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COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACH AS A METHODOLOGICAL BASIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article explores the competency-based approach as a modern methodological foundation for higher education, addressing its theoretical principles and practical application. In a rapidly evolving world marked by technological progress and a dynamic labor market, the traditional knowledge-based paradigm has proven inadequate for preparing competitive specialists. The competency-based approach emerges as a crucial alternative, shifting the focus from the mere transmission of information to the development of integrated skills and abilities.

The paper delves into the historical evolution of educational paradigms, highlighting the transition from a knowledge-centric model to a skills-oriented one. It clarifies key terminological distinctions, such as competence (an individual's potential) versus competency (its practical application), and categorizes them into key and subject-specific types. The theoretical foundations of this approach are also examined, linking it to pedagogical concepts like constructivism, active learning, and the student-centered approach.

Furthermore, the article analyzes the implementation of this approach within a global and national context, referencing key initiatives like the Bologna Process and Ukraine's National Qualifications Framework. It details the phased implementation process, from diagnosing labor market needs to modernizing curricula and training instructors. The analysis identifies significant advantages, including increased graduate competitiveness and enhanced lifelong learning skills, while also addressing inherent challenges such as systemic inertia, a lack of unified assessment methods, and the need for significant resource investment. The article concludes that while the competency-based approach is essential for ensuring the quality and relevance of modern higher education, its successful adoption requires a systemic and comprehensive effort to overcome these obstacles.

Key words: competency-based approach, higher education, educational paradigm, curriculum modernization, key competencies, competency, learning outcomes, active learning, assessment, lifelong learning, labor market.

Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape is undergoing constant transformations driven by technological progress, globalization, and dynamic changes in the labor market. In this context, higher education faces new challenges. The traditional model, predominantly focused on the transmission of theoretical knowledge, has proven insufficient for preparing competitive specialists. The modern world requires graduates to not only possess a body of information but also to demonstrate critical thinking, self-development, adaptability, and effective interpersonal skills. This necessitates an

urgent reevaluation of educational goals and methods, as well as a modernization of academic curricula [1].

The competency-based approach has emerged as a leading methodological foundation for modern higher education. Its relevance lies in its focus on the development of both **key and subject-specific competencies** in students. These competencies are understood as an integrated set of knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences, and attitudes essential for successful professional and social self-realization.

The core of this approach is to shift the emphasis from the mere acquisition of information to the development of practical readiness for professional and personal life. Consequently, the competency-based approach enables the preparation of specialists who are not just knowledge bearers, but are also capable of applying their knowledge in practice, solving complex problems, and adapting effectively to changing conditions [4].

Main part

Theoretical Foundations of the Competency-Based Approach in Higher Education

Historically, educational paradigms have consistently evolved to reflect societal needs and new perspectives on the learning process. The shift from a knowledge-based model to a modern competency-based paradigm marks a pivotal stage in the development of higher education.

The traditional knowledge-based paradigm prioritized the transmission of facts, theories, and information. Under this model, learning success was measured by a student's ability to memorize and reproduce acquired knowledge. While this approach ensured a systematic presentation of material, it had significant drawbacks, often leading to passive learning and a disconnect between theory and practice. Students frequently lacked the skills to apply knowledge in real-world contexts, which diminished motivation and fostered a "knowledge for knowledge's sake" mindset.

These limitations prompted a fundamental shift in focus: from the transmission of knowledge to the formation of actionable skills. In contrast to the previous paradigm,

the competency-based approach focuses on a student's ability to perform effectively in various professional and life situations [7]. This entails not just possessing information, but also the capacity to analyze, apply, problem-solve, make decisions, and collaborate effectively. The ultimate goal is to cultivate graduates who are adaptable and committed to lifelong learning.

To properly understand this educational philosophy, it's crucial to distinguish between its core terms. **Competence** refers to an individual's integrated ability, which includes knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and experience necessary for successful performance in a given activity. It represents a potential that can be realized. In contrast, a competency is the demonstrated application of that competence in a specific situation. Thus, while competence is potential, **a competency** is its practical manifestation.

Modern education distinguishes between two main types of competencies:

1. **Key competencies.** These are universal, cross-cutting abilities essential for personal fulfillment, societal participation, and lifelong learning. They include, but are not limited to, digital, communication, social, civic, entrepreneurial, and cultural competencies.

2. **Subject-specific (professional) competencies.** These are specialized skills directly related to a particular field or professional activity and are defined by the requirements of a specific discipline.

The competency-based approach is grounded in several philosophical and pedagogical ideas [3]. **Constructivism** is a key concept, which posits that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by the learner through prior experience and interaction. This aligns with **a student-centered approach**, which places the student's individual needs at the core of the educational process.

Furthermore, the approach draws upon **theories of active learning and reflective thinking**. Active learning involves engaging students in cognitive activities like discussions, project work, and case studies, transforming them from passive listeners into active participants. Reflective thinking is the ability to analyze one's own actions and experiences, enabling students to become independent and self-aware learners.

These principles fundamentally change the role of the teacher from a knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator. The teacher's primary task is to create optimal conditions for active and independent learning, guiding students to seek information, stimulating critical thinking, and providing constructive feedback. They serve as a mentor, helping students achieve holistic development.

Implementation of the Competency-Based Approach in Higher Education

The implementation of the competency-based approach in higher education is guided by a clear system of international and national legal frameworks, as well as global best practices. These foundations define the direction, goals, and mechanisms for transforming educational programs and pedagogical practices.

The adoption of the competency-based approach in Ukraine is part of broader global educational trends. **The Bologna Process**, initiated in 1999, was a key driver for unifying European higher education by focusing on learning outcomes and competencies [2]. In Ukraine, this is reflected in **the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**, which sets standards for all educational levels, as well as in the laws "On Education" and "On Higher Education", which establish the competency-based approach as a core principle [6].

A crucial tool for this implementation is **the State Standards of Higher Education**. Unlike previous standards, these documents focus not on a list of disciplines but on the specific competencies a graduate must possess. This encourages universities to design curricula that deliberately build these necessary skills and abilities.

Global implementation models offer a variety of strategies that can be adapted for Ukraine:

- European Union:** *The Tuning project* has been a highly influential initiative for designing competency-based programs. *The Erasmus+ program* also promotes the development of intercultural and communication competencies through student mobility and international collaboration [5].

- USA, Canada, Great Britain:** These countries emphasize "outcomes-based education", close collaboration with industry to develop competency frameworks, and

the integration of “soft skills” into curricula [3; 5].

While Ukraine’s move toward this approach is a new stage of reform tied to European integration, significant challenges remain. These include systemic inertia, insufficient methodological training for instructors, and the ongoing need to harmonize educational programs with labor market demands.

The competency-based approach fundamentally transforms every stage of the educational process [3]:

- **Goal setting:** The focus shifts from merely studying topics to forming competencies. Educational goals are now defined in terms of what a student will be able to do upon graduation.
- **Curriculum content:** Content is selected and structured to directly support the development of specific competencies. Emphasis is placed on interdisciplinary connections and the inclusion of practical tasks and case studies.
- **Teaching methods:** The reliance on passive lectures is replaced by active and interactive methods, such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, case studies, trainings, and simulations. These methods actively engage students.
- **Assessment:** Assessment shifts to evaluating developed competencies. Formative assessment provides continuous feedback, while summative assessment is conducted through comprehensive exams, project defenses, and portfolios. A key element is criterion-referenced assessment, which makes the evaluation process transparent and objective by judging performance against predefined criteria.

Implementation of the Competency-Based Approach

Effective implementation of the competency-based approach in higher education requires a commitment to its core principles, a strategic, phased process, and a clear understanding of its benefits and potential challenges.

The competency-based approach is founded on five key principles [1, 3]:

1. **Student-centered learning:** This places the student’s unique needs, interests, and autonomy at the heart of the educational process, viewing learning as an interaction

aimed at holistic development.

2. **Practicality:** Acquired knowledge and skills must be directly applicable to real-world and professional situations. This is achieved by integrating practical tasks, projects, and internships into the curriculum.

3. **Integration:** A full-fledged competency requires the organic combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The educational process must therefore encourage a comprehensive, not fragmented, study of these components.

4. **Systemic approach:** All elements of the educational process – from goal-setting and content to teaching methods and assessment – must be interconnected and aligned toward the single goal of forming a defined set of competencies.

5. **Lifelong learning:** This principle emphasizes that higher education is merely the initial stage, and graduates must be prepared for continuous self-improvement and learning throughout their lives.

Implementing this approach is a multifaceted, sequential process that includes the following stages [3]:

1. **Needs analysis:** A fundamental step that involves diagnosing labor market requirements, industry trends, and societal demands.

2. **Profile development:** Based on this analysis, a clear profile of the desired graduate is created, defining the integrated, general, and specific competencies they should possess.

3. **Curriculum modernization:** The content and structure of educational programs are revised to focus on achieving specific learning outcomes.

4. **Resource development:** New educational and methodological materials are created to stimulate active student engagement.

5. **Instructor training:** This critical stage involves training instructors in new interactive teaching and assessment methods, shifting their role to that of a learning facilitator.

6. **Method and assessment implementation:** New forms of teaching (e.g., project-based learning, problem-based learning) and assessment (e.g., criterion-referenced competency assessment) are put into practice.

7. Monitoring and evaluation: Continuous data collection on program effectiveness and stakeholder feedback ensures the system remains flexible and adaptable.

The implementation of the competency-based approach offers significant advantages but also faces notable challenges [4; 7].

Advantages of the competency-based approach:

- *Increased graduate competitiveness:* The approach produces specialists who can apply their knowledge in practice, making them more valuable to employers.
- *Enhanced self-development skills:* Students develop self-directed learning abilities, which are crucial in today's dynamic world.
- *Higher learning motivation:* Learning becomes more practical and focused on solving real-world problems, making it more engaging.
- *Stronger links to practice:* The approach fosters close cooperation between universities and employers, ensuring educational programs meet labor market needs.

Challenges for the competency-based approach:

- *Systemic inertia:* The conservatism of traditional curricula and resistance to innovation from some faculty members present significant obstacles.
- *Instructor preparedness:* Many faculty members require systematic retraining to master new teaching and assessment methodologies.
- *Lack of standardized assessment:* Objectively evaluating complex qualities like critical thinking and teamwork remains a difficult task.
- *Resource costs:* Implementation requires substantial investment in staff retraining, modernizing resources, and developing new educational materials.
- *Employer engagement:* Establishing effective dialogue with businesses to align educational programs with real-world demands can be difficult.

Conclusions

The analysis of the theoretical foundations and practical aspects of **the competency-based approach** leads to several key conclusions.

First, the competency-based approach is a modern and highly effective methodological foundation for higher education, directly addressing the demands of the 21st century. The shift from a traditional knowledge-based paradigm to a competency-based one is a direct response to rapid changes in the labor market, globalization, and technological progress. This approach ensures that specialists are trained not only with theoretical knowledge, but also with the ability to apply it effectively, think critically, solve complex problems, and adapt to new conditions. Thus, it is an essential prerequisite for ensuring the quality and relevance of modern higher education.

Second, implementing this approach fosters the training of highly qualified specialists capable of successful professional activity and personal growth. By shifting the focus of the educational process from the instructor to the student, the approach stimulates active participation and independence. Graduates become more competitive in the labor market by developing the key and professional competencies necessary for practical work. Furthermore, cultivating skills for self-development and lifelong learning ensures their continuous professional and personal growth.

Finally, despite its significant advantages, the implementation of the competency-based approach faces a series of challenges that require systemic solutions. The main difficulties include the inertia of the educational system, insufficient preparedness of instructors, a lack of unified assessment methods, and the need for substantial material and technical resources. Successful implementation requires not only an update of the legal framework but also a comprehensive approach at all levels, from state educational policy to specific pedagogical practices within universities. Overcoming these challenges is a critical task for the future development of the Ukrainian higher education system.

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