

Competency-Based Frameworks and Assessment

Introduction

A competency-based framework is an organised system composed of statements of the abilities required for effective workplace practice and performance. It aims to enable organisations, industries and professions to recognise, describe and assess work performance against specified agreed standards.¹ This title explains:

- The history of competency-based frameworks
- The general definition of a competency
- The elements of a competency framework
- Competency-based frameworks and their application within professions
- Competency-based assessment
- The elements of a strong competency-based system
- Critical issues underlying the use of competency-based systems and assessment.

History of Competency-Based Frameworks

The development and use of competency-based frameworks for appraising and managing performance came about as a response to significant changes in organisations and wider society in the 1970s and 1980s. The development was dominated by the management strategy literature of the 1990s, which emphasized 'core competence' as a key organizational resource that could be exploited to gain competitive advantage.² These developments included flatter structure, changes in working practices which required employees to develop a wider range of skills and be more flexible and adaptable, and the need for a consistent set of standards applicable across the globe and within professions.³ In the vocational education and training sector ('VET'), competency-based training is a curriculum model widely employed in professions and industries around the world. For example, all Australian health professions have adopted competency models and frameworks as core constructs defining scopes of practice and registration requirements.⁴ Australian vocational education and training has been 'competency-based' for more than 25 years.⁵ It is built upon the Australian Qualifications Framework ('AQF'), which forms the basis for educational and professional assessment requirements, from Senior Certificates of Education to Doctoral Degrees, and provides principles and process for alignment of the AQF with international qualifications frameworks.⁶

¹ Helen Simms (ed), *Performance Management* (University of Cambridge, 2005).

² Françoise Le Deist and Jonathan Winterton, 'What Is Competence?' (2005) 8 *Human Resource Development International* 27, 27; Steven Hodge, 'Alienating Curriculum Work in Australian Vocational Education and Training' (2016) 57 *Critical Studies in Education* 143; Nick Boreham, 'A Theory of Collective Competence: Challenging the Neo-Liberal Individualisation of Performance at Work' (2004) 52 *British Journal of Educational Studies* 5.

³ Simms, above n 1, 3.

⁴ Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, 'About the National Scheme' <http://www.ahpra.gov.au/~link.aspx?id=D4E5EF420D3C4EAB8B247FDB72CA6E0A&z=z> (accessed 24 October 2017).

⁵ Steven Hodge, 'After Competency-Based Training: Deepening Critique, Imagining Alternatives' (2016) 14 *International Journal of Training Research* 171.

⁶ Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Australian Qualifications Framework* (2013).

What are Competencies?

Competencies consist of a 'cluster of related knowledge, skills, abilities and other requirements necessary for successful job performance'.⁷ They may describe requirements which are key to the effective performance of a particular job, or applicable across a range of jobs in an organisation.⁸ These qualities generally include job-relevant behaviours which demonstrate knowledge of a technology, profession, procedure, job or an organization. Once established, competencies can provide a common and transferable vocabulary for describing, crediting and assessing performance and the ability/attributes displayed by individuals.

Organisations may develop their own lists of competencies through a process of internal research and evaluation. This requires recognising both culture and process by bringing together knowledge about the differing groups of people and transforming this knowledge into standards, policies and practices which recognise aspects such as cultural norms and social and power relationships.⁹ Alternatively, organisations may use published or international frameworks. These are often linked to qualifications or requirements of professional bodies.¹⁰ Essentially, in the broader sense, competencies aim to enable organisations and professional and technical bodies to recognise, describe and assess work performance against specified agreed standards.¹¹

What is a Competency Framework?

A competency framework is an organised system composed of statements of the abilities required for effective workplace practice and performance. (Standards-based frameworks are like competency-based frameworks, and in some cases the difference between the two can be nominal.¹² In some frameworks, the two notions are explicitly combined in a 'competency standards framework'.) Competency-based frameworks are often developed around a raft of generic headings or competency groups. These include planning and organising, communication skills, team orientation and team work, people management, problem solving, application of technical or professional knowledge and values and beliefs.¹³ Within a competency-based framework, 'core competencies' generally summarise the capabilities that are important to an organisation across all jobs, with further competencies being specific to particular roles. Each level of

⁷ United Nations Evaluation Group, *Core Competencies for Evaluators of the UN System* (2008) 5.

⁸ Harvard University, *Harvard University Competency Dictionary* (Development Dimensions International) 4 <https://apps2.campusservices.harvard.edu/cas/empldocs/cs/harvard_competency_dictionary_complete.pdf> (accessed 19 October 2017).

⁹ Boreham, above n 2.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Australian Qualifications Framework Council, above n 6; Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education and Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework* (2013); South Australia, *Competency Framework: Entry Level Competencies for the SA Public Sector* (2014) <<https://publicsector.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/20120401-South-Australian-Public-Sector-Entry-Level-Employee-Competency-Framework.pdf>> (accessed 19 October 2017); Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development ('OECD'), *Competency Framework* (2014) <https://www.oecd.org/careers/competency_framework_en.pdf> (accessed 19 October 2017); Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, *National Competency Standards Framework for Pharmacists in Australia* (2016) <<http://www.psa.org.au/practice-support-and-tools/psa-information-framework>> (accessed 19 October 2017).

¹¹ South Australia, above n 10.

¹² See Aileen Kennedy, 'Models of Continuing Professional Development: A Framework for Analysis' (2005) 31 *Journal of In-Service Education* 240.

¹³ Simms, above n 1; Olle ten Carte and Fedde Scheele, 'Competency-Based Post Graduate Training: Can We Bridge the Gap between Theory and Clinical Practice?' (2007) 82 *Academic Medicine* 542.

the core competency has behavioural indicators designed to show the requirements for successful performance at a given level of employment, from entry-level employees to senior management.¹⁴ The degree of mastery of the core competency is generally related to the level of the position in terms of scale of responsibility, complexity and autonomy.¹⁵

Competency-Based Frameworks and the Professions

In professions, competency-based education and training frameworks are constructed to specify competencies relevant for registration and assessment of practice and for curriculum design, and further education and training. Competency-based career frameworks define levels at which a role can be performed – beginning at initial entry level roles and extending to the most senior and specialist levels.¹⁶ The value of competency-based frameworks rests with their capacity to support and facilitate professional practice and growth. They are commonly adopted in professions such as teaching, allied health, medicine, nursing and engineering. Australian universities offering professionally accredited courses adopt competency standards frameworks as the basis for curriculum development and implementation. Professional standards frameworks are often informed by several different approaches to competence. Themes such as ethics, judgement and professionalism are written into the standards with the aim of being able to apply across the breadth of practice, rather than being treated as separate topics or discrete areas of competence.¹⁷

A good example of a well-established competency framework in the professions is *The National Competency Standards Framework for Pharmacists in Australia 2016*.¹⁸ Building upon a long history of competency standards within the pharmacy profession, these standards are living documents that have undergone a series of reviews since the 1993 draft document was first produced. The 2016 framework articulates the scope of practice and the desired performance levels. Covering all elements of the profession, it serves as an underpinning resource for all pharmacy training courses. It sees the value of competency standards as lying in their capacity to support and facilitate professional practice and growth, as well as reinforcing fundamental ethical obligations to practice within the limits of professional competence.¹⁹ The *Standards Framework* identifies five domains: Professionalism and Ethics; Communication and Collaboration; Medicine Management and Patient Care; Leadership and Management; and Education and Research. Within each domain, specific standards and enabling competencies are identified. For example, the first domain of

¹⁴ See, e.g., OECD, above n 10; Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education and Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, above n 10; University of Nottingham, *Behavioural Competency Reference Guide* (2015) <<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/hr/guidesandsupport/performanceatwork/pdpr/documents/pdpr-behavioural-competency-reference-guide.pdf>> (accessed 24 October 2017).

¹⁵ United Nations Evaluation Group, *Evaluation Competency Framework* (2016) 3.

¹⁶ Sharon Brownie, Janelle Thomas and Mark Bahnisch, *Exploring the Literature: Competency-Based Education and Training and Competency-Based Career Frameworks* (National Health Workforce Planning and Research Collaboration, 2011) <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:312842/hwa_lit_review_2012.pdf> (accessed 19 October 2017).

¹⁷ Stan Lester, 'Professional Standards, Competence and Capability' (2014) 4 *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 31.

¹⁸ Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, above n 10.

¹⁹ Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, above n 10. United Nations Evaluation Group, *Evaluation Competency Framework*, above n 15, also provides an excellent example of a competency framework that is used for professional evaluators across the United Nation system. It indicates distinct levels with different expectations depending on levels of responsibilities, complexity and autonomy.

Professionalism and Ethics has, as a standard, 'Uphold professionalism', with several enabling competencies expected to be demonstrated by all levels. Another standard within the same domain, 'Apply expertise in professional practice', lists enabling competencies identified for pharmacists seeking to demonstrate advanced level performance.

Assessment

When it comes to assessment based on competencies, the aim is to ensure that what is being measured must be explicit and conspicuously related to the competency in question.²⁰ This approach to assessment seeks to combine knowledge, understanding, problem solving, technical skills, attitudes and ethics. Ideally, assessment occurs in an integrated manner by having methods which assess a number of elements of competence and all their performance criteria simultaneously.²¹ For example, in the case of a school teacher, observations of classroom performance could be used to assess, amongst other things, classroom management skills, knowledge of the subject matter being taught, ethical principles and lesson planning – all within the one assessment event.²² Under a well-designed competency-based assessment system, assessors' judgments are based on evidence gathered from performance about whether the subject meets the criteria specified in the profession's competency standards.²³ By broadening assessments from the traditional focus on the learner's knowledge, to performance in more complex professional activities, assessment of competencies requires approaches that integrate the assessment of knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes across multiple domains.²⁴ Many sources of assessment information are used to assess competencies, such as multi-sources feedback, workplace-based assessment, reflection and portfolio assessment – as well as standardised testing.²⁵ Within the professions, assessment regimes are often designed to serve a dual purpose of certifying current competence and capability, and identifying potentials for developing higher-level expertise.²⁶

Elements of a Strong Competency-Based System

A well-constructed competency-based system provides:²⁷

- A common and transferable terminology for assessment and performance, with behaviours defined in detail and in a way that all relevant parties can share and understand.
- An account of the relevant, structured development of behaviours, identifying both essential attributes and those associated with outstanding performance. This provides a basis for constructive feedback and tailored developmental activities.

²⁰ Andrew Gonczi, 'Competency Based Assessment in the Professions in Australia' (1994) 1 *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 27.

²¹ Gonczi, above n 20.

²² Gonczi, above n 20.

²³ Gonczi, above n 20.

²⁴ Peter Harris et al, 'Evolving Concepts of Assessment in a Competency-Based World' (2017) 39 *Medical Teacher* 603, 604.

²⁵ James Drisko, 'Competencies and Their Assessment' (2014) 50 *Journal of Social Work Education* 414.

²⁶ Boreham, above n 2, 134.

²⁷ University of Nottingham, *Behavioural Competency Reference Guide*, above n 14, 2-3.

- Objective indicators of the required attributes for assessment of potential and succession planning for more senior jobs. These indicators can be used to draw attention to likely candidates and provides a specific focus for their development.
- A map for career paths and options, particularly in cases where examination of similarities between attributes required for a role can form a basis for logical career progression or horizontal development. This map can help the individual identify transferable skills where they may not have been obvious.
- A competency-based development program that assimilates learning activities into the daily business processes or professional activities.²⁸

Benefits of Competency Frameworks

Multiple benefits have been identified in support of the development and use of competency frameworks within the professions. Competency frameworks can help align education and industry, ensuring that the intellectual skills and knowledge taught at university or through Continuing Professional Development ('CPD') schemes map onto the established standards desired by professional bodies and institutional employers. The frameworks can also aid in the development of equitable assessment tools with transparency and clarity about expectations for practitioners. They can provide increased objectivity in the recruitment and selection of staff and illustrate how decisions are based on evidence of past behaviours which are known to be associated with successful performance on the role that the organization is attempting to fill. Relationships between professions or between specialities within professions can be identified by the frameworks, allowing professionals to consider when horizontal career movement may be possible and what areas would need to be strengthened to empower such movements. Similarly, the frameworks can assist in the effective and equitable recognition of prior learning and thereby facilitate the assessment of international practitioners – an increasing part of professional practice in the 21st century.²⁹ More broadly, the framework assists a profession in communicating its intentions and goals.³⁰

²⁸ Shaun Goldfinch and Joe Wallis, *International Handbook of Public Management Reform* (Edward Elgar, 2009); South Australia, above n 10.

²⁹ Brownie et al, above n 16, 22.

³⁰ See United Nations Evaluation Group, *Evaluation Competency Framework*, above n 15; United Nations Evaluation Group, *Professionalization of Evaluation Concept Paper* (2016); University of Nottingham, 'Competency Framework'

<<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/hr/guidesandsupport/performanceatwork/pdpr/documents/pdpr-behavioural-competency-reference-guide.pdf>> (accessed 24 October 2017).

Issues Identified with Competency-Based Frameworks and Assessment

Despite their widespread use in many professions, competency-based frameworks and assessment processes can suffer from drawbacks and weaknesses.³¹ One major concern is that the frameworks or systems implementing them can become unwieldy and bureaucratic.³² Even in cases where there is extensive support for developing competencies, there may remain significant resistance to formal mechanisms that recognise competencies (for example, mechanisms include credentialing, accreditation or licensing within professions).³³ In addition, as a result of the fast pace of change in organisations and technologies, frameworks may become outdated and they can be difficult and expensive to change.³⁴

Indeed, the development and implementation of competency-based education and training frameworks and competency-based career frameworks create significant resource demands. Maintenance and development expenses are high as significant resources in time and cost need to be devoted to consultation, development and revision of the frameworks to ensure their relevance.³⁵ In response to these drawbacks, professional bodies may make use of existing competency-based frameworks to regulate some or all aspects of the profession's activity, with frameworks being duplicated across jurisdictions, sectors and employer bodies. Alignment of frameworks across professions in this way is currently the exception rather than the norm. While such duplication is less resource-intensive, it inhibits workforce flexibility, ease of articulation of pathways, subtle differences that may arise in various professions and specialisations, and more.³⁶

Further concerns with competency-based frameworks include the worry that too much emphasis may be placed on inputs rather than outputs. An employee may demonstrate many of the right skills and abilities but still fail to get results as work performance is influenced by a range of factors relating to the context in which the skills are being applied.³⁷ Concerns with content also arise. Frameworks may pay insufficient attention to the diversity of the workforce and may even indirectly discriminate,³⁸ while generic competencies may not be transferable across different knowledge domains.³⁹ Alternatively, it was noted above that the focus on diverse competencies shifts the attention from an exclusive focus on professional knowledge and expertise. But this focus can be broadened too far, leading to a concern that professional competencies effectively crowd out the hallmark of professional life – the professional's specialized knowledge and expertise. Finally, despite concerted efforts to create standardised, objective, competency-based evaluations, assessment can still have a strong subjective influence.⁴⁰

³¹ In the specific case of professionals who are also managers, the use of competency frameworks in managerial development has been criticised because this approach may fail to capture the diversity, complexity and qualitative nature of managers' tasks and roles in public organizations. See Goldfinch and Wallis, above n 28, 51.

³² Simms, above n 1, 22.

³³ United Nations Evaluation Group, above n 30, 10.

³⁴ Simms, above n 1.

³⁵ Brownie et al, above n 16, 31.

³⁶ Brownie et al, above n 16, 32.

³⁷ Simms, above n 1.

³⁸ Simms, above n 1.

³⁹ Le Deist and Winterton, above n 2.

⁴⁰ Le Deist and Winterton, above n 2; Shiphra Ginsburg et al, 'Toward Authentic Clinical Evaluation: Pitfalls in the Pursuit of Competency' (2010) 85 *Academic Medicine* 780.

Summary

Competency-based frameworks and assessment are widely used within education, industry and the professions across Australia and worldwide. When well-designed and flexibly updated, such frameworks can provide a common and transferable language for describing professional performance and explaining the abilities and attributes expected of specific types of professionals at different stages of their careers. The frameworks then can be used to fashion targeted education schemes to develop specific competencies and to derive indicators to be used for assessment and evaluation of performance. However, competency frameworks have their own weaknesses, especially in cases where the established competencies fail to articulate the actual skills and knowledge required across the profession. This may occur because the framework neglected to include the full sweep of diverse skills required of a professional or because it has become outdated in the face of major changes to technology, education or practice.

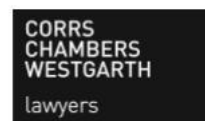
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