

Stakeholder Summary

Competency-based higher education in Ontario? Proceed with caution

Competency-based education (CBE) might be a pathway to improved postsecondary quality, accountability and cost containment, but a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) recommends caution in its application to Ontario's higher education system. The borders between CBE and traditional programs are dissolving, the report says, and institutions could implement some features of CBE without introducing new academic delivery structures.

Although variously defined, CBE is generally structured around self-paced study where progression is determined not by credit hours but by the student demonstrating mastery of specific knowledge and skills. *Productivity Implications of a Shift to Competency-Based Education: An environmental scan and review of the relevant literature* explores how moving to competency-based education might affect the cost, quality, productivity and accountability of higher education programs, institutions and systems, particularly as compared with more traditional forms of academic delivery.

Project description

The study included a literature review on the development of CBE postsecondary education programs, and cost efficiency and productivity changes in postsecondary education, as well as an environmental scan of a sample of CBE programs. The authors also created a survey instrument to compare resource requirements for academic delivery modes in CBE and traditional programs. Follow-up interviews were conducted after the survey.

Programs were examined at Southern New Hampshire University, Alverno College, Excelsior College, De Paul University, King's College University (London, Ontario), Northern Arizona University and Western Governors University.

Findings

The report offers a "cautious appraisal" of CBE as a model for academic delivery and suggests the same caution when considering the introduction of CBE into Ontario's postsecondary framework.

The authors note that most CBE models implemented in the university sector are geared to vocational or professional studies such as business, education, nursing, information technology, medicine and engineering, and tend to be directed to older, working adults. For CBE to have a significant impact on productivity and costs in the postsecondary sector, such programs would have to be available to the traditional postsecondary age cohort and in the areas of liberal arts, humanities, social sciences, and physical and natural sciences. There is a sizeable market niche for CBE in the US, which lags Canada in its postsecondary participation rate among those aged 25-64 and has a consequent focus on meeting the needs of working adults. The authors say it is not clear that there is a similar market niche in Ontario that is not already served by existing institutions.

If competency-based education is to have a significant impact on productivity and efficiency in Ontario's postsecondary sector (an outcome the authors say is yet to be demonstrated) it would have to be introduced on a broad scale.

The literature review found no studies that directly or indirectly examine the productivity of CBE, nor any evidence that competency-based education provides a better platform for student success. According to the report, there are no studies comparing the labour market success of CBE graduates and those from traditional programs. There is no systematic, comprehensive study indicating that the purported skills from a CBE program translate into performance, either in graduation results or in the labour market. "This is not to say that CBE does not improve student performance," say the authors. "It may well, but we could not find any evidence that it does."

The study also found that the costs of CBE were about the same as for traditional programs. Establishing a CBE delivery system would likely come with a higher capital cost. The ongoing costs of program delivery and institutional academic management might be higher for CBE, but could be offset by lower faculty costs.

Among challenges to introducing CBE in Ontario's postsecondary system: a prevailing culture and practice of institutional autonomy, the composition of the teaching faculty for CBE programs (and the nature of the teaching itself) are not the norm for Ontario universities and funding mechanisms (including student aid) would have to be reappraised and/or revised.

The institutional surveys found considerable variety in CBE implementation, including delivery structure, program size and target audience. This flexibility reflects the fact that the borders between CBE programs and traditional programs are dissolving, say the authors. They note that adjustments to traditional programs may achieve the desired objectives without the need to introduce new academic delivery structures.

While studies in liberal arts, humanities and the sciences do instill competencies, they are "buried" inside the degree studies rather than being pulled out and directly assessed as they would be in a CBE program. "Universities need to develop the means to better assess and communicate to students, employers and other stakeholders the connection between the program/course syllabus and the competencies that are generated through completion of the degree program," say the authors.

Among other CBE-inspired measures: Student self-assessment might be incorporated as a component of courses and a narrative transcript could be developed that specifies the learning outcomes achieved at course completion, described in terms of generic competencies that would inform both students and employers.

Productivity Implications of a Shift to Competency-Based Education: An environmental scan and review of the relevant literature was conducted by Brian Abner, Oksana Bartosh and Charles Ungerleider, Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, LLP, with the assistance of Rob Tiffin.