

Consultation explores CBTE, micro-credentials, global Christian training

Q & A WITH
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Hosted and organized by the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE)—an organization that partners with ATS through the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative—a

consultation was held from February 13 to 16, 2024, in Rome, Italy. This gathering brought together 71 invited participants from 32 countries to delve into the potential impact of competency-based theological education (CBTE) and micro-credentials (MCs) on the future of global Christian education and training. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, ATS director of accreditation and global engagement, and Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives, attended the consultation and shared what they learned as well as the implications for their work at ATS.

Q: What was the purpose of the consultation?



RUIZ: The consultation aimed at addressing the formal/non-formal "gap" experienced in theological education and fostering collaboration among stakeholders including church and parachurch

leaders, theological educators, and quality assurance organizations. The consultation's planners articulated three primary aspirations for the event: (1) to envision



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how CBTE and MCs can strengthen and accompany the church in its missions, (2) to envision how CBTE and MCs can advance quality and collaboration in global Christian teaching, training, and forming, and (3) to spark and fuel a global CBTE movement that will complement and empower Christian teaching, training, and forming.



DEASY: In addition, the consultation allowed ATS to continue developing relationships with its sister accrediting agencies and to expand our relationships with schools and ministry organizations around the globe.

Q: What did you do as an attendee?



RUIZ: Structured around workshop-style sessions, a problem-based learning approach for attendees focused on two main areas: (1) identifying the shortcomings of formal theological education (FTE)

and non-formal theological education (NFTE) and (2) exploring how CBTE and MCs might address these gaps. Central to this exploration was a focused discussion in workshop groups on strategic competencies (defined by some participants in the US as content, craft, and

character), including guided practice in how to design competencies, identify needed competencies, determine demonstrable proficiency indicators, plan learning experiences and activities, and design authentic assessment—all key elements of CBTE.

Following a similar format, participants were introduced to the structures, processes, and examples of MCs, discussing the questions of how they might address the shortfalls of FTE and NFTE. Participants worked with an MC design template that included, among other things, the design, learning outcome, proficiency indicators, providers, and delivery modes, access requirements, integration/stackability options, and quality assurance.

Notable in these workshops were not only the passionate and sustained interest of participants involved in both areas of theological education (FTE and NFTE), but also the very clear commitments to quality and excellence in their respective involvements. Despite diverse vocational backgrounds and theological perspectives, the consultation fostered an evangelical sensibility, marked by passionate dialogue and shared values.



DEASY: I found the process of trying to develop competencies with a diverse group of voices from around the world in a generative and appreciative space fascinating. As we each shared a possible

competency—competencies that were deeply tied to our various theological and cultural traditions—we were asked to provide more clarity and to name our assumptions. As we did so, not only did we learn more about one another, but we learned more about ourselves. Participants came away with a renewed commitment to aligning the practices of their various ministries, agencies, and schools with the competencies they were seeking to develop in others. The process helped them better align their educational programs with their missions and provided a clearer framework for assessment.

Q: What did you learn?



RUIZ: CBTE is a philosophy, not a model, and this was explained well. It is a contextualized standard of excellence that drives everything (so there is no one model that should be copied wholesale). Micro-credentials, in contrast, because of their reliance on providers not always associated with theological education, can be overly influenced by providers' standards of excellence (in short, these small learning strategies are not “neutral.”) In both instances, the importance of a careful and critical assessment of their appropriation for theological education are needed.

We were reminded that the landscape of accreditation and quality assurance in theological education varies significantly across different regions globally. Unlike the US and Canada—where accreditation is often governed autonomously—many countries outside North America rely on statutory frameworks established by ministries of education or regional quality assurance institutions. Consequently, theological institutions must navigate not only theologically-oriented standards but also state-centric measures that shape accreditation and certification processes.



DEASY: At the conference, I learned that competency-based education is a global phenomenon. For example, the Ministry of Education in Kenya adopted a competency-based curriculum back in 2017.

While the philosophy of competency-based education is easy to grasp, the actual implementation is nuanced and difficult to understand in the abstract. As we practiced writing competencies for possible micro-credentials, I found myself struggling to find the right scope for the various aspects of the program. What was a competency? What was a learning outcome? What was an activity that would adequately demonstrate mastery at a basic

or advanced level? It became clear that before starting to write a competency-based course or curriculum, you must be clear about the purpose of the course, both in terms of educational outcomes and in the scope of learning, including potential stackability. These are, of course, good practices for designing any educational program whether a micro-credential or a degree program.

Q: What are the implications for your work at ATS?



RUIZ: For North American organizations like ATS, embracing a global movement for quality theological education requires sensitivity to these differences and a commitment to facilitating educational access

and recognition across boundaries. In the context of CBTE, ATS must continually review its guidelines—especially in terms of the consequences of competency-based theological education understood as not only a delivery modality, but as an educational philosophy and practice—and methods to align with the diverse educational philosophies and practices prevalent globally.

One of the profound, if unsettling, learnings from the Rome consultation was that, in theological education—both formal and informal—different parts of the world are probably quite ahead in the pursuit of competency-based education, even if parts of the US and Canada or the European Higher Education Area are advanced in seeking to bridge the institutional, statutory, and educational dimensions of CBTE. It's part of the economic context and the demands of certain regions of the world for education and training to align with the market demands of these regions and their polities. ATS would do well to explore in partnership with theological institutions in

these regions what aspects of the political, economic, and cultural contexts have to do with shaping our understanding of higher theological education, not only in terms of the rest of the world, but the worlds that ATS itself inhabits.



DEASY: There is much for us to learn from our global sisters and brothers about this work. Europe has developed a taxonomy of micro-credentials that includes the area of focus, level of knowledge, and transferability to other degrees. Such a framework might help us better understand and support the breadth of non-degree programs currently being offered by ATS member schools.

Competency-based education must be tied to good evaluation practices. If ATS schools want to move towards more competency-based approaches, we'll need to keep developing as an association committed to good assessment practices. The move toward competencies very much parallels the 2020 move in the *ATS Standards of Accreditation* to a more principle-based approach. A principle-based approach requires schools to name tangible goals as defined by their individual missions and then demonstrate progress toward those goals in ways that can be seen and understood by their peers.

ATS schools have grown a lot in their assessment practices in the last decade, but the ICETE conference highlighted how important this work is for the future of theological education as we seek to become more accessible, more contextual, and increasingly global.

Please contact [Lester Edwin J. Ruiz](#) or [Jo Ann Deasy](#) for further information or questions.



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