The Competence Paradigm of the State Examination in Professional Media Education: Problems and Experience

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Abstract

The article analyses and summarises the experience of conducting the state final assessment of undergraduate students in journalism with regard to the competence-based examination model. The relevance of the study is related to the need to achieve systemic unity between the competence-based concept of university training of journalists and its final stage that is the assessment of the quality of the received education. Sinceprofessional competence has an integral activity nature, the knowledge paradigm of the final assessment used for many years does not meet modern requirements. The article describes the reasons and primary goals that determined the transition to a new concept of the state examination at the Southern Federal University in 2021. The article offers the rationale for choosing a case method as the main means of assessing the degree of professional competencies among graduates, including examples of developed case tasks. To assess the effectiveness of the applied innovative methods in 2021-2023 the authors surveyed 4th-year undergraduate students in journalism and members of the state examination boards. An empirical study enabled to determine the level of satisfaction of all participants in the educational process with the new model of the final exam to identify the degree of its effectiveness, as well as potential opportunities and ways to improve. The article presents the dynamics of the survey results and their interpretation. The authors conclude that a practice-based approach should be used not only in the process of training journalists but also in organising the final examination. Implementing interdisciplinary case-based tasks allows graduates to demonstrate the degree of competency formation provided by the educational program, which contributes to their confident entry into the modern media.

Keywords: journalism training, competence-based approach, final exam, case study, questioning, quality assessment, professional reflection, interactivity.

1.Introduction

The beginning of the XXI century has marked a century of digitalisation, the rapid development of information, communication, and mobile technologies involved in the production and consumption of media products (Bui, Moran, 2020). The radical change in the media environment has challenged media education in general and journalism education in particular to respond to the "urgent need" of digital transformation (Galik, 2019; Galik, 2020; Kirchhoff, 2022). This required media education specialists to revise the content and form of professional training in journalism at all stages starting from entrance examinations to final assessment. The final assessment of students pursuing a degree in journalism at all Russian universities was conducted for many years according to a single, now classic scheme that included two phases: a state

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examination and a defence of a thesis. In the current Federal Standard of the Russian Federation, the state examination has acquired an optional status. Thereby the Russian universities that train personnel for the media started to have two options to hold the graduation procedure, i.e., defence of a thesis alone or a state examination along with a defence of a thesis.

In the spring of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of the necessity and possibility of holding a final examination became critical. Due to the tense epidemiological situation, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation authorised universities not to conduct state examinations if the approved standard allowed it. In addition to this, if the decision to have an exam was made, it was recommended to organise it only online. At the Institute of Philology, Journalism and Cross-cultural Communication of Southern Federal University, state examinations in almost all areas of training were cancelled. The reasons for this decision were insufficient technical equipment capability and participants' (both students' and state examination board members') low-quality Internet connection during the assessment procedure. Other universities faced the same difficulties (Grabelnikov et al, 2020). In addition, distance learning was not yet widespread in the educational process and did not earn the complete trust of teachers and other involved parties. Their matter of concern was the lack of a guaranteed opportunity to identify academic dishonesty, which could ultimately lead to the devaluation of the test results.

In 2021, the academic staff of journalism departments at SFEDU concluded that it was necessary to return to having final exams for students specialising in journalism, but radically change its concept. It was urgent to solve a systemic problem that was the lack of direct correlation between a traditional academic exam, comprising, on the one hand, an extensive list of questions on the theory and history of journalism and modern media communications, and, on the other hand, the declared competency-based learning paradigm and practical application of undergraduate educational programs. It means that a practice-based approach was not used at the final stage, although experts recognised that 'it is not only necessary for training media specialists, but' it is the only possible one' (Oleshko, 2018: 311).

As a result of discussions, a collective decision was made to develop a new model of the state examination. The model was expected to allow the evaluation of professional culture and the examination of both the level of knowledge acquired by students and their ability to apply this knowledge when solving problems. Finally, the new model was expected to help assess the degree to which graduates developed the basic skills and abilities required for successful work in the modern media.

Considerable accumulated experience in implementing the concept of a competency-based final examination for students obtaining a bachelor's degree in journalism at SFEDU demanded comprehension and evaluation from the perspective of current scientific and methodological trends.

2. Materials and methods

To achieve the aim the authors used surveys as the main research method. The surveys were undertaken at SFEDU in 2021, 2022 and 2023. The participants were the graduates and members of the state examination board participating in the final assessment of students specialising in journalism. The survey was conducted using the Google Forms service in 2021 and 2022. In 2023, handout questionnaires were used. The surveys took place in June, a few days after the final exam, and lasted for two weeks. The graduates who planned to complete their studies in the autumn (usually from 1 to 5 people) did not participate in the survey.

The number of questions in a survey was reduced to a minimum. There were only 5 questions in 2021 and 2022, and there were 7 questions in 2023. During the first two years, the texts of the questionnaire were completely identical and had a sufficiently traditional structure:

- a short message to potential respondents, which explains the purposes and principles of the survey;
- 3 questions regarding the procedure and content of the state exam;
- 1 question dedicated to preparing for the exam;
- 1 question that allowed to identify respondents (students/members of the state board);
- a proposal to express their suggestions for further improvement of the form and content of the final examination in the field of journalism at the undergraduate level.

This year, the basic block was supplemented with two questions: the first one was clarifying and related to the difficulties that arose during the preparation or conduct of the exam; the second

one was aimed at a general conclusion about the degree of compliance of the competency-based state examination model with the specifics of the educational programme.

Since the participants in the assessment procedure were divided into two groups, i.e. examiners and examinees, if a significant difference was identified in the answers of students and members of the state examination board, the analysis of the survey results was conducted discretely. Integrated indicators were also considered.

The sample size annually amounted to more than 80 % of the general population and ensured representativeness for both groups of participants. Thus, the obtained empirical material enabled us to conduct a correct comparison of results and track the dynamics of all participants' attitudes towards the innovative model of final assessment over three years.

3. Discussion

The new information and communication environment has again regenerated discussions on new qualification requirements for the work of a journalist and the need for changes in training programmes for journalists around the world (Shesterkina, Ismailov, 2019; Solkin, 2020; Vartanova, 2021; Zamkov et al., 2020).

The modern paradigm of higher education was formulated in the logic of a competency-based approach. According to scientists, this approach strengthens the practice-based orientation of education, and its professional orientation, which allows us to consider a future specialist from the perspective that is relevant to the modern understanding of the profession and makes learning results significant 'beyond education' (Matukhin, Nizkodubov, 2013: 88). In addition, as Faith Valencia-Forrester notes, 'Practice-based learning is widely accepted as a crucial aspect of educating and training future journalists around the world. Shrinking newsrooms and changing media landscapes shift responsibility onto journalism programmers for delivering practical experiences' (Valencia-Forrester, 2020: 697).

In the light of the multi-layered structure of the competence that is knowledge-related, activity-related, and contains personal and motivational components and professional experience, it becomes possible to reorient the knowledge system towards a specific result and ensure students' active cognitive activity for independent and qualified solving professional problems (Freebody et al., 2008; Zeer, 2004).

Defining competence as an assessment category at the final stage of education, which consists of various independent components, such as cognitive, functional, personal, behavioural, and value-ethical ones, researchers state that these components correlate with professional knowledge, skills, values, and personal abilities required for effective journalistic work (Kirchhoff, 2022).

At the same time, the competency-based model of education is identified not as a set of instrumental skills and abilities that allow future graduates to be in demand in the competitive conditions of the media environment, but rather as a set of necessary competencies for the development of creative thinking, the analytical potential of the individual and the professional culture of a journalist (Drok, 2019; Nigmatulina, 2019). Thus, that comprises all those aspects which are supposed to stay stable and unchanged in journalism regardless of technological changes, since it is the foundations of journalism that give technology a conscious meaning and specific purpose (Zelizer , 2019).

The research efforts (Blömeke et al., 2013; Korkonosenko et al., 2018; Zylka, Müller, 2011) were aimed at understanding the theoretical foundations and methodological principles of the competency-based education paradigm given the unique characteristics of different regions and reorienting educational programs to train students following the real needs of the industry and professional standards, adherence to which 'guarantees protection against professional erosion' (Tulupov, 2014: 218). However, in the XXI century, when traditional types of jobs in journalism are disappearing without a trace, the employment of graduate journalists is under threat (Gillmor, 2016), information and news are no longer the monopolies of professional journalists, and the effectiveness of the media is declining, it is necessary to respond quickly to deep structural changes in the media environment (Mensing, 2010),consider the needs of the global labour market, not specific media companies, and correlate the concepts of education with existing realities.

Nowadays, according to the current educational standard of the Russian Federation, educational organisations have received a certain degree of independence to create and develop their educational standards, develop professional competencies and indicators of achieving them, which enabled the institutions involved to consider the resource potential of the organisation and

the demands of the media industry (Novikova et al., 2021). At the same time, the procedure for assessing the results of competence development is not regulated by the state standard. The freedom was granted to universities in choosing forms, methods, and means of assessment in the absence of unambiguous measuring instruments to evaluate the manifestation of competence. This leads to the fact that the results of the final assessment 'are characterized by high subjectivity (i.e., low reliability), low suitability for assessing the level of competence formation (low validity) and complete incomparability' (Malygin, Chelyshkova, 2023: 7).

Interactive methods allow the identification of a formed competence in cases when a student successfully demonstrates 'the personal experience acquired during the learning process' and proves oneself in action (Chandra, Baikina, 2018: 14). Interactive technologies as elements of practice-based training are widely used in the training of future media specialists, as, according to A. Fedorov, they imply the productive forms of acquiring knowledge – problematic, heuristic, game-based teaching methods,'which develop students' individuality, independent thinking and stimulate their abilities through direct involvement in creative activity' (Fedorov, 2015). They motivate students to seek self-development, activate their professional self-reflection, allow to form individual educational trajectories of creative growth, and increase the efficiency of the educational process as a whole, which is noted by many researchers (Corroy et al., 2017; Frolova et al., 2018).

At the same time, the possibilities of using these technologies to organize state assessments of graduates receiving a degree in journalism are practically not discussed in the professional community.

Russian and foreign researchers include case assignments as interactive assessment tools, i.e. the methods that facilitate the development of students' critical self-reflection and allow assessment of the degree of development of the competence being determined (Bordovskaya et al., 2018). Due to its significant diagnostic capabilities, the case method gradually began to spread to the assessment procedure of graduates, in pedagogical universities in particular (Chandra, 2016; Gureeva, 2018). In our opinion, it is time for changes in the system of final diagnostics of the educational results of future journalists when the testing of acquired knowledge is transferred to new contexts through individual and universal case tasks that are similar to modern media practice.

4. Results

At the stage of organising the study, we made a hypothesis that a fundamentally new model of state assessment procedure arouses significant interest among both students and teachers. This assumption was fully confirmed. In 2021, 39 students, which amounted to 90.7 % of the total number of students studying in the 4th year of a bachelor's degree course in journalism, and 5 members of the state examination board (100 %) participated in the survey. We would like to emphasise that such a high level of respondent activity was obtained in full compliance with the principle of voluntary participation in the survey. The factor of novelty also contributed to the increase in interest in the survey. Even though SFEDU students studying journalism regularly participated in the assessment of various components of the educational process, it was the first time they had the opportunity to express their attitude to the content and form of the final state examination.

In 2022, 84.8 % of students and 80 % of members of a state examination board completed the online questionnaire. A slight decrease in the intensity of the responses was interpreted by the researchers as a consequence of fatigue, experienced after the online communication format in which all participants were forced to participate, and, accordingly, the weakening of interpersonal and corporate ties within the team.

The latest survey, conducted in June 2023, was the most effective in terms of the graduates' level of activity: 46 students (95.7 %) and 10 members of the state examination board (100 %) expressed their viewpoints. In our opinion, this is explained primarily by the fact that a handout type of questionnaire was used. Teachers' requests to participate in the study evoke a much greater response among students when the survey is conducted in real life rather than in virtual communication conditions. At the final stage of training, tomorrow's graduates have a stronger sense of themselves as part of the university, and an increased readiness to act in the interests of the entire alma mater team, both teachers and current and prospective students.

The idea of making the assessment system similar to the conditions of future professional activity to examine the quality of the received education was implemented with the help of interdisciplinary case assignments. Mastering training courses generally implies the use of

collective case assignments, which, among other things, form the competencies related to teamwork, meanwhile, the final exam provides for individual solving of the situational problems.

In 2021 and 2022, under the conditions of distance assessment, the students performed one case task, which was the same for everyone. The examinee was offered the following situation: *to imagine that the members of the examination board are potential employers, such as the representatives of the media editorial offices, media corporations, news agencies, etc. They invited the graduate to an interview to discuss his or her possible employment. The purpose of the examinee is to characterise their professional experience, demonstratecreativity as well as a high level of motivation for journalistic activity, and convince employers of their interest in cooperation.*

This situation is similar to the real circumstances in which the graduate would find himself or herself soon, entering the labour market. It is also relevant because most of the state examination board's members are the heads of large Rostov mass media companies, which determine the personnel policy of editorial offices.

To achieve the goal, the student was asked to complete the following case task within a limited time: *to show the main professional competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired during specific types of professional activity (a correspondent, a reporter, a TV presenter, a radio presenter, a photojournalist, a universal journalist, etc.) and possible thematic and/or genre specialisations.* The examinee was to accompany their speech with the materials from their portfolio that are to be prepared and provided to the board in advance.

The structure of the portfolio includes the journalistic materials prepared by the student during their studies at the university, an analytical report, reflecting the process of gaining professional experience and creative growth, as well as professional references from the editorial offices and additional materials (diplomas, certificates, etc.). The process of its creation and presentation at the exam stimulates professional self-reflection, without which further growth and reaching 'a new, external position concerning future projected activities and the previous, already completed activities' (Golovin, Kormakova, 2016: 269), are not possible. In addition, this process gives the incentive to search for the optimal vector for building one's career and promotes maximal self-realisation in the future. Self-reflection practices are recognised as the best in the field of higher education since they help to overcome the discrepancy between theory and practice in the process of training journalists (Greenberg, 2007).

After the speech andthe portfolio presentation, the examinee was asked questions regarding their professional experience in general and/or the preparation of specific materials. The questions enable one to identify the presence of systemic ideas about the state and demands of the modern media market, an understanding of the specifics of journalistic activity, the level of proficiency in professional terminology, as well as the ability to rely on the theoretical knowledge gained in comprehending their own practical experience. The list of questions is not fixed, only approximate options are given in the program: *what is the reason for the choice of this media? What do you know about the specifics of its type? How were the audience's information requests taken into account in the news agenda? What guided you when choosing a topic? Why was this genre chosen? What difficulties did you face when working with thesources? Have there been any legal/ethical problems during the preparation and release of the material? How would you describe your professional experience in terms of successes and failures (unrealised plans)? Which role is preferable for you in journalistic activity: an observer, an analyst, a critic, or any other?*

Experts emphasise that at the present development stage of the media industry, 'the creative, spiritual and moral components of the intellectual potential [of the journalistic community] are of particular importance' (Demina, 2010:183). The proposed questions help to revealnot only the existence of specific competencies but also the professional culture of the graduate, the system of their goal-setting, and the humanities grounding. Thus, an idea of their professional identity is formed, which includes both functional and existential correspondence of personality and profession (Shneider, 2001).

As the results of the survey showed, the proposed option of conducting the final exam in the form of case assignments received much more support than the initiators of the experiment expected.

In the 'other' option line, in all cases, the participants stated that a mixed form with the inclusion of questions on the history and theory of journalism and a practical case assignment was optimal. It should be noted that in the first years of the study, the members of the state

examination board gravitated to the traditional, decades-tested form of the exam, or offered a mixed version more often than the students did. However, the difference in the responses of the representatives of the two groups did not reach a significant level.

Table 1. Which form of the state exam for the graduates of the applied bachelor's degree in the field of journalism do you consider more optimal?

Response options	2021	2022	2023
An academicinterdisciplinaryexamination	4,6 %	15,4 %	0 %
Practice-based case tasks	84,1 %	76,9 %	94,6 %
Other	4,6 %	0 %	1,8 %
I find it difficult to answer	6,7 %	7,7 %	3,6 %

A noticeable increase in the popularity of the competence-based model of assessment among all participants of the examination procedure this year is explained by the inclusion in the program of the second case task aimed at identifying the degree of retention of graduates' professional skills and abilities and basic algorithms for working on journalistic text. Four blocks of tasks had been formed, which were designated as 'A journalist's methods of work', 'Agenda of various media types', 'Media law and professional ethics', and 'Genres, language and style'. Each task was practice-based,similar toeditorial realities. For example, in the section 'A journalist's methods of work' the tasks were formulated as follows:

'Tomorrow you will need to prepare a report on the opening of a new monument to M.A. Sholokhov. What information will you be looking for today? Whose opinion do you plan to present in the material, and which experts to attract?'.

'You've received the information from social networks that an unauthorised rally against the felling of trees in the Kumzhenskaya grove took place today. You need to write a news item within an hour. Specify the algorithm of your actions and sources for fact-checking'.

'Write a technical task for a designer to create illustrations for the news on the website "The Vodokanal promised to return clean water to the homes of Rostov residents in the next two weeks" (infographics, memes, photography, etc.) so that the youth audience responds positively to the information'.

Performing the tasks from the 'Genres, language and style' block involved working with the corresponding source texts:

'Prepare material for the VKontakte social network using the proposed press release from the website sfedu.ru taking into account the specifics of preparing a text for social networks'.

'Here is the text published on the website of the SFEDU's Trade Union. Edit it, considering that the main audience of this page is students'.

In the case tasks from the media law and professional ethics field, the specific problematic situations were described and the task was to find a way outby explaining the logic of actions. To cover the current agenda of different media types, students had to write at least 5 newsworthy items that meet the needs of the target audience.

This kind of creative work aroused considerable interest and emotional response among students and examiners. 80.4 % of all respondents noted that they liked the content of case assignment №2. Only 3.6 % of the survey participants chose the 'did not like' option. 16 % of the participants did not determine their positions on the assessment procedure. As expected, the members of the state examination board were more critical of the innovation. They liked the second case assignment in 60 % of cases, in 10 % they did not, and 30 % of teachers and employers refrained from evaluating it. Representatives of this group of participants most often made proposals to improve the form of the second case, i.e. doubts were expressed about the equivalence of tasks in terms of their complexity, and the need for their detailing and further improvement of evaluation criteria was noted.

All participants in the final assessment were more unanimous when answering the question about possible difficulties that arose in the process of preparing and conducting the state exam, which allows us to consider the results for two groups in total.

Table 2. Answers to the question about possibledifficulties

Response options	2021	2022	2023
there were no difficulties	50 %	73,1 %	71,4 %
there were some difficulties, but not very significant ones	47,7 %	26,9 %	28,6 %
there were some significant difficulties	2.3 %	0 %	0 %

The presence of certain difficulties for a significant number of students in the first year of the final examination in a competency-based form is explained by the conditions of self-isolation during the pandemic. In the comments, they wrote that they did not have time or were unable to create a complete portfolio because the editorial offices worked remotely. At the same time, we see that even this year more than a quarter of future journalists showed poor organisation, having started preparing materials for their portfolio at the last moment. This was reflected in the notes *'I didn't have time to scan all the publications, 'I couldn't sign the professional reference', 'I've lost the recordings of the video reports',* etc.

Almost complete solidarity (no significant difference was identified) was shown by the representatives of the two groups in their attitude to the discussions between students and members of the state examination board that took place when presenting the results of completed case assignments. The opportunity to discuss the proposed options for solving creative problems was positively assessed in 2021 by 86.4 % of all respondents, in 2022 – by 84.6 %, and in 2023 – by 83.2 % respectively. These consistently high figures, in our opinion, indicate the need for a dialogue and the readiness of all the participants, involved in the educational process, for the dialogue at the stage of the final examination.

The form of a traditional academic exam is hierarchical, it places teachers and students on the opposite sides (interviewers and respondents), and does not imply initiative, i.e. communication occurs according to a given passive scenario. In this form, the reproduction of the acquired knowledge dominates; in fact, only the covered theoretical contentis assessed, which makes the problem of cheating eternal. When performing creative case tasks, there cannot be a single, the only correct solution, therefore its evaluation requires the cooperation of assessment participants – students, teachers, employers, i.e. 'the changes in the very nature of interaction between all subjects involved in the educational process' (Bespalova, Kuznetzova, 2018: 12).

The democratic type of communication between the journalism representatives belonging to different generations and possessing different levels of experience and the new subject-subject relationships characteristic of communication between colleagues are attractive to young journalists. Answering the question 'What did you like about the procedure of theconductedstate exam?', the option 'exam atmosphere' was chosen by 75.0 % in 2021, in 2022 – 71.2 %, in 2023 – 71.4 % of respondents respectively. Some respondents did not like the atmosphere developed during the final assessment procedure, that is 2.2 % in 2021, 6.5 % in 2022, and 5.1 % in 2023. These figures correlate well with those obtained from asking the previous question about the discussions that arise when examining the completed case assignments.

Summarising the general results of the experiment to transform fundamentally the model of the state exam in journalism at SFEDU, we have recognised it as successful and intend to continue it in the future. Our estimation is based on the data obtained from the surveys, the results of discussions at the departments, as well as the score-rating indicators of the conducted state examination. They indicate that the degree of professional competencies development among the graduates in the vast majority of cases is at a high level.

Undoubtedly, the model wehave developed and tested for assessing professional competencies during the final examination of undergraduate students requires further improvement. In particular, we would like to expand the bank of case tasks, to provide more detail in the assessment tools, perhaps to introduce new blocks of tasks focused on a journalist's professional culture issues, etc.

5. Conclusion
The experience of conducting the final exam for bachelor students earning a degree in journalism at SFEDU with the help ofa competency-based model has shown its high efficiency and prospects. The results of surveys conducted with various parties involved in the state assessment

process, such as students, teachers, and employers, indicate a high level of consensus in evaluating this concept as optimal and meeting the modern demands of the media market.

The case method, which is already widely used by teachers in the training of journalists, has shown significant potential at the stage of assessing the quality of the education received and the level of professional competence of graduates.

The combination of different types of self-reflection, such as retrospective, situational, and prospective when comprehending the gained practical experience allows tomorrow's graduates not only to summarise the results of the bachelor's degree stage of their university life, to find meaning in the already completed and future work, but also choose the most effective ways to achieve goals in their journalistic future through professional self-determination.

By performing case tasks similar to editorial practice, students realize that they can do much, they are ready for much, and this helps to overcome uncertainty, and the feeling of insecurity that arises among novice journalists at the stage of entering the 'mature' media environment.

Unlike the traditional academic form of the final examination, students see benefits in the competency-based model. Subject-subject relationships between participants in the assessment process strengthen young people's sense of belonging to the professional community, and the values and norms that are accepted in it.

A two-stage final assessment, including the defence of a thesis and an exam aimed at determining the degree of professional skills and abilities retention, enables to reveal the level of the graduates' training comprehensively in both fundamental and applied components.

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