

Learning Outcomes and Public Trust in Higher Education

Tia Loukkola and Helene Peterbauer

Abstract

Learning outcomes are increasingly used in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance processes. As such, they aim to secure and foster public trust among education providers. Yet, against the backdrop of internationalized higher education, questions arise on whether learning outcomes can fulfill this function on a global scale and whether there is a way, and need, to verify if learning outcomes have been achieved.

Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner should know and be able to do at the end of a learning experience or sequence. Within higher education institutions, they are meant to guide the development of curricula and the work of teachers in delivering curricula. They should be aligned with pedagogical and assessment methods, thus ensuring that the core aspects of the educational experience are geared toward the same outcomes and student learning. In the 2018 Trends survey conducted by the European University Association (EUA), almost half of the respondents reported that the introduction of learning outcomes had to some extent driven methodological change in teaching. Among other benefits reported were revision of course content and assessment and enhanced awareness of learning objectives among students.

Beyond being a vehicle for promoting outcome-based, student-centered learning, learning outcomes have another fundamental goal: to secure and foster public trust among education providers. They are a tool to enhance transparency and accountability within higher education and in relation to its stakeholders, not least society, which needs to be assured of the added value of the higher education that it contributes to funding. Enhanced transparency is believed to enable understanding and comparability across borders—this is the basic ideal driving the Bologna Process in Europe.

Defining Intended Learning Outcomes

With this dual function in mind, an important role has been attributed to learning outcomes in many of the frameworks developed over the past two decades with the aim of enhancing public trust in higher education. For example, they are at the core of qualifications framework developments around the world. In the European Higher Education Area, all 48 countries have a national qualifications framework or are in the process of developing one. As regional collaboration in higher education increases, regional (reference) qualifications frameworks have emerged. To give a few examples, there are regional frameworks in Europe and in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and one is currently being developed in Africa. The aim of these frameworks is to increase the transparency and comparability of qualifications by using learning outcomes as descriptors against which to reference qualifications, allocated within given framework levels.

The underpinning philosophy is that all study programs should be correctly aligned to their respective national qualifications framework, to assure the public that graduates have the knowledge and skills of the corresponding level in the framework. Frameworks allow actors and stakeholders outside the education sector to “read” and understand graduates’ knowledge and skills, and thus to assess how these fit into the labor market, to name only one example. The frameworks also allow for comparison between qualifications from different systems and thus support freedom of movement for education and employment purposes.

Verifying Achieved Learning Outcomes

But is there a universal, transferable method of verifying that students have achieved the prescribed learning outcomes of their programs, and that the approach is working? A decade has passed since the OECD launched its Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study, which aimed to develop an international assessment framework and instruments to measure what first-degree graduates know and can do. One of the starting points for this much-headed study was the perceived need to provide internationally comparable data on the effectiveness of higher education learning. This need was primarily driven by demands for more accountability and transparency

Beyond being a vehicle for promoting outcome-based, student-centered learning, learning outcomes have another fundamental goal: to secure and foster public trust among education providers.

within higher education, with an emphasis on the comparability of the levels of student achievements. Eventually, the AHELO experience signaled a set of methodological issues regarding the global perspective of such an assessment instrument. As a result, the project was abandoned and there have not been any comparable endeavors since.

With the same objective in mind (i.e., finding a way to compare students' achievements in different countries in a meaningful manner), but taking a different angle than the AHELO project, the CALOHEE project (Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe) emphasizes different institutional and program profiles in the assessment. The work of the project, which is coordinated by the International Tuning Academy, is ongoing; hence the results and success of the methodology are not yet known.

For all these reasons, standardized tests measuring higher education learning outcomes and providing comparability remain rare, if nonexistent. However, there are other approaches to verify the effectiveness of education using learning outcomes while still respecting individual systems and institutional profiles. In Europe, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area stipulate that higher education institutions must ensure that their programs have defined learning outcomes (standard 1.2) as a basis for student assessment (standard 1.3). Thus, this framework anchors learning outcomes and their appropriate assessment in internal quality assurance. It assigns responsibility for adequate articulation and implementation of learning outcomes to the higher education institutions themselves. And each institution may do this differently.

Comparability above Accountability?

While learning outcomes are based on a common approach, this does not necessarily mean that they, or their assessment, must be comparable in the sense of being standardized, let alone being the same across various higher education systems. The inadequacy of large-scale attempts at comparing learning outcomes at the international level does not entail that learning outcomes as a concept are flawed in terms of their transparency function, because transparency does not negate diversity. Learning outcomes create many benefits for both higher education institutions (as demonstrated by EUA's 2018 Trends survey) and their stakeholders, and their value is versatile. For this reason, they constitute a key element of a variety of European transparency and accountability tools.

The decentralized manner in which learning outcomes are currently defined and assessed poses challenges to other comparative tools, such as ranking exercises. The EUA recently conducted a mapping of indicators of education quality used in international university rankings, which highlighted a lack of indicators linked to learning outcomes or quality of learning across all rankings covered in the mapping. This finding concurs with the overall conclusion of the study (of which this mapping was a part), that there has been no substantial development in the use of indicators of quality or effectiveness in higher education in the recent past. This suggests that there is no meaningful, one-size-fits-all tool to define and assess the outcomes of higher education. However, as stated, learning outcomes can foster public trust in higher education institutions through a variety of other means. ▲

Tia Loukkola is director for institutional development at the European University Association (EUA). E-mail: tia.loukkola@eua.eu. Helene Peterbauer is a policy and project officer at EUA. E-mail: helene.peterbauer@eua.eu.