Acquiring Transferrable Competencies for Life and Work

The rapid development of the new global, knowledge-based and hi-tech environment presents challenges for universities all over the world. It has caused institutions to conduct critical assessments of their undergraduate education and pedagogy in order to adapt to this dynamic situation. As universities shift to a new paradigm, it is time to review our educational goals and student outcomes in the region.

With this move towards 21st-century learning, we need to ask some deeper questions. What do we want our students to become? What should they do to measurably demonstrate their preparation to work, live and fulfil their life purposes? What skills will students need most to succeed in the 21st century?

The purpose of an undergraduate education is not only to prepare for a first job and a future career. It also allows students to identify and establish their personal values and life purposes, so that they can have fuller personalities, and can confidently handle future challenges to attain their value goals. We wish to nurture graduates who are self-reflective, grateful, soulful, caring and satisfied.

To train people who are both school-smart and street-smart, our business, social and educational leaders are increasingly asking universities to integrate the development of competencies (sometimes also called soft skills, attributes or qualities). These include critical thinking and non-routine problem solving techniques, teamwork and communication skills, self-management, and

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human caring. It also entails that the academic curriculum adopts a global vision, as well as co-curricular programmes. These transferrable core or generic competencies are often referred to as "the 21st century competencies" which are mostly acquired via "deeper" learning. They have been proven to be essential in many life situations.

These competencies are different from the knowledge that has characterised traditional disciplines, or the physical skills that are associated with technical fields. The broader term "competencies" rather than "skills" has been more commonly used to include both knowledge and soft skills. However, this author always finds that a more useful competency model should also cover nurturing one's attitudes, characters, and values (such as integrity, persistence and tolerance). In the 1990s, I developed and advocated for the ASK competency model which is composed of three basic components:**A**ttitude, **S**kills and **K**nowledge. I have also used the practical '5Cs' competence model in several universities since the early 2000s:**C**ritical Thinking, **C**ommunication, **C**ollaborations, **C**aring, and**C**haracters.

Deeper learning, or 21st century learning, is the dynamic process through which a person becomes capable of transferring what they have learned in one situation into new situations, from one subject area to another, or from one work/life task to another. Through this process, students possessing more relevant transferable competencies can develop better expertise in a particular subject discipline. At the same time, such processes can reinforce and enhance their transferrable core competencies.

Competency Models with Deeper Learning Process

Over the past decade, education bodies and institutions have been actively developing their respective lists of "desired graduate attributes" or learning goals. There have been many different lists and models of needed competencies in the literature. There are also variations in the ways that competency models have been deployed in different countries.

For instance, the OECD's Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) Project in the early 2000s identified three main categories of competencies: (1) interacting in socially heterogeneous groups; (2) acting autonomously; and (3) using tools interactively. In the USA, the P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning has classified competencies/skills into four categories: (1) key subjects and 21st century themes; (2) learning and innovation skills; (3) information, media and technology; and (4) life and careers skills. What is lacking is a single integrated framework that scientifically and systematically classifies different competencies into categories or domains.

A committee commissioned by the US National Research Council (NRC) in 2012 developed such a conceptual framework to categorise and develop such competencies in a more scientific manner. The committee identified three broad domains of competence:

- the cognitive domain:
- thinking, reasoning, unstructured problem solving and related skills.
- the intrapersonal domain:
- self-discovery and self-management, including the ability to establish one's own values and measure of success, and regulate one's behaviour and emotions to reach goals.
- the interpersonal domain:
- expressing information to others, as well as interpreting others' messages and responding appropriately.

Most of the identified core competencies or desired graduate attributes can be grouped within these three domains. Nevertheless, the NRC model was developed within the American culture and context. It has a focus on skills and labour market needs, but less on personal attitude/values and social engagement, which are treasured by some East Asian economies heavily influenced by Confucian beliefs. Thus, some Asian countries and their institutions have enhanced the 'attitude/values' elements and incorporated the 'social engagement' domain into their competency models.

For instance, the Hang Seng Management College (HSMC), the only higher education institution in Hong Kong with a competency module adapted from the NRC model has developed the following 'iGPS' desired graduate attributes framework:

1. **I**ntellectual competence (i): a solid foundation in chosen academic disciplines, the acquisition of the ability to think and reason critically to solve problems and to engage in life-long learning.
2. **G**eneric skills (G): have developed skills in:

   o languages including English and Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua).
   o information technology and data analysis tools
   o interpersonal communication
   o teamwork and leadership
3. **P**ersonal Development (P): self-awareness, ethical beliefs, emotion management, personal effectiveness and other values including positive thinking, caring, empathy, persistence and tolerance.
4. **S**ocial Engagement (S): the willingness to be involved in the community and a commitment to acting for the betterment of the society.

The acronym iGPS also carries the symbolic meaning of "i" and the "GPS"; with "i" referring to the individual student and "GPS" taking on the metaphor of "Global Positioning System", which guides the development of students through their four-year education process. This framework may also serve as a useful reference for other institutions in the region to develop or modify their list of desired graduate attributes.

Research results collected by NRC indicate that these competencies can be taught and learned in deeper learning ways that support transfer. Instructions should adopt methods which encourage questioning and explanation using case examples, to engage learners in challenging problem solving tasks, to raise learning motivation by linking topics to students' personal lives and interests, and to use continuous assessment with timely feedback by focusing on developing competencies rather than just scores or grades.

This author's research also found that today's teaching/learning activities focus too much on some cognitive competencies. Coverage of intrapersonal, interpersonal and social engagement competencies are often insufficient and uneven. Developing a wider range of core competencies will require additional commitments and instructional time and resources.

We need our young people to be work and life smart, not only classroom smart.