

Signalling Abilities and Achievement: Measuring and Reporting on Skill and Competency Development

Prepared by: Mary Catharine Lennon, HEQCO

The third in a three part series, this paper examines initiatives designed to measure and report on acquisition of skills and competencies. It looks specifically at how various jurisdictions have developed common definitions when stating expectations about learning outcomes, transparency in communication of goals and accomplishments and the enhanced mobility of students within education systems and institutions.

Research shows that students, faculty and employers all benefit from defined learning outcomes. Students are better able to make informed choices, faculty are able to translate outcomes into skills and employers gain a better understanding of what they can expect graduates to know and be able to do.

Many jurisdictions are developing tests to determine the actual outcomes of learning in postsecondary institutions. There are many different approaches to this from examining general skill competencies to focusing on domain-specific knowledge and skills to examining occupational competencies. While providing valuable information, there is a concern that the results of learning outcomes assessments could be used as tools to rank and compare institutions if they are not carefully implemented.

The paper concludes with the assessment that identifying a student's aptitudes through stated learning outcomes increases the likelihood of an appropriate fit for specific job requirements and assures employers that graduates have the skills they are looking for.

About the author:

Mary Catharine Lennon is a Policy Analyst at HEQCO and a PhD Candidate in Theory and Policy Studies in Higher Education at OISE/UT. She holds degrees from Simon Fraser University and Queens' University. Her background in the field of higher education includes positions with the Association of Commonwealth Universities; the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; and with numerous university council and student group associations.