

Chapter 8

Expanding Knowledge Acquisition Frontiers in University Education: Accreditation of Learning Outcomes in Universities

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ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental principles of contemporary postsecondary education system is that knowledge is rooted in experience. Contemporary andragogy and experiential learning theories recognise the ability of people to learn in a variety of places, times, and styles, thereby challenging rigid, subject-matter-centred pedagogies. Accreditation of Learning Outcomes (ALO) is the assessment of previously unrecognized skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. The ALO initiative is imbued with substantial potential to benefit learners, higher education sectors, employers, and the society at large. This chapter reviews the concept of ALO and successful initiatives for standardising the accreditation process for learning from experience—work experience, in-service training, self-study, or community work—in South Africa. Approaches for addressing the barriers encumbering ALO implementation are discussed.

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Learning theories in higher education outline how information and knowledge are disseminated, accessed, processed and applied during a learning process. Major categories of learning theories include behaviorism, cognitivism, social learning theory, social constructivism, and multiple intelligence learning (Zhou & Brown, 2021). The main domains of learning are Cognitive (focus on knowledge and intellectual skills), Affective (focus on feelings and emotions), and Psycho-motor (focus on skills acquisition via experiential learning) (Sönmez, 2017). Unlike the cognitive domain, for which universities are probably best suited to adopt for facilitating learning, the affective and psycho-motor domains are at least just as adaptable to utilize in learning acquisition. For example, psycho-motor skills development relies mainly on experiential learning. Three key aspects of experiential learning are personal experience, reflection on the experience, and transformation of knowledge and meaning based on the experience (Burnard, 2013, p. 3). Within universities, commonly used strategies for facilitating experiential, skills-based learning include simulation, case-based learning, project-based learning, web-based learning, group and peer learning, and internships. Internships are essentially a snippet of real-world opportunities for experiential learning in workplaces or volunteer settings (Chawłowska et al., 2021; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Affective learning outcomes involve attitudes and values which motivate life-long learning within and outside formal academic settings. Experiential learning activities optimise achievement of affective learning outcomes (Johns et al., 2017).

Accreditation of Learning Outcomes (ALO) is the assessment of previously unrecognized skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. ALO assesses such unrecognized learning against the requirements of a qualification or award, in respect of both entry requirements and outcomes to be achieved. By removing the need for duplication of learning, ALO encourages an individual to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment outcomes. ALO differs from Credits for Formal Learning, which provides for credit transfer for individuals who have undertaken formal courses or related training at tertiary (i.e. postsecondary) level from nationally accredited educational centres such polytechnics, vocational training centres, colleges of technology or other Universities. In the United Arab Emirates education system, ALO is described as the formal recognition of any previous learning experiences for skills and/or knowledge acquired, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred, which is eligible to count towards a qualification (NQA Qualification Framework, Emirates Handbook, 2012). Individuals appear to seek ALO status to gain credit for further formal education, to increase self-confidence based on acknowledgment of prior self-learning, to identify strengths and skills, while also identifying long term educational goals and how such goals may be achieved. Universities, employers, and the wider knowledge society can significantly benefit from effective ALO implementation (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2021).

Assessment for ALO may be undertaken using either evidence of competencies attained in informal educational settings—mainly the primary place of work of the applicant—or from non-formal settings from educationally relevant activities undertaken by the applicant, such as volunteering and continuing education programs. One aspect of continuing education programs which bridges formal and non-formal learning is microcredentialing from participation in courses organised by tertiary education institutes, particularly on online higher education platforms. Typically, university credit is awarded only if a learner who takes a “tracked” microcredential course goes on to enrol in the degree program associated with the microcredential. It is however conceivable that universities may consider such microcredentials as non-formal learning in other degree programs (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021).

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