



Core Competencies for the Substance Abuse Field

Educational and Training Experts Consultation Report

GREG GRAVES, M.A. (CCSA)
KARINE PLOUFFE, B.A. (CCSA)

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Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse

75 Albert Street, Suite 300

Ottawa, ON K1P 5E7

tel.: 613-235-4048 | fax: 613-235-8101 | www.ccsa.ca

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Introduction

The addiction workforce survey published in 2005 by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) revealed a demand for increased career development opportunities among front-line substance abuse professionals and a desire for "national standards and competencies...that can be tailored to the meet the needs of provincial and territorial jurisdictions". CCSA responded to the survey by engaging in national consultation with the substance abuse field to explore and develop core competencies outlining the skills and knowledge required for effective service delivery. The outcome of this consultative process was compiled into a collection of 18 core competencies and released at Issues of Substance 2007, CCSA's national addictions conference in Edmonton in November, 2007, in a report entitled "Core Competencies for the Substance Abuse Field, version 1.0", hereafter referred to as the Core Competencies.

As part of the consultative process leading to the release of the Core Competencies, CCSA initiated the formation of two "expert" groups, one representing post-secondary education and the other, professional development training. The Centre hosted a meeting of each group to evaluate the competencies report and to map out "next steps" for implementation. This report presents the results of these consultations.

The first section of the report is reflective of the meeting of post-secondary education experts (hereafter referred to as the Education Experts) that took place in Toronto on October 23, 2007. This group examined how the Core Competencies can be integrated into post-secondary academic curriculum. The second section reflects the meeting of professional development training experts (hereafter referred to as the Training Experts) that took place in Toronto on October 24, 2007. This group explored how the Core Competencies could be adopted in the field through professional development activities.

Part One: Report on the Education Experts Meeting

The Education Experts meeting included eight faculty members from colleges and universities across the country. The meeting included faculty who are teaching in addiction-specific certificate, diploma and degree programs at colleges and universities. The topics explored during the meeting included

1. The current state of competency-based addiction programming in Canadian colleges and universities,
2. The potential impact of the Core Competencies on addiction programming in colleges and universities in Canada, and
3. The integration of Core Competencies into addiction programming at colleges and universities in Canada.

As well, as an example of how competency-based education has been implemented in other jurisdictions and "lessons learned" from that experience thus far, input was provided on the current state of competency-based addiction education and service delivery in the United Kingdom.

Opening Considerations

Faculty members emphasized the importance of presenting students with clear career paths so that they are able to foresee the practical applications of their certificate/diploma/degree in addictions. The faculty was open to incorporating competency-based education for addiction students instead of exclusively focusing on completing academic certificates, diplomas and degrees. The faculty also expressed interest in applying best practices in existing academic curriculum.

Even though there is currently no regulatory requirement or licensure associated with substance abuse as a profession, a significant number of those employed in the substance abuse workforce are subject to regulation or licensure as social workers, psychologists, nurses, etc. Hence, the expert group members cautioned that introducing new competencies into post-secondary institutions would require full consultation and agreement from regulatory bodies (e.g., social workers), since any changes to the existing curriculum would have to continue to meet specific regulatory requirements for certification upon graduation.

The expert group members also stressed that changes to curriculum involve a process of navigating through several bureaucratic levels within the institution (e.g., boards of directors, boards of education, regulatory boards). Most colleges and universities have their own internal systems to oversee this process. Changes to curriculum, even if fast-tracked, require a lead time of at least one or two years. This process is more time-consuming when considering revisions to an entire addictions program (e.g., Indigenous Wellness and Addiction Prevention Program) versus a single substance abuse course found in a related discipline (e.g., Introduction to Pharmacology in Social Work).

Current Status of Existing Competency-Based Curriculum

In both colleges and universities, competencies are tied to the learning objectives of the curriculum. Competency-specific language, however, is more common in colleges than in universities since college curriculum is often designed to meet specific requirements linked to certifying bodies and direct employment in the field. Faculty cautioned against a regulatory framework that recognizes the completion of designated coursework instead of focusing on the quality of the academic program as a whole.

The UK Experience: Lessons Learned Thus Far

Simon Shepherd, President of the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals (FDAP) in the United Kingdom, provided an overview of the UK experience with regard to the implementation of competency-based curriculum development and certification as facilitated through the Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS).

DANOS is a collection of competencies that apply to anyone “working to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities by minimizing harm associated with substance misuse” (Skills for Health, DANOS Guide, 2005) and was designed to ensure practitioners perform their jobs according to a measurable standard of service. A statutory body located in the Department of Health is responsible for ensuring that the field is in compliance with DANOS. However, while the government has a significant amount of control over the implementation of DANOS within the voluntary sector (e.g., needle exchange, housing and social services), the government has limited or no authority over a wide range of professionals working in the field (e.g., psychologists, nurses, social workers) who have been resistant to DANOS, purporting that their existing qualifications are sufficient for practising in the substance abuse field.

Other challenges in the implementation of DANOS include the application of DANOS to “unqualified” workers, or workers without credential, who make up 50% of the workforce. Upon implementation, unqualified workers were required to demonstrate a minimal level of competency, a requirement that was met with resistance by the field as even the minimal level of competency was perceived as “too high” in the absence of additional training and/or professional development support.

With regard to post-secondary institutions, the developers of DANOS failed to connect with colleges or universities during the initial development and implementation phases. As a result, DANOS is not necessarily aligned with curriculum offered through these institutions. With specific regard to universities, there has been limited success in promoting DANOS to these institutions, given that their focus is more oriented to higher learning. In general, universities did not understand the competency framework and were therefore unreceptive to it. Colleges, on the other hand, have a greater focus on vocational training and were quick to engage since they saw an opportunity to connect students with employers. The colleges recognized that if their courses did not show evidence of the competencies required for employment, students would not enrol.

Special mention was made of the need for a distinction between competency-based hiring and credential-based hiring. The viewpoint was expressed that there is a need to educate employers on the importance of identifying the competencies they need in employees. If the focus is on credentials alone, assumptions are made about clinical skilfulness without actual demonstration of the knowledge, skills, and understanding required in working effectively with clients. By the same token, there is a danger of moving towards traditional academic qualifications if colleges and universities do not adopt competency-based education. In an “ideal world” scenario, students would possess a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical understanding of how work is conducted in the field.

Review of the Core Competencies for Canada's Substance Abuse Field

The group expressed very positive viewpoints on the Core Competencies, although constructive criticism was also offered. The report was viewed as comprehensive, accurate, communicated in plain language, and broad in description, likely resulting in flexibility of application in different jurisdictions. The view was also shared that employers would likely be receptive to the menu of competencies offered.

One member preferred the term "addiction" over "substance abuse", believing that this would broaden the application of the competencies in the field. Expert group members stressed the importance of a literature review to accompany the report and a more elaborate methodology to describe the background and process involved in designing the competencies and their linkage to best practices.

It was noted that it is important to illustrate how the competencies could be used in the development of various job profiles in the field. For example, an outreach worker requires a different set of competencies than a substance abuse counsellor working in a residential treatment setting. It was also suggested that the rating scales themselves could be applied differently. For example, the "basic" and "foundational" competency scales would apply to a student intern whereas the "intermediate" and "advanced" scales would apply to a senior clinician. The view was expressed that "job profiling" is an important next step when implementing competencies in the field.

Strategy to Develop Competencies

The rest of the meeting was devoted to a small-group exercise in which members were tasked with the development of a strategy for how the Core Competencies could be integrated into post-secondary education in Canada. To this end, the group members responded to the following five questions:

1. What do you see as the key goals of integrating the Core Competencies within the academic community?
2. What steps are required to implement the Core Competencies into academic curriculum?
3. What type of support/collaboration is required from government, provincial addiction agencies, the addictions workforce, or other key stakeholders?
4. How can competency-based education address the needs of both students new to the field and practitioners who are experienced in treatment delivery?
5. How could CCSA assist with this process?

Key Goals

The group members identified the following goals:

- Create awareness of competencies at colleges and universities;
- Engage government in supporting competency-based education at the post-secondary level;
- Create a national multi-disciplinary body to help steer the agenda on competency-based education at the post-secondary level;
- Improve the ability of colleges and universities to meet the needs of the substance abuse workforce, including employers;
- Develop and implement an effective marketing strategy to promote competency-based education to students;
- Ensure students offer the most effective services to their clients upon graduation; and
- Conduct research to measure the effectiveness of the competencies.

Integrating the Core Competencies

The group members identified the following key steps required to implement the Core Competencies into academic curriculum:

- Engage in ongoing national consultations with the academic and training communities,
- Raise public awareness of the prevalence and significance of addictions in our society,
- Identify the need and demand for competency-based education in an academic community,
- Create awareness in the overall academic community about the benefits of competency-based education,
- Consult with regulators and employers to learn about their specific competency requirements,
- Find champions within academic institutions to call attention to competencies,
- Lobby the provincial ministries of health to build support for the competencies,
- Create a national overriding body of addictions in the academic sector to promote the idea of competencies,
- Provide information on competencies to other academic programs to allow for a specialization in addictions,
- Ensure that competencies lead to accreditation for addiction programs,

- Recognize that it is a long-term process to revise and approve academic curriculum,
- Recognize that this process will be easier for addiction based programs than for single courses in addiction in a related discipline, and
- Conduct applied research in an academic setting to test the competencies.

Support and Collaboration

The group members highlighted the following types of support and collaboration as necessary for the Core Competencies project:

- Seek input from the government, provincial addiction agencies, and the addiction workforce, including front-line service providers;
- Invite key stakeholders (e.g., regulators and employers) to offer input on their concerns about how competencies will impact on them;
- Present a cost-benefit analysis to all stakeholders to show what happens if we ignore addictions in society;
- Map out who will be using the Core Competencies—target institutions and organizations, professional groups and employers;
- Lobby government for increased funding to the addictions field to support well-prepared substance abuse practitioners;
- Learn from provincial jurisdictions that have already integrated competency-based job descriptions and acknowledge their contribution to the process; and
- Involve francophone, Aboriginal, new immigrant and visible minorities in the process.

Students and Experienced Practitioners

The group members stated that competency-based education could address the needs of students new to the field and experienced clinicians in the following ways:

- Design career paths for students new to the field;
- Develop increasingly challenging levels of competencies to match the needs of various types of student accreditation (e.g., a two-year community college program, a Bachelor of Science program, and a Master's or Ph.D. program);
- Benchmark job descriptions against competencies for experienced practitioners;
- Acknowledge that experience in the field could be assessed against existing competencies, leaving room for upgrading;

- Link the level of competencies required to the scope of practice expected by the employer; and
- Involve professional licensing and regulatory boards in setting competency-based education for different types of employees (e.g., new to field or experienced).

CCSA's Role

The group members identified the following roles for CCSA:

- Lead the process over the long term;
- Secure a funding base for the Core Competencies;
- Facilitate support for the Core Competencies among all stakeholders;
- Conduct research on the competency levels of substance abuse professionals in Canada;
- Encourage faculty to engage in consultation at their institutions and among employers;
- Host another seminar or conference to assess progress on integrating the Core Competencies into academic curriculum;
- Create a national council on Core Competencies that could perform several functions such as promoting continuing education, measuring competencies, promoting professional dialogue, and assessing how well educational addiction programs meet competencies; and
- Consult with employers about what they really need from their substance abuse practitioner.

Part Two: Report on the Training Experts Meeting

The Training Experts meeting included nine managers from provincial addiction agencies, a non-profit treatment centre and a provincial health authority. The participants were drawn from across Canada. The structure of the meeting was the same as for the Education Experts meeting; however, the focus was on practitioners in the field.

The topics explored during the meeting included

1. Highlighting the current status of competency-based addiction service delivery in Canada,
2. Reviewing the potential impact of the Core Competencies within the substance abuse field in Canada, and
3. Designing a strategy for how to integrate the Core Competencies within the substance abuse field in Canada.

Opening Considerations

The training experts agreed that credentialing alone is not a productive route to hiring addiction specialists in the field. Emphasis was placed on moving beyond theoretical knowledge to the application of skills and knowledge. The training experts viewed the ability to effectively engage with substance-abusing clients as critical to employment success. One participant noted that hiring has always taken the human qualities of the individual into consideration; for example, a non-judgmental stance, empathy and a caring approach to the client are all examples of human qualities essential to effective service delivery.

Current Status of Competencies

The training experts shared the status of competency development and application in their respective jurisdictions/regions as follows:

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

CAMH integrates competencies into the course designs of the educational and professional development services they offer through a variety of instructional methods, including online courses. CAMH is currently working with colleges and universities to have courses developed in-house formally accredited. Many of the courses offered through CAMH are accessible to practitioners anywhere in Canada and are not restricted to CAMH employees.

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC)

AADAC offers a wide range of addiction core training services to its staff. Currently, AADAC offers approximately 50 standardized courses, covering a range of evidence-based addiction topics. These courses target core knowledge and skills and the application of clinical principles to service delivery. In this sense, competencies are embedded in AADAC's core training.

Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA)

VIHA is working on a curriculum design project for addiction and mental health workers. The topic of this five-day core training is "Introduction to Addictions Programs and Clinical Practices". All efforts have been made to ensure this training is explicitly competency-based. The view was expressed that Core Competencies have value to this project in terms of helping the training team to develop clinical plans—for example, in designing job profiles and evaluating job performance.

Addiction Services, Northern Nova Scotia (ASNNS)

ASNNS is moving away from core standards. In recent years, they have been mapping competencies onto evidence-based clinical practices. There is a combined approach of initial and follow-up training that is further reinforced through "coaching". Specific and intentional attention is paid to "program drift", as clinicians typically lose some proficiency over three to five years of practice. This process is coupled with clinical supervision, mentorship, and audio taping sessions for feedback, thereby supporting a continual cycle of professional

development. As well, clients are provided with an opportunity to express views about the clinician's skills and proficiency in supporting change.

Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM)

AFM offers a competency-based training program as part of the Co-occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders Initiative (CODI). CODI provides a comprehensive approach to training and treatment delivery whereby mental health and addiction specialists work in concert. There is an explicit set of competencies embedded in this service-delivery model. It was also noted that US-based competencies from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration are currently being piloted at one service-delivery site.

Summary

Overall, there was consensus within the expert group that competencies can act as a foundation for program standards, provide clarity, and define career paths linked to service-delivery requirements. Competencies are also important to consider when examining the current challenges in the substance abuse field with recruitment, retention and worker wellness. Competencies can and should be reflected in succession planning, as new employees are recruited into the field with the appropriate knowledge, skills, abilities and experience.

Review of the Core Competencies for Canada's Substance Abuse Field

The experts had a very positive impression of Core Competencies for Canada's Substance Abuse Field, stating that they were satisfied with the scope of the document, the content, and the general descriptions of competencies—indicating that all of these factors would be useful in applying the competencies to various job profiles.

The group emphasized the importance of developing a concrete plan for adopting the competencies in the field. As well, there was consensus that Professional Ethics should be more prominent in the Core Competencies report and a number of specific recommendations were made with regard to the use of language.

Participants emphasized the importance of articulating different groupings of competencies to different job profiles, self assessments and performance appraisals, and suggested creating examples of these applications to illustrate this point.

Strategy to Develop Competencies

The rest of the meeting was devoted to a small-group exercise in which participants were tasked with the development of a strategy for how the Core Competencies could be adopted in the substance abuse field through professional development activities. The participants responded to the following five questions:

1. What do you see as the key goals of integrating the Core Competencies across the substance abuse field?
2. What steps are required to implement the Core Competencies across the substance abuse field?
3. What type of support/collaboration is required from government, provincial addiction agencies, the addictions workforce, or other key stakeholders?
4. How can competency-based education address the needs of both students new to the field and practitioners who are experienced in treatment delivery?
5. How could CCSA assist with this process?

Key Goals

The group members identified the following goals:

- Adopt core competencies for substance abuse and allied professionals across all provinces and territories;
- Improve human resources, such as recruitment, performance standards, professional development planning, and performance reviews;
- Support the creation of policy that reflects workforce wellness issues such as caseload, and budget;
- Create new opportunities to enhance professionalism in the field;
- Create common language and standards for education;
- Encourage quality assurance in the field (e.g., protect against risk and liability); and
- Enhance treatment outcomes.

Implementing the Core Competencies

The group members identified the following key steps required to implement the Core Competencies in the field:

- Develop an implementation plan and communications strategy that targets all key stakeholders (e.g., government, professional organizations, post-secondary institutions, the front line in the field);
- Secure government endorsement at the provincial and federal levels as well as at the level of the local (regional/district) health authority;
- Create linkages with regulatory and accreditation bodies, professional colleges and associations, and post-secondary institutions;

- Develop promising practice guidelines on each of the competencies for the various governing bodies, front-line managers and staff in the field;
- Develop information packages that include samples of performance reviews, curricula, implementation models, job profiles, and templates for recruitment;
- Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to assess the viability of implementing the competencies;
- Develop self-assessment tools for experienced staff to assess their competency level and allow for grandfathering of staff who meet all competency requirements;
- Develop the behavioural competencies (personal characteristics) to complement the existing technical competencies; and
- Match groupings of individual competencies to various job profiles of substance abuse and allied professionals.

Support and Collaboration

The group members highlighted the following types of support and collaboration as necessary for the Core Competencies project:

- Government endorsement at all levels;
- Funding for training in the competencies;
- Professional college or association to explore certification in the substance abuse field and endorse competencies;
- Health authorities to set out hiring/retraining expectations;
- Accreditation bodies (e.g., Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) to support the implementation of the competencies at an agency/organization level as a requirement of accreditation;
- Human resource departments within larger agencies/organizations to offer expertise and advice while leveraging broad organizational support; and
- Substance abuse workforce to provide endorsement, awareness and promotion.

Students and Experienced Practitioners

The group members stated that competency-based professional development could address the needs of students new to the field and experienced clinicians in the following ways:

- Tier professional development services to match the needs of various groups: curricula for professionals in training (students), continuing education for experienced

graduates/professionals, and continuing education for experienced staff who are not professionals/have no academic background

CCSA's Role

The group members identified the following roles for CCSA:

- Provide national leadership in order to engage all key stakeholders (e.g., government, professional organizations, colleges and universities, front-line professionals) in the adoption of the competencies;
- Develop a professional association and code of ethics for the substance abuse field;
- Lead colleges and universities on how to integrate the Core Competencies in an academic setting;
- Create a network through the CCSA website and disseminate information;
- Develop self-assessment toolkits so that professionals can determine their competency level;
- Coordinate promising-practice documents around the Core Competencies;
- Secure substantial funding to support independent research on the uptake of the competencies, the gaps in the field, and creating a clinical trial network to support best practices with the competencies;
- Create a forum for Knowledge Exchange on the results of the research on the competencies; and
- Host a national conference on the Core Competencies.

Note: A consistent theme that emerged was the importance of "champions" to lead the process of adopting competencies in the field. Champions refer to leaders within the field who have made a fundamental contribution to advancing our understanding of addiction. This could include a wide range of professionals, including researchers, policy experts and practitioners. The champion is someone capable of mobilizing the substance abuse field to adopt innovative ways of performing work more effectively.

Conclusions for Education and Training Groups

Both groups conveyed a clear appreciation of the importance of adopting competencies in the substance abuse field, and offered a positive appraisal of the Core Competencies report. The Education Experts emphasized the importance of embedding core knowledge and skills in academic curricula in an effort to support career paths for students entering the workforce and to promote consistency across programs and jurisdictions. They cautioned, however, that the process of integrating competencies into the academic community is a long-term strategy, often taking at least one or two years. They emphasized that a high level of consultation and approval would be required to integrate core competencies into an academic setting, including

cooperation from regulatory bodies. Furthermore, the suggestion was made that an evaluation of the educational experience would most likely require the development of a competency framework rather than a check-list of courses completed. The Education Experts also expressed a willingness to conduct research to test the effectiveness of the competencies over time.

The Training Experts indicated a long-standing relationship between professional development and competencies, reporting on a variety of competency-based initiatives already underway in the field, including online and manual-driven training as well as recruitment and retention practices. It was emphasized that competencies must move beyond knowledge and skills to incorporate behavioural measures (personal characteristics) as these were seen to be equally, if not more important to the work of the field.

Both groups agreed that the adoption of Core Competencies has the potential to enhance professionalism in the field, improve client outcomes, and create consistent standards across provincial and territorial jurisdictions. This adoption would require the engagement of a wide range of key stakeholders, including all levels of government, professional colleges and associations, accrediting bodies, colleges and universities, employers, and the substance abuse field as a whole.

A communications plan was also seen as a key component in any implementation strategy. This could include the development of an information package with samples of job profiles, performance reviews, and templates for recruitment of staff. There was also agreement that a national conference could serve to coordinate a wide range of diverse players such as government, professional organizations, colleges, universities, service-providing agencies, and front-line service providers. Both expert groups agreed that a communications plan has the potential to facilitate change and move the impact of this initiative beyond the simple distribution of a report.

To this end, CCSA was identified as playing the lead role in engaging all key stakeholders in the adoption of the Core Competencies across the field. Potential activities related to such a role included securing funding, engaging "champions", establishing a professional association or network, facilitating knowledge exchange, conducting research, and monitoring the adoption of competencies by post-secondary institutions and service-providing organizations.