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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Faculty of Business and Graduate School of Business
Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong

www.polyu.edu.hk

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The AoL Challenge at Hong Kong PolyU

Of all the Standards which need to be met to achieve AACSB accreditation, those concerned with the Assurance of Learning (AoL) probably raise the most difficult set of issues, both conceptually and in terms of implementation. Those challenges were particularly marked for the Faculty of Business at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) because of its unusually large portfolio of programs, made up of a DBA and a PhD, an MBA offered in both Hong Kong and Mainland China, more than 20 specialized master’s programs, and a BBA scheme containing seven different majors. As Acting Dean and Associate Dean Howard Davies puts it, “The sheer volume of work involved meant that we had to develop something systematic which could be applied in the same way to every program. Otherwise we would have been forever confused about what was going on.” Over a five year period the school has therefore developed and refined a comprehensive AoL system, which provides an annual review of every outcome for every program, drawn together into an overall “meta-review” of how the system itself has been working and might be further “tweaked.”

Reflecting on this development, “which will always be a work in progress,” Dean Davies identified a number of factors which have helped the system to develop, and drew a number of lessons which might be helpful for other schools to think about. Many of these are considered in more detail in the AACSB’s Assurance of Learning Workshops held several times each year, around the world.¹

The Institutional Setting

In the Hong Kong PolyU context, the institutional setting has been an important factor, both at the university-level and in terms of the influence exerted by the government funding body, the University Grants Committee (UGC). The UGC has established a Quality Assurance Council (QAC), which visits each of the universities it funds in order to report on the effectiveness of their quality processes. While the QAC does not explicitly adopt an AoL or “outcomes-based approach” to quality assurance (QA), many of the questions it explores are framed in a similar way, and the UGC has also established an Outcome-Based Approach Task Force, whose task is to assist in the implementation of the outcomes-based approach across the whole of the UGC-funded sector, and of which Dean Davies is the Co-convener. The fact that the funding body is highly supportive of AoL is largely a positive influence, although Davies also notes that, “The outcomes-based approach, which is the same thing as AoL, has had some bad reviews arising out of situations where it has been forced on schools by their funding bodies as a mechanism for

¹ AACSB International Standards encourage schools to each develop a unique approach to Assurance of Learning (AoL). The AoL at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University provides one example of such an approach. For additional interpretation of AACSB Standards, please see:

- Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation
- AACSB Assurance of Learning Standards: An Interpretation
accountability. Academics often resent being bullied as they see it, and they are always capable of infinite guile in resistance if they choose to play it that way.”

Just as the funding body emphasizes AoL in Hong Kong, so does the Polytechnic University, which has a long tradition of very active QA processes, stemming back to its origins as a UK-style Polytechnic, with degree programs externally validated through the then Council for National Academic Awards (CNA). The PolyU requires that every program has a Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan (LOAP), which sets out the learning goals for the program, uses a curriculum map to explain how they are aligned with the course content, and shows where the students are assessed on those goals. In the Faculty of Business, the LOAP is integrated into an Annual Program Outcomes Report, which measures the achievement of each outcome against a range of metrics, identifies priorities for improvement, and reports on how last year’s priorities have been acted on. Dean Davies points out that, “We now know things about our students’ achievements which we didn’t know before, and we take action on things that we did know but were insufficiently systematic in addressing. For example, we have a very useful Graduating Students Language Proficiency Assessment, which tells us how good our students are in written and spoken English and Chinese. In the past, Heads of Department got a copy of the results, but we had no definition of the level of achievement we expected and no clear idea of where the problems were. The data was glanced at and then filed away. Now we have a set of benchmarks, we look to move them up a little each year and we commit ourselves to finding ways to help our students meet the gradually rising standards.”

The Annual Program Outcome Reports provide a feedback loop on program effectiveness allowing departments and program teams, “to confirm the achievement of the institutional or program goals, to identify discrepancies between what students are intended to learn and what they actually learn, to make informed decisions about curricular or pedagogical changes based on the evidence, and to take improvement actions where required to enhance the quality of the program and its graduates.” Furthermore, outcomes assessment activities are integral for soliciting support from industries and employers, and for attracting prospective students.¹ In the Faculty of Business, a kind of “meta-report” is also written, which comments on the current level of development of the AoL process itself, and suggests improvements in the system for the following year. Most recently, for instance, the report suggested that each Annual Program Outcomes Report contain data for the last three years instead of the last two (in order to better identify trends), it identified programs whose definition of learning goals could be further improved, and it “tweaked” the response scales to be used for exit and alumni surveys.

Overall, the institutional background in Hong Kong and the PolyU has been very supportive of AoL. For schools in other places who maybe do not have similar support, the AACSB’s insistence that its Standards are met provides an important substitute.
The Importance of Having A Structured System for AoL

With such a large number of programs for which AoL is needed, PolyU had to develop a structured system. In the early rounds of discussion by the Faculty’s Accreditation Task Force, it was suggested that perhaps each program would be fully reported on only every few years, or that within each program, only selected outcomes would be examined each year. However, it was soon realized that the process of negotiating with Program Directors and other groups of staff over whose program or work would be included and when, would be almost as time consuming and problematical as simply agreeing once and for all that every outcome for every program would be assessed every year. Having taken that decision it then became imperative to try to minimize the amount of faculty members’ time that would be required and to ensure that the time they do put in is focused on the key tasks of interpreting the data on their programs and identifying where improvement efforts should be focused. This was achieved through the mundane process of first developing a template for the Annual Program Outcomes Report, then identifying a set of initial benchmarks to be met in respect of commonly used metrics, like approval ratings in exit and alumni surveys, and then having the data entered by the administrative staff, rather than the faculty members. That last step had the obvious benefit of saving faculty members’ time, but it had the further advantage of preventing faculty members from “cherry-picking” those items of data which showed their programs in the most favorable light. Dean Davies noted that “in the very first round we simply asked each Program Director, ‘What is the evidence that this learning goal is met?’ thinking that would give them maximum flexibility. But the responses we got were non-comparable and in some cases a Program Director would say things like, ‘Only 3 percent of students felt this outcome was poorly met’ - but how many thought it was well met?” The template now in use requires that subject results and the responses to student feedback questionnaires, exit surveys, alumni surveys, and employer surveys are all reported in the same way. But there is also space to report any special or “ad hoc” measures which have been used – like the Defining Issues Test used to measure the level of students’ ethical thinking, or the Torrance Test of divergent thinking/creativity, both of which are used from time to time.

The template used for reporting also brings together all of the information, which hitherto had been spread across various different locations. For each outcome there is a page which is headed with the definition of the outcome and a brief explanation of where in the program it is addressed. The key items of data used – student feedback and the other sources mentioned above – are reported below for a three year period, and any item which does not meet the benchmarks set is highlighted in bold italic and underlined for easy reference. Setting benchmarks can be a problem, notes Davies, with Program Directors naturally being unhappy if some aspect of their program does not meet them, and feeling that those benchmarks are arbitrary. However, if they are initially set with reference to the better performing programs, Davies suggests that benchmarks can be reasonably defended on the grounds that “some programs are already meeting these, so they are achievable –let’s try to get all programs to that level.”
Just as the reporting format needs to be structured, so does the system for dealing with the reports once they have been completed. Dean Davies notes a real risk, especially with as many programs as are dealt with at PolyU, that the reporting process leaves everyone so exhausted that nothing is actually DONE about the findings. In the PolyU system there is an Undergraduate Studies Committee, which deals with the BBA, while the DBA, MBA, and specialized master's programs are grouped together into schemes. Each Scheme Committee endorses the Annual Program Outcome Reports and agrees on the actions to be taken, which are passed onto an overall Taught Postgraduate Studies Committee, which draws together any commonalities and finally passes all of the recommendations for action to the Faculty Board. About half way through the next academic year each of the Committees re-visits the actions which are to be taken to ensure that there is real follow-through and follow up on any issues which might have fallen by the wayside.

**The Overwhelming Importance of Well-Specified Learning Goals**

Asked to identify one issue which is of overwhelming importance, Dean Davies points to “the well-thought specification of learning goals for each program.” Learning goals are so important for many reasons, he says –not least because they communicate to faculty and students what programs are really about – but the immediate practical point is that having once specified a set of learning goals, the program team is largely stuck with them for a long period of time, during which the school may also be stuck with any problems they bring. For a four-year BBA program, for instance, the goals cannot be fully assessed for four years and the school will need at least two or three years of data to get an understanding of what is happening, which adds up to seven years at least.

The question of what constitutes a good set of learning goals is not directly addressed by the AACSB Standards, and Davies notes that “We gradually evolved a set of criteria to be met by a good set of goals. Not all of our programs meet all of those criteria but at least we have a better understanding of what goals should look like.”

Below, Dean Davies offers his perspective on what the criteria for a “good” set of learning goals could be:

- **AUTHENTICITY** – The learning goals should represent what the program is genuinely trying to do. This criterion is also related to the tricky issue of “generic” versus “management-specific” goals and the related issue of how many goals to have. As a member of the AACSB Pre-Accreditation Committee, I see many Accreditation Plans and most of them simply specify a small number of generic goals. It’s my personal view, not that of the AACSB, but I think that to specify learning goals for a business program, which are entirely generic, is wrong. Students sign up because they want to learn about business and faculty members teach business. Of course we have a deeper agenda and we want students to be critical and ethical thinkers, be creative, work...
in and lead teams, and communicate well. But so do programs in nursing and in agriculture! If we declare that the real and only aims of our program are the generics, we are creating a separate world from the one in which real students and faculty members live and work. Certainly the generics should be there, but so should the business content. If that means having a large number of learning goals, so be it. Our PolyU BBA has 13 learning goals, of which 7 are management-specific and 6 are generic. In practice this does not impose a huge burden on us because the management-specific goals are all pretty well delivered by the subjects taught and evidence of whether students can use financial data, carry out a piece of market research, or design a pay and benefits package can easily be objectively assessed through course assignments. The generics are more difficult both to deliver and to provide evidence on, and that is where our improvement efforts are focused. But to pretend that our BBA is solely about the generics is just not the truth.

ACHIEVABILITY – The goals should be achievable in the time available and for the students who will attend the program. For me one of the advantages of AoL is that it imposes a “reality check” on program teams, insisting that the claims we make for what we can actually do for students are followed through. It’s a sad fact that despite their insistence that research is important, universities rarely take notice of the research done on the impact they have on students. What that tells us in fact is that our impact on the deep personal traits often referred to in generic program goals is rather limited. So let’s set goals which are worthwhile and can actually be met, instead of grandiose motherhood and apple pie statements.

ALIGNABLE – Goals should be written in such a way that they can be assessed in students through assessment tasks, which are directed specifically onto the outcome. And there should be a commensurate proportion of the time and assessment tasks devoted to them. For instance, we had a master’s program which had 5 goals, one of which was ethics, added after the Enron scandal had everyone scampering to strengthen their ethics content. That goal was alignable – there could easily be ethics content taught and ethics tasks given to students. However, the extent of the ethics content amounted to one topic taught within a broad organizational behavior subject, which was not necessarily assessed in any essay, exercise, or exam question. Clearly it was not reasonable to claim ethics as a real learning goal for that program.

CLEAR – Students (and employers) should know what the goals mean. The involvement of students in the whole AoL process is a difficult area. As noted above they come to B-school to study business and get a business job. Presenting them with often-abstract generic goals can be counter-productive. Hence it is important that learning goals are expressed in ways they can relate to and understand.
MEASURABLE – The goals can be subject to evidence – without being dumbed down. One of the criticisms of the whole AoL approach is that in order to render goals more measurable they get dumbed down. It is a real threat but not inevitable. “Measurable” does not necessarily mean translatable to a 1-7 scale! Indeed, in our Hong Kong-wide UGC Task Force I have learned never to use the term “measurable” because the colleagues from humanities get all excited about it. If we simply say “Can be made subject to evidence,” they are OK. Qualitative measures have as much validity as scales, although they make technical issues, like benchmarking, more difficult. Making goals measurable can also entail being careful about how they are framed. To say that “Students will behave ethically throughout their business life,” is neither achievable nor measurable until the students have retired! However, to say that students “will be able to identify and assess the ethical dimensions of business issues,” is achievable – it can be developed through tools like the Babson Framework, which we use at PolyU, and the level of students moral thinking is well measured in-class by the Defining Issues Test –version 2. (DIT-2)

DIFFERENTIATED – The goals should be distinct from one another. If it is difficult to see the difference between one outcome and another –usually because they are poorly written – schools will have trouble when it comes to AoL because they will just be repeating themselves!

SINGULAR – Goals should not be multi-dimensional. This is one of the most common problems, and difficult to avoid. However, if a supposedly single outcome contains many sub-divisions - “students will be able to think critically and creatively, and communicate the results of their thinking clearly” – it will become operationally difficult to ensure that each part is well-addressed. “Professor X in course Y is covering this outcome” could mean that he is covering all of it or part of it, and identifying the assessment tasks associated with each sub-goal will be difficult. This actually raises a deeper and more difficult issue, which concerns the “dimensionality” of learning goals. Most goals can be divided into lower level goals; for example, creative thinking might include divergent thinking, opportunity identification, etc. At the same time it is often possible to group a number of goals together into a single higher level goal –for example “Effective Global Thinker” for analytical, creative, critical thinking, plus global awareness. This is not the place for the kind of epistemological discussion needed to explore this issue, but it can be useful to realize that the school may be able to go a level up or a level down to render its set of goals more manageable.

WORTHWHILE – Of course.

COMPLETE – The set of learning goals is intended to communicate what the program is trying to achieve for its students. If that set is not complete then there is “something else” –not articulated, which is being sought. But because it is not articulated, it is not followed through and it doesn’t
happen. Or there are some faculty members who have something they want to achieve with students, and they implement it, but it only applies to the students they are teaching and not to others, who might well have benefited. It is not uncommon in meetings, often at University level or higher, to hear a faculty member, often very senior, saying (a real example), “What we really want to do is to have our students read more.” If such additional goals keep coming up and tasks are added into the curriculum on an “ad hoc” basis, without being articulated through program learning goals, program designs can soon become a rag-bag hotchpotch of the content and pedagogy needed to address the program goals, plus the “ad hoc” additions which have been bolted on, to everyone’s confusion.

A last couple of points about learning goals follow. In principle the goals are written first and then the content or pedagogy is designed to meet those goals. That approach is largely restricted to the educational textbooks. With the exception of totally new programs, we always begin with existing program content and delivery. Existing programs are often a little ragged in terms of expressing the goals they are intended to achieve, because before AoL came along we were not required to show that the goals are really addressed. We could afford to be rather casual about the extent to which goals are followed through. Nevertheless, most existing programs do “make sense” and it is possible to “retro-fit” a new set of learning goals to an old program by asking, “What is this program really trying to do?, What are the students actually capable of?” At PolyU we did exactly this. Faced with one of our school’s AoL reports saying essentially that “The learning goals for this program are not being met, and therefore we should re-write the learning goals,” one of our academic advisers, a very senior scholar from the Netherlands, commented that this was like going to a restaurant, being served a tough steak, and being told, “It’s OK sir, here is a sharper knife!”. The point is well taken. However, in the real world it can happen that a program has a rather over-ambitious set of learning goals. A more realistic, and still worthwhile, set of goals is actually achievable, and maybe being met, but we don’t know that for sure, and the program is essentially making claims which cannot be supported. In that kind of situation it is only common sense to re-write a set of more realistic goals, which do match what is actually happening. They can then be assessed. If they are all being met, the program team can begin to raise the standards or think of other directions in which improvements might be made.

Finally, and related to much of the discussion above, there is the question of how to balance the management-specific versus generic learning goals in programs at different levels. My view is that in a four-year, full-time undergraduate curriculum the most appropriate approach is to articulate both types of goals quite extensively – maybe six or seven of each type of goal should allow the criteria set out above to be met. In “real” MBA programs, intensive programs intended for experienced managers who are ready for general management positions, learning goals should require students to be able to apply concepts from the management domain and the other
goals should be generic, because that is the nature of the general management task. For specialized master’s programs, especially those offered on a part-time basis, the extent to which generic outcomes can really be achieved is highly doubtful. Hence to be realistic program goals should focus on the management-specific content, and students’ ability to apply and criticize that content.

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End Notes