

# Guiding Principles to Set International Competency Standards

2 February 2014

## Introduction, Context

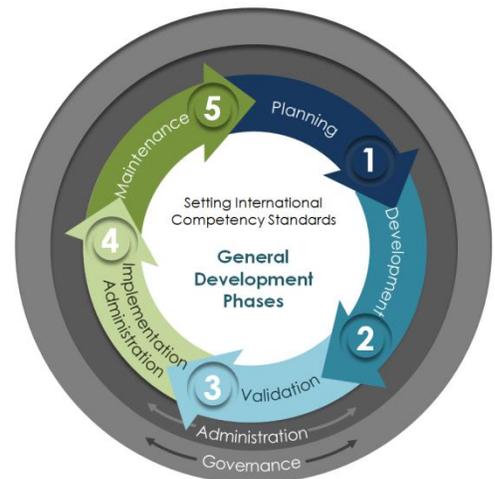
International competency standards define what is expected of a proficient and experienced practitioner adept at working in a range of contexts applicable to their field of practice. The standards are used by individuals or groups responsible for providing career guidance, education, training, or employment. Standards are the basis of assessment models used to evaluate the competence of individuals, inform public policy and facilitate learner and worker mobility.

Competency standards must be trusted and acceptable; they must be based on a rigorous methodology that follows a globally accepted quality assurance process and adhere to recommended principles. Guiding principles aim to promote good practice for organizations that set competency standards. The principles embody the values that should apply to all phases of setting a standard: planning, development, validation, implementation/administration, and maintenance. Principles also apply to the overall administrative and governance structure for the standards themselves.

The Guiding Principles aim to focus on priorities and significant issues in setting competency standards that apply across many national contexts. The principles are intended to be feasible and flexible, and respect social, economic and political differences; the emphasis is on quality assurance and applied use of the competency standards by diverse stakeholders. The principles respect the interests and rights of individuals (i.e. those affected by the standard) over the interests of institutions (e.g., education systems, employers), and governments even though the key aim of the standards serve all of these groups.

## Structure of the Guiding Principles

There are fifteen guiding principles, arranged alphabetically. Each principle contains a summary of *Important Elements*, which describes how the principle applies in the practice of setting a standard. Further context and information is provided under *Guidance*, to help illustrate the consequence of compliance or non-compliance.



## Summary of the Guiding Principles

1. Accessible, equitable, and fair
2. Coherence and rigour
3. Confidentiality
4. Consensus
5. Compliant with regulations affecting the domain
6. Current, relevant and valid
7. Flexible
8. Forward looking
9. Harmonization
10. Held within an appropriate governance structure
11. Impartiality and independence
12. Openness and transparency
13. Representative and inclusive
14. Socially, economically and politically relevant
15. Sustainable

**PRINCIPLE 1** Accessible, Equitable, and Fair

*All individuals should have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively.*

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### *Important Elements*

- 1.1 The process to set international competency standards must:
  - be accessible to all individuals, taking into account costs, literacy levels, and the needs of individuals with different abilities; and
  - be inclusive and respectful of diversity, taking into account the diverse range of stakeholders, gender, age, and special needs.
- 1.2 Resources and methods must be made available to enable all stakeholders to participate meaningfully and to increase accessibility to the standards setting process.
- 1.3 Provisions for privacy, security, and safety must be equally available to all users.
- 1.4 Published copies of international competency standards must be easily accessible to users.

### *Guidance*

Standards-setting bodies should demonstrate that impartial and reasonable efforts were made to ensure accessibility to the process and information, and to enable participation of any interested person regardless of where they reside.

Published versions of the standards may be provided in multiple formats to support the diverse needs of users, for example: print-based, electronic, or multiple languages.

The standards-setting process should have multiple methods to disseminate and collect information, allowing for optimum input and taking into account the diversity of stakeholders (e.g., age, literacy, abilities).

Avoid segregating or stigmatizing any users.

Policies and procedures and their implementation should be fair and equitable to participants, and comply with all applicable regulations, statutory requirements and human rights.

International competency standards should be made available at fair price or at no cost. When a fee is charged, the price should be reasonable and affordable to users, with the aim of covering costs that will help sustain the standards (rather than focus on making excessive profits).

## PRINCIPLE 2

**Coherence and Rigour**

*International competency standards must be stated clearly in plain language and be meaningful, realistic, and easily understood by users.*

*Important Elements*

- 2.1 Information must be developed and presented in a logical, rigorous, and consistent manner.
- 2.2 Information is explicitly presented and readily perceived.

*Guidance*

The methodologies used to set standards should be rigorous and follow an acceptable quality assurance process.

International competency standards should have *internal validity*:

- Appropriate specificity
- Clarity; lack of ambiguity
- Consistency
- Focused objective
- Free of inherent bias; politically neutral
- Harmony, agreement and concordance
- Legally defensible
- Meaningful, realistic, accurate
- Measurable, attainable
- Proper defined domain
- Structured in a logical format
- Void of the use of complex rhetoric
- Void of unnecessary redundancy

PRINCIPLE 3

**Confidentiality**

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*Information must be accessible only to those authorized to have access.*

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*Important Elements*

- 3.1 Confidentiality policies and procedures must be developed and followed to ensure that personal information of stakeholders is treated as confidential, and must outline the circumstances under which this information may be disclosed or made public (e.g., name and affiliation published in the standard).
- 3.2 Records, documents, and/or other materials must be identified, managed, and disposed of in such a way as to ensure the confidentiality of information, as appropriate. Standards-setting bodies and their agents must maintain all personal information pertaining to participants in a secure manner as required by applicable laws.

*Guidance*

Preservation of confidentiality and privacy is central to treating people with dignity and respect. All information provided by stakeholders should be kept confidential unless informed consent to share with others is provided. Informed consent is obtained only when the stakeholder is provided sufficient information to understanding the issues involved.

**PRINCIPLE 4****Consensus**

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*A consensus process must be used to make decisions. Consensus is defined as general agreement, characterized by the absence of sustained opposition to substantive issues by any relevant stakeholder and by a process that seeks to take into account the views of all relevant stakeholders and to reconcile any conflicting arguments. Consensus implies much more than a simple majority, but not necessarily unanimity.*

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### *Important Elements*

- 4.1 International competency standards must be developed based on stakeholder consensus.
- 4.2 All parties with a significant interest in the issue must be involved in the consensus process. The parties who are affected or interested participate voluntarily.
- 4.3 All stakeholder groups' positions must be treated equally, regardless of the number of individuals included in the respective stakeholder group.
- 4.4 The stakeholders are accountable both to their constituencies, and to the process that they have agreed to establish.

### *Guidance*

Consensus processes are designed to ensure that all significant interests are represented and respected. The process should enable participants to deal with each other directly and allow individuals to voice their own opinions freely. The process aims to focus the discussion, clarify the underlying issue, identify options, build respect and understanding among the parties, and ultimately come to agreement on a solution or outcome.

Acceptance of the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of the parties involved in the consensus process is essential.

Working with a consensus-based approach is unfamiliar to some cultural groups. For example, achievement-oriented cultures base respect on an individual's competence or performance, where other cultures are orientated towards ascription where titles, rank and hierarchy are more important. A requisite to setting international standards is to come to an agreement amongst the stakeholders on a consensus or decision-making approach.

Consensus is a stipulation for a standard to be accepted and trusted, along with the principle that subject matter experts (primarily comprised of competent job incumbents) inform content and must formerly validate the standards.

## PRINCIPLE 5

**Compliant with Regulations Affecting the Domain**

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*International competency standards must respect and uphold relevant laws and regulations, where they apply to the domain.*

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*Important Elements*

- 5.1 Standards-setting bodies are responsible for identifying and becoming aware of laws and regulations, and at times, particular customs, that affect the occupational domain. Standards-setting bodies must demonstrate efforts to ensure that personnel are aware of and take steps to comply with relevant laws and regulations.
- 5.2 Final published versions of international competency standards should be in agreement with the laws and regulations that affect the domain, and declare possible limitations or the range of contexts where the competency standard may be open to interpretation of non-compliance.

*Guidance*

Competency standards are not a replacement for laws or regulations; they should complement or reinforce the expected practices. The process of validating a competency standard should include a review of the document contents to the identified laws and regulations to ensure there is agreement in meaning and intent, where applicable. In some situations it may be necessary to consult with legal counsel to obtain advice related to how a law is interpreted or applied.

**PRINCIPLE 6** **Current, Relevant, and Valid**

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*Information must be credible, applicable, and up to date.*

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### *Important Elements*

- 6.1 Information used to develop or inform decisions on the standards must be accurate, come from clearly identified and credible sources, and reflect a range of different perspectives. The document should contain a statement describing the limitations of the data, where needed.
- 6.2 All components of the international competency standard must be reviewed periodically to ensure that the content is current and accurate, and is consistent with the intended objectives or purpose of the standard. Standards-setting bodies should conduct periodic program evaluations to assess program quality and effectiveness and implement future improvements.
- 6.3 International competency standards developed as part of a competency framework that has a dynamic lifecycle must conduct period validations of the content (i.e. more than episodic reviews and validation of the components that were affected).

### *Guidance*

To ensure the international competency standards are current, relevant, and valid, early and continued stakeholder engagement, particularly industry/sector involvement is essential throughout the entire standards-setting process, including planning, implementation, and maintenance.

## PRINCIPLE 7

**Flexible**

*International competency standards must be written in way that enables them to be applied to varied contexts for which they are intended and to allow them to be modified, augmented or adapted for local use without affecting the overall integrity of the standard.*

*Important Elements*

- 7.1 International competency standards must be relevant and applicable to practice in all countries that have adopted the use of the standard. In order to achieve this, methodologies used to set standards must:
- Describe the practice and the outcome of meeting a standard (rather than be prescriptive and declare a limited means to achieving the standard);
  - Define a range of contexts and examples that illustrate how the standard can be applied and how the standards can be achieved/met, taking into account the varied work contexts; and
  - Establish agreement on terms and concepts contained in the standard.

*Guidance*

Local regulations, laws and customs will vary from country to country. Subsequently, business practices and the language used to conduct business, as well as operational activities will vary. International competency standards should be written in a form that defines a standard of practice that is transferable to the range of contexts in which the standard is performed. To ensure that the intended meaning of the standard is clearly understood and universal in application, key terms and concepts should be defined and contain explicit examples on how the standards manifest in the work context.

Standards by their very nature should be dynamic or reflect the ever changing context of work influenced by contingent factors such as economic pressures, social policies, political agendas, or the impact of new technology (all beyond the influence or control of the field of practice). Increasingly, occupations have become more complex and require greater competency across broader key functional areas; the integration of job roles within and across functional areas is critical for productivity and efficiency. Flexibility in this case refers to the need to define the standard in a way that will enable users to comply without the need to update the standard each time an influence affects the domain. For example, content related to ‘compliance with regulations’ may define types of regulations and not refer to specific elements from any particular regulation (as these can easily change and may not be universally applied).

Standards can and should be augmented by company policies and procedures without affecting the integrity of the standard. International competency standards should not be described as the *definitive way* of working; instead, they should apply to the diverse work contexts relevant to the practice.

## PRINCIPLE 8

## Forward Looking

*International competency standards should take into account emerging issues and trends, with the aim to make the standards both current and forward looking.*

### Important Elements

- 8.1 Methodologies used to develop and validate international competency standards must define current practice and focus on what is needed to perform effectively in the future. Necessarily, this requires standards-setting bodies to employ multiple research methods that will help inform decisions on forecasted needs.
- 8.2 Research methodologies must consider contingent and environmental factors and account for the influence of these factors on future needs:
- Political factors, e.g., regulations, legal issues, trade restrictions, labour mobility legislation
  - Economic variables, e.g., economic growth, employment/unemployment rates
  - Social policies, e.g., mobility of workers, emphasis on safety and security or improved ecological practices
  - Demographic trends, e.g., age, levels of education
  - Technological factors, e.g., automation, rate of change, research and development investments, increased complexity in tools needed to perform work
  - Legal factors, e.g., employment laws, discrimination or equity laws, health and safety requirements
  - Environmental factors, e.g., ecological and environmental aspects such as weather and climate change.

### Guidance

Standards are not simply the ‘embodiment of current practice’; they are intended to define a standard of practice. Often methodologies aim to define the competencies according to the knowledge and skills needed to work in the current context or based on what job incumbents already do, instead of focusing on what is needed to perform effectively in the future.

## PRINCIPLE 9

## Harmonization

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*Harmonization with existing relevant national and international policies, procedures, and requirements helps to ensure consistency and quality. Harmonization is the process of achieving concordance and involves the prevention or elimination of differences and inconsistencies.*

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### Important Elements

- 9.1 International competency standards must be harmonized (to the extent possible) with existing relevant international, regional, or national standards and policies and procedures, standards, regulations or other industry norms.
- 9.2 Where harmonization is achieved, effort must be made to establish liaison arrangements with the originating organization (i.e. 'rights holders'). Every effort should be made to engage the originating organization in the process to set international competency standards, and to keep the organization informed of how the international competency standards relate or align to their Works.

### Guidance

Harmonization allows for local differentiation; it is not intended to result in *standardization* which imposes one identical process.

Reasons for harmonization extend beyond achieving concordance. Rights holders of any associated norm may view the setting of international competency standards as a duplication or competing effort and may be concerned about 'cannibalization' – the very influence of a new international standard taking precedence over the established standard or practice. This principle reinforces the fundamental need to engage these stakeholders, and the commitment not to duplicate what may already exist. In the event that a standard exists and meets the intended need, the focus should be to adopt and adapt, as needed (where the standards-holder is amenable).

**PRINCIPLE 10****Held within an Appropriate Governance Structure**

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*The standards-setting body must have an appropriate governance structure that ensures autonomy in decision making, impartiality, and appropriate representation of stakeholders. The structure must include competent individuals with appropriate qualifications.*

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### *Important Elements*

- 10.1 The standards-setting body must show that the governance structure, policies, and procedures that have been established protect against undue influence that could compromise the integrity of the standards.
- 10.2 The governance structure including the advisory or subject matter committees must be a fair representation of stakeholders. Individuals involved in the work must be qualified and have sufficient and appropriate orientation to the task in order to participate.
- 10.3 Standards-setting bodies must employ or contract qualified people with the necessary credentials and experience to perform functions relating to the planning, development, implementation, administration and maintenance of the competency standards.

### *Guidance*

The structure should include competent individuals with appropriate qualifications. Where standards are held within any single stakeholder group (e.g., governments, academe) concerns of inherent bias, conflicting agendas or differing priorities can emerge. The competency standards will not be trusted and may lack integrity, and without endorsement, the standards will serve no purpose. The appropriate structure and governance of international competency standards should reflect the interests of the stakeholders.

**PRINCIPLE 11**   **Impartiality and Independence**

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*Decisions must be based on objective criteria, rather than bias, undue influence, or prejudice.*

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**Important Elements**

- 11.1 The standards-setting body and the processes used to plan, develop, validate, implement, and maintain the standards must be impartial and independent in relation to committee members and/or stakeholder groups.
- 11.2 Decisions should be based on objective evidence and not be improperly influenced by other interests or parties.
- 11.3 Impartiality and independence must be established at all phases of work and with the structure of the organization, and its policies and procedures. The standards-setting body must have documented procedures which are followed, that ensure the independence and impartiality of stakeholders. The documented procedures should contain explicit information on prevention of conflict of interest.

**Guidance**

Independence is vital to fostering stakeholder confidence in the fairness and objectivity of the standards-setting process.

Individual stakeholders involved in the process of setting standards must be seen to be objective and impartial. The standards-setting body should uphold the practice of respect, and require stakeholders involved in setting standards to avoid words and actions that appear to be biased or disrespectful. In addition, individuals should be required to declare potential conflicts of interest.

Standards-setting bodies should avoid activities that may diminish confidence in its competence, impartiality, judgement or operational integrity.

**PRINCIPLE 12** **Openness and Transparency**

*Stakeholders must have the opportunity to be engaged, and the information provided to stakeholders should be open and transparent. An open and transparent process allows all individuals to participate effectively. Openness is access to or disclosure of information.*

**Important Elements**

- 12.1 The public must be notified of the development of the international competency standard to promote broader stakeholder awareness and participation.
- 12.2 The standards-setting body will demonstrate accountability, and transparency by:
  - publicly disclosing the progress in planning, developing, validating, and implementing the international competency standards;
  - implement effective and transparent engagement, communication and reporting arrangements;
  - provide information that is timely, accurate and relevant; and
  - engage with and respond to stakeholders through open consultation processes.
- 12.3 The development and validation process must be open for anyone to provide comments; all comments should be considered and responded to, if requested.
- 12.4 The development and validation process must be transparent and the degree of influence that stakeholders have on the standards outcome should be honestly declared.
- 12.5 A due diligence process must be followed to verify that stakeholders participating in the development process do not have a conflict of interest in carrying out their roles and responsibilities; potential conflicts should be declared.
- 12.6 The development and validation process must include a mechanism for dispute resolution, complaints, and appeals.

**Guidance**

In an open and transparent process, the roles of stakeholder groups are clearly defined, the process to be followed is clearly communicated, and the details of how the resulting information will be used are shared with all involved. Standards-setting bodies should provide public access or disclosure of appropriate and timely information about the process and about the intended use and access to the standards.

Care should be taken in identifying and notifying stakeholders of the standards development, ongoing collection of feedback and validation.

**PRINCIPLE 13** **Representative & Inclusive**

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*The process must be inclusive, not exclusive. All individuals with a significant interest in the issue should be involved. Acceptance of the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of individuals involved is essential.*

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**Important Elements**

- 13.1 International competency standards must include stakeholders who represent a board range of perspectives in all phases of work (planning, development, validation, implementation, and maintenance).
- 13.2 Sufficient representation by stakeholders from across the globe is necessary for a standard to be international in scope, particularly in the process to validate the standard.
- 13.3 Representatives must reflect the diversity of the sector and take into account the demographic profile, type and range of work contexts, and geographic representation.
- 13.4 Stakeholder representatives must have the knowledge and capacity to participate effectively on behalf of their constituency.
- 13.5 Stakeholder groups must be given the opportunity to determine their representation through their own processes and mechanisms.

**Guidance**

## PRINCIPLE 14

**Socially, Economically and Politically Relevant**

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*International competency standards must consider contextual variables and resolve to set standards that are socially, economically, and politically relevant. The standards must be ethical, incorporate different cultural views, and cause no undue burden or risk.*

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### Important Elements

- 14.1 International competency standards must be inclusive of the range of work contexts and the diversity of job incumbents and other stakeholders affected by the standards. Minimally, the standards must adhere to ethical principles, values and codes which guide professional behaviour and inform decisions to resolve ethical dilemmas.
- 14.2 International competency standards must consider contextual variables or contingent factors that influence the field of practice and will inform the knowledge and skills requirements of existing and future job incumbents (practitioners). Methodologies should consider social, political, economic, regulatory/legal, ecological and technological issues.

### Guidance

Standards-setting bodies that work in international competency standards have a responsibility to learn about and work with diverse cultures. Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Culture is inclusive of values, norms, rules, ritual, symbols and practices. Cultural frameworks are helpful in making decisions on how to work with diverse groups of people. For example, one example of a cultural framework<sup>1</sup> is characterized by the following dimensions:

- Individual vs collectivism
- Universalism vs particularism
- Specific vs diffuse
- Achievement vs ascription
- Attitudes towards time
- Ethnocentrism

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<sup>1</sup> [http://byuipn.net/PGVT/index.php?path=/lessons/06/01.php&id=a\\_90](http://byuipn.net/PGVT/index.php?path=/lessons/06/01.php&id=a_90)

## PRINCIPLE 15

**Sustainable**

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*Commitment and sufficient resources are essential to continue and prosper.*

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### *Important Elements*

15.1 Standards-setting bodies should have sufficient human resources, financial resources, and infrastructure to develop and maintain the international competency standards.

### *Guidance*

The standards-setting body should develop a financial plan that includes multiple funding strategies. Strategic options should consider various funding sources such as governments, earned income (e.g., fees), investments, or shared resource initiatives.

This principle also infers the difference between moral and intellectual ownership. The rights holder of the standards is quintessentially responsible for meeting this principle, however, it is understood that moral rights holders (i.e. the industry/sector) have a responsibility. (A standard is not feasible if it is not sustainable; it would otherwise have no presence in the market.) Standards-setting bodies should educate stakeholders on the cost to sustain the standards.

## References and Acknowledgements

(To be completed)

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