

## COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS

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### Abstract

*Over the past decades, shifts in social and labor market demands have driven higher education institutions (HEIs) to transition from qualification-focused models toward Competence-Based Learning (CBL) and Competence-Based Education (CBE). These approaches prioritize the development of both core (disciplinary) and transversal (soft) competencies, fostering adaptability, employability, and lifelong learning. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of competencies, highlights international frameworks such as UNESCO and ESCO, and explores challenges related to curriculum adaptation, assessment practices, and digital competence integration. A case study at the University of Oradea investigated employer perceptions of 27 bachelor-level curricula across 15 faculties. Findings revealed high concordance between curricula and labor market needs in engineering programs (70–100%), whereas social sciences, particularly Psychology, displayed lower alignment (50–70%), reflecting persistent gaps between academic training and professional practice. Across all disciplines, employers consistently valued transversal competencies, including teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and digital skills. These results underscore the importance of integrating employer perspectives, promoting faculty-industry collaboration, and systematically evaluating CBL/CBE implementation to enhance graduate employability. Moreover, the study emphasizes the critical role of digital competence for both students and educators in preparing graduates for technology-driven workplaces. Overall, aligning competency-based curricula with labor market expectations, embedding transversal skills, and fostering digital literacy offers a robust pathway for HEIs to support graduates in navigating diverse career trajectories while contributing to inclusive and sustainable societal development.*

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Since the end of the twentieth century, numerous social and work-related transformations have required a shift from an educational paradigm centered on qualifications and specialization toward a modern paradigm focused on the development of competencies and multifunctionality. This new paradigm is referred to, in a narrower sense, as **Competence-Based Learning (CBL)**, which encompasses the processes and methods of teaching and acquiring skills, or, in a broader sense, as **Competence-Based Education (CBE)**, which structures the entire learning environment around the demonstration of mastery of specific competencies (Srinivasan et al., 2007). The increasing emphasis on competence development in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Abelha et al., 2020).

Within this framework, CBL approaches emphasize learning outcomes rather than instructional time. According to Franklin and Lytle (2015), competency-based approaches reward demonstrated learning rather than time spent in class. For example, some universities in the United States organize their CBL systems in such a way that students are free to progress to a new set of competencies as soon as they demonstrate mastery of the previous ones.

Beyond structural changes in learning organization, the implementation of CBE in HEIs is expected to foster graduates' adaptability and employability. Specifically, CBE should enable graduates to be creative and proactive in identifying professional opportunities, to maximize their personal resources in securing desired employment, and to transition between jobs when needed. In this sense, CBL aims to enhance the work-life relevance of education in order to meet the evolving demands of the labor market and society more broadly (Brauer, 2021). Ideally, CBE should also prepare graduates to understand global events, collaborate with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, and contribute to peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable communities (Jiaxin et al., 2024).

### **Defining Competencies**

A central concept underlying this educational paradigm is that of **competencies**. Competencies have been defined as a multifaceted integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empower individuals for personal development, active citizenship, and success in evolving labor markets (European Commission, 2006). By promoting a holistic, lifelong learning perspective rather than a narrow focus on vocational requirements, this framework supports the design of national education policies and

curricula. A key role in this implementation is played by specialized tools such as the LifeComp framework, which operationalizes the "Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn" competence in order to foster both individual well-being and a prosperous, adaptable society.

Complementing this definition, competencies are also described as "valuable goals that are based on the combination and mastery of new knowledge, styles of practice, and attitudes or values that are desirable and formative" (García-Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 203). This emphasis on competencies reflects a broader shift in the understanding of human capital as a critical factor for improving employability. Individuals can increase their human capital by investing time and/or financial resources in education and training, thereby overcoming certain limitations associated with demographic characteristics (Faur & Drugaș, 2025).

Within the context of CBL, the literature commonly distinguishes between two main categories of competencies. Core competencies, also referred to as "technical", "subject-specific", or "hard skills", denote "technical and academic knowledge and the abilities needed to perform a certain job" (García-Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 4). These competencies are closely related to professional practice and are strongly linked to specific fields of knowledge (Abelha et al., 2020).

In contrast, transversal competencies, often labeled as "soft skills," encompass generic competencies resulting from a "dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills" (García-Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 4). As such, they are highly demanded by employers. Although transversal competencies extend beyond technical subject matter, they remain closely connected to professional practice, including areas such as communication, teamwork, and digital competencies (Abelha et al., 2020).

Despite a relative degree of consensus in the literature regarding the definition of competencies, HEIs continue to face significant challenges related to curriculum adaptation and the effective fostering and development of competencies (Abelha et al., 2020). In response to these challenges, some HEIs have begun to explicitly list the competencies acquired by graduates on diplomas as a means of certifying their readiness for the labor market (Hodgman, 2018).

From the employers' perspective, transversal competencies appear to be particularly valued due to their contribution to business efficiency (Bezanilla et al., 2019) and their importance in navigating periods of labor market uncertainty (García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

#### *A Special Mention on Digital Competence*

We live in an era dominated by digital technologies, many of which are increasingly driven by artificial intelligence (AI). Despite the optimism expressed in the early 2000s regarding the digital skills of young people

(e.g., Prensky, 2001a; 2001b), research suggests that most teenagers and young adults possess only a basic level of digital competence (Drugăș, 2022; Drugăș, 2025; Zhao et al., 2021).

In response, many higher education institutions are striving to modernize their teaching methods and provide students with educational environments that emphasize digital competence. Today's students have grown up immersed in online media and have experienced the challenges of remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, making digital literacy essential for their academic and professional development.

However, the development of digital competence is not limited to students. Educators themselves must acquire the necessary skills to teach and collaborate effectively with digital natives (Zhao et al., 2021). In practice, however, the digital realm remains unfamiliar to many teachers, at least in Romania (Drugăș, 2020). A recent meta-analysis by Zhao et al. (2021) found that participants in the selected studies reported "limiting capacities when operating technological tools in some areas" (p. 8), and some educators were uncertain about how to integrate digital technologies into their teaching practices.

The European Commission (2006) identified digital competence as one of eight key competencies for lifelong learning, alongside:

- Communication in the mother tongue (literacy competence),
- Communication in foreign languages (multilingual competence),
- Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology, and engineering (STEM),
- Digital competence,
- Personal, social, and learning-to-learn competence,
- Civic competence,
- Entrepreneurship competence,
- Cultural awareness and expression competence.

Zhao et al. (2021) highlighted the growing interest in developing digital competence within higher education institutions, while noting that further effort is required to identify and implement pedagogical approaches that effectively integrate digital skills into current educational models.

### **International Competency Frameworks: UNESCO vs. ESCO**

To operationalize competence-based education and align learning outcomes with societal and labor market needs, various international frameworks have been developed to define, structure, and classify competencies. Among the most influential are the competency frameworks proposed by UNESCO and the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification developed by the European Commission. Although both initiatives address competencies as key levers for education, employability, and social development, they differ

substantially in their underlying purposes, conceptual orientations, and modes of application. The following section outlines these two approaches, highlighting their normative versus functional logics and their complementary roles in shaping education, workforce development, and policy across global and European contexts.

UNESCO competency frameworks are normative, values-driven constructs designed to articulate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required to achieve complex societal goals, such as sustainable development, inclusive education, or effective organizational performance. These frameworks are often domain-specific (e.g., sustainability competencies or AI literacy competencies for students and teachers) and are grounded in global values, including human rights, equity, inclusivity, and sustainability. For instance, UNESCO's sustainability competencies emphasize systems thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and integrated problem-solving as essential capabilities for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2016; 2017). In addition to education-focused frameworks, UNESCO has also developed competency instruments for organizational human resources, in which core values such as integrity, professionalism, respect for diversity, and commitment are embedded within behavioral competency standards for staff (UNESCO, 2016).

Consistent with this normative orientation, UNESCO frameworks place strong emphasis on transformative learning and ethical agency, supporting learners and professionals in interpreting and acting within complex, uncertain, and value-laden contexts (UNESCO, 2017). This focus highlights the role of competencies not only as functional skills but also as drivers of social responsibility and systemic change.

In contrast to UNESCO's values-based approach, the *European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)* framework represents a multilingual classification system developed by the European Commission to identify, describe, and standardize skills, competences, knowledge, and occupations relevant to the European Union labor market and education and training systems. ESCO is not normative or values-driven per se; rather, it serves a descriptive and functional purpose by providing a shared terminology that enables stakeholders to match skills and qualifications with occupational requirements, facilitate labor mobility, and enhance transparency and interoperability across countries (European Commission, 2025). The ESCO taxonomy categorizes approximately 13,485 skills and competence concepts, along with knowledge elements, structured hierarchically (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and language skills), and links them to specific occupations and their essential or optional roles within job profiles (European Commission, 2019).

Accordingly, ESCO operates primarily as a classification and reference tool for employers, jobseekers, education providers, policymakers, and digital systems. It supports standardized labor market intelligence and qualification transparency, simplifies skills matching in job vacancies and curricula vitae, and enables digital platforms to conduct reskilling and upskilling analyses as well as cross-border job matching across Europe (European Commission, 2025).

### **Competency Implementation and Evaluation**

Despite the growing adoption of Competence-Based Learning (CBL), there remains a pressing need to establish clear standards, including those related to competency-based assessment practices (Cano et al., 2023), as well as to develop tools capable of examining the extent to which the CBL model has been implemented within higher education institutions. Such tools are also needed to support institutional managers in monitoring and guiding implementation processes, without diminishing the central roles of teachers and students. In this context, a competency-oriented approach requires substantial changes in teaching and learning practices, including a shift in focus from content transmission and knowledge acquisition toward the development of complex abilities. This shift entails the adoption of new teaching approaches, the implementation of assessment systems that incorporate structured feedback, and, more broadly, a rethinking of the entire curriculum (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2017).

In response to these challenges, and based on a review of the existing literature, Bezanilla et al. (2019) proposed a comprehensive model for the evaluation of CBL implementation in higher education. This model comprises seven interrelated dimensions that together capture the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical conditions necessary for effective competency-based education:

1. **Legal and administrative context**, acknowledging that HEIs operate within specific legislative frameworks that vary across countries. Key indicators for this dimension include the existence of dedicated legislation, guidelines, and procedures related to CBL, as well as governmental support for its implementation;
2. **Institutional context**, which refers to organizational and structural changes within HEIs designed to incorporate and sustain CBL principles;
3. **Degree program planning process**, beginning with the presence of an integrated educational project, the use of student-centered approaches, and the establishment of procedures for monitoring the implementation process;
4. **Module or subject planning process**, whereby individual teachers define both specific and generic competencies targeted within their

- courses, specify appropriate teaching and learning strategies, and establish suitable systems for competency assessment;
5. **Teaching practices and assessment**, addressing the actual implementation of methodologies that promote student motivation and involvement, meaningful learning experiences, student guidance and tutoring, and alignment between targeted competencies and assessment methods, which should be formative as well as summative in nature;
  6. **Module review and improvement**, encompassing teachers' reflective practices based on multiple sources of feedback, including personal reflections, input from colleagues and academic managers, and, in particular, students' evaluations;
  7. **Degree program review and improvement**, which functions as a feedback loop connected to degree program design and supports continuous curriculum enhancement.

Nevertheless, existing evaluation models appear to overlook an important economic pressure, namely employers' strategies for recruiting new workers. Although the variables that influence graduate employability remain insufficiently clarified, employability nevertheless represents a key metric for evaluating the efficiency of HEIs (Drugaş & Tiba, 2024). Consequently, HEIs are facing increasing pressure to produce "more employable" graduates. This pressure does not stem solely from national agencies responsible for evaluating institutional performance, but has also entered public political discourse, including that of policymakers (e.g., *Romania Journal*, 2025).

Within this context, HEIs have frequently been criticized for failing to adequately prepare graduates for real work environments (Abelha et al., 2020; Bogdány et al., 2025; Hodgman, 2018). Critics argue that graduates often lack sufficient professional experience - even in cases where practical training is formally required during their studies - and that a mismatch persists between what students learn and the actual requirements of the workplace (García-Álvarez et al., 2022). Illustratively, Hodgman (2018) reported that more than half of employers experienced difficulties in finding qualified candidates for job openings.

These concerns suggest that, among the factors contributing to graduate employability, "what graduates know" in terms of disciplinary knowledge may be less decisive than the transversal competencies that HEIs seek to develop. From this perspective, employability becomes closely linked to the broader competency-based agenda discussed earlier.

Against this background, at least two key topics emerge in discussions of employability that are relevant to both employers and HEIs: (1) which competencies are most relevant for increasing employability, and

(2) how employers from different sectors are involved in curriculum development. The following sections address these two dimensions in turn.

### **The most relevant competencies to increase employability**

According to a study conducted by García-Álvarez et al. (2022), which reviewed 52 articles published between 2008 and 2018 and indexed in the Web of Science and/or Scopus databases, the ten most important transversal competencies valued by employers were as follows:

- Basic skills: literacy, numeracy, and oral and written communication (73.1%);
- Teamwork skills (67.3%);
- Problem-solving skills (51.9%);
- Interpersonal skills (46.2%);
- Basic and job-specific ICT and computer skills (38.5%);
- Lifelong learning skills (36.5%);
- Basic knowledge and skills of the field and the profession (34.6%);
- Flexibility and adaptability skills (32.7%);
- Analytical skills (28.8%);
- Ethical working (25%).

In contrast, gender awareness, environmental sustainability awareness, negotiation skills, and networking skills received 0%.

Using a sample of 479 hiring managers in the United States, Franklin and Lytle (2015) identified a partially overlapping but slightly different hierarchy of valued competencies:

- Problem solving (74%);
- Teamwork (71%);
- Personal development (67%);
- Communication (67%);
- Technical skills (66%);
- Diversity (63%);
- Ethics (58%);
- Analysis (48%);
- Data analysis (42%);
- Technology (40%);
- Math (40%);
- Arts (16%).

Similarly, Hodgman (2018) identified a set of competencies that HEIs should prioritize in student development, including interpersonal, speaking, writing, ethical decision-making, technological, and intercultural skills.

Further reinforcing these findings, Brauer (2021) conducted a systematic literature review of 114 articles across multiple scientific databases and reported a notable pattern: although HEIs tend to place strong emphasis on technical knowledge, this category appears to be among the

least valued by employers. Instead, employers consistently prioritize transversal and generic competencies, such as teamwork and interpersonal skills.

### **Employers' involvement in curriculum development**

Beyond identifying relevant competencies, the extent to which employers are involved in curriculum development represents a second critical dimension of employability. The literature indicates that overall awareness of Competence-Based Education among employers remains relatively low (Henrich, 2016).

In this regard, Franklin and Lytle (2015) identified several obstacles to the broader adoption of CBL models across the labor market:

- Overall employer awareness of CBL is low;
- Employers who are already aware of these models constitute a small minority;
- Employers often do not understand the benefits of CBL education;
- They are generally unable to articulate their needs in terms of discrete competencies;
- Most employers believe it is more efficient to identify graduates who already possess a specific skill set for a given job.

Despite these barriers, the same study reported encouraging findings, indicating that employers generally expressed a strong willingness to collaborate with HEIs through formally established partnerships.

Acknowledging that HEIs are often insufficiently prepared to meet employers' expectations, Hodgman (2018) proposed a set of recommendations for higher education, based on articles indexed in fifteen academic databases:

- Modernization of academic programs to align them with contemporary labor market demands;
- Increasing the rigor of writing standards;
- Providing students with more opportunities for public speaking and structured feedback;
- Sharpening students' problem-solving skills;
- Teaching interview skills;
- Emphasizing professional ethics, including workshops based on real-life cases;
- Strengthening technology literacy;
- Updating technological curricula;
- Encouraging the study of foreign languages;
- Emphasizing graduate employability as a central driver of curriculum change.

Finally, employers can contribute directly to the development of meaningful work experience by offering internship opportunities that allow

students to build content knowledge, develop employability skills, and become familiar with organizational culture. Recruiters tend to rate prior relevant work experience as highly attractive (Hodgman, 2018), regardless of whether it was acquired through paid internships, unpaid volunteer activities, or specialty practice.

### **Case study: The University of Oradea**

Incorporating both HEIs' and employers' perspectives on the competencies that graduates should develop during their studies represents a significant challenge for educational policy. To address this issue, a project funded by the National Council for Higher Education Financing (Consiliul Național pentru Finanțarea Învățământului Superior – CNFIS) specifically analyzed the competencies outlined in formal documents at the University of Oradea, as well as factors related to employability rates of bachelor-level graduates. The project, entitled "For an efficient professional insertion, optimizing career counseling and guidance services" (Romanian original title: "Pentru o inserție profesională eficientă, optimizarea serviciilor de consiliere și orientare în carieră", registration code CNFIS-FDI-2024-F-0293), was coordinated by Marius Drugaș, PhD, received funding of 250,000 RON (approximately 50,000 EUR), and was implemented between April and December 2024.

Between July and November 2024, five employers from diverse domains - including education, engineering and manufacturing, foodservice, and infrastructure and resources - evaluated the competencies listed in 27 bachelor-level curricula organized across fifteen faculties at the University of Oradea. These evaluations were conducted during workshops organized by the project manager. The curricula were selected randomly and included programs such as Civil Constructions, Physical Education, Informatics, Electrical Engineering, Marketing, Mechatronics, Music, Psychology, Political Science, and Security Studies.

The employer representatives were instructed to carefully review the competencies proposed in each curriculum and assess the degree of concordance between these competencies and a list of competencies deemed necessary in real-world work conditions, based on their professional experience.

The results of these analyses revealed very high concordance rates in the engineering domains, ranging between 70% and 90%, with Electrical Engineering reaching 100%. These high rates can be partially explained by the close collaboration of faculty with private organizations—both paid and unpaid—their own private practice, and/or the supervision of student internships in industry. Conversely, the lowest concordance rates were observed in social science fields, averaging around 70%, with Psychology showing a minimum of 50%. For Psychology, this discrepancy may be attributed to the employers' expertise being primarily focused on

educational and work psychology, while major domains such as clinical and counseling psychology were underrepresented. This gap also reflects the well-documented "rupture" between academic psychologists and practicing professionals (Drugaş, 2023).

Despite these variations, a consistent finding across all disciplines was the high value placed by employers on the inclusion of transversal competencies within all analyzed curricula, highlighting their perceived importance for graduate employability in diverse professional contexts.

The findings of the University of Oradea project underscore the critical alignment between competency-based curricula and labor market expectations, reinforcing the arguments presented in the literature on CBL and graduate employability. High concordance rates in engineering programs illustrate how strong collaboration between faculty and industry can ensure that both technical and transversal competencies meet employer needs, while lower concordance in social sciences highlights persistent gaps between academic training and professional practice. Importantly, the consistent emphasis by employers on transversal competencies across all disciplines confirms that these generic skills - such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving - are increasingly valued over purely technical knowledge. These results provide empirical support for the integration of employer perspectives into curriculum design and assessment within HEIs, demonstrating how CBL/CBE approaches can be operationalized to enhance graduates' employability and responsiveness to evolving labor market demands.

## **Conclusions**

Higher education institutions must continue investing in quality standards, often evaluated by national or international organizations. At the same time, there is an increasing need to align curricula with the requirements of the global labor market and the expectations of local employers. HEIs should dedicate efforts to ensure that graduates achieve high educational outcomes, are prepared for challenging professional roles, and attain higher employability rates. Students are expected not only to acquire domain-specific knowledge and skills but also to develop transversal competencies essential for navigating complex professional contexts (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2017).

The findings from the University of Oradea highlight the critical importance of aligning competency-based curricula with real-world labor market demands. High concordance rates in engineering programs demonstrate that strong faculty-industry collaborations—through internships, joint projects, and professional practice—ensure that both core

and transversal competencies are adequately addressed. Conversely, lower concordance rates in social sciences, such as Psychology, reveal persistent gaps between academic training and professional requirements, emphasizing the need for targeted curriculum adaptations and greater engagement with field-specific practitioners (Drugăș, 2023).

Moreover, the consistent emphasis by employers on transversal competencies across all disciplines underscores their centrality in graduate employability. Skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability were valued even in curricula where technical knowledge was predominant. These results reinforce the argument that HEIs must move beyond a purely professionalizing approach and embed generic, transferable competencies throughout the curriculum to prepare graduates for diverse career pathways (Bezanilla et al., 2019; García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

In addition to ensuring that graduates acquire both domain-specific knowledge and transversal competencies, HEIs should prioritize continuous collaboration with employers and industry stakeholders. Engaging employers in curriculum design, internship programs, and competency assessment can help institutions anticipate labor market trends, identify emerging skill requirements, and enhance the relevance of educational programs. This collaborative approach strengthens graduate employability while supporting HEIs in producing professionals who are responsive to evolving economic, technological, and societal challenges (Hodgman, 2018; Franklin & Lytle, 2015).

HEIs must also adopt systematic and evidence-based evaluation mechanisms to monitor the implementation of competency-based curricula. Utilizing tools such as the Bezanilla et al. (2019) seven-dimensional model, institutions can assess legal, institutional, and pedagogical factors that affect CBL effectiveness. Regular review and improvement cycles at both module and program levels can ensure alignment with targeted competencies, enhance teaching practices, and provide actionable feedback from students, faculty, and employers. Such systematic evaluation strengthens institutional capacity to adapt to labor market dynamics while maintaining educational quality.

Finally, the increasing centrality of digital technologies in professional contexts underscores the need to integrate digital competence across curricula, not only for students but also for faculty. HEIs should provide ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure instructors are proficient in emerging digital tools and AI-driven platforms. Integrating digital skills within disciplinary and transversal competencies prepares graduates to thrive in increasingly technology-driven workplaces and fosters adaptability, critical thinking, and lifelong learning in the digital era (Drugăș, 2020; Zhao et al., 2021).

Collectively, these insights demonstrate that CBL and CBE approaches, when combined with employer engagement, systematic

evaluation, and digital competence integration, offer a robust pathway for HEIs to enhance graduate employability and ensure that education remains responsive to the evolving needs of society and the labor market. Universities must continue to cultivate students' personal resources, equipping them to pursue multiple career pathways and navigate diverse challenges throughout their professional and personal lives.

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