# **Video Talk 1: The importance and definition of competences**

Welcome to this first session. To start this course we want to ask the fundamental question, why are developing learners’ competences so important, and why should teaching, learning and assessment be grounded in a competence-based approach? Life is increasingly non-routine, problem-based and technology rich. That’s why education systems are moving away from solely content-led approaches, and focusing more on helping learners develop a range of competences to cope in our complex world. Education today, just as in previous centuries, is intended to promote learners’ personal growth, citizenship and preparation for the world of work. However, the skills needed for this in today’s society, just as in the future society of the 22nd century, are and will continue to be very different from those that were needed in previous times. While some skills, such as numeracy and literacy, are just as important today as they were in the past, other more transversal and higher order skills, such as **collaborative problem-solving** are increasingly valuable for citizens to be able to effectively take part in life today, whether personally, socially or professionally. Let’s hear what Professor Patrick Griffin, of the University of Melbourne, had to say when we interviewed him about the importance of these competences in today’s working environment.

The need for school students to develop competences, also known as **‘key competences’** or **‘21st century skills’**, has increasingly gained importance, and has recently become prominent in education systems worldwide thanks to social and economic motivations, as well as developments in educational research. The need to improve the quality and relevance of the competences learners acquire before leaving formal education has been widely recognized, particularly in view of Europe’s current high youth unemployment. Knowledge and basic skills are necessary but no longer sufficient to meet the complex requirements of today’s social demands in an increasingly competitive global economy. As we heard from Patrick, in a digital world where functional skills-based professions are in decline, competence oriented education has particular relevance. New technologies are constantly changing the way we learn, work, live and function in a digital and knowledge-based society. So the need to develop learners’ competences seems pretty clear. But what exactly are they, and which ones should we be focusing on?

A useful definition is given by Hoskins and Crick who state that a ‘competence’ can be defined as ‘*a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire which lead to effective, embodied human action in the world in a particular domain’.* In other words, being competent means being able to effectively apply a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully react to a situation or solve a problem in the real world.

The term ‘competence’ was originally used in the **professional context** in France in the 1970s to refer to what employees needed beyond qualifications to act effectively in a range of work situations. In the 1980s, competence-based approaches started to be developed in **vocational education and training** in various countries. Since then, the growing importance of competences has meant that competence-based learning has now also been extended to **general school education**, which is the focus of our course.

**Competences are expressed, understood and implemented within each education system in different ways according to** **national context, depending on educational philosophies, historical and political traditions, as well as outside influences**. Countries have therefore developed their own **national definitions and competence frameworks**, including **subject-based as well as transversal competences**. In addition to this range of national frameworks, some of which we will look at later in this module, various **international competence frameworks** have been developed over the past 20 years. These include the European Union’s Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, the UNESCO framework, the OECD DESECO framework, Partnerships 21 framework, and the ATC21S framework. All these frameworks share common points and have been developed in consultation with experts and stakeholders globally. For the purposes of this course, we will mainly use the European Union framework and the ATC21S framework as reference points. You can access all the frameworks mentioned if you are interested in further reading, from our course library.

Let’s firstly take a brief look at the ATC 21st century skills framework which includes four dimensions: ways of thinking; ways of living in the world; ways of working; and tools for working. Ways of thinking is conceptualized as including creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making and learning to learn. Ways of living in the world includes local and global citizenship, life and career skills, personal and social responsibility and cultural awareness. Ways of working is considered to include collaboration and communication; and tools for working comprises information literacy and ICT literacy. As you will see, the European Framework also refers to all these competences, but is more firmly rooted in the context of the school curriculum. As school education is the focus of our course, let’s take a closer look at the European framework.

**The European Union Framework**, developed by the European Commission in consultation with all member states, includes the following 8 Key Competences:

- Communication in the mother tongue

- Communication in foreign languages

- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology

- Digital competence

- Learning to learn

- Social and civic competences

- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship

- Cultural awareness and expression

All 8 key competences are considered equally important, because each of them contributes to the personal fulfilment and development of all individuals. Many of the competences overlap and interlock, and they are all interdependent, with the following transversal skills playing an important role in each of them: critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision taking and the constructive management of feelings.

You can access the precise definition of each of the 8 key competences, as well as the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated to each one in the European framework, available in the course library. You are all teachers of different subjects, and while all these competences are interrelated, certain competences may be of more direct interest to you than others. However, there is one particular competence which will be considered extremely important by all of you, and that is the ‘learning to learn’ competence, as it is the foundation of all learning. As with all the 8 key competences, the European framework firstly provides a definition of learning to learn and then identifies the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated to it.

Learning to learn is defined as the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise one's own learning, including through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups. This competence includes awareness of one's learning process and needs, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully. Learning to learn engages learners to build on prior learning and life experiences in order to use and apply knowledge and skills at home, at work, in education and training.

In terms of the **essential knowledge** related to this competence, learning to learn requires an individual to know and understand his/her preferred learning strategies, and the strengths and weaknesses of his/her skills and qualifications.

In terms of the **essential skills** related to this competence, learning to learn firstly requires the acquisition of the fundamental basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT skills that are necessary for further learning. Building on these skills, an individual should be able to access, gain, process and assimilate new knowledge and skills. This requires effective management of one's learning, career and work patterns, and, in particular, the ability to persevere, concentrate for extended periods and to reflect critically on the purposes and aims of learning. Learning to learn skills include being able to learn autonomously and with self-discipline, as well as being able to work collaboratively and share what one has learnt. Learners should be able to organise their own learning, evaluate their own work, and seek advice, information and support when appropriate.

The **essential attitudes** related to this competence include the motivation and confidence to pursue and succeed at learning throughout one's life. A problem-solving attitude supports both the learning process itself and an individual's ability to handle obstacles and change. The desire to apply prior learning and life experiences and the curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and apply learning in a variety of life contexts are also essential. Whichever subject and age range you teach, these are the knowledge, skills and attitudes you should be developing in your students to ensure they can be competent lifelong learners.

This course is intended to familiarize you with competence-based learning as a general approach. To do this we will focus on how to develop two specific competences in students – the first is an example of a subject-based one, **mathematical competence**, while the second is an example of a transversal skill which can be developed in any subject; **collaborative problem solving**. You will hear more about both in modules 2 and 3.

Remember that you can access further reading and related resources to this session from our course library. We also encourage you to visit the course forum where you can discuss the frameworks and definitions mentioned as well as how they relate to your own national frameworks and understanding of competences. I hope in this first week you will join the discussion with fellow participants and instructors, and wish you an enjoyable rest of the course.