



## Determining Learner Needs

### **Assessing learning needs-Accreditation principle #1 RCPSC and CFPC: The activity is planned based on the identification of needs.**

A needs assessment is a systematic process of collecting and analyzing information on what a target group needs to learn. Every continuing professional development activity should have needs assessment data to justify the interests of the audience. For most practitioners, a need implies a discrepancy or gap between the current or perceived condition in knowledge, skill and attitudes and the desired condition. Educational programs are designed to close the gap between what is and what is desired. Learning needs are generally divided into two categories, perceived needs and unperceived needs. Perceived needs are what the learner has identified as what they need to learn or “I know what I don’t know”. Unperceived needs are discrepancies not perceived by the learner or “I don’t know what I don’t know”.

## Needs Assessment Methods

The method and scope of a needs assessment depends on the nature of the education activity that is being planned. One common way of assessing the need for a short course or seminar is to base it on the potential demand. For example, a lot of needs assessments are simply done by asking people on evaluations, what other topics they would like. Comprehensive programs tend to involve a more formal or planned approach to needs assessments than do shorter, stand-alone courses and seminars. Conducting an assessment is a way to collect information that can be used to decide what type of educational information will be seen as relevant and useful. Needs assessments are the first step in planning an educational activity and are the basis for developing learning objectives. All continuing professional development activities should have measurable learning objectives derived from the needs assessment.

Finding out what learners want and need to know is a basic principle of adult learning. Adult’s value learning that is relevant, practical and applicable to their situation.

## Planning a Need Assessment

When planning a needs assessment, the following points should be kept in mind.

1. Define as clearly as you can the purposes of your needs assessment. Identify the kinds of information that will be most useful in decision making. Determine how you will use the information that you collect and how it will affect your decision making.
2. Define the scope of the needs assessment and the methods you intend to use to collect the information.
3. Use a variety of methods to obtain information
4. Estimate the resources that you will require. Develop a budget and time frame for the needs assessment.

Some typical approaches to needs assessments follow. These range from informal and exploratory approaches to more formal methods.

1. Secondary sources of data: What can you learn from existing sources of data. For example: information from registration forms, statistics on program participation and the results of program/ course evaluations.
2. Primary Sources of data: this can range from informal discussions with potential learners to formal surveys and interviews. Some typical sources of primary needs assessment include:
  - Advisory committees: Since they are made up of representatives from a variety of interested groups, they can be helpful in identifying needs.
  - Focus group interview: An interview with a number of the representatives from the target audience are asked questions to determine their needs. Focus groups can provide a wide range of qualitative data and can be used at various stages of program development.
  - Surveys: Questionnaire with any number of questions to determine what learners need to know. Questionnaires can address a wide range of topics, analyze diverse educational needs and sample a large population.

The CME/CPD educational planning policy on *Identifying Educational & Learner Needs* links identified educational needs regarding knowledge, competence, and performance with a desired result. The need for each CME/CPD activity must be substantiated through identification and assessment of professional practice gaps of the target audience. These gaps may come from any number of sources and documentation is required for each accredited educational event. Examples of sources include:

**Perceived needs** which may be derived from the following:

- Evaluation results from previous CME/CPD activities
- Formal surveys of potential participants (mail and Internet-based)
- Informal comments from individuals or groups (participants, course directors, potential faculty, planning committee members, experts in the field, hospital administrators, researchers, patients)
- Patient problem inventories compiled by potential participants
- Consensus of faculty members within a department or service area
- Availability of new method(s) of diagnosis or treatment
- Availability of new medication(s) or indication(s)
- Development of new technology
- Legislative, regulatory, or organizational changes effecting patient care

**Unperceived needs** which are based on objective external data sources. These needs may be derived from the following:

- Epidemiological data
- Quality assurance/audit data
- Morbidity/Mortality

- Critical incidence reviews, college complaints
- Statistics, infection control data
- Surgical procedures statistics
- Professional society requirements and guidelines
- Peer Reviewed Literature
- Government/Ministry of Health reports
- Results of self-assessment tests
- Direct observation of practice performance

Multiple sources of information must be considered when determining needs and should include both perceived and unperceived needs. Additionally, the process may include identification of the learner characteristics and an analysis of tasks.

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