

**Invitational Forum on *Converging Competences: Diversity,
Higher Education, and Sustainable Democracy***

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Council of Europe, Agora Building
Room G03

**Converging Competences
- Conclusions -**

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**QUOTE: from Radical Democracy: A Contested/ing Terrain
by Kate Sandilands (York University, Toronto)**

Not that long ago, during a discussion of university teaching, a friend of mine posed an interesting question: "who," he asked, "is your ideal student?" After some thought, I replied something like this: one who has understood the course materials in relation to her own experiences of the world; one who has considered the validity of these course materials, challenged them, and found them to be inadequate on their own; one who has formulated her own, independent analysis of the world and her own position within it, and has found that these, also, are not complete.

Upon further reflection, I found that this "ideal student" closely resembles my vision of an "ideal citizen" in a radical democracy. Substitute "common good" for "course materials" in the above description, and see what happens. To me, this similarity underscores the relationship between education and democracy. Not only should education (formal and informal) foster the types of awareness, empowerment, and participation that are crucial to active, democratic citizenship, but the processes of democracy themselves should be educative, dynamic, and ongoing. In this context, universities need to be both sites of education for democracy and sites, themselves, of democracy.



What have we learnt?

Key points from presentations

Why learning outcomes and competences are vital to the Bologna reform process?

Explored the connection between learning outcomes/competences and the contribution of higher education to the broader political and societal agenda

Identified some of the key generic competences that informed citizens should possess

Begun to explore the convergence of the goals of higher education + its implications

Identified practical ways in which HEI can promote these - via curricula and institutional reform

The way forward - practical challenges to consider tomorrow and thereafter ...?

Key points from presentations:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Ding-Jo Currie | President of Coastline Community College |
| Georgia Nugent | President of Kenyon College |
| Zarko Nozica | Pro-rector of the University of applied Sciences in Zagreb, EURASHE |
| Ayne Hyland | Former Vice-President of the Cork University College, EUA |
| Jeanine Bruun | European Students' Union, ESU |

Why learning outcomes and competences are vital to the Bologna reform process?

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- as the basic building blocks of reform
- impact on all aspects of Bologna reforms
- have a major role in curriculum reform (cathartic process)
- are an integral part of output-focused approach to teaching, learning and assessment
- their use is intimately linked to the adoption of student-centred learning and the role of the teacher moves towards being a facilitator/manager of the learning process.
- relate to all the external reference points (qualifications descriptors, levels, level descriptors, subject benchmark statements) that constitute 'new style' qualification frameworks.

Towards a typology of learning outcomes - multiple applications

MODE AND AREA OF APPLICATION	FEATURES AND ATTRIBUTES
<p>MODULE: (learning outcomes employed at the level of the unit or module as statements that identify what a successful learner will be able to know, understand and / or be able to do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerned with the achievements of the learner. • Differ from 'aims' that indicate the intentions of the teacher. • Directly link to a teaching strategy for the effective delivery of the learning outcomes. • Directly link to an assessment strategy and appropriate assessment criteria. • Are developed in a context of a wide range of internal and external reference points and influences.
<p>ASSESSMENT AND GRADING CRITERIA (at the level of the module, learning outcomes can be used to express the criteria that establish the standard of achievement and the relative performance of individuals)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment criteria are the description of what the learner is expected to do to demonstrate that the learning outcome has been achieved. These are normally written at threshold level and distinguish the pass and fail threshold. • Grading criteria refer to the precise quality of the achievement of the outcome. They distinguish the relative performance of each student. Grading criteria are also written as learning outcomes.
<p>UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS (learning outcomes used for describing and expressing individual subject-specific qualifications validated / accredited by a Higher Education Institution)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written individually or collectively by academics and are unique to a specific qualification and institution. • Include subject specific statements of skills, abilities and understanding. • Can include general transferable / transversal skills that are sought by employers. • Will be created within the context of the appropriate national and / or international 'external reference points' and qualifications frameworks.

<p>NATIONAL QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS (learning outcomes as generic descriptions of types of qualifications)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exemplify the generic (non-subject specific) outcomes of a nationally recognised qualification • Produced by appropriate national authorities. • Will include statements of the wider abilities of a typical holder of the qualification (transferable / transversal skills). • Linked to national level descriptors. A generic qualifications descriptor can encompass several national level descriptors to show progression or just typify one level. • Generally describe the learning achieved by a student at the finish of a qualification (as do the international ‘Dublin Descriptors’). • Act as an external reference point, for those at the institutional level, developing individual qualifications.
<p>NATIONAL SUBJECT BENCHMARK STATEMENTS (learning outcomes employed as statements designed to make explicit the general subject-specific academic characteristics and standards of programmes in the UK)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject. • These have been extensively developed in the UK by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). • They function as subject-specific external reference points for curriculum designers. • Internationally, the Tuning project explores the significance of subject-specific and general competences. It has encouraged detailed reflection on subject specific learning outcomes associated with the first and second Bologna cycles.

NATIONAL LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

(Learning outcomes employed as generic statements that describe the characteristics and context of learning)

- Designed to provide a shared understanding of each level and to facilitate the comparisons to be made between qualifications and learning at each level. A qualification will often straddle several levels.
- The number and complexity of national level descriptors is a matter of national decision. They are often expressed in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, practical applied skills, learner autonomy etc.
- They can be expressed in terms of what the best student might achieve (aspiration) or minimum standards (threshold) or something in between.
- Act as an external reference point for those developing individual qualifications as well as modules and units.

CYCLE DESCRIPTORS

(Also known as the 'Dublin descriptors' describe the three cycles of the Bologna overarching qualifications framework in terms of learning outcomes)

- Adopted by the 45 Bologna Process countries and used to express the three cycles of the *'framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)'*.
- Are composed of generic statements of the typical expectations of achievement and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.
- Function as meta-level international descriptors (guidance tools) that act as an external reference point for those developing 'new style' national qualifications frameworks and national levels descriptors.

Explored the connection between learning outcomes and competences and the contribution of higher education to the broader political and societal agenda

RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT:

- the purpose of higher education + whether these are changing as universities change (globalisation, competition, new technologies, etc.)
- what general transferable/transversal skills we should value?
 - Multidisciplinary core skills: to live in a complex fast changing society
 - Ability to listen, interact, communicate, be active and proactive
 - To understand other cultures and religions + be aware of our own cultural identity, etc.
- the who, what, why, where, how and when of education - the role of universities and colleges in the 21st century
- the public responsibility for Higher education
- the role of the university as a site for democratic citizenship + what this means in practice
- higher education governance

Identified some of the key generic competences that informed citizens should possess

COMPETENCES SHOULD INCLUDE:

- helping to incorporate the principles of human rights, democracy, tolerance and mutual respect, the rule of law and peaceful resolution of conflicts into the daily practice of teaching and learning
(Council of Europe website)
- to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law;
- to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity
- to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society: such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, bioethics and cloning, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, organised crime and corruption, cybercrime, violence against children;
- to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform.

(The current CoE mandate 2005)

Begun to explore the convergence of the various goals of higher education + its implications

ESTABLISHED THAT:

- the individual goals should not be regarded in any sort of priority or competing way
- the goals of higher education can mutually reinforce rather than contradict each other
- the goals of higher education are interlinked and should not be seen as separate entities - the divisions between them are not clear cut
- qualifications should be described in qualifications frameworks in such a way as to cover the full purposes of education

Identified practical ways in which HEI can promote these - via curricula and institutional reform

INCLUDING:

- reconsideration of the curricula
- expressing the curricula in terms of learning outcomes - a cathartic process
- introduction of learner/student-centred learning
- re-examination of institutional structure and process - an evaluation of the level of transparency, democracy (governance) and representation (staff and student) within the institution
- developing an appropriate, dynamic process of staff development and training
- introducing more flexibility and choice in study programmes (credits)

Practical challenges - to consider tomorrow and thereafter...

QUESTIONS:

- The connection between the contribution of learning outcomes and competences (just tools) and the contribution of HE to the broader political and societal agenda - needs to move up the policy agenda as the role of universities is increasingly challenged - by diversity, economic pressures, marketisation, etc. How do we ignite the debate?
- What is the role of these 'converging not competing competences' in relation to questions about: who, what, why, where, how and when we educate citizens + the rights of all citizens?
- How do these converging competences challenge our conception of the university and college in the 21st century (including their structure, management and mission)?
- Research is needed to see if any consensus can be built as to the nature of the most significant converging competences - can we identify them with more precision?

5. More thought is needed on the nature of these non-subject specific transversal/transferable skills - how they can be translated into practical reality (curriculum change) - they are not easy to write and even harder to translate into assessable practical activities? How can they be integrated with subject specific skills?
6. What are the implications of introducing these converging competences into the curriculum for teaching, learning and assessment?
7. How can we overcome prejudice against the introduction of what are sometimes described disparagingly as 'soft skills'?
8. How can we prevent the potential dominance of the higher education landscape by employers' market driven priorities?
9. How do converging competences impact on the notion of learner/student-centred learning?
10. What can be done to ensure that 'converging competences' are fully reflected in the newly developing national qualifications frameworks as well as the Bologna Framework for EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)?

These represent huge challenges + many difficulties ...

Final thought:

A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.

Sir Winston Churchill
(1874 - 1965)

