

## **Brief #4: Outcome-Based Education**

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The following document, based on the *Ontario Universities Quality Council. Outcome-Based Education* webinar (Goff, 2010), provides a brief overview of outcome-based education.

### **Outcome-Based Education**

Outcome-based education, or OBE, is a student-centered approach to education that focuses on the intended learning outcomes resulting from instruction. The three components that comprise an outcome-based approach to learning are:

- an explicit statement of learning intent expressed as outcomes which reflect educational aims, purposes and values;
- the process or strategy to enable the intended learning to be achieved and demonstrated (curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and support and guidance methods); and
- criteria for assessing learning which are aligned to the intended outcome.  
(Jackson, 2002, p. 142)

Biggs and Tang (2007) identify three versions of outcome-based education, each of which is briefly discussed below.

#### **Outcome-Based Education Version 1 (Spady)**

Developed in the 1980's and '90's, the concept of outcome-based education is most commonly associated with William Spady (Harden, 1999; Killen, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 2007). According to Spady (1994),

Outcome-Based Education means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organizing the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens. (p. 12)

Outcome-based education is designed so that "all students are equipped with the

knowledge, skills and qualities needed to be successful after they exit the educational system” (Spady, 1994, p. 9). Spady (1994) describes learning outcomes as “...clear learning results that we want students to demonstrate at the end of significant learning experiences” (p. 2). While “exit outcomes” represent the culmination of a student’s career, “enabling outcomes” provide the “key building blocks” upon which these are developed (p. 8). Once the exit outcomes have been identified, curriculum, instructional strategies, assessment and performance standards are organized to ensure that students are able to achieve them.

Spady’s “OBE Paradigm” (1994) is based on three premises and four principles.

The premises are:

1. All students can learn and succeed but not on the same day and not in the same way;
2. Successful learning promotes even more successful learning; and
3. Schools control the conditions that affect directly affect successful learning.

The four “power principles” are:

1. Clarity of focus on culminating outcomes of significance;
2. Expanded opportunity and support for learning success;
3. High expectations for all to succeed; and
4. Design down from your ultimate, culminating outcomes.

The first principle, *clarity of focus*, requires instructors to make deliberate, informed choices when designing instruction in order facilitate students’ achievement of the intended learning outcomes. The second principle, *expanded opportunities*, “...is based on Spady’s first premise that, while all learners can be successful, they may require different instructional strategies and additional learning opportunities in order to do so. ...Most students can achieve high standards if they are given appropriate opportunities” (Killen, 2000, pp. 3-4). This is linked to the third principle, *high expectations*, according to which success reinforces prior learning, heightens self-confidence and provides motivation. Finally, according to the last principle, *designing down*, the instructor begins by identifying the exit outcomes, followed by the “building blocks” of learning that enable students to achieve these. In order for an educational system to be described as outcome-based, these four principles must provide its philosophical foundation.

Two approaches exist within Spady’s outcome-based education paradigm: “traditional/transitional” OBE and “transformational” OBE. The traditional/transitional approach “...emphasises student mastery of traditional subject-related academic outcomes (usually with a strong focus on subject-specific content) and some cross-

discipline outcomes (such as the ability to solve problems or to work co-operatively)” (Killen, 2000, p. 2). In contrast, the transformational approach “...emphasises longterm, cross-curricular outcomes that are related directly to students’ future life roles (such as being a productive worker or a responsible citizen or a parent)” (Killen, 2000, p. 2).

### **Outcome-Based Education Version 2: Ensuring Accountability**

In the 1980’s and 90’s, outcome-based education was widely adopted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom to provide evidence of accountability to meet the needs of accreditation agencies and external stakeholders, such as government and employers (Killen, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Accountability requires quality measures, metrics or performance indicators, typically defined as inputs, outputs or outcomes (Woodhouse, 1999).

### **Outcome-based Education Version 3: Enhancing Teaching and Learning**

In the third version of outcome-based education, learning outcomes are used for the sole purpose of enhancing teaching and learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In this model, instructors must first clearly state and communicate the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), and minimum acceptable standards for success are established so that students understand what is expected of them. Instructors then select instructional strategies that will help students to gain the desired skills, knowledge or values. Finally, instructors choose assessments that are *constructively aligned* with the learning outcomes and provide evidence that these have been achieved.

## **Conclusion**

In this document and the accompanying webinar, *Ontario Universities Quality Council. Outcome-Based Education* webinar (Goff, 2010), we have presented a brief overview of outcome-based education. Additional information on outcome-based education can be found in the resources listed below.

## **References**

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