programme.

Set up sectoral human resources councils which include entrepreneurs, trainers and workers.

Agree with these actors on a national competencies framework which would order types and levels of skills, knowledge and aptitude.

Define labour competency and employability standards in the sectors that are most important for the economic and human resources development of the country.

Establish methodological bases for assessment and certification mechanisms, and also organise the training offer into modules.

[www.chilecalifica.cl](http://www.chilecalifica.cl)

Another project is to encourage local initiatives in which educational and/or training institutions would develop projects to coordinate education with training for work. In this way the beneficiaries would find that they would progress in formal education at the same time as developing labour competencies.

### **Starting from pilot applications**

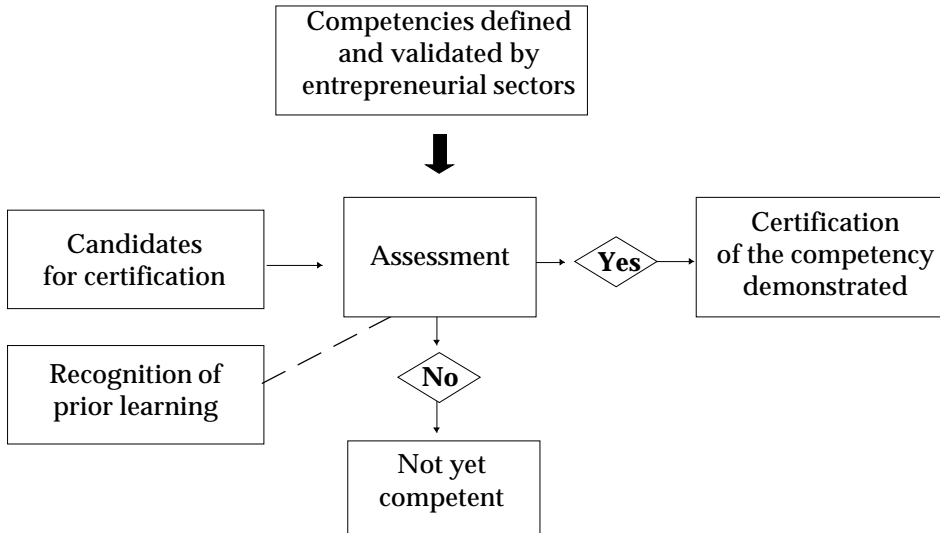
One of the promising characteristics of this project is that it has been initiated in a strategy of “bottom up”, with pilot applications of certification in different sectors which have a commitment from entrepreneurs and workers to move forward in identifying competencies and in certification.

This has allowed a good proportion of what has been learned to be incorporated into the activities. Although the institutional structure to be adopted for certification has not yet been defined, pilot applications show what has taken place in different stages of the process.

Enterprises participated in identifying competencies, but there are no signs of participation from unions as such.

Design work is being done on the best structure for bodies to carry out independent quality assessment. In this sphere a number of universities have shown themselves to be suitable as assessment centres. Similarly, work is going ahead to design the best institutional set-up for certification. Very probably, given the structure of the Chilean training model, this role will be played by third-party organizations. It is precisely these crucial activities that the project is financing. The diagram next shows the certification process as it was designed during the pilot application phase.

### COMPETENCIES CERTIFICATION PROCESS



Source: Labour Competencies Project, Chile.

The progress of the “Chile Califica” project will show whether the execution strategy turns out to be more effective than that of other experiences in which work was done with more commitment from the public sector. The sustainability of the fledgling structure of certification bodies and assessment centres will be put to the test in the execution of the programme. The configuration which is ultimately adopted for assessment and certification processes will have a lot to do with whether the programme turns out to be sustainable, and with the roles which the training actors in Chile play.

#### 2.1.5. The CONOCER experience in Mexico

As was explained in the section on the development of national qualifications frameworks in Latin America, the CONOCER in Mexico is promoting the generation of labour competency qualifications, and the certification of these qualifications, based on the real needs of enterprises.

CONOCER grew from the framework of the Technical Education and Training Modernisation Project (PMETyC), which was financed by the World Bank.

The supply of vocational training in Mexico comes from a wide range of institutions and they are all linked to the public sector, either the Secretariat of Labour or that of Public Education.

CONOCER is executing a wide-ranging programme of restructuring the supply of human resources training. Its sources of finance are the World Bank, and to a greater extent the IADB. In 1996 CONOCER set up its first eight standardization committees, and by October 2003 it had 75 standardization committees operating in that same number of occupational sectors. The work of the committees has led to the production of 601 technical labour competency standards, and 32 certifying bodies and 1,273 assessment centres have been set up.

Recently CONOCER has focused on diffusing and utilising its standards through certification. There are authorized certifying bodies for 308 technical labour competency standards (51% of the total), and these bodies have been accredited as assessment centres for 256 technical labour competency standards. A total of 170 qualifications are covered by certification. The number of labour competency units that have been certified is 177,396, and 80% of these are concentrated in 22 qualifications

#### **WHAT IS A QUALIFICATION?**

A labour qualification is a collection of competency units and their elements. It specifies the criteria and the ways to evaluate, through efficient performance, the knowledge, skills and dexterities required for that competency.

#### **What is a certifying body?**

It is an entity accredited by CONOCER to be in charge of certifying the labour competency of candidates and conducting the outside inspection of assessment centres.

### The most frequently certified competency units

SECTOR	Competency units certified
Computers	57,407
Clothing	20,718
Tourism	13,737
Commerce	12,976
Occupational health	8,461
Energy	6,913
Forestry	7,154
Human resources	4,064
Consultancy	5,368
Electrical maintenance	4,979
Urban passenger transport	3,746
Office work	2,947
Sugar industry	2,375
Agro equipment	3,158
Graphic arts	3,002

#### Some figures about the PMETyC in Mexico (1996-2003)

- Total value of the project: USD 412 million. For competencies: USD 221 million. For the modernisation of training: USD 159 million
- Technical labour competency standards produced: 601
- Standardization committees: 75
- Certifying bodies: 32
- Assessment centres: 1,273
- Percentage of competency standards with accredited assessment centres: 42%
- Units of competency certified: 177,396
- Most of the certificates have been on competency levels 1 and 2.

CONOCER is itself a certifying body. It has set up an open process in which the worker can apply to a certifying organisation to be evaluated and to have his labour competencies recognized in some of the standards that are available. The certification process is known as “third party”, and was inspired in the model which is mainly used in England, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Scotland. It is based on a national body, and the roles of assessment and certification are separate.

In this process the two components, the assessment body and the certifying body, are separate. The former carries out the assessment of competencies based on criteria in the standard in question, and the latter awards the certificate based on the results of the assessment. Both the assessing and certifying bodies must be accredited by the national standardization and certification authority.

The stages that CONOCER has designed for certifying a candidate are as follows:

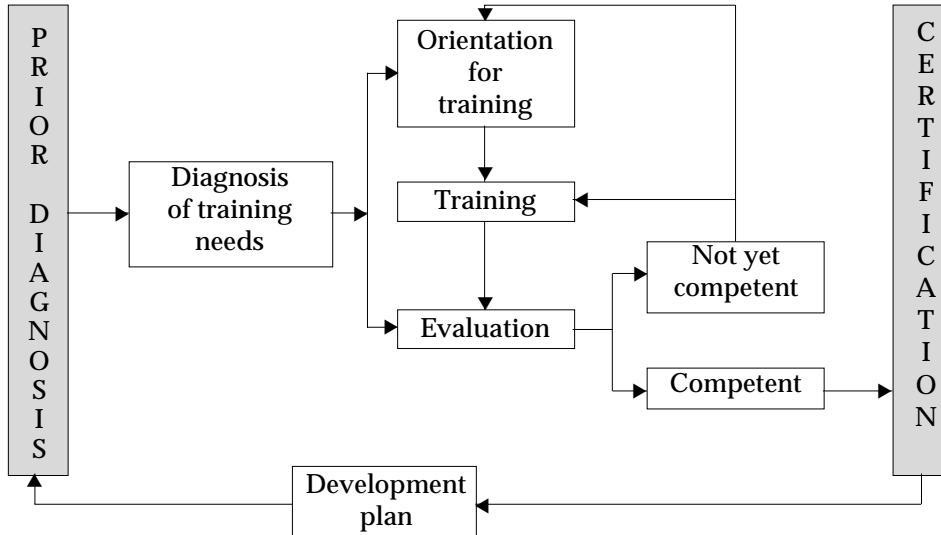
- a) Previous diagnosis in which the candidate’s possibilities of being awarded certification for the competency in question are analysed.
- b) The assessment process itself, carried out by a certified center. This is based on specific criteria in the labour competency standard.
- c) A report on the result of the assessment of the candidate. The result may be “competent”, in which case the certificate is awarded; or “not yet competent”, in which case the causes for this are analysed, and the candidate is offered options for training and development which could lead him or her to reach the competency level required.

#### **WHAT IS CERTIFICATION?**

A process by which a third party body recognizes and certifies that an individual has shown competency in a determinate labour function, regardless of the way in which this was acquired, and based on a standard that is recognised at the national level.

The diagram below is a graphic representation of the process of recognising prior learning and certification.

### Labour competency certification cycle



Source: CONOCER

Some of the lessons that have been learned from the CONOCER certification model are as follows:

- In the early years the effort was concentrated on promoting the setting up of standardization committees and preparing competency standards. The Council was a public body functioning in the framework of a legal ruling in private law known as a “trusteeship”, and this gave it great autonomy, versatility and operative flexibility. At the moment there is intense debate about the possible adscription of CONOCER to the Secretariat of Labour. The period of execution for the project has ended, and the credit from the World Bank has also come to an end.<sup>6</sup>
- A good number of standards have been established, and now the emphasis is on “putting them into practice” through certification. What is needed is to activate a certification market which would use and value certification in the technical standards of labour competencies that have

<sup>6</sup> The authorities from the Secretary of Public Education are successfully negotiating the continuation of some action with IDB funds.

already been produced. Recently CONOCER has concentrated more on this aspect than on continuing to advance in preparing new competency standards.

- The certification market must be attractive enough to allow the certifying and assessment bodies that make it up to enjoy financial sustainability. In the beginning the project invested funds to stimulate assessment and certification, and contributed to fee payments to help unemployed workers, but now what is needed is an explicit policy to facilitate access to certification for unemployed people.
- In the beginning the “pure” third party model did not allow educational institutions to assess competencies. This is a perfectly valid stance from the point of view of training or from that of the assessment of training. But as time passed and the experience progressed, assessment became more flexible. It is a costly process and one which requires a “real atmosphere” and a “pedagogic structure”, so now educational institutions like CONALEP are accepted as assessment centres, but they are required to maintain their two functions completely separate.
- The experience in Mexico also shows that having a labour competency certificate is not attractive in all labour sectors. In fact, 36% of the certificates that have been awarded are concentrated in the computer sector. Other sectors which have obtained a sizeable proportion of the total number of certificates are linked to pilot applications that are usually concentrated in big enterprises. In these cases, implementation has to do with a desire to incorporate the focus into human resources management.
- Most of the certificates are concentrated at competency levels 1 and 2. This echoes the trend in the English system in which, up to 2001, a total of 3,488,787 certificates were awarded, and of these 18% were in level 1, 59% were in level 2, and 20% in level 3. Another point is that three occupational areas (engineering, goods and services, and financial services) issued 75% of the certificates.<sup>7</sup>
- Capturing the interest of the labour market is a continuing challenge for the system. Much has been gained from the point of view of enterprises through simplifying the methodologies of competency standardization and certification, and also due to the fact that many business sectors find the competency standards useful for their specific needs.

| 7 QCA. *Annual NVQ Statistics*, [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)

### 2.1.6. Certification in the INA in Costa Rica

In Costa Rica the National Training Institute (INA) has developed a well-structured certification experience, and it has one organisational unit specialised in providing the certification service.

In the INA definition of the certification process, it is described as the “official recognition of vocational qualifications that a person possesses (knowledge, skills and attitudes) regardless of the way that these were acquired, whether through participation in systematic vocational training or as the result of working in a trade without previous training.”<sup>8</sup>

The INA has been running its pilot scheme in the tourist sector since 1997, and the certification there is based on labour competency standards. A “vocational profile” is also taken as a reference.

The certification process emphasises consistency and dependability based on public recognition of the certificates issued by the INA. It also embodies the principles of equity and impartiality, and it is an open process for those who meet the set requirements, which are communicated without any restriction to people who request them.

The INA certification process involves theoretical and practical tests. For the theoretical test the institution has developed a procedure which covers the general design of the test, the design of the item, the production of support materials, the structuring of the test, and the validation of the test.

For the practical test, the process begins with a definition of the situation in which the test will take place, determining the psycho-motor indicators of socio-affective and cognitive behaviour, determining the execution criteria of the test,

**The National Training Institute (INA)** in Costa Rica was one of the first institutes to initiate the process of quality assurance. It acceded to ISO 9000 certification for its accreditation unit in June 1998, and auditing of follow up was carried out in December of that year and in June 1999. This unit’s main task is to verify the suitability of the training offer of institutions outside the INA, measured against the quality of the institute’s own offer. An INA policy statement reads, “Design and execute programmes and projects which will allow the assurance of quality in the internal and external management of services offered to officials and users.”

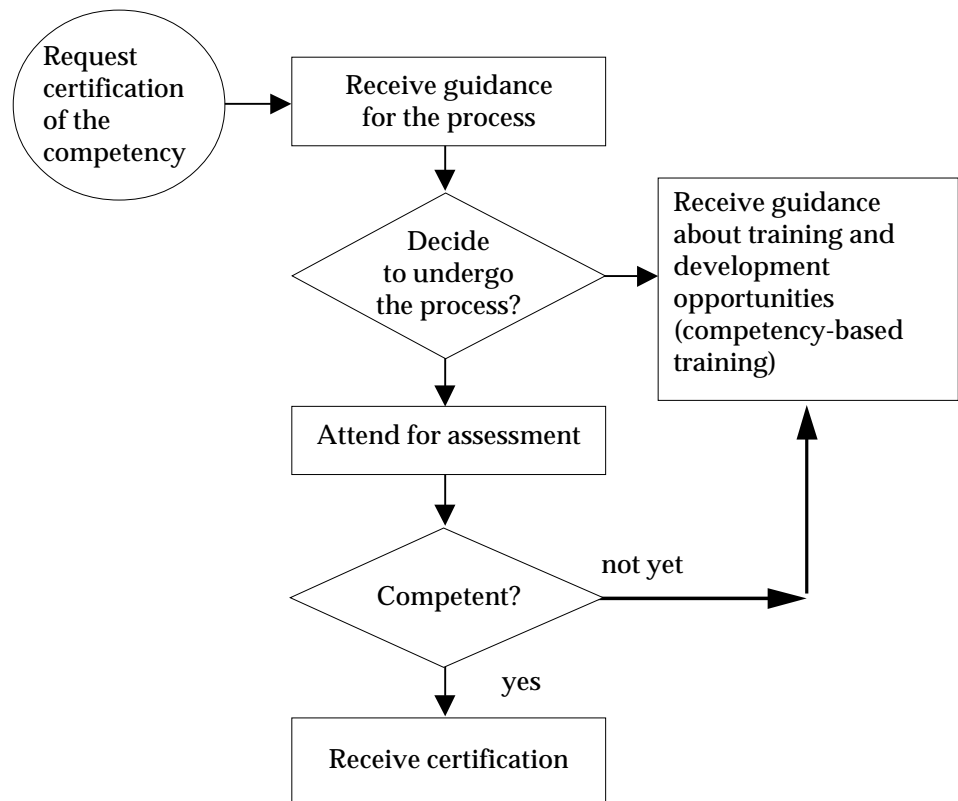
<sup>8</sup> INA experience in the framework of the Standardization, Training and Certification of Labour Competencies, INA, 2001.

preparing the instruments that will be used by the evaluator on the candidate and for validation of the test.

## 2.2. The certification of competencies in specific occupational sectors

This section deals with experiences of competency recognition which, unlike the analyses in the previous section, concentrate on a specific occupational sector and are mostly promoted by enterprises or by interest groups affiliated to that sector. The general characteristics of the competency certification process in these experience are shown in the diagram below.

### General process of competency certification in the sectoral ambit



The diagram above gives a general representation of the different stages in the certification process from the candidate's point of view. Normally these processes include the group of training opportunities associated with the assessment, that is to say, certification is not designed only to measure a certain level of competency but rather to diagnose and generate opportunities for training and development.

### **2.2.1. Certification in specific occupational sectors in Brazil**

In Brazil there have been a number of certification experiences of a sectoral nature, and we will describe that of the Brazilian Maintenance Association (ABRAMAN) and that of the Brazilian Petrol Enterprise (PETROBRAS).

#### **The ABRAMAN certification programme**

In 1990 ABRAMAN<sup>9</sup> was asked to organise a national qualification and certification project for the personnel who work in the maintenance field. The growing trend for enterprises to outsource maintenance services revealed that there was a need to improve the quality of maintenance workers' performance.<sup>10</sup>

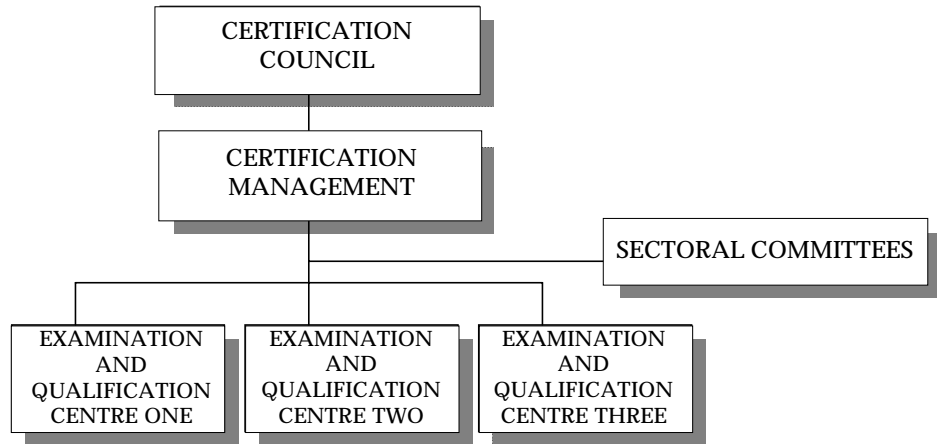
In 1991 it was decided to launch a project to develop a National Plan of Personnel Qualification and Certification (PNCC), and this gave rise to a series of activities to make enterprises conscious of the need to have their maintenance workers certified. ABRAMAN then organised a certification process<sup>11</sup> and went into action. The diagram below shows the structure of the PNCC.

9 This is a body established in private law that was set up in 1994 with the aim of gathering together professionals, enterprises and institutions from the maintenance field with the objective of becoming the natural forum for questions of interest to this group.

10 In 1999 an ABRAMAN report showed that there were flaws in the training of maintenance personnel in 73% of the enterprises surveyed.

11 With the support of Cinterfor/ILO.

## STRUCTURE OF THE PNCC



Source: ABRAMAN.

The programme is run by a National Qualification and Certification Council, which has representatives from 35 enterprises and is counselled by the Qualification and Certification Committee, which acts as an executive organ of the system. The Council is responsible for defining the occupations covered by the certification process and the requirements necessary. The Council's other important functions are follows:

- Formulate the administrative guidelines of the programme.
- Approve the qualification criteria for the different occupations.
- Decide about the coverage and validity of the certificates.
- Decide about the recognition of certificates issued by other domestic or foreign organizations or by enterprises.

The management of the PNCC is an executive body and its functions include the following:

- Submit the profiles of the occupations (including specific knowledge) prepared by the sectoral technical committees to the Council for approval.
- Submit proposals for setting up new technical committees for specialised functions to the Council for approval.
- Set out the criteria for recognising and accrediting examination and qualification centres.

- Supervise the examinations given by the centres.
- Promote and set up programmes to audit the centres.
- Coordinate the work of the sectoral technical committees.

The sectoral technical committees represent the different occupational sectors catered to in the programme, and their role includes:

- Formulating the standards required for certification, which include the knowledge, skills and experience for qualification (certification requirement standards).
- Interacting with the examination and qualification centres in holding the certification examinations.
- Representing the management of PNCC in supervising the certification examinations.

The examination and qualification centres are bodies accredited by the SNCC. They are responsible for examining, qualifying and certifying workers. They can function by taking advantage of training institutions, and this is why some of them are installed in SENAI training schools. In this way they use not only the infrastructure but also SENAI's capacity and knowledge in the area of vocational training. This means that candidates who do not reach the performance levels required by the certification standard can accede to specific training programmes. There is also an advantage for SENAI because it can gauge the certification candidates' needs for training because this gives a good idea of how to update their training programmes to cater to these needs. At the present time, there is certification for the mechanical, boiler-making, electricity and electronics areas.

For ABRAMAN, occupational certification is the formal recognition of vocational qualifications regardless of the way these were acquired, and considering the employed, unemployed and sub-employed population who have specific abilities that can be updated through the certification mechanism, and who can therefore enter the job market through recognition of their skills.

ABRAMAN, PNCC, 1996.

The general process for certification in the ABRAMAN PNCC is as follows:

- Manifestation of interest on the part of the worker.
- Pre-qualification. Demonstration through documentation that the worker has the schooling and occupational experience requirements laid down in the standard of the occupation chosen.
- Written and practical examination. Pedagogic interview and analysis of results.
- If the worker passes, certification that is valid for five years is obtained. If the worker fails, he or she may opt for a new examination to be taken no sooner than thirty days after the first.
- Needs for specific training may be identified as a result of the pedagogic interview.

### **The PETROBRAS certification programme**

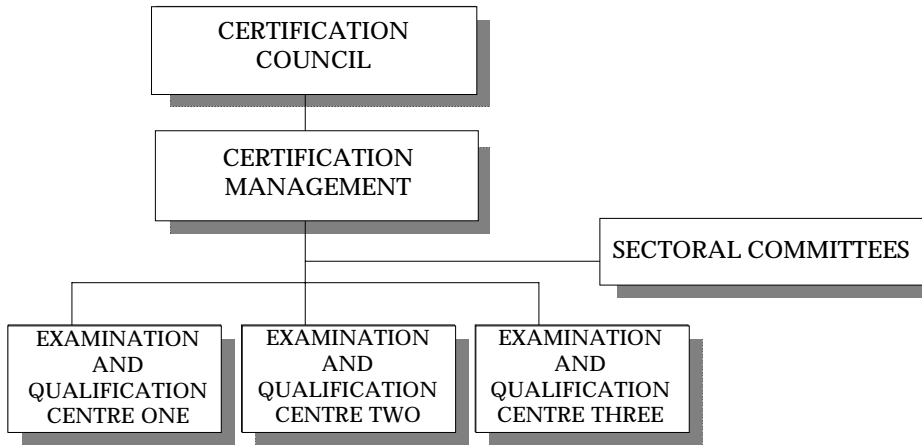
In 1978 this enterprise organised the Qualification and Certification Sector (SECUI) in the framework of its quality management policy. The aim is to qualify and certify personnel who work in functions that have to do with quality control in the enterprise. These functions include non-destructive testing, underwater inspection, inspection of welding, technological checking of concrete, industrial painting, instrumentation and electricity.

PETROBRAS decided to set up the system in the belief that competent personnel are essential in order to have safe installations and to ensure operational continuity. This is especially necessary in activities involving quality control.

The enterprise adopted the structure of the National Qualification and Certification System, which was mentioned above in the ABRAMAN experience.

Importance is given to having a certification council which includes bodies representing diverse sectors such as suppliers of goods and services, big purchasers, employers' associations and vocational training bodies.

## STRUCTURE OF THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATION AND CERTIFICATION SYSTEM AND ITS APPLICATION IN PETROBRAS



Source: PETROBRAS

The Examination and Qualification Centres have specialists in the areas in which certification tests have been prepared. PETROBRAS had its SECUI accredited as an examination centre with the Brazilian Association of Non-Destructive Testing (ABENDE). Thus the qualifications awarded by the SECUI have nationwide coverage and validity since they are recognized by ABENDE as complying with national standards.

An interesting feature of the PETROBRAS experience with personnel certification is that it involves international standards. Some of these are as follows:

- EN 45013, September 1989 (ISO 17024 of 2003), *General criteria for certification bodies operating certification of personnel.*
- EN 473, November 1992, *Qualification and certification of personnel. General principles.*
- ISO 9712, May 1999, *Non-destructive testing. Qualification and certification of personnel.*

These standards have their equivalents in the Brazilian standardization system which comes under the Standardization and Metrology Institute (INMETRO). The SECUI in PETROBRAS is accredited by INMETRO as a personnel certification body.

This experience has been incorporated into the enterprise's human resources policy. The qualification of personnel has come to be based on knowledge and skills whereas previously it was only based on experience. A number of career plans have been defined internally in areas such as industrial operation and maintenance, industrial safety, etc.

### **2.2.2. *The certification of competencies in some occupational sectors in Argentina***

As we saw in the section on key competencies, the labour competencies certification programme in Argentina is developing the design of a process of competency certification in four sectoral areas: the graphics industry, metal working, automobile mechanics and traditional cake making.

The execution of the programme has allowed progress to be made in identifying the competencies of a good proportion of the occupations involved in the different sectors in question. With these competency profiles as a base, a certification system will be designed which will allow skills acquired as the result of labour experience to be recognised.

To this end, the project is developing the phases of competency standardization, training materials development and the execution of training, assessment and certification. Up to now, the progress in preparing competency standards has allowed deeper analysis of the certification process so as to begin defining the different procedures and actors involved. In fact, a good number of profiles are already available, as can be seen in the table below, and some of these will be selected to begin the certification process in line with the needs of each sector.

On the project, work is being done in five dimensions of the labour competency certification system. These are as follows:

- To select the profiles and/or units of competency to be assessed and certified in each occupational sector analysed. This dimension is at the stage of identification and development in each of the sectors.
- To develop assessment instruments for the competency units corresponding to each profile.
- To develop the competencies which an evaluator must have to be accredited as such.
- To develop the procedures for making an assessment based on competency standards, which shall be transparent and legitimate.
- To design the institutional set-up for each sector to develop a system of labour competency assessment and certification.

TRAINING AND COMPETENCY CERTIFICATION PROGRAMME  
COMPETENCY STANDARDS DEVELOPED

GRAPHICS INDUSTRY	AUTOMOTIVE	TRADITIONAL CAKE-MAKING	METAL WORKING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexography printer machinist</li> <li>• Combined offset press</li> <li>• Gravure</li> <li>• Digital graphics set up</li> <li>• Stereotype set up and photopolymer preparation</li> <li>• Guillotine cutter</li> <li>• Cost analyst</li> <li>• Quality control</li> <li>• Technical salesperson</li> <li>• Binders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintenance and repair of electronic systems</li> </ul> <p>Mechanics in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Air conditioning systems</li> <li>• Automatic transmission</li> <li>• Installation of alarms and audio systems</li> <li>• Conventional feed and sparking systems</li> <li>• Conventional diesel injection systems</li> <li>• Conventional brake systems</li> <li>• Front wheels - steering</li> <li>• Transmission</li> <li>• Engines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Master cake maker</li> <li>• Cake maker</li> <li>• Assistant cake maker</li> <li>• Pastry maker</li> <li>• Catering cook</li> <li>• Minute cook</li> <li>• Waiter/waitress</li> <li>• Cake salesperson</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thermal cutters (processes of manual and automatic plasma, manual and automatic oxy-gas)</li> <li>• Differentiated welders (MIG process in tubes, on plates, SMAW in tubes and on plates, GTAW in tubes and on plates)</li> <li>• Braizing welder of electric conductors</li> <li>• Lathe operator</li> <li>• Mill operator</li> <li>• Mould and tool-making operator.</li> </ul>

Source: Training and Competency Certification of Programme, Argentina, 2003.

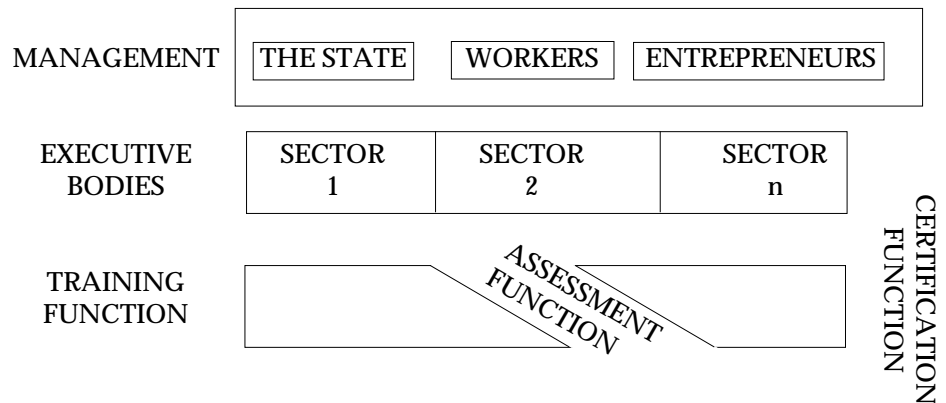
### 3. SOME FINDINGS: WHAT ARE THE MINIMUM CHARACTERISTICS COMMON TO CERTIFICATION PROCESSES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN?

Certification models have followed the evolution of educational practices, and these in turn grew out of cultural values and a heritage that has accumulated throughout history. Each system expresses national beliefs about what a training model should achieve. If this expression is transplanted from one country to another without suitable adaptation the result could be unsuccessful.

#### 3.1. A structural vision of a certification system

There are four main stages in the development of a certification system: the identification of competencies, standardization, opportunities for competency-based training, and the process of certifying competencies. There are usually three levels in the structure of a certification system, and these are shown in the diagram below.

**Profile of the training and certification system**



The management level is usually a participative set-up in which workers, employers and the government establish “the rules of the game” of the system, which are normally underpinned with legal norms. The management establishes how the system will be set up and the bodies to be in charge of training, evaluation and certification. It is highly desirable for the state to participate, above all because it is an excellent sphere for regulating such aspects as access, equity, quality and transparency.

At the executive level, the organization is almost always sectoral. In most cases this level is made up of workers and employers in a specific labour sector like forestry, the automotive sector, or leather and footwear, etc. Methodologies are used for identifying competencies and setting performance standards. The basic functions at this level are to verify quality and pertinence for the operative level (which executes the training, assessment and certification), to ensure that the training corresponds to identified needs, and to ensure that the certificates have the quality required, that is to say that they do in fact certify what they say they certify.

The operative level is where the functions of training, assessment and certification are carried out. From our point of view these functions may be carried out with the suitable level of quality by a training institution.

The certification of skills constitutes an important tool in this process in that it solves an information problem by making the quality and quantity of the skills that workers have observable for employers. However, certification requires committed institutional participation on the part of enterprises, workers and unions in designing the content and mechanisms for accreditation.

Source: Márquez, Gustavo, *Capacitación de la fuerza laboral en América Latina: ¿Qué debe hacerse?*, Inter-American Development Bank, 2001.

In fact there is no one best formula for organising an institutional training system. What is common to all models is that they usually seek the best quality, coverage and pertinence, but obviously there are different modalities for reaching these goals. When we examine the various kinds of institutions set up in different countries (which are very often taken as inspirational models) we should bear in mind that each is the result of practices that have been assimilated culturally into the educational and training ambit.<sup>12</sup>

A number of common elements have been identified in all the certification models:

- **A solid institutional structure.** Social actors participate in identifying and standardizing competencies, and defining processes and procedures and their references to equivalents in education, to make competency certification possible in what in many countries is called a “national qualifications framework”. This solidity also extends to the capacity of the certifying institutions

| 12 “Cuatro afirmaciones sobre Certificación. Todas falsas”, Cinterfor Bulletin No.153, 2002.

to offer training and development opportunities to those who are evaluated. The experiences in the region are making an effort to ensure that certification should not only be a filter but also a mechanism for promoting opportunities for learning.

- **A standardized reference.** This is commonly called a competency standard, and it functions in a framework of reference and consultation which usually has nation-wide scope. The competency standards are known to all, and access to them tends to be free. In 2001, an external assessment commission in the English standardization and certification system recommended that the competency standards should be managed as a “public good”.<sup>13</sup> This national qualifications framework must facilitate the inclusion of core skills, and it is increasingly being recognised that these should be understood as a group of skills which influence the capacity to perform successfully in a wide range of occupations (for example, solving problems, working in a team, critical thought, etc.).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, a number of countries have developed labour competency standards. The most advanced is the CONOCER in Mexico, but also countries like Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Brazil have developed standardized descriptions of labour competencies. These standards become the basis for the process of preparing training and competency assessment programmes.

- **A process of assessment or diagnostic.** The main aim of this is to establish which competencies the person has and has demonstrated, but it is also geared to the needs for training which would enable the worker to attain higher levels of competency and to fix an itinerary for training and career development. Theories and methodologies of assessment have advanced in this area, and assessment based on criteria and substantiation is widely accepted. Assessment seeks to establish whether or not the criteria of quality for competent performance have been met. These criteria have been defined beforehand in the competency standards. In addition, assessment makes it possible to identify shortcomings in certain abilities, so these abilities can be fostered with guided labour practice or through training.
- **Training opportunities.** There are opportunities for training linked to the results of assessment. These must be very close to the results of the assessment for there to be an effective connection between the assessment process and the development of competencies. There is not much data about the percentage of assessment candidates who successfully obtain a competency

| 13 Report of the independent review of the UK National Occupational Standards Programme, 2001.

certificate, but there is evidence that no more than 15% of workers with educational or training needs obtain some sort of certification at the first attempt.

- **Validity and legitimacy.** These are derived from the recognition that the certificate enjoys in the labour market. This point shows that there should be demand for certification, that is to say that entrepreneurs should value the competency certified because it is connected to their needs in the productive process, and also that workers should find that certification is going to be useful to them in their search for employment and in developing their competencies as a worker and as a citizen.

Perhaps it is the value that is given to certification as a generator of possibilities for labour insertion that explains why so many of the certificates awarded are in the lowest competency levels (levels 1 and 2 in Mexico, levels 2 and 3 in Great Britain). However, the perception of the “value” of certification has been a barrier to the development of the certification system. In a vocational education college in Mexico, qualifications are offered in computers and demand from candidates is high. However, although there is good demand in the market for computer certification, when a new type of certification from a well known software manufacturing enterprise appeared recently, there was a change in the candidates’ preferences and they began to demand the new certificate. The college, therefore, was disposed to make an alliance with this firm to begin certification in accordance with the firm’s standards.

When it comes to the value that employers and workers put on certification, we can make a comparison with money. The value of money is not attributed to the paper, the design, the ink or colours used to make it. The certificate, like money, does not have intrinsic value or value that is attributed to the legal bearer, it needs solid backing, it needs to represent a value for the employer, for the worker and for other interested parties. This capacity to reflect a value which will be demanded by interested parties derives from the fact that these parties are certain about the validity and legitimacy of the certificate. A competency certificate is taken as valid if it really represents the competencies that are possessed and demonstrated by the bearer, and if it is issued by an institution that is recognised and socially valued.

### 3.2. Elements of the debate in Latin America Who should recognise competencies?<sup>14</sup>

The certification of labour competencies is more than a process of verification based on assessment. The recognition of competencies is of little value if it does not become a base upon which the worker can recognise his or her limitations and can be offered training options to remedy them.

The recognition of competencies has other characteristics, and these are as follows:

- *A coherent framework* (an occupational structure) which allows anyone to recognise the content of an occupation which is certified (this is how national qualifications have been defined in England and in the qualifications framework in Mexico, and other countries are now in the process of updating their occupational classifications).
- *A guarantee that the certificate is legitimate and valid.* This means that it is valued by the entrepreneur, the worker and the state. The value of the certificate can be compared to the value of money: a banknote is not valuable because of its design, colour or size, but because of the value that is put on it by the society and the economy that uses it.
- *It is derived from a simple mechanism.* There is not much bureaucracy, and it is less costly for the user than other alternatives. To pursue the money metaphor,<sup>15</sup> people use it because they find that it is a better reference than directly exchanging apples for cheese, for example, or salt for rice.
- *It has legitimacy and credibility.* That is to say, it comes from an institutional mechanism that is credible and socially recognised. If there were many kinds and sources of certificates, the bad certificates would soon displace the good ones. Many people would have no alternative but to resort to lower quality certificates which would be more accessible and less strict.
- *It facilitates transparency.* This means that workers know what the certificate says about them and what is expected of them as regards performance, and a prospective employer can be sure of the type and scope of the competencies that a worker has.
- *Certification must allow the configuration of a concept of lifelong learning.* This is because it extends to the recognition of all know-how, and values the knowledge and aptitudes acquired in all ambits of life. It also connects up with the

<sup>14</sup> This discussion does not apply to the institutional framework of the English-speaking Caribbean, which uses the model of third party certification.

<sup>15</sup> This was developed by Jens Bjørnåvold in various papers for CEDEFOP.

offer of training opportunities which allow competencies that a worker does not yet have to be acquired. The process of competency recognition should offer all the educational and training possibilities so as to motivate the candidate to develop professionally. Creating a culture of learning means widening opportunities for training.

On this point, the experiences in Latin America show that how the process is developed is more important than who does the certifying. In other words, the process of assessment with quality can be perfectly well carried out by the same institution that does the teaching. There is a guarantee of elements like trustworthiness, impartiality and validity, and there are also suitable pedagogic spaces available, connections with enterprises and knowledge about assessment, and in all these areas training institutions and centres have big advantages.

A certification body may provide training, and if so it shall clearly demonstrate how separation of training and examination is managed to ensure confidentiality, objectivity and impartiality.<sup>16</sup>

This argument has a bearing on the debate about whether it is better to adopt a system or to adapt one because, very often, the logic of the certification of processes and goods tends to be automatically translated to the ambit of the certification and recognition of people's capacities. Training institutions are very well equipped to run training, and the assessment which leads to certification is, above all else, a form of training.

The role of the state in determining levels of quality and the ways in which national training frameworks can be set up suggests a need to have a rector body to regulate the modalities, levels, forms of access, determination of standards, equivalences and other aspects necessary to set up lifelong learning schemes. This role is complemented by training institutions that are efficient in providing programmes and assessment.

| 16 Standard ISO 17024, "General requirements for bodies which operate systems for certifying persons." (4.2.2)

### **3.3. Weak points and challenges in competency certification experiences**

The experiences described in this study allow us to focus on a number of important points. These are the coordination between different experiences at the national level, the degree of participation of the actors as reflected in the results of those experiences, and the subject of access to certification.

#### ***3.3.1. It is desirable to work towards integrating and coordinating different experiences?***

In the examples we have given of experiences at the level of sectors or enterprises, the certification of competencies had undeniable advantages for the immediate ambit but there are limitations on the mobility that the certificates and recognition can facilitate at the national level, or even at the sub-regional or international levels. Hence there is a tension between achieving immediate results, which relate to certification at the level of the enterprise, and the broader aim of generating a national certification model which would cover a number of sectors and therefore facilitate the recognition of portable competencies. In developing a certification model at the national level it usually takes longer to organise and to promote the participation of interested parties.

Competency certificates that are awarded at the level of an enterprise generally reflect immediate interests that have to do with human resources management and the productivity of the economic unit in question, but because they are limited to the enterprise they do not do much to promote the mobility of workers who have improved their competencies and received certification. Obviously, interest in improving the mobility and employability of workers often falls in the public sphere, so the system is flawed if there is no mechanism to coordinate enterprises, sectors and the national level.

If there is no clear vision from the government level about the way to generate a framework in which knowledge and competencies are valued regardless of how they were acquired, there is little chance of finding a remedy for this defect. Coordination is necessary, but what is also needed is a national framework which establishes a common language between the different levels and occupational areas in which competencies can be certified. There is a clear need to have a framework for classifying the different levels of competency and for defining the route to labour progress and the way that new competencies can be acquired and validated.

It is for this reason that some experiences at the national level, like “Chile Califica”, have brought in different actors from education and from the world of

work, so as to create bridges to allow an upward trajectory in the occupational biography of the worker, with inputs of knowledge and skills from different sources. In certification systems the objective is not to create an offer of competency standards and assessment bodies, rather it is to facilitate opportunities for assessment and the recognition of knowledge to favour the levelling and acquisition of what is required for good labour and social performance.

To sum up, given that the recognition of prior learning has reached different levels in different experiences, it is clear that experiences in enterprises or specific sectors are usually geared to the needs of the sector in question. To improve the worth of competency certification as a mechanism for detecting training needs and orienting labour life, the public sector will have to intervene on matters such as defining a national framework, setting up a mechanism for validation and recognition between sectors, and above all to ensure that there is a progression in the training of the worker in the framework of the philosophy of lifelong learning.<sup>17</sup>

### **3.3.2. Do entrepreneurs and workers participate more in national initiatives or in sectoral experiences?**

When the public sector promotes certification systems, usually through the ministry of labour or the ministry of education, its first efforts are to attract private actors and convince them to take part. Entrepreneurs will be interested in getting involved if they perceive that the certification of competencies is useful in their management of human resources. Workers will be interested if they are given clear signals that a competency certificate will be valuable in their relationship with the enterprise and in training processes.

The first national standardization and certification programmes began with an “top down” strategy, combined with pilot experiences. An example of this is the CONOCER in Mexico, whose coverage grew slowly as the methodologies designed centrally by the Council’s technical apparatus were applied in more and more new sectors.

However, the excessive uniformity and, paradoxically, the high degree of standardization that this approach involves, came in for criticism from some entrepreneurial sectors because these sectors did not all see their training needs reflected in the competency standards that had been drawn up using a procedure that was standardized and uniform at the national level. As a result, flexible

<sup>17</sup> On this point, the 2004 ILO Recommendation concerning of human resources development says, ‘The national framework should include a credible system of certification which will ensure that skills are portable and recognized across sectors, industries, enterprises and educational institutions.’

strategies were applied as regards response times, kinds of intervention, methodologies and even technical language, in order to make the system easier for the enterprises to understand.

On the other hand, some programmes of a sectoral kind have not had to face the great challenge of having to develop a “national system” and have been limited to more restricted spaces such as “the foodstuffs sector”, “the graphics industry” or “tourism”. In these cases, the programmes are usually closer to the enterprises, and this makes it easier for the enterprises to take part. However, it cannot be said that whether the initiative to set up a certification system is national or sectoral in nature makes that initiative more attractive or less attractive for the actors.

The degree of participation depends more on the design of the programme in question and on the capacity of the people who run it to promote it. The CONOCER succeeded in reaching a large number of occupational sectors, and organised many standardization committees with the participation of entrepreneurs and workers, but the wide range of certifiable competency standards offered is not reflected in the same proportion in the flow of certificates awarded. A factor here could be the degree to which workers perceived certification as useful, that is to say, how far they believed that certification would help them to find employment or to increase their income. It is in these elements that we find the roots of their “disposition to pay” in terms of the time devoted to assessment, and in terms of the actual monetary payment for assessment and certification.

Certification programmes geared to an enterprise or sector, like those in Brazil that we have outlined, are from the very beginning better coordinated with the practices of human resources management in the enterprises involved, and therefore are perceived to belong to those enterprises and are strongly promoted. Even mechanisms whereby assessment has to be paid for do not discourage candidates since the certificates on offer are recognized and valued by enterprises in that occupational area. It is clear that in these cases training institutions like the SENAI play an active role, and this facilitates a direct connection between assessment and training opportunities. This is typical of the Latin American training model, in which assessment is conceived and executed as part of the training process.

The actual volume of competency certificates awarded has not yet reached significant proportions, but this does not necessarily mean that the programmes are failing to attain their objectives. More and more experiences are being implemented, and the recognition of prior knowledge is gaining ground in the region. This does not only apply in the sphere of public employment and training policies but also in the private ambit in which the competency-based human resources management and the pressure for greater competitiveness are forcing enterprises

to seek competent personnel. This increasing priority for competency certification also figures in the perspective of some large global corporations. They have launched their certification systems onto the market, and these have the added attraction that they carry a brand name.

One important lesson that has been learned is that the need for certification is not inherent, nor is it required, for all levels of competency. As can be seen in the experience in England, there is usually greater demand for certificates at the operative and technical levels where there is a closer connection between certification and options for employment. However, to the extent that employers and workers both perceive the advantages of incorporating mechanisms for recognizing knowledge into enterprise management, without doubt there will be activity in this area, and ministries of labour and education as well as training institutions will be under more pressure to design and to implement such mechanisms.

### ***3.3.3. Different certifications and different objectives. Numerous approaches coming together in the Latin American experience***

At the present time the concept of certification in the Latin American region involves a variety of theoretical and practical aspects. To speak of certification in the region it is first necessary to define the concept and the institutional model in question. The biggest three groups are certification experiences promoted from the public sphere, those promoted on a sectoral level by representative entrepreneurial groups, and those which are linked to corporations that operate worldwide.

As far as the public ambit is concerned, the experiences analysed have a number of common features such as the fact that they are voluntary, that the intention is to promote accessibility and equality of opportunities, that there is a need to implement mechanisms to safeguard public safety through "authorising" certificates, and the idea of fostering certification as a mechanism to promote lifelong learning. In this area there are experiences promoted by ministries of labour and of education. The outstanding characteristic of these is that certification makes it possible to recognise a worker's learning regardless of how this was acquired. This gives a national perspective that is very close to the theories of human capital and the impulse towards lifelong learning.

The initiative from the public sector carries with it the possibility of creating or defining institutional structures that are responsible for this undertaking (for example, the CONOCER in Mexico, "Chile Califica", and the SENA National Service of Training for Work in Colombia). Cases of certified authorisation also

come in this group. These are activities which have to do with the regulation of the exercise of certain occupations that fall in the category of public welfare and/or safety, such as regulations for the exercise of occupations in the health sector or in some industrial fields like handling combustible liquids or gases. The authorisation certificate is indispensable to be able to work in these occupations.

The sectoral approach is almost always connected to a specific area, and it almost always enjoys the active participation of entrepreneurs and workers. Its basic objective is to improve the competencies of the workers and consequently raise productivity and competitiveness in that sector. These experiences are carried out in sectors where there is a high level of competitive maturity, and usually where the enterprises are involved in global trade or are faced with international competition. Very often these practices are linked to concepts in business culture and the development of worker competencies. In these cases certification is usually connected to practices in human resources management, specifically in the stages of selection, training and development. These experiences may function in alliance with national training institutions such as the SENAI in Brazil.

The corporate initiative focus is usually promoted by an enterprise which has global reach. In this category we see the development of a model of “certification” with technical parameters of quality that apply in that framework or global sector. Sometimes this sector can have multinational scope, as is the case of certification in the field of precision welding or automobile repairs. This trend also tends to facilitate improved quality in after sales service, which is of great interest to any manufacturer.

Corporate certification usually involves allies in the educational sector who subscribe to the quality standards of the brand and are therefore accredited to offer the certification in question. Given the fact that these brands usually have a wide projection in the market, this kind of certification is very attractive to educational providers (who make agreements with the owners of the brand in question, and have access to world class technology in the educational services involved), to employers (who find the certificate gives a “seal of quality” to workers who have it), and to the workers themselves (who rapidly see the advantages of a certificate that is recognised world wide).

This kind of certification has great geographical and technological portability, but it does not correlate well with internal references or sectoral training frameworks. There is no doubt that it is an irrefutable recommendation in the generation of employment opportunities, but its connection with public training policies is still very weak, above all because there is a barrier that prevents public programmes from associating themselves with one provider in particular, without going through a call for offers. This kind of certification is very common among software manufacturers in the computer sector, but it also exists, and has

for a longer time, in markets as varied as the hotels sector and automobile repairs.

A question that has to be asked is why this kind of certification model has recently come into the region. There is no one single answer to this, but we can pinpoint some of the factors involved. First, the trend towards a global economy has put an emphasis on the concept of global brands and uniform quality. This has made it legitimate for manufacturers to wish to preserve their level of service by directly checking the quality of programmes and permitting accredited agents to use their logotype and trademark. Second, consumers usually follow signs that are more visible in the market, and this very probably accounts for the growing demand for training and assessment on the part of the providers of these brands.

One consequence of this situation is that there is widespread debate about what the contents and characteristics of a certification programme should be. Should the objective be general competencies, key competencies for employability, or content that has already been defined and tested in the market though a connection with specific technology or prestige? What role should the state play in the regulation of matters connected to raising workers' levels of skills and competency? Is it better to have a national framework for recognising know-how which promotes lifelong learning, or a series of specific offers which are geared to sectoral competencies? These are new questions, and they can be added to the traditional ones that have been asked time and time again in discussion forums in many countries in the region: Who should pay for certification? How is it possible to avoid the recognition of knowledge becoming a cause of, or at least a factor in, exclusion? Who should do the certifying, and for what? On this last point, there is frequent analysis of first-, second- and third-party certification mechanisms.<sup>18</sup>

Regional experiences are still marking out the ground of what is already a demand from workers and employers. Some ideas about the role and objectives of certification need to be clarified before it can serve as a solid foundation for defining institutional models. This is because very often a lack of knowledge means that judgements are formed *a priori* or programmes are designed which favour methodological positions without regard to technical considerations. The next table presents some of the dimensions of certification initiatives.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed description of these mechanisms, see Vargas, F. *40 Questions on Labour Competencies*, Cinterfor/ILO, available at [www.cinterfor.org.uy](http://www.cinterfor.org.uy)

**Some dimensions of competency certification experiences  
in Latin America and the Caribbean**

<b>DIMENSION</b>	<b>NATIONAL INITIATIVES</b>	<b>SECTORAL INITIATIVES</b>	<b>CORPORATE INITIATIVES</b>
PROMOTED BY	National training institutions Ministries of labour Ministries of education	Entrepreneurs' associations Sectoral branches International sectoral associations	Multinational business corporations
IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE	Recognition of knowledge Lifelong learning	Competitive performance Productivity Human resources management	Brand complementarity, service, quality Image and commerce
COVERAGE	National Developed with sectoral pilot applications	Sectoral Can be local or national	Global Development at the rhythm of local markets
FINANCIAL RESOURCES	Funds from international loans Funds from the national budget Funds from vocational training institutions	Private funds Sometimes co-financed from public funds	Private funds
UTILITY	Levelling and progress in studies Occupational recognition Possibility to work	Linkage and career development Connected to performance evaluations and permanence decisions	Brand image Business image Brand-quality link
ACCESSIBILITY	Open Not obligatory Favours the inclusion of workers Occasionally requires payment	Not obligatory Closer to workers in the sector Almost always has to be paid for Does not include the unemployed	Not obligatory Proximity to partners and corporate collaborators Is always paid Attraction of image

<b>DIMENSION</b>	<b>NATIONAL INITIATIVES</b>	<b>SECTORAL INITIATIVES</b>	<b>CORPORATE INITIATIVES</b>
WHO PAYS?	Free in the pilot phase Subsidised for disadvantaged groups Interested party can pay a part	The interested party Employees of the interested party In some cases subsidised with public funds in its pilot phase	Interested party Employees of the interested party
WHO ASSESS?	National training institutions participate First-, second- and third-party models co-exist	National Training institutions participate Second- and third-party models	Interested corporations, sometimes in alliance with educational institutions Third-party models
STRONG POINTS	Public backing Promotion of education Lifelong learning Portability	Sustainability Use in personnel management Explicit participation	Global representation Brand backing
WEAK POINTS	Sustainability Education-work coordination Token participation	Little portability Inter-sectoral occupational mobility	Accessibility Concentration Little portability

Source: Author

### **3.3.4. The importance of financing and of institutional structures for the sustainability of certification mechanisms**

Finance is always a key factor for initiating and sustaining innovation in human resources training. In the regional panorama, experiences that were initially promoted by training institutions are usually financed with the funds of those institutions themselves. However, many new experiences are financed by multilateral bodies, and take place in the framework of projects with a limited life cycle and a fixed amount of financing. Although the progress of certification experiences in the region, particularly those with sectoral coverage, do not yet allow definitive conclusions to be drawn, the absence of enduring institutional arrangements puts a question mark against their ultimate sustainability.

The certification of competencies is emerging as a new instrument for diagnosing training needs and for recognising achievements obtained in ambits other than training centres. According to the new ILO Recommendation concerning human resources development, countries need to be encouraged to formulate national human resources development policies in such a way as to favour employability, this being understood as the possibility of finding decent work, being promoted in the enterprise, or changing jobs when necessary, and all this in the framework of the continual changes that are caused by technology and the new forms of organization in work.

It is here that the responsibility of governments to maintain a system of education and training for work lies. They should create a training framework that facilitates lifelong learning and motivates enterprises to maintain and improve their investments in training. The design of competency recognition mechanisms must facilitate access to training and re-training for workers. Thus the Latin American experiences show that countries should be encouraged to give great weight to developing these mechanisms in the framework of national training institutions.