

Developing a competency framework for ministerial formation from a postcolonial perspective: A South Africa contribution

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Assessment of students for ministerial practice is traditionally done through assignments and oral examinations, which often only concentrate on the knowledge component and outcomes of the program. Assessing students in this way has mimicked a view of ministerial practitioners as intellectuals preaching over the heads of the congregants and not being in touch with the pastoral and contextual needs of the members, and normally leads to a disconnect between knowledge, practice, and context. Disjuncture of this nature signals a need for a broader set of competencies, rather than simply working with and analyzing texts in theological education. Developing a set of competencies also responds to the reality that the practice of ministry takes place within a rich diversity of postcolonial settings and practices. The central research question of this study was therefore formulated as follows: What are the central ingredients for developing a competency framework for ministerial formation from a postcolonial perspective at a research-intensive university in South Africa? In answer to this question, this paper looks at the ways in which a competency framework can help to translate generic graduate attributes into a set of competencies that are specific to the field of ministerial training. Some empirical work shows evidence of a growing postcolonial awareness in the development of these competencies.

1. Introduction

The overarching question that led to this research was: How well do we prepare our graduates for the 21st century? We have to take the comment of Tencer (Tencer 2017, 2) seriously: “Eighty five percent of jobs that will exist in 2030 haven’t been invented yet.” We therefore have to prepare our students and graduates for a world for which it is essentially not possible to prepare for. In preparing our students for these professions that do not yet exist, we have the

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further responsibility to assess whether they will be in the position to carry out the work competently.

Therefore, the assessment of students enjoys a high priority in higher education institutions all around the world and there are ongoing efforts to improve it by adopting new policies every year. All this is related to quality assurance and control and forms an integral part of the Higher Education

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Qualification Framework in South Africa. At the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU), we are currently in the process of going through a new phase of policy renewal in this regard and it forces every lecturer to investigate in depth their various forms of assessment.

Assessment of theology students for ministerial practice is traditionally carried out through the completion of assignments and oral examinations, which often only concentrate on the knowledge component and outcomes of the program. This has mimicked a view of ministerial practitioners as intellectuals ‘preaching over the heads of the congregants and not in touch with the pastoral needs of the members.’ This can therefore lead to a disjuncture between knowledge and practice. This disjuncture signals a need for a broader set of competencies than simply those of working with and analyzing texts during ministerial education (Burger and Nell 2012).

This also responds in part to the reality that the practice of ministry is carried out within a rich diversity of postcolonial settings and practices (Naidoo 2012). To resolve this dilemma, a competency framework can help to translate generic graduate attributes as well as the profiles of students who finished their studies, as developed by different partner churches, into a set of competencies that is specific to the field of ministerial training that they wish to practice in.

2. The involvement of stakeholders

The need for a competency framework also flows from an initiative from the side of SU in developing four generic graduate attributes, namely that of an enquiring mind, being an engaged citizen, and being a dynamic professional and well-rounded individual. SU has begun the process of embedding these Graduate Attributes within the Curriculum as well as the Co-curriculum to ensure that students acquire these core competencies that move them towards graduate success.

The importance of a competency framework has also been recognized by different partner churches at our Faculty, for example by the Uniting Reformed Church, which states in their “Profile for Ministers of the Word in the URCSA” (Agenda of General Synod 2005, 13) the following:

1. Values/attitudes – genuine faith, a sense of calling, self-respect, character traits, reflexivity, respect for others

2. Knowledge – basic theological orientation, the Bible/hermeneutics, systematic theology, theological ethics, church history, practical theology, missiology, intercultural theology, ecumenism, church polity, and inter-disciplinary approach, willingness and ability to use insights from other sciences, global context, general knowledge
3. Skills – communication skills (proclaiming, teaching, writing), interpretation (hermeneutical) and intellectual skills, spirituality, management/leadership, pastoral care-giving, involvement in society (research, intervention, ecumenical cooperation, community issues).

Before I move on to the problem statement and the research question, it is worthwhile to get some clarity on what is meant by a postcolonial perspective, seeing that this is the context in which this research was done.

3. A postcolonial perspective

Much has been written on what is meant by ‘postcolonial,’ especially since the student protests and the #fallist movements of October 2015 onwards. A number of distinctions have to be made. Postcolonialism, according to scholars Keller, Nausner, and Rivera (Keller, Nausner and Rivera 2004) and Sharp (Sharp 2012), is primarily concerned with the time following various movements towards independence in the former colonies. In that sense, it criticizes forms of colonialism that are ongoing. Postcolonial theories analyze unequal power relations in the era after the formal end of colonialism and focus on the marginalization and subordination of populations that formerly lived in colonial contexts. When we look at the historical development of colonialism, we see that it is related to the organization of nations and people in hierarchical relationships of oppression and domination.

A postcolonial perspective could therefore be articulated as narratives that venerate inequalities and hide behind masks of colonizing patterns of relationships. A postcolonial perspective unmasks the historical legacy of norms that suppress people and limit their possibility for participation. Participation here refers to the purpose of mutuality in relationships between people from structures of interpersonal relationships to institutional and ecclesial structures (Abraham 2008, 377). According to Sharp (Sharp 2012, 425), “[p]ostcolonial work aims to less-



en global oppression and increase justice, particularly in concrete lives of women and children, through recognizing the full humanity of all persons.”

4. Problem statement

There is a need to develop a competency framework that can be incorporated in the Master of Divinity Program that meaningfully takes into account the postcolonial context. This needs to go beyond simply stating the graduate attributes in general terms. There is a need to actively develop students’ competencies to function as professional practitioners within this context.

According to Ashwin (Ashwin 2012), competencies acquired in higher education are assumed to be specific to a field of study and need to be multidimensional. In this sense, these competencies distinguish themselves from intelligence and general cognitive abilities. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, however, will require transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge creation driven by a solution-oriented mindset. This is the case because there is a gradual shift away from higher education as it is traditionally known, towards transdisciplinary education.

This is of specific importance for preparing students for ministry. There is also a shift towards program evaluations based on critical competencies and skills developed and the related practices. This represents a departure from the emphasis on learning outcomes where it is knowledge and retention that are measured.

5. Research question

In the light of the argument above, the research question was formulated as follows: What are the central ingredients for developing a competency framework from a postcolonial perspective for a master’s degree in theology at a research-intensive university?

6. Aims of research

The aim was to develop, implement and evaluate a first iteration of a competency framework to facilitate the assessment of Master of Divinity students that could subsequently serve as a framework for the

assessment of students more broadly in Master of Divinity programs in the African postcolonial context. At a broader level, the aim of the project was to challenge the traditional ways of assessment that mostly concentrate on cognitive (knowledge retention) skills.

7. Review of relevant literature

At SU, we initiated a process of embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum of certain chosen programs in the ten faculties of the University, from 2015 onwards (Nell and Bosman 2017). This initiative was intended to ensure students acquired the core competencies that move them towards graduate success. In our Faculty, there is a particular need to develop a competency framework that can be incorporated into the Master of Divinity Program, in the light of the fact that this is a professional degree required by students who wish to go into full-time ministry. This initiative underscored the importance of a framework that goes beyond simply stating graduate attributes in generic terms. A survey of the literature produced the following headings.

7.1 From graduate attributes towards competencies

Research by Jacobs and Strydom (Jacobs and Strydom 2014) indicates that the development of graduate attributes is enhanced when embedded in a disciplinary framework. In their contribution titled “From ‘Matie’ to Citizen” they look at the ways in which graduate attributes as signature learning at SU can help students to become well-rounded individuals and engaged citizens. According to Jones (Jones 2013, 592), a further determinant of a well-rounded individual is the notion of teaching and learning that embrace life-wide experiences integrated into the textured and complex lives of our students. This takes place by acknowledging the valuable development that occurs in student-driven spaces beyond the classroom and formal curriculum.

7.2 Defining competencies

There is a voluminous body of literature on competencies, in which competencies are broadly defined as “a combination of cognitive, affective, motivational, volitional and social dispositions that form the basis for performance” (Shavelson 2010, 43).

Shavelson presents an approach to measuring and statistically modelling competency measurements by defining competency as a complex ability construct closely related to real-life-situated performance. The intent is to make the construct ‘competence’ amenable to measurement. Competencies can thus be seen as trait dispositions that are relatively stable over time and across situations, while changes can be induced by dynamic components. An additional consideration for developing a competency framework is Bloom’s taxonomy framework, with its emphasis on scaffolding learning. There is a need for threshold concepts to be purposefully integrated into programs and activities and to make them a part of the competency framework.

It is also important to make a distinction between learning outcomes and competencies. *Learning outcomes* are defined in terms of particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained (Adam 2008, 9). *Competencies* take this further by describing learning outcomes in terms that define not only what is to be learned, but also the specific levels of performance that students are expected to master (Mulder, Weigel and Collins 2007, 67).

7.3 Global competencies

It is interesting that when one works through the literature, one finds what is called ‘global competencies’ (Bird, Osland and Lane 2004, 57–80; Jokinen

2005, 199–216). According to the OECD PISA global competence framework (see figure 1 below), global competence “includes the acquisition of in-depth knowledge and understanding of global and intercultural issues; the ability to learn from and live with people from diverse backgrounds; and the attitudes and values necessary to interact respectfully with others. *Global competence* is the capacity to examine local, *global* and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and *world* views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development.” (Ramos and Schleischer 2018, 6).

7.4 Increased demand for generic competencies

An interesting contribution is the work of Young and Chapman (Young and Chapman 2010), in which they give a description of the historical overview of the development of competency frameworks. According to them, “rapid transformations of the world economy over the last three decades have precipitated profound changes to labour markets across the globe” (Young and Chapman 2010, 2) and through globalization, a shift away from agriculture/manufacturing towards a new knowledge-base global market took place. This necessarily led to the situation that increased levels of necessity for workers able to keep up with changes that the new economy brought and also led to the development of a whole new set of broad skills or generic competencies. They provide interesting examples from all over the globe of the development of these generic competencies.

7.5 Competency-based theological education

The purpose and task of theological training are to educate and equip prospective leaders with the necessary gifts and competencies to empower other believers to participate in the mission of the Church. In this study, the point of departure is that there is a close connection between the quality of theological training and the quality of the candidate arriving for the ministry. Competency-based theological education (CBTE) takes this challenge seriously. According to the Association of Theological Schools (The Association of Theological Schools 2018, 4), CBTE “represents a paradigm shift in theological education. It offers an innovative way for seminaries



Figure 1: The dimensions of global competence
<https://www.oecd.org/education/Global-competency-for-an-inclusive-world.pdf>



and learning networks to raise a new generation of proven leaders, trained in context, in the knowledge, in the skills, and in the character traits they need to prosper in their callings.”

Compared to the content-transfer model, where the focus is on content and topics of study as the organizational principle, the competency-based model works with fluidity, providing a framework for learning and teaching in a variety of contexts. In the competency model, excellence is mainly measured by the nature of the process and not through knowledge production. The real criterion for excellence in competency-based education is the degree to which the student is ready to function effectively in ministry and show potential for continued theological training (Youngblood 1989, 29).

According to Brown (Brown 2016, 2), CBTE “is an educational model that emphasizes: (1) learning more than ‘seat time,’ (2) the mastery of professionally-oriented competencies, (3) well-planned learning activities or assessments (class-based or not, online or onsite) that students may complete at their own pace, and (4) a community of learning where regular and substantive interaction occurs between qualified faculty and students... One way to compare and contrast CBTE with more traditional educational models is that the CBTE model holds learning constant while time varies, whereas traditional models hold time constant while learning varies.”

From this it is clear that CBTE is an approach to developing academic programs where the focus is on the competencies rather than on the time spent in classrooms. Students illustrate and demonstrate their skills and knowledge by participating in learning experiences, activities, and exercises where there is an alignment with well-defined learning outcomes.

Mwangi and De Klerk (Mwangi and De Klerk 2011, 7) put it as follows: “As a curricular model, competency-based learning seeks to develop competencies in persons at different stages of their maturation journey. The competencies encompass the development of the whole person: affect understanding, character, and skills. Competency-based learning does not focus on courses and grades but on measuring competencies based on design outcomes.”

8. Research approach: Design-based approach

The research involved six sequential steps:

1. Develop a better understanding of competency frameworks for teaching and learning in higher education based on a literature review
2. Translate those generic competencies and graduate attributes identified in Step 1 to the context of ministerial education
3. Engage lecturers (and students) in terms of the need for and experience of making use of the framework
4. Design teaching and learning activities for the use of the competency framework in the Master of Divinity Program at SU based on steps 1 to 3
5. Implement the designed framework
6. Evaluate the implementation in Step 5 as the final step of a first cycle of design.

In the six sequential steps I made use of design-based research as an appropriate research approach to address the research question. The design-based research approach has been succinctly summarized by Reeves (Reeves 2006) into four phases (see Figure 2 below).

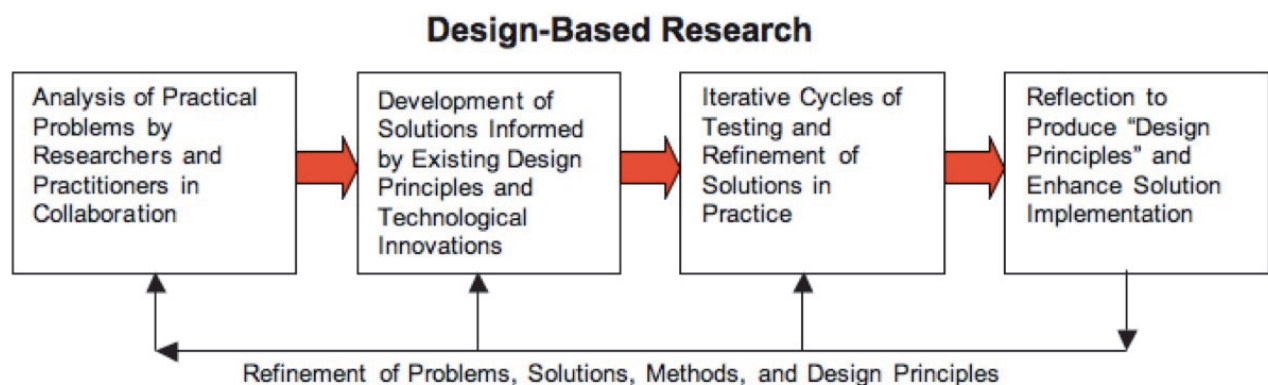


Figure 2: Design-based research



Phase 1: Analysis of practical problems by researchers and practitioners in collaboration

The first phase is focused on the analysis of a significant educational problem, which in this case is the absence of a well-developed competency framework for the Master of Divinity Program. Teachers and researchers together explore the nature of this educational problem facing students. It is also important for teachers to be involved in this phase so that the full extent of the problem is known, rather than being interpreted solely by researchers. A literature review is also conducted in this phase to refer to the work that has already been carried out in the area, or in related areas, and how similar problems could have been addressed. After this initial investigation of the problem, related literature and practitioners' ideas, it should be possible to provide draft research questions. By the end of this phase, my aim was to have a clear idea of the problem and its educational context, to have read the literature related to the area in question, and to have written preliminary research questions.

Phase 2: Development of solutions informed by existing design principles and technological innovations

In the second phase, a solution to the problem is proposed that can be implemented in the classroom or educational setting. The literature is consulted to find relevant theory that can guide thinking as well as existing design principles that may have addressed a similar problem.

Phase 3: Iterative cycles of testing and refinement of solutions in practice

Once a learning environment or intervention has been designed and developed (in Phase 2), the next phase of design-based research is the implementation and evaluation of the proposed solution in practice. Design-based research is not a methodology, but a research approach. While both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used, it is worth noting that "[d]esign researchers do not emphasize isolated variables. While design researchers do focus on specific objects and processes in specific contexts, they try to study those as integral and meaningful phenomena" (Van den Akker et al, 2006, 5).

Phase 4: Reflection to produce design principles and enhance solution implementation

Once a learning environment or intervention has been implemented, evaluated, and refined in cycles, the last phase is to produce design principles that can inform future development and implementation decisions.

There are potentially at least three outcomes of design-based research: the design principles, designed products or artefacts – the physical representations of the learning environment (e.g. website), and societal outputs, such as professional development and learning.

9. Empirical research: Methodology

The research design for the empirical research that I used works from an interpretive perspective in qualitative research, with its roots in hermeneutics as the study of the theory and practice of interpretation (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004, 19–21). The aim of this kind of empirical research is to provide contextually valid descriptions and interpretations of human actions, which are based on an insider's perspective of people and their world. The research was done by means of a semi-structured interview schedule (five questions) with five of my colleagues from the Faculty of Theology. The following interview schedule was used:

Open ended-interview schedule

1. Tell me about your field of lecturing.
2. In relation to what you do, what do competencies mean for you?
3. You know about our graduate attributes framework at the University. Do you see a relationship between competencies in our field and the graduate attributes?
4. Have you thought about the way in which your field of teaching contributes towards the competencies of the students?
5. If you look at the following competencies, which in your opinion are the most important, and how do you rank them?



10. Interpretation of the data

In an initial round and to come to a deeper understanding of what my colleagues understood concerning competencies, I only looked at the answers that my colleagues gave to questions 1 and 2. Looking at the data through these bifocal lenses of expertise in lecturing, combined with a postcolonial perspective, some interesting data came to the fore.

Concerning *the expertise* of each of the colleagues, it was interesting to see in what ways it colored their way of looking at the competencies. Some examples:

Respondent 1: *So, my field is theology and development, sometimes termed community development, but for me there is a core theological motivation for the church's engagement in issues of poverty and inequality. So, that's the key focus and a lot of my research has been focused on congregations' response to issues of poverty and inequality across denominations, across race groups.*

Respondent 2: *My fields of so-called expertise are called homiletics and liturgy. Homiletics in plain language is all about the art and the act of preaching and liturgy is all about constructing structures for worshipping God, and both of these two fields of my research [have] to do with communication. It's about the communication of the gospel. So, communication is part and parcel, I would say, actually in the heart of what I try to teach.*

Respondent 3: *I am a lecturer specifically in practical theology and more so, specialization in youth work, children and faith formation. So, with that, undergrad, I teach modules like Youth Work and Substance Dependency, Children's Ministry and Child Theology. I teach Youth Culture, Planning and Organization of Youth Work and I teach Faith Formation.*

Respondent 4: *My sub-discipline in practical theology is pastoral care and counselling. So, I have two undergraduate modules that I focus on. The first one is to give students a basic understanding of the basis or to create a basis for pastoral care and counselling, called the Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counselling, which gives them sort of an overview of what the subject matter entails. And then a specialized module in HIV/AIDS Care in the third year and then on the postgraduate level, I have the opportunity to zoom into more specific areas...*

Respondent 5: *Mine is just much more in the field of theology of religions and that means the religious plurality and the responses of churches, and therefore you get in the second year a kind of an introduction, an overview to religions in Africa and ecumenism or ecumenism and religions in Africa. But then applied or demonstrated in terms of two religions and that would be at least Christianity and African religion or Christianity and African Islam.*

From the examples above one can immediately sense that the fields of expertise will have a direct influence on the way the respondents might approach the different competencies. It cannot but color their perspectives.

Concerning *postcolonial perspectives*, I found some interesting snippets in the data, for example the following:

Respondent 1: *I think firstly they need to be able to read text and context and the interplay between them. So, for me that's key. They need to have a framework and [...] maybe some normative framework in terms of what theological perspectives relate to issues of poverty and inequality. Also, intercessions of powers are some core frameworks that they need to understand. But they also need to interpret, to do social analysis and to see how text and context relate to one another and to be able to read that changing context also and how the text relates to it.*

Respondent 2: *If you have good communication linked to real integrity or honesty whatever you want to call that, then you have a moment or moments where communication, deep communication, takes place. You could also, on the other hand, [...] have all the integrity in the world, but if you are lazy and not making use of the best modes of communication that we have also currently, you know, in terms of technology etcetera, etcetera, then you could also sabotage in a certain sense your integrity.*

Respondent 3: *I would think someone who is able to develop their own theological framework or lens. So, you've studied a degree in theology. So, at some point, I would think you are able to discern and make decisions around what you believe or don't believe based on a lens or framework you've developed while studying. I think that's what makes you different from someone studying theology and someone doing ministry without a theology degree. So, being able to make sound theological choices within ministry*



based on some form of theoretical framework or lens that you've developed.

Respondent 4: *My understanding of the competencies is to make sure that the students understand that there are smaller competencies or [that] competencies could be required after one module. But then there are life-long competencies in terms of continuous education, which should always still be part of a student's framework, even while they are busy studying, but also after completion of their studies. That needs to be a reality. The second point is that Pastoral Care and Counselling always works with the existential realities of life, which means that you train young students to deal with the complexities of trauma.*

Respondent 5: *I would say since they engage in a true realistic context [...] they have the appreciative knowledge in terms of cultural and religious diversity. I mean that is the major one. And therefore they should actually as far as the discipline is concerned even begin to map that, depending [on] whether [they are on] the second-year level or the fourth-year level, to map these are the issues that are important because only if you have that kind of knowledge [can] you begin to appreciate the theological and religious and the cultural kind of differences. So, appreciation, it's a key kind of dimension in it also.*

From the responses one can see that a large number of very different competencies surfaced in the interviews: from competencies to read the text and context, to understanding intercessions of power, to good communication linked to integrity, to developing own theological frameworks, to understanding smaller competencies, to dealing with complexities of trauma, to appreciating knowledge in terms of cultural and religious diversity. This concurs with the thoughts of Shavelson (Shavelson 2013, 43), who understands competencies as “a combination of cognitive, affective, motivational, volitional and social dispositions that form the basis for performance,” and therefore as a complex ability construct closely related to real-life-situated performances. This brings us to move in the direction of a first attempt at constructing a competency framework, taking the graduate attributes of SU as a starting point.

11. Towards a first attempt

In a first attempt, I linked the four basic SU graduate attributes to four different types of skills: an enquiring mind to personal skills, a well-rounded individual to people skills, an engaged citizen to applied knowledge skills, and a dynamic professional to

Competency framework for MDiv



Personal skills	People skills	Applied knowledge	Workplace skills
Thinking critically	Initiating transformational change	Becoming a mature disciple	Embracing Cultural Diversity – Cross-cultural competency
Research and writing	Exercising Flexibility in Ministry	Understanding Healthy Congregations	Articulating Biblical Theology
Practicing Biblical Hermeneutics	Embodying the Love of God	Applying Biblical exegesis	Utilizing Biblical Languages
Understanding the development of doctrine	Communicating God's Truth	Applying foundational Doctrines	Resolving Leadership Conflict
Articulating Personal Theology	Recognizing one's impact on other people	Embracing sanctification	Taking responsibility

Figure 3: Competency framework for the Master of Divinity



workplace skills. I further developed five different competencies under each of the skills by making use of literature on Master of Divinity programs, inter alia from the Association of Theological Schools in the USA. See the following diagram in Figure 3:

12. Assessing the competencies

Once one has identified the core competencies required for success in the targeted ministry, setting a four-step approach can be applied to help with the improvement of assessing these competencies. It is important to invest the time to write a description, performance standards, and indicators for each competency.

- The competency *description* is a concise, high-level definition of the competency. It expresses the intent and scope of the competency within the context of the program. It is a necessary element but does not provide enough detail on its own for consistent assessment.

- *Performance standards* provide more detail. They describe what mastery of the competency looks like in context; the observable components of the performance that, when combined, fully represent mastery as defined in the description. They articulate what the student is expected to know (cognitive domain), be (affective domain), and do (proficiency domain) with respect to that competency.
- *Performance indicators* describe observable, measurable behaviors, outputs, or circumstances that signal achievement of the performance standards. They quantify criteria a mentor can use to assess whether the student has demonstrated achievement of the performance standard; they describe what evidence of competency achievement might look like in a student.

An example of a competency rubric is presented in Figure 4.

Competency Rubric



Learning Behavior	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED APPLICATION	ADVANCED THEORY & APPLICATION
Taking Responsibility for one's actions	Student has significant difficulty recognizing and articulating a reasonable degree of responsibility. They may deflect much of it or accept much of it without question or critical thought.	Student has some difficulty recognizing and articulating a reasonable degree of responsibility. They may deflect some of it or accept some of it without question or critical thought.	Student has little difficulty recognizing and articulating a reasonable degree of responsibility. They do not deflect much if any and the responsibility they take is contextually reasonable and well-thought out.	Student has no difficulty recognizing and articulating a reasonable degree of responsibility. They demonstrate no deflection at all and demonstrate sound reasoning in terms of distinguishing their degree of responsibility from others.
Recognizing one's impact on others	Student has significant difficulty recognizing the impact of their behavior on others. They often attribute undue blame either upon others or themselves.	Student has some difficulty recognizing the impact of their behavior on others but can describe some impact. They often minimize or exaggerate the seriousness of that impact.	Student has little difficulty recognizing the impact of their behavior on others. They often attribute reasonable degrees of responsibility to themselves and others.	Student has no difficulty recognizing the impact of their behavior on others. They almost always attribute reasonable degrees of responsibility to themselves and others.

Figure 4: Example of a competency rubric



13. Conclusion

In this paper I worked with the basic research question: What are the central ingredients for developing a competency framework for a master's degree in theology at a research-intensive university from a postcolonial perspective? After explaining what I understand under a postcolonial perspective, I reviewed some literature on graduate attributes and competencies and also gave a short description of CBTE. I described my research approach as design-based and gave a short depiction of some of the empirical research that I conducted. The interpretation of the data showed that the participants revealed their understanding of the competencies from the background of their field of interest and they defined a number of competencies that they see relevant for theological education. Finally, a first attempt at a competency framework was undertaken, followed by some concluding remarks on the assessment of the different competencies.

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