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Most Frequently Asked Questions About Student Learning Outcomes in Poland: A Delphi Study

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Abstract

For decades, critics of higher education have been asserting that competencies students can demonstrate upon course completion are much better predictors of what students know and can do than time spent in courses or grades. However, assessment of student learning has not been adopted by faculty and their leaders, and the effort is normally addressed as a bureaucratic demand. The objective was to identify topics that could help shape the discourse regarding the assessment of student learning. The study revealed that the universities in Poland are ready to ensure graduating students competencies demanded by the contemporary world.

Keywords: *student learning outcomes, Delphi method, higher education.*

Introduction

Despite increasing calls for the assessment of student learning as a means to enhance higher education institutions in general and the academic betterment of their students in particular, few establishments use competency and skill attain-

ment as measures for improvement in teaching and learning (Bok, 2020; Finney et al., 2021; Jankowski, 2021). Indeed, student learning outcomes (SLOs), as statements of student learning, are not developed with students in mind (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017). Instead, colleges and universities measure their success based on student attendance, persistence, and graduation rather than what students learn. SLOs are not very well developed or assessed, and their use for institutional improvement remains unclear at best (French & O’Leary, 2017). Considering the examples of the ongoing discussions on a lack of consistent understanding and practices of assessing student learning to improve institutions of higher learning, the role of faculties seems crucial.

Theoretical Framework

The focus on the achievement of specific knowledge and abilities is largely missing from discussions about curriculum and the overall effectiveness of institutions of higher learning (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2018). Competency-based education (CBE) has been recognized as a “disruptive innovation” (Sun, 2018, pp. 177–192), as it is based on a promise of showcasing learning as represented by mastery and proficiency, rather than activities organized by teachers (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020, pp. 11–21; Rasmussen et al., 2017). Simultaneously, a complex-process approach to pedagogy argues the need to consider the interplay of teaching with equity, curriculum, assessment, and learning (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017; McNair et al., 2020).

In Poland, all institutions of higher learning operate under the law that came into effect on July 20, 2018; it states that academic programmes at universities are based on curricula, documents outlining course, programme, and institutional levels with specific outcomes (Article 67, Paragraph 1).

Competencies that are expected to be attained by students over a specifically designed instructional process are defined as more general concepts governing the course content. They are often described as human dispositions constituting knowledge or education that can be observed at the course, programme, and institutional levels. Such definitions allow further articulation of these competencies and their translation into a student’s observable behaviors in specific academic contexts (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020, pp. 11–21).

Methodology

The Delphi method, developed by RAND Corporation in the United States in 1950, was selected as the best method to reach consensus among parties separated by geographical distance but share the expertise on the topic studied (Helmer, 1967). This method of scientific inquiry relies on the composition of a group of experts who respond independently and anonymously to a series of questionnaires in a series of iterations (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Plummer & Armitage, 2007; Sudoł, 2016, pp. 69–74). The data collection procedure is based on a series of questionnaires sent in a sequence of separate iterations to reach a consensus on the studied issue. The experts' judgments are collected and analyzed after each round and then sent again to the participants to solidify their collective opinion on the topic studied (Green, 2014; Grime & Wright, 2016, pp. 1–6).

Data Sources

The Delphi method allowed the research team to identify a group of experts who responded to questions in three separate iterations of the questionnaire. The research team agreed that experts – academic programme coordinators at four-year publicly funded universities in Poland – would be employed full-time for this study.

In the first round, it took approximately three weeks to find programme coordinators at 21 publicly funded four-year universities in Poland. It resulted in a list of 153 emails of professionals responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in their respective institutions. These experts were engaged in a consensus-building exercise; they were provided answers to three consecutive survey iterations. The research team intended to collect responses from experts on competency attainment throughout the spectrum of higher education in Poland.

The research team agreed that the study would take no more than three rounds, and the consensus threshold would be set at 70% of an aggregate from a Likert scale in the third round for each statement. Additionally, Respondents would be allowed to write clarifying statements in the final round if they wish to add comments to the questions of the third round.

In the first round of the study, the experts were to identify three most commonly asked questions brought to them by the faculty regarding competency attainment among their students. These questions were sent out to the study participants in November 2020. After an analysis by the research team, the following iteration of

the questionnaire focused on the solicitation of a grouping and clarification of the questions formulated by the respondents in the first round. Analysis of the second round resulted in a list of nine questions. These, in turn, were sent to the experts with the intent that they indicate their agreement with the statements. Respondents also had the opportunity to clarify their answers or write any additional comments. The study was completed in three rounds as planned.

Data Collection

Round 1

The search and identification of experts resulted in a list of 153 email addresses of professionals responsible for teaching and learning in 21 publicly funded universities in Poland. The first question was sent to the experts on November 12, 2020, and then a reminder was sent out two weeks later.

The first question sent out with an invitation to participate in the research was following: “What are the three most frequently asked questions brought to you by the faculty about competency attainment among students?” After the first round, 23 responses were received from the 153 emails sent to the identified email addresses. Three of the total responses stated that the given institutions did not address, nor did they deal with, any of the issues related to SLOs. In response to the first round, 18 (12%) respondents sent their answers, resulting in a total of 42 unique statements that were analyzed by the research team, and nine most frequently asked questions were developed.

Round 2

Analysis of all responses revealed nine most frequently asked questions about SLOs. The second iteration of the survey was sent out on February 22, 2021, followed by a reminder, whereas the collection of responses to the second round was closed on March 15, 2021. In this round, respondents were asked to answer the nine questions identified in Round 1. Of the 21 respondents, 4 stated that they did not receive any questions regarding the student competency attainment. One response was straightforward: “In my programme, we have other things to do, for example, affirmation of the doctoral work, student practicums, scheduling, and other important matters. Nobody asks such questions”.

At the end of Round 2, the nine questions with answers constituted the third and last round of the study. The questions were proceeded by Likert scale statements for each question to provide an opportunity for the experts to indicate the

degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. After each one of the question/answer pairs, there was also a category of “additional comments”, where respondents were asked to write any additional and final comments.

Round 3

The last survey was sent out on April 28, 2021, to all participants who responded to the Round 2 questionnaire. In this survey iteration, participants were asked to rank the answers to the questions as interpreted by the research team. The ranking was done using the Likert scale, and respondents also had the opportunity to write their own comments and explain or make any other comments justifying their ranking. A reminder was sent on May 7, 2021, and data collection was closed on May 14, 2021. As it turned out, answers were received from 17 experts.

Findings

The following are the most commonly asked questions about SLOs ranked from most popular (1) to the least common (9). Each question is followed by an answer with an analysis of the responses marked on the Likert scale to reach a consensus established at 70% by the research team. Observations regarding optional and additional comments made by the respondents are also discussed.

Question 1: What methods are used to verify competency attainment among students? Answer: The most used methods to measure competency attainment are standardized tests. The experts shared significantly different opinions about the tests, stating that while standardized tests are “adequate to assess knowledge”, they are also perceived as a “bad method of assessment”, although they are expected to help meet bureaucratic requirements. Faculty leaders also agreed that standardized testing is a flawed and outdated method, which ultimately reduces, for example, the necessity for interaction between faculty and their students. The utility of the method is only appreciated as a universally accepted, for good or bad, a tool often used to measure the institutional effectiveness of universities in Poland. Respondents also commented that standardized testing is an easy way to document student learning and that it has been adopted by the administrative structures of the higher education system. Standardized tests are used and expected by both faculty and students as universally “safe” and are often perceived as an objective way to evaluate student learning.

Question 2: What modifications of competency attainment are possible at the course and programme levels? Answer: Modifications of competency statements

at the course and programme levels are possible because of changes made to the syllabus. None of the experts disagreed with the aforementioned statement. However, despite the consensus, respondents also pointed out in additional comments that changes to the syllabus, while possible, are time-consuming and often require several meetings and acceptance from numerous individuals who govern the programme or institution bodies. According to the clarifying statements issued by the respondents, competency statements as descriptions of SLOs are normally imposed by higher education regulatory bodies. They are not addressed by faculty or students in any meaningful way for teaching across the academic programmes. The lack of system-wide flexibility to modify once-established learning outcomes included in documents describing the course and programme content runs along with complaints about the bureaucratic accountability system. Finally, the lack of faculty freedom to change SLO statements runs counter to the spirit of academic independence touted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2018).

Question 3: How do attained competencies prepare students for future employment? Answer: Future employment demands can be reflected with consistent monitoring of the workforce demands necessary to shape the competencies and skills taught. While some respondents indicated that monitoring workforce demands are already regulated, the information on employment trends allows faculties to guide students on the path leading to meaningful employment. Faculties are not always prepared to ensure competency attainment for their students while they are getting ready for jobs of the future. Efforts to connect university training with employers are still fledgling, whereas competencies, which are expected to underlie the curriculum, are not specifically articulated and taught.

Question 4: What are the best teaching methods that ensure effective competency attainment among students? Answer: Developing and supporting academic growth among students, recognizing students' needs for workforce training, and stimulating them to engage in the educational processes will raise competency attainment. Respondents reached the highest consensus on this statement. In the clarifying statements, respondents pointed out the importance of associating prior learning with workforce preparation as a basis for sharing knowledge and experience in higher education classrooms. Effective teaching and learning require collaboration between faculties and students. It is important because faculties are normally not trusted by administrative bodies that oversee the instructions. Student engagement also seemed to have emerged as one of the dominant trends because of the analysis of responses. Intrinsic motivation is widely recognized as the ultimate force driving students to study; however, student interactions

with their peers, university faculty, and staff must also contribute to the learning environment supported by the institution.

Question 5: How effective is workforce preparation? Answer: The effectiveness of workforce training is low. No consensus was reached on this statement. In the clarifying statements, respondents wrote that they are not normally responsible for workforce training. The comments point to a gap between two conflicting ideas about the tasks of higher education: Is it academic preparation or workforce training? According to at least one of the clarifying comments, workforce training is not considered a primary mission of four-year universities in Poland. This thinking is prevalent among students, faculties, and the public at large, including policymakers. The effectiveness of student practical workforce training is also difficult to assess, although respondents indicated that several external factors may influence evaluation attempts.

Question 6: How are educational programmes governed at the institutional level? Answer: The management of teaching and learning at the institutional level is overly bureaucratic. Eight respondents (73%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Respondents described bureaucracy as obstacles preventing significant change and meaningful progress in teaching and learning by demanding compliance with requirements imposed by regulatory bodies. Furthermore, the current higher education system in Poland is not conducive to collaboration among faculties, whereas formal changes to the programme content require too many signatures and documents generated at every step of the approval process. Participating in the study, experts feared that higher education institutions in the country do not keep up with changes in the marketplace, which means that the gap between skills taken out of higher education and workforce demands will continue to grow. Older management systems may be resentful, for example, to monitor workplace trends for university graduates, which requires an emphasis on competency attainment crucial for student success after attainment of diplomas and certificates qualifying students to seek employment in their fields of study.

Question 7: What are the possibilities for developing pathways at the course and programme levels? Answer: Individual learning is possible only at the course level. The respondents agreed with this statement and expressed skepticism about creating meaningful pathways for students. Customization of instruction and responsiveness to individual students' needs occur only at the course and not the institutional level. It may be an expectation of governing bodies that all courses add to the education of the whole individual, but respondents did not confirm that the competencies attained at the course level add value to the learning outcomes at

the institutional level. The current system results in effective support for especially gifted students, to begin with.

Question 8: What are the differences in learning effectiveness between traditional and online learning? Answer: The quality of online teaching is lower than that of traditional education. While the consensus on this item was significant at 82%, experts pointed out that the quality of online teaching depends on teachers; the sudden arrival of COVID-19 that resulted in school closure was not supported with just as immediate training for faculties. Despite the massive shift to online teaching, experts have expressed their concerns about prospects for the future, and their clarifying comments focused on the lack of chronic support for online teaching and learning throughout the system of higher education in Poland. Finally, online learning has been uniformly found to have a negative impact on learning. Responding to the questionnaire, the experts agreed that the lack of training, more specifically, competency to deliver effective online instruction, and the lack of technical support for faculty had been identified as primary reasons. However, respondents agreed that the online content delivery as a new, albeit imposed by COVID-19, way of teaching should be perceived as a challenge to mobilize faculty and their leaders to utilize technology better in teaching for the benefit of the students. Planning and organizing teaching at the university level need the flexibility to articulate and change specific competencies and skills that students will be expected to attain at the course, programme, and institutional levels.

Question 9: How can students be better engaged in the learning processes? Answer: Higher student engagement for competency attainment can only be achieved through higher levels of commitment and motivation among faculties and students. In total, 82% of the respondents agreed with the statement and clarified that better competency attainment could be achieved through engaging and varied teaching methods supported by hands-on activities rather than lecturing. Respondents also expressed concerns about the availability of technology that could reduce student engagement, as they could log in to their online class while performing daily chores or doing other tasks that may not have much to do with what is happening in the online classroom. On the positive side, some respondents pointed out that the faculty started providing more opportunities for their students to reflect, comment on, and discuss the content taught because of the necessity to teach with technology.

Significance of the Study

Although there may be differences in funding and governance systems between Poland and other countries, the picture of higher education institutions in Poland can be characterized by similar problems and challenges in teaching and learning. Although imposed and expected by policymakers, attainment of competency is not a concept that faculties and their leaders recognize as important because of the sets of expectations set by regulatory bodies that result in efforts to meet bureaucratic demands rather than learning. Competency attainment still does not drive higher education, but bureaucratic accountability does. The nine topics that emerged after the second round of this study are an attempt to identify topics of discussions among faculties and their leaders and may indicate what needs to be done in higher education if student learning, as understood by competency and skill attainment, is to be considered a viable solution to address the question of how well four-year publicly funded universities in Poland prepare their graduates for the future.

Discussion

Analysis of the findings reveals a complex picture of stress and fears among faculty regarding the understanding and implementation of assessment of SLOs on their campuses. The survey resulted in a diverse range of responses that paint a picture of the significant need for discussion, decision, and careful planning if four-year publicly funded universities in Poland are to truly address the needs of their students.

Starting with institutional management based on bureaucratic structures, inflexible systems of decision-making, and dynamics running against the current of modern life and workplace expectations result in a complete lack of adaptation skills among students while dangerously relieving them from responsibility to think critically and make decisions based on visions and beyond *status quo*. Stagnant and void of meaningful change system of management results in lesser competency attainment not only for students but also for their faculty who obliged to fulfill imposed academic programmes. Organizational planning then must include a consistent and current system of monitoring the demands from the global workplace of the future.

Skills often perpetuated by faculty as important include: punctuality, meeting deadlines, persistence, and time and resource allocation, are only a beginning. Fac-

ulty need to know and practice methodologies that would empower their students to discuss competency attainment to a level where students could gain a better, in-depth understanding of what it means to apply their skills and competencies to solve local and global problems. Conversely, faculty need support and training to acquire the skills needed to deliver discipline-specific academic content in contexts relevant to students' lives utilizing modern technology in the process.

The acquisition of multidimensional competencies in the academic process is a foundation for realizing all subsequent life goals. Understanding student and institutional goals require careful and purposeful planning and focus on the university's mission statements regarding teaching and learning.

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