

Stakeholder Summary

Report examines the language of learning outcomes

Learning outcomes – what students should know or be able to do at the completion of a course or program – are rapidly replacing credit hours as the preferred unit of measurement for postsecondary learning. But assessment has yet to keep pace with growth, according to a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Project description

The Language of Learning Outcomes: Definitions and Assessments examines the current state of learning outcomes assessment through the lens of [four classifications](#): basic cognitive skills, discipline-specific skills, higher-order cognitive skills and transferrable skills. The report explores the dynamics of each classification, areas of overlap, and challenges and opportunities they present for postsecondary education.

Findings

Assessing learning outcomes is challenged by the number and diversity of outcomes as well as the comparability of the language used. Not all institutions use the same terminology to describe skills and competencies, which affects the extent to which outcomes can be assessed and interpreted reliably, say the authors. For example, while literacy and numeracy have been widely acknowledged as basic cognitive skills linked to positive outcomes later in life such as lower unemployment and higher wages, the postsecondary sector has often viewed them as a prerequisite to higher learning rather than as skills to be developed within a postsecondary program.

The authors say that literacy and numeracy need to be viewed as skills in their own right rather than as ‘background’ skills implicit in postsecondary-level courses.

Disciplinary or content-based knowledge has long been the focus of a postsecondary education although the specific nature doesn’t necessarily lend itself to broader or more generic assessment. While debate continues on whether discipline-specific skills can be assessed in non-disciplinary contexts, these outcomes benefit from more clarity and consensus than other learning outcome categories.

Employers, governments and postsecondary institutions acknowledge the importance of higher-order cognitive skills even if there’s less consensus on what they are or how they are defined – particularly critical thinking. The lack of consistent definitions poses problems for teaching and assessment, and measurement tends to focus on component skills such as communication and problem solving.

Transferable skills – behavioural and personality attributes such as determination, confidence, initiative, persistence and resilience – have long been assessed in early childhood education but have yet to figure prominently in the postsecondary learning outcomes discussion. The authors stress the importance of these outcomes and suggest that the postsecondary sector could look to the K-12 sector for inspiration.

“In order for a system to be truly outcomes-based, we need to prove that students are graduating with the skills they need to succeed,” the authors conclude. “Assessment remains the keystone of the learning outcomes approach at the postsecondary level...and could be an invaluable source of strength and flexibility for a system in transition.”

As part of its comprehensive exploration of learning outcomes assessment, HEQCO convened a [consortium](#) of six Ontario colleges and universities. Each is developing and piloting assessment tools and techniques that, over time, could be adapted across the system. HEQCO also hosted a series of three webinars on learning outcomes. The full series, *Measuring matters: Assessing learning outcomes in higher education*, can be viewed on HEQCO’s [learning outcomes website](#).

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