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**The conditions shaping different forms of convergence –
competency frameworks for the senior civil service in a comparative perspective**

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ABSTRACT

The process of translating a common idea label to specific action is under-theoretised and lacks empirical studies in the convergence literature. When studying convergence in public sector reform, the literature has so far focused more on what countries say they do than on what they do. This distinction also reveals the difference between two kinds of convergence – convergence in label and convergence in action. Not only must this distinction be taken seriously, we also need to focus more on the aspect of the reform process that actually shapes the idea and determines how it is to be applied in a particular national context. Thus, we need knowledge on the translation process from label to action. This paper examines competency frameworks for senior civil service personnel using quantitative data from OECD countries in juxtaposition with a case study of Great Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark to show that the conditions for the two kinds of convergence are not the same, underlining the importance of studying the reform process as a whole when assessing convergence.

Introduction

During the 1990s numerous OECD countries imported the idea and concept of a competency framework for the senior civil service. A central aim was to get performance indicators for senior civil servants and to ensure a clear focus on leadership and management in the public sector. However, not all OECD countries imported this idea, and second, not every country that imported the idea acts and implements it in the same way. This leaves us with the questions why some countries imported the idea while others did not (convergence in label), and second, why (in many ways similar) countries implement and use it quite differently (convergence in action).

The last decades have witnessed several waves of public sector reform. These reform initiatives have been meant to change – or even reform – a broad range of public sector institutions and mechanisms. They have introduced citizen charters, tried to put service focused, efficient and effective delivery of public services on the top of the agenda, looked into revitalisation of public sector management, etc. These common reform trends have spurred a range of studies arguing convergence across nations. A common approach to the study of this reform phenomenon is to assess the degree of convergence, if any, between the implicated countries on the basis of these reform trends. However, the last few years have seen a number of studies that emphasise the *lack* of convergence between countries on several reform trends. These studies point to the impact of the different national filters, for instance culture and different institutional settings, as important when reform ideas travel. However, several studies concurrently underline that there still seem to be unexplained differences in the workings of the reforms across countries – and thus that the institutional perspective does not seem to suffice to explain the differences. I will argue that the problem is that these studies have failed to view the national filters in the right light. When ideas of different public sector reforms travel they ‘hit’ different countries and some of them adopt the idea, first as a decision, and then, after a while, the idea is converted into action. So far the convergence literature has neglected to focus systematically on the last stage of the reform – on the stage of action – instead just focusing on the first stage – the decisions. So when scholars study the national filters that condition convergence they study only the *formal decisions* and how institutions matter in sorting different ideas of public sector reform. As indicated above, that is not the only place where national contexts shape reform ideas. When a reform decision is put into action a more thorough filtering takes place. This process is much studied in the organisational literature as the process of *translation*. This second filtering – the process of translating a reform idea into action – is essentially more important than the decision stage. It is at the second stage that a more or less coherent reform idea is turned into concrete action, thereby impacting and affecting national institutions and the people inhabiting them. Neglecting this stage in the study of the conditions for convergence produces what we might call a cosmetic result where the phenomenon of convergence is examined only on the surface.

However, some would argue that the conditions shaping label convergence will be the same as those that shape action convergence, rendering the analysis of the second stage an unnecessary complication of the phenomenon. To enable us to counter this criticism we look at the reform as a trajectory (Pollitt 2002; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000) and examine both levels of filter variables. To accomplish this we focus on a public management reform idea in the area of public leadership – a competency framework for the senior civil service. The paper proceeds in the following way: First an introduction to competency frameworks, their origin and purpose and relation to public sector reform. Second, we look into the convergence literature at the conditions that shape the first part of the reform process – convergence in labels. Third, the first analytical consists of singling out which national institutional variables condition convergence in labels. This is followed by a theoretical look at the conditions that affect the translation of an idea (convergence in action). Based on the first empirical analysis we then go on to a case study of how the Netherlands, Denmark and Great Britain have translated the competence framework idea and taken action on the subject.

Competency frameworks – what, from where and why?

Various public sector reform ideas are often encompassed in a common reform framework called New Public Management, and several academics, politicians and civil servants argue that the many common features of public sector reforms indicate, and even prove, that what we see is in fact cross-national convergence in public sector organisation (Kettl 2000; Pollitt 2001). Some of these reform ideas focus on public management and leadership, and one reform idea in this area is the use of competency frameworks for the senior civil service (Hood & Lodge 2005). The term competency, associated with individual attributes fostering excellent performance and behaviour to reach the strategic goals of the organisation, was originally developed in the 1960s (Hood & Lodge 2003) and subsequently applied by HR managers in private organisations, in particular by consultants. The competency focus diffused, in the first instance, particularly between private sector organisations in the USA and later spread to the rest of the private sector organisations in the world. Along with the diffusion of the term ‘competency’, a way to organise and evaluate the different competencies of the organisation was developed – the ‘competency framework’, which is both a list of competencies that are important for the organisation but also can be used to express the strategic focus of the organisation and as a tool to assess and measure the organisational leaders’ competencies (Horton 2002). The first competency framework for public leaders was formulated in the US in 1979 together with a formal personnel system, the ‘senior executive service’ (SES), for top civil servants in American public administration. The purpose of the SES was twofold. First, there was no government wide system for selecting, recruiting, paying and promoting top managers in the public sector. At the same time, the skills and expertise of managers was accorded very little attention, and many top positions were held by lifelong bureaucrats with a minimum of management expertise and experience. Second, the American system is known as a strongly politicised one – especially in the top echelons of the bureaucracy. A key goal of establishing the SES was therefore to “*provide for an executive system that is guided by the public interest and free from improper political interference*” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 2004: 1). Due to these deficiencies a range of ‘executive qualifications’ was put together to form a ‘competence base’ for the SES. The competency framework (and the SES) is administered by the Office of Personnel Management, which administers recruitment, assessment and promotions (Weihe 2005: 12), and the competency framework is a tool in this work and is used as “*primary selection criteria for the SES*” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 2004: 9).

In the beginning of the 1990s several countries, especially Anglo-Saxon ones within the OECD, developed competency frameworks for their senior civil services. Concurrently with this development the OECD generally argued for the need of enhanced focus on public leadership. The claim was that only certain public managers with the right skills (or competencies) were capable of handling the pressure on the public sector from globalization, the economy and the people (OECD 1995). At the end of the 1990s the OECD-argument evolved to include competency frameworks for the senior civil service and to emphasize that a clear trend of convergence between the OECD countries was emerging (OECD 1996; OECD 1999; OECD 2000; OECD 2001). With the OECD catalyzing the idea of a competency framework for senior civil servants, it rapidly diffused to a broad range of member countries. However, not all OECD members have imported the idea, which leaves us with the question of whether *common characteristics*, or filters, apply to the countries that adopted the idea.

The study of the different competency frameworks has so far mostly been concerned with single case studies and with describing the content of the frameworks in different countries (Hondeghem, Farnham, & Horton 2002). These studies clearly show that a broad range of countries are embarking on new developments in the area of public leadership, but with certain common features. The lack of comparative analysis makes it difficult to assess these developments more thoroughly and analyze convergence and divergence issues between the countries. However, a few studies (Hood

& Lodge 2003; 2004; 2005) have analyzed the ‘competency movement’ in Germany, Great Britain and the US from a comparative perspective and they indicate that the different national settings are important when making comparative analyses of public sector reform (2004; 2005: 820).

Convergence-theory, public-sector reform and competency frameworks

The study of cross-national policy convergence dates back to the 1960s and gained popularity in the 1990s because of increasing interest in the theoretical framework from scholars studying European integration and globalization (Holzinger & Knill 2005), and more recently, the study of different New Public Management reform trends (Poole, Mansfield, & Gould-Williams 2006). Convergence is broadly recognized as: “*the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances*” (Kerr 1983; cited in Knill 2005). The causal mechanism of convergence is simple. An outside stimulus is received in a country and calls for a (national) response. Basically such stimuli can be based on two different perspectives. Either the stimulus contains some sort of force often, of a legislative nature. That is the case when the EU publishes directives that member countries must comply with. On the other hand, we have the purely optional and voluntary stimulus that may originate in an intergovernmental organization (e.g. the OECD) or other actors (e.g. countries) without decision making or legislative competencies. Here the stimulus is not legislative orders but just various ideas. However, as mentioned in the first section, the literature has increasingly addressed the problematic nature of the basic argument in the convergence theory because the theory tends to ignore the national context, the national filters repeatedly emphasized by recent research as important when ideas and policies are imported in various domains (Christensen & Lægheid 1999; Christensen & Lægheid 2001; Holzinger & Knill 2005; Knill 2005; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000). A clear focus on the national filters and how they work in different cases and on different levels modifies the simple notion of similar countries developing in similar ways. Studies of the importance of national characteristics in filtering ideas floating in ‘international space’ and their effect when such ideas are interpreted, translated and implemented into the national setting, however, lack a coherent theoretical framework. In this paper, I will argue that these filters can be examined at two different levels – an aggregated one consisting of different institutions and a case- and context specific level consisting of the interests and behavior of the involved individuals. These two different levels of national filters affect different types of convergence. Table 1 illustrates this tentative model.

>>Table 1 about here<<

Elaborating on the first part of the reform process, convergence in label, national filters work as determinants of change that enable or hinder ideas in crossing the national ‘border’. These filters, although not alive and thinking, structure the flow of ideas into a country. The Europeanization literature uses a parallel argument using the term ‘goodness of fit’, arguing that national adaptation is contingent upon the degree of fit between the requirements, rules and regulations from the EU and the national institutional setting (Lægheid 2000: 2) (e.g. Knill 2001). Drawing some way on the historical institutionalist concept of rigid institutions with traditions and routines, this institutional explanation has become popular and quite successful in explaining different varieties of convergence and lack thereof – not only in the area of Europeanization but also numerous other topics. At the same time, not only the national institutional setting is argued to have the power to filter ideas. Using culture as a point of departure some authors emphasize the importance of cultural similarity between countries when ideas and labels travel (Lenschow, Liefferink, & Veenman 2005: 799; see e.g. Strang & Meyer 1993). Yet others argue that similar economic conditions affect the degree of convergence observed on the adoption of ideas. In the area of public sector reform the OECD has played an important role in promoting this view, in particular by arguing that people in different

member states across the OECD want "...*better, faster and more services from government*" (OECD 2000: 11). However, these characteristics have never been formally tested against each other, leaving us with three national characteristics (institutional, cultural and economic) that potentially determine which ideas penetrate the invisible idea boundary of each country (Lenschow, Lieferink, & Veenman 2005).

Why convergence in label? The meaning of administrative traditions, culture and economic pressure

As mentioned briefly in the second section, the OECD generally has had a hand in diffusing various ideas of public sector reform. Some studies of convergence argue the importance of organizations for cross-national convergence (Marcussen 2002; Oberthür & Tänzler 2002) on the grounds that such organizations affect ideas and whether or how they are diffused to different member countries, thus impacting the degree of convergence in labels. In the first part of the analysis we can keep the organizational (OECD) factor constant and thereby isolate the national setting. However, we begin by operationalizing the three independent variables that can be seen as representatives of two different views of what promotes adoption of a competency framework. On the one hand, the OECD put forward an argument of 'rational learning' where countries face certain challenges and have to respond to them. On the other hand we have the approach of cultural, historical and institutional fit indicating that an idea is adopted when it 'fits' the national setting and context hence, implying that an idea is only imported if it is easy because it already 'fits' the national context. First we operationalize the 'fit' argument.

When looking at institutions the national design and values of the public sector are often used as starting points in the study of ideas and labels and how they travel (Hood 1995; Radaelli 2005). The term 'administrative tradition' covers the subject more fully and is widely used as a categorical variable in comparative studies across several subfields in political science – including the study of public sector reform (Olsen & Peters 1996; Rhodes 1999). But it is also related to the case in question that focuses on how the administration is organized and thereby the institutional setting in which the competency framework is to be incorporated. The literature identifies four main administrative traditions: Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, French (or South European) and Scandinavian (Peters 2000). In the Germanic tradition the bureaucracy is organized along Weberian principles, implying a legalistic focus and much emphasis on hierarchy. The Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition is characterized by the different role played by civil servants. In the Germanic tradition the *word* of the law is strictly adhered to, often termed 'legal-positivism', while in the Anglo-Saxon tradition the *intention* of the law holds sway (Müller, Bovens, Christensen, Jenny, & Yesilkagit 2007: 5; Winding & Nørgaard 2005: 4). Third, there is the French tradition in which the administration's strong emphasis on tradition and a specific legal framework is similar to the Germanic tradition, the French tradition, however, placing more emphasis on the centrality of the state and thus the workings of the civil service (Peters 2000). The Scandinavian tradition is constructed around a strong welfare state tradition, but it is at the same time based on hierarchy and legality much like we saw for the Germanic and French traditions, albeit with a less rigorous precision of the law (Müller, Bovens, Christensen, Jenny, & Yesilkagit 2007: 5). So we have four ideal types of administrative tradition according to which we can divide the countries when analyzing the common characteristics of countries that have adopted the idea of a competency framework for the senior civil service.

On the cultural side we have to focus the concept and specify it to suit the subject of this study. The reason is that the concept of culture is a very broad one and there are many ways to define and measure it. However, Mouritzen & Svara (2002) using Geert Hofstede's (1997) cultural theory come close to a proxy of culture that can be used in this case. Hofstede's cultural theory focuses among other things on how individuals perceive their relationships with power and authority and how they deal with uncertainty (Mouritzen & Svara 2002: 73). This cultural view supplies the

national institutional setting of the administrative tradition with the norms that guides society, and therefore also the norms that guide the relationship between senior civil servants and ministers. The cultural measure is divided into two dimensions. First, the measure of power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”; and second, the measure of uncertainty avoidance defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain, unknown, ambiguous and unstructured situations” (Hofstede 1997: 113).

Finally, the importance of a parallel socioeconomic pressure or condition is examined. When operationalizing socioeconomy and macroeconomy much uncertainty will be present as to whether our measure is valid. In this case we use public spending as share of GDP as a measure of the socioeconomic pressure. In addition, we use the World Bank measure of effectiveness in the public sector. Naturally, measuring effectiveness is very complex. However, quantitatively the World Bank measure uses 32 sources of effectiveness (surveys on the effectiveness of the national public sector on a variety of issues answered by national experts) provided by 30 different organizations. These two measures are also closely connected to the argument of the OECD. Firstly that a large public sector will create a pressure of public sector reforms because the public wants “...*better, faster and more services from government*”. Secondly that the less effective the public sector is the more pressure there will be for public sector reforms because the public wants ‘better, faster and more’.

Formal testing (not reported) of how these structural characteristics affect the import of public sector reform-ideasⁱ confirms a lack of empirical proof for the OECD argument that socioeconomic pressure and an ineffective public sector increase the chances of importing public sector reform (the rational learning perspective). If we look at public spending as share of GDP the relationship does indicate that high public spending increases the chances that a country imports the competency framework idea. This relationship is far from significant, however. Turning to the effectiveness variable we find a clear and significant indication that the relationship is the opposite of the expected – a very effective public sector increases the chances of having a competency framework for the senior civil service. These results are somewhat puzzling and clearly reject the OECD argument. The indication of an opposite relationship on the effectiveness variable could imply that reforms in the domain of public leadership and adoption of a competency framework for the senior civil service is initiated only when the comprehensive reform programmes are in place, thus indicating that a country is ahead in the process of public sector reforms.ⁱⁱ We must, however, still question the validity of the general claims in the OECD argument. First, the argument has a weak theoretical foundation. Second, it is questionable that people in a country have *unified* feeling and impression of a subject as diverse and complex as the effectiveness and size of the public sector, and hence, that this forms the foundation for their attitudes to the need for public sector reforms. If it is in the opinions of the people that put pressure on the politicians for public sector reform, we could argue that it may *not be the real numbers* of the effectiveness and size of the public sector that shape people’s attitudes but rather *their impression* of the country’s state in this area. Lastly, another possible explanation is that the claim made by the OECD is simply wrong and that other factors condition convergence in labels. In fact, when analyzing the two remaining structural characteristics, administrative traditions and culture, a relatively clear relationships is revealed, as illustrated in figure 1.

>>Figure 1 about here<<

Figure 1 shows a dichotomous picture. The Anglo-Saxons, the Germans and the Scandinavian administrative traditions share largely the same cultural characteristics and the French administrative tradition as the ‘outsider’. If we also look at which countries have adopted the idea of a compe-

tency framework for senior civil servants (not reported), we find support for the dicotomy. Nearly all importer countries are found between the group of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and Scandinavian countries (lower left quadrant). This shows that certain common characteristics do apply to countries that have adopted the same label. However, this picture also shows that it is difficult to separate the cultural and institutional dimensions. This is hardly surprising considering that power distance by definition also concerns hierarchy and how it is dealt with, and it therefore also concerns the administrative tradition of the country. But there is a difference between the two variables. With the administrative traditions framing the relationships, interaction and, in a narrow sense, culture on the level of public administration, the culture dimension of uncertainty avoidance and power distance corresponds to forces and phenomena on the society level. Thus, administrative tradition is a subset of the broader culture dimension. Even though the two mediating variables are hard to separate, the above analysis of convergence of the competency framework label shows that national institutions and national culture have an important impact on the scope of convergence on this issue. The importance of institutions and culture could indicate that the idea of a competency framework for the senior civil service is a modernization phenomenon which, if it is to penetrate the national setting, requires structures that are open to new ideas and ready to handle a globalized world.

To finish the journey with a comparison of the two forms of convergence we have to examine the concrete patterns of action on the competency frameworks in different countries. For this purpose we narrow down the study to just three countries. From the above analysis we know that two variables, administrative tradition and culture, are significant in explaining convergence in label. The next section of the paper will address the action part of the competency idea and the conditions shaping convergence in this respect. Turning to this aspect of the analysis of convergence we argue that the structural explanation is insufficient. We basically expect something more context- and area-specific to be at stake when an idea is translated into action. The counter argument would be that the conditions shaping convergence in labels will be the same as those that shape convergence in action. To counter this criticism we first choose three countries with competency frameworks for their senior civil services, one with either an Anglo-Saxon, Germanic or Scandinavian administrative tradition and countries that somewhat alike on the two cultural dimensions. Great Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark together fulfill these criteria and can in this case, therefore, be viewed as most similar cases. Secondly, this collection of countries also enables us to perform a most different study 'within' this most similar study. The reason is that the Netherlands and Denmark are in many aspects similar, both quite different from Great Britain. The British form of democracy – the Westminster model – is in many ways used as the archetype of majoritarian democratic rule. The basic elements in the British model are a two-party system and a so-called first past the post election system. Executive power is in the hands of the party commanding the majority, and though the local governments in Britain perform important tasks, the British system remains unitary and has a centralized rule of government, leaving few boundaries on parliamentary rule (Lijphart 1984). Regarding democratic traditions and rule of government The Netherlands and Denmark are very different from on both counts. Both systems belong to the consensus model of democracy, which is manifested in coalition rule with proportional representation and multiparty systems. Last, both countries have a strong tradition for strong decentralized local government levels, albeit without federalist traits. An overview of the three countries is given in table 2.

>>Table 2 about here<<

The two characteristics on which Great Britain differs from the Netherlands and Denmark are not trivial in this context. First, the British majoritarian democratic model means that a departmental minister is comparatively stronger than his Dutch and Danish counterparts. Second, the fact that Great Britain has a strong tradition for unitary statehood leaves a lot of power in the hands of the

cabinet and the ministers. Taken together this means that working conditions are very different, especially between the British senior civil servants on the one side and the Dutch and Danish senior civil servants on the other. Based on this we can generate two hypotheses, both of which can be claimed to support the general institutionalist claim that similar institutional settings produce similar outputs. First, based on the analysis of the conditions of convergence in label, we would expect *all three countries* to converge along similar lines, showing that the same filters are important for both types of convergence. Alternatively, following a more general institutionalist claim, we would expect the Netherlands and Denmark to converge with Great Britain as a more divergent case because the differences in voting system, government rule and organization, and importance of and power accorded to the local level of government. This forms our H0-hypothesis. However, as mentioned above, we argue that neither version of this H0-hypothesis will suffice to explain convergence in action, and we need instead to consider the challenges, interests, and powers affecting the idea. This alternative hypothesis will be further specified in the section below.

The conditions shaping the translation of the ideas – the meaning of challenges and area-specific developments

As noted earlier many studies in the convergence literature underline that there still seems to be unexplained differences in the workings of reforms across countries, differences that cannot be explained by differences in the institutional, cultural, or economic setting. This is not surprising because “models are unlikely to be imported whole cloth...” (DiMaggio & Powel 1991: 28). In the study of Europeanization the need for other than a simple national institutional approach is also noticed (Knill 2001). The reason is an overly deterministic logic arguing that only institutions structure the outcome (Knill 2001: 22) and therefore, in extension of the basic argument of the convergence literature, the approach expects similar institutional structures to engender equally similar output. I argue, however, that this only holds for convergence in labels. If we turn to the variation in convergence in action the institutionalist explanations no longer suffices. Institutions can only sort different ideas using the goodness of fit perspective. They can not independently convert ideas into actions. In organizational studies the *translation mechanism* is used to describe how an idea is *translated* into the specific institutional context (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996), and thus converted into action. This view is reflected by Kerstin Sahlin-Anderson (1996), who focuses on the *editing* of ideas and the different editors. In addition, a recent country study indicates that the translation mechanism is not only important in organizational studies, but also when countries import different ideas (Maman 2006). Although proving the important point that ideas are filtered once more when they are put into action and implemented in different settings, the argument is in many ‘translation studies’ extended to an extreme. It is argued that these translation processes are *utterly* contingent upon the different settings, leaving no room for similarities and thus convergence. Taking the empirical evidence and theoretical implications from the convergence literature into consideration this proposition also appears somewhat deterministic. Not only may the process of turning an idea into action be influenced by other countries that have already been through this process, and it is therefore posed as an obvious case of transfer or copy that can result in convergence (Holzinger & Knill 2005). But similarities in action can also be observed when the specific setting into which the idea is imported has some of the same basic features and challenges. The political context and the purpose of the imported idea have been put forward as important aspects when national context translates ideas. Reforms with the common label of NPM lead to difference in action in Spain and Great Britain (Torres & Pina 2004) and likewise between Australia, Great Britain and the United States (McGuire 2002) because of the different political contexts and the different purposes and strategies of the reforms. Studies of ideas of leadership and competency frameworks for the senior civil service also indicate that the different political contexts in Germany, the United States, and Great Britain are important when the idea is translated (Hood & Lodge 2004). On a less aggregated level the

importance of the involved actors and their preferences is also recognized in the literature (Maman 2006; Radaelli 2005). But not only the political context and interests affect the translation; the same goes for the particular challenges that the idea is thought to solve (Hine 2005: 154). This view asserts that different ideas are in some way *recipes* for solving questions or challenges. If countries face similar questions and challenges we can expect convergence in action because they are similar in this important respect.

Summing up, we have to abandon the singular notion of convergence and think of the term in more than one way (Pollitt 2001; Pollitt 2002). Allowing for convergence on one level and variation on the other, the distinction between convergence in labels and convergence in action makes it possible for countries to use the same bottles but pour different (if any) wine into them (Radaelli 2005). Empirical evidence not only shows that the difference between label and action does exist; it also indicates that different filters apply to each of the two forms of convergence. This confirms our tentative model in figure 1.

>>Figure 1 (again!) about here<<

It should be noted this does not suggest that the implication will be non-convergence, but instead to point out that convergence can be viewed on different levels. The implication is that if convergence in action is to take place we need countries with not only the same goodness of fit between the national settings, broadly speaking, and the idea label, but also a somewhat similar pool of interests and challenges that need to be met in the given area of the idea. Together this creates difficulties for convergence in action to happen but, as the following will show, it is by no means impossible.

Convergence in action on the competency idea and the importance of politico-bureaucratic relationships

Our claim is that the challenges, interests, and powers within an area and the context into which the idea is imported should be taken into consideration when analyzing the conditions of convergence in action. This means that we must look into what kind of idea we are dealing with and the particular topics it addresses. In general the idea of a competency framework for senior civil servants focuses on the two main aspects of the work of a senior civil servant. First, a competency framework deals with civil servants' relationships with the political executive and the delivery of services to that executive. Second, a competency framework deals with organizational issues such as internal management and steering of departments and ministries. As concluded above we can look at different ideas as solutions to particular country specific challenges – as recipes for meeting challenges. In relation to this the idea of a competency framework should then be viewed as a solution or recipe for dealing with existing or rising challenges in the relationship between politicians and senior bureaucrats, and management and steering challenges within a department. More specifically, the expectation is that changes, conflicts, or new challenges related either to the politico-bureaucratic relationships or to management and steering in ministries will shape the translation process of the idea of a competency framework, and thereby the form, content, and use of the competency framework.

Focusing on the relationship upwards to the political executive, we will take the temperature on this relationship and evaluate the potential problems, difficulties and challenges each country currently deals with. Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Denmark are all democracies with public administrations built around the basic notions of a merit bureaucracy, as described by Max Weber, with political advice as a senior civil servant 'core competency'. The basic question is therefore whether the politicians receive the advice they want and need. By looking at recent research in the politico-bureaucratic relationship we can point to three different places where the relationship may be compromised, and which therefore constitute excellent areas to focus on when

comparing the three countries. First, the senior civil servant has two loyalties, one towards the government in power. This follows naturally from the basic political rule where politicians are political executives with more or less autonomy within the ministry, and one towards the system and the particular area he or she is part of. Not only the minister but many different interests and people have a vote in each ministerial area. This can be a variety of advisory organs or different interest organizations and pressure groups. This divided loyalty can influence the advice given to the minister – the question is how balanced this divided loyalty is. Second, the senior civil servant has to balance between continuity and change. Each civil servant basically wants to ensure a good and solid working-relationship between himself and his superior. Moreover; in a world where political communication is centralized through the media, the demands on the civil service for responsiveness and political support has increased (Christensen 2006: 1014). However, a too activist advisory role could damage his reputation in the political environment and make the transition to a new minister harder and in general compromise the basic notion of reusability. The senior civil servant therefore has to balance good, solid and prudent advice with responsiveness towards the minister in power. Third, the division of work poses a threat to the basic workings of the politico-bureaucratic relationship. Because the civil service controls the guidance and advice of the minister there is an asymmetric information relationship, which the senior civil servant can use to present issues and problems focusing only on part of the problem and presenting selected solutions, thus acting politically.

Concerning management and steering issues two issues seem obvious to include. The competency framework is translated in a specific working context with certain 1) organizational, and 2) management tendencies. If new ideas about how to organize and/or manage the area of the ministry and the public administration in general are to be adopted it is obvious that these tendencies have the potential to affect the translation of the competency framework and thus work as national filters.

This leaves us with five dimensions to investigate: Divided loyalties, continuity and change, degree of bureaucratization, organizational tendencies, and management tendencies. Taken together they constitute our filter variable and we will argue that the placement of the three countries along these five dimensions will be able to explain the variation in convergence in action regarding competency frameworks for the senior civil service. In the next section we analyze the three countries along these five dimensions and conclude the section with our alternative hypothesis, which is then tested in the last section of the paper.

The politico-bureaucratic relationship

The balance of divided loyalty in the Netherlands has for many years been argued to be biased towards the sector side. This is a consequence of how the Netherlands is structured as a country and its historical legacy. The Netherlands has in many ways been built on a pillarized system required to consider the many different interests of the multicultural Dutch society. Ultimately, this also meant a strong tradition for consensus and involvement of different interest-groups in policy making. This fragmentation and consideration of many interests has also been manifested in the Dutch ministerial system in that each ministry is in close contact with organized interests within its brief. The result has allegedly been a Dutch senior civil service (actually the entire civil service) suffering from compartmentalization and sectorization (Meer 2004). The problem is far from new and has been discussed on several occasions. In 1979 the Vonhoff-committee was commissioned to investigate the compartmentalization and propose solutions to the situation. The committee pointed out several problems: Segmentation, lack of coordination, and lack of attention on the part of secretaries general to management issues. But none of the suggestions for solutions was actually implemented (Vries 2001: 45, 49). Interdepartmental mobility has subsequently been a central aim and tool in trying to overcome the compartmentalization issue. The various initiatives addressing the mobility question, however, have hitherto been largely ineffectual. In addition, the ministers feel that the

senior civil servants see the policy process from an academic point of view rather than a political one, leaving the ministers to demand a more broad focus on the process and especially more knowledge and advise on the political-tactical aspect of the game (Hart & Wille 2006). Contrary to the Netherlands, Denmark and Great Britain have seen no recent debates on the issue of sectorization. However, both countries have also fought this issue from time to time. In Great Britain Margaret Thatcher's focus on 'can-do' management implicitly addressed the issue of sectorization and in Denmark the issue was dealt with on and off over the years. Therefore there is every reason to be cautious when asserting that the Netherlands is a special case in this regard. The discussion about sectorization is in fact inherent in any bureaucracy divided into different ressorts with a political executive as leader. The structure in itself enhances sector thinking, and this is not new and has also been identified and addressed in Denmark as well as in Great Britain. The Netherlands only differ on the discussion over the issue rather than over the 'real' differences.

All three countries have discussed the civil service and its ability to balance between continuity and change. However, only the British administration suffered a real conflict over the issue. Balancing has been compromised several times in British history, but perhaps most notably during the 1980s 'Tory' rule under Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher complained about a lack of ideological flexibility among the senior civil servants, feeling that the civil service had clear preferences for Labour policies. Social democrats have felt the same way after eighteen years of Tory rule, expressing a general concern whether the civil service in general and the senior civil service in particular would be able to adjust to the new political environment (Dargie & Locke 1999: 198; Wilson & Barker 2003). Political scepticism towards the civil service has not been confined to the policy side. The Blair-government has thus expressed some discontent over how the (party) political needs have been served in handling the media. This case shows a civil service drawing a fine line between political tasks and *party* political ones, refusing to supply the latter (Wilson & Barker 2003: 351). The picture of a political executive demanding better and more professional advice has also prevailed in Denmark and the Netherlands. In Denmark this has resulted in scepticism towards the civil service by new governments when power is turned over, e.g. from the Social Democratic to the Liberal Conservative wing in parliament. However, this part of the debate over politicization is limited in a Danish context, which is illustrated by the fact that former ministers in general acknowledge the skills and professionalism of the departmental staff (Christensen 2004: 17, 32). The issue of politicization has instead centered around the use of the civil service for campaign purposes and political appointments. The debate over these two issues, however, did not have the character of the British scepticism towards the civil service but took the form of continuous parliamentary debates, which served to strengthen a tradition of soft controlⁱⁱⁱ of the government's use of the civil service. Together this meant a continued development of a Danish merit bureaucracy characterized by wide limits in its dealings with the government, restrained only in areas of party-political activities and during elections (Christensen 2006). Similar discussions have taken place in the almost permanent multi-party coalition political system of the Netherlands. Here the balance between continuity and change was sought through the secretaries general (permanent secretary) declaring their political affiliation. The political trust in the system could be seen as manifested by the fact that changes in the government do not automatically mean replacement of the secretary general by another civil servant with the 'right' political affiliation (Vries 2001).

Not only in Great Britain have governments criticized the civil service when seizing power. Turning to the next dimension, the bureaucratization of politics, several Dutch governments have in the last decade taken office with a largely negative rhetoric about the bureaucracy (Hart & Wille 2006). This is the aftermath of a politico-bureaucratic battle in the 1990s over the level of civil service policy activism. When the New Public Management waves rolled in, senior civil servants saw the theme on proactive public managers as a way to escape the popular image of the 'old-fashioned' (bureaucratic) way of running government. This leads Meer and Dijkstra to talk about a

'bureaucratization' of Dutch politics and an increase of the power accorded to the senior civil service (2000: 183). During the 1990s this led to a series of confrontations between ministers and senior civil servants over the degree of involvement and initiative allowed the senior civil servants (Meer 2004). Commentators argued that there was an administrative trend towards autonomy, even hegemony, among senior civil servants, and even the ministers and the senior civil servants agreed that the incidents indicated an erosion of the traditional relationship and 'modus vivendi' between the two groups. The changing relationship between the two groups continued when the cases in the 1990s were followed by an increased willingness by the governing politicians to send blame and responsibility in the direction of the civil service when a ministry was investigated. One indication of the impact is that several senior civil servants today agree that in their daily work they prefer to 'play it safe' (Hart & Wille 2006). This battle over roles between politicians and bureaucrats has not been observed to the same extent in either Great Britain or Denmark. Both countries have, however, also dealt with this issue. Since the 1980s Danish politicians too have shown little restraint in blaming the civil servants in stormy political situations and scandals. These single cases, however, were not part of a bigger and more coherent picture of a changed relationship. Though some white papers and memorandums of ethics have been published this development has not given rise to any caution in the civil service (Christensen 2004: 36). In Great Britain it has been debated whether different pressures and developments, especially the 'can-do'-culture and the enhanced managerial side of the senior civil servants job, has put the traditional civil service values under threat (Dargie & Locke 1999). As a consequence the Committee on Standards in Public Life (Nolan-committee chaired by Lord Nolan) was appointed in 1994 and has until now published ten reports on how to focus and work with ethics in the public sector in general with the seven ethical principles for public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness and honesty (Doig 2006).

Organizational and management tendencies

Like nearly every other western country, none of the three countries in question has escaped the ideas of New Public Management, which has shaped the ideas of organization and management in public administrations around the world. The basic organizing principle of the British bureaucracy is often phrased as monolithic, indicating a centralized system where the departments deal with both policy and implementation. However, in the late 1980s the politicians felt dissatisfied with the senior civil servants in general and their lack of focus on implementation and management in particular. Then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party were striving for a more service-oriented and lean public service and bureaucracy, which resulted in the so-called Next Steps initiative of moving operational functions to semi-autonomous executive agencies (Dargie & Locke 1999; Wilson & Barker 2003). This, it is argued, has led to a more fragmented British civil service, and thus a more complex environment for senior civil servants and politicians alike (Fry 2000: 21; Smith, Richards, & Marsh 2000: 43). However, executive agencies, especially those handling politically sensitive topics, are not that clearly separated from the core departments, which leaves the argument of change somewhat contested (Wilson & Barker 2003: 353). But generally it is still argued that the advice part of the senior civil servant job is contracting because the agentification has led to more focus and more tasks related to regulation, supervision, and management and a lost battle over the advisory role (Bevir & Rhodes 2006). The senior civil servants play the role of policy implementer rather than policy-initiator or advisers (Dargie & Locke 1999; Smith, Richards, & Marsh 2000), which is also supported by developments in how civil servants view their roles (Wilson & Barker 2003). Concurrently with what happened in Britain, a trend of decentralization and agentification in the Netherlands and Denmark was identified by several authors. Compared to the British case the route to agentification has however been very different in these two countries. In Denmark the organization pattern followed various routes and the trend toward agentification was identified already in the 1960s, followed by trends toward de-agentification in the 1980s. Fi-

nally, both trends appear in the 1990s and by the beginning of the new millenium the majority of the ministries were organized with a department and agencies (Christensen, Christiansen, & Ibsen 2006: 81-85; Jørgensen & Hansen 1995). In the Netherlands the issue of the lack of focus on management in the ministries resurfaced in the beginning of the 1990s along with a general political wish to trim the central departments. This was, as mentioned above, already pointed out by the Vonhoff-comitee in 1979, but a new report showed that the biggest problem was lack of coordination and cooperation. Inspired by Denmark and the British Next Steps initiative, the Dutch response was agentification and an effort to clearly differentiate between policy tasks and implementation, and hence enhance managerial focus in the public administration. As in Denmark it can, however, be contested whether the agentification trend is new or is in fact a continuation of a Dutch administrative pattern (Christensen & Yesilkagit 2006). While all three countries have in some respect experienced agentification trends, the focus on management is somewhat different. All three countries have to some extent experienced a focus on what could be termed management. However, the content of this term is not the same, where the Danish case deviates. In Great Britain the issue surfaced in the 1980s, focusing the role of senior civil servants in relation to regulation, supervision, and implementation. In the Netherlands it cropped up in the 1990s along with the recent agentification process. Concurrently with the agentification process the traditional religious and cultural barriers (the *pillaris*) were broken down and this engendered a less stable and more fragmented political environment of greater complexity. One effect of was a more managerial and result oriented focus from the secretaries general because the insecurity and pace of the political and administrative system has increased (Vries 2001: 68). Although not in the same way dismissing the advisory functions of senior civil servants, the Dutch management focus is in many ways similar to the British one in that it focuses on implementation and leadership. New winds of management have also swept over the Danish administration, albeit with a comparatively different focus. Basically the trend has to find new ways of steering the government units by way of a new wagesystem (Ny Løn) and contract steering.

>>Table 3 about here<<

Table 3 illustrates the paths of the politico-buraucratic relationship and the organizatory context in the three countries. Despite differences and similarities across the three countries table 3 still illustrates a fairly clear pattern of trends and perceived challenges in the relationship. Though the paths of the respective systems were not been the same it is nevertheless clear that the debates in the British and the Dutch systems basically adress the same questions – the balanced loyalty of the civil service, the responsiveness of the administrative system and the quest for enhanced managerial focus in public administration. This leads to a rather similar diagnosis of the two systems, which could be indicative of a prescription for the same medicine. Together this forms our alternative hypothesis. Above we formulated an H0-hypothesis expecting all three countries to converge in action, at minimum Denmark and the Netherlands. Using our alternative hypothesis we now have the opposite expectation, namely that Denmark will be the outlier while Great Britain and the Netherlands converge in action. The following section tests these two hypotheses by examining the competency frameworks in the three countries in terms of purpose, content, focus and use.

Competency framework for the British, Dutch and Danish senior civil service

The histories of competency frameworks in the three different countries are somewhat different, as is the timing of framework implementation. Competency and competency frameworks have a long history in Great Britain. Work with British senior civil servant competencies started in the mid-1980s when the civil service college developed a comptency based training program for the top seven grades of the civil service (Farnham & Horton 2002). The first competency framework, how-

ever, was first developed in 1993 and subsequently revised in 1996 with the creation of the Senior Civil Service (SCS). Version 3 was developed in 2001, and in September 2005 the latest version was rolled out. The use of the competency framework is mandatory for all senior civil servants. In the Netherlands the competency movement can be traced back to the 1990s and the agentification at that time. The agentification process was part of a bigger project of government modernization, and along with the decentralization tendencies focus was also on personnel and human resource management (HRM). Early HRM-programs solely focused on senior civil servants and took the form of management development schemes (Meer & Toonen 2005: 842). In 1995 the Algemene Bestuursdienst (ABD – the Dutch version of a senior civil service) was formed, thus centralizing the organization and management of the group of senior civil servants in a bureau placed under the Department of the Interior. The ABD was formed in order to reduce compartmentalization, enhance the flexibility of the bureaucracy, quality, integrity, and professionalism of the senior civil service. The basic tool was cross-departmental promotions and a stimulation of interdepartmental mobility and management development. In 1996/1997 a competency framework was created as a new tool (Meer & Toonen 2005; Vulpen & Moesker 2002). In the beginning the ABD only comprized directors, directors general and secretaries general. Later on, however, the ABD was extended to include the civil servants employed in senior line management functions in policy-making units (Meer & Toonen 2005). Denmark is the absolute ‘latecomer’ in this regard, presenting the first competency framework for the senior civil service in 2005. Second, the Danish framework departs from the British and the Dutch ones by being initiated by the senior civil servants in Denmark and local government organizations. The administration of the framework is in the hands of the Ministry of Finance, but the construction and continuing work on the Danish competency framework is inherently in the hands of the senior civil servants themselves. This historical outline is indicative of the differences between the three countries, and hence there are problems for our H0-hypothesis.

Turning to the precise *purpose* of the competency frameworks in the three countries we get three different answers. In Great Britain the purpose of the systematic work with competencies and developing a competency framework coincides with the general focus on performance management in the British civil service delivery that began in the 1980s. The second revision of the framework was carried out following the *Modernising Government* white paper and a prime concern guiding the work on the revision was the need to ensure that senior civil servants had the core competencies required to carry through the reform program, and the new competency framework was to act as a *vehicle* for organizational and cultural change (Farnham & Horton 2002). The British competency framework can thus be seen from two perspectives. First, it is a continuation of the goals of efficiency and performance in delivering public services. Second, it is a top-down developed competency framework without clear support from the senior civil servants, even though a number of them were interviewed when the core competencies was identified and the competency framework constructed (Farnham & Horton 2002: 43). The Dutch purpose is in many ways different from the British one. The point of departure for the Dutch competency framework was to support the general purpose of the ABD, that is, to reduce compartmentalization and enhance flexibility, quality, integrity, and professionalism in the senior civil service – in part by coordinating senior civil servant recruitment, and in part to ensure interdepartmental mobility. However, the Dutch purposes are somewhat similar to the British ones, as anticipated in our tentative argument in table 2. Thus, the purpose of both competency frameworks is grounded in the *challenges* faced by the public administration in general and among the senior civil servants in particular in the two countries. The background and purpose of the Danish competency framework is on the face of it not much different. Partly inspired by work in the Danish private sector on corporate governance, the ambition was to develop a common leadership culture and to develop a framework connected to the daily work of senior civil servants (Balslev & Kruse 2005: 171, 173). More specifically, public leadership in Denmark, it is argued by the initiating group of senior civil servants, is restrained by four

elements that need to be addressed: 1) The senior civil servant is a political advisor to the political executive and a leader downwards in the system. 2) The need for senior civil servants to handle fragmentation and create unity because the public sector is centralized, decentralized and affected by public-private partnerships and the internationalization – simultaneously! 3) The ‘information superhighway’ adds more complexity to the tasks solved in the public sector. 4) Different forms of management (e.g. hierarchy, market based and governance based) also increases complexity and the need to understand the different logics. However, these four themes are far from special or even new. Great Britain and the Netherlands operate in general under exactly the same conditions as the Danish public sector does. The four themes largely illustrate dilemmas inherent in the construction of the public sector. Hence, the starting point and purpose for a Danish competency framework, unlike in the Netherlands and Great Britain, has not been debate about the politico-administrative relations, but rather been a more general assessment of future demands on the public sector (Balslev & Kruse 2005: 172). Besides these official statements, a look at the more unofficial sources interviews and articles clearly indicates that the senior civil servants themselves feel a lack of management competencies, which has also been a more implicit part of the project. Regarding this more or less explicit focus on management the purpose of the Danish competency framework shares some similarities with the Dutch and British ones. Again, however, we must maintain that in Denmark we have seen no political focus on the management issue, nor political wishes or demands for more focus in this issue, as was the case in the Netherlands and Great Britain. Also, the management part does not dominate the Danish framework, indicating another agenda in the initiating stages.

If we turn to the content side of the frameworks the British and Dutch versions have a more or less generic view on competencies, and both seem to be largely imported from the competency world of the private sector. In Great Britain the latest version of the competency framework consists of four main competencies: Leadership, comprising the four subcompetencies integrity, direction capability, and results. Core competencies, consisting of people management, financial management, program and project management, analysis and use of evidence, strategic thinking and communications, and marketing. Third, we have job-related professional skills. These build on recommendations by the existing heads of the profession and work already taken forward by the new centers of excellence across government. The Dutch framework is more flexible in that it operates with a list of core competencies supplemented by competencies that can be selected to fit each individual senior civil servant’s job specification. The first part is mandatory for all members of the ABD and concerns the potential for development in members’ skills and the relationship between individual performance and developments in the public sector in general. This mandatory competency framework consists of seven core competencies: self appraisal, learning potential, environmental awareness, understanding of the need for staff development, decisiveness, integrity and initiative (Algemene Bestuursdienst 2003; Meer & Toonen 2005). Another deviation from the British framework is that a small fraction of the Dutch framework deals with specific public service competencies. However, the similarities between the two competency frameworks prevail with a more or less generic focus on competencies, a rigorous framework and a focus on the management side of senior civil servant jobs. Compared to the British and Dutch competency frameworks the Danish one is very distinct. First, the Danish competencies are almost all specifically directed toward the public sector, focusing on the relationship between the senior civil servant and the political executive, on legitimacy and democratic values in the public sector, a responsive organization, and that the entire organization meets the political goals. Second, the ethical dimension of public leadership is incorporated into the Danish competency framework (Pedersen 2005: 203). In the Netherlands and Great Britain this question is addressed elsewhere.

So far, the picture of the actions taken on the competency frameworks in the three countries has shown similarities as well as differences. Although not a clear picture, there is some indication that the Danish competency framework does in fact differ from the British and Dutch

versions. However, we need to look at the last dimension in our comparison – the one regarding the *use* of the competency frameworks. The most extensive use by far is found in Great Britain and the Netherlands. In Great Britain the unit *Professional Skills for Government* (PSG), was formed to ensure the workings of the competency framework. The PSG will “...provide clarity about the skills individuals need to develop and progress in the civil service and access to more consistent opportunities to develop those skills”. This means directing people to the right places to seek programs to develop them as leaders or to acquire other essential competencies. The PSG calls for each civil servant to demonstrate skills and expertise in the four areas at an ‘appropriate level’ in relation to their job and chosen career path. These are tested at three key career gateways: Entry to grade 7 (or equivalent), to SCS pay band 1 level, and to SCS pay band 3 level. But the competency-framework is used not only in recruitment . Senior civil servants are also benchmarked against each other’s performances on the different competencies, and together with this benchmark, and insofar as performance against development objectives agreed upon in the beginning of the year indicates growth in competence, it can impact base pay. In the Netherlands the competency framework is part of a bigger toolbox used by the ABD. The ABD has developed several instruments to meet the goals set out for the bureau and the ABD. These include management development instruments, assesment of (leadership) potential, a career counselling organization providing personal development programs, and also a competency framework. The competency framework is used in three ways in the daily work of the ABD, first in the recruitment and selection system. The ABD nominates candidates for vacant posts in the ABD and in the recruitment proces the competency framework is used to asses applicants. Secondly, the competency framework is used in career planning activites for senior civil servants, and third, the competency framework is used to create a common language when planning personal development and also in the evaluation of each senior civil servant (Meer & Toonen 2005; Vulpen & Moesker 2002). To a large extent, many of the initiative that the competency framework is involved in are similar in the Netherlands and in Great Britain – recruitment and assesment of senior civil servants. Only Great Britain stretches the use a bit further by letting it affect base pay. This also serves tp stress the two different starting points, the Netherlands looking to enhance cross-departmental mobility, whereas Great Britain wants to enhance the managerial skills of senior civil servants. In Denmark the use of the competency framework is shaped by three things. Firstly, the framework is relatively new. Secondly, whether or not to work actively with the framework as a senior civil servant is decided from organization to organization. Third, the organization is free to decide how to work with the framework. This somewhat blurs the picture of the practice in Denmark, some patterns do exist. In fact, despite the voluntary aspects of the Danish framework 90 % of the civil servants in the central government use the framework in some way. A year after the introduction of the Danish competency framework it was mainly used as a starting point for dialouges with other leaders in the organization about leadership and management. Even though the questionnaire does not inquire about the use of the competency framework with regard to payment and evaluation it is clear that these issues do not dominate in the use of the Danish competency framework. This is illustrated by the fact that when asked about the future use of the competency framework, it is still the reflection and dialouge oriented use that is the focus of the Danish senior civil servants. However, some do indicate that they in the future use of the framework will engage more in feedback and evaluation pratices. Future surveys must show whether this is the case (Forum for Offentlig Topleldelse 2006: 5, 8)^{iv}. An overview of the above discussion is produced in table 4.

>>Table 4 about here<<

Though not the same we can still detect a pattern in how competency frameworks are put together in the three countries – with Great Britain and the Netherlands showing most similarities. In both

countries the framework was initiated by a central source, the framework approaches competencies as generic and use of the framework is centralized and has a mandatory core. Both frameworks also mainly focus on management competencies, e.g. results, leadership, strategy etc., and the use of the framework is in many ways the same with focus on recruitment and development. Development is also central in the Danish use of the framework, but more in terms of self-assessment and dialogue with colleagues and not directed toward courses in e.g. leadership as in Great Britain and the Netherlands. The Danish framework is in many other ways comparatively distinct with clear focus on public leadership as a distinct discipline, a non-rigid use of the framework regarding the competencies in focus and the particular use of it.

Assessing our H0- and Ha-hypotheses the differences across the three countries regarding the purpose, content, and use of the competency frameworks leads us, firstly, to dismiss the H0-hypothesis. The above analysis clearly shows that with regard to action the three countries, viewed together, do not converge. It is, however, more difficult to dismiss the Ha-hypothesis. The similarities between the British and Dutch competency frameworks clearly outnumber the differences, which confirms our expectation that Denmark would be the outlier while Great Britain and the Netherlands converge in action.

Conclusion

The theory of cross-national convergence is not a myth as proposed ironically by Pollitt, but in identifying convergence we should be aware of the different forms and shapes convergence can assume and therefore investigate them separately. This paper demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between two forms of convergence. Not only is the result describing which countries converge different in the two analyses. Different filters apply when we want to explore why the countries examined here show similarities and differences.

When reviewing the convergence literature we identified three basic filters with the potential to work in tests of the 'goodness of fit' between the idea in question and the national setting – institutional, cultural, and economical filters. As the notion of goodness of fit indicates, these filters work as sorting mechanisms. We can assess the possibility that a certain idea penetrates these filters by reviewing the idea and the goodness of fit with the national setting or filters. However, turning to the action-level of analysis these rather broad categories of filters no longer apply. Instead of a sorting mechanism we now have a translation process when an idea is put into practice. Research indicates that this process, unlike the process of 'choosing' an idea, is dominated by the actors affected by the newly imported idea and the challenges it is thought to encounter in the national context. We then set out to investigate whether the same filters apply when examining convergence in action. The three countries selected in this second part of the paper should, if the same national filters apply across different levels of analysis, show great similarities on their competency frameworks. Alternatively, only Denmark and the Netherlands should show similarities, while the British case diverges. However, neither of these scenarios is present. Instead the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats and the evolution of this relationship over the past two decades seem to provide a much stronger basis for explaining the cross-national similarities and differences in the competency frameworks. In their comparative study of the emergence of competency frameworks in the US, Great Britain, and Germany, Christopher Hood and Martin Lodge argue that the introduction of competency frameworks in the three countries was accompanied by political attempts to modify the so-called public service bargains – a strategic deal between bureaucrats and other key actors over their roles and responsibilities (2004: 315, 323). Though we do not use the framework of public service bargains, the findings reported above also indicate the importance of these bargains – but with a strong emphasis on the political will and interest in controlling these bargains. When the relationship and the setting for the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats are under pressure, one way to cope is to create a senior civil service and a competency

framework which, along with other activities, can ensure political control and a senior civil service that suits the political demands.

Leaving the narrow focus of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats and looking at the paper theoretically, we find that different national filters apply when studying different levels of convergence. Studying convergence in labels the cultural and institutional/administrative national settings, though difficult to separate, seem to be very important in this case. However, when studying convergence in action the actual relationship between the two sets of actors in this case, politicians and senior civil servants, is the important predictor when holding the importance of the cultural and institutional/administrative national settings constant. To generalize we could say that the important filters should be found on the same level of abstraction or analysis as the type of convergence being studied. Convergence in label looks at a more macro level of analysis. The important filters also operate at macro level with the importance of the *national* setting. Convergence in action operates on a lower level of abstraction (more concrete). Along these lines the important filters on this type of convergence are also to be found on a more concrete level of abstraction – the actual relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. The reason that scholars in different studies identify not only convergence but also the lack thereof, and even sometimes divergence, is that certain national characteristics determine what seems appropriate for a country to import (convergence in label), while in the second stage of reform *other national characteristics* determine how this particular idea is turned into action and implemented in the national setting. It thus follows that the different national filters apply to the two different reform stages.

With its narrow focus on competency frameworks for the senior civil servants and the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats, this paper is somewhat explorative. That raises two rather big questions for further research. First, working with just one case this paper can only provide tentative conclusions on how ideas are exposed to different filters while being transformed to concrete action. This does, however, illustrate the important differences between different types of convergence and how they operate. But we need multilevel assessments of the national filters on other topics if we are to formulate a more general framework of analysis. Second, the paper poses a question regarding all three competency frameworks. The three countries all imported the idea and translated it into a national version. However, the pattern shows little effect of the national institutional setting and points to the importance of occasional national debates and agendas that form the political and administrative relationship when translating the idea. The question remains whether this indicates pure symbolism in importing the idea.

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Figures and tables

Table 1. A tentative model for analyzing different forms of convergence.

| | | |
|---------------------|--|---|
| National filters | Institutional, cultural and socio- economical | The national political and administrative setting which the idea is imported into |
| Form of convergence | | |
| Label | | |
| Action | | |

Figure 1. The relationship between uncertainty avoidance and power distance within administrative traditions.

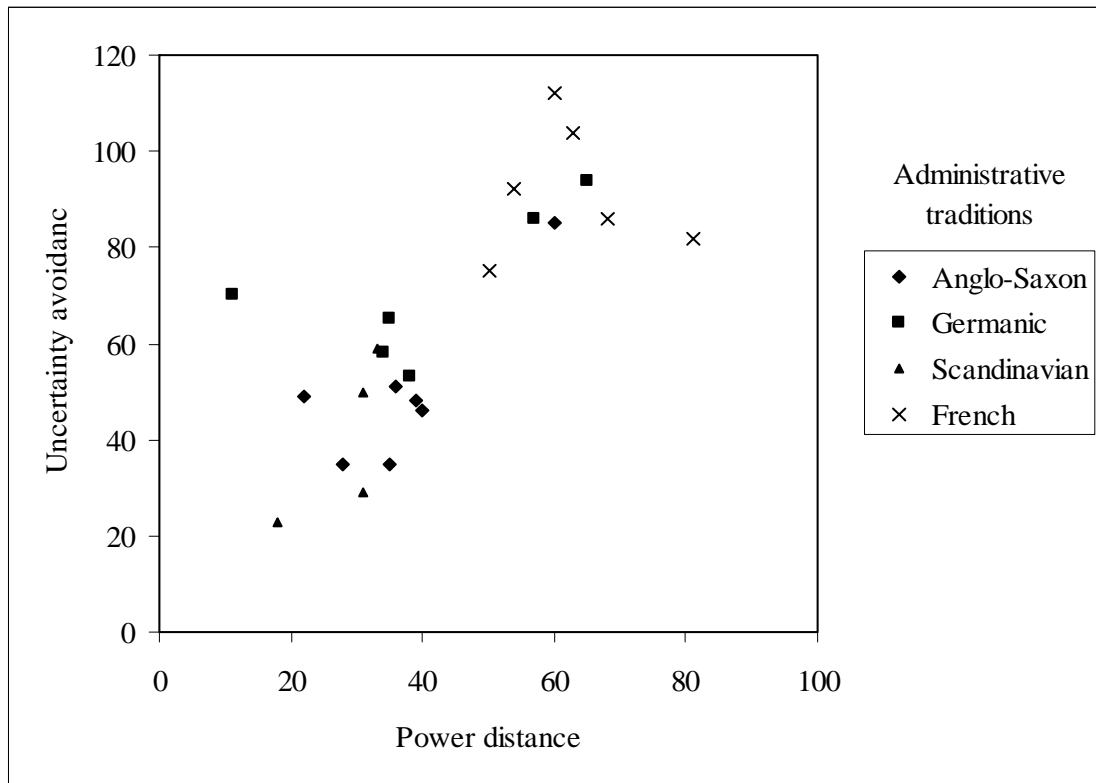


Table 2. Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Denmark on five characteristics.

| Country \ Characteristic | Great Britain | The Netherlands | Denmark |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Competency framework | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Culture (power distance / uncertainty avoidance) | Low/low | Low/low | Low/low |
| Administrative tradition | Anglo-Saxon | Germanic/Scandinavian | Scandinavian |
| Democratic model | Majoritarian democracy | Consensual democracy | Consensual democracy |
| Rule of government | Centralized | Decentralized | Decentralized |

Table 3. Trends and developments in the politico-bureaucratic relationship and the organizational context in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

| | Great Britain | The Netherlands | Denmark |
|---|--|--|---|
| <i>Politico-bureaucratic relations:</i> | | | |
| Divided loyalties | - | Recent debate and initiatives to counter sectorization | Occasional debate on this issue. However, recently no debate |
| Continuity and change | Diminished faith in the administration and its reusability | Balance through openness about top civil servants' party affiliation | Incremental development of a responsive but balanced civil service |
| Degree of bureaucratization | Some debate. The Nolan Committee | Bureaucratic activism in the 1990's. Now towards passivism? | Ethics and white papers |
| <i>Organizational context:</i> | | | |
| Organizational tendency | Agencies and separation of administration and politics | Agencies and separation of administration and politics | Agencies and separation of administration and politics |
| Management tendency | (Diminished advisory-role). Leadership and implementation – focus on results | Leadership and implementation – focus on results | Focus on new management instruments (e.g. contract steering and new wage) |

Table 4. Overview of the purpose, content, and use of competency frameworks in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Denmark.

| | Great Britain | The Netherlands | Denmark |
|--|---|--|---|
| Initiation of the framework | The SCS (a central government initiative) | The ABD (a central government initiative) | Senior civil servants as a group, founded by state and local government organizations |
| Purpose of competency framework | Regulation: Securing senior civil servant focus on management and especially policy initiative and political advice | Lessen sectorization (tunnel vision). Enhance cross-departmental mobility of the civil service | Counter the pressure on the merit bureaucracy |
| View of competencies (private vs. public leadership) | Generic | Mostly generic | Public leadership as a special case |
| Possibility of variation in competencies | Rigid | Rigid | No strings attached |
| Content of framework (emphasis) | Management | Management | Relationship with the political leader, management and leadership of the organization |
| Use of competency framework | Recruitment Development Benchmark (Pay) | Recruitment Development Career development | Self-assessment (reflection) Dialogue |

ⁱ Measured by adopting the idea of a competency framework or not (logistic regression)

ⁱⁱ Assuming that these reforms have in fact had a positive impact on the effectiveness of the public sector.

ⁱⁱⁱ No legislative action have been taken on this issue but the limits have been defined through parliamentary resolutions and operational measures.

^{iv} These results are from the senior civil servants in the Danish central government – permanent secretaries and agency directors.