



Applying Principles-Based Standards

The Relationship between Principles-Based Standards and an Education and Training Programme

In brief ...

The Introduction of principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* marks a transition from more prescriptive input-focused descriptions of the threshold knowledge and skills required for entry to a register. Instead, the emphasis moves towards defining the outcome – the knowledge and/or skills a graduate must demonstrate. In essence, this approach moves from describing how proficiency should be demonstrated to articulating more clearly and directly what the proficiency is, and in so doing giving education providers the flexibility to determine *how* it should be evidenced.

Adopting a fully principles based approach will require education providers to engage with the *Standards of Proficiency* differently, treating them as the foundational framework upon which programmes are designed. This places greater importance on mapping the learning journey across the full programme, leading up to the point where a student is assessed and deemed to have achieved the required proficiency. The focus therefore shifts from teaching discrete elements of a standard to assessing whether the holistic standard has been achieved.

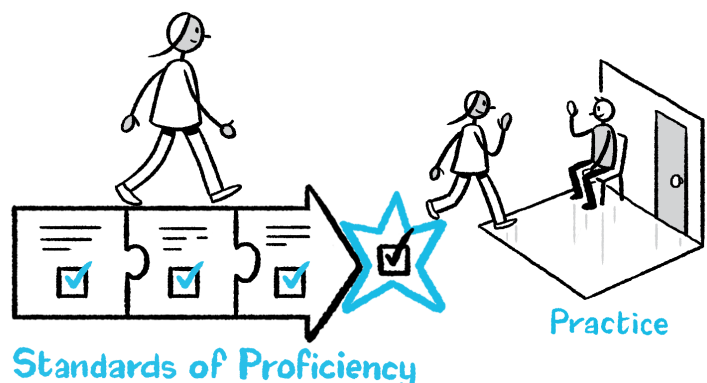
The wording and structure of the principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* have been intentionally crafted to support this approach. The language used is designed to enhance clarity, reinforce the intended outcome, and ensure that each standard remains straightforward to interpret and measure in terms of demonstrated proficiency.

Principles-Based Standards and the Holistic Development of the Professional

CORU is updating its *Standards of Proficiency* to take a more **principles based approach**. This change is being made to better reflect the intended outcome of setting threshold regulatory requirements. Instead of treating each standard as a separate requirement to be met one by one, the new approach looks at the *Standards* as a whole and focuses on what a safe, competent practitioner needs to be able to do from their first day in practice.

This shift supports a more **holistic understanding of professional competence**. It recognises that knowledge and skills do not develop in isolation - they build on one another throughout education and training. A principles based approach gives clearer guidance on the purpose behind the *Standards* and helps ensure that graduates are prepared not just to meet individual requirements, but to apply them confidently and ethically in a variety of situations.

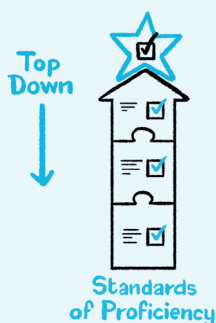
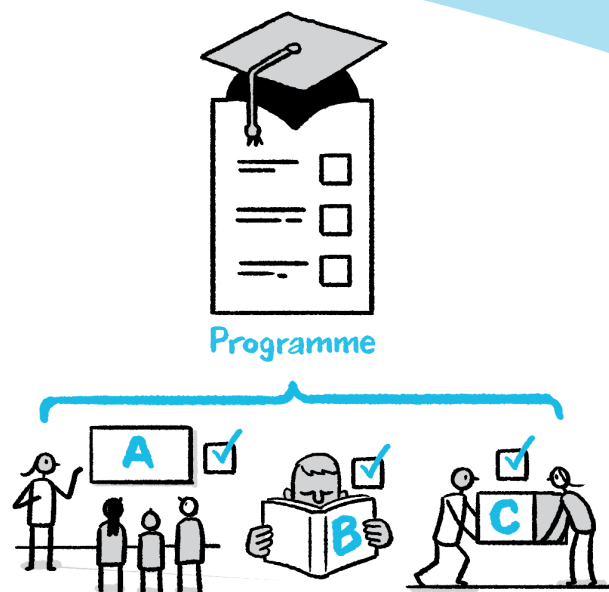
Moving to this approach also aligns with contemporary regulatory thinking, which encourages standards to be **clear, flexible, and focused on outcomes** rather than checklists. Instead of asking, “Has every item been ticked off?”, educators are encouraged to ask, “Does this graduate have what they need to practise safely and independently?” This helps ensure that the *Standards* remain meaningful, relevant, and better able to support safe, high quality care for the public.



Programme Level Oversight

Because the principles based approach focuses on how all the *Standards of Proficiency* work together, it is important that they are treated as the **key reference point** when designing and reviewing an education and training programme. They should not be considered as optional or secondary requirements; they should sit at the **centre** of the education and training programme.

To make sure students become competent professionals, an education provider should clearly plan how each standard will be achieved across the whole programme. This means looking at the standards at **programme level**, not just within individual modules. Decisions made about what goes into each module should support the overall delivery of the *Standards*. Instead of thinking that each module “delivers” specific standards on its own, it’s better to see the programme as a whole as being responsible for meeting the standards.



Guidance Note...

When using the *Standards of Proficiency* in the design and oversight of your education and training programme, come together as a team and work out the pathway for each of the standards through the curriculum.

Approaching the standards at a module level can risk introducing a piecemeal application of a standard where connections with other modules are not always clear and the point of achievement of a standard is not evident to the regulator.

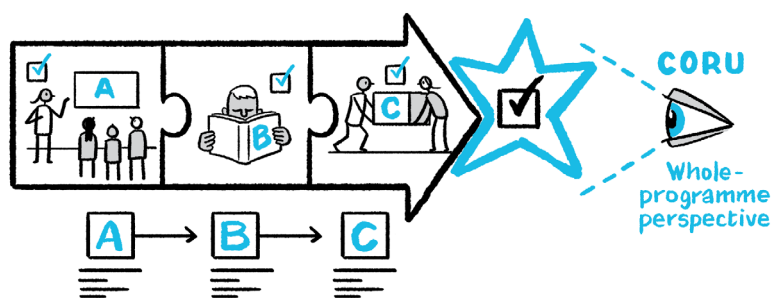
Centrality of Assessment

The regulator and the education provider have different but connected roles. Although both are involved in assuring the quality of an education and training programme, they bring different priorities and expertise.

The regulator’s main responsibility is to make sure that every person entering the register has met all the required standards. It does **not** prescribe how students must be taught. Decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, and programme structure rest with the education provider; each provider has flexibility to decide how best to support students’ learning.

What the regulator needs from an education provider is clear evidence showing **when** and **how** each student has demonstrated achievement of each standard. With a principles based approach, CORU on the **assessment of the standards**. CORU is not so much concerned with where in the programme a standard is taught. Rather, what matters is:

- ▶ how the provider assesses the standard, and
- ▶ how the provider decides a student has demonstrated achievement of the threshold level of proficiency.



The questions, therefore, CORU will ask of an education and training provider will be to identify the **point in the programme at which it has assessed that a standard has been achieved** and the **description of the assessment process by which it has reached this determination**.



How is this different than what happened previously?

Previously when mapping the assessment of standards across an education and training programme, emphasis has been placed on **where each standard appeared in individual modules**. This sometimes resulted in the same standard being listed as “assessed” many times across a programme. While this showed activity, it did not make it clear **when a student had actually achieved the standard**.

For example, a programme might state that a particular standard is assessed six times. From a regulatory point of view, this raises several important questions:

- ▶ Are all six assessments testing the full standard, or has the standard been broken into smaller parts across different assessments?
- ▶ Is the standard only achieved once the student has passed a certain combination of those six assessments?
- ▶ What happens if a student passes five of the six assessments but fails one—have they met the standard or not?
- ▶ What if the student fails the specific component linked to the standard but passes the overall module—how is the achievement of the standard recorded?

These situations make it difficult to determine the exact point at which a student has clearly demonstrated the standard.

A principles based approach helps simplify and clarify this process. Instead of focusing on **every module where a standard appears**, the focus shifts to identifying:

- ▶ the **single point** (or clearly defined point) in the programme where the **full standard** is assessed, and
- ▶ the **assessment pathway** that confirms the student has achieved the standard.

This provides a clearer regulatory picture. By emphasising the moment when a student demonstrates the entire standard – rather than tracking partial assessment – the process becomes more transparent, more consistent, and easier to quality assure.

Breaking Down Principles-Based Standards

Principles-based standards are deliberately written to aid interpretation to ensure measurability and accessibility. Each standard is built around two principal components:



Component	Purpose
Verb 	Each standard starts with a verb. The verb identifies two things that are important when understanding what is expected of a regulatory standard: ▶ if the standard is a knowledge-based standard or a skills-based standard; and ▶ the broad assessment framework that is needed to demonstrate achievement of the standard. For example, <i>Standard 1A requires that at entry to the register an entrant is able to: Act within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession.</i> ▶ this standard is one that must be actively demonstrated – it is a skills-based standard. The assessment, therefore, requires that the individual demonstrates their active engagement in the practice of the profession. It is important to note the choice of a skills-based verb. Inherent in this standard is the knowledge of legal and ethical boundaries without which it would not be possible to act within these professional boundaries. While this standard is to be assessed as a skills-based requirement, it captures within it the knowledge needed to be able to deliver on the skill.
Topic Area 	The second element that each standard is built around is the topic area of the standard. This is what the knowledge or the skill is that is being assessed. Continuing with the example of <i>Standard 1A: Act within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession.</i> ▶ The topic area is the legal and ethical boundaries of the profession. Taking a further example: <i>Standard 1G: Apply equality and diversity theory and legislation in order to provide inclusive service-user care.</i> ▶ The topic in this standard is the area of equality and diversity theory and legislation.

Most standards also have a **third built in element**. This is usually the part that explains the context or the conditions under which the standard must be demonstrated. In other words, it describes the circumstances, setting, or type of situation where the student needs to show they can meet the standard.

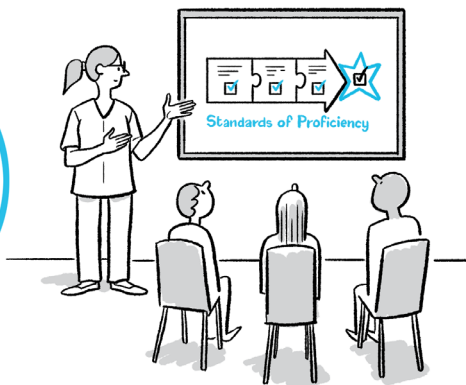
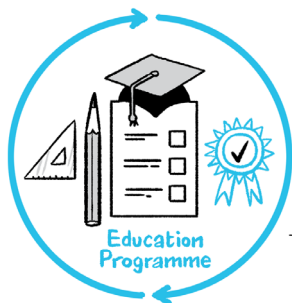


Purpose

Component	Purpose
Purpose 	Within the construction of the standard this purpose plays an important role in applying the standard for assessment purposes. The purpose narrows the application of the topic area and provides a direction for its assessment. Some standards do not require the articulation of this purpose because the requirement is self-explanatory and applies across all elements of practice. For instance: ▶ Standard 1A: Act within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession ▶ Standard 1D: Take responsibility for their independent decisions and actions ▶ Standard 3E: Maintain clear and accurate records Where the purpose is included in the articulation of the standard, it is identified by the conjoining phrase 'in order to' or the word 'to' which links the topic area to the purpose. Taking for example, <i>Standard 1G that requires entrants to the register to be able to: apply equality and diversity theory and legislation in order to provide inclusive service-user care.</i> ▶ Verb: <i>Apply</i> – this is a skills-based standard that will require assessment through active engagement in practice of the profession ▶ Topic Area: <i>equality and diversity theory and legislation</i> ▶ Purpose: <i>in order to provide inclusive service-user care</i> – this gives a direction to the application of the equality and diversity theory and legislation and sets the context for the assessment of its application. A further example is <i>Standard 2A: Use effective communications skills in their interactions with service users and others in order to build professional relationships.</i> This standard, therefore, is concerned with communication skills in professional practice for the purposes of building the necessary relationships to deliver effective health and social care services. Therefore, this standard is assessing communication skills in the context of professional relationship building with service users and others.

Guidance Note...

Before you begin working with the Standards of Proficiency in the process of designing, mapping and managing an education and training programme, work through each of the standards individually, breaking them down to understand what the outcome of each standard is and whether the assessed outcome is a knowledge-based or skills-based one.



Interpreting Principles-Based Standards of Proficiency

The key characteristics of principles-based standards mean that the standards themselves are written in broader terms and at a higher level than inputs-based or prescriptive regulatory standards. This has two key consequences:

► More flexibility for education providers

Providers have space to design the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment approaches in ways that best support their students, encourage innovation, and still meet the *Standards of Proficiency*.

► Less built in certainty

When standards are less detailed, they naturally give fewer specific instructions. This can sometimes lead providers to ask: “*What exactly is the regulator looking for?*”

Ultimately, the regulator is seeking assurances that students graduating from an education and training programme consistently achieve the outcomes set out in the *Standards of Proficiency*. Where principles-based standards differ from previous iterations of regulatory standards is that they do not express how the education provider should demonstrate this. Because of this, some education providers might feel things are less clear than before.

However, one of the key principles for CORU in adopting a principles-based approach is the recognition of and respect for the expertise and judgement of educators in determining how best to design, and deliver, an education and training programme.

The programme approval and monitoring process is a space where the programme team can explain to the regulator how their curriculum works and, most importantly, how their assessments ensure that every student who graduates has met the *Standards of Proficiency*.

With a principles-based approach, the regulator understands that the achievement of each standard is a complex process through *multiple modules, multiple learning outcomes and multiple assessment opportunities (both formative and summative)*, combined together through *diverse learning processes* and in *different learning settings*, both classroom and practice placement.

It is for this reason that the programme approval or monitoring process should be viewed as an opportunity for engagement whereby the education provider is able to explain how the *Standards* have been used in the programme design and management and how the programme ensures that all the outcomes articulated in the *Standards* are achieved.

In short, when the regulator reviews an education and training programme against the *Standards of Proficiency*, it focuses on two key questions:

- When is a student considered to have met a standard?
- How does the education provider know—and show—that the student has met that standard?

The programme approval and monitoring process gives the education provider the chance to explain to the regulator how they answer both of these questions.

Resources

- [Criteria and Standards of Proficiency - Coru](#)
- [About Approval and Monitoring - Coru](#)
- [Introduction to Principles-Based Standards Fact Sheet](#)

Got Questions? Get in touch

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