

# Competencies and Employer Engagement

**Pam Irwin**

Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance  
UK.

Using the UK experience as a template, this paper explores the concept of competencies as a viable bridge to employer engagement. In this context, the definition of competency coalesces into three primary interpretations (input, output and 'behaviour'), leading to three applications: work related skill sets, standards and professionalism. These in turn, inform intersecting relationships – the link between employer skills needs and education (work-based learning), educational and workplace competency, and quality (accreditation of employer based training, and credit accumulation and transfer systems) and vocational competency (fit for practice, and fit for purpose). For each element, relevant models and indicative practice is presented. The paper concludes by offsetting competencies with employer engagement, and offers approaches (vignettes) to actively advance this critical agenda.

Key words: competencies, employer engagement, educational and vocational competency, accreditation and employer based training, fit for practice/fit for purpose

## Defining Competencies

Although the terms 'competency' and 'competencies' are widely used in management, employment and education, they are challenging to define. Initially coined by Boyzatis (1982) to mean "an underlying characteristic of a person...motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge" (p. 21), other conceptions of competency range from Randell's (1989) 'nothing more or less than glorious human skills' to 'a dimension of behaviour' (Liam, Healy, & Associates, 2003). Often equated with skills, competencies are also categorised as generic (transferable) and situation specific (van Gelderen, 2007), and core and defined (Skills for Health,

2007a). By contrast, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD] Directorate for Education's (2005) selection and definition of competencies is more holistic, and, in addition to knowledge and skills, "a competency involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context." Analogously, Lathi (1999) adopts an inclusive definition of competency – essentially the skills needed to perform specific functions, integrating elements of knowledge, skills and behaviours and/or attitudes.

## Competencies - Typology

Other interpretations of competency are discussed by van Gelderen (2007). He describes three views of competency – the perspective adopted in this paper. First, competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual (the input approach favoured in the United States of

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Pam Irwin, Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, UK.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pam Irwin, Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, Tresco House, 149-153 Oxford Road, Manchester. M1 7EE. UK. e-mail: pamirwin@gmail.com

America); next, competency is linked to standards or outcomes (the output model identified in the United Kingdom [UK]); and in the final definition, competency is informed by both inputs and outputs and related to behaviour or attitudes.

## **Competencies - Applications**

In turn, these approaches broadly align with three primary applications of competency – work related skill sets, standards, and ‘professionalism’.

### ***The Input Model of Competency – Work Related Skills Sets***

The input model of competency causally relates competency with successful performance in the workplace (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). It also suggests that these work related skill sets are discrete and can be learned; collaborative competencies (Barr, 1998) being one example. Much of the revitalised vocational agenda in the UK seems to conform to this assumption, for instance, the 14-19 diplomas (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005a), and advanced and professional apprenticeships (Learning and Skills Council [LSC], 2005). By accommodating academic and work related learning, these initiatives provide robust alternatives to the traditional A-level educational benchmarks, and in the case of the new diplomas, will replace the current system of around 3,500 separate qualifications. With an overarching goal to improve vocational education, the 14-19 qualifications will be led by employers through the Sector Skills Councils [SSC], and create new gateway(s) to higher education and skilled employment (DfES, 2005a). Similarly, modern apprenticeships are designed to meet employer’s present and future skills needs, and offer a progression route into further learning and higher qualifications (Lammy, 2007).

### ***The Output Model of Competency – Standards***

Standards underline the output conception of competency, and in the UK, “National Occupational Standards [NOS] define the competences which apply to job roles or occupations in the form of statements of performance, knowledge and the evidence required to

confirm competence” (Skills for Business, 2007). Development of NOS and National Workforce Competences (NWC) for healthcare is a major commitment of Skills for Health, the SSC for the UK health sector. This NOS/NWC project also links to key government agendas such as National Service Frameworks, key targets, and the Knowledge and Skills Framework [KSF], where appropriate (Skills for Health, 2007b). As statements of competence describing good practice and performance criteria, the NOS/NWC are proactive decision tools related to the demands of employment, the coverage and focus of services, and the structure, content of education and training and related qualifications. Consequently, they are useful in the management and development of organisations and individuals, job design, recruitment, personal, professional and team development, career planning and appraisal. The interactive competency tool allows cross-referencing and searches according to NOS/ KSF suites and specific functional tasks. Since each NOS and NWC consists of various elements such as activity scope, the tool also supports competence clustering, team and/or personal and professional profiling, and group and/or self assessment. An additional tool, the Health Functional Map relates competencies and functions needed to deliver effective health care services at a strategic level, to the operational NOS/NWC level (Skills for Health, 2007b).

### ***The ‘Behaviour’ Model of Competency – Professionalism***

As the third conception of competency addresses both inputs and outputs in terms of behaviour or attitudes, it aligns with many professions. The perception of ‘professionalism’ and professional competence is strictly regulated and enforced by statutory authorities such as the Health Professions Council [HPC] in the UK. Currently registering over 180,000 practitioners from 13 professions, the HPC only ‘accepts’ professionals who meet pre-determined standards of professional skills, behaviour and health (HPC, 2008).

Most self-regulating professions require evidence of the registrant’s competence in the form of mandated continuing education such as attendance at continuing professional development [CPD] courses and submission of practice hours and/or reflective portfolios.

## Competencies and Education

The symbiotic relationship between competency and education is also reflected in the recent political emphasis on employment and skills in the UK, primarily via the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006). With an increased emphasis on skills development, the Review aims to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice, and identify the balance of responsibility for achieving an optimal skills profile. It also recommends investing in a knowledge economy by treating learning as a lifelong activity - one that is responsive to changing skills demands of a globalised economy, or more pragmatically, a skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling agenda. In essence, the Leitch Review of Skills advocates a significant re-focusing of the fundamental educational mix of teaching/learning, quality assurance/'fit for purpose', to include employer demand-led provision, thereby leveraging workforce development (competencies and skills) with education.

### *Higher Education*

A parallel report, the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE]'s strategy 'Engaging employers with higher education' (2006a) also explores how Higher Education Institutions [HEI] can be supported to develop dynamic partnerships with employers. For example, Higher Level Skills Pathfinder projects work with employers and their representative bodies to provide specialist skills brokerage to meet regional employment priorities (HEFCE, 2007a). In addition, HEFCE's (2007b) Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey demonstrates that 88% of HEIs offer flexible tailor-made courses for business on campus, and 80% offer similar bespoke education at companies' premises. 78% of HEIs also report that employers are actively engaged in the development of content and regular reviewing of curricula. Currently, HEI's interact with employers and the 'community' as a supplier and user of 'labour'; in economic development and knowledge transfer initiatives, networks and partnerships; and to support lifelong learning (Hogarth et al., 2007).

### *Further Education*

Within Further Education [FE], there is a greater

emphasis on colleges engaging with employers to ensure provision is demand led and that "learners and employers are in the driving seat in determining what is funded and how services are delivered. Employers will benefit from training delivered in the workplace, by a provider of their choosing, delivered to suit their operational needs" (DfES, 2006). Further Education Colleges [FEC] are involved in many specialist networks with employers, including Centres of Vocational Excellence [CoVE], and the 14-19 Diplomas.

### *Lifelong Learning*

As noted previously, employer engagement will also be crucial in promoting lifelong learning. By 2020, 70% of the UK workforce will have completed compulsory education (HM Treasury, 2006). To cater for 'non-traditional' workers/learners, such as vocational, mature and part-time learners, increasing flexibility of provision will be important (Universities UK, 2007).

## Education and Employment

Although these burgeoning relationships between education and employers are laudable, challenges remain. Differences in terminology, priorities, and outcomes are underscored by Mumford (2007) in his keynote address at the North-west Lifelong Learning Network conference. In his presentation titled 'Employer HE partnerships. What works well and what needs to improve', Mumford cautions that "employees are motivated differently to normal students" and "concepts like 'fine grading', 'volume of learning' and 'level' are counterproductive" (Mumford, 2007). While educational providers often purport to successfully 'engage with employers', confusion over fundamental concepts, such as 'learning' ('academic' and 'vocational'), awards and qualifications ('accreditation' and quality assurance), and competency in the workplace ('fit for practice'), persists.

## Competencies, Education and Employment

### *Exemplars*

Nonetheless, some innovative exemplars that link

competencies, education and employment are evident; specifically work-based learning, accreditation of employer based training, credit accumulation and transfer schemes, and vocational competence ('fit for practice').

Work-based learning. Recognition of work-based learning opportunities across the UK, such as Middlesex University Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Work-based Learning (2007) is increasing. Defined as learning that is derived at, in and from the workplace (Seagraves et al,1996), much work-based learning is integrated into two year Foundation Degrees (Foundation Degree Forward [FdF], 2007a). Foundation Degrees are designed with employers to equip learners with the knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to their employment, and are often delivered by innovative teaching/learning methods. A model of work-based learning founded on 'academic' learning in a healthcare setting is constructed by Irwin (2007).

Accreditation of employer based training. Accreditation of employer based training [EBTA] in England is driven by Foundation Degree Forward (FdF, 2007b). The EBTA pilot project enables employers to benefit from the accreditation of existing workplace training by providing a trained EBTA facilitator to perform a preliminary analysis of the training and assign notional credits and levels, brokering the accreditation processes between the employer and a HEI, and finally, facilitating further progression by employees into and through HE. To this effect, FdF engages a range of universities, FEC's, Chambers of Commerce, UnionLearn and selected employer groups (Phillips, 2007).

Credit accumulation and transfer schemes. Various systems of credit accumulation and transfer are being piloted by some Lifelong Learning Networks to 'test' the overarching principles and operational criteria for a 'common approach to credit' developed by the Joint Forum for Higher Levels (Joint Forum for Higher Levels, 2006). For example, the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance [GMSA] module catalogue/credit accumulation and transfer scheme [ModCAT] aims to support institutions in providing employer-led, flexible, work-related HE provision, centred on small 'bite-sized' units (modules) of learning. Each module offers a clear and coherent 'stand-alone' learning experience. Learners are awarded credit for each module and can also link several modules within the catalogue to form a credit bearing award or qualification. While the

ModCAT is operated by the GMSA on behalf of its members, ownership and management of each module is retained by the validating HEI and its delivery partners. It is expected that these learning opportunities will suit the needs of part time learners who may be in employment and seeking personal, professional and/or career development opportunities; and also, employers accessing HE to help them develop their workforce (GMSA, 2007a).

Vocational competence/'fit for practice'. In 2004, the University Vocational Awards Council anticipated issues related to competency in the workplace and vocational 'fitness for practice' by advocating the use of NOS in higher education to meet the needs of employment. As curriculum 'benchmarks', NOS are expected to enhance graduate employability, workplace competence, professional standards and create a gateway to substantial HE engagement in workforce development (University Vocational Awards Council, 2004).

A contrasting model, the Catalyst business interchange scheme (Clark & Craven, 2007) permits FE teachers, tutors, and trainers in the FE sector to update their business related skills through a variety of learning experiences in industry. These opportunities extend from one-day industry awareness visits to one academic year industry based sabbaticals. At present, all sectors of industry are represented and the 'exchange' programme is fully funded.

## **Employer Engagement**

Despite these renewed skills, education and employment relationships, a common understanding of 'employer engagement' remains elusive. For instance, HEFCE's (2006) definition - employer engagement is 'a sub set of the broad range of collaboration between education providers and public and private sector organisations', is vague. Similar reports published in 2007, such as 'World Class Skills: implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England' (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2007); 'Workforce Development: employer engagement with higher education (King, 2007); 'Higher Education, Skills and Employer Engagement' (Sastry & Bekhradnia, 2007); 'Response to HEFCE's Employer Engagement Strategy' (Universities UK, 2007); 'Employer Engagement: higher education for the workforce. Barriers and facilitators'

(Wedgwood, 2007); unpick the HE/ employer relationship, but circumvent a rigorous analysis of employer engagement. Even the engagement framework, (a five point classification scale ranging from awareness activity to strategic alliance), produced by Accelerating Change in Built Environment Education in 2005, does not elaborate on how education providers can effectively engage with employers (Accelerating Change in Built Environment Education, 2005).

## Competencies and Employer Engagement

To ameliorate this situation and move the employer engagement agenda forward, this paper proposes that the key to closer education/employer relations rests with competencies. By cross matching competencies (typology, applications and exemplars) with the simplified outcomes of workforce development (essentially, skilling, upskilling and reskilling) and education in general (teaching/learning, quality assurance, and fitness for purpose), an interesting resonance with employer engagement emerges. This is reflected in the following table:

Three authentic vignettes from the GMSA, briefly illustrate the synergy (employer engagement) between employers and educators at an operational level – enhanced and mediated through competencies:

### Vignettes

Vignette 1: Step-In to HE. The ‘Step-In to HE’ project

is a personal development ‘taster’ that enables advanced apprentices who have completed their technical certificate and other framework requirements to study at a HE level and gain 10 transferable HE credits. Co-sponsored by the GMSA, the bridging module provides a new, work related, skills based progression for advanced apprentices from work-based learning into HE (GMSA, 2007b).

Vignette 2: First steps. First Steps is a pilot project to develop and deliver inter-institutional community based, active learning modules across Greater Manchester. The pilot allows the lead HEI to work with a variety of potential partners and explore the potential of accreditation options, and possible upskilling progression routes (GMSA, 2007c).

Vignette 3: Continuing professional development awards in leadership management. A suite of CPD awards leading to a Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Leadership Management will support personal and professional development (reskilling) for selected staff required to undertake team leadership roles within target organisations. The CPD provision is predicated upon stand alone modules in a targeted aspect of professional leadership, rather than the acquisition of a broader-based management qualification of more significant size. This is a deliberate strategy to enhance ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘fitness for practice’ (GMSA, 2007d).

Finally, while these vignettes do not claim to be ‘best practice’, it is hoped that this competency based approach to employer engagement will stimulate dialogue, and then actively advance education/employment partnerships.

Table 1

*The relationship between employment and education (employer engagement) mediated through competencies*

Context		Operational indicators		
		Vignette 1	Vignette 2	Vignette 3
Employment(Demand)	Workforce development	skilling	upskilling	reskilling
	Competencies	input model	output model	behaviours (informed by input and output models)
Employer Engagement	Applications	work related skill sets	standards	professionalism
	Exemplars	work-based learning	accreditation of employer based training	fit for practice
Education(Supply)	Educational provision	teaching and learning	quality assurance	fit for purpose

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