International Journal of Religion
2023
Volume: 4| Number 2 | pp. 615 – 625
ISSN: 2633-352X (Print) | ISSN: 2633-3538 (Online)
ijor.co.uk
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61707/6p0cx830

Competency-Based Evaluation in the Context of Higher Education: A Systematic Review of the Last Five Years

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Abstract

This paper aims to define competency-based evaluation, its methods, practices, meaningful and functional learning, and an evaluation plan in higher education. The methodology is exploratory, based on a systematic review under PRISMA guidelines with eligibility criteria that included research related to competency-based evaluation in higher education, research articles, student and teacher participation, publications in indexed journals in Spanish or English since 2020. Searches were conducted in databases such as Dialnet, Proquest, Redalyc, and the repository of the Universidad César Vallejo using specific search strings. The results highlighted the difficulties and improvement proposals in the implementation of competency-based evaluation strategies in higher education, identifying deficiencies in the conceptions of teaching-learning and evaluation by faculty, and the need for more socially adapted pedagogical strategies. The importance of participatory processes to achieve agreements and improvements was emphasized, as well as the relevance of self-evaluation, reciprocal evaluation among students, and co-evaluation between teacher and student as key techniques and instruments. The findings highlight that evaluation should be a continuous and systematic process that goes beyond simple measurement, aiming to assess and judge the competencies that the student uses in their learning and its practical application in real situations.

Keywords: *Competency-Based Evaluation; Meaningful Learning; Functional Learning; Evaluation Practices*

INTRODUCTION

Escalona et al. (2022) assert that being competent involves possessing certain professional capacities to utilize available resources in order to carry out a specific activity. This makes it clear that the control and application of this knowledge make an individual competent, capable of mastering a set of knowledge, procedures, and attitudes.

Currently, there is a noticeable increase in publications that highlight the complexity of the task of competency-based evaluation in higher education institutions. This phenomenon is familiar if we consider that the culture of evaluation based on traditional models has not generated the expected results. Portorreal and Hernández (2023) acknowledge that competency-based evaluation in Spanish universities is a vital aspect; however, it brings with it very evident shortcomings, such as techniques and strategies focused on student learning. Furthermore, they note that interviews with directors of training centers from five Spanish universities reveal that despite having extensive training offerings, there are still limited formative experiences oriented toward competency-based evaluation. According to the authors, traditional formative strategies outweigh the use of competency-based pedagogical strategies, making this aspect a challenge for Spanish teachers, as it requires continuous training strategies that truly respond to the social context to offer appropriate training plans.

On the other hand, Ramón-Bautista et al. (2023) recognize that competency-based evaluation generates negative aspects such as resistance to change, coordination difficulties, logistical conditions, and insufficient teacher training. In the same Spanish context, the University of Zaragoza has proposed a real transformation of the traditional educational model, characterized by its focus on student learning and specifically directed towards the acquisition of competencies. Thus, studies disseminated at the international and Spanish levels highlight the deficiencies in the conceptions of teaching, learning, and faculty evaluation. Therefore, a new approach is

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desirable and requires participatory processes that consider the use of mechanisms to achieve agreements and gather all possible improvements.

Meanwhile, Sandoval et al. (2022) collect local experiences and relate the evaluation in higher education institutions to the old evaluation culture through the use of written and oral exams. It is evident that it is necessary to create new evaluative strategies that are capable of considering the expected results in clear dependence on the learning design oriented towards the professional role, using real and/or simulated work situations as a reference for designing authentic evaluation tasks.

From this context, considering that competency-based evaluation fosters the achievement of functional and valuable learning for students, the present work systematically compiles information on the problems and improvement proposals for a higher education institution in the application of strategies to evaluate competencies, as their application is currently not generating the expected results. From this perspective, the question arises: How are competency-based evaluation, its methods, practices, meaningful and functional learning, and a competency-based evaluation plan defined in the context of higher education in the last five years?

Consequently, to answer this question, the general objective is proposed: To define through a systematic review with the PRISMA method the competency-based evaluation, its methods, practices, meaningful and functional learning, and a competency-based evaluation plan in the context of higher education in the last five years. Therefore, the following specific objectives are proposed: to describe the different methodologies and techniques used for competency-based evaluation in higher education over the last five years; to analyze the pedagogical practices that promote meaningful and functional learning in this context; and to develop recommendations based on the reviewed literature for the implementation of an effective competency-based evaluation plan in higher education.

METODOLOGÍA

This work is exploratory in nature, conducted through a systematic review following the PRISMA guidelines. According to Fuentes-Canosa (2020), PRISMA facilitates the development of systematic reviews in fields such as education, health, and others. Additionally, it includes a checklist with verification items and a document for preparation and explanation that promotes a rigorous, objective, comprehensive, and precise review. This is achieved through a description of how research studies were identified and selected, as well as a characterization and analysis of the main results. The systematic review process is detailed as follows:

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility of the research was based on the following criteria:

Topic: Research related to competency-based evaluation in higher education.

Type of Research: Research articles.

Participants: Research involving students and teachers in higher education.

Publication: Research published in indexed journals within databases.

Language: Research published in Spanish or English.

Date: Research published between January 1, 2020, and the present.

Main Field: Social Sciences.

Subfield: Education.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

The electronic search for research studies was conducted in databases such as Dialnet, Proquest, Redalyc, and the repository of Universidad César Vallejo. The search strategy identified key terms from the previously mentioned research question: competency-based evaluation; higher education; teacher

performance. Specific search strings were proposed for each database using Boolean operators such as AND, OR, NOT, and "…". The search string that yielded the best results was: ("evaluación por competencias") AND ("educación superior"); ("proceso de evaluación") AND ("competencias"); ("evaluación por competencias") AND ("aprendizaje").

The first search conducted based on the mentioned criteria and in the indicated databases yielded a preliminary total of results: articles related to the research topic. However, from this total, only those articles that served as the basis for this review were selected. Articles were eliminated due to duplicate titles, participants outside the research context (i.e., in basic level school settings), publications in languages other than those pre-established, and restricted access publications. It is worth mentioning that some articles mentioned the concept of competency-based evaluation in the title, but upon reading the abstract, they did not align with the objective of this research. In contrast, although some titles did not explicitly mention competency-based evaluation, the abstract indicated that the author(s) related their results to the purpose of this work.

As previously mentioned, the results obtained in the first search were relatively extensive. Therefore, attention was given to the abstract of each document yielded by the database, focusing on the methodology employed and the results obtained. Below is a preliminary table used to detail the process described.

Table 2 Summary of specific searches

Database Formula	Initial Result	Removed Due to Duplicates	Removed Due to Language	Removed Due to Title	Removed Due to Abstract	Total Included
Evaluación por competencias *AND* Educación superior	8406	5523	2408	2103	1000	**12**
Proceso de evaluación *OR* método de evaluación *AND* competencias docentes	7240	6003	623	415	182	**17**
Evaluación por competencias *AND* Desempeño docente	7077	5489	789	618	170	**11**
TOTAL ARTICLES	22723	17015	3820	3136	1352	**40**

From the above table, it is clear which searches were most successful. Although the databases returned a significant and exhaustive number of results, it is known which works were not included because the content did not align with the research objectives; many of them did not relate to the pre-established concepts or offered different information.

In order to delve into a sample of the selected research and provide more validity and reliability to this review, the following preliminary table describes the authors, year, title, and journal where the selected articles were published.

Table 3 *Details of Articles Selected for the Systematic Review Representing the Last Five Years*

Author (s)	Year	Title	Journal
Assessment by competencies and learning in higher education			
León, C., León, C. y Troya, H.	2024	El desarrollo de competencias profesionales una aproximación de la universidad a los museos y sitios arqueo-arquitectónicos	Cuaderno de Pedagogía Universitaria
Caso, J., Ponce, S., García, B. y Díaz, C.	2023	Validación y optimización de un cuestionario para evaluar las competencias del tutor(a) en educación superior	Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa
Hincapié, N. y Clemenza, C.	2022	Evaluación de los aprendizajes por competencias: una mirada teórica desde el contexto colombiano.	Revista de Ciencias Sociales
Quijije-Anchundia, P.	2021	Metodología para desarrollar la competencia didáctica profesional en los docentes universitarios	Revista Luz

Ibarra-Sáiz, M., Rodríguez-Gómez, G., Rotsaert, T., Brown, S., SalinasSalazar, M. y Rodríguez-Gómez, H.	2020	El futuro de la evaluación en la educación superior	RELIEVE. Revista Electrónica de Investigación y Evaluación Educativa

Description of the Research Selection Process

After the research studies were retrieved from the databases, they were subjected to a screening process. Initially, studies with duplicate titles were eliminated. Next, studies that did not meet the language eligibility criteria were excluded. Additionally, titles and abstracts of the research studies were reviewed, and those that did not align with the objectives of this review were discarded. Finally, the full texts of the remaining studies were read.

Consequently, for this systematic review, a reduced total of publications was obtained, ensuring that all of them correspond to research articles. To evaluate the risk of bias in the selection process of the chosen studies, a checklist will be used, based on the criteria of Ibarra-Sáiz et al. (2020) and Fuentes-Canosa (2022), which include the following indicators:

The research presents objectives that directly relate to competency-based evaluation.

The research clearly and robustly defines the relationship between competency-based evaluation and the context of higher education.

The research is supported by solid results.

The research includes participants within the pre-established context.

The research demonstrates a logical and coherent relationship between objectives, methodology, and results.

These indicators will be assessed on a scale of 0 to 4, where 4 indicates "satisfactory compliance," 3 "approaching compliance," 2 "partial compliance," 1 "insufficient compliance," and 0 "non-compliance." Based on this scale, studies can achieve a score of up to 24 points. Therefore, to ensure that the selected studies are appropriately aligned with the topic, it is considered that each study must obtain a minimum of 75%, which equates to 18 out of 24 possible points. From this, the review of the total selected studies is validated.

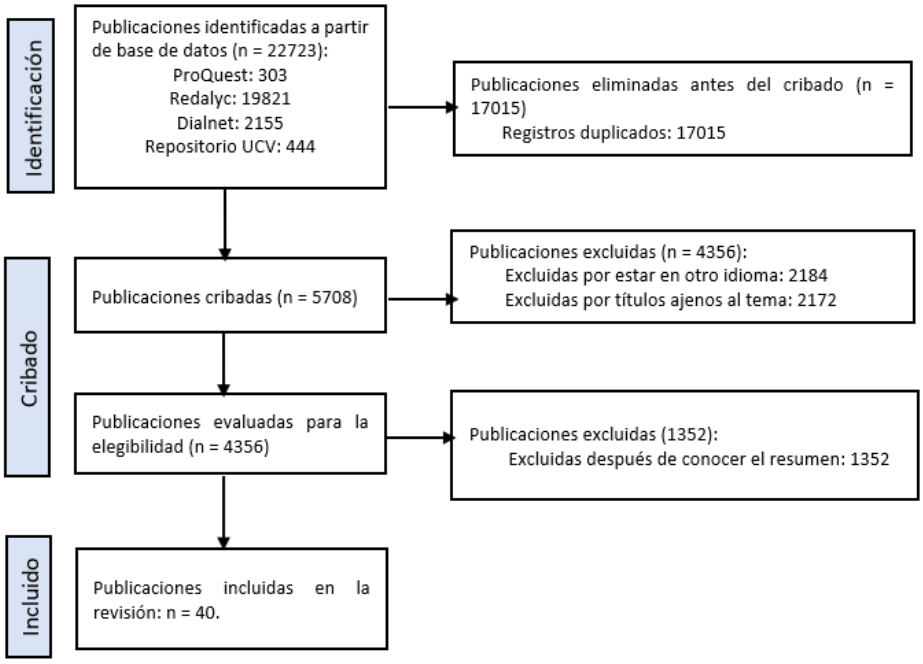

Figure 1 Process of Identifying, Screening, and Selecting Studies Through Databases

RESULTS

In the systematic review conducted, research studies that appeared to be directly related to the topic of competency-based evaluation in the context of higher education were excluded because they addressed the problem from contexts far removed from the educational field or, in other cases, only focused on didactic evaluation strategies for basic education.

Competency-based Evaluation by Authors

In this context, it is essential to consider that competencies encompass everything a person requires to respond to the problems and needs they will face throughout their daily life, which involves mobilizing aptitudes, procedures, and concepts (Quijije-Anchundia, 2021). In the words of Escalona et al. (2022), "providing quality education requires that university faculty have a strong command of competencies grounded in disciplinary and pedagogical aspects" (p. 380). Moreover, in teaching and learning, they become the guiding thread by revealing the levels of achievement of the capacities the student aims to develop. In this sense, the competency-based approach requires that the teacher be competent in designing and operationalizing didactic situations (Hincapié and Clemenza, 2022). From this perspective, competency-based evaluation requires the search, selection, and implementation of the best strategies, methods, techniques, and tools to carry out the competency evaluation process.

Thus, understanding that evaluation goes beyond measurement—that is, it is a continuous and systematic process that seeks to assess and make judgments based on the properties or qualities obtained from the object of evaluation (Cano de la Cruz, 2021)—in this case, the competencies that the student uses in learning when faced with situations they encounter or will encounter in life (Escalona et al., 2022). Therefore, this work assumes the definition presented by Hincapié and Clemenza (2022), who argue that competency-based evaluation, conceived formatively after the inconsistencies of evaluation that neglect a relevant aspect of learning such as the qualitative, is constituted as a process that allows obtaining evidence to measure and assess the student's progress through a set of quality criteria that clearly define achievement indicators. Additionally, for Sandoval et al. (2022), it is an objective, valid, reliable, complete, integral, meaningful, and predictive process

whose purpose lies in accountability within a dialogical relationship between the teacher and the student and the other actors involved in teaching and learning.

On the other hand, Ramón-Bautista et al. (2023) consider that to follow a competency-based evaluation model, one must rely on quality criteria such as authenticity, cognitive complexity, impartiality, significance, direct interpretation, transparency, educational consequences, reproducibility of decisions, homogeneity, and cost-effectiveness. In that line, Cisternas-San et al. (2024) state that any competency-based evaluation model is pedagogically and methodologically functional and should require systematic monitoring by the teacher and provide timely feedback. For the author, proposing a competency-based model implies a complex process that requires analyzing the conception, knowledge, formulation, programming, pedagogical practices, activities, and strategies to be implemented in the competency evaluation process (Ruiz, 2021).

Meanwhile, the planning of an evaluation process involves the organization and anticipation of the teaching and learning process based on the pedagogical intent of the institution (España and Vigueras, 2021). On the other hand, León et al. (2024) explain that an evaluation plan should incorporate all the elements the teacher expects to develop in initial, formative, and summative aspects according to specific didactics. In their words, "one should not evaluate what was not warned, considered, or taught" (p. 32).

This organization involves selecting the most appropriate strategies to achieve the assessment of teaching and learning based on competencies. For this, according to Bernard and González-Moreno (2020), Hincapié and Clemenza (2022), and Cabero-Almenara and Palacios-Rodríguez (2021), whatever the strategy, it must meet the following characteristics: search for evidence, record and analysis, criteria, value judgment, and decision-making. Additionally, the authors point out that strategies serve as a driving agent in the complex inter-, intra-, multi-, and transdisciplinary relationships. Therefore, any strategy should provoke conscious, consistent, and systematic actions through a flexible process. In this context, following Hincapié and Clemenza (2022) and Delgado and Bravo (2021), some methodological strategies for competency-based evaluation include: recirculation strategies focused on evaluating information verbatim; elaboration strategies that capture knowledge during learning; organization strategies aimed at promoting meaningful learning; retrieval strategies to evaluate long-term stored learning; integration strategies for a particular learning situation; and socio-formative strategies in activities deployed over time to solve a problem.

In an effort to exemplify the development of a strategy for evaluating competencies, according to Quijije-Anchundia (2021) and Velasco and Cardeñoso (2020), a methodology to follow (strategy, technique, and resources) for virtual environments is the socio-formative, which is developed in four phases: planning, execution, monitoring, and control. Each phase comprises activities that, in summary, start from the design of the formative project, where learning activities are defined, to the dissemination of products and results. At the heart of the matter, Olarte-Arias et al. (2022) and Rojas-Valverde et al. (2024) suggest the importance of considering self-evaluation, reciprocal evaluation among students, and co-evaluation between teacher and student. Consequently, the authors propose the following techniques and instruments that can be used to collect information or evidence in competency-based evaluation: oral, written, theoretical, or practical exams; skill tests; research and reflection works such as projects and reports; individual or group presentations, simulations, interviews, portfolios, among others.

Finally, following Frade (2009), cited by Ramón-Bautista et al. (2023), the following diagram summarizes the strategies:

Table 4 Table of Evaluation Strategies and Instruments

Evaluation Moment	Techniques	Instruments
Initial	Entrance exams, direct evaluation in a didactic situation, projective techniques	Analytical and holistic rubric, self-evaluation, co-evaluation
Formative	Portfolios, products from the didactic situation (e.g., experiments), tasks, field diaries, checklists	Holistic rubric, self-evaluation, co-evaluation

Summative	Written exams, products, oral exams or interviews, neuropsychological evaluation scales	Analytical rubric, self-evaluation

Competency-based Evaluation Practices

Evaluation practices play an important role within the educational field because they allow for reflection and feedback. In this sense, Ramos and Márquez (2024) and Gutiérrez and Ayala (2021) indicate that evaluation and feedback help provide support to students so that they take responsibility for their learning. In this same context, it is important to highlight the significance of evaluating and providing feedback to achieve meaningful improvements in the teaching process and, above all, to overcome the fear of evaluation and thus develop a culture of evaluation.

Considering the current context, higher education institutions (HEIs) must take responsibility for educating and training well-rounded individuals who will be capable of addressing and solving challenges in their respective contexts and fields and, in turn, demonstrate a sense of social responsibility (Crespí and Ramos-García, 2021). Related to this, Molina-Saavedra et al. (2022) and Valverde-López and Ureña-Hernández (2021) state that HEIs have found it necessary to rethink their pedagogical and evaluative strategies to promote the use and synthesis of knowledge in the resolution of contextualized situations, emphasizing competency-based training.

Within this framework, Casanova et al. (2018), cited by Portorreal and Hernández (2023), mention that an important characteristic of competency-based evaluation is that the process is student-centered; furthermore, it allows linking theory and practice by incorporating essential knowledge. In addition, Cisternas-San Martín et al. (2024) and Llaudet et al. (2022) state that competencies are a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are presented in a coordinated and integrated manner in practice, enabling individuals to solve the challenges they may encounter in their context.

Student training should be comprehensive, so they can develop and face the inherent challenges of the social environment. In this regard, Ramón-Bautista et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of evaluating competency-based learning, as it offers a precise and reliable guide to the evaluation process by defining the conditions under which inferences can be made about the acquisition of specific competency achievement indicators based on performance tests and execution levels (Tejada and Campos, 2023).

HEIs are undergoing changes in their evaluation processes since the formative process will focus on the acquisition of certain competencies, which will be reflected in the curricula and syllabi of the courses. Thus, according to Rodríguez (2010), cited by Sandoval et al. (2022), evaluation should focus on assessing the acquisition of these competencies, considering that competencies are not only about mechanical repetition but also about reflection to ensure optimal training.

Meaningful and Functional Learning of Students

In their work, Robles and Ortiz (2024) and Aroca et al. (2022) point out that meaningful learning, as proposed by David Ausubel, plays a fundamental role in the educational process because it represents knowledge that endures throughout an individual's life and is intrinsically related to their previous experiences. According to Mena and Troyano (2020), Dávila et al. (2023), and Gajardo and Cáceres-Iglesias (2023), this meaningful learning allows individuals to acquire, learn, and absorb information more effectively and also enables them to apply what they have learned practically in their environment, establishing deep and relevant connections with their reality. For example, a student who understands mathematical concepts by solving real-world problems is building meaningful learning by associating these concepts with concrete situations in their daily life.

Various theories support the notion of meaningful learning. For example, according to Siemens' theory, meaningful learning is achieved through digital interaction between individuals worldwide, involving diverse approaches such as experiential learning and peer collaboration. This integration of perspectives helps individuals achieve a deep and applicable understanding in their daily lives, allowing them to relate the concepts learned to their own experiences and prior knowledge (Salido, 2024; López et al., 2024).

Chaccha et al. (2022) discuss the contribution of David Kolb, who proposes a classification of four types of meaningful learning: durable, characterized by its ability to be stored in long-term memory and be accessible at any time; generalizable, establishing a close relationship between the learning context and the individual, which enhances its significance; and functional, achieved through the practical application of concepts in various situations (Ochoa-López et al., 2022). For example, when a student applies the principles of physics to solve engineering problems, they are demonstrating functional learning by effectively using their knowledge in a real context.

In the 21st century, authors such as Parra and Mejía (2022), Camacho and Ramos (2022), and Inglada et al. (2024) consider that meaningful learning strengthens individuals' ability to apply what they have learned practically in their daily lives. The deep understanding and ability to relate concepts to previous experiences are key aspects in building meaningful learning, requiring the integration of various educational approaches and the consideration of students' individual differences and contexts.

Competency-Based Evaluation Plan

According to Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014), cited by Hincapié and Clemenza (2022) and Quijije-Anchundia (2021), a competency-based evaluation plan involves a design that encompasses learning. Based on this, the following are the key elements to consider when creating or designing such a plan:

Identify Key Competencies: Define the specific competencies you want to evaluate in individuals. In this section, it is crucial to clarify the competencies that need to be assessed. This provides a clear idea of the direction in which the teaching-learning process is moving. It is essential to know what we want to measure.

Establish Evaluation Criteria: Define the criteria that will be used to evaluate each competency. It is vital to specify and/or define the aspects on which the evaluation or the proposed evaluation plan will be based. This is important to set clear goals for the ultimate objective of the evaluation itself.

Select Evaluation Tools: Determine which tools will be used to evaluate the competencies, such as structured interviews, practical tests, performance evaluations, among others. This part involves establishing the tools that will be used in the test. The aim is to have a tool that allows us to measure the person we intend to evaluate. This tool is essentially our working instrument, producing the necessary inputs for constructing or designing a competency-based evaluation plan.

Design the Evaluation Process: Outline the process that will be followed to carry out the evaluation, including scheduling activities, communicating with participants, and collecting data. This involves creating a timeline or methodology for carrying out processes, understanding in advance the tasks involved in each section of the evaluation process.

Collect and Analyze Results: Once the evaluation is complete, gather and analyze the results to identify the strengths and areas for improvement of the evaluated individuals. This is one of the final stages of the Evaluation Plan, where results are displayed, stored, and then analyzed to provide feedback for the next phase of the plan.

Provide Feedback**:** Offer feedback to participants on their results and provide recommendations for their professional development based on the evaluated competencies. This is the final part of the Evaluation Process, where the plan's results are communicated. It is important to inform those involved about the necessary recommendations to demonstrate corresponding improvement in future evaluations.

Ultimately, to carry out a valid evaluation, key competencies must first be considered, guiding the teaching-learning process. Then, the evaluation criteria should be clearly specified to highlight the areas that will be evaluated. To ensure valid measurement, a suitable instrument must be selected, such as an interview or a practical test, to ensure the validity of the measurement. Proper control of the evaluation process, with scheduling and notification to stakeholders, ensures logistical feasibility. The data is then analyzed to determine strengths and opportunities for improvement. Finally, by providing feedback and recommendations to the evaluated individuals, the career development process largely closes the evaluation cycle.

CONCLUSIONS

Higher education institutions worldwide are adopting a new competency-based approach. Given the competitive environment and complexity, competency requires new forms of evaluation. The need to change the institutional culture of evaluation is undeniable, along with the potential for integrating technologies that facilitate the performance of evaluation tasks and become a central tool in the development and management of evaluation. Competency-based evaluation is a rigorous, delicate, and systematic process that requires the full attention and involvement of the teacher as the evaluating agent. It is important to understand that competency evaluation goes beyond simple measurement; it involves assessing the student's aptitudes, procedures, and attitudes when using knowledge and information to solve real-life problems.

In this endeavor, the strategies, techniques, and instruments planned for competency evaluation depend on the pedagogical intent of the institution where the process takes place. Evaluation and feedback are essential elements in the educational context, as they lead to reflection and continuous improvement of the teaching process. They also promote a culture of evaluation. Higher education institutions face the challenge of training well-rounded individuals capable of confronting and solving problems in their respective contexts. This implies rethinking pedagogical and evaluative strategies. In this framework, competency-based evaluation emerges as an alternative that centers on the student and allows for the integration of theory and practice.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that higher education institutions are experiencing changes in their evaluation processes. This is evident in the restructuring of their curricula and course syllabi. The competency-based evaluation plan has been conceived to comprehensively assess students' progress in this crucial aspect of their professional training. Through a competency-focused approach, the aim is to evaluate how future educators develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to effectively apply case study methodology in their teaching practice.

It is also concluded that to improve the techniques and strategies for developing a competency-based evaluation that allows for the achievement of meaningful and functional learning for students, the designed plan provides clear and precise evaluation criteria as well as a variety of suitable instruments to measure the extent of the established competencies. The plan is executed through an evaluation schedule that ensures an equitable distribution of evaluation activities throughout the unit, ensuring continuous and systematic assessment of learning.

It should be noted that the inclusion of various didactic resources and the application of timely and constructive feedback strategies contribute to strengthening the teaching-learning process and promoting students' autonomous development. In short, a competency-based evaluation plan represents an essential tool for guiding students' learning, laying the foundation for their development as competent educational researchers committed to improving educational quality.

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