

What is higher education curriculum for? The reflection from the debate of outcome-based education

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The idea of outcome-based education (OBE) has become a prevailing trend in higher education practices. In its concept, the assessment of students' learning and the arrangement of curriculum organization are based on essential outcomes. The acquisition of these outcomes decides conditions of success for students. William G. Spady and Kit J. Marshall (1991) differentiate three paradigms of outcome-based education, which are traditional, transitional, and transformational OBE. The mode that they advocate is transformational one. In this newly agreeable paradigm, education is based on performance credentialing, aided by instructional coaching, oriented to inclusionary success, formed on collaborative structures, and confirmed by criterion validation. This educational innovation is constituted in order to make shift from traditional course, content, and skill to higher-order and life-role performances. According to Ronald Barnett (1994), there are three aspects of plight that OBE has to confront with. First, the generation of competences is always partial and debatable. Competences are identified by practicing professionals, but each professional group has its distinctive standard. The identification of the occupational standard can rarely be settled. Second, we live in a changing world. Competences that we recognize today may not cope with tomorrow's professional problems. What students learn is not merely to accommodate to present change, but also to shape change in the future. OBE may not satisfy with this requirement. Third, Barnett believes: "A statement of competences is a statement about the kind of curriculum we want (Barnett, 1994: 74)." Outcomes cannot be extrinsic to the process of education, as current practices in higher education do.

The purpose of this paper is to compare discourses of the encouraging rhetoric of OBE with its counter understanding, so as to display their different standpoint. After this, I shall highlight the limit of OBE and consider several key points for higher education curriculum under the trend of OBE. They mainly focus on: What is outcome in OBE? How do we carry out outcomes in outcome-based learning? Do outcomes or consequences are essential in curriculum design? What curricula do we need in higher education? The exploration of these questions is related to thinking the aim of higher education curriculum.