

Organizational and Pedagogical Conditions for Developing the Professional Competence of Future Engineers

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Abstract: The preparation of future engineers increasingly requires higher education institutions to move beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge toward the systematic development of professional competence that integrates engineering knowledge, practical skills, problem-solving ability, communication, teamwork, ethical responsibility, digital literacy, and readiness for lifelong learning. This study examines the organizational and pedagogical conditions necessary for developing the professional competence of future engineers in contemporary higher education. The research is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of international engineering education standards and peer-reviewed studies concerning engineering competencies, active learning, problem- and project-based learning, authentic engineering practice, and curriculum design. The analysis demonstrates that professional competence develops most effectively when educational objectives are aligned with measurable learning outcomes, theoretical and practical training are integrated, students engage with authentic engineering problems, cooperation with industry is institutionalized, digital technologies are embedded in professional tasks, and assessment is designed to evaluate performance rather than reproduction of theoretical information. The study further establishes that these conditions should operate as an interconnected educational system rather than as separate methodological innovations. Particular attention is given to the role of curriculum coordination, engineering projects, laboratory and industrial experience, faculty methodological competence, formative feedback, and continuous programme improvement. The findings provide a methodological basis for designing engineering education environments oriented toward graduates' readiness for professional activity.

Keywords: Engineering education, future engineers, professional competence, organizational conditions, pedagogical conditions, project-based learning, problem-based learning, engineering practice, professional training, active learning, competence-based education, industry cooperation.

Introduction: The transformation of engineering practice has significantly changed expectations regarding the professional preparation of university graduates. An engineer is no longer expected merely to reproduce scientific and technical knowledge or perform predetermined calculations. Contemporary professional activity requires the ability to identify and formulate complex problems, design technically justified solutions, work with incomplete information, communicate with different stakeholders, cooperate in multidisciplinary teams, evaluate social and environmental consequences, use modern technologies, and continuously acquire new

knowledge. Consequently, professional competence in engineering should be understood as an integrated capacity to mobilize knowledge, skills, experience, values, and professional judgement in solving authentic engineering problems.

This understanding is reflected in contemporary international standards of engineering education. The current ABET accreditation criteria define engineering outcomes through abilities related to complex problem solving, engineering design, communication, ethical and professional responsibility, teamwork, experimentation, interpretation of data, and independent acquisition of new knowledge [1]. The

EUR-ACE Framework similarly links engineering education quality with programme outcomes, professional engineering practice, transferable skills, and systematic programme management [2]. These approaches demonstrate that the quality of engineering education cannot be assessed only by the volume of disciplinary material taught; it must also be evaluated through what graduates are able to perform in professional situations.

Research on engineering practice confirms the importance of this broader interpretation. Male, Bush, and Chapman demonstrated that engineering work requires a combination of technical, interpersonal, organizational, and attitudinal competencies [3; 4]. Passow's study of engineering graduates showed that teamwork, communication, data analysis, and problem solving were among the competencies consistently regarded as particularly significant in professional activity [5]. These findings indicate that professional competence cannot be formed through a curriculum dominated by lectures and isolated theoretical disciplines. It requires an educational environment in which scientific knowledge is systematically transformed into professional action.

The discrepancy between academic preparation and real engineering activity remains an important problem in higher education. Traditional curricula often divide mathematics, natural sciences, engineering disciplines, laboratory work, and professional practice into relatively independent components. Students may successfully master individual concepts without developing the ability to integrate them when solving unfamiliar problems. Professional competence, however, emerges precisely through such integration. The organizational structure of the programme and the pedagogical design of learning therefore become equally significant.

The purpose of this study is to identify and theoretically substantiate the organizational and pedagogical conditions that support the development of future engineers' professional competence. The study considers professional competence not as a set of independent qualities, but as an integrated result of curriculum organization, instructional methodology, professional context, learning resources, assessment, feedback, and interaction between higher education and engineering practice.

The study employed a qualitative theoretical research design based on comparative document analysis, analytical synthesis, and pedagogical modelling. The source base included international engineering education frameworks and peer-reviewed studies addressing engineering competencies, professional preparation, active and inductive learning, project- and problem-based education, curriculum integration, and the development of engineering expertise.

The ABET Criteria for Accrediting Engineering Programs and the EUR-ACE Framework Standards and Guidelines were used to determine contemporary requirements for engineering learning outcomes and programme organization [1; 2]. The CDIO approach developed by Crawley, Malmqvist, Östlund, Brodeur, and Edström was examined as an integrated curriculum model connecting disciplinary knowledge with conceiving, designing, implementing, and operating engineering products and systems [6]. Studies by Male and colleagues and Passow were analysed to identify competencies considered important in engineering practice [3–5]. Research by Prince, Prince and Felder, Freeman and colleagues, Chen, Kolmos and Du, and Litzinger and colleagues was used to examine instructional conditions capable of supporting the transition from theoretical knowledge to professional performance [7–11].

The analytical procedure focused on the relationship among four elements: expected professional outcomes, organization of the engineering curriculum, learning activities through which those outcomes are developed, and mechanisms used to assess their attainment. Particular attention was paid to conditions that recur across different engineering education frameworks and research traditions. No experimental student data were generated. Accordingly, the Results section presents a theoretically derived system of organizational and pedagogical conditions rather than artificial quantitative effectiveness indicators.

The analysis demonstrates that the development of professional competence depends first on the alignment of curriculum objectives with the actual structure of engineering activity. Competence-based engineering education requires a movement from discipline-centred planning toward outcome-oriented curriculum design. This does not reduce the significance of fundamental sciences. On the contrary,

mathematics, physics, engineering sciences, and specialist knowledge remain essential, but their educational value increases when students learn to use them as instruments for solving engineering problems. The organizational task is therefore to establish continuity between fundamental knowledge, specialized disciplines, laboratory activities, design tasks, projects, and professional practice.

Such alignment requires programme-level coordination. If each instructor develops a course independently, students may encounter repeated theoretical content while important professional abilities remain insufficiently developed. Communication, teamwork, engineering design, data interpretation, project management, and professional decision making should not be assigned to a single isolated course. Their development must progress throughout the curriculum. The CDIO approach is significant in this respect because it places engineering education within the lifecycle of real engineering activity and integrates disciplinary knowledge with personal, interpersonal, design, implementation, and operational capabilities [6].

A second essential condition is the systematic introduction of authentic problem- and project-oriented learning. Engineering competence becomes observable when students apply knowledge under conditions involving constraints, alternatives, uncertainty, and responsibility for a result. A professionally oriented task should therefore require more than substitution into a known formula. It should involve interpretation of initial conditions, selection of methods, justification of assumptions, comparison of alternatives, use of technical information, and explanation of the proposed solution.

Problem-based and project-based learning provide an appropriate pedagogical environment for this purpose. Prince and Felder showed that inductive approaches, including problem-, project-, inquiry-, and case-based learning, can support a broad range of learning outcomes by beginning with problems or observations that establish a need for theoretical knowledge [8]. Chen, Kolmos, and Du's review of engineering PBL practices demonstrates that project- and problem-oriented learning has been implemented at course, cross-course, curriculum, and project levels, while successful implementation depends not only on

teaching technique but also on institutional support, teacher preparation, curriculum coherence, and appropriate resources [10].

The pedagogical significance of authentic projects lies in the integration of competencies that are separated in conventional instruction. When students design a mechanical component, develop an energy-efficient system, automate a technological process, analyse transport infrastructure, or create a technical prototype, theoretical knowledge becomes connected with planning, communication, experimentation, digital tools, economic limitations, safety requirements, and collective decision making. Professional competence therefore develops through coordinated activity rather than through the accumulation of isolated subject knowledge.

Another organizational condition is the establishment of stable cooperation between universities and professional engineering environments. Industrial practice should not be treated merely as a period during which students observe an enterprise. It becomes educationally meaningful when workplace experience is connected with clearly formulated competencies, academic supervision, professional tasks, reflection, and assessment. Employers and practicing engineers can also contribute to curriculum review, formulation of project tasks, evaluation of student solutions, and identification of emerging technological requirements.

Research on engineering graduates supports this connection between educational preparation and professional practice. Male, Bush, and Chapman found that practical engineering and engineering-business competencies represented important areas in which graduate preparation required attention [3]. Martin and colleagues similarly examined graduates' perceptions of preparedness for industrial work and demonstrated the importance of connecting university learning with the realities of professional engineering [12]. This suggests that university-industry cooperation is not an auxiliary activity but an organizational mechanism for maintaining the professional relevance of the curriculum.

A further condition concerns the educational use of laboratories, digital technologies, modelling environments, and engineering software. Digital

competence should not be reduced to learning the interface of a particular programme. Future engineers need to use computational and digital tools for modelling, data acquisition, analysis, visualization, design, simulation, and evidence-based decision making. The effectiveness of such tools depends on their integration with meaningful engineering tasks. Virtual and physical laboratories should therefore complement one another: simulation can enable rapid examination of alternative scenarios, while physical experimentation develops understanding of measurement uncertainty, equipment constraints, material behaviour, safety, and the difference between theoretical and real systems.

Faculty methodological competence constitutes another important condition. The transition from explanatory teaching to competence-oriented learning changes the teacher's function. The instructor remains a subject expert but also becomes a designer of learning environments, facilitator of engineering reasoning, developer of authentic tasks, and evaluator of professional performance. PBL research demonstrates that insufficient institutional support and lack of preparation among teachers can significantly complicate implementation [10]. Therefore, faculty development should address assessment design, project supervision, facilitation of teamwork, integration of digital resources, and methods for linking theory with professional application.

The analysis also establishes assessment as a decisive pedagogical condition. If professional competence is the expected outcome but examinations predominantly measure reproduction of definitions and algorithms, teaching and assessment become structurally inconsistent. Competence-oriented assessment should require students to demonstrate what they can do with knowledge. Engineering reports, design solutions, laboratory investigations, technical presentations, prototypes, simulations, case analyses, and project documentation provide evidence of integrated performance. Formative feedback is particularly important because it enables students to identify deficiencies while the competence is still developing rather than only receiving a final grade.

International accreditation frameworks reinforce this principle by connecting programme outcomes with

documented assessment, evaluation, and continuous improvement [1; 2]. Professional competence development should therefore operate within a feedback cycle in which expected outcomes determine learning activities, student performance provides evidence of attainment, and assessment results inform improvement of courses and the programme as a whole.

The findings indicate that organizational and pedagogical conditions cannot be effectively separated in engineering education. Active learning, for example, is a pedagogical method, but its sustainable implementation requires organizational decisions concerning class structure, teacher workload, laboratory access, curriculum sequencing, and assessment policy. Likewise, industrial cooperation is an organizational arrangement, but its educational value depends on pedagogical design.

Evidence concerning active learning supports the need to rethink passive instructional models. Prince's review found broad, although methodologically uneven, support for active, collaborative, cooperative, and problem-based approaches [7]. A later meta-analysis by Freeman and colleagues synthesized 225 STEM studies and found higher examination performance under active learning and a greater likelihood of failure under traditional lecturing [9]. These findings do not imply that lectures should disappear from engineering education. Rather, explanation should be positioned within a broader learning architecture in which students regularly analyse, design, test, discuss, justify, and revise solutions.

The results are also consistent with research on engineering expertise. Litzinger, Lattuca, Hadgraft, and Newstetter argue that the development of expertise requires deep conceptual knowledge, fluent application of technical and professional skills, and engagement in authentic engineering projects. They also emphasize that curriculum-level design is necessary because isolated pedagogical improvements are insufficient when the overall programme structure does not support these goals [11].

This perspective is especially important for universities seeking to modernize engineering programmes. Introducing a single project course, purchasing advanced software, or increasing the duration of

industrial practice will not automatically produce competent graduates. The central requirement is coherence. Learning outcomes, subject content, teaching methods, projects, laboratories, digital resources, professional placements, and assessment must reinforce the same model of the future engineer.

The proposed interpretation also avoids reducing professional competence to narrowly technical performance. Contemporary engineering solutions affect people, organizations, economies, and environments. Professional preparation therefore requires the integration of engineering judgement with communication, ethics, teamwork, responsibility, and capacity for continuous learning. Current ABET outcomes explicitly reflect this multidimensional understanding, while studies of practicing engineers demonstrate the professional importance of both technical and non-technical competencies [1; 4; 5].

The study is conceptual rather than experimental, which constitutes its principal limitation. The identified conditions require subsequent validation in specific engineering disciplines and institutional contexts. Mechanical, civil, electrical, transport, chemical, and information engineering programmes differ in professional tasks and technological resources. Nevertheless, the general mechanism remains applicable: professional competence develops when students repeatedly mobilize disciplinary knowledge and professional skills within increasingly complex and authentic engineering activity.

The development of future engineers' professional competence is a systemic educational process that cannot be ensured by subject knowledge alone. Its effectiveness depends on a coherent combination of organizational and pedagogical conditions that connect programme objectives with engineering practice. The analysis shows that competence-oriented curriculum alignment, integration of theoretical and practical preparation, authentic problem- and project-based activity, stable university–industry cooperation, meaningful use of laboratories and digital technologies, methodological preparation of faculty, performance-based assessment, formative feedback, and continuous programme improvement constitute mutually reinforcing elements of such an environment.

Professional competence is therefore formed not at

one particular stage of engineering education but throughout the entire programme. Fundamental knowledge provides the intellectual basis, professionally oriented tasks create situations for its application, project and laboratory activity develops engineering judgement, teamwork and communication connect individual knowledge with collective professional practice, while assessment and reflection transform experience into conscious competence.

For contemporary engineering higher education, the key methodological principle is the transition from teaching engineering knowledge as a collection of separate disciplines toward organizing learning as a progressively complicated model of engineering activity. Under these conditions, the graduate is prepared not simply to reproduce acquired information but to analyse unfamiliar situations, formulate problems, design and justify solutions, evaluate their consequences, cooperate professionally, use modern tools, and continue learning. Such an approach provides a sustainable organizational and pedagogical foundation for preparing engineers capable of effective professional activity in rapidly changing technological environments.

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