



University of Malta Forum – The Three Cycle System

Qualification Frameworks and Learning Outcomes – Report on working group discussion

Workshop 1

Chair – Dr Suzanne Gatt

Rapporteur – Mr Jacques Sciberras

1. Is the shift from a content-led curriculum to a learning outcomes approach an added value to programmes in HE?

Yes it has very high added value however:

- a. What is the competence of those writing the outcomes? Training would need to be provided to academic staff;
- b. Consequence and challenges which emerged from discussion included:
 - Do outcomes have and weighting in terms of which outcomes are more important, or any relevance to grading?
 - Is hierarchy of outcomes and chronological/sequence mapping important?
 - May or may not impair student mobility rather than increase it, depending on how it is used.
 - Outcomes engineering at different levels has implications for progression.
- c. Is there any evidence that an outcomes based approach is better than the current systems used? More research on best practices needs to be made available;

Leaner centred education implies that students are provided with adequate information and understand the structure and intent of their courses –in terms of both content and outcomes. In a long term scenario this should give students more tools to make more informed choices on their progression through study.

2. To what extent do learning outcomes provide a key role in organising systematic aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and quality assurance?

Learning outcomes can serve in a positive manner to all the above mentioned dimensions, if the are used with the right approach. Rigid interpretation and over specified outcomes defeat the scope of what the process should lead towards.

3. Should learning outcomes in HE be tied in with the standards and skills of the labour market?

Learning outcomes need to be tied with the structure of the labour market but give space for innovation. They cannot be tied in a strict manner and must take into consideration the certainty of future changes within existing labour market structures.

Learning outcomes need to focus on the overall development of students as citizens, their personal formation is as important as their occupational skills.



Generic skills are equally important to occupational skills, and need to be reflected in the outcomes.

4. What approach should be taken to learning outcomes as a basis of credit systems (ECTS)?

Outcomes gradually help academics adjust workloads and ECTSs

Vice-versa, ECTSs help academics aggregate workloads and better define and describe learning outcomes.

The process should be iterative with a constant two way reflection on the adequacy of both types of descriptors.

5. Do you think the preparation of learning outcomes should be a collaborative effort between teachers, learners and employers?

Yes, however some aspects of this effort need to be emphasised:

- a. Learners are equally responsible for learning outcomes to be attained;
- b. Learners need to be aware of the importance of the outcomes listed and have a positive critical approach towards the respective roles that all should play for these to be achieved;
- c. Quality teaching and research are crucial for successful preparation of learning outcomes;
- d. Employers are there to guide not over influence outcomes. They need to be guided to think long-term, preferably in a collective sectoral manner rather than a firm specific frame of mind.

6. Should learning outcomes perform multiple functions such as recognition, validation of prior learning, award of credits, quality, learning plans, key competences for life, credibility for employers, governance of education and training?

Learning outcomes are a crucial 'basis' for all other processes including the evaluation of programmes for quality, governance, credibility, recognition, etc.

The more complex aspect is how will such outcomes be used for other purposes. So far various guidelines recommend that learning outcomes are taken into consideration in a manner that evaluates whether various elements that make up a qualitative educational experience are 'fit for purpose'. In this context learning outcomes are one of the tools for such an evaluation to take place.



Workshop 2

Chair – Dr James Calleja

Rapporteur – Mr Henry Mifsud

1. Is the shift from a content-led curriculum to a learning outcomes approach an added value to programmes in HE?

Yes however:

- a. Learning outcomes should solve unexpected problems i.e. produce mature people.
- b. HE is to prepare thinkers; using their skills and knowledge to integrate in the world of work (LLL);
- c. Work placements in industry is also very important;
- d. Degree-plus i.e. getting additional skills.

2. To what extent do learning outcomes provide a key role in organising systematic aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and quality assurance?

- a. students abilities (not necessarily academic) should be clearly acknowledged e.g. musical talent, etc.;
- b. At the end of compulsory education, skills should be clearly visible e.g. the School leaving Certificate is being changed to reflect this in a more positive approach to clearly demonstrate competencies;
- c. Comparability rather than equivalency.

3. Should learning outcomes in HE be tied in with the standards and skills of the labour market?

Yes

4. What approach should be taken to learning outcomes as a basis of credit systems (ECTS)?

Learning outcomes should form the basis of ECTS and gradually help academics to adjust their preparatory work with the expected end result.

5. Do you think the preparation of learning outcomes should be a collaborative effort between teachers, learners and employers?

Yes, however:

- a. Learners are too much ingrained into the present system – “WHY?” is constantly being asked. The parameters are too tight and we should start asking as to how should students be involved more;
- b. All stakeholders need to be aware of the importance of the outcomes listed and have a positive critical approach towards the respective roles that all should play for these to be achieved;



- c. Quality teaching and research are crucial for successful preparation of learning outcomes;
- d. Although there exist a strong link with industry (FOI, MHRA, EAM, etc.) Employers are there to guide not influence outcomes. They need to be guided to think long-term, preferably in a collective sectoral manner rather than a firm specific frame of mind, especially in courses which are vocationally driven. A model already exists which is fast and flexible.
- e. Best practice should be derived from research.

The dilemma with learning outcomes however is whether seniority should be taken into consideration. Should competencies and experience be properly acknowledged?

One must also consider the fact that although the mechanism of Learning outcomes is in place, it is being felt that (say at university) it is very hard to implement because of red tape. It was also strongly felt that during the difficult transit period, a hand-holding process is needed. Besides, the funding procedure does not help.

6. Should learning outcomes perform multiple functions such as recognition, validation of prior learning, award of credits, quality, learning plans, key competences for life, credibility for employers, governance of education and training?

Yes, especially from a national perspective, Learning outcomes are a crucial 'basis' for all other processes including the evaluation of programmes for quality, governance, credibility, recognition, etc.

But we should be constantly asking:

- a. What is happening elsewhere?
- b. What are our outcomes at micro level?
- c. Where are we heading?
- d. Is Bologna 20121 a reasonable target?

With good preparation, learning outcomes should be part of an ongoing process which has to be also part of the assessment procedure. Therefore one must not neglect the importance by doing. Students are currently being driven to study just to get a qualification. This culture should change and lecturers with it.

Conclusions:

- Pluralism in Higher Education – accommodate change rather than resist it
- We are building on best practice rather than scrapping what has been built in the past
- We should increase communication between all stakeholders
- We should endeavour for a more holistic approach in Higher Education which will eventually make it more visible.