Writing and using learning outcomes: a practical guide

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Abstract:
The overall aim of the Bologna Agreement (1999) is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education in Europe. One of the main features of this process is the need to improve the traditional ways of describing qualifications and qualification structures. As a step towards achieving greater clarity in the description of qualifications, by 2010 all modules and programmes in third level institutions throughout the European Union will be written in terms of learning outcomes. International trends in education show a shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach, i.e. the focus is not only on teaching but also on what the students are expected to be able to do at the end of the module or programme. Statements called learning outcomes are used to express what the students are expected to achieve and how they are expected to demonstrate that achievement. Learning outcomes are defined as statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning (ECTS, 2005). When writing learning outcomes it is helpful to make use of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. This classification or categorisation of levels of thinking behaviour provides a ready-made structure and list of verbs to assist in writing learning outcomes. Most learning outcomes describe evidence of learning in areas like knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. This area is known as the cognitive domain. The other two main domains are the affective domain (attitudes, feelings, values) and the psychomotor domain (physical skills). In general, when writing learning outcomes begin with an action verb followed by the object of that verb. This handbook contains a list of action verbs for each area of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Sentences should be kept short to ensure clarity. Learning outcomes must be capable of being assessed. When deciding on the number of learning outcomes to write, the general recommendation in the literature is about six learning outcomes per module. The most common mistake in writing learning outcomes is to use vague terms like know, understand, learn, be familiar with, be exposed to, be acquainted with and be aware of. It is important to link learning outcomes to teaching and learning activities and assessment. This may be done with the aid of a grid to assist in checking that the learning outcomes map on to the teaching and learning activities as well as to the mode of assessment. The advantages of learning outcomes for teachers and students are well documented in the literature in terms of clarity, effectiveness of teaching and learning, curriculum design and assessment. In addition, learning outcomes assist greatly in the more systematic design of programmes and modules.

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Theme by

- Learning outcomes are more precise, easier to compose and far clearer than objectives.