Learning outcomes and subject benchmarking in UK

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Structure of the talk

- General context of HE in UK
- The academic infrastructure
- Benchmarking
- Learning outcomes and their development
- The link between outcomes and assessment
- Challenges of assessment
- Academic resistance
- Conclusions and questions

Universities in UK

- Increasing student numbers and declining per capita funding
- Widening participation, different kinds of students and different student demands
- Increasing institutional differentiation and widening 'reputational range' of institutions
- Recruitment and retention problems in some institutions
- The pressures of research selectivity and implications of this for teaching
- Greater student choice and the 'democratisation' of learning and teaching
- Increased accountability - the 'audit explosion'
- Pressures to respond to market demand, employability, the 'knowledge economy'

UK HE agenda to which all university teachers are required to respond

- elaboration and publication of programme specifications with associated learning outcomes;
- systems to ensure quality standards via subject benchmarking;
- more interest in outcomes rather than classroom performance of lecturer;
- improved student feedback and greater rigour and reliability in assessment.
- This entails a shift in the occupational culture of academics.

2 strong pressures

- *Pedagogic* pressures are usually particular to the learning objectives, student intake, modular structure, or some other local feature of the educational institution or environment
- *Regulatory* pressures are, in contrast, geared to national 'standards', quite literally to standardisation, comparability and universalism.
- Both have their own legitimate internal logic

The academic infrastructure…

- Codes of practice
- Benchmark statements
- Qualifications framework
- Programme specifications

http://www.qaa.ac.uk

QAA Codes of practice

- Admissions to higher education
- Academic appeals and complaints
- Course design and review
- Assessment of students
- External examining
- Collaborative provision (incl e-learning)
- Postgraduate research
- Placement learning
- Postgraduate research
- Students with disabilities

Programme specifications

- Aims and any special features
- Knowledge & understanding of:
- Cognitive skills 'students should be able to…'
- Subject practical skills 'students should be able to…'
- Transferable skills
- 1 intellectual
- 2 practical
- 3 personal
- 4 Social/interpersonal

Subject Benchmarking

- Where does the term come from?
- What is the purpose of benchmark statements?
- How were the Benchmark panels constructed?
- How did they work and how did they gain legitimacy?

Greater accountability...an inevitable consequence of the move from an elite to a mass system

- Accountability of all professionals is an integral component of democratic and meritocratic discourses
- the spread of a more egalitarian ethos underpins the call for the performance of public servants to be made more open to scrutiny
- The language of citizenship legitimises the 'right' of 'stakeholders' to have more information about what it is that Universities do and what is involved in subject knowledge
- The activities of the 26 subject benchmark panels in specifying the nature of the subject is justified in terms of explicit criteria for comparing the standards of courses but also for enabling new constituencies of parents and potential students to make informed choices about subjects and institutions.

Benchmark guidance

- Describe *threshold* and *typical* performance by students
- Nature and extent of the subject – its 'boundaries' and concerns
- Subject specific knowledge, understanding and skills
- Generic skills – employment, personal etc
- Teaching, learning and assessment specific to the subject

What are learning outcomes?
If you don't know where you're going, any bus will do

- They should specify the knowledge and skills (and any other attributes) which a student will be required to demonstrate in order to have completed the course of study successfully
- 'What has a graduate of this course demonstrated they can do?'
- The learning outcome of a module should be consistent with the overall aims of the course
- Do learning outcomes replace the syllabus? NO - because the syllabus describes the topics and the subject matter. Learning outcomes describe what students will be able to do with that content
- Communicating to students – written in terms that are meaningful
- Learning outcomes and assessment – they must be consistent!

What kind of language should we use when writing learning outcomes?

- Avoid the following words – 'know', 'understand', 'be familiar with', 'be aware of', 'been introduced to', 'appreciate...'
- Why? They are useful concepts but they are not easily subject to unambiguous test. They are better used in course or module aims
- Better words – solve, construct, select, specify, translate, analyse, describe, distinguish between

Learning outcomes for one module in sociology of health & illness

Subject-related knowledge
- By the end of the module you should be able to:
- apply sociological concepts to health care issues
- compare and contrast different theoretical approaches to the study of health
- analyse changing patterns of morbidity and mortality and the consequences of such changes for individuals and for society
- evaluate the contribution made by various theoretical perspectives to our understanding of health and illness

Sociology of health and illness

- *Discipline-specific skills*
- report on research into some aspect of health and illness
- describe the theoretical and practical difficulties involved in operationalising and measuring concepts
- *Key employability skills*
- Access official data from government sites
- Evaluate data
- Search libraries and internet and evaluate material discovered
- Reference and cite to a high standard
- Work collaboratively to produce a report

The link between outcomes and assessment

- Assessment is in 'crisis' in the modern university.
- Repetitive tasks, heightened risks of plagiarism, disconnected from practice, unreliable and invalid, student dissatisfaction with quality of feedback from teachers.
- Pedagogic research shows that feedback needs to be frequent, timely, meaningful and focussed on constructive ways of improvement. It is often NONE of these
- What is the evidence? Teaching Quality Assessment in the UK in 1996-2000 and 2007 National Student Survey

The neglect of assessment?

- 'Whilst... curriculum, dominates bookshelves, professional training, and research and development work, the study of assessment has been confined largely to that of techniques'
- (Broadfoot, 1990: 649)

- However it has become recognised that if a curriculum consists not only of content but as 'skills elements', then assessment regimes have not only to access a sample of candidates' knowledge but somehow test their ability to practice.   (Payne 1998)

What can sociologists do?

- 'While being able to read, understand and critique other sociologists' work is a major requirement of being a sociologist, sociology also exists as *practice.* Doing sociology entails more than a passive sociological imagination; not least examining evidence, constructing new ideas, and creating new meanings. The practice of sociology, at its best, involves social skills like negotiation, listening, co-operating and empathising, and technical skills in information retrieval and effective presentation' (Payne, 1998: 5).

Curriculum and Assessment

- an integral part of any programme of study
- Assessment has a critical motivational role in the development of learning
- In an attempt to give voice to the 'inextricable' bond between the two Broadfoot coins the term 'curssessment' (Broadfoot, 1990: 653).
- Experiments with benchmarking and more varied diets of assessment are results of the merger of 'curriculum' and 'assessment'

How not to assess learning outcomes

Learning outcome: you will be able to ride a bicycle

Assessment task: write a 3000 word essay on the history of the bicycle

Assessment criteria:

- Detailed historical analysis of bicycle design 50%
- Beautiful photograph of favourite bicycle   25%
- Reflexive account of where you might go on your bicycle (when you learn to ride one)   25%

Experience of using learning outcomes

- Lecturers struggle initially – course design has traditionally been content driven.
- Students see logic of learning outcomes. It makes explicit what was implicit. It removes an element of guesswork
- Assessment is more likely to be tied to learning outcomes
- Module or unit evaluation can now directly ask 'are you meeting the learning outcomes?' so we have feedback from students (eg ESRC Teaching & Learning Project

Fordist higher education: The drive towards;

- standardised systems of credit rating
- modularisation
- imposition of 'quality control' mechanisms
- benchmarking
- the massification of higher education
- All are explicable in terms of the Fordist narrative, accompanied by downward pressure on costs and the deskilling of the academic labour process (see Parker and Jary, 1998).

Or is it post-Fordist?

Other trends seem consistent with post-Fordist thought
- Modular courses and niche markets
- the search for products tailored to the demands of quite specific groups
- Centrality of choice
- the consumer-led rather than producer-centred approach to economic life (Harrison & Mears 2000)

Academic resistance

- A challenge to routine practices and ways of working. Turns upside down the principle of content-driven course design
- The fear of a national curriculum in universities
- The threat to academic freedom
- Challenging the legitimacy of the process - 'The State will not tell us what to do and how to do it'

Overcoming resistance

1. academic and professional domination of all QAA panels and working parties

2. evidence that the process strengthened not weakened a sense of subject collegiality – it compelled a discussion 'what kind of a Department are we?' 'what do we offer our students that is distinctive about us?'

3. evidence of student approval of 'clarity' and lack of 'drift' from lecturers!!