

## **Background of the Competency-Based Education**

What is education for? Is it about learning ‘stuff’ or skills? For Jean Piaget (1896-1980), ‘The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive and discoverers.’ For Benjamin Bloom (1913-1999), ‘The purpose of education is to change the thoughts, feelings and actions of students.’ For Alvin Toffler (1997), “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn”. The UNESCO four pillars of education are: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

### **Background of Competency-based Systems**

The notion of competency-based education (CBE) programmes was first introduced in the USA, beginning in teacher education in the late 1960s, and evolved through applications to other professional education programmes in the USA in the 1970s, vocational training programmes in the UK and Germany among others in the 1980s and vocational training and professional skills recognition in Australia in the 1990s.

Competency-based approaches have been seen to have the potential not only to influence the ways in which employment-related skills are assessed and recognised, but also to influence the structure and delivery of formal education and training programmes and to provide enhanced opportunities for articulation between sectors and for credit transfer across institutions.

The instructions are based on worldwide research that highlights the importance of the links between learning and context of use, thus helping the learners in making learning meaningful. For several decades, competencies have been used in the educational field. Since emphasis is put on the learner’s social and personal development, the aim is to make him reinvest his knowledge while performing tasks at school level as well as at social and professional levels. The programme has been conceived with the purpose of ensuring sustainable and viable learning.

Although the imperatives for the introduction of competency-based education have been different in different countries at different times, and the ways in which this concept has been operationalised have changed over time, the basic principles and intentions of CBE have remained essentially unchanged since the 1960s. They are: a focus on outcomes, greater workplace relevance, outcomes as observable competencies, assessments as judgements of competence, improved skills recognition and improved articulation and credit transfer.

### **A focus on outcomes**

A first characteristic of competency-based education is its emphasis on the specification and assessment of outcomes (referred to as competencies). This focus on outcomes is often contrasted with more traditional concerns of educational programmes with inputs such as methods of student/trainee selection, lengths of courses and training programmes, class sizes, teacher-pupil ratios and so on.

### **Greater workplace relevance**

There is a commonly expressed belief that institution-based courses too often emphasise theoretical or ‘book’ knowledge at the expense of the ability to apply knowledge to perform practical tasks and to fulfil workplace roles. Under competency-based approaches, the redesign of curricula to make them more relevant to workplace requirements normally begins with an analysis and identification of workplace ‘competencies’ which are then organised into a set of ‘competency standards’ for an occupation.

### **Outcomes as observable ‘competencies’**

A third intention of competency-based approaches is to express outcomes as explicit, observable workplace performances. The intention is to express outcomes in the form of clear and precise ‘competencies’, so that (a) the needs of employment can be better communicated; (b) the goals of educational programmes can be re-defined and communicated with greater precision; and (c) straightforward judgements can be made about the extent to which any particular competency has been attained: Explicitness and precision are recurring themes in discussions of competency-based outcomes. If outcomes can be expressed in precise, observable terms, it is argued, these can then be used to set clear goals for educational programmes.

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