THE ASSESSMENT OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES:
THE IMPORTANCE OF *GENERAL* CRITERIA

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published in:

Edwards A & Knight P (Eds.) *Degrees of Competence: The Assessment of Competence in Higher Education*, London, Kogan Page, 1995

1) Introduction: Criticisms of Competence-based Higher Education as the Starting Point for the ASSET (Social Work) Programme

This chapter describes the use of a set of general assessment criteria in a competence-based degree in social work (the ASSET Programme - **A**ccreditation and **S**upport for **S**pecified **E**xpertise and **T**raining) as a resolution of some key difficulties in the model of competence-based education promoted by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).

The underlying principles of competence-based education , as exemplified in the work of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), would seem to have much to recommend themselves to those concerned with the education of professional practitioners. They suggest that we should (and can) derive curricula empirically, by consulting the practitioners themselves as to the practice requirements of professional work; that we should (and can) formulate educational objectives in terms of required professional outcomes ("competences") which can be used as criteria by assessors; that candidates for qualifications should (and can) produce evidence of learning from their practice, without necessarily carrying out a prescribed assignment or attending any particular "course". In other words, NCVQ implicitly speak to us of familiar and acceptable educational themes, such as curriculum relevance, precision and justice in assessment, increased access to educational opportunity, and a general "learner-centredness" which is the very first emphasis in Gilbert Jessup's book on the work of NCVQ (Jessup, 1991, pp.3-4).

Nevertheless, in spite of this apparently respectable educational basis for a competence -based approach to professional curricula, many academics have treated it with

the utmost suspicion. One of the most widespread criticisms is that the lists of specific requirements are "behaviourist" (Elliott, 1991, p.123; Norris, 1991, p.332) and "atomistic" (Ashworth and Saxton, 1990, p.11; Elliott, 1991, p.119; Field, 1991, p.50).   This is also presented as a problem of "reductionism" (Whitty and Wilmott, 1991, p.317) as opposed to professional "holism" (Douglas, 1990, p.24). Field sums up the underlying worry when he describes "competence based assessment" as "the new Fordism of the education system", i.e. as a method of analysis and organisation in which the motive of "managerial control" (Elliott, p.119) "narrows the scope of initiative and field of responsibility of each individual in her work" (Field, p.50).   Ashworth and Saxton suggest that competence statements are intended always to refer to a single behavioural aspect of a task, and therefore cannot encompass such obviously important matters as "maturity" (op. cit., p.16), "critical thinking" (p.17), "group work" (p.14), and "complex skills" (p.12) in general.   Finally, Elliott claims that competence-based approaches lead to the denial of "theoretical understanding as a basis for professional practice" (op. cit., p.119) and of the ethical basis for professional work (op. cit., p.124).   The culmination of this criticism was the report by Alan Smithers, who roundly condemned the lack of intellectual rigour and suggested that we should take note of French and German vocational education procedures which retain a strong element of conventional classroom teaching (Smithers, 1993, pp.38-9)

Such criticisms of competence-based education were the *starting point* for the development of the ASSET Programme, which was conceived from the outset (i.e. in January 1990) as a project which would attempt to negotiate a model for work-based learning combining precision and holism, a concern for practice standards and a concern for educational processes.   This has led the ASSET Programme to adopt procedures which while accepting the educational values underlying some aspects of the work of NCVQ, nevertheless involve a substantial difference in emphasis and in format.   This chapter describes the nature of these differences and argues for the advantages of the ASSET format.   In particular it focuses on the systematic incorporation of *general* assessment criteria alongside the specification of detailed practice requirements (i.e. "competence statements").   The argument is that this gives due weight to the educational aspects of the accreditation of learning and also allows the demonstration of practice competences to be clearly associated with assessment at a particular educational "level".

The ASSET Programme was funded by the Employment Department (Further and Higher Education Branch) for a total of four years.   The first two years established a post qualifying practice-based honours degree in social work, under the general aegis of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and involved a partnership between Anglia Polytechnic University and Essex Social Services department. (During this stage of the work, ASSET stood for **A**ccreditation of **S**ocial **S**ervices **E**xpertise and **T**raining.)   The next phase involved a partnership between Anglia Polytechnic University and the Ford Motor Company and has led to the establishment of a work-based honours degree in Automotive Engineering, based initially on the model devised for the ASSET social work degree.

The central feature of the social work ASSET model is that its approach to assessment is two-dimensional (see Winter, 1994b) and this is the way in which it explicitly attempts to address the issues outlined in the opening paragraphs.   Briefly, the ASSET Model combines the use of a) detailed practice requirements derived from the analysis of the specific "functions" which practitioners need to fulfil in the course of their work ("Functional Analysis") and b) general role requirements embodying an analysis of the parameters of the professional role.   These two types of criterion are involved in every assessment decision, as described in sections 3 & 4 below.   In order to clarify the significance of this feature of the ASSET Model the next section analyses the short-comings of the "orthodox" NCVQ model which presents practice "standards" in terms of a single dimension, i.e. the progressive subdivision of an abstract purpose into a multiplicity of concrete tasks.

2) One-Dimensional Assessment -The Managerial Specification of "Standards'

The NCVQ approach to competence specification involves generating a simple logical hierarchy in which the "Key Purpose" of an occupational area is "disaggregated" step by step into detailed "Performance Criteria" for each "element of competence".   Let us take, as a typical example, extracts from the document which presents the "National Standards" for professional practitioners working in the area of Training and Development, produced by the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB, 1991).

The overall "Key Purpose" of the work as presented by TDLB is to:-
Develop human potential to assist organisation and individuals to achieve their objectives.

This is divided into five "Areas", for example:-

A) Identify Training and Development Needs

B) Design Training and Development Strategies and Plans

etc., etc.

Each Area is divided into two or three "Key Roles".   For example B) above is divided into:-

B1) Design organisation training and development strategies and plans

B2) Design strategies to assist individuals and groups achieve their objectives.

Each unit of competence is divided into between two and seven "Units of Competence.   For example, B2 above is divided into five units, including:-

B23)   Specify the resources needed to deliver programmes

B24)   Test, adapt and agree learning programme designs.

Each Unit is then subdivided into several "Elements of Competence".   B24) is thus subdivided into:-

B241) Identify and select strategies for testing learning programme designs

B242) Test and assess learning programme designs

B243) Adapt and agree learning programme designs

etc., etc.

Finally "Performance Criteria" are given for each element.   In the case of B242 these are as follows:

a)   adequate, accurate and timely briefings are given to appropriate people

b)   test are administered within agreed timescales, plans and budgets

c) accurate and reliable information is identified and accessed

d) confidential information is stored securely and made available only to those who have a right to it

e) data gathering, tests and assessment activities are administered in a manner which enhances and maintains the dignity of the individual

f) assessments are fair and justifiable

g) assessment reports are presented which accurately and coherently describe the methods and results of tests and the conclusions to be drawn about the design of the learning programme

h) reports are stored securely and made available only to those who have a right to them.

The implication of the logical hierarchy format is that it should provide a mapping of an occupational area which is exhaustively complete, and which becomes more and more

behaviourally precise as it subdivides an original abstraction into smaller and smaller components.   I have argued elsewhere (Winter, 1992) that this approach risks falling into a simple philosophical misunderstanding: linguistic maps of experience are not systematic, but metaphoric, and are thus always open to interpretation.   There can thus be no suggestion that documentation of this type might provide "objective" standards, as the algorithmic format might otherwise seem to imply.   The important thing to realise is that *we are not "measuring" anything* (with all those aspirations to unambiguous precision so appealingly embodied in the clock, the thermometer, and the ruler).   Rather, we are *evaluating evidence*, and much can be learned about the process from writers on jurisprudence, concerning "sufficient" evidence, "standards of proof", etc. (see, for example Twining, 1990, on the myth of the "the perfect map", p.367).

The main points I wish to make at this stage in the argument are that this supposedly systematic document leads to assessment criteria which a) are neither particularly precise nor particularly consistent, b) are more managerial than educational, and c) give little help in indicating the educational level for which they are appropriate.   These points are elaborated below. The term "performance criteria" hints at behavioural / observable / quantifiable evidence (and hence "objective" measurement), but all it means in the NCVQ documentation is the inclusion of explicitly evaluative terms or phrases (e.g. "accurate", "timely", "in a manner which enhances....the dignity of the individual").   These evaluative terms can, of course, only be applied to actual situations by means of further judgements as to how they will be interpreted: what will *count as* an "adequate" *briefing*? etc.   And similar questions can also be raised about statements much higher in the logical hierarchy.   For example we can easily convert an "Area" statement into the same syntactical form as a performance criterion (e.g. "Training and development needs are identified") and then ask: "What counts as a 'need'?" and "What counts as 'identify'?" (A list? Any old list? An *accurate* list? A list plus rationale?).   In other words, the logical hierarchy format does not create an objective measuring device but an orderly series of comments, which can be helpful to those who are already knowledgeable .   If "standards" documents like those of the TDLB are "occupational maps", they are not like Ordnance Survey Maps, but more like a regional Good Pubs Guide. Of course, some of the performance criteria are even less precise than others. Considering the example above, "accurate" and "reliable" have a technical aspect which might place them at one end of the scale, while at the other end we would have such terms as "adequate" and "fair" which immediately open up a whole Pandora's box of further questions.

The list of criteria also varies in terms of the implied vocational role.   At one end of this scale we might put criteria e) and f), which present candidates with complex ethical judgements and a large degree of discretion in the application of specialised bodies of knowledge.   At the other end we have b) and h), which imply only obedience to simple work-place rules, and are less likely to specify the direct responsibilities of professional trainers (learning programme designers) than those of their receptionists or clerical administrators.   In between, perhaps, we find b), which implies a sort of "middle manager" role.   Why, we may ask, such apparently obvious inconsistency, especially after such a massive analytical effort as the logical hierarchy seems to proclaim?

The reason is not hard to find. The performance criteria are not intended to comprise a unified *educational* "standard" (a level of understanding, knowledge, and awareness) but a *managerial* standard, i.e. a subset of the various dimensions in which an organisation will wish to (or be required to) monitor its effectiveness, its efficiency, its profitability, its conformity to external legislation and to its own mission statement.   From this (managerial) point of view inconsistencies in terms of educational requirements clearly do not matter.

Indeed, NCVQ argue that competence statements (their "standards") have no necessary link with an "educational level":

> "One feature of the NVQ model is that units [of competence] are not assigned a fixed level within the levels framework.   It is the qualification as a whole which carries level."

(Oates, 1994, p.23)

The "educational levels" framework of NCVQ ranges from work which is "routine and predictable" to work which involves "the application of ...fundamental principles, ...substantial personal autonomy,...and...responsibility for others". (NCVQ 1991, pp. 17-18). The NCVQ levels framework is, as I have argued elsewhere (Winter, 1993) an unsatisfactory document which implicitly assumes a link between cognitive achievement, levels of personal autonomy, and organisational responsibilities in an uncritical evocation of a social class hierarchy.   Nevertheless, the sequences of NCVQ levels do represent an attempt to outline an educational progression, as well as a managerial hierarchy, even though one may not accept the parallelism between these two dimensions.   It might therefore seem to be a strange feature of the NCVQ format that its competence statements remain outside its levels framework, and that the set of criteria we have just considered could be applied to assessing

candidates' work within a vocational course which was the equivalent of an A level or the equivalent of a Higher Degree.

The explanation, as I have suggested, is that within the NCVQ format "standards" are not educational standards but, ultimately, managerial or "quality control" standards. This means that they have no clear relationship whatsoever with educational curricula: they are not, for example, "objectives" or "learning outcomes".   This feature of the NCVQ work is likely to create considerable confusion; the Further Education Unit , for example, in its current attempts to establish a credit framework, explicitly *do* wish to treat competence statements as learning outcomes and to associate each learning outcome with an educational level. (see Wilson, 1993)   In the context of this debate the model of competence assessment developed by the ASSET Programme would seem to have a clear contribution to make: the ASSET format *does* have a systematic linkage between statements referring to practice requirements ("standards" in the NCVQ sense) and educational criteria.   The nature of this linkage will be described in the following section.

3) The ASSET Programme - A Two-Dimension Process for Educational Assessment

The first process in establishing the competence statements which were to be the starting point for the ASSET social work degree was *not* the "functional analysis" discussions with practitioners as to what their work involves.   Instead, our first emphasis was to establish a general set of criteria which could be used to clarify the level at which the competences would be assessed, namely at the level of "an honours degree" and at the level of "professional" practice.   In other words, we realised from the outset that it would be important for an educational curriculum document to resolve the difficulties previously noted, and which - even in 1990, when our work began - were apparent in the NCVQ approach (See Maisch and Winter, 1991.

Three separate studies were therefore undertaken in order to establish the general criteria. These were as follows:-

a) An empirical study of the categories used by academic examiners in evaluating honours degree level work in a variety of different disciplines (These were at first taken to be specific to honours degree level study, but subsequent research showed that most of the categories used by examiners were common to all post-school study (see Winter, 1994a), so that what this study established should be described perhaps as "successful academic work".)

b) An empirical study of the categories used by social work practitioners to indicate the qualities required for successful professional practice (This study used the Kelly "Personal Construct" Repertory Grid method of investigation and analysis - See Kelly, 1955.)

c) A theoretical study of the nature of the professional role, with particular reference to interpersonal professional work (e.g. social work, teaching, management. etc.)

From the results of these three studies, a set of "Core Assessment Criteria" was drawn up.   These are presented below.   (They have been slightly modified (simplified) in the course of use within the Programme over the last three years.)

THE ASSET PROGRAMME CORE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

NOTE: All criteria must be implicitly demonstrated in the evidence for each element of competence in each unit : the evidence for each element must be explicitly related to one of the criteria; particular attention should be paid to criterion no. 1 throughout the work.

CRITERION No. 1: "Commitment to Professional Values"

Demonstrates understanding of and commitment to professional values in practice, through the implementation of anti-discriminatory / anti-oppressive / anti-racist principles.

This involves demonstrating:-

1) awareness of the need to counteract one's own tendency (both as a person and as a professional worker endowed with specific powers) to behave oppressively;

2) respect for dignity / diversity / privacy / autonomy;

CRITERION No. 2: "Continuous Professional Learning"

Demonstrates commitment to and capacity for reflection on practice, leading to progressive deepening of professional understanding.

This involves demonstrating:-

1) willingness and capacity to learn from others, including clients / supervisees / colleagues;

2) recognition that professional judgements are always open to question;

3) ability to engage in self-evaluation, recognising and analysing one's strengths and limitations.

CRITERION No. 3: "Affective Awareness"

Demonstrates sensitivity to and understanding of the emotional complexity of particular situations.

This involves combining sensitivity with effective management of emotional responses in the course of professional relationships.

CRITERION No. 4: "Effective Communication"

Demonstrates ability to communicate effectively in complex professional contexts.

This involves communicating in a form and manner which is clear, sensitive, and appropriately varied in style and medium according to particular audiences and purposes.

CRITERION No. 5: "Executive Effectiveness"

Demonstrates ability to pursue the stages of a chosen approach in relation to a clearly established purpose.

This involves demonstrating decisiveness combined with sensitivity in making difficult judgements in response to complex situations.

CRITERION No. 6: "Effective Grasp of a Wide Range of Professional Knowledge"

Demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between various types of professional knowledge, and an ability to apply this understanding effectively through practice.

This involves demonstrating:-

1) comprehensive knowledge and critical evaluation of professional methods / policy / procedures / general theory / research findings / legislation;

2) ability to relate specific details to other contexts and to general principles.

CRITERION No. 7: "Intellectual Flexibility"

Demonstrates an open-minded awareness of alternatives.

This involves demonstrating the ability to analyse issues in terms of dilemmas and/or to analyse situations in terms of continuous change..

In parallel with the work to establish the set of general criteria presented above, discussions with practitioners were conducted to gather data about the detailed practice requirements of their role. This work used the functional analysis method advocated by NCVQ (See Winter and Maisch, 1991) and led to the construction of units of competence which have much in common with NVQ documentation such as the TDLB "standards" previously discussed. The main difference is that the general criteria were used to exclude from the list of competence statements any which seemed to be too "simple" to offer an opportunity to demonstrate any of the general criteria. (This removes one of the difficulties with the TDLB example; see the comments on TDLB performance criteria d) & h) on p.x above)

The ASSET Programme competence statements follow the NVQ "elements of competence" syntax, rather than the "performance criteria" syntax. This simply involves making the candidate the implied subject of the sentence, which seems appropriate since they are intentionally focused on the work of the individual, as befits a learning outcome within a curriculum document. The difference between the two syntactical forms is, however, in the end, a fairly superficial matter, such that one form of any given statement can easily be translated into the other (see p.x above.) However, since my intention is to show the extent of the common ground between the ASSET Programme and the NCVQ format as well as the key differences, the example of an ASSET Programme unit of competence is quoted below in a "performance criteria" format, since it is the performance criteria which are used within the NCVQ model (like the ASSET unit elements) as the basis for the presentation of evidence.

THE SOCIAL WORK ASSET PROGRAMME
(UNIT OF COMPETENCE 3)
"PROMOTING CLIENTS' POTENTIAL FOR INDEPENDENCE"
<u>NVQ (PERFORMANCE CRITERIA) FORMAT</u>

<u>Elements of competence</u>

a) The full range of relevant resources and services and the criteria for their provision is communicated to clients.

b) Clients are advised concerning the policies and statutory responsibilities of local authorities and the legal framework within which they operate.

c) Clients are helped to recognise their own strengths and needs, and to assess and accept their individual starting points and capabilities.

d) Differences between clients' perceptions and candidates' perceptions concerning achievable goals are understood, and a plan is constructed which accepts the outcomes of negotiated processes.

e) Effective representations are made on behalf of clients.

f) Supportive links are developed between the client, the client's personal network,, relevant local organisations, and social work agencies.

g) The theoretical basis for the social worker's authority, responsibilities, and methods of practice are understood.

h) A professional relationship with clients is managed, in which the exercise of appropriate authority is balanced against an understanding of the necessity for client empowerment.

j) Clients are involved in discussions and decisions which affect their situation.

k) The relationship is clarified between candidates' feelings concerning the situation and those of the client.

The competence statements given above suggest that, in spite of the criticisms quoted at the beginning of the chapter, competence statements *can* do justice to the complexity of the professional role, with its inevitable combination of the intellectual, the affective, and the ethical, its uncertainties and its dilemmas. Comparable examples in the context of teacher education are quoted in Whitty, 1991, p.10. There is no need to frame statements of competence within a narrowly behaviouristic, reductionist model of human activity, unless one is committed to a model of social enquiry which still has these characteristics (in spite of recent decades of development in social science methodology), or unless one is engaged not in curriculum design at all, but in articulating a format for managerial control, which has its own purposes for thinking it requires a reductionist model (see Winter, 1989, pp. 186-193).

4) Combining General and Specific Criteria

Within the ASSET Programme, candidates compile portfolios of work-based evidence and a supporting commentary to demonstrate that they have fulfilled the competence requirements AND the general criteria. They begin by drawing up an action plan in which they consider

how their actual (or potential practice) can link each of the competence statements (a - k) with one or other of the core criteria (1 - 7).   This allows candidates a measure of autonomy in adapting the Programme documentation to the details of their own practice situation or work profile.

Thus, candidates might approach competence a) in a number of ways:
* The obvious focus would be on core criterion 6, ensuring that the range of resources is very varied,detailed and comprehensive, and that the criteria for provision are explained in such detail that the principles underlying them are analysed.
* If this is a new or unusual type of client for the candidate, fulfilling competence a) may involve investigative work, which would then enable the candidate to focus their evidence on core criterion 2. ("Professional Learning")
* If the client is one with whom communication is difficult, then fulfilment of this competence might also create evidence for core criterion 4 ("Effective Communication")
*   If there is a painful discrepancy between the client's perception of their needs and the availability of resources, then the fulfilment of this competence could also create evidence for criterion 3 ("Affective Awareness").
** What would not be acceptable within the Programme, would be to simply pass on to the client an official pre-prepared document.   This would fulfil the competence statement, but would NOT demonstrate any of the core criteria.   It *could* be carried out by the team clerk, although the social worker might usually do this personally.   In many cases it would be quite acceptable practice in terms of managerial "quality" standards (and would thus be acceptable within the NVQ format) but it would not earn credit within the ASSET Programme.

It is not necessary to analyse all the possible permutations of competences and general criteria.   Readers can do so for themselves simply by reading the competence statements a) - k) against each of the Core Criteria (1 - 7) in turn.   Not all permutations make sense, of course, but there are always two or three realistic possibilities.   Each combination of specific competence and general criterion provides an intellectual and professional challenge and makes the demonstration of the competences a taxing educational process while retaining the basic format of practice-based assessment evidence.   I hope, therefore, that this example indicates how the combination of specific and general criteria enables ASSET Programme assessment procedures to ensure the level of the work, both in terms of its professional quality (the value base of the work, affective awareness, executive effectiveness) and also its intellectual qualities (the knowledge required, the ability to learn through practice,

flexibility). This dichotomy (intellectual / professional is, of course, not one which the Programme encourages: on the contrary, the essence of the Core Assessment Criteria is that they identify the role requirements of candidates in a way, at a level of abstraction, which synthesises the practical and the academic and thereby transcends the distinction. That, surely, is what a university competence-based vocational curriculum should aim to do.

5) Conclusion, Implications

I have tried to show how the two-dimensional assessment process of the ASSET Programme can resolve the problems created by the NVQ one-dimensional approach. Single dimensional assessment always runs up against Wittgenstein's problem of definitions: any rule-like statement apparently defining an action (e.g. a statement of a competence requirement) always needs a further rule-like statement explaining how the first rule is to be applied in a particular context. (What will count as "identifies" in the TDLB example? (see p.) What counts as "the full range" or "relevant" or "communicated" in the ASSET example?) This obviously leads to either an infinite regress or to a practical decision which ignores the problem (See Wittgenstein, 1963, pp. 40-49). Hence, all rules (and especially Assessment procedures) can only operate as interpretive judgements within a knowledgeable community. Learning can never, therefore, be "measured", as with a ruler.

Indeed, the limitations of the ruler as a metaphor for educational judgements returns us to the alternative metaphor of the "second dimension". One of the few vivid memories I have of secondary school geometry is that the *accurate* way of identifying a particular point along a line was to construct a perpendicular to the line: the *point* is defined as an intersection. Rulers were excluded, with the explanation that each marker upon the ruler had its own irrelevant and distracting width, making "accuracy" impossible. The mathematical principle here is that to identify a point along one dimension you need a second dimension; or, more generally: to identify a point in N dimensions, you always need $N + 1$ dimensions.

This is the principle underlying the role of the general assessment criteria within the ASSET Programme: as a necessary means for identifying a range of acceptable interpretations for statements describing specific competences. More generally, this may be taken as a formulation of the *necessity* for "Core / Transferable Skills" in educational assessment, i.e. as a set of *general* "learning outcomes" operating as the requisite "second

dimension" in conjunction with the specific learning outcomes of a particular curriculum unit. As a principle for assessment, it is also broadly applicable to academic as well as vocational courses, but this would require a further chapter; the work of Sue Otter on "Learning Outcomes in Higher Education" (Otter, 1992) would be a useful starting point for such an analysis.

NCVQ have begun to acknowledge the role of this second, *general* dimension of assessment in their references to "communication, problem-solving, and personal skills" and they note that "the identification of such requirements may become essential" (NCVQ, 1991, p.8). There are further hopeful signs in the GNVQ work on "Grading Themes" which focus on the candidate's ability to manage the learning process, i.e. on planning, organising, revising, selecting and evaluating resources, and self-evaluation (see BTEC, 1992, p.14).

The ASSET Core Assessment Criteria document takes such thinking to its logical conclusion, and builds in the general dimension of assessment in such a way that it is not "added on" but is inseparable from the specific, competence-based dimension. This, I have argued, is a way of reconnecting the specification of competences with professional values and with the challenge of a genuinely educational process. It might also be, as I have suggested, one way of beginning to address the vexed and vexing question of educational "levels".

Acknowledgements

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