



# Introduction to Principles-Based Standards

What do you mean by Principles-Based Standards of Proficiency?

## In brief ...

Regulators share a common purpose - to protect the public - but they may adopt different methods to achieve this.

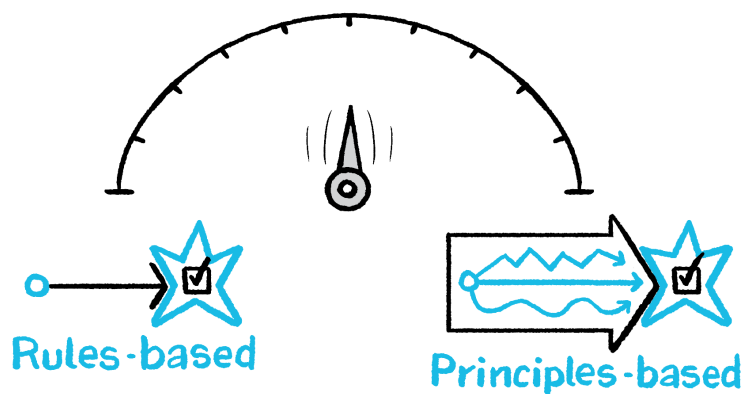
Regulatory approaches generally fall along a continuum ranging from rules based to principles based models. While some regulators apply one model exclusively, others combine elements of both, to create a hybrid approach.

In developing its *Standards of Proficiency*, CORU is moving to a fully principles based approach. Rather than setting highly detailed, prescriptive requirements characteristic of a rules based model, CORU now expresses its standards using broader, outcome focused language. This shift emphasises the underlying purpose of each requirement rather than specifying exactly how it must be met.

Adopting a principles based approach provides greater flexibility for education and training providers, allowing them to design programmes that meet the standards in ways that best reflect current practice, innovation, and the needs of learners, while still ensuring public protection.

## What are the different Regulatory Approaches?

There is no single way to regulate. While all regulators aim to act in the public interest, they can take different approaches to achieve this. These approaches sit on a spectrum, with a Rules Based Approach at one end and a Principles Based Approach at the other.



### Rules-Based Approach

Traditionally regulation is characterised by setting clearly defined *rules*. These rules set out exactly what must be done and how compliance will be measured. Because they specify what is and is not allowed, they often leave little room for flexibility or professional judgement.

### Principles-Based Approach

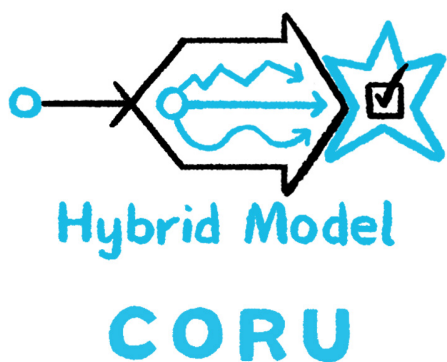
A principles based approach is different. Instead of detailed instructions, it sets out broadly defined principles that describe the intended outcome. This shifts the focus from the process ('how' something must be done) to the *outcome* ('what' must be achieved).

While this approach gives greater flexibility in how a requirement can be met, it still maintains clear expectations about the standard to be achieved. It recognises that there can be multiple valid ways to meet a regulatory requirement, as long as the intended outcome is delivered.

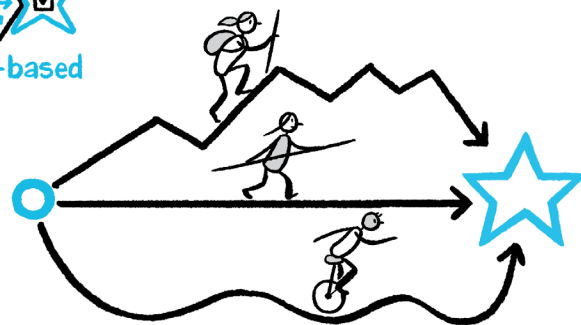
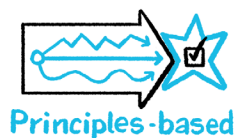
These approaches to regulation can be applied in different ways:

- ▶ A regulator can have its overall structure based on one approach or another. In such circumstances the regulator is known as being a *rules-based regulator* or a *principles-based regulator* and every one of its regulatory activities is informed by this; or
- ▶ A regulator can select a different regulatory approach depending on its different functions. For example, it could adopt a principles-based approach when setting its *Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics* but use a rules-based approach when setting its requirements for registration, for example around the qualification that an applicant must hold at entry into practice or the level of English language proficiency. This is known as a *hybrid approach*, blending both the rules-based and principles-based approaches.

CORU sits in this second group of regulators, adopting a hybrid approach, where some of its functions are principles-based and others are rules-based. This reflects CORU's application of *Right Touch Regulation*, as defined by the Professional Standards Authority in the UK. This means that CORU assesses and evaluates the level of risk of harm to ensure that the regulatory intervention introduced is proportionate, striking a balance to ensure that risk is managed and regulation is only introduced when justified.



For one of its key regulatory functions, the setting of the threshold knowledge and skills for entry to a register – known as the *Standards of Proficiency* – CORU has adopted a principles-based approach.



### Applying a Principles-Based Approach to Standards of Proficiency

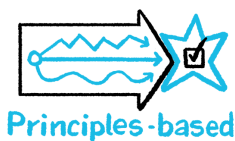
The application of a principles-based approach to the *Standards of Proficiency* has an impact on *how the individual standards are articulated*. It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the *Standards of Proficiency* does **not** change with a principles-based approach. The *Standards of Proficiency* still set the threshold knowledge or skills required for entry into practice. What is different about principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* is how they look.

### If they are doing the same thing, why change how you write them?

Principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* are written differently because they are focused on the *output* that is to be achieved – i.e. the knowledge or skill that an individual has at the point of entry to a register. Rather than expressing *how* a standard is to be achieved, a principles-based standard articulates *what* is to be achieved.

Therefore, principles-based standards are characterised by:

- ▶ **avoiding prescription** moving away from specific inputs or processes that are to be demonstrated;
- ▶ **flexible application** in contexts that are continually evolving and changing, meaning the *Standards* are also **future-proofed**, allowing regulation to be responsive to changes and developments in the practice of a profession;



Principles-based



Avoid  
Prescriptive  
Rules



Flexible



Future-proofed



Clearly express  
Intent



Simplify  
Standards

- ▶ emphasis on the **articulation of the outcome**, meaning that the standard is directly focused on the area of knowledge and/or skill, rather than it being the indirect result of a rule or process; and
- ▶ **less complexity** in how the standard is expressed, meaning that the specific regulatory focus on public protection is clear.

At the core of the adoption of principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* is its emphasis on the substantive meaning and intent of each standard, rather than viewing a standard as something to be procedurally followed. This approach encourages viewing the *Standards of Proficiency* as a cohesive whole, recognising how individual standards interact and collectively shape a proficient professional. It acknowledges the interconnected nature of practice - how knowledge and skills in one domain influence competence across many others. This holistic orientation is essential in preparing practitioners for the responsibilities of autonomous practice and ensuring they can deliver safe, effective care to service users. Although regulatory standards have always aimed to achieve this, the principles based approach enables clearer articulation of these expectations and better reflects the complexity and integration of knowledge and skills inherent in professional practice.

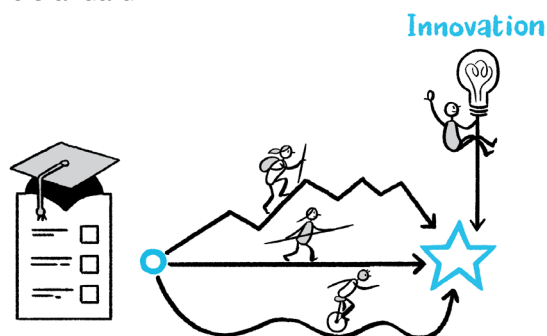


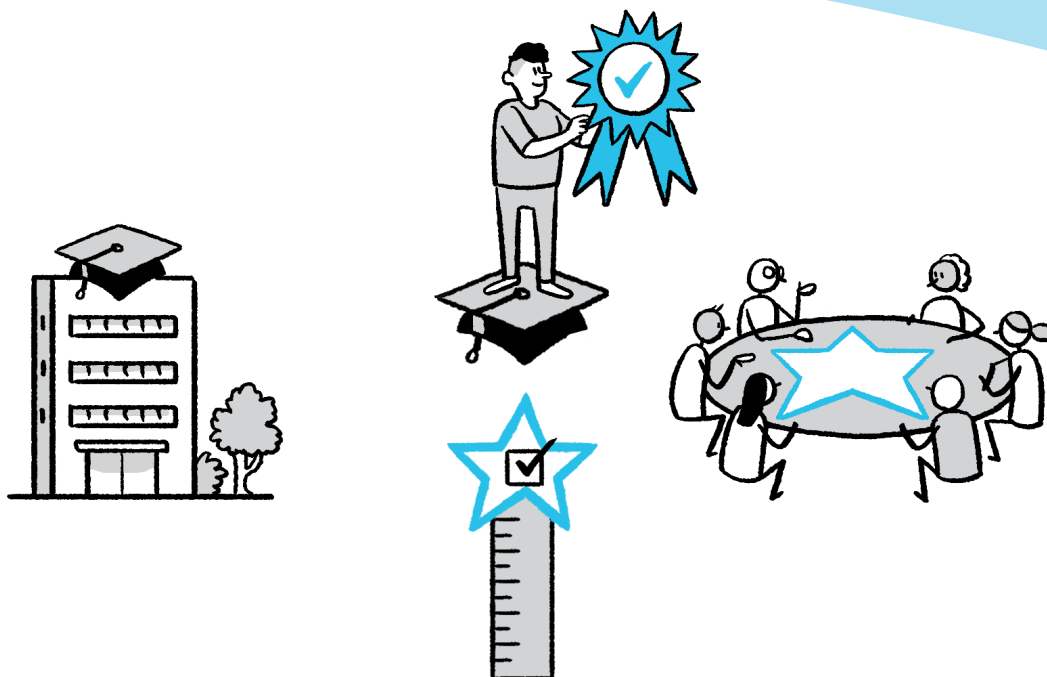
## Impact of adopting Principles-Based *Standards of Proficiency*

For most people who engage with CORU, particularly our registrants, the move to principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* will not affect you or your day to day practice. The *Standards of Proficiency* set the regulatory requirements for entry into the profession, so the shift to a principles based approach will impact education and training providers as they design their curricula and, importantly, their assessment strategies.

Because principles-based *Standards of Proficiency* emphasise outcomes rather than detailed, prescriptive instructions, they provide greater flexibility in how programmes are structured and assessed. This approach recognises that there can be multiple valid ways to demonstrate a standard, rather than requiring a single prescribed method. As a result, education providers have more room to innovate, experiment, and tailor assessment approaches in ways that best support learners while still meeting the required regulatory outcomes.

A principles-based approach to setting threshold standards recognises that an education provider, rather than the regulator, is best placed to determine how students should be assessed in order to demonstrate achievement of a proficiency. Instead of prescribing *how* a standard should be achieved, the regulator takes a step back, and allows education providers - who have the expertise in curriculum design and assessment - to determine the appropriate method, while the regulator focuses on defining the intended outcome, the *what* of the standard.





Naturally, when *Standards of Proficiency* are expressed with greater flexibility, some of the certainty associated with a rules-based approach may feel reduced. However, it is important to remember, that CORU uses the *Standards of Proficiency* as the key tool in the programme approval and monitoring processes. These processes are interactive and give education providers the opportunity to explain how their programme is structured and how the *Standards* are assessed in practice. In effect, they create a space for dialogue, allowing education providers to demonstrate to the regulator how their curriculum and assessments ensure that all graduates achieve all standards of proficiency.

This ensures that, even within a principles-based approach, clarity, accountability and regulatory assurance are maintained.

Ultimately, a principles-based approach to *Standards* respects the expertise and judgement of educators in designing their curriculum and learning experiences for students, while ensuring that CORU can maintain assurance that all graduates have the knowledge and skills to practice safely at entry to a register.

## Resources

- ▶ [Criteria and Standards of Proficiency - Coru](#)
- ▶ [About Approval and Monitoring - Coru](#)
- ▶ [Applying Principles-Based Standards Resources](#)

## Got Questions? Get in touch

Email: [strategyandpolicy@coru.ie](mailto:strategyandpolicy@coru.ie)

