

# European Competency Frameworks Applied for Improving Quality of Online Training Programs Addressed to Public Administration in Romania

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## **Abstract**

*Competency Frameworks and quality standards have become a topic of interest in public system reforms all over the world. Although, often seen as a support tool in the recruitment process, there are approaches that integrate competency frameworks into other processes such as workforce planning, performance management and especially in design of training programs. In Romania there is no national database with training topics and courses, for the specific activities of civil servants. The adoption of standards and competency frameworks in training programs for public sector could be facilitated by the migration of training programs to the online environment and the use of dedicated LMS (Learning management systems). The article analyse the opportunity of integration of the Competency Frameworks based on authors' experience in implementing online training programs at the National Institute of Administration through the Pilot PPP Online program in the pandemic context.*

**Keywords:** *competency framework, human resources development, quality management in learning services, online training, public administration*

**JEL classification:** O15, O38, P36

**DOI:** 10.24818/RMCI.2021.2.274

## **1. Introduction**

The paper is addressed to the need of integration of the proposed Competency Framework for public administration in Romania into the training programs organized by public and private training providers for public administration at central and local level, with direct implications on increasing the quality level and the added value.

The Government of Romania introduced a competency framework for addressing national significant human resources management (HRM) problems. A competency framework is a model where competencies are identified and defined in terms of expected behaviours to achieve excellent individual and organizational performance (World Bank, 2020). Competency frameworks have become

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increasingly popular in recent public sector HRM reforms, in most countries and serve as a management tool that potentially integrates all HR processes (recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, training and development, career path, payment, etc.) into one coordinated strategic approach. If properly implemented within training programs, along other HR processes, the competency framework can create the premises for strengthening capacity of public administration to deliver quality services, as formulated in National Reform Programme (Government of Romania, 2020).

## **2. Competency frameworks applied in Romania and EU**

Although competency frameworks are most often used to support the recruitment process, there are countries that have integrated their competency frameworks into other HRM functions, such as workforce planning, performance management and career advancement and training. In a recent research based on a sample of 25 countries which have a competency framework integrated in HRMS for public administration, 22/25 (88%) utilizes it also for training purposes and 16/25 (64%) for competency-based performance appraisal (World Bank, 2020). Specialists noticed important advantages of using competency frameworks approaches in trainings related to an increased significance of the training offers for the beneficiaries and to a broader acknowledgement of future personal development plans (Nunes, et al, 2007) (OECD, 2010).

The competency framework model designed for Romania is structured on general and functional competencies. The general competency framework includes three core competency clusters for executive level positions: personal effectiveness, interpersonal effectiveness, social accountability and additional two competency clusters for managerial positions: managerial abilities and leadership. Each competency cluster includes a set of competencies identified for each level, clear descriptors for the competency and behavioural indicators.

In the same time European Commission (EC) prepared specific competency frameworks for the management and implementation of the ERDF and Cohesion Fund and for public procurement professionals. Another competency framework is available to support EU citizens to achieve goals related the digital society. (EC, 2017, 2020, 2019). The Competency framework for the management and implementation of the ERDF and Cohesion Fund incorporates a competency matrix, a self-assessment tool, a training curriculum and an overview of existing training courses, education and learning options in this sector. Special attention is dedicated to presenting characteristic of different learning methods appropriate for building specific competencies required by the model: interview based learning programmes, on the job learning, coaching and performance support, moderated discussions involving experts, virtual classroom arrangements, group assignments, interactive gamification, web based learning and engaging presentations. (EC, 2017). The ProcurCompEU package for public procurement professionals includes: a competency matrix, a self-assessment tool, a generic training curriculum and a

study of professionalisation policies in public procurement in the Member States and selected third countries (EC, 2020). The Digital competence framework consists in 21 competences, clearly defined through learning outcomes, mapped across 8 different levels of progression, from beginner to highly specialized (EC, 2019). An useful guideline for supporting implementation of the Digital competence framework was also produced via initiative of professional communities; it maps experiences and presents challenges and solutions encountered in adoption it. (Carretero et al, 2018)

### **3. Problems identified in training for public administration**

The main challenges in training field for public sector identified are related to: insufficient financial resources from national budget for covering training needs, limited capacity of HR departments and managers to plan continuous training for civil servants and preponderant usage of traditional training methods, instead of coaching, mentorship, collaborative networks. The recommendations consider to accelerate implementation of The Strategy for public administration training 2016 –2020, particularly in respect of the measures regarding: designing and organising training programs for strategic groups with high impact for public administration, setting a system for quality assurance and strengthening National Institute of Administration's capacity due to the complexity of its mandate at national level (World Bank, 2019).

A report on central public administration highlights that here is no national database with training topics and courses, for the specific fields of the activities of civil servants, nor are there any unitary control mechanisms regarding the quality of the training programs for civil servants (World Bank, 2016). Other important quality concerns have been identified in a detailed research conducted by World Bank (2013) on a sample of 33 projects with significant training components, financed through Operational Programme Administrative Capacity Development 2017-2013 and 300 training beneficiaries. Although 82% of the respondents mentioned their high satisfaction with the trainings attended, 41% could not identify a specific activity that was enhanced through their participation and content learnt. The findings were validated through interviews and backed up the recommendation that training services need to incorporate more practical methods to build relevant competences.

Training for public administration system is the only education & training sector without proper regulations and professional guidelines in place. Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and National Qualification Agency implemented occupational standards for quality assurance of the content delivered for the accredited training programs. One occupational standard includes relevant information on competences, curriculum, methods of teaching, assessment criteria, hours distribution to each module of the training programme, level of experience for the selected trainers. Ministry of Education and Research applies curriculum and lesson's plans for pre-university education and syllabus for higher education.

This way there are created premisses for delivery of standardised education and training services, all over the country, as well as a consistent methodological support for teachers and trainers, from both public and private education and training providers.

#### **4. Requirements of ISO Standards and migration to online environments**

BS ISO 29993:2017 approved by British Standards Institution (BSI) provides a generic framework for quality learning services outside formal education and describes requirements for all major processes of a training provider: advertising, acquisition, needs analysis, design, services delivery, assessment, and evaluation (BSI, 2017). Any training provider could implement this standard as a useful resource in order to align its own management system with the modern requirements as presented within the document. The section dedicated to the need requirements analysis highlights the importance of assessing the current level of learners' competence by qualified staff in order to guide the training experience to acquirement of the desired level of competence within an optimal and realistic time frame. Two of the most important sections of the standard focuses on the design of the learning service and on the service delivery, approaching specific activities such as: development of the curriculum, settlement of learning outcomes, selection of teaching methods, resources and modes of learning (e.g. face-to-face, blended, online), design of the learning resources, identification of means of assessment and evaluation and drafting profile for facilitators. For every activity mentioned above it is recommended to elaborate specific requirements as: the proposed number of instruction hours, quantity and levels of authenticity and up to date of the learning content, adaptation of the content to learners' social and cultural needs and professional development plans for the facilitators and trainers involved.

Relevant guidance is supplied to the education and training providers in order to become capable of meeting learners' requirements by the BS ISO 21001:2018 (BSI, 2018). This standard is aligned with ISO 9001's requirements for management system standards and can be implemented alongside other standards and different management systems. The implementation of this standard will support organizations to make learning more inclusive, personalised and efficient and to demonstrate their commitment to effective educational management practices, stimulating continuous improvement, excellence and innovation.

The National reform programme mentions that problems such as: inadequate digital infrastructure, absence of online teaching materials and insufficient digital skills will highly challenge the education and training institutions, trainers, students, and beneficiaries. (Government of Romania, 2020). According to the National Strategy on the Digital Agenda for Romania 2020, the pedagogical and technical skills of teachers for the integration of ICT in the educational process is rather modest, although externally funded projects have been

implemented in this regard. The use of e-learning tools is constrained by the reduced flexibility in developing and using content using the software applications available to teachers and trainers, combined with an increased duration and complexity of the digital content development (Government of Romania, 2015).

The usage of e-learning platforms in professional training for public administration was extremely limited and the platforms developed within European funded projects were not widely utilised after the closure of implementation period, participants preferring and requiring unanimously just face-to-face trainings. In 2016, National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) in partnership with accredited training providers organised all the 503 training programs for 7551 participants in face-to-face format (NACS, 2017). Romania is ranked 28 out of 28 according to Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) Report on the digital performance of European Union countries, due to the difficulty of attracting and retaining specialists in developing efficient digital public services and the poor integration of IT systems in public administration. (European Commission, 2018). A strategic approach is required to facilitate the introduction of online training for public administration on a larger scale, due to lack of significant and relevant prior experience in the field.

Although there was an extremely limited preference for online training before the pandemic outbreak, according to an Ernst &Young's (EY) market research it was noticed a widespread use of mobile devices in Romania, 87% of respondents said they own a smartphone and 58% affirmed they have a tablet. (EY, 2015). Specialists estimated a significant increasing of video content traffic, stimulated by video streaming services and the inclusion of more and more video content in the media and advertising space. 37% of the respondents watch 1 up to 5 videos/week, 21% over 15 videos/week, 19% watch between 6 to 10 videos, which represent a real premise for accessing the video content uploaded on the e-learning platform. 66% of respondents say that it takes less than 30 minutes from the moment they wake up and look at the mobile device. For 29% of respondents, it seems that the morning routine begins with checking the mobile device before breakfast and sometimes even before washing their face. 52% of respondents say they look at their mobile devices from 11 up to 50 times a day, and 22% look at between 51 to over 200 times a day. The highest frequency of use of mobile devices - over 200 times in 24 hours - is in the 25-35 group age (41%). The next segment with the highest frequency of use is between 45-55 years old (26%) (EY, 2015). All these aspects may be exploited in an online learning platform by creating accessible and highly attractive digital content of training programs, supported by transmitting key messages, news and progress statuses (such as: Good morning, you have completed 18% of the course, the group average is already 45%, please find enclosed recommendations for fast track recovering delays!). In addition to the need for information, Romanian users access their home internet connection for communication, 75% of respondents communicating with family or friends via instant messaging, 61% of respondents watch online TV, videos or movies, and 52% of respondents state that they access it to play online games.

(National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications of Romania, 2015).

## **5. INA PPP Online pilot project experience and standards designed**

The National Institute of Administration (INA) is a public sector training provider, playing an important role in the process of implementing the strategic objectives of the Romanian Government for the development of a professional civil servants' body, with specific responsibilities in the fields of specialized and short-term training programs, research & innovation, knowledge sharing and establishing quality standards for services delivered. Recently re-established in 2017, INA organised, during 2018 – 2019, 285 face-to-face training programs with a total of 4235 participants. In 2020, due to the outbreak of the pandemic and social distances measures imposed all over the country, INA adapted its activities towards online training and undertook rapid measures such as: updating the existing Moodle platform, drafting standards and operational procedures for online training delivery, training the trainers for basic operations on the Moodle platform and design of online trainings. There were also training sessions for INA staff. These initiatives were followed by a pilot national wide project for facilitating the access of public administration staff to online training programs, in the pandemic context. (INA, 2021)

During the project entitled PPP online (Romanian abbreviation for “online training programs”), the 22 trainers previously certified, with the support of INA’s training managers, delivered 66 online training programs with 1252 participants, of which 1161 graduates received digital certificates, accompanied by descriptive supplements attesting the competences acquired. In the period between September 18<sup>th</sup> and December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1083 participants answered a feedback questionnaire designed for assessing the proposed model for learning and evaluation, as well as for identifying technical difficulties encountered during the program. The participants answers and the conclusions draw after project finalisation validated the structure for online training programs, including distribution of learning activities (self-learning, webinars, practical applications), integration within working schedule of participants, competencies assessment process, relationship with participants, based on quality standards and procedures designed (INA, 2021).

The lessons learnt and the tools developed within PPP online project can be applied also for the activities of other public and training providers, as well as in future INA’s programmes.

Most LMS (Learning Management Systems) such as Moodle allow the implementation of learning plans. A learning plan defines a set of competencies that can be assigned to a set of users (participants in online training programs). For example, in Moodle a competency defines a learner's level of understanding of a related subject. In a learning management system as Moodle, a competency framework is a structured collection of competencies. Competences can be

automatically assigned to learners as they go through certain stages of the learning process or solve certain tasks.

In the PPP online pilot project organized by INA, competencies were stored in the database for each training program in order to be printed on supplements to digital certificates but no competency frameworks were implemented on the online platform. The use of the competencies framework on the online platform is considered for further developments.

Another aspect that could not be implemented in the pilot project due to the short preparation time was the creation of digital content for specific public administration programs. The analysis driven by the Institute's specialists recommends the use of free software products (such as H5P plugin included in the Moodle platform) or the purchase of specialized software (such as Articulate) in order to transform existing content (PowerPoint slide or pdf files) into interactive digital content.

One of the procedures drafted during the project for the trainers' activity includes a detailed structure for an online training program covering 18 hours of training, accompanied by instructions for content preparation and delivery. Each online program aimed to contribute to the acquirement of 3 up to 4 general and/or specific competencies.

**Table 1. Recommendations for trainers' activity in PPP online project**

Activity	Specifications
Asynchronous: Self-learning (4 activities of 60 minutes each)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The course materials used to will be uploaded in the Study Resources folder (1).</li> <li>2. Identification of useful resources for the specific topic of PPP Online (example: professional guides, forms, studies and analyses, procedures, sections of projects, etc.).</li> <li>3. Balanced distribution of learning resources in the 4 folders called Study Resources.</li> <li>4. Sizing the uploaded resources so that the time required to complete the resources is at least 60 minutes for each of the 4 learning activities included in the program.</li> <li>5. Correlation of resources with the theme of the 4 webinars.</li> </ol>
Synchronous: Webinar (4 activities of 120 minutes each)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Making a short presentation of PPP online and the topic, briefly mentioning aspects related to participating in the 4 webinars, browsing the materials from the resource folders, solving the 4 practical applications and the grid test.</li> <li>2. Encourage the involvement of participants through various methods and tactics aimed to increase the level of interactivity during the webinar.</li> <li>3. Recommendation for participants, during webinars and on the forum, to download and to browse the self-learning resources.</li> <li>4. Informing the participants about the deadlines for solving the practical applications and uploading them on the platform.</li> <li>5. Instruct participants to fill in the Feedback Questionnaire, which will be available on the day of the knowledge assessment activity.</li> </ol>

Activity	Specifications
<p>Asynchronous: Practical applications and competency assessment (4 activities of 90 minutes each)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The design of 4 practical applications from the specific topic of PPP online, which will aim the facilitation of its understanding and application in the activity of the institutions and authorities of public administration in Romania. Each application will be associated with one of the competencies certified upon completion of the program.</li> <li>2. Correlation of the 4 practical applications with the theme of the 4 webinars to facilitate the training process.</li> <li>3. Sizing the requirements so that the time required to solve the practical applications is at least 90 minutes for each of the 4 activities included in the program.</li> <li>4. For each practical application the trainer will include the necessary information for the participants to be able to perform the activity in optimal conditions: context, clear task to be performed, detailed description of issues to be addressed, possible action limits, and evaluation and grading scale.</li> <li>5. Carrying out a debriefing through interventions in webinars or through posts on the PPP forum, regarding the analysis of solving practical applications, mentioning recommendations, key messages and lessons learned.</li> <li>6. The evaluation of the practical applications is marked by grades from 1 to 10. The evaluation of the grid test is done directly by the platform, awarding 1 point for each correct answer.</li> <li>7. The final grade is calculated automatically by the platform, as a weighted arithmetic mean, to 2 decimal places, as follows: 1 officio point + Application grade 1 * 10% + Application grade 2 * 10% + Application grade 3 * 10% + Application grade 4 * 10% + Grid test grade * 50%. Participants who do not meet the deadlines set by trainers for solving practical applications will receive a grade of 0. Participants who will not take the knowledge assessment grid test will receive a grade of 0.</li> </ol>
<p>Synchronous: Knowledge assessment (a set of 30 grid questions)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Design a set of 30 grid questions with 3 answers, with only one correct answer.</li> <li>2. The questions will be conceived from the information included in the course support and the materials presented and distributed to the participants.</li> <li>3. All questions, answers and correct answers will be saved as a .txt (plain text) file, which complies with the AIKEN format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the question, the answer and the correct answer are each written in a paragraph (type Enter only at the end);</li> <li>• the answers are preceded by a capital letter and a period (example: A., B., C. etc.);</li> <li>• the correct answer is presented in the form: "ANSWER: " (with a space after the colon) and then give the letter for the correct answer (example: ANSWER: A, ANSWER: B etc.);</li> <li>• all questions, options and answers are saved as a .txt (plain text) file.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>



Activity	Specifications
	4. Balanced distribution of the questions designed on the 3 or 4 competencies that will be certified after the completion of the program. 5. Upload the set of questions and configure the test structure on the existing model on the platform: start date and time, end date and time, duration and number of 10 randomly extracted questions.

*Source:* Authors' own research

## 5. Conclusions

Applying the competency framework in training programs for public administration in Romania requires proper and consistent interventions for designing training materials, including guidelines for training delivery, content digitization and for integrating the general and functional competences into specific training programs from training offers of public and private training providers. The training materials for the general competences should be designed in digital format, suitable to be utilized in blended training and online training, adapted for the 4 correspondent levels (elementary, operational, extended and strategic) and should include for each category: handbook, lesson plan, practical applications, assessment guide and other necessary educational resources. The training materials for the functional competencies should contain guidelines for applying each functional competency into learning programs, recommendations for adapting to specific target groups and situations, as well as description and presentations of concepts utilized.

In the absence of a unitary approach within training activities at national level, this competency framework would not be used effectively in the process of HRM, requiring professional guidance and extensively support activities to strengthen HR departments and training beneficiaries through appropriate programs. In the same time, without a proper operationalization of competency framework into the training programs organized at national level, consequences will conduct to utilization of different teaching methodologies and will lead to obtain different results for similar training programs, affecting quality levels and impact. The above-mentioned interventions are fully in line with the requirements of the 2 ISO Standards described in the article.

Advantages of online trainings are related to: reduced accommodation and transport costs associated with attendance at face-to-face programs, integration of trainings within the current schedule of participants, avoiding blockages and interruptions of activities, and extended availability of the digital content, accompanied by the benefit to access it even after the certification. The cost economies registered through online training might contribute to a significant increase of the number of the services' beneficiaries.

The high quality of video content designed by the marketing departments of organizations or by the entertaining industry and shared through social networks will compete for public attention with the learning materials uploaded on the online education and training platforms. This way, producing quality training materials, digitized and interactive, is the only appropriate approach for getting a significant level of attention and interest from the online training participants.

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**This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Operational Programme Human Capital 2014-2020, project number POCU/380/6/13/125015 "Development of entrepreneurial skills for doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers in the field of economic sciences".**