

Learning Outcomes

Hugh Glanville



The learning outcome of a programme or a course unit

is not

the body of known facts that the successful student will have been taught

but rather

the understanding, skills and competences which are intended to result from any student's study of the programme or course unit

The “learning outcomes” concept is a key to unlocking many issues:

- the difference between Higher Education and other forms of post-school education
- the admission requirements for entry to Higher Education in general or to a particular programme of studies

- the levels represented by the Bologna cycles
- the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

- curriculum design and its improvement
- the role of a professor in relation to students' learning
- the use of the ECTS system and the Diploma Supplement
- the employability of graduates

- the assessment of students and the certification of their achievement
- the correct interpretation of the Lisbon Convention
- student mobility

- Quality Assurance

Attention to “learning outcomes” is not new

*“student orientated/centred” = paying attention
primarily to learning outcomes and how these are
achieved*

rather than

primarily to the teacher's inputs

What may be new is the attention being given to trying to make intended learning outcomes *explicit*.

An example of 'learning outcomes': History as an academic study (a 'subject benchmark'):

- An ability to understand the necessarily different context in which people have acted and thought in the past.
- An appreciation of the complexity and diversity of past situations, events and mentalities.

The study of History (learning outcomes continued)

- An ability to read and use texts and other source materials, both critically and empathetically.
- An understanding of the problems inherent in the historical record itself.
- A recognition that not all historical statements are of equal validity, and that there are ways of testing them.

The study of History (learning outcomes continued)

- Intellectual independence and the ability to set tasks, solve problems and organise and synthesize large quantities of evidence.
- An ability to marshal structured, relevant and concise argument in written and oral form, and amend views as necessary in the light of evidence and the argument of others.

The study of History (learning outcomes)

- finally -

- Knowledge of particular period(s) and place(s)*

*as indicated by the programme's specifically intended outcomes.

What distinguishes Higher Education from other kinds of education is most obviously the formal institutional structure in which it takes place,

but

more importantly

it is that the learning process has some essential (although not unique) characteristics.

It is essential to the nature of Higher Education that all students are expected to **develop their competence as individuals**, through at least being

- **stimulated to pursue a desire to learn**
- **challenged to extend their capacities**
- **encouraged to doubt – including doubting the certainty of their own beliefs**
- **guided on the means by which they can reach sound conclusions**
- **encouraged to communicate clearly and with confidence in what they say**
- **enabled to see the subject they study in its wider context**

Whether these educational needs are met is
largely in the hands of the students' professors

both individually and as

a team of professors (and others)

responsible for designing and managing the
programme of studies between them, and

whether what they provide (not necessarily through
direct teaching)

*stimulates and empowers the students to achieve
(and possibly surpass) the intended learning
outcomes.*

A programme of studies is a framework within which a student admitted to it should be able to

develop within the subject studied to *the fullest extent.*

There will be many possible frameworks enabling students to achieve comparable learning outcomes

- *and therefore ample opportunity
for innovation and diversity
(cf. The Lisbon Convention)*

What is achievable in terms of learning outcomes will be constrained by the level a student can reach **within a limited learning time**

(e.g. 180 to 240 ECTS for the first Bologna degree award)

But what is achievable is also determined by the way in which the programme, and the way in which it and its separate parts are delivered, recognises the students' educational needs and supplies them.

The students' educational needs at entry to a
programme

- or at entry to any part of it -

are determined by **what the student has already learned** - i.e. learning outcomes (*as well by the students' general ability*).

(Building upon previous learning outcomes is a key to the design of any programme of studies which provides for the students' development.)

The value of a degree/Diploma award depends upon
the fact that it

**certifies that the graduate has achieved
certain learning outcomes.**

This is certified following

the assessment (examination) of students

- the validity of the assessment depends upon
the method/s used being

*the most appropriate for the learning
outcome/s concerned.*

Part of the value of a degree award is the graduate's **employability**.

Employability depends on the relevance of the final learning outcomes to the graduate's career development -

as well as the extent to which these outcomes include transferable skills

An example of 'transferable skills' from the learning outcomes for the study of History:

- Intellectual independence and the ability to set tasks, solve problems and organise and synthesize large quantities of evidence.
- An ability to marshal structured, relevant and concise argument in written and oral form, and amend views as necessary in the light of evidence and the argument of others.

The formal assessment of students is not the only means by which the value of their education can be judged.

A further means is to consider **the quality of the student's education**

– i.e. the extent to which it has supported the achievement of the associated learning outcomes.

The hierarchy of learning outcomes (in descending order):

(1) There are *general (generic) learning outcomes* which are progressively being identified to *describe the level of academic awards* which conform to the Bologna cycles.

(The “Dublin Descriptors” are now being regarded as a basis for the further development of these.)

(2) There are also *specific learning outcomes* which are considered appropriate for the achieving the level of the general descriptors through *a programme of study in a particular subject or combination of subjects (e.g. the History example)*.

These should be consistent with the general
Descriptors (1)

(3) There are then the *even more specific* learning outcomes which are defined for *a particular programme of studies* (which may be in a combination of subjects).

These should be consistent with both the general descriptors (1) and the subject specific learning outcomes (2).

They may include learning outcomes which are specific to a particular employment (e.g. whatever knowledge and competencies are considered necessary for someone to practice as a lawyer in Croatia)

(4) Each study unit in a programme of studies should have its own learning outcomes defined as the criteria for a student's success in that unit.

In combination they should represent the achievement of (3), i.e. the intended learning outcomes of the programme of studies as a whole.

Dublin Descriptors

*Qualifications that signify **completion of the first cycle** are awarded to students who (firstly):*

Have demonstrated *knowledge and understanding* in a field of study that *builds upon* [the level of] their general secondary education,

and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, *includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study.*

Dublin Descriptors (contd)

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (secondly):*

Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional* approach to their work or vocation, and have *competence typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study.*

*The word ‘**professional**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense...., It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions.

Dublin Descriptors (contd)

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (thirdly):*

Have the ability to *gather and interpret relevant data* (usually within their field of study) [in order] to inform *judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues.*

Dublin Descriptors (contd)

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (fourthly):*

***Can communicate* information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.**

Dublin Descriptors (contd)

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who (fifthly and finally):*

Have developed *those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.*

The learning outcomes defined for a programme of studies as a whole must be *capable of being achieved by any of those who are admitted as students.*

It therefore very important to take account of the body of knowledge, understanding, competences, capacities and commitment which are required for entry to the programme.

Similarly

The learning outcomes defined for the units taken beyond the first semester of a programme of studies should take account of the knowledge, understanding, competences and capacities which will have been developed by the units which the student will have been required to complete previously.

I.e. *the 'prerequisites'*.

A student's achievement of the intended learning outcomes of a programme of studies will depend upon:

- the abilities and capacities required for entry to the programme;
- the knowledge and understanding with which the student enters each course unit;
- the order in which units are taken (i.e. the structure);
- the course units' syllabuses;
- the teaching and other forms of learning support, including support for independent study; and
- *the time available to the student for mastering the course units (i.e. the student's workload*)*.

**capable of being expressed as ECTS credits.*

As well, of course, as the diligence of the student.

**The basic key to good programme design
(and its evaluation)
is**

‘Put yourself in the position of the student’