



Canadian Association of University Teachers
Association canadienne des professeures et professeurs d'université

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MEMORANDUM 14:28

TO: Presidents and Administrative Officers
Local, Federated and Provincial Associations

FROM: David Robinson, Executive Director

RE: **Student Learning Outcomes**

Several universities and colleges in Canada, along with some provincial governments, have embraced various forms of defining and measuring "student learning outcomes" in recent years. While the idea of learning outcomes has its roots in educational and pedagogical theory, the concept is increasingly being taken up by institutions, governments, testing agencies and international bodies such as the OECD as a way to develop new measures, no matter how flawed, to assess the efficacy and performance of systems, programs and potentially individual faculty.

In the post-secondary education context, learning outcomes refer generally to the core competencies and abilities that students should be expected to demonstrate at the completion of a course or a program. These outcomes are defined in various ways by different institutions, ranging from vague generalities to more substantive and specific outcomes.

In some cases, learning outcomes are being adopted in Canada with respect to accreditation requirements. Simon Fraser University and Thompson Rivers University, for example, have both developed learning outcomes largely in response to meeting the requirements for accreditation with the North West Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). In both cases, the faculty associations have raised a number of objections about learning outcomes generally, including the following:

- Learning outcomes undervalue the learning process by focusing solely on outputs. While the ends are important, the means also matter.
- The development of standardized learning outcomes threatens the autonomy and academic freedom of faculty by imposing targets or pre-determined learning objectives.
- Learning outcomes represent another bureaucratic and workload burden on faculty.
- Learning outcomes focus on the short-term rather than the long-term benefits of a college or university education.

- The development of pre-determined learning outcomes runs counter to the educational mission of universities and colleges. Post-secondary education should not seek to meet rigid objectives, but rather advance knowledge by exposing students to intellectual uncertainty, ambiguity and experimentation.
- While most learning outcomes at the institutional level in Canada have been to date largely descriptive and qualitative in nature, there is pressure mounting to develop ways of *quantitatively* measuring these outcomes. Other jurisdictions have had some experience with this. In the United States, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and Community College Learning Assessment (CCLA) were developed by the Lumina Foundation and the Council for Aid to Education to identify the value added from a college or university education. To do so, the tools test students on generic skills both at the beginning and the end of a degree/diploma program. The CLA and CCLA are being tested by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to determine if the results are valid in the provincial context.

At the international level, the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is intended to measure what final-year university students "know and are able to do" in terms of both generic skills and discipline-specific skills. While the future of AHELO is in doubt, Ontario has participated in the feasibility phase of the project.

The quantification of student learning outcomes through standardized tests like the CLA, CCLA and AHELO instruments clearly raises a number of methodological and implementation problems. However, the more serious challenges as our colleagues in the K-12 system well know are political. Various attempts to "measure" and "assess" appropriate "student learning outcomes" have had a deleterious impact on public education in the United States in particular. They have encouraged the growth of simplistic standardized and high stakes tests used to punish and reward schools and teachers. Already, they have begun to infect American universities and colleges.

Assessment is of course central to teaching and learning, and evaluating students is part of what academic staff have always been doing. Whether testing their students' grasp of certain facts and information, evaluating the logic of arguments, or challenging pre-conceived opinions and biases, academic staff use their professional judgment to evaluate a student's performance in a class. Learning outcomes measurements imply that this professional judgment is not enough. Instead, teachers in colleges and universities are being asked to use measurements that essentially reduce student learning to quantifiable standards. It is not a far stretch to see how the results of these assessments could be used, and most certainly abused, to evaluate the "effectiveness" of teaching and learning at the institutional, departmental and individual instructor level.

I would encourage associations to monitor the development of learning outcomes at your institution and to engage with your members on the issue. I would also encourage you to resist the introduction of versions of learning outcomes, such as quantifiable measures like the CLA, which could have significant implications for the work and professional autonomy of academic staff. Finally, please share with me any information you have about the impact of learning outcomes for your members.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or require further clarification.