

# **A TOOL PROPOSAL TO ASSESS COMPETENCES IN BUSINESS AND ADMINISTRATION DEGREE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years a great deal of investigations as well as discussion papers, within Bologna framework which aim at identifying competences for university degree programmes, are coming out. Nevertheless it is not only necessary to identify competences in educational programmes but also to establish assessment forms which permit to know how learners make progress in the development of generic competences or transferable skills. This last component is relevant for preparing learners well for their future role in society in terms of employability and citizenship.

The main objective of this investigation is to draw up a practical tool to assess competences which have to be obtained and developed by learners during the process of learning, in the subject area of Business Administration, according to Tuning project for higher education.

The methodology is based on the analysis, selection and definition of transversal competences with the purpose of making a competence dictionary, specifically, for Business Administration Degree. It is desirable to assess the level obtained by learners

in each competence so the competence dictionary is a key starting point. Each competence in the dictionary is assessed for four different stages of competence development taking into consideration the description of observable behaviours. Assessment forms such as situational tests have been used in order to analyse the response from the learner faced with real or hypothetical challenging situations. This type of assessment test makes possible to connect the response from learners to a concrete situation with each and every one of the stages and different levels of competences defined in the dictionary. It is a prominent and reliable tool for the assessment of the learners' potential but also for the assessment of their progress in lifelong learning.

**KEYWORDS:** competence assessment, competence dictionary, business and administration Degree

## **1. Introduction**

The traditional paradigm of learning process has shown a stressed transformation after the implementation of European Space for Higher Education (ESHE). One of the most relevant keystones of this new paradigm is referred to competency-based curriculum design defined as the set of abilities that an individual should achieve because of a direct interaction with the information given by the educational system.

New challenges and difficulties remain in competency-based education for teaching staff, especially in Spain, where they lack appropriate training and background to afford this new educational model.

A wide bibliography about competency-based education is compiled nonetheless most surveys show a partial approach that makes difficult non-specialists have a comprehensive point of view of this new educational model and the necessary stages to be traced in the teaching planning. In this study a practical and effective guidance for competency based curriculum is made as a proposal.

In section two a brief review of the competency-based education background is done, paying particular attention to its implementation in Europe. Next, a generic competences dictionary for Business Administration Degree is proposed. Fourth section deals with competences assessment, specifically the characteristics that should be satisfied by the assessment process and their role in the competency-based educational model. In addition, practical examples about situational tests are presented as a learning tool and a way of competences assessment. The need of a common and objective competency assessment framework is one of the main aims in this research, just as it is possible to see in the fifth section. The methodology for competency assessment and implementation provides quantitative information about the grade to which a competence is achieved by students, as a key guidance of their training and development of abilities and skills through lifelong learning. Finally, in section seven, the most relevant conclusions are mentioned and other possible researches in future related to this topic are considered.

## 2. Competency based on education and training: background

The origins of occupational competence-based movement can be traced by the early 1980s, mainly, in some developed countries where there was a prominent disparity between learning quality by educational system and the needs of the work activity. Adapting the occupational training to more and more new and complex economic situation was required. The reaction appeared to be a comprehensive training approach to the design and implementation of an occupational competence based model with a closer connection between labour market and education industry (Metens, 1996).

The individuals' competence describes outcomes expected from knowledge, skills and attitudes thought to be essential to the performance of professional role (Gonczi, 1996). The competency based movement in education and training (CBET) has been developed in United States. In the 1960s and 70s David McClelland, a psychology professor at Harvard University, started to develop techniques to identify rudiments and define variables to forecast the performance in the professional role. The objective of the study was to discover why people differed in their levels of motivation to achieve and check if a direct relationship between the academic and labour success existed. He came to the conclusion that the traditional training and assessment methods did not guarantee an appropriate performance in the working activity or a successful life even it was very frequent to discriminate against to women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups in the labour market. From this point, McClelland established to search for other variables or competences in order to forecast an individual's performance in a job.

The tasks undertaken by the International Association for Educational Achievement in USA and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have had a great influence on a development of an education and training competences based model in European Union. As a result of this context, a competency based curriculum is becoming more widespread throughout, both educational system from the general compulsory education to the higher one, and the training processes in Europe.

All the countries include implicit or explicit references to competency based curricula in the general compulsory education according to a survey done by Eurydice (2002) about competency education in European Union. In Spain explicit references are included for the first time in Organic Law of Education, 2/2006, 3<sup>rd</sup> May-LOE.

Within the European Space for Higher Education framework a competency system was established as a common point to describe objectives in the educational curriculum, for that reason a competency based education is becoming one of the mainstays for the new model of university in Europe. The introduction of transversal competences model in the curriculum and the learning processes is "a challenge and an opportunity for rethinking the meaning of the education" Garagorri (2007). The objective is not only the accumulation of knowledge but also the development of basic and relevant competences required for the integration between capabilities and the broader social goals that an individual should have in the labour market and through lifelong learning.

The students' competences development and evaluation must be global and comprehensive in which common standards are defined for competences based curriculum to make sense. In this work, different stages that must be traced in a competences based educational model with a real and effective implementation are shown.

### 3. Competence Dictionary: an implementation for Business Administration Degree

As mentioned above, defining competences as tasks combining knowledge and skills in professional situations makes it possible to design a consistent competency based curriculum. This is the first step if it is desirable to provide full information to all the implied agents and to get a comprehensive educational model.

In the summer of 2000, a group of universities took up the Bologna challenge collectively and designed the well-known pilot project called Tuning-Educational Structures in Europe. Tuning makes the distinction between learning outcomes and competences to distinguish the different roles of the most relevant players: academic staff and students. In Tuning competences are described as reference points for curriculum design and evaluation, not as straightjackets. They allow flexibility and autonomy in the construction of curricula. At the same time, they provide a common language for describing what curricula are aiming at.

As it is known, Tuning distinguishes three types of generic competences, as a common framework for Business Administration Degree: instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences. Instrumental competences are related to cognitive, methodological, technological and linguistic abilities; therefore, these competences are a way to attain a concrete aim. Interpersonal competences capture social skills such as social interaction and co-operation within multidisciplinary teams. Systemic competences are abilities and skills concerning whole systems (Table 1).

On the other hand, specific competences can be split into three types: academic or related to theoretical knowledge; disciplinary or a set of practical knowledge required by each industry; and finally, the ones in the context of professional profile consisting of communication abilities or know-how abilities applied to a particular profession.

Each generic competence is defined in three levels. The first level reflects the command of the competence in a usual context. The second level shows a command of the competence in which the good use of the technique is demonstrated by the student. And in the third level the competence is considered in many and complex situations.

Likewise a set of indicators (from fourth to eight level) are defined as an evidence of the grade of development of the competence and each indicator presents a scale of five values easily to assess.

The competency assessment was intended to be designed with the scientific precision. In our opinion and in accordance with our teaching experience, a type of the competence assessment like this is excessively complex to put into practice for Spanish teaching staff. For that reason, another definition system to assess competency is proposed in the present work.

In the first place, defining competences means to know their nature. An agreement does not appear to have been reached with the meaning given to competency in general terms. This is a great difficulty in the educational system. There are two main positions defended by scholars in this field: (Pereda & Berrocal, 2001):

a) Competences are considered as underlying characteristics that determine an individual behaviour.

b) Competences are defined as observable behaviours which can be noted through one of the senses (Boyatis, 1982). The second option has been taken into account in this study for the competency dictionary.

The process of identification for competences finishes after the description and specification of performance levels required in the work activity. It is usual to establish four levels to distinguish the way of performance: better, good, minimum and fail (Alles, 2006). In the dictionary below the performance levels of the competence are shown on the basis of observable characteristics. Five levels for each competence are defined including level 0 for students who do not achieve that competence. The different levels, except from Villa & Poblete (2007) proposal, are not linked to diverse contexts of performance of the competence but they present different grades of command in a cumulative way. Each competence is defined by using outstanding indicators featured observably to facilitate the assessment. Such indicators are used as a common denominator in respective levels. If a student is placed in the level number four of a concrete indicator, it means that he has passed the rest of the levels established for that indicator. But it does not mean that the same student can be placed in a lower level for other indicators. The possibility mentioned above is included in the proposal of assessment system in this study.

Next, one example of the competences defined in the dictionary is developed: interpersonal skills. It has been selected because of the difficulty to be assessed in a formal and explicit way for the academic staff. For this competence definition indicators, underlined in bold, are selected. Each of them are developed in different levels to reflect an increasing tend in the command of the competence. The number of definition indicators is not restricted and is open to the level of the definition of the competence. Otherwise, the grades are permanent, from zero to four, in order to maintain the homogeneity of the assessment.

#### Interpersonal skills Competence: Definition and grading

- Willingness to listen carefully (**Active Listen**)
- Intention to make someone understand by using the dialogue to have good co-operative relations with each other (**Dialogue**)
- Understanding the others' thoughts, feelings and concerns (**Empathy**)
- Capacity to respect the others' rights by defending own thoughts, feelings and concerns in a non-aggression way (**Assertiveness**).

#### **Grade 0**

- a. Active Listen. His attention is wandering while the others are speaking to him. He does not pay attention to his speakers.
- b. Dialogue. He is incapable of holding a fluent communication with the others.
- c. Empathy. He does not put himself in the others' place. He is incapable of understanding different points of view from his.
- d. Assertiveness. He is able to respect the others' rights and defend his own ones.

**Grade 1**

- a. Active Listen. He listens and pays attention to his speakers and takes it for granted that he can understand them.
- b. Dialogue. He takes part in conversations. He implies that he is right and he does not change his mind when the others defend opposite arguments. It is hard for him to incorporate the others' points of view.
- c. Empathy. He can understand the others but he is incapable to put himself to the others' place.
- d. Assertiveness. It is difficult to find out he is thinking about. He can notice the feelings but he ignores their origin.

**Grade 2**

- a. Active Listen. He pays attention to his speakers carefully.
- b. Dialogue. He passes on his thoughts in a concise way. He intends to argue his points of view. He admits the others' positions although he values the differences more than the agreement points.
- c. Empathy. He can understand the others' behaviour. He makes questions with an open mind to understand the others' different positions.
- d. Assertiveness. He expresses himself respectfully to the others, with no scorn. He aims to search for the common points by guaranteeing all the implied parts' rights.

**Grade 3**

- a. Active Listen. He pays attention to his speakers carefully and he is capable to show it.
- b. Dialogue. His oral and body language is appropriate to the circumstances. He shows interest in the others' discussion. He supports for the agreements and makes proposals to achieve them.
- c. Empathy. He can understand the others' behaviour and he shares his feelings, and concerns with them.
- d. Assertiveness. He is sure he is thinking about and feeling. He respects all the points of view and tries to integrate them to reach an agreement by consensus.

**Grade 4**

- a. Active Listen. He shows understanding of the others.
- b. Dialogue. He enjoys situations in which there is an exchange of views in order to reach an agreement. His body language emphasizes the oral message. He creates a favourable atmosphere for the understanding and dialogue.
- c. Empathy. He inspires confidence in his speakers. He is able to adapt to the situations and people through his conversations.
- d. Assertiveness. He is assertive, capable to express what he is thinking about and feeling openly to attain his objectives with no emotional damage for the others.

He asks for critical points of view to get his talks better. He takes the initiative to reach agreements and helps the others to get common points.

The definition system presented, as a proposal, in this study makes easier the assessment process because it provides a feasible number of indicators required by the teaching staff to determine the grade of the development of a competence a student has achieved. In addition, the implementation of this system allows to detect the weaknesses and strengths for each student and to guide their learning process by teaching staff.

After defining competences, the following step is to design the learning and assessment strategies.

#### **4. Competency assessment: characteristics and delimitation**

It is impossible to separate the learning from the assessment process. As Jessup (1991) points out 'a method not only requires new ways of evaluation but also assessment as a significance role in the global and comprehensive learning process'. A competence is not assessed in itself but the achievement of such competence by students. The question is: which are the most effective ways to prove if the students have achieved the competences required for a curriculum?

So far, the traditional educational model has followed these standards: (i) the command of the contents is the key aspect in the curriculum; (ii) the assessment is mainly focused on the cognitive performance and the application of algorithms and rules; (iii) interpersonal and emotional requirements are out of the training; (iv) the assessment is done from an individual perspective with no other components of the training; and (v) the written answers, above all those ones mean to mark higher, are considered to assess by emphasizing a non-evolutionary intelligence

The design of an integral and efficient system for competence assessment requires:

- I. Defining competences by using observable indicators and determining grades for each one.
- II. An integral and standardized system has to be outlined with the following features:
  - i. A common system for generic competency assessment for the grade as a whole.
  - ii. Determining the relative weight of the generic competences in the diverse courses for the student to be capable to develop the required competences at the appropriate grade over his learning process.
  - iii. Selecting the learning and assessment tools for a practical and motivational approach and pointing out the competences to be developed.
  - iv. Defining the assessment criteria based on the different grades of each competence.
  - v. Planning a common schedule for continuous evaluation system with the timing of the competence assessment tools adapted to each subject.
  - vi. Defining an objective mark method to be applied in a common way.

The epigraphs before, third, fourth and sixth, are attached great importance and they are the matters are going to be discussed in this work.

Many tools can be used in the learning process and competence assessment including not only traditional but also innovative ones: case study, research work, video-forum; textual analysis, among them. As an example, situational tests have been selected to assess interpersonal skills defined before, being an original tool in education field.

From this point, the way to define the assessment criteria and to establish an objective evaluation system will be shown.

### *1.1.Situational Tests*

Situational tests or samples are 'very realistic exercises in a similar scenario to the labour market' (Levy-Leboyer, 1997: 77). This technique is aimed at the observation of behaviors in practise by a person when he is doing a particular task. A protocol of rules for observation or check-lists are necessary to be available for assessors to systematize all the information collected during the observation period of time. Although the implementation of situational tests is considered to be helpful to assess the learning process, the drawing-up requires a great deal of time, energy and resources. For that reason, it is recommendable to be very systematic to assure the validity and reliability of a test like this.

The behavioral observation is accomplished through the situational tests and provides a means of objective measurement of a wide range of behaviors as they occur in the natural environment. For many authors, it is a suitable technique to assess competences (McClelland, 1973).

In this work, the description of situational tests is presented and how to use them as tools to assess the competences selected by the teaching staff in accordance with the dictionary of competences mentioned.

Role-playing is a simulation exercise where the learners act out specified roles in a dramatization of an event or situation. The purpose of role playing is to achieve better understanding of a situation by experiencing a realistic simulation. Role playing is useful as a training exercise.

Group dynamics is the study of groups, and also a general term for group processes. Frequently a learner pays attention to the words he is listening in an oral communication but he ignores other key points of the communication process such as both sender and receiver's perception, beliefs, values, motivations and needs.

It is possible to assess the degree in which the learner has developed interpersonal competences such as teamwork, interpersonal skills, ability to work in an interdisciplinary team and ethical commitment by using the techniques mentioned above. As a proposal, the assessment of the competence interpersonal skill has been carried out by the situational tests that can be applicable to any course in Business and Administration Degree, for example, to the course Enterprise Economics at University Francisco de Vitoria. As it is shown in Table 2 evidence indicators are defined by teaching staff for the course mentioned in accordance with the dictionary of competences.

The last step in the assessment system presented in this study is referred to the grade evaluation system shown in the following section.



## 5. Assessment methodology for situational tests cases

The methodological approach designed for this study is an original combination of two well-known types of competency assessment systems: educational and managerial systems. Educational approach is related to the competences certification. From this point of view a competence is the ability to do a work in an effective way. The competence is considered as a discrete variable defined up to five grades in accordance with the dictionary (Non-competent if Grade 0, Grade 1 competent, Grade 2 competent, Grade 3 competent and Grade 4 competent). The full achievement of a competence is represented by Grade 4, as the maximum level development of a competence and it is expressed in numerical terms as 100.

Nevertheless, from the managerial approach a competence is defined as a continuous variable and it assumes some values in a range related to a structure of mastery levels. Command indicators are a set of items or short phrases referred to observable behaviors in order to assess the level of mastery achieved in a competence, taking all the indicators into account one by one. The mastery level in a competence is expressed as a total scoring by establishing different levels with a relationship of increasing continuity (or decreasing if it is the opposite) of monotonic type. Each level represents the command of the lower level in the scale: Grade 4 means to attain the goal of Grade 2, this one represents the achievement of the goal related to Grade 1 and so on. This relationship might give cause to think about a sort of invariance and irreversibility but there is no evidence to affirm or reject that assumption. The methods here used for the assessment have to provide an evolutionary view of the information about the learner progress. Taking a decision on assessment by teaching staff involves active actions in order to remedy or change the results achieved by the student.

Next, the method for competency assessment by using situational tests is described into nine steps:

- 1.- Competences to assess are selected by teaching staff.
- 2.- A situational test is designed.
- 3.- Descriptors for each competence are defined on the basis of the levels in the dictionary. These descriptors can be measured because they are referred to observable behaviours, so they have to be identified in a ready way. The number of descriptors to assess depends on the dictionary used as a reference for competency assessment by each institution.
- 4.- The command of the competence achieved by every student is assessed by using a table as shown below (Table 3). The degree of competence achieved is marked with just one tick in the appropriate box. By using this implement it is easier to collect information about students by teaching staff. The levels or grades are defined in accordance with the reference dictionary.
- 5.- The step four is repeated for each student.
- 6.- Once all the students have been evaluated, the information is collected in a global table similar to the mentioned above. The boxes are marked with the number of the students who show both characteristics. For example, if there are three students who have grade 2 in the descriptor 3, the number 3 should be written in the appropriate

box. That is, a contingent table should be created. From this table, the scoring for each descriptor is calculated by using the statistical methodology mentioned.

7.- Scoring for each level of grade is set through a statistical method called correspondence analysis. It is a descriptive technique to represent contingency tables, that is, tables to record and analyse the relationship between two or more variables. The origins of this method are traced in the seventies by Benzecri (1976) and his students: Lebart (Lebart & Fenelon (1975), Lebart *et al.* (1984, 1985, 1995 and 2000)) and Greenacre (Greenacre (1984, 1993) and Greenacre & Blasius (1994)), among others. In this step the limit is defined for the maximum and minimum degrees of competence to be operative.

8.- Scoring ranges are defined.

Score for Grade 4 = Grade A, that is, the achievement of the highest level identified with 100 per cent of the scale.

Score for Grade 3-Score for Grade 4 = Grade B

Score for Grade 2-Score for Grade 3 = Grade C

Score for Grade 1-Score for Grade 2 = Grade D, defined as the competence in the lowest level.

Score for Grade 0 – Score for Grade 1 = Grade E, defined as the competence with no development.

Score for Grade 0 = Grade F, described as the incompetence in the lowest level.

9.- According to the scoring for each level of command of the competence (and for every student) in the step 7 the geometric average is calculated. Here the weighing of each descriptor is determined by the assessor. The total sum of the weights is valued as one.

## 6. Conclusions

The implementation of a competency based educational model implies important changes in the learning strategy and, especially, in the design of the learning activities and the assessment processes. The competences that a student has to develop during his training period should be the leitmotiv of the teaching activity. It is necessary to define common rules to provide the educational model with consistency through an agreement that promotes a holistic and integral system for competency definition and assessment. The contribution of this work lies in the fact of designing a general and very useful method that comprises all the stages of the teaching planning.

The definition of competences by using observable indicators expressed for each competence in accordance with different mastery levels makes easier the assessment process as a key point in the competency education model. This allows the teaching staff not only to know the degree of a competence achieved by a student but also the aspect of the competence in which the student shows weakness.

The situational tests are an effective tool in the learning and assessment processes. The development of two practical examples above reveals their usefulness. Finally, the scoring system satisfies the need of quantifying, in an effective and objective way, the degree of the command of the competence for each student.

The development of a software tool, in progress at this moment, capable to automate the system of scoring and assessment process with graphical and numerical functions is

the potential research in future. This type of tool permits assessors to gather all the information easily.

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## TABLES

**Table 1** List of generic competences for Business Administration Degree

<b>Instrumental</b>	
	- Capacity of analysis and synthesis
	- Planning and time management
	- Basic general knowledge
	- Grounding in basic knowledge of the profesión in practice
	- Oral and written communication in native language
	- Knowledge of a second language
	- Elementary computing skills
	- Information management skills
	- Problem solving
	- Decision-making
<b>Interpersonal</b>	
	- Critical and self-critical abilities
	- Teamwork
	- Interpersonal skills
	- Ability to work in an interdisciplinary team
	- Ability to communicate with non-experts (in the field)
	- Appreciation of diversity and multiculturality
	- Ability to work in an international context
	- Ethical commitment
<b>Systemic</b>	
	- Capacity for applying knowledge in practice
	- Research skills
	- Capacity to learn
	- Capacity to adapt to new situations
	- Capacity for generating new ideas (creativity)
	- Leadership
	- Understanding of cultures and customs of other countries
	- Ability to work autonomously
	- Project design and management
	- Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit
	- Concern for quality
	- Will to succeed

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the information available in: <http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=183&Itemid=210>

**Table 2** List of evidence indicators to assess Interpersonal Skills competence for Business and Administration Degree

<b>Grade</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>					
<b>Active Listen</b>	He is not capable to repeat the ideas given by the others.	He is capable to repeat the others' ideas but he does not pass judgement on them.	He can repeat the others' ideas and he demonstrates to be capable to understand them although he is not in favour of them.	He makes comments and criticizes everything about the speakers' points of view.	He strengthens the others' point of view in an agreed way and he continues his argument starting from the others' positions.
<b>Dialogue</b>	He does not take part in.	He only takes part in the team to defend a position.	He takes part in if there is a controversial situation.	He gets closer to other speakers through his corporal position-posture, and nodding his assent.	He respects the round of questions. He is capable to express fluently with no deficiencies in his language and no communicative barriers (pet words or stereotypes)
<b>Empathy</b>	He does not accept different points of view from his.	He accepts the others' contributions but he continues to defend his own one.	He makes questions to the others to understand their position.	He makes questions or tries to go deeply into the others' feelings.	He shows to be capable to feel what the others can feel.
<b>Assertiveness</b>	He does not express what he can feel or think about.	He is capable to express his own feelings or the others' ones.	He says his thoughts although they are the opposite to the others' ones.	He defends his own points of view with no aggression to others' ones.	He expresses what he can feel and think about and asks for critical opinions of his points of view to the others.

Source: Own elaboration

**Table 3** *An example table to collect information about how to assess the command of the competence*

<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Descriptor1</b>			<b>X</b>			
<b>Descriptor2</b>		<b>X</b>				
<b>Descriptor3</b>		<b>X</b>				
<b>Descriptor4</b>		<b>X</b>				
<b>TOTAL</b>						

*Source: Own elaboration*