

***Developing Generic Competences
in Life Sciences: The Untold Story
of Makerere University College of
Health Sciences in Uganda***

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Introduction



- Fundamental purpose of HE: Transformation of students (value-addition)
- From “adolescents with school-type knowledge into adults ready to enter society and the labour market at the highest level of competences available” (Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007, p.7)
- Facets of transformation:
 - Subject-specific competences
 - Generic competences

Introduction-cont'd..



- Generic competences: A priority area of the Tuning Africa Project (TAP): Creation of the African Higher Education Space (to mirror the Bologna Process and the EHEA)
- 18 Generic competences identified by TAP
- Project has provided us with “...an improved understanding of the graduate competences that are relevant...to the labour market” and that can inform measures to close the gap between higher education and the continent’s needs (Hahn & Teferra, 2013, p.115)

Statement of the Problem

- Treats generic competences as general!
- The “why” aspect of generic competences not addressed in the Project
- Emphasis on “end” (what generic competences to develop) rather than “means” (how to develop the competences), or both
- The above gap(s) resonates with extant literature (Calma, 2013; Wickramasinghe, 2010)

Research question



- What generic competences are aligned with life sciences at undergraduate level at the Makerere University College of Health Sciences and how does the College develop them?

Context of Mak, CHS

- One of the nine colleges of Makerere University, Uganda
- Established in 1924
- The oldest medical training university unit in East Africa
- Comprises four Schools: Medicine, Health Sciences, Public Health, and Biomedical Sciences

Methods

- Case study design: “why” & “how” question
- Purposive sampling: sampling frame
- Two programmes: nursing and dental surgery (Biglan’s classification of academic disciplines)
- 2 academics from Nursing and 2 from Dentistry
- Data collected through interviews
- Data analysis: thematic

Results- Generic competences

Problem solving

- Nurses and dental surgeons deploy problem-solving skills to find answers for patients' problems
- Life sciences are basically about solving health problems of clients

“For us [health workers], life is about solving problems [related to health]...I mean our work is about solving problems” (LDD-2)

Students of dental surgery and nursing should, by implication, be prepared to solve problems

Generic competences-cont'd...

- **Lifelong learning**
- Respondents regarded change as the only constant in the health field
- Why: the mode of diseases and treatment are always changing and healthcare professionals need to keep abreast with shifting trends in their respective fields of study
- Health practitioners are not immune from learning on completion of their degree programmes

...the mode of diseases change, the treatments change; everything changes, the way things are done changes. There are certain things I was taught when I first came here [at Makerere University] as a student nurse which have changed completely. So, if you don't continue to search for knowledge, then you can be out of practice (LND-1)

- Need for learning, unlearning and relearning so as to prevent obsolescence of knowledge and competences

Interpersonal skills

- Highly social and complex environment
- Nurses and dental surgeons interface with other professionals, patients and their caregivers
- The social nature of these professions necessitates possession of sound interpersonal competences

Generic competences-cont'd...



- The relevance of interpersonal competences is illustrated in the following dilemma that was put forward by a lecturer of Nursing:

If you are a nurse on the [medical] ward and you do not have [good] interpersonal skills, how will you deal with the doctor, deal with the lab attendant, how would you deal with the radiologist and then you must also deal with the dietician because your patient must eat specific foods? (LND-1)

Generic competences

- Communication, team working and leadership skills featured under interpersonal competences
- The three skills (and their dimensions) resonate with five out of the 18 generic competences for African higher education that were reported by Hahn and Teferra (2013)

How does the College Develop the competences?



- **Strategy 1: Problem Based Learning (PBL)**
- Part of student-centred learning
- Findings on this strategy point to a nexus between the “perceived purpose” of life sciences (solving health problems) and the approach to developing discipline-specific and generic competences (problem-based learning)
- Develops the competences which were identified:
How?
- Benefit: Hitting two birds with one stone/Challenges: Denies students the theoretical underpinning of the competences

How does the College Develop the competences?



Strategy 2: Conducting general course units

- “...our curriculum has communication skills; we have management, which includes teamwork [as a topic] and so on. So all those things are incorporated” (LDN-1)
- “The College [of Health Sciences] actually put...learning items in the curriculum. When it comes to communication skills, we actually have a course unit on that” (LDD-1)

How does the College Develop the competences?

Strategy 3: Role modeling

- *Since this (Nursing) is a people sort of profession, you must teach by example. You must be a role model. I think that is very important. So if we are talking about time keeping, you are there on time and they see you. Then the learners get accustomed that this is how things are done (LDN-1)*

Recommendations



- Generic competences should be embedded throughout the curriculum at undergraduate level
- HEIs should embed generic competences in student assessment
- HEIs should make generic competences part of discipline-specific teaching and learning
- Generic competences should be elevated to a quality assurance issue in HE
- HEIs should shift from mapping out the generic competences to demonstrating greater evidence of the attainment of competences

Contributions: Why does the study matter?



- Addresses the “why” aspect of generic competences- a grossly neglected area in the TAP
- Extends scholarship on generic competences from “what” competences should be developed to “how” the competences should be developed

Thank You

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