

Stakeholder Summary

Rise of competency-based education could help bridge ‘skills gap’

With increased pressure on the postsecondary education system to prepare students for a changing workforce, competency-based education (CBE) is emerging as a promising model for preparing graduates to meet employer demands.

A new report published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Competency-based Education: Driving the Skills-measurement Agenda*, explores the development of CBE in North America and examines its promise and potential in Ontario.

Competency-based education — a model that focuses on the knowledge and abilities students demonstrate, regardless of the amount of time they spend in a classroom — is gaining attention internationally. Because they hold the potential to graduate students quickly, cost-effectively and with the skills needed to meet employer demands, CBE programs are ideally suited for groups not always well-served by traditional postsecondary education, such as adult learners.

Since Western Governors University — an American non-profit institution offering online, competency-based degrees — opened its doors in the late 1990s, CBE has grown exponentially in the United States. In 2012 there were roughly 20 institutions offering CBE in the US, and by 2016 more than 600 were either designing or implementing CBE programs.

Competency-based education has taken off at a slower pace and on a smaller scale in Canada. However, the programs that do exist have shown promising results. The orthopedics residency program in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, for example, started a two-track experiment where the conventional program ran alongside a competency-based version. The students in the competency-based track were consistently out-performing their peers in the conventional track, leading the researchers to end the experiment early and change the entire program to a competency-based model.

Additional Findings

The researchers found that CBE is best-suited to adult learners who might have family or work responsibilities, and who can progress through material quickly given their previous school or employment experience. CBE programs also offer the potential for adults, particularly those who have been displaced from their jobs, to upgrade their skills.

The researchers acknowledged that younger students who have just finished high school and who have limited labour market experience may be better served by a traditional, cohort-based model.

“CBE works when you have a very clear target behaviour that is highly measurable,” said one interviewee from the University of Toronto. “Our [undergraduate] program is more about practising an

interconnected set of skills and abilities.” With this in mind, the researchers predicted that most opportunities for expansion of CBE in Ontario will be in graduate or professional degree programs.

The benefits of CBE, however, need not be restricted to self-paced programs, they added. All postsecondary programs could benefit from elements of the model — particularly its well-defined learning outcomes, its credential that signals competence to employers, and its underlying assumption that with the right resources and support all students can meet high standards of achievement.

Competency-based Education: Driving the Skills-measurement Agenda is written by Jackie Pichette and Elyse K. Watkins, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.