

Briefing Note: Competence Standards and Reasonable Adjustments

June 2025

A competence standard is: *‘an academic, medical or other standard applied for the purposes of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability.’*

Competence standards are the essential elements (knowledge or skills) of a course, without which a student could not be said to have ‘competence’ in that subject.

The Equality Act (2010) includes specific provision relating to competence standards: a competence standard **does not need to be adjusted**, and must be attained by each student, but the way a student demonstrates it **can be adjusted**. An assessment mode is almost never a competence standard.

Competence standards must be **measurable**: students have to meet a minimum ‘standard’.

Competence standards criteria

To qualify as a competence standard there are four key criteria that must be met (in addition to being measurable).

Competence standards must be:

1. **applied equally** to all students.
2. **demonstrably relevant** to the course - so a non-specialist must be able to understand the justification requiring the competence standard (i.e. objectively justifiable).
3. **necessary** in service of a lawful objective (e.g. ensuring a level of knowledge sufficient to protect the integrity of the discipline or the safety of the public).
4. **proportionate** (i.e. being suitable and not excessive. Does the importance of the aim outweigh the discriminatory effect? Are other less discriminatory approaches available?)

Identifying competence standards

- Competence standards can be similar to course learning outcomes – and your course learning outcomes are often a good place to start to identify possible competence standards.

Some learning outcomes may be competence standards, if they meet the criteria.

- For some subjects, a PSRB might provide the competence standards.
- For other subjects the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements often give a useful indication of possible competence standards.

Bear in mind though that a competence standard is not:

- a requirement unrelated to the content and objectives of the course
- a requirement that arises from pedagogic preferences, or norms of common/historic practice

Subject examples

Example 1: 'A requirement for students in a Modern Languages program to demonstrate proficiency in reading and writing in the target language.'

Example 2: 'A requirement for Law students to demonstrate a particular standard of knowledge in specific areas of law to obtain their degree.'

- This examples aims to ensure that graduates have the necessary legal knowledge to practice law (the 'particular standard' would need to be specified).

Example 3: On a clinical course: 'Students must be able to recognise and interpret monitoring results in order to take the appropriate actions. This is the required competence standard. To meet this standard, students may use either digital or manual methods of patient monitoring in an assessment'.

Questions for writing or reviewing competence standards

Is this an assessment method, a learning outcome, or a competence standard?

Who might the competence standard exclude? And is that reasonable?

Is the language used inclusive and free of bias and assumption?

Does the competence standard describe the threshold?

Can you separate the competence standard from the assessment method?

Would a pre-applicant understand what is required of them?

Is the competence standard sufficient to convey what is required of students?

Can you describe an effective assessment method for the standard?

Can you explain your justification to a non-expert?

Suggested steps

- List anything in your course which must be successfully completed or demonstrated by students in order to access, progress within, or successfully complete your programme (e.g. course learning outcomes).
- After identifying possible competence standards carefully consider the criteria – do they meet the threshold to be competence standards?
- If so, consider how to apply each in practice – can you design inclusively to avoid barriers in how students attain and demonstrate them? (examples may include flexibility

in placement participation, choice of format of assessment, additional support and scaffolding to prepare students adequately, etc.).

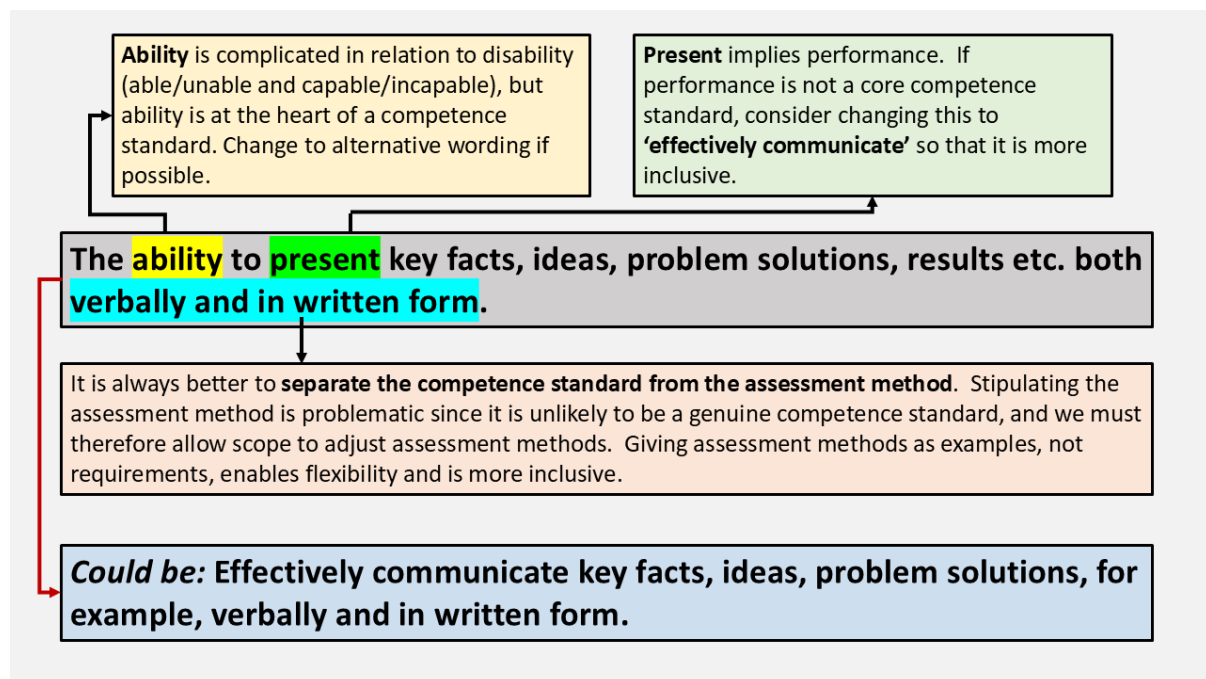
- Consider your course design – how will students be supported to achieve each competence standard? Which module/element will be chosen to assess them?
- If you cannot see a way to avoid a reasonable adjustment – what might that adjustment look like?

Advice on writing competence standards

- Use action verbs
- Make them objectively measurable
- Don't mandate the assessment method*. Use 'for example' instead.
- Use inclusive language and plain English.
- Think: who might this exclude? Then, is this reasonable?

*Unless a genuine requirement, e.g. performance- or practice-based courses

Worked examples of competence standard design and inclusive alternatives



Ability is complicated in relation to disability (able/unable and capable/incapable), but ability is at the heart of a competence standard. Change to alternative wording if possible.

The **ability** to work **independently**.

Independence is problematic in relation to disabled students, who may require support to study. They cannot study truly independently as they depend on elements of support. However, they can direct all elements of their study, even if those elements are practically carried out, translated, or organised by someone else. Changing this depends on what exactly we mean by 'work independently' but it could be something like 'Demonstrates ability to direct, monitor and evaluate their work beyond taught sessions'.

Demonstrate effectiveness in directing, monitoring and evaluating their work within and beyond taught sessions, using appropriate support as necessary.

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- AdvanceHE: [Disabled Student Commitment: Competence Standards and Reasonable Adjustments](#) (2025)
- Equality Act (2010): <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- Equality and Human Rights Commission: [Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education](#) (2014)
- Equality and Human Rights Commission: [Advice note for the higher education sector from the legal case of University of Bristol vs Abrahart](#) (2024)
- Equality Challenge Unit: [Understanding the interaction of competence standards and reasonable adjustments](#) (2015)