Learning Outcomes-Based Curricula in Higher Education

Case Study

The University of the West of England (UWE)
Bristol, UK

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UWE's Profile 2003/04

- Post 1992 multi-disciplinary University

• Academic staff			1786
• Students			
• - postgraduate	full-time	1829	
	part-time	2968	
- undergraduate	full-time	16639	
	part-time	5276	
(total students)			26712
• Support staff			1181

Academic Infrastructure

- 9 faculties, each faculty representing a grouping of cognate subject areas
- each faculty owns several “fields”, which are co-terminous with groupings of staff in “schools“
- each field represents a grouping of cognate modules
- currently 59 fields
- currently 4,604 modules (many with 500+ students enrolled on them and several have 1000+ students)

So, the fundamental principle of parity of treatment for all students presents interesting challenges ….!

UWE Taught Programmes (ie excluding PG research)

- 577 programmes, leading to 3193 named awards
- 96% of UG students and 70% of PG students gain their awards through credit accumulation (excludes short courses and some professional programmes eg LPC (Law)
- each CA award has a minimum credit requirement which includes a minimum number of credits at each level (eg 360 credits for a degree with honours including a minimum of 100 at HE level 3 and a minimum of 100 at HE level 2

Credit, Threshold Competence and Differentiated Outcomes

- credit is awarded for successfully completing a module to a standard which reflects threshold competence (but what does this mean? UK v US)

- recognition of differential levels of competence above the threshold level is a separate process

(both practices present challenges in the context of Bologna due to different national norms for representing the minimum level of acceptable performance to gain an award or to pass a module – cf the ECTS compromise)

Principles of UWE's CA Framework

- a flexible range of module/unit credit ratings (one standard module size is unnecessarily restrictive and does not "fit" all disciplines – modules of 10/15/20/30/40/50/60 credits at all levels are permitted)

- "progression" from one module level to another is determined exclusively by meeting pre-requisites, ensuring necessary combinations through "co-requisites" where appropriate and excluding certain combinations to prevent duplication of learning outcomes

- no “stages” (ie no requirement to gain an average mark/grade of X across Y proportion of a full-time [equivalent] programme in order to “progress”
- simultaneous study of modules at different levels is permissible
- no distinction between full-time and part-time students in curriculum content or assessment
- a student’s eligibility for an award is exclusively determined by credit accumulation

- no compensation at module level
- no condonement – except against extenuation within a prescribed limit and even then credit is not awarded
- a credit shortfall of 20% against the requirements of an award is permissible against extenuation but is not automatic (award board discretion)

LEARNING OUTCOMES (1)

- every PROGRAMME leading to a UWE award must have prescribed LEARNING OUTCOMES

- every MODULE within the UWE Modular Framework must have prescribed LEARNING OUTCOMES

but

on what basis are

LEARNING OUTCOMES attached to LEVELS?

and, moreover

LEVELS …. of what? …. LEARNING

… (but how might this be packaged?)

- by using descriptors of learning outcomes for **whole qualifications**

  (but are LOs in Programme Specifications too **general** to be meaningful?)

- by using descriptors of learning outcomes for Modules, or "**part qualifications?"**

  (but at which point do "part qualifications" become too **fragmented** to be meaningful?)

LEARNING OUTCOMES (2)

might LOs suggest the appropriate place of

- an award in the hierarchy of learning achievements in Higher Education?

- a module/unit in the hierarchy of achievement within a programme leading to an award?

  - but on what basis are LOs within these hierarchies differentiated?

level descriptors

LEARNING OUTCOMES (3)

LOs for Modules are expressed by reference to (Credit) Level Descriptors
(cf Credit Guidelines (2001) pp 7/8 and SEEC Credit Level Descriptors (2003)

SEEC suggests four sub-divisions at each level

- development of (subject specific) knowledge and understanding (factual/conceptual/level of complexity)
- (generic) cognitive and intellectual skills
- (generic) key transferable skills
- practical (subject specific) skills

If a curriculum represents the sum of its parts and parts = “modules” or “units” …….

(a) a measure is necessary to show how each module/unit at each level of learning relates to other modules/units in terms of the demands it makes on the learner

(b) a framework is necessary to differentiate between levels of intellectual demands and other demands on the learner

the measure might be “CREDIT” …

the framework might be a structure within which (credit) level descriptors can be used…

LEARNING OUTCOMES (4)
provide a definition of what the learner is expected to achieve … and must be

S pecific (and appropriate to the level of learning)

M easurable (without requiring over-assessment)

A chievable (within the scope of the programme or module)

R ealistic

T ime-related

and are integral to programme and module design

LEARNING OUTCOMES ≠ AIMS

(nb “objectives” is an ambiguous term)

LEARNING OUTCOMES (5)

…. are not all achieved at the end of the learning experience …….

PROCESS – derived OUTCOMES

END POINT – derived OUTCOMES

LEARNING OUTCOME statements require

- an active verb
- a qualitative descriptor
- terms that indicate the nature of the performance required to demonstrate achievement of the LEARNING OUTCOME
- what else?

(cf Moon 2003)

(examples from handout)

Questions (1)

1. Is it possible to formulate meaningful statements of learning outcomes at PROGRAMME level (cf QAA programme specifications?)?

2. If meaningful statements of learning outcomes are made at MODULE level, how can we avoid duplication and fragmentation within a student's learning experience?

3. Does a requirement to state learning outcomes for every constituent part of a curriculum lead to reductionism?

Questions (2)

4. Does a student have to achieve all of the learning outcomes of a module to gain credit?

5. Is it acceptable to differentiate between **essential** learning outcomes and **desirable** learning outcomes? If so, how might one avoid a contradiction between this and credit accumulation?

6. Does each learning outcome have to be assessed ?

7. Does each learning outcome have to be assessed separately?