

Defining competencies for geo-engineering: Implications for education and training

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ABSTRACT: The competency-oriented approach for evaluating education and training issues defines professionalism and establishes international standards. Over the past decade, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) have assessed professional competency for civil engineering by utilizing recognized terminology used by education professionals to quantify 24 “outcomes” and 6 “levels of achievement” (or “competencies”) required for professional recognition. The ASCE process can be readily adapted to represent the geo-engineering field. A geo-engineering competency matrix can be developed to reflect principles and professional standards of the geo-engineering community. Competency profiles can define the relative roles of different specializations and show how competency can be achieved through education or by training/experience. Individuals can use them to evaluate their competencies, develop life-long-learning plans, or evaluate specialist training courses at the post-Masters level. They may also help promote appropriate international professional recognition of geo-engineering.

1 INTRODUCTION

Large civil engineering construction projects are increasingly undertaken by consortia composed of companies from different countries. This has resulted in a growing need for international cooperation and mutual understanding of design and construction codes and practices. It has also promoted mobility of geo-engineering experts, increasing the need to understand the qualifications and quality of geo-engineers from different educational and national backgrounds (Morgenstern 2000). Professional expertise of civil engineers and geologists often overlaps; competition, rather than cooperation, results when individuals seek opportunities to perform similar tasks and duties in site-investigation, design, and construction, as well as identification, evaluation, and mitigation of geo-hazards.

In response to these developments, the three principal international professional societies—the International Association of Engineering Geologists (IAEG), the International Society for Rock Mechanics (ISRM), and the International Society for Soil Mechanics and Geotechnical Engineering (ISSMGE)—undertook studies of the educational aspects of their professional responsibilities.

In July 2002, a Joint European Working Group (JEWG) was formally established by the Presidents of ISRM, ISSMGE, and IAEG. In 2004 the JEWG issued a report which recommended further steps be undertaken to develop guidelines for the education of the different disciplines and that “competencies” be used to define their areas of expertise (Bock et al. 2004). This report was subsequently revised in 2008 (JEWG, 2008). The Joint Technical Committee on Education and Training (JTC-3) was established in 2006, under the umbrella of the Federation of International Geo-engineering Societies (FedIGS), with the specific request to develop and maintain a “State-of-the Art Report on Education and Training in Engineering Geology, Rock Mechanics, Soil Mechanics and Geotechnical Engineering.” A progress report has been prepared by JTC-3 (Turner & Rengers 2010).

2 THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS APPROACH

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) defines the domain of knowledge and experience that is considered to be essential for a qualified expert in civil engineering as “the ASCE Body of Knowledge (BOK).” The ASCE BOK is defined according to 24 outcomes; each outcome defines a certain part of the domain of knowledge and experience that is considered essential in civil engineering (ASCE 2008). The ASCE Report uses the term “outcome” with an almost identical meaning as “competency” in the JEWG Report (JEWG, 2008; Bock et al. 2004; Rengers & Bock 2008). However the ASCE has further defined how outcomes are mastered in terms of “level of achievement”, instead of defining each competency in terms of the number of educational credits, the approach used by Rengers & Bock (2008).

This difference appears to be a critically important improvement in providing a clear basis for international communications and comparisons. Experience with compilations of curricular tabulations from different universities demonstrates their limited utility as they merely show that apparently identical topics are taught in courses with different names, and two courses with the same name may contain dissimilar subject matter (Higgins & Williams, 1991; Rosenbaum 1997; Manoliu et al. 2000; Manoliu & Radulescu, 2008). In contrast, competencies define the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired by individuals through appropriate formal education and experience. A single competency may include topics that might appear in more than one course, or one course might contribute to many competencies, and many competencies can only be fulfilled with post-graduation experience. Thus, while conceivably one competency could encompass an entire course, in most cases the relationship between competency and educational credits is very complex.

Some competencies are more important than others; so a definition of the level at which each competency has to be mastered is required. The ASCE defines a “level of achievement” according to “Bloom’s Taxonomy”—an international standard used worldwide by educational specialists (Bloom, et al. 1956). Although more than 50 years old, Bloom’s taxonomy remains highly relevant. The current ASCE efforts focus on the cognitive domain because that domain addresses many conventional learning outcomes associated with engineering. Bloom’s taxonomy assesses the cognitive domain according to six levels of achievement, which are summarized in Table 1.

The ASCE BOK2 Committee developed a matrix composed of 24 rows—one for each competency—and 6 columns—one for each “level of achievement” in Bloom’s taxonomy. The 24 competencies are categorized as foundational, technical, and professional and, within each category, are organized in approximate pedagogical order, and not relative importance. To complete the matrix, the ASCE BOK2 Committee first evaluated and defined each cell. Then the committee made decisions concerning the recommended level of achievement that an individual must demonstrate for each competency to practice civil engineering. With a third step, the committee identified the roles of bachelors, masters and experience in achieving each competency.

Figure 1 illustrates the resulting “Competency profile” for Civil Engineering which was developed by the ASCE following their prescribed analysis procedures. It shows the 24 outcomes, each with its necessary level of achievement and a code that explains when and how, through formal teaching and training or by experience, the competency may be developed.

The ASCE BOK2 Report (ASCE 2008) emphasizes that acquiring competencies with the appropriate levels of achievement is generally not a quick or simple process, and certainly is not a process that is restricted to formal education in a baccalaureate program of study. While some basic competencies are typically fulfilled through formal study in a baccalaureate program, other more advanced competencies require a master’s degree or equivalent instruction, and some competencies can only be gained through practical field experience. The assumption is that experience is needed, in addition to formal education, to enter the practice of civil engineering at the professional level.

Table 1. Brief definitions of the Six Levels of Achievement in Bloom's Taxonomy. (ASCE, 2008, Appendix F).

Level 1: Knowledge

Knowledge is defined as the remembering of previously learned material. This may involve the recall of a wide range of material, from specific facts to complete theories, but all that is required is the bringing to mind of the appropriate information.

Level 2: Comprehension

Comprehension is defined as the ability to grasp the meaning of material. This may be shown by translating material from one form to another (words to numbers), by interpreting material (explaining or summarizing), and by estimating future trends (predicting consequences or effects).

Level 3: Application

Application refers to the ability to use learned material in new and concrete situations. This may include the application of such things as rules, methods, concepts, principles, laws, and theories.

Level 4: Analysis

Analysis refers to the ability to break down material into its component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. This may include the identification of parts, analysis of the relationship between parts, and recognition of the organizational principles involved.

Level 5: Synthesis

Synthesis refers to the ability to put together to form a new whole. This may involve the production of a unique communication, a plan of operation (research proposal), or a set of abstract relations (scheme for classifying information).

Level 6: Evaluation

Evaluation concerns the ability to judge the value of material for a given purpose. The judgments are to be based on definite criteria. These may be internal criteria (organization) or external criteria (relevance to the purpose) and the individual may determine the criteria or be given them.

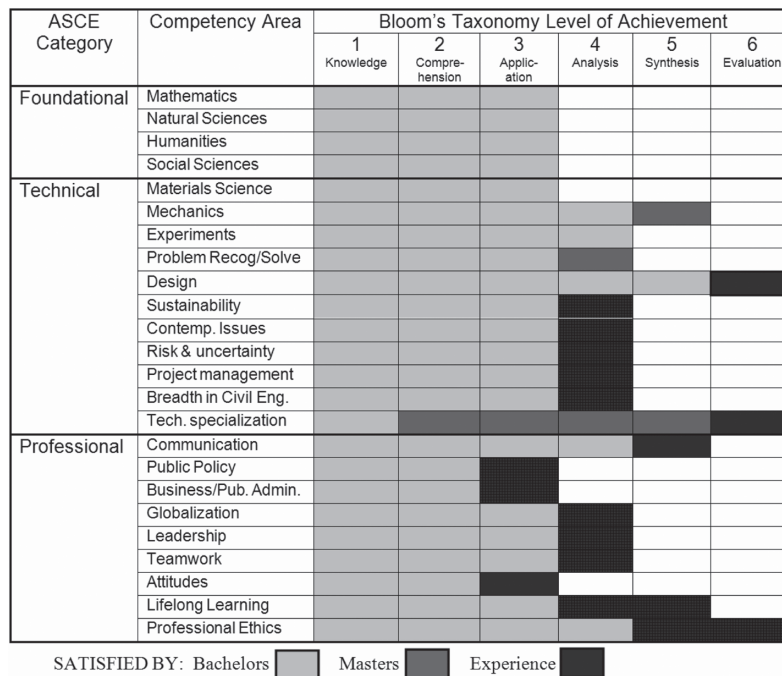


Figure 1. ASCE "Competency Profile" showing essential competencies for a qualified expert in civil engineering. (modified from ASCE, 2008).

3 ADAPTING THE ASCE APPROACH TO GEO-ENGINEERING

The ASCE process can be adapted to represent the geo-engineering field. A geo-engineering competency matrix can be constructed with the same 6 levels of achievement, but with competency descriptions that reflect principles of geo-engineering (Fookes 1997; Morgenstern 2000; Knill 2002), plus additional relationships and professionalism characteristic of the geo-engineering community.

3.1 *Defining geo-engineering specializations*

In recent decades, engineering projects have become much more complex in response to enhanced environmental regulations, technological advances, and economic forces—bridges and tunnels are longer, high-speed transportation links have become common, and population growth has pushed developments into more complex geological locations where site conditions are less optimal and geohazards more likely. These trends naturally led to an increase in geo-engineering specializations, but four specializations are commonly recognized:

- The term “Engineering Geology” is widely used throughout the world in two contexts—to describe the application of geological principles relevant to engineering works, environmental concerns, and societal concerns, and to define specialist geologists (“Engineering Geologists”) who are involved in such studies.
- “Geotechnical Engineering” is a specialty that applies earth sciences to the solution of civil, environmental, and mining engineering problems. Geotechnical engineers typically have competencies in soil mechanics and rock mechanics, but relatively little geological science knowledge. They are dominantly civil engineers and are capable of designing structures for foundations in soil or rock.
- “Rock Mechanics” is defined by the ISRM Statutes as including all studies relative to the physical and mechanical behaviour of rocks and rock masses and the applications of this knowledge for the better understanding of geological processes and in the fields of engineering.
- “Geological Engineering” developed as a specialty field within the broader engineering professions in the USA and Canada, where it first became established in response to a combination of existing legal and technological conditions (Turner 2004; 2008).

The terms “geological engineer” and “engineering geologist” may appear synonymous, both employ the words “geology” and “engineering,” although in reverse order. The word choices may be unfortunate, but the two terms represent distinct, although related, concepts concerning educational and professional endeavors (Turner 2004; 2008).

Because geo-engineering practitioners are increasing likely to become involved in litigation, professional liability and professional recognition is becoming an important concern in many countries. The issues surrounding the professional recognition of geo-engineers are complex and often specific to each country, as the legal basis for professional recognition varies from country to country. Part of the complexity arises because aspects of geo-engineering practice frequently involve scientific studies and engineering design topics to varying degrees. In many countries, there are long-standing legal separations that divide engineering and scientific activities. Tepel (2009) provides views on the situation within the USA. The situation in other countries is often quite different. Bock (2009) provides some details of the contrasting situations in several European countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria. The recent report by the Joint Commission on Professional Practice (JTC4 2009) provides additional perspectives.

3.2 *Defining geo-engineering competencies*

The JEWG prepared a list of competencies for Soil Mechanics Engineers, Rock Mechanics Engineers, and Engineering Geologists in 2008 (JEWG, 2008). Rengers & Bock (2008) and Bock (2009) discuss the concepts developed by the JEWG. Subsequently, Dr. J.D. Higgins, a

professor at the Colorado School of Mines, created a draft competency model for Geological Engineers that tends to bridge the competencies for the Engineering Geologists and the Soil Mechanics Engineers and Rock Mechanics Engineers defined by Rengers & Bock (2008). The recent JTC-3 progress report provides comparisons of the competencies proposed for all four specializations (Turner & Rengers 2010).

3.3 Demonstrating the concept

A sequence of four conceptual competency profiles have been developed to provide an example of how the competency-based approach can provide benefits to the assessment of educational and training needs for sub-disciplines within geo-engineering. Figure 2 shows four profiles—Engineering Geology, Geological Engineering, Geotechnical Engineering,

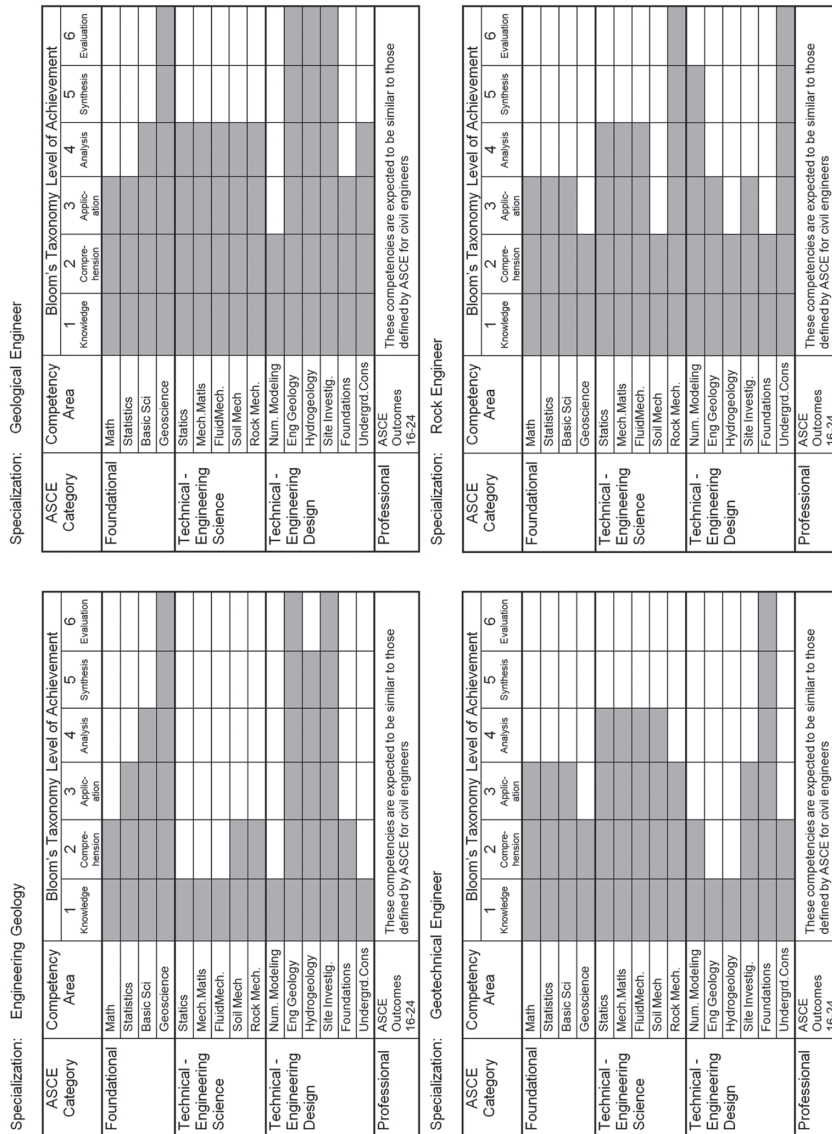


Figure 2. Four conceptual competency profiles for geo-engineering specializations demonstrate their distinctive required competencies.

and Rock Engineering. These profiles are conceptual only. They should not be construed as representing definitive descriptions of these sub-disciplines, nor of providing answers to educational and training issues that must still be resolved in the future after a fully-developed geo-engineering assessment matrix has been developed.

These conceptual competency profiles were developed by faculty at the Colorado School of Mines, based on their extensive experience and interactions with Engineering Geologists, Geotechnical Engineers, and Rock Engineers (rock mechanics specialists) within North America (Higgins 1991; Turner 2008). Thus the four profiles shown in Figure 2 represent this collective experience. The profiles were developed in the following manner:

1. A representative, but temporary, set of competency categories had to be developed because competencies defined for civil engineering by the ASCE BOK2 Report were not considered entirely appropriate for assessing the competencies of geo-engineering sub-disciplines, and a full set of such competencies has yet to be established,
2. Thus, a series of 15 competency classes was established that approximated the ASCE Foundational and Technical categories. “Engineering Science” and “Engineering Design” classifications, formerly used to assess engineering curricula in the USA, were used to define the Technical category.
3. The resulting sequence of competencies thus neither entirely conforms to existing assessment criteria, nor is expected to be the selection developed in the future.
4. The 6 levels of achievement defined by Bloom’s taxonomy were used to form the columns of the matrix.
5. Guidance in establishing the profiles was obtained by using the competency profile for civil engineering developed by ASCE (Fig. 1) as a base case against which the levels of achievement for each geo-engineering sub-discipline could be raised or lowered.

In spite of the limitations imposed by the fact that these are preliminary conceptual representations, the four profiles show distinct patterns of strength and specialization for each sub-discipline. Accordingly, they demonstrate, on a conceptual level, some of the advantages of a competency-based assessment approach applied to geo-engineering with its several sub-disciplines.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Competency profiles for the specialties within geo-engineering can provide a basis for defining the relative roles of the different specializations. Competency can be achieved through education, or by training/experience; individuals can use them to evaluate their own competencies. Competency profiles may also allow for:

- Developing individual life-long-learning plans,
- Establishing the relevance of specialist training courses at the post-Masters level, or
- Evaluating professional qualifications of individuals wanting to work at certain levels within the Eurocode structures, or seeking professional licensure.

Competency profiles should be produced by analyzing a single matrix of competency topics and levels of achievement—the development of this matrix for geo-engineering is currently the major task remaining to be undertaken cooperatively by the geo-engineering community. The size and complexity of this matrix, the number of columns and rows comprising it, should be similar to the existing matrix (or rubric) developed by the ASCE for civil engineering.

Once such a matrix is agreed to, it can also form the basis for evaluating regional variations in the competency profiles of individual specializations, or of geo-engineering in its entirety. For instance, how do the desired competencies for Engineering Geologists in South America compare to those in Europe, or in Asia? Such competency profiles are likely to show differences among the various regions due to the presence/absence of geohazards, and the relative importance of several economic factors, such as large urban centers, groundwater resources or flooding, and mining or underground construction. The availability of such international comparisons will provide the basis for communicating and understanding the

role and importance of education and training issues. They may also assist in promoting appropriate professional recognition of geo-engineering specializations within nations, regions, and internationally.

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