STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

FOR

COMPETENCY-BASED

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

(CBTE)

1 - INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to equip quality assurance agencies for the work of accrediting providers of competency-based theological education programmes.

It is also the reference document for the ICETE Competency Based Theological Education Alignment procedure. [1]

This document arises from an ICETE-led consultation in 2023 of key stakeholders and experts in competency-based theological education and relates to the use and quality assurance of competency-based theological education programmes.

1.1 - Introducing Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)

The emergence of competency-based theological education (CBTE) has built on the advances in competency-based education (CBE) in the higher education and professional training sector[2.]

Competency-based education (CBE) has been discussed and explored more explicitly since the 1970s. Recent technological developments (such as the internet in general, but LMS and online classes in particular) have made CBE more feasible for higher education institutions and, by opening it up to accreditation, more desirable for students.

CBE is commonly characterized as a learner-driven approach that aims at empowering students by allowing for participation in the educational and training journey. Progress in a given programme is made by demonstrating competency rather than through "seat-time". The path to gaining competency can be variable and takes into consideration specific vocational and contextual needs. The competences developed are holistic in nature rather than focusing on knowledge or skills alone. In traditional approaches, time and learning activities are fixed and student learning is variable. In CBE models student learning (competencies) is fixed and time and learning experiences are variable.

CBTE belongs under this larger umbrella of CBE and typically shares this description but is distinct in its thematic focus (theology and ministry), stronger emphasis on spiritual and character formation, and the utilization of a mentor team.

In CBTE, traditional approaches to theological and/or ministerial education that are heavily based on lecture time and written assessments are often replaced with an approach that places emphasis on development of individual competences. CBTE programmes thus typically use backward design to identify competences first, and subsequently develop assessable learning activities that will lead to achieving those competences.

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[1] https://icete.info/alignment/

[2] Theological institutions in North America joined the CBE discussion in the early 2010's. In 2012, Northwest Baptist Seminary started a CBTE MDiv based on direct assessment. In 2014, Sioux Falls Seminary (now Kairos University) launched its credit-based CBTE MDiv. In 2014, The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) granted experimental approval and in 2015 launched a focus project on CBTE. In 2017, Grace Seminary launched its version of a CBTE MDiv called "Deploy". The first conference on CBTE was offered in 2018. By 2022 there were around 30 CBTE programmes in the US, and this approach has been expanded to include BA, MA, and doctoral degree programmes.

Both learning activities and assessment may be of different kinds and tend to be 'authentic' in the sense that they seek to replicate real-life situations and ministry contexts in which graduates need the desired competence.

1.2 - Key features of CBTE

Some of the key features of CBTE include:

Student focus. CBTE programmes typically do not have a set curriculum that is the same for all students. Whereas programme outcomes and competences are the same for all students, the way students achieve them can be different allowing individualised learning pathways that consider prior learning, student maturity, context, etc. Students progress through their degree not by passing classes, but by demonstrating competences. The educational and training journey is often agile, with an iterative process between discerning, developing, and demonstrating competences. Although the students do not determine the journey independently, they have a significant influence on its shape.

Mentoring teams. CBTE programmes normally employ a team of mentors to work with each student. Although each team includes an academic faculty member, it can include other mentors as well, such as a personal mentor and vocational mentor. Mentors help students in initial diagnostic assessments in relation to the programme competences, and then mentor the student in individualised learning pathways. Through this, the role of the educator/trainer changes from one that primarily creates and teaches content towards one who primarily helps the student discern relevant information and apply it in a contextually relevant, and vocationally appropriate way.

Recognition of Prior Learning (or Initial Assessment). Each journey towards an outcome starts with a rigorous assessment of the student's current competence. Based on the assessment, the journey towards the outcome might be shortened or lengthened. In this assessment, formal, non-formal and informal learning is taken into account. This assessment is often done by the mentor team and includes and self-assessment by the student.

Authentic/Tailored assessment. Assessment in CBTE expands beyond written work and exams to assessment of tailored learning activities and the competences that are being developed by the student. The assessments are formative as well as summative. They can be typically described as reliable, authentic, holistic and contextualised, as they are set in the vocational context.

Proficiency indicators. In CBTE programmes the generic programme competences are normally broken down into clear contextually appropriate and vocationally fitting proficiency indicators. These indicators are customised and make the competences clear, measurable, meaningful, integrated, holistic and observable. Proficiency indicators are developed in collaboration with stakeholders (often represented through the vocational mentor and/or the agency associated with the student's ministry) and are contextually adaptable, while still articulated in such a way that program level assessment of student achievement is possible. Students progress through the programme as by demonstrating that they are gaining proficiency and are normally not allowed to progress until they have achieved the set competence proficiency. Thus, completing each CBTE competency may be graded as 'pass' and 'not yet passed' instead of using a traditional letter/numerical grade.

Holistic emphasis. CBTE places a high value on holistic training. Competences of CBTE programmes are thus typically related to: 1) knowledge and understanding in the field of study (e.g. theology, ministerial studies, biblical studies, intercultural studies, leadership, counselling, etc.), 2) proficiency in

the skills and abilities needed for ministry or related vocation and 3) the formational aspects of personal character and virtue.

Backward design (also known as 'curricular alignment'). This starts by identifying the competencies that students need, designs assignments and activities for demonstration of each competency, provides learning resources in a variety of media, crafts assessment rubrics to identify mastery, plans activities at different levels of difficulty and provides extensive formative feedback.

The following features are also often part of CBTE

1. CBTE avoids the term *courses* in favour of *learning experiences*, to emphasise the fact that learning can take place in many different places outside the classroom.
2. CBTE is often attractive to people who are already working in a ministry setting.
3. CBTE often utilises just-in-time learning to connect vocational challenges or questions with studies in a very direct way.
4. Students often create a portfolio of artefacts that document their development of a particular competency.
5. CBTE shares many commonalities with micro-credentials, which provide formal recognition of specific, single competencies that, when combined, can make up a macro-credential such as a certificate or degree.
6. CBTE privileges student-centred learning.
7. Although CBTE is usually done part-time it can be delivered in a variety of modes, including full and part time, intensives, workshops, synchronous, asynchronous and self-paced online leaning. In general the student determines the pace.
8. The general philosophy of CBTE can be applied to residential and non-residential programmes.

In addition, some other general observations may be made:

- CBTE programmes can be delivered both by higher education institutions and alternative providers alike.
- CBTE programmes encourage collaboration with other providers/partners who train people for various ministry contexts (e.g. other higher education institutions, alternative providers, employers, learners, NGOs, charities, public authorities, etc.).
- CBTE programmes can include learning experiences inside and outside of the provider that offers them.
- CBTE allows for the recognition of any competences, developed in any setting, formal, non-formal or informal.
- CBTE programmes take the learning style of the student into consideration.
- Unlike CBE, which can also occur in primary and secondary educational settings, CBTE is designed for adult learning (andragogic)
- CBTE usually seeks to develop skills and competences that empower students for life-long learning.
- CBTE programmes often consider the local church as the student's main community of reference.
- CBTE programmes include a rethinking of education in light of the rise of the internet which has provided massive, decentralized, and easy access to information. The challenge is no longer access to information, but rather learning how to assess the quality and relevance of information, and to reflect on and apply that information well.

1.3 - Quality Assurance of CBTE

As with all educational innovation, the issue of quality of competency-based theological education programmes is at the forefront. Given the innovative CBTE educational philosophy there is room for misunderstanding as comparisons are made with 'traditional' qualifications in tertiary education.

ICETE procedures and standards for Competency-based Alignment based on the standards in this document are designed to enhance quality in growing CBTE movement, increase stakeholder trust and favour international recognition of CBTE programmes and student mobility.

2 – ACCREDITATION STANDARDS FOR CBTE PROGRAMMES

These standards address the (minimum) standards that competency-based theological education programmes must meet to obtain accreditation. These standards are referred to in section A1 of the *Competency Based Theological Education Alignment Standards*.[3]

Further generic details for each standard should be consulted in the *Standards and Guidelines for Global Evangelical Theological Education* (SG-GETE).[4]

A.1 – IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

The vision and mission of providers offering CBTE programmes clearly reflects a commitment to CBTE for relevant programmes.

CBTE providers publish programme information that includes clear descriptions of the educational and training philosophy of CBTE and of the specific ways in which the programme will be delivered.

A.2 – GOVERNANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Providers offering CBTE programmes have appropriate and effective governance structures.

Providers have public policies for internal quality assurance (IQA) that are applied to CBTE programmes.

Providers undergo regular external quality assurance (EQA) of their CBTE programmes activities on a cyclical basis.

A.3 – HUMAN RESOURCES

Providers offering CBTE programmes have human resources that are fit for purpose and managed for flourishing.

Providers have a broad definition of their educational and training staff including those that are involved in helping students achieve the competences in CBTE programmes.

Providers that are new to CBTE programmes have adequate training and development provision for educational and training staff. Ongoing training in CBTE theories and practices is included in professional development plans.

Providers ensure that academically qualified staff are included within the teams that mentor CBTE students for the academic level with which the related training is to be recognized.

A.4 – COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT

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[3] https://icete.info/alignment/
[4] https://icete.info/educational_resource/sg-gete/

CBTE programmes engage a plurality of learning communities that integrate the learning process. Learning communities include local learning communities that connect students to their context and allow for situated learning.

A.5 – EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Providers offering CBTE programmes have educational resources that support their mission and strategy.

Student services are tailored to the specific needs of students enrolled in CBTE programmes.

Providers ensure that learning facilities (including digital facilities) and learning resources are adequate and readily accessible to CBTE students.

Providers have systems and policies to analyse and use of relevant data for the effective management of CBTE programmes.   These include tools to collect, monitor and act on information pertaining to enrolment and graduation statistic of CBTE students.

CBTE programmes do not necessarily utilise grades, hence they may not need to monitor marking trends and grade inflation. Providers delivering CBTE programmes should, however, utilise data to monitor the success rate of competence achievement through the given learning activities and the reliability and validity of assessment schemes.

Where used, virtual learning platforms are fit for purpose and designed to support CBTE programmes.

A.6 – FINANCES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Providers offering CBTE programmes have suitable financial potential, planning, policies and procedures.

Full transparent information is made available to students concerning the costs of CBTE programmes.

A.7 – HOLISTIC INTEGRATION

CBTE programmes intentionally form students in integrated areas related to cognitive learning, skills learning and practical training, and affective development including character and spiritual formation. While allowing for different emphases depending on programme outcomes, these areas are given equivalent status in designing outcomes, in designing and delivering mentoring and learning activities, in assessment strategies and in graduation requirements.

A.8 –PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

Providers offering CBTE programmes have formal processes for the design, approval and review of programmes that involve stakeholders.

Learning outcomes in CBTE programmes are clearly matched to competences, which are normally broken down into clear, measurable, integrated, holistic and observable proficiency indicators. Competences and proficiency indicators are developed in collaboration with stakeholders and are contextually adaptable. At the same time, programmes allow sufficient consistency to be measured in quality.

CBTE programmes do not use standardized curricula for all students. Rather, mentors define flexible trajectories with students and move them through tailored learning activities that contribute to programme competences.

Likewise, CBTE programmes do not rely on standardized syllabi featuring content, credit and duration. Rather, while still operating within a given structure of outcomes, programmes focus on the demonstration of learning outcomes and competences in the appropriate setting through a range of learning activities as determined by the mentoring team and by the student.

The competences in CBTE programmes include competences in theological, biblical studies and other areas of ministerial studies, that are matched to educational levels but are not necessarily matched to credits.

CBTE programmes focus heavily on the demonstration of learning outcomes and competences and may, or may not, use credit counting to quantify student learning activities. Credits often still provide a point of reference for how long an average student might need to achieve a particular outcome in a traditional format and the appropriateness and of awarding a qualification with little or no structured learning time should be evaluated. However, since CBTE focuses on achieving competencies (however long that might take for a student), credit given is independent of the actual time the student needed to achieve an outcome and its related competencies.

A.9 – LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Providers have a clearly articulated CBTE philosophy that is grounded theologically, that undergirds the curriculum and the learning and teaching strategy and that is understood and engaged with by the learning community.

Providers also have a clearly articulated andragogic practice, grounded in CBTE theory and in studies of best practice. Variety in teaching, training, and learning allow for a diversity of approaches that fit the student profile, while at the same time ensuring consistent quality.

CBTE programmes are delivered in ways which highly encourage student voice, choice and ownership (with the support of educational and training mentors). CBTE programmes do not necessarily use 'courses' to deliver learning, although these may be used to meet designated competences. Delivery strategies are fit for the purposes of competency-based education and personalized to the profile of the student.

Assessment strategies are designed to fit CBTE frameworks and include diagnostic assessment (initial assessment of the student's competences in relation to programme competences), formative assessment (ongoing development of programme competences) and summative assessment (evaluation of the achievement of programme competences).

Various approaches to grading and proficiency scales may be used in assessing competences. Where grading is used, providers formulate appropriate policies.

Educational and training mentors understand competence-based assessment strategy and their role in student assessment activity as it relates to the overall programme delivery strategy.

Appropriate complaints, appeals and feedback procedures are available to CBTE students

A.10 – STUDENT ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION

Admission criteria are clearly related to the programme competences and are formulated to ensure that students show promise to successfully complete the programme. In the application phase, providers give a clear induction to the nature and practice CBTE.

Policies are in place for the recognition and transfer of competences, which may, or may not be, related to credits. Providers elaborate strategies for the recognition of non-formal and informal competences as they relate to the designed programme competences.

Students in CBTE programmes are informed of graduation requirements as they relate to the achievement of the set programme competences. Transcripts of CBTE programmes are designed to illustrate transparently the nature and content of the programme, the competences that graduates have achieved and the level/nomenclature of the qualification.

A.11– QUALIFICATION NOMENCLATURE AND CREDITS

CBTE programmes adopt internationally recognised qualification nomenclatures.

CBTE programmes may, or may not, use credits to define student workloads.