

UK BOLOGNA SEMINAR: USING LEARNING OUTCOMES EDINBURGH, 1-2 JULY 2004

REPORT FOR BFUG

Introduction

1. The UK Bologna seminar on using learning outcomes took place at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh on 1-2 July. Twenty six of the Bologna countries were represented at the seminar (listed at Annex A). It was attended by some 150 delegates, including policy makers and practitioners drawn from higher education institutions, government ministries, staff, students and representative bodies responsible for developing the European Higher Education Area.

2. This paper provides a short report for BFUG on the background to and the key conclusions of the seminar.

Using learning outcomes in the UK

3. Learning outcomes focus on the student's experience and achievements and thus more accurately reflect the value of a qualification for students, teachers and employers. There is a general consensus in the UK that the time taken to reach a qualification is not the most appropriate criterion to describe the value of a qualification.

4. The UK first started to develop the use of learning outcomes in curriculum design some 10-15 years ago. This development was associated with the need to assure standards during a period of considerable expansion in the UK higher education sector.

5. The whole UK system represents a complex outcomes-based approach, with learning outcomes having direct links to standards, national mechanisms for quality assurance and the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment. Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the subject techniques, skills, intellectual demand and challenge. Programme specifications are written by institutions to clarify the knowledge, critical understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have on successful completion of a specific programme.

6. Using a learning outcomes approach therefore supports student-centred learning and flexible provision. It can facilitate the identification of clear entry and exit points within an education system and has been used as the basis of the comprehensive qualifications frameworks developed in Scotland and in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

7. In light of the potential for learning outcomes to act as a useful tool to promote transparency and articulation across the diverse range of qualifications available in the European Higher Education Area, the UK offered to host a Bologna seminar on using learning outcomes.

Objectives of the seminar

8. The main focus of the seminar was to provide a platform to exchange ideas and information about learning outcomes and to consider how they might be applied in the Bologna context. This educational theme was underpinned by the objectives set for the seminar. They were:

- To explore the meaning of the term ‘learning outcomes’ and illustrate how this approach is being used within HE systems across Europe.
- To discuss how the learning outcomes approach links with Bologna action lines.
- To provide participants with an opportunity to consider how the learning outcomes approach could be applied to best effect within their own HE systems.
- To create an opportunity for discussion, debate and sharing of applications and good practice in this important area amongst interested stakeholders.

Background paper

9. To inform discussion, the UK Seminar Organising Committee commissioned a background paper from Stephen Adam from the University of Westminster, on the use of learning outcomes across Europe and their role in the development of the European Higher Education Area by 2010. Stephen Adam has wide ranging European expertise as an ECTS/Diploma Supplement Counsellor and extensive experience of both the use of learning outcomes and the Bologna process.

10. His informal survey found that there was considerable activity on the use of learning outcomes across Europe. Some of this activity was taking place on a bottom-up basis (c 35%), with just over half taking place on a top-down basis. This activity was linked to the Bologna process in about 20% of countries.

11. The report identifies a number of positive and negative issues relating to the use of the learning outcomes approach, as well as alternative approaches. Learning outcomes can be seen as constraining the learning process. They are also technically difficult and can be expensive to produce. Positive aspects include using learning outcomes to support student-centred learning and inform student choice. Learning outcomes also highlight the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment. Particularly important in the context of the European Higher Education Area, learning outcomes were found to support improved international recognition and transparency of qualifications. However, many countries continue to express their curricula in terms of course content and the time taken to complete qualifications.

12. The report also outlines the contribution the learning outcomes approach can make to the 10 Bologna action lines and to other associated initiatives, including:

- promoting transparency and mobility
- mutual recognition of degrees
- development of ECTS
- co-operation on quality assurance

- elaboration of an overarching European qualifications framework.

13. The report concludes by highlighting a range of issues for consideration at institutional, national and international level, relating to curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance regimes.

14. Stephen Adam presented the findings of his report at the seminar and a copy was issued to all seminar delegates. The report is being published by the Scottish Executive and will be available shortly at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/recent.aspx>

Key conclusions

15. The key conclusions of the seminar are listed below, under three broad themes:

- engagement
- alignment
- implications

16. These conclusions are a synthesis of the wide ranging discussions that took place at the event. They are intended as guiding principles and key issues to consider in the future development of the Bologna agenda, at European, national and regional level. These points have been endorsed by participants.

- **Engagement**

- There is general acceptance of the value of the learning outcomes approach within the context of the European Higher Education Area: they improve transparency and choice for students and encourage mobility.
- Learning outcomes support the development of student-centred learning and the employability agenda.
- Students as well as academic staff must be involved in the development of learning outcomes.
- There is a need for leadership by Ministers, heads of European, national and regional agencies, Rectors and all key staff in higher education institutions to drive progress on the Bologna agenda.

- **Alignment**

- Learning outcomes are a useful tool which can help to facilitate recognition and transfer, between higher education systems and between VET and higher education.
- Learning outcomes support flexibility and diversity, because they help recognition and mobility across sectors and within Europe, and because they can act as reference points across higher education systems.

- This type of approach is not a ‘quick fix’, nor a panacea, but is an important tool in the ‘transparency tool-box’ which can assist the development of Diploma Supplements, ECTS and qualifications frameworks.
 - Learning outcomes are not static and will evolve over time.
 - There is a need to ensure coherence across the different strands affected by the learning outcomes approach: ECTS, qualifications frameworks, Tuning, Diploma Supplements, and quality assurance.
 - There is a need to ensure synergy and broad coherence between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.
- **Implications**
 - Applying the learning outcomes approach has implications for the development of ECTS for the curriculum, assessment, quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and institutional quality culture.
 - The deadline of creating the European Higher Education Area by 2010 is approaching fast. There is a need to accept that the pace and nature of change will not be uniform across all countries or all disciplines. Such flexibility will protect the diversity inherent in the European Higher Education Area and lead to greater ownership of the final outcome.
 - There is a need for continuing dialogue. While it is accepted that there is a need for a common language and a need for a shared understanding of that language, there is also recognition that this will take time to achieve.

Full seminar report

17. A copy of the full seminar report, together with all the slides, handouts and associated papers used at the event, will be made available shortly on the Berlin to Bergen website at <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>

Points for consideration by BFUG

18. The main conclusions of the seminar suggest that BFUG could:
- Take a lead role in ensuring coherence across the different strands affected by learning outcomes: in particular the relationship between ECTS and qualifications frameworks, Tuning, Diploma Supplements, and quality assurance, and more broadly between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.
 - Consider reflecting the following themes in the draft Bergen Ministerial communiqué
 - The importance of learning outcomes for the future development of Diploma Supplements, ECTS and qualifications frameworks, as a tool to promote transparency and mobility, while supporting flexibility and diversity across the European Higher Education Area.

- The need to accept that the pace and nature of change will not be uniform across all countries or all disciplines. Such flexibility will protect the diversity inherent in the European Higher Education Area and lead to greater ownership of the final outcome.
- The need for continuing dialogue to achieve a common language and a shared understanding of that language.

19. BFUG members organising future Bologna seminars may also wish to take note of comments made about the structure and organisation of the UK event in the summary evaluation feedback attached at Annex B.

Ann McVie
On behalf of the UK Seminar Organising Committee
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Participating countries:

Albania
Austria
Belgium
Croatia
Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Ireland
Italy
Latvia
Macedonia
Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Russian Federation
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
UK