

Translating programme core competencies at the course level

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Abstract

In order to verify if the objectives for a certain study programme are reached, it is necessary to link the objectives and learning goals of the study programme on the one hand and the learning outcomes of the individual courses on the other hand. As working with a standard competence matrix with ticks does not give a complete overview of all objectives worked on within a course, we worked out an alternative method for this representation.

Introduction

In recent years, assessment has evolved a lot. As a rule, competence based learning now starts from writing out the objectives by means of learning goals or core competencies for a study programme at programme level; the assessment then includes a check of whether these competencies are reached by the students. In order to verify if each of the objectives defined for a certain study programme is reached, it is necessary to link the objectives and learning goals of the study programme on the one hand and the learning outcomes of the individual courses on the other hand.

In our Faculty, the Faculty of Applied Economics of the University of Antwerp, the learning goals of the study programme are formulated as a combination of (1) core competencies and (2) professional roles.

- (1) Our Faculty organizes different programmes in the domain Business Economics, for which the core competencies slightly differ. While the main competencies are the same for all programmes (with differences of course for Bachelor's degrees compared to Master's degrees), the differences originate from the different focus of the programmes. For a Bachelor or Master in Commercial Engineering e.g. there is an emphasis on technology and engineering on top of the business economics part, while for a Bachelor or Master in Economic Policy there is an extra focus on economics.
- (2) Next to these core competencies, all graduated Bachelor and Master students of our Faculty should be able to fulfill certain roles in their professional life. Therefore, we defined six professional roles for all programmes organized by the Faculty, which are "analyzer", "coordinator", "communicator", "creator", "inspirer" and "strategist". As the first three roles are more basic and the last three are more advanced and building on the first three, there is a difference in mastering these roles, depending on the study level. Bachelor students are trained in the first place in the analyzer, coordinator and communicator roles, whereas Master students go deeper and also achieve the ability to perform the more complex and challenging creator, inspirer and strategist roles.

The links between the learning goals at programme level (core competencies as well as professional roles) and the specific learning outcomes at course level are displayed in a

competence matrix, a cross tabulation where ticks are used to indicate the connections that are present. As this way of working has certain limitations, we propose a more elaborate alternative.

Method

As mentioned in the introduction, until last year the link between the objectives of the programme and individual courses was visualized by ticking in a competence matrix each of the core competencies that was reached and tested in the different courses. In this matrix, each of the ticks indicates that a specific competency was reached and tested in a particular course.

This way of working has some limitations. First, one could argue that some competencies are initiated in a specific course, but not yet completely mastered. In this case, we should not tick this link in the table, as this would imply that the competency is mastered as well as tested in this course. As a consequence, working with just ticks does not give a complete overview of all objectives worked on within a course; indeed, not adding a tick does not mean a certain competency is not initiated or developed during this course, it only means that this competency is not mastered. Second, ticks do not allow to show progression of achieving the objectives throughout the programme as a whole. Each programme contains different learning tracks (e.g. accountancy, finance, quantitative methods, ...), where related courses progressively develop knowledge and skills in this domain. In a classic competence matrix, it is only visible in which courses competencies are completely mastered, but it does not show how these competencies are developed in successive courses.

In order to overcome these limitations we introduced nuances by means of a letter code in our table instead of the ticks. This way we can differentiate between competencies which are initiated (I), developed (D) or mastered (M) in a certain course. It also allows to show the advancement in the achievement of competencies throughout the learning tracks in the programme.

In order to decide on the links between the core competencies and professional roles for the programme as a whole on the one hand and the learning outcomes of each individual course on the other hand, we organized meetings with professors of the different learning tracks. In preparation of these meetings, possible links and levels of mastering throughout the programme were set up by the staff members of the Center for Quality Control and Innovation in Teaching. Certain rules were developed to assign the different levels of achieving a competency to the specific courses. During the meetings the proposed links between the competencies and the courses of a learning track were discussed with all the professors of this track. By doing so, all professors of a learning track decided together about how to build up the competencies in that track, in order to improve the advancement and to increase the support among the Faculty members.

As a result of the discussions, together with the professors we then rewrote the learning outcomes in each course outline so as to make the link between the core competencies and professional roles more visible for students, which give students a clear understanding of the aims and expectations of each course.

Results

By the introduction of a letter code and the learning track meetings, we obtained a much more detailed overview of the progressive building up of competencies throughout the programme, especially for the three year Bachelor's programmes. The system also gives us an opportunity to show that in first year courses competencies are rather introduced and developed than mastered. With only ticks, hardly any core competencies would be achieved in the first year, although these introductory courses are very important for initiating and developing these core competencies which are then mastered in later years. In fact the mastered-level code M replaces the former tick, which means that the competency is reached in this course. As regards the assessment, we suggested that for all courses, competencies with code M should be included in the exams and evaluations. For courses in which competencies are only initiated (code I), the evaluation is more free, while for code D (developed) the obligation to include the evaluation of a competency is changed to a recommendation.

The advantage of working with the meetings of a group of professors for a learning track can be found in the much clearer formulations and an observable coherence of the learning outcomes for the different courses, thanks to instructive discussions that turned out to be very lively from time to time. Finally, this also resulted in a substantially larger support of the translation of competence based learning into the whole set of courses in our programmes.