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# Linking knowledge, education and work: exploring occupations

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To have an occupational identity is to occupy a social and moral as well as economic position, to have mastered bodies of knowledge (both theoretical and practical), and earned a jurisdiction over practice.

## Introduction

The notion of occupation is used in several educational policies in South Africa, including our National Qualification Framework (NQF), the Organising Framework of Occupations (OFO), the Occupations in High Demand list, the Senior Management Service (SMS) Competency Framework, and others. The notion of 'occupation' is used when thinking about career pathways, mobility and progression within education, development of training programmes, designing curricula and qualifications, devising human resource development strategies, and when planning for the professionalization of the public service sector.

From a social justice perspective, the notion of occupation provides a way of thinking about what counts as meaningful work, what distinguishes 'work' from 'a job', why some occupations hold more power than others or have an exclusive right to perform the tasks associated with them, and how can weaker occupations be protected.

## Five dimensions to occupation

The issues are complex and the literature is dense. In this policy brief, we unpack what occupation means and some key ideas for considering occupation and occupational progression.

There are five dimensions which together constitute the idea of occupation:

### 01 NORMATIVE DIMENSION

**Since occupation is a social activity, workers do not simply perform their specialised tasks; they often share norms and values and views about society which go beyond their working lives. There is, then, a normative dimension to 'occupation'.**

All occupations have traditions of doing work which they draw on to maintain unity and integrity of work. Working within the framework of an occupation provides persons with a sense of 'belonging to a community of like-minded people with similar interests and aspirations' (Standing, 2009: 57). Labour economist Guy Standing also explains that 'lasting meaning to people's lives and in doing so anchors their identity' (Standing 2009b: 12). The notion of occupation shows the importance of meaningful work for personal development and the pitfalls of repetitive meaningless work.

The notion of occupation is vital for thinking about meaningful work. Work organized in occupations can provide workers with greater autonomy and satisfaction. This view of occupation requires a distinction between 'work' and 'labour/jobs'. The former refers to creative

PSETA Public Service Sector Education & Training Authority

activity and confers the worker with a degree of autonomy and control over their work processes; the latter refers to repetitive and often meaningless work, with no sense of community and with no or very little control over work and power over their destiny.

'Work' can convey the intimate link between the work we do and how we are seen by society or by ourselves.

## 02 KNOWLEDGE DIMENSION

**Occupations require formal knowledge in addition to everyday knowledge). This knowledge is acquired by education and training and is signalled in the labour market by means of qualifications. Formal knowledge in preparation for occupation varies but in some or other way it includes conceptual and practical knowledge.**

To a greater or lesser extent, all occupations rely on organised bodies of formal knowledge. Eliot Freidson (2001, pp. 157–158), a sociologist of professions, classifies bodies of knowledge into three:

- Knowledge which is descriptive and is concerned with the analysis of facts (e.g., medicine, engineering). This knowledge draws on science and technical scholarship and claims technical authority.
- Knowledge where the primary aim is normative and the main concern is behaviour and social norms in society (education, law, and clergy). This knowledge claims prescriptive authority.
- Aesthetic knowledge (the arts). This knowledge claims normative aesthetic authority but is not intended to inform the behaviour and morals of persons.

Formal knowledge is necessary for ensuring that any professional judgement in specific situations which arise in the course of work is both accurate and appropriate.

The work that people do every day in any workplace requires another type of situated knowledge often referred to as practical knowledge or know-how. Some of the know-how occupations developed are routine knowledge and others are far more complex, relying on capacity to apply formal knowledge to distinctive situations. Christopher Winch, (2013) a philosopher of education, identifies three kinds of know-how:

- Exercising a technique: The more routine a task is (which means that performing the task requires the use of an agreed procedure) the easier it will be to exercise that task, even across different workplaces. The focus is on the actual procedure, behaviour or norm needed to be exercised for a task to be completed.
- Polymorphous abilities: These are abilities which are manifested differently in different types of tasks and rely on the ability to make a more complex judgement. Planning is a good example of this ability and it includes drafting, classifying, discussing, and drawing implications but also writing notes, and drawing schemes and schedules.
- Project management: The emphasis here is on a division of work whereby different spheres of activity (which means specialisation) are allocated to different individuals or groups. Project management is the widest know-how, and it comprises both specialised knowledge of specific procedures and a variety of groupings of polymorphous abilities which are more generic.

> **Over time through project management experience, persons develop an expanded sense of self, and an integrated view of their role in the organisation.**

> **Judgement is a central facet of know-how. Judgements involve decisions of different sorts and levels of complexity.**

## 03 AUTHORITY DIMENSION

Studies on occupation examine the degree of autonomy members of an occupation at a different level of authority and power are able to exercise. Richard Stanley Peters (1973), one of the founders of the philosophy of education, argues that analysing the relations between persons within a formal division of labour requires a good understanding of authority. This is because, in rule-governed occupations, the performance of a bundle of tasks requires a guiding authority which will regulate correct and incorrect ways of following the rules, etiquette, or rituals.

### Two types of authority

**In authority or the the right to command someone else to follow rules and procedures. This would include control over the pace of work, its intensity, and over the raw material required to perform the task.**

**An authority or the right of the person in control to be believed that her/his opinion is correct. This includes the person knowing why her/his opinion is considered to be true (or not), and what is commonly accepted. about it.**

## 04 FORMAL RECOGNITION OF OCCUPATIONS

Strong occupations have control over: entry to occupation; referral networks; induction and training; criteria for performance; nature of work; competitors and evaluators; order of activities in a hierarchy of subordination. This can be seen as positive because occupational workers are to a large extent in control of their work (Freidson, 2001) or negative because other potential occupational workers struggle to gain access to the occupation and prices can be unfairly inflated (Derber, Schwartz, & Magrass, 1990). It is important to bear in mind that there is also a negative side to strong occupations. Some occupations and/or persons within strong occupations can create unfair monopolies, and charge outrageous fees. This tendency is sometimes what makes people critical of occupational control.

**Occupations thrive when they have monopoly of practice, when they establish occupational councils and other labour organisations which regulate their members by means of control over recruitment, training and licensing as well as impose work procedures and modes of self-discipline.**

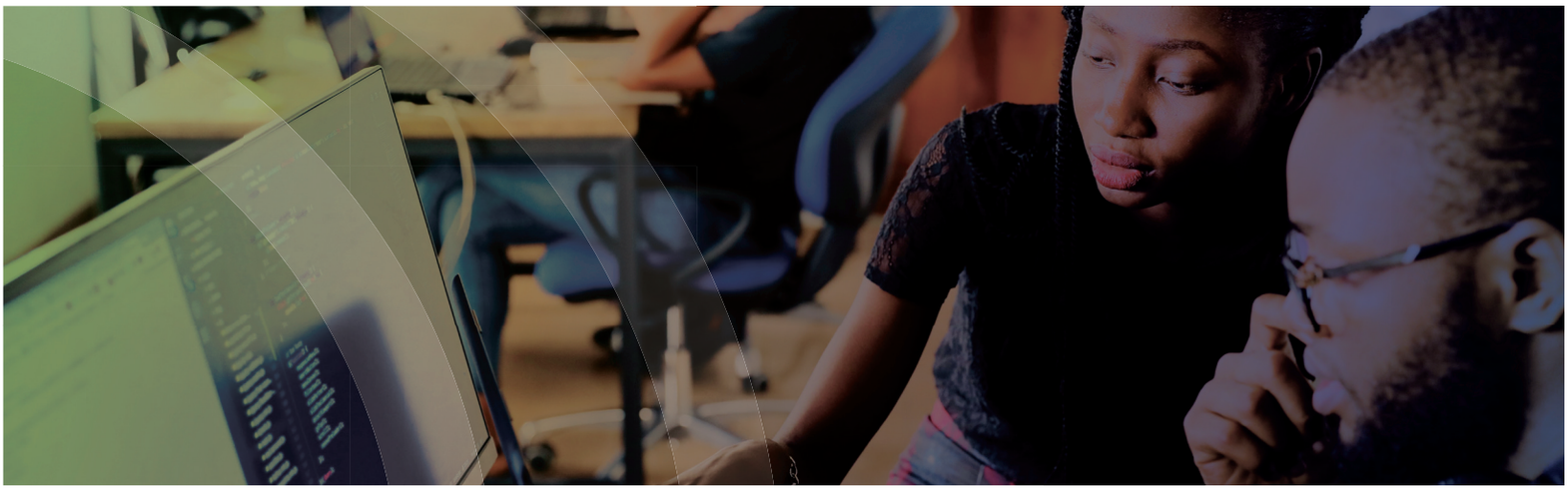
# How do qualifications confer power to occupations?

A qualification is traditionally seen as the symbolic expression of sustained study for a designated period in a designated area. Qualifications are intended to qualify an individual to do something, which in turn, determines their place in a division of labour in the labour force. Because qualifications are used when persons move between education and the workplace, they are seen as a mechanism for translating something obtained in one area to something desired in another. They have come to be seen as an indicator of the specialisation persons have gained through education which make them more productive, and hence as an indicator of an individual's economic value in the labour market.

While this is sometimes the case, there are many different ways in which qualifications play a role in the jobs that people get, and the salaries that they earn. For example, instead of being used as indicators of productive skills, qualifications can function in labour markets as vehicles for social closure. This happens when qualifications are used as a mechanism for legitimating exclusion, for example, in regulated occupations. And so qualifications create labour market shelters for those who possess them (Freidson, 2001). Sometimes employers use qualifications as a screening device. They hire at the highest qualification level they can, regardless of the relationship between the specifics of the job in question and the qualification in question.

**The value of a qualification may be dependent on how many other people have it, and not on its intrinsic worth. This phenomenon is referred to as 'credentialism' (Freidson, 2001, p. 79).**

In unregulated occupations (clerical, management consultant, financial analyst, construction project manager etc.) employers use qualifications as a proxy for knowledge and attributes rather than as indicators of knowledge of the specific work the candidate applies for. This is less true of regulated occupations (accountant, nursing, electricians, social worker etc.).



## 05 POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF OCCUPATIONS

Through the state's legal and bureaucratic apparatuses, state ministries, civil and criminal courts, occupations seek policy legislation on what knowledge and qualifications legitimately belong to the profession, what penalties should be imposed on those who breach occupational rules, and how to restrain the powers of other occupations which try to prevent the emergence and development of new ones (Freidson, 2001, p. 134; Standing, 2009a, p. 27).

Ideally occupations rely on the state for shaping their scope of practice and/or for protection against competing occupations.

But states have different political and economic structures and these shape their power to control occupations or their interest in doing so. In more liberalized labour markets, occupations compete with each other and the stronger ones use the state to strengthen their power in the market or simply deal with their own affairs altogether independently of the state. In stronger states, such as what Hall and Soskice (2001) call 'coordinated market economies', state institutions are actively involved in forming labour organisations, coordinating tight relations between education and work by advancing and supporting strong apprenticeship systems that prepare young people for work and citizenship more broadly. These states are much more successful in producing a strong supply of certified occupations within a collective framework of skill formation and over time have achieved a general trust in occupational standards (Allais, 2016).

## Implications for Policy

- The idea of flexible skills and preparation for employability has many weaknesses. It fails to convey the internal coherence of occupational knowledge, which is at the core of discretionary judgement.
- Education systems have become more preoccupied with qualifications and qualification reform as a result of qualification inflation: more qualifications are on offer and more money is spent by public authorities on administering qualification systems, and by individuals in gaining qualifications.
- The proliferation of more and more qualifications only fragments post-school pathways and does not provide persons with real access to higher education and with access to meaningful work.
- Occupations benefit from social regulation and as Guy Standing suggests they need to establish two kinds of bodies – a regulatory body in the form of occupational boards and collective bodies in the form of occupational association and a system of collaborative (associational) bargaining.
- Weaker occupations require that social institutions (unions, educational institutions, government and employer organisations) work together to build a common purpose, stability and trust in their work.
- Privatisation of economic activities, social policy dumping, labour migration, casualisation (short-term employment) and the growing phenomenon of outside contract hours work (tertiarisation) will weaken further weak occupations and reduce public trust.
- With regard to strong occupations which have monopolized their practice (lawyers, dentists, for example), the state is expected to develop regulations which curtail this tendency.

