

## Learning Outcomes:

### Building Better Pathways or Building Pathways Better?

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#### PANEL ORGANIZERS/MODERATORS:

**MARY WILSON**, Director, Centre for Academic Excellence, Niagara College

**JEAN BRIDGE**, Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts and Centre for Digital Humanities, Brock University

#### PANEL PURPOSE:

This roundtable convenes a group of thought leaders in Ontario post-secondary education who provide a diversity of perspectives that reflect both practically and critically upon the use of learning outcomes-based approaches to building post-secondary pathways for Ontario. This discussion roundtable will identify and explore the function, structure and value of applying learning outcomes to transfer and how these relate through consideration of PSE policy; curriculum, learning and assessment frameworks; the cultures of education; as well as transfer mechanisms and practices.

#### PANELISTS and POSITIONS:

**JUDITH SPRING**, Dean of Business, IT and Management at Durham College

##### *Block Transfer Arrangements and Learning Outcomes*

As an Ontario College dean responsible for approximately 2000 business, IT, and management students, my goal is to ensure quality College programming, and to maximize opportunities for further education through pathways. This has entailed negotiating articulation agreements with many Canadian and international universities and more recently, participating in the formulation of several ONCAT agreements for block transfer using the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' approved vocational learning outcomes and essential employability skills. The implementation of the ONCAT transfer agreements has resulted in a change in approach to approval of advanced standing. College administrators and faculty are accustomed to approving credits based on an 80% equivalency of the curriculum covered in course outlines. Because many Ontario programs have learning outcomes covering a two or three year program of study (Ontario diploma or Advanced diploma), administrators and faculty approving a one-year transfer will need to ensure that students can complete their program of study in the appropriate time while covering the learning outcomes prescribed. This approach is a paradigm change but effective in creating improved access and pathways. As previously stated, my goal is to build pathways.

**CHRISTINE HELEN ARNOLD**, PhD Candidate University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education

##### *Policy Frameworks*

Learning outcomes are at the forefront of Ontario's postsecondary policy frameworks and are a primary objective of government. A commitment to learning outcomes is often regarded as advancing measures of academic program quality, teaching/learning, student competencies, and equivalencies for the development of

pathways. However, while the measurement of learning outcomes is established for program and degree standards and quality assurance, its role in providing evidence-based credit transfer assessment is still underdeveloped. This problem persists in part because system-wide coordination of a shared vision, standard nomenclature, cooperative writing and authentic assessments of learning outcomes across sectors has not yet been established.

To move in the direction of establishing such coordination, several challenges will need to be addressed: determining the basis for alignment, defining general/lower division core education, piloting common assessment tools and techniques, supporting interprovincial and international mobility, maintaining institutional autonomy and differentiation, and building trust. The national discussion of standards that is occurring in the United States provides valuable insight, where Degree Qualification Framework proficiencies are being utilized as the basis for student transfer across sectors. The following initiatives are setting precedents: Liberal Education as a Global Necessity, Quality Collaboratives, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Interstate Passport. Similarly, a more holistic examination of Ontario's credit transfer system is needed to move forward.

**MARY CATHARINE LENNON, PhD candidate at University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Department of Higher Education**

***Tuning activities***

The term 'Tuning' refers to a process of bringing together individuals to articulate student learning outcomes. Quite simply, it is a bottom-up process of those that are 'on-the-ground' to ensure that the expectations are relevant, appropriate and useable. The concept originated in Europe during the time of the Bologna Process and the integration of the European Higher Education Area, when systems across Europe needed to harmonize their programming. By bringing together faculty members they were able to agree to common student learning expectations in order to support program reform. The success of the project was widespread, though have varied in how they approach learning outcomes. Some take a very broad definition and seek to identify learning outcomes that generalize across all the areas that are included within a degree category, such as the B.A. or B.Sc, such as the Lumina Degree Qualification Profile (DQP) (Lumina, 2010). Others adopt a much narrower scope and seek to identify and measure learning outcomes in a specific discipline (often restricted to a single administrative department), such as history or chemistry, such as the US Tuning projects. "Sectors," a term used by the European Union, refer to the groupings that bridge the gap between the broad "degree qualification" learning outcome approaches and the narrower "discipline-based" learning outcome projects.

**BRIAN FRANK, Associate Professor in Electrical and Computer Engineering at Queen's University**

***Context of Assessment of Learning Outcomes***

The push for learning outcomes in higher education, coming from diverse groups including educational developers, innovative educators, accreditors, and quality assurance bodies, is leading to discussions within programs about what students should be able to do by the end of a program. This collective understanding of a program's goals supports curriculum design, regular program improvement, and transferability.

For example, engineering programs in Canada are required to use a common framework of high-level program expectations (graduate attributes), but develop their own program-specific learning outcomes (known as indicators). This is leading to a better understanding of the relative emphasis of each program, and the differences between programs. The framework has stressed the development of course-level learning

outcomes, which provide a more comprehensive view of the program than that afforded by the traditional course calendar description.

When using learning outcomes to support transferability, I think an often-missing element is the context of assessment. Most course-level learning outcomes focus on the activity done by the student and the content area (e.g. “students will be able to apply Newton’s three laws of motion to solve word problems”), but omit the context in which an outcome is assessed (e.g. degree of scaffolding by course personnel, proximity to instruction, complexity and novelty of the problem). This context is generally understood within a course or program, but not outside, and this is very important for transfer between qualification levels in particular (e.g. diploma to degree).

### **PAOLA BORIN, Curriculum Development Consultant at Ryerson University**

#### **Position Statement**

When the Ontario Council of Academic Vice Presidents introduced the Degree-Level Expectations, policies in every Ontario University were changed to require an outcomes-orientation to curriculum. My work involves supporting departments as a whole to navigate and translate this process. Working with academics from such widely diverse academic fields as Philosophy, Financial Mathematics, and Fashion Design is a complex process. University faculty are hired because they are academic subject matter experts. Core cultural values and beliefs permeate the discipline and their approach to curriculum; theory and research is essential. In a “career-oriented” university with strong ties to industry, accreditation requirements are also common. However, the clear articulation and assessment of the intended learning outcomes is still a challenge, and requires a complex negotiation and mediation in order to find shared language, shared understanding and common ground. I provide a variety of supports and tools to facilitate this departmental work. Some of the supports involve facilitation, some are analytical, and some involve software tools we have been developed to aid this work. When they are well articulated, intended learning outcomes get at the heart of what a program expects from its graduates. If a curriculum is aligned with teaching methods and assessments, the outcomes and assessments alone, could be a major tool facilitating credit transfer that goes beyond checkboxes, time-on-task, and topics.

### **JOVAN GROEN, Acting Director of the University of Ottawa's Centre for University Teaching**

#### ***Curriculum Maps and Syllabi Data***

##### *Determining Pathways between Programs by Mapping the Pathways within Them*

One of the many challenges when considering credit transfer is that of equivalency. Is a course or entire semester within a program at one institution equivalent to a similar one at another institution? At a granular level, explicit and well-written course level learning outcomes can help define the knowledge, skills and values a student possesses following the completion of a specified number of course credits. However, when considering semesters, years of study, or even course equivalencies across programs that are structured significantly differently, identifying pathways for credit transfer may become more difficult. Perhaps curriculum maps may hold a solution by effectively representing the sequence of courses and their respective contributions in the evolution of a student’s learning throughout a program of study. Populating and maintaining curriculum maps can be a complex exercise. How might we comprehensively, time-efficiently, and systematically collect data related to each course within a program in order to populate an up-to-date picture of the learning outcomes of each course and its role within a program? Perhaps an answer lies in the mining of information rich course syllabi.

**LEESA WHEELAHAN William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto**

***Trust and the importance of educational inputs***

My perspective challenges the assumption that basing qualifications on learning outcomes facilitates educational pathways and credit transfer. The argument is that such an approach renders the outcomes of learning more visible, and when underpinned by adequate quality assurance, makes it possible to identify and provide credit for commonalities between programs.

In contrast, I argue that pathways depend on two levels of trust. The first, referred to in the literature as 'Zones of Mutual Trust', comprises agreements between key players about the quality, standard and outcomes of qualifications (Coles & Oates, 2005). Coles and Oates (2005:13) explain that ZMTs 'exist through the behaviour of people who are participating in them, operating through, or anticipating, common values and concerns. ZMTs cannot be imposed, they are dependent on processes of consensus and on voluntary participation.'

However, this is a necessary but not sufficient basis for pathways and credit. Levels of student transfer and credit are higher when there is trust between institutions. Such trust is based on confidence in teaching, learning processes, syllabi and assessment and not independently of these. Consequently, it does not make sense to talk of credit transfer and articulation between sectors in outcomes-based systems independently of 'inputs' when the trust needed to establish such arrangements is based precisely on those inputs. Minimal levels of credit transfer may take place based purely on outcomes and result in credit transfer agreements that have been 'bolted on' to qualifications, but it is unlikely to result in coherent and supported pathways developed holistically within complementary programs that maximise credit and support student learning.

Coles, Mike, & Oates, Tim. (2005). *European reference levels for education and training promoting credit transfer and mutual trust* (Cedefop Panorama series; 109). Luxembourg: Study commissioned to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. <[http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/publication/download/panorama/5146\\_en.pdf](http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/publication/download/panorama/5146_en.pdf)> viewed 30 August 2009.