positive learning outcomes take centre stage

Professor Richard Johnstone is the Executive Director of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, established in 2004 to promote and advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education. He shares his views on:
Changes in higher education

In the past 30 years the tertiary education industry has focused increasingly on the needs of students, graduates and colleagues to master new levels of complexity, solve problems, move from one culture to another, and adapt with ease to diverse changes.

“Educators are more deliberately asking how you actually generate knowledge for yourself, how you acquire it, integrate it, adapt it and pass it on to others,” Professor Johnstone said.

“A lot of these issues are not new, but we are much more conscious of them, and are more deliberately thinking about them when constructing, delivering and evaluating the curriculum.

“All students benefit from this focus on learning outcomes and the attributes we expect them to have when they graduate.”

A focus on evidence

Professor Johnstone believes the emergence of a more businesslike orientation of universities, with a deliberate focus on objectives, outcomes and a culture of evidence, has engendered a climate of greater collegiality among academics.

He reports growing numbers of academics are keen to learn from each other to improve their teaching skills and the learning outcomes they can achieve for their students.

Internally, university administrators are gathering relevant data and prioritising budget decisions accordingly, and recognition continues to grow that quality teaching is fundamental to a university’s reputation and capacity to attract and retain students, now and in the future.

“Universities have always employed people who are deeply committed to teaching,” he said. “What is different about the past 10 to 15 years is the overt re-evaluation of the core business of universities, in response to a more discerning national and international market.

“Parents, students, governments and employers want to see teaching valued, recognised and highlighted at our universities, and there are generations of cohorts of graduates whose lives and careers are benefiting from this increasing emphasis on learning outcomes.”

Benefits for the sector

“The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, and other national bodies such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), by their very existence, send a national and international message about how seriously Australia considers learning outcomes to be,” he said.

These initiatives are strengthening Australian universities’ ability to attract top students, research partners, educators and tertiary management and administrators in an increasingly well-informed global market.

“Whether they are a prospective international student selecting a degree, or a distinguished professor considering an appointment, or a researcher looking for partners, they are looking for assurance of quality within Australia’s tertiary sector as a whole, as well as at the quality, standing and credentials of individual institutions.”

The power of a national focus

When considering engaging with a specific university, students, academics and researchers are looking not only at the learning outcomes of that institution, but also what qualifies the organisation values.

“Students are asking what a degree from a particular university will say about their strengths as a person and potential employee.

“For example, at ACU National, the national focus on the Mission ensures that every student considers the moral and ethical dimensions of their study and professional and personal lives. This is a recognisable overarching ethos of the University, and people know that there is national consistency, no matter which campus is involved.”

In an increasingly mobile workforce, employers want to be assured that a graduate from a particular university not only possesses certain common professional knowledge and skills, but also exhibits specific qualities.

“And universities want to produce graduates who are unique individuals but are also able to demonstrate a common approach to their work and to others, a common set of values.”

Looking ahead

For the future, Professor Johnstone sees the measurement of learning outcomes continuing to grow.

“In recent years, feedback has been collected and distributed from students and recent graduates on the quality of their learning experiences, but longitudinal measures of the correlation between these experiences and the graduates’ employability and career prospects are yet to receive detailed attention,” he said.

“The more we can discover about the nature of the relationship between positive learning experiences, positive learning outcomes and the successful professional and personal lives of graduates, the better.

“A person who has a positive learning experience is more likely to enter their professional life with more confidence and a greater long-term capacity to succeed.

“The more one can review curriculum and teaching methods to enhance that, the more everyone will benefit. Positive learning outcomes impact our capacity to work well, to learn throughout life, and to pass our skills on to others.”