

WHEN CERTIFICATION FAILS TO RECOGNIZE COMPETENCE IN SPORT

A Critical Reflection on Competency Recognition in Martial Arts and Combat Sports

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Editorial Note

This reflection paper critically examines the current system of competency recognition and coach certification in sport in Portugal, with particular emphasis on martial arts and combat sports.

Although grounded in the Portuguese context, the issues discussed here reflect broader international tensions surrounding professional recognition, institutional regulation, experiential learning, and the relationship between formal certification and effective competence.

The purpose of this document is not to reject regulation or certification themselves, but rather to contribute constructively to the ongoing debate concerning professional legitimacy, pedagogical competence, human development, and the future of coach education in sport.

A Portuguese version of this reflection paper is also available through the Open Science Framework (OSF) and the author's official website.

Abstract

Over recent decades, sport has undergone an intense process of institutionalization, regulation, and professionalization. Coach certification systems were introduced with the objective of improving quality standards, athlete safety, pedagogical intervention, and professional credibility. However, an increasingly important question emerges:

To what extent do current certification systems genuinely recognize competence?

This reflection paper critically examines the mechanisms of competency recognition in Portugal, particularly those associated with the Recognition of Professional and Academic Competencies (RCPA), focusing especially on martial arts and combat sports.

The analysis identifies structural limitations related to excessive bureaucratization, dependence on federative reference frameworks, inconsistencies during transitional implementation periods, and the growing dissociation between formal certification and effective professional competence. Special attention is given to the relationship between practical experience, academic education, pedagogical intervention, ethical responsibility, and human development in coach qualification processes.

More broadly, the article argues that sport should not be reduced to administrative formalities or institutional control structures detached from the human, educational, and ethical dimensions that justify its social value.

Keywords

Martial arts; combat sports; competency recognition; coach certification; RCPA; sport policy; professional legitimacy; human development; coach education; sport governance.

The Institutionalization and Bureaucratization of Sport

The professionalization of sport constitutes an important historical achievement. The establishment of coach certification systems aimed to guarantee minimum standards of quality, safety, and professional responsibility.

In principle, these objectives are legitimate and necessary.

However, professionalization should not become synonymous with bureaucratization.

Certification systems only retain legitimacy insofar as they remain connected to the principles that originally justified their existence: competence, pedagogical capacity, ethical intervention, and the promotion of human development through sport.

Sport cannot be understood merely as an administrative structure designed to regulate access to professional activity. Its social and educational value extends far beyond formal institutional mechanisms.

In martial arts and combat sports, these issues become particularly sensitive. Historically, these disciplines developed through highly diversified educational pathways, experiential learning processes, international lineages, pedagogical traditions, and long-term practical engagement that frequently transcend rigid administrative models.

As a result, systems excessively centered on documentary or procedural validation risk failing to recognize the complexity of real professional competence.

Structural Limitations in Competency Recognition

One of the central problems affecting current competency recognition systems concerns the growing predominance of administrative logic over substantive evaluation of competence itself.

In theory, mechanisms such as the Recognition of Professional and Academic Competencies Regime (RCPA) should allow the validation of knowledge and competencies acquired through

professional experience, pedagogical intervention, competition participation, and long-term practical involvement.

In practice, however, these mechanisms often appear heavily dependent upon procedural, documentary, and institutional conditions that may not necessarily correspond to effective competence.

Particularly problematic is the dependence on specific reference frameworks issued or operationalized through sports federations.

In certain cases, the absence of such frameworks effectively prevents access to professional recognition, independently of the candidate's actual experience, pedagogical intervention, or academic education.

Consequently, the central issue ceases to be competence itself and becomes instead the existence – or nonexistence – of external administrative conditions unrelated to the professional's real capacities.

This situation generates an important conceptual contradiction: systems created to recognize competence may ultimately become obstacles to its recognition.

Federative Dependence and Risks of Institutional Exclusion

A particularly sensitive dimension of this debate concerns the growing dependence of public administrative processes upon federative entities for the operationalization of competency recognition systems.

Whenever access to professional recognition depends upon frameworks, procedures, or validations controlled by external institutional structures, legitimate questions inevitably arise regarding:

- equality of access;
- proportionality;
- transparency;
- administrative coherence;
- and institutional neutrality.

More concerning still is the possibility that such dependency structures may indirectly create conditions favorable to institutional privilege or monopolistic influence over access to professional recognition.

In such contexts, professional legitimacy risks becoming conditioned less by competence itself and more by administrative or institutional mediation.

This problem becomes especially complex within martial arts and combat sports, where educational pathways are historically heterogeneous and where highly competent professionals may emerge from diverse experiential, pedagogical, competitive, and academic trajectories.

A system designed to promote professionalism and equal opportunity should not unintentionally create structural mechanisms capable of excluding competent professionals from recognition processes.

Inconsistencies During Transitional Regime

Particular concerns also emerged during the transitional implementation period of the certification system.

Various situations appeared difficult to reconcile in terms of consistency and proportionality. In some instances, individuals with limited pedagogical or competitive backgrounds obtained advanced certification levels, while other professionals with extensive practical experience, international competitive participation, and advanced academic education encountered significant barriers to recognition.

Without focusing on individual cases, such inconsistencies raise legitimate questions concerning the coherence, proportionality, and transparency of the criteria applied during transitional recognition processes.

The problem is therefore not certification itself, but rather the degree to which certification effectively corresponds to demonstrated competence and professional legitimacy.

Formal Certification and Effective Competence

One of the central tensions explored in this reflection concerns the growing dissociation between formal certification and effective professional competence.

Competence in coaching – particularly within martial arts and combat sports – cannot be reduced exclusively to administrative validation.

Effective professional competence emerges from the interaction of multiple dimensions:

- practical experience;
- pedagogical intervention;
- technical knowledge;
- leadership capacity;
- psychological management;
- ethical responsibility;
- long-term professional engagement;
- and, in many cases, academic education.

Previous academic research has already suggested that academic education, when combined with significant professional experience, may contribute positively to broader and more coherent perceptions of coaching competencies, particularly regarding leadership, pedagogical intervention, and ethical responsibility.

The objective, therefore, is not to reject formal education or institutional certification. On the contrary, regulation and qualification are essential.

The central issue is whether certification systems remain sufficiently open, coherent, and flexible to recognize the complexity of real professional competence.

Sport as Human Development

At its deepest level, this debate concerns the very meaning and purpose of sport.

Sport cannot become merely a bureaucratic system focused on formal validation, institutional control, or the distribution of administrative legitimacy.

Its value resides fundamentally in its human dimension.

Martial arts and combat sports, in particular, have historically embodied educational, ethical, philosophical, psychological, and developmental principles extending far beyond technical performance alone.

When certification systems lose connection with these broader pedagogical and human dimensions, sport risks becoming an end in itself rather than a means of human development.

The coach is not merely a technical operator. Coaches are educators, mentors, leaders, and facilitators of human growth.

Consequently, any system intended to regulate professional legitimacy in sport must remain coherent with these broader human and pedagogical responsibilities.

Rethinking the Model

If the true objective is to promote quality, credibility, safety, and professionalism, then competency recognition systems must remain open to continuous critical reflection and institutional improvement.

This requires:

- greater coherence;
- greater transparency;
- proportionality of criteria;
- institutional neutrality;
- recognition of diverse educational pathways;
- and meaningful consideration of experiential and pedagogical competence.

Particularly within martial arts and combat sports, where professional trajectories are historically diverse and internationally interconnected, excessively rigid administrative models may prove insufficient to evaluate the complexity of real competence.

Certification systems should exist to recognize competence – not to obscure it.

Final Considerations

This reflection does not advocate the absence of regulation, certification, or institutional organization.

On the contrary, regulation remains necessary and important.

However, regulatory systems must remain coherent with the principles that justify their existence: justice, proportionality, competence, pedagogical legitimacy, ethical responsibility, and human development.

Sport should never lose its educational, ethical, and human foundations.

When certification ceases to recognize competence, the system risks distancing itself from the very values it was originally created to protect.

Biographical Note

Fernando Loio holds a PhD in Sport Sciences and is an integrated researcher at CIEQV – Research Centre for Quality of Life. He is the author of research and reflection papers in the fields of sport coaching, martial arts, and combat sports.

He has more than 50 years of experience in martial arts and combat sports as an athlete, coach, event promoter, and sports official. Throughout his career, he has been associated with several national and international organizations linked to Boxing, Taekwondo, Ultimate Full Contact, Pankration, MMA, Free Fight, Kickboxing, Muay Thai, and Grappling.

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