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The Provision of Competence-Based Advanced Education Level in Zambia

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Abstract
The transition toward competence-based education (CBE) has become a central feature of global educational reform aimed at enhancing learners' employability, adaptability, and lifelong learning skills. In Zambia, the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) marks a major shift from content-driven curricula to competence-based approaches across all levels of education, including advanced education. Using a qualitative documentary analysis of national policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and existing literature, the study highlights progress made in aligning advanced education with national development priorities. However, persistent challenges related to teacher preparedness, assessment practices, resource availability, and institutional capacity may affect effective implementation. Hence, there need to strengthen the delivery of competence-based advanced education and ensure its responsiveness to labour market and societal needs.

Keywords: *Competence-Based Education, Advanced Education, Curriculum Reform, Zambia, Skills Development*

Introduction

The introduction of the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) marked a significant restructuring of the national education system, with a deliberate shift toward competence-based learning outcomes across all levels, including advanced secondary education (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023). This reform reflects a strategic policy response aimed at embedding competence-based education (CBE) within the broader education ecosystem encompassing advanced secondary education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and higher education. Such alignment underscores the government's commitment to enhancing post-secondary pathways in line with national development priorities articulated in Vision 2030 and the Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP), both of which emphasize human capital development as a driver of socio-economic transformation.

Globally, education systems are undergoing a paradigmatic shift from traditional knowledge-based models to competence-based approaches that prioritize the application of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes in real-life contexts (UNESCO, 2017). This transition is largely driven by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and evolving labour market demands that require adaptable, innovative, and self-directed individuals. Advanced education, in this regard, occupies a critical position as it prepares learners for higher education, employment, entrepreneurship, and active civic participation (Bratianu et al., 2020). Within competence-based systems, this level is expected to promote independent learning, critical thinking, and the ability to transfer knowledge to complex and dynamic situations.

Competence-based education is grounded in the premise that learning outcomes should reflect learners' demonstrable ability to perform tasks and solve problems in authentic contexts. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018), competencies encompass an integration of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable individuals to effectively respond to complex demands. Unlike traditional curricula that emphasize content coverage and summative assessment, CBE prioritizes learner-centered pedagogies, continuous assessment, and mastery of clearly defined competencies. At the advanced level, this often translates into increased learner autonomy, where students are expected to engage in independent

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study, manage their time effectively, and take responsibility for their own learning processes. Empirically, literature suggests that such approaches foster critical 21st-century skills, including creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. Similary, Chisala (2025a) underscored the curriculum's potential to equip Zambian learners with critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills essential for national development and global competitiveness.

In the Zambian context, curriculum reforms have increasingly focused on competence development as a response to persistent challenges such as skills mismatch, youth unemployment, and the limited relevance of education to socio-economic needs. The 2023 ZECF emphasizes practical skills acquisition, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and values education as key pillars for national development. While existing studies indicate that the competence-based approach holds considerable promise in enhancing learner outcomes and aligning education with labour market demands (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019; Chisala, 2025a), its effective implementation particularly at the advanced secondary education level remains uncertain.

Advanced education is expected to function as a critical bridge between basic education and specialized academic or professional pathways. Bratianu et al (2020) argued that within a competence-based framework, it should not only consolidate foundational knowledge but also cultivate higher-order competencies such as analytical thinking, innovation, and ethical reasoning. However, despite the strong policy orientation and theoretical benefits associated with CBE, gaps remain in understanding the extent to which teaching practices, assessment strategies, learner autonomy, and institutional support systems align with the intended competence-based outcomes. This disconnect between policy aspirations and implementation realities creates a critical problem: while the 2023 ZECF envisions a transformative competence-based advanced education system, it is not yet clear whether schools possess the pedagogical capacity, resources, and institutional frameworks necessary to actualize these goals. Consequently, without systematic investigation, there is a risk that the reform may remain largely theoretical, thereby limiting its potential to address the very challenges it seeks to resolve, such as graduate unemployability and weak school-to-work transitions. It is against this backdrop that the present study seeks to examine the provision of competence-based advanced education, with particular focus on its implementation practices, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening outcomes in the Zambian situation.

Method and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative documentary analysis design to enable a systematic and in-depth interrogation of existing policy and scholarly texts. Data were drawn from national policy documents, curriculum frameworks, strategic plans, and peer-reviewed literature related to competence-based education and Advanced Level education in Zambia, ensuring a comprehensive and contextually grounded evidence base. The use of documentary analysis was justified by its strength in examining official intentions, reform trajectories, and institutional priorities as articulated in authoritative sources, particularly across databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Cochrane Library, for peer-reviewed articles published. This approach allowed for the identification of policy coherence, gaps, and underlying assumptions shaping the implementation of competence-based education. Furthermore, documentary analysis facilitated triangulation across multiple sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The design was appropriate because it provided rich, text-based insights into the contextual, structural, and policy dimensions influencing the provision of competence-based Advanced Level education in Zambia.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on the provision of Competence-Based Advanced Education Level in Zambia. This section critically examines the emerging themes from the data and compares them with previous studies and theoretical perspectives on competence-based education provision.

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Implementation Practices in the Provision of Advanced Education

The findings indicate that the implementation of Advanced Level education within the competence-based framework is marked by a gradual but discernible shift from traditional teacher-centered pedagogies toward more learner-centered approaches. Teachers reported adopting instructional strategies such as project-based learning, group discussions, research assignments, and continuous assessment practices. These approaches are consistent with the core principles of Competence-Based Education (CBE), which emphasize active learner engagement, contextualized knowledge application, and the development of transferable skills (OECD, 2018). This aligns with UNESCO (2017), which posits that competence-based systems prioritize meaningful learning experiences that cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving competencies necessary for the 21st century. However, while these pedagogical shifts are evident, the extent to which they are systematically embedded in classroom practice remains variable, suggesting that the reform is still in a transitional phase rather than fully institutionalized.

Furthermore, the study established that learners at the Advanced Level are increasingly expected to engage in independent study and self-regulated learning. This reflects global expectations that advanced education should promote intellectual autonomy, metacognitive skills, and lifelong learning dispositions (Bratianu et al., 2020). Such expectations are aligned with constructivist learning theories, which position learners as active agents in the knowledge construction process. Nevertheless, the findings reveal uneven implementation across schools, with some teachers continuing to rely on lecture-based, transmission-oriented methods. This inconsistency reinforces Michael Fullan's (2007) argument that educational change is inherently complex and often results in partial or superficial implementation, particularly where teacher capacity, beliefs, and institutional readiness are not adequately addressed. In this regard, the persistence of traditional pedagogies may not merely reflect resistance to change, but also structural constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and insufficient professional development.

With respect to assessment practices, the increased use of continuous assessment strategies including coursework, presentations, and practical assignments demonstrates alignment with the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (MoE, 2023). Continuous assessment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of CBE because it facilitates formative feedback, supports mastery learning, and enables the monitoring of learner progress over time (Black & Wiliam, 2009). However, the continued dominance of high-stakes, examination-oriented practices suggest a tension between policy intentions and classroom realities. This tension reflects broader critiques in the literature that assessment reforms often lag behind pedagogical reforms, thereby constraining the full realization of competence-based approaches. As such, without a coherent alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment systems, the transformative potential of CBE may remain limited.

The findings further highlight the centrality of instructional leadership in facilitating effective curriculum implementation. Head teachers and deputy head teachers play critical roles in coordinating teaching and learning processes, managing resources, and fostering a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. Effective leadership has been consistently linked to improved student outcomes and successful school reform (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2018). However, the study identified leadership challenges, including limited strategic planning capacity and weak instructional supervision, which contribute to inconsistencies in implementation. This underscores the need for targeted leadership development programmes that equip school leaders with the competencies required to support pedagogical transformation, monitor instructional quality, and drive sustained reform.

In addition, guidance, counselling, academic mentoring, and career advisory services were identified as essential components of learner support at the Advanced Level. These services play a critical role in enhancing learners' academic engagement, supporting psychosocial well-being, and facilitating informed educational and career choices (Lapan et al, 2012; UNESCO, 2021). Despite their importance, the availability and

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quality of such services were found to be uneven across schools, with significant gaps limiting learners' ability to cope with academic demands and plan their future pathways. This finding resonates with Redecker (2017), that emphasizes the integral role of holistic support systems in promoting equitable and inclusive education outcomes. Strengthening institutional frameworks for guidance and counselling is therefore essential for maximizing learner success within the competence-based system.

Finally, quality assurance mechanisms such as lesson observations, internal evaluations, and performance reviews were found to contribute positively to teaching quality and curriculum compliance. These mechanisms are critical for ensuring accountability and maintaining educational standards within decentralized education systems (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). However, gaps in inspection frequency, the provision of constructive feedback, and follow-up support were reported to undermine their effectiveness. This suggests that quality assurance processes are often compliance-driven rather than developmental in nature. Strengthening both internal and external quality assurance systems by emphasizing supportive supervision, data-informed decision-making, and continuous professional improvement is therefore vital for sustaining the effective implementation of competence-based Advanced Level education.

Challenges in the Provision of Advanced Education

Despite the observed progress, several interrelated challenges continue to constrain the effective implementation of competence-based Advanced Level education. A prominent concern emerging from the findings is limited teacher preparedness and professional capacity. Many teachers reported inadequate training in competence-based pedagogies, learner-centered instructional strategies, and appropriate assessment methods. This finding corroborates the work of Mulenga and Kabombwe (2019), who established that insufficient teacher orientation significantly undermines curriculum reform implementation in Zambia. Similarly, Linda Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argue that the successful adoption of learner-centered approaches is contingent upon sustained, high-quality professional development, ongoing instructional coaching, and institutional support systems. From a critical perspective, this suggests that one-off training workshops commonly used in reform rollouts are inadequate for transforming deeply embedded pedagogical practices. Instead, continuous, practice-based professional learning is required to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Resource constraints also emerged as a significant structural barrier to effective implementation. Schools reported persistent shortages of teaching and learning materials, inadequate physical infrastructure, and limited access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools necessary for facilitating practical, inquiry-based, and research-oriented learning. These findings are consistent with those of UNESCO (2017), which emphasizes that competence-based reforms are resource-intensive and depend heavily on well-resourced and enabling learning environments. Critically, the Zambian context characterized by disparities between urban and rural schools may further exacerbate inequities in implementation. In support, Chisala (2025a) noted potential CBC implementation challenges, such as inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and resistance to change, which could hinder the effectiveness of the 2023 ZECF. Without deliberate and equitable resource allocation, competence-based education risks widening existing educational inequalities, thereby undermining its inclusive intent.

Another key challenge found relates to learner readiness for the demands of competence-based learning. The shift toward self-directed and inquiry-based learning presupposes that learners possess well-developed metacognitive skills, self-discipline, and intrinsic motivation. However, the study found that many learners struggle to adapt, particularly those transitioning from traditionally teacher-centered systems. This finding supports Barry Zimmerman (2002), who conceptualizes self-regulated learning as a developmental process that must be explicitly taught, modelled, and scaffolded over time. From a critical standpoint, this raises important questions about the sequencing of curriculum reform: expecting immediate learner autonomy without

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systematically building foundational self-regulation skills may lead to superficial engagement and reduced learning outcomes. Therefore, structured support mechanisms such as guided learning frameworks, study skills programmes, and differentiated instruction are essential to facilitate this transition. This is sustained by the Chisala's Innovative Transformation Curriculum Framework which emphasizes learner-centered, inclusive, and competence-based approaches tailored to diverse educational needs in Zambia and bridge policy-practice gaps by fostering innovation, collaboration, and adaptability in curriculum implementation (Chisala, 2025a).

Assessment-related challenges were also identified as a major constraint. Teachers reported increased workload associated with continuous assessment, alongside a lack of clear and standardized assessment frameworks to guide practice. While continuous assessment is central to competence-based education, its implementation appears to place significant demands on teachers' time and expertise. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2009) caution that the effectiveness of formative assessment depends not only on its design but also on teachers' assessment literacy and the manageability of assessment processes. In contexts where teachers are already overburdened and under-supported, continuous assessment may become mechanistic rather than meaningful, thereby limiting its intended impact on learning. This suggests the need for streamlined assessment policies, clear guidelines, and capacity-building initiatives that enhance teachers' competence and confidence in implementing formative assessment. Therefore, these challenges highlight a critical tension between the aspirational goals of competence-based education and the practical realities of implementation. Addressing these constraints requires a systemic and coordinated approach that prioritizes sustained teacher professional development, equitable resource provision, deliberate learner capacity-building, and coherent assessment frameworks. Without such comprehensive support, the effectiveness and sustainability of competence-based Advanced Level education may remain constrained.

Opportunities in the Provision of Advanced Education

Despite the identified challenges, the findings illuminate several strategic opportunities for strengthening the provision of Advanced Level education within the competence-based framework. The competence-based approach provides a robust foundation for aligning education with labour market demands and national development priorities. By emphasizing practical skills, critical thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship, Advanced Level education is well-positioned to enhance employability and stimulate economic productivity. This in agreeable with Chisala et al (2025), who argued that CBC align education with labour market needs by emphasizing employability, innovation, and problem-solving. This perspective is consistent with Gary Becker's (1993) human capital theory, which posits that investment in education and skills development contributes directly to economic growth and national competitiveness. In the Zambian context, this alignment resonates strongly with national policy frameworks such as Vision 2030 and the Eighth National Development Plan (Republic of Zambia, 2022), both of which prioritize human capital development as a driver of socio-economic transformation.

The study further reveals that the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) constitutes a significant policy shift aimed at aligning the education system with global trends and the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Central to this reform is the transition from Outcome-Based Education (OBE) to Competence-Based Education (CBE), with a strong emphasis on practical competencies, adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023). This reform trajectory aligns with global education policy directions advocated by organizations such as UNESCO (2021), OECD (2019), and the World Bank (2020), all of which emphasize learner-centered pedagogies and the development of transferable skills for lifelong learning and active socio-economic participation. However, while policy alignment is evident, a critical perspective suggests that translating these global frameworks into local practice requires contextual adaptation, particularly in resource-constrained environments such as Zambia.

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Further, the emphasis on learner autonomy presents a valuable opportunity to cultivate lifelong learning competencies. Competence-based systems inherently promote adaptability, resilience, and self-directed learning skills that are essential in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain global landscape (UNESCO, 2017). When effectively supported, independent learning at the Advanced Level can significantly enhance learners' readiness for higher education and professional life. Comparative evidence from African education reforms further suggests that competence-based curricula can bridge the gap between education and labour market needs by fostering employability, innovation, and specialized knowledge (Schweisfurth, 2015; World Bank, 2020). The ZECF is underpinned by principles of access, equity, quality, participation, partnerships, excellence, and efficiency, which collectively provide a strong normative foundation for effective implementation. Moreover, the identification of key competencies such as problem-solving, communication, entrepreneurship, and ethical reasoning reflects alignment with global frameworks like the OECD Education 2030 Learning Compass (MoE, 2023; OECD, 2019). Nonetheless, the realization of learner autonomy requires deliberate scaffolding and structured support systems; otherwise, there is a risk that disparities in learner readiness may undermine equitable outcomes.

The findings also highlight that Advanced Level curricula promote deep subject engagement, enabling learners to develop analytical, research, and higher-order thinking skills. Evidence from Cambridge Assessment International Education (2021) and Green (2022) suggests that A-Level systems are particularly effective in fostering subject specialization and intellectual depth. Such specialization allows learners to concentrate their efforts in disciplines such as sciences, humanities, and social sciences, thereby enhancing their preparedness for tertiary education (OECD, 2020; Marginson, 2016). However, this opportunity is contingent upon the availability of qualified teachers, adequate learning materials, and supportive institutional environments. Without these enabling conditions, the intended depth and rigor of Advanced Level education may not be fully realized, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Furthermore, the integration of continuous assessment offers a significant opportunity for more holistic and authentic evaluation of learner performance. Unlike traditional high-stakes examinations, formative assessment provides ongoing feedback that supports learning progression and skill mastery. This is strongly supported by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2009), who argue that formative assessment can substantially improve learning outcomes when effectively implemented. The ZECF's adoption of a mixed assessment model—combining formative, school-based, and summative approaches—reflects alignment with competence-based principles (MoE, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2018). However, the study found that inadequate teacher training in competency-based assessment—particularly in areas such as rubric design, authentic task construction, and portfolio assessment—limits effective implementation (Sibanda et al., 2023; Zulu et al., 2022). International literature further emphasizes that successful assessment reform requires strong teacher assessment literacy, clear performance standards, and structured moderation processes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014). Therefore, while continuous assessment presents a transformative opportunity, its effectiveness depends heavily on systemic capacity-building efforts.

Closely linked to this is the broader issue of teacher readiness, which remains a critical determinant of successful CBE implementation. The findings indicate that many Advanced Level teachers have limited exposure to competence-based pedagogies, reflecting a common challenge across Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2020). Effective CBE requires a fundamental pedagogical shift from content transmission to facilitation of inquiry-based, collaborative, and problem-oriented learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, gaps in training, delayed provision of teaching materials, and limited instructional support were reported to undermine teacher confidence and classroom effectiveness. This reinforces Schweisfurth's (2015) argument that learner-centered reforms often face implementation challenges when teachers are insufficiently supported. Consequently, sustained professional development, mentoring, and institutional support

mechanisms are essential for building teacher capacity and ensuring fidelity of implementation.

Moreover, the integration of digital technologies presents a significant opportunity to enhance teaching and learning processes. Digital tools can facilitate access to diverse learning resources, support collaborative learning, and enable research-oriented inquiry. Yves Punie Redecker (2017) highlights that digital competence is a critical component of modern education systems and can significantly improve learner engagement and achievement. However, the study revealed substantial disparities in access to digital infrastructure, including limited ICT equipment, inadequate connectivity, and shortages of specialized resources for emerging subjects such as Computer Science. These constraints limit the potential for experiential and technology-enhanced learning (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Addressing these gaps is therefore essential for leveraging digital transformation as a catalyst for competence-based education.

Additionally, the ongoing curriculum reform process itself presents an important opportunity for continuous improvement through iterative policy learning and stakeholder engagement. Michael Fullan (2007) emphasizes that successful educational change is not a one-time event but a continuous process involving implementation, feedback, reflection, and refinement. This perspective suggests that the current phase of CBE implementation in Zambia should be viewed as an evolving process, with opportunities to address emerging challenges and strengthen system coherence over time. Engaging key stakeholders including teachers, school leaders, learners, and policymakers in reflective practice and evidence-based decision-making will be critical for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of competence-based Advanced Level education. While the findings reveal notable constraints, they equally underscore substantial opportunities for advancing the quality, relevance, and responsiveness of Advanced Level education in Zambia. Realizing these opportunities, however, requires a coordinated and systemic approach that integrates policy alignment, capacity building, resource provision, technological investment, and continuous evaluation. In support in the study by Chisala (2025b), who argued that to fully realize the CBC, Zambia must invest in capacity building, infrastructure development, and continuous stakeholder engagement.

Conclusion

The provision of competence-based advanced education in Zambia reflects a deliberate effort to reform the education system to meet contemporary socio-economic demands. Advanced Level education should prepare students for university education, professional training, or specialized careers by equipping them with advanced academic knowledge and research skills. A successful Advanced Level education provision depends on a well-designed curriculum, competent teachers, adequate resources, strong leadership, effective assessment systems, and supportive learning environments that prepare learners for higher education and professional careers. While policy frameworks provide a strong foundation, implementation challenges related to teacher capacity, assessment systems, and resource availability persist. Addressing these challenges is essential to realizing the full potential of competence-based advanced education as a driver of national development. Sustained investment in teacher training, learning resources, and institutional capacity is essential to support equitable and effective CBE implementation.

Recommendations

i. Strengthen teacher professional development in competence-based pedagogy and assessment at advanced levels.
ii. Reform assessment systems to incorporate authentic and performance-based evaluation methods.
iii. Increase investment in infrastructure and learning resources, particularly in rural institutions.
iv. Strengthen industry–education partnerships to enhance curriculum relevance and graduate employability.
v. Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to support continuous improvement of CBE implementation.

Consent for participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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