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DEFINING GOOD LEARNING OUTCOMES – UKLO CASE¹

Natasha Petrova - Popovski, PhD

University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, Rectorate,
natasa.popovski@uklo.edu.mk

Prof. Marija Malenkovska Todorova, PhD

Faculty of Technical Sciences, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” – Bitola,
marija.malenkovska@uklo.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

The 2008 European Qualification Frameworks’ recommendation defines learning outcomes as ‘...statements of what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process’. This paper is mainly focused to obtain answers to the questions: What are learning outcomes? Why are learning outcomes important? What is the difference between learning outcomes and learning objectives? What are the main characteristics of good learning outcomes? How do we know if UKLO’s learning outcomes meet the objective criteria? The research include many scientific sources, such as published papers and professional instructions/manuals by relevant educational institutions as well as UKLO’s acts and documents, closely related to this topic.

KEY WORDS: learning outcomes, study programme, quality

¹ professional paper

INTRODUCTION

The defining learning outcomes is a main driving force for working on this paper, since the way such outcomes are defined and written orients teaching and learning, and influences the quality and relevance of education and training. This is proven over and over again through the process of evaluating the study programmes, the University's teaching practice and, finally, the labour market assessment of learners' competences.

The paper is focused on the best practices and theory on developing learning outcomes agreed among higher education World policy-makers and stakeholders wanting these practices and theory to be transferred on and modified, minded the specifics of Macedonian higher education system.

Since, the process of defining learning outcomes is a very complex one, containing several phases and connecting numerous "players", the paper tries to give a preview of the basic phases, their purpose as well as the importance of critical figures involved in the process.

Having into consideration that the paper's authors are engaged into the processes of defining learning outcomes at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, the paper aims to point out the need of ever adjusting and vibrant defined learning outcomes, that will correctly reflect the curricula goals and University/faculty capacities connected to the labour market demands and learners' expectations.

DEFINING LEARNING OUTCOMES

Studying the various relevant definitions of learning outcomes leads to a conclusion that there is a common understanding that the learning outcomes are '...statements of what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process' as is recommended by the 2008 European Qualification Frameworks. This is the most basic definition of the learning outcomes that encompasses broader definitions such as one found in Cedefop document (2017), *Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook*, stating among other that the learning outcomes can be

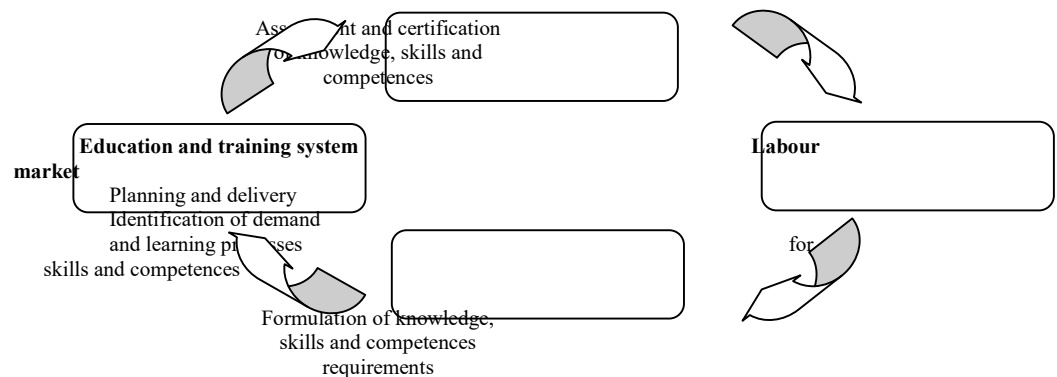
seen as a loop where the interaction between what is intended and what has actually been achieved feeds into a continuous improvement process.

The Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, University of Toronto, stresses out that “instead of focusing on coverage of material, learning outcomes articulate how students will be able to employ the material, both in the context of the class and more broadly.”

Apart from the basic understanding of what learning outcomes are, there is an evident need of not forgetting that the learning outcomes must be developed into an ongoing process, including the study materials and context, without ignoring the labour market requirements.

The essential point of the previous statements is that the learning outcomes should be perceived as a bridging tool between the study programmes and the world of work.

The above can be shown as the following image



Picture 1. Basic elements in the procedure for defining learning outcomes

Source: Cedefop, 2013

The learning outcomes have different meanings for the main different stakeholders involved in their process development. So, for students, learning outcomes draw connections between courses and between coursework and other kinds of knowledge, enhancing students’ engagement. Through learning outcomes students understand the conditions and goals of their study

programmes. The professors, most importantly, use the learning outcomes to focus on the knowledge and skills that will be most valuable to the student now and in the future and, in that way, set the standards for course success evaluation. As for the higher education institutions, the learning outcomes contribute to the development of a coherent curriculum, providing structures from which courses and programmes can be evaluated and can assist in programme and curricular design. The learning outcomes help into identifying gaps or overlapping in programme offerings, and clarify priorities in each level – course, programme, institution. Finally, the learning outcomes are referentials of what are graduates capable of from the employers' perspective. The outcomes are seen as an important tool for recognizing the insufficiencies in the students' capacities and workload demands. Therefore, as mentioned above, the learning outcomes signalize what the education system should target in order to improve employability rates.

The learning outcomes should clearly distinct from the learning objectives. It means that learning outcomes should focus on what the student should know and be able to do by the end of the education, while learning objectives are focused on the material the professor intends to cover or the disciplinary questions to be addressed.

PHASES IN DEVELOPING GOOD LEARNING OUTCOMES

The process of developing good learning outcomes offers an opportunity for reflection on what is most necessary to help learners gain this knowledge and these skills. In accordance to University of Toronto Faculty Developing Learning Outcomes: A Guide for University of Toronto Faculty, ©Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, University of Toronto (2017), there are several main phases in developing the learning outcomes. It considers the answers to the key questions regarding: essential things students must know and be able to succeed in the study programme, the basic and advanced knowledge and skills gained throughout the study process connected to the work, and interrelation with other areas of knowledge, that improve the study curriculum leading to success in defining and developing realistic and reachable learning outcomes.

It is very important these answers to be clearly presented through key words, describing disciplinary content and generalizable skills taught. Therefore, the first phase is Articulation of the outcomes, that is based on a list of useful language for clarification the needed learning outcomes.

The next core phase in this process is the precise Addressing levels of learning using six vectors: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, and Create, which help identifying and describing different aspects of learning – content, skills and values.

Connecting the outcomes is the final phase in the process of their developing. It is a very important one since there is a need for interrelating, complying with and contextual completing of the courses in the frame of the study programme.

These phases lead toward SMART(TT) learning outcomes:

- S – speak to the learner
- M – measurable
- A – applicable
- R – realistic
- T – time bound
- T – transparent
- T – transferrable.

HOW DO WE KNOW IF UKLO’S LEARNING OUTCOMES MEET THE OBJECTIVE CRITERIA

There is a formal procedure for creation of study programmes in higher education in North Macedonia, issued by the National Agency for Quality – Board for Accreditation. Additionally, when it comes to defining learning outcomes, there are some legal acts that derived from the National Qualifications Framework. Within the Law on National Qualifications Framework the basic definitions, principles and criteria for the higher education are set, amongst other (in/non-)formal education levels. The Law defines the learning outcomes as “statements about what the participant knows, understands and is able to do, as a result of the formal, non-formal or informal learning process. Learning outcomes are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences (autonomy and responsibility).”

Furthermore, the descriptions of learning outcomes referred to all three types of studies (first, second and third cycles) are also presented. The descriptions are based on three main pillars – Knowledge and understandings, Skills and Competences. These pillars offers mutual connections and continuation beginning from the first to the third study cycle, starting from the basics (first cycle) and ending in the most demanding study cycle (third).

Going through the descriptions one can notice that they encompass the elements relevant for SMART(TT) learning outcomes. According to them, the professors/faculties/universities, in the process of defining the learning outcomes, should take into consideration what the students will know or be able to do at the completion of the respective study cycle (course), what are the assessment tools for measuring the students' achievements, applicability and transferability of the gained knowledge, skills and competences in a wide variety of contexts – educational and real-life, and their understandability/transparency for students.

The Law's descriptions refer to the general learning outcomes and their basic characteristics. The more detailed guidelines for study programmes/courses learning outcomes are prescribed in the bylaws issued by the National Agency for Quality – Board for Accreditation. In fact, there are Guidelines for preparing accreditation documents for study programmes for all three cycles, containing directions how the learning outcomes should be articulated in order to meet the accreditation criteria.

Respecting the importance of producing quality in study programmes, starting from their preparation, the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, also issued its own acts. Defining SMART(TT) learning outcomes is a great part of these documents, among other elements.

Having on mind that there is a pile of documents covering the process of defining learning outcomes on all level, it appears that it is sufficient, but there is something missing.

When it comes to reviewing and assessment of the study programmes content, it is an evident need of training and guiding the teaching staff for defining SMART(TT) learning outcomes. This is also a recommendation from the IEP (EUA) expert team for external evaluation of the University, based on their findings that there is "a lack of appreciation and understanding of the concept of student-centred learning (SCL) and, in particular, the role of learning outcomes..." and also "lack of differentiation in learning outcomes for

different levels of study and, generally, a failure to link learning outcomes to assessment tasks.”

Apart from this, it is notable that the weakest point in defining learning outcomes is TRANSFERABILITY attribute, meaning that there is a discrepancy between educational context and work life demands. These question the MEASURABILITY and REALISTIC attributes, as well, because the reality proves the differences between faculty and labour market knowledge, skills and capacities’ assessments. The faults of the UKLO’s learning outcomes come as results from the surveys some faculties realized for the purpose of study programme content preparation, but also from the direct contacts with the real sector representatives (business and non-business). The working experience of this paper authors help to identify the roots for these inconsistencies in faculties/University insufficient equipment for practical work and research purposes, as well as lapses in students practical work, either it comes to the actual planning of the practical work or its proper realization.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a broad scope of definitions for learning outcomes, but the general notion is that defining learning outcomes is a continuous complex process through which the students gain knowledge, skills and competences, not only useful in the educational, but also the real-life context, having on mind the different meanings for the main different stakeholders involved in the process development.

The learning outcomes and the learning objectives cannot be put under the same definition. While learning outcomes cover what the student should know and be able to do by the end of the education, i.e. the applicative dimension, the learning objectives are more static and theoretic.

When we speak about good learning outcomes, it means that they should be SMART(TT) ones, i.e. they should comply with the attributes: Speak to the learner, Measurable, Applicable, Realistic, Time bound, Transparent and Transferrable.

There are national acts that prescribe the basic elements of learning outcomes in higher education, but also UKLO has its institutional guidelines containing more in-depth directions for defining and describing the outcomes for all three study cycles. Nevertheless, the institutional experience and analyses, as well as the external evaluation, showed that there is a need for further upgrading this process and transfer it from written words into practice. This leads us to the recommendation for organizing “training and guidance ... and delivered to academic staff across the university so that they can provide consistent student-centred learning, particularly in relation to learning outcomes.” This training and guidance should be focused especially towards the transferability, measurability and realistic attributes of the learning outcomes.

In order this training to be successful it should be organized and realized in the scope of an institutional structure dealing with the quality assurance and quality enhancement. It is also one of the recommendations given by the IEP (EUA) expert team.

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