Using 'learning outcomes' in higher education: where is the evidence?

Dobbins Kerry, Brooks Sara, Rawlinson Mark, Scott Jon, Norman Robert, *University of Leicester, UK*

Paper

Learning outcomes are statements of what a student should be able to do, know and understand at the end of a learning period (Dillon 2005), and they are typically expressed from the student's perspective, for example 'at the end (of the unit/module/course) you will know/be able to do…' (Jackson, Wisdom, and Shaw 2003; Adam 2004). In recent decades learning outcomes have received considerable attention within the educational literature as discussions about their adoption within higher education, both nationally and internationally, have grown. Much of this attention has involved scholars debating the desirability of a learning outcomes approach in higher education. Those who view learning outcomes as emerging from the Bologna process suggest that they are a central element of the move towards student-centred education (e.g. Adam 2008). In contrast, others align learning outcomes to managerialist/accountability agendas and argue that they have the potential to stifle creativity and flexibility within the learning process (e.g. Hussey and Smith 2002; Buss 2008). Despite these debates, significant resources are offered on the internet to support academics in writing effective learning outcomes and implementing them within their practices. There is, however, correspondingly little information or empirical evidence about how students and academics actually view and use them. Consequently, whilst debates about the appropriateness of learning outcomes in higher education continue, understanding about their impact upon learning experiences or teaching practices remains limited.

The 'Learning Outcomes Project' is concerned to build the empirical evidence-base regarding the use of learning outcomes in higher education. Our presentation will report the findings from two specific initial research investigations:

1. A review of the published literature to identify the scope and extent of the evidence-base concerning the adoption and/or validation of a learning outcomes approach in higher education.

2. Surveys and interviews conducted with students and academic staff at one institution to elicit their views concerning the utility of learning outcomes and the extent to which they are used within learning and teaching practices.

These two investigations are directly connected, as the results of the literature review indicated that there have been very few research-based examinations of student and lecturer/tutor use of and engagement with learning outcomes. Indeed, there has been little research attention directed overall towards the adoption of a learning outcomes-based approach in higher education. Of the 74 papers included in the review, only 10 reported the results of an empirical investigation concerning learning outcomes. The remaining 64 papers discussed learning outcomes largely from a theoretical or reflective perspective. Consequently, our results illustrate that a learning outcomes approach is being implemented in higher education without any substantial evidence-base to validate it. From this review, it is recommended that research efforts should be directed, with a matter of some urgency, towards exploring student and academic staff perceptions of and engagement with learning

outcomes, and examining the impact of these outcomes on student learning and achievement.

Our surveys and interviews with academic staff and students begin to fill the research gap that has been identified within the literature review. In particular, this research identifies the nuanced and varied understandings about and uses of learning outcomes. In total, 918 students across three disciplines in the institution responded to the 'Learning Outcomes Project' survey and 20 students participated in focus group sessions. The findings offer support for contentions on both sides of the educationalist/managerialist learning outcomes debate. The majority of students reported that learning outcomes are useful learning aids and are used variously as guides for course syllabuses, note-taking or revision frameworks. In contrast, some students indicated that they may struggle, at times, to deduce from their learning outcomes the depth of learning that is required. This point reinforces Hussey and Smith's (2003, p.358) argument that these types of outcomes are imbued with a 'spurious sense of precision and clarity'. The danger of learning being restricted by learning outcomes was recognised, leading some in the focus groups to stress that these outcomes should be used as guides for their learning and not become the sole focus of it. Significantly, the majority of students did not want to see learning outcomes abolished but used more effectively by their tutors and within their courses, so that they themselves could use them more effectively in their studies.

Seventy-six responses were received for the staff survey, across the same three disciplines, and interviews were conducted with 11 academics. Our findings suggest that there are both similarities and differences in how academics from different disciplines understand and enact learning outcomes, which includes the extent to which they refer to them with their students and whether they plan out their learning outcomes first or fit them post-hoc to their teaching content. Significantly, whilst the interview data showed that opinions about learning outcomes can vary along a student-centred learning to tick-box accountability continuum, it also revealed more nuanced understandings in which both purposes can be subtly incorporated into academics' actual implementations of them. The learning outcomes literature does not adequately acknowledge or address these nuances and our findings suggest that it is time to move beyond the polarised arguments that currently dominate discussions.

The research conducted to date for the 'Learning Outcomes Project' has identified important weaknesses and gaps within the evidence-base concerning learning outcomes in higher education. The project is now beginning to fill those gaps and, in so doing, is enriching discussions about the implementation of this approach in tertiary education.

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