Learning outcomes based higher education and employability

Official Bologna Seminar on
Employability: The Employers’ Perspective and its Implications,
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Learning outcomes based higher education: the Scottish Experience, Edinburgh, February 2008

- Learning outcomes are one of the basic building blocks of European higher education reform
- Lack of clarity and shared understanding about the meaning of some key terms is likely to impede effective implementation
- Degree of scepticism about the value and appropriateness of the learning outcomes approach in the context of higher education
Learning outcomes are...

...statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do by the end of a period of learning.
Why learning outcomes are important for staff?

• Help teachers to translate the aims of a course or programme of study into a set of competences that the learner is expected to be able to demonstrate by satisfactorily performing a set of assessment tasks

• Make it easier to recognise and give credit for learning acquired in another institution or workplace

• Remove a barrier to student mobility and promote lifelong learning
Why learning outcomes are important for students?

- Help students make informed choices about their courses and study programmes
- Help students articulate what they have learned from their academic studies and extracurricular activities
Why learning outcomes are important for employers?

- Help employers to understand what they can expect a graduate to know, understand and be able to do.
- Important in countries where employers are having to adjust to a new pattern of bachelors and masters qualifications.
Two kinds of learning outcomes

- Subject-specific competences: associated with particular subject studied
- Generic competences: express skills and attributes that learners might be expected to acquire in the course of degree level study (whatever their subject): also known as *graduate attributes* or *transferable skills*
Tuning Educational Structures in Europe

- Identified 30 generic competences
- Survey of employers and graduates and academics in six subject areas from 101 universities to find out the relative importance each group attaches to these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th>Academics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 944</td>
<td>n = 5183</td>
<td>n = 998</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Capacity to learn</td>
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<td>2. Capacity for applying knowledge in practice</td>
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<td>3. Capacity for analysis and synthesis</td>
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<td>4. Capacity to adapt to new situations</td>
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<td>5. Interpersonal skills</td>
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<td>10. Elementary computing skills</td>
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<td>12. Basic general knowledge</td>
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Learning outcomes: a global employer’s perspective (PricewaterhouseCoopers)

Â Valued for providing information about ðwhat people have learned as a result of an experienceì
Â Employers also need to know:
  ï how students have gone about acquiring new knowledge and skills
  ï whether they can display the competences being sought
Â Interested in how as well as what people have learned
Learning outcomes: a senior academic’s perspective (University of West of Scotland)

• Before development of learning outcomes it was hard to know what graduates could do and to ensure compatibility of standards between degrees
• Information now available about the generic skills that UK graduates should possess and which make them attractive to employers
• Subject Benchmark Statements – developed by representatives of subject communities and published by QAA
Generic skills associated with a honours bachelor degree in English

- use advanced literacy skills to communicate effectively in an appropriate style
- apply sustained written and oral arguments coherently and persuasively
- analyse and critically examine diverse forms of verbal and textual communication
- adapt the critical methods of the discipline to a variety of working environments
- gather, sift, interpret and organise substantial quantities of diverse information in structured ways
- organise their time and workload as developed through the planning and delivery of written assignments, presentations and project work
- exercise independent thought and judgement
- comprehend and develop intricate concepts in an open-ended way that involves an understanding of aims and consequences
- work with others through the presentation of ideas and information and the collective negotiation of solutions
- understand, interrogate and apply a variety of theoretical positions and weigh the importance of alternative perspectives
- handle information and argument in a critical and self-reflective manner
- use IT effectively to retrieve, evaluate and present information.
Student Employability Profiles (Higher Education Academy and Council for Industry and Higher Education)

Map generic skills, subject by subject, against the six key competences that employer members of CIHE have observed in individuals who can transform organisations and add value early in their careers:

- Cognitive skills: e.g. problem solving
- Generic competencies: e.g. team working
- Personal capabilities: e.g. ability and desire to learn and improve performance
- Technical ability: e.g. working with modern lab equipment
- Business/organisation awareness: e.g. work experience
- Practical elements – vocational courses: e.g. reflecting and reviewing own professional practice

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/employability/disciplines
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<tr>
<th>Subject Benchmark Statements</th>
<th>Cognitive Skills</th>
<th>Generic Competencies</th>
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Student Employability Profiles

• Example of the academic community and employer representatives working together at national level to develop a tool that helps staff embed generic skills valued by employers in the curriculum and employers to understand better what graduates have to offer.

• Can also be used by students to seek opportunities outside the academic curriculum to acquire and practice generic skills that employers are looking for, and then to articulate and provide evidence of these skills to potential employers.