

Notes for presentation

Unit Standards

Standards and quality

Materials:

Literacy methodology / visual and psychomotor skills

The importance of visual literacy and getting used to text

Interactive and activity based

Careful progression in terms of complexity

CCFOs - Certainly many ABET materials include rich activities which bring together a number of skills and processes activating the critical outcomes.

Reading and writing must be taught in an integrated way.

Range of functional and transactional sentences / paragraphs are built up towards

Themes: good practice learning programme in terms of adult education philosophies

(see other training programme)

This section of the report provides an overview of the policy formulations and terminology relating to the Critical Outcomes.

The first official SAQA Bulletin gave form to the concept of the NQF:

... agreement was reached on the concept of transparent national standards, understood as specific descriptions of learning achievements agreed on by all major stakeholders in the particular area of learning. The standards were housed within a qualifications framework designed to promote lifelong learning, integrate education and training, recognize learning gained outside of formal institutions and allow for flexible, portable credits and qualifications. (SAQA 1997(a) p.3).

In this same Bulletin motivation for the critical outcomes is put forward.

This vision intends that all qualifications, and hence learning programmes and unit standards, should give attention to the critical outcomes, since they are critical for the development of life long learning. (SAQA 1997(a) p.6).

Subsequently the regulatory dimension for the Critical Outcomes was set out as follows:

Critical outcomes contemplated in regulation 7(4) shall be embedded within a standard as specified in regulations 7(1): provided that where such standard forms part of a qualification, those critical outcomes not included in the standard shall be embedded in the qualification. (NSB Regulation No. R 482, 1998).

In addition, the Critical Outcomes were named as 'Cross-Field' outcomes in that they apply across education sectors and occupational training and qualifications. The NSB regulations set out twelve organizing fields as a structuring principle for the NQF which reflects this range.

In more detail, SAQA's document 'The NQF and Curriculum Development' set out the aims and intentions of the Critical Outcomes, and re-stated the requirement.

These critical outcomes describe the qualities which the NQF identifies for development in students within the education and training system, regardless of the specific area of content of learning i.e. those outcomes that are deemed critical for the development of the capacity for life long learning. These outcomes are intended to direct the thinking of policy makers, curriculum designers, facilitators as well as the learners themselves.

It is mandatory for standard setters to incorporate at least some of the Critical Outcomes in the standards that they recommend and proposers of qualifications must ensure that all Critical Outcomes have been addressed appropriately at the level concerned within the qualifications being proposed. (SAQA 2000(b), p.18)

Of interest to the South African ABET context is an emerging focus on the literacy foundation needed for key competencies. The consolidation study cited above commented that further research is required on 'effective strategies for integrating the key competencies while addressing equity and English language, literacy and numeracy needs'. In addition, a later study (Curtis & McKenzie 2001) reviewing the state of employability skills in Australia separated out 'basic skills' from what it saw as the Mayer competencies. This report drew on development of other national frameworks, the International Adult Literacy Survey and the literature on the views of Australian employers to propose an emergent skills set for consultation. It comprised three main domains:

Basic skills

Foundation skills in literacy and numeracy, and in using information and communication technology

Intellectual abilities

Critical and creative thinking, and planning and organisation

Personal attributes

Attitudes and abilities of self-management, on-going learning, and collaboration

What is noteworthy here is the separation out of the Basic Skills from the domain of intellectual abilities, which is where the Mayer competencies are placed in the Curtis & McKenzie study. Part of the reason given for this is the awareness of the importance of foundational skills not only for **entry** into work as the Mayer competencies implied, but also for effective functioning in the workplace. In addition, this study recognizes that 'the problem of basic skills achievement is one that must be addressed separately for different groups within the community' (Curtis & McKenzie 2001 p 52) – a relevant point for our ABET learners.

3.1 Assumptions: foundations

The most striking difference between the formulations given in the international literature and the Critical Outcomes is the explicit naming of assumptions prior to the development of the competencies. Both Mayer and SCANS note these as 'building on to' an achieved level of general education, SCANS going so far as to separate out literacy, numeracy and communication into 'the

foundation' for competence. The Scottish and UK listings also assume an entry level point above that of basic, general education. This is partly due to the origin of the 'key skills' debate as response to an identified need for employment-related capabilities, to prepare those about to enter the workplace or undertake vocational training. None of the literature directly addresses linking acquisition of the key competencies to those who have little or no literacy skills or basic formal education, central areas for ABET (although Overtoom's comment cited above suggests a nod in this direction; and there is a reference to teaching SCANS students 'with limited English proficiency' in one of the resources; and the later Australian study separates out what is called 'the basic skills'). The South African Critical Outcomes, by contrast, do not state any assumptions as to the starting point for development of the outcomes, and do not address the idea of a 'foundation' for key competencies or critical outcomes. This is a key issue for ABET – as we will see in later discussion, there are views which suggest that certain foundational areas in ABET itself should be established prior to engaging with the Critical Outcomes.

In SAQA's first bulletin, an interesting discussion follows the SAQA Decision on the critical outcomes (SAQA 1997(a) p.7). Three areas of debate and compromise were identified. It is worth noting that these were described as 'demanding and contentious questions' around the 'naming and use' of the concept, as these very same questions continue to arise in the context of this research. The three areas identified were:

- 'The naming of those qualities which the NQF wished to promote across all areas and content of learning: proposals included generic (or core) skills or competencies, abilities, capabilities, and essential outcomes. Agreement was reached on the term 'critical cross-field education and training outcomes.' All these terms contain within them their own implications, relating to views on structuring principles, educational purposes, depth and breadth.
- The number of outcomes to be specified: the formulation of seven 'critical' outcomes, differentiated from the five 'developmental' outcomes, continues to raise questions for curriculum design, assessment and implementation.
- The application of the outcomes: the issue here was to ensure that that the critical outcomes became what SAQA termed as 'actionable' in education and training, with the focus on where and how they should be built into unit standards to ensure that they are taken seriously. Where the critical outcomes most usefully 'belong', and how to activate them, is again a key question for this research.

Design down – leading to the use of qualification descriptions, unit standards and the outcomes as the starting point for curriculum development, and hence the decision to put Critical Outcomes in unit standards. Spady distinguished between 'culminating outcomes' as exit outcomes, and 'enabling outcomes', which are the building blocks for learning towards the exit outcomes (Spady 1995). The question 'what kind or order of outcomes are the Critical Outcomes?' is key to any discussion of how to activate the outcomes, and is examined in this section and in Part D. In addition, the relationship between unit standards, specific outcomes and Critical Outcomes to curriculum design is discussed in this section.

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SAQA notes the issue of the relationship of the critical outcomes to context, and thereby to curriculum, at least at learning programme¹ level:

The critical outcomes, sometimes called generic skills or essential skills or core skills, have been deemed problematic for learning programme developers on two counts. The first is 'the impossibility of decontextualising statements about core skills with any meaning' (Wolf). The problem is not so much that these skills do not exist or that they cannot be identified, but rather that they are, by definition, inseparable from the contexts in which they are developed and displayed. The separation of a critical outcome from a specific outcome e.g. problem solving in the context of electricians' work or law, does not necessarily give the concept independent value. The nature of problem-solving in law is different from the nature of problem solving in electricians' work. Others however would argue that regardless of context there are common features in approach, attitude, process and management that are common to all successful problem-solving contexts. (SAQA 2000(b) p 20).

While SAQA acknowledges the influence of context on the critical outcomes, then, it is somewhat coy about committing itself to a position – as noted in the same document,

There is no prescription in any of the SAQA regulations or requirements of how these outcomes are to be incorporated and developed. Since the qualifications and standards focus on the learning outcome, the methodology of how the critical outcomes will be developed within context, is in the hands of the practitioners. (SAQA 2000(b) p. 20)

This poses various curriculum questions for ABET. If the Critical Outcomes are located in learning area content and contexts, the question is whether there is sufficient content, especially at the lower ABET levels, for learners to engage with the complexities of the Critical Outcomes, and for providers to deal with progression issues. As Lyster points out, '... ABET is at its very heart, a foundational subject upon which all other education is built', and 'literacy is the primary mechanism on which other subjects build' (Lyster in Hemson 1998, p.73). She reminds us that '...its an incredibly complex, slow and arduous process to teach someone simply to read and write and calculate' (p 77), and the focus on other outcomes has the effect of undervaluing the real foundational skills needed for further learning. This resonates with the concerns expressed in the case studies in Section D, regarding the issue of where the priorities for ABET lie in terms of limited time and resources.

¹ A learning programme is narrower than the curriculum, and is defined by SAQA as '... the sequential learning activities, associated with curriculum implementation, leading to the achievement of a particular qualification or part qualification.' (SAQA 2005 (c)).

To put it simply, outcomes **alone**, especially if slavishly followed to determine the shape and form of a learning programme², are not enough for the development of good curricula; further, if the outcomes in a unit standard themselves are flawed (either opaque, or over-specified to the point of trivialization or fragmentation), and if learning programme developers use these as their starting point, it could have damaging consequences on programme development. In short, the quality of individual unit standards, and their appropriateness and consistency in terms of content and progression across related sets of standards, will impact on the quality of the programme.

What is important for our discussion, though, is the question 'of what order are the critical outcomes'? As we have seen from the discussion so far, they can be seen as both broad educational goals, and as process skills or enabling outcomes. The nature of their applicability will shift according to the context and content through which they are delivered. The purpose of an assessment will therefore also shift for different outcomes at different times. As noted, this could be a fruitful lens through which to view how Critical Outcomes could be assessed in ABET. It also supports the idea that generalizing about the Critical Outcomes as a group is unsound.

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Outcomes are meant to be the result of learning. However, many of the critical outcomes are processes that underpin learning, or are applied continuously in the context of specific learnings. They are not necessarily a definable goal which is reached outside of a context or a learning process.

Exit or enabling outcomes

It needs to be said that ABET learners, especially those at ABET Levels 1 and 2 who are attaining initial literacy, are generally not confident learners. They are those who have had little exposure to formalized, text-based learning and its codes and conventions. Encouraging an active and self-directed approach to learning encounters different kinds of barriers to those you might find in teaching children in a school. It is for this reason that ABET educators are encouraged to stress developmental outcome (i) (learning strategies) as a key process in ABET. In addition, one must bear in mind that the main activity that most ABET learners are engaged in (as opposed to children) is that of earning a livelihood, or improving opportunities to earn a livelihood. For many adult learners, particularly those in industry-based ABET, education and training is a means to an end. There is limited time and limited resources, and various other practical issues which take priority over learning. In brief, adult learners are not particularly interested in engaging with the kinds of learning and study activities beyond the classroom boundaries that active and participatory learning

² As they sometimes are in the development of ABET learning programmes; however, writers and planners of good quality programmes will draw on a number of other elements (e.g. discipline and learning progression; integrating principles; needs analyses) to develop a learning programme.

suggests. By the same token, as adults they are dealing with a whole range of other responsibilities in their lives anyway, so may very well not want to extend this to learning in a proactive way.

CONC

1. A research agenda

The consensus from the literature review and the case studies is that the concept of Critical Outcomes (or comparable formulations) is a vital component of education and training. The devil is, of course, in the detail. As this report has explored, there are numerous problems in relation both to their conceptual clarity and their implementation.

Possible research areas to address these problems have defined themselves in the course of the arguments of this report. Some of these are as follows:

- Critically, there is a need to explore a range of options for ensuring that the Critical Outcomes are taken seriously: if the intended curricular impact and integration goals are not being achieved through embedding Critical Outcomes in the specific outcomes in unit standards, then different approaches need to be investigated.
- There is a need to unpack and re-define the way in which the Critical Outcomes are expressed, through clarifying definitions of competence, outcomes statements, and educational goals. This would include reviewing of category issues, overlaps, and wording of the Critical Outcomes. In addition, the relationship between generic and 'transferable' outcomes, discipline-specific outcomes and curriculum needs to be understood in a consistent way. Curriculum research could also include a detailed investigation of how taxonomies such as those described by Smith (2006) are exemplified in curriculum.
- The impact of different sites and modes of delivery on how the Critical Outcomes are implemented (for example, the differences between institutional learning and non-institutional learning) needs to be acknowledged and investigated.

- The relationship between 'foundational' skills, and the Critical Outcomes themselves needs to be analysed: should foundational skills be a prior platform for the Critical Outcomes, or are there synergies between the basic skills and some of the Critical Outcomes that could be key to successful learning if accessed appropriately?
- The nature of assessment judgements in relation to the Critical Outcomes could be explored in more detail, through concrete examples. This would include an understanding of the issues relating to the malleability of assessment, in terms of the purposes and levels in different contexts for these outcomes.
- A review of the applicability of some of the themes identified in this research to higher levels of education and training could be done. This could include a survey of international findings on key competencies in vocational training. It could also involve an exploration of the links between ABET and occupational and vocational training in the present South African environment, and ways in which the Critical Outcomes are addressed in occupational qualifications and curriculum design in the Further Education and Training band. There could be some synergies with other initiatives currently unfolding, such as the work being done around proposals for the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations.