

## Designing a learning programme

A digest from NQF Support Link Module 3

### The outcomes-based approach

The schooling sector does not use unit standards as such, but applies certain elements such as specific outcomes and critical cross-field outcomes (CCFOs) to guide curriculum and learning programmes. In the Higher Education sector, universities might take a similar approach for some courses. In other instances, universities may have specialised units or bureaus which deliver short courses to unit standards, or there may be unit standards within a particular professional pathway which are addressed in programme development (e.g. in the education and training field; in the information technology field; in some areas of business studies). Universities of technology tend to deliver against unit standards more frequently, especially where courses are related to occupational pathways and involve relationships with industry partners. Unit standard-based programmes occur most frequently in the FET band, in relation to industry qualifications. These may be delivered by public FET colleges, or private providers, or community-based organisations.

Standards are not written as descriptions of content. Instead, they identify the outcomes that the learning will achieve. So what are these outcomes? It has often been said that outcomes represent a shift from a focus on content, based on syllabi, to learning outcomes based on unit standards .

There are a number of views about outcomes-based education and training; some argue that not all learning can be captured in an outcome and that you cannot break all learning into chunks. However, many educators believe that learning that does not lead to an outcome is simply not learning. (For this to be true, though, an outcome must be seen as something that can be assessed, even if it is impossible to measure in some narrow way.) Outcomes-based learning has a number of advantages:

- Outcomes and assessment criteria are specified so that the learners are aware of the goals towards which they are working and can understand the basis on which they will be assessed.
- Outcomes-based education places emphasis on the results of learning, that is, what a learner knows, understands and can do. It stresses the importance of contextualised learning in which skills, attitudes and values are assessed, rather than focusing on memorisation of content. This means that competence is often measured through demonstration.
- An outcomes focus will enable trainers to plan training with the desired achievements clearly specified. In other words, if you know where you need to go, you can plan how to get there more efficiently and effectively.

- By focusing on the outcomes and not the inputs (e.g. what the teacher, trainer or lecturer does and the text book says), teaching and assessment can be learner-centred and learners can learn in their own way and at their own pace.

## **An overview of the activities required for designing and delivering a learning programme**

The following is a quick overview of the key activities required to design, develop and deliver a learning programme:

1. Conduct research to ensure the relevance of the learning programmes; for example: the national, provincial, local and market factors; the relevant sector skills plans and workplace skills plans; information from clients regarding learner needs.
2. Translate needs into outcomes and relate these to national standards: what are you responding to? For example: skills needs, market needs, SETA defined needs. Undertake a search of existing qualifications and unit standards.
3. Consider the implications for learning programme content, and method and mode of delivery; for example, who are the learners, how will they learn, what is the mode of delivery, what is the most appropriate form?
4. Develop learning materials, including an assessment plan and assessor guide, linked to the requirements of your sector.
5. Consider options around learner support: for example, what is the context, where will they need help, what are the resources to provide this?
6. Prioritise materials and resources in line with learner needs: for example, institutional factors, workplace dynamics, language issues.
7. Build in monitoring and evaluation from the start: for example: learner and client feedback mechanisms, data capture, impact studies, ETQA requirements.

These elements are usually the focus of the programme evaluation process conducted by the relevant ETQA. Thus, considering each of these areas prepares you as a provider to complete the requirements of the ETQA for programme approval.

## Designing a learning programme

An important starting point is to translate needs into outcomes, and map these against standards and qualifications registered on the NQF.

### 1. The process of translating needs into outcomes

Establishing the needs in the sector and the economy enables the provider to understand what the core outcomes of the learning programme must be if individuals are to be prepared to play more rewarding roles in the economy.

In addition, the societal and individual needs also suggest the kinds of outcomes that an individual must attain to participate actively in society, and to ensure that the individual can embark on a journey of life-long learning.

Unit standards specify what the outcomes of a learning programme should be. However, before a unit standard becomes meaningful to you as providers, you need to first explore what the outcomes of your programme are, and then compare these outcomes with the relevant standards and qualifications, and consider the implications of these national standards and qualifications for the programme. The steps below suggest one way of approaching the process.

#### Step 1 – Defining the purpose of the learning programme

The purpose statement of a learning intervention aims to capture what the learner will know and be able to do at the end of the learning programme. It also specifies the environment(s) in which the learner will be able to undertake these activities, and states the level of expertise that the individual will have acquired. Essentially, the purpose of the learning programme relates to the overall applied competence that the individual needs to achieve through the learning intervention.

#### Step 2 - Exploring the broad programme outcomes that the individual must attain if the purposes of the learning are to be met

Once the purpose of the learning is clear, it is necessary to determine what broad outcomes the learner must attain in order to ensure that the purposes of the learning are met. These broad outcomes of the programme are called exit outcomes in a registered qualification. Exit level outcomes refer to the overarching outcomes required in order to achieve a qualification, whether or not the qualification is unit-standard based. These are then broken down into specific and critical outcomes. Qualifications are made of three domains, with a specified number of credits from each: Fundamental, Core and Elective.

There does not need to be a one-to-one relation between each module of a programme and the exit level outcomes. As a guide, there should not be more than seven broad outcomes in any programme.

To determine these broad outcomes, you need to ask the following questions:

- What different activities (roles) must the individual be able to fulfill in terms of the stated purpose?
- What must the individual be able to do in order to undertake these activities?
- What must the individual know and understand in order to do this effectively?

Once the broad outcomes have been defined, it is necessary to refer again to the purpose statement to ensure that the stated outcomes will enable the learner to achieve the overall purpose of the learning programme. If necessary, any changes to the purpose statement must be made and additional outcomes identified.

### **Step 3 - Reviewing the current programme and the manner in which it relates to the outcomes**

Once you have established the purpose of your programme, and the broad outcomes that will be achieved by your learners upon completion of the programme, you will be able to cluster the current content of your programme around these broad outcomes. This process involves matching the actual programme content, as it currently exists, with the proposed outcomes of the programme. The process aims to ensure that education and training will enable the learner to acquire the stated outcomes. This step is important, as it enables the provider to identify gaps in the current programme. It also allows the provider to establish whether there are any areas that are currently included in the programme but that may not, in fact, relate to the outcomes or purpose of the programme.

When such gaps, or extras, are identified through this process, the provider can make the appropriate adjustments to the programme. A programme must cover the outcomes, but may also include additional material, especially if it is relevant and enriching within the particular context of the identified learners.

### **Step 4 - Exploring the specific outcomes of each component part of the programme**

This step involves looking at each specific content area of the programme and answering the question - "what will the individual be able to do, know and understand once he/she has completed this section of the programme?"

This allows you as a provider to develop the specific outcomes of each element of the programme.

Once again in this step you would look at the specific outcomes, and assess whether a learner would have achieved the broad outcome if he/she had achieved each of the specific outcomes. This would then in turn get mapped against the purpose statement of the programme. This ensures that each aspect of the programme contributes to the programme's overall purpose and that any gaps are identified and addressed.

## 2. Mapping outcomes against standards

The next steps for you as the provider is to consider whether or not there are qualifications and unit standards on the NQF that address the needs you have identified, and that allow the individual to be assessed against the outcomes, with their related assessment criteria, that are specific in the unit standards and qualifications. The unit standards include:

- Specific outcomes, which outline what an individual must be able to do and know on completion of the programme,
- The critical cross-field outcomes, which detail the more generic ability the learner must have to undertake the specific activity, and
- The embedded knowledge that is required to undertake and understand the specified roles.

SAQA's seven critical cross-field outcomes (CCFOs) 'are those outcomes deemed critical for the development of the capacity for life-long learning'. These are compulsory and are incorporated into unit standards and qualifications as they are developed. Qualifications must contain all of the critical outcomes at the appropriate level on the NQF. Unit standards however need not contain all of them.

It is essential for you as a provider is to establish what the outcomes and critical cross-field outcomes of your programme are. This will assist you to explore whether or not these meet the expressed national, sectoral and individual needs.

In some cases the relevant qualifications and/or unit standards may not yet be registered. Where there are unit standards and qualifications registered on the NQF, providers must establish which are relevant for the learning programme. This allows for programmes to lead to national standards and qualifications.

There are various reasons why there is so much value in ensuring that programmes are aligned to unit standards and qualifications on the NQF. Firstly, the generation of national standards allows for the delivery of programmes that are both credible and facilitate portability and progression of the learner upon completion of the programme.

Secondly, the unit standard and qualification requirements are designed to ensure some kind of comparability between programmes, in support of a common understanding of quality. Finally, the outcomes in unit standards and qualifications represent the desired achievements of learning in the discipline or field.

### **3. Developing the learning programme framework**

The following elements need to be built into the learning programme framework:

- Defining the purpose of the programme.
- Defining the content of the programme: for example: the components may be determined by the qualification structure, or institutional requirements, or professional body requirements, or other specified combination requirements.
- How the unit standards or qualification and the critical outcomes will be integrated into the different components of the programme.
- Sequencing of the content, including the relationship between theory and practice.
- An assessment plan setting out the assessment requirements.
- The link to any existing competence learners may have.
- Any life skills interventions that may be required.