

LEARNING OUTCOMES IN EXTERNAL PROGRAMME REVIEWS: A CASE STUDY FROM BAHRAIN

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Abstract

This paper considers the role that learning outcomes play in the programme reviews conducted by the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) of the Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training (QAAET) in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The findings of the 12 bachelor programmes reviewed in the field of Business Administration reveal that almost all of those programmes have developed programme intended learning outcomes (ILOs). This, in most cases, is the result of the programme review framework developed and used by the HERU of the QAAET to review the programmes offered by higher education institutions operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain. There is evidence that the conducting of programme reviews has started a paradigm shift, moving programmes from an input-based approach towards an outcome-based approach. An outcome-based approach to programme design, delivery, assessment and evaluation will inevitably be of more significance as the Kingdom develops its National Qualification Framework, which is due to be implemented by the year 2014.

Introduction

The last decade of the 20th century witnessed a global paradigm shift in higher education whereby it changed from teaching to learning that is outcome focused, and where students became the centre of the learning process (Al-Mudhahki, 2010). This shift has influenced the way internal and external quality assurance processes are implemented (Adamson, 2010). Learning outcomes have provided a means for both education institutions and quality assurance agencies through which the actual learners' achievements can be evaluated and measured and hence provide a 'genuine measure of the value of education' (Maher, 2004: 47).

This paper highlights the role that the use of learning outcomes play in the programme reviews conducted by the Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training (QAAET) of the Kingdom of Bahrain and to provide a critical analysis of the findings of those reviews. This is imperative as the Kingdom develops its National Qualification Framework which will be outcome-based and is planned to be implemented by the year 2014.

Background

During the 1990s and beyond the number of students seeking access to higher education in the Kingdom of Bahrain increased dramatically. This placed a great pressure on the national university, University of Bahrain, increasing the number of its student intake from 9,665 in the academic year 1998–1999 to 18,773 in the academic year 2002-2003 (CIO, 2012). In response to growing demand for access to higher education and as a result of the general privatisation policy adopted by the Bahraini government, it made the unprecedented decision to open higher education to the private sector. This led to an exponential growth in the number of higher education institutions and a wide diversification in the range of programmes offered and, hence, a significant increase in the number of higher education graduates. Currently there are 12 private and two public higher education institutions operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The Higher Education Council (HEC), established by the Higher Education Law in 2005 and operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, is the regulatory body responsible for licensing the private higher education institutions. At the time of this paper, institutions (both public and private) are responsible for the development of the structure and content of their study programmes, with minimal requirements, such as total credit hours, imposed by the HEC on the private providers. Maintaining the quality of the outcomes of programmes offered by those institutions has been a source of considerable concern to the government, the public and the marketplace, especially with the absence of an independent body reporting on the quality of these offerings.

In response to this concern, and as a part of a wider education reform process overseen by the Education Reform Board, the QAAET was established in 2008, as an independent body mandated, pursuant to Article 4 of Royal Decree No. 32 of 2008, amended by Royal Decree No. 6 of 2009, to 'review the quality of the performance of education and training institutions in light of the guiding indicators developed by the Authority' (Gazette, 2008: 10).

To fulfil its mandate of reviewing the higher education provision in Bahrain, the Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) of the QAAET developed two review

frameworks: the institutional review framework and the programme review framework. The institutional review framework 'evaluates the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance arrangements against a pre-defined set of quality indicators' while a programme review is a 'specialised exercise, which focuses on the quality assurance arrangements within existing learning programmes' and reports on whether the programme meets minimum standards (QAAET, 2009b: 54). Launched six months apart, the two review frameworks complement each other. An analysis of the review results goes some way in providing a comprehensive picture of the status of higher education in the Kingdom. One of the main objectives of conducting programme reviews is to 'provide decision makers ... with evidence-based judgements on the quality of learning programme' (QAAET, 2009a: 9).

Outcome-based learning

As higher education was opened to the private sector, international trends such as massification, hosting of international branches and to a lesser extent increased student diversity developed rapidly in the Bahraini higher education sector. Considering the wide range of differences in the way these newly developed higher education institutions operated, including their delivery, teaching and learning, and assessment methods, the QAAET adopted the definition of quality as 'fitness for purpose'. In both review frameworks, external reviews are conducted by an independent panel of peers. However, the process is guided by the institution's own self-evaluation against a pre-defined set of indicators. Hence, the process respects the autonomy and identity of the programme and the institution while applying externally determined indicators. This provides a system that is 'based on explicit reference points using learning outcomes and competencies, levels and level indicators, subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors' (EHEA, 2005: 76), as its main features. An approach that has been adopted by a number of countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and South Africa, over the last two decades (Jarvie, 2003; McNaught, 2009; Adamson, 2010; CHEA, 2011; De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2005).

The description, formulation, measurement and evaluation of learning outcomes have emerged amongst the most pressing topics for higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and research institutions (Gallavara, 2008). The QAAET review frameworks, for both institutional and academic programme reviews, place much emphasis on learning outcomes. Whilst the institutional reviews evaluate the internal quality assurance system used by the institutions to ensure that programme and course learning outcomes are developed, evaluated and reviewed properly for all their offerings, and that there are consistently implemented policies used to measure students' achievements of those learning outcomes; it is in the programme reviews where the appropriateness and the level of students' achievements of those outcomes are evaluated by the peer reviewers.

Learning outcomes are statements of what learners are 'expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning' (Adam, 2009: 2). The introduction of learning outcomes in programme development and evaluation has ignited a wide range of debate amongst academics. Searle & Mckenna argue that using learning outcomes as a measure for the quality of programme delivery and outcomes could hinder academic freedom and 'ignore the learning that emerges from educational encounters which have not been pre-determined, but which might be every bit as important' (Searle & Mackenna, 2007: 108). Allais also maintains that while learning outcomes could play some role in providing guidelines for designing learning programmes, they cannot provide a basis for the programme design or for the comparison of qualifications (Allais, 2006). Adamson, on the other hand, suggests that incorporating learning outcomes in the measuring tools of the programme reviews enables both the institution/programme being reviewed and the reviewing authority to have a common language (Adamson, 2010), which should in turn lead eventually to a more efficient and effective review process (CHEA, 2011). This is emphasised by Boughey who argues that the use of outcome-based education leads to the construct of curriculum and assessment alignment and hence provides institutions, and, the author argues quality assurance and accreditation agencies as well, with 'a tool which can be used to ensure that students' learning needs are met and standards are

achieved' (Boughey, 2012: 18). Maher also suggests that the adoption of this learning paradigm 'puts the learner at the heart of the educational process' (Maher, 2004: 47). A setting, she argues, that is favoured by both educators and students.

Whilst the author agrees that using learning outcomes as the only indicator to evaluate the quality of an offering could limit the learning experience and put an undesired emphasis throughout the learning experience on the achievement, and only the achievement, of a pre-defined set of outcomes, these outcomes used as a part of a holistic programme evaluation framework, do provide a reference point that ensures, once achieved, a minimum academic standard of the graduates. Moreover, programmes can be benchmarked nationally and internationally. This is of high importance as the international trend is moving towards developing and implementing national qualification frameworks that are based on the attainment of pre-defined learning outcomes and level descriptors. It is within this context that this paper considers the use of learning outcomes as one of the main indicators for reviewing and evaluating the quality of a given programme and its academic standards. Furthermore, as the Kingdom of Bahrain continues with the development of its national qualification framework, which is similar to those of the United Kingdom and South Africa, an outcome-based approach will become of increasing significance.

The QAAET in developing its Programme Review Framework gave a prominent role to learning outcomes in both Indicator 1: Curriculum and Indicator 3: Academic Standards of the Graduates. It was deemed important to evaluate the extent to which students learning needs are identified and met as this is a strong indicator of academic standards being achieved. It is worth mentioning here that the scope of this paper is limited to the use of learning outcomes in the development, delivery and assessment of course content and is not concerned with the wider aspect of teaching and learning. It is to the former that we now turn.

Programme review framework

Cycle-1 of the programme reviews conducted by the HERU of the QAAET was launched in January 2009 and ended in May 2012. This cycle was based on a sampling process whereby the reviews were carried out nationally for a particular field of study and degree to ascertain whether the minimum standards are being met (QAAET, 2009a: 10). The reviews were based on the following four indicators:

Indicator 1 - Curriculum. The programme complies with existing regulations in terms of the curriculum, the teaching and assessment of students' achievement; the curriculum demonstrates fitness for purpose.

Indicator 2 - Efficiency of the programme. The programme is efficient in terms of the use of available resources, the admitted students and the ratio of admitted students to successful graduates.

Indicator 3 - Academic standards of the graduates. The graduates of the programme meet acceptable standards in comparison with equivalent programmes in Bahrain and worldwide.

Indicator 4 - Effectiveness of quality management and assurance. The arrangements in place for managing the programme including quality assurance, give confidence in the programme (QAAET, 2009a: 11-13).

It is worth mentioning that each indicator has a set of sub-indicators that must be satisfied and that these sub-indicators cover not only the learning outcomes and their achievements but also inter alia the depth and breadth of the curriculum and its delivery modes and methods.

The review process starts with the institution conducting a self-evaluation of its programme based on the above four indicators and their sub-indicators, followed by a site visit conducted by a panel consisting of peer reviewers. The output of the review is a report drafted by the panel and moderated and adopted by the QAAET that contains the review's main findings (QAAET, 2009a). The report undergoes different stages of internal moderation and quality assurance until it is submitted to the QAAET Board for approval and finally to the Prime Ministers' Court, after which it is published on the QAAET webpage.

Using learning outcomes in programme reviews

The QAAET programme review handbook explicitly expects that higher education institutions have an outcome-based curriculum where intended learning outcomes (ILOs) are clearly stated at both programme and course levels and the teaching, learning and assessment methods are geared towards achieving the course and, hence, the overall programme learning outcomes. Amongst other sub-indicators, the Programme Review Handbook (QAAET, 2009a: 11-12) states:

Intended learning outcomes are expressed in programme and course specification.

Teaching and learning approaches are adopted which support the attainment of aims and intended learning outcomes.

There is a clear link between what is assessed and the programme aims and intended learning outcomes.

Academic standards are clearly stated in terms of aims and intended learning outcomes for the programme and for each course.

Benchmarks and internal and external reference points are used to determine and verify the equivalence of academic standards with other similar programmes in Bahrain and worldwide.

The achievements of the graduates meet programme aims and intended learning outcomes, as expressed in final results, grade distribution and confirmation by internal and external independent scrutiny.

For the purpose of the review, the QAAET defines intended learning outcomes (ILOs) as... the outcome-related definition of knowledge, understanding and skills which the institution intends for its programmes. They should be mission-related, capable of measurement (assessable) and reflect the use of external reference standards at appropriate level (QAAET, 2009a: 61).

On the submission of the self-evaluation report, the higher education institution is expected to submit programme specifications that include: a 'summary of

programme main features and learning outcomes that a typical student is expected to achieve and how ILOs are approached, assessed and achieved across contributing courses' (QAAET, 2009a: 17).

Prior to the site visit, the review panel examines the appropriateness of the programme and course ILOs and their relations to the programme aims and objectives. During site visits, review panel members (international and regional peers), scrutinise samples of student course work and assessments, discuss teaching and learning and assessment approaches with faculty members, and interview students to assess if there is a shared understanding between faculty members and students as to what is expected that students should have learned by the end of each course and by the end of the programme. The panel members interview alumni and employers to evaluate their satisfaction with the attainment of the learning outcomes of the programme. Alumni and employers' satisfaction surveys are also examined when available although these have still not been developed for most programmes.

Hence, the small number of interviewees has meant the information received from those interviews is of limited use. Cohort portfolios and students achievements, on the other hand, proved to be of more use.

Main findings

To date, the HERU of the QAAET has completed the institutional review of the 14 higher education institutions and reviewed a total of 30 programmes distributed across three fields of study, namely: Business Administration (Bachelor: 12, MBA: eight programmes); IT (Master: five programmes); Law (Bachelor: five programmes). The review of these programmes comprised Cycle-1 of programme reviews. As stated above, the cycle started in January 2009 and ended in May 2012 when a new review cycle called 'Programmes-within-College Reviews' was adopted, which allows for the simultaneous review of all programmes (bachelor and master levels) offered within a given college of each institution operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

This section of the paper analyses the findings of the reviews of the 12 bachelor

programmes reviewed in the field of Business Administration (BBA) with regard to the existence and the use of ILOs and their relation to teaching and learning and assessment methods and benchmarking. The site visits for the 12 programmes were conducted between January 2009 and January 2010. Since then four re-reviews and three follow-ups of these programmes have been conducted. The review reports of these programmes are published on the QAAET website (<http://en.qaa.edu.bh/reviewreports.aspx>).

The findings discussed below are extracted from the published reports. The BBA programmes have been selected because they were the first programmes to be reviewed nationwide and are offered by 12 out of the 14 institutions operating in Bahrain. Moreover, the outcomes of the follow-ups and re-reviews of these reports give an insight on how the use of the outcome-based approach has or has not evolved within these programmes. This analysis provides an illustration of the challenges which might be faced by Bahrain and other national systems developing qualification frameworks and a concomitant move to an outcome-based education system.

In the coming paragraphs the author discusses the status of these programmes in relation to the development and usage of learning outcomes both on a programme and course level to inform programme development and delivery and the attainment of these outcomes. The discussion below looks at reports as an aggregate and does not segregate them and evaluate individual programmes.

Almost all 12 programmes reviewed had, at the time of the site visit, developed programme intended learning outcomes (ILOs). However, the levels and stages at which the ILOs were at, varied significantly. The programme ILOs of two of these programmes were at an embryonic stage consisting of short statements that were closer to programme objectives with no clear descriptors. In two others, the programme ILOs mainly related to knowledge and understanding with limited reference to skills. In other programmes, the ILOs were more related to individual courses than to the programme as a whole, i.e. there were overarching learning outcomes on the programme level. However, follow-ups

and re-reviews of these programmes showed a significant improvement in the way programme ILOs were developed and articulated. Five of the reviewed programmes had clearly stated and well-articulated programme ILOs with balance between knowledge and understanding, cognitive and analytical skills, subject and transferrable skills, and the expected graduate attributes being clearly linked to the learning outcomes.

On the individual course level, course ILOs were properly developed and mapped to programme learning outcomes in three of the reviewed programmes. Whereas in the other two programmes that had properly developed programme ILOs, the course ILOs in one of them needed to be reviewed in order to differentiate between ILOs related to knowledge and understanding and those related to the development of subject specific skills. In the other programme, course ILOs did not reflect the course level. In the other seven programmes, course ILOs ranged between being not developed or developed for some of the courses. In most cases there was no clear distinction between learning outcomes related to knowledge and understanding, cognitive and analytical skills, and transferable skills. Moreover, the developed course ILOs in some of the programmes were highly general and courses in different levels had the same ILOs without clear reference to establishing depth of study across different levels of curriculum. The newness of applying learning outcomes and the usage of reference tools such as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) without clear contextualising of the outcome appears to be one of the reasons for such misalignment. Mapping of course ILOs to programme ILOs is expected to reveal the contribution of an individual programme, once completed successfully, to the attainment of the programme outcomes. With such mapping being absent or done hastily, the contribution of any course to the overall programme cannot be assessed or measured.

It is hoped that, like many other countries, the use of learning outcomes for programme evaluation will lead to curriculum reform for programme offerings in the higher education sector such that it would reflect student competencies in disciplinary knowledge, thinking and transferable skills (De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2005). While the follow-ups and re-reviews showed some limited

progress in the development of course ILOs and level descriptors associated with them, one of the main concerns that still persists is the lack of proper mapping of course and programme ILOs. This could be due to the fact that most of these programmes and courses were developed without learning outcomes and that the development of the learning outcomes came at a later stage and in response to an external demand, i.e. the QAAET. The follow-ups and re-reviews showed limited development in this area, most significantly in the engagement of faculty members in developing the learning outcomes and course descriptors. This seems to have created a healthy debate amongst academics towards the benefits/shortcomings of the usage of learning outcomes in course design, delivery and assessment.

Students' approaches to learning differ according to their past experiences and current context. Therefore it is expected that institutions will develop teaching and learning 'policies and practices with the explicit view of student learning in mind' (Barrie & Prosser, 2003: 155). In almost all reviewed programmes teaching and learning policies were at an embryonic stage with a simple general statement of the teaching philosophy of the institution, if they existed at all. Only four of these programmes had clearly developed teaching and learning schemes drawn out to address the course ILOs. The follow-up and re-reviews, however, revealed a progression in the development of teaching and learning methods. In most of these programmes, there was evidence of course documents being developed to include the use of various teaching and learning methods. While some of these documents are still far from clearly linking the teaching and learning methods to the learning outcomes expected to be achieved by the learners, it is this movement and debate amongst faculty members that will provide the seed for future development of an outcome-based learning system (Boughey, 2012).

Assessment has proven to be one of the main problematic areas within these reviews. For an assessment to be effective 'there needs to be an agreement of what is being assessed and how, and against what criteria' (De Vries, 2009: 3). The findings of the reviewed programmes reveal the extent to which assessment is focused on the identified course and programme ILOs. Except

for three of the reviewed programmes, the reports show that institutions generally do not possess the requisite knowledge to evaluate whether the students are fulfilling the learning outcomes of the course, let alone the overall learning outcome of the programme, and the other non-explicit outcomes. This was still persistent throughout most of the follow-ups and re-reviews conducted for the BBA programmes. There were no formal mechanisms within the management of these programmes to assess the extent to which programme or course learning outcomes have been achieved by students. Learning outcomes can be integrated relatively easily into review frameworks if institutions have fully implemented learning outcomes (Gallavara, 2008). However, the lack of appropriately framed learning outcomes, both at programme and course level, makes the task of assuring the quality, effectiveness, fairness and rigorousness of the assessment more difficult both for the external reviewer and for the institution itself.

With the absence of a national qualification framework, benchmarking becomes a challenging exercise. Once the Bahrain National Qualification Framework is implemented in 2014, there will be a common ground for the higher education institutions and programme providers on the one hand and the QAAET and licensing and accrediting bodies on the other. In the meantime, institutions are expected to compare their respective ILOs against internationally well-accepted standards for the field and level of study (Adamson, 2010). Thus, the QAAET evaluates the mechanism used by the programme management team to benchmark their programme learning outcomes against national and international norms for similar programmes or professional standards. Only four of the reviewed programmes showed varying levels of such activities. In almost all the other cases, a faculty member or a committee consisting of a number of faculty members were assigned the task of developing programme and course ILOs without a clear frame of reference or benchmarking requirements.

As stated earlier, in most programmes the ILOs were developed only recently in response to the QAAET programme review requirement rather than through natural development and collegial discussion amongst faculty members. This, in addition to the lack of appropriately framed learning outcomes at both

programme and course level, has led to the lack of understanding, among faculty members, of the reasons behind the development of these ILOs thus hindering the role of ILOs in curriculum development and delivery. During follow-ups and re-reviews, however, there was evidence of such debates being raised amongst faculty members in a number of these programmes. This was seen in the documents submitted by the institutions and the way in which faculty members engaged with review panel members. It is hoped that this will create a foundation for a full national debate as the Kingdom sets the stage for implementing its national qualification framework.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that higher education institutions recently have engaged in developing and formulating learning outcomes for their programmes offerings. This, in most cases, was brought about by the programme review framework developed and used by the HERU of the QAAET to review the programmes offered by higher education institutions operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain. An analysis of the findings of the programme reviews, follow-ups and re-reviews conducted for the 12 bachelor programmes in the field of Business Administration reveals that the development of programme and course learning outcomes are at the early stages for most of these programmes. Only three programmes showed a mature stage of using learning outcomes in the delivery, assessment and benchmark of their offerings. There was evidence, however, throughout the reviews, of an increased awareness of the need to move to a student-centred approach and a willingness to work with quality standards. The published reports show that these reviews indicate that a paradigm shift is underway, moving the design, delivery and assessment of higher education programmes into an outcome-based approach. The effect of this shift is expected to become more evident during the second cycle, Programmes-within-College Reviews, launched in May 2012 and which will cover all programmes at bachelor and master levels offered by higher education institutions operating in Bahrain.

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