

Learning outcomes and the Bologna process –

Keynote speech by Dr Andrew Cubie

Can I add my very warm welcome to all of you to this City of the Enlightenment, where I am fortunate to live and work. I feel partly responsible for your presence here today and tomorrow. At the conclusion of the Prague seminar in June of last year, I airily proposed, with no authority whatsoever, that a future seminar be held in Scotland. You may imagine, therefore how delighted I am that this gathering is being held in Edinburgh.

Stephen has described how across the Bologna countries and beyond learning outcomes are being used and developed.

What I would like to do is to speak from a UK perspective, but with some emphasis upon the Scottish experience. So let me provide you with a Scottish example, of what we understand of learning outcomes and how we are using them as a key concept around our learning strategy.

Learning outcomes are central to our work in regard to:-

- Recognition of learning for Credit
- Credit transfer
- Qualification Frameworks
- Explanations to learners
- Quality assurance
- Learner assessment
- Links between vocational education and training and 'academic' learning

Before I talk in detail about what we have so far achieved in Scotland I do want to say a few words about the experience, history and use of the concept of learning outcomes in the UK.

For the purposes of illustration, I may exaggerate some of the points I wish to make, but I hope that you can bear with me.

It is probably true to say that ten- fifteen years ago most of us in Higher Education probably described courses in terms of what we were going to teach. There would be a document somewhere that would list the main topics to be covered. Behind this document, the lecturer would no doubt have a more detailed explanation of what his or her students would learn.

But, and I know in this I do exaggerate, the programme as a whole would be described simply in terms of the 'topics to be covered' or perhaps in terms of aims.

Later, people in higher education, and indeed in other sectors were increasingly paying attention to questions such as 'what is it that students will have learned from our courses? What are the key things that we want them to know and be able to do? How can we make these explicit and how can we make sure that our assessments – the exams – relate directly to what it is that we have said they will know and be able to do?

In 1997 the UK established a national Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. This Committee, (The Dearing Committee including its Committee for Scotland under Sir Ron Garrick), looked at a whole range of issues associated with the future delivery of higher education across the UK including funding, wider participation and supporting research.

One of its key pre-occupations was, however, 'standards' of qualifications. Broadly speaking, the Committee looked at the concerns that had been expressed by many, that standards were 'not what they used to be in my day'. These types of concerns were then or now by no means unique to the UK. they resulted, perhaps, from the massive growth in both the size and diversity of the higher education sector over the decade preceding the Dearing Committee Report. Whilst much attention had been paid to quality of teaching and learning, the Committee also urged that attention should also be given to the assurance of standards. This is an important point and a particular feature of UK higher education.

The outcomes of Dearing have played a large part in shaping developments across the UK since 1997 and in which learning outcomes have played a key role.

For instance their recommendations included that for the purposes of:-

1. assisting the assurance of standards and quality;
2. helping learners and employers understand the range of qualifications, their purpose and how they relate to each other,

institutions themselves should make clear what skills, competences, knowledge and understanding learners will have acquired as a result of their higher education programme

similarly, subject communities should also work together to develop a clearer, collective view of what it is that a graduate in say chemistry should know, understand and be able to do

and finally, that credit and qualification frameworks should be developed which make clearer what the qualifications of UK higher education are, how they relate to each other, and the typical, general characteristic outcomes associated with for example an Honours degree, a Diploma of Higher Education, a Masters Degree etc.

Implicit in all these developments was the concept of outcomes. In its report the Committee affirmed that

'institutions need to be more explicit and publicly accessible about the standards of attainment required for programmes and awards'.

There are two further points that I want to highlight.

First, we in the UK have journeyed a long way and attempted different processes before coming to terms with and making use of the concept of learning outcomes

The second is that while, in the UK the concept of learning outcomes is a fairly simple one, it underpins everything I have said so far and is a key element in the work to assure and make explicit the standards of UK higher education qualifications.

And I now want to spend a bit of time talking about each of these developments. Here there will be no exaggeration, but I will tackle them in reverse order

Some of what I will say relates to the UK as a whole while other topics will relate specifically to Scotland.

First – what do we mean in Scotland by "a learning outcome?" It is a simple proposition:-

'That which learners will know, understand or be able to do as a result of their learning'

Implicit in this is the relationship between outcome and assessment.

Perhaps I can illustrate this through what we call programme specifications.

As I mentioned earlier, one outcome of the National Inquiry and of the subsequent Guidelines developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was that institutions would develop brief programme specifications and make them public.

The Guidelines describe a programme specification as being a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. They include for example, information on teaching and learning approaches and the overall aims of the programme. Importantly, however, they contain the explicit statement of what it is that learners will know and importantly be able to do as an outcome of their learning result.

Programme specifications should make explicit the intended outcomes in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes.

They should also include that they should provide a useful source of information for students and potential students seeking an understanding of the programme.

Importantly the specification should also provide a key reference point for review of programmes and for external examiners (who are an important ingredient in the UK's approach to the assurance of quality and standards) and other external reviews.

Perhaps I can best illustrate through the following slides which contains some extracts from a theoretical programme specification for radiography.

I will now turn to a second development from Dearing which is described as subject benchmark statements

You will recall that I mentioned earlier that the Inquiry recommended that subject communities should work together to clarify the nature, features and characteristics of general outcomes

Through the QAA and over the last 5-6 years, 'benchmark' groups (of some 15-20 members) have been established to clarify standards within their subject.

These groups have been set the task of working with the academic subject community to develop a document, typically of some 15-20 pages, which describes the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specified subject. Of particular relevance to our discussions today they also set out general expectations about the standards of awards in the subject.

If I can illustrate this by way of the benchmark statement for Architecture which amongst other things describes the subject-specific knowledge, understanding and skills relating to

Design
Cultural context
Environments and technologies
Communication

Professional studies Transferable skills, including for example: How to work in teams, effective communication and as an opposite to the first how to work alone.

There are now some 50 similar subject statement benchmarks for History, Chemistry, Business, Art Design and so on, each of which includes the characteristic outcomes associated with a UK Degree in that particular discipline

Can I also clarify that these statements are not specifications of content, nor are they a prescriptive checklist. Rather they represent general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications, and they provide higher education institutions with guidance – a framework for articulating the outcomes of their particular programme.

They are used by higher education institutions as a useful external reference point when new programmes are being designed or when programmes are being reviewed, internally or externally. Overall, they are an important ingredient in the assurance of quality and standards in UK higher education institutions.

Finally I want to turn to our credit and qualification frameworks. Here I will speak mainly about developments in Scotland although there are similar development in the rest of the UK. I chair the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. I do so from the standpoint of someone with a legal and business background, not as an education alist. This recognizes that the supply/demand balance is important.

As you may know, in Scotland, higher education has worked with the Scottish Qualifications Authority, (the qualifications body for schools and further education) and the Scottish Executive (the Government in Scotland) to develop a single unified credit and qualifications framework that embraces learning and qualifications at all levels from schools to Doctorates and qualifications of all types: academic, professional, vocational, work-based. Although this is a Bologna Seminar let me stress as I often do that whilst those levels relating to Higher Education are important so is Level 1. Level 1 relates to learning for those with severe and profound learning difficulty. Learning in our context is relative to the capacity and often the opportunity available to the learner. The S.C.Q.F. is not a disconnected structure – it is over arching to all of our qualifications. At the end of the day it is to facilitate the growth of the potential of individuals – intellectually, economically and spiritually and from such extended reach to the gain of society. However, let me return to the mechanics!

In developing the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework we came very early to the clear view that it required to be an outcomes-based framework.

This is important and relates to the underlying principle of the SCQF which is that all learning, regardless of wherever, or however, it is acquired, and provided, it has or can be assessed through some quality assured process, and is capable of attracting credit. Basically, so long as there are clear outcomes which can be assessed, then the learning can be recognised within the SCQF. I will come back to this point several times.

Firstly, however, I want to talk about the detail of the SCQF.

I believe it to be a very simple and potentially very powerful tool

We use some basic concepts to describe and position those learning outcomes within an overall framework. Again, can I stress that the learning outcomes might be those from a formal academic programme, they might be from a vocational qualification, they might be an employers training programme; community based learning opportunities, a professional bodies qualification or the learning that an individual has achieved through work, voluntary activity etc.

The concepts that we use are credits, levels and descriptors. Let me talk of them separately.

Volume of outcome or "credit"; So far, no one has found a direct means of measuring the volume of outcome so like others, we use notional learning time as an indirect means of judging or estimating the volume.

In the SCQF one credit represents the outcomes that can be achieved though a notional 10 hours of learning time.

Another point that I want to stress, is that notional learning time covers all learning time including time in formal lectures, laboratories, studios, fieldwork etc. It also includes all library-private study and also all time spent in preparing for assessment and the assessment itself. In some programmes, the amount of formal lecture time might indeed be very small. In a work based programme, or say in a community programme, there may be no requirement whatsoever for a definable formal programme. Those who create such programmes, with, of course, external evaluation judge the notional learning time around the typical learner.

The important point is that it is the volume of outcome that we are trying to describe – not the learning time.

The second key concept in the SCQF is level. Levels are levels of outcome!

We have 12 levels
See accompanying slide

Levels do not have a direct link to years

They are broad, general and typical levels of outcome and each level has what we call a level descriptor which has been developed through work across all the education and training sectors in Scotland.

Again, I must stress, that the descriptors are not a prescriptive checklist of outcomes that must be included in each qualification at a particular level. Rather they are a general reference point to be used as an aid in determining the level of a particular programme.

Level of outcome and credit are the "quantitative" means that we use to describe and position programmes, qualifications, units etc within the overall framework.

The third concept of the SCQF is "qualitative descriptors".

I have already mentioned the levels descriptors

We are developing descriptions for all qualifications within the SCQF. These will describe, in brief, the main features of the qualification, where it sits within the SCQF, the number and level of credits, and the overall aims and outcomes

Can I illustrate this by reference to the following extracts from a descriptor for an Honours Degree (which is uniform across the UK)

Finally, I would like to mention the various Guidelines that we are developing and which will be used across the whole of the SCQF.

Our website SCQF www.scqf.org.uk is now quite active and there you can now find a draft of guidelines on credit rating.

We will also be developing guidelines on recognising informal learning, on credit transfer and in due course other topics.

At the core of all these guidelines, the concept of 'outcome' will remain essential, as I have said a few times now.

We are ambitious in our aims for the SCQF. Our objective is to make the Framework the national vocabulary of qualifications for Scotland. It is facilitating articulation between Further and Higher Education. It is bringing qualification providers in similar disciplines closer together. It is challenging relativities, we are vigorously aware that in expanding the Framework by inclusion, or reference against it, we dare not "debase the coinage".

Let me end by looking further afield.

I was delighted last September when Jim Wallace's depute – Lewis McDonald - was the Senior UK Minister at the Ministerial Summit in Berlin. One part of the Minister's communiqué stated that signatory states should be encouraged "to elaborate a Framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their Higher Education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competencies and profile".

To achieve this we need some flexibility. In the UK, we have four developing Frameworks, based on devolved powers. So it is also across Europe. In this diversity is strength, but we need to move to closer shared concepts. I believe this seminar has a pivotal role in defining learning outcomes. Those outcomes sit, however, in our own individual arrangements, adapted to allow for mobility in study and work. If that is not the result we would be wasting our time. Happily I know we are not!!