



DQP

Using the Degree Qualifications Profile

To Foster Meaningful Change

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT (NILOA)

Established in 2008, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) assists institutions and others in discovering and adopting promising practices in the assessment of college student learning outcomes. NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

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Abstract

The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) frames degree-level learning outcomes at three levels: associate, baccalaureate, and master's. The outcomes are action-verb driven, integrated, scaffolded, and developmental in nature. They align with student demonstrations of knowledge and skills through the form of assignments embedded throughout the curriculum. Moreover, the DQP implies the creation of intentional and coherent learning experiences with learning happening in various venues, not just the traditional curriculum. The document applies to all students, regardless of field of study and institution type. As a framework that explicitly articulates degree-level outcomes, the DQP provides a common language for institution-wide discussions about student learning. Thus, the DQP can serve as a catalyst for comprehensive reform with the student at the center—initiating changes in curriculum and pedagogy, as well as organization and support structures.

Examples from the field indicates that effectively using the DQP can benefit both students and institutions (Jankowski & Giffin, 2016). But what does “effective use” entail and how does it unfold? That is, what is the nature of the process that makes it possible for institutions to use the DQP to achieve desired ends? In a post-convening survey of participants following the October 2014 launch of the revised DQP, 91% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with Lumina's call for widespread implementation of DQP, but only 5% agreed that they understood the next steps in order to implement it. With this in mind, NILOA has been tracking campus engagement with the DQP, identifying approaches that institutions have used to implement the framework in meaningful ways. In this report, we describe those approaches and how they have been used within and across institutions.

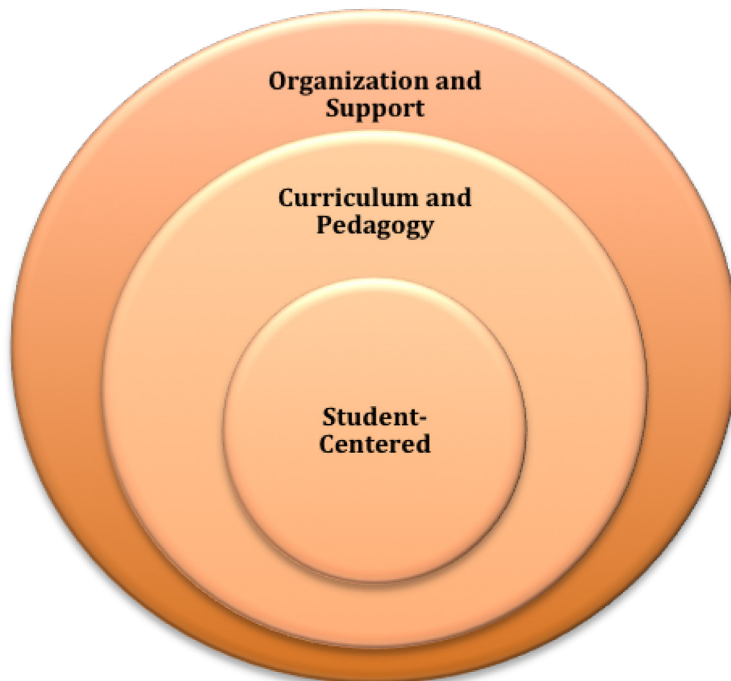
Using the Degree Qualifications Profile to Foster Meaningful Change

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Introduction

The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) frames degree-level learning outcomes at three levels: associate, baccalaureate, and master's. The outcomes are action-verb driven, integrated, scaffolded, and developmental in nature. They align with student demonstrations of knowledge and skills through the form of assignments embedded throughout the curriculum. Moreover, the DQP implies the creation of intentional and coherent learning experiences with learning happening in various venues, not just the traditional curriculum. The document applies to all students, regardless of field of study and institution type. As a framework that explicitly articulates degree-level outcomes, the DQP provides a common language for institution-wide discussions about student learning. Thus, the DQP can serve as a catalyst for comprehensive reform with the student at the center—initiating changes in curriculum and pedagogy, as well as organization and support structures (as illustrated below).

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with Lumina’s call for widespread implementation of DQP, but only 75% agreed that they understood the next steps in order to implement it. With this in mind, NILOA has been tracking campus engagement with the DQP, identifying approaches that institutions have used to implement the framework in meaningful ways. In this report, we describe those approaches and how they have been used within and across institutions.¹

DQP: The Implementation Process

Working with the DQP has the potential to promote positive change when an institution organizes itself around students and their learning. In a survey of DQP participating institutions, the various processes and change initiatives undertaken when working with the DQP included revision and alignment of student learning outcomes; mapping of the curriculum; revision of assessment processes and practices; curricular redesign for enhanced coherence and intentionality; and review and revision of existing programmatic or institutional policies (Figure 1). Although there are numerous ways in which institutions started their work with the DQP (Jankowski & Marshall, 2014), once conversations began, institutions and programs followed a similar path of implementation.

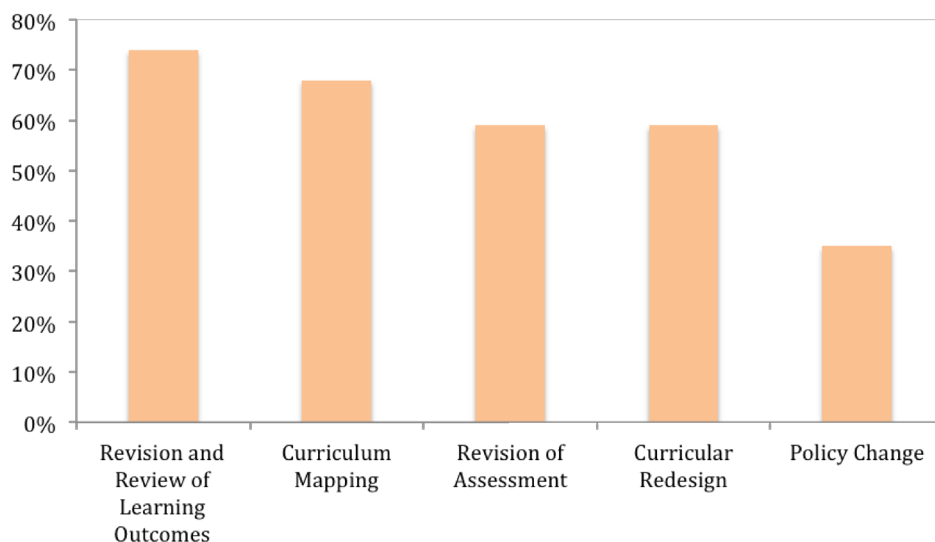


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents reporting engagement with different change processes.

¹ To determine the impact of DQP use on institutional policies and practices, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) conducted a study of the more than 400 (n=425) institutions that used the DQP between the 2011 release and the October 2014 revision. The study explored how institutions engaged with the DQP and how working with DQP was associated with changes in curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment activities. Data sources consulted included DQP project final reports, over 1,000 Institutional Activity Reports, 15 DQP case studies, 25 institution-authored examples of practice, information located on institutional websites, and a survey administered to DQP users about their perceptions and attitudes related to working with the DQP. Linking survey responses to data from the Institutional Activity Reports helped generate a clearer picture of the characteristics of effective use of the DQP.

Begin with Faculty-led Conversations

DQP implementation tends to be less effective when driven solely by administration. Realizing the power of the DQP requires substantial faculty involvement to create the conditions that promote enhanced student learning. The importance of faculty-led conversations was highlighted in a DQP campus case study by Pat Hutchings (2014a) that found repeated conversations between faculty were needed to reach shared understandings before moving forward. A case study by Jillian Kinzie (2015) indicated that to develop increased ownership, the “DQP provided an institution-wide common base for discussion about curriculum and learning outcomes” (p. 3), but also provided faculty with a “reason and structure, tools, and time to engage in this substantive review” (p. 4).

Faculty review of the DQP prompted conversations about curricular revisions, distinctions between degree levels, the relationship between general education and the major, redesign of program review, design and alignment of assignments, and considerations of alternative documentation of learning. The conversations focused upon student learning, and led to shared awareness that the student develops learning in various ways, across programs, and throughout an institution. The power of shared language was outlined in the report from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) (2013) DQP project,

Two significant outcomes associated with this process were the development of a clear and common understanding among faculty members on expectations for student competencies at the course level as well as degree level. Moreover, faculty members left the process able to describe degree curricula using the same terminology irrespective of their discipline (p. 5)

Review and Revise Learning Outcomes

Faculty-led conversations around the DQP involved examination of existing learning outcomes in relation to those within the DQP—comparing institutional or program learning outcome statements to DQP degree-level proficiencies. These conversations often revealed little to no agreement about or shared understandings of existing learning outcomes at the program, institution, or co-curricular levels; that the outcomes needed to be rewritten for clarity and actionable measurement; and that the curriculum needed to be examined to see if it includes intentional development of the agreed upon knowledge and skills. As a faculty member at a four-year public university put it:

DQP benchmarks are a well-informed broadly representative group of individuals’ best efforts at defining learning levels associated with progress to degree, but by no means definitive, and...it is in the discussion and application of these benchmarks that institutions can form their own conclusions which can be used formatively to inform learning design as well as summatively for assessment purposes.

Faculty members reviewed the statements in the DQP either as a point of departure for creating new learning outcomes or in relation to their own as an external check. The focus of review included examination of content, action-verbs, and coverage of important outcome areas. The majority of institutions

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Curriculum mapping process that led to the greatest change in curricular structure involved groups of faculty meeting to collectively discuss how various elements of the program fit together, where general education fed into and was reinforced by the major, and where additional experiences from co-curriculum might provide support.

found strong alignment and convergence with the DQP proficiencies, and modifications to the statements entailed altering language to emphasize areas of institutional focus. Rarely was it the case that faculty chose to adopt the entirety of the DQP as written; in fact, 98% of DQP users modified either the DQP statements or revised their own existing learning outcomes to better align with DQP statements. Only 2% adopted the DQP without modification.²

Map the Curriculum

After learning outcome statements had been reviewed and revised, faculty began to examine the curriculum to determine where learning outcomes were addressed, if there were gaps, how the curriculum reinforced and fostered development of knowledge and skills over time, and how different outcomes were assessed over time. Curriculum mapping processes that led to the greatest change in curricular structure (in terms of increased coherence and integration) involved groups of faculty meeting to collectively discuss how various elements of the program fit together, where general education fed into and was reinforced by the major, and where additional experiences from the co-curriculum might provide supportive opportunities for students to engage in active and applied learning.

Curriculum mapping exercises undertaken by individual faculty marking spreadsheets that were then compiled by a department chair, or crosswalks of the alignment of program outcomes to DQP proficiencies documented by a small group of administrative leaders did not lead to meaningful changes or implementation efforts.³ Similarly, projects that were administratively driven and focused on mapping for reporting or compliance purposes ended quickly. A small team in a room making decisions for other faculty to implement also failed to engage the power of faculty for positive curricular change, and subsequently positioned DQP work as another initiative or fad, removed from teaching and learning. As these scenarios suggest, the intended effects of using the DQP did not take root as an administrative project—though the majority of DQP projects were initiated by administrators. Where meaningful change occurred, the work was framed as by and for the faculty, and once conversations between faculty members across an institution began, the role of administrators in successful projects was to make space and time for faculty to engage in the conversations. The potential of the positive, supportive role of administration backing faculty work is captured in a comment from a faculty member at a two-year institution,

We crossed a threshold last year, in part because of the support of the President, where the DQP became the common language of the institution. That means that programs who thought they were isolated or stand-alone programs started to see that there was a unity and cohesion to the college that did not exist before. The cohesion and unity allowed our conversations to take deeper roots to impact all our students as opposed to some.

² For a resource to help with revision of learning outcomes see: Adelman, C. (2015, February). *To Imagine a Verb: The Language and Syntax of Learning Outcomes Statements*. (Occasional Paper No. 24). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

³ For additional information on curriculum mapping see Jankowski and Marshall, 2014.

Curricular Revision

Once the curriculum had been mapped, faculty and staff examined the maps for alignment between desired learning outcomes and what was currently expected in the curriculum. Through gap analysis and conversations faculty discussed the design and timing of assignments, content coverage, alignment with disciplinary associations or accrediting body expectations, the role of general education in the major, the expectations of pre-requisites, and course-taking patterns of students. Each of the areas of consideration led to revisions or modifications of the curriculum in terms of order, placement, focus, or clarity.

Of note, examining course taking patterns is very salient for curricular revision processes, and students can play an active role in this process. Indeed, even the most exemplary scaffolded, integrative, curriculum will be simply a paper-based blueprint if it and its purposes are not communicated clearly to students. To actualize the revision process, students should be actively involved in discussions, the timing and course-taking patterns of students explored, advisors actively involved, and the collective cohesion of the revised curriculum widely communicated to various audiences.

Alignment of Assessment

As Ewell (2013) argues in the occasional paper exploring the implications of DQP and assessment, the DQP necessarily involves faculty ownership of assessment that is embedded squarely within teaching and learning. It involves a formative component of feedback to students over time and opportunities within the curriculum to allow students to practice and refine their knowledge and skills through integration and application. In most instances, this has taken the form of alignment through assignment efforts (Hutchings, 2016; Hutchings, Jankowski, & Ewell, 2014).

Campuses are holding faculty-led, peer review sessions where assignments are examined for their alignment with an outcome of interest as well as their clarity to students. In addition, the timing of assessments is being examined in relation to curriculum maps and the possibilities for assignments that cross courses. Finally, the examination of the assignment has also led to a review of the alignment between the assignment and the evaluation criteria (thus far mostly rubrics). This has been important because in most instances there were clear disconnects between the learning outcome statements and the assignment instructions, as well as between the assignment and the evaluative criteria. Meaningful implementation involves a review of the relationship between the three.

Policy Revision

After each of the revision processes outlined above, changes need to move through committee structures for review and approval before becoming program or institutionalized policy. Revised learning outcomes are in process to be accepted policy across the institution once, approved by faculty governance procedures and committees, and policies are under discussion or committee review for acceptance of revised statements regarding assessment processes, transparent sharing of curricular information, the role of centers of teaching and learning, and others. Some faculty are beginning to use the common language of the DQP to provide a means to develop and write their teaching statement as part of promotion and tenure, placing their work in a larger, national context.

The DQP has proven to be a useful tool in helping faculty revise pathways, align assessments within and across courses within these pathways, and move toward a common language of assessment.

Regardless of institutional type and reason for engaging in DQP work, institutions moved through a common implementation process.

Policy revision is the stage in which the fewest number of institutions are currently taking part, but it will continue to be an area of exploration in future studies of DQP implementation.

DQP Implementation Cycle

The movement through the various processes outlined in this report were consistent regardless of institutional type and reason for engaging in DQP work—thus projects that began working with the DQP for purposes of strategic planning, accreditation, or general education, all moved through the same processes. Figure 2 represents this common implementation process. The use of gears indicates that each of the elements are connected to each other such that faculty and staff teams often returned to prior elements as more faculty and staff partners became involved, and the picture of student learning across an institution broadened to include learning beyond the formal curriculum.

For example, the process of reviewing and mapping the curriculum could lead to further refinement and clarity of learning outcome statements, while alignment of assessment activities may entail mapping assessment processes onto the completed curriculum maps.

The gears identify the shared nature of the changes underway, and indicate that the movement is towards a shared end where each step supports and reinforces or builds upon the prior. Not surprisingly, the longer an institution engaged with the DQP, the further along in the implementation process it was, meaning institutions that began working with the DQP in 2011 were more likely than those beginning DQP-related efforts to indicate that changes in policy and curriculum design were made or underway. In short, meaningful implementation takes times.

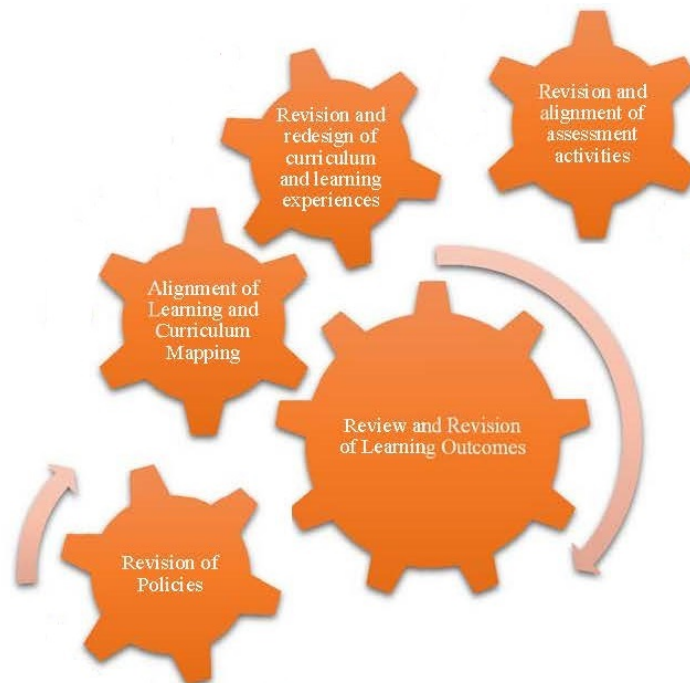


Figure 2. Process of DQP implementation.

Overall, faculty spent the majority of their time reviewing learning outcome statements, revising and aligning those statements with the DQP, and then exploring through curriculum mapping where students acquired and demonstrated their learning throughout the institution. After curriculum mapping, faculty teams moved into redesigning curriculum to better align with the revised learning outcome statements and intentionally integrate and scaffold student learning over time. Subsequently, faculty participants revised assessment processes, examining how students are asked to demonstrate their learning and the ways in which assignments might need to be modified to more intentionally align with the revised learning outcomes and scaffolded curriculum.⁴ Currently, the majority of institutions implementing the DQP are in the process of revising assessment processes and practices.

Considerations for Practice

Examining institutional movement through implementation processes over time points to four important principles for consideration.

DQP work needs to be owned and led by faculty, supported by staff, and involve various constituents within and across institutions, including students. Most DQP projects were started with a small team of faculty and staff, or as a pilot in a single academic program. But as the work progressed and more faculty became involved, additional programs and committees were invited into discussions. Committee structures were modified to include cross-campus representation, and the addition of faculty new to the effort as well as connecting with staff and other offices across campus, required additional time for conversations to be successful.

Most teams that began working with the DQP had strict timelines for the project in place that were modified as it became increasingly apparent that conversations needed to involve multiple partners from across the institution. This has implications for how the work is introduced to the campus community as well as the professional development that is provided, not just to faculty, but other interested staff. A thoughtful change process of revising policies and practices that influence learning experiences takes time to take root throughout an institution, and conversations to get there should not be rushed.

DQP work takes time to see substantial impact. With the first group of institutions currently in the process of policy revision, one would not expect to see significant impact on graduation or retention rates since policy changes and curriculum revisions have yet to be fully implemented across institutions. On average, it has taken institutions four years of conversation, revisions, and examination of policies and practices before wide-scale institutional change through policy revision occurred. As Hutchings (2014b) indicated in her case study,

With the new process now several years underway, it's also safe to say that the evidence is starting to make a difference. Faculty are seeing information they would not have seen (or perhaps thought to ask about) a few years ago. Areas for needed improvement are being talked

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⁴ Examples of assignments that have been revised by faculty to more closely align to DQP proficiencies may be found at www.assignmentlibrary.org.

DQP work involves a culture change through developing shared consensus on the value and purpose of educational processes and experiences in place for students.

about and are starting to be addressed. Some actual changes have been made; others are in discussion. And the individuals we spoke to, in a range of programs, were hopeful about the potential of the system to make a difference, though aware, as well, that the real key is finding time to bring colleagues together to look at the evidence, think together, plan, and act (p. 6).

DQP work entails cultural change. In some ways, DQP work involves a culture change through developing shared consensus on the value and purpose of the educational processes and experiences in place for students, as well as consensus on the outcomes which the institution strives to achieve. An example of the culture change that can develop from including large numbers of faculty, staff, students and others in discussions is this observation from an Institutional Activity Report from a four-year, public institution:

A great example of the impact that these discussions have had on campus occurred in a recent academic affairs subcommittee meeting in which a revamped general studies degree was being considered. The struggle with assessing the current general studies degree came up, and led to a discussion about the expectations for a graduate with the degree. The DQP came up which led to a conversation about university-wide learning outcomes. The point was made that this would allow each college to develop an assessment plan for general studies majors with concentrations in the college. This conversation would not have gone in the same direction if it had occurred prior to our DQP project and if cross-campus representation had not been a part of the discussion.

The focus of DQP work shifts over time. Although the impetus for DQP work may have originally been concerns over transfer from two-to-four year institutions within a specific program area, the work becomes institution-wide as conversations unfold and the principles behind the DQP are actualized in implementation. Instead of solely focusing on transfer program curricula, DQP work spreads to include discussion of student success supports, connections with pathways, incorporation of advising, investment with prior-learning, connections with employers, and documentation of learning in meaningful ways on a transcript. Successful DQP implementation has served as an umbrella for various initiatives across a campus and has helped to create coherence and intentionality. In part, this is due to the focus within the DQP on self-reflection for an institution. An administrator from a four-year institution indicated that this process enabled them to:

(1) analyze our existing programs, (2) see the “perception versus reality” of our existing programs, and (3) better understand who we are and what we deliver in terms of business education. Upon completion of the program review and evaluation process, we began to shape our “web” with the data, which had been collected. Interestingly, the shape of the “web” seemed to be different than what many of us had anticipated, which is the “perception versus reality” aspect referenced earlier. We were not who we thought we were and it became necessary to perform some Program self-reflection. In addition, the potential value of the review utilizing the DQP and better understanding and appreciation for its potential, allowed us to realize a more expansive capability of this marketing endeavor to include other external stakeholders.

Concluding Thoughts

Meaningful implementation of DQP efforts is well aligned with principles of effective assessment practice driven by improvement interests as opposed to compliance exercises (Kuh, et al, 2015). For instance, DQP work was most impactful when faculty led, collaborative in nature, focused on students, and embedded in the processes of teaching and learning. As outlined in the NILOA Policy Statement (2016), “It is no longer beyond the capacity of a college or university to articulate expectations for learning, to document student progress toward these expectations and to use the resulting evidence to improve student success. Doing this job and doing it well is within our grasp” (p. 7). The DQP provides one mechanism by which campus communities can advance their assessment efforts by encouraging campus conversations focused on students and their learning.

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