



Four assertions about certification – All False

Fernando Vargas Zúñiga

There are many interpretations, methodological approaches, and discussions surrounding labour skills certification. In the region, vocational training stakeholders are increasingly adopting the principles and methodologies associated with competency-based training and certification.

But why is this topic garnering so much interest now? How clear are the reasons that drive various public and private actors to implement certification systems?

This paper aims to address the questions posed above. It presents an analysis of four commonly debated assertions:

1. A certificate is issued only at the end of a training course and after all tests have been passed.
2. Certification processes encourage social exclusion.
3. In a certification system, the institutions responsible for training, assessment, and certification must be separate.
4. A certification system resolves the problems traditionally attributed to training institutions.

In our view, all these assertions lack support and are therefore considered false.

First assertion: A certificate is issued only at the end of a training action and after all the tests have been passed.

For a long time, certification was directly associated with a credential received at the successful completion of studies and completion of an educational stage. Education and training systems conferred prestige on the existence of different credentials which, in turn, gave their holder a certain value and social recognition. This was especially true in the stable employment conditions that prevailed until the end of the twentieth century.

It is worth remembering that in the world of work, experience used to be certified. Thus, Barbagelata (1980) described cases in which labour laws prescribed the obligation of employers to issue upon termination of the employment contract; A certificate of the positions and responsibilities held by the worker. This obligation still exists in many national legislations and, in fact, opens the other facet of certification, that of access to recognition based on experience or, better still, the learning developed throughout the exercise of the work.

But the changes that have arisen in the characteristics of work and the organization of production in recent decades have led to the recognition of the increasing complexity of human labour and the rapid variability of the contents of occupations.



The new ways of working are not characterized by a stable set of instructions and subordinate tasks; On the contrary, they incorporate new elements of variability that require the initiative and autonomy of the worker. The need to express what quality performance at work means challenges traditional certification processes to become good indicators of the real capacity of its bearer.

Several studies conducted in the 1970s showed the low relationship between workers' actual skills and their educational credentials. To all this can be added the following traits that are increasingly identifiable at work:

1. Less stability.
2. Advent of new "social" and relationship skills as key to successful performance.
3. Greater need for higher levels of education that allow them to operate with mathematics, read and interpret and apply basic sciences.
4. Rapid evolution of techniques and technologies applied in jobs that have an impact on a rapid obsolescence of skills.

Thus, as new explanations for successful job performance (job competencies) were identified, the need to develop new ways to certify that job well done became evident. What kind of certificate could show, not the successful completion of an educational cycle, but the actual ability to perform a job?

Finally, the recognition of the formative role of employment led to the admission, from a lifelong learning perspective, that people learn and develop skills as a result of their daily experience. The open, transparent and public recognition of these competencies can support the entry into complementary training programs that allow the worker to develop his or her career with a better use of his or her work and with better mobility.

Certification is seen as a process and an outcome; a process that involves implementing standards and defining the criteria that will evaluate them, and a result of the evaluation procedures, whether or not they lead to a grade.

Currently, a certificate can account for:

1. the culmination of a formative process,
2. the ability (previously assessed) to exercise certain professions with a risk to public safety or health.
3. the possession of the competencies contained in a standard, no matter where and how they were acquired.

The first case requires that the training programme be updated with the competencies required by the world of work, and that the assessment be referenced against that updated programme. A competency-based training program should include what the job requires of people in terms of a competency profile.

In the second case, there is usually a specialized agency, highly related to the occupation in question and from which the "quality of performance" in that field of work is defined. In this case, the certification is of a qualifying nature with respect to the exercise of the employment in question. At the level of skilled work, examples can be cited in the occupations of precision welding for oil pipelines, nursing assistants, installers of domestic gas networks; in which the certificate is essential for professional performance.



In the third, there are many new experiences in which a competency standard is defined, and instruments are used to assess whether candidates satisfactorily meet that standard. This case includes the recognition of skills acquired as a result of experience. An inclusive conception is identified here, as it facilitates the participants' better integration into programs that support them to raise their skills and integrate into a dynamic of lifelong learning.

Certification is no longer necessarily tied to the completion of an educational or job training process. Its focus now lies on demonstrating work capacity rather than simply logging hours of study or practice within a company. Consequently, the certificate diverges from the purely educational notion of a "degree," as it does not indicate participation in a programme. Instead, it identifies the holder as a competent worker in a specific occupational field.

The growing interest in certification processes is showing how the diversification in the sources of acquisition of competencies requires mechanisms that recognize the knowledge acquired outside of formal teaching processes and also allow the integration of such achievements in the formation of a career and lifelong learning.

From this perspective, there are several situations that can shape the lifelong learning process, which can begin with formal education, lead to initial vocational training actions (apprenticeship, for example), include certifications for in-company training courses, contemplate the evaluation and recognition of skills acquired at work, etc. etc. The possibility of recognising and valuing these competencies is one of the great challenges for certification systems. From a broad perspective, the certification pathway within the philosophy of lifelong learning contributes to expanding the possibilities of access to better jobs.

Certification is the public, formal and temporary recognition of the work capacity demonstrated by a worker, carried out based on the evaluation of his or her competencies in relation to a standard and without necessarily being subject to the culmination of an educational process.

Certification can make explicit the body of knowledge and skills developed as a result of on-the-job learning; This type of training is highly effective because of its direct relationship with needs. In fact, the most competitive companies in the world stand out, among other things, for their concern for the training of their workers.

Such companies have understood that knowledge is the main resource they possess and develop it through their organizational practices, willingness to learn, and recognition of what they have learned. There is still discussion about how to "value" this enormous asset that is "knowledge capital" and even more, how to reflect it in the financial statements by associating it with the market value. People and their skills account for the entire body of knowledge in the organization, and training is one of the best ways to increase that asset.

The certificate acquires the dimension of a credible reference, as a sign of the skills that a worker possesses and that, to the extent that they are clearly transmitted to the employer, can save valuable resources in their search for a qualified resource.

Second assertion: Certification processes encourage social exclusion.

It has been believed that access to the certificate will differentiate between holders and non-holders. However, putting certification processes in place has shown, over time, to facilitate



access to more workers for better levels of employment; calls for a better organisation of the various training offers; It leads to an increase in relevance and makes it easier to identify areas where training can be most effective.

The certificate acts as a sign of value to its holder and to society. There is a lot of evidence in Latin America about how unemployment is higher among those who have fewer years of certified education or those who do not have specific training (and therefore do not have a certificate).

In its traditional conception, the certificate represented a sign of "participation" in a program. From there, it is evolving into a certificate that represents a "recognition" of capabilities. The more these skills are recognized, the more likely they are to be valued and the better their chances of participating in the labour market.

Certificates have traditionally been a good indicator for employers and employees of their chances of reaching an employment contract. The problem does not seem to be the certificate but its accessibility.

The links between the diploma, the institution that issued it and the status of its holder are still strong. In this sense, an inclusive effect can be generated by opening up more opportunities to demonstrate the competencies possessed. Certification mechanisms must be open and accessible, so that the certification process is no longer considered a "filter" but a "means of promotion".

There is nothing to prevent certification mechanisms from including workers with lower levels of education and those employed in low-skilled activities. On the contrary, the informal sector is increasingly integrated through subcontracting with formal companies, and its insertion into the economy means that it must improve its levels of competitiveness and quality. In several countries of the European Union, certification programmes favour the inclusion of low-skilled workers as a means of incorporating them into a training cycle.

While it is true that not all the informal sector has these opportunities, it is also true that training with good programs and opening up access to skills assessment opportunities for more workers does not contradict the substance of training-certification models, nor the recognition of skills.

The disconnection from the informal sectors is not a problem exacerbated by certification schemes. On the contrary, a training program for informality can be made more inclusive and more effective, which, in exchange for short-term palliatives, provides a valued and explanatory credential on the labour skills developed and possessed. The role of the State is fundamental in this approach, generating the national frameworks that make it possible to establish, for workers, a perspective of lifelong learning.

In this context, a certificate of labour competence, valued and recognized, is a good way to access better job opportunities, right in line with expanding the possibilities of accessing decent work.

A more effective way of demystifying sectoral duality as an assumed shortcoming of certification is to identify the skills that are normally included in the contents assessed and certified, such as:



1. Competencies derived from basic knowledge (reading, writing, mathematical operation, chemistry, physics, etc.).
2. Technical competencies that are applied in the exercise of work and involve the use of tools, equipment, participation in transformation processes, etc.
3. Social competencies that define skills for relationships, teamwork, cooperation, etc.

From this point of view, jobs of the informal sector, analysed from the perspective of competence, do not escape from applying combinations of the three types noted. Their greater or lesser development will mostly define the success of any enterprise. Thus, the certification model becomes a good reference for promoting the creation of decent jobs, the exercise of better labour and technological practices in small and medium-sized enterprises typical of informality, while enabling their workers to move more easily to jobs in other sectors with greater economic structure.

A point that should not be forgotten is the one that refers to considering the differences in the abilities to enter and move within the system of a worker with, for example, completed basic education compared to another with only two or three years of education. In these cases, training systems must develop guidance mechanisms that allow participants to "decipher" the navigation keys in the system and join it. This would also include the possibility of covering, for those who need it, the costs associated with tests and certificates if they exist.

The most sensitive point to the ease of access is the financing of the certification process for the candidate. A poorly designed funding scheme could favour some over others. This topic includes all the possibilities of implementing active employment policies and facilitating access for those who are not able to pay for the certificate.

Third assertion: In a certification system, the institutions that train, those that evaluate, and those that certify must be separated.

The application of the legal maxim "one cannot be judge and party", mechanically repeated, adds little in relation to the validity of the certification and is far from universally true.

Certification models have followed the evolution of educational practices, which in turn have arisen from historically accumulated values and cultural heritages. Each system expresses beliefs about what a training model should achieve. Transposing this expression from one country to another, without proper revision, may be unsuccessful.

In fact, there is no single and best formula for the organization of an institutional model of training. What is common to all of them is usually the search for better quality, coverage and relevance; Obviously, there are various ways to achieve these ideals. When observing the institutionalization carried out by the different countries, often taken as inspiring models, it must be borne in mind that this is the result of their culturally assimilated practices in the field of education and training.

It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that recent reorganisations and concerns about training systems stem from national diagnoses that have usually revealed some of the following aspects:

1. proliferation of training offers of different quality and little coordination between themselves and with national objectives;



2. inadequate relationship between training supply and the needs of the economy expressed in the demand for skilled workers;
3. loss or low level of competitiveness of the economy, often expressed in low levels of training and poor productivity performance;
4. signs of burnout in the current training systems in use.

A quick historical review shows that the first references to training and certification systems focused on job skills appear at different times in Europe. For example, in Germany, training standards within the framework of the dual modality were set around 1937; in France, the benchmarks for training were established around 1950; Later, in Spain, laws were enacted establishing benchmarks based on work skills in the 1970s and finally, in England, national vocational standards in the 1980s.

The introduction of job references in training programs shifted the emphasis from academic content to job performance. While traditional educational programs developed content that was centrally academic; The training programmes were based on the detailed description of the tasks and operations associated with a job. Today, the new standards, which serve as the basis for training programs, describe competent work: a set of skills and attitudes mobilized to successfully resolve a particular situation in job performance.

In addition, in view of the growing number of both public and private training offers, the quality levels of the certificates are dissimilar, creating, among other things, the need for mechanisms that guarantee the connection between training and the needs of jobs. In a number of countries, the development of standards – in which employers and workers participate and often under the protection of active policy measures originating in a public authority – was used to try to raise and standardize the quality levels of job education and training.

Let us now add a consideration that arises from verifying the old methodological rule according to which there is no second without first. In other words, the existence of a third-party certification model presupposes the existence of a second-party certification model, and therefore there must also be a first-party model. The first-party certification is granted by the institution that does the training and that has the mechanisms to ensure the quality, transparency and validity of the certificate. Almost all of Latin America's training institutions fall into this model. To this end, they carry out the functions of training, evaluation and certification.

Normally the second part models are verified in the formal education system, a certificate of completion requires the signature of a second party authority, usually the Ministry of Education. This means that the quality assurance mechanisms are in place and applied by the authority; In proof of this, he endorses the certificate.

In the third-party model, on the other hand, there is a full separation of functions and, preferably, of organisms. On the one hand, those who train, on the other those who evaluate, and on the third hand, those who certify. Its origin is located in eighteenth-century England when the State tried to regulate its training system, with a high prominence in guilds and corporations; creating rules of the game in which they maintained their certifying character.



Fourth assertion: A certification system solves the problems traditionally attributed to training institutions.

It is often assumed that a certification system, on its own, improves quality and becomes a good neutralizer of problems attributed to the institutionality of training.

This is not really the case. However, the institutional fabric that is designed for training systems, especially third-party ones, contains verification mechanisms that fall under the category of quality assurance. The standards of competence, on which certification is based, do not in themselves guarantee the improvement of the quality intrinsic to training.

By intrinsic quality of training, we understand those attributes of the training process achieved by the set of inputs applied, such as: didactic materials, teaching skills and educational environment.

An activity such as training has a high educational and pedagogical content; which cannot be confused with mere training focused on the development of a particular skill.

If the company is not a good place to learn, the skills acquired in the experience deteriorate and are minimized. A certification program for workers who have not had training opportunities on the job would not be very successful. The certification process acts as an excellent means of detecting and channeling training efforts, as well as supporting an occupational career for the candidate.

The certificate is an excellent indicator of the result of a good training process in an institution or in the company. The focus of these programs in Latin America will require a review of the need to improve the deficiencies of basic education and the definition of the standards that underpin good curricula, perhaps with more emphasis than is usually placed on the development of institutional structures dedicated to certification.

In the design of certification systems, the number of assumptions must be measured and weighed against the realities that experience reveals. It can be assumed, for example, that all public and private actors will provide better training if standards are defined to be used in their programmes; In this way, certification would stimulate improvements in the quality of training, increase new offerings and facilitate access for new participants.

But experience has shown that improvements in quality and attracting workers to the certificate are not automatic. Certification does not seem to be a clear answer in all sectors and in all occupations; It is usually more successful when it is guided by the initial interest of employers and workers and is closely applied to the reality of work and human resource management. The strategy of the United States, for example, is to start with a voluntary partnership in which it is based on the support and commitment of representative interested companies.

It is difficult for a training provider to improve the quality of its teachers, generate and accumulate knowledge applied to training (curricular designs, pedagogical materials, evaluation techniques and new technologies) without a stable institutional structure oriented to the generation of knowledge applied to training. It is unlikely to raise the quality of training in an atomized perspective of tendered prices and often dependent on external and sporadic financing.



On the other hand, when training and certification programs are institutionalized, there is usually methodological support in areas such as curriculum development and teacher training; In this way, quality improvement can be achieved, including the institutional effort to achieve it.

In certification systems, we must not lose sight of the process by placing the emphasis on the certificate (product) only. A good examination is the result of a good training process, regardless of whether this process has been carried out in the company or in the training institution; Thus, the certificate is a good indicator of an outcome; Its role is important as an indicator and its qualities are highlighted in the reliability and validity it possesses. Good practices in training, the updating of programs, the provision of good teachers, the frequent renewal of content and the provision of teaching materials are always essential in the final objective of achieving a good level of performance and therefore a certificate of quality.

So where to put the accent?

Developed countries have many years of experience in the design and use of training and education systems, they have managed to accumulate knowledge applied to training and by setting up their certification systems they are not taking away the weight of their institutional structure. On the contrary, they are optimising it by defining quality mechanisms such as the certificate.

If there is a good training system, if the curricula are developed from profiles constructed and standardized with the participation of workers and employers, if there is the participation of the actors in the definition of the levels and characteristics of the certificates and if there is, desirably, a role for the State in creating a stable framework for all this to work; You will be closer to a reliable, equitable and socially valued certification model, a natural result of good training.

Strictly applying the principles enshrined in other models does not seem to be the best solution either. Certification schemes are rooted in countries' own experiences, traditions and institutional developments. In this sense, it is better to think of a process of analysis and adaptation of best practices than of a model for adopting them.

Linked to the **assertion** that we have been analyzing, there is usually the discussion about: who trains, who evaluates and who certifies?

In this regard, experiences in Latin America are showing that the most important thing is not the who, but the how. In other words, a quality evaluation process can be perfectly developed by the same institution that carried out the training. It is about ensuring elements such as reliability, impartiality and validity; But in addition, the provision of appropriate pedagogical environments, the connection with companies, the knowledge about evaluation and in this, institutions and training centres have great advantages.

The role of the State in determining the levels of quality and the paths that make possible the formation of national training frameworks suggests the need to have a governing body that regulates the modalities, levels, forms of access, determination of standards, equivalences, and other aspects necessary to configure lifelong learning scenarios. This role is complemented by efficient training institutions in the provision of programmes and their



evaluation. The regulatory body would be responsible for developing verification and quality assurance actions with all those in charge of implementation.

Skills certification is an important tool in this process, in the sense that it solves an information problem, making the quality and quantity of workers' skills observable by potential employers. However, certification requires strong institutional involvement of companies, workers and trade unions in the design of content and accreditation mechanisms.

A prevalent factor in these considerations is the strong involvement of business, workers and government in the design and implementation of regulatory and enforcement activities.

There are three essential elements for a good certificate, regardless of the institutional model adopted:

1. A quality training, up-to-date and based on profiles developed with the participation of the actors.
2. An agreement on measures to ensure the quality of the certificate. This involves the way it will be evaluated and the participation of employers and workers in the analysis of the performance of certified workers.
3. An institutional design that indicates who fulfills the functions of standardization, training, evaluation, and certification without necessarily implying that they are new and different institutions, it is emphasized that they are first and foremost independent functions.

References:

- Barbagelata, Héctor Hugo. La institucionalización de la certificación ocupacional y la promoción de los trabajadores. Montevideo: Cinterfor/OIT, 1980.
- Cinterfor/OIT. Observatorio de experiencias de formación basada en competencias laborales.
- Boudier, Annie y otros. Certification and legibility of competences. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP, 2001.
- CEDEFOP. Evoluciones en el ámbito de los sistemas de formación profesional de los Estados Miembros entre setiembre 2001 y febrero 2002. www.cedefop.eu.int
- Fretwell, David. A framework for defining and assessing occupational and training standards in developing countries. 2001.
- Gamerding, George. Calificaciones profesionales: experiencias del Caribe. Boletín Técnico Interamericano de Formación Profesional. Montevideo, Cinterfor/OIT, n.149, may.-ago. 2000.
- McClelland, David. Modificando la competencia más que la inteligencia. American Psychology Review, 1973.
- Márquez, Gustavo. Capacitación de la fuerza laboral en América Latina: ¿Qué debe hacerse? Washington: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2001.
- National Skills Standards Board. An Introduction to the use of skills standards and certifications in WIA programs. 2002. www.nssb.org
- Proyecto DOCREF/SEM 128/1. Montevideo: Cinterfor/OIT. 1979.
- Report of the independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme. London: QCA, 2001.



- Casanova, F.; Montanaro, L.; Vargas, F. El enfoque de competencia laboral: manual de formación. Montevideo: Cinterfor/OIT, 2001.
- Vargas, Fernando. Algunas consideraciones alternativas para un sistema de formación profesional. OIT. Ministerio de Trabajo y Empleo. Brasil. 1999.
- Vargas, F.; Irigoin, M. Competencia laboral. Manual sobre conceptualización y aplicaciones a la educación en el sector salud. OPS; Cinterfor/OIT, 2002.
- Proyecto DOCREF/SEM 128/1. CINTERFOR/OIT. 1979.
- Una descripción de las experiencias a cargo de los distintos actores está disponible en: www.cinterfor.org.uy/competencias/observatorio
- Irigoin, M. Vargas, F. Competencia Laboral. Manual sobre conceptualización y aplicaciones a la educación en el sector salud. OPS-CINTERFOR/OIT. 2002.
- Barbagelata, Hector Hugo. La institucionalización de la certificación ocupacional y la promoción de los trabajadores. CINTERFOR/OIT, 1980.
- McClelland, David - "Modificando la competencia más que la inteligencia", American Psychology Review, 1973.
- Boudier, Annie y otros. Certification and legibility of competences. CEDEFOP. 2001.
- Irigoin, M. Vargas, F. Competencias Laborales. Manual de conceptualización y aplicaciones en el sector salud. OPS. CINTERFOR/OIT. 2002.
- En todo caso, si existe un efecto según el cual, quienes poseen una credencial adquieren mayores ventajas respecto de quienes no la poseen; incluso en igualdad de condiciones de experiencia y competencia. Es el llamado "efecto credencial"
- Report of the independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme. QCA. London. September. 2001.
- Boudier, Annie y otros. Certification and legibility of competences. CEDEFOP. 2001.
- Esta columna no pretende incluir todos los casos; muestra varios países donde sabemos, las IFP desarrollan programas de certificación a partir de perfiles por competencias.
- QCA. Report of the independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme. 2001.
- En el sistema inglés la mayor parte de las certificaciones se concentran en los niveles bajo y medio de competencia; en el caso mexicano hay alta demanda en ocupaciones de la informática. En ambos casos un porcentaje de la oferta de normas, no se utiliza en procesos de certificación.
- Existen muchos casos en que las Instituciones de Formación al trabajar con Centros colaboradores privados, comparten sus currículos, apoyan la capacitación de docentes y las metodologías de formación integrándolas como parte de la relación de trabajo.
- Borrador de la norma ISO 17024 "Requerimientos generales para organismos que operan sistemas de certificación de personas". Circulando para aprobación en el Comité de evaluación para conformidad. Diciembre del 2000
- CEDEFOP. Evoluciones en el ámbito de los sistemas de formación profesional de los Estados Miembros entre setiembre 2001 y febrero 2002. www.cedefop.eu.int