Conceptualizing Quality Improvement in Higher Education:
Policy, Theory and Practice for Outcomes based Learning in Hong Kong

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Abstract

'Policy borrowing' continues to be an important factor in the construction of higher education policy in East Asia. This has meant that many post-colonial societies have continued to look to the West for models that will assist them to reengineer their universities in the quest for crating world class institutions. It is against this background that Hong Kong's University Grants Committee adopted an outcomes based approach to teaching and learning in 2005 and gained support from institutions under its responsibility for doing so. Supported with ample resources, the subject of numerous public symposia and incorporated into regular quality audit assessments, outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning are in the process of becoming part of Hong Kong's distinctive approach to quality reform in higher education. This paper reviews the policy context in which this initiative emerged, analyses the policy meaning in terms of its underlying theories and derives a set of principles that could guide the implementation of outcomes based approaches The multiple possibilities associated with of outcomes based teaching learning demonstrate how systemic reform agendas are subject to interpretation and local adaptation.

A recent OECD reported on higher education noted that (Hénard, 2010, p.6):

> … institutions want to be recognized as providers of good quality higher education. They understand that competing on the basis of research only is not sufficient to ensure the reputation of the university. As such, they want to find new ways of demonstrating performance. They respond to students' demand for valuable teaching: students want to ensure that their education will lead to jobs and will give them the skills needed in the society of today and tomorrow"

Yet it is not only students who require universities to focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Given that universities increasingly operate in an competitive international market, they must be able to demonstrate that they can supply human capital capable of meeting the needs of   a globalized market place. While research may well contribute to the development and transmission of new knowledge, it is teaching that most directly affects human capital formation influencing immediate social and economic outcomes in the world of work and in society.   Hénard (2010, p.72) put it this way:

> The quality of teaching must therefore be thought of dynamically, as a function of contextual shifts in the higher-education environment, such as the internationalisation of studies and the additional missions that education is being asked to fulfill (innovation, civic and regional development), producing an appropriately skilled workforce to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

This view of teaching and learning from the OECD is not unexpected since it reflects the views of advanced industrial economies to leverage their economic development off one of their most expensive expenditure items, education. From the early years to undergraduate study, the economic focus of educational provision is to produce workers for the 'knowledge economy". Otherwise, from an OECD perspective at least, there is little warrant for such large government expenditure on schools and universities.

Research policy in particular has benefited from this rationale and the means of funding R&D are now well established. Outputs from research are easily defined, knowledge transfer and the commercialization of research outputs are regularly managed within research intensive universities and governments continue to invest in research attracted by the possibilities of innovation and the development of cutting edge technologies that have the potential to enhance national development in the global environment.

Yet support for teaching does not have such obvious benefits, or at least any benefits have not been sufficiently promoted. This often leaves teaching as the 'poor cousin' in terms of funding, prestige and development. Nevertheless, it is teaching that has the greatest potential to impact directly on students and the labour markets that they will enter. How can teaching, and perhaps more importantly learning, be elevated to the same status as research in the modern university in terms of both the necessary policies to drive teaching-led reform but also in terms of on- the- ground practices that can influence student learning?

To address this question, several steps need to be considered. First, how do policy contexts frame teaching and learning setting the stage for systemic change? Second, in moving from policy to practice how does any theory behind the policy inform the practice of teaching and learning? These questions will be pursued in the context post-colonial Hong Kong where, since the return to Chinese sovereignty, there has been a particular focus on multi-sector education reform education (Kennedy, 2005) including higher education . The remainder of this paper will:

- Review the policy mechanisms that led to a renewed focus on teaching and learning in Hong Kong's higher education institutions;

- Analyze the theoretical basis of the new policy to assess the implications for the practice of teaching and learning; and

- Based on this analysis indicate how institutions might go about the process of adopting an outcomes based approach to teaching and learning

Policy Mechanisms to Promote Change

Hong Kong's history of higher education, embedded as it was in colonial policy and administration, has meant that indigenous policy development has rarely been a strong feature. The University Grants Committee (UGC), the Hong Kong SAR government's main source of policy advice on higher education, continues to rely heavily on external advisors. Of the twenty four UGC members in 2010, more than one third were from outside Hong Kong, including former and current Vice- Chancellors from Australia and the United Kingdom, Professors from leading universities in the United States and one Professor form Mainland China. The most recent review of higher education in Hong Kong was conducted by a group that had more international members than local members and was chaired by a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford. Thus even in these post colonial times, Hong Kong continues to look outwards for its sources of policy advice, and in general it looks towards the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia raher than Mainland China.

Phillips (2005) has characterized these kinds of policy exchanges as "policy borrowing" and (Deem) 2008 has argued that such borrowing is endemic in higher education policy formation. Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor (2001) have shown how policy discourses generated by the OECD have influenced education policy on a international scale, aided and abetted by globalization. More recently, Rizvi and Lingard

(2010) returned to the theme of globalization as a significant shaper of education policy within national jurisdictions. It seems that national or local jurisdictions, either deliberately or because of the pure force of global discourses, are more likely to look outwards rather than inwards for policy innovation. The concept of 'policy borrowing' in this context is particularly useful because it can also be used as an analytical tool for studying particular systemic changes. Phillips and Ochs (2003) identified four stages as part of the 'borrowing process', the first of which was 'cross national attraction'. In order to locate Hong Kong's current teaching and learning policy in context, the following section will analyze the extent to which it has been characterized by 'cross national' influences and, if so, what purposes they served in the local social and political context.

Initiating Policy Change in Teaching and Learning in Hong Kong – Was there 'Cross National Attraction'?

Teaching and learning policy is not a new concern for the UGC and it predates Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty. A series of Teaching and Learning Quality Reviews (TLQPR) had been held starting in 1995 guided by standard quality assurance models as shown by the overall aims of the TLQPR (French, 1997):

- to focus attention on teaching and learning as the primary mission of Hong Kong's tertiary institutions;
- to assist institutions in their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning;
- to enable the UGC and the institutions to discharge their obligation to maintain accountability for the quality of teaching and learning.

Yet the evaluation of the first round of TLQPR's concluded as follows (TLPQR Review Team, 1999):

Given our remit, we cannot judge whether increased quality assurance processes led to increased quality of learning outcomes. Some interviewees suggested that a focus on universities' processes to assure *quality of learning outcomes* might be useful in a second round. (italics added)

Thus began Hong Kong's discourse of outcomes oriented approaches to teaching and learning. It was given further support up in recommendations for the second round of TLPQRs where one of the options suggested was "a review of the measures of student learning that are being utilized by the institutions" (TLQPR Review Team, 1999). Even at this early stage, the policy input was largely international – the TLQPR process involved many academics from outside Hong Kong and the evaluation of the first round had been conducted by a Dutch team. Yet the local response was not immediate. The second round of TLPQRs went ahead, but with little reference to learning outcomes. Nevertheless, a publication appeared at the end of this round that returned to theme of student learning outcomes.

Entitled, *Education Quality Work* (Editorial Committee, 2005*)* and compiled by a group of local academics, most of whom held senior management positions in local universities, there is an unmistakable emphasis on student learning outcomes as a part of "education quality work". The following description appears prescient given UGC; eventual adoption of outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning (Editorial Committee, 2005, p.22):

As assessment of student learning outcomes is critical, there should be a constructive alignment of the following:

- intended learning outcomes,

- teaching and learning arrangements (including curriculum), and

- methods for assessing (describing/measuring/reporting) students' learning outcomes.

The publication had no real policy status, although it was funded by UGC. Nevertheless, it is perhaps of interest to note that one of the members of the group that compiled the publication eventually became a member of the UGC. More importantly, the publication suggests that Hong Kong's support for improving teaching and learning was at a crossroads at the end of two rounds of TLQPR: there seemed little support for continuing with such reviews and there was a hint that perhaps a new focus on student learning outcomes might be a more productive approach. Yet this was a long way from formalizing any new policy directions for teaching and learning.

The UGC's response to the issue of ongoing quality assurance came in 2006 when it established the Quality Audit Council (QAC) with "the mission of assuring that the quality of the educational experience in all first degree level programmes and above, both UGC-funded and self-financed, offered by UGC-funded institutions is sustained and improved, and is at an internationally competitive level" (UGC, 2006). What is more the QAC was also to have some responsibility as part of regular audit processes to monitor institutional implementation of outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning (Stone, 2005). Ironically, however, it appeared that it was disillusionment with the very processes of quality assurance that led to the adoption of outcomes based approaches. This was suggested by the Secretary-General of the UGC (Stone, 2005):

> Until recently, the assessment of quality was based primarily on terms of inputs and processes: intentions and efforts, procedures and feedback, spending and time. Recently and internationally, there has been an increasingly specific focus on outputs: goals and ends, products and results. The questions asked of our educators are often "what are our children learning, how well are they learning it and how do we know that they are learning it?

He went on to outline the international pressures for moving towards for outcomes focused on   such examples as the Bologna process in Europe and the demands for accountability in the United States, although he concluded that "our goal is simple and straightforward – improvement and enhancement in student learning and teaching quality (Stone, 2005).

Thus international policy directions and local needs were joined together in what was the Secretary-General's Opening Address to the initial *Symposium on Outcome-based Approach to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Higher Education: International Perspectives.* Outcomes based approaches being adopted elsewhere were seen to be a solution to the local "problem" of process focused quality assurance as well as providing a sharper edge in institutional assessment. Some three years later, the UGC's US Consultant on outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning reiterated what by then had become almost a mantra for teaching and learning policy with the statement, "Universities and university systems worldwide are reaching the conclusion that this kind of intentionality about student learning is increasingly necessary in today's world" (Ewell, 2008).

If the focus on student learning presents one face of the policy discourse on teaching and learning   the other face was concerned with accountability. This issue was mentioned as early as 1999 when the first TLPQR was being reviewed: "the consultants

concluded that the first TLQPR round emphasized improvement over accountability, and that this was appropriate. We agree. We also agree that accountability should have a higher priority in subsequent rounds" This same emphasis came through in the UGC Secretary-General's address to the Outcomes based Symposium (Stone, 2005), it was highlighted by the then Chairman of the UGC with the comment "public accountability is therefore a common and primary rationale for audit regimes across the globe" (Lam, 2007) and it also featured in the US consultant's address to a subsequent outcomes based symposium (Ewell, 2008).

Accountability is also a familiar and recurring theme in the recent literature on higher education policy (Alexander, 2000; Hoecht, 2006; Kearns, 1998). It is the 'hard' edged face of teaching and learning policy. It looks towards the government and the public indicating that the UGC takes a strong role in managing public funds and it signals to universities, the consumers of those funds, that they will be regulated and monitored. In this sense, teaching and learning policy becomes a tool of the administrative state (Caiden, 2006) seeking to 'produce' outcomes that justify expenditure and contribute to social and economic development.

In terms of 'policy borrowing', therefore, it seems clear that from the time of the TLQPRs the UGC looked outside of Hong Kong to resolve issues of teaching and learning policy. The employment of international consultants to conduct and evaluate the TLPQRs and the use of a US consultant specifically to promote outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning almost guaranteed that Hong Kong would mimic international policy directions. At the same time, the UGC was conscious of the need to both be accountable and to hold institutions accountable for the expenditure of public funds. Student leaning

and accountability were therefore yoked together as they had been elsewhere (This is not to say that there was not local support as shown in the *Education Quality Work* (Editorial Committee, 2005) report and the subsequent consensus on the issue shown by universities following consultations by the US consultant). Nevertheless, in adopting outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning in higher education, the UCG adopted a policy solution that accommodated two international trends in higher education policy: accountability and learning. Endorsed, funded and monitored over the succeeding years, the real issue is what it meant for actual teaching and learning. What were institutions meant to do? This issue will be addressed in the following section.

From Policy to Practice: Theoretical Constructions of Student Learning and the Implications for Practice

It is not possible to identify a single policy text that provided a template for Hong Kong's outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning in higher education. The UGC's approach was to allow institutions to define such approaches for themselves. A common statement often appearing in UGC texts was, "The UGC is facilitating institutions to move forward by building up their OBA capacities" (University Grants Committee, 2010). This 'soft' mandate was accompanied with $HK65million distributed across the sector over seen by a Task Force on Outcome-based Approaches in Student Learning that was at arm's length from the UGC and managed largely by the institutions themselves. This context meant that institutions had to think strategically about how to proceed from a loosely defined policy to implementation. In general this meant considering what form outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning would take to suit local conditions. What were the options available to institutions?

It had been recognized by the UGC and was well known within the educational community that outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning were by no means new and had been constructed in multiple ways to meet the needs of policymakers and practitioners in different sectors of education. Such approaches were well known as a reform tool in the school sector and had been promoted as outcomes based education in countries such as the United States, Australia and South Africa. Its most significant application was in universities in the European Union as part of the Bologna Process designed to create a barrier free European Higher Education Area. There are some commonalities in the use of outcomes based approaches, their theoretical underpinnings and practical implications, across these different contexts. These will be reviewed in what follows.

There is agreement that outcomes based approaches to learning have their origins in behaviorism and are linked to similar educational initiatives such as mastery learning (Block, 1971) behavioral objectives (Mager, 1984), and competency based approaches to curriculum and assessment (Argüelles & Gonczi, 2000). While there are many versions or variations of behavioral orientations to learning, one thing they share in common is the emphasis on the importance of performance. Describing learning in terms of expected learning outcomes - whether it is for the purposes of describing mastery, making the learning explicit or describing a specific kind of competence – facilitates the assessment of the extent of student learning in relation to what is expected. Student performance on a specific assessment task is often taken as a measure of this learning.

This behavioral orientation to learning is an underlying assumption rather than a necessary defining characteristic of outcomes based approaches. Often, the promotion of

these approaches stresses progressive or constructivist aspects and, in particular, the idea of "student focused learning". For example, (Spady, 1994) talked about, "organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences" and (Schwartz, 1994) pointed out that outcomes based education "starts with the assumption that all learners can learn and succeed". This progressivist emphasis can also be seen in the application of outcomes based approaches in higher education. Explaining the rationale for an outcomes based approach in the context of the European Union's moves towards a more integrated higher education system, Adam (2004, p. 3) noted that:

> In terms of curriculum design and development, learning outcomes … represent a change in emphasis from 'teaching' to 'learning' typified by what is known as the adoption of a student-centred approach in contrast to traditional teacher-centred viewpoint. Student-centred learning produces a focus on the teaching – learning – assessment relationship and the fundamental links between the design, delivery and measurement of learning.

At the same time he also pointed to another aspect of an outcomes orientation:

> The very nature and role of education is being questioned, now more than ever before, and learning outcomes are important tools in clarifying the results of learning for the student, citizen, employer and educator.

This 'clarification' is linked to the accountability element in the policy context that supported outcomes based orientations. Making student learning explicit through regimes of assessment achieves two objectives: it provides good feedback to students and teachers but it also can be used to point to the effectiveness of programmes and even of the staff who teach them. This 'double discourse' is often difficult to disentangle but it needs to be

considered, especially when so much effort is placed on supporting outcomes based approaches. Academic staff may well accept the gains in terms of better understanding student learning but they will also be skeptical of the accountability overtones as pointed out by Hoecht (2006). This is always a tension for institutions in moving towards the adoption of outocmes based approaches.

Whether outcomes based approaches are presented as a behaviourist approach to learning focusing on observable performance, a progressive approach highlighting student-centered learning or simply as an accountability tool, its practical application is the same. It is a "design down" approach (Spady, 1994, p.21) to curriculum development. It starts with what students are expected to learn, then focuses on the creation of teaching and learning environments that will assist students to reach the desired learning and finally involves the use of assessment that can provide feedback about the level of learning that has been achieved. There are different elaborations of this approach and multiple levels of outcomes. Yet at the core, outcomes based approaches focus on what students should learn. It is this learning, often expressed in the form of learning outcomes, that becomes the guiding principle in curriculum design. Yet learning is not a neutral activity – it is embedded in philosophy and theory. These drive practice either explicitly or implicitly.
This intertwining of theory and practice is reflected in different models that have been proposed for implementing outcomes based approaches. Two of these models will be reviewed to show how theory and practice interact and to demonstrate the kinds of choices institutions have in adopting outcomes based approaches.

The Constructive Alignment Model

This model is most closely associated with (Biggs, 2003) and it has been applied to the current outcomes based initiative in Hong Kong (Biggs & Tang, 2007). It is a widely used model in higher education and its use, along with suggestions for adjustments, has been reported in the literature (McMahon & Thakore, 2006). The word *'constructive'* refers to what the learner does to construct meaning through relevant learning activities. The *'alignment'* aspect refers to what the teacher does. The key to the alignment is that the components in the teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks are aligned to the learning activities assumed in the intended learning outcomes. The essential features of the model are shown in Figure 1 below:

Osborne (2004) has pointed out that "Biggs here is speaking of constructive alignment in the context of the development of a particular unit of study". Biggs' overall purpose was to encourage higher level learning (represented in the middle box by objectives). It is a relatively simple model of teaching and learning that is well known to educators – set objectives, design learning activities and evaluate the results. While it is claimed to be built on constructivist learning principles, Jervis and Jervis (2005) have pointed to what they see as an anomaly:

> We cannot reconcile this claim (i.e. to be constructivist] with admonitions to get the students to do the things that the objectives nominate, -- and test to see if the students have learned what the objectives state they should be learning" (Biggs, 2003). Students are "trapped" into activities but free to construct the knowledge they may or may not acquire in the process, in their own way. This appears to us to be a constructivist epistemology, which is embedded in behaviourist pedagogy

Insert Figure 1 about here

This criticism, that is essentially theoretical in nature, does not negate the value of constructive alignment as a way to organize teaching and learning. Rather, it points to the constraints that objectives or outcomes can have on student learning - constraints imposed when learning outcomes are defined narrowly. This has led Boud (2004) to assert "not just constructive alignment, but alignment of assessment now with long term learning goals". This is recognition that there are often broader outcomes related to society's needs, institutional mission or professional accreditation and these also need to be taken into consideration. The broader outcomes movement has always recognized this (Spady, 1994) and has recommended different levels of outcomes to accommodate these different expectations. What seems important to keep in mind is that while the concept of constructive alignment can facilitate instructional planning at the course level to focus on learning outcomes, it may not be able to facilitate the integration of broader sets of outcomes that may be required at institutional or society levels. Constructive alignment is better seen as an instructional planning tool rather than a tool for curriculum planning. It is but one option available to institutions charged with implementing an outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning

Integrated Outcomes for Broad Learning

This model of outcomes based learning was developed in Australia in the 1990s based on attempts to specify learning outcomes in a broad range of occupations and professions. For example, by specifying entry level occupational competencies, entry to occupations and professions could be controlled or at least regulated. The identified competencies could also be used as the basis for trade or professional education both at the entry level and for ongoing professional development. (Hager, 1993) pointed to the

dangers of a narrowly defined approach to the specification of competencies, especially in relation to the education of professionals such as teachers and he suggested an approach based on a broader conception of competency. He preferred an integrated approach where "competence is conceptualized in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of a carefully chosen set of realistic professional tasks ("intentional actions") of an appropriate level of generality". This approach is shown in column 3 of Figure 2 below.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Hager (1993) described the key features of the integrated approach:

> It avoids the problem of a myriad of tasks by selecting key tasks ("intentional actions") that are central to the practice of the profession. The main attributes that are required for the competent performance of these key tasks ("intentional actions") are then identified. Experience has shown that when both of these are integrated to produce competency standards, the results do seem to capture the holistic richness of professional practice.

This was an attempt to move away from narrowly defined learning outcomes and create more holistic and complex outcomes that could be assessed not just as isolated and discrete performances but as actions performed in contexts requiring the integration of professional knowledge, skills and values.

This integrated conception of learning was, on the one hand, a response to the behaviorism that has always characterized outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning. Yet it was also an approach that influenced practical action in terms of the development of competency standards for the professions (Heywood, Gonzi & Hager,

1992). Unlike Biggs' constructive alignment model, the 'integrated approach' to competence does not provide a prescription for course development. Rather, it provided a conceptual model that defined competence as "the specification of knowledge and skill, and the application of that knowledge and skill" and recognized that any "competency statement is intended to represent an amalgam of knowledge, skills and attitudes, a 'whole' that is inseparable" (Watson, 2005). In other words individual behavioural outcomes, or learning outcomes, contribute to a more generalised competence that requires both knowledge and values as well in order to facilitate competent professional practice. Competence is thus underpinned by knowledge, skills and values that come together in an integrated way to enable complex professional action.

The approach outlined above sought to downplay the behaviourist orientation of long lists of fragmented learning outcomes and replace it with what has been called a progressive orientation in which "competencies are relational, involve reflective practice and place importance on context" (Hughes, 2004, p. 3). Given the critique of constructive alignment referred to early (Jervis & Jervis, 2005), this re-orientation is important to keep in mind. Defining outcomes that are significant rather than simply observable seems to be the key lesson to take from the 'integrated approach'. If follows from such an approach that assessment will be very challenging since its focus will be on the attainment of complex outcomes and the extent to which they have been achieved. Yet this should not be a deterrent from considering such an approach since it can lead to the development of meaningful, relevant and representative outcomes required by institutions and the community.

The Practice of Outcomes based Learning

Drawing on the above analyses, it is possible to develop a number of principles that could guide the actual practice of outcomes based approaches to teaching and learning. In doing so, institutions need to take account of the broader context in which they operate (this is the accountability side of outcomes based approaches) while at the same time enhancing student achievement (this is the learning side). Both of these aspects can be accommodated when:

1. Outcomes can be defined at different levels for different purposes.

This means that outcomes are not just narrowly defined course objectives as suggested by the constructive alignment model. Rather, institutions can define outcomes that broad and generic in nature – what are sometimes referred to as 21st century skills. These are the expectations of all graduates. In addition, specific programme outcomes can also be developed to reflect expected learning attributable to the programme itself. Finally, course outcomes become the building blocks that contribute to the development of the higher level outcomes. These different outcomes work together to define "the ideal graduate" equipped to contribute to the social and economic development of their communities.

2. Outcomes are complex, based on the integration of knowledge, skills and values.

It follows from the above that outcomes are not necessarily simple, behavioural or even observable. Critical thinking, problem solving and creativity are examples of generic outcomes and they are complex and demanding. This is what can make outcomes based approaches challenging – for teaching, for learning and for assessment.

3. Multiple outcomes need to be integrated and treated holistically.

Since outcomes need not be described in behavioural terms, it is possible to avoid long lists of atomistic objectives and to focus on significant outcomes that may be integrated and developed across courses and over time. This does not obviate the need for assessment but rather highlights the importance of monitoring and reporting on student progress

4. The outcomes will provide the springboard for students to become active learners.

   Drawing on the progressive tradition in outcomes-based approaches, moving students towards the attainment of outcomes should engage them in relevant and meaningful learning activities. Students can be 'active learners' as they take part in different learning activities designed to help them develop curse, programme and generic outcomes.

5. The process for creating outcomes at different levels needs to be collaborative and open. It needs to involve a broad range of stakeholders.

   Outcomes for learning cannot be imposed from above. Discipline experts to engage with each other about essential learning outcomes in their areas of expertise. Broader discussions also need to take place where general education, professional experiences and extracurricular activities also contribute to students' programmes.

6. Staff development and support will be necessary to assist individuals and teams at different levels to define learning outcomes that are significant.

   Adopting outcomes based approaches will often move staff out of their 'comfort zones' and they will need to be supported to change their curriculum and teaching practice. Such support needs to focus not just on planning for outcomes but on teaching and assessment for outcomes as well. Outcomes based approaches do not stop once the

curriculum is prepared. The delivery of the curriculum in terms of learning activities and assessment also needs to be a focus.

7. Assessment needs to be in place at different levels to monitor students' progress in their learning and provide constructive feedback.

Assessment and outcomes go together because students' movements towards outcomes across courses and over time need to be monitored. Because outcomes are complex, assessment needs to play a role in providing feedback to students on their learning progress and teachers need to be able to support students who progress differentially. Assessment, therefore, may also be more complex and more sensitive to respond more formatively and provide helpful and useful feedback.

8. Assessment's primary role is to promote learning.

'Assessment for learning' has become a popular movement amongst assessment theorists and it is often opposed to 'assessment of learning'. The rationale is that assessment practices should also be designed to enhance learning for example, by providing feedback and multiple opportunities for responding. In this context, assessment is not just a one-off test but a means for identifying students' learning progress.

What has been described above outlines what could be described as a multidimensional approach to outcomes based teaching, learning and assessment. More than just a tool for curriculum planning, the approach extends directly into the classroom to construct teaching and assessment as essential activities linked to assisting students attain the desired outcomes. Viewed in this way, outcomes based approaches have the potential to create learning focused classrooms that can deliver outcomes valued by both students and the communities they will eventually serve

Conclusion

Policy can provide direction but it cannot create the actual conditions that facilitate implementation. As shown here, a loosely framed policy can lead to multiple options for implementation. This can be positive in the sense that it creates flexibility but it could also be negative in as much as key policy objectives may not be met if implementation options are too broad. For example, in the case reported here a constructive alignment approach to outcomes based teaching and learning could be too narrow if it focuses only on instructional contexts rather than engaging with broader curriculum issues. The alternative of a tightly specified policy may not be the answer in a higher education context that values autonomy and academic freedom.   Whether or not 'hard' measures (for example links to funding, standards based reporting) are required to ensure more consistent implementation of policies related to teaching and learning is an open question since promoting uniformity would be bound to raise opposition in the academy. Higher education policy makers, therefore, may need to be content with 'soft' measures in the sphere of teaching and learning.

'Soft' measures such as funding support, light touch surveillance and system wide professional development are policy levers that can support implementation. These are particularly helpful when, as in the present case, theory or a philosophy that can inform implementation. These provide alternatives that can guide practice. Policymakers, however, need to be aware of these alternatives in case they may not achieve the major objectives of any new policy. In the Hong Kong context described here these soft measures were used with the result   that different institutions have adopted different alternatives. Whether this is a good approach to policy making will depend, ironically, on the outcomes and whether

Hong Kong's universities have adopted new approaches to teaching and learning that will enhance student learning as well as meet the accountability mission that was so much part of the policy context.

The principles for outcomes based teaching and learning outlined here draw on theoretical literature and therefore provide an example of how policy, theory and practice can be be linked. The principles seek to focus on student learning as a curriculum aim but also as an aim that should inform both teaching and assessment. This multidimensional approach seeks to integrate the different planning elements to ensure that each is learning related .The approach looks to the broader needs of institutions and the community (for example with the adoption of generic outcomes but it also provides for programme outcomes that can focus on professional knowledge and competence). It is not the only approach that could be adopted but it shows how policy principles can be translated into practice. It is consistent with the policy and potentially it could have benefits for students. The kind of analysis shown here could be adopted as a tool for policy analysis as a way of identifying underlying theory and philosophy in policy initiatives.

Finally, the trajectory from policy to practice shown here shows the weight that is placed on higher education institutions in Hong Kong. 'Light touch' policy is relatively easy for the policy maker but it shifts the implementation burden downwards. Interpreting policy becomes an institutional level process and there is little feedback about what is 'right' or 'wrong'. This preserves institutional autonomy but it has the potential to create considerable debate and discussion within institutions. In the current case, however, where the focus is on student learning debate can be productive and can draw on long held academic values that encourage open and transparent processes in higher education

institutions. Time will show just how successful such an approach has been for Hong Kong students and whether the community will be convinced that universities are delivering what is needed for social and economic development

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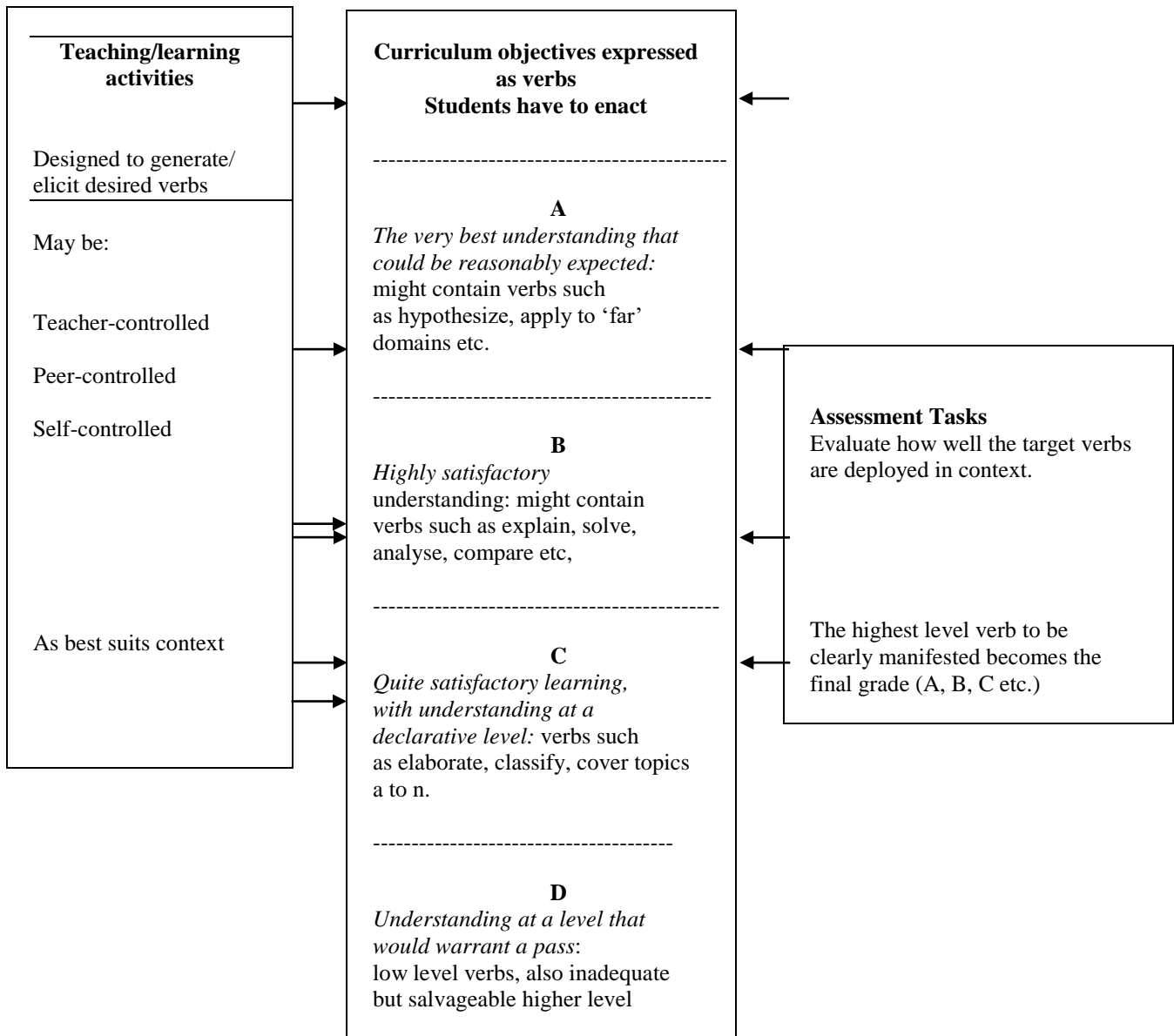
Teaching/learning activities

Designed to generate/ elicit desired verbs

May be:

Teacher-controlled

Peer-controlled

Self-controlled

As best suits context

Curriculum objectives expressed as verbs
Students have to enact

A
The very best understanding that could be reasonably expected: might contain verbs such as hypothesize, apply to 'far' domains etc.

B
Highly satisfactory understanding: might contain verbs such as explain, solve, analyse, compare etc,

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C
Quite satisfactory learning, with understanding at a declarative level: verbs such as elaborate, classify, cover topics a to n.

D
Understanding at a level that would warrant a pass: low level verbs, also inadequate but salvageable higher level

Assessment Tasks
Evaluate how well the target verbs are deployed in context.

The highest level verb to be clearly manifested becomes the final grade (A, B, C etc.)

Figure 1. Biggs' model of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003).

BEHAVIOURIST OR SPECIFIC TASKS APPROACH	ATTRIBUTE OR GENERIC SKILLS APPROACH	INTEGRATED OR TASK ATTRIBUTE APPROACH
1. Overt performance is competence	General attributes as predictors of future performance	Competence inferred from performance
2. Atomistic, reductive, trivial, mechanistic, standardised, routine, discrete tasks or skills	Abstract, remote from actual practice, problem of transfer. Overall rationale often lacking	Holistic, richness, of practice captured
3. Large number of specific competencies – list lengthens with complexity of work e.g., professions	Small number of generic competencies	Manageable number key competencies
4. Uniformity(1 right way)	Diversity (> 1 right way)	Diversity (> 1 right way)
5. "Doing" curriculum. Practical modules. Jettison current curriculum	Conventional curriculum. Fragmented into subjects	Powerful device for improving content, delivery and assessment of current curriculum
6. Central control of curriculum	Provider autonomy in curriculum	Profession/provider, joint control of curriculum
7. Checklist for ticking invalid assessment	Traditional assessment has its limitations	Competence demonstrated over time portfolios, etc. Assessment needs careful planning
8. Minimum competence "Lowest common denominator discourages excellence." "Deskilling"	Encourages excellence that is remote from professional practice	Richness of quality professional performance is captured

Figure 2. Hager's (1993) Comparison of Approaches to Defining Competence