

EDUHEM 2018
VIII International conference on intercultural education and
International conference on transcultural health: THE
VALUE OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH FOR A GLOBAL,
TRANSCULTURAL WORLD

RESISTANCE TOWARDS THE COMPETENCY-BASED
APPROACH IN MEXICAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The introduction of the competency-based approach in higher education at an international level and, specifically, in the Mexican university system, has led to important transformations in the way of planning, developing and evaluating educational processes. However, some authors have indicated that its concretion, inclusion and dissemination in the university have not yet been solved. In this way, the diverse origin and concept of competencies, the improvable and prescriptive training of teachers, the lack of contextualized response or the difficulty to evaluate through competences are some of the challenges and goals that still involve the consolidation of this new approach in university education. The objective of this paper is to unravel the strengths, weaknesses and resistances of the competence model, analysing the elements and factors that delay its adequate adoption and establishment in higher education. The research has been carried out under a qualitative approach and twenty-two interviews were conducted in different university institutions. This work explores the perspectives and experiences about the evolution of the competency-based approach in higher education. The result invites reflection and the establishment of new commitments and interdisciplinary work in relation to the design, development, monitoring and consolidation of the competency model. Besides, the findings have provided an understanding of the competency model, which could help to establish strategies and action guidelines for the development of suitable educational practices, considering the key factors that promote resistance to change.

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Keywords: Competency-based approach, higher education, in-depth interview, Mexico, rejection, resistance.



1. Introduction

The introduction of the competency-based approach in higher education at an international level and, specifically, in the Mexican university system, has led to important transformations in the way of planning, developing and evaluating educational processes (Corominas & Sacristán, 2011). However, some authors (Díaz-Barriga Arceo & Barrón, 2014, Díaz Barriga Casales 2011), have indicated that its concretion, inclusion and dissemination in the university system and different fields of knowledge have not yet been resolved. This situation is even more serious in the work of generic competences, where there is a disagreement, among the different degrees, about how and when these competencies should be taught and evaluated (Ang, D'Alessandro, & Winzar 2014; Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). In fact, a large part of the debate about the incorporation of competencies has always been characterized by several terminological differences; the lack of methodological rigor to define and evaluate the components of the competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, etc.); the absence of attention to the context of the application, and the scarcity of resources or guidelines to support a real curricular change (Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004).

In the same way, regarding the implementation of the competency-based approach in educational reforms deployed in Mexico, some inconsistencies are identified (Castellanos & Luna, 2009; Moreno Olivos, 2012):

- Lack of a consolidated theoretical framework that determines the notions, principles and foundations of the competency-based learning.
- Lack of agreement and transparency to understand the key procedures and strategies that allow the implementation of the competency-based model.
- Predominance and rootedness of the traditional teaching approach, with a disciplinary structure focused on the faculty members, rote learning and summative evaluation. In addition, there is an absence of a wide range of active learning techniques such as the project-based learning and collaborative learning.
- Deficient and superficial program of faculty members training to explain the implications and scope of the competency model.
- Imprecision in the dialogue, commitment and participation of the educational community.

Besides, Robles-Haros & Estévez-Nenninger (2015), indicate that the changes produced in the academic structures and curricular designs of Mexican universities are the result of alignments, guidelines and institutional political criteria, established unilaterally and dependently to periodic evaluations by the federal administration. Therefore, according to Moreno Olivos (2012), curricular evaluations and revisions could respond only to the accountability system, forgetting that educators have a much more important role than satisfy the inspection and control requirements of the bureaucratic system (training, guide, feedback, motivation, etc.). In this way, evaluations in the Mexican context become important because they are linked with material privileges (subventions and economic resources) and social privileges (academic prestige and citizenship recognition). This situation distorts the pedagogical nature of teaching and promotes the emergence of beliefs and bad educational practices in teaching.

In addition, there is a certain rejection and resistance to competency-based learning due to its consideration of being an utilitarian and efficient approach in education (Escudero, 2008), focused on basic and mechanical job skills training. Consequently, this includes a lack of integration of values and other needed skills for a good integral training, which reduce the significant and lifelong learning on the student (Zabala & Arnau, 2014; Díaz-Barriga Casales, 2011). In this sense, Pisté, Ávila, Aguirre, & Sáenz (2016), add that the competency-based learning has not managed to minimize the separation between the knowledge acquired in the university and the real demands of the labor market. This is due to a lack of consensus in the elaboration of a curricular design that responds to the demands placed upon by Mexican university institutions. As a result, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017) indicates that one out of every two Mexican graduates does not work in positions related to their area of study and that many graduates do not have the competencies required for their jobs. In this way, the OECD recommends connecting the demand of labor market with the competencies needed in the graduate profile in order to guarantee educational quality at the Mexican universities.

From this perspective, some authors (López-Ruiz, 2011; López, Benedito, & León, 2016; Riesco, 2008) suggest that the competency-based approach cannot be accepted in a reductionist and univocally way, away from a conciliatory vision between the university training and the debate of the competencies. In the same way, several authors (Cano García, Fernández Ferrer, & Pons Seguí, 2017; Díaz-Barriga Casales, 2011; Tejada & Ruíz, 2016; Quesada-Serra, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Ibarra-Sáiz, 2017), point out that the difficulties in determining the origin, nature and purposes of the competency-based approach are derived from an absence of deep reflection about their implications, advances and setbacks in the improvement of educational quality. In this sense, this lack of agreement to define, adopt and integrate the competency model is having a negative impact on issues such as decisions on institutional organization, educational function, financing, inertia of innovation processes and renovation of teaching, curricular planning, research priorities, etc.

Therefore, Rué (2008) highlights the need to propose an integral curricular model that combines the new requirements, responsibilities and expectations of our current society with a personal, social and professional training of students.

2. Problem Statement

The problem statement of this work focuses on the need to review new concepts, curricular structures and educational experiences linked to competency-based learning that guarantee an educational model more connected with the transformations of society. From this perspective, this paper intends to carry out an analysis and follow-up on the state of development and implementation of the competency-based approach in the study programs of university degrees. Therefore, this work seeks to explore perspectives and experiences about the evolution and current situation of the competency-based approach in teaching-learning processes, identifying the elements and factors that increase the resistance to change.

3. Research Questions

The adoption and implementation of the competency-based approach raises a series of questions in relation to the changes and transformations that are taking place in teaching, learning and evaluation processes, taking into account the new training models promoted by the Common Area of Higher Education (CHEA). Some of these questions are:

How to introduce innovation in higher education, in a constant changing and transforming world? What is the origin and purpose of the competency-based approach (training, guiding, qualifying, accrediting, certifying, etc.)? What conception of teaching and evaluation do teachers have in relation to the competency approach? Has the traditional model been overcome with the shell of the competency model? How to break with inertias and outdated pedagogical processes that are current in our educational culture? What are the keys and mechanisms to integrate the competency-based approach in the educational practices of teachers? What impact and implications does evaluation for competencies have on educational processes in relation to teacher planning and practice (changes in institutional policies, curricular structures, educational practices, etc.)? How to make known the meaning and scope of the evaluation by competences?

The analysis of these questions will allow to determine the quality and improvement of the university education system, exploring the conceptions and opinions of faculty members regarding the development and integration of the competency-based approach.

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of this paper is to unravel strengths, weaknesses and resistances of the competence model, analysing the elements and factors that delay its adequate expansion, adoption and establishment in higher education.

5. Research Methods

In this section, the methodological design, the sample, and the techniques for collecting and analysing qualitative data are shown.

5.1. Methodological

The research has been carried out under a qualitative approach. The purpose of this study was to delve into some of the key factors that determine resistance and rejection to work under the competency-based approach. The interviews carried out with professionals of educational research and university teaching allowed to know the perceptions and visions of the faculty members about the difficulties and remains yet to be included in the curriculum the model of competences, considering their experiences in the university context.

5.2. Sample

The sample was composed of researchers, faculty members and heads of different Higher Education institutions in Mexico, who were conducting projects and experiences of suitable educational practices based on the competency-based model. Therefore, a theoretical sampling was used. Many experiences had

an interdisciplinary nature and included, among the phases of the project, the basic elements and procedures that define the competency-based learning model.

5.3. Information collection and analysis procedures and techniques

In this research, twenty-two interviews were conducted in different university institutions: National Autonomous University of Mexico, Institute of Research on the University and Education, Ibero-American University, Autonomous University of Tlaxcala, Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla, and Monterrey Institute of Technology. This method of information collection is meant to know the conceptions and opinions of faculty members, researchers and heads about the categories of study related to resistance and rejection.

5.4. Analysis

A qualitative analysis was carried out, considering as units a series of verbatim quotations taken from the transcripts of the interviews. The verbatim quotations, or text fragments, were taken into account throughout the process of categorization, analysis and elaboration of conclusions (Tójar, 2006). Processes of reduction, displaying, and conclusions drawing and verification were applied to the qualitative data collected. Through strategies such as categorization, modelling and typologies, the obtained data were transformed into theory (Goetz & LeCompte, 1988). From the processes mentioned above, matrices and explanatory graphs were constructed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The ATLAS.ti v22.0 software (2012) was used to facilitate qualitative data analysis.

6. Findings

Once the analysis of the transcripts of the 22 interviews had been finished, 2041 verbatim quotations or text fragments were selected. With these fragments, 14 categories and 31 subcategories were built. Taking into account that some of the citations were codified and recodified several times, the total number of analysis units or fragments per code was 21846 units. An example of verbatim quotations regarding resistance and rejection categories appears on table 1.

Table 01. Codes and examples of verbatim quotations related to resistance and rejection categories.

Codes	Subcategories	Categories	Verbatim quotations
LTU	Lack of training and updating of faculty members	Resistance	“A culture has not been established. I observe that the main explanation for me is that they have not constituted a teaching culture in which the teacher sees not only these changes as obligation and commitment, but as desire and motivation to be innovating with what is being taught in the classroom, modernizing his procedures, asking himself how he could improve” (P3: 55, 59:59)
LKIC	Lack of knowledge on how to incorporate the competency-based approach in the classroom.	Resistance	“To begin with, the main problem is the ignorance, there is not much information about learning models, curricular models focused on competencies... We do not have a clear vision on how the competency-based approach is transferred to the labour sector, the link of the university with the labour market and... Then, I think that this is one of the conditions or situations for which the teachers... for which there is a bit of

			resistance. I believe that the programs, well... because it is also a line that I have also ventured, teacher training programs should focus more in that sense, in the student-focused learning, in other types of models, in another type of evaluation.” (P2: 24, 3131)
DD	Disinterest, demotivation of the faculty members to work under competency-based approach	Resistance	“Oh! I'm going to have to make a rubric, now how will I evaluate them? And the students ask themselves – Why cannot you do a simple exam?” (P5: 79, 262: 262).
NK	The faculty members do not know another teaching model, only the model that was taught to them as students.	Resistance	“Teachers training and their practice has not been given the same rigor and monitoring, and you know very well that teachers who are training in higher education, teach how they taught because there is really no consolidated program. There is no obligatory teacher training in higher education, it does not exist.” (P21: 13, 17:17).
RMV	Rejection of the approach due to the mercantilist vision of the competences	Resistance	“Those who have taken over the direction, have always had a more technical vision and had understood and applied the use of skills in a more technical way. They associated skills with work competencies, not with professional competencies or training competencies” (P22: 24, 30:30)
LO	Lack of opportunities	Resistance	"I think everything comes together, lack of opportunities, a bit of pledge, certain apathy, but also some conformity, there are many new teachers who take the easy way out. They think- they do not demand it, I do not do it-and they stay in their comfort state, I know it"(P13: 125, 267: 267)
LR	Lack of resources	Resistance	“The resources” (P2:27, 35:35)
RFMW	Rejection of faculty members to work under the competence-based model	Rejection	“It takes a lot of work, a lot of work... because, suddenly, the Administration told the teachers of normal schools that they had to teach under the competency-based approach and design strategies based on the case analysis, the based-problems learning, the analysis of critical incidents, etc. In this sense, we thought it could not be achieved overnight. The teacher has to be trained to strategically plan the achievement of learning and, consequently, the competences.”(P20: 27, 57:57)
RSI	Rejection of the student because of the innovations in the teaching, they prefer the master class	Rejection	“I want to be optimistic and believe it, but we know that it is a change, it is a complete change of the way in which you did it and I think that there will always be a resistance to change. Even, the students rejected this approach. We have 20 students and some of them admitted that they did not want to be there, so we gave them the option of opting out” (P10:139, 251:251).
RPR	Rejection of the approach for political reasons	Rejection	“In Mexico, Normal schools are an emblem in the field of teacher training. Then, when the proposal was made, immediately some groups of professors, some ideological positions within normal schools responded quickly against the new curriculum. The reason was that the approach was contrary to the teacher training and, precisely, they were fighting for a pragmatic professional approach, seeking to eradicate the issue of philosophy, identity, etc.” (P20: 67, 123: 123)

7. Conclusion

In light of the results, it was appreciated that teachers conceive the competency-based model as an alternative to change the focus of higher education, speeding up the adaptation of educational plans to the new demands and challenges of our times.

However, educational reforms are still contemplated only from structural changes, without condemning the need to make adjustments and modifications in educational practices. From this reality, Más-Torelló & Olmos-Rueda (2016) suggests that in order to make effective the reform and inclusion of a training model at the service of education, the educational community must participate and be committed to processes of change. This means that faculty members must know the scope and meaning of the competences, as well as their implications to interpret and adopt the new curricular proposal. In this sense, according to Villaroel & Bruna (2014), it is assumed that the competency-based approach requires a review of teacher training and an update in teaching and evaluation methodologies, which imply a higher level of organization and time that can be interpreted as: 1) planning the classes; 2) carrying out activities of a practical nature where the acquisition of competences in the subject is displayed; 3) designing authentic evaluations; 4) providing feedback to students about their results.

In the same way, Pisté, Ávila, Aguirre, & Sáenz (2016), highlight the need to adopt the approach through professional training, flexibility and openness to innovation, as well as the development of infrastructure and administrative organization that provide coverage to the competency model. Besides, Moreno Olivos (2012), points out that education professionals need clear theoretical-methodological and practical references to effectively apply competency-based curricular designs. These referents will be used to support the swings and turns of the reforms driven by the centrifugal forces of educational policies. In addition, the OECD (2017) warns that Mexico could increase the quality and relevance of the competences that are developed in university curricula, offering better working conditions for teachers. This situation becomes more serious in rural or indigenous areas due to the shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of resources and strategic support (Castellanos & Luna, 2009; Moreno Olivos, 2012).

Therefore, once analyzed the current state of implementation of the competencies model, the purposes and uses in educational practices (training, guidance, accountability, etc.), as well as some of the components and factors that directly condition the professional development of faculty members (educational policies, teacher training, contextual aspects, etc.), it has been possible to present a deep diagnosis of the level of development, application and effectiveness of competency-based teaching.

The results obtained in this work have provided an understanding of the competency model in higher education, which could help to establish strategies and action guidelines for the development of experiences and good educative practices, considering the elements of resistance that affect the decision-making and the success of its implementation in the classrooms.

Finally, this study invites reflection and dialogue, as well as the establishment of new commitments and interdisciplinary work in relation to the design, development, monitoring and consolidation of the competency model.

After the qualitative analysis, the suitability of the adopted phenomenological perspective became evident. From this approach, we were able to delimit codes and categories and arrange them in various category families. In fact, categories and subcategories that functioned as “theoretical” frameworks were

built, represented by means of comprehensive diagrams that allowed to understand better the relationships among categories and dimensions to analyze the level of implementation of the competencies model. In this sense, figure 1 shows one of the comprehensive diagrams that functioned as a theoretical framework in the analysis of resistance and rejection categories.

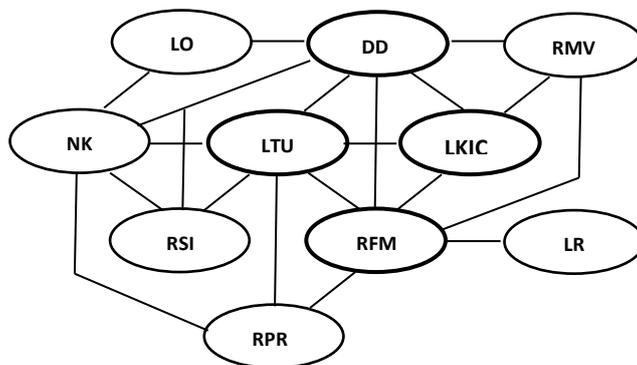


Figure 01. Relationships among categories related to resistance and rejection

Qualitative analysis of the interviews with researchers, faculty members and heads of the different university institutions of Mexico, who were conducting innovative projects under the competency-based approach, allowed us to know their opinions and perspectives in relation to the competency-based model.

With the use of similar diagrams to the one in figure 1, it is possible to analyze the way in which faculty members, involved in innovative projects, conceive the competency model. Therefore, the qualitative strategy based on the construction of systems of categories and subcategories is considered adequate to analyze the conceptions about the competency model of the Mexican faculty members interviewed.

In this way, the construction of the categories and subcategories, corresponding to the categories “resistance” and “rejection”, has allowed the design of a comprehensive diagram that acts as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the key factors that determine resistance and rejection to work under the competence-based approach.

Acknowledgments

We thank researchers and faculty members who have participated in this work.

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