



## In the last Issue

...we dealt with standards and how they are supposed to affect things. We asked "What does 'at standard' mean? How does this relate to competence? Do we train to reach a standard: To produce competent people? To achieve perfection?"

## In this Issue

...we reflect on competence and in particular our efforts, nationally, to define competences via outcomes, range statements and criteria.

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### Key point summary...

- ✚ *When we write unit standards, what "competence" are we intending to define?*
- ✚ *At what point do we assess what it is that we have defined?*
- ✚ *Are we fair to candidates in this?*
- ✚ *Are we honest in our assessment judgements?*

### Getting to the heart of things...

#### **The development and recognition of competence...**

We turn our thoughts to our efforts, nationally, to define competences via outcomes, range statements and criteria. In particular we reflect on the way in which we load such outcomes and criteria with possibly unreasonable expectations.

When we look at registered unit standards, it seems that in many cases the outcomes can only truly be achieved once the person has worked for some time within that particular area. No great surprise here. True competence is seldom, if ever, achieved through a course alone, but rather through living with and applying that which you have learnt. In fact, even this last comment is not quite correctly stated. It suggests we first learn then we apply. Rather, we learn as we apply and we apply as we learn, all of this needing experience, context, interpretation and reflection. And so there comes a point when we may justifiably be called competent, and that point is not at the end of the course nor is it soon after. It comes later.

**But when do we assess ...?** The relationship between what we write into the standard, what learners learn, and when and what we actually assess can be reduced to the following:

- We often define competence (in various documents such as unit standards) *to represent a point in a person's development **beyond the point** at which we actually intend assessing them for competence.*

Thus when it comes to assessment, we either fudge our declaration (we call them competent when in fact they are not) or else we make an honest declaration (not-yet competent) and express dismay at the unreadiness of the learner or the poor state of our training department.

Perhaps we should do something else altogether. Perhaps we should only render our assessment judgement at a later stage when the learner has had a chance to actually become competent (through learning and application in the workplace). I doubt that anyone would argue the point, and possibly many would justifiably claim that they already do as

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much.

- But others may point to the impracticality of this, for example, when learners are not in working environments but are at traditional learning institutions. Even in work environments the dislocation between the training function and line operation is such that learners are 'handed' from one to the other, with a 'sign off' required.

Thus, we ought, perhaps, to be defining initial competences (in various documents such as unit standards) to represent a point in a person's development that is achievable at the stage at which they would typically exit the (initial) learning intervention, knowing that there is still a further point that is desired and can be defined and assessed separately (or later).

### By way of illustration – a SADC example

We were recently involved in a project for a neighbouring country in which we were required to describe competence standards for teachers. Through the consultative process, the descriptions of what constituted "competence" grew and grew, until truly we had begun to describe the most magnificent teacher. It became a wonderful statement of what we expect (or would like) teachers to be, and yes, we have met such teachers.

*But we did not meet them when they entered the teaching profession fresh out of college or university.*

When we met them at all, it was after they had spent many years teaching. And thus, in our project, it made sense to define the competences at two stages:

- Stage 1: Entry Level Teacher

The standards stated, in effect: This is what we expect of you when you leave initial training (college / university – with limited practical experience included), and based on which, we are happy to risk unleashing you on the children of the nation. You thus deserve a Certificate to Enter Teaching.

Extrapolated, this could be a Certificate to Enter Manufacturing / or Painting / or Whatever...

- Stage 2: Professional Teacher (after 2 years)

These standards stated, in effect: This is what we now expect of you if we are to call you a professional teacher (or line operator, or painter, or whatever), and it will take significant time in the classroom (or workplace) for you to achieve this standard. When you achieve this, we can give you a Certificate of Competence which will allow you to register as a professional teacher.

### Standard for life – similar outcomes at different stages...

Our reflection on competence points to the idea of *similar* outcomes at *different* stages in a person's development and the need for us to be more mindful of these stages when drafting unit standards and qualifications. When we draft unit standards, we need to be mindful of when and how we might assess, and this should have an impact on the way we define the requirements in the unit standard.

This is not saying that we should only set standards for the level at which we can assess, for that could leave us merely endorsing the status quo. Indeed, we need to **transform** education, training and assessment by setting the standards we need for workplace **competence**. However, we do need to take into account that learning happens in various ways, with practical experience

sometimes integrated in significant ways, sometimes in relatively minor ways, and sometimes hardly at all. We also need to take into account that no matter how well designed the learning process is (integrating theory and practice), it can never be complete; we move towards real competence by being in the job. This is not a poor reflection on learning design, it is merely a reality of life and learning. There is a need to get people out there, starting to practice in their appointed jobs, even though we know that they are not as good as they can be, or as good as they will be.

### **Assessing against the standards...**

Given this, the unit standards should define what is required of people when they exit the desired learning process and are deemed ready to enter workplace practice. There is no point defining requirements at points that can only be reached after significant periods on-the-job, *unless* we are confident that our assessment models will be supportive of assessing learners/workers at those points. Our example of the Teaching Standards suggests that it is useful to set standards and assess at both points.

Alternatively, it could be that we may look at some unit standards as having a two step part to the assessment:- one during and at the end of the learning process, including practical experience (representing *entry* to the job) with competence being verified after a certain amount of specified workplace experience and application.

### **Competence and standards...**

Our reflection also suggests the possibility that the use of the term "competence" may be misleading in relation to unit standards. We are not necessarily competent when achieving a unit standard, but we will have **achieved a significant outcome of learning**. We are thus "competent" in relation to whatever the unit standard was about, but that does not mean we are competent in terms of the workplace understanding of competence. Depending on the unit standard in play, we have simply achieved that standard.

A colleague, Brent Richardson, says: "in assessment, we cannot say that a person is competent because we rarely assess competence. What we assess is whether a person meets a defined set of criteria, in context. They meet a standard – or they do not meet a standard".

In light of this, it may be better to revert to talking of "required outcomes of learning" rather than "competence". In that way we also get rid of the problem of 'competent', 'more competent', and 'even more competent' when people progress from one unit standard to another along the continuum of development. Now they simply meet standards, where these standards may be at an increasingly 'higher' level, or reflect different stages of development.

### **What do we want, and what do we get...?**

Over and above this, our reflections point to the idea that we should also just accept that people will become "more competent" in future than they are at the moment, through the university of life and work, and that this is okay. We don't need to define all those points via the NQF, and we don't need to assess for achievement of those points, at least not through the NQF. No assessment can ever be perfect or complete, nor can it ever result in a declaration about a person that is remotely true of the whole, developing person.

We know this.

Let us therefore re-think what information we can get from assessments and why we want it in the first place. Let us also re-think the way in which we describe what we want assessed i.e. the way in which we define “outcomes of learning”.

### **Making sense of it all...**

Our understanding of the core constructs of the systems we work with directly affect the way we work with the system, our expectations of it and, therefore, its effectiveness as a system – in this case standards-based assessment.

In this issue we have tried to clarify:

- ✚ what it is we define when we write standards
- ✚ what it is that we assess when we assess against these standards
- ✚ the relationship between competence and standards

*The Learning Network* has, and continues to, try to “put quality into the quality system”. This frequently involves challenging assumptions and correcting misperceptions. Feel free to contact us for further input, or to share your own thoughts and views.

### **Last thought...**

*“Men have become the tools of their tools”.* **Henry David Thoreau**

If this is true, let us make the tools well, and understand what they do and how they affect us. Otherwise we may create a system which drives us although it makes no sense. Just a thought...

***Erik, Brian and the TLN Team***