LEARNING OUTCOMES:
Understanding learning outcomes in the context of NQF implementation

(Role, potential role, use, misconceptions and benefits - with special reference to their potential further application in South Africa in terms of recognition, qualifications design, evaluation of foreign qualifications and level descriptors)

• Learning outcomes express what a successful learner knows, understands and can do.
• The contextually demonstrated end products of specific learning processes which include knowledge, skills and values.
OBSERVATIONS:

- Learning outcomes (LO) are often misunderstood + difficult to create.
- They exist at the heart of most modern educational reforms - a cross cutting element + permeate all the major reform tools...
- Reforms are about improving transparency, recognition, efficiency and quality in the context of internationalisation and globalisation.
- LO have a huge potential impact on recognition tools and processes.
- LO are complex and take considerable time to fully implement (decades?).
European and global education is going through a very difficult period of rapid change:

- Learning outcomes based NQFs + systems
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)
- Disruptive technologies
- New education delivery platforms
- Unbundling of qualifications
- New providers
- More aggressive competition
- Development of global standards, etc.

This means that education could well be unrecognizable by 2025!
Education systems fit for the 21st century:
Modern, efficient, effective, transparent, high quality, internationally/globally recognized, skilled workforce, aid to economy, etc...

THE EUROPEAN HE EDUCATION REFORM PROCESSOR
THE MULTIPLE APPLICATIONS AND ROLES OF LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Exist at the heart of a complicated paradigm change – input to output focus.
- Act as a basis for NQF level descriptors (AS STANDARDS).
- Fundamental for curriculum development.
- Used for the expression of external reference points (regional, national and international).
- They function in three dimensions: (i) Institutional applications, (ii) National applications; and (iii) International applications.
- Learning outcomes play a decisive role in all aspects of recognition and transparency tools, policies, and frameworks...
- Learning outcomes can even revitalise old recognition tools - (educational Viagra!).
MULTIPLE LEARNING OUTCOMES APPLICATIONS

- National generic qualification descriptor (BA, MA, PhD)
- National subject benchmark/sector descriptor/National Occupational Standard
- Unique qualification descriptor (BA History = with 6-8 overall LO?)
- Assessment and grading criteria
- Module/unit precise descriptors (6-8 LO?)
- National generic level descriptor
- International generic cycle/level descriptor (Dublin + EQF)
LEARNING OUTCOMES - DEFINITION AND TERMINOLOGICAL ISSUES:

• No precise, agreed international definition exists.
• South Africa defines them as: ‘The contextually demonstrated end-products of specific learning processes which include knowledge, skills and values’.
• There is a need for a precise common global definition and understanding or recognition decisions are made more difficult.
• More significant variations in understanding and applying ‘competence’ and ‘competencies’ exist, e.g. South Africa has 10 categories to describe applied competencies.
• If we do not have a common understanding the whole basis of recognition is undermined.
HE reform: complex challenges

**UNIVERSITY EDUCATION REFORM ISSUES**

**SURVIVAL?**

- **SAQA National Qualification Framework** + sub-frameworks and level descriptors + articulation
- **Relationship to global standards and reference points**
- **Mobility and internationalisation**
- **Curriculum reform/development**
- **Markets**
  - Borderless education (TNE) + increased competition
  - CAT (Credit and learning outcomes)
- **Recognition issues**
  - (Transcripts, the Arusha Convention + RPL + substantial difference)
- **Quality Assurance**
  - (Internal + External) + accreditation issues
- **Revenue sources**
  - Finance and mergers!
- **Mission + diversity in university roles**
- **New technology**
- **Student-centred learning**
- **Employability + graduate attributes**
- **Learning outcomes + delivery + assessment**

**CONTEXT:**
- Growth in demand
- Constrained funding
- Demographic change
- Increased competition
- Globalisation

**Rethink role:**
- Autonomy
- Modernisation agenda
- Restructure

**Student-centred learning**

**Employability + graduate attributes**

**Learning outcomes + delivery + assessment**
SOME COMMON NQF/DESCRIPTOR-RELATED CHALLENGES?

1. The central role of learning outcomes is not understood.
2. No understanding of how system reforms relate/integrate.
3. Incomplete NQF + no reconsideration of qualification types.
4. Inadequate implementation strategies - top down/bottom up.
5. Level descriptors not fit for purpose.
6. Generic descriptors have limitations!
7. Universities fail to adapt: structure, processes, policy, organisation, etc.
8. Proliferation of unreformed qualifications - HEIs make only cosmetic reforms.
9. Capacity building blockages prevent descriptor use: no teaching and learning policy/staff development, academic intransigence, resource constraints, political interference, etc.
There is a complex and difficult relationship between frameworks, descriptors and learning outcomes.

An insightful resource on the current situation is the December 2014 ‘Report by the Structural Reforms Working Group to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)’. This report focuses on progress and problems in 47 countries:

- underlines the key role learning outcomes play
- grass roots capacity at HEI level must be improved (training)
- NQF are essential for ‘fair recognition’
- NQF must be used by HEIs in qualifications and recognition
- calls for a common transparency infrastructure including subject specific learning outcomes
- calls for a common understanding of LO in relation to knowledge, general competence, and level
- places the curriculum expressed in terms of LO and aligned to NQF at the centre of educational reform
The relationship between curriculum/qualification development, quality assurance and HEI modernisation is of fundamental importance. Top-down and bottom-up reforms must take place. Without radical change at HEI level reform will fail. Qualifications need to be fit for the 21st century and many are not... The delicate learning outcomes-delivery-assessment relationship is fundamental to reform and when done effectively is a cathartic process. Some countries have developed ‘zombie’ NQF and only cosmetically changed qualifications = ‘un-dead’ qualifications. Qualifications require appropriate learning outcomes at the level of the qualification and its unit/module/component level. Many poor NQF exist in Europe that have cloned simplistic, generic level descriptors – this is detrimental to recognition. Strong quality assurance regimes (internal and external) are essential.
THE BENEFITS OF A LEARNING OUTCOMES-BASED APPROACH

2. More accurate international comparisons - NQF, qualifications, etc.
3. Provide transparency so more objective judgements can be made.
4. The basis of recognition tools.
5. Facilitate the cathartic rethink of the curriculum.
7. Highlight the learning-delivery-assessment relationship.
8. Essential for student-centred learning, transferable skills + employability.
9. Aid recognition - RPL + more accurate decision making.
10. Facilitate the use of credits + credit allocation.
11. Improve articulation between sub systems.
12. Strengthen quality assurance mechanisms.
SOME AWKWARD QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES:
There are many uncomfortable realities associated with attempts to refine and implement level descriptors and learning outcomes in South Africa:

1. How are you currently using the South African level descriptors? What are the benefits and challenges associated with their use?
2. In addition to the level descriptors are there additional tools that you could use and/or develop?
3. How can top-down and bottom-up reform policies be effectively and simultaneously implemented?
4. Are there disjunctions between SAQA decisions to register qualifications and some Quality Council recommendations?
5. Can the recognition of foreign qualifications be aided by the renaming of the South African Honours degree? Why do a number of South African HEIs fail to grant ‘fair recognition’ to applicants with foreign degrees?
6. How do the length and credit values of level 8 and 9 qualifications compare to practice elsewhere?
7. How can quality assurance bodies (internal and external) ensure that good learning outcomes are embedded at all levels of education (no cosmetic changes)?
8. Do all HEIs have effective teaching and learning policies that support the dynamic learning-delivery-assessment dimension of learning outcomes?
9. Why do quality assurance systems often fail to properly examine learning outcomes and their relationship to delivery and assessment?
CONCLUSIONS

Concern about educational reform is driven by similar motivation across the globe. Learning outcomes based approaches are clearly being adopted across the world but politicians and educational leaders need to come to terms with the multiple challenges that such reform entails. It takes many years to change educational culture and this is made more difficult as disruptive technologies and new providers further challenge the 'who, what, how, where and when' learning can take place and be recognised.

The recognition world is being fundamentally impacted upon by learning outcomes but until they are of improved quality and ubiquitous (permeate NQF, qualifications, recognition policies and tools, etc) they pose numerous problems. Outcomes-based qualifications need to provide clear, unambiguous and explicit statements of competences that show what it is that the bearer of a qualification can do.

NQF level indicators lie at the heart of new educational reforms – they link and anchor the multiple new initiatives.