

USING LEARNING OUTCOMES

A consideration of the nature, role, application and implications for European education of employing learning outcomes at local, national and international levels.

--- Conference Background Report ---

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USING LEARNING OUTCOMES

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1. Context and Issues

INTRODUCTION:

'Degree structure: Ministers encourage the member states 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, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.'

'Within such frameworks, degrees should have different defined outcomes. First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.'

1. Context and Issues

INTRODUCTION:

- Problem - ubiquity of references coupled with relatively poor understanding and practical usage (may slow development of the EHEA).
- Learning outcomes can be regarded as basic educational building blocks that impact at the local, national and international levels.
- Have a major role in curriculum design/development.
- Potential to integrate VET and HE.
- Part of a paradigm shift - teaching to learning (student-centred learning).
- Dangerous antecedents - Pavlov, Watson and Skinner!

Paradigm shift ...

Teacher-centred:

- Teachers serve as the centre of epistemological knowledge, directing the learning process and controlling students' access to information.
- Students are viewed as 'empty vessels' and learning is viewed as an additive process.
- Instruction is geared for the 'average' student and everyone is forced to progress at the same rate.

Student-centred:

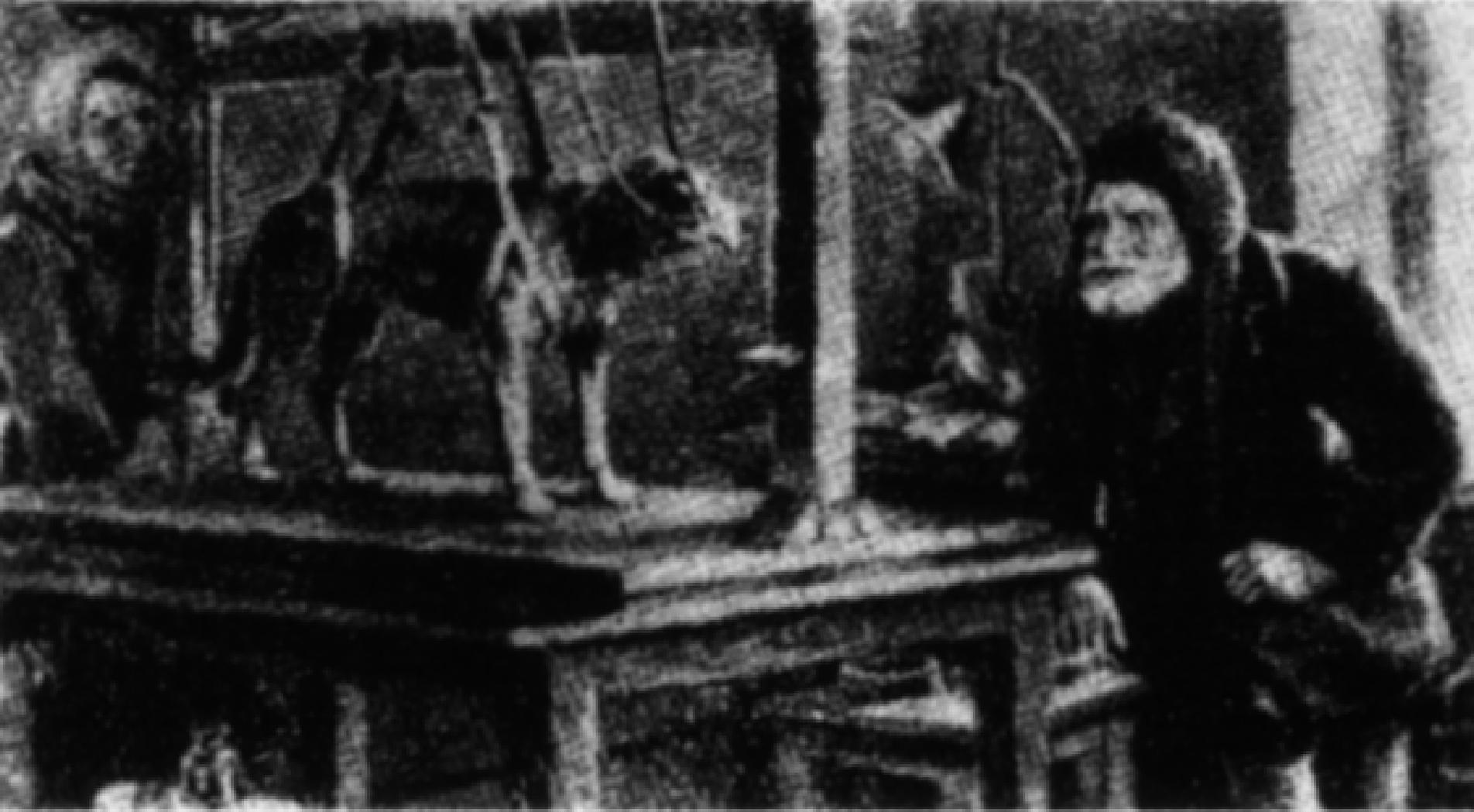
- Students are not passive. They come with their own perceptual frameworks (Erikson, 1984).
- Students learn in different ways (Briggs-Myers, 1980; Kolb, 1984).
- Learning is an active dynamic process (Cross, 1991).
- Students construct their own meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading, and reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns (Meyers and Jones, 1993).

(Source: University of Bath)

However, the dichotomy between teacher- and student-centred is not so crude or stark in practice!

Be quiet and write down everything I say!





Pavlov

Dangerous antecedents: Pavlov (+ salivating dogs) + Watson, Skinner.

1. Context and Issues

WHAT ARE LEARNING OUTCOMES?

- **Multiple definitions exist but all are fairly similar:**
'Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate at the end of a learning experience.'
- **Embody a common desire for more precision**
- **Focus on achievements**
- **Can be written for the module or programme of learning**
- **Employ active verbs (see Bloom's taxonomy)**
- **Emphasise the teaching, learning, assessment relationship**
- **Learning outcomes are often expressed in terms of competences**

1. Context and Issues

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS (Controversial area):

NEGATIVE (Philosophical + technical):

- Inhibits/constricts the learning process
- Suits training better than open-ended higher education
- Creates a target-led culture
- Attacks the liberal conception of the university
- Technically difficult and expensive to introduce + resented by staff

POSITIVE (Course design, learner, national, international):

- Helps ensure consistent delivery across programmes of learning
- Provides more precision to course design + stops overlap
- Informs student choice
- Highlights teaching, learning, assessment relationship
- Benefits quality assurance
- Potential to link vocational education & training (VET) & higher education (HE)
- Improved national/international recognition and transparency of qualifications

1. Context and Issues

ALTERNATIVES TO THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Most countries express their curriculum in terms of what the student will cover - the course content.
- An input-focused approach is employed.
- Programmes are expressed in terms of time taken, access requirements, staffing and resources.
- Qualification descriptions are articulated in general terms, often in relation to other qualifications (higher or lower) in undeveloped qualification frameworks.
- A strong emphasis is put on student workload (time measures).

1. Context and Issues

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

- The use of learning outcomes is intimately linked to the adoption of student-centred learning.
- Learning outcomes are an integral part of output-focused approach to teaching, learning and assessment.
- The role of the teacher moves towards being a facilitator/manager of the learning process.
- Learning outcomes relate to external reference points (qualifications descriptors, levels, level descriptors, subject benchmark statements) that constitute 'new style' qualification frameworks.

2. Learning Outcomes in Europe

	<u>Albania</u>			<u>Latvia</u>	✓
	<u>Andorra</u>			<u>Liechtenstein</u>	
	<u>Austria</u>	✓		<u>Lithuania</u>	✓
	<u>Belgium</u>	✓✓		<u>Luxembourg</u>	
	<u>Bosnia and Herzegovina</u>			<u>Malta</u>	✓
	<u>Bulgaria</u>			<u>Netherlands</u>	✓
	<u>Croatia</u>	✓		<u>Norway</u>	✓
	<u>Cyprus</u>			<u>Poland</u>	✓
	<u>Czech Republic</u>	✓		<u>Portugal</u>	✓
	<u>Denmark</u>	✓		<u>Romania</u>	
	<u>Estonia</u>	✓		<u>Russian Federation</u>	✓
	<u>Finland</u>	✓		<u>Serbia and Montenegro</u>	
	<u>France</u>	✓		<u>Slovak Republic</u>	✓
	<u>Germany</u>	✓		<u>Slovenia</u>	✓
	<u>Greece</u>	✓		<u>Spain</u>	✓
	<u>Holy See</u>			<u>Sweden</u>	✓
	<u>Hungary</u>	✓		<u>Switzerland</u>	✓
	<u>Iceland</u>			<u>"the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"</u>	
	<u>Ireland</u>	✓		<u>Turkey</u>	✓
	<u>Italy</u>	✓		<u>United Kingdom</u>	✓

2. Learning Outcomes in Europe

COUNTRY REPORT ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS:

WARNING!

- Simple one-question survey
- Some terminological confusions
- No opportunity to explore situation
- Snapshot picture only

2. Learning Outcomes in Europe

COUNTRY REPORT ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS:

- Considerable activity across Europe (97%).
- Most developed systems: Denmark, Hungary, Ireland Italy, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, UK and Belgium (Flanders).
- Considerable bottom-up activities reported (34%).
- Majority of activity top-down (52%).
- Several countries linked efforts with the Bologna process (21%).
- No countries made any link with student-centred learning (SSL).
- In some countries activity focused on the non-university HE.
- There is a strong desire to share information and good practice.

3. Learning Outcomes & the Bologna Process

CONTRIBUTION TO THE 10 BOLOGNA ACTION LINES:

1. **Adoption of easily readable and comparable degrees:**
 - Aids existing recognition tool + makes qualifications more transparent
 - Makes credential evaluation easier + improves judgements
2. **A system essentially based on two (three) main cycles:**
 - Effective cycle, level and qualification descriptors depend on learning outcomes
 - Effective NQF + EQF are built on learning outcomes
3. **Establishment of a series of credits:**
 - The evolution of ECTS will depend on credits expressed in terms of LO
 - Allows the quantification of learning achievement from different contexts
4. **Promotion of mobility:**
 - Curriculum transparency helps student exchange + recognition of studies
 - Promotes precise judgements about the curriculum

5. Promotion of cooperation in quality assurance:

- Building on common methodological approaches (LO) improves QA
- Adoption of external reference points helps to develop universal standards and accurate cross-border judgements about qualifications and QA systems

6. Promotion of European dimension in higher education:

- LO facilitates the fit and design of joint degrees + makes study programme components transparent

7. Lifelong learning

- Credits based on LO are the only tool to link VET and HE
- Credits linked to levels can create all-encompassing credit and qualifications frameworks for lifelong learning

8. Higher education and students:

- The employability of students is enhanced by highlighting generic skills and competences
- Student-centred learning involves active learning + a better learning experience

9. Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area:

- A modern, effective, efficient, world-leading education zone is facilitated by the adoption of LO

3. Learning Outcomes & the Bologna Process

LINKS TO OTHER CURRENT INITIATIVES:

Tuning Educational Structures in Europe Project

- Raising Europe-wide consciousness on learning outcomes
- Identifies generic and subject specific competences
- Has mapped subject areas + developing common subject reference points
- Exploring the relationship between LO, teaching, learning and assessment

Joint/dual awards

- LO aid integrated curricula and promotion of the European dimension
- LO have a potentially vital role to play in the development of joint degrees via detailed comparisons and articulation of programmes

Recognition tools

- 2002 'Bologna' recognition seminar in Lisbon + 2003 Vaduz statement by ENIC/NARICs emphasised the importance of LO
- LO have a positive role to play in EUROPASS

Development of ECTS

- ECTS is in a period of transition from credit transfer to accumulation
- ECTS credits redefined in terms of LO and notional learning time
- Profound impact/implications for lifelong learning + EQF

Quality assurance developments

- Evidence that *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) is moving towards an output model for QA
- *Transnational European Evaluation Project* (TEEP) explored the use of output approached (Dublin Descriptors + Tuning) for the purposes of external evaluation

Overarching European qualifications framework

- There is a fundamental link between LO and new style qualifications frameworks (National & overarching European Qualifications framework)
- New qualifications frameworks share a methodology and tools based on learning outcomes (level, level and qualifications descriptors, etc.)
- LO link to the development of credit based EQF for lifelong learning

Levels of application - learning outcomes have profound implications at the:

1. Institutional/local level:

For the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment.

2 National:

For the nature and expression of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) and quality assurance regimes.

3. International:

For developing EQF + tools used to express it - cycle and level descriptors. For a massive increase in transparency, mobility and recognition.

4. Issues for Consideration

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

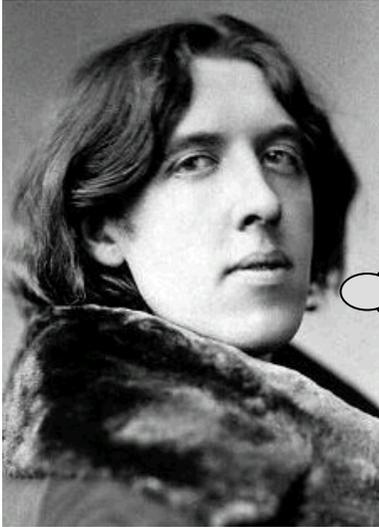
- What is the appropriate role of learning outcomes in the European Higher Education Area - do they have a positive contribution?
- Can learning outcomes contribute to all three Bologna cycles?
- What are the implications of learning outcomes for governments, ministries and national authorities - how do they relate to quality assurance frameworks and qualifications frameworks?
- What contribution do learning outcomes make to the development of ECTS, lifelong learning and the linking of VET and HE - and what are the national and international implications of this? Can national parallel frameworks for vocational and academic education be linked by the common use of learning outcomes?
- How might learning outcomes contribute to the development of quality assurance at the European level? How can national and internationally accepted threshold standards (and descriptions of learning) be developed?
- What are the implications of learning outcomes for higher education institutions (at module and programme level)?
- How can good practice and experience associated with the development and implementation of learning outcomes be shared, and is a top-down or bottom-up or a mixed approach more effective?

4. Issues for Consideration

TECHNICAL QUESTIONS:

- Do we need to develop common definitions and understandings about learning outcomes and their expression, and if so, how?
- Is it useful to distinguish between subject specific and generic learning outcomes?
- What are the implications of learning outcomes for the normative versus criterion reference assessment debate - if credits or any learning is expressed in terms of learning outcomes does this dictate the adoption of a criterion-led approach to assessment?
- Does the widespread adoption of learning outcomes necessitate any updating of existing recognition tools e.g. recognition conventions, good practice guidelines, EUROPASS, ECTS, etc?
- Should we seek some practical agreement about the role of learning outcomes in terms of cycle descriptors, levels, level indicators, qualification descriptors and subject benchmark statements?
- Should learning outcomes at module level be written as threshold statements?
- Are credits vacuous without learning outcomes?
- What are the local, national and international implications of adopting an outcomes-based definition of ECTS credits?
- How does workload relate to learning outcomes and how can workload most effectively be expressed?

FINAL THOUGHTS BY TWO SUPPORTERS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES...

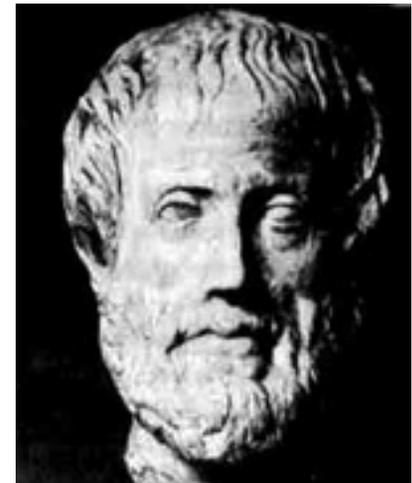


Oscar Wilde:

'Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.'

Aristotle:

'What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.'





Learning outcomes
act as a form of
'educational Viagra'
- by stimulating
higher education and
invigorating the
European Higher
Education Area?