Learning Outcomes: The Currency That Never Circulated

Why a Common Language of Outcomes Has Not Produced Common Recognition

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Learning outcomes were introduced to make programmes comparable across systems, and comparison has not followed. This article examines why: the outcomes that programmes publish are written at a level of generality that makes them translatable and untestable, the assessment that would verify them is invisible to a reader, and the credit that attaches to them is a measure of time rather than of achievement. It argues that the currency failed because nobody accepted it as payment, and that the instrument which would make it circulate is an external examiner's report rather than a catalogue of statements.

Contents **Page**

1. The Promise and the Record **7**
2. Why the Statements Converge **8**
3. The Assessment Gap **8**
4. Credits and the Time Problem **9**
5. The Recognition Officer's View **9**
6. What Would Make Outcomes Circulate **10**
7. Conclusions **10**

1. The Promise and the Record

The promise of learning outcomes was straightforward. If every programme stated what a graduate would be able to do, then a programme in one country could be compared with a programme in another, a qualification could be recognised on its content rather than on its title, and a student's mobility would be a matter of matching statements rather than of negotiating equivalences.

The record is different. Programmes state their outcomes in language that is nearly identical across institutions, and the identity is not evidence of comparable achievement. It is evidence of a drafting convention: outcomes are written at a level of abstraction that satisfies a template, and a template that any programme can satisfy distinguishes nothing.

Outcomes became a drafting convention rather than a currency

The consequence is that recognition still runs on titles, on institutional reputation and on bilateral agreements, and the outcomes sit in a document that a recognition officer rarely reads. The instrument that was meant to carry the comparison has become an ornament of the programme specification.

2. Why the Statements Converge

The convergence of outcome statements has three causes, and none of them is intellectual laziness.

The first is the template. A national or institutional template asks for four to eight outcomes, written in the future tense, with an action verb and a level. The template is a form, and a form produces conformity: an academic group writing to a template will produce a statement that resembles the statements of its peers, because the template encodes the genre.

The second is the review. An agency that reviews programmes reads outcome statements for their presence, their clarity and their alignment with assessment, and it rarely reads them for their ambition. A statement that is legible to a reviewer is a statement that is general, since a specific statement invites a question about whether the programme can deliver it.

The third is the discipline's own caution. An academic group that writes that its graduates will be able to do something specific has made a promise that its teaching may not keep, and the safer formulation is the one that describes a capacity rather than a performance.

3. The Assessment Gap

The reason outcomes do not circulate is that a reader cannot see whether they are achieved.

An outcome is a claim about what a graduate can do, and the evidence for the claim is the assessment. The assessment is described in the programme specification as a method: an examination, a portfolio, a project. The description does not disclose the standard that was applied, the level that was demanded or the distribution of results, and those are the only facts that would allow a reader to compare two programmes' claims.

The gap is not unavoidable. An external examiner's report states, for a sample of work, what the standard was and whether it was met, and the report is written by someone with standing in the field who has read the work. A recognition officer who could read such a report would have evidence of achievement rather than a statement of intention, and the evidence would be comparable in a way that the statements are not.

4. Credits and the Time Problem

The credit system compounds the difficulty, because a credit measures the volume of work rather than its result.

A credit is defined as a unit of student workload, and the definition is deliberately neutral about what the student has learned. That neutrality is the source of the system's flexibility, since it allows a module of any kind to be assigned credits, and it is the reason that credits cannot carry the comparison that outcomes were meant to carry. A programme that awards sixty credits for a year has stated how long the student worked and not what she achieved.

The two instruments were meant to work together: outcomes would describe the achievement and credits would describe the volume, so that a reader would know both. In practice the credits are used for recognition, because they are countable, and the outcomes are used for documentation, because they are not. The pairing that was designed as complementary has become a hierarchy in which the countable part is the one that operates.

Instrument	Measures	Can support recognition
Credit	Workload	Volume, not achievement
Outcome statement	Intention	Only if verifiable
Assessment method	Format	No standard disclosed
Examiner report	Standard	Yes, for a sample

Table 1 What each instrument can carry

5. The Recognition Officer's View

The people who take recognition decisions describe their practice in terms that the policy discussion rarely consults.

They report that a title is the first and often the only information they receive. They report that a transcript with credits is legible and a programme specification with outcomes is not, because the specification describes a design and the transcript describes a person. They report that a case is decided by the reputation of the awarding institution when the documentation is insufficient, which means that the outcomes are consulted only when everything else has failed.

The view is not a criticism of the officers. It is evidence about which instruments operate in practice, and it suggests that the reform of recognition should proceed by making evidence available rather than by requiring statements. An officer who is given a standard and a sample will use them; an officer who is given an aspiration will use the title.

6. What Would Make Outcomes Circulate

Four measures would give outcomes a function in recognition, and each of them changes a document rather than a principle.

The first is to require that outcomes be paired with an assessment that can be described: what the student produces, what standard is applied and who applies it. The second is to publish external examiners' reports, in a form that protects the anonymity of students and names the standard. The third is to define outcomes at the level of the qualification rather than the module, since a module's outcome is an internal instrument and a qualification's outcome is the one that a recognition officer needs.

The fourth is to make the diploma supplement carry the evidence rather than the description: the outcomes of the qualification, the assessment regime, the distribution of grades and the name of the external examiner. The supplement already has a section for this information and most institutions fill it with a description of the programme's aims.

7. Conclusions

Learning outcomes were meant to be a currency and they became a convention, because a statement of intention cannot carry a comparison that requires evidence of achievement. The credits that were to be their companion measure volume, and volume is what recognition actually uses.

Three conclusions follow. Outcomes should be paired with a described assessment and a published examiner's report, since evidence of the standard is what a reader needs and a statement of the aim is what a reader already has. The qualification rather than the module should be the unit of the statement, because recognition compares qualifications. And the diploma supplement should carry evidence instead of description, which is a change that institutions can make without waiting for a framework, and which would give the currency its first circulation.

Outcome	Credit	Method	Report
intention	workload	format	standard

Figure 1 From statement to evidence

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