

Building Academic Cultures of Evidence: A Perspective on Learning Outcomes in Higher Education by Dr Peter Ewell

The use of outcomes-based approaches is now worldwide and their salience is growing at both the institutional and national levels in designing curriculum and teaching approaches and in determining their effectiveness. Effectively implementing an outcomes-based approach in higher education demands that universities develop a “culture of evidence,” characterized by the continuous collection and use of evidence about student learning to improve teaching and learning. This, in turn, requires developing a common language about learning that allows academic leaders and teaching staff to communicate their expectations about learning and to align their teaching.

Advantages of adopting an outcomes approach include clarity of expectations, flexibility of instructional provision, the ability to compare learning across settings, and portable academic credentials. Disadvantages include the difficulty of defining learning outcomes adequately, gaining legitimacy among academics, and excessively disaggregating complex abilities. Applications at the institutional level include program evaluation and improvement, competency-based instructional designs, and managing student transitions across different levels of provision. Applications at the national/system level include performance indicators, resource allocation and institutional “steering,” alignment of standards, and quality assurance.

Obstacles to be overcome in adopting outcomes-based approaches include unclear motives, philosophical objections, and a range of specific implementation challenges. Experience from universities worldwide that have successfully adopted these approaches suggests many specific strategies that can be used to overcome these obstacles. Above all, experience suggests that outcomes-based approaches take time to develop, should be applied flexibly, and with continuing respect for disciplinary and academic values.