



Member States consultation on the ESCO v1 pre-release (English version)

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Purpose of this document

The purpose of the current document is to inform the BOA on the results of the first phase of the Member States consultation on the ESCO v1 pre-release (English version).

At the joint MAI-BOA meeting of 12th July 2016 the Commission has already informed the BOA on the aims and format of this consultation. At that occasion the working document "Review of ESCO by the MSWG", presented by the Commission to the Member States working group on ESCO (MSWG) at its meeting of 26th April 2016, was distributed to the BOA. This working document explained the objectives and the carrying out of the consultation.

Context

As agreed with the MSWG last April, the Commission launched an on-line consultation on a pre-release of ESCO v1 in English. The consultation lasted from 1st July to 9th September 2016 and was addressed to national authorities and other ESCO stakeholders. Its aim was to provide to Member States a first-hand insight of the new European classification and test its fitness for purpose.

The consultation

The goal of this consultation was to gather informal and general feedback from the MSWG members on ESCO terminological richness, how it compares to other similar international classifications such as ISCO 08 and notably on its adequacy to map to national classifications, according to article 19 of the new EURES Regulation¹.

The consultation focused solely on the English version of the ESCO occupations and skills pillars. MSWG members were asked to give their informal output on two points:

1-The adequacy of ESCO's current final draft to map your national classification system(s) to it;

2-The adequacy of ESCO's current final draft to allow for a more precise exchange of information in EURES than the currently used ISCO-08 classification.

MSWG members could associate other national experts and interested parties to this consultation.

20 Member States (AT, BE, CY, DE, DK, ES, FR, FI, HR, IT, LT, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI and SK) and NO replied to the consultation.

In Q4/2016-Q1/2017, the Commission expects to have ready the final version of ESCO occupations and skills/competences pillars in all official EU languages, plus Icelandic and Norwegian. A second phase of this consultation will then be launched, focusing on ESCO linguistic accuracy.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2016/589

The results

Concerning the two questions and its feedback:

Question 1: adequacy of ESCO for mapping national classifications to it

A vast majority of respondents replied quite positively to this question. No clearly negative answer to it was explicitly voiced. In particular, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Italy, Cyprus and Croatia provided a clearly positive feedback on the potential for mapping ESCO to their classifications.

Other Member States expressed their concerns about the technical implementation of the mappings. The Netherlands and Austria reported that more time and resources would be needed to validate the ESCO content.

Different comments were made concerning the level of detail of the classification. Austria mentioned that ESCO should provide more detail when it comes to specialisms. Latvia observed that their classification is less detailed than ESCO and that ESCO "is still excessively broad and comprehensive, especially for non-professional users (employers and employees)".

Belgium, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania indicated that not all occupations in ESCO exist in their national classification and/or vice-versa. On this Belgium suggested that the Member States could provide lists of shortage occupations for the future update of ESCO. Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania were concerned that some occupations in ESCO are assigned to different ISCO-08 unit groups than it is the case in the national classifications.

Belgium stressed that "mapping can only be performed on a detailed version of ESCO v1 in the national language". Therefore, the quality of the translations would be crucial to allow the creation of quality mappings.

France and the Netherlands raised some doubts on the consistency of the classification. For these countries some sectors are over-represented while others are under-represented, suggesting that a better harmonisation would be of added value. Germany also reported overlapping of some skills terms;

Italy and Germany asked for a period of trial and testing with the classification in the context of different tools (e.g. EURES and EUROPASS).

Proposals for following up actions related to question 1

The Commission acknowledges that mapping national classifications to ESCO will require technical adjustments and specific work at national level. To this purpose Article 19(5) of the updated EURES Regulation clearly indicates that "...technical and, where possible, financial support..." will be provided by the Commission to Member States for their mapping exercises or to the Member States which choose to replace national classifications with ESCO. The same article indicates as well that Member States will have three years to execute this process.

This technical support can take several formats: a technical platform facilitating the mappings, availability of manuals, other technical documents and training for national experts, an ESCO help-desk and new mapping pilots².

Furthermore the Commission has recently finished the mapping between ESCO occupations and the ISCO-08 unit groups. This mapping is currently considered to be stable. The Commission cooperated closely with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to validate this mapping.

Since both national classifications and ESCO are mapped to ISCO, this can facilitate the mapping process, even in those cases where the ISCO mappings are not consistent (e.g. the same occupation in ESCO and in the national classifications is placed in different ISCO unit groups).

ESCO's translation process from English to all other EU official languages will be carried out by the Commission's Directorate General Translation (DGT). Nevertheless, the Commission acknowledges that Member States' input is important for an accurate translation of the ESCO terminology into the correct labour market terms currently being used at national level, for instance at employment services. For this the Commission reiterates its plea to the MSWG to share with the ESCO Secretariat contacts of relevant national experts who could help on this task.

National contact points would allow DGT translators to have an additional resource for validating their decisions on challenging translation terms. We believe that this support to the translation process will not claim to national administrations a significant effort in terms of human or other resources. Furthermore this exchange of knowledge between DGT and national experts might become an added value for future mapping exercises.

The Commission believes that the measures proposed in this point can mitigate the main risks associated with the general mapping exercise. Technical support to it will be discussed in the near future with the MSWG.

Question 2: adequacy of ESCO to allow for a more precise exchange of information in EURES than with ISCO-08

In their feedback to question 2, the Member States also did not highlight major difficulties.

Spain, Latvia and Lithuania replied in a very supportive way. Spain expressed that the use of skills and competences in ESCO will be an advantage for placement and recruiting activities. Lithuania supported the idea that ESCO will lead to a "better and more precise practical exchange of information in the EURES network than the currently used ISCO-08 classification".

However, Latvia stressed that using ESCO for the exchange of information within EURES will require "a wide range of technical adjustments". Austria appreciated the level of detail that ESCO will add to the ISCO unit groups, thus increasing the compatibility with their classification system. Additionally, Austria assessed the skills pillar to have reached a very high level.

² As indicated to the Board the Commission has recently carried out mapping pilots on ESCO occupations with CZ, ES, FR and the NL, using their national classifications, to better understand the technical challenges of the mapping exercise.

On the same line, Portugal expressed that this additional detail that ESCO provides will facilitate the link between the world of education and training and the labour market. Both Austria and Belgium acknowledged that by retaining the ISCO structure, ESCO might inherit its weaknesses. E.g. Austria stressed that the ISCO categories and terms are not always 'user-friendly'. Belgium, instead, commented that "each occupation has only one ISCO-08 code, although based on the activities that need to be performed in a specific job or occupation it is obviously related to more than one ISCO-08 category".

On the same topic, Slovakia suggested that a sectoral categorisation would help to better navigate the occupations. Similarly, France suggested assessing the possibility of further groupings, but this time referring to skills/competences. Also with regard to the skills/competences, France commented that they are too detailed.

Proposals for following up actions related to question 2

For proper exchanging information in EURES the mapping between the occupations in the national classifications and the ESCO occupations should be correct. The data exchange within EURES will not be affected by ISCO. In fact, we currently use ISCO to organise and maintain our occupations, to make the mapping process easier and for statistical comparability.

As a general principle, ESCO does not necessarily need to be as detailed as each national classification. Since ESCO covers the European level, it cannot encompass all the specificities of the national level (which are in any case best described in the national classifications).

Yet it is important that all occupations in the national classifications have a corresponding ESCO occupation. A first attempt on this direction was recently done by the Commission by doing a gap analysis between ESCO and eight national classifications. This allowed us to fill occupation gaps and ensure the completeness of the classification. In the mapping process this will ensure that the ESCO classification always contains one or more reference points for an occupation described in a national classification.

We expect that further input from the labour market, the education and training sector and the employment services will contribute to fine-tune the European classification, and allow for its continuous improvement.

Concerning the use of a hierarchical structure to find an occupation or knowledge, skill or competence concept in ESCO: we consider this approach as not being user-friendly for an end user. Advanced search functions like semantic search and type ahead can provide a more approachable access to ESCO concepts.

However structuring elements in the ESCO pillars make it easier to retrieve concepts in applications – be it through search, suggestor tools or hierarchical trees.

The Commission is currently discussing with MAI the possibility to use clusters/groupings of occupations and skills in future versions of ESCO to facilitate the navigation of the classification and provide users with additional filtering options (e.g. based on sectors). The Commission will inform the MSWG on the topic.

Additional comments

Several participants to the consultation took this occasion to convey to the Commission additional feedback on ESCO subjects not directly linked to the consultation. As the purpose of this document is to inform the BOA on the results of the consultation we will only deal briefly here with this extra information. Some of the mentioned subjects, such as the future governance of ESCO and the qualifications pillar, are currently (or were in a recent past) being discussed at the BOA.

Extra information was sent on the following subjects:

a) The usability of the skills pillar independently from the occupation pillar

Sweden commented that it would be useful to implement a user-friendly system allowing users to select their skills as navigating more than 12,000 skills is not very easy.

The Commission is discussing internally how users can be better supported in finding relevant skills and is experimenting with different possibilities. The aim is to create a user-friendly system allowing users to select directly their skills.

b) The consistency of the level of detail of the skills and competences and their use in the occupational profiles

France and Germany provided feedback on specific cases of inconsistent use of the skills and competences (e.g. some occupations feature many transversal skills while others do not have any, some skill terms are overlapping). The Commission will carefully evaluate each of these cases, assess if the level of detail of skills and competences and their use in occupational profiles is well justified, and solve them in line with the ESCO Guidelines where needed.

c) The difference between skills and competences and their relation to knowledge concepts is not always clear

The Commission assessed best practices from other classification systems, and together with several stakeholders, considered that the distinction between skills and competences would not add significant value for the exchange of information within the EURES platform. However, the Commission is committed to consider this issue further after the release of ESCO v1 in order to see if any changes to this approach might be needed in future ESCO releases.

d) The consistency in the use of the non-preferred terms

Slovakia raised the concern that some non-preferred terms re-occurred in occupations that belong to different ISCO unit groups. The Commission is already addressing this issue by assessing all duplicate non-preferred terms across the entire classification. Additionally, the Commission is consulting an ILO expert recommended by the MAI to review the attribution of some non-preferred terms, so that they are aligned with the scope of the ISCO unit groups.

e) The long term maintenance and sustainability of the system and the ESCO governance and legal status

France, Finland and Germany shared the view that the complexity of ESCO requires that the Commission details its plan for the future governance and maintenance of ESCO.

The BOA was informed by the Commission at its last meeting on 12th July on the Commission's proposals for the future governance of ESCO. These proposals support a more coordinated approach to several European initiatives on skills and similar tools and services, including the simplification of the current governance structures, as expressed in the recently launched initiative A New Skills Agenda for Europe.

These proposals are currently being discussed between the Commission and the Member states in the context the recent proposals for a revision of the EQF Recommendation and the future structure of Europass. These subjects will also be reported to the MSWG.

f) The lack of information on occupations that are regulated professions

Slovakia observed that the ESCO pre-release version lacks information for the users indicating if an occupation is regulated.

On the same topic, Germany and France highlighted that ESCO professions do not or only partly correspond to national job markets. Additionally, France warned from the risk that the way ESCO defines occupations may impact the way professions are defined at national level.

The Commission is perfectly aware of legal restrictions and requirements in specific professions that vary across Member States. ESCO will make this information available via a link between the ESCO occupations and the European Database of Regulated Professions. This link was not yet part of the pre-release, but will be added before the publication of ESCO v1.

Furthermore ESCO does not intend to be prescriptive from a legal point of view. On the contrary, it tries to capture the reality of the labour market at European level (e.g. which terminology employers and jobseekers use when exchanging CVs and vacancies).

g) The successful development and integration of the qualification pillar

Both France and Germany raised the concern that it is unclear how the qualification pillar will be integrated with the other two pillars. Finland questioned the added value of having a qualifications pillar on ESCO.

Germany acknowledged that the ESCO approach is to develop the occupational profiles based on the labour market requirements. However, this approach does not clarify how qualifications can fit these descriptions. This is particularly relevant in the VET area, where agreed descriptions of learning outcomes exist.

On the same topic, France warned about some risks related to the relation between the skills and competences and qualifications pillar. In particular:

-the risk that the ESCO skills and competences influence the development of qualifications, creating a risk for their quality;

-the risk that the competences are de-contextualised from the qualifications;

-the risk that ESCO facilitates the development of competences lists from sources that are completely disconnected from the national qualifications.

The Commission reiterates that recognition and awarding of qualifications is national prerogative and not a European competence. The ESCO qualifications pillar will mostly reproduce the official information currently present on national qualifications frameworks. Furthermore ESCO will not artificially create any direct links between existing qualifications and occupational profiles. Only if these links are already present at national classifications they will also be reproduced in ESCO.

The Commission has the intention to report soon to the MSWG the latest developments of the qualifications pillar.

Next steps

The Commission informed on and discussed the consultation results with the MSWG members during a webinar on 27th September. At the next MSWG meeting (12th December 2016 in Brussels) the Commission will discuss the follow up to this first phase of the consultation.

As indicated before, a second phase of the consultation with the Member States, focusing on ESCO linguistic accuracy, is forecasted for Q4 2016/Q1 2017. Once this second phase is concluded the Commission will report to the MSWG its final conclusions.

The Commission estimates the results of this first part of the ESCO consultation to be promising and positive. Again, no major blocking issues were reported concerning the ESCO structure and its adequacy to perform the mapping exercise as described in Article 19 of the updated EURES Regulation. We are looking forward to plan and coordinate with Member States when appropriate the technical assistance needed to largely facilitate this mapping exercise.