

**LOOKING BEYOND SMALL STATES:  
HOW DO WE MEASURE UP IN  
COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT-  
A CASE STUDY OF JAMAICA**

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## **Abstract**

**This paper addresses the approach to competency-based assessment adopted by the National Council on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NCTVET) in Jamaica, a small state.**

**With the advent of globalization, our policy makers have been forced to rethink the approach to education, work-based training, assessment and certification in order to remain competitive. This paper examines the radical approach taken by the NCTVET and HEART Trust -The National Training Agency of Jamaica in developing national occupational standards, implementing flexible training and assessment strategies, in order to certify individuals who are productive, working to world-class standards, and who appreciate the need for life-long learning.**

## **Background**

Jamaica lies in the Caribbean Sea, southeast of The Florida Pan Handle, about 90 miles (142 km) south of Cuba, our closest neighbour. With a landmass of 11,000 sq km, Jamaica has a population of 2.6 million, with 49.8% below the age of 24. The country's per capita GDP is US\$4,000 and the economy is heavily dependent on remittances, tourism and bauxite. Agriculture has declined significantly over the past 20 years and now contributes only 5% to the GDP. The service sector is growing rapidly and contributes 64% of the GDP. The remaining 31% is based on industry. As a small state, Jamaica has a labour force of approximately 1.2 million people. By occupation, 60% are in services, while the remaining 40% is split evenly between agriculture and industry. A rather startling statistic is that 70% of the workforce have no formal certification or training for the job that they currently hold.

## **Effects of Globalization**

With the advent of globalization, competition has had a dramatic impact on the economy. There has been a significant fall-out in the economy, and several firms have down-sized, and, as a corollary to this, there has been a dramatic loss of jobs. For example, with the liberalization of the telecommunications industry, the telephone company, which once enjoyed a monopoly, has had to reduce the size of its workforce from over 4,000 in 1999 to less than 1,000 in 2004 - a period of only five (5) years. This attrition in the company's workforce was, deemed a necessary response to fierce competition posed by new entrants to the deregulated market. As a result of worldwide competition, employers, educators, trainers, individuals and other stakeholders have had to rethink the approach to technical and vocational education and training. In this regard, competency-based training (CBT) has come to the forefront with great prominence.

There is now a noticeable shift in demand for types of worker, with present trends clearly in favour of highly-skilled technicians and professionals. In this new environment, organizations have to strive for greater competitiveness, and the concept of life-long employment no longer holds. If a worker is unskilled, he or she no longer adds value to

the organization. It means, therefore, that individuals have to enhance their life-long employability by becoming life-long learners. This requires the worker to continually upgrade him- or herself to stay relevant, developing attitudinal skills which include creativity, flexibility, self-reliance, problem-solving and an interest in life-long learning.

While the HEART Trust/NTA (The National Training Agency) continues to emphasize skills upgrading, training and life-long learning, NCTVET, as the certifying body, has been at the forefront of change in facilitating assessment and certification, thus helping the Jamaican labour force to gain current qualifications and remain competitive. Today there is greater acceptability of the value of qualifications, and it has become more important than at any time in our history for individuals to obtain both academic and occupational (professional) certification. Foremost for the decision makers is the need to train a workforce that will meet global standards.

### **Role of the National Training Agency and the NCTVET**

The HEART Trust/NTA is the umbrella organization for technical and vocational training in Jamaica. Each year, approximately 30-35,000 individuals are trained in over 100 occupational skill areas, ranging from Hospitality, Business, Commercial and Construction skills to Early Childhood Care and Development, Engineering and Information Technology. The transformation of the workforce began in 1994 with the establishment of the NCTVET, whose mandate it is to promote improvement in the technical competence and productive capacity of the labour force. The NCTVET has overall responsibility to develop occupational standards, accredit and approve training programmes and institutions which meet established standards, and to assess individual competencies (measured against the standards) leading to the awarding of the National Vocational Qualifications of Jamaica (NVQ-J).

### **Why Competency-Based Education and Training?**

HEART Trust/NTA and the NCTVET have promoted the competency-based (also termed learning outcomes) approach to training assessment and certification as a deliberate strategy, as it speaks to the demand-driven standards-based system of preparing

individuals to meet the needs of industry. Competence defined, speaks of the application of knowledge and ability to a “standard of performance required in the workplace, now and in the future.” The competency standards developed cover a range of activities which are related to the workplace and are appropriate to a business, industry or cross-industry.

Spady, an American writing in 1994, spoke of outcomes based education as *‘focusing and organizing ... the educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for the students to be able to do, then organizing the curriculum, instruction and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens.’* Killen elaborates further, by stating that *“outcomes should describe long-term significant learning...underpinned by three basic premises:*

- *All students can learn and succeed, but not all at the same time or in the same way*
- *Successful learning promotes even more successful learning*
- *Schools (and teachers) control the conditions that determine whether or not students are successful at school learning.”*

### **Elements of Competency-Based Training and Assessment Systems**

A number of essential elements have been identified in applying the competency-based approach to education, training and assessment. These are:

1. Competencies/standards to be achieved are carefully identified, verified by industry and made public in advance. A standard of competence or benchmark of performance must be in place.
2. Training and assessment are directly related to what is expected in the workplace. The assessment process must be valid, reliable, flexible and fair.

3. The criteria for assessment are explicitly stated and made public in advance.
4. The instructional programme provides for individual development and evaluation in each competence.
5. Assessment is independent of the learning programme. Established Standards and Assessment Plans are in place and Prior Learning is recognized.
6. Assessment of competency takes the participant's knowledge and attitudes into account, but also requires **actual performance** of the competency as the **primary** source of evidence.
7. There are established methods for the collection of evidence of competence. For example, an holistic approach can be used to collect a range of evidence.
8. Participants can progress at their own pace by demonstrating mastery in the specified competence.
9. Assessor training (qualified), appointment, and quality assurance are valued by industry.
10. There is a system of record- keeping reporting and feedback mechanisms.

### **So (as a Small State) How Do We Measure Up?**

Using the criteria above, we can determine qualitatively how Jamaica, as a small state, measures up in terms of the essential requirements of a truly competency-based approach to tech-voc education and training.

#### **(a) Industry-Validated Occupational Standards**

In order to enable individuals to be highly skilled and competitive, NCTVET works with many employers through Lead Groups (experts) to establish occupational (competency) standards. These are important to promote the efficient flow of business information across an industry or profession. Consensus is gained on **what** tasks the learner or worker is expected to perform in a particular role and **how** the worker is expected to perform on the job. The standards speak to best practice in industry, and make for quality performance at the workplace. These standards are then used as the basis for the development of curricula and for delivery within the training system. To date, over forty such Lead Groups have been formed, 100 occupational standards and over 5,000

Competency Standards have been developed. These are accessible in both the electronic and hard-copy formats (see the web-based National Qualifications Register of Jamaica, <http://www.nqrjamaica.org>)

**(b) Work-Based Training and Assessment**

Under the competency-based approach to training and assessment as practiced by HEART Trust/NTA and the NCTVET, the learner (or worker) learns defined competencies to pre-determined performance standards, defined and validated by industry lead groups as specified at (a) above. Learners, whether institutional or work-based, are given the opportunity to hone their skills in industry or in an enterprise attached to each of the twenty-six (26) training entities under the auspices of HEART Trust/NTA. However, while this works well for individuals at the higher levels of training, who, for the most part, are already on the job, we have not had similar success at the lower levels, where more time is spent in an institutional setting rather than in the enterprises.

**(c) Assessment Criteria are stated and are published**

Assessment instruments are developed and validated by industry and the learner or worker is assessed on the basis of what he or she is able to do as a manifestation of learning or demonstration of competence in the skill or occupational area. Assessment guidelines are published as part of the Training Package, which includes the Competency Standards, Learner Guides and Assessment Guidelines.

**(d) The instructional programme provides for individual development and evaluation**

The CBT programmes developed by HEART Trust/NTA encourage and facilitate flexibility. Learning and mastery is stressed over training time, and the programmes recognize and accommodate different learning styles to meet individual needs and abilities. Under the model, learners are introduced to the competency profile before the training begins, and are encouraged to become independent learners, supported by

Learner Guides and modules. Participants can progress at their own pace by demonstrating mastery in the specified competence. Learners have prior knowledge of the assessment methods, criteria and processes. Each competency is individually assessed, and the learner accumulates Statements of Competence on successful completion of each unit making up the qualification. Even though the instructional programme provides for individual development and evaluation, learners in some institutions may have to work within fixed term or semester dates according to their institution, and, as a result, may not be afforded too much flexibility.

**(e) Assessment is independent of the learning programme**

Under the system of outcomes-based assessment, acknowledgment and recognition is given to learning which takes place outside the formal classroom setting. The learner is assessed against pre-determined standards, and if there is evidence that competence exists (including underpinning knowledge and practical demonstration of competence), training may not be required. Recognition of Prior Learning therefore becomes a critical component of competency-based systems. Learners can have their competencies assessed, recorded and recognized through a variety of methods such as On-the-Job and prior learning, college credits, etc. NCTVET offers assessment and certification of prior learning as one of four modes of increasing accessibility to certification.

**(f) Assessment of competency takes into account the participant's knowledge, skills and attitudes**

Assessment of individuals entails gathering **evidence** and making decisions about the outcomes of learning or competence. Assessment focuses on all aspects of the competence – task skill, management of skills, transfer skills, employability skills, etc - and requires actual performance of the competency as the **primary** source of evidence; that is, the individual has to **demonstrate** the required knowledge, skills and attitude necessary for the job. Methods of assessment include practical demonstrations, role-play, oral and written questioning, work place simulation, case studies, direct and indirect

observation, log and supervisor's reports. Thus, a wide range of assessment instruments are applied in the appropriate setting, ensuring that all competencies are assessed.

**(g) Assessor training, appointment and quality are valued by industry**

Prior to their use in the TVET system in Jamaica, all assessors undergo a training course in competency-based assessment methods. Here, they pursue various modules, including how to plan, conduct, review assessment, select assessment procedures and develop assessment tools. On demonstrating the competencies they are then certified and placed on the National Qualifications Register, to be used by accredited training organizations.

**(h) There is a system of record-keeping, reporting and feedback mechanisms**

Competency-Based education and training is participatory. There is constant feedback from all the stakeholders in the development of standards, training and delivery. Records are maintained at the local and national levels,. On completion of the required competencies within a qualification, competency statements or the NVQ-J - recognized locally by employers and tertiary institutions and regionally by CARICOM - are issued by NCTVET.

**Conclusion**

Now in its tenth year, NCTVET has issued over 45,000 National Vocational Qualifications, and over 25,000 customised Joint Certificates. A system is in now place to assure quality in training and assessment. This system allows for life-long learning to take place and for training to respond to the demands of the economy. It allows for a system of articulation to take place and for a viable career path to be established for individuals. Jamaica should begin to feel the impact of this approach to training, as well as an increase in the variety of skilled practitioners in the workforce. The objective is to reduce the numbers of uncertified workers by increasing the opportunities for them to be trained and certified to world-class standards, and, thereby enhancing Jamaica's competitiveness in the global environment. By training and certifying a productive labour force, NCTVET aims to continue playing a vital role in contributing to the prosperity of the country.

*NCTVET*  
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