active learning
in higher education

Vol 1(2): 132–151 [1469-7874 (200012) 1:2;132–151;015078]
ARTICLE

Programme specification and its role in promoting an outcomes model of learning

NORMAN JACKSON *University of Surrey, UK*

ABSTRACT Programme specifications will have an important influence on academic practice in UK higher education. They will provide concise summary descriptions of the educational learning outcomes of programmes. They are intended to promote and support a systematic process of critical reflection on the curriculum and the means by which the desired outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. They will provide a foundation for the public assurance of academic standards in universities and colleges and will provide the initial point of contact between an institution's evaluative and assurance processes and the new peer review process of academic review. They will show how programmes and awards relate to the HE qualifications framework now being developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. This article tries to explain some of the thinking that underlies policy so that those responsible for implementing it will have a better understanding of what it is trying to do and why it has been shaped in the way it has.
KEYWORDS: *programme specification, QA policy, learning outcomes, standards*

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed the transformation of UK higher education from a highly selective, elitist system to a more accessible, multi-purpose mass system. Successive government administrations have repositioned the university system from one founded on the notion of autonomous self-regulation (the right of institutions to decide freely and independently how to perform their tasks; Johnson, 1994), to notions of autonomy and

self-regulation that are founded on an explicit public policy (quality assurance) framework (Jackson, 1997).

The massive expansion and increased flexibility of higher education provision, the rapid expansion of the university system and the student population between 1989 and 1994 coupled to changes in public perceptions of the purpose of higher education, all contributed to concerns for the comparability of standards across the higher education system (HEQC, 1997; 1–9). Such concerns were addressed in a national debate led by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) between 1994 and 1997 and a National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997). The report of the committee (known as the Dearing report in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Garrick report in Scotland) contains a set of recommendations that are intended to provide the basis for public policy (*statements of intent for the management of public services like education*) aimed at improving the capacity of a diverse, multi-purpose higher education system to regulate its academic standards.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA; an organization established in 1997 'to support higher education institutions in discharging their responsibility for the quality and standards of their educational provision'; Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals [CVCP], 1996) is charged with developing policy in consultation with the higher education community and other interested parties (e.g. students, employers, professional and statutory regulatory bodies, funding councils and higher education representative bodies). The intention is to develop and implement by 2000–2001 a new quality assurance regime focused on the public assurance of standards. Descriptions of, and commentary on, emergent policy can be found in QAA (1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d), Jackson (1998a, 1998b, 1999a) and Brown (1998). This article focuses on one aspect of policy – programme specification. It considers the role it is intended to play in encouraging a system-wide move to outcomes-based learning (OBL) and referencing learning activities and outcomes to a national qualifications framework (QAA, 1999c).

Underpinning the UK approach to policy aimed at assuring standards in a diverse mass system is the belief that it is neither desirable nor possible to achieve uniform standards across the whole higher education system. Instead, the onus is placed on those responsible for creating standards to be more explicit about the nature of their standards. A fundamental principle in developing policy is to help teaching teams explain the basis for their standards without seeking to take away their professional autonomy for determining the standards or the way those standards are achieved. The adoption of OBL (rather than a national curriculum or assessment) is critical to maintaining this principle.

The main elements of the policy framework are:

- a universal framework on which qualifications, credit for achievement and programmes/modules can be positioned
- programme specifications that will enable higher education institutions to describe the main learning outcomes for a programme and show how programmes, modules and awards are positioned on the national qualifications framework
- quality assurance processes that will: (a) help clarify the dimensions of standards in subjects (via subject benchmarking groups) and (b) utilize a strengthened system of external examiners and an external review process to provide greater public assurance that standards are acceptable
- a progress file that will enable achievement to be monitored, evaluated and recorded containing two elements: (a) transcript for recording student achievement that will follow a common format and (b) means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development (the term personal development planning is being used to describe this process).
- codes of practice against which HE institutions can reference their own practices and procedures for assuring the quality and standards of the education they provide.

Making the basis of academic standards more explicit

The question of standards in a diverse, multi-purpose, higher education system is very complicated. Pring (1992), writing at the time UK higher education was beginning its radical transformation, provides a perspective on the meaning of academic standards that many academics would recognize.

> The academic tradition lays stress upon intellectual discipline and upon high standards of thinking, arguing, enquiring, experimenting, speculating that are part and parcel of an intellectual discipline. Such disciplined ways of thinking develop over time. They are sustained by social arrangements partly recognised in learned societies and professional associations, partly reflected in the power structures and authorities recognised by people with similar interests . . . There is a dominant academic tradition which sees quality of intellectual endeavour (and the implicit standards of good and bad performance) to lie within specific traditions of disciplined enquiry. Such traditions are defined partly in terms of the relevant concepts, procedures, problems, tests of validity and the use of these concepts etc., more or less effectively, more or less correctly. Thus there are standards but these, though acknowledged in one's intellectual efforts, are more often than not unspoken . . . and the application of these standards does not entail explicit formulation of them. Hence the importance of the

> 'judgement' of those who are authorities within the subject (the academics, external examiners and advisors), and hence the importance, too of a period of initiation – the gradual recognition by the learned of the many standards which are acknowledged within the exercise of intellectual disciplines.

The shift from an elitist to a mass system and expansion of the university system raised the issue of the comparability of standards: a matter that had not been challenged in the elitist system. Following government prompts in 1994 the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) commissioned the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) to seek a more robust and transparent way of assuring standards. Emerging from the public debate that was engineered by HEQC (HEQC, 1997) was the belief that the basis for academic standards could and should be rendered more accessible by adopting a model of learning that views the creation of academic standards as a deliberate and explicit process (in marked contrast to Pring's [1992] view of standards). This model (elaborated by HEQC, 1997: 35, and Jackson, 1998a) involves the formulation of general educational expectations which guide the creation of programme educational objectives or learning outcomes and more specific learning outcomes in the taught elements of the programme. These in turn provide the rationale for particular teaching and learning strategies to enable the outcomes to be realized and assessment methods and performance criteria that measure the extent to which the outcomes have been demonstrated/achieved. Although it might appear from this description of the model that progression from expectations to performance standards is a simple, precise, linear process, in reality it is a complex, imprecise, iterative process requiring many adjustments within, and sometimes subsequent to, the learning process, and supported by referencing and discussion within peer groups. The approach acknowledges the complexity of an academic standard in terms of the interrelationship and balance of knowledge, understanding, cognitive, practical and general skills, capabilities and other implicit educational outcomes. It recognizes that written specifications are an aid to professional judgement about a standard rather than the total embodiment of the standard.

The Dearing review accepted this analysis and recommended (within the recommendation for programme specification) that learning intentions be expressed in the form of learning outcomes. The programme specification, together with subject benchmarking, academic review and the national qualifications framework with its awards and level descriptors (QAA, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d), are therefore policy vehicles for promoting system-wide adoption of OBL.

Pros and cons of OBL

Debates on the relative strengths and weaknesses of OBL are international rather than national. They have become politicized and polarized because of the link between OBL and the reconstruction or reform of education systems (for example in South Africa, North America, Australia, New Zealand and the UK). The idea behind OBL is simple, namely that learning and teaching should be determined by learning outcomes rather than a syllabus. OBL provides a model of learning that emphasizes what is expected of students, teachers (and support systems and structures) rather than a prescription of what they should know.

Supporters of OBL argue that the approach provides a sounder foundation for learning, teaching and testing because it demands greater clarity and transparency of objectives. These have to be expressed in terms of measurable behaviour, i.e. defining the learning objective makes clear what students should be able to do in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the specified objective. The philosophy behind the approach is simple yet compelling, namely that objectives stated in such a manner will provide teachers and learners with clear guidance as to what is expected of them, and will indicate in advance how student performance will be assessed (Melton, 1997). Because learning outcomes are a type of behavioural objective they also tend to emphasize 'the can do' aspect of learning. Supporters argue that this benefits students when they come to present themselves to employers who, we are told, are more concerned with the capability to apply knowledge and skills than with knowledge itself. It must, however, be acknowledged that in moving from content- to outcomes-based learning there are significant implications for pedagogy, curriculum and assessment.

Criticisms of OBL are of four main types (Chisholm, 1997). The first accepts that OBL, with its emphasis on explicitness and transparency may not be a bad thing, but that policy-driven implementation underestimates the time needed to develop the professional capacities of individuals to design and teach outcomes-based courses and the institutional costs of supporting curriculum reform. The second criticism is also not fundamentally against the approach but is concerned with the bureaucracy that OBL demands in order to demonstrate the connections between outcomes and the learning and assessment process. Such criticisms are founded on a number of beliefs: that all bureaucracy is a waste of time, that being required to make explicit what had previously been implicit amounts to an erosion of professional autonomy, and that in doing so academics render themselves even more accountable to students and peers. The third type of criticism fundamentally questions the philosophical and epistemological

basis for OBL. For example, (i) that it offers an instrumentalist view of knowledge that violates the epistemology of the structure of some subjects and disciplines; (ii) that it pays little attention to process itself and therefore is pedagogically unsound; (iii) that important educational outcomes, such as values and attitudes, are difficult to accommodate; (iv) that it trivializes curriculum content and emphasizes skills at the expense of knowledge. The fourth type of criticism challenges the political assumption in the model, arguing that any attempt to impose a universal model for learning, regardless of the reasons for its introduction, is bound to fail.

The polarization of arguments between policy makers seeking a systemic and politically acceptable solution to perceived problems and educational developers and practitioners who are promoting the pedagogic benefits of OBL, and practitioners and educational researchers who reject OBL, makes it more difficult to develop policy. In creating policy on programme specifications the strategy has been to raise awareness of such issues in public debate, to explain the reasons for policy, to consider different options, and to work with institutions and practitioners willing to try out, evaluate and help improve policy proposals (hundreds of academics in many institutions have contributed to the development work). So although policy is being driven top-down it is actually being created bottom-up by those who are going to be most affected by it. This pragmatic (but caring) approach is more likely to result in policy that is workable and an understanding and public recognition of the limitations of policy, but it will not result in policy that satisfies those who are opposed to OBL in principle.

OBL model to support practice and quality assurance

The discussion above highlighted that OBL focuses attention primarily on 'what is to be learnt' and 'what is actually learnt.' But academic practice is rooted in concerns for the process of learning. In order for OBL-based policies to be operationalized it is necessary to create a process model that links the 'what is to be learnt' with the 'what is actually learnt' via the 'process of learning' (Figure 1). All the policies within the new quality assurance regime can be related to this simple model and it represents an attempt to bridge the gap between political imperatives, expressed in the Dearing recommendation, and the reality of academic practice.

A further consideration in the OBL debate is 'who' is defining the outcomes to be learnt? The Dearing recommendation assumed that academics are in the driving seat but the small, but growing, demand for contract-based learning (where the learner defines their own outcomes) compromises this assumption. Furthermore, inherent in the aspiration for

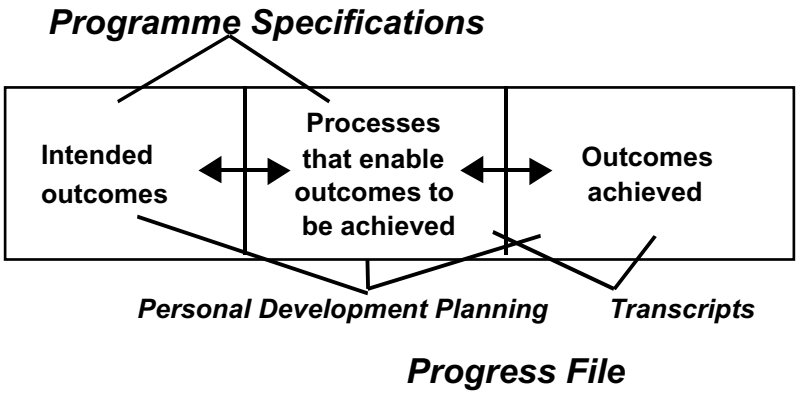

Figure 1 **Conceptual framework for outcomes-based learning. The parts of the model that are addressed by Programme Specifications and Progress Files are shown**

the personal development planning element of the progress file (another Dearing recommendation) is the idea that learners will contribute to the definition of their own learning outcomes. Responsibility for defining the outcomes of learning is clearly not a simple matter when learners are taking increasing responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.

Conception of programme specification

The idea of a programme specification (a consistent and concise description of the purpose, learning intentions, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment strategy for a programme) emanated from the graduate standards programme (HEQC, 1997: 91). The holistic idea of a graduate (but not the holistic conception of a programme profile) was incorporated into recommendation 21 of the Dearing review:

> we recommend that institutions of HE begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a 'programme specification' which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:
> – *the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;*
> – *key skills: communication, numeracy, use of information technology and learning how to learn;*
> – *cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;*
> – *subject specific skills – such as laboratory skills.*

The primary motivation for this proposal was to make the learning intentions of a programme explicit in order to improve the quality of public information on the access to learning opportunities and the outcomes

of learning. QAA argued that the value of information on intended outcomes would be enhanced if it could be related to the educational process. Making the relationship between intended outcomes and the learning process explicit helps students to understand and appreciate the reasons for particular teaching, learning and assessment strategies. It also encourages curriculum designers and teachers to make this connection and institutional quality assurance processes to check that sufficient opportunities for learning are provided to enable the intended outcomes to be achieved.

Policy development work attempted to reconcile the Dearing objective of providing more explicit public information on outcomes with the broader educational objective of showing how the intended outcomes from a programme are promoted and demonstrated through the learning process. QAA policy on programme specification is therefore a mix of the Dearing and HEQC conceptions (Jackson 2000).

Categorization of learning

The Dearing recommendation assumes that the generic outcomes of higher level learning can be described adequately in terms of four parameters (knowledge and understanding, cognitive and subject-specific skills, and key skills). The production of over 70 completed templates in more than 20 subjects indicated that the outcomes of programmes could be described within these parameters. However, it was apparent that some outcomes, such as problem-solving, were often cited in more than one category. Some participants felt that categorization gave undue emphasis to the acquisition of skills at the expense of knowledge and understanding, and that categorization inhibited the inclusion of desirable outcomes that were not measured explicitly. It also became apparent that there was a mismatch between the way that some subject benchmarking groups formulated their outcome statements and the categorization of learning outcomes given in the programme specification (Jackson et al., 2000). This made it more difficult to relate programme outcomes to subject benchmarking statements.

Another important question posed by the development process was whether the parameters proposed by Dearing adequately reflect the dimensions of higher education learning. Academic standards are difficult to explain because they represent a complex, ever-changing, interdependent, mixture of contextualized (subject/programme/institution) knowledge (information/facts, concepts, principles, procedures or theories usually relating to one or more subject domains), understanding (comprehension, interpretation, judgement) and skill (capacity to do something with the knowledge). Possessing knowledge does not necessarily mean that it can be used effectively. To do this a learner must posses certain intellectual or

cognitive processing skills, e.g. the ability to analyse, synthesize or evaluate (Bloom, 1956). The ability to process and apply knowledge may also be dependent on the possession of subject-specific practical skills (e.g. ability to operate a particular piece of equipment) and more general practical and personal qualities and skills, such as self-motivation and the ability to communicate in various ways and through various media (variously described as transferable, core, common, generic or key skills in the UK).

The third question raised by the Dearing categorization relates to the validity of the requirement for higher education to adopt the four key skills (communication, numeracy, use of information technology and learning how to learn) as a valued outcome of the educational process. There is little recognition in the Dearing report of the contested nature of key skills or of the differences of understanding that lie behind the terms (Whitston, 1998: 307. See also the critique of the theoretical and conceptual basis for such skills by Hyland and Johnson, 1998 and Bennett, Dunne and Carre, 1999). Challenges to the idea of key skills cannot be ignored by the policy developer because they reflect a significant (though not always articulated) view within the academic community. What can be said of key skills is that while there is widespread acknowledgement of the idea that learning is underpinned by certain generic qualities and skills, there is no consensus view as to how this aspect of the educational process should be dealt with in either practice or policy terms. This provides a poor and confusing foundation on which to build coherent and workable public policy.

A QAA commissioned study to inform policy (Garrett, 1999) indicated that 94 percent of institutional respondents to a questionnaire (70% response from 70 higher education institutions surveyed) either have in place or are developing a formal policy on key or transferable skills with the enhancement of graduate employability the most commonly cited reason for the development of policy. Most institutions are focusing on a common list of general skills, e.g. communication, teamwork, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn and problem-solving, but references to analytical/critical thinking skills, practical skills, etc. serve to remind us that academic communities view such skills in an holistic rather than atomistic sense.

QAA's response to these important questions has been to argue that the primary concern of programme specifications is to encourage institutions and subjects to make explicit what they believe are their own educational and learning outcomes. It should not set out to define lists of potential outcomes, rather, it should promote continued discussion within subject communities and programme teams about the nature and balance of particular qualities and skills and the way that these might be promoted within different curricular, teaching, learning and assessment contexts. The adoption of

this principle led to a simplification of the four-fold characterization of learning outcomes to: (i) knowledge and understanding, (ii) skills and other attributes in order to:

- provide greater opportunity for institutions/subjects to represent their educational/learning outcomes in ways that they consider are most appropriate (institutions can still use the Dearing categorization of outcomes if they feel that it is appropriate to do so)
- accommodate better the variety of approaches to the specification of outcomes in subject benchmark statements
- enable higher education institutions to represent skills in a holistic way and avoid the criticism of fragmentation and artificial compartmentalization that results from over-categorization
- facilitate the inclusion of other valued but non-measurable educational outcomes such as attitudes and behaviours, if deemed appropriate.

Universal adoption of OBL

Implicit in the Dearing recommendation for programme specification is the assumption that an outcomes model of learning could be adopted by a higher education system. Development work on the feasibility of an outcomes-based approach in higher education was undertaken in the early 1990s (Otter, 1992). The main conclusions of this study (which involved engineering, design, English, environmental science and social science) were that:

- it is possible to describe the outcomes of higher education more explicitly, although they cannot be expressed in simple 'can do' statements, and, in a complex and changing environment, such definitions will never be complete or fixed
- descriptions of learning outcomes in higher education cannot be expressed as a single set of 'national standards' of the kind developed for national vocational qualifications, since higher education exists to meet the needs of a variety of client groups and a range of social, economic, scientific and actual needs, and properly embodies a range of different cultures and value systems
- it is necessary to develop processes within each institution to link outcome definitions with quality assurance, since the authority to define the purposes of degree programmes rests with the chartered institution, rather than with any national agency
- an outcomes-led approach requires staff to develop and use methods of assessment which measure achievements directly, but current assessment practice tends to neglect these questions of validity in favour of

reliability, and many academic staff lack experience of appropriate approaches to assessment.

The policies developed by QAA to promote OBL recognize and accommodate these conclusions. There are few statistics on the extent to which OBL is used in UK higher education. A report commissioned by QAA (Turnbull, 1999) indicated that 64 percent (18 of 28) of the universities surveyed in the Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCAT) use learning outcomes as the means of specifying the expected learning and achievements of students at the level of a unit or module. About 50 percent of the institutions surveyed also reported that every learning outcome had to be achieved in order for credit to be awarded. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the extent to which OBL is understood and practised across the higher education system is highly variable.

It is unlikely that programme specification alone would promote a system-wide move to OBL. However, other policies – subject benchmarking (QAA, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 2000b and on-line at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public.htm; Jackson et al., 2000), the national qualifications framework (QAA, 2000d), codes of practice for assessment and programme review and approval and the process of academic review, will promote and reinforce this policy objective.

Information content

Programme specification is based on a minimum data set (core information) and optional information (Table 1). The information content was developed progressively by voluntary testing in different subjects, institutions and types of programme.

Programme specifications can be created using the headings given in Table 1 but there is the potential to display and relate information graphically (e.g. Figure 2). Example templates were prepared and piloted to show the type of information that might be included. This approach also served to develop an appreciation of the level of detail that could be contained in the format. Four different templates were developed and tested with practitioners between mid-1997 and mid-1998. The process was one of iteration and refinement in which QAA attempted to respond to the issues and concerns raised and incorporate suggestions for improvement. The final policy position adopted by QAA is that the information can be presented in either open text or template format. This reduces the potential for consistency and comparability, but is more likely to achieve ownership of the product and process.

Table 1 **Suggested information content of a programme specification (QAA 2000a)**

- awarding body/institution
- teaching institution (if different)
- details of accreditation by a professional/statutory body
- programme title
- UCAS code
- aims of the programme
- relevant subject benchmark statements and other external and internal reference points used to inform programme outcomes
- programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills and other attributes
- teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated
- programme structures and requirements, levels, modules, credits and awards
- date at which programme specification was written or revised

In addition, institutions might wish to include:

- criteria for admission to the programme
- information about assessment regulations
- indicators of quality
- particular support for learning
- methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning

Programme specification as an educational construct

Constructs are the expression of complex abstract ideas produced from a synthesis (or assembly) of simpler ideas (see Cherryholmes, 1988; Haertel, 1985; and Moss, 1992 for a comprehensive examination of this concept). In the educational context they can be used to convey information on the fundamental attributes that result from learning. Such attributes may be too general to be demonstrated directly but their definition is helpful in enabling teaching teams to gain a better appreciation of the teaching and learning strategies that are necessary for the acquisition and progressive development of attributes and to design an assessment regime that is valid to demonstrate their achievement. Programme specification is a type of educational construct (a concise synthesis of valued educational outcomes that can be used as a set of organizing principles to guide the design of curricula and assessment). Policy is intended to provide a framework for the systematic description of outcomes and to make explicit, through the structure of the information the connections between programme outcomes and the outcomes of curriculum units. The real value of the construct is in

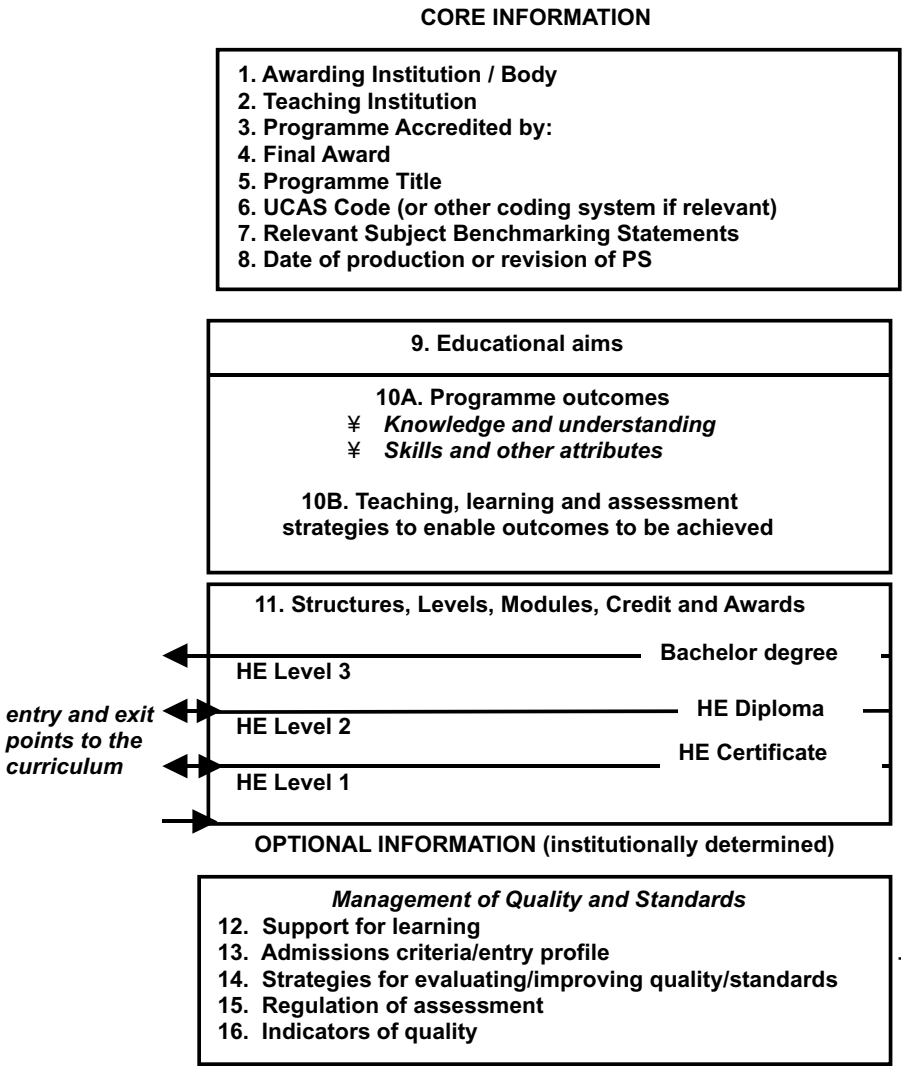

Figure 2 **Example Programme Specification template developed by the Quality Assurance Agency. Nb the level structure reflects current practice rather than the structure proposed in QAA (2000d).**

prompting a deliberate process of curriculum deconstruction in order to understand better how the sum of the parts relates to the whole. As such, the summary statement is merely the end product of a considered, professional and skilled process.

Types of learning outcome

An outcome is simply a result or consequence of an action or process. So, in an educational context the process of learning results in learning outcomes. The development process engendered considerable debate around the issue of whether the nature of the outcomes is the same at programme and module level. The conclusion reached was that while the construct of learning outcomes can be applied to whole curricular routes as well as curriculum units within the route there were differences of meaning and application.

Module outcomes predict the learning that students will have demonstrated when they have completed the curriculum unit. These learning outcomes relate directly to the assessment methods and criteria used to evaluate performance. Module outcomes are connected to academic standards through explicit assessment criteria and the evidence students provide of learning. Assessment criteria guide students on the quality of work expected in order to achieve the necessary standard and help academic staff to judge the extent to which the outcomes have been achieved. The actual standards of achievement are embodied in marks, grades and performance statements.

In contrast, programme outcomes are learning outcomes of a more strategic nature. They embody the educational purposes and values of the overall learning experience within a subject and institutional context. These outcomes provide the strategic framework for the process of learning. It should be possible to demonstrate that all the programme outcomes are being developed through the learning opportunities provided but there may be some educationally desirable outcomes that are not explicitly and separately assessed. There should, however, be a clear link between the programme outcomes, the overall assessment strategy for a programme, and the assessment methods and instruments used to demonstrate and judge whether outcomes (*intentions*) have actually been achieved (*results*).

Programme outcomes are generally not assessed directly (although synoptic forms of assessment such as final-stage projects and dissertations could be structured to do this). They are connected to academic standards through general assessment criteria that are used to distinguish between students that have performed at different levels over the whole programme. For example, quality of performance criteria relating to grade bands for honours classification or the award of pass, merit, distinction. The performance criteria in subject benchmarking statements illustrate how such criteria are constructed with reference to subject outcomes. The standards of achievement are embodied in classified awards, certificates and transcripts.

Curriculum design and evaluation

OBL requires a systematic approach to curriculum design. The programme specification is intended to encourage teaching teams to consider and explain how the programme outcomes connect with the specific learning outcomes for individual study units in the programme. Figure 3 shows schematically how such a relationship might be demonstrated in a modular or unitized curriculum. The educational outcomes for each programme are set out in a programme specification and the ways in which they are realized are made explicit in the specification for each module/unit in the programme. An overview (across a portfolio of modules) can be created using a mapping tool that shows where particular learning outcomes are developed, taught and assessed. Additional mapping tools could show the types of teaching and learning methods that are used to enable particular learning outcomes to be achieved, the assessment methods that enable the achievement of particular learning outcomes to be demonstrated and even the support and guidance strategies that underpin the pedagogic processes. Practical examples of the use of such mapping tools are given in the *Guidelines for Programme Specifications* (QAA, 2000a) and Jenkins (1997).

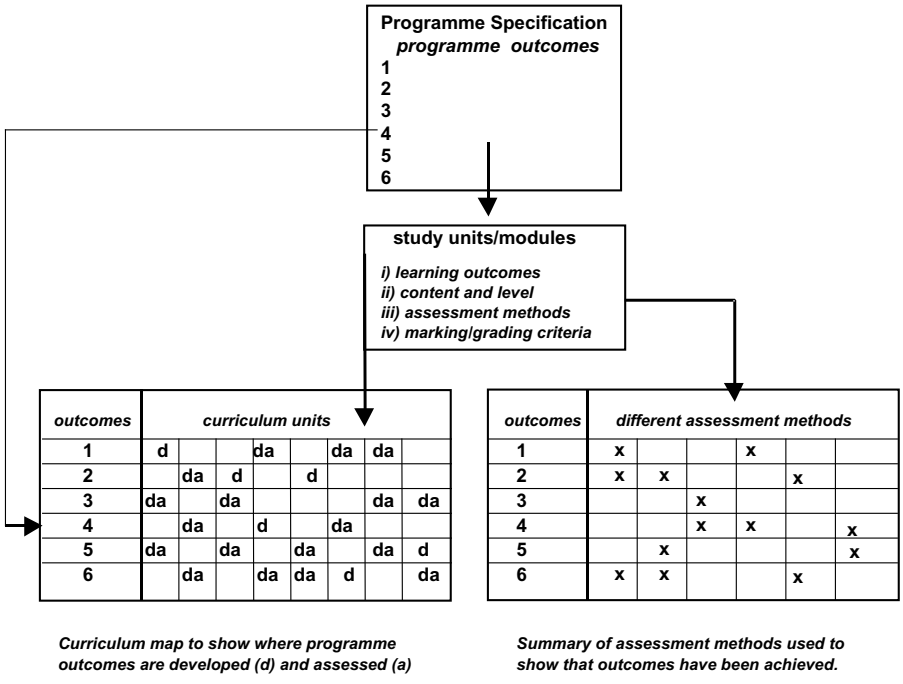

Figure 3 **Diagram to show how programme outcomes might be connected to module learning outcomes and assessment methods**

Assessment

OBL increases the importance of the validity of the assessment methods (Otter, 1992). At the programme level it assumes an explicit relationship between the learning outcomes and:

- the overall assessment strategy (are the assessment methods appropriate for assessing the range of specified outcomes?)
- the assessment instruments (do examination questions/coursework assignment tasks actually test learning outcomes?).

At module level the questions are:

- are the assessment methods appropriate for assessing the range of specified outcomes?
- do the assessment instruments (examination questions/coursework assignment tasks) actually test learning outcomes?
- do the assessment criteria guide judgements on different levels of performance in the specified outcomes?

A key question for any higher education system that promotes OBL is whether there is an expectation that all outcomes will be explicitly and individually assessed. Two different positions were argued in policy debates on programme specification. The first argued that all intended outcomes should be assessed (with the implication that policy would be ineffective if this was not the case). The second argued that it was educationally undesirable to limit a higher education experience to a set of measurable outcomes that must be explicitly assessed. But that if such outcomes are implicit in the educational process, the onus is on teaching teams to show how the curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and support strategies promote their development. It is the second of these two positions that is being promoted by QAA policy.

Sharing academic and occupational standards

One of the most cogent and persistent drivers of educational reform in the UK is the idea that the distinctive domains of occupational and academic learning can be integrated through various policies, constructs and strategies (Jackson, 1999b). The design intentions of an integrated system is that it facilitates access to, and progression through, the learning opportunities provided in ways that more compartmentalized systems cannot. The absence of a common conceptual vocabulary has inhibited the sharing of standards between the two domains. The adoption of OBL by higher education would, for the first time, provide a common conceptual vocabulary

for the exchange of information about standards and facilitate this process in those areas where it is relevant to do so (e.g. healthcare education).

Concluding remarks

Programme specifications (in conjunction with other QAA policies) will have an important influence on UK higher education, specifically in the way in which they will promote outcomes-based learning and encourage a more systematic approach to curriculum design and assessment. This article tries to explain some of the thinking that underlies policy so that those responsible for implementing it have a better understanding of why it has been shaped in this way. In doing so it exposes some of the dilemmas faced in this type of development work. Educational policy shapers (such as Lord Dearing and his committees) are concerned primarily with identifying simple ideas to solve complex problems, maintaining the overall integrity of a policy framework and addressing/balancing the needs of different interests. They do not concern themselves with the detailed implications of their proposals or of the practicalities of implementation. Neither are they interested in the educational arguments and values that might persuade higher education colleagues to work within the policy framework or the way in which one policy will relate to another.

Policy makers and developers must be concerned with the detailed implications of policy, with the reasons for and assumptions that underlie policy. They must also acknowledge those aspects of emergent policy that are contested by practitioners and educational theorists. National policy must be sufficiently credible for consensual agreement to be reached, but it must be flexible enough to enable users to embed the policy in their own organizational structures and processes. Policy is only given meaning when it is made to work by the professional and administrative communities that will use it.

The starting position for policy on programme specification was the political desire to provide public information on the outcomes of a programme. The development process revealed that if such information is to have any validity (and the learners' interests are to be protected) the initial objective of policy must be to ensure that programme specification is central to curriculum design and approval processes, i.e. it becomes an aid to quality assurance rather than simply a statement for public consumption. Once the PS has been validated it provides a source of information that can be provided in a variety of ways to different audiences (QAA 2000a examples 4A–4D and Harrison 2000).

The simplistic model of outcomes-based learning portrayed in the programme specification is deficient in two respects. First, it does not take

account of the quality of human and physical resources and support mechanisms and processes that facilitate achievement of the desired educational outcomes. To some extent this is accommodated in the supplementary information but the connection between these two types of information is tenuous at best and further consideration of this relationship is warranted. Institutional and academic review processes could for example consider the extent to which the human and physical resources promote or inhibit the achievement of programme outcomes.

Secondly, the model does not indicate that outcomes are achieved by individuals whose abilities, attitude, motivation and personal circumstances quantitatively influence the standards of achievement. This deficiency can be offset to some extent by another element of the policy framework – the personal development planning element of the higher education progress files (see consultation paper on-line at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public.htm and CVCP, 2000). Connecting programme specifications with the learners' own experience of learning will demonstrate that the achievement of educational outcomes is a shared responsibility. Connecting these two areas of policy and practice should create a synergy that has the potential to really make a difference to the quality of learning in UK higher education. That is the vision!

Acknowledgements

Public policy developed through public debate is created by people who care. This paper is dedicated to all of you who contributed to the development work on programme specifications between January 1997 and July 2000. The policy position is that of the Quality Assurance Agency but the views and interpretations of policy are my own. The definitive views of the agency are published in its *Handbook for Academic Review*, its codes of practice and in guidance to support policy. Further information on programme specification is available from the QAA web-site (http://qaa.ac.uk/progspec/policy.htm) and a special issue of Quality Assurance in Education v8 no 4.

References

BENNETT, N., DUNNE, E. & CARRE, C. (1999) 'Patterns of Core and Generic Skill Provision in Higher Education', *Higher Education* 37(1): 71–93.

BLOOM, B.S. (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain*. London: Longman.

BRIDGES, P., BORDILLON, B., COLLYMORE, D., COOPER, A., FOX, W., HAINES, C., TURNER, D., WOOLF, H. & YORKE, M. (1999) 'Discipline-related Marking Behaviour Using Percentages: A Potential Cause of Inequity in Assessment', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 24(3): 285–300.

BROWN, R. (1998) *The Post-Dearing Agenda for Quality and Standards in Higher Education*. Monograph, Institute of Education, University of London.
CHERRYHOLMES, C.H. (1988) 'Construct Validity and Discourses of Research', *American Journal of Education* 96: 421–57.
CHISHOLM, L. (1997) *Fear of Failure: OBE and its Critics*. Unpublished paper given at Registrars' Meeting on the South African Qualifications Framework, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 10 September.
CVCP, SCOP, COSHEP, QAA (1999) *Developing a Progress File for Higher Education*. Joint Consultation Paper, September.
CVCP (2000) Joint CVCP, COSHEP, SCOP AND QAA Policy Statement on a Progress File for HE. Information for Members I/00/80.
GARRETT, R. (1999) *Key Skills in Higher Education*. Unpublished report for the Quality Assurance Agency, February.
HAERTEL, E. (1985) 'Construct Validity and Criterion-reference Testing', *Review of Educational Research* 55: 23–46.
HARRISON, M. (2000) 'Creating Programme Specifications for Different Audiences', in N. Jackson (ed.) 'Programme Specification', *Quality Assurance in Higher Education* 8 (4). [Special issue]
HEQC (1997) *Graduate Standards Programme: Final Report*. London: Higher Education Quality Council.
HYLAND, T. & JOHNSON, S. (1998) 'Of Cabbages and Key Skills: Exploding the Mythology of Core Transferable Skills in Post-school Education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 22: 163–72.
JACKSON, N.J. (1997) 'Academic Regulation in UK Higher Education Part 1: The Concept of Collaborative Regulation', *Quality Assurance in Education* 5: 120–35.
JACKSON, N.J. (1998a) 'Understanding Standards-based Quality Assurance Part I: Rationale and Conceptual Basis', *Quality Assurance in Education* 6: 133–40.
JACKSON, N.J. (1998b) 'Understanding Standards-based Quality Assurance Part II: Nuts and Bolts of the Dearing Policy Framework. *Quality Assurance in Education* 6: 183.
JACKSON, N.J. (1999a) 'Programme Specifications and Their Role in Creating a More Explicit Environment for Demonstrating and Recording Achievement', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 23(2): 197–210.
JACKSON, N.J. (1999b) 'Modelling Change in a National HE System Using the Concept of Unification', *Journal of Education Policy* 14(4): 411–34.
JACKSON, N. J. (2000) 'The Concept of Programme Specification and its Place in the New National Quality Assurance Framework', in N. Jackson (ed.) 'Programme Specification,' *Quality Assurance in Higher Education* 8 (4). [Special issue]
JACKSON, N. J., PARKS, G., STEBBINGS, C. & HARRISON, M. (2000) 'Making the Benchmarks Explicit Through Programme Specification', in N. Jackson (ed.) 'Programme Specification', *Quality Assurance in Higher Education* 8 (4). [Special issue]
JENKINS, A. (1997) *Course-based Profiling – Case Studies from Oxford Brookes*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.
JOHNSON, N. (1994) *Dons in Decline. Twentieth Century British History*, pp. 370–385.
MELTON, R. (1997) *Objectives, Competences and Learning Outcomes*. London: Kogan Page.
MOSS, P.A. (1992) 'Shifting Conceptions of Validity in Educational Measurement: Implications for Performance Assessment', *Review of Educational Research* 62: 229–45.
NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 2 volumes (also known as the Dearing Report).
OTTER, S. (1992) *Learning Outcomes in Higher Education*. London: Unit for the

Development of Adult and Continuing Education (UDACE), Employment Department.
PRING, R. (1992) 'Standards and Quality in Education', *British Journal of Educational Studies* XXXX (1): 4–22.
QAA (1998a) 'An Agenda for Quality. Consultation Issue of Higher Quality', *Bulletin of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*, March.
QAA (1998b) 'The Way Ahead. Higher Quality Number 4', *Bulletin of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*, October.
QAA (1999a) 'The New Quality Assurance Framework: Update. Higher Quality 5', *Bulletin of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*, May.
QAA (1999b) 'Assuring Quality and Standards. Higher Quality 6', *Bulletin of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*, November.
QAA (1999c) *A Consultative Paper on Higher Education Qualifications Frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) and for Scotland*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
QAA (2000a) *Guidelines for Programme Specification*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
QAA (2000b) *Subject Benchmarking Statements.* Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/benchmark/index.htm.
QAA (2000c) *Handbook for Academic Review*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
QAA (2000d) *The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: A Position Paper*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SADLER, D.R. (1987) 'Specifying and Promulgating Achievement Standards', *Oxford Review of Education* 13(2): 191–209.
TURNBULL, W. (1999) *Assessment and Credit: Regulations and Practice within UK Higher Education*. Unpublished report commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
WHITSTON, K. (1998) 'Key Skills and Curriculum Reform', *Studies in Higher Education* 23(3): 307–19.

Biographical note

NORMAN JACKSON is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Policy and Change in Higher Education at the University of Surrey and Senior Professional Advisor to the Generic Centre, Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). Prior to taking up this position he was an Assistant Director in the Development Directorate of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education where he was responsible for the development of policy on programme specifications and progress files. Recent publications include a special issue of the journal *Quality Assurance in Education* dedicated to Programme Specification and a co-authored SRHE/OU Press volume *Benchmarking for Higher Education*.

Address: School of Educational Studies, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 5XH, UK [email: Normanjjackson@cs.com]