



Competence-Based Curriculum in Higher Institutions: An Homework for Zambia's Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

The global imperative for educational systems to produce graduates with industry-relevant, transferable skills necessitates a radical curriculum reform in Zambia's tertiary sector. This explored the implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum in Zambia's higher institutions. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study utilizes document analysis and semi-structured interviews with university administrators, academic staff, and industry representatives. Findings reveal a universal agreement on the necessity of CBC to align graduate competencies with the demands of the labour market and national development goals (Vision 2030). The findings revealed that lecturers perceived the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) as a major shift from traditional, content-based teaching to a learner-centered approach focused on demonstrable skills and practical application. They understood CBC as aligning education with labour market needs by emphasizing employability, innovation, and problem-solving. While most lecturers appreciated CBC's relevance in enhancing graduate readiness and national development, varying levels of conceptual clarity highlighted the need for continuous capacity building and clearer implementation frameworks in higher education institutions though some expressed uncertainty about its practical implementation due to limited guidance and institutional support. The study recommend that the Government standardize curricula and invest in infrastructure, that tertiary institutions build staff capacity, adopt performance-based assessments, and promote inclusive lifelong learning, and that the Ministry of Education grant institutions autonomy to innovate in teaching and curriculum design.

Keywords: *Competence-Based Curriculum, Employability, Skills Development, Tertiary education*

Introduction

The global landscape of higher education is undergoing a fundamental transformation, shifting its focus from mere content delivery to the deliberate cultivation of measurable skills, practical competencies, and tangible abilities required by the modern labour market. This shift is embodied by the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) model, a pedagogical framework designed to bridge the persistent gap between academic qualifications and industry demands, especially in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Internationally, successful economies recognize that graduate employability is the key metric of a tertiary system's effectiveness (Boahin, 2018; Tshabalala & Ncube, 2022). Tertiary institutions worldwide are strategically restructuring their teaching, learning, and assessment methods to ensure graduates are not just knowledgeable but demonstrably "job-ready," making the adoption of CBC a strategic imperative for global competitiveness and national economic vitality (Mungai, 2019). While the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) has been introduced at primary and secondary levels (GRZ, 2023), its comprehensive adoption in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains a critical, unfinished task.

Further, Chisala (2025b) Indicated that the 2023 Zambia Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) Framework discloses a progressive shift from traditional content-heavy education to a learner-centered, skills-oriented model aimed at producing competent, adaptable, and entrepreneurial citizens. The necessity of skill-focused education is clear, many of Zambia's higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to operate within traditional, theoretical curriculum models (Tembo & Phiri, 2023)). This legacy approach, often characterized by rote learning and examination systems that prioritize memory recall over practical problem-solving, is creating a growing dissonance between the academic output and the socio-economic needs of the country. Despite increasing enrolment rates, Zambia faces significant challenges related to youth unemployment and a recognized deficiency in specialized, technical, and entrepreneurial competencies across various sectors (Mumba, 2023). This disparity underscores a systemic failure to adequately equip graduates for the rigors of the contemporary Zambian economy, thereby highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive curriculum reform in higher education. It is against this critical backdrop that this study posits the transition to a Competence-Based Curriculum as indispensable "homework" for Zambia's tertiary education sector.

Methods and Materials

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore lecturers' perceptions regarding the implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's tertiary institutions. This approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' views, beliefs, and lived experiences within their natural academic settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected lecturers from tertiary institutions to ensure representation of diverse academic disciplines and institutional contexts. The interviews provided rich, descriptive data that captured both individual and collective perspectives on CBC implementation in tertiary institution. To complement this, document analysis of policy frameworks such as the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (2023) and institutional curriculum documents was conducted to contextualize participants' responses. Thematic analysis was used to identify, categorize, and interpret emerging patterns and themes related to lecturers' conceptual understanding of CBC with national education goals. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings & Discussion

The findings showed that for many lecturers, the CBC represents a paradigm shift away from the comfortable familiarity of knowledge transmission and towards verifiable skill application. Lecturers perceived the CBC as a shift from traditional content-based teaching to a more practical and learner-centered model. One lecturer explained that, CBC is all about ensuring that learners are not just cramming theories but are able to demonstrate what they have learned in practical situations. That suggests that lecturers associate the CBC with performance and demonstrable learning outcomes rather than mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge. This view aligns with Chishimba (2020), who noted that the CBC aims to equip learners with transferable competencies that enable them to function effectively in diverse environments. Chisala M. (2025a) indicated that transitioning to a Competence-Based Curriculum is a strategic move for Zambia, aiming to produce skilled, adaptable, and responsible citizens ready to contribute to national development and succeed in the global arena. CBC shifts the focus from content mastery to the demonstration of knowledge and skills through performance-based assessments. In support one lecturer indicated: We now understand CBC less as a syllabus and more as a promise to the employer. The shift is from 'What do you know?' to 'What can you demonstrably do in a real-world scenario?' That measurable application of skill is the core distinction. Other participants viewed the CBC as a response to the need for graduates who can contribute effectively to national development and employability (GRZ, 2023). As one lecturer put it, the new curriculum emphasizes competencies that make students ready for the job market. It moves us away from just teaching content to developing critical thinkers and problem solvers. This understanding aligns with the broader national education reform agenda that promotes employability and lifelong learning. This understanding reflects the perspective of Bataineh and Al-Hassan (2021), who argue that CBC promotes employability and innovation by aligning education with the needs of the labour market. Similarly, Chisala (2025b) emphasized that CBC seeks to produce graduates who are self-reliant, creative, and responsive to national development challenges. It is an approach to teaching and learning that primarily focuses on the learner's demonstration of their desired learning outcomes as central to the overall learning process (GRZ, 2023). Their consensus focused on the necessity of graduates demonstrating measurable skills for the labor market.

Nonetheless, some lecturers expressed uncertainty about how CBC is practically implemented at the tertiary level. One observed, "We have heard about CBC, but in reality, we still use lecture notes and examinations as before. There is a lack of clear guidance on how to translate competencies into classroom practice." This is consistent with Tshabalala and Ncube (2022), who found that educators often understand the theory behind CBC but struggle with practical translation due to limited institutional support, resources, and monitoring mechanisms. The discussion underscores the need for continuous sensitization and capacity building among lecturers to ensure uniform comprehension and effective implementation of the CBC across higher education institutions (Sakala et al., 2025). From the finding lecturers understood the CBC as a skills-oriented and learner-centered curriculum, the findings show varying levels of conceptual clarity. They indicated the need of professional development opportunities for them to possess a deeper and more accurate understanding (Tshabalala & Ncube, 2022), while others displayed misconceptions.

Foundation for the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Tertiary Education

Addresses Skills Gap in the Labour Market

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's higher education institutions represents a transformative shift from content-based instruction to outcome-oriented learning that prioritizes the acquisition and application of practical competences. Through clearly defining learning outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, CBC ensures that graduates can effectively apply theoretical understanding to real-world contexts, thereby bridging the long-standing gap between academic preparation and industry expectations (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). This approach promotes constructive alignment between teaching, assessment, and desired competences (Biggs & Tang, 2011), fostering accountability and relevance in tertiary education. Through experiential learning, internships, and problem-based activities, CBC enhances employability and responsiveness to labour market demands while supporting Zambia's national development goals (GRZ, 2023). The model not only strengthens collaboration between academia and industry but also cultivates innovation, critical thinking, and lifelong learning among graduates. Hence, CBC advances a holistic and pragmatic approach to education that aligns with both national priorities and global calls for sustainable human capital development.

Improves Employability of Graduates

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) promotes the holistic development of learners by integrating cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains, ensuring that students acquire theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes simultaneously. Through this integration, CBC fosters constructive alignment in teaching and assessment, enabling learners to demonstrate competence in both academic and professional contexts. As Marope et al. (2017) note, such an approach equips graduates with the ability to navigate complex tasks, make informed decisions, and adapt to evolving societal demands. Furthermore, CBC enhances employability by emphasizing critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills essential for success in modern workplaces (UNESCO, 2017). In preparing students for both formal and informal sectors, CBC aligns with Zambia's Vision 2030 goal of developing a skilled and competitive human resource base (GRZ, 2023). Thus, the curriculum transforms graduates into adaptive, innovative, and ethically grounded professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to national and global development.

Promotion of Innovation and Research

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's higher education institutions underscores learner-centered and experiential pedagogies that position students as active participants in constructing knowledge rather than passive recipients (UNESCO, 2017). Through interactive strategies such as problem-based learning, simulations, internships, and community projects, CBC bridges theory and practice, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. Lecturers assume the role of facilitators, guiding students to apply concepts in authentic contexts while cultivating collaboration and self-directed learning. This pedagogical transformation promotes inclusivity by accommodating diverse learning needs and ensuring that all learners, including those with special educational needs, can achieve intended competences. Furthermore, the integration of CBC in TEVET and university programs aligns education with industry and national development priorities, thereby enhancing employability, entrepreneurship, and responsiveness to labour market dynamics (TEVETA, 2016). Therefore, CBC's experiential focus contributes to Zambia's Vision 2030 by developing competent, innovative graduates capable of driving socio-economic transformation in a knowledge-based economy.

Aligns Training with Industry Standards

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's higher education institutions emphasizes work-based and experiential learning through internships, industrial attachments, community engagement, and research projects, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts (UNESCO, 2015). By means of integrating academic and practical experiences, CBC cultivates technical proficiency, interpersonal communication, ethical conduct, and adaptive problem-solving skills essential for professional success. This is in line with Chisala (2025b) who posits the underscore the curriculum's potential to equip Zambian learners with critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills essential for national development and global competitiveness. Collaboration between higher education institutions and industry ensures curricula are aligned with current technological, occupational, and professional standards (TEVETA, 2016). Such partnerships enhance the relevance and credibility of academic programs, producing graduates who are well-prepared to meet contemporary labour market demands. This synergy strengthens employer confidence in Zambian qualifications while promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning among graduates. The industry-linked and experiential nature of CBC contributes to a dynamic, competent workforce capable of advancing national and global development priorities.

Promotes Entrepreneurship and Innovation

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia promotes entrepreneurship and innovation by encouraging students to apply knowledge creatively to address real-world challenges (African Union, 2016). Through project-based and experiential learning, CBC fosters initiative, resilience, and business management skills, equipping graduates to identify opportunities and create sustainable ventures. Lecturers highlight that the curriculum shifts the focus from mere employment preparation to cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets that enable students to innovate within their communities. This approach aligns with national strategies aimed at youth employment, poverty reduction, and economic diversification (GRZ, 2017). By integrating practical problem-solving with entrepreneurial thinking, CBC produces graduates capable of transforming local challenges into viable economic opportunities. This resonates with Chisala (2025b), who revealed that his innovation promotes work-readiness and life-long skills. It contributes to both individual empowerment and broader socio-economic development.

Alignment with Global and Regional Education Agendas

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia aligns national higher education with international frameworks such as UNESCO's Rethinking Education (2015) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education alongside lifelong learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, integrating these global standards, CBC ensures that programs prepare graduates to compete and contribute effectively at both local and international levels. The curriculum also reflects the African Union's vision of producing citizens equipped with competences to drive sustainable continental development (African Union, 2016). Through adherence to SDG 4 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25), CBC enables higher education institutions to access international partnerships, capacity-building initiatives, and resources that support innovation and competence-based learning (UNESCO, 2024). Subsequently, graduates are not only employable but also capable of generating employment, addressing local challenges, and contributing to the global knowledge economy. The CBC strengthens the role of Zambian higher education in advancing national and continental socio-economic development.

Performance-Based Assessment

Assessment in the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) emphasizes the demonstration of practical competences over rote memorization, ensuring that learners can effectively apply knowledge and skills in real-world contexts (GRZ, 2023); TEVETA, 2016). Lecturers note that practical tasks, projects, and presentations provide a clear measure of students' abilities, moving beyond traditional recall-based evaluation. Assessments are aligned with national occupational standards, linking curriculum outcomes to labour market requirements and societal needs (TEVETA, 2016). This approach guarantees that graduates are both knowledgeable and capable of performing competently in professional and community settings. Moreover, continuous feedback from assessments informs instructional strategies and curriculum adjustments, promoting responsiveness to evolving educational and industry demands (Tshabalala & Ncube, 2022). The CBC assessment strengthens the relevance, accountability, and effectiveness of higher education in Zambia. The Ministry of Education need to foster stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Effective curriculum implementation requires the active involvement of all stakeholders, including parents, communities, the private sector, and civil society.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's higher education institutions constitutes a significant paradigm shift from traditional, content-driven instruction to a learner-centered, outcomes-focused model that emphasizes the acquisition and application of practical competences. The findings indicate that CBC enhances graduate employability by integrating cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and entrepreneurial skills aligned with national development priorities and labour market needs. The curriculum's emphasis on experiential and work-based learning, industry-aligned training, and performance-based assessment ensures that graduates are equipped to apply knowledge effectively in real-world contexts, innovate, and contribute to socio-economic development. Furthermore, CBC aligns with regional and international education frameworks, including SDG 4, UNESCO's Rethinking Education, and the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa, positioning graduates for meaningful participation in the global knowledge economy. Nonetheless, the study highlights challenges in practical implementation, including limited institutional support, inadequate resources, and gaps in lecturers' capacity, which underscore the need for continuous professional development, policy reinforcement, and monitoring mechanisms. Therefore, CBC holds substantial potential to transform Zambian higher education by producing competent, adaptable, and socially responsible graduates capable of driving sustainable national and regional development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following were the recommendation for the study:

- ❖ Curriculum Reform and Standardization: The Government to establish a clear national policy framework to standardize curricula, qualifications, and competence descriptors across universities, teacher education colleges, and TEVET institutions to ensure coherence and facilitate learner mobility.
- ❖ Capacity Building and Staff Development: The tertiary institution to prioritize continuous professional development programs to equip lecturers with the pedagogical, assessment, and digital competencies required for effective CBC delivery.
- ❖ Assessment and Quality Assurance: The tertiary institution to adopt performance-based assessment standards such as portfolios, simulations, and reflective practices, and update accreditation and quality assurance guidelines to align with CBC principles.
- ❖ Institutional Autonomy and Innovation: The Ministry of education to grant higher education institutions sufficient autonomy to innovate in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and partnerships while maintaining national standards.
- ❖ Funding and Infrastructure Support: The Government to mobilize government and private sector investment in teaching and learning materials, laboratories, workshops, and technology infrastructure to support experiential and practical learning.
- ❖ Inclusivity and Lifelong Learning: The tertiary institution to enact policies that promote inclusive education and lifelong learning by integrating digital platforms, open distance learning, and strategies to accommodate diverse learners, including those with disabilities.

Consent for participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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